

Hard As Nails: Draft Research Paper: 2024.

"Hard As Nails: Expanding Masculinity Through Increased Empathy and Openness Via The Unlikely Intervention of Male Nail Art" Exploring Small Acts with Big Impacts: How the symbolic gesture of nail painting by men could unlock new pathways to positive masculinity and social change, leading to the foundations of a widener campaign, or movement.

Conniff, Fiandaca, Smith, Lacey: 2024

"It's hard to display toxic masculinity when you've got your nails done."

Hard As Nails Research Participant 2024

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"I sometimes go into this sports pub nearby to watch the football. But after having our nails done, I had this weird moment when I walked to the pub door, looked down at my hands, and stopped.

I told myself, 'No one's going to care,' but I couldn't convince myself. I didn't want to deal with the landlord and regulars taking the mickey out of my nails.

That inner voice was so loud,' and I just turned around and left.

But then I thought, I never had to think about this. Whereas if you're from a certain group that is not represented, you probably worry all the time; "I can't go into that space because it might not be safe for me.

So that was an interesting thing I won't forget"

Hard As Nails Research Participant, 2024

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Executive Summary: Hard As Nails Study

"Hard As Nails" is a bold but simple act—men painting their nails— to broaden the conversation around the crisis in men's mental health, widen the healthy ideals of masculinity, and challenge barriers to authentic inclusion and equality.

The story so far

Men from various backgrounds painted their nails during an ordinary week and recorded their experiences confronting deeply ingrained ideas about what it means to "be a man." The research suggests this small symbolic act disrupts norms, fosters empathy, and initiates conversations about masculinity, mental health, and allyship.

What We've Discovered

1. **Breaking Masculinity Norms:** 80% of Participants discussed stepping out of the "man box" and challenging rigid norms associated with masculinity, such as emotional suppression or fear of judgment.
2. **More Confident Conversations:** 75% of participants reported engaging in meaningful conversations with others as a direct result of the intervention, often about gender norms, mental health, or allyship.
3. **Mental Health Impact:** 80% of participants reported an increased sense of connection and bonding and 65% of participants reported experiencing emotional release and joy as a result of stepping outside traditional norms.

Why This Matters

Rising rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide among men highlight the urgent need to rethink masculinity. "Hard As Nails" offers a compelling counterpoint to men wanting to take a stand against the manosphere in a way shown to foster empathy, resilience and allyship in a way that feels inclusive, practical, and impactful.

What's Next?

A further research stage of a statistically representative sample of men tested against robust scales that can demonstrate shifts in mindsets and behaviours, beginning with an open invitation for collaboration in the first stage of research.

"I'm not saying it's the answer to misogyny, but it will make men feel differently...I feel more vulnerable as a result."

Hard As Nails Research Participant 2024

Overview: What is Hard As Nails, and how could it help?

This study explores the evolving concept of masculinity through the lens of a novel intervention: men painting their nails to challenge gender norms. The project, "Hard As Nails," created organically between a father and daughter, was initially hoped to encourage conversations and promote allyship amongst men by creating visible disruptions to traditional masculine norms.

However, the research revealed that allyship is a term with mixed interpretations, and many men found it abstract or inaccessible. As Kossok et al. (2024) highlight, allyship is a "perceptual and relational concept," with behaviours perceived as either authentic or performative. To address these challenges, the study shifted its focus to attributes believed to be intrinsically valued by men and research participants; empathy, vulnerability, and stepping outside the "man box"—positioning these as pathways to meaningful allyship, as defined by De Souza (2019) and others.

Using qualitative methods—including pre-, during-, and post-intervention diaries, focus groups, and longitudinal surveys—the study uncovered profound shifts in participants' attitudes and behaviours. Men reported feeling greater ease with vulnerability, initiating meaningful discussions about mental health, and becoming more mindful of diverse expressions of masculinity. These findings align with prior research, which shows that men can be effective allies when they incorporate vulnerability and allyship behaviours into their self-concept (Moser, Siegel, & Wiley, 2024).

It is impossible to explore masculinity without acknowledging the pressing crisis in men's mental health, which has been linked to rising rates of anxiety, depression,

and suicide among men worldwide (Cleary, 2012). While this intervention was not designed to directly 'solve' these issues, the research underscores the strong connection between 'toxic masculinity'—defined as a set of restrictive norms promoting dominance, emotional suppression, and aggression (Connell, 1995)—and the mental health struggles many men face.

The stress and isolation caused by these societal expectations often make it challenging for men to openly confront or discuss issues related to their own vulnerability and emotional well-being (Jakupcak et al., 2005). As with allyship, the intervention posits that improvements in men's mental health may emerge as a secondary yet significant outcome of fostering empathy, vulnerability, and the courage to challenge traditional masculine norms. By encouraging men to 'step out of the man box' and engage more openly, the intervention lays the groundwork for a broader, positive impact on their mental health and emotional resilience.

While male engagement with allyship remains a complex topic, and the sample size here is too small to draw major conclusions, the intervention appears to prove highly effective in fostering ongoing dialogue about societal norms and gender expectations. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the campaign and what participants referred to as the "small but brave" symbolic act of nail painting could act as a "Trojan horse," sparking larger conversations about mental health, inclusion, and redefining masculinity.

Although allyship has demonstrated effectiveness in fostering inclusion and reducing bias (Collier-Spruel & Ryan, 2024), its long-term success depends on sustained engagement and authenticity (Wilson et al., 2021). Thus, as a step towards enhancing allyship, fostering positive masculinity, and creating accessible routes for broader male participation in these conversations, "Hard As Nails" may offer a potential blueprint for campaigns aiming to challenge stereotypes and promote social change. While further research is needed to validate its long-term impact and scalability, the initial findings suggest a lasting positive impact, highlighting increased levels of empathy, vulnerability, and a greater propensity for meaningful allyship among participants.

"Painting my nails made me uncomfortable at first, but that discomfort opened doors—to vulnerability, to conversations about masculinity, and to the realisation that allyship starts with understanding yourself."

Hard As Nails Research Participant, 2024

Abstract: Understanding Allyship in the Context of *Hard As Nails*

The concept of allyship, though increasingly prominent, is not new but remains open to misinterpretation. Broadly defined as "using one's own power to act in support of a marginalized individual or group" (De Souza, 2019), allyship has evolved to encompass diverse contexts and interpretations. However, despite its importance, allyship can often be perceived as impotent or reduced to criticisms of political correctness, box-ticking, or empty 'wokeness.' For instance, industry-specific initiatives or corporate Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) programs may prioritize surface-level changes rather than addressing systemic gender inequalities (Dobele and Schuster, 2022), leading to perceptions of inauthenticity or performative action (Kossok et al., 2024).

The *Hard As Nails* intervention initially sought to foster allyship by encouraging men to engage in the visible act of nail painting to challenge traditional masculinity and invite conversations around topics many men find difficult to broach—topics that can contribute significantly to poor mental health. This approach aligns with the understanding that allyship involves voicing support, confronting stereotypes, and advocating for marginalised groups (Williams et al., 2023; Moser and Branscombe, 2021). However, following the initial experiences of the project's founder, Sam Conniff, the approach was re-evaluated in collaboration with DEI specialist and experienced activist Danieli Fiandaca. Fiandaca argued that the term "allyship" often carries mixed connotations and suggested focusing instead on attributes more intrinsic to men's personal growth, such as empathy, vulnerability, and stepping

outside societal norms. Together, Conniff and Fiandaca developed research groups to explore these attributes, discovering that they served as more relatable and accessible pathways to allyship. This reflects existing research emphasizing authentic engagement and relational allyship (Wilson et al., 2021).

The campaign concept was further strengthened by an explicit goal: to shift mindsets while driving tangible changes in actions and behaviours. The effectiveness of allyship is profoundly influenced by how it is perceived and enacted. Kossok et al. (2024) noted that allyship behaviours are judged on their authenticity, while Collier-Spruel and Ryan (2024) cautioned against performative allyship, which can negatively impact psychological safety and foster cynicism among marginalised groups.

This insight underscores why *Hard As Nails* sought to move beyond superficial gestures, creating an experience that was both deeply personal and publicly visible. Participants reported that painting their nails—a small but symbolic act—prompted introspection, vulnerability, and discussions about masculinity and mental health. This aligns with Moser and Branscombe's (2021) findings on allyship's potential to challenge biases and foster inclusion. The intervention also addressed barriers to allyship. As Birnbaum et al. (2024) highlighted, potential allies often fear their actions may be perceived as performative or misguided. Participants in *Hard As Nails* initially shared similar apprehensions, particularly around public perception. Yet overwhelmingly positive reactions from friends, colleagues, and strangers bolstered their confidence, supporting Lyubykh, Alonzo, and Turner's (2022) observation that initial resistance to allyship can evolve into broader acceptance over time.

The intersection of allyship and masculinity presented unique opportunities and challenges. Research suggests that men can be highly effective allies, particularly in male-dominated spaces, where their actions may reduce prejudice and foster inclusion more effectively than similar efforts by women (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Gervais & Hillard, 2014). However, this effectiveness depends on overcoming entrenched stereotypes and fostering openness, as Vajda (2023) observed. By emphasising empathy and vulnerability, *Hard As Nails* provided participants with tools to step outside the "man box," redefining masculinity in ways that resonate with broader societal goals of equality and mental health advocacy.

It is impossible to disentangle the impact of masculinity from the crisis in men's mental health, marked by rising rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide worldwide (Cleary, 2012). While *Hard As Nails* was not designed to address these issues directly, it became clear that fostering empathy, vulnerability, and courage challenged traditional masculine norms and created pathways to improved mental well-being. Toxic masculinity, characterised by dominance, emotional suppression, and aggression (Connell, 1995), often exacerbates the isolation many men feel when confronting vulnerability or emotional challenges. By encouraging participants to embrace these qualities and engage in conversations about mental health, *Hard As Nails* inadvertently touched on deeper issues underpinning the broader societal crisis in men's well-being.

As such, *Hard As Nails* aligns with the literature's recognition that allyship is not a one-size-fits-all concept. Instead, it is a nuanced and evolving practice shaped by context, relationships, and perceptions of authenticity. By centering attributes intrinsic to participants while maintaining a broader goal of fostering allyship, this intervention offers valuable insights into how small, symbolic acts can catalyse meaningful social change.

Methodology: How were these findings uncovered?

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to explore the potential for challenging traditional masculine norms and fostering allyship through the intervention "Hard As Nails." The research involved 20 participants, the majority of whom (N=15) identified as white and ranged in age from 30 to 60 years. No additional demographic data was collected to preserve participant anonymity and encourage open, honest engagement with potentially sensitive topics.

Research Design and Phases

The intervention unfolded over four phases:

1. **Pre-Intervention:** Participants completed reflective diaries capturing their initial attitudes toward the intervention, expectations, and anticipated challenges.
2. **During Intervention:** Observations and narratives were recorded as participants engaged in the act of painting their nails and interacting with others in their daily environments.
3. **Post-Intervention:** Follow-up diaries and focus groups collected immediate reflections on the experience, including perceived shifts in attitudes, behaviours, and external reactions.
4. **Longitudinal Follow-Up:** Surveys and optional diaries tracked longer-term impacts, offering insights into sustained changes in perspectives and actions.

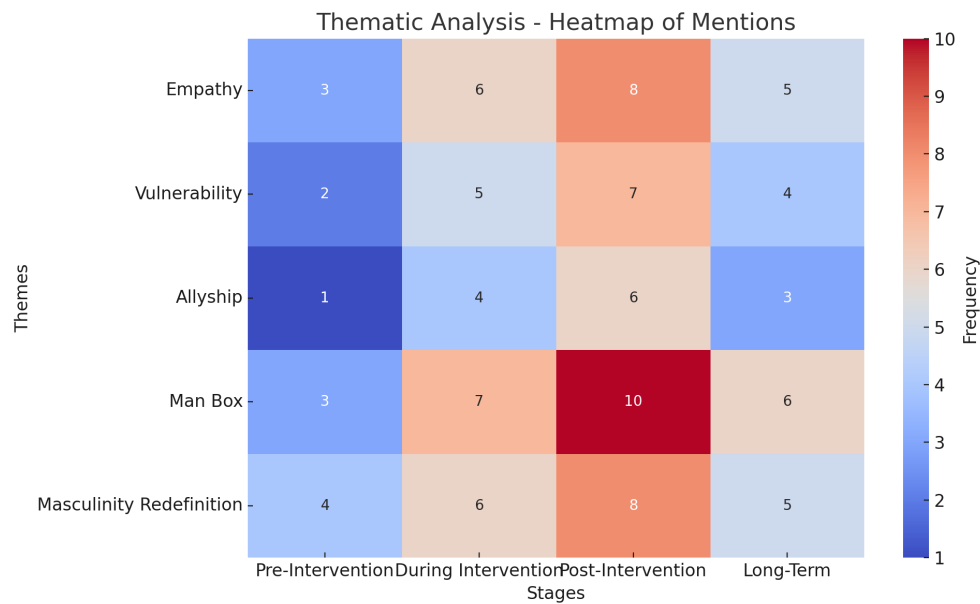
Data was collected via written diaries, structured focus group discussions, and longitudinal surveys, ensuring a triangulation of qualitative insights.

Sampling and Recruitment

Participants were recruited through professional networks and community groups, with an emphasis on diversity of thought and life experience rather than demographic representation. The sample included individuals from varied professional backgrounds, including media, education, and business, contributing to many perspectives. However, the participant group shared a willingness to engage with issues of masculinity, vulnerability, and allyship, ensuring alignment with the study's aims.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data were examined using a thematic analysis approach. Entries and transcripts were coded and analysed for recurring themes, including shifts in perceptions of masculinity, experiences of vulnerability, and reflections on allyship. The data were revisited iteratively to capture nuances and emergent insights.



Participant Engagement

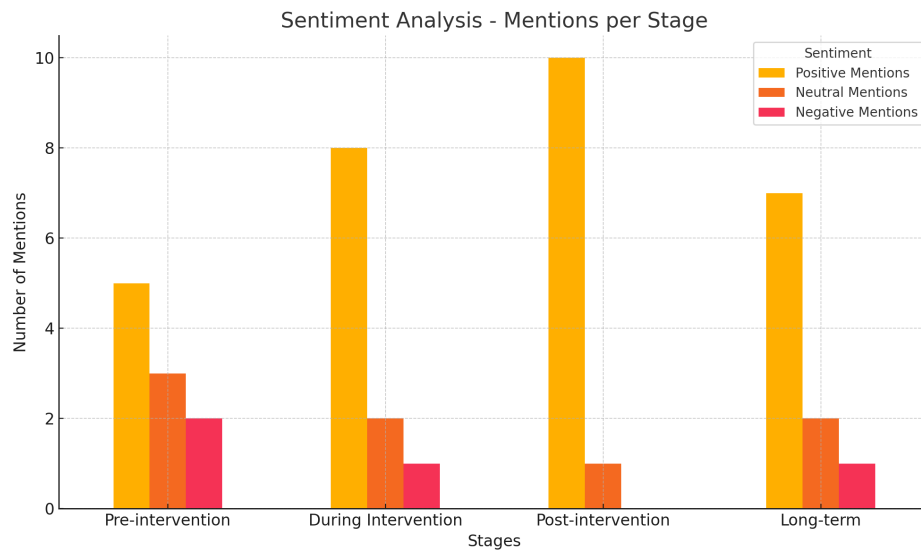
Engagement was high across all phases:

- **Pre-Intervention:** 18 participants provided reflective diary entries.
- **During Intervention:** 14 participants submitted observational narratives.
- **Post-Intervention:** 12 participants completed follow-up surveys or focus groups.
- **Longitudinal Follow-Up:** 8 participants contributed additional reflections.

Findings from Participants

Participants described their experiences in rich detail, revealing both challenges and moments of profound insight. For example:

- One participant noted, *“Painting my nails was small but felt enormous. I realised I’d never done something openly inviting reactions—it made me notice how much I avoid vulnerability.”*
- Another wrote in their post-intervention diary, *“I’ve started asking men in my life deeper questions, and it’s amazing how willing they are to open up once you take the first step.”*



Challenges and Limitations

The small sample size and relative homogeneity in race (majority white) limit the generalizability of the findings. However, the depth of engagement and iterative design compensated by providing detailed, context-rich data that aligned with the study's exploratory nature. Anonymity was critical in ensuring candid responses, a consideration validated by the participants' willingness to reflect on sensitive topics such as mental health and societal expectations.

"It's cracked me open a little more. Vulnerability isn't weakness; it's a strength."

Hard As Nails Research Participant

Practical Implications and Applications: What benefit could Hard As Nails offer?

The findings from Hard As Nails suggest promising pathways for addressing the complex dynamics of masculinity and allyship in contemporary society. Below, we outline key implications for mental health, workplace diversity, and counteracting the rise of toxic masculinity:

1. Engaging Men in Critical Conversations:

Research consistently highlights the detrimental impact of unaddressed mental health issues among men, including higher rates of suicide, anxiety, and depression (Cleary, 2012). However, it is equally evident that men often resist engaging with topics of vulnerability, allyship, and emotional openness due to societal stigma (Jakupcak et al., 2005). While the Hard As Nails sample was self-selecting, the high levels of participant engagement suggest that experiential and symbolic interventions can effectively bridge this gap. By creating an accessible entry point, the intervention demonstrates the potential to catalyze meaningful change among men, even within populations typically resistant to such conversations.

2. Reimagining Workplace Diversity and Inclusion (DEI) Strategies:

Workplace DEI programs are often perceived as essential but flawed, criticized for being performative or ineffective (Kossok et al., 2024). Hard As Nails offers an alternative model, combining immersive experience with personal accountability to foster genuine engagement. The intervention's emphasis on empathy, vulnerability, and open dialogue provides a blueprint for DEI initiatives seeking to move beyond box-ticking exercises. As one participant noted, *"This wasn't about a policy or a seminar; it was about us, as*

people, reflecting on who we are and who we want to be.” Scaling such interventions could significantly enhance the authenticity and impact of organisational DEI efforts.

3. Countering the Rise of Toxic Masculinity in the Digital Age:

In recent years, online communities such as the manosphere and incel forums have propagated toxic masculinity, fostering harmful behaviours and attitudes that challenge societal progress (Ging, 2019; Van Valkenburgh, 2021). Public figures like Andrew Tate have further amplified these trends, contributing to a cultural climate where hyper-masculinity is valorised (Aharoni et al., 2023).

Hard As Nails presents a compelling counterpoint, leveraging the same energy of visibility and engagement but redirecting it toward positive, inclusive outcomes. By normalising vulnerability and challenging restrictive norms, the intervention can act as a powerful antidote to the toxicity in these spaces.

4. Urgency in the Current Sociopolitical Climate

The recent re-election of Donald Trump in 2024 has exacerbated cultural divisions and sparked renewed attention to the role of toxic masculinity in political discourse (Smith & Jacobs, 2024). This intervention comes at a critical juncture, offering a scalable, impactful strategy for fostering allyship, reducing bias, and promoting healthier expressions of masculinity. By addressing these issues at both individual and collective levels, Hard As Nails aligns with the urgent need for positive interventions in increasingly polarized societies.

The insights from Hard As Nails underscore its potential to transform how we approach masculinity, allyship, and mental health. By creating accessible, symbolic entry points for engagement, the intervention demonstrates that small acts can lead to significant shifts in attitudes and behaviors. As toxic masculinity and societal divisions continue to pose challenges, innovative, scalable approaches like Hard As Nails may serve as critical tools for fostering inclusion, resilience, and progress.

Key Findings

The findings from Hard As Nails suggest three core insights:

1. **Increased Vulnerability, Empathy, and Willingness to Challenge Masculinity Norms**

The intervention encouraged participants to confront traditional ideas of masculinity, fostering greater vulnerability and empathy. One participant shared, *“At first, I was worried about how people would react, but I found myself opening up to strangers in ways I never expected. It’s like the nails gave me permission to be myself.”* This aligns with the intervention’s goal of helping men step out of the “man box,” a concept linked to restrictive norms that prioritize emotional suppression and dominance (Connell, 1995).

2. **Improved Confidence, Awareness, and Ownership of Allyship**

By focusing on intrinsic attributes like empathy and emotional openness, the intervention helped participants redefine allyship in accessible terms. One participant reflected, *“I always thought allyship was something abstract or for other people. This made me realize it’s about being real and showing up, even in small ways.”* This shift echoes research emphasizing the importance of authenticity and self-concept in effective allyship (Wilson et al., 2021).

3. **Shift from Awareness to Action and Behavior**

The intervention didn’t just create awareness—it led to tangible changes in behavior. Many participants described initiating conversations about masculinity and mental health or stepping in to challenge stereotypes. One participant noted, *“I used to stay quiet when people made offhand comments, but now I feel like I can challenge those ideas without starting a fight. It feels like progress.”* These outcomes highlight the potential for symbolic acts to serve as catalysts for broader social change (Moser and Branscombe, 2021).

Connection and Bonding

A recurring theme across the data was the sense of connection and bonding fostered by the intervention. Participants frequently mentioned feeling part of something larger, which strengthened their commitment to the initiative. One participant wrote, *“It wasn’t just about me—it felt like we were creating a little movement together. That sense of belonging gave me so much energy.”*

This sense of connection may have been amplified by the intimacy and novelty of a small pilot group. As the intervention scales, preserving this element will be a challenge. Future iterations might consider incorporating structured opportunities for reflection and group interaction to maintain this critical dimension.

“It’s not about nails or fashion—it’s about breaking down barriers, one small step at a time. This feels like a blueprint for something much bigger.”

Hard As Nails Research Participant

Longitudinal Responses

While the number of longitudinal responses is currently limited, they offer a valuable glimpse into the intervention’s potential for sustained impact. Two key themes emerge:

- 1. Sustained Reflection and Behavioral Change**

Participants reported that the intervention had a lasting influence on their self-awareness and behaviors. One respondent reflected, *“Months later, I still catch myself thinking about how I engage with others—whether I’m being open, empathetic, or just defaulting to old habits. This experience planted a seed that keeps growing.”* This aligns with the intervention’s goal of fostering ongoing vulnerability and empathy, suggesting that the symbolic act of nail painting continues to serve as a catalyst for introspection and personal growth over time.

- 2. Momentum for Broader Engagement**

Longitudinal responses also indicated a ripple effect, where participants felt empowered to extend their learnings to new contexts. One participant shared, *“I’ve started bringing these conversations into my work, not in a preachy way but by just being more intentional. I notice when people are holding back or stuck in traditional roles, and I try to open that door a little.”* This suggests that the intervention’s impact is not confined to the immediate context but may inspire participants to act as informal allies or advocates in their communities and professional lives.

Reflection on the Longitudinal Data

Though these insights are drawn from a small subset of participants, they highlight the intervention's potential to initiate lasting change. Future research with a larger longitudinal sample could substantiate these findings and explore how shifts in mindset and behavior evolve over time. This would provide deeper insights into the mechanisms that sustain allyship and foster a redefinition of masculinity.

"I never thought painting my nails would make me think differently about being a man, but it opened up conversations I never knew I needed to have."

Hard As nails Research Participant 2024

Strengths and Limitations

This study represents an innovative approach to exploring masculinity and allyship through a novel intervention that emphasizes vulnerability, empathy, and behavioral change. However, as with any research, there are both strengths and limitations that must be acknowledged to understand the findings' scope and implications.

Strengths

1. **Novel Intervention Design:** The intervention's unique and symbolic nature offered participants a tangible and visible action. This design fostered meaningful introspection and facilitated public conversations that would otherwise be challenging to initiate. Such creativity highlights the potential for small, symbolic acts to have broad societal implications.
2. **Qualitative Depth:** Using diaries, focus groups, and longitudinal surveys allowed for rich, qualitative insights into participants' emotional journeys and behavioral shifts. These methods captured nuanced experiences and provided a detailed understanding of how participants engaged with the intervention over time.
3. **High Participant Engagement:** Despite the potentially sensitive nature of the topic, engagement levels were consistently high. Participants demonstrated a willingness to confront uncomfortable topics, suggesting that this type of intervention could be an effective entry point into broader conversations about masculinity and allyship.
4. **Practical Relevance:** The study addresses pressing societal issues, including toxic masculinity, the mental health crisis among men, and challenges in fostering allyship. The findings offer actionable insights for workplaces, DEI initiatives, and societal interventions aiming to tackle these challenges.

5. **Foundation for Future Research:** By documenting shifts in sentiment, mindset, and behavior, this study provides a solid foundation for further exploration. The methodology and initial findings could inform larger-scale or more targeted interventions.

Limitations

1. **Small Sample Size:** The sample size of only 20 participants, limits the generalizability of the findings. While the qualitative data provides depth, larger-scale studies are needed to confirm results across diverse populations.
2. **Self-Selection Bias:** Participants volunteered for the study, allowing a degree of bias. Those who chose to participate may already have been open to questioning traditional masculinity or engaging in allyship, limiting the applicability of findings to more resistant or disengaged populations.
3. **Demographic Homogeneity:** The sample lacked significant diversity, with 15 out of 20 participants identifying as white and all aged between 30 and 60. Broader demographic representation is necessary to explore how the intervention resonates across different racial, cultural, and age groups.
4. **Limited Quantitative Data:** While the study's qualitative approach yielded rich insights, the absence of robust quantitative measures makes it difficult to assess the intervention's statistical impact or compare results across cohorts.
5. **Short-Term Focus:** Although some longitudinal responses were collected, the majority of data reflects participants' immediate reactions. The long-term sustainability of shifts in mindset, behavior, and allyship remains uncertain and requires further investigation.
6. **Scalability Challenges:** The intimate and interactive nature of the intervention contributed significantly to its impact. Replicating this level of connection and engagement at scale may be challenging, and future iterations must account for how to maintain these elements.
7. **Potential for Misinterpretation:** The symbolic act of nail painting could be misconstrued as performative or trivial by external observers. Ensuring that the intervention's deeper goals and outcomes are effectively communicated is essential for broader acceptance and success.

"I never thought painting my nails would make me think differently about being a man, but it opened up conversations I never knew I needed to have."

Hard As Nails Research Participant 2024

Conclusion: What have we learned?

Hard As Nails offers a potentially compelling lens to explore and challenge traditional notions of masculinity. By engaging men in a small but symbolic act of painting their nails it created a space for vulnerability, empathy, and meaningful conversations. The findings suggest the intervention could foster significant shifts in attitudes and behaviours, as participants reported increased confidence in challenging gender norms and initiating discussions around allyship and mental health.

At a time when societal challenges like the mental health crisis among men and the rise of toxic masculinity demand urgent action, these insights hold profound implications. Hard As Nails not only provides a practical framework for promoting allyship but also serves as a counterpoint to the polarizing narratives dominating online and offline spaces. The intervention's ability to generate dialogue and connection underscores its potential for scalability and broader societal impact.

However, this study has limitations. While rich in qualitative data, the initial sample was small and lacked diversity. Furthermore, the reliance on self-selection may have influenced the nature of participation. Future research will address these limitations by incorporating a larger, more diverse sample and integrating validated quantitative scales to assess empathy, vulnerability, and positive masculinity.

"This wasn't just about nails. It was about seeing and being seen differently—finding courage to step outside the norm and realizing how small actions can start big conversations." **Hard As Nails Research Participant**

Research Stage Two: A Proposal for Expanded Inquiry into Hard As Nails

Overview

Building on the insights from the first phase of Hard As Nails, the second stage seeks to deepen our understanding of masculinity, allyship, and men's mental health by engaging a larger, more diverse group of participants. This next phase aims to validate the initial findings through both qualitative and quantitative research methods, exploring whether the themes of vulnerability, empathy, and positive masculinity hold across varied demographics. Additionally, the study will incorporate standardized scales to measure key outcomes, bridging the gap between anecdotal insights and statistically robust data.

By involving up to 200 men from different ethnicities, ages, and social contexts, this phase will allow us to explore the intervention's broader potential. The ultimate goal is to refine and scale the Hard As Nails initiative, ensuring it remains impactful, inclusive, and grounded in evidence.

Key Objectives

1. Broaden Sample Diversity

The first study's participants were predominantly white, aged 30-60, and self-selecting, which limits the generalizability of its findings. For this stage, we aim to recruit up to 200 participants from a variety of ethnic, geographic, and socio-economic backgrounds. To achieve this, the recruitment process

will include a brief demographic survey to ensure a balanced and representative sample.

2. **Introduce Quantitative Measures**

To complement qualitative insights, we will integrate validated psychological scales that assess the core themes identified in Phase One. These include empathy, vulnerability, positive masculinity, and mental well-being. By adding these measures, we can quantify the intervention's impact, providing a clearer picture of how participants' attitudes and behaviors shift.

3. **Enhance Longitudinal Insights**

Understanding whether the intervention creates lasting change is critical. Therefore, we will extend data collection to include follow-up surveys six weeks post-intervention. This will allow us to assess whether the positive effects observed immediately afterward are sustained over time.

Research Design

1. Recruitment and Demographic Survey (S1)

The recruitment process will begin with a demographic survey to capture key participant details, including age, ethnicity, geographic location, and profession. This will ensure the final sample represents a diverse cross-section of society. The survey will also ask preliminary questions about participants' views on masculinity and their comfort level with vulnerability and allyship to establish a baseline.

Participants will receive a standardized handbook outlining the purpose of the study, what their involvement entails, and guidelines for navigating conversations about their nails. This step is designed to address any apprehensions participants may have while emphasizing the importance of their honest reflections.

2. Pre-Intervention Assessment (T1)

Before participants have their nails painted, they will complete an initial survey combining open-ended qualitative questions and quantitative scales. The purpose is to capture their thoughts, expectations, and baseline attitudes.

The quantitative portion will include measures such as:

- **Man Box Scale (MBS):** Evaluates adherence to traditional masculinity norms.
- **Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI):** Measures cognitive and emotional empathy.
- **Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS):** Assesses overall mental health and well-being.

The qualitative questions will explore themes like participants' views on masculinity, allyship, and their expectations of the intervention.

3. Intervention

Participants will have their nails painted as part of a group activity whenever possible, as the social aspect of the intervention was highly valued in Phase One. These sessions will aim to create a safe, supportive environment where participants can reflect on the symbolic act of nail painting and its broader implications.

The intervention will take place early in the week to maximize exposure to a range of environments—workplaces, social gatherings, and family settings—over three to four days. Participants will be encouraged to observe and document the reactions they encounter and their own evolving feelings throughout this period.

4. Daily Diary and Mid-Intervention Assessment (T2)

During the three to four days of the intervention, participants will complete a short daily survey or journal entry. This will include questions like:

- "What conversations have you had as a result of your painted nails?"

- "What emotions did you experience today—positive, negative, or unexpected?"
- "Have any of your perspectives shifted since yesterday?"

These reflections will provide a real-time snapshot of participants' experiences, allowing us to identify patterns of discomfort, acceptance, and transformation.

5. Post-Intervention Survey (T3)

Once the intervention period concludes, participants will complete a follow-up survey. This will repeat many of the questions and scales from the pre-intervention assessment, enabling us to measure changes in attitudes and behaviors.

Additional questions will ask participants to reflect on:

- The most surprising reactions they encountered.
 - Whether they feel more confident challenging traditional gender norms.
 - Any lasting impressions or personal growth they attribute to the experience.
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6. Longitudinal Survey (T4)

Six weeks after the intervention, participants will receive a final survey designed to evaluate the long-term impact of the experience. This survey may repeat key scales and qualitative questions from earlier stages while adding new prompts based on preliminary findings. The goal is to understand whether the intervention's effects are sustained over time or if additional support is needed to maintain positive change.

Proposed Timeline

1. **December 2024 – January 2025:** Recruitment and demographic survey.
2. **February 2025:** Intervention and daily diary entries.

3. **March – April 2025:** Analysis of post-intervention and longitudinal data.
 4. **May 2025:** Final follow-up survey and data synthesis.
 5. **July 2025:** Publication of findings and public release.
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Potential Applications

This expanded research stage will provide actionable insights for:

1. **Workplace DEI Programs:** By demonstrating how immersive experiences can foster empathy and allyship, this study offers a blueprint for more impactful diversity initiatives.
2. **Men's Mental Health Campaigns:** The findings could inform interventions aimed at reducing the stigma around vulnerability and emotional openness in men.
3. **Countering Toxic Masculinity:** At a time when online movements like the "manosphere" and figures like Andrew Tate promote toxic masculinity, Hard As Nails provides a powerful counter-narrative that resonates with a broad audience.

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Appendices

Appendices A and B list the themes mentioned by participants along with the number of participants who mentioned them in response to each question.

Appendix A – Summary of pre-nails survey

Q1. How are you feeling about your new nails?

Excited: 6

Bit of both: 2

Q2. What are the reasons you wanted to have your nails done?

Pushing boundaries: 3

Unhappiness with concept of masculinity: 2

Doing something new: 2

Was invited: 1

Had chance to attend after seeing HAN article: 1

Admired men in fashion: 1

Makes me think how others judge: 1

Supporting a friend: 1

Mentorship to mental health matters: 1

Demonstrate “love over fear”: 1

Meet new people: 1

Expressing myself: 1

Q3. How were you feeling before coming to the nail bar?

Excited and nervous: 4

Nervous, discomfort: 2

Excited and energised: 1

Curious about the outcome: 1

Don't want to smudge my nails: 1

Q4. What positive reactions do you expect to get?

Comments / compliments: 8

Empathy from others (communicative but deeper): 3

Convincing others to join in: 1

Get conversation: 1

Unsure: 1

Q5. Do you expect to get any negative reactions? If so, what are they?

Disapproval from people with different concept of masculinity: 4

Don't expect any: 3

Mild disapproval through being made fun of: 2

Reminder of negative memories: 1

Awkwardness rather than negative: 1

Q6. How did you feel while at the nail bar?

Fun and excitement: 3

Teaming up with like-minded people: 3

Welcomed: 3

Chatting with nail technicians: 3

Energised and calm: 2

Really nice atmosphere: 1

Unexpected connections: 1

Q7. How did you feel after you left?

Happy, felt good: 3

Eager to show other people: 3

Excited: 2

Took effort to get used to them: 2

Meeting amazing people: 1

Proud, anticipating comments: 1

Q8. As you enter into the research phase this week, are you thinking differently about anything

Want more interaction with people: 4

Still surprising and excited: 2

Don't want son to be pressured into traditional male role: 1

Keen to see how long it takes to get used to them: 1

Son focused on colour: 1

Felt more comfortable than expected: 1

Paying more attention to others' nails: 1

Amused that no one in work has commented: 1

Appendix B – Summary of interactions and events survey

Q1. *Broadly speaking has your experience been:*

Positive: 6

Q2. *What have been the highs?*

Interacting with others: 10

Connecting with other men: 3

Being a part of something: 1

Meeting the group: 1

Doing something I thought was uncomfortable: 1

Q3. *What have been the lows?*

Less interaction than wanted / expected: 3

Male friend's negative response: 1

Not convincing entrenched attitudes: 1

Social media exposure was uncomfortable: 1

Paranoid about damage to nails: 1

None: 1

Q4. *How have your family reacted?*

Supportive family members: 7

Loved the nail art: 1

Should be a campaign: 1

Q5. How have your colleagues reacted?

Positive experience overall: 4

Seen as a part of my personality so not unusual: 2

Some male colleagues stayed silent: 1

Q6. How have your friends reacted?

Positive interactions: 5

Seen as a part of my personality: 2

Felt it was courageous: 1

Some banter but a catalyst: 1

Q7. How have strangers reacted?

Little or no response: 5

Conversations and positive responses: 3

Compliments from women but not men: 1

Q8. *Have people reacted in different ways in different environments?*

Very exciting: 3

Few or no responses: 3

Just some looks on the Tube: 1

Q9. *What kinds of discussions have you had and how have they made you feel?*

Very positive and energised: 2

The mechanics of good nails: 2

Mental health (in general plus men in particular): 2

Masculinity and society: 2

Superficial conversation about nails but not deep: 2

Can offer my own perspective: 1

Opened me up to my own vulnerability: 1

Racism: London v rest of country: 1

More conversations than ever before: 1

Q10. *What is the best discussion you have had and why?*

At initial nail painting: 2

Inner monologue: Was nervous and skeptical but thought about expectations of men:
1

Accepted by feminist friend for first time when I drove a change: 1

Conversion with PT: 1

Talking about mental health challenges: 1

Q11. *What is the worst discussion you have had and why?*

Little or no discussion: 4

No bad ones but disappointed some did not ask: 1

Negative conversation with male friend who felt men shouldn't do this: 1

Q12. *How has it generally made you feel?*

Very positive experience: 4

Want to keep the nails: 1

It felt like I was doing something positive which gave energy: 1

Happy connecting to the group: 1

Uncomfortable on social media, anxious about network finding out: 1

Unsure if I want to continue painting nails: 1

Q13. *Has it made you think about things differently?*

Using experience and privilege to lead: 2

Difficult conversations are easier: 2

Showing vulnerability to others can help them open up: 1

We need to do more about mental health: 1

Didn't realise allyship could be joyful: 1

More open than before: 1

Surprised by lack of reaction: 1

Society needs to be fluid not rigid and must evolve attitudes: 1

Appendix C – Summary of post-nails survey

Positive experiences

Common factors:

Making connections with other people, often strangers (bonding)

Having conversations about traditional ideas of masculinity and stereotypes, using nails as ice-breaker

Seeing other people do the same thing bravely

Negative experiences

Common factors:

Stereotypes being maintained and used

Concern about other people's reactions used

Reactions may have been inappropriate in setting

Allyship means challenging stereotypes

Neutral experiences

Only one so no common factors but often mentioned:

Engagement about nails did not happen because of "politeness" (minding own business, not wanting to embarrass) which may have been seen as a virtue (conflicting needs that are unstated and cannot be known until stated).

Appendix D – Summary of workshop

Q1: *“Word challenge: About nails being painted”*

“Lots of excitement was observed in the group but also some deeper feelings about a challenge, an awakening about being noticeable and, possibly, vulnerable.”

Fun, exciting, love: 4

Awakening: 1

Challenge: 1

Noticeable: 1

Vulnerable: 1

Q2: *“Best thing about having nails done was...”*

“The participants experienced new conversations with people that went in directions they’d not encountered before with people sometimes asking the general question, “why?”, other times offering compliments. There were also deeper and more meaningful conversations inspiring thoughts about sensitivity, the barriers constructed around a certain perspective of masculinity and how breaking through them can feel liberating. Feeling more comfortable about going to salons in future was also mentioned inferring a much greater ease with the practical mechanics of getting nice nails.”

New conversations with people: 6

Barriers, social constructs, feeling liberated: 4

Some new, novel, exciting: 3

Meeting and connecting with people in a meaningful way: 3

Became sensitive: 1

In professional environment, people ask me why? 1

Things I wouldn't normally have (compliments): 1

More comfortable going to the salon and choosing colours, etc: 1

Q3: *"Word association: "Awkward""*

"A common source of awkwardness was that other people often didn't mention the nails explicitly, despite them being noticed. This awkwardness came from both sides and gave participants a desire to be bolder in future in raising the issue with other people. Younger and older people appeared to be more comfortable with men painting their nails than those between but not all was negative: Some participants reported that colleagues expected them to do something like this, even despite initial surprise; and influential people may be more comfortable than expected, particularly when the actions towards allyship are clarified.

Exposure on social media was a source of awkwardness when the spread of information was outside of a participant's control which may exacerbate vulnerability. There was some expectation of awkward conversations with family members."

People not talking to me about my nails or avoiding mentioning it despite showing an interest: 5

People close to me criticising in what feels like an unfair way: 2

Younger people were fine, didn't expect that from old but they were: 1

Had chat with influential client about nails: 1

Was unexpected of me, I'm naturally anxious: 1

Knew about awkward conversations with family: 1

My nails being on social media was awkward. It's going to distant colleagues without my explanation: 1

Colleagues looked surprised but it's the kind of thing I do: 1

Q4: *"Word association: "Uncomfortable""*

"Being uncomfortable appeared to stem from people noticing the nails but not talking to the participant about them. A positive outcome was the perception of masculinity being a driver of allyship. It also aided in understanding the perspectives of other more vulnerable people in society. There was an awareness that this activity should never impinge upon the recipients of allyship so care is needed.

Some felt that they should have pushed back against any negativity encountered like when, for example, a conversation about nails led to what were perceived as homophobic statements."

Getting non-verbal attention but no one talking directly to me about them: 6

Possible negative consequences with men treading on womens' toes: 3

Generating empathy in me, seeing the world from other people's eyes: 3

Masculinity as a driver of allyship: 2

Should have pushed back against negativity: 1

Need to include cohorts of people so participants are not alienated: 1

Conversation about why having nails painted leading to homophobic statements: 1

Q5: *"As a movement?"*

“Vulnerability was experienced by participants and seen as a driver of personal growth with positive feelings (such as feeling lots of potential and communicating love, kindness and openness) being externalised and sparking great conversations. Thoughts dwelt upon how hard it was to display toxic masculinity with painted nails and how helpful they were to getting outside of orthodox masculine roles and into something where painting ones nails is more normalised. One even worried about doing manual activities and the safety of their nails but also realised women do this all the time.

Curiously, experience of going through normal life with painted nails led to participants normalising it and may have reduced the strength of vulnerability.”

Vulnerability is a driver of personal growth: 4

Positive feelings externalised: 3

Hard to display toxic masculinity with painted nails: 1

Worried about nails, especially doing manual work (but then, so do women!): 1

Had hair dyed before so easier for me but helpful to guys to get outside the “man box”: 1

Makes me wonder if this will be normalised: 1

Q6: *“What kind of man would have biggest impact?”*

“In terms of the kinds of men who would have the biggest impact (allies of the allies), most possibility was seen as lying with all men or celebrities with a particular likeliness of painting their nails (Harry Styles was the name most mentioned), although icons like David Beckham and George Clooney were also mentioned, using a combination of age and style. Despite that, there was some mention of support coming from unexpected, less artistic sources as a driver of allyship.”

All men: 2

Harry Styles: 2

Leaders / allyship: qualities, role models (Beckham or Clooney): 2

Unexpected, less artistic types: 1

Age and style: 1

Q7: *“What kind of environment?”*

“The best kind of environments for introducing nail painting among men was seen as either regular events (similar to Mowvember) and as a part of a regular self-care routine. A common point was that it must be inclusive and not force participation before it could be a normal, everyday activity for men. Some skepticism about this being a popular movement was noted and the issue of timing might be important for dedicated periods such as weeks or months: It must not overstep time periods for other worthy causes.”

Use regular events to introduce and normalise (e.g., Mowvember): 3

Encourage it to be a part of self-care routine: 3

Must be inclusive and not forced: 3

Becoming a normal, everyday activity: 2

Skeptical it could be a movement but it could be: 1

Timing is important for dedicated weeks/months: don't overstep: 1

Celebrate effort rather than outcome: 1

Q8: *“Best partners?”*

“For partners, the preferred approach was that of a male perspective (Clooney, Beckham, male allies, premier league footballers or beer brand) but a female approach (self-care brands like Dove) was also included. There was also mention of charities and glamour magazines but one person warned of consequences such as the recent media furore over a Bud Light promotion.”

Male perspective and approach: 4

Female approach (self-care brands, female expanding into male): 2

Personal grooming brands: 2

Glamour magazines, faces of changing masculinity: 1

Charities: 1

Careful of response (e.g., Bud Light): 1

Q9: *“Most inspiring thing you might tell stranger?”*

“The relationships between men along with the warmth, closeness, openness and reflection that emanated were very rewarding aspects and seen as positive masculinity. Going through the experience of painting nails as a man helped participants feel more genuine, grounded and authentic and helped them feel inspired to get involved and continue their efforts. Mention was made of how this could have made a positive difference to participants’ lives if it had happened earlier, that it is an easy thing to do and easy to back out of, that it’s fun with a group of other men, and that it used to be historically normal for certain men in society to wear makeup. Finally, the sense of vulnerability can help open men up to new conversations with new people and demonstrate authentic allyship.”

Male “brotherhood” – aspect of positive masculinity: 5

Longer-term positive changes: 2

Heritage: Used to be normal for men to wear makeup: 1

Easy, low stakes: Can be reversed easily: 1

Being vulnerable opens up conversations: 1

Overall interpretation

Vulnerability may well be a key element, both to help men understand the vulnerability and perspectives of those whom they aim to support, but also to help generate a greater sense of connection with others by providing the keys needed for deeper conversations about how masculinity could play out today.

Beyond this, men treasure brotherhood with other men and can understand vulnerability more than we may realise; and shared experience can bond men together into a common aim. With a more positive masculinity, this common aim can improve the welfare, not just of men, but of everyone.

Finally, men often find character in refusing to play by the system's rules. Painting your fingernails as a man is a clear statement that you're willing to play a different game and have a say in how the game is played. In doing so, a man is willing to take a risk for a decent cause for the welfare of everyone and, in short, be a man.