

The image shows two men standing in a field of tall grass. The man on the left is wearing a grey hoodie and is gesturing with his hands as if speaking. The man on the right is wearing a denim jacket and is listening. The entire image has a warm, yellowish-orange tint. Overlaid on the center is the text 'Healthy Masculinity Forum' in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The word 'Healthy' is on the top line, 'Masculinity' is on the bottom line, and 'Forum' is on the right side of the bottom line. A thin black horizontal line is positioned under the 'H' in 'Healthy'. An orange square frame surrounds the text, with the top-left corner cut off by the horizontal line.

**Healthy
Masculinity Forum**



Design for Social Innovation MFA
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BACKGROUND

Preface

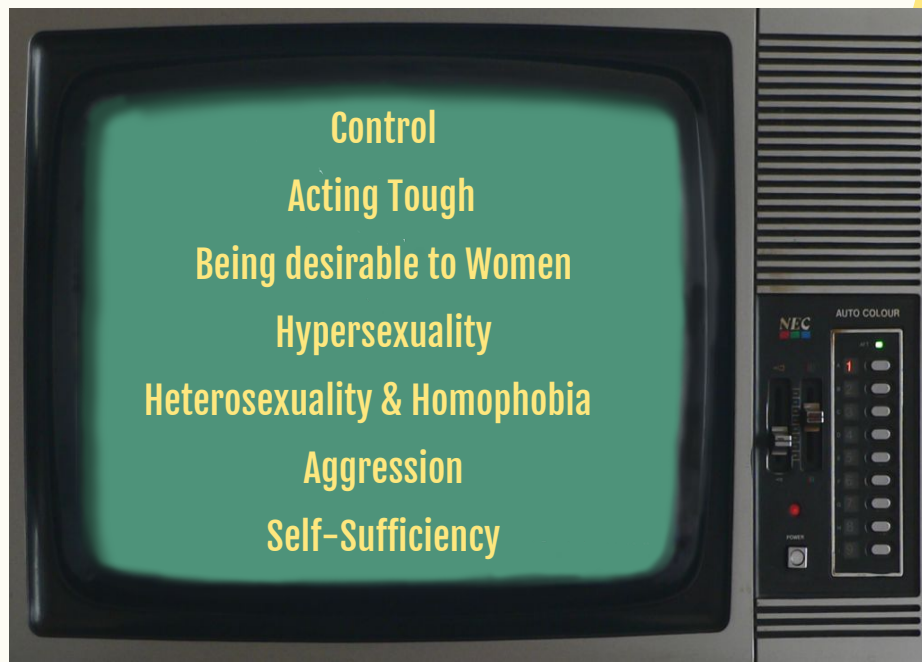
My name is Damian and I arrived at DSI with a background in marketing and content strategy. Before marketing I was an educational and social justice activist. I got my start in youth and criminal justice, however I attended a speakout where women shared men's sexual violence against them. This experience reframed my pedagogical approach to social change. Instead of organizing to change policy makers or others in power, I realized how my gender afforded me power and that I have the responsibility to change and raise the awareness of myself and my peers.



Addressing unhealthy masculinity is important for my own wellbeing and for other men. Equally as important is holding myself and other men accountable for the power and privilege our gender affords us, and the responsibility we have to foster a healthier and more equitable society.

Context

In the seminal book, *The Myth of Masculinity*, author and psychologist, Alan Peck asserts the ways that boys are enculturated to perform traditional masculinity. In the 1980's, Paul Kivel of the Oakland Men's Project coined the term "the man box" to describe these rigid characteristics. Some of these include the following:



“Man Box”

In light of the #MeToo movement, the discussion of masculinity has come into focus again. Through news and social media platforms, such as twitter, public discourse refers to these characteristics as toxic masculinity, however I refer to them as unhealthy masculinity, traditional masculinity and being in the man box.

Context

In 2018 the organization Promudo, a global leader in gender equity, conducted an international study building off of Kivel's man box framework to understand the experiences of men inside and outside of the box. The study further revealed dramatically different experiences between men who were trying to live up to traditional masculinity and those who weren't.

Overwhelmingly, men have experienced pressure to be in the box. 70% of men in the united states reported that they had been told "act like a man."

In the united states, for example, 81% of men in the box said that they had bullied someone compared to 23% of men outside of the box.

Sexual Assault



56% of men in the box reported to have had suicidal thoughts compared to 19%. Men commit suicide 3.5 time more often than women.


Bullying



71% of men inside of the box reported to have sexual harassment whereas men outside of the box reported at a rate of 7%. In fact, men comprise 97% of those arrested for sexual assault.

Mental Health





Disrupt the Man Box

The link between mental, emotional and physical harm and the man box is evident. In order to increase men's overall health, their relationship with other men, women and society, we need to understand how to disrupt support men to move outside of the box.

At the outset of thesis, my initial question was how might we design an intervention that motivates men to move from within the box to outside of it. This question was the initial guide leading the evolution of my thesis inquiry and process, landing at the final intervention- the Healthy Masculinity Forum.

A photograph of a meeting room with wooden chairs and a patterned rug, overlaid with a teal tint and the word 'RESEARCH' in white text. The room contains several wooden chairs arranged in a circle, a patterned rug, a wooden table, and a brown leather chair. A person's leg in blue jeans is visible on the left. The word 'RESEARCH' is centered in the foreground in a bold, white, sans-serif font.

RESEARCH

Process Overview



Time

Research and co-creation started in spring of 2019 and continued through spring 2020.



Research & Co-Creation

Qualitative research included two community partners with auxiliary interviews.



Insights

Research was iterative and generated three evolving lines of inquiry before arriving at the final intervention

Community Partners

Positive Masculinities Group

The Positive Masculinity group started September of 2019 and has over 100 cis and trans in their 20's and 30's of different racial and class backgrounds coming from the tri-state area. The group meets monthly at the Ethical Society in Brooklyn with an average turnout of 7-15 participants. The meeting format is open and members set the discussion topics, such as anger, dating or work as it relates to positive masculinity.

Feminist Discussion of Masculinities

The Feminist Discussion of Masculinities started in 2016 and holds monthly meetings at the LGBT center in New York. There are four facilitators that include queer and straight men and women in their early 30s and they set the meeting discussion topics for each meeting. The group is open to all genders and ages and has over 800 members. Around 20 participants show up to the meetings. The goal of the group is to foster a safe space to discuss the gendered expectations of men and masculine-identified people.

I engaged in both groups as a researcher and a participant. Over the course of the thesis process I maintained direct communication with the facilitators and members.



Lines of Inquiry

Primary Inquiry


Inquiry at outset: For men that are outside of the box, how did they get there and what was their process?

Secondary Inquiry

Deeper line of inquiry: How might we create opportunities for men to call-in other men?

Tertiary Inquiry

Refining the Inquiry: How might we create a resource for men outside of the box to feel empowered to call in other men, in any situation?



Primary Inquiry

For men that are outside of the box, how did they get there and what was their process?

Primary Inquiry: insights

Stepping out of the box requires vulnerability

1

“ If you're completely secure [as a man] then you would be able to go for the ideal moral high ground. Righteousness. But if you're not, you're going to fill that gap with what you think it means to be a man and what the world is telling you you're supposed to be.”

Men were motivated to step outside of the box by being “called-in” vs “called-out

“After several days of not talking we finally spoke. She told me that I had really hurt her. She told me that she really valued me and our friendship and that she wanted me in her. And she wanted me to know how id hurt her so we could continue to be close. It was hard to hear. In order to acknowledge the hurt I had caused I had to admit I did something wrong- I had to confront this sense of weakness. Framing is everything. Instead of calling me out, she called me in.

2

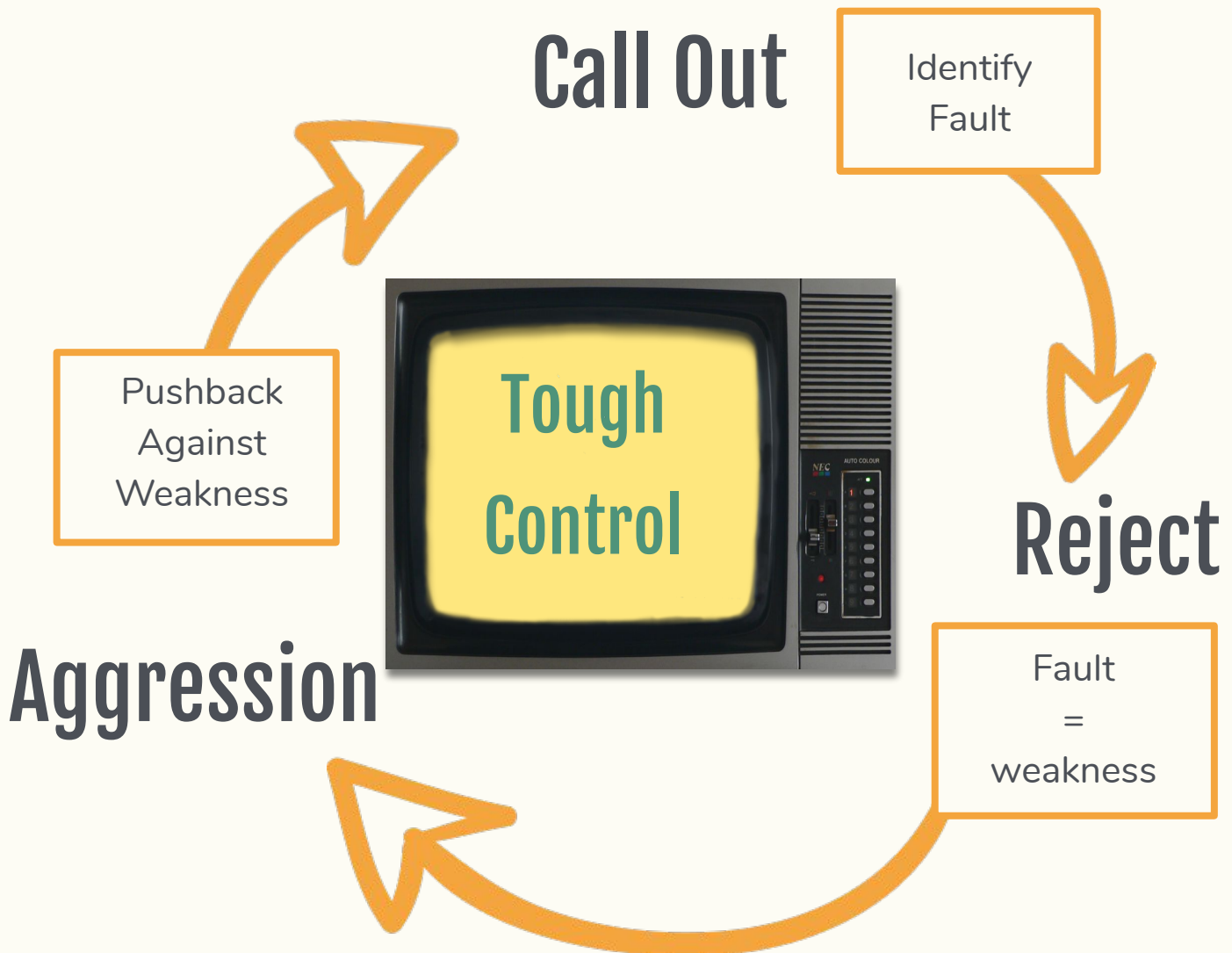
Once outside of the box, experiencing vulnerability is empowering and rewarding

3

“I was locked in a prison for over 20 years. This prison didn't have any walls. This prison was my fear. My fear of my feelings. “

Primary Inquiry: takeaway

The **man box** is a perfect negative reinforcing loop- when someone calls out men's unhealthy masculinity they reject fault as its seen as weakness. Instead, men lean into aggression to regain control with defensiveness, which strengthens the manbox, not disrupting it.





Secondary Inquiry

How might we create opportunities for men to call-in other men?

Secondary Inquiry: calling-in

To better understand working being done around calling-in, I attended a workshop in the fall put on by the national anti-racist organization, **Standing Up For Racial Justice**, know as **SURJ**. The workshop included discussion and conversation scripts that we used for role playing to practice calling-in.



It's important to note that sometimes calling-in isn't the most appropriate response. At a time when someone in power may be acting violently, calling-out can be an important tool to suppress the violence. Also, standing in solidarity can be taking a step back and letting marginalized communities advocate for themselves. Calling-in isn't easy, and often calling-out becomes a backup when speaking up when one isn't sure how.

Secondary Inquiry: insights

To learn how we might have men call-in other men I circled back with the community partners to understand the opportunities and challenges they faced calling in their peers in their daily lives.

What I found was that it was really hard and that there were two main barriers they faced trying to call in other men.

Men struggle to know how to talk to other men

“There’s the man that I am and the man I want to be. In those situations I’m not sure I’m the right person to say something when I still have a lot to figure out.”

1

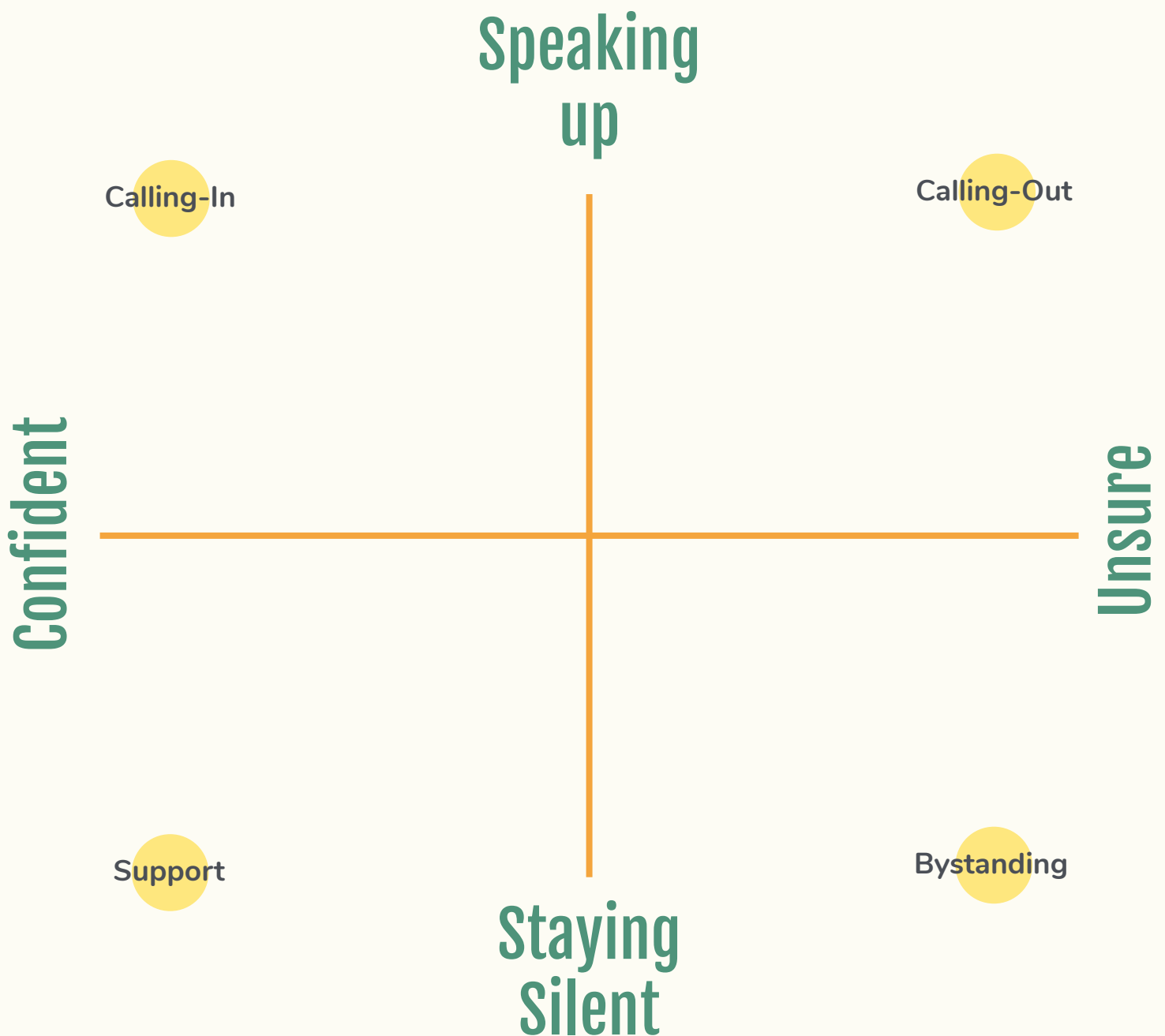
Times when there is opportunity to call-in are often difficult and men don’t know how

2

“I’m part of a sports league, and I know there’re issues with what a lot of the guys say. I know I should say something, but I’m in the locker room and everyone is changing; I just don’t know how to do it at these times.”

Secondary Inquiry: takeaway

Undoing traditional masculinity is an ongoing process, which can create hesitations for men to speak up, and secondly the circumstances can be difficult to know how to call-in in those moments.





Tertiary Inquiry

How might we create a resource for men outside of the box to feel empowered to call in other men, in any situation?

Tertiary Inquiry: insights

We set out to have two co-creation sessions with the Positive Masculinity group using role playing and collaging define healthy masculinity and develop a calling in toolkit. Instead of the activities, a conversation developed that took the focus away from the initial plan.

Men want more opportunities to connect with other men

1

“It’s so hard to make friends with other men. We need to have something to do. In high school we had things like sports that brought us together- an activity. They didn’t actually bring us closer together. Maybe that’s why we (men) become more and more isolated after high school.”

Men want a space where they feel safe to be vulnerable by sharing their questions, thoughts and feelings

“I’m lucky, I have a few core group of male friends that we’re able to get deep with each other, but I know so many men that don’t have their group of friends or don’t have that group they’re able to be vulnerable with.”

2

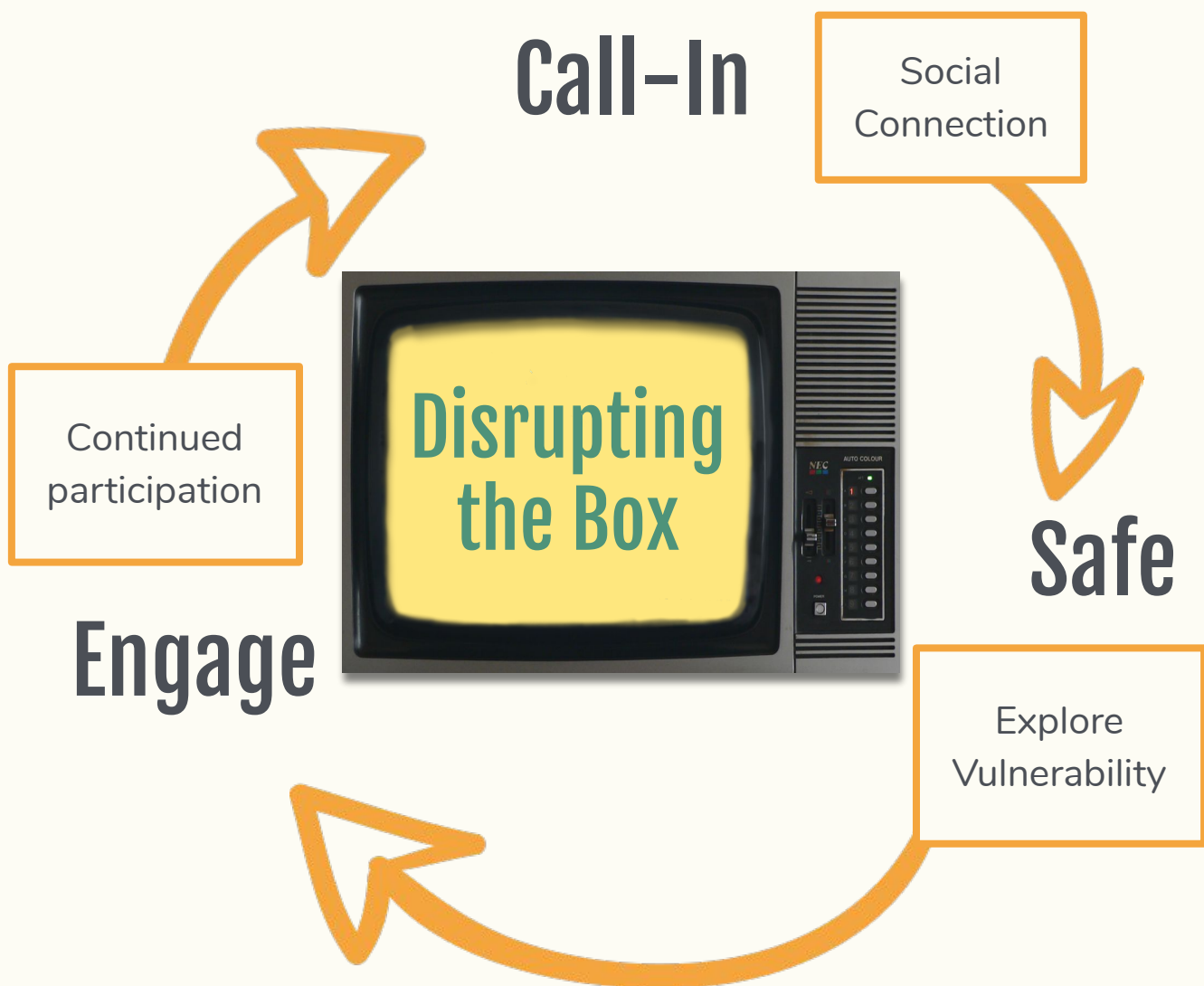
Men want a dedicated place, like a group, that is easy to access that they can refer other men to the platform

3

“There are times when I wonder, was I being sexist? This group is so important because I have a place to talk about issues and have the support of you all to question myself.”

Tertiary Inquiry: takeaway

Spaces like the Positive Masculinity group are an essential tool. This is where the work is being done to call men in. The work of calling in happens because they provide a platform to forge connection, which offer participants security to be vulnerable with each other, and a space/platform that is an intentionally-driven community space to participate.





INTERVENTION



How might we create a space for men to have supportive friendships and community, to be vulnerable with themselves and others, in order to foster healthy masculinity?

Intervention Overview

The **Healthy Masculinity Forum** is a dedicated website to building an online and offline community. The forum fosters men's desire to connect with other men and be supported through questioning and discussions. The forum is also a dedicated platform that they can participate and refer others, at any time and from any place.

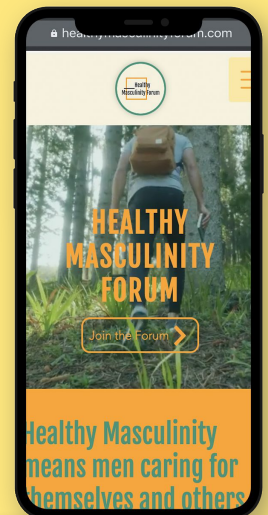
Unlike third party sites, like facebook, the Healthy Masculinity Forum is dictated by its participants from design, functionality, management and moderation. Secondly, unlike reddit, we wanted to create a conversation platform that focused on healthy masculinity that includes easy to navigate and search topics.

Having a standalone site is for complete community ownership and a design that reflects its members.

Website Features



Website



Visit The Site

Meetup Handbook



Download

Forum Ad



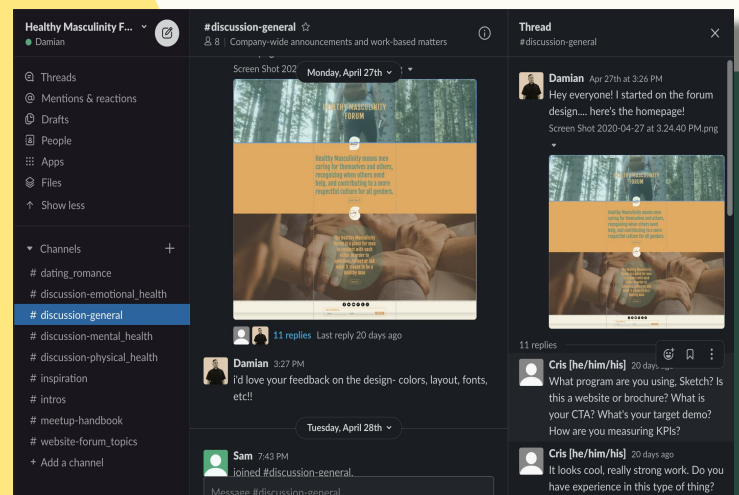
Watch Ad

Co-Creation Process



Given the pandemic, during this process the ongoing co-creation, we moved to a **Slack** workspace and **Zoom**. On slack we were able to test the functionality of an online community, conversation topics organized by slack channels, as well as get ongoing feedback on the website design. Zoom was a great way to have realtime website feedback and monitoring.

Some of the initial design considerations were gender neutral colors with a hint of masculine, inclusive images of men, and forum topics. Site navigability was a point of feedback as well as concept validation through excitement and eagerness for participation.



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Thank you:

Thesis Advisor Esther Kang

DSI Staff and Faculty

The DSI graduating class of 2020