

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

“Real men” need keepsakes too: both Italian men and women use inanimate objects to cope with separation

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BACKGROUND

Using tangible objects to alleviate distress contradicts the traditional masculinity that is stereotypically attributed to Italian men. This study tested whether the willingness to use a photograph of a romantic partner as a substitute for that person and as a cue for nostalgia in the situation of unavoidable separation depends on gender and conformity to the traditional masculine norms of Italian adults.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

The study involved 119 Italian adults. Participants were randomly assigned to the separation or the connection condition. Next, they described the willingness to use a photograph of their partner as a substitute and as a cue for nostalgia; then we measured men's differences in their conformity to masculine norms.

RESULTS

We did not find support for the hypotheses that gender or traditional masculine norms impede using inanimate objects to regulate emotions.

CONCLUSIONS

It is worth considering photographs as reminders of social bonds that are accessible for both men and women.

KEY WORDS

separation; gender role norms, attachment to inanimate objects; Italian men

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BACKGROUND

Counteracting loneliness can significantly improve people’s well-being, especially in situations such as the coronavirus pandemic in which a social-distancing policy is implemented (Palgi et al., 2020). The attachment theory (Bowlby, 1997) posits that when threatened or distressed people seek connection to their attachment figures such as romantic partners. When the attachment figure is unavailable, they use “substitute objects,” i.e. inanimate objects that symbolize the attachment figure. Indeed, research shows that tangible reminders of social bonds such as photographs of loved ones help to regulate the unsatisfied need for closeness and can provide temporary substitutes for direct interaction (e.g., Gardner et al., 2005; Niemyjska, 2019). However, does the traditional masculine identity interfere with using photographs to cope with loneliness? The aim of this study was twofold: First, it was to test whether Italian men – who are stereotypically perceived as traditionally masculine (Tager & Good, 2005) – differ from Italian women in their willingness to use inanimate objects to cope with unavoidable separation from a loved one. The second aim was to investigate whether men’s willingness to use inanimate objects depends on their conformity to masculine norms.

Previous research showed that people who experience an unavoidable separation from loved ones (e.g., work-related temporary separation, the death of a spouse, or the end of a relationship) use inanimate objects, mainly photographs, to cope (Gardner et al., 2005). Research shows that in such critical moments people may redirect their attachment to inanimate objects, which become substitutes for their loved ones. That maintains the sense of connection even if the person is gone (Niemyjska, 2019, Study 3). Another mechanism of the alleviation of loneliness using inanimate objects is nostalgia (i.e., a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past; Wildschut et al., 2006). Tangible reminders of loved ones may elicit nostalgia that, in turn, restores the sense of connection by boosting perceived social support (Zhou et al., 2008) and/or motivating people to pursue friendships (Abeyta et al., 2015).

The research on counteracting loneliness with inanimate objects shows that gender does not moderate the effects of using inanimate objects as a partner substitute (Niemyjska, 2019) or as cues for nostalgia (Abeyta et al., 2015; Wildschut et al., 2006; Zhou et al., 2008). However, in some of these studies men were underrepresented (e.g., Niemyjska, 2019, Studies 1 & 3; Wildschut et al., 2006, Studies 2-6; Zhou et al., 2008, Study 4). Thus, in this study, we wanted to confirm that when the separation is unavoidable, both men and women alike report willingness to use inanimate objects as substitutes for romantic partners and as cues for nostalgia.

Using tangible objects to satisfy the need for closeness contradicts the traditional masculinity that is stereotypically attributed to Italian men (Tager & Good, 2005). The masculine-gender-norms approach defines traditional masculinity as conformity to norms that have been set for men in the form of societal expectations for how to behave in the public or private spheres of life (Mahalik et al., 2003). The norms comprise issues such as the importance of winning, risk taking, self-reliance, the primacy of work, heterosexual self-presentation, being a playboy, displaying violence, restrictive emotionality, and exhibiting power over women (Mahalik et al., 2003; Parent & Moradi, 2009). It may be difficult for men who conform to traditional masculine norms to use inanimate objects associated with their loved ones to regulate emotions for at least two reasons.

First, the socialization of young boys that compels self-sufficiency and restrictive emotionality may leave men unprepared to cope with separation by using close relationships to regulate anxiety (Blazina & Watkins, 2000). Indeed, Blazina and Watkins (2000) found that men who conform rigidly to restricted emotionality and high achievement norms (as indicated by increased gender role conflicts) report decreased attachment to their parents and relationship problems resulting from separation or individuation difficulties. Detachment in close relationships may discourage people from attributing special meaning to inanimate objects associated with close others and/or using them as reminders of social bonds. Likewise, Niemyjska and Parzuchowski (2020) observed that avoidant attachment predicts a decreased tendency to use inanimate objects as substitutes for a romantic partner. Similarly, Wildschut et al. (2010) found that people with elevated attachment avoidance derive much less social connectedness from nostalgia than do people with low attachment avoidance.

Second, using inanimate objects to counteract loneliness per se may produce a gender role conflict, that is, a psychological state that has negative consequences for a person (O’Neil et al., 1986). Someone who conforms to masculine norms of restrictive emotionality and the primacy of work and winning may experience discomfort when using inanimate objects to bring up emotions and nostalgic reveries. Moreover, from the traditional masculinity perspective, collecting photographs and other keepsakes may be perceived as something sentimental and worthless, something that “women do,” because using inanimate objects to regulate emotions suits feminine norms of being emotionally expressive (Kring & Gordon, 1998), affectionate, dreamy, and focused on relationships (Mahalik et al., 2005).

In sum, although we did not expect gender differences in the willingness to use a photograph of a partner in the situation of unavoidable separation, we expected that the conformity to masculine norms

would moderate the effect of separation on the use of a photograph. We hypothesized that men who are high (compared with low) in conformity to traditional masculine norms would be less willing to use the photograph of their romantic partner as her substitute and as a cue for nostalgia.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

PARTICIPANTS

The study involved 119 Italian partnered, heterosexual adults. Of these, 60 were women and 59 were men ($M_{\text{age}} = 24.10$, $SD = 3.30$, age ranging from 19 to 36). They were undergraduate students of the University of L'Aquila. They were in romantic relationships, but not with each other. The mean length of their romantic relationships was 37.9 months ($SD = 24.0$, ranging from 2 to 37 months).

MEASURES AND PROCEDURE

This research was conducted before the coronavirus pandemic, through a paper-and-pencil study that took place in classrooms. Participants received booklets with all instructions and materials. The procedure, manipulation, and dependent variables align with those of Niemyjska (2019, Study 1), but with two key differences. First, this study was a paper-and-pencil rather than an online study. Second, at the end of the study, we added a measure of individual differences in the conformity to masculine norms (for men only) along with additional questions unrelated to the current analyses (e.g., feminine norms – for women only).

Manipulation of separation from romantic partner. This study aimed to test whether a person experiencing separation from a loved one will use a photograph of this person as his/her substitute and/or as a cue for nostalgia. To observe how someone changes his/her perception of their partner's photograph, we compared the separation condition to a possibly natural situation, that is, the connection (control) condition when social needs are satisfied. To evoke a sense of separation (vs. connection), we used a fictional scenario. Participants imagined a fictional situation in which a powerful storm blows their ship far off course, where it crashes against rocks. They were asked to imagine ending up on a desert island – alone (in the separation condition) or with their loved one (in the connection condition). For full instructions, see Niemyjska (2019, Study 1). To check the effectiveness of this manipulation, we asked how vivid the image of the island was (on a scale from 1 – *not at all* to 7 – *very much*) and how distressed participants felt about the imagined scenario (two items rated on

a scale from –4 – *definitely unpleasant/painful* to 4 – *definitely pleasant/definitely joyful*; $\alpha = .91$).

Participants followed the desert island scenario. They learned that “they discover that a photograph of themselves with their partner miraculously survived the shipwreck.” Then they described how they would use the photograph of their partner.

Photograph of a partner as that partner's substitute. Six items measured the extent to which participants would direct attachment behavior aimed at their romantic partner to the person's photograph and thus use the photograph as a substitute for their partner (e.g., “To what extent would you talk to a photograph of a partner?” and “To what extent would you kiss the photograph of your partner?”; $\alpha = .92$). The answers were rated on a scale from 1 (*definitely no*) to 7 (*definitely yes*).

Photograph of a partner as a cue for nostalgia. Six items measured the extent to which participants thought the photograph of their partner would elicit nostalgia (e.g., “Nostalgia is a sentimental longing for the past. To what extent would this photograph make you feel nostalgic?” and “To what extent would this photograph make you reminisce about the past?”; $\alpha = .86$). The answers were rated on a scale from 1 (*definitely no*) to 7 (*definitely yes*). Questions about photograph-related nostalgia were mixed with questions about the photograph being a substitute for the participant's partner.

Individual differences in conformity to masculine norms. Additionally, male participants fulfilled the Italian version of the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (CMNI-46; Parent & Moradi, 2009; Tager & Good, 2005), which is an abbreviated version of the original 94-item CMNI (Mahalik et al., 2003). The CMNI-46 assesses conformity (or non-conformity) to masculine norms that reflect expectations of masculinity constructed by Caucasian and middle- and upper-class heterosexuals in the Western culture (Mahalik et al., 2003). This instrument consists of nine scales measuring the importance of winning (e.g., “In general, I will do anything to win”; Cronbach's $\alpha = .48$), emotional control (e.g., “I never share my feelings”; Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$), risk-taking (e.g., “I enjoy taking risk”; Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$), violence (e.g., “I am willing to get into a physical fight if necessary”; Cronbach's $\alpha = .79$), exerting power over women (e.g., “In general, I control the women in my life”; Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$), being a playboy (e.g., “I would feel good if I had many sexual partners”; Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$), self-reliance (e.g., “I hate asking for help”; Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$), primacy of work (e.g., “My work is the most important part of my life”; Cronbach's $\alpha = .50$), and heterosexual self-presentation (e.g., “I would be furious if someone thought I was gay”; Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$). The reliability of the whole inventory was .85. The answers were rated on scales of 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 3 (*strongly agree*).

RESULTS

The manipulation of imagined separation from a partner was successful. A 2 (imagined separation vs. imagined connection) × 2 (women vs. men) analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated the main effect of imagined separation for distress related to the imagined scenario of being separated from a partner. In the separation condition, participants rated the imagined situation as significantly more unpleasant and painful ($M = -2.78$, $SD = 1.57$) than in the control condition ($M = 0.30$, $SD = 2.27$), $F(1, 115) = 73.32$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .40$. There was no effect of gender on this variable. Moreover, in both conditions the vividness of participants’ imagery was similar ($p = .474$).

First, we tested whether gender moderated the effect of imagined separation from a partner on using an inanimate object as a substitute for that partner and a cue for nostalgia. A 2 (imagined separation vs. imagined connection) × 2 (women vs. men) ANOVA indicated only the main effects of imagined separation for a substitute function of the photograph, $F(1, 115) = 7.76$, $p = .006$, $\eta^2 = .06$, and the photograph as a cue for nostalgia, $F(1, 115) = 23.27$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .17$. Importantly, there was no effect of gender on using the photograph as a substitute for a partner

or as a cue for nostalgia. See all statistics in Table 1 and supplementary materials.

Next, we tested whether men who showed high (as compared to low) conformity to traditional masculine norms would be less willing to use the photograph of their romantic partner as a substitute and a cue for nostalgia. To this aim, we analyzed only the results obtained from men. Multiple regression was employed to test the interaction effects of the experimental condition and the conformity to masculinity norms on the willingness to use a photograph of a partner as that partner’s substitute and a cue for nostalgia. Variables were standardized prior to inclusion in the analyses. The analysis was run separately for the conformity to all masculinity norms (and its interaction product) and then for each of the nine norms (and the interactions). See all statistics in Table 2. The mean, standard deviation, and zero-order correlation values for the study variables are reported in the supplementary materials.

None of the norms showed significant interaction effects. Thus, we did not find support for the hypothesis that in a situation of unavoidable separation, men’s conformity to masculine norms would decrease their willingness to use of a photograph of a romantic partner as her substitute or a cue for nostalgia.

Table 1

ANOVA summary

Dependent variables	Photograph as partner’s substitute					Photograph as a cue for nostalgia				
	Source	df	MS	F	p	partial η^2	df	MS	F	p
Condition	1	24.70	7.76	.006	.06	1	17.12	23.27	< .001	.17
Gender	1	4.75	1.49	.224	.01	1	0.28	0.38	.536	.00
Condition × Gender	1	0.15	0.05	.826	.00	1	0.70	0.95	.332	.01
Error				115					115	

Table 2

Moderating effects of conformity to masculine norms on men’s willingness to use the photograph of their romantic partner as her substitute and as a cue for nostalgia when separated from their romantic partner (vs. connected)

Variables	Photograph as partner’s substitute				Photograph as a cue for nostalgia			
	SE	β	t	p	SE	β	t	p
Condition	.14	.24	1.78	.080	.47	.44	3.72	< .001
Masculinity general	.14	-.07	-0.50	.618	-.13	-.12	-0.97	.338
Condition × Masculinity	.14	.03	0.22	.831	.22	.20	1.68	.099
R ²	.06				.26			

Table 2 continues

Table 2*Table 2 continued*

Variables	Photograph as partner's substitute				Photograph as a cue for nostalgia			
	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Condition	.14	.24	1.87	.066	.13	.44	3.71	< .001
Winning	.14	.00	0.03	.973	.13	.08	0.65	.520
Condition × Winning	.14	.22	1.67	.100	.13	.16	1.36	.179
<i>R</i> ²	.11				.23			
Condition	.14	.24	1.85	.071	.13	.44	3.71	< .001
Emotional control	.14	.05	0.38	.707	.13	-.11	-0.92	.360
Condition × Emotional control	.14	.06	0.49	.626	.13	.14	1.19	.238
<i>R</i> ²	.07				.23			
Condition	.14	.26	1.94	.058	.13	.44	3.54	.001
Risk taking	.14	.10	0.71	.483	.14	-.06	-0.51	.614
Condition × Risk taking	.14	-.05	-0.40	.691	.14	-.01	-0.08	.937
<i>R</i> ²	.07				.20			
Condition	.14	.25	1.91	.062	.12	.48	4.18	< .001
Violence	.14	-.09	-0.71	.482	.12	-.31	-2.69	.009
Condition × Violence	.14	.08	0.59	.558	.12	.06	0.52	.606
<i>R</i> ²	.07				.30			
Condition	.14	.24	1.84	.071	.13	.44	3.69	.001
Power over women	.14	-.05	-0.34	.737	.13	.12	0.99	.326
Condition × Power	.14	-.06	-0.46	.650	.13	.10	0.79	.436
<i>R</i> ²	.06				.22			
Condition	.14	.21	1.61	.114	.13	.44	3.58	.001
Playboy	.14	-.14	-1.04	.302	.14	-.02	-0.14	.888
Condition × Playboy	.14	.03	0.20	.845	.14	.07	0.60	.552
<i>R</i> ²	.08				.21			
Condition	.14	.24	1.82	.074	.13	.44	3.69	.001
Self-reliance	.14	-.01	-0.08	.932	.13	-.08	-0.69	.496
Condition × Self-reliance	.14	-.04	-0.26	.794	.13	.12	1.02	.312
<i>R</i> ²	.06				.22			
Condition	.14	.23	1.78	.080	.13	.44	3.71	< .001
Primacy of work	.14	-.19	-1.40	.168	.13	-.16	-1.28	.205
Condition × Primacy of work	.14	-.07	-0.53	.596	.13	.13	1.07	.289
<i>R</i> ²	.09				.25			
Condition	.14	.24	1.83	.073	.13	.45	3.73	< .001
Heterosexual self-presentation	.14	-.01	-0.08	.934	.13	-.01	-0.04	.969
Condition × Heterosexual	.14	-.05	-0.38	.703	.13	.16	1.29	.204
<i>R</i> ²	.06				.23			

DISCUSSION

The results did not provide any evidence that men and women facing an unavoidable separation differ in their willingness to use a photograph of their romantic partner as a cue for nostalgia and a substitute for their partner, replicating the pattern found in a feminized sample of Polish adults (Niemyjska, 2019, Study 1). However, these results extend previous findings by showing that both men and women use inanimate objects and that this effect is plausibly not culture-specific because it has been observed in two European countries. Most importantly, the results do not support our hypothesis that traditional masculine norms of restrictive emotionality and primacy of work would impede using a photograph of a romantic partner as a substitute or a cue for nostalgia. If the use of inanimate objects (such as a photograph of a partner) is independent from masculine norms, it opens opportunities for using artifacts to alleviate loneliness, for example, as part of a therapeutic process. Despite the image of a “real man” based on traditional masculine norms, it appears that “real men” need keepsakes too.

This study has important limitations. First, despite the stereotype of an Italian man as a patriarchal macho, Tager and Good (2005) found that Italian male students reported significantly lower adherence to most masculine norms measured by the CMNI than their American counterparts. Furthermore, our study involved young men (students), who may display substantially lower conformity to traditional masculinity than older men (e.g., Pompper, 2010). Thus, future studies could test whether men who score high on traditional masculinity (e.g., mature or elderly men) are willing to use inanimate objects to cope with loneliness.

The generalizability of the results on inanimate objects other than photographs could also be a concern. A photograph of a partner may be a keepsake that fits well with the masculine identity, unlike other types of keepsakes. In popular war movies, soldiers often hold dear photographs of women. Also, a photograph of a lover may be perceived as a trophy that attests to a man’s attractiveness and agency (Niemyjska et al., 2020). Photographs of romantic partners may therefore fall outside the usual realm of memorabilia (associated with femininity) and more closely align with masculinity than artifacts such as love letters (and emails), clothes, jewelry, and holiday souvenirs. Finally, following the original study (Niemyjska, 2019, Study 1), we used a sample size of 59 men, which is relatively small, and thus our study may be underpowered. Considering all these limitations, one must be careful about drawing definitive conclusions.

This research showed that an observer sensitive to traditional masculine norms may create false expectations about men’s reactions to unavoidable separation.

The assumption that traditional masculinity hinders using photographs of loved ones as substitutive objects and as cues for nostalgia can limit development of coping strategies within a therapeutic process. Our results, however preliminary, suggest that it is worth considering photographs as reminders of social bonds that are accessible for both men and women. Given that social isolation and loneliness severely impair health (Palgi et al., 2020) and contribute to increased mortality (Steptoe et al., 2013), surrogates for a loved one may, at least temporarily, be an important source of support.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Table 3

Descriptive statistics for dependent variables

Experimental condition	Dependent variables	Photograph as partner's substitute			Photograph as a cue for nostalgia			
		Gender	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Separation	Men		4.17	1.92	30	6.56	0.59	30
	Women		4.49	1.62	30	6.51	0.57	30
Control	Men		3.18	1.84	29	5.65	1.14	29
	Women		3.66	1.74	30	5.90	1.00	30

Table 4*Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for the study variables*

Variables	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	M	SD	Kurtosis	Skewness
1. Photograph as partner's substitute	.56**	-.09	.02	.05	.06	-.08	-.03	-.19	-.02	-.18	.00	3.88	1.83	-1.04	0.08
2. Photograph as a cue for nostalgia		-.20	.10	-.12	-.14	-.27*	.11	-.12	-.10	-.21	-.03	6.16	0.93	2.29	-1.45
3. Masculinity general			.53**	.67**	.07	.49**	.44**	.45**	.56**	.48**	.54**	2.21	0.28	-0.46	-0.21
4. Winning				.30*	-.18	.24	.17	.14	.19	.21	.27*	2.61	0.42	0.82	-0.37
5. Emotional control					-.17	.23	.16	.07	.57**	.29**	.37**	2.17	0.54	0.91	0.93
6. Risk taking						.15	-.17	.00	-.09	-.11	-.05	2.25	0.48	0.16	-0.18
7. Violence							-.07	.07	.02	.17	.13	1.93	0.61	-0.11	0.37
8. Power over women								.24	.26*	-.02	.50**	1.61	0.49	0.63	0.56
9. Playboy									.12	.30*	-.01	2.11	0.81	-0.98	0.25
10. Self-reliance										.25	.11	2.29	0.63	0.23	0.31
11. Primacy of work											-.06	2.20	0.70	0.98	1.09
12. Heterosexual												2.40	0.60	0.33	-0.43

Note. Note that only men ($n = 59$) fulfilled the CMNI-46. Masculinity general – the conformity to all norms assessed by the CMNI-46; Heterosexual – heterosexual self-presentation; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$.