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The use of defensive masculinities by transgender men in the South African workplace

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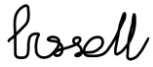
A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts by Dissertation in the Department of Psychology, School of Human and Community Development, Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Witwatersrand

Ethical clearance number: H24/05/44

I declare that this dissertation is my own, unaided work. It has not been submitted before for any other degree at the University of the Witwatersrand or any other university.

Signed: 

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Abstract

Psychological research which focuses on the experience of transgender people, while increasing, remains scarce. This is particularly so within the South African environment and is especially salient at a time when transgender people and their rights are under increased scrutiny, with social discourse and discord around the integration of transgender people in broader society increasing. This qualitative study focuses specifically on transgender men, aiming to explore transgender men's expressions of masculinity in the South African workplace, with a specific focus on defensive masculinities and the impact on mental health. Data for the research was collected through semi-structured interviews with seven participants and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings of this study indicate that transgender men practice defensive masculinities in the South African workplace, and that they are particularly aware of how they present in relation to their gender expression in their places of work. The study suggests that this negatively impacts their mental health and sense of well-being. This finding highlights the need for increased consideration of a population which is at notable risk for developing mental health difficulties. The study makes recommendations for future research which would deepen an understanding of the issues and challenges which this minority group face on a daily basis in their workplaces, against the backdrop of an essentially conservative sociopolitical climate in South Africa. An over-riding objective of the study is to increase awareness of transgender people, and to deepen an understanding of their lived experiences.

Keywords: defensive masculinities, masculinity, South Africa, transgender men, workplace

Contents:

Glossary 5

Chapter 1: Introduction 7

1.1. Aims 9

1.2. Rationale 10

Chapter 2: Literature Review 12

2.1. Introduction 12

2.2. Transgender People and Gender Dysphoria 12

2.3. Social Constructionism 18

2.4. Masculinity 20

2.5. The Impact of Practicing Defensive Masculinities on Mental Health 23

2.6. Being Transgender in South Africa 23

2.7. Being Transgender in the Workplace 26

2.8. Transitioning, Passing and Living as Stealth 27

2.9. Disclosure and Disclosure Avoidance 29

2.10. Contextualising the Current Study Against Existing Literature 30

2.11. Conclusion 31

Chapter 3: Methodology 33

3.1. Research Design 33

3.2. Research Questions 34

3.3. Participants and Sampling 35

3.4. Data Collection 36

3.5. Data Analysis 38

3.6. Ensuring Trustworthiness 39

3.7. Ethical Considerations 40

Chapter 4: Reflexivity 44

Chapter 5: Findings and Discussion 48

5.1. Being Transgender in the South African Workplace 48
5.1.1. Discrimination in the Workplace 48
5.1.2. Living in Secret 51
5.1.3. Gender Identity versus Sexual Orientation 54
5.1.4. Coming out in the Workplace 56
5.2. Defensive Masculinities 58
5.2.1. Ego Defence Mechanisms 58
5.2.2. Performances of Masculinity 64
5.3. The Impact on Mental Health 68
Chapter 6: Conclusion 75
6.1. Limitations 77
6.2. Directions for Future Research 78
6.3. Final Conclusions 78
References 80
Appendix A 96
Appendix B 98
Appendix C 99
Appendix D 102

Glossary

Binder: A clothing item that compresses a person's chest to make it appear flatter and therefore more masculine (Lee et al., 2019).

Cisgender: A person who is not transgender (Anderson et al., 2020), and therefore identifies with the sex that they were assigned at birth (Davis & Yeung, 2022).

Defensive masculinities: The types of masculinities that are practiced when men, especially transgender men, feel as if they are being threatened with violence by masculinities that are seen as superior, such as hegemonic masculinity (Abelson, 2014).

Gender: A characteristic that is performed based on societal norms of how a person of a particular sex should act, including beliefs about how they should behave and how they should express themselves (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender is constructed through psychological, societal and cultural means (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Gender affirming care: Healthcare for transgender people that consists of cross-sex hormones or gender-affirming surgery to make them feel more comfortable in their body (Nguyen et al., 2018).

Gender dysphoria: A term used to refer to the distress that a transgender individual may experience due to the incongruence between their gender and their sex assigned at birth, as described by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed., text rev.; *DSM-5-TR*; American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

Gender identity: An individual's felt sense of gender that is innate (American Psychological Association, 2015).

Hegemonic masculinity: Hegemonic masculinity is a pattern of practice enacted by men that allows for the continuation of men's dominance over women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

LGBTQ+: An acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer, with the plus symbol representing all other identities (Russell et al., 2023).

Masculinity: The way that men conduct and position themselves in society, which has been developed through discursive practices (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Misgendering: The intentional or unintentional use of the wrong pronoun, name or gendered language for a person, which can be damaging to the person's mental health (Jacobsen et al., 2023).

Passing: Transgender people being able to appear as cisgender to others rather than being seen as the sex that they were assigned at birth (Rogers, 2019).

Sex: A person's biological category which is dependent on their physiology, their anatomy, and their hormones (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Stealth: A type of living where transgender people do not disclose their transgender identity unless absolutely necessary and instead live their lives presenting as a cisgender man or woman (Rogers, 2019). If they are a transgender man, they present as a cisgender man, and if they are a transgender woman, they present as a cisgender woman.

Transformative masculinities: The types of masculinities that men, including transgender men, would prefer to enact and that feel more authentic to them (Abelson, 2014).

Transgender: A person who does not identify with the gender expression or gender identity that was assigned to them at birth by parents or medical professions based on their sex (Davis & Yeung, 2022).

Transition: The process a transgender person undergoes where they make changes to their appearance and their gender presentation to align more accurately with their gender identity (Merrium-Webster, n.d.). This can be medical, though hormones or surgery, or social, through changing their name and pronouns, or their clothing and hairstyle (Nguyen et al., 2018).

Transphobia: Prejudice towards transgender people (Kanamori & Xu, 2020).

Chapter 1: Introduction

This study's focus was on the lived experiences of transgender men, in particular on their experiences of gender expression within their places of work and additionally the impact that their experiences have on their mental health. Transgender people are individuals who do not identify with the gender expression or gender identity that was assigned to them at birth by their parents or medical professions based on their sex (Davis & Yeung, 2022). Transgender adults make up between 0.3% to 0.5% of the population, while transgender youth make up 1.2% to 2.7% of the population (Coleman et al., 2022). This increase in people openly disclosing that they are transgender is thought to be due to sociopolitical and medical advances, since transgender people have gained increased acceptance in society and easier access to gender affirming healthcare in recent years, in addition to a decrease in social stigma over having a different gender expression to your sex assigned at birth (Zhang et al., 2020).

Despite these sociopolitical and medical advances which in previous years improved the lives of transgender people, in more recent years transgender people and their rights have become an increasingly debated topic, particularly in the western world (Montiel-McCann, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). This has caused an increase in the amount of legislation targeting transgender people's rights to protection, legal recognition and gender-affirming healthcare (Montiel-McCann, 2023; Wuest & Last, 2024), evidenced by the 661 anti-transgender bills being introduced across the United States of America at the time of writing this dissertation in October 2024 (Trans Legislation Tracker, 2024), a significant increase from previous years (Lee et al., 2024; Wuest & Last, 2024). However, this increase in anti-transgender legislation is not exclusive to the United States of America; the recent release of the Independent Review of Gender Identity Services for Children and Young People (commonly known and hereafter referred to as The Cass Review) in the United Kingdom prompted a restriction on gender-affirming healthcare for all transgender adolescents in the United Kingdom (Cass, 2024; Department of Health and Social Care, 2024). This restriction is due to The Cass Review's recommendations against the use of gender affirming care in anyone under the age of twenty-five (Cass, 2024; Grijseels, 2024; Horton, 2024).

Similar to the anti-transgender laws in the United States of America, the harmful rhetoric of The Cass Review is once again not isolated to a specific country, as popular South African newspapers like the Mail & Guardian (Donkin et al., 2024) and The Daily Mavrik (First Do No Harm SA, 2024) have reported on the review in articles biased towards The Cass Review.

Additionally, an organisation named “First Do No Harm Southern Africa” was formed in December 2023 which opposes gender affirming healthcare for transgender youth in South Africa and favours the results of The Cass Review (First Do No Harm Southern Africa, n.d.). The organisation has published multiple articles on their website advocating for The Cass Review and opposing any evidence that The Cass Review is biased. While this may not initially appear to be cause for concern, it must be remembered that it is similar organisations that have advocated for and successfully passed legislature in both the United Kingdom and the United States of America banning gender-affirming care (Wuest & Last, 2024). This illustrates the international increase in transphobia that is clearly spreading from its previous isolation in the western world, as the legislation from the United States of America and The Cass Review from the United Kingdom have begun to have an impact in South Africa. This impact is particularly concerning when The Cass Review has been shown to have several methodological flaws (Grijseels, 2024), which will be discussed in detail in the literature review, and therefore it cannot be considered as being based on evidence rather than on bias. Therefore, in order to combat this international rise in transphobia, and counter social discourses which are fuelled by affect rather than evidence, more research is urgently needed on transgender people and their lived experiences to give further insight into their existence. This makes this research particularly relevant at this point in time and it is extremely important for study to be followed by further research, recommendations for which are made in the conclusion.

It is noted from the outset that this research is of subjective relevance to the researcher. As a transgender man myself, there has been a personal investment in the research endeavour, and as a consequence, reflexivity is woven into the research from the start, influencing and nuancing not only my choice of topic, but also the ways in which I have read the literature, interviewed participants and analysed the emerging data. I have been mindful throughout the research process to be thoughtful about my reflexive stance in order to minimise bias in the reporting and analysis of this study’s findings. To achieve this, I prepared and worked through a variety of strategies, discussed in detail in the reflexivity chapter, to ensure that I was able to practice reflexivity effectively, using my own experiences to my advantage while ensuring they do not impact my ability to accurately report the results of this study. My ultimate aim in practicing these reflexive techniques is to ensure that my findings accurately reflect the results of the study rather than my own experiences.

Following an elucidation of the research aims and rationale, this dissertation will begin with a review of the literature and an explanation of the theoretical framework that was used in this

study, before discussing the methods undertaken to complete this research. It will then discuss the findings of this research and link it to previous literature before finally drawing conclusions about the results of the research, providing directions for future research and highlighting the limitations of this research. Additionally, there are multiple appendices including the data collection instrument that was used, the ethical clearance certificate from the University of the Witwatersrand to conduct this research, the participant information sheet that was distributed to participants ahead of the interview to read through and lastly an example of the consent form that was given to participants to sign before they could participate in this research. These appendices are presented as evidence that this research was conducted under strict ethical standards to ensure that the participants were protected from harm throughout the research process.

1.1. Aims

The central objective of this research was to deepen an understanding of the lived experience of transgender individuals, and to give transgender men, in particular, an opportunity to name and describe their experience of their gender identity and expression in the workplace, with a specific focus on defensive expressions of masculinity at work. Defensive masculinities, as defined by Abelson (2014), are the type of masculinities practiced when men, especially transgender men, feel as if they are being threatened with violence by masculinities that are seen as superior, such as hegemonic masculinity. To avoid violence from those performing hegemonic masculinity, transgender men may also perform hegemonic masculinity in order to gain safety and acceptance (Abelson, 2014). This research aimed to examine whether transgender men feel pressure to enact defensive masculinities, what makes them feel pressured to do so, and how they may enact defensive masculinities in the South African workplace. In tandem, a related aim was to examine the impact of enacting defensive masculinities on transgender men's emotional and mental wellbeing.

The study aimed to increase awareness about the everyday experiences of transgender people in an environment such as the South African workplace and in doing so, to challenge an entrenched societal stigma against transgender individuals. A broader aim of the research was to increase awareness of transgender people's daily experiences in the hope that such visibility, and indeed a potential normalising of the transgender experience, will bring with it an increased acceptance of transgender people in South Africa, decreasing the pressure transgender men may feel to perform defensive masculinities, with a potential positive impact on their mental

health. A final research aim was to create impetus for further studies into the transgender experience in South Africa, in the hope of expanding understanding, and countering discrimination and prejudice. To achieve these research aims, this research used

1.2. Rationale

The primary rationale for this study lies in the paucity of research which focuses specifically on the daily lives of transgender men in South Africa. While studies conducted on the lived experiences of transgender people are increasing, the experiences of transgender people at work remains an understudied area (Monakali & Francis, 2022; Watson et al., 2023). This is problematic when considering the amount of time spent in the workplace, and when the prevalence of discrimination that transgender people face in a variety of contexts, including in the workplace, is taken into account (Cooper et al., 2023; Jeanes & Janes, 2021; Rogers, 2022; Watson et al., 2023). This gap in research examining transgender peoples' experiences of the workplace is particularly notable regarding transgender men's expressions of masculinity at work, with only three studies dedicated to examining how and why transgender men display masculinity at work (see Jeanes & Janes, 2021; Schilt, 2006; Schilt & Connel, 2007).

Jeans and Janes' (2021) study found that transgender men were enacting defensive masculinities at work, a type of masculinity that is performed when transgender men fear that they will be the victim of violence and discrimination (Abelson, 2014). The lack of research on defensive masculinities and particularly defensive masculinities in the workplace is problematic, not only due to the previously mentioned significant amount of time that a person spends at work, but also because of the impact that enacting defensive masculinities has on mental health (Cooper et al., 2023; Jeanes & Janes, 2021). As Cooper et al. (2023) found, there was a higher prevalence of mental health issues among participants who stated that they felt pressure to conform to hegemonic masculinity, which is problematic in a population who, as Cooper et al. (2023) state, have an existing increased risk of developing mental health issues.

It is noted that Jeanes and Janes (2021) study was conducted in England, a country with a vastly different sociopolitical climate than that of South Africa, where this research is based, and which is said to be much more patriarchal and have more conservative views about transgender people than other countries (Monakali & Francis, 2022). There is also a notable lack of research on transgender people in South Africa in general (Macheso, 2020; Monakali & Francis, 2022), a gap that this study suggests needs to urgently be addressed through research. The rationale for this research is further fuelled by the subjective experience of the researcher, as I myself

am a transgender man. As a transgender man, my time as an employee made me aware of how workplace experiences, and particularly how masculinity is expressed at work, can impact a transgender person's behaviour and mental health. These personal experiences prompted me to research this phenomenon, where I found a gap in the literature that this research sought to fill.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This review of the literature aims to describe the relevant literature that grounds this research, to identify gaps in the literature, and to indicate which of the identified gaps it aimed to fill. It begins with outlining of transgender people and of the gender dysphoria diagnosis and discusses the current debates surrounding this diagnosis in addition to how these debates are particularly relevant at this point in time. This discussion leads into the study's theoretical framework of social constructionism and how this particular theoretical framework is relevant to this study. Following this, it discusses the types of masculinities practiced by cisgender and transgender men with a specific focus on defensive masculinities, and how this is relevant to transgender men's experiences in the current sociopolitical climate of South Africa and additionally, the impact that practicing defensive masculinities has on mental health. Finally, it examines transgender individual's experiences of the workplace and the mechanisms that they may use to avoid discrimination. This chapter will therefore cover the key concepts needed to understand the findings of this study in addition to the significance and relevance of the findings, considering the recent increase of negative attitudes towards transgender people internationally.

2.2. Transgender People and Gender Dysphoria

It is relevant to this research to give a comprehensive exposition of the ways in which transgender individuals are identified in current literature, including an overview of psychiatric classification. Transgender people feel that they are unable to relate to the gender expression or gender identity that was assigned to them at birth by parents or medical professions based on their sex (Davis & Yeung, 2022). Transgender men, the focus of this research, were born female, and transitioned to male in response to what is subjectively experienced as a more authentic expression of their felt gender and identity (Jeanes & Janes, 2021). One of the main factors that may influence transgender people to transition, in this case from female to male, is gender dysphoria (Cooper et al., 2020).

According to the American Psychiatric Association's (2022) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed. text rev.; *DSM-5-TR*) gender dysphoria is a term used to refer to the distress that a transgender individual may experience due to the incongruence between their gender identity and their sex assigned at birth. Gender dysphoria can cause a disconnect between the person and their body, leaving the person feeling as if there is something severely

incorrect about their body, or that their body feels unfamiliar to them (Pulice-Farrow et al., 2020). This is especially true for parts of the person's body that are usually heavily gendered, such as primary or secondary sex characteristics (Pulice-Farrow et al., 2020).

Gender dysphoria extends beyond basic bodily discomfort and has been found to affect the individual's thinking patterns and behaviour, including increased sensitivity to transphobia and increased fears of being rejected because of their transgender identity (Cooper et al., 2020). The severity of the distress caused by gender dysphoria is acknowledged in the most recent edition of the *DSM*, the *DSM-5-TR*, where gender dysphoria is said to occur with distress that is clinically significant and can result in impairment in multiple important areas of functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). The distress caused by gender dysphoria is extremely impactful and for some transgender individuals, it is overwhelmingly pervasive to the extent that they may resort to self-harm to manage it or attempt suicide to escape it (Marconi et al., 2023; Pulice-Farrow et al., 2020).

Rates of suicidal thinking and attempts vary between studies due to different measurement instruments, but in a systematic review conducted by Marconi et al. (2023) they found that rates of suicidal thinking and attempts in transgender individuals ranged from 14.3% to 80.9%. This large difference in rates across studies could be explained by the location of the studies, with the former taking place in Finland and the latter in Iran. However, a common finding across the studies examined by the systematic review is an increase in suicidal thinking and attempts in transgender individuals when compared to suicidal thinking and attempts in cisgender individuals (Marconi et al., 2023). Additionally, there was an increase in rates of suicidality and non-suicidal self-harm in transgender individuals when compared to cisgender individuals (Marconi et al., 2023). The findings of this systematic review were consistent with the findings of a South African study conducted by Pickstone-Taylor et al. (2024), where it was found that over half of their participants who were diagnosed with gender dysphoria also had some form of consequent mental health diagnosis. These findings are evidence for the severe impact that the distress associated with gender dysphoria has on transgender individuals.

The formal recognition of transgender people and the gender dysphoria diagnosis has undergone many changes over the many years since it was first introduced in the *DSM-III* in 1980 under the "transsexualism" diagnosis, which was categorised under psychosexual disorders (Beek et al., 2015). This was edited in the *DSM-III-R* in 1987 with the removal of the psychosexual disorders category and instead placed under the new "sexual disorders" category

under the subclass of "disorders usually first evident in infancy, childhood or adolescence" (American Psychiatric Association, 1987, p. 424; Beek et al., 2015). However, this placement was deemed inappropriate for the *DSM-IV* as gender dysphoria is not always apparent in childhood or adolescence (Beek et al., 2015). Therefore, a new category of disorders, named gender identity disorders, was developed for the *DSM-IV*, published in 1994, and transsexualism and other similar disorders that fell under this category were merged and renamed gender identity disorder (Beek et al., 2015). The focus in the fifth edition of the *DSM*, the *DSM-5*, which was published in 2013, was on destigmatising transgender identities, which lead to the name of the diagnosis changing once more to gender dysphoria (Beek et al., 2015). Additionally, the gender dysphoria diagnosis was separated from other paraphilias to fall under its own category (Beek et al., 2015).

Despite these efforts in the *DSM-5* to reduce the stigma around transgender identities, it should be mentioned that there is an ongoing debate regarding whether gender dysphoria should be included in the *DSM* in any form, as this means that it remains classified as a mental disorder and therefore identifying as transgender could be seen as something that should be rectified (Pulice-Farrow et al., 2019). Many agree that it should be declassified, as homosexuality previously was, but there are also oppositions to this, as a diagnosis of gender dysphoria is often required to gain access to gender affirming healthcare, such as cross-sex hormones or gender affirming surgery (Cooper et al., 2020; Pulice-Farrow et al., 2019). Another criticism of the gender dysphoria diagnosis is that the criteria for gender dysphoria was decided on by cisgender clinicians rather than those who directly experience it, with studies finding that only fifty-two percent of transgender individuals feel that the clinical description of gender dysphoria accurately reflected their experiences (Pulice-Farrow et al., 2019). This means that transgender individuals may have to lie in order to receive a diagnosis of gender dysphoria which allows for access to gender affirming healthcare (Pulice-Farrow et al., 2019). This supports the criticism that having a gender dysphoria diagnosis may be unnecessary as it allows clinicians, through gatekeeping gender affirming care, to prevent transgender individuals from receiving care because they do not fit into a set of criteria or a worse alternative, because they do not feel that transgender individuals should be given the gender affirming care that they need (Pulice-Farrow et al., 2019).

Gatekeeping gender affirming care, Tomson (2018) argues, contradicts the medical ethics that healthcare providers are taught of non-maleficence, beneficence and respect for a person's autonomy. Instead, healthcare providers should use the informed consent model when

providing gender affirming care, providing their patients with the relevant information and allowing them to make the decision for themselves. Gender affirming care has been shown to be safe, to reduce suicide rates and be overall beneficial for the patient (Tomson, 2018). Withholding this care is therefore ignoring the patient's best interests and violating these medical ethical standards (Tomson, 2018). However, some healthcare providers continue to argue that this is the incorrect way to treat transgender individuals with gender dysphoria, and that transgender people should instead be treated with extensive therapy, often termed 'gender exploratory therapy' (Ashley, 2023). This type of therapy shares attributes with conversion therapy, a type of therapy that aims to discourage a person from identifying as transgender and change their gender identity to cisgender (Ashley, 2023). Gender exploratory therapy seeks to find the cause of the gender dysphoria, such as childhood sexual assault or another adverse experience, rather than treat the gender dysphoria by exploring possibilities around transition (Ashley, 2023). This approach is not evidence based and studies have consistently shown that it has detrimental effects on a person's mental health, increasing rates of depression, anxiety and suicidality rather than having a positive impact (Ashley, 2023; Lee et al, 2023; Turban et al., 2019). This increase in mental health issues from conversion therapy is extremely concerning when, as discussed previously, transgender people already face an increased risk of mental health issues and suicidal thoughts and attempts (Marconi et al., 2023).

Debates about gender dysphoria and its treatment cannot be mentioned without including the recent publication of The Cass Review in April 2024, a review into evidence about gender affirming care for minors commissioned by the National Health Service in the United Kingdom in 2020 (Grijseels, 2024). The review was commissioned in the context of increased violence and increasingly negative views about transgender people in the United Kingdom, as well as a widely publicised legal battle on the use of puberty blockers for transgender adolescents (Grijseels, 2024; Moss et al., 2023). The review has had a far-reaching impact on transgender healthcare, with the United Kingdom implementing a complete ban on the use of puberty blockers for transgender adolescents (Department of Health and Social Care, 2024) and the publication of articles in newspapers supporting The Cass Review have reached as far as South Africa (Donkin et al., 2024; First Do No Harm Southern Africa, 2024). Additionally, First Do No Harm Southern Africa was formed in 2023, an organisation that supports The Cass Review and argues against the use of gender affirming healthcare (First Do No Harm Southern Africa, n.d.). Their impact appears small as a young organisation, but they recently successfully published an article in the *South African Family Practice* journal criticising the gender-

affirming approach (Giddy et al., 2025). This, while seemingly insignificant, is part of a growing international movement that opposes gender-affirming healthcare (Wuest & Last, 2024) which is now extending outside of the western world to South Africa.

In the wake of the court case on the use of puberty blockers for transgender youth there is emerging evidence that the United Kingdom has seen a rise in suicides committed by transgender youth which has been covered up by the National Health Service and Hilary Cass, the author of The Cass Review (Good Law Project, 2024; Lazine, 2024). This finding is unfortunately unsurprising given the evidence on gender affirming healthcare improving mental health and decreasing suicidality (Chen et al., 2023), evidence which was ignored and discredited in The Cass Review because the studies were not randomised control trials and therefore these studies were viewed as being methodologically flawed (Cass, 2024). However, as Ashley et al. (2024) discuss, it would be impossible and unethical to conduct randomised control trials on the effects of gender affirming healthcare, particularly on puberty blockers. This is due to the physiological effects of gender affirming care, making it impossible to mask who is part of the control group and who is part of the test group (Ashley et al., 2024). This would cause a large variety of significant flaws with the study, making randomised control trials impossible to conduct (Ashley et al., 2024). Therefore, the existing evidence should be seen as trustworthy, as it is the most ethical and methodologically sound evidence possible in this particular situation (Ashley et al., 2024).

Before the publication of The Cass Review, the main guidelines that the treatment of transgender people were based on were the Standards of Care published by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH), which published the eighth version of these guidelines in 2022 (Coleman et al., 2022). These guidelines have been developed based on extensive evidence and aim to ensure that the people that are receiving gender affirming healthcare are indeed transgender, while also balancing this with ensuring that there are no unnecessary barriers to receiving gender affirming healthcare (Coleman et al., 2022). These guidelines are not decided on lightly, as the recommendations are based on credible evidence and a thorough review of the benefits and drawbacks of gender affirming care (Coleman et al., 2022). The guidelines have separate recommendations for adults, adolescents and children (Coleman et al., 2022). The recommendations state that adults should receive access to gender affirming surgery and cross-sex hormones, while the recommendations for adolescents state that they should be able to receive some limited gender affirming healthcare, including puberty blockers and hormones, and finally the recommendations for children involve gender

exploration with no access to gender affirming care and recommendations strictly against conversion therapy (Coleman et al., 2022). It is extremely important to note here that gender affirming care is only given after an adult or adolescent meets strict criteria (Coleman et al., 2022). The decision to begin gender affirming care is carefully considered in all cases, and the approach is entirely based on reputable evidence (Coleman et al., 2022).

Interestingly, The Cass Review's recommendations deviate significantly from the WPATH's eighth version of the Standards of Care (Coleman et al., 2022; Grijseels, 2024). The Cass Review's recommendations are allegedly founded on evidence, however there are multiple contradictions throughout the review and multiple studies are regarded as not being credible, while studies of the same quality of evidence that do not support the use of gender affirming healthcare are deemed to be credible and are used to make recommendations (Grijseels, 2024). At times, the findings are stated with no evidence to support the claim, or with evidence that directly contradicts the studies that were examined (Grijseels, 2024). Results that do not support their narrative of gender affirming care being harmful are deemed inconsistent, although there is no formal definition given of what is deemed by them to be consistent (Grijseels, 2024). Together, these inconsistencies make The Cass Review appear biased (Horton, 2024) and not methodologically sound, and therefore The Cass Review does not have enough substantial evidence to justify its deviations from the WPATH's Standards of Care (Grijseels, 2024). And yet, this is the justification for a large amount of legislature in the United Kingdom targeting transgender people and their rights (Horton, 2024). This situation serves as evidence to support the removal of gender dysphoria's classification as a mental disorder in the *DSM*, as The Cass Review has served as justification to many, including both United Kingdom and international politicians, that there is a cause to gender dysphoria, such as childhood sexual assault, and that it is therefore something that can and should be rectified (Horton, 2024).

Overall, the classification of gender dysphoria as a mental disorder and the treatment of gender dysphoria is a highly debated and contested topic. However, there is a large amount of evidence stating that transgender people should be allowed to transition and change their gender expression, and therefore the way that they are perceived in society, to ease their gender dysphoria (Coleman et al., 2022). Additionally, gender has been theorised to be entirely socially constructed, and therefore able to be changed (West & Zimmerman, 1987), which is the view that this research held. To support this theory, this research used the theoretical framework of social constructionism.

2.3. Social Constructionism

As suggested in West and Zimmerman's (1987) work, gender is not a set of traits that a person is born with depending on their sex, but rather the result of how people interact with one another. Gender can therefore be explained as a performative social act that is based on personal beliefs about how a person of a particular gender should act (Abelson, 2014; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This makes it clear that gender is social rather than biological, and that gender is constructed socially. With this assumption in mind, it became apparent that this research should use the framework of social constructionism as theoretical scaffolding.

Social constructionism was originally developed through a sociological lens by Berger and Luckmann (1966), who stated that reality and knowledge are socially constructed. Burr (2015) expanded further on this in the context of psychology. While there is no single definition of social constructionism, social constructionism can be said to have a few key assumptions, which formed the foundation of this research (Burr, 2015). The first assumption states that a more critical view should be taken of how knowledge is generated about the world and ourselves, as knowledge cannot be constructed in an objective, unbiased manner, but is rather subjectively created by the individual (Burr, 2015). Another assumption states that knowledge is always fluid and differs depending on when and where a person is situated (Burr, 2015). This means that what is accepted as a piece of knowledge in South Africa may differ to what is accepted in other countries, or in the past or future in the same country. The final assumption states that knowledge is constructed between people during their daily interactions with each other (Burr, 2015). These assumptions can be applied to concepts such as gender, which has been described as being constructed through cultural, psychological and social methods (West and Zimmerman, 1987).

The social construction of gender usually begins at a young age, with gender roles being placed onto children by their family or friends, and as they develop, they encounter more diverse contexts with further expectations of how gender should be performed (Dietert & Dentice, 2013). The development of a gender identity for cisgender and transgender people alike is a gradual process (Jessen et al., 2021; Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Jessen et al (2021) describe the trial and error of developing a gender identity, which is also discussed in Bussey and Bandura's (1999) work on the social cognitive theory of gender development. Bussey and Bandura (1999) describe three methods through which a gender identity is developed in children: through modelling by others, through experience and through direct tuition. These methods allow

children to gradually develop a gender expression that aligns with what they have been taught by significant figures in their lives and the reactions to the way they have performed gender (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). It is thought that transgender people create their gender identity in a similar manner, through trial and error, in an attempt to see what accurately represents them and what allows them to best fit into society (Jessen et al., 2021).

Extending social constructionism to masculinity, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) explain that the way that masculinity is enacted can change depending on what social situation a person is in, which is supported by Abelson's (2014) study. Therefore, masculinity can also be said to be socially constructed, as a man's expression of masculinity can change based on the social situation that he is in, and there are multiple theories of masculinity that emphasise that masculinity is socially constructed rather than innate (Abelson, 2014; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

However, it should be mentioned that there are arguments against the use of the social constructionism framework for studies that are focused on transgender people and their experiences (Keegan, 2020a, 2020b). Social constructionism is a framework that is commonly used in queer studies that use queer theory, and while transgender studies and queer studies are related since they both involve marginalised communities, there are some core differences between them (Keegan, 2020a, 2020b). Most relevant to this study is the way that gender is viewed. Social constructionism, used in queer studies, states that gender is completely performative, and not an innate characteristic (Keegan, 2020b). While this is true for expressions of gender like masculinity, Keegan (2020b) suggests that this is not true for a person's sense of their gender identity. Being transgender involves an inclination to *be*, not just to *perform*, another gender (Keegan, 2020b), which is an important distinction, and therefore one that must be emphasised in this study.

Despite the arguments about queer studies versus transgender studies, social constructionism remains an appropriate theoretical framework for this research, as it explains how a person's gender is socially constructed, which is applicable to masculinity. Masculinity is one of the main focuses of this study, and expressions of masculinity impacted not only the experiences of the participants and the way that these experiences were viewed in the data analysis phase, but it also impacted the data collection process, discussed in the following chapter. It is impossible to ignore the role that society has played in the construction of men's masculinity, however, a distinction must be made between gender identity and gender expression for the

purposes of this study. This study viewed gender identity as innate, as transgender men innately know that they are men, and viewed gender expression (and by extension masculinity) as socially constructed, and therefore something that could be changed based on the context of the situation, which this study sought to explore.

2.4. Masculinity

There are multiple theories of different types of masculinities that have been proposed as research on men and masculinities has increased, with the most recognisable being that of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is a pattern of practice enacted by men that allows for the continuation of men's dominance over women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is not a type of man, but rather a type of masculinity, which is defined as the way that men conduct and position themselves in society, developed through discursive practices (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). From a psychoanalytic point of view, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) propose that both men and boys choose to perform a type of masculinity that allows them to avoid feeling powerless or anxious. This leads to them performing hegemonic masculinity, as this allows them to have dominance over women and additionally over men who do not have the same privilege as them, such as men of colour, gay or transgender men, or any other man that does not conform to hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This does not mean, however, that marginalised men cannot practice hegemonic masculinity, as they may practice hegemonic masculinity or complicit masculinity to improve their place in the hierarchy (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Another theory of masculinity that builds on Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) theory is that of Abelson's (2014) defensive and transformative masculinities theory, which discusses the masculinities that transgender men may enact. This theory is the focus of the present study. Defensive masculinities, according to Abelson (2014), are a type of masculinity that is practiced when men feel threatened with violence by masculinities that are seen as superior, such as hegemonic masculinity. This may cause men, and particularly transgender men, to practice hegemonic masculinity to avoid this threat of violence and gain safety and acceptance (Abelson, 2014).

There is very little literature which utilises Abelson's (2014) theory, possibly because of the scant literature that focuses on transgender people outside of healthcare settings. Most relevant to this study is Jeanes and Janes' (2021) study that examines transgender men in the workplace.

They found that transgender men do indeed practice hegemonic masculinity as a defensive technique in order to pass (or appear cisgender) at work and reduce their risk of violence and discrimination (Jeanes & Janes, 2021). However, the type of masculinity that was enacted changed depending on the risk of violence towards them (Jeanes & Janes, 2021), a similar finding to other studies, including Rogers' (2019, 2022) studies on transgender men's masculinity in the southern United States of America, a location where transgender men face a high risk of violence.

Evidence for transgender men practicing defensive masculinities can be seen in a study conducted by Anzani et al. (2023), where they examined hegemonic masculinity in a sample of one hundred transgender men when compared to a similar sample of cisgender men. They used a set of ten factors that covered the different dimensions for testing the men's conformity to hegemonic masculinity (Anzani et al., 2023). These factors included the participants' feelings towards violence, their emotional control, their promiscuousness, their need to be a top achiever or a prominent figure, their need to be seen as heterosexual, whether they wanted to be dominant over women, how important work was to them, if they felt they needed to take risks, and lastly their reliance (or lack thereof) on others (Anzani et al., 2023). These factors were able to show how closely both cisgender and transgender men conform to hegemonic masculinity and found that transgender men scored lower on hegemonic masculinity on some factors, but many still felt the need to conform to hegemonic masculinity practices in order to protect themselves (Anzani et al., 2023).

Contrary to this, there is also evidence that transgender men do not practice defensive masculinities and instead practice a hybrid form of masculinity (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2022). However, Aboim and Vasconcelos' (2022) study examined transgender men's masculinity in a more holistic manner rather than studying masculinities in a certain context, which is a large limitation as masculinities should be studied in context due to how they are socially constructed (Abelson, 2014). Therefore, this study aimed to discover whether defensive masculinities are used by transgender men in the specific context of the workplace.

As previously mentioned, transgender men do not have the early gender role socialisation that cisgender men have; as a result, they must use the gender norms that are modelled to them by fathers or other men in their lives to learn how to perform masculinity and to avoid their masculinity, and therefore their gender identity, being scrutinised (Boffi et al., 2022; Jourian, 2017). One study found that transgender people feel that physical transition is the easier part

of transitioning, and that it is learning the mannerisms and practices of the other gender that are more difficult (Anderson et al., 2020). This was experienced by a transgender man who was not openly transgender at work, where in the early days of his transition he did not know how to act appropriately masculine and was questioned by coworkers about his lack of masculine gender practices (Connell, 2010). These learnt practices can conform closely to hegemonic masculinity, depending on the environment that they are in (Rogers, 2019, 2022). This has been found in the southern United States of America, where transgender men have been found to hold deeply sexist views, mirroring their cisgender counterparts (Phillips & Rogers, 2021). Transgender men must newly learn important aspects of life, such as how to control their emotions, how to avoid or respond to violence, and how to navigate fear in order to conform to hegemonic ideals and be able to appear as if they are cisgender (Phillips & Rogers, 2021).

Additionally, transgender men may practice compensatory manhood acts in order to compensate for their transgender identity (Phillips & Rogers, 2021; Rogers, 2022). Compensatory manhood acts are performances of exaggerated hegemonic masculinity, to counteract their inability or unwillingness to perform other aspects of hegemonic masculinity (Phillips & Rogers, 2021; Rogers, 2022). These acts are learnt from heterosexual cisgender men and are used in the hopes of being accepted by them through claiming to share values with them (Phillips & Rogers, 2021). These acts were especially prominent when their safety was threatened (Rogers, 2022), meaning that these acts can be classified as part of defensive masculinities. This serves as evidence for the learnt nature and performance of masculinity, as these men may wish to practice a different, less hegemonic type of masculinity, but instead must practice hegemonic masculinity and carry out compensatory manhood acts in order to feel safe (Phillips & Rogers, 2021).

Defensive masculinities may not always be enacted and instead, transgender men may choose to practice transformative masculinities, which are masculinities that conform more closely to the gender expressions that they would prefer to see and that feel more authentic to them (Abelson, 2014). This goes beyond practicing these masculinities themselves and may extend to them confronting other men and encouraging them to act in a more transformative manner (Abelson, 2014). However, it can be theorised that because of the sociopolitical climate of South Africa, transgender men may feel the need to practice defensive masculinities rather than transformative ones.

2.5. The Impact of Practicing Defensive Masculinities on Mental Health

The lack of research on hegemonic and defensive masculinities in transgender men is an issue as feeling the need to conform to hegemonic masculinity can extend beyond transgender men simply feeling uncomfortable (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2022). In a study conducted by Cooper et al. (2023) the majority of a large sample of 8977 participants that completed an online survey stated that they felt pressure to display masculinity from either society, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer plus (LGBTQ+) community or family and friends, and the participants who reported feeling pressure to be masculine had a significantly higher chance of struggling with their mental health. This is concerning, as transgender and queer cisgender people are already at an increased risk of developing depression, anxiety or a substance abuse disorder (Cooper et al., 2023). However, it is thought that these increased rates of mental health problems are not to be because of their identity, but rather because of the challenges that accompany it, including stigma, alienation from others both outside and inside the LGBTQ+ community and discrimination (Cooper et al., 2023).

To be recognised as men, transgender men must conform to stereotypically masculine clothing, hairstyles, body language and speech (Rogers, 2019). This is a significant sacrifice when some transgender men may feel that conforming to these traditionally masculine mannerisms does not reflect the way that they would like to present, but passing by using these mannerisms is the only way to be seen as anything other than a woman (Cooper et al., 2023; Rogers, 2019). However, it is not as simple as choosing to enact a gender nonconforming gender expression, as people with a gender nonconforming gender expression often face increased discrimination, which can lead to harmful behaviours in some transgender people, such as self-harm, drug abuse and suicidal ideation (Miller & Grollman, 2015).

2.6. Being Transgender in South Africa

Studies on the percentage of transgender people in the South African population appear non-existent, with the scarce number of South African studies reporting exclusively their sample size rather than the size of the greater population (see Buthelezi & Brown, 2023; Macheso, 2020; Monakali & Francis, 2022; Pickstone-Taylor et al., 2024). The largest sample size consisted of thirty-nine transgender youth who had been treated at the gender identity service in Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital's Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry between January 2012 and May 2019 (Pickstone-Taylor et al., 2024). However, this statistic has several limitations, including that it mainly consisted of youth from the middle-class,

meaning that those from lower economic backgrounds were less able to seek care (Pickstone-Taylor et al., 2024). Additionally, the hospital is located in the Western Cape, meaning that those from other provinces are unable to seek care unless they have the funds to travel (Pickstone-Taylor et al., 2024). Additionally, there is the limitation that the sample size number only includes those that were seen by a medical professional at the hospital and does not include those on the long waiting list that was mentioned in the article (Pickstone-Taylor et al., 2024). Lastly, this study only focused on youth, not adults, meaning that the number will be significantly lower than if it were to include the entire transgender population of South Africa. Therefore, future studies should examine the number of transgender people in South Africa to gain a better understanding of the number of people that require gender affirming healthcare in order to improve access to it, and also to more accurately gauge what percentage of the population live as transgender individuals.

Despite protections for LGBTQ+ people being written into the South African constitution, a significant number of South African LGBTQ+ people still face discrimination and persecution (Dayal, 2022). This is theorised to be particularly severe for transgender people in South Africa, as they are discriminated against by other members of the LGBTQ+ community as well as by greater society (Macheso, 2020). This is thought to be due to the widely held view that being LGBTQ+ is "unAfrican" and is instead a western idea (Dayal, 2022; Monakali & Francis, 2022). This means that transgender people in South Africa are subjected to rejection from family and friends and harassment from strangers in their daily interactions with others (Macheso, 2020). To avoid this, the only option for transgender people in South Africa is to pass as cisgender, which comes with its own set of challenges, such as fears about deceiving those around them (Macheso, 2020). Fears of discrimination may be particularly heightened following the publication of The Cass Review and the media coverage supporting it in South Africa, as well as the current debates around transgender rights in the western world (Donkin et al., 2024; Montiel-McCann, 2023).

While transgender people are able to change their legal gender marker in South Africa, the process is difficult, with changes taking months to years to be processed (Macheso, 2020). Additionally, this change can only be done once a person has undergone treatment with cross-sex hormones or gender affirming surgery, which are expensive and can be otherwise difficult to access (Buthelezi & Brown, 2023). Fortunately, constitutional protections help transgender people even if they have not yet changed their legal gender, as courts often rule in favour of transgender people in discrimination cases (Buthelezi & Brown, 2023). However, it is

important to note that it is common in South Africa for crimes to go unreported (Fraser, 2023), and therefore justice cannot be served. There are multiple factors that impact a South African's decision on whether or not to report a crime, including perceptions of a lack of support from the police for the victims, negative perceptions about the effectiveness of the police and the belief that the police will not believe them, or not care enough about the crime to investigate it or follow up on the investigation (Mbewu et al., 2021). Due to the above factors, it is thought that a large amount of hate crimes in South Africa do not get reported and therefore are never resolved (Dayal, 2022). Therefore, Dayal (2022) suggests that the South African media should emphasise the importance of reporting hate crimes and seeking support and should help to normalise the acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in society to reduce hate crimes.

Another challenge that specifically transgender men may face in South Africa was highlighted in Monakali & Francis's (2022) study, where a white transgender man felt that he needed to reconsider his transition as he did not want to be a white man in a country with high rates of gender-based violence, meaning he had to choose between his happiness and becoming what he feared (Monakali & Francis, 2022). He desperately wanted to practice masculinity as a transgender man but did not want to be associated with violence or violent masculinity, which is a dominant culture in South Africa (Monakali & Francis, 2022). This echoes the findings of Rogers (2019) study, where their location was found to greatly influence how transgender men expressed masculinity.

Studies done on South African transgender people are mostly focused on transgender people's experiences of receiving healthcare, with very little literature focusing on the everyday experiences of being transgender in South Africa and the challenges that accompany being a minority in South Africa. This is a significant gap, as more awareness about these issues is desperately needed. However, one South African study was found that examined the construction of transgender masculinity, relevant to this research (Monakali & Francis, 2022). They found that masculinity was expressed differently depending on the participants' experience or fears of experiencing transphobia (Monakali & Francis, 2022). This reinforces the role of context in the way that masculinity is performed in transgender men. This research sought to understand the expression of these masculinities in South African transgender men in the workplace.

2.7. Being Transgender in the Workplace

High rates of discrimination, violence and harassment against transgender people are commonly reported in international research in a variety of contexts (Cooper et al., 2023; Jeanes & Janes, 2021; Rogers, 2022; Watson et al., 2023). In addition, studies indicate that transgender people face increased discrimination, including when compared to their lesbian, gay and bisexual counterparts, a testament to the extent of the discrimination that transgender people face (McFadden, 2020). Discrimination against transgender people appears to persist despite laws attempting to prevent discrimination being passed in various countries (Jeanes & Janes, 2023; Watson et al., 2023). This is especially true for South Africa, where, as previously mentioned, transgender people's protection from discrimination was written into the South African constitution (Dayal, 2022). Despite this, many transgender people in South Africa are still subjected to high rates of discrimination and oppression in a variety of contexts (Dayal, 2022), although this study focuses specifically on the context of the workplace.

While there are studies that report the statistics behind transgender people's discrimination at work (Watson et al., 2023), there are few studies, either South African or international, that examine the lived experiences of transgender individuals at work. This is a significant gap, as transgender and cisgender employees alike spend a significant amount of time at work, and it can therefore be extremely problematic when transgender people face discrimination at work (McFadden, 2020). Therefore, more research should be done to examine the experiences of transgender people at work and determine the mechanisms that transgender people use to avoid discrimination in contexts as important as the workplace. This can assist with bringing awareness to this important issue and improve understanding around transgender people's daily experiences.

There are three qualitative studies on transgender people in the workplace, two of which are by Schilt (2006) and Schilt and Connell (2007). However, these studies have a number of significant limitations and differ to the present study in a variety of ways. Firstly, these studies were conducted on transgender people who have transitioned without changing their place of work (Schilt, 2006; Shilt & Connell, 2007), while the present study included both participants that have started at a new workplace since they transitioned from female to male and those that have stayed in the same workplace. The previous studies also did not focus specifically on masculinity (Schilt, 2006; Shilt & Connell, 2007) and additionally, these studies can be considered dated since, as Connor et al. (2021) state, masculinities are always changing and

evolving. Lastly, these studies did not examine how transgender people may attempt to avoid possible discrimination in the workplace, as they had to openly be transgender due to transitioning while in the same workplace (Schilt, 2006; Shilt & Connell, 2007).

As previously discussed, one of the mechanisms that transgender men may utilise to avoid discrimination is enacting hegemonic or defensive masculinities (Abelson, 2014), which have also been seen to be enacted in the workplace in a singular study conducted by Jeanes and Janes (2021). Their study sought to understand how transgender men make their gender identity visible at work by examining their displays of masculinity in the workplace (Jeanes & Janes, 2021). The study found that transgender men used a hybrid type of masculinity, termed the "flexitarian" (Jeanes & Janes, 2021, p. 1255) approach, often displaying a more transformative form of masculinity, however many transgender men still felt the need to perform masculinity that was more closely aligned to hegemonic masculinity, which allowed them to have more positive experiences at work (Jeanes & Janes, 2021).

2.8. Transitioning, Passing and Living as Stealth

Passing as a transgender man is defined as being able to appear as cisgender to others rather than being seen as the sex (female) that they were assigned at birth (Rogers, 2019). Often, passing as cisgender is the only way for the transgender person to live free of discrimination in South Africa (Macheso, 2020), however, passing is not just important for transgender people in South Africa, it is important for transgender people worldwide (Doyle, 2022). One of the steps that transgender people may take in their journey to pass as cisgender may be to begin transitioning. Transitioning is defined as the process that a transgender person undergoes where they make changes to their appearance and their gender presentation to align more accurately with their gender identity (Merrium-Webster, n.d.). Transitioning is referred to as a process rather than a single event as it happens gradually over time, often consisting of social, medical and legal transitions (Nguyen et al., 2018).

A social transition is generally the first to take place, which can include changes in the name or pronouns that the transgender person uses, as well as changing their appearance to be more masculine, more feminine or more androgenous, depending on what they feel best fits their gender identity (Nguyen et al., 2018). Changing their appearance may include getting their hair cut short or growing it out, purchasing new clothing from the opposite gender section of clothing stores and overall working to better fit into society as their felt gender identity (Nguyen et al., 2018).

A medical transition may follow social transition, which can include cross-sex hormones and gender-affirming surgery (Nguyen et al., 2018). For transgender men, cross-sex hormone therapy includes treatment with testosterone to begin the development of male secondary sexual characteristics and stop female secondary sexual characteristics (Fabris et al., 2015). Changes include gaining a deeper voice, changed body fat distribution to form a more masculine figure, increased hair growth and cessation of menses (Fabris et al., 2015). These physical changes masculinise the person and help them to pass better in society, leading to decreased gender dysphoria and decreased bodily discomfort (Nguyen et al., 2018). These physical changes often cause psychological changes, with studies reporting decreased symptoms of depression and anxiety and less psychopathology in individuals taking cross-sex hormones (Nguyen et al., 2018). Additionally, studies found transgender individuals who had been taking cross-sex hormones had decreased stress levels and improved their quality of life (Nguyen et al., 2018). The only characteristic that was impacted negatively appeared to be anger in transgender men, however, results on this were mixed and the study that reported the increase in anger also reported an increase in the transgender men's ability to control their anger (Nguyen et al., 2018).

Lastly, a legal transition may be made, where a transgender person may change their legal name and gender to the name and gender that they identify or feel most comfortable with (Nguyen et al., 2018). This allows them to change important documents such as their identity document and birth certificate, allowing them to live their life appearing as a cisgender person, or passing, if they wish to do so (Buthelezi & Brown, 2023). This process is, as previously stated, legal in South Africa, although these changes take months to years to be processed (Macheso, 2020).

Passing is defined as transgender people being able to appear as cisgender to others rather than being seen as the sex that they were assigned at birth (Rogers, 2019). The importance of passing cannot be understated. Passing is important to transgender men as they are able to be seen as the gender that they identify as rather than the gender that had been incorrectly assigned to them at birth, elevating their confidence and improving their psychological health (Rogers, 2019). Passing can be the central aim of many transgender people's transition (Doyal, 2022), and many transgender people have been found to be consistently altering the way that they appear and act in order to be perceived as their felt gender (Marques, 2019). In addition, passing is often a priority that is constantly at the forefront of a transgender person's mind in order for them to accurately express their gender, affirm their gender identity and to avoid discrimination (Anderson et al., 2020).

There are multiple studies that focus on passing and examine the experiences of transgender men in southern United States of America, an area which is well known for having a large conservative population who have traditional values of how men should behave and present themselves (Phillips & Rogers, 2021; Rogers, 2019, 2022). The studies found that passing was helpful for a large number of transgender men, as it allowed them to feel less fear when living in more conservative and therefore more dangerous areas such as the southern United States of America (Rogers, 2019). However, because of the traditional values about the performance of masculinity in the southern United States of America, many transgender men feel as though they have no choice but to enact hegemonic masculinity in order to avoid discrimination and vulnerability (Rogers, 2022).

Transgender men may choose to live as completely stealth to gain acceptance from others and to feel safer in dangerous areas by avoiding the vulnerability and discrimination that accompanies not passing (Phillips & Rogers, 2021; Rogers, 2019, 2022). Being stealth is a type of living where transgender men do not disclose their transgender identity unless absolutely necessary, and instead try to live completely as a cisgender man (Rogers, 2019). However, in order to gain the acceptance and safety that comes from being stealth, transgender men must enact the same type of masculinity that surrounds them, allowing them to be accepted into the brotherhood of men in their area (Phillips & Rogers, 2021). This can become troublesome, as the people that they have begun to trust can then control the way that they express masculinity, leading to increased pressure to conform to hegemonic ideals (Phillips & Rogers, 2021). This pressure can lead to practicing defensive masculinities (Abelson, 2014), which this research studied in the context of the workplace, exploring whether this occurs in South Africa, why transgender men may feel the need to perform defensive masculinities and how they may perform these defensive masculinities in the workplace. A transgender person can choose to be stealth exclusively in a given context, such as in the workplace, or it can cover all the social aspects of their life, ranging from strangers, to coworkers, to potential partners, where they choose to practice disclosure or disclosure avoidance (Kade, 2021).

2.9. Disclosure and Disclosure Avoidance

In the context of the workplace, transgender people have been found to struggle with deciding whether or not they should disclose their transgender identity when going through the hiring process or when interacting with others in the workplace (Eger, 2018). Forty-nine percent of the surveyed transgender people stated that they did not disclose their transgender identity to

their supervisors, and forty-two percent did not disclose their transgender identity to their coworkers (Eger, 2018). Additionally, Jeanes and Janes (2021) found that transgender men experience workplace difficulties if they freely disclose their transgender identity or if they decide to keep their transgender identity hidden, exhibiting the difficult situations that transgender people must face.

It is common for transgender men to desire to practice symbolic disclosure, a type of disclosure where disclosure of their transgender identity is strategically used in order to strengthen relationships and affirm their identity, with their coworkers in order to increase intimacy in their relationships with coworkers and to feel less alienated (Kade, 2021). However, this desire is mediated by fears of discrimination, being viewed as female, or receiving inappropriate questions about their genitals or sexual activities (Kade, 2021). They may also fear that the coworker could disclose their identity to others without them knowing, leading to widespread issues in the workplace (Kade, 2021). This causes many transgender men to practice disclosure avoidance, where they choose to strategically avoid disclosing their transgender identity to others in order to avoid unwanted emotional and mental difficulties and further challenges (Kade, 2021). Overall, when it comes to coworkers, there are a variety of factors that influence a transgender man's decision to disclose their transgender identity, also labelled as coming out (Kade, 2021).

2.10. Contextualising the Current Study Against Existing Literature

Jeanes and Janes (2021) conducted a study similar to the present study, however there are a few core differences. Their study was conducted in England, and as Rogers (2019) describes, the context that transgender men are in greatly impacts the way that they practice masculinity due to changes in their feelings of fear and safety. Therefore, the findings of the study cannot necessarily be applied to other countries. This is especially true for South Africa, where the sociopolitical climate is said to be "deeply patriarchal, homophobic and transphobic" (Monakali & Francis, 2022, p. 4). In addition, the participants were mostly white, whereas in South Africa there is a large amount of racial diversity. Therefore, this study was advertised to all races of transgender men in South Africa, to increase the chances of accessing a more diverse sample.

This study also differs from Jeanes and Janes (2021) study in that the researcher is a transgender man himself, whereas Jeanes and Janes describe themselves as cisgender women in their paper. This gave me an advantage, as it allowed me to build rapport with greater ease with the

participants due to shared experiences, as Kade (2021) found to occur in his study. This is also a technique that Rogers (2022) used, as they describe themselves as queer, and detail how this allowed them to bond with the participants and make them feel understood. I was open about my transgender identity with each participant and give them space to ask any questions that they may have, but as Kade (2021) ensured in his study, I assured the participants that I was there to learn about their experiences, not to be an expert.

This study, like Jeanes and Janes' (2021) study, recruited participants that are binary transgender men as they are more likely to have a masculine gender expression than genderqueer people. In Jeans and Janes' (2021) study they used snowball sampling, as a majority of the studies on transgender men do, which has the limitation of not being generalisable to the wider population, making it difficult to come to a strong conclusion (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Instead of following this method, the present study used volunteer and purposive sampling to recruit eligible participants. In the broader literature, most studies on transgender men were qualitative, with data collection being done through semi-structured or unstructured interviews, and thematic analysis was the most commonly chosen method of data analysis, particularly in some of the most relevant studies (Abelson, 2014; Jeanes and Janes, 2021; Kade, 2021; Rogers, 2019).

Studies on the lived experiences of transgender people in South Africa are sparse, with only two focusing on transgender men's masculinity (Francis, 2014; Monakali & Francis, 2022). Monakali and Francis (2022) focused on the construction of transgender masculinity in the country's legislative capital, Cape Town, while Francis's (2014) case study focused on the experiences of a transgender man working in education in a rural community. Most studies conducted on transgender people in South Africa focus on their experiences with accessing healthcare rather than everyday experiences (Monakali & Francis, 2022). The paucity of research which looks specifically at the daily lived experience of South African transgender men, is further impetus for the current study which seeks to address this gap in the research literature.

2.11. Conclusion

The above examines the literature on transgender people's experiences, with a specific focus on providing background to this study's context, namely the context of the South African workplace. Not only is this research important because of the lack of awareness around transgender people's lived experiences in an increasingly hostile sociopolitical climate

(Montiel-McCann, 2023), but the practicing of defensive masculinities can take a toll on the transgender person's mental health, which is problematic as transgender people are already at an increased risk of developing mental health issues (Cooper et al., 2023). This literature review supports the current study's aim to fill the existing research gap on transgender men's expressions of masculinity in the South African workplace, with a specific focus on defensive masculinities. The next chapter details the methods used to conduct this research and fill the identified gap in the literature.

Chapter 3: Methodology

One manner of confirming the trustworthiness of research is through the reporting of the methods used throughout the data collection and data analysis phases (Shenton, 2004). This chapter discusses the methods that were used in preparing, collecting and analysing the data for this research. It will begin with a description of the type of research that was used, before discussing in detail how this research was conducted and how trustworthiness was created. Lastly, it discusses the ethical considerations that were taken into account and how these were managed.

3.1. Research Design

Due to the use of a social constructionist framework, this research held the view that knowledge cannot be constructed in an objective, unbiased manner as knowledge is instead constructed between people in their daily interactions, with context playing an important role in the construction of knowledge (Burr, 2015). Therefore, since qualitative research shares the perspective that knowledge is not objective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), a qualitative approach was viewed as the most appropriate approach for this research.

While defining qualitative research is becoming increasingly difficult, there are a few important distinctions between qualitative and quantitative research (Aspers & Corne, 2019). Quantitative research observes a phenomenon removed from its context which is represented by numerical data and analysed using statistical procedures (Gravetter et al., 2021). Quantitative research attempts to represent results in an objective manner and uses large sample sizes to improve the generalisability of the findings (Gravetter et al., 2021). In response to this, qualitative research was founded on the belief that reality cannot be represented in an objective manner, since reality is interpreted subjectively (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). It is curious about the meaning that is subjectively generated from people's everyday experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) and interested in studying the person and their interpretations of their experiences in the surrounding context rather than trying to remove context completely (Taylor et al., 2016).

Qualitative research is the approach that aligns the closest to the aims of this research, with its interest in the everyday experiences of transgender men in the workplace, and this research aimed to collect descriptive data that would answer the research questions to gain a detailed understanding of these transgender men's experiences and their subjective interpretations of them. The focus on context in qualitative research is particularly important, as this research

studied these experiences in the context of the workplace and specifically the South African context in which they occur. The impact that this context has on these experiences cannot be ignored or downplayed as expressions of masculinity are constantly adapted based on context (Rogers, 2019). Therefore, using a research design that considered the context of these experiences and the subjective interpretation of them was essential.

Rather than seeking researcher objectivity, qualitative research accommodates the inevitable subjectivity of the researcher in the research process (Aspers & Corte, 2019). This means that qualitative research acknowledges the researcher's position within the research and places an emphasis on the fact that the researcher should consider their positioning when conducting research, as it influences the research process in its entirety (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). This is extremely important in the context of this research, where my position as a transgender man influenced how I collected my data as well as how the data was analysed and therefore, a large amount of reflexivity was needed in this research to ensure that my findings are trustworthy and accurately reflect the data.

Overall, the depth of data that qualitative research provides (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) was considered essential to acquire a detailed understanding of transgender men's expressions of masculinity in the workplace, and the impact that it has on their lives, which was the central aim of this research, to bring transgender men's everyday experiences to light.

3.2. Research Questions

This research had four questions that were used to guide the research.

1. Do transgender men use defensive masculinities in the South African workplace?
2. How do transgender men make use of defensive masculinities in the South African workplace?
3. Why do transgender men make use of defensive masculinities in the South African workplace?
4. What is the impact of employing defensive masculinities in the workplace on transgender men's emotional and mental wellbeing?

These questions were developed from the literature and were used to form an interview schedule (see Appendix A) and guide the data analysis process.

3.3. Participants and Sampling

The sample for this research was seven transgender men who were over the age of eighteen, currently employed in South Africa and who have transitioned in some manner. This is because it can be assumed that if these transgender men have transitioned in some way, they must have either disclosed their transgender identity at their place of work or must be perceived to be cisgender men at their place of work. This meant that they would need to practice some form of masculinity at work, allowing the type of masculinity that they perform and their experiences of masculinity to be studied.

The size of the accessible population was small, as gaining access to the transgender population in South Africa is difficult due to disclosure avoidance in the aforementioned conservative sociopolitical climate and the location of the participants being clustered in Johannesburg and Cape Town, meaning that I was not able to access them locally from my location in Durban. Therefore, the sample was not limited by the type of work that the transgender men did, as the accessible population was too small to be able to limit it further, although there was a question in the interview schedule that asked about the field that the transgender men work in. Participants were not excluded if they worked from home or had less interaction with their coworkers, as this was not a consideration at the outset of this research and was instead a subject that was brought up during the interview. Two participants did work mostly from their home, but this was not seen as an issue as they were able to draw on previous experiences or their experiences when they did go into the office with other coworkers to answer my questions.

This study used a combination of two non-probability sampling methods to sample participants, namely volunteer and purposive sampling. Non-probability sampling is a type of sampling that is used when it is difficult to gain access to the entire population, and only a small sample of the population is accessible, meaning that each person in the population does not have an equal chance of being chosen to participate (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014).

Volunteer sampling is a non-probability sampling method where participants volunteer to participate in the study instead of the researcher contacting them directly (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). This sampling method was used by posting a flyer on a WhatsApp group chat for transgender men in South Africa that requested that members of the group chat consider volunteering to participate in the study if they were eligible and willing to participate. I had been a member of this WhatsApp group chat for a number of years and was therefore able to access part of the South African transgender population through this group chat. Additionally,

when this method did not produce enough participants for the study, a South African general practitioner who is well known in the transgender community for treating transgender people was contacted and asked if she would disseminate the poster to her transgender clients via email, which she agreed to. Additionally, she offered to display the poster in her practice's reception and send it to patients with her monthly newsletter, as well as informing patients who she perceived may be eligible to participate about this study. It is important to note that before this second method of sampling was commenced my ethical clearance was amended accordingly.

However, volunteer sampling does have the limitation of participants possibly not meeting all the population parameters (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). To mitigate this, purposive sampling was used in addition to volunteer sampling. Purposive sampling, another non-probability sampling method, is used by defining a specific set of population parameters that participants must meet, and participants are selected based on whether they fit the selection criteria or not (Robinson, 2014). A specific set of population parameters, namely that the participant is over eighteen years old, that they have transitioned in some manner and that they are currently employed in South Africa, were identified which was be stated in the flyer so that potential participants knew if they are eligible or not, allowing only those who were eligible to volunteer to participate.

3.4. Data Collection

After informed consent was obtained from the participant, data was collected in the form of an individual semi-structured interview, which generally lasted one hour. Semi-structured interviews are interviews that follow a conversational approach (Adams, 2015). They contain questions intended to prompt the participant to talk about their experiences in depth and allow the interviewer to ask clarifying or additional questions as the need for them arises (Adams, 2015; Willig, 2008). This allows the interviewer to become an active participant in the data collection process, as they are more likely to engage with the participant, making the participant more comfortable and therefore more willing to share their experiences, rather than the interviewer simply reading off a set of questions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This results in detailed data, helping to increase the quality of the qualitative research (Willig, 2008).

A set of questions (see Appendix A) were prepared based on existing literature and the research questions, and these formed a foundation for the interview schedule and allowed for further questions to be asked when necessary. Additional questions included asking for clarification,

as well as asking questions that were not directly related to the study but instead helped the participant to feel more comfortable with answering questions and to build rapport. These additional questions were added to the interview schedule after a discussion with my supervisor after my first two interviews. I had found that in the first interview it was difficult to get information out of the participant, and my supervisor suggested asking about themselves and their transition to build rapport. One participant asked to see the questions ahead of time, as he told me he was eager to participate but was anxious about not knowing what was going to be asked. After receiving permission to do so from my supervisor, I sent him the questions and he was able to read over them before the interview. However, he was the only participant that had access to the questions before the interview. Data was collected in a cross-sectional manner, meaning that the data was collected at a single point in time and did not look for differences between one point of data collection and the next (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Table 1 below shows the details of each participant who volunteered to participate in the study and met the population parameters, and who were subsequently interviewed.

Table 1

Participant Details

Alias	Age	Race	Years living as transgender	Stealth at work
Richard	24	Coloured	4	Yes
Thomas	28	Black	5	Yes
Gavin	19	White	2½	Yes
Alex	30	White	2	No
Peter	29	White	1½	No
Stefan	25	White	5	Yes
Mark	28	Unidentified	5	Yes

As seen in the above table, the final participant decided not to identify his race, stating instead that he is “just South African”. His decision to not identify with a race was respected, and his race has been listed as unidentified. It should be noted that the decision to include race as an identifier in this research is based on the assumption, corroborated in the literature, that context - including cultural, ethnic and racial context - is relevant in understanding a transgender person’s subjective experience of being in the world.

It should be mentioned that this research's framework of social constructionism influenced the data collection process, as masculinity was also being performed in the interactions between myself and the participant, and the way that they portrayed their experiences at work and their expression of masculinity at work could have changed based on their feelings of safety in the interview (Abelson, 2014; Rogers, 2022; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This is the reason why I disclosed to the participants in the interview that I am transgender myself, as it may have helped them to feel an increased sense of safety while interacting with me due to the increase in rapport (Kade, 2021) and could have changed how they described their experiences to me and how much they were willing to divulge.

The interviews were conducted online over video call on the platforms of Google Meet and WhatsApp. The interviews took place online as due to the small size of the accessible population; participation was open to transgender men from across South Africa. All interviews were audio recorded with the participants consent, which were then transcribed using Microsoft Word's transcription service, before finally the transcript was checked for discrepancies between the generated transcript and the original audio recordings of the interview.

3.5. Data Analysis

Once the transcripts were generated by Microsoft Word, they were checked for accuracy, and the participants' names and other identifying information were either changed or removed as an extra precaution to ensure confidentiality. The transcripts were then opened using a desktop application called Taguette, a free qualitative coding tool (Rampin & Rampin, 2021). It allows for highlighting of extracts, which can then be sorted into codes, which are then sorted into themes, allowing for thematic analysis to be conducted with greater ease.

Thematic analysis is used to identity patterns or themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021), which in this case was used to find themes relating to masculinity, specifically defensive masculinities, and if, how and why it may be used, as well as the impact on mental health. Thematic analysis has six phases between collection of the data and the final analysis of the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). These stages involve becoming familiar with the data, generating codes from the data, creating themes from the codes, expanding on and editing the initial themes, naming remaining themes after refinement and conducting the final write up of the themes that have been properly developed, named and that are relevant to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2021). These phases were followed in the analysis phase of this research.

The data analysis process occurred as soon as possible after each interview once the transcript had been generated and checked for discrepancies to ensure that the data that I was coding was accurate. I first began the analysis by reading over the transcripts twice without any attempts to begin coding to familiarise myself with the data before I began coding during my third complete reading of the transcripts. I read the data with the research questions in mind and searched for any quotes that could assist with answering the research questions. I worked online on Taguette, highlighting any excepts I perceived may be significant. These highlights were then sorted into codes by grouping together relevant words or phrases, and the view of the transcripts with highlights and codes was then exported into PDF form. Using this view, I was able to see which of the codes fit together, and after compiling a list of codes I began to sort them into themes. These themes were then refined, where I removed themes that I thought may not assist with answering the research questions or that were not relevant, and the remaining themes were given a final name.

3.6. Ensuring Trustworthiness

While qualitative research does not rely on validity or reliability markers to show to readers that the study is trustworthy, qualitative research does have other attributes that allow its trustworthiness to be evidenced (Shenton, 2004). Namely, these attributes are credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability (Shenton, 2004).

Credibility refers to whether a study examines what it intends to, the qualitative form of internal validity (Shenton, 2004). This research created credibility through using previously established data collection and data analysis methods (Shenton, 2004), namely semi-structured interviews as well as thematic analysis. In addition, it only used willing participants and encouraged them to be honest through building rapport with them (Shenton, 2004). This research was also conducted while having frequent communication with my supervisor to discuss possible issues with the research, examine the research through a new point of view and to minimise any possible bias in reporting results (Shenton, 2004). In addition to this research being examined by my supervisor, I presented the proposal of this research and allowed the proposal to be examined by others who offered their own opinions and questioned my choices to gain additional points of view and ensure that my choices were justified (Shenton, 2004). Finally, this research write-up included a detailed description of the results with extracts to prove that the findings did indeed come directly from the data, and the findings were also compared to relevant literature (Shenton, 2004).

Dependability is the qualitative equivalent of reliability, meaning that research shows dependability and therefore is trustworthy if the research could be repeated with similar conclusions being drawn from the findings (Shenton, 2004). Dependability can be achieved through detailed reporting of the research process that was completed, which the final write up contained (Shenton, 2004). Additionally, the detailed reporting process helped to increase transferability (Shenton, 2004). Transferability refers to external validity, or the ability of the findings to be generalised to the wider population (Shenton, 2004). This is done by providing a full description of all steps taken during the research process, as well as by thoroughly discussing the findings and factors influencing the findings (Shenton, 2004). Lastly, confirmability is the ability of the researcher to be objective (Shenton, 2004). While having complete objectivity is impossible in qualitative research, in order to minimise bias I practiced reflexivity throughout the research process, discussed in detail in the next chapter. Additionally, I disclosed all biases and preconceptions in order for the reader to be aware of any issues that may affect my ability to be objective (Shenton, 2004).

3.7. Ethical Considerations

Conducting research in an ethical manner is vital for a multitude of reasons (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014), and all researchers have a responsibility to protect both their participants and the reputation of the accuracy of research (Gravetter et al., 2021). Ethics are vital to the research process, particularly when studies use human participants, as there is a possibility for the research to harm the participants (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). This is problematic when one of the central principles that psychologists must follow is to do no harm (American Psychological Association, 2010). Therefore, it is important for all research to follow basic ethical principles to minimise possible harm to the participants. This research has employed a variety of strategies to ensure this research minimised the possibility of harm to participants and was conducted in an ethical manner.

According to the University of the Witwatersrand's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC non-medical), this study is classified as a low risk study, as it dealt with some sensitive topics that could have caused emotional distress, and the participants were from a marginalised group of people. However, while this study did have some risk, there were a variety of mechanisms put in place to prevent harm and ensure that the research was conducted ethically. This research was only conducted after receiving ethical clearance from the Human Research Ethics Committee (non-medical) to ensure that this research was ethical and had appropriate

justification for conducting this research, as well as to ensure that there were enough mechanisms in place to reduce harm wherever possible. The Ethical Clearance Certificate for this study is attached as Appendix B. The need for researchers to gain institutional approval is listed in the American Psychological Association's ethical guidelines for human research (American Psychological Association, 2010).

Volunteer sampling was chosen to ensure that participants were participating of their own free will, which is important when data collection involves the discussion of sensitive topics, as participants are then able to decide if they have the ability to participate without becoming distressed. In addition, the interviews took place at a time and date that was decided on by the participant to ensure that it was convenient to the participant and to ensure that they only participated in the interview when they were in an emotional state where they were able to talk about sensitive topics, which aimed to reduce the possibility of emotional distress. Participants were also able to decline to answer any questions they were not comfortable with or withdraw from the study without any consequences, as stated in the participant information sheet (Appendix C) and I also reminded them that they could do this at the beginning of the interview. Participants were sent the participant information sheet via email or WhatsApp, as well as a consent form (Appendix D) that they were required to sign before they were able to participate in the study. The participant information sheet stated that some questions may be uncomfortable or cause emotional distress to ensure that the participant gave fully informed consent (American Psychological Association, 2010). In the event that a participant did become distressed during or after the interview a distress protocol was prepared and they would have been directed towards free counselling through the South African Depression and Anxiety Group, however no participants became apparently distressed during the interview, so this was only a precaution, but it was still a necessary one.

Another ethical issue that should be disclosed is my presence in the WhatsApp group that I conducted the initial part of my sampling through. However, my participation in the WhatsApp group with a total of forty-six members was minimal, only occasionally answering transition-related questions and I had never interacted privately with anyone in the WhatsApp group. This meant that there was no coercion or pressure to participate, as no one in the group chat knew me personally. Additionally, I gained permission from the group admin to post the flyer I had created on the WhatsApp group after I had received my ethical clearance from the University of the Witwatersrand Humans Research Ethics Committee (non-medical) and could therefore begin sampling.

When it became clear that only sampling though the WhatsApp group would not provide a sufficient number of participants, I amended my ethical clearance to get approval for a South African general practitioner to disseminate the flyer that I had created to her patients through an emailed newsletter and through displaying the poster in her waiting rooms. To ensure that this was done in an ethical manner, she sent out the flyer on my behalf so that I never had access to any patient details or records. Instead, participants were able to reach out to me directly through the contact details on the flyer, allowing the identities of those that chose not to participate to remain unknown to me. Additionally, she stated her agreement to assist me with sampling in this manner in writing which was signed by her, and I had never interacted with her in either a personal or professional manner. This meant that there was no risk of coercion or pressure to assist me with sampling for this study, and she did so of her own free will.

There was a possibility of ethical concerns with my use of tools in the data analysis process which must therefore be disclosed. I used Microsoft Word's built in transcription tool to transcribe my audio recordings, however, Microsoft Support states that it does not save the audio recordings that are uploaded, meaning that my participants details remained confidential (Microsoft Support, n.d.). This is also true with Taguette, the tool that was used to code the transcripts. Taguette is a tool that is downloaded to your computer, allowing your transcripts and the codes you create to never leave your computer (Rampin & Rampin, 2021). As an extra precaution, I removed or changed any names and identifying information from the transcripts before I uploaded them to Taguette. Therefore, my participants personal details were kept confidential. Additionally, to be completely transparent with my participants, the use of these tools was stated in my participant information sheet to ensure that the participants could make an informed decision and could decide not to participate if they did not consent to the use of these tools in the data analysis process.

The data that was collected for the purposes of this study was handled with extreme caution to ensure that the participants identities were kept confidential and will remain confidential in the future. The audio recordings of the interviews will be deleted upon the completion of this qualification in 2025 and the transcripts that were generated from the audio recordings will be stored with the altered or completely removed personal details on a password protected device for ten years to allow for additional analysis or publications before their deletion. This was stated in the participant information sheet to ensure that the participants were made aware of

how their data was handled and will be protected after their interview and they could therefore offer their informed consent before they participated.

Finally, the participants' names and any identifying information were changed when reporting the findings and in the discussion of the findings in this dissertation to ensure that I am the only person that knows their identity. This means that their identities can be kept confidential, as promised in the participant information sheet and as stated in the American Psychological Association's (2010) guidelines for research on human participants.

Chapter 4: Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the process where the researcher continuously reflects critically on their beliefs, experiences, and biases throughout the research process, and discloses the factors which may possibly influence their work (Berger, 2013). The researcher's subjectivity can have an impact on multiple parts of the qualitative research process, including the research setting, the interview questions and the final interpretation of the data, which is why being attuned to reflexivity throughout the research process is so vital (Berger, 2013). As a transgender man conducting research on other transgender men, reflexivity was an important part of this research process. This chapter will discuss how reflexivity was interwoven through each stage of the research process, how my subjectivity impacted the research process, and finally my own reflections on being a transgender man studying other transgender men's experiences.

Originally, I had planned to go into this research in an objective manner, where I intended to completely remove myself from all parts of the research process. This, I thought, came from a desire to have real findings from my research rather than research that confirmed my own assumptions. At the time I held the incorrect assumption that it was indeed possible to remove yourself as the researcher from your qualitative research, and that acknowledging your subjectivity in the research process meant that your findings were inaccurate rather than having the opposite effect. Reflecting on it now, however, I can also see that this was a defensive position. If I removed myself from the research, I did not have to come to terms with the fact that I had shared experiences with my participants because we are all transgender men.

At the outset of this research, I had been struggling with coming to terms with being transgender for over a year. I wanted to see myself and be seen by others completely as a cisgender man and completely erase the fact that I am transgender. I had been hiding the fact that I was transgender from classmates, colleagues and friends alike, becoming completely stealth in an effort to somehow distance myself from being transgender. Even at the time of writing up this research, when a stranger or someone that I have not disclosed my transgender identity to asks about my research topic I respond by saying that it is on masculinity in the South African workplace, completely excluding the focus that my research has on transgender men, which is crucially the most important aspect of my research. This is a conscious choice that I made in an attempt to avoid speculation from the individual that I myself am transgender, indicating the deep ambivalence with which I live, and which I saw mirrored in the experiences described by my participants.

Fear is unfortunately a constant companion for a significant number of transgender people, with a large number of the sample of a survey of 873 transgender adults in the United States of America stating that they fear being the victim of discrimination when accessing healthcare with a new provider (73%), using a public bathroom (68%), showing affection to their partner in public (62%) or going to non-LGBTQ+ nightclubs or bars (64%) (Phares et al., 2024). There is no formal research that I could find besides the cited report that researched fear in transgender people, and how it underlies every experience transgender people have with others or in public. Although this fear is discussed briefly in the following findings and discussion chapter, and this could be an important direction for future research. Conducting this research has made me confront these fears, which has been difficult, but also rewarding in how I have been able to connect with my participants in the hour we spent together during the interview for this research.

I began each interview by telling the participant that I am transgender myself, and if my own experiences were similar to theirs in some way, I would mention my own experiences, which then prompted them to talk about their own experiences in a more detailed manner. Additionally, I felt that the sharing of my own experiences with my participants was important for both myself and them, as I feel that it created a sense of community, that we were in this together, and that our experiences were not unique. We were able to speak to someone who understands what we are going through, and I felt that this was very powerful, and a bond that a cisgender researcher could not have replicated with these transgender men. I found disclosing my own experiences to other transgender men to be almost therapeutic, although I was careful to not treat it like a therapy session, as I still was there to learn from them, not talk about myself. This was also an experience that Harvey (2017) had when conducting her own research, where she found that she had to carefully balance disclosing too little and disclosing too much in the interview, as the researcher is there to learn, not to become well acquainted with the participant.

According to Harvey (2017), in conducting research, there are boundaries that need to be kept between the researcher and the participant, although these boundaries should be flexible and allow for some self-disclosure when the researcher feels it would be beneficial to the participant. To ensure that I did not make these interviews about myself, I continuously examined my motivations before self-disclosing to the participant to maintain a focus on what would benefit the participant instead of what would benefit me, as Harvey (2017) suggested. Additionally, I kept a diary where I wrote about how these interviews affected me and brought this to my therapy sessions with my personal therapist, where I could speak about what came

up in the interview and how it made me feel instead of sharing this with my participants and allowing this to affect them.

However, there are challenges that come with disclosing your own experiences, such as the researcher making assumptions or the participants not sharing as much detail as the participants may assume the researcher is an expert and therefore, they need not explain their experiences in depth (Berger, 2013). In addition, the participants may fear that their experiences are being compared to the researcher's and that there is a competition between the researcher's and the participant's experiences (Berger, 2013). I did not find this to be an issue, but in order to prevent this possible problem from occurring I began each interview by reminding the participant that I was there to learn from their experiences rather than to compare their experiences to mine. I then gave each participant the opportunity to ask me any questions that they had to build rapport with them and attempt to make them more comfortable.

During the analysis phase of this research, I found it easy to not become emotional over the participant's experiences when reading and analysing the first two interview transcripts. This may be because while I had shared experiences with the participants, the interviews did not touch on issues which I had not yet resolved with my personal therapist. However, in my third interview I met with a transgender man who worked in a job where most of his interactions were with cisgender men and he described the atmosphere of this workplace to be extremely toxic and damaging to his mental health. His detailed description of his experiences did not have an impact on me during the interview, however when I was proofreading the transcript for discrepancies between the generated transcript and the audio recording of the interview, I found myself getting emotional over his experiences and how he had adapted to this toxic workplace climate. I related to his fear of coming out and of being discriminated against in the workplace. In my own experiences working as a tutor in higher education, I was asked for advice on how to deal with unsupportive parents by a transgender student who had been told by a mutual friend that I was transgender. Still uncomfortable in my transgender identity and worried that the news the I am transgender would spread to the other students that I tutored, and I would be ridiculed or not taken seriously, I told the student that I am not transgender and therefore I could not help them as I knew nothing about the subject. My fear in that moment and in future interactions with that student was significant. I could not cope with the thought of being discriminated against in a workplace that I loved and was thankful for. While the previously described third participant, Gavin, did not feel as passionately about his workplace as I did, it allowed him to make enough money to support himself, and therefore was important

to him. This created a shared experience between him and I and is what made me so emotional when reading his experiences.

Therefore, to ensure I did not allow my own experiences and emotions that came from reading his testimony and his shared experiences to negatively impact the data analysis process, I closed the generated transcript of my interview with him and only came back to it two days later when I was feeling less emotional. This was an important experience for me and one that I feel should be reported, as it significantly changed the way that I viewed this research. I thought that I had become so desensitised to the experiences of being transgender that I believed that conducting this research would not impact me, but I was incorrect in this assumption. This experience made me aware of the fact that this research can and will have an impact on me, and therefore I must be careful to manage my emotions and ensure that I take steps to minimise my impact and be aware of my subjectivity on the data analysis process, as I did by closing the transcript and returning to it after I had control over my emotions again. This step was taken to ensure that my findings came from the data and not from my own experiences.

While my own positioning within this research impacted the research process throughout, including how I recruited my participants and how I conducted the interviews and analysis, I believe that my positioning gave unique insight into my participants experiences. I believe that the participants of this study were able to share their experiences with more detail because of our shared experiences, and possibly felt more understood than they would have with a cisgender researcher. Throughout this research I took steps to ensure that my findings came from the data, not from my own assumptions, and that my positioning enhanced this research instead of discrediting it, and these steps are reported here along with my own reflections on conducting this research to be completely transparent with the reader.

Chapter 5: Findings and Discussion

This chapter presents and discusses the findings of this study and compares the findings to those of relevant literature. It should be mentioned, however, that some findings were unique, and in some instances I was unable to identify any corroborating literature due to the scarce literature on the topic of masculinities, and particularly defensive masculinities in the workplace, or literature based specifically in South Africa. Three over-arching themes emerged from the data during the data analysis phase of this research. This chapter begins with a discussion on the experiences of being transgender in the South African workplace, the first theme, before discussing how masculinity is displayed by the participants in their workplaces, the second theme. Finally, it covers the impact that being transgender in the South African workplace and practicing defensive masculinities has on mental health.

5.1. Being Transgender in the South African Workplace

This theme describes and discusses the experiences of transgender men in the South African workplace. The sub-themes included in this theme are experiences of discrimination and coming out in the workplace, feelings that they were keeping a secret from their colleagues, sexual orientation versus gender identity, and the impact of coming out in the workplace. While this theme does not directly answer any of the research questions, it gives important background into the motivations behind how participants expressed masculinity in the workplace to contextualise the findings discussed in the second theme. Additionally, this theme contributes to broader research on transgender men in South Africa.

5.1.1. Discrimination in the Workplace

Dayal (2022) described how many LGBTQ+ people in South Africa continue to face discrimination and persecution despite the constitutional protections that South Africa offers, as many South African people still believe that same-sex attraction is immoral in the conservative sociopolitical climate of South Africa. This was also a finding in Watson et al.'s (2023) study, where they examined experiences of discrimination in the workplace in Italy, and found that despite gender identity being a protected characteristic, there were still high rates of discrimination present.

Consistent with the above-mentioned literature that described high rates of discrimination against LGBTQ+ people in South Africa (Dayal, 2022) and high rates of discrimination in the workplace internationally (Watson et al., 2023) out of the seven transgender men that were

interviewed for this research, four reported experiencing some form of discrimination in the workplace. One participant, Richard, described his previous experiences at work of his coworkers teasing him about his transgender identity and while this was played off by his coworkers as just friends teasing each other, it did not feel that way for him. On another occasion, his friend had told him that some of his coworkers were having a discussion about what is in his pants, an extremely inappropriate topic that objectifies him and denies his right to what Nadal et al. (2012) term 'personal body privacy' (p. 69). This is a type of microaggression where transgender people are reduced to what genitals they have, and this may include being openly questioned about what is in their pants (Nadal et al., 2012).

A second participant, Stefan, also reported dealing with inappropriate questions about him in the workplace, asked by both his employer and the human resources representative at his place of employment. Additionally, these inappropriate questions were occasionally asked in the presence of other coworkers. Inappropriate questions from coworkers are reported by McFadden (2020) to be part of the harassment that many transgender employees face and is evidence for the fact that these are not isolated experiences, but rather a common experience of transgender employees.

The teasing that Richard experienced was also echoed in my interview with Gavin, where he described how, despite none of his coworkers knowing that he is transgender, he is constantly "picked on" for what they deem to be feminine aspects of him. Therefore, even though it cannot be considered a directly transphobic attack, he still considers it to be a transphobic attack because if he were born a cisgender man he would not have the feminine features that they are harassing him for.

> There's like always, always, always comments about transgender people, and I'm also picked on extremely at work…because of things like my height or because of my voice…although they don't know I'm transgender - so it's not necessarily picking on me because I'm transgender, it's still picking on me for things that are out of my control because I've transitioned. You know, if I weren't transgender, possibly my voice would be deeper and I would be taller and AB and C so it's not direct, but it's an indirect attack at things that I don't have control over.

Stefan also had the experience of being exposed to negative comments about transgender people in the workplace despite him being stealth at his place of work. Stefan's coworker, a

person who he considers to be a friend, described how he would react to finding out that he had accidentally taken a transgender woman home.

> That friend of mine has told me before that like if he meets a woman and they go home together and he finds out that that woman is actually trans, he would react violently. So the idea of that is in my head is that OK, cool. So if you find out now that I'm trans, you can react violently.

This has caused Stefan to fear being the victim of violence from this coworker if his coworker were to discover that Stefan is transgender. This has caused Stefan to change his behaviour at work, discussed in detail in the next theme.

It should be mentioned that discrimination can take many forms instead of being solely teasing or inappropriate comments or questions, and in Stefan's case, he theorises that the reason why he lost his first job was due to his transgender identity.

> I'm pretty sure that I ended up losing my first job because I was trans, because things did go pretty well until the boss found out. And then after that, he did not like me…he just kind of made it very clear to me that he wasn't comfortable with it and then a week later, I didn't have a job.

While it appears that there have not been any recent studies about rates of job dismissal because of the employee's transgender identity, one report from 2011 states that 26% of the large sample of 6450 individuals that participated in the survey had lost a job due to their transgender identity (Grant et al., 2011). This report included participants from across the United States of America and other United States territories, but did not assess the discrimination rates of other countries. The lack of studies on this topic internationally is concerning, as this is a significant experience of discrimination that, according to Stefan's experience, may still be occurring and is not isolated to the United States of America. In the South African context, Dayal (2022) stated that hate crimes against LGBTQ+ people have persisted despite the constitutional protections that South Africa has to offer, which supports Stefan's experience.

Finally, a fourth participant, Alex, mentioned that he struggled with his employer misgendering him in front of coworkers that he was not out to. Although he says that it previously affected him, he states that he has adapted to it.

> I've learned how to deal with it in kind of in day-to-day life, being misgendered and stuff that comes up, obviously it's awkward, but I wouldn't say that I'm afraid of it. It's the reality of the life that I live is it's probably gonna happen and I've made peace with that.

The experiences of harassment and teasing can be classified as microaggressions, which are described as behaviours or statements that contain hostile or derogatory messages (Cancela et al., 2024). Microaggressions are particularly difficult to deal with, as often they are perceived as being too subtle to report to a manager or human resources representative (McFadden, 2020). The microaggressions that transgender people face in the workplace can include intentionally or unintentionally calling the person their previous name, also termed their deadname, purposefully misgendering them, or asking them inappropriate questions (Cancela et al., 2024; McFadden, 2020). The prevalence of these experiences in the workplace is high, as has been discussed, and this finding of the high prevalence of microaggressions in the workplace is unfortunately not exclusive to this study. Cancela et al. (2024) found in their study that 62.71% of transgender employees had experienced microaggressions in the workplace, leading to emotional exhaustion. Building on Cancela et al.'s (2024) study, Kimber et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review on the impact of microaggressions on mental health and found that experiencing microaggressions was linked to negative mental health outcomes including anxiety, depression, suicidal ideations and overall decreased quality of life. Therefore, while these experiences may seem insignificant, they can have a severe impact on a person's mental health, which will be discussed further in the third theme.

5.1.2. Living in Secret

A shared experience between two participants that I found interesting was their management of social media and how they navigated being transgender on online platforms. Both Gavin and Thomas were extremely cautious with hiding their transgender identity online from coworkers and clients, deleting YouTube videos or declining follow requests on social media.

> If my friends at work try to follow me on Instagram, I decline because on Instagram I'm always posting about LGBTQ+ rights and I don't want them to come to work and, you know, question why I'm posting about that stuff.

For Gavin, he was scared that his association with LGBTQ+ rights would out him to his colleagues and that the microaggressions from them would worsen and possibly become blatant discrimination. This fear that he has is justified, as Ozturk and Tatli (2016) state, transgender

people often face experiences of stigmatisation, marginalisation and exclusion in the workplace. This statement is supported by the experiences discussed throughout this theme.

In order to minimise these negative workplace experiences, many transgender people may choose not to disclose their transgender identity at their workplace (Ozturk & Tatli, 2016), the course of action that the majority of the participants in this study chose. Gavin chose to make the decision to openly disclose his transgender identity in some aspects of his life, such as with his friends or on Instagram, but he chose not to disclose his transgender identity at work to avoid discrimination. This causes what Ragins (2008) terms 'disclosure disconnect' (p. 195), where managing differences in identity concealment among different domains of life leads to psychological conflict and distress in the individual, as they must constantly avoid threats to the non-disclosure of their transgender identity in the workplace. Gavin must constantly manage the different degrees of concealment of his transgender identity in the different domains of his life, including monitoring who is following him on Instagram. His constant monitoring of these threats to the non-disclosure of his transgender identity at work led to mental health issues, as Ragins (2008) described would occur from this disclosure disconnect.

While Gavin was concerned about experiencing discrimination from his coworkers, Thomas was more concerned about the impact on the clients that he dealt with as a graphic designer and how his clients would feel about his transgender identity.

> I used to have a YouTube channel where I spoke about [being transgender], and when I started working I took those things down because I didn't want any overlap…I feel like I'm an inconvenience in that sense, like - dealing with clients is already difficult…and so now it's even harder because the clients not only have an issue with the fact that the logo is green, but that you're there.

He expanded on this part of his experience of being transgender in the South African workplace later in the interview:

> I think being trans in the workplace, specifically in South Africa I'm making this assumption in my head that it's easier to be stealth because you know, if you do have this desire to [build a career]…I feel like being stealth in my head is easier because you don't want to make doing that harder because people are mean about something like that. Whereas I feel like if I was cisgender, I wouldn't be thinking about that at all. I would be able to live my life in my free time however, I talk about whatever I want to without fear that my personal life and my professional life might mingle together or mix and then this

> one thing about me is now impacting my professional life. So I think that you feel like - it's good for your professional career to be stealth because you don't want to make certain situations awkward or even like I think affect the kinds of opportunities that you will get because of it.

In both Thomas and Gavin's cases, taking these precautions were done to avoid disclosure, or 'coming out' to those around them. This was also present in my interview with Richard. When I asked him why he had not disclosed his transgender identity to some of his coworkers, he stated that it was for "convenience and for my own sanity, I guess. I don't want people to know." His mental health was affected because of the discrimination and inappropriate questions that his coworkers asked when he was not present to defend himself, a finding that is consistent with the findings in Kade's (2021) study. Kade (2021) states that the reasons why transgender men choose not to disclose their transgender identity in the workplace relate to fears of discrimination and stigmatisation, inappropriate questions, fears about their coworkers telling others and changing their coworkers perceptions of them being "just one of the guys" (Kade, 2021, p. 6). Thomas spoke about a similar fear that he has to this last point about how people picture him and how this may change once he has disclosed to them that he is transgender, as he does not want them seeing him as anything else than a man, and how this increases gender dysphoria for him, leading to him being hesitant to disclose that he is transgender to other people.

> I think what you're mentioning about what's in my pants - I think that's the feeling I have in general with telling people that I'm trans who I don't know like that… I don't know if this is the right way to describe it, but they've already pictured who I am and what I look like and because I've mentioned this thing and what they are picturing is, I guess, something that brings me myself a lot of [gender] dysphoria. So it's like you don't kind of want people to know that.

Later, he reinforced this point, talking about "there's also this, like, oh, what's up, my brah kind of thing. I just don't want it to be get become awkward now. It's like, so what do I say to you type of thing, you know?" He did not want these types of interactions with his male coworkers to become awkward because they did not know how to treat him now that he is not 'just one of the guys'. This would be an invalidation of his masculinity and by extension his identity, as he would instead be seen as an 'other', or worse – a woman, instead of the man that he is. This can cause significant distress, as Stefan pointed out stating "when somebody doesn't take me

seriously as being trans it causes [gender] dysphoria. It causes this like actual stress." This stress can be related to the minority stress model and will be discussed in detail in the third theme. Therefore, it is logical that many participants took steps to ensure that they did not give their coworkers the opportunity to not take their identity seriously by avoiding the disclosure of their transgender identity in the workplace.

5.1.3. Gender Identity versus Sexual Orientation

Participant Thomas introduced an aspect of his experience which was substantiated by other respondents. Thomas described that he felt that he was constantly living with a secret in his place of work, whether he was with clients or with coworkers.

> You're getting along with the person, but you feel weird inside. Like you feel like you're keeping a secret. It's like - I'm not trying to keep this a secret, but also, this is - I don't know when is the appropriate time to tell your client or some person you just met about this thing that may in fact cause issues if they do find out about it.

He expressed how, because of this issue, he feels that it was easier to be a lesbian than it is to be transgender in the workplace for two reasons. Firstly, when he identified as a cisgender lesbian, he knew that the people he was interacting with were not prejudiced towards people who identify as a lesbian, as he presented as very visibly queer, so when a person interacted with him they already knew who he was, or rather what he identified as. This meant that if he was interacting with a person, they knew he was a lesbian and they were therefore not going to be prejudiced or discriminatory towards him because of his identity. However, being transgender is different as people are often not immediately aware that a person is transgender if they pass well.

> So when I was - before I transitioned, I was, you know, I was perceived as a woman who dressed like a man...So any, I guess discrimination, we've kind of gotten it out the window just by you looking at me, but I think you are seen or perceived as being cis[gender] - there's this thing of like you think - or my fear of like, oh, we're all buddy buddy now. But then you know this one thing about me and then this whole relationship is just in the drain. And then you turn into this really mean person. So it like - passing makes it more difficult to kind of assess who you can feel comfortable with and who you can't.

What Thomas is describing in the above extract is how difficult it is to ensure that the people that he interacts with would not be prejudiced towards him if they knew that he is transgender.

Therefore, while passing as a cisgender man is affirming and therefore important, it also has its disadvantages.

The second reason that Thomas perceives being transgender as more difficult than being a lesbian is because if a person disagrees with a lesbian's lesbian identity, they are disagreeing with a part of them, but when a person is disagreeing with a transgender person's transgender identity, they are disagreeing with who that person fundamentally is. He believes that disagreeing with who a person is fundamentally is considerably more significant than disagreeing with a part of a person's identity.

> It's a lot more difficult to be like transgender than it is to be gay in the workplace. Because if someone disagrees with [your transgender identity], they're disagreeing with a fundamental part of you…whereas if you're gay, that's more of an aspect of you, whereas if you're trans, that's who you are. You know, if they're disagreeing with you, then they're seeing you as a woman, you know or they're seeing you, I don't know - as not the man that you are, you know…It can be more difficult to be trans in the workplace and that's why I feel like there's so much fear around, you know, disclosing that you're transgender to your coworkers, even in my own experience, because then it's a disagreement with if someone disagrees with that, that's they're disagreeing with who I am as a person, you know?

In future interviews when I asked other participants if they also felt that it was easier to be a lesbian than it is to be transgender, they agreed with Thomas. Stefan added to this point, and spoke about how to be transgender, you need other's acknowledgement of your identity through their use of the right name and pronouns, whereas you do not need the same acknowledgement with your sexual orientation.

> You don't need anybody's validation to be gay, you just are gay…but the only message that you're gonna get - you get it when you transition, when you wanna make legal changes…if you just want top surgery - you can't because you need somebody else's validation, so being trans is like constant thing. It's constant messaging of you need external validation. So I think being stealth is like a weird way to combat that - is specifically that you - now you don't need the external validation because you aren't asking for any validation. You know that you aren't giving them an opportunity to reject you because they just don't know, but again it's hard because now you are closing off a part of yourself.

This can be linked back to the previous discussion of how transgender people control who has the opportunity to discriminate against them through choosing who to disclose their transgender identity to. Stefan has expanded on this to include how disclosure can be used to remove the opportunities that other people may have to reject or not validate a person's transgender identity. Therefore, the importance of the choice of disclosure cannot be emphasised enough.

Additionally, Alex spoke about the difference in stigma between being a lesbian and being transgender, and how that makes being transgender in the workplace more difficult.

> I think there's less social stigma and kind of navigating of awkward conversations. Whereas before I was very in your face like yes I'm a lesbian. What the fuck you gonna do about it? What are you fucking looking at? Whereas now - I feel a bit more timid in that sense. A little bit more hesitant confronting people or being assertive when people get things wrong. Because there's this thing of …we'll just hate trans people.

He also stated that this causes "a perpetual sense of anxiety", as firstly you feel anxious about if people can tell that you are transgender, and secondly, you feel anxious about if they care that you are transgender. The impact of being transgender and practicing defensive masculinities on mental health will be discussed in detail in the final theme.

When considering the significance of this finding, I searched for but was unable to find any literature that reported differences in the experiences of discrimination in the workplace between lesbian women and transgender men. Additionally, I searched for rates of discrimination against lesbian women in the workplace to attempt to compare this to rates of discrimination against transgender people in the workplace. However, I was unable to find any research that focused specifically on lesbian women, as the studies that I was able to find examined LGBTQ+ people as a single group rather than separating the experiences of the different identities. Therefore, it is not possible to state whether this finding is applicable to a broader context, and this could be a direction for future research.

5.1.4. Coming out in the Workplace

Participants' stories of disclosure in the workplace were not all negative. Three of the seven participants had positive experiences of coming out in the workplace and had never experienced workplace discrimination, with one participant mentioning that "people knowing you're trans doesn't make them treat you different." Peter stated that his experience of coming

out at work was “surprising” as he “did not expect it to go that smooth.” His manager was incredibly supportive of him and Peter mentioned that he is “pretty sure [his manager] fought a couple of battles for me in that office of his.” While Peter is completely out in his workplace, Thomas has changed his place of work since he came out, and is now stealth, but when he came out in his previous workplace, he had a positive experience with his coworkers who he describes as “very open, understanding people.” Additionally, while Mark did experience some misgendering when he came out at work, he stated that as soon as his voice started changing and becoming deeper, it stopped. When he spoke about this he said, “I don't think…they were out to hurt me or something”, so he perceives his overall experience to be positive, and he perceived the misgendering he faced as non-intentional. There did not appear to be a pattern of positive or negative experiences of coming out, meaning that each person’s experiences with coming out in the workplace in South Africa may be different, and it truly depends entirely on the type of people that a person’s coworkers are or the workplace environment that they are in.

Lastly, the impact of being transgender at work in this section cannot be discussed without also mentioning the positive impact that being openly transgender has on others. Peter is a transgender man who is open about his transgender identity at his place of work, where he is a high school teacher. When I mentioned during the interview that him being open about his transgender identity must have a positive impact on his students, and in particular the LGBTQ+ students at the school, he agreed. While his manager had told him that he should not have conversations with the students about his transgender identity, he did disclose to me that he did speak to a student who came to him for support.

> Honestly, in that moment that kid needed support - needed to hear “I see you, you're gonna be fine. Keep on talking to your parents, even if they don't get it. They're trying”. And they actually are - which is impressive. That kid didn't need to hear “sorry. I was forbidden to speak to you on these sensitive topics.”

In addition to this, he spoke about the impact that just having an openly transgender teacher must have on the children.

> Just having that role model and just having someone showing that you can live a happy life - like you will be accepted. Like look at this guy surviving in this environment. You'll be just fine. Just having that. I mean, how much would that have meant for us?

I think his question in the above excerpt “how much would that have meant for us?” was particularly striking. As someone who went to an extremely conservative girls only high school

where I was open about being transgender, having a teacher who was forthcoming about being part of the LGBTQ+ community would have been significant for me, and from this statement, it would have been impactful for him as well. The positive impact that being openly transgender has in the workplace has previously been studied by Salter and Sosso (2022), although their study had a larger focus on LGBTQ+ people as a whole rather than studying a specific identity. Salter and Sasso (2022) found that people who had disclosed their LGBTQ+ identity in their workplace felt that they created a more positive workplace environment, both for other LGBTQ+ employees and in a wider context. This was also a finding in their smaller sample of transgender participants of approximately 54 people, which was qualitatively studied as opposed to the previous quantitative results. Therefore, while being open about being transgender in the South African workplace is terrifying for a large amount of people, like Gavin and Thomas, there are positive aspects about being openly transgender in the workplace.

5.2. Defensive Masculinities

This theme discusses defensive masculinities, and the findings related to defensive masculinities, to answer three out of the four research questions that guided this research. The research questions answered in this theme asked whether defensive masculinities are used by transgender men in the South African workplace, how they are used by transgender men in the South African workplace and finally, why they are used by transgender men in the South African workplace. This theme has two sub-themes, namely the use of ego defence mechanisms and the performances of masculinity.

5.2.1. Ego Defence Mechanisms

During the analysis phase of this research, it became clear that many of the defence mechanisms that the participants were using align with the ego defence mechanisms referred to in psychoanalysis, despite no obvious reference to this in the literature on defensive masculinities in transgender men, although this has been referenced in studies conducted on defensive masculinities in cisgender men (Gough, 2004). In Gough's (2004) study he describes through a psychoanalytic lens how heterosexual men experience unconscious anxiety due to femininity and homosexual men, and this anxiety is reduced through the use of the ego defence mechanisms of splitting and projection, which are first learned in childhood. The practicing of these defence mechanisms leads to men practicing defensive masculinities because of their insecurity in their own masculinity (Gough, 2004). While this description differs from this study's understanding of defensive masculinities, where transgender men must practice

masculinity in a hegemonic manner in order to avoid violence, the core concept is similar. Defensive masculinities are practiced when men feel as if they must practice a different form of masculinity to the performance of masculinity that they feel is authentic to them in order to avoid a threat that can be either internal anxiety (Gough, 2004), or an external threat (Abelson, 2014).

Gough's (2004) study can therefore be used to support this theory that ego defence mechanisms are used when performing Abelson's (2014) version of defensive masculinities that are practiced by transgender men. Ego defence mechanisms are unconscious processes that protect the person from thoughts, impulses or feelings that are threatening and anxiety-inducing (Corey et al., 2021). Participants' responses suggest that the primary defences that are at play in the performance of defensive masculinities are those of identification and compensation.

Abelson's (2014) theory of defensive masculinities discusses how transgender men may conform to hegemonic masculinity to avoid violence and gain acceptance from men who are practicing hegemonic masculinity, which is viewed as superior. It must be mentioned that there may be multiple reasons why transgender men may practice masculinity, such as to pass and alleviate their gender dysphoria, defensive masculinities can be seen to align closely to the ego defence mechanism of identification with the aggressor, although this is not stated explicitly in Abelson's (2014) article. Identification with the aggressor occurs when a person feels completely overwhelmed by a threat, causing them to supress their authentic self and instead transform into the aggressor's ideal version of themselves (Frankel, 2002). To do this, there are three unconscious actions that are followed (Frankel, 2002). First, the person positions themselves as subordinate to the aggressor, which leads to the second action, where the person gains an ability to think like the aggressor and therefore predict the aggressor's next actions (Frankel, 2002). Finally, the person performs in whatever manner they believe will save them from the threat, based on their deductions about the attackers next actions (Frankel, 2002). These three actions can be seen in the descriptions in the following paragraphs.

Identification begins with an awareness that the self is different to the other (Cramer, 1991). In this case, it was an awareness about being different to cisgender men as a transgender man and trying to identify with them to gain their acceptance and possibly to be considered 'a real man'. Consistent with this, most participants enacted what Richard described as "just trying to relate to cisgender stuff". Thomas stated that in meetings he "just tried to be like the most generic man you've ever seen ever." He later went on to explain that his need to be "the most generic

man" extended to how he responded to emails, as he felt that he needed to email in the same manner as his cisgender male coworkers did, therefore identifying with them.

> When one of the project managers or account managers will email me with a brief, she'll be very expressive…and then she'll cc one of our other coworkers, and he's a man. And in the beginning…I felt weird about also responding in the same way because I don't know…how he would respond to her, would he also have this kind of excited, happy to receive your email energy or am I supposed to email it very reserved?

Thomas feared that the way that he responded to emails might make his coworkers suspicious of him and that this might lead to them discovering that he is transgender. This is similar to the findings of Monakali and Francis (2022), where the transgender men in their study reported feeling as if they could not show any emotion as they felt that showing emotion was weak and therefore, participants could be seen by both themselves and others as not masculine enough, causing their masculinity to be called into question (Monakali & Francis, 2022). Thomas's experience is similar to Stefan's description of why he tries to "not make any waves" at work, stating "I don't want anybody to have a reason to have a problem with me - to look into me a bit more because if they look into me a bit more I don't know what they're gonna find out." Stefan fears that if his coworkers go searching for information about him, they will find out that he is transgender and this will therefore compromise his safety in the workplace. To avoid this, he makes every effort to blend in by identifying with his other male coworkers by deepening his voice, pushing out his chest and laughing at jokes he would not normally find humorous.

Common across the different testimonies were their methods of hiding traits that the participants perceived as being feminine, as Stefan did, such as their voice and their chests and instead making efforts to identify with their cisgender male coworkers. Five out of the seven participants reported deepening their voice around coworkers in an effort to fit in, a finding which is consistent with the testimony of one of Rogers' (2019) participants, where he stated that having a deep voice is an important component for passing as a man. Participants of this study identified with their cisgender male coworkers by enacting masculinity in the same manner as they did, a finding consistent with Rogers' (2022) study. Rogers' (2022) study found that transgender men in the southern United States of America enacted masculinity in a way that closely aligned with their cisgender counterparts in the same location. This is a finding which aligns with their previous finding that transgender men in the south have no desire to

challenge the gender binary, but instead chose to do their best to fit into the gender binary (Rogers, 2019). This, although not stated explicitly by them, is another example of transgender men identifying with the aggressor in order to gain safety. Therefore, it can be said that transgender men identify with the aggressor in multiple locations, although both locations of study are in more conservative sociopolitical climates.

Not mentioned in other literature on defensive masculinities, however, is the use of binders. A binder is a piece of clothing that aims to flatten a person's chest to make it appear more masculine (Lee et al., 2019). Binders may be used for multiple reasons, including to be seen as more masculine and therefore pass and to alleviate gender dysphoria (Lee et al., 2019). Three out of the seven participants mentioned using binders to help them appear more masculine at work, while the other four had undergone surgery to masculinise their chests. Thomas described how he not only used a binder to make his chest appear flat, but also changed the type of clothes he wore to ensure he maintained his masculine appearance at work.

> There are some people around me who know, but I wanted to make sure that I present as I guess, masculinely as possible. So, like, make sure my chest is very flat. That made me like - caused a lot of stress…but I was doing everything I guess to make sure I presented in a very masculine way. So even changing the kinds of clothes I wore like, not wear certain shirts, because I feel like they may be maybe a little too tight and maybe a little too form hugging or whatever.

However, wearing a constricting garment like a binder is taxing on the body when working long hours, which Alex mentioned. Studies have shown that using a binder may have negative impacts on a person's physical health. However, the positive impact binding has on mental health outweighs the possibility of negative health effects for the majority of people who wear binders (Lee et al., 2019). Wearing binders or undergoing surgery to masculinise their chests was done in part to be able to identify better with their cisgender coworkers, but it must also be mentioned that the main reason was typically to alleviate gender dysphoria and to be seen as a man by others rather than purely to fit in. This is a finding consistent with literature on binding, where binding is practiced for multiple reasons, including to pass and to alleviate gender dysphoria (Lee et al., 2019). However, while the participants of this study used a binder for multiple reasons, the other mechanisms of appearing cisgender discussed under this theme were purely to fit in and identify with the aggressor rather than because of gender dysphoria.

While most of the participants deepened their voice or used a binder, there were additional ways that the participants tried to identify with other male coworkers. Gavin tries to identify with his male coworkers by gaining a higher status in his place of work, which allows him to be seen as more masculine by his coworkers because of his position of authority.

> There is definitely a feeling of needing to be better than them or needing to just be on the same level as them so that they don't see me as less or they don't see me as less masculine or whatever.

This led to a reduction in how much his coworkers teased him and shows that identifying with the aggressor does indeed lead to less threats. However, gaining increased recognition as a man also comes with consequences, as Richard mentioned "when they confirm your gender as mister you have to now be that, there are certain expectations." This is a finding that is consistent with Rogers (2019) study. As Rogers (2019) discusses, since transgender men do not have the early gender role socialisation that cisgender men have, transgender men instead base their expressions of masculinity on how those around them expect them to perform masculinity. This can lead to practicing hegemonic masculinity to meet these expectations of how a man should act and avoid being seen as not masculine enough (Rogers, 2019).

Overall, while participants were not directly questioned about whether they identified with their aggressors (cisgender male coworkers) and if they followed the three previously described actions of identification, many participants seemed to unconsciously follow these actions. Firstly, participants' own internalised transphobia often led them to position themselves beneath their cisgender male coworkers. Secondly, they described themselves as having heightened anxiety about their feminine features and being overly critical over actions that they believed others would consider too feminine, which can be viewed as their attempts to think like their aggressor. Finally, due to the threats that cisgender men posed to them, which were discussed in the previous theme, it is understandable that most participants performed masculinity in the same manner that they felt their aggressor would perform masculinity, which often aligned with hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, by examining these actions, it becomes clear that most participants did indeed attempt to identify with their aggressors to avoid threats of discrimination or threats to their masculinity.

The second ego defence mechanism that appears to be used is that of compensation. Compensation in terms of defensive masculinities refers to the enactment of extreme displays of masculinity in response to a threat to the person's masculinity (Willer et al., 2013).

Regarding transgender men, they may feel the need to compensate in terms of masculinity so that they can fit in with other men, allowing them to gain a sense of brotherhood with other men (Phillips & Rogers, 2021). This reinforces their masculinity and compensates for the parts of hegemonic masculinity that they are unable, or unwilling to enact (Phillips & Rogers, 2021).

The use of the compensation defence mechanism was a finding consistent with the literature, where Phillips and Rogers (2021) discuss what they call compensatory manhood acts, which can be part of the enactment of defensive masculinities. Thomas described how he lowered his voice around clients and tried to be more assertive and came to the realisation that he was overcompensating because he is short.

> I was probably overcompensating. I felt like it was maybe easy to tell that I'm not [cisgender] and I'm very short…but I think that as well adds to me trying to kind of - yeah, add to me overcompensating - to kind of be like, yes, I'm a guy.

By overcompensating, Thomas reinforces to both himself and his colleagues that he is a man, which helps to alleviate his gender dysphoria and ensure that he maintains the appearance of being a cisgender man at work. Alex also made an effort to be more assertive at work to reinforce his masculinity, particularly in his interactions with his employer who has misgendered him in the past.

> I had to be more assertive, especially with [his employer] to kind of…assert my gender and kind of drill it into her head…in some way. So that's made me feel uncomfortable because I don't really like being like that.

Alex being overly assertive is a method of exaggerating his masculinity to prove to his employer that he is a man and by extension, since he is indeed a man, he should be treated as one. Stefan also reported feeling the need to prove to others that he is a man, stating "I do act a bit more like a stereotypical straight guy when I'm around other men…like I am kind of trying to prove something." Lastly, Richard described how he overcompensates to blend in with his other male coworkers, stating "I think it's the fact that I know I'm transgender and I know they're cisgender so I think that's a major factor and not wanting to stand out." He feels that being transgender is something he has to overcompensate for.

Overall, these four participants all felt like they had to overcompensate to prove or reinforce their masculinity to their coworkers in order to gain acceptance from them, as Phillips and Rogers' (2021) study found. This is a new direction for research as Phillips and Rogers' (2021)

study was the only study I could find on transgender men feeling the need to overcompensate in terms of their masculinity, as research on compensatory manhood acts is usually focused on cisgender men, with Phillips and Rogers' (2021) study being the exception. In terms of a focus on transgender people and how they may overcompensate for being transgender with extreme expressions of masculinity or femininity, there are a variety of posts on social media sites where transgender people discuss overcompensating in their assigned gender at birth in order to supress their transgender identity. For example, transgender men acting in an overly feminine manner in order to suppress the fact that they are a transgender man. It is suggested that transgender people overcompensating with an extreme gender expression is a relatively new finding and could be an interesting direction for future research.

5.2.2. Performances of Masculinity

In my interview with Gavin, he theorises that it is the environment of the workplace that brings out the worst in people and creates a space where transgender men or anyone who does not practice hegemonic masculinity is not accepted. Gavin works in a male-dominated workplace, and he believes that the workplace environment causes his coworkers to feel insecure in their masculinity. This insecurity about their masculinity is, Gavin theorises, what causes the toxic work environment that he is in rather than the actual views that his coworkers have. Coworkers, essentially, align with a workplace culture which may not coincide with their own ways of being, but which nonetheless impact the ways in which they enact masculinity.

> A lot of them are insecure…they're not confident in their masculinity, so it takes one or two guys coming in who are toxic and problematic to trigger the insecurity in the next guy and the next guy and the next guy and those insecurities all build up and then everybody's being toxic and horrible. And you know, so I'd say that it probably is just a…manifesting of insecurity and ego.

This phenomenon that Gavin described is termed masculinity threat theory, where men fear being categorised as feminine or gay and overcompensate to avoid this threat to their masculinity (Willer et al., 2013). When Gavin's coworkers are interacting, they all feel less masculine than the other man (Willer et al., 2013). This leads to one person overcompensating, which creates a feedback loop and causes all of his coworkers to overcompensate in an effort to be the most masculine person at work and therefore, not feel as if their masculinity is being threatened (Willer et al., 2013). This theory is also supported by Gough's (2004) finding that men's anxiety about threats to their masculinity are heightened when they are in male

dominated spaces, which causes them to act in a defensive manner. When Gavin is added to this workplace situation, he cannot disclose his transgender identity at work as they would feel threatened even further because he is transgender, which Gavin stated earlier in the interview, saying "I think a lot of them would be threatening because they would be threatened that a transgender person is at work with them. They feel threatened, so they would be threatening towards me." To avoid being ridiculed or threatened by his coworkers, Gavin must identify with the aggressor, his cisgender male coworkers, and practice defensive masculinities. There is no literature that I could find that stated explicitly why cisgender men may feel threatened by transgender men, but this could be a direction for future research.

As previously discussed, defensive masculinities are masculinities that are practiced to avoid being threatened with violence by masculinities that are seen as superior, such as hegemonic masculinity (Abelson, 2014). In order to avoid violence from those practicing hegemonic masculinity, transgender men may practice defensive masculinities in order to gain acceptance and safety (Abelson, 2014). Transformative masculinities fall on the opposite side of the spectrum to defensive masculinities and are masculinities that are most often practiced in situations where the person feels an increased sense of safety (Abelson, 2014). Additionally, transformative masculinities are masculinities that align closely with the person's authentic expression of masculinity and are often performed in the manner that these men would prefer to see others perform masculinity (Abelson, 2014).

In terms of the seven participants' performances of masculinity, Richard, Gavin and Stefan practiced defensive masculinities, while on the opposite side of the spectrum Peter and Mark practiced transformative masculinities. An unexpected finding, however, were the two participants, Thomas and Alex, who practiced what Jeanes and Janes (2021) term the "flexitarian approach" (Jeanes & Janes, 2021, p. 1255) where their gender expression is changed based on the situation instead of being entirely defensive or entirely transformative. Defensive masculinities were therefore the most common pattern of practice in the participants of this study. Whether the participant was stealth or not was deemed important to add to the table in the methods chapter, as generally those who were stealth appeared to practice defensive masculinities more often compared to those who were open about their transgender identity at work.

Defensive masculinities were most apparent in Gavin's testimony. He mentions that "with the conversations that were being had, I knew that I would put myself in danger if I was to come

out to anyone there", and how he has "a completely different persona when I get to work" to avoid this danger.

> I really try to like push down my more feminine traits and like I really censor what I talk about. And there's just a lot of things that I'm not necessarily proud of that I do in the workspace that I'm doing because I'm trying to avoid more bullying or I'm trying to avoid them knowing at all.

Stefan describes similar motivations to Gavin for the way he practices masculinity at work, stating how if one of his coworkers found out he was transgender "everything would change." To stop them from finding out, he does what he calls "code switching", where he changes how he speaks and how deep his voice is. He does mention, however, that since he had top surgery he worries about his coworkers finding out that he is transgender less often as he is now more comfortable in his body. Additionally, Richard described how he changes his gender expression in his workplace to be more masculine when compared to interacting with friends because when he is with his friends he is "much safer and secure, mentally and physically" when compared to being at work. He describes having a lot of anxiety around appearing masculine enough at work, since he is out to some coworkers and stealth to others, and this could be due to disclosure disconnect (Ragins, 2008), which was discussed in the previous theme. Despite being out to some of his coworkers, Richard still feels a need to prove that he is masculine enough to his other coworkers, especially to his male coworkers, so he overcompensates in his expressions of masculinity, as previously mentioned.

Alex and Thomas take the flexitarian approach to their performance of masculinity. Alex only practices masculinity in a defensive manner around his employer, who misgenders him in the presence of his other coworkers who may not know that he is transgender. Thomas, on the other hand, does not practice defensive masculinities as he is not afraid of violence, but he does have some defensive practices such as overcompensating in his expressions of masculinity at work. The difference with Thomas is that he is stealth and overcompensates in an effort to fit in with the other men at work, as this is affirming to him and his coworkers finding out that he is transgender against his will would cause him to feel an increase in gender dysphoria and overall invalidated. This was discussed in the literature review, where passing is not always done for safety reasons (Rogers, 2019) but may also be done for mental health reasons. Being perceived as a man is important for the participants of this study, and this finding was reinforced by Rogers' (2019) study's findings. Rogers (2019) state that passing is important for transgender

men's mental health and their self-confidence, as it affirms their identity as a man and not as a woman or 'other'. It is particularly impactful when strangers affirm their identity as men, as it means that they are passing and therefore being seen by strangers as who they are rather than there being a disconnect between who they see themselves as and who others see them as, which can have a negative impact on mental health (Rogers, 2019). Passing also means that they do not have to constantly explain themselves and instead be seen and accepted as who they are, which reduced psychological distress (Rogers, 2019).

On the opposite side of the spectrum to defensive masculinities are Mark and Peter, who practice transformative masculinities. They both described their gender expression as being masculine but worry less about how masculine their coworkers see them when compared to other participants. Peter described how he has accepted that some coworkers do not see him as a man.

> I know for a fact that some staff members don't see me as man enough. Thing is, I don't really care. That's their business, their opinion, their world view. That has nothing to do with me as long as it doesn't become a personal attack.

He has learnt that it does not matter what his coworkers think about him as long as they stay professional, and this has allowed him to experiment with how he displays masculinity. He mentions that he does occasionally subconsciously try to act more masculine, but when he becomes aware of this, he reverts to expressing masculinity in the way that he feels most comfortable with. He reflects on this, stating that he thinks that "on some level I do care, but I know that I shouldn't."

Mark described how having a coworker who was extremely supportive of him affected how he displayed masculinity at work. He says that having a supportive coworker "affected how I expressed masculinity because I didn't need to be extremely masculine." This meant that while he describes his gender expression as more masculine, he does not practice hegemonic masculinity, and instead is more transformative in his performance. Anzani et al. (2024) describe how transgender people choose masculine role models that are less hegemonic in their practice of masculinity in comparison to cisgender people, and how despite transgender peoples' choosing of more transformative role models for expressing masculinity, they often feel pressured by society to display a more hegemonic performance of masculinity. This finding can be applied to Mark's experience, where he had positive role models for displaying masculinity and he presumably did not have the outside pressure to enact hegemonic

masculinity because of the support that he received from his coworker. Therefore, the impact that having an ally in the workplace environment cannot be understated and is consistent with both Mark and Peter's experiences. Mark and Peter were both able to be open about their transgender identity in the workplace and could practice transformative masculinities as they had a coworker or manager that were there to support and affirm them.

From my interviews, it appears that the most important factor in determining whether transgender men practice defensive masculinities at their place of work is their first experience in the workplace. Mark is the participant who pointed this out, stating

> I think just important in my experience, for having like a good basis for presenting masculinity is just having allyship and having like a safety net to fall into…having that actually set the stage for, I think, how I presented my masculinity in my personal life, in my professional life, all sorts of things because it showed me that you don't have to be toxic to be accepted.

This is true for all my participants. If they had a negative experience in their first workplace, they made every effort to fit in with the other men in the workplace, including practicing defensive masculinities. However, if they had a positive experience, such as Mark and Peter, they were more willing to practice transformative masculinities. This was a finding in Rogers' (2019, 2022) studies, where transgender men learnt how to practice masculinity by mirroring their cisgender counterparts. If the participants had positive experiences with coworkers at work, they had a better, more transformative basis to form their performance of masculinity on. Therefore, the importance of having allyship in the workplace cannot be understated, as it not only allows transgender men to be authentic, but it also has an impact on their mental health, discussed in the following theme.

5.3. The Impact on Mental Health

Transgender people face an increased risk of developing mental health issues when compared to the general population, which is thought to be because of the challenges that come with their transgender identity rather than their transgender identity itself (Cooper et al., 2023). The findings of this study support this hypothesis, as participants who had not had negative experiences were less likely to report having persistent anxiety or other mental health issues. This theme covers the impact that the participants' experiences had on their mental health, including the impact of being transgender in the workplace, and the impact of practicing masculinity in the workplace.

Transgender people may experience what is termed minority stress, which is a model that describes the chronic stress that members of a minority, and particularly members of the LGBTQ+ community, experience (Tan et al., 2019). This model was developed by Meyer (2003) and was used to describe the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people, but has since been expanded on to include transgender people (Tan et al., 2019; Testa et al., 2015). This model can assist in explaining the findings of this study, and therefore, the findings will be explained using this model as a foundation.

Testa et al. (2015) described the two categories of the minority stress model that are present in transgender individuals, namely distal stressors and proximal stressors. Distal stressors describe the experiences of transgender people and include experiences of discrimination, rejection, victimisation and non-affirmation of their identity (Testa et al., 2015), which were discussed in previous themes. Proximal stressors include negative expectations of the future, nondisclosure and internalised transphobia, which are relevant to the current theme.

Negative expectations of the future were present in multiple participants. Thomas described how when people, including coworkers, do not respond to his messages for a small period of time he begins to fear that they have discovered that he is transgender and no longer want to interact with him because of his transgender identity.

> My instinct is that it has something to do with [being transgender]. Like maybe they know about this and they don't like me and they don't want to say that they don't like me. So I have had instances where I've just assumed that certain people don't like me because of that.

Thomas's fears of rejection were echoed by Stefan, where he states that he changes how he performs masculinity at work because "I think because I'm afraid of the rejection. I'm afraid of the actual physical danger." This fear of rejection and discrimination is significant for him and bleeds into his life at work. As mentioned previously, Stefan's previous place of work decided not to renew his contract. While they did give him a professional reason for why they chose not to renew his contract, namely that he "wasn't doing a good job", he strongly believes that it was not renewed because of his transgender identity. Because of this negative experience, Stefan decided that he would not disclose his transgender identity to his coworkers at his second job.

> There is a part of it for me where I do like being treated the same as everybody and the moment that people find out, they treat me differently. So I learned that at my first job...So then I decided with the second job not to tell anybody who I work with.

By avoiding disclosing his transgender identity to coworkers and clients, he ensures that there are no hidden motivations behind any criticisms of his work. Being criticised and not knowing what the real motivation behind the criticism might be is incredibly concerning to him and has affected his self-esteem in the past.

> But I will say at work that does add an extra layer when somebody knows. This is 'did I do a bad job or do you have a - do you have a personal problem at the moment' and it's not always actually clear in some of these situations…You can't tell and it ends up affecting your self-esteem in a really weird way because you can't tell what's true and what's not true.

Nondisclosure also falls under the proximal stressors category, where transgender people choose to remain stealth to avoid experiencing distal stressors (Tan et al., 2019). However, this often leads to hypervigilance around if they should disclose their transgender identity or not and leads the person to constantly fear threats that could force them to disclose their transgender identity to others, causing high stress levels and therefore increased distress (Tan et al., 2019). This relates to disclosure disconnect, discussed previously, where individuals (who in this case are transgender, but this can be applied to all stigmatised identities) must constantly be monitoring for or thinking about situations that could force them to disclose their transgender identity, and how to avoid these situations (Ragins, 2008; Ozturk & Tatli, 2016). Richard described this experience when we were discussing avoiding disclosure, stating how "you think five steps ahead of everyone else." He described an experience where he had to present his identity document which displayed his old name and had his gender listed as female to a coworker to get his work identity document, and the steps he had to take to ensure that he would not have to disclose his transgender identity to any of his other coworkers.

> We had to present the ID to get the key card and I just went last. So if they do speak loud I'm the only one there. So I do have to think of a lot of things, a lot of factors. When I do have to present my ID generally I just got last in line…so that when they speak its only to me and no one else can hear.

He also mentioned fears around going to the bathroom at work. The possibility of a coworker discovering that he is transgender in public bathroom causes significant distress for him to the

extent that he stopped drinking water at work so that he would not have to use the bathroom as often. This is a similar experience to one of the participants in Rogers's (2019) study, where a few of the participants in their study stopped drinking water and developed urinary tract infections from their avoidance of public bathrooms. Transgender people are less likely to use public bathrooms if they believe that they are able to be perceived to be transgender by others, if they have been questioned about if they are using the correct bathroom before, or if they have previously faced discrimination (Lerner, 2021). A large amount of transgender people meet this criteria, and therefore a large number of transgender people avoid using public bathrooms (Lerner, 2021). Fears around going to the bathroom are common in transgender men, as they fear that they may be discovered to be transgender and face violence from cisgender men because of their transgender identity, as Rogers (2019) reported in their study.

Gavin shared Richard's anxiety about bathrooms. Despite his workplace only having a single bathroom, he still makes an effort to ensure that his coworkers had no reason to suspect that he is transgender. He states that "if I go to the bathroom, I make sure that I leave the seat up after I've used the bathroom." He knows that logically this is unnecessary, but this small action helps to reduce his anxiety about his coworkers discovering his transgender identity. There are a few studies based in South Africa that researched or mentioned transgender peoples' experiences of public bathrooms (Brown et al., 2020; Buthelezi & Brown, 2023; Patel, 2017). These South African studies found that transgender people remain consistently excluded from public bathrooms and continue to face discrimination in them, including in spaces that are supposed to be inclusive, such as the province of the Western Cape and higher education institutions (Brown et al., 2020; Buthelezi & Brown, 2023; Patel, 2017). This fear of public bathrooms due to the possibility of being the victim of violence or due to the risk of having their transgender identity discovered is therefore international, and one that transgender people must face whenever they leave their house, so it is unsurprising that it is at the forefront of both Rogers' (2019) participants and this study's participants' minds.

Due to the constant anxiety that accompanies the non-disclosure of a transgender identity, Gavin stated that he would prefer for his coworkers to know that he is transgender, as he describes the experience of keeping this secret as being "a lot of pressure" and it "creates a lot of stress and anxiety in that space" for him. He describes the extent of the impact that this has on him, stating "it's every action I do, or every word I say or how I say the word. I'm always thinking about how are they going to perceive me sitting like this or talking like this or walking like this?" When each action has to be thought out before acting, this can also lead to

overthinking and second guessing how their actions have been interpreted by others. Occasionally, Gavin feels like he may have acted in a way that made it obvious that he is transgender, and he states that he will "stress about it for the next day or two thinking…did they see that?" This causes him to be in a constant state of anxiety, significantly impacting his mental health.

To remain stealth at work, Gavin must practice defensive masculinities to fit in with his coworkers. However, he also spoke about how practicing hegemonic masculinity in a defensive manner and, by extension, being transgender in the workplace affects his mental health.

> It impacts me in two ways. It impacts me in the way that I feel like a stranger to myself…and in the second way, I feel that I'm letting myself down…I'm also hard on myself because I preach that you should be proud and you should tell everyone…but then in my own practice, I don't do that…But it's definitely emotionally draining and it's extremely emotionally draining sitting there hearing them talk about you in such a disrespectful way….but not being proud of who you are in a space, it is draining and like it's difficult to stop the shame from creeping in, you know, shame for being transgender and shamed for hiding the fact that you're transgender.

Not only is it mentally draining, but it also created some internalised transphobia in Gavin, as he started to feel that there was something wrong with him when he is consistently exposed to transgender people being spoken about in such a negative light (Tan et al., 2019). While not explicitly stated by other participants, it can be theorised that this is a common experience, a theory that is supported by the literature (Tan et al., 2019; Testa et al., 2015), but from the findings of this research, it is thought that it is particularly evident in those that are stealth. In Gavin's case, this shame about being transgender and having internalised transphobia has not always existed but has instead developed over time due to his coworkers' opinions about transgender people. This reinforces the importance of having an ally in the workplace, as was previously mentioned, as the participants who had had positive experiences with coworkers in the workplace were less likely to practice defensive masculinities or be made to feel ashamed of their transgender identity. This was true in both Mark and Peter's experiences, where they had strong allies in their workplaces and therefore appeared to have better mental health than participants who did not have many allies in the workplace.

Coming out as transgender and receiving gender affirming care does indeed have a positive impact on a transgender person's mental health (Nguyen et al., 2018; Verbeek et al., 2020), and this was particularly evident in Peter's case.

> Yeah, I think I'm a happier, healthier human. I think I'm a better teacher because there's not all of this emotional baggage weighing on me. I don't get my - it was a little bit of a nick to the ego. Every time a student would call me ma'am like I would just - and last year I couldn't say anything about it. And that would grate at me by the end of the day, I'd be exhausted. So since coming out I relate to my students better, I'm less self-involved so I hear them better.

Not only does he describe his mental health as having improved now that he is open about his transgender identity, but he also describes how he has become a better teacher since disclosing his transgender identity at work. While he has faced some challenges, he has learnt to not focus on the negative experiences that he has, but instead focuses on the positive aspects.

> I think I've tried to focus on the positives…And whenever there is something that's you know, uncomfortable or even just plain wrong. I try to see it in the context and I try to evaluate how important is this really and most of the time. I can just move on from that.

Overall, the majority of the participants struggled with their mental health in some manner, but these issues were caused by the stigma that came with their transgender identity, rather than being from their transgender identity itself. In particular, participants expressed anxiety around their coworkers discovering that they are transgender, and they reported being hypervigilant about situations that could possibly compromise their stealth status. Gavin mentioned how practicing defensive masculinities does indeed affect his mental health, although he was the only participant that directly linked his performance of masculinity to his mental health, while other participants spoke about their mental health in a more holistic manner. The impact that the stigma that accompanies having a transgender identity and practicing defensive masculinities has on mental health was significant, and transgender people are therefore in urgent need of mental health interventions that address their mental health while also affirming their identity.

The results emerging from the current study indicate that whilst the process of accepting one's own gender identity and living in the world as the gender with which they align has a positive impact on mental health for transgender men, the impact of both perceived and real stigma and

discrimination against them in social spaces, including the workplace, is stress-inducing, and takes a significant toll on mental wellbeing.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The findings of this study give insight into the workplace experiences of seven transgender men who are based in South Africa, focusing on their performances of masculinity in the workplace and the impact on their mental health. The findings indicate transgender men do indeed perform defensive masculinities in their South African workplace. This is a finding different to Jeanes and Janes (2021) finding, where they found that the majority of their participants practiced the flexitarian approach to performing masculinity in the workplace. This difference is theorised to be due to the differing sociopolitical climates that the studies were based in, as Jeanes and Janes (2021) studied masculinity in the workplace in England, while this study was based in South Africa, which is said to have a more conservative sociopolitical climate where discrimination can thrive (Monakali & Francis, 2022).

However, the results indicate that those that perform defensive masculinities at work are less of a clear majority than expected, with three participants practicing defensive masculinities, two practicing transformative masculinities, and two practicing the flexitarian approach to performing masculinity. A clear majority of either transformative or defensive masculinities were expected as it was assumed that those who practiced defensive or transformative masculinities did so consistently in the conservative South African sociopolitical climate, and the flexitarian approach was therefore not considered until it became apparent that two participants' performances of masculinity did not align with either defensive or transformative masculinities. Therefore, this became an interesting, unexpected finding, however defensive masculinities remained the most common pattern of practice.

Data suggested further that transgender men draw on two primary defence mechanisms that align with the ego defence mechanisms identified in psychoanalysis, namely identification and compensation. This link was not mentioned in any of the literature on defensive masculinities in transgender men but has been discussed in reference to defensive masculinities performed by cisgender men (Gough, 2004). The participants of this study sought to identify with their cisgender male coworkers by trying to appear more masculine and pretending to share values with their coworkers, a finding consistent with Rogers' (2019) findings on how transgender men in the southern United States of America practice masculinity. Additionally, some participants attempted to compensate for being transgender by acting overly masculine in front of their coworkers. The most common methods of trying to appear more masculine around their coworkers were deepening their voice and masculinising their chest through using a binder or

undergoing gender affirming surgery. The practice of binding in order to improve the chances of passing is common, a finding of Lee et al.'s (2019) study, however the importance of having a deep voice to improve the person's chances of passing is not present in a large amount of literature, with the only mention of it that I could find being from one participant in Rogers' (2019) study who stated that having a masculine voice is important to be able to pass as a man.

Considering why transgender men may practice defensive masculinities, it was found that those that strictly practiced defensive masculinities did so to avoid violence or discrimination from their coworkers. The participants that practiced defensive masculinities had previously had negative experiences at work in the past or knew that they would have a negative experience if they disclosed their transgender identity at work because of the views that their coworkers had expressed. The negative experiences that they feared they would have at work included fears of discrimination, such as being misgendered or being ridiculed, fears about losing their job or fears about experiencing physical violence. Jeanes and Janes (2021) mention that performances of masculinity are often impacted by previous experiences, which is apparent in the results of this study. If participants had previously had positive experiences in the workplace they were less likely to practice defensive masculinities, and were instead more likely to practice transformative masculinities or use the flexitarian approach to performing masculinity. Therefore, defensive masculinities were practiced to avoid discrimination or violence, and often those who had previously had negative experiences in the workplace were more likely to practice defensive masculinities.

Findings emerging from the study also shed light on the impact of performing masculinity on mental wellbeing. Most participants experienced distress consistent with the minority stress model, which included having negative expectations of future events, hypervigilance around disclosure, and the development of internalised transphobia. This negatively impacted the majority of the participants' mental health, which is problematic because of the increased risk that transgender people have of developing mental health issues (Cooper et al., 2023). Therefore, most participants exhibited some symptoms of mental health distress, but a more detailed assessment would have to be conducted to determine if this did manifest into mental illness or other mental health issues. The findings of this study do support Cooper et al.'s (2023) findings which suggest that the transgender population are at particular risk for experiencing mental health issues.

6.1. Limitations

As with any research study, there are a number of limitations to the current research (Clarke et al., 2024). Firstly, the sample was limited in terms of racial diversity, with most participants being white. The lack of diversity also extended to location, as all of the participants were based either in Cape Town, Pretoria or Johannesburg, despite the methods of sampling allowing participants from anywhere in South Africa to participate. The participants all being based in main cities may be due to the cities generally being more accepting of transgender people, and the increased accessibility to gender affirming care in these areas. The lack of diversity could affect the generalisability of the results to the greater population of transgender men in South Africa, however this study was designed to give insight into some of the experiences of transgender men and prompt future research, as this was only a preliminary study. The absence of generalisability is significant, however this does not detract from the findings made. Additionally, the generalisability of this study was affected by the size of the sample. However, this sample size is common for qualitative research because of the depth of data that is collected from each participant.

Secondly, there is the limitation of the language that I chose to communicate with participants in. A small number of participants did not have English as their first language and instead spoke Afrikaans. None of the interview questions asked what the participants' first language was and therefore an exact number of how many participants' first language is Afrikaans is unknown. However, this subject came up in a few interviews when participants could not remember the equivalent word in English or when they mentioned that their place of work was predominantly Afrikaans. While the few participants whose first language was Afrikaans were able to speak English fluently, they were unable to express themselves in their first language as I can only communicate in English. Therefore, while we were able to communicate, it would have been ideal if I could speak their first language, and this is therefore a limitation.

Lastly, there is the limitation of my subjectivity. My unique positioning in this research as a transgender man doing research on other transgender men is considered a limitation due to the inability to remain objective during the research process. However, I believe that this has enhanced the research as I was able to get additional data from the participants that they may not have shared with a cisgender researcher, and it allowed me to interpret the data with greater understanding of the participants' experiences. Therefore, while my subjectivity is a limitation that must be reported to the reader, I believe it can also be viewed as an advantage that enhanced

the research process, as multiple measures were taken to ensure that the findings come directly from the data rather than from my own biases and assumptions, the process of which was discussed in detail in the reflexivity chapter.

6.2. Directions for Future Research

Since this research was on a topic that is understudied in several ways, there are many future directions that studies could be conducted in to broaden the literature on this topic. Firstly, more research on the South African transgender population is desperately needed, as research on transgender people in South Africa is limited to a few studies, and even the broader literature on LGBTQ+ South Africans is scarce. There is also a need for further literature, both internationally and in South Africa, on transgender men's expressions of masculinity in the workplace and defensive masculinities. While there are broader studies on the workplace experiences of transgender people, there are few that discuss how gender is performed at work, and what impact this has. Additionally, future research could examine how transgender men perform masculinity in different types of workplaces. This study was unable to sample from a specific type of workplace because of the limited number of people in the accessible population, but this could be the topic of a future study. Lastly, this research could be repeated with a larger and more diverse sample size, to explore if the findings of this study are generalisable to the wider, more diverse population of transgender men in South Africa.

6.3. Final Conclusions

This research is important for a number of reasons. Its over-arching aim has been to increase awareness of transgender people's daily experiences at a time when transgender people and their rights are under increased scrutiny in an attempt to humanise them and demonstrate that being transgender is difficult and therefore, coming out as transgender is not a choice taken lightly. It aimed to showcase transgender men's experiences at work, specifically looking at masculinity and masculinity practiced to avoid discrimination. It studied this phenomenon within a South African context, a country with a more conservative sociopolitical climate, filling a gap in the current research about transgender people's daily experiences. Lastly, it examined the impact of practicing a type of masculinity, namely defensive masculinities, on mental health on a population who already have an increased risk of developing mental health issues. It is my hope that this research has added to the sparse literature on the topic and has the potential to increase awareness of an important issue affecting transgender individuals.

On a personal level, this research has positively impacted me in a number of ways, some of which were unexpected. It has brought awareness to this issue, forced me to accept my own transgender identity and left me, and possibly my participants, with a sense that I am not alone in my experiences, which is powerful. My hope for this research is for it to have a positive impact that is not limited to just myself and my participants, but that the positive impact extends to other transgender individuals who are looking for representation of themselves in formal literature and to have the knowledge that they are not alone in the struggles that they are facing in an increasingly hostile sociopolitical climate.

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Appendix A

Interview Schedule

Demographics:

How old are you?

What is your race?

In what area do you stay?

Would you say the area that you stay in is more tolerant or more conservative of minorities?

Being as general or as specific as you would like, what is your occupation?

Transition History:

How long have you been living as a transgender man?

Can you tell me about your transition? Such as hormone therapy, surgeries, legal changes etc., with as much or as little detail as you feel comfortable.

The experiences of being transgender at work:

Have you changed your place of employment since you have come out?

Do any of your coworkers know that you are transgender?

If not, what influenced your decision to not tell anyone?

Have you ever experienced discrimination at work because you are transgender?

Have you experienced microaggressions in the workplace? Such as deadnaming, misgendering etc.

Did you change anything about yourself, including your actions or the way you present yourself to try to avoid discrimination or microaggressions in the future at work?

Masculinity at work:

Would you say that you pass as a cisgender man well at work?

Do you make an effort to pass as a cisgender man at work?

If yes, why?

What do you do to ensure you pass as a cisgender man at work?

How would you describe your gender expression at work? More masculine? More feminine? Both?

Does your gender expression at work differ from how you express your gender identity in a safe space?

Have you ever engaged in behaviour at work that you feel does not match the gender expression you feel is most authentic to you?

If yes, what gender expression differences are there?

What factors would you say influenced you to change your gender expression in the workplace?

Would you say you display a more traditional form of masculinity at work?

For example (hegemonic ideals list to read out to participant):

1. Do you tend to share your feelings with your coworkers?
2. Do you feel as if you would do anything to be more successful than others at work?
3. Do you ever worry about coworkers seeing you as queer or gay?
4. Do you feel like you need to gain higher status at work?
5. How important would you say work is for you compared to other elements of your life?
6. Would you describe yourself as a feminist when you are at work?
7. Do you ask others for help at work when needed?
8. Do you take risks at work?

If yes, what factors would you say influence you to act more traditionally masculine at work?

<u>Psychological and emotional impact of employing masculinities at work:</u>

Is your mental and emotional wellbeing affected by being transgender at work?

<u>Closing question:</u>

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences at work?

Appendix B

Ethical Clearance Certificate

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

Research Office

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)
R14/49 Russell

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE	**PROTOCOL NUMBER: H24/05/44**
PROJECT TITLE	The use of defensive masculinities by transgender men in the South African workplace
INVESTIGATOR(S)	Mr L Russell
SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT	Human and Community Development/
DATE CONSIDERED	17 May 2024
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	Approved Risk Level: Low
EXPIRY DATE	13 June 2027

DATE 14 June 2024 **CHAIRPERSON** _____
(Professor J Watermeyer)

cc: Supervisor : Dr Y Esprey

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR(S)

To be completed in duplicate and **A SIGNED COPY** returned to the Secretary electronically. Unreported changes to the application may invalidate the clearance given by the HREC (Non-Medical)

I/We fully understand the conditions under which I am/we are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I/we guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to submit an amendment of the protocol to the Committee. **I/we agree to completion of a regular progress report. For Minimal and Low Risk studies, this is due annually on 31 December. For Medium and High Risk studies, this is due twice annually on 30 June and 31 December.**

_____ _____/_____/_____
Signature **Date**

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES

Appendix C

Participant Information Sheet

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
PSYCHOLOGY

To whom it may concern

My name is Leonardo Russell and I am a Master of Arts in Psychology student at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. My supervisor is Dr Yvette Esprey. I am conducting a research study about transgender men's masculinity in the South African workplace, with my study title being "The use of defensive masculinities in transgender men in the South African workplace".

I am inviting you to participate in an interview for my research. If you decide to participate, your participation in this research study would last 60-90 minutes. The interview will take place online, on a platform of your choosing, or should you be in the Durban area, we can meet wherever you feel most comfortable. The interview will take place at a time convenient to you.

With your signed permission, I would like to audio record the interview. The audio recording will be stored on a password protected device until the completion of my qualification in 2025, at which time they will be deleted. The transcripts from the audio recording will be stored for any future publications and further analysis for ten years on the password protected device, with all identifying information removed or disguised.

The interview will be confidential and you will be anonymous in the reporting of the results. Only myself and my supervisor will have access to the interview transcript on which your personal identifying information will be omitted or disguised. When I share the results of the research study your name or any other identifying information will not be included, or, if necessary, will be disguised so that you cannot be identified.

If you decide to take part in this research study, it should be because you want to volunteer. You do not have to participate. You can stop participation in the study at any time, and can choose not to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering with no consequences. You will not get any direct benefits from participating in the study. You will not lose any services, benefits or rights you would normally have if you decide not to join, and there is no pressure for you to participate. Participating in this study will not cost you anything except any possible data costs if you are participating online. If you are in Durban, I will travel to meet you so that you do not have travel costs. You will not be paid for participating in this research study.

During the research activity, I will need to ask for some personal information about you, including about your race, occupation and location in addition to questions relating to any experiences of discrimination that you may have experienced at work, or discuss if you have ever felt pressured to act or present in a certain way at work. Some of these questions may make you feel upset or uncomfortable. You may decline to answer these questions, or if you become distressed, I will stop the interview, and, depending on what you feel would be best, may stop your participation or may continue the interview another time. If you need support or counselling services following the interview, these are available free of charge through the South African Depression and Anxiety Group. You can contact Cassey (office@anxiety.org.za), Krystle (operations@anxiety.org.za) or Tracy (info@anxiety.org.za) during office hours, or the 24 hour helpline on 0800 21 21 21. Additionally, the South African

Umthombo Building – 2nd Floor, Room U211, Braamfontein East Campus, Private Bag 3, WITS 2050
T +27 11 717 4503/53 | **E** psych.SHCD@wits.ac.za | www.wits.ac.za/shcd/psychology/

Depression and Anxiety Group offers multiple LGBT+ specific support groups, which you can find more information on at the end of this sheet.

This research study will be written up as a dissertation. The dissertation will be saved to the password protected device. If you would like to receive a summary of this report I would be happy to send one to you.

If you have any questions before, during or after about the research study, please feel free to contact me or my supervisor on the details listed below. If you have any concerns of complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (non-medical), telephone +27 011 717 1408, or email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours sincerely

Leonardo Russell

Researcher:

Leonardo Noah Russell

2905468@students.wits.ac.za

082 099 6014

Supervisor:

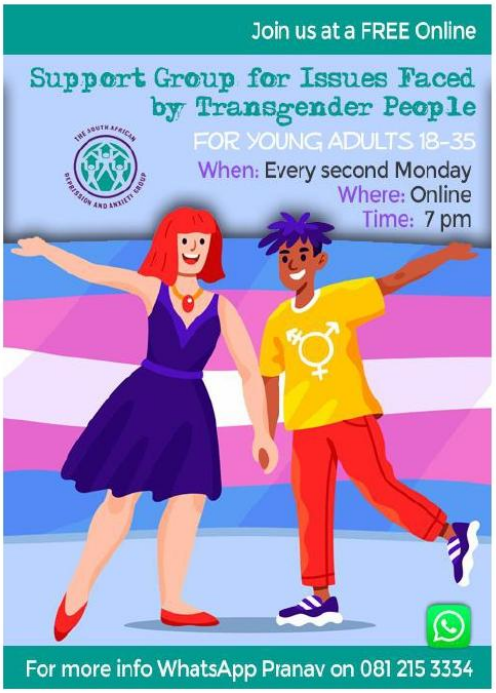
Dr Yvette Esprey

yvette.esprey@wits.ac.za

011 717 1000

Participant Information Sheet Support Group Resources for Participants

LGBT+ specific support groups by the South African Depression and Anxiety Group:









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Appendix D

Participant Consent Form

Research Study Title: The use of defensive masculinities in transgender men in the South African workplace.

Researcher: Leonardo Russell

I …… agree to participate in this research study.

I agree to the following: (please mark the box)

The research study was explained to me and I understand what the study is about:

YES □

NO □

I understand that I can volunteer to participate in the study:

YES □

NO □

I agree to participate in an interview with the researcher:

YES □

NO □

I agree to the interview being audio recorded:

YES □

NO □

I agree that direct quotations from my interview can be used by the researcher in their dissertation:

YES□

NO □

I understand that my participation remains confidential (names and other identifying information will be changed):

YES□

NO □

I agree to the interview transcripts (with my name and identifying information changed) possibly being analysed again at a later date for other research purposes:

YES□

NO □

I understand that my identity will remain anonymous in the reporting of the results and in any publications:

YES□

NO □

I agree that other researchers may use the information I provide in my interview/focus group/other activity (depending on their own ethics clearance being obtained) but my name and any personal information will not be used or passed on:

YES□

NO □

…… (Signature)

…… (Full Name)

…… (Date)