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RESEARCH

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Boys Do Cry: what do Australian men think of a music video encouraging them to talk about their mental health struggles?

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Abstract

Background Suicides by men account for three-quarters of all Australian suicides. This increased risk may relate to the traditional masculine norm of 'self-reliance', which can hinder men from seeking help when experiencing mental health difficulties. We created and tested the effects of a four-minute, purpose-designed music video, 'Boys Do Cry', to encourage Australian men to show emotion and reach out to others when facing mental health difficulties.

Methods A total of 221 men (aged 18+) watched the Boys Do Cry video and completed two surveys about their opinions of the video and its impact. Data were collected as part of a broader randomised controlled trial. We conducted descriptive analyses of numerical data and performed a content analysis of text responses.

Results Most participants enjoyed watching the video. The core messaging, encouraging men to express their emotions and seek help when struggling, was seen as valuable and needed. The most prominent theme in our qualitative findings highlighted the importance of seeing the diversity of men in the video in terms of characteristics like age, culture, and appearance. Participants saw this diversity as representative of the society they live in.

Conclusions This study demonstrates the acceptability of using a music video to promote help-seeking for mental health difficulties among men. It also highlights the importance of creating persuasive narratives to which specific audiences can relate, in order to foster meaningful behaviour change.

Keywords Help-seeking, Male, Mental health, Media, Suicide

Background

Suicides by men account for three-quarters of all Australian deaths by suicide [1]. International trends show a similar predominance of suicide deaths among men [2]. Suicide is a complex phenomenon with many contributing factors. However, those that likely contribute to this elevated suicide rate among men include greater use of drugs and alcohol [3, 4], use of more lethal means in suicide attempts [5, 6], propensity for social withdrawal when depressed [3], and lower likelihood of seeking help for mental health difficulties [7, 8]. Social withdrawal and reduced help-seeking may relate to dominant masculine

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social norms in Australian, and similar, cultures. These norms communicate that ‘real men’ should be able to deal with their problems alone. In the masculinity and mental health literature, this dominant masculine trait, termed ‘self-reliance’, has been associated with suicide risk among men [9, 10].

It therefore follows that promoting an opposing message that it is acceptable, and indeed desirable, for boys and men to reach out to others in times of mental health difficulty may contribute to preventing suicides among men. Media campaigns promoting help-seeking among various at-risk groups have shown some success in help-seeking intentions and behaviours [11–14]. A randomized controlled trial (RCT) was conducted to test the effects on help-seeking among Australian men of a four-minute purpose-designed music video, ‘Boys Do Cry’ [15]. The video encourages men to show emotion and reach out to others when they are experiencing mental health difficulties. It shows a large and diverse group of Australian men in a community hall singing a revised version of the Cure’s classic rock song “Boys Don’t Cry” (watch the video here: <https://boysdocry.com.au/>). Halfway through the video, a well-known Australian Indigenous rapper, Dallas Woods, raps lyrics related to the loss of his own friends by suicide (see the lyrics here: <https://boysdocry.com.au/getcracking#lyrics>). The video finishes with the tagline, ‘*When the going gets tough, get talking*’.

In this study, we report results from participants who viewed the Boys Do Cry video and completed two online surveys (at one-week and one-month follow-up) as part of the RCT. In these surveys, using both quantitative and qualitative question formats, we asked participants to provide their opinions about the video and its likely effects if broadly promoted. We aimed to understand what components of the Boys Do Cry video participants liked most and least, as well as their perceptions of the effects on others of viewing the video. In this paper, we present the results of these surveys, with a focus on presenting themes identified in the qualitative data.

Methods

The method for the RCT has been described in detail elsewhere [15, 16]. Briefly, we collaborated with Heirless Films (a film production company) and The Hallway (a creative agency) to produce a professional short video aimed at promoting help-seeking among men; both organisations also assisted with participant recruitment. Additionally, we partnered with Gotcha4Life, an Australian non-profit focused on men’s suicide prevention, which further assisted with recruitment and outreach.

Participants were recruited online from the general population. Recruitment methods included a flyer distributed via our project partners and research team email and social media networks; University of Melbourne

student portal and email lists for male-dominated disciplines (e.g., engineering and business); and snowballing. Participants were randomly assigned to watch either the intervention or control video, with follow-up surveys at multiple time points. All participants were introduced to a study psychologist in an online introduction session and provided with the phone number of that psychologist should they want to contact them during the study and for four weeks after. In addition, any participant who scored above a cut-off on a suicide risk scale were contacted by the psychologist. The detailed protocol for providing support to participants can be found in the trial protocol paper [16].

The present study includes only those who viewed the *Boys Do Cry* video and completed these surveys. Participants had unlimited access to the video for one week before completing the first follow-up survey. The surveys administered one week after viewing (“one-week follow-up”) and four weeks later (“one-month follow-up”) contained purpose-built closed- and open-ended questions assessing participants’ opinions of the video and its impact on their lives (see Table 1 for the number of respondents per question). The survey questions are presented in the supplementary file. Ethics approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Melbourne (2021-14638-18028-3).

Data analyses

We used STATA 17 to analyse the close-ended responses using descriptive statistics and Excel to analyse the open-ended responses. Beginning with the survey questions as a broad framework, we conducted an iterative content analysis [17, 18] to identify common themes in participants’ responses to these open-ended questions. Initially, two researchers (AN, SSR) independently coded responses to each question and identified key themes. We then compared themes, discussed discrepancies, made modifications to the coding framework and recoded discrepancies until agreement was reached. We counted the frequency of occurrence of each theme and report the data in the results section along with illustrative examples taken verbatim from participant responses. Following each quotation, we show the age, region of birth and highest level of education of the participant who supplied the text, illustrating that the provided text has come from a variety of participants. Percentages are calculated based on the number of responses to the question (shown in Table 1); however, as more than one theme could be coded within a single response, the percentages will sum to more than 100%.

Input from the study lived experience advisory group

The *Boys Do Cry* RCT forms part of a larger research program of seven RCTs assessing interventions to reduce

Table 1 Closed and open-ended questions at one-week and one-month follow-up surveys

Question	Response option	n
<i>One-week follow-up</i>		
1. Did you enjoy watching the video?	1 (not at all) to 10 (very much)	221
2. What parts did you like most in the video?	Free text	221
3. What parts did you like least in the video?	Free text	221
4. What do you think was the main take home message of the video?	Free text	221
5. Do you think that the video would have an impact on men's mental health and wellbeing if a lot of men were to see it?	1 (no impact at all) to 10 (a great impact)	221
6. (In response to 5) Please briefly explain your response.	Free text	221
<i>One-month follow-up</i>		
1. Now tell us in your own words what were the parts of the video if any that had the most positive impact on you and explain why.	Free text	221
2. Has the video had any negative impact on you?	Yes/No	214
3. (In response to 2) If yes, tell us more about it.	Free text	11
4. Did you talk to a friend or family member about the video?	Yes/No	214
5. (In response to 4) If yes, how many people did you talk to about the video?	Numerical	112
6. Would you recommend watching the video to your friends or family?	Yes/No	214
7. Would you be likely to comment on this video on social media?	Yes/No	214
8. (In response to 7) Can you tell us why or why not?	Free text	214
9. Would you be likely to share this video on social media?	Yes/No	214
10. (In response to 9) Can you tell us why or why not?	Free text	214

suicide among Australian men, called *The Buoy Project* (<https://lifeinmind.org.au/buoy-project>). To ensure the input of men with lived experience into the Buoy Project, we formed a reference group of men with lived experience of suicide from the organisation Roses in the Ocean (<https://rosesintheocean.com.au/>). Roses in the Ocean offers people with lived experience training and support to empower them to provide input into research and policy. The group is chaired by a member with lived experience.

For this study, we conducted qualitative analysis of data from the open-ended questions and presented the results to a group of six self-selected men from this advisory group. We asked them to assist us in interpreting the findings and to tell us their opinions regarding the *Boys Do Cry* video, its effects on Australian men, other content on the campaign website, and directions for future campaigns for men's suicide prevention and for future research. We have incorporated this input into the interpretation of our findings, limitations of the study, and future directions, as presented in the Discussion. A member of this group also reviewed the manuscript.

Results

Sociodemographic characteristics

Table 2 shows the sociodemographic characteristics of the 221 participants who watched the *Boys Do Cry* video and completed the one-week follow-up survey. Participants had a mean age of 42 years (SD = 13.67). Most were born in Australia (71%) and spoke English at home (90%).

One-week follow-up survey

Enjoyment of the video

The majority of participants watched the *Boys Do Cry* video either once (100, 45%) or twice (70, 32%). When asked to rate how much they enjoyed watching the video on scale from 1 (not at all) to 10 (very much), participants' mean rating was 7.59 ($N = 221$, $SD = 2.45$); almost one-third of participants gave the highest rating of 10 (29%).

In response to the free-text question, *what parts did you like most about the video*, the most common response was the diversity of men who appeared in it ($n = 105$, 48%). The men who appear are a range of ages, from adolescence to older age, from a range of cultural backgrounds and wear a variety of dress. This opinion is reflected in the following extracts from participant responses:

"I loved the idea behind the video, since that group of men actually represent[s] our society. Videos often tend to be anglo-focused, and that is not good for people from different backgrounds." (Age 41, Born in South America, Bachelor's degree or higher)

"I love how diverse the group is and how everyone is involved in the piece of work." (Age 20, Born in Southeast Asia and Oceania, Year 12)

The second most common response was that participants most liked the song, lyrics or performance ($n = 95$, 43%):

"I love anything with a big chorus and the lyrics got stuck in my head it was catchy and I did think about

Table 2 Participants' socio-demographic characteristics (n = 221)

Characteristic	n (%)
Age range	
18–24	24 (10.86)
25–34	55 (24.89)
35–44	50 (22.62)
45–54	48 (21.72)
55–64	31 (14.03)
65–74	12 (5.43)
75–84	1 (0.45)
Country of birth	
Australia	157 (71.04)
Other	64 (28.96)
Language spoken at home	
English	198 (89.59)
Other	23 (10.41)
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	
Neither	217 (98.19)
Aboriginal	2 (0.90)
Torres Strait Islander	0 (0)
Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	0 (0)
Prefer not to answer	2 (0.90)
Marital status	
Married or De facto	119 (53.85)
Widowed	1 (0.45)
Separated	6 (2.71)
Divorced	17 (7.69)
Studying	
No	152 (68.78)
Full-time student	39 (17.65)
Part-time student	30 (13.57)
Education	
Year 11 or lower	4 (1.81)
Year 12	18 (8.14)
Certificate/Trade Certificate/Apprenticeship	30 (13.57)
Associate or undergraduate diploma	19 (8.60)
Bachelor's degree or higher	149 (67.42)
Other	1 (0.45)
Employment	
Employed	177 (80.09)
Unemployed and looking for work	13 (5.88)
Neither working nor looking for work	31 (14.03)

the meaning of the video for a few days later” (Age 31, Born in Australia, Bachelor's degree or higher).

“The unexpected song - it looked like the bearded bloke was going to address the group.” (Age 66, Born in Australia, Bachelor's degree or higher).

Forty-five participants (20%) stated they liked the message of the video, which related to encouraging men to show emotion and reach out to others when they are experiencing mental health difficulties:

“That it tried [to] encourage men to show more emotions” (Age 25, Born in Australia, Bachelor's degree or higher).

“The overall message was clear, easy to understand and portrayed in an interesting manner” (Age 20, Born in Australia, Associate degree or undergraduate diploma).

Thirty-eight participants (17%) liked the support and camaraderie shown by the men in the video:

“.. Feeling of camaraderie, support and understanding amongst the men.” (Age 46, Born in Australia, Bachelor's degree or higher)

“The fact that most of the participants really seemed to feel something, gain strength from singing together.” (Age 51, Born in Western Europe, Bachelor's degree or higher).

Other less common responses were the production of the video (n = 22, 10%; *“the location, the sound, and the camera work” - Age 41, Born in South America, Bachelor's degree or higher*); and that the video was emotionally moving (n = 11, 5%; *“I did have tears in my eyes each time I watched it” - Age 53, Born in Australia, Bachelor's degree or higher*). Two participants (1%) stated they liked nothing about the video.

The most common response to the question, *what parts did you like least about the video*, was “nothing” (n = 74, 33%; *“Nothing. It was excellent” - Age 42, Born in the United Kingdom, Bachelor's degree or higher*). The second most common theme was that the whole approach to promoting the central message was not the right one (n = 51, 23%):

*“It's too long and far too 'ad award worthy'. It comes across as one of those campaigns which *needs* to be artfully shot, imbued with cinematic meaning... and as a result simply looks like someone wanted a well shot 'worthy' video for their reel. A 4-minute rendition of people re-doing that song, is – for me – less likely to cut through and speak to someone who needs help. What is needed is bluntness, relatability, stripped back and honest language. And speed” (Age 34, Born in Australia, Bachelor's degree or higher).*

“I hated most of it. It was in a church, it was like a Pentecostal AA meeting, it was cliched mens [sic] help meeting only thing missing was bongo drums, in fact it would put men off getting help because it reinforces stereotypes about mental health as a namby pamby'give me a hug' problem instead of treating it like a broken leg. 9 out of 10 men/teenage boys would never walk into that room. I hated it for get-

ting it so wrong, and it made me cross” (Age 53, Born in Australia, Bachelor’s degree or higher).

The third most common theme relating to what participants liked the least about the video was the rap section (n = 23, 10%):

“The rapper. Sorry, rap lyrics about mental health just don’t resonate with me. I struggled to understand what he was saying.” (Age 36, Born in Australia, Bachelor’s degree or higher)

“Why does every song have to have a rap section these days?” (Age 65, Born in Australia, Bachelor’s degree or higher).

Other less common themes relating to what participants disliked about the video were the length (4 min) or slow pace of the video (n = 19, 9%; *“... could get to the message quicker” - Age 40, Born in Southeast Asia, Bachelor’s degree or higher*); the song or singing (n = 18, 8%; *“men do not communicate to each other by singing” - Age 62, Born in Australia, Bachelor’s degree or higher*); the setting, which was a large empty hall (n = 18, 8%; *“would be better... at a pub, at a footy game, meeting for coffee” - Age 48, Born in Australia, Associate degree or undergraduate diploma*); not being able to hear the lyrics well (n = 12, 5%; *“sometimes words get lost and too fast to understand” - Age 25, Born in Australia, Bachelor’s degree or higher*); a lack of representation, including of queer men, women, or men from different professions (no professions were portrayed) (n = 10, 5%; *“it came across as very straight and cis-gender” - Age 34, Born in Australia, Bachelor’s degree or higher*; *“[if] some of the guys were in a uniform it may have helped” - Age 42, Born in Australia, Certificate*; *“absence of female participants means the message isn’t being shared to the public” - Age 48, Born in Australia, Associate degree or undergraduate diploma*); and aspects of the production (n = 5, 2%; *“the lighting, the large set” - Age 22, Born in Western Europe, Bachelor’s degree or higher*).

Message of the video

When asked to state what they thought the main take home message of the video was, all participants described variations on the intended central themes. The most commonly stated message related to help-seeking for mental health or life difficulties (n = 112, 51%):

“That men should talk to other people, especially, other men about their feelings and should let their friends know they are open for supportive conversations.” (Age 50, Born in the United Kingdom, Bachelor’s degree or higher).

“When things get tough, no matter who you are, reaching out for help is what assists in overcoming those challenges” (Age 31, Born in Australia, Bachelor’s degree or higher).

The importance of men expressing emotion was also a commonly identified message (n = 83, 38%):

“Expressing emotion and vulnerability is not unmanly, men shouldn’t be expected to suppress their feelings, and that it is healthy for men to connect and communicate with each other about their feelings.” (Age 27, Born in Australia, Bachelor’s degree or higher)

“men is [sic] emotional as well and need to be taken care of” (Age 21, Born in East Asia, Certificate).

Sixty participants (27%) wrote specifically about the message of boys and men being allowed to cry:

“Boys do cry. We have been taught that they don’t and that belief has cost us dearly” (Age 52, Born in Australia, Certificate).

“Men have a stigma that crying is a weakness which this is trying to say it’s perfectly fine to cry” (Age 37, Born in Australia, Year 10).

Fifty-nine participants’ responses (27%) related to men being able to show vulnerability, to feel ‘down’ or to be ‘not okay’:

“It’s ok to show you are vulnerable, you have cracks and flaws like everyone else” (Age 53, born in Australia, Bachelor’s degree or higher).

“Men sometimes experience pain and depression and it’s okay to acknowledge our fragility and ask for help” (Age 36, Born in Eastern Africa, Bachelor’s degree or higher).

Twenty-eight (13%) participants noted the message of the importance of men providing support for each other, of showing solidarity and commonality:

“We’re all in this together” (Age 38, Born in Australia, Trade certificate/apprenticeship).

“Feeling vulnerable is ok, look after your mates” (Age 31, born in Australia, Bachelor’s degree or higher).

Perceived effects of watching the video

Participants were asked to rate (from 1 to 10, with 10 being the greatest impact) how much impact the video would have ‘on men’s mental health and wellbeing if a lot of men were to see it.’ Their expectations for the effect

were positive ($M = 6.81$, $SD = 2.32$); 16% gave the highest rating.

Participants were asked to explain, using free text, the rating they gave regarding the impact of the video on men's mental health and wellbeing. The most common theme was that the key messages were the right ones and that the video would cause men to reflect on them ($n = 114$, 52%):

"I think it would prompt some men to reflect on their feelings and how they express them. Even if they can't picture themselves singing to a group it could encourage men to do lower stake things like initiate a conversation with another person and be candid about their feelings" (Age 27, born in Australia, Year 11).

"I think it would have a great impact if a lot of men saw this video as it has a variety of men that the men watching could relate to. There is a lot of stigma around especially with older men to express their feelings so for older men to see this, it would be fantastic" (Age 21, born in Australia, Year 10).

Less common themes relating to a positive impact were, again, the diversity of the men in the video ($n = 16$, 7%; "all types of men are depicted and the song is great" - Age 31, born in Australia, Bachelor's degree or higher); that the video will need the right setting to have an effect on men ($n = 8$, 4%; "if it was played as an ad during the football grand finals it could have a big impact" - Age 21, born in Australia, year 10). In explaining why the *Boys Do Cry* video might have little impact, most ($n = 29$, 13%) stated it was because the video and its message won't 'cut through', have broad enough appeal, or particularly won't appeal to those men who might need most to heed it:

"I think the video may have impact for some men, but that it might be too 'touchy-feely' for others. It could also be that the song, being forty years old, might not resonate with young men" (Age 52, born in Australia, Bachelor's degree or higher).

"It would only have an affect [sic] on those who are open to this kind of message. I can't see it having a dramatic affect [sic] on those that believe in the old-fashioned idea that men should not express their feelings" (Age 48, born in the United Kingdom, Bachelor's degree or higher).

The second most common reason for why the video might have low impact ($n = 27$, 12%) was that to encourage men to express their emotions and seek help when needed required more than just a video (the participants were not aware, during the trial, that the video would form the centre of a larger campaign):

"One commercial won't make a massive difference, unless it saturates TV and YouTube. For a cultural shift, more work is required" (Age 47, born in Australia, Bachelor's degree or higher).

"I feel that overall it will have an impact, but needs to be alongside some other approaches also. Any major change to societal norms will take considerable time, but this is a great endeavour" (Age 32, born in Australia, Year 11).

A smaller number of participants ($n = 7$, 3%) stated that the messaging is now outdated: "So what - we've heard it all before" (Age 61, born in Australia, Trade certificate/Apprenticeship).

One-month follow-up survey Impact of watching the video

Almost all (95%) participants reported that the video had no negative impact on them. For those participants describing a positive impact, they most commonly reported that they related to the message that it is okay to emotionally open and to talk to others about mental health difficulties ($n = 81$, 38%):

"You're not on your own and don't need to suffer in silence. Reach out to your brotherhood. They will understand, be supportive, and possibly be sharing the same insecurities and life issues. It's OK to voice your issues, "Boys Do Cry"..." (Age 57, born in Australia, Associate degree or undergraduate diploma). "The overall theme of the video and how honest it was. Really made me realise (along with a few other things) how out of date the old style of thinking about what it is to be a man and how we aren't supposed to show emotion or weakness" (Age 31, born in the United Kingdom, Bachelor's degree or higher).

The diversity of men in the video was again noted as impactful, particularly in relation to portraying the message that emotional suffering is a common experience ($n = 50$, 23%):

"The diversity of men represented in the video, and the complexity of men's issues. These allowed me to have more compassion for men in my community that are hurting" (Age 46, born in Australia, Bachelor's degree or higher).

"The fact that there were men and boys of all ages, races and apparent sexual preferences in the same group sending the same message resonated with me. I live in a country town and there is still bias based on these differences which can lead to mental health problems and suicide" (Age 56, born in Australia, Certificate).

Similar to the theme of diversity, participants also stated they recognised the message that all men have mental health difficulties at some time ($n = 39$, 18%):

“There is a stigma against men seeking help in a group environment, and that mental health is isolated to only people who may be homeless or have addiction problems. This video highlighted that mental health doesn’t discriminate, it can affect men from all walks of life.” (Age 44, born in the United Kingdom, Bachelor’s degree or higher).

“The idea of being brave and speaking up and then seeing other men respond. We all have struggles, we all need support from time to time” (Age 58, born in Australia, Bachelor’s degree or higher).

Twenty-one participants (10%) stated that the song, music or singing had the most positive impact on them:

“...The value of music as a way of messaging and expressing emotions. Opening up the mental health issues by various means, in this case through music, is beneficial to all, even me the listener” (Age 65, born in Australia, Associate degree or undergraduate diploma).

Other less common themes were the message of men standing together and supporting each other ($n = 16$, 7%; *“Men of all ages and backgrounds... showing the... brotherhood of men”* - Age 58, born in Australia, Bachelor’s degree or higher); the need to look out more for men who might be struggling ($n = 15$, 7%; *“makes me more conscious to look out for red flags”* - Age 36, Born in East Africa, Bachelor’s degree or higher); the need to take better care of one’s own mental health ($n = 14$, 7%; *“It flicked a switch in my head that I probably need to have the same compassion for myself”* - Age 34, born in Australia, Bachelor’s degree or higher); the need to re-think traditional masculine norms ($n = 8$, 4%; *“made me think a lot more about what defines manhood/strength”* - Age 21, born in Australia, year 12); and thoughts about role-modelling for boys and younger men ($n = 7$, 3%; *“made me think about my own actions and what message I should be sending to my son”* - Age 42, Born in South Asia, Bachelor’s degree or higher).

For those relatively few participants who stated the video had no positive impact on them, the most common reason was because they were already adhering to the messages of the video ($n = 12$, 6%; *“confirmed my current ideas and approach. I didn’t learn anything...”* - Age 38, born in Australia, Certificate). Ten participants (5%) gave negative feedback on the video (*“The video was terrible. Largely forgettable”* - Age 53, born in Australia, Bachelor’s degree or higher); and four stated (2%) it was not the right

message or solution (*“...I saw the video to be a dis-service to men generally...”* - Age 49, born in Australia, Bachelor’s degree or higher).

Eleven participants (5%) stated that watching the video had a negative impact on them. The most common reasons given for a negative impact were similar to those previously discussed relating to taking the wrong approach ($n = 6$, 54%; *“It made me angry to think that a video is the ‘all the eggs in one basket’ response to a very complex issue”* - Age 49, born in Australia, Bachelor’s degree or higher). Four participants (36%) reported reflecting on the message of the video and them feeling sadness or confronted as a response and interpreted this as a negative impact, though this reaction is consistent with the intended message of the video (*“It has made me take the time to stop and think, reflect on my boys and male family, friends”* - Age 54, born in Australia, Associate degree or undergraduate diploma). The remaining comment did not make sense in the context of the question.

Sharing and commenting on the video

Almost equal numbers of participants stated they had ($n = 112$, 52%) and had not ($n = 102$, 48%) talked to a family member or friend about the video. Those who had talked to a friend or family member about the video had talked to a mean of 2.41 people ($n = 112$, $SD = 2.02$, range 1–14). Three quarters of participants stated they would recommend the video to family or friends ($n = 164$, 77%). About one third said they would comment on the video on social media ($n = 74$, 35%) and slightly more stated they would share the video on social media ($n = 96$, 45%).

For those who said they would be likely to comment on or share the video on social media, the most common reasons for wanting to comment on, and share, the video were very similar. The most common theme was wanting others to see the video (comment = 43, 58%; share = 64, 67%):

“It is a fantastic video and I would like to share it with everyone. I think the more people see the video the better for the whole community. I hope this video can shift the social way Australian men perceive themselves” (share) (Age 52, Born in East Asia, Bachelor’s degree or higher).

“To spread the word. I love it” (comment) (Age 42, Born in the United Kingdom, Bachelor’s degree or higher).

This was followed by wanting to encourage discussion or change relating to willingness of men talk about their mental health difficulties (comment = 32, 43%; share = 31, 32%):

"It is a traditionally negative stigma that needs to be spoken about amongst people" (comment) (Age 40, Born in Southeast Asia, Bachelor's degree or higher). "I would share if I knew someone was going through mental health problems. So that they can know it is okay to talk about there [sic] problems to people around them" (share) (Age 27, Born in South Asia, Bachelor's degree or higher).

For those not wanting to comment on, or share, the video on social media, the primary reasons given related to a lack of social media use or not interacting with social media in this way (comment = 96, 69%; share = 69, 58%):

"Not really on social media. Also not overly public like that" (comment) (Age 40, Born in Western Europe, Bachelor's degree or higher). "I don't use social media for this type of purpose" (share) (Age 36, Born in Australia Bachelor's degree or higher).

Fewer participants would not comment on, or share, the video because they did not like it (comment = 3, 2%; share = 17, 14%; *"it's very stupid"* - Age 28, Born in Australia, Bachelor's degree or higher); because they did not think that social media was a good approach to broaching mental health topics (comment = 10, 7%, share = 10, 8%; *"I'd rather spread the message myself in a language my friends and family would receive more genuinely"* - Age 38, Born in Australia, Certificate).

A few participants feared attracting negative judgement through association with the video (comment = 5, 4%; share = 6, 5%; *"Fear of being ridiculed by other boys because I'm saying it's okay to cry"* - Age 19, Born in Australia, Year 12) or negative comments to the video (comment = 3, 2%; share = 2, 2%; *"...Even positive messages attract such toxic behaviour and comments..."* - Age 35, Born in Australia, Bachelor's degree or higher).

Discussion

The aim of the study was to understand what parts of the *Boys Do Cry* music video, which aimed at encouraging men to express their emotions and seek help for mental health difficulties, participants liked the most and the least, as well as their perceptions of the effects of viewing the video. In this study we analysed the responses of 221 men who had viewed *Boys Do Cry* and answered a series of open- and closed-ended questions relating to it. We also gained input into interpretation of this data from a lived experience advisory group of six men. Participants' opinions of the video were largely positive. Most stated that they enjoyed watching the video and that the core messaging, encouraging men to express their emotions and reach out to others when experiencing mental health

difficulties, was valuable and needed, and believed that positive change could result if many men were to see the video following its public release.

Insights about what men in our study liked the most and the least about the *Boys Do Cry* video may be useful to others attempting to appeal to men for the purpose of attitudinal and behaviour change. For narratives to be persuasive, it is important that viewers (or readers) undertake 'self-referencing' in relation to the narrative they are observing [19]. When self-referencing, viewers relate information they are receiving with information in their own memory, associating what they see with their own experiences. There is evidence to suggest that self-referencing is more likely if viewers see similarities between themselves and the protagonist presenting the narrative [19, 20]. The strongest and most repetitive theme found in analysis of our qualitative data was the importance of seeing the diversity of men in the video. Participants saw this diverse group of men as representing the society they live in. This diversity may also have increased the potential for self-referencing because they saw similarities between themselves and one or more of the men they saw onscreen.

Behaviour change messages are also more persuasive when they are internalised by the viewer, and they are more likely to be internalised when they are relevant to the viewer's experience [21]. Another common theme identified in our analysis was that participants believed the messages communicated in *Boys Do Cry* – that despite longstanding stereotypes that 'boys don't cry', it is desirable for men to express their emotions and reach out for help – were timely and encouraged them to reflect upon their own beliefs about masculinity. This internalisation of the video's core messages may assist in promoting consequent behaviour change. (Further discussion of the core message, relating to the masculine norm of 'self-reliance' can be seen in the trial outcomes paper [15]).

The mode of delivery of educational messages is also important to the success of changing behaviour. Delivering education as entertainment (or 'edutainment') is a longstanding approach in public education [22] and its effective use in changing knowledge, attitudes and behaviour has been demonstrated in a range of areas, particularly sexual health [23, 24]. Entertainment-Education is defined as "a theory-based communication strategy for purposefully embedding educational and social issues in the creation, production, processing, and dissemination process of an entertainment program, in order to achieve desired individual, community, institutional, and societal changes among the intended media user populations" [25]. The approach of the video, taking an iconic song *Boys Don't Cry* and adapting it for our messaging to *Boys Do Cry* and having a group of men sing it, was appealing and emotionally moving for many. Given

that the participants rightly identified the key messages of the video and largely enjoyed this approach, music videos may be one relatively novel approach to delivering public health messaging. Mental health and suicide prevention messages may be especially adaptable to this format because of their emotional valence. It should be noted that the original song would have been known to many men in the trial who had grown up at the time of its release (1979). These men are also in the age bracket in which Australian men are at an elevated risk of suicide, and in which this risk is increasing [1], though this song may have less resonance with younger men. The ability for a music video to be used in promoting help-seeking for mental health difficulties was recently evidenced by the American hip hop artist Logic. Following a period of intense public attention on his song “1-800-273-8255”, which encouraged listeners to call this US Lifeline number in times of suicidal crisis, there was a substantial increase in calls to Lifeline and a reduction in suicides [26].

Despite the largely positive feedback we received about *Boys Do Cry*, there was a small number of men strongly opposed to various aspects of the video, including the music video approach, the core messaging, and the setting of which the video was recorded, which involved a group of men singing in a community hall. Given the forementioned concepts of self-referencing, internalisation, and education as entertainment, having one approach to promoting public health messages appeal to a whole population will never be possible. Some men in our study and in our advisory group did not see themselves represented onscreen, despite the diversity of men included; some were opposed to the central idea that it is acceptable for men to appear vulnerable, as it contrasted too strongly their own beliefs about what it means to be a man; and some were not at all entertained by the men singing in the video, rather turning away from it as laughable. Therefore, it is necessary in a public health campaign to consider the need for a variety of approaches that will appeal to different groups of people with differing beliefs and tastes in order to affect the greatest change.

Strengths and limitations

A key strength of this study is its mixed methods design, which offers both breadth and depth of insight by combining quantitative measures with qualitative feedback. In particular, 221 men provided open-ended qualitative data, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how watching the intervention video influenced participants. Moreover, the double and independent coding of the qualitative responses, and significant discussions of reflexive practices related to the coding (particularly in relation to language and cultural points of view between

researchers: Australian (English language) vs. Brazilian (Portuguese)), helped ensure the reliability of the findings between researchers and across the different questions of the survey.

Nonetheless, there are limitations. Because participants could watch the video unlimited times within a one-week period and most of them watched it once or twice, we were unable to explore whether multiple viewings would have substantially altered perceptions or enhanced perceived effects. Additionally, the study may have attracted men who were already interested in mental health, meaning the findings may not fully capture broader attitudes and knowledge among Australian men. Finally, the men in our sample were highly educated – 67% had a Bachelor’s degree or above, compared with 29% in the general Australian population [27] – so perceptions among men with lower education levels may differ.

Future research

Future research aimed at media interventions for suicide prevention for men might benefit from a co-creation process whereby the intervention is developed and evaluated, end-to-end, with men with lived experience of suicide risk. Research into public health media campaigns suggests prolonged and multi-faceted campaigns are those most likely to be effective [28] and consideration should be given to how best appeal to a range of viewers in order to have the broadest effects.

Conclusions

The majority of participants in this study had largely positive feedback on the *Boys Do Cry* video. This study showed that most participants were particularly appreciative of the diversity of men shown in the *Boys Do Cry* video, and of the central message that it is acceptable for men to express emotions and reach out for help in times of difficulty. A minority believed, however, that the approach taken and the central messages were not desirable or impactful. This variation in opinions emphasises the difficulty of appealing to a broad audience across the population. It also illustrates the need for multi-faceted approaches to population-level suicide prevention media campaigns to create cut-through messages that can prevent suicides among the greatest diversity of men.

Abbreviation

RCT Randomized Controlled Trial

Supplementary Information

The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-025-24214-w>.

Supplementary Material 1.

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Authors' contributions

AN, SSR, SR, ZS, and JP were involved in designing the intervention video (Boys Do Cry). JP, SR, and ZS obtained funding for the broader project of which this study is a part. AN was the trial manager. AN and SSR designed the current study. AN, SSR, SR, ZS, JP, MF, and JF contributed to data interpretation. AN and SSR coded and analysed the data. AN and SSR drafted the manuscript and made the decision to submit it for publication. All authors critically revised the manuscript for important intellectual content.

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Data availability

The data analysed in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The survey questions are included in the Supplementary file.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Melbourne (2021-14638-18028-3). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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