Example of a Proposal 2

**Title:** Fresher pressure: Examining the damaging effect of lad culture on first-year male University students.

**Key words**: Lads, masculinity, students, university life, student experience.

**Introduction:**

The transition from school to university is daunting for many young people. For most students, they are leaving home for the first time and adapting to an unfamiliar environment and social surrounding. The task of making new friends is frequently viewed as intimidating but necessary to effectively integrate (Wilcox et al., 2006). Men may feel pressured into acting as a ‘lad’ as a means of bonding with other men to create friendships, since there is habitually a dominant lad culture on the university campus (Phipps and Young, 2013: 4). In a study by Phipps and Young (2013) lad culture was defined as ‘a group or pack mentality residing in activities such as sports and heavy alcohol consumption, and banter which is often sexist, misogynist and homophobic’. Since first-year men often conform to the laddish norm to avoid isolation, this generates pressure to be tough and conceal any difficulties they may face to maintain their masculine identity. However, young men becoming part of a social circle that views emotion as a sign of weakness is not healthy for their wellbeing, since they are deprived of social support (Preece, 2009). This research will use a qualitative approach to examine the impact of lad culture on first year university males and how it can be harmful for men regarding mental well-being.

Finding your Way: This introduction highlights previous work, starts to hint towards a knowledge gap, indicates that this is a problem worth engaging with, and that this can have wider implications e.g. beyond lads and into wider society.

**Literature Review:**

A significant amount of literature concerning lad culture focuses on its adverse effects on females, rather than on men who become part of the culture. This is because the peer pressure put on first-year men is often underestimated, due to the belief that men are assumed to be tough and resilient (Fisher, 1993). This is reaffirmed in a study conducted by the Priory group (2015) that found over three-quarters of male students find it difficult to believe their friends and have mental health issues.

Peer pressure and the inherent need to ‘fit in’ arguably influences men to converse or communicate and act in a certain way to allow them to fit in with the ‘lads’ (Verkaik, 1998). This can be associated with Goffman's (1956) theory on presentation of self, which states people are actors with a “front stage”, referring to how we behave when we are aware we have an audience, often shaped by expectations from our audience. Hochschild (1983) builds upon this notion, arguing that emotional cues are essential for human interaction. Hochschild (1983) describes the rules surrounding masculinity as being far stricter than the rules for femininity, suggesting if a man were to present his emotions visibly in the way a woman may, his sexuality would be questioned. Hochschild (1983) also maintains that men are socialized to understand aggression as masculine and therefore positive, a characteristic commonly seen in lad culture.

Furthermore, West and Zimmerman (1987: 17) suggest that we ‘do gender’, arguing
that an individual's gender is ‘not simply an aspect of what one is, but, more fundamentally,
it is something that one does, and does recurrently, in interaction with others’.
In accordance with Goffman (1956), West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that
gendered behaviour is enacted based on what others expect. Sallee and Harris (2011) continue that the way someone does gender is contextual; individuals perform gender for others who then determine whether their performance meets the standards expected for appropriate gendered behaviour. Consequently, such monitoring ensures the compliance of males to the socially prescribed gendered behaviour within groups of males (Sallee and Harris, 2011). Moreover, since accepted norms dictate the behaviour of individuals and the norms within university are dominated by lad culture, men frequently feel required to partake to fit in. Those who disregard the norms, such as if a man was to appear to feminine, would then be either perceived of as gay or have their masculinity challenged by other men Kimmel (2001).

Men are seldom able to express emotion because of the attached stigma of not ‘acting like a man’, hence do not have the support network of an understanding social circle (Clare, 2000). This corresponds with research indicating that men are less open than women in recognizing mental health problems, a finding that suggests lack of openness in men, highlighting a gender specific issue that must be acknowledged (Mackenzie et al., 2006). However, there is a significant lack of literature on why men struggle discussing emotions, specifically first year men since they are experiencing lad culture and are at an impressionable and vulnerable time in their lives. This research is important to gain an understanding of the harmful effects of lad culture experienced by first-year men regarding mental well-being.

Finding your Way: This review of the literature highlights the main themes of the research and ties them together effectively. It provides a solid justification for the study and shows a clear knowledge gap. The connection to sociological theories/concepts and links created between these shows analytical thinking too.

**Aim:**

* To explore sociologically the damaging effects of lad culture on first year males in relation to mental well-being.

**Specific Objectives:**

1. Do first your males feel pressure to conform?
2. Do those who partake in laddish behaviour approve of their actions?
3. Do they feel unable to express emotion because of participating in lad culture and what are the implications of this on their mental well-being?

Finding your Way: The inclusion of a broad aim and the breakdown of this into specific research questions help to outline the direction of the project. These questions are all doable for the scale of this project.

**Method and Methodology:**

This research will utilize a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding to address the questions posed above. Respondents will be first-year male students at the University of Sheffield and will be accessed using snowball sampling**.**

Following an extensive literature review analysing secondary data, interview questions
will be constructed for both of focus group and one-to-one interviews. The focus group
will have 6 participants and may help students open up, thus creating broader detailed
information about personal and group feelings. Following this, 10 to 15 one-to-one
interviews with male first-year students will be conducted, which will allow for more
control over discussion and subsequently individuals may give more in-depth answers
than they would necessarily reveal within a group setting. Both will take a semi-structured form to allow flexibility and gain detailed responses for in-depth qualitative analysis, remaining focused on the specific topic of their feelings towards lad culture at university and whether it has affected their wellbeing (Bryman, 2012). The focus groups and interviews will be recorded using a dictaphone, then transcribed. With content thematically analysed to find key patterns in the data.

Finding your Way: The methods are appropriate and justified. However, some acknowledgement of challenges of undertaking potentially sensitive interviews and how this is resolved might have been useful. Additionally, some more discussion of the sample would strengthen the proposal.

**Ethical Issues:**

Due to the personal nature of the research, limitations may include participants not feeling comfortable to confess emotions due to the ongoing stigma for men and therefore they might not be completely honest. Informed consent will be obtained through the distribution of an information sheet to all participants, disclosing the aims of the research and what their involvement will include. Furthermore, participants will be made fully aware of their right to withdraw and the participants will be given pseudonyms to protect their identity (Kaiser, 2009).

Finding your Way: This is a good brief ethical overview. To improve, confidentiality could have been noted here (e.g. keeping data shared within the FG’s confidential), as well as signposting information about local/national support services to the participants.

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