

## **THE UNSPOKEN VOICE: THE EXPERIENCE OF EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION THROUGH JOURNALING AMONG MALE COLLEGE STUDENTS**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to understand the subjective experience of male students in using journaling as a means of expressing emotions. Previous research has focused more on journaling as an intervention, while individual experiences in undergoing the process, particularly in male students, are still limited to study. This study uses a qualitative approach with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) analysis. Three male students who had been journaling regularly for at least three years were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed following the stages of science. The results show that journaling functions as a private, safe, and reflective space that allows for the expression of emotions without social judgment. This practice facilitates the release of emotions, supports self-reflection, and allows for the negotiation of internalized masculinity norms in a non-confrontational manner. These findings confirm the relevance of journaling in the context of guidance and counseling and expand the study of masculinity by showing that the expression of emotions can take place through internal processes.

**Keywords:** Emotional expression, Journaling, Male students, Masculinity, Self-reflection.

### **Abstrak**

*Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami pengalaman subjektif mahasiswa laki-laki dalam menggunakan journaling sebagai sarana ekspresi emosi. Penelitian sebelumnya lebih banyak berfokus pada journaling sebagai intervensi, sementara pengalaman individu dalam menjalani proses tersebut, khususnya pada mahasiswa laki-laki, masih terbatas dikaji. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan analisis Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Tiga mahasiswa laki-laki yang telah melakukan journaling secara rutin minimal selama tiga tahun dipilih melalui purposive sampling. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam semi-terstruktur dan dianalisis mengikuti tahapan IPA. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa journaling berfungsi sebagai ruang yang privat, aman, dan reflektif yang memungkinkan ekspresi emosi tanpa penilaian sosial. Praktik ini memfasilitasi pelepasan emosi, mendukung refleksi diri, serta memungkinkan negosiasi norma maskulinitas yang terinternalisasi secara non-konfrontatif. Temuan ini menegaskan relevansi journaling dalam konteks*

*bimbingan dan konseling serta memperluas kajian maskulinitas dengan menunjukkan bahwa ekspresi emosi dapat berlangsung melalui proses internal.*

**Kata kunci:** *Ekspresi emosi, Journaling, Mahasiswa laki-laki, Maskulinitas, Refleksi diri*

## INTRODUCTION

The expression of emotions plays a vital role in an individual's life, including in understanding oneself, managing feelings, and building relationships with others. In the context of social interaction, expressing feelings is often seen as a means of conveying inner experiences and psychological needs. However, in reality, not everyone feels comfortable expressing their emotions. Various factors, such as social norms, cultural values, and societal expectations regarding gender roles, can influence the extent to which a person is open about showing their feelings. In some situations, these barriers lead individuals to choose to suppress or hold back the emotions they are experiencing (Chervonsky & Hunt, 2017).

Research by (Susan et al., 2025) indicates that male adolescents with a strong internalization of masculine gender roles tend to exhibit restrictive emotionality, due to social demands to display strength, resilience, and independence. This does not necessarily mean they reject social norms entirely, but rather how they manage these feelings in daily life. Pilar Matud et al. (2020) found that early adulthood, as experienced by college students—with academic demands, role transitions, and social relationship dynamics—can trigger emotional stress. This situation raises the question: how do male college students actually understand and manage their emotional experiences?

One tool that can be used to capture students' internal processes is journaling or reflective writing. A reflective journal is not merely a record of experiences but also serves as a vehicle for inner dialogue that connects thoughts, feelings, and actions (Hubbs & Brand, 2005). Therefore, its use in higher education is considered capable of fostering critical reflection and transformative learning. (Sahan et al., 2025) found that journals provide a relatively safe space for students to express emotions and personal issues because the writer has full control over who can access their writing, thereby eliminating concerns about direct judgment from others. This finding is supported by Harrington, Morrison, and Pascual-Leone (2018), who demonstrated that increased depth of emotional processing (depth of experiencing) in expressive writing practices correlates with reduced anxiety, enabling individuals to better understand and manage feelings that are difficult to express openly.

Wahyuningtyas & Setiowati (2020) investigated journaling as an intervention to improve students' psychological well-being. Lai et al. (2023), in their meta-analysis, compared the effectiveness of expressive writing and positive writing on mood and health. Both studies focused on intervention outcomes. This focus on outcomes and impacts has resulted in the subjective experience of individuals undergoing the journaling process itself receiving relatively little attention in the literature. Meanwhile, studies specifically exploring journaling experiences among male students in relation to daily emotional expression

remain very limited. Unlike previous studies focused on interventions and impact measurement, this study focuses on how male students actively make sense of their emotional experiences through journaling practices in daily life.

Based on this description, this study aims to gain a deep understanding of how male college students make sense of their emotional experiences through the practice of journaling in their daily lives, as well as how this practice interacts with the ways they view and manage emotional expression

## **METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative approach using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design. This approach was chosen because it is suitable for gaining an in-depth understanding of the participants' lived experiences through the interpretation of personally constructed meanings (Kassai, 2020).

The research participants consisted of three active undergraduate (S1) students selected using purposive sampling with the following criteria: (1) male students aged 18–23 years, (2) who have routinely engaged in journaling as a means of emotional expression for at least the past three years, and (3) who were willing to participate in in-depth interviews and openly share their experiences. The number of participants in this study was three. Eatough and Smith (Eatough & Smith, 2017) emphasize that the number of participants in IPA can range from one to thirty, though the trend leans toward the lower end of this range, and there is increasingly strong justification for smaller sample sizes. (Alase, 2017) also states that IPA studies should focus on a small number of participants (between 2 and 25 people) due to the complexity of human phenomena, and that IPA studies generally benefit from concentrating on a small number of cases. Thus, the use of three participants in this study aligns with common practice in IPA studies and allows for in-depth idiographic analysis.

Data collection was conducted through three methods: semi-structured interviews, observation, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted for 60–90 minutes per session at locations chosen by the participants to ensure comfort and openness. All interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder after obtaining participant consent and were subsequently transcribed verbatim. Observations were conducted non-participatively during the interviews, focusing on participants' nonverbal expressions, intonation, and emotional responses as they recounted their journaling experiences. Meanwhile, documentation was gathered through personal documents—such as journals or writing samples—voluntarily shared by participants regarding specific sections they permitted, to enrich the contextual understanding of the narratives presented.

Data analysis followed the IPA stages according to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2021), which include: (1) intensive reading and rereading of the transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding; (2) making initial notes in the form of descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments in the margins of the transcripts; (3) developing

emergent themes by abstracting patterns of meaning; (4) identifying relationships between themes within each case through theme clustering and mapping; and (5) identifying patterns and integrating themes across cases (cross-case analysis). The coding process was conducted manually by assigning conceptual labels to significant units of meaning in each transcript. This process followed the three generic cycles proposed by Alase (2017): initial condensation of participants’ responses into meaningful statements, further simplification toward the core of meaning, and final categorization representing the essence of participants’ experiences. Theme verification was conducted through member checking—returning the interpretation results to the participants for confirmation—and peer debriefing—discussing the findings with fellow researchers to minimize interpretive bias.

Data validity was maintained through these two strategies consistently throughout the analysis process. The entire research process was conducted in accordance with research ethics principles, including written informed consent, participant anonymity, and the participant’s right to withdraw at any time without any consequences.

**Table 1.** Description of Study Participants

<b>INITIALS</b>	<b>UZ PARTICIPANTS</b>	<b>LV PARTICIPANTS</b>	<b>MY PARTICIPANT</b>
<b>GENDER</b>	Male	Male	Male
<b>AGE</b>	21 years old	20 years	21 years old
<b>STATUS/VACATION</b>	S1/Semester 7 Students	S1/Semester 5 Students	S1/Semester 7 Students
<b>MEDIA JOURNALING</b>	Buku diari, digital diary	Buku diari, digital diary	Diary
<b>LAMA JOURNALING</b>	4 years	6 years	5 years
<b>FREQUENCY OF JOURNALING</b>	Daily and Situational	Situational	Daily and Situational

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Dealing with Expressive Barriers**

All three participants described the difficulty of expressing their feelings as a long-standing experience. UZ stated:

*“Back when I was in junior high, I was a bit reserved and rarely talked. But actually, when there was a space or place to express something—like everyday stories—it was there.”*

This indicates that expressive barriers do not reflect an absence of the need to share, but rather limited access to spaces perceived as safe. Thus, the difficulty experienced by UZ can be understood as a mismatch between the need for expression and the availability of trustworthy relational spaces.

Unlike UZ, LV describes barriers rooted in the lack of clarity regarding whom to share with:

*“It’s just that I’m the type to keep things to myself with my family. I don’t get a pleasant response. When it comes to venting, since I don’t know who to tell, I just write it down.”*

This experience reflects a state of emotional isolation, where available relationships are not perceived as responsive spaces. The uncertainty regarding whom to confide in is not merely practical but indicates the absence of relational bonds that would allow for safe emotional expression.

Meanwhile, MY highlights a more complex barrier, involving the accumulation of emotions alongside social norms that restrict expression:

*“During those times, so many thoughts piled up but I couldn’t just share them like that—things I couldn’t tell others, my parents. I mean, as a guy, the fear and sadness I mentioned, I just held them in, like, ‘What’s the big deal?’”*

The use of the term “over-the-top” indicates that expressive barriers have been internalized as self-judgment. Emotions like fear and sadness are not only perceived as socially unacceptable but are also interpreted as such by the individual themselves. In this context, emotional suppression is not merely a response to external pressure but reflects the internalization of masculinity norms that shape how individuals understand and regulate their self-expression.

### **Journaling as a Safe and Quiet Space**

Participants perceive journaling as a space beyond the reach of others’ judgment. UZ stated:

*“I think if we look at it more broadly, you could say it’s safe. Because there’s no one else, no one at all who can see it. But we can look at it over and over again. So it’s safe.”*

This statement shows that the sense of safety stems from the absence of others as observers. Full control over access to their writing allows participants to express their feelings without fear of external reactions.

A similar perspective was shared by LV:

*“Safe, in my context, means I’m not afraid to pour out my heart. I’m also not afraid of others’ opinions, and I’m not afraid to be open with myself. No one judges me for doing this.”*

For LV, the absence of judgment not only provides a sense of safety but also enables self-openness. In this context, journaling is understood as a space that facilitates self-honesty without direct social pressure.

Additionally, participants also distinguish journaling from direct conversations involving responses from others. MY explains:

*“In a direct conversation, there’s a reaction from the person you’re talking to. Journaling is more like a quiet space—my thoughts, my feelings. With journaling, you can be more yourself, more honest. Honest with the book rather than with people. Because they can’t know what I’m feeling.”*

*“It’s so safe; it’s like a place where I can express everything—even things I can’t tell my own friends. It’s like emotional freedom; that’s a safe space.”*

These statements show that the absence of a response from others allows for more honest expression of feelings. The term “quiet space” reflects a condition where feelings can be expressed without having to consider others’ reactions. Thus, journaling is not only understood as a private space but as a medium that offers freedom to express emotional experiences more openly.

### **Emotional Release Leading to Self-Reflection**

Participants turn to journaling when emotions can no longer be contained within social relationships. UZ and MY describe this experience:

*“At that one moment when I was really down, in a terrible mood. That’s when I poured everything out. Usually I just type it out, write it down there—it’s like a release, you know? Everything gets poured out.”* (UZ)

*“It’s like my ritual, a mental health ritual. I feel weird if I don’t write, especially when things pile up, because I guess I’m just used to it.”* (MY)

These findings suggest that writing functions as a response that emerges when emotional intensity increases. The habit of repeated writing also indicates that journaling has become a reliable way to channel feelings.

The writing process is further interpreted as an emotional release. UZ and LV shared:

*“It’s definitely a relief. How do I put it? It’s like crying, but instead of tears, ink and text come out. It feels lighter.”* (UZ)

*“To vent my emotions, to describe what my moments and expressions are like. I can understand what my condition and circumstances are like, what my emotional state is like, and what the environment is like.”* (LV)

The metaphor used by UZ suggests that writing becomes a medium for channeling emotions that were previously held back. At the same time, LV indicates that the process is not merely expressive but also helps in self-awareness. Thus, journaling serves not only as an outlet but also as a means of understanding the experience being lived through.

Furthermore, participants described changes occurring after writing. LV, MY, and UZ stated:

*“That’s where I realized how I could manage myself and re-evaluate. I gradually changed through the written reflections I’d produced.”* (LV)

*“It’s just about being more self-aware or getting to know myself better, and feeling calmer. Before, there was mental stress and overthinking. It feels like being heard, even though it’s an inanimate object, right?” (MY)*

*“It’s more about self-reflection. After calming down, my thoughts eventually became clearer.” (UZ)*

These findings suggest that after emotions are expressed, participants can reflect on their state of mind with greater composure. The expression “feeling heard by an inanimate object” suggests that writing is perceived as a medium that holds feelings without a response. This allows participants to reflect on their experiences more clearly, so that journaling does not stop at emotional release but continues into the process of self-reflection.

### **Reinterpreting Emotional Expression in Male Identity**

Participants described a shift in how they interpret emotional expression as they gained journaling experience. UZ stated:

*“I used to think sadness wasn’t allowed. But over time—perhaps due to my environment or my way of releasing stress through writing—I gradually realized that sadness actually plays its own role in my life.”*

This quote reflects a shift in the interpretation of emotions from something to be avoided to something that can be accepted. This shift does not appear as a rejection of previous norms, but rather as an expansion of how one understands the function of emotions in life.

LV describes this shift alongside an awareness of social norms:

*“It turns out I’m a very expressive person—I talk a lot. I realized my way of thinking is different. People assume men should be this way or that way, but I’m not. That’s when I realized I’m brave enough to express myself despite the stigma, because self-expression is human and natural.”*

This statement shows that LV is aware of the expectations regarding men’s emotional expression but chooses not to fully conform to them. Emotional expression is understood as natural, not as a deviation from gender roles.

Meanwhile, MY interprets emotional expression as a need not limited by gender:

*“Because this isn’t about being a guy or a girl, but about emotional health. Men should really be able to open up to their own inner world. Writing or venting is something that helps us learn more about ourselves without needing to involve others.”*

*“It’s the most honest place—a way to organize your thoughts, to improve yourself. Taking care of yourself is the same as mental health; it’s about maintaining your sanity.”*

These quotes reflect that journaling is understood as a way to maintain one's well-being. Emotional expression is no longer viewed through the lens of masculine norms, but as part of the effort to understand and care for oneself.

### **Observing and Interpreting Personal Growth**

Participants interpret rereading their journals as an experience of looking back at their past selves. UZ states:

*"Days have passed, and I read it again. Oh, so this is what I'm like when I'm angry. This is such an immature attitude, these traits. It's all about self-reflection."*

*"But after 1–2 years, reading it again, I think, is this really me? It feels different, maybe because we've grown. When we reread it, we can finally reflect on ourselves and understand who we are. We're the ones who've calmed down, the ones no longer consumed by those emotions."*

This quote shows that rereading one's writing allows participants to reassess their past responses. The passage of time helps participants see the changes that have occurred, so old writings serve as a reference for understanding personal growth.

A similar experience was shared by LV:

*"It's actually pretty exciting to read them again. Sometimes there's sadness, sometimes joy, sometimes a desire to relive it. Through this journal, we can see our process. Like, for example, I've already done this, and it's good. I wonder what's missing, what needs to be evaluated."*

*"When I was in middle school, I went through my bookcase and found my middle school diary. I read it until I cried. We've come this far; we've been amazing."*

For LV, rereading the journal is not only about evaluation but also evokes an emotional response to the journey that has been taken. This indicates that the journal is perceived as a record that helps recognize changes, while also giving meaning to those experiences.

Meanwhile, MY interprets this process as part of the effort to get to know oneself:

*"The feeling of being confused about what to do. Hopes, what I want to pursue. How I view others, how I improve myself."*

*"Well, it's part of the process of self-discovery; whether I like it or not, I have to get used to being as honest as possible. Over time, I've become more true to myself."*

This indicates that journaling plays a role in the gradual process of shaping self-understanding. Honesty in writing is practiced repeatedly, thereby contributing to how participants understand and navigate their daily lives.

## **DISCUSSION**

Barriers to emotional expression among young men cannot be understood solely as a matter of personal character; rather, they must be viewed as the result of the interaction

between relational experiences and the internalization of social norms. The tendency to suppress feelings, as seen in the experiences of participants who struggled to find a safe space to share, indicates a mismatch between the need to express emotions and the availability of relational spaces perceived as safe. Within this framework, emotional expression is determined not only by the intensity of emotional experiences but also by the extent to which individuals perceive their environment as responsive and non-judgmental (Ruan et al., 2019).

Relational experiences that lack support, as depicted in participants' narratives regarding uncomfortable responses or the absence of a figure to share with, can contribute to the formation of emotional suppression habits. Nevertheless, empirical evidence suggests that this strategy is not necessarily dysfunctional. In insecure or predictably unresponsive relationships, emotional suppression can actually function as a short-term protective mechanism against negative responses or interpersonal rejection (Chervonsky & Hunt, 2017). These findings not only reinforce the literature on barriers to emotional expression but also shift the traditional perspective by emphasizing that the effectiveness of emotional regulation is contextual; the same strategy can be adaptive or maladaptive depending on the safety and responsiveness of the social environment.

In relation to gender norms, these findings affirm the concept of restrictive emotionality, yet simultaneously reveal more complex dynamics. Restrictions on emotional expression do not merely emerge as external pressure from the social environment but have been internalized into self-evaluation mechanisms, at least in some participants' experiences. This is evident in the emergence of judgments regarding emotions such as "over-the-top," indicating that standards regarding emotional expression do not originate solely from external sources but have also been adopted in how individuals evaluate themselves. This finding is consistent with the findings of Wong, Pituch, and Rochlen (2006), who showed that restrictive emotionality in men is most strongly predicted by negative attitudes toward emotional expression and difficulty identifying feelings. Thus, restrictive emotionality operates not only at the behavioral level but also at the cognitive level through a process of self-policing of emotional experiences. The implication of this is that interventions focused solely on changing expressive behavior may not be sufficient, as these barriers are embedded in the way individuals assess and understand their emotional experiences.

The Indonesian cultural context provides an important framework for understanding these dynamics. In many social practices, men are socialized to demonstrate self-control and emotional resilience, while expressions of emotions such as sadness and fear tend to be restricted (Malhotra et al., 2025). Furthermore, hierarchical and harmony-oriented family relationships often do not provide explicit space for open emotional communication, leading individuals to learn to align their emotional expressions with relational expectations. Findings by Klein et al. (2024) indicate that vertical collectivism, which emphasizes hierarchy and conformity, correlates with increased use of emotional suppression strategies. In this context, participants' difficulty in finding a figure to

confide in reflects not only individual conditions but also points to structural limitations within the social relationships in which they are embedded, suggesting that norms of masculinity and hierarchical collectivist values may mutually reinforce tendencies toward emotional restraint in men. In the Indonesian context, participants' difficulty in finding someone to confide in reflects not only individual circumstances but also indicates structural limitations within social relationships, where masculinity norms and hierarchical collectivist values mutually reinforce tendencies toward emotional suppression. These conditions encourage men to manage their emotional experiences privately, rather than expressing them openly in social relationships.

Amid these limitations, journaling emerges as an adaptive strategy that allows individuals to express emotions without facing social risks. Unlike emotional openness in interpersonal interactions, which is vulnerable to evaluation by others, journaling provides a space that is entirely under the individual's control. These findings not only align with the expressive writing literature but also expand upon it by demonstrating that journaling's function as a space without an audience is particularly significant within the context of the relational constraints experienced by participants (Pennebaker & Chung, 2012). More than just a medium for expression, this study indicates that journaling also functions as reflected in participants' experiences of feeling more honest when writing compared to speaking directly.

Furthermore, the writing process does not stop at emotional release but evolves into self-reflection. Emotional release through writing creates psychological distance from the experienced events, allowing individuals to reorganize their thoughts and feelings. This supports findings in expressive writing studies that emphasize the importance of cognitive processes in helping individuals build an understanding of emotional experiences (Pennebaker, 1997). Thus, the primary benefit of journaling lies not only in catharsis but in its ability to facilitate the restructuring of the meaning of experiences.

Nevertheless, the practice of writing does not automatically result in changes in broader social dynamics. Participants still demonstrated caution in expressing emotions in interpersonal settings. This finding aligns with Smyth's (1998) synthesis, which indicates that expressive writing significantly enhances individuals' psychological well-being and physiological functioning; however, its impact on behavioral changes or social functioning tends to be smaller and less significant. In other words, journaling plays a more dominant role in facilitating the internal processing of experiences rather than directly altering relational patterns or the social context surrounding the individual.

This reflective process then contributes to a reinterpretation of emotions in relation to one's identity as a man. Within the framework of narrative identity, this can be understood as an effort to integrate emotional experiences into one's self-understanding. However, the findings of this study indicate that such integration does not always result in a fully coherent or comprehensive identity narrative, but rather develops through small, context-specific adjustments. These findings align with critiques of the assumption of coherence

in narrative identity theory, which emphasize that identity construction is often fragmentary, dynamic, and shaped through repeated negotiation with social contexts, rather than through a single, unified life narrative (McLean & Syed, 2016). This finding also reinforces the view that self-meaning-making among male participants in this study, particularly within the context of emotional expression constraints, occurs more through partial internal reflection processes than through the articulation of a complete self-narrative in social spaces.

Within this framework, journaling plays a strategic role. The practice of writing is not merely about recording experiences but functions as a medium that facilitates gradual emotional integration, allowing individuals to reinterpret their masculine identity through partial reflective awareness, without being required to achieve drastic identity changes or a final self-narrative.

Furthermore, the practice of rereading journals reveals a reflective dimension that is temporal in nature. Through the repeated process of writing, participants gradually organize their emotional experiences into a more coherent narrative. This is consistent with findings that narratives becoming more focused as writing sessions progress correlate with increased well-being (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999).

Overall, this study demonstrates that journaling serves as an alternative space enabling men to manage emotional experiences within a social context that restricts expression. This practice not only facilitates the release of emotions but also allows for gradual reflection and negotiation of self-meaning. In the Indonesian cultural context, where men's emotional expression remains within certain normative boundaries, journaling can be understood as a strategy that allows individuals to stay connected to their emotional experiences without directly challenging prevailing social norms.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that male students perceive journaling as a safe, private, and reflective space for emotional expression amidst the limited social spaces available for expressing feelings. This practice allows for the release of emotions while facilitating a process of self-reflection, enabling individuals to understand and organize their emotional experiences more clearly.

Furthermore, the findings of this study indicate that journaling serves as a space for internal negotiation regarding masculinity norms. Emotional expression is not directly displayed in social relationships but is processed privately through writing, thereby allowing individuals to remain connected to their emotional experiences without having to openly challenge prevailing social norms. Scientifically, this study contributes in two ways. First, in the field of guidance and counseling, this study demonstrates that journaling can be understood not only as an intervention technique but also as a reflective practice relevant to male students' needs in managing emotions. Second, in the study of masculinity and emotional expression, this research demonstrates that restrictions on emotional expression are not only external but also internalized, and that the process of

self-meaning-making can occur gradually and contextually through private spaces such as journaling.

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