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What does it mean to be a man? A narrative study of young masculine identities

By

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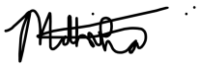
Supervisor: Professor J Bradbury

08 August 2025

Plagiarism Declaration

Declaration

I, Vusani Mathivha, declare that this research is my own unaided work. It is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters in Community-based Counselling at the University of the Witwatersrand. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other university



Vusani Mathivha

08 August 2025

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Lastly, thank you God. I prayed to get here and you never left me nor forsaked me. I give you all the praise and all the glory.

Thank you

Abstract

This dissertation explores the social construction and lived experiences of masculine identity among young men in Soweto, South Africa. Using a narrative research design, the study investigates how young men make sense of what it means to "be a man" in Soweto, a township marked by historical inequality, shifting gender norms, and ongoing socio-economic challenges. Through narrative interviews, six participants' life stories are examined to uncover the complexities of masculine identity formation within the intersections of family, community, education, and broader societal expectations. The six participants are black males aged 15 to 23.

The thematic analysis yielded six key themes. First, masculine identity formation Second, family dynamics and responsibilities. The third theme, peer and community influences. Fourth, gendered divisions of labour and masculine roles. Fifth, aspirations for studies and future careers. Finally, the sixth theme was focused on emotional expression and mental health.

These themes collectively show how masculinity is actively constructed in everyday life and deeply influenced by family dynamics, peer interactions, community values, and broader psycho-social factors. The study offers insight into how young men resist, reproduce, and reimagine what it means to be a man, and it contributes to ongoing conversations around gender equity and youth development. Implications for policy implementation, education, and psychosocial support are also discussed.

Table of Contents

Plagiarism Declaration i

Acknowledgements ii

Abstract iii

Chapter 1: Introduction 1

1.1 Background of the Study 1

1.2 Rationale of the Study 2

1.3 Problem Statement 4

1.4 Research Objectives 4

1.5 Research Questions 5

1.6 Significance of the Study 5

1.7 Scope and Limitations 8

1.8 Definition of Terms 9

1.9 Structure of the Dissertation 10

Chapter 2: Literature Review 12

2.1 Understanding Masculine Identities 12

2.2 Psychosocial Challenges Facing Young Men in the African context 15

2.3 Theoretical Frameworks in Masculinity Studies 18

2.4 Contemporary Masculinity: Fluidity and Resistance to Traditional Norms 19

2.5 Changing Narratives of Masculinity 20

2.6 Masculinity and Mental Health 21

2.7 Engaging Boys and Young Men in Gender Transformation 24

2.8 The Role of Media in Shaping Masculinity 25

2.9 Role Models and the Construction of Masculine Identity 26

2.10 Intersectionality and Masculine Identities 28

2.11 Masculinity and Peer Influence 31

2.12 The Impact of Family Dynamics on Masculinity 33

2.13 Educational Interventions for Gender Equality 35

2.14 Policy and Advocacy for Healthy Masculinities 37

2.15 Masculinity and Violence 38

2.16 Masculinity and Health Behaviours 39

Chapter 3: Methodology 42

3.1 Introduction 42
3.2 Research Design 42
3.3 Participants 43
3.4 Sampling and Sample Size 44
3.5 Data Collection Methods 45
3.6 Data Analysis Techniques 46
3.7 Ethical Considerations 47
3.7.1 Ethical Clearance 48
3.7.2 Participant selection and Informed Consent 48
3.7.3 Debriefing 49
3.8 Research Setting 49
3.9 Validity and Reliability 50
3.10 Limitations 51
Chapter 4 Results and Analysis 54
4.1 Introduction 54
4.2. Masculine Identity Formation 55
4.2.1 Role Models and Masculine Identity 55
4.2.2 Personal Insights and the Transition to Manhood 57
4.3 Family Dynamics and Responsibilities 58
4.3.1 Household Structure and Family Relationships 59
4.3.2 Negotiation of Gendered Responsibilities at Home 60
4.4 Peer and Community Influences 62
4.4.1 Peer Influence in School Settings 62
4.4.2 Community Influences on Masculine Identity 63
4.4.3 Peer Groups as Reinforcers and Challengers of Masculinity 64
4.5 Masculine Role Expectations and Gender Norms 66
4.5.1Traditional vs. Evolving Masculine Roles 66
4.5.2 Domestic and Public Spheres: Gendered Division of Labour 68
4.6 Aspirations for Studies and Future Career 70
4.6.1 Balancing Academics and Personal Interests 70
4.6.2 Future Planning and Career Aspirations 72
4.7 Emotional Expression and Mental Health 74

4.7.1 Emotional Resilience vs. Vulnerability 74
4.7.2 Self-Reflection and Growth 77
4.7.3 Cultural influences on masculinity 78
4.7.4 Influence of Media and Social Movements 81
4.7.5 Reactions to Social Media Narratives 82
4.7.6 The Contradictions of Media Messaging 84
Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations 87
5.1 Introduction 87
5.2 Summary of Findings 87
5.2.1. Narration of Masculine Identities 87
5.2.2. Psychosocial Challenges in Soweto 88
5.2.3. Hopes, Despairs, and Fears Regarding Present Lives and Imagined Futures ... 89
5.3 Conclusion of the Study 90
5.4 Limitations 92
5.5 Recommendations 92
5.5.1 Education Interventions 93
5.5.2 Community Programs 93
5.5.3 Mental Health 93
5.5.4 Policy Changes 94
5.5.5 Media and Advertising Campaigns 94
5.5.6 Families and Parental Education 95
5.5.7 Monitoring and Evaluation 95
5.5.8 Future Studies 96
References 97
Appendices 108
Appendix A 108
Appendix B 109
Appendix C 111
Appendix D 114

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

It can be challenging for young men to actively build their identities in a context of dominant narratives of masculinity. Most often, these stories reinforce a type of hegemonic masculinity that is characterised by control, dominance, and power (Connell, 2020). However, Pattman, Phoenix and Frosh (2002) found that young men may also resist these hegemonic masculinity norms when constructing their own identities. This study aims to explore the narratives of young men and boys in the context of Soweto, a township in South Africa, and how these contested masculine identities are constructed.

Hegemonic masculinity is the theoretical concept that explains how and why men keep their position above women and other gender identities that are seen as "feminine" in a society (Connell, 2020). As a result, there are real social problems taking place, like violence against women and gender-based violence, and these kinds of stories continue to be told. Gender-based violence happens because of social norms of gender roles and unequal power relationships between men and women (Levant & Pryor, 2020). Society and cultural expectations are deeply rooted in hegemonic masculinity, which fixes a rigid model for young men. Following this often involves maintaining control over one's emotions, being tough, and exerting power, all of which can be damaging to both men and women (Levant & Pryor, 2020). For instance, McLean (2021) argues that in societies such as Sierra Leone, which have undergone a crisis, the reconstruction of masculinity often involves reclaiming power and control, which may reinforce violence and complicate the recovery of society. These expectations are reinforced by media, peer group socialisation, and even family expectations. This creates a narrow view of what it means to be a man with little room to imagine different ways of being a man (Connell, 2020).

Furthermore, there have been numerous social movements that have arisen in response to the widespread problem of violence against women. This is especially true in South Africa, where the prevalence of violence against women is incredibly

high. #MenAreTrash and #TheTotalShutdown are two of the more prominent movements that demand that politicians do something about the endemic sexism in society and that demand that "good men" speak out against these norms (Keddie, 2020). Violence against women is a hugely important problem that these movements have drawn attention to. They have also prompted broader debates around how to reimagine masculinity in terms that are not based on power and control (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2022)

Aboim and Vasconcelos (2022) discuss the idea of trans masculinities and the ways in which body practices and reflexive embodiment disrupt traditional understandings of what it means to be a man. Their work demonstrates the importance of considering masculinity as a construction that is open to transformation over time, as opposed to an essentialist characteristic.

People further argue that the concept of hegemonic masculinity fails to take into account several forms of manhood that do not conform to the current structure. For example, Reeser (2023) notes that scholarship on manhood needs to consider that a sea of masculinities exist that are non-normative. That includes attention to experiences of men that are nurturing, empathetic and peaceful, and aren't always duly noted in discussions of manhood. By adopting more traits that are stereotypically viewed as masculine, society can provide a space in which all men can be themselves and freely express themselves.

Furthermore, the media plays a massive role in reproducing these hegemonic stories of manhood. These highlights of strength, control and emotional stoicism serve to reinforce the depiction of men in media and turn men's representation into stereotypes (Connell, 2020). These depictions happen to influence how young men view themselves, and other men, and pressure them to conform to these ideals. Education campaigns and media literacy initiatives that teach young men to critically analyse the media they consume and understand that there are many different types of masculinities in the real world, can help with this (Connell, 2020).

1.2 Rationale of the Study

Telling different stories about what it means to be a man is a key part of creating the conditions necessary for gender equality. This means that men may learn to value

women's bodily freedom and to have a more accepting and respectful vision of what constitutes manhood (Keddie, 2020). Men such as these will be more deliberate in how they treat women and less inclined to harm them. It's very important to educate young men to a vision of manhood that excludes violence when they are growing up (Keddie, 2020).

Traditional masculinities are highly associated with practicing violence and power over others, that both men and women suffer from, studies show. For instance, Di Bianca and Mahalik (2022) propose a relational-cultural model of healthy masculinity. They emphasise the need to teach boys and young men relational competencies and empathy. This approach contradicts the notion that "not being a man" means suppressing feelings and resorting to violence. It is in favour of a model of manhood that involves expressing feelings and healthy relationships (Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022).

Adolescents must be educated and informed, but they need to build their own sense of manhood, their own selfhood. Young men can tell stories about their masculine identities, forge healthier models of manhood and challenge hegemonic ones (Dery & Ganle, 2020). Having young men tell stories about their own lives allows them to reflect on and reimagine who they are in ways that are closer to what they want to be and aspire to do, and that incorporate their values and desires. Dery and Ganle (2020) explain how young men in Northwestern Ghana negotiate being men through storytelling, which offers them a vehicle for articulating their individual and collective identities in ways that are opposite to traditional understandings.

The aims of this study are to present narratives exploring young men's masculine identities, psychosocial challenges, hopes and fears for now and the future. Using narrative interviews and thematic analysis, this study aims to provide an overview of the trajectories of young men transitioning to adulthood (Christofidou, 2021). Narrative interviews enable one to delve deeply into people's personal experiences and stories. They offer one a lot of information that is capable of showing how complicated identity formation is and how societal expectations affect young men (Christofidou, 2021).

By exploring the challenges young men face in developing their masculine identities, this knowledge can help individuals create solutions and support systems that enhance their mental and social well-being. Keddie (2020) explains how a pedagogy of empathy can enable boys and young men to reimagine their gender, allowing them to engage in healthier relationships and gain a deeper understanding of who they are. Additionally, a deeper understanding of the aspirations and fears young men have for their present and imagined future lives would aid in the design of effective policies and programs (Roy & Ayalon, 2023). Policies that accept diverse expressions of masculinity and offer mental health and social support can do a lot to prevent violence and promote gender equality (Roy & Ayalon, 2023).

Promoting diverse forms of masculinity affects more than just changing people's behaviours, it changes the rules that all people follow. By calling for young men to become more empathetic and tolerant, societies can strive for an equal and respectful society for each other. Societies can change, claim Roy and Ayalon (2023), if structures and policies support new models of masculinity. This includes introducing school programs that confront traditional gender roles and giving individuals the tools needed for mental health and social development that are foundational to creating healthy identities.

1.3 Problem Statement

Young black men in Soweto face various challenges as they build their masculinities within a society that sustains hegemonic masculinity. These challenges include high levels of unemployment, low household income and crime amongst others and are compounded by high rates of gender-based violence and social expectations that uphold traditional masculine ideals (Khumalo, Msimang & Bollbach, 2014). It is crucial to examine how young men form their masculine identities and the psychosocial challenges they face in doing so.

1.4 Research Objectives

1. To explore how young men narrate their masculine identities.
2. To identify the psychosocial challenges faced by young men in Soweto.
3. To understand the hopes, despairs, and fears of young men regarding their present lives and imagined futures.

1.5 Research Questions

1. How do young men narrate their masculine identities?
2. What are the psychosocial challenges that young men face in the Soweto community?
3. What are the hopes, despairs, and fears of young men regarding their present lives and imagined futures?

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study is important as it seeks to give an in-depth perspective of what young men in Soweto go through as they grow up. What is garnered from this study is going to be extremely useful in several ways. Firstly, the results may help people in implementing interventions and support mechanisms that will improve the mental and social lives of young men. From research, it is evident that most young men suffer from the pressure of adhering to normative male roles where help seeking behaviours for conditions such as anxiety and depression are seen as not “manly” and men who display alternative masculinities are marginalised (Seidler et al., 2016; Young et al., 2024). Thus, this research project in the context of a South African township offers significant insights where there is a gap in understanding masculine identities in township environments (Langa, 2012).

Such situations lead to multiple mental health problems like anxiety and depression (Smith et al., 2022). So much so that devising more effective interventions to reach these young men comes down to understanding the facts of what they are doing. For example, the work of Sharp et al., (2022) demonstrates the importance of finding ways to provide spaces for boys in which they can openly talk about their feelings and mental health without fear of being judged, criticised or made to feel ashamed. Formation of such platforms in the Soweto community, may nurture young men to step up to help and support each other, thus making the community healthier. Herron et al., (2020) and others, state that proactive mental health promotion efforts can help towards changing some masculinities and mental health. Some of these strategies can include community workshops, peer support groups and awareness and education campaigns that challenge traditional notions of what it means to be a man and raise awareness of mental health.

The study could also aid in the implementation of policies and programs that help young men navigate the specific challenges they face in forming their male identities. Policies that embrace the fluid and unique nature of masculine identities can help young men feel less pressured to conform to dangerous stereotypes. Levant and Pryor (2020), for example, write that schools should have programs educating boys and young men on what it means to be a healthy man, respecting others, and emotional intelligence. To be able to reach as many people as possible, such programs can be incorporated into school curricula and community programs. Current policy such as the 1997 Gender Equity Task Team (GETT) has laid a foundation for the formation of national policy on gender and education (Rarieya, Sanger & Moolman, 2014). GETT is an advisory board that was appointed by the South African Minister of Education to solve gender inequalities within the South African education system post-apartheid (Rarieya et al., 2014). Under this framework, policies regarding gender issues have been created within the Department of Education, focusing on key concerns, such as, “The Measures for the Prevention and Management of Learner Pregnancy Guidelines (2007)” or the “Guidelines for the Prevention and Management of Sexual Violence and Harassment in Public Schools (2008)” (Rarieya et al., 2014). These policies tend to be framed in terms of interventions in response to problems. This study attempts to offer more nuanced understandings, particularly of boys’ psychosocial challenges in South African townships and schools.

Furthermore, the research will illuminate how race, class, and cultural background impact different aspects of masculinity. There are numerous historical and socioeconomic forces that shape male identities in South Africa, so this is especially applicable there (Connell, 2020). Understanding these points of intersection can help lawmakers implement programs that are more effective and inclusive for all of the different types of young men in Soweto. For example, McLean (2021) talks about the idea of "post-crisis masculinities" and how historical events, like apartheid, still impact how men and women interact with each other today. Policies that address these lingering effects of the past are critical for social transformation and psychosocial healing. Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment Act 53 of 2003 was designed to address the injustices of apartheid and allow more access for black men and women in the economy. However, this policy has had arguably little effect

for the majority of ordinary young people who remain marginalised and struggle in precarious conditions with little hope of social mobility.

In these conditions of racialised inequality, gender-based violence is pervasive. It is hoped that cultural shifts toward more equitable and respectful gender relations may be attained through the promotion of diverse expressions of masculinity that are not founded on aggression and control. Keddie (2020) speaks about how boys and young men can be involved in changing gender roles. He outlines that making the changes early can have a great impact on individuals' thoughts and actions. Gender-based violence can be averted and community health promoted through the introduction of school and community-based programs that teach empathy, respect, and healthy relationships.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the existing literature by exploring the lived experiences of young men who operate in a defined sociocultural context. It will also give us new perspectives on how masculinities are lived and constructed. The narrative approach taken in this study will allow for depicting the nuances and complexities of the ways in which men construct their identities, resulting in a more balanced view of the subject (Christofidou, 2021).

Finally, the study will also have implications for practitioners who work with young men. Being aware of this particular group of people allows practitioners to be more effective and culturally responsive in their interventions. For instance, Roy and Ayalon (2023) discuss ways of involving men in family and community life as a means of fostering healthier masculinity. Programs that encourage positive fatherhood, volunteerism, and mentoring can have a lasting impact on the growth and development of young men, as well as their contributions.

As a qualitative study, the project cannot be exhaustive in its aim to portray the lives of young men in Soweto. However, this in-depth study may inform the development of more targeted interventions, and to guide policy and programmatic changes, while deepening a larger academic understanding. Investigating the particular challenges these young men encounter as they try to determine what it means to be men, as well as whether they can find a place in the world around them, the study will aid in establishing healthier, more equitable and supportive environments.

1.7 Scope and Limitations

The study engaged with young men aged 14–25 years who are growing up in Soweto. This group was selected because it captures both the adolescent and the early adult years where young men are at critical junctures of identity development and self-discovery. Adolescence and young adulthood are both formative transition periods in life, during which people are particularly susceptible to social expectations and norms (Levant & Pryor, 2020). By making this age group the target, the study aimed to get a variety of experiences with and understandings of manhood, from individuals who are just beginning to understand themselves and who are beginning to transition into adult roles, including work and intimate relationships.

Due to its unique social, economic and cultural environment, Soweto was selected as the geographical focus. The old township of Soweto is made up of a 99% Black African population where different cultural groups (Zulu, Xhosa, Tsonga, Sotho, Tswana etc) are represented and this makes it an ideal context in which to study how young men respond to social ills such as poverty, mass unemployment and pervasive violence against women as well as cultural and familial influences (Connell, 2020; Statistics South Africa, n.d).

Despite the study's effort to offer a comprehensive account of the experiences of young men in Soweto, the study is limited both by the nature of the people that it studies and the areas that it visits. The findings may not apply closely to all young men or to regions with other social and cultural forces. For example, young men from different cultural backgrounds or living in more prosperous areas may have significantly different experiences and perceptions of what it means to be a man (McLean, 2021). In addition, given that the study investigated men from a specific age group only, it excludes the experiences of older men, who are likely to have different concerns and perceptions of what it means to be a man.

The qualitative study also suggests that the results are based on subjective accounts and may not be statistically representative of the whole community. This is because the study gives us detailed information about individual narratives. Narrative research is based very much on the richness and depth of each narrative, which can

be extremely variable and not always comparable (Christofidou, 2021). The method favours depth over breadth, a strength, but also a limitation of qualitative research.

Furthermore, the utilisation of self-reported data in the study can lead to biases like social desirability bias, where individuals change their responses to align with what they feel are social norms or expectations. The researcher ought to be aware of such limitations and try to create a comfortable and non-judgmental interviewing setting to allow individuals to give open and reflective answers (Dery & Ganle, 2020).

1.8 Definition of Terms

Hegemonic Masculinity: This is a form of masculinity that constructs the gender order and is associated with dominance, power, and control (Connell, 2020). Hegemonic masculinity is not just about the attitudes and behaviours of a few particular men, it is a cultural ideal that legitimises and naturalises male dominance over women and other gendered subjects seen as inferior. This ideal masculinity is characterised by aspects of being talkative (Connell, 2020), competitive, and emotionally restrained (Bay-Cheng, 2003), with the exclusion of men who do not conform to these norms (e.g., more expressive, nurturing men). Exploring how ideals of hegemonic masculinity create norms for boys and men sheds light on how these cultural expectations and pressures contribute to problems like violence against women and mental health issues among men.

Gender Based Violence: Gender based violence (GBV) is based on normative role expectations and asymmetrical power relations between the genders (Levant & Pryor, 2020). GBV is a continuum of acts that include physical and sexual violence as well as psychological and economic abuse, all based on unequal gender relations. It is an issue that can affect anyone, regardless of age, race, or socio-economic status, but one that is disproportionately represented among women and girls. Without a comprehension of GBV, there cannot be a discussion of the pressures and consequences normative gender roles impose on men and women, and the potential for such to promote destructive attitudes and behaviours.

Masculinity: Masculinity refers to the attributes, behaviours, and roles associated with boys and men. Masculinity is a socially and culturally constructed category, and it looks decidedly different between cultures and over time (Reeser, 2023).

Traditional definitions of masculinity, for example, emphasise strength, stoicism and independence, whereas more contemporary approaches call for a broad, inclusive definition calling for the inclusion of emotional expression like vulnerability (Connell, 2020). Knowing what masculinity is means recognising how these characteristics are promoted and policed in various contexts, and their impact on individual lives and social relations.

Intersectionality: Intersectionality is a nearby and complementary perspective that develops a framework for comprehending how different types of inequality and discrimination intersect and interact with one another. The term was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw as a way to express how race, gender, class and sexuality do not stand in isolation but are intertwined (Roy & Ayalon, 2023), resulting in different types of oppression and privilege. In terms of masculinity studies, intersectionality offers an analytical lens with which to understand how other elements of a young man’s identity, like race and socio-economic class, influence his experiences of and perspectives on masculinity. This method gives us a multi-faceted view which is beyond a two-dimensional view of gender roles.

1.9 Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation is structured as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction. This chapter provides an overview of the study, including the background, rationale, problem statement, research objectives, research questions, significance, scope, limitations, and definitions of key terms.

Chapter 2: Literature Review. This chapter reviews existing literature related to the study's focus on masculine identities, psychosocial challenges, and the theoretical frameworks that inform the research.

Chapter 3: Methodology. This chapter details the research design, including the participants, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques used in the study.

Chapter 4: Results and analysis. This chapter presents the findings of the study, based on the narrative interviews and thematic analysis conducted.

Chapter 5: Discussion and conclusion. This chapter discusses the implications of the findings, linking them to the existing literature and theoretical frameworks. It concludes the dissertation, summarising the key findings and offering recommendations for future research, policy, and practice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter covers existing literature on the study focus on masculine identities, psychosocial challenges, and theoretical models that inform the study.

2.1 Understanding Masculine Identities

The definition of masculinity has changed significantly over time with experts pointing to how it is complex and multidimensional. Masculinities are not static, as argued by Connell (2020), but are made by society and are dynamic and subject to changes with time and place. Reeser (2023) similarly stresses how manhood is situational and situationally dependent. Traditional ideas about what it means to be a man are challenged more and more in contemporary Western societies. Additionally, this is also happening in South Africa where research has been done to see how normative masculinities can be transformed through participatory programs to create more gender equitable and non-violent forms of masculinity (Gibbs, Myrttinen, Washington, Sikweyiya & Jewkes, 2020). This has created what Connor et al., (2021) call a "crisis of masculinity," and men are required to deal with changing gender norms and expectations. With race, class, and sexuality entwined, this is a more complex issue. Aboim and Vasconcelos (2022) discuss this question in relation to trans masculinities and how these disrupt traditional gender roles.

Connell's (2020) hegemonic masculinity framework is still one of the major tools used to account for why some forms of manhood are privileged while others are not. Dominant, controlling and straight hegemonic masculinity is used as a yardstick to compare and judge other masculinities. This dominating type marginalises women to peripheries and represses other masculinities that are not aligned with it, for example, those that are connected with being gay or emotionally weak (Connell, 2020). It is supported by institution practices and media representation and cultural norms that promote hegemonic masculinity. McLean (2021) explains how post-crisis societies like Sierra Leone show how men restore traditional norms of masculinity as a way of re-establishing control and power and to maintain violence and social instability.

If you look at manhood in terms of race, class, and sexuality, you can see how complicated it is. Aboim and Vasconcelos (2022) look at trans masculinities and how these are oppositional to gender as binary and to traditional ideas of what it means to be a man. Trans men work through gender in a way that reworks and undermines gender norms. This is a much richer and complex sense of what it is to be manly. Therefore, this intersecting methodology is important for us working in the field of masculinities effectively considering diverse identities and experiences. For this reason, masculinity is not a unitary interpretation but is affected by a variety of its own characteristics and social factors. This stands in contrast to what Keddie (2020) also identifies as one critical element in any successful restructuring of gender roles for boys and young men getting engaged in that process. There, he thinks, must be a pedagogy of empathy to make boys into better men.

Connor et al., (2021) refers to a “crisis of masculinity” in modern Western societies. This is a byproduct of broader shifts in society toward gender equality and breaking down traditional concepts of gender. There’s much friction between traditional ideas of masculinity and new ideas about male emotionality punctuated by male fairness and gender equality. Men can have identity crises and mental stress when they feel like they have to fit in with these new rules while also being affected by old ones (Connor et al., 2021). Levant and Pryor (2020) talk about how these traditional masculine ideals hurt men, pointing out that they are linked to higher rates of violence and mental health problems in men. Because of these shifting factors, we need to think again about what models of masculinity are good and long-lasting in today's world.

Furthermore, Reeser's (2023) focus on the changing nature of masculinity makes it even more important to see masculinity as a concept that changes based on the situation. Social interactions, national stories, and personal experiences are always changing and shaping what it means to be masculine. It makes possibly different forms of masculinity to emerge that are less concerned with power and control and more concerned with acceptance and understanding (Jewkes, Morrell, Hearn, Lundqvist, Blackbeard, Gottzen & Lindegger, 2015; Reeser 2023). In 2022, Di Bianca and Mahalik introduced a relational-cultural framework for developing healthy masculinity. It is grounded in developing relational competences and empathy. Undoing harmful effects of hegemonic masculinity on men and women means

imagining this potential for transformation. In the South African context, masculinity is often understood and controlled by cultural expectations that position men as breadwinners and “heads” of households who protect their families and communities. However, this view tends to exert significant pressure on men which leads to a limited display of vulnerability and alternative masculinities (Young, Moji, Duby, Tenza, Atujuna, Palanee-Phillips, Minnis & Montgomery, 2024). Young et al., (2024) discuss in their study how these norms are influenced by factors such as race, sexuality and socioeconomic status which in turn shape how South African men form their masculine identities. Furthermore, their study posits that in South Africa, masculinity is not monolithic but is rather fluid and dependent on individuals’ contexts.

It also helps us to understand what it means to be a man by studying different forms of manhood, for example, those of young men in different cultures. Writing of the young men of Northwestern Ghana, Dery and Ganle (2020) show how they navigate to be men, achieving the masculine imperative of toughness and resilience, in their Ghanian setting. Such stories demonstrate how to be a man is performed and lived differently in different situations across cultures. That is to say, it needs approaches to studying masculinities that are culturally responsive. Roy and Ayalon (2023) also argue that we need to rethink family gender practices and how family relations make men.

Overall, the concept of manhood as described by researchers such as Connell (2020), Reeser (2023) and Aboim and Vasconcelos (2022) show how dynamic, multidimensional and complex it is. Its interaction with other social identities makes it even more complicated. This demands an approach that is more sensitive to how manly identities are context-bound and flexible, and thus contextually-variant. This is what we need to address to confront men’s mental and social problems and to encourage healthier and more tolerant ideas about what it means to be a man in the world today. Keddie (2020), Connor et al., (2021) and Di Bianca and Mahalik (2022) help lead us to new understandings, and rework the old ones, of how traditional masculinity plays out.

2.2 Psychosocial Challenges Facing Young Men in the African context

Young men nowadays are having a difficult time identifying themselves in a society that has strict regulations. Levant and Pryor (2020) posit that stress regarding conformity to hegemonic masculinity can cause extreme mental health problems like anxiety and despair. This may be particularly evident in post-conflict societies and in the African context these stressors manifest in different ways. For example, Dery and Ganle (2020) talk about stories of young men in Northwestern Ghana who are under traditional expectations to be emotionally resilient and macho, and this aggravates their social and mental problems. All these stresses combined with socioeconomic problems make it hard for young men.

In post-crisis societies like Sierra Leone, reconstructing manhood makes it difficult for young men to overcome mental and social challenges. In such a situation, McLean (2021) asserts that pressure on men by society to regain control and dominance may perpetuate violence and make it difficult for society to heal. This needs to fit into standard male roles can make it harder for young men to heal mentally because they may feel like they have to hide their trauma and act tough instead. According to McLean (2021), the stories of young men in Sierra Leone show how these standards can keep them in roles that make violence and instability worse instead of helping them heal and get better. This doesn't just happen after a disaster; it also happens in other cultures where toughness and resilience are important parts of traditional masculinity (Dery & Ganle, 2020; McLean, 2021; Roy & Ayalon, 2023).

The circumstances of young men in Northwestern Ghana make it clear how emotional stoicism and toughness are valued in their culture. Dery and Ganle (2020) look to see how these young men deal with social pressures that demand that they be resilient and tough. People are supposed to conform to these norms, and this can make it impossible to be weak or get mental assistance. This can cause a lot of internal struggles for young men as they try to balance what society expects of them with what they are experiencing. When these social pressures are combined with other socioeconomic challenges like lack of education and poverty, they compound their mental and social challenges. These increased stresses require that we have comprehensive, culturally responsive plans for addressing young men's mental health and overall wellness (Christofidou, 2021; Dery & Ganle, 2020; Levant & Pryor, 2020).

Young men in South Africa face a complex interplay of psychosocial challenges shaped by structural inequalities, gender norms, and emotional vulnerabilities. In *Becoming Men*, Langa (2020) presents a longitudinal portrait of young Black males from Alexandra township who navigate manhood under conditions marked by absent fathers, poverty, violence, and restrictive ideals of masculinity. The research shows that some young men want non-violent and emotionally expressive identities, but their communities consider these choices as dangerous and weak. The majority of these young men develop masculine identities through performative actions which serve defensive purposes because they need to survive and maintain social status instead of developing authentic selfhood or emotional wellbeing. Young men in this context experience emotional burdens during their transition to adulthood because they must handle the contradiction between their personal ideals and the societal standards they must meet (Langa, 2020). The role of peer groups to reinforce norms of masculinity is well documented (Thompson & Bennett, 2017). Within peer groups that value toughness and aggression, young men are inclined to exhibit hypermasculine behaviour to gain approval (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Young men in disadvantaged communities are regularly subjected to pressures to embody typical forms of masculinity that are connected to crime and violence (Morrell et al., 2012). Poor economic opportunities, gang culture, and absence of positive role models fuel these pressures (Pyke, 2022).

There has been empirical work that has connected crime to economic precarity and masculinity (Messerschmidt, 1993). It is claimed that young men who lack access to schooling and financial means might turn to crime as a replacement for producing “success” and dominance (Langa, 2020). Alternatives to traditional means of social mobility through mentorship, sports, and creative industries are effective crime preventions for youth (Gibbs & Scothorne, 2020).

Additionally, the absence of fathers and restricted access to caring male role models intensifies these gender-based pressures. The research of Clowes, Shefer and Ratele (2013) shows that young South African men create meanings about fatherhood and yearn for emotionally involved fathers. In the absence of biological fathers, many young men must turn to substitute "social fathers" or peer influences for their development. The emotional struggle generates internalised stress which

directly relates to mental health issues observed in young South African males. The research by Pakhomova et al., (2021) demonstrated that young men from Soweto and Durban who experienced depression along with anxiety, may be at greater risk of perpetrating intimate partner violence. Their results indicate that gender-based violence together with emotional suppression and unaddressed traumatic experiences function as major factors affecting the mental wellness of young men in South African contexts.

The psychological impact of hegemonic manhood is rather negative. Social norms that link manhood to controlling your feelings and toughness make it less likely for young men to get help for mental health problems, based on Levant and Pryor (2020). Due to stigmatisation of mental illnesses that is culturally based, those with mental illnesses may not get treatment that can make them even more stressed and emotionally uncomfortable. Sharp et al., (2022), for example, found that social pressures on what it means to be a man keep men silent about their mental health problems. This can keep them isolated and increase their mental health problems. Cultural pressure to abide by these strict norms of manhood leaves no room for emotional expressiveness. This makes it difficult for young men to deal with and regulate feelings in a healthy way (Dery & Ganle, 2020; Levant & Pryor, 2020; Sharp et al., 2022).

These psychosocial stressors are exacerbated by financial insecurity that beset young black men and form a multidimensional and complex lattice work of stress. Connor et al., (2021) discuss how lack of financial stability, unemployment and limited educational attainment can make pressures around traditional manhood even stronger. If financial prosperity and safety are linked to what it means to be a man, losing out on these commodities can leave a man feeling unworthy and diminish his self-esteem. Together, these stresses can amplify worry and anxiety among other mental health problems. In South Africa, Holmes (2019) highlights that unemployment amongst Black youth simultaneously blocks their financial involvement in the economy while severely damaging their sense of self along with their agency and ambition. Most young men internalise social standards about leading and providing thus, unemployment becomes an immediate threat to their masculine identity (Holmes, 2019). The research by Selebano (2014) shows that Black men who lack employment in Soweto tend to face depression and social

isolation because they fight to match their actual lived experience to traditional masculine standards that emphasise productivity and financial strength. According to Sibanyoni (2024) the extended unemployment of Black youth in Gauteng produces mental health problems and substance use issues which increase the likelihood of dangerous behaviours while they try to handle their perceived inadequacies and social exclusion.

This psychological and social plight of young men is inextricably bound to hegemonic ideals of manhood that demand emotional suppression, stoicism and power. These pressures are intensified in crisis-impacted communities and layered onto socioeconomic challenges to create a complex context that has profound effects on the mental health and wellbeing among young men. The solutions to these challenges and to having young men excel in all areas are needed and must be expansive and culturally responsive (Dery & Ganle, 2020; Levant & Pryor, 2020; McLean, 2021).

2.3 Theoretical Frameworks in Masculinity Studies

There are different theoretical lenses through which masculinities are studied. Such theories account for how masculinities are constructed and reinforced. One of the strongest concepts in this field is still that of hegemonic manhood by Connell (2020). It accounts for how some forms of manhood become hegemonic and stay that way by dominating others and relegating them to margins when reproducing gender. Cultural structures and practices that reinforce aggression, emotional stoicism, and dominance sustain this power (Connell, 2020). By situating hegemonic masculinity in context in society, Connell's theory accounts for how powerful masculine values build young men. This is significant in explaining how such norms are adopted and passed on across generations and contexts (Levant & Pryor, 2020; Reeser, 2023).

The relational-cultural model by Di Bianca and Mahalik (2022) is aligned with that of Connell. This relational-cultural model shifts focus away from traits and on to relations and emphasises the part relations play in producing a healthy form of masculinity. Di Bianca and Mahalik (2022) suggest that traditional masculinity causes men to eschew emotional closeness and open-endedness and to become isolated with negative mental health effects. There are emotionally expressive masculinity and healthy and positive relations. This is reinforced by relational-cultural framework

that encourages relational competences and empathy. This is useful for therapy and education because it allows young men to construct more open and flexible conceptions of what it is to be a man (Keddie, 2020; Roy & Ayalon, 2023).

Also, McLean's (2021) "post-crisis masculinities" definition gives us a different framework for thinking about how manhood is renegotiated during times of social recovery and transition. McLean's 2021 study looks at how men in war-torn or crisis-struck regions like Sierra Leone re-make manhood to deal with challenges of re-making communities and lives. Men are also amenable to re-taking traditional protector and provider roles that can recreate patterns of violence and control. It also gives us a chance to re-think what it means to be a man on more positive and equitable terms. Post-crisis masculinities are also worthy of attention in shaping programs that help men in those contexts surmount these harmful behaviours and enact more functional and rapport-building roles (Connor et al., 2021; Dery & Ganle 2020).

Discourses of hegemonic masculinity, relational-cultural framework and post-crisis masculinities can all be used as lenses to see how the conditions of young men differ. It is possible to create a comprehensive framework of the difficulties and pressures young men experience in meeting the expectations society has placed on them and how there is room for improvement. The subsequent interaction of these lenses enables researchers and practitioners to cultivate interventions that promote more positive and inclusive forms of masculinity. That is what will provide improved mental health and social outcomes for young men down the track. This overarching framework is critical in addressing the complicated issues of constructing masculinity and building spaces in which all masculinity can be valued and honoured (Connell, 2020; Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022; McLean, 2021).

2.4 Contemporary Masculinity: Fluidity and Resistance to Traditional Norms

Masculinity has been built on dominance, stoicism, and physical strength in traditional terms (Connell, 2005; Ratele, 2014). More contemporary studies suggest that younger men negotiate masculinity in more dynamic and fluid terms (Anderson, 2009; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Studies in South African contexts provide insight into how socio-economic pressures and shifting cultural expectations are reconfiguring self-understanding for young men (Mfecane, 2018; Morrell et al.,

2012). For example, Mfecane (2018) contends that Western mainstream theories about masculinity fail to grasp the actual experiences of African men. A framework based on African principles should study masculinity through its social construction alongside its foundation in ubuntu and spiritual connections and relational personhood. His research demonstrates that Black South African men frequently develop their masculinity by focusing on community care along with maintaining their integrity and earning respect which contradicts basic stereotypes that define masculinity through power or violence alone.

Morrell et al., (2012) demonstrate that hegemonic masculinity in South Africa exists in multiple forms which come from racial background, socio-economic position and historical influences. The authors distinguish between different types of masculinities which emerge from apartheid-era power, as well as traditional authority systems, and post-apartheid urban youth cultural environments.

The dynamic quality of masculinity is best exemplified by the way young men resist or rework traditional gender norms (Schippers, 2007). Hegemonic masculinity is argued by some to still pressure young men (Messerschmidt, 2018; Ratele, 2014), while others suggest that hybrid masculinities where men selectively take on stereotypically feminine traits are increasing (Demetriou, 2001). This is a slow transition away from strict, hegemonic masculinity to a more adaptive and individualistic conception of manhood (Seidler, 2006).

2.5 Changing Narratives of Masculinity

Social groups and academic debates are rewriting stories about what it means to be a man in important and significant ways. Christofidou (2021) outlines the debate regarding how masculinity is transforming and points to the conflict between traditional conceptions of masculinity and new forms of being masculine. This is especially true in modern-day Western societies, as traditional conceptions of men as strong, calm and self-controlled are increasingly challenged. Traditional conceptions of masculinity that are typically aligned with hegemonic masculinity have been criticised for decades for sustaining gender difference and for producing conditions that are detrimental to men and women (Connell, 2020). Since conceptions of what it is to be a man are changing, it is more important than ever to

portray men in a more open and diversified way to enable men to express themselves and become more experienced (Reeser, 2023).

In South Africa, social movements like the #TotalShutdown and #MenAreTrash have been key to calling out and reconfiguring what it means to be a man (Keddie, 2019). Sexual violence against women is a widespread practice that has been put into focus by these movements. #MenAreTrash is a movement originating in South Africa and is about how men have created situations that are unsafe for women in society. (Maledu, 2017). The #TotalShutdown movement began as a social media campaign to mobilise women to protest against gendered violence (Mathews, Oppelt, Moolman & Jamieson, 2024). These movements promote a more respectful and compassionate form of masculinity by calling on men to engage with these discussions and reject violence and sexism. Keddie (2019) believes that participation of boys and young men in reconfiguring genders through school and community-based programs is important in creating a culture of equality and respect.

The portrayal of men in stories is also changing. This is seen in academic research as it is now more focused on how masculinity is connected to race, class, and sexuality. An example is where Connor et al., (2021) did a systematic review of contemporary masculinities in Western society. This was done to uncover how these identities are shaped by and change with increased social changes. From what they found, it is clear how different masculinities are and how men cope with changing social norms differently. This is a key field of study in realising how complicated masculine identity is and how to come up with mechanisms to enable men to adopt more adaptive and positive forms of masculinity. Social movements and academic debate are important to make society more inclusive and equitable because they resist traditional narratives and promote other forms of masculinity (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2022; Christofidou, 2021; Keddie, 2019).

2.6 Masculinity and Mental Health

The key area of study is manhood and mental health and how men's mental health is shaped by stringent gender roles. Levant and Pryor (2020) state that hegemonic manhood and traditional notions of what it is to be a man that stress self-reliance and stoicism and controlling feelings cause men's mental health to deteriorate. Traditional notions of what it is to be a man stop men from confessing weakness and seeking

help and can make them even more withdrawn and with untreated mental health problems. Smith et al., (2022) share this viewpoint and discovered that older white men in America who lived up to hegemonic manhood experienced dramatic declines in mental health and wellbeing as they aged, mostly when health and prosperity declined. Men do not talk about their problems or seek help that they require because they wish to maintain a veneer of toughness and indestructibility (Sharp et al., 2022).

Conforming to traditional gender norms is harmful to boys' and young men's mental health. Rice et al., (2021) expose that young men who conform to these norms are more susceptible to anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. Emotional repression has been rife in masculinities (Oliffe & Han, 2016; Seidler, 2006). Expectations that men be stoic and self-sufficient, individuals whose emotional displays can only be anger, are linked to increasing rates of mental illness and suicide among men (Oliffe & Han, 2016).

According to recent studies, norms of toughness and self-reliance under traditional masculinity minimise the likelihood that men will seek treatment for psychological discomfort (Mahalik et al., 2020). This repression has consequences anywhere you look, you'll see higher rates of depression and anxiety in men, and corresponding increases in suicidal ideation, especially in young men (Rice et al., 2021).

Teenage boys internalise these negative ideas and learn that it is to be macho and suppress your feelings to be a man. Socialisation is done very early and has long-term effects on mental health and therefore it is important to tackle these norms in mental health improvement initiatives (Chandler, 2022). Gough and Novikova (2020) also talk about how men's willingness to undergo treatment for mental illness is shaped by men and society's definition of what it is to be a man. This reinforces this vicious cycle of poor mental health.

Sharp et al., (2022) look to men's challenges and possibilities for improved mental health. Social norms make it unlikely for men to seek help, or to even admit that they’re vulnerable. Men consider mental health a weakness, according to what they have read, and this is not the case for men. This stigma makes it difficult to obtain help and support using mental health (Herron et al., 2020). Sharp et al., (2022) do see possibilities. One is that they indicate to formulate the targeted mental health

promotional practices that are immune to such adverse norms by encouraging men to pursue assistance. They would make it possible for men to discuss mental health without feeling judged and shamed.

Herron et al., (2020) also discuss the need to address mental health concerns in rural communities with a prevalent ideal of manhood and gender norms. What is true is that mental health treatment is more of a challenge for men in rural communities, where there is a lack of resources. According to Herron et al., (2020) community programs that promote open discussion around mental health and challenge traditional notions of gender have been shown to benefit men's mental health among rural communities (Rice et al., 2021). Such programs can take away shame that has been placed on mental health and guide men to obtain help (Sharp et al., 2022).

Changes in society also shape the intersection of manhood and mental health. For example, Chandler (2022) explains that changing economic realities and social roles expose men to different pressures than they used to face and whose impacts are resulting in stress and mental health challenges. As traditional sources of manhood identity like stable jobs and provider roles become insecure (McLean, 2021), men may struggle to find alternative sites of identity in self-worth and meaning. This can make men feel inadequate and depressed, which is another reason why masculinity needs to be defined in a way that is open and flexible so that men can change to new situations (Smith et al., 2022).

There are many complicated parts to the link between manhood and mental health. Traditionally male gender roles have a big impact on men's mental health. Levant and Pryor (2020), Rice et al., (2021), and Sharp et al., (2022) all stress how important it is to fight these harmful norms and support mental health methods that are more open and helpful to everyone. It is possible to improve men's mental health and general well-being by reducing the shame that surrounds mental health problems and encouraging them to get help (Gough and Novikova, 2020). In this process, we need to work together to redefine what it means to be a man in language that values emotional expressiveness, vulnerability and support for each other (Herron et al., 2020).

2.7 Engaging Boys and Young Men in Gender Transformation

Boys and young men must be part of the conversation about what it means to be a man and about making societies more equitable and inclusive. Keddie (2019) engages young men with gender transition through empathy-based pedagogy. And it leads to better relations: Pedagogy with empathy is founded upon the idea of educating boys and young men to care and to consider those outside of themselves and that means opposing negative gender norms. The prevailing culture of toxic masculinity is rigid, bull-headed, inflexible, and ultimately harmful; in contrast, empathy pedagogy styles itself as an intercept of emotional intelligence and welcoming of the experiences of others. This aligns with the larger aims of gender transition as it promotes alternative forms of masculinity that are equitable and inclusive (Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022; Keddie, 2019; Roy & Ayalon, 2023).

Dery and Ganle (2020) show how important stories and narratives are to make young men think and rethink themselves. They say that narratives offer young men a powerful way of speaking about what they do and go through, challenges and aims, and also about how to question and rework what it means to be a man. Narration can be therapy that helps young men to cope with feelings and happenings in a safe space. This form of storytelling is important to foster self-reflection and development that is important to build healthy manhood identities (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2022; Dery & Ganle, 2020; Connor et al., 2021).

If we want to enlist boys and young men in taking back gender, we will have to acknowledge the larger social and cultural forces that influence how they understand what it means to be a man. Connor et al., (2021) discuss the “crisis of masculinity” in modern-day Western cultures, where traditional gender roles are increasingly being challenged. Communities and schools have to provide programs that feature men questioning such roles and building more flexible and adaptive manhood. These programs address mental health, respectful relationships and the impact of gender stereotypes, using mentorship, workshops and peer support groups. These programs aid young men in well-adjusted adaptation and development of healthy and positive manhood (Connor et al., 2021; Christofidou, 2021; Keddie, 2019).

The inclusion of gender-sensitive lessons in school curricula is also a highly effective way to mobilise boys and young men for gender change. Christofidou (2021) asserts

that schools are powerful in shaping young people's gender conceptions and can do a great deal to promote equality between men and women. Through educating boys on gender inequality impacts and gender equality advantages through programs, we can create a gender justice-interested and gender justice-friendly group of men. It is advisable that this educational intervention is interactive and involves boys in discussions and activities that are different from traditional gender roles (Christofidou, 2021; Keddie, 2019; Levant & Pryor, 2020).

Also important is that such projects are represented by good role models who are men. Young men can learn to be prosperous and powerful and still be kind and helpful through role models who offer them alternative forms of masculinities. Aboim and Vasconcelos (2022) talk about how trans masculinities disrupt gender norms and offer alternative more open-minded notions of what it means to be a man. Men like these can teach young men that there are other ways to be a man and can help them find identities that are their own, and not what society has to offer. These projects can inspire younger men to embody these more positive and just expressions of masculinity by emphasising the experiences and perspectives of men who defy restrictive models of traditional masculinity (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2022; McLean, 2021; Ralph & Roberts, 2020).

The involvement of young men and boys in gender transitions is an intricate phenomenon; one which does not just rely upon stories, positive role models, educational programs, and the promotion of empathy. (Keddie (2019), Dery and Ganle (2020), Connor et al., (2021) all describe it as necessary to give young men a safe space to explore and move toward alternative masculinities. Through such programs, societies can become healthier and more equitable by destabilising the traditional ideas of manhood and generating more tolerant and compassionate models of masculinity.

2.8 The Role of Media in Shaping Masculinity

The media has a large part to play in what individuals observe about what it means to be a man and has a tendency to reinforce normative and hegemonic conceptions. Men are presented in a manner that has a tendency to reinforce that men are powerful and controlling and emotionally distant and can be harmful to what young men observe and do about themselves, as chronicled by Levant and Pryor (2020).

There are many such portrayals in different forms of media such as television shows, movies, and social media. They create a consistent story that values certain traits of traditional manhood. Connor et al., (2021) say that these kinds of media portrayals add to the "crisis of masculinity" by setting an impossible standard that many men feel like they have to meet. The intersectionality of race, class, and sexuality makes this problem even worse by making it harder for the media to reach different groups of men (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2022).

Media has an effect on masculinity that goes beyond how men see themselves and affects social norms and expectations as a whole. Reeser (2023) says that media stories often support and spread hegemonic masculinity, which keeps gender roles in place and causes more injustice. By making behaviours related to dominance and control seem normal, these portrayals can change how men deal with others, especially women. McLean (2021) says that in places like Sierra Leone that have been through a crisis, the media can either reinforce harmful masculine norms or question them, based on the stories that are spread. Because it can change the way people talk, the media is a strong way to either support or question gender norms.

In addition, the media doesn't just have negative effects on masculinity; it can also bring about good change. It is important that the media question traditional gender norms and portray different forms of masculinity (Christofidou, 2021). If campaigns and stories portray other and non-traditional forms of manhood, you are making people think about a broader definition of what it is to be a man. Keddie (2019) discusses how the impact of social movements that abuse media usage in order to be heard, and how they transform the constructs of gender in the society. Some of these movements, such as #TheTotalShutdown and #MenAreTrash utilised their use of the media to make themselves heard and to campaign for gender equality and they are examples of how the media can be used to bring about changes in society.

2.9 Role Models and the Construction of Masculine Identity

Much of the theoretical literature focuses emphasising on men act of the making of masculinity (Connell, 2020). Mentorship and fatherhood play an important role in cultivating young men’s sense of leadership as well as their sense of responsibility and emotional regulation (Furstenberg, 2019; Ratele et al., 2012). Because of

negative role models, young men seek guidance from elsewhere (Clowes, Theo, Sanger, Mabenge, & Ngabaza, 2023).

Research indicates that without fathers, young men look towards older men within their families, to teachers or community leaders (Hunter, 2006; Mkhize, 2006). A study has shown that homes led by single mothers do not create “weak” masculinities, they instil resilience and ethos (Elliott, Reid, 2019). Although young men demonstrate resilience, they still express strong desires for emotionally available fathers who actively participate in their lives. According to Langa (2010) adolescent boys experience father absence as both a source of emotional distress and a strong drive to shape their future paternal identities. Clowes, Ratele and Shefer (2013) conducted research that demonstrated how men develop their self-concept and relational capacities through the emotional neglect and lack of paternal support they experienced. Langa (2017) demonstrates how young Black South African men describe work and fatherhood as combined paths which they use to redefine masculinity with caring socially responsible characteristics. According to Clowes et al., (2013) men tend to create alternative stories about fatherhood because they view it as a place for emotional healing which replaces traditional male parenting distance with affection and presence. According to Shefer and Ratele (2023) the process of reevaluating fatherhood is essential for challenging patriarchal power structures while developing new approaches to gender relations. Research indicates that young men in the South African context experience structural and emotional challenges due to missing fathers, yet they actively create aspirational models of fatherhood and masculine ideals which stand against violent and emotionally distant models (Shefer, Stevens & Clowes, 2010).

However, there is growing work dispelling the myth that men are necessary for healthy masculinity to flourish. Studies show that young men who are brought up in non-traditional family structures can display healthy masculinity as long as they are emotionally supported (Hearn, 2019; Makusha, 2024). Social fathers, mothers, teachers, community networks can play a role in this process. Research findings demonstrate that young men frequently establish relationships with extended family members and educational figures and community leaders who act as social fathers when biological fathers are missing (Hunter, 2006; Mkhize, 2006; Ratele et al., 2012). According to Mkhize (2006), fatherhood exists primarily within social

connections because African communities share fatherhood responsibilities between uncles and older brothers and male leaders in their community. Significantly, he argues, these social fathers are responsible not only for material provision but also for moral and emotional guidance, reflecting an African sociality that “It takes a village to raise a child”.

Clowes along with Ratele and Shefer demonstrated in their 2013 work that mothers, grandmothers and non-biological caregivers can offer vital moral and emotional guidance which leads to reflective masculine identities in boys. The narratives of young men according to Langa (2010) show how they use both official and unofficial male influences from their community to develop their masculinity which emerges from social interactions and environmental factors. These studies challenge traditional beliefs about nuclear families by demonstrating how expansive emotional connections along with community ties influence masculine identities in South Africa's socio-historical context of non-nuclear family structures.

Mass and social media are strong channels for constructing masculinity (Pascoe, 2017). Social communities and celebrities and influencers are poised to shape what young men consider to be toughness and emotional regulation and what is considered to be success (Ricciardelli, Clow, & White, 2010).

Men's exposure to hypermasculine characters has been found to reinforce individualistic and competitive ideologies and sometimes misogynistic ideologies (Duncanson, 2015). There are also counter-narratives with celebrities and sports stars like Marcus Rashford and Kevin Love speaking out for mental health awareness and emotional health (Gannon et al., 2021).

These hybrid influences capture hegemonic and modern conceptions of masculinity in interplay (Newman et al., 2023). Adolescent boys negotiate between such ideals and sometimes select and mix opposing characteristics across different role models (De Boise, 2019).

2.10 Intersectionality and Masculine Identities

In order to really get a sense of men and what it means to be a man, there is a requirement to look at the idea of intersectionality and how social categories like race, class, and sexuality intersect to form how each man feels to be a man.

Masculinities are not single and monolithic for example, (Connell, 2020), but many are inter-relational. They are shaped and interact with each other and a variety of other forces. It is vital to remember in the regards of how men from various walks of life can navigate between identities vis a vis hegemonic manhood. According to Aboim and Vasconcelos (2022) they analyse how trans masculinities subvert traditional gender rules and demonstrate how what it means to be a man may be very different depending on how an individual identifies and how they express their gender identity. This is an example of how, in searching for masculinities, looking for overlap helps provide a fuller understanding of what it means to be a man.

If only to be cognisant of the ways that cultures construct masculine identities, it's significant to realise how interrelated our understanding of masculinity and race is with one another. Dery and Ganle (2020) describe young men in Northwestern Ghana who face norms that stress a lot on toughness and emotional regulation. Such norms are fortified by challenges in their communities that render manhood complicated. Similarly, McLean (2021) writes about post-crisis masculinities in Sierra Leone. He finds that race, history, and socioeconomic class intersect in men re-conceptualising manhood after a social crisis.

In South Africa, race is particularly significant and masculine identity development operates through the intersection of racial legacy and enduring racial inequalities that affect society. Primary school boys learn masculine ideals through racialised and class-based perspectives (Govender and Bhana, 2023). Their research indicates that Black boys who attend township schools develop masculine traits which include extreme resilience and physical dominance together with behaviours influenced by their impoverished social conditions. These behaviours include physically fighting with other boys over girls they are romantically interested in / dating or even ostracising boys who act in more feminine ways and labelling them as “gay” (Govender and Bhana, 2023). The masculinities which emerge from Black youth experiences in present-day South Africa cannot be explained by natural traits alone because they develop from systemic societal positioning following apartheid, while structural inequalities persist. According to Govender and Bhana (2023) Black boys utilise masculinity as a resource to deal with their marginalisation by either opposing or emulating dominant white middle-class standards for success, power and recognition.

Langa, Kirsten, Bowman, Eagle and Kiguwa (2020) conducted an analysis of the Oscar Pistorius trial which evaluates how Black masculinities were judged without direct presence. The courtroom, along with media discourse, applied racialised standards of masculinity by associating white male characteristics with humanity and vulnerability yet making Black masculinity either invisible or connecting it to violent criminal behaviour. According to their argument the disjuncture demonstrates how racialised hierarchies' function within South African cultural discussions that define masculinity (Langa et al., 2020). Representation politics together with personal identity determine the way society constructs and controls masculine identities which cross racial boundaries. Langa's Becoming Men (2020) also provides in-depth, qualitative insights into the life experiences of Black adolescent boys in Alexandra township. The study reveals how these young men grapple with competing ideals of masculinity, some are based on compassion, ambition, and emotional honesty, while others are based on strength and endurance.

Langa (2020) shows how racialised poverty, structural lack of opportunity, and historical disenfranchisement constrain the range of possible masculine expression for young Black men. Many men are pushed towards protective and resistant but constrained and occasionally destructive forms of masculinity by the racialised and economic disparities of township life (Langa, 2020). Such studies make it clear how important it is to account for multiple intersecting factors to really get a sense of men's various experiences and performances of manhood.

Class is also important to men's development because men's class position can affect whether and on what terms men can assume or resist traditional men's roles. Men's socioeconomic standing can determine what resources are available to them and whether they can dominate and control others, which are central to hegemonic masculinity (Levant and Pryor, 2020). In her 2023 book, Reeser writes about how men in poorer families may be put under more pressure to assume traditional men's roles as a way of compensating for lacking financial power. In South Africa, Langa and Leopeng (2022) highlight the manner in which class is a deciding element in constructing Black masculinities in post-apartheid South Africa. In analysing *Destiny Man* magazine, they illustrate how middle-class Black masculinity cannot be separated from material success, consumer power, and professional achievement. Having the resources to afford being able to purchase luxury goods and gain access

to exclusive spaces becomes symbolic capital through which masculinity is legitimised and performed (Langa, Leopeng, 2022). Economic empowerment is here established not only as personal attainment but also as a means of reclaiming dignity (Langa, Leopeng, 2022). This connection between class and masculinity shows how different men are privileged and disadvantaged in different ways and makes it even harder to think about there being a single male identity.

Another key aspect of intersectionality that builds masculinities is that of sexuality. Aboim and Vasconcelos (2022) talk about how non-heteronormative masculinities like those of trans men deconstruct gender and make individuals question what society anticipates of them. Trans men show that manhood is flexible and multifaceted and that it can't be defined without examining other areas of identity as well. Ratele (2014) and Christofidou (2021) also speak about how there is argument about how masculinity is changing and how contemporary gender ideas need to account for multiple identities that men hold that intersect. Intersectional thought is necessary in order to achieve a richer and more nuanced understanding of what it is to be a man.

The idea of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2013) is therefore a good means to think about how complicated male identities are. By thinking about how race and class and sexuality intersect with and with one another, researchers can more closely observe how men act and feel like men in different ways. Doing it this way counters the idea of monolithic manhood and shows how important it is to portray male identities in a more complicated and expansive way. Research by Connell (2020), Dery and Ganle (2020), and Aboim and Vasconcelos (2022) shows how important intersectionality is to capture the range of masculine experiences. They also show how important it is to keep researching this topic.

2.11 Masculinity and Peer Influence

Men build and sustain themselves to a large degree through peer influence. Adolescent males seek approval and direction and adjust what they believe and do to conform to what others in the group deem right. It should be noted that it is argued by Connell (2020) that peer groups are powerful influencers of hegemonic masculinity since they reinforce and celebrate toughness and competitiveness and emotional control. When others around you reinforce traditional manhood, it can

make you feel that you should conform and that can be detrimental to your mental and emotional health. Levant and Pryor (2020) say that this pressure from peers to follow traditional male norms can cause problems like more violence and not wanting to get help for mental health issues.

Peer effect on masculinity is most clear during adolescence and early adulthood, when social relationships are very important for shaping who you are. Keddie (2019) looks into how using a pedagogy of empathy to get boys and young men involved in gender change can help fight harmful peer norms. Young guys can become healthier and more flexible men by growing up in places that value empathy and emotional expression. This method can fight the bad effects of group pressure by encouraging different, more positive stories about what it means to be a man. Dery and Ganle (2020) also talk about how important stories and narratives are for young men to be able to think about and rework their identities and be able to deal with the stringent and harmful expectations that are typically placed on them by others.

The difficulties that marginalised groups of young men go through can also be compounded by peer pressure. McLean (2021) writes about how manhood is rebuilt after a crisis in an economy that is recovering and unstable and in which young men are forced to deal with expectations by friends. In South Africa, Langa (2020) illustrates how, in the absence of engaged father figures, boy peer groups become the site of constructing masculine identity by frequently focusing on resilience and emotional repression as survival strategies. Pattman and Bhana (2021) further observe the ways masculinity is constructed among groups of boys, in which boys negotiate each other's gender performances, particularly in terms of sexuality and difference. In their analysis of gendered interactions between South African high school learners, they discuss how masculinity is constructed with peer discourse, teasing, and monitoring especially in relation to girls' appearances and displays of gender non-conformity indicating that young men are socialised to enact masculinity in relational terms, often through the exclusion or marginalisation of non-hegemonic masculinities (Pattman, Bhana, 2021). Traditional roles of men that are based on power and control can be reinforced by peer relationships and make it more complicated to restore peace and restore society. In the same way, Aboim and Vasconcelos (2022) write about how trans men cope with masculinity among groups of people who do not completely know and accept their gender identities. It makes it

harder for them to make friends and feel that they belong. These examples show how important it is to provide intervention that is personalised to account for how peers engage with each other in different societies and cultures.

Peers do not just harm male identity, they can also be utilised to make improvements. Peer-led initiatives can encourage better masculinities by using peer power to show and promote good behaviour, as stated by Connor et al., (2021). Peer support and peer mentoring programs can help young men to better know what it means to be a man and can help them to resist harmful norms and become resilient. Christofidou (2021) also believes that gender role shifts today are facilitating freer and more progressive friendships in which different forms of masculinity can be explored and tolerated. It can be seen through such changes that peer pressure can lead to positive changes in understanding and experiencing masculinities.

Men's identities are built and solidified to a large extent through peer influence. Studies by Connell (2020), Levant and Pryor (2020), and Keddie (2019) show how complicated peer relations are. They show how they can support traditional manly roles and promote healthier and more tolerant forms of male identity. Peer influence has to be understood and addressed to create effective interventions that help young men know who they are and make a positive impact in social spaces.

2.12 The Impact of Family Dynamics on Masculinity

Relationships with family are a major factor in how men form and maintain their identities. Family members socialise boys into specific gender roles as children by providing a good example of what it means to be a man. Hegemonic masculinity is built to a significant extent by family structures as defined by Connell (2020). This is owing to the fact that parents and other family members teach expectations and behaviours that are aligned with common male ideals. Socialisation by a young man's family can affect his identity in the long term with ideas of toughness, control of emotion, and dominance.

When traditional norms for males are reinforced in the family, it can cause a range of psychological and social problems. Levant and Pryor (2020) explain how conformity pressures can make individuals stifle feelings and vent stress on themselves and become mentally unhealthy with issues like anxiety and unhappiness. This is especially true in patriarchal families that put a lot of emphasis on control and

dominance by men. In South Africa, Makusha (2024) highlights how patriarchal structures are a foundation for the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity norms where young South African men and boys are influenced to be providers and protectors in their families. Makusha (2024) however does also note that this pressure to take on those responsibilities within their families appears to be restrictive and hampers men's ability to express vulnerability, engage in help-seeking behaviours and also their caregiving abilities often associated more with motherhood.

How young men see and treat women is also affected by how their families work, which is a big part of how manhood works. In 2022, Aboim and Vasconcelos looked into how trans masculinities were dealt with in families that might not fully accept or understand non-traditional gender identities. These interactions with family can help or hurt the growth of healthy masculine identities, based on how much acceptance and understanding there is. In the same way, Dery and Ganle (2020) talk about the stories of young men in Northwestern Ghana who have to be emotionally tough and silent because their families expect them to be. This makes it hard for them to be with women and for their own mental health. When looking at family dynamics in South Africa it becomes important to consider that many boys grow up in homes without a present father figure. Thus, mothers, grandmothers, aunties and sisters become key to the socialisation of young boys and how they might model their masculine identities (Patel, Mavungu, 2016). These relations may influence boys to show empathy and care towards women. However, these family dynamics can still influence boys to conform to traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity. Gendered discourses in Black families typically view men's position in families as the head of the household responsible for financial provision and protection (Govender, Bhana, 2023; Ratele et al., 2012). Thus, boys are socialised with these ideals even in female headed households.

The family has various and complex functions in constructing masculinity. It can reinforce traditional norms and be open to positive development. Family-based interventions can be quite effective in constructing healthier masculinities, as posited by Connor et al., (2021). This is especially noted in circumstances where parents and children talk about gender roles and expectations. Programs that encourage good family relations and educate on how to sustain healthy ones can minimise

negative effects of stringent masculine norms. Christofidou (2021) also believes that gender role shifts today are enabling families to cultivate more diversified and inclusive forms of manhood. Such shifts are mirroring changes in society in general.

Family relationships are a major factor in how men construct and maintain their masculinity. There are three studies by Connell (2020), Levant and Pryor (2020), and McLean (2021) that identify how family relationships are a major factor in shaping how young men think and act like men. Implementing focused interventions and creating supportive family environments to deal with the influence of family relationships is key to constructing better and more tolerant masculinities and enhancing young men's mental and social health.

2.13 Educational Interventions for Gender Equality

Educational programs are very important in bringing about gender equality by encouraging young men and women to question traditional norms and develop open-mindedness towards others. Schools and education programs are in a privileged position to affect young people while they are shaping their ideas. They are thus privileged sites for treatments that can break down negative gender stereotypes. Keddie (2019) writes about how important it is to use a pedagogy of empathy to engage boys and young men in gender change. Education can help young men to form more flexible gender identities and more healthy relationships through learning to know and care for others.

Instituting gender education programs that tackle complex manhood and gender relations is a useful means to tackle these subjects in school. Christofidou (2021) explains that ongoing debate regarding manhood in school shows that there is a requirement for more detailed and elaborate lessons that do not depict simplistic gender roles. Such lessons can tackle different means through which men can represent manhood and how strict gender roles affect men and women. Teachers can offer learners with critical thought about and challenges to traditional gender roles by including these themes in the regular school curriculum.

In addition to this, education programs that involve hands-on learning and peer-to-peer dialogue can be very effective. Dery and Ganle (2020) talk about how effective it is to engage with narrative practices with young men sharing and finding out who they are in a safe space. Peer-to-peer dialogue can help them learn more about how

society affects how they act and see themselves. Education programs can help young men question and re-think what it means to be a man by creating safe spaces for open-ended dialogue. This can foster a more tolerant and inclusive peer culture.

Teacher training and development are also crucial to gender equality education. In order to make an argument for Levant and Pryor (2020), you must know how to discuss gender positively. In order to do that, you must know psychological and social gender role dynamics and be able to lead discussions on difficult subjects like violence against women and masculinity. Teachers can become aware of what they need to know through development courses to build inclusive classrooms, disrupt gender norms, and support students' emotional and social development.

Education programs also need to address the wider social and cultural context on which they are based. In post-disaster times, McLean (2021) is of the opinion that education can be used to reconstruct gender and social values and identities. Education can create social cohesion and resilience in these situations by addressing violence and gender-based discrimination against women. Incorporation of community and culturally responsive content can enhance program efficacy and longevity and make gender equality messages effective in and out of classrooms.

Having online resources and websites incorporated into lesson plans also offers avenues for increased equality for men and women. In their publication on this topic in 2021, Connor et al., explain how digital media can be employed to engage youth to talk about manhood and gender roles. Online resources can offer accessible materials and debate platforms that can be employed by students to study these topics in creative and interactive ways. Online resources can offer greater convenience to people with different backgrounds and viewpoints to share them. This can offer students greater gender awareness and make class accessible to everybody.

In a bid to promote gender equality, there is a need to utilise education to get youth to critically question gender roles and be receptive to alternative viewpoints. Keddie (2019), Christofidou (2021), and Dery and Ganle (2020) all posit that there is a need to promote healthier masculinities through pedagogy that is empathetic in nature, whole curricula, and peer-to-peer dialogue. The theories of Levant and Pryor (2020) and McLean (2021) also depict how important it is to prepare educators and utilise

methods that are contextually responsive. We can build a future generation of young men and women who are equipped to make society more inclusive and equitable through the power of education.

2.14 Policy and Advocacy for Healthy Masculinities

Equitable societies need to create legislation and activism that encourages healthy masculinity. Regulations would need to tackle social and cultural issues that encourage unhealthy gender roles and create channels for men to live manhood in a healthier form. Levant and Pryor (2020) state that policy changes need to go beyond changing people's behaviour and target what is allowing hegemonic masculinity to persist, for example, unequal pay and hierarchical structures. By doing this, policies can provide space for alternative and healthy forms of manhood that decrease violence and improve mental health.

Education is also a site where policy can be truly effective. Keddie (2019) writes that gender equality in class is part of policies in schools that can really make a difference to young men's thinking and behaviour. Policies must require gender education that is comprehensive and covers how society constructs manhood and what this entails for men and women. This can mean teacher training to cover gender in a respectful and inclusive manner and producing learning materials that disrupt traditional gender roles and promote multiple forms of masculinity.

Gender equality policies and policies that allow men to exhibit a variety of feelings and behaviours are just as important as policies in school. Dery and Ganle (2020) talk about how traditional masculinity behaviours like competition and hiding your feelings are supported by norms in the workplace. Negative norms can be untangled by policies that encourage a balanced work-life, parental leave for fathers, and mental health care. Policies can make workplaces inclusive and nurturing for everybody and can make men more involved with families and communities and more balanced and improved individuals.

There is also a requirement for advocacy to educate policy and make individuals aware that there is a requirement for healthy masculinities. The social conventions we live under are not enough and Christofidou (2021) argues that there needs to be campaigns that both challenge the social norms and promote alternate notions of how to be a man. There, campaigns can be centred on mass media, community

organisations and social movements to have them re-formulate people's ideas and feelings. In order to lobby effectively, there must be a unified voice for those who represent government agencies, non-profits, and community leaders to step up and demand change.

International agreements and cooperation can also promote national action towards healthy masculinity. McLean (2021) asserts that international agreements and programs can support countries in enforcing gender equality policies by offering them advice and assistance. Global agencies like the United Nations and World Health Organisation can contribute significantly to make policies gender-sensitive and to share resources and best practice. By aligning policies with international norms, states can share information and ideas that support equality for men and women.

Healthy manhood and gender equality are attained through a lot of policy and lobbying. Ideas of Levant and Pryor (2020), Keddie (2019), and Dery and Ganle (2020) uncover that it is important to implement policies in workplaces and in schools that are opposite to traditional gender roles. Further, Christofidou (2021) and Aboim and Vasconcelos (2022) uncover that it is important to campaign and that policymakers are needed to apply intersectional approaches. Through blending national and international models, we can make spaces that promote healthy and alternative forms of manhood. This will make societies inclusive and equitable for everyone.

2.15 Masculinity and Violence

The link between violence and masculinity is important to discuss because it shows how traditional masculinity can generate violence and harm to society. Levant and Pryor (2020) state that hegemonic masculinity with emphasis on power and control tends to manifest as violence against others and especially women and those in marginalised groups. Gender violence is very common and is normally done by men since society thinks that manhood is about aggression and strength.

McLean (2021) explains how post-crisis masculinities in Sierra Leone expose how men reassert themselves by reasserting power and control and how this is usually expressed through violence. Both Bhana et al., (2021) and Dunkle et al., (2013) show how South African masculinity constructions are inseparable from the

normalisation of violence. Bhana et al., (2021) explain how violent masculinity, such as [1]"*amaphara* masculinity", emerges as an adaptive response to social and economic crisis, particularly in rural South African communities where persistent unemployment, poverty, and fragile households erode dominant masculine identities, so violence becomes a symbolic means through which boys and men attempt to regain status and dominance. This breakdown of a given scenario shows how violence and masculinity are locked in a cycle and how crises and society upheavals make men more violent. To tackle these challenges, there are detailed plans that not only aim to change people's behaviour, but also to address larger society and culture factors that support violent masculinities. To encourage non-violent masculinities that are based on empathy, respect, and equality, there has to be a convergence of educational programs, community interventions, and policy initiatives.

It is also important to remember that there is a part played by the media in reinforcing violent masculinities. Connor et al., (2021) say that violence and aggression are regularly valorised in the media as typical of males and this reinforces negative ideas and behaviour. So, activism and policymaking should entail media literacy education that teaches people how to critically read what they watch and promote alternative stories that represent positive and diverse masculinities. By changing what makes men violent and how society facilitates them to be that way, we can create a culture that promotes respectful and peaceful avenues for men to assert their identity.

2.16 Masculinity and Health Behaviours

It is essential to examine how masculinity underpins men's health behaviour and health outcomes with regard to gender norms. Men avoid seeking medical treatment or health prevention due to masculine gender norms regarding toughness and self-reliance (Levant & Pryor, 2020). Men without medical treatment suffer badly, with higher mortality. Rice et al., (2021), for example, show how this pressure to conform to these norms takes a toll on the mental health of boys and young men, exposing them to despair, anxiety and drug use. Men find it difficult to acknowledge

[1] "Amaphara" is a term that describes poor criminals who are addicted to drugs like "nyaope" which are substances that contain harmful ingredients, i.e. rat poison (Bhana et al., 2021).

they are weak to seek help due to societal norms of stoicism and emotional denial (Levant & Pryor, 2020; Rice et al., 2021).

Sharp et al., (2022) argue, there is a need to create spaces for men's mental health and well-being. Bedford et al., (2023) tell us that men distrust mental illness support and are frightened of what others would say about them if they went to seek help. In parts of the country with particularly strong backing for traditional manhood, it is especially clear that people do not want anything to change. For example, Dery and Ganle (2020) find that traditional stories about young men in Northwestern Ghana being resilient and emotionally stoic exacerbate their mental and social challenges. Ending this cycle means we need to normalise the conversation around mental health and deserved access to resources. Community-based, workplace and public health programs can also help make it more acceptable for men to seek help and reduce the shame that accompanies having a mental illness (Dery & Ganle, 2020; Sharp et al., 2022).

And alongside recognition of the experience of varying men, health practices and masculinity must also be considered (Nixon, 2023). Aboim and Vasconcelos (2022) engage with the ways in which trans masculinities distinctly challenge familiar narratives about health and reveal how transgender men are seeking different health. Their writing reveals how health practice and policy should be inclusive and acknowledge men's multiple identities and lived experiences. McLean (2021), for instance, engages with how men reconstitute identity in post-crisis Sierra Leone, wherein traditional masculinity is repressed, often to the benefit of men's physical and psychological disadvantage. In that sense, to enable everyone to have access to parity of condition services and to stimulate a comprehensive vision of health, based on a physical, mental and social perspective, inclusive health plans must take into account these intersections (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2022; McLean, 2021).

According to Levant and Pryor (2020), Rice et al., (2021), and Sharp et al., (2022) This is a problem that we can fix with a mix of education, policy, and community. According to research, creating men-centred mental health strategies, integrating both sensitive leadership and resilience strategies within therapy and emotional wellness programs can lead to patient outcomes that are associated with higher attendance (Robertson et al., 2018). Through resisting harmful norms of manhood

and practicing healthy manhood, we can make societies healthy and just for all. This can enable care within regions to fill this grand plan to provide on par resources and health to all men, regardless of origin (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2022; Levant & Pryor, 2020; Sharp et al., 2022).

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the research design, the participants, the sampling & sample size, the methods of data collection, the data analysis, ethical considerations, research setting, validity and reliability and limitations of the study.

3.2 Research Design

A qualitative research approach is described as well suited for exploring complex social phenomena such as masculine identities and psychosocial challenges (Bradbury, 2020; Hiles & Chrz, 2017; Willig, Rogers, 2017). Narrative method is particularly interested in the story an individual begins to tell about their life as it is lived. In narrative research, people collect, analyse, and unpack stories to further understand how meaning is constructed discursively through stories as well as how the story itself is a meaning-making apparatus. In other words, this means that when participants share stories about their lives, it’s not just about remembering and retelling what has happened. Rather they actively create and understand the importance of the experiences they share through that act of storytelling (Nystrom & Sjogren, 2011). The positive side to qualitative approaches is that they allow researchers to collect rich and detailed data that helps them to gain better insights into participants' attitudes and emotions (Hennink et al., 2020). This is important for this study, as it aims to reveal complex stories of young men who are finding out who they are in the specific social and cultural context of Soweto. Qualitative approaches allow the study to explore the emotional meanings and interpretations young men associate with their experiences. In this way, the study stays in dialogue with emergent themes and understandings of those involved (Clark et al., 2021). Thus, as new themes or insights emerge from the data, the research can explore these further and ensure it is in line with the participants’ experiences.

Also, the qualitative design applied in the research study contributes to a thorough and comprehensive understanding of the specific phenomenon in Soweto, where narrative inquiry as a method was utilised. This method let the researcher really get to know the participants and find out the specific social, economic, and cultural

factors that shape how young men feel about being men (Clark et al., 2021). This study provided us with more detailed information that helps us understand how gender and identity-related social processes affect and are affected by local circumstances. This in-depth study not only makes the results more reliable, but it also helps find specific policies and actions that will best meet the needs of the community.

3.3 Participants

The study is focused on young men who live in Soweto who are 14 to 25 years old. This age range was chosen because it includes a key time in the development of male identities, when there are big changes in biology, sociality, and psychology (Phillips, 2006). Young men actively build and negotiate their identities in reaction to both internal and external influences during these formative years (Phillips, 2006). Five eligible participants were recruited from an after-school youth program that operates at a local Secondary school in Soweto. An additional participant, who was previously a part of the program and is now a university student, was recruited. Targeting this specific grouping also allowed the study to go in-depth into issues and experiences that young men in this neighbourhood endure, yielding data that may be able to guide tailored intervention. It was not by coincidence that the study is based in Soweto, given that the space has a history of gang culture and restricted social mobility which influenced how men’s masculinities were constructed in the space (Glaster, 1998). However, despite this piece of history in the space, there is also a rich history of resistance against apartheid and notably the 1976 Soweto uprising where students protested against an oppressive educational system. This legacy of resistance is linked to the study in that, research on masculinity in townships such as Malose Langa’s 2020 study “Becoming Men” reveal that young black men in these spaces do not simply follow the stereotype of hegemonic masculinity associated with them by the public but instead they negotiate their own identities despite amidst societal pressures. By analysing the local context and the personal experiences of young men, one can discern the influences of larger social values and how things are done in the place on the men's sense of self (Christofidou, 2021).

3.4 Sampling and Sample Size

Purposive sampling is a strategy that was used to select the participants best positioned to inform the study's questions in a deep and nuanced way. Purposive sampling is a type of non-probability sampling through which people are chosen dependent on particular attributes consistent with goals of the study (Berndt, 2020). Purposive sampling, which is particularly helpful for qualitative studies, guarantees that the group will consist of people who are most knowledgeable of or familiar with the main object of study (Gill, 2020). The present study examines a sample of a group of young men in different school grades and levels of study within the critical age range of late adolescence to early adulthood. A table is provided below which contains a brief profile of each participant. Pseudonyms have been used to protect their identities.

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Name	Age	Occupation
Sifiso	23	University Student
Rele	20	Grade 12 Learner
Thato	18	Grade 12 Learner
Mandla	18	Grade 12 Learner
Ntokozo	16	Grade 11 Learner
Sello	15	Grade 10 Learner

According to the principle of data saturation, sample size is determined when no new patterns can be extracted and thus no new conclusions can be drawn from the data. That is to say, enough data has been collected to fully respond to the study questions (Taherdoost, 2021). However, the qualitative analysis should have enough data to deliver depth and quality. It is usually expected that the range of 6 to 10 will be sufficient to reach saturation. This range balances a reasonable number of in-depth interviews with the need for a widespread range of experiences and ideas for robust analysis. As a result, 6 participants were recruited into the study. Through achieving saturation, the study may be able to provide a comprehensive view of the psychological and social issues young men in Soweto experience and how they construct their identities. This may contribute significant information to the research field of masculinity studies (Keddie, 2019).

3.5 Data Collection Methods

Data collection was conducted through narrative interviews. These were deemed most appropriate for exploring nuanced personal experiences and narratives. Narrative interviewing offers a systematic yet flexible structure for individuals to share their life experiences. This provides researchers with the rich, deep qualitative accounts necessary for making sense of complicated social phenomena, such as masculine identities (Knott et al., 2022). The participants in these interviews were able to discuss what they believe masculinity is, the issues they are facing and their aspirations for the future. This is important to understand how people construct and negotiate their identities.

Narrative interview schedules (refer to Appendix A) help ensure all interviews are consistent, while also allowing for discussion of themes that emerge in greater depth. Narrative interviews were conducted using a predetermined set of questions, but with the flexibility to explore additional topics that may emerge in the course of the interview (Hennink et al., 2020). It finds a great balance between what is essential to gather data against a common objective and the ability for each participant to introduce their own perspective on the situation. The interview schedules are structured to discuss crucial topics such as what men believe it is to be a man, how they have dealt with social expectations, and their social and personal struggles. It can also make sure that the most important issues get dealt with, while still allowing individuals to say what they think in their own words.

Interviewees were interviewed in a comfortable environment, which helps bring out their honesty. Creating a safe space for the sharing of personal experiences and sensitive information is key to fostering openness (Knott et al., 2022). This helped the researcher and subjects get to know each other and trust one another, which was vital in getting sincere and helpful information. Rele, Thato, Mandla, Ntokozo and Sello were interviewed at their school in a private recreational room that the youth program they are part of makes use of for activities. Sifiso was interviewed at his home in Soweto.

All narrative interviews were conducted in English as each participant confirmed that they were fluent in the language and would not require any translation for questions

asked to them in English. However, Sello and Ntokozo did provide some answers during their interviews in SePedi and isiZulu respectively while answering other questions in English. Thus, their interview answers in SePedi and isiZulu were translated into English during the transcription of the participant interviews with the assistance of native speakers of both languages with whom the researcher consulted.

Furthermore, the length of the interviews ranged from the shortest being 25 minutes to the longest interview being 1 hour and 11 minutes. Other interviews were recorded as being 31, 45, 48 and 43 minutes long.

3.6 Data Analysis Techniques

Thematic analysis is a method for discovering, analysing and reporting patterns or themes within data. There are several steps in thematic analysis, including familiarisation with the data, coding the data and generating themes, followed by a review of the themes, naming and defining the themes and lastly creating a report and final analysis where those themes are linked back to the initial research questions of the study in order to answer them (Castleberry, Nolen, 2018). Thematic analysis is widely used in qualitative studies, as it can help researchers consistently find and describe work (Lester et al., 2020). In addition to describing data, it allows scholars to seek more profound meanings and insights within the data. The data in this study was analysed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). It is also worth noting that although thematic analysis does not belong to a specified theoretical framework, this study made use of Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity which meant the data was analysed in a way that accounted for participants' experiences and narratives on masculinity to be considered when themes that occurred in the data were described.

The first step was familiarisation which involved the researcher reading and re-reading the interview transcripts so that they become familiar with the data. Looking at the data as a whole and looking for early trends and themes (Lester et al., 2020) This first step is very important. In this phase, the researcher takes detailed notes and highlights key concepts or quotes that stand out (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The second step in the coding process was to organise the data into categories that have some significance. According to Salmona and Kaczynski (2024), "codes are essentially meaningful labels or tags that capture the ideas or themes that have been identified in data." Coding is an iterative process, meaning that codes are adjusted and developed as more data are coded (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This keeps the analysis anchored in the data and shows how nuanced and layered the participants' experiences were.

The third step completed was searching for themes and here codes from the last step were assigned into larger themes that explain what the data is actually about. A theme is a pattern that is significant for research questions and relates to the phenomenon under research (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lester et al., 2020). Therefore, theme development is an important aspect of the research because it involves determining how the different codes relate to each other and the meaning of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The fourth step was where the initial themes were reviewed and refined. This included collapsing similar themes and breaking complex themes into sub-themes, it also can include re-coding elements of the data so that they are coherent and logical (Salmona and Kaczynski 2024). The fifth step was to name and define each theme in order to relate it to the data and the overall study.

The final step was creating a report by giving a final analysis of the themes and linking them back to my initial research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This holistic approach ensures the study is comprehensive and well-organised, and it assists us in truly comprehending the key concepts regarding male identities and mental health issues among young men in Soweto.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

In qualitative research, ethical concerns may arise during research and potentially after research has been completed with participants (Ciuk, Latusek, 2018). The adherence to ethics is aided by my integrity as the researcher and my ability to demonstrate multi-cultural competence when working with the participants within their context (Ciuk, Latusek, 2018; Pietila et al., 2020).

Additionally, this study was required to comply with ethical principles in qualitative research which includes the right to withdraw from the study at any time by participants, informed consent, confidentiality and debriefing (Pietila et al., 2020).

3.7.1 Ethical Clearance

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the University of the Witwatersrand Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) with the protocol number H23/07/26 (refer to Appendix B). The study was approved with a Minimal risk level.

3.7.2 Participant selection and Informed Consent

In the process of recruiting participants, I provided participant information sheets (one for participants and one for parent/guardians) to any potential participants who expressed an interest in joining the study granted that they met the requirements for the study (refer to Appendix C). The participant information sheets allowed participants to gather information such as the nature of the study, where and how interviews would be conducted and stored, and who would have to access to the data collected besides the researcher, this included my supervisor. The sheet also informed the participants that their participation is voluntary and that they would not be remunerated for their participation or receive any benefits nor would they lose any rights or benefits they would normally have by participating in the study.

Furthermore, consent and assent sheets were provided to participants (as well as parents/guardians) (refer to Appendix D). The consent and assent sheets were required to be signed by all participants before any data collection could take place. Participants were also encouraged to ask any questions for clarification about the consent and assent sheets. As part of the sheets, participants agreed to voluntary participation in the study; understanding the nature of the study; their quotes from interviews being used in the research report; the interviews being audio recorded; their participation remaining anonymous together with any of their identifying data; and their data being archived in the Narrative Enquiry for Social Transformation (NEST) and Wits Library archives.

3.7.3 Debriefing

As stated in the participant information sheet, information regarding the minimal risk of the study was stated. In particular, the contact details of The South African Depression and Anxiety Group as well as Lifeline Pretoria were provided if during the study or after the interview any participants required psychological support as a result of their participation in the study. These resources are toll-free telephonic counselling services.

Additionally, in the participant information sheet I also provided participants with the contact details of the Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) at the University of the Witwatersrand, in the event that they had any concerns or complaints about any ethical procedures of this research study.

Participants were also encouraged to contact me via text or email to enquire about the research's progression during and also upon completion of the study. Participants were also informed that they could request a copy of the completed research report if they required it and that they would be informed of when the research report would be ready for request. These procedures ensured adherence to ethical principles as stated by Pietila et al., (2020).

3.8 Research Setting

This study was conducted in Soweto, an urban township in Gauteng, South Africa. Soweto is located in the larger Johannesburg area and is known for its vibrant community life and diverse social dynamics (Bogatsu, 2014; Klingberg, van Sluijs & Draper, 2020). An understanding of the local context is vital for interpreting the results and their significance to the community (Connell, 2020). With a long history and rich multicultural heritage, the area is an appropriate space in highlighting how social factors are integral to the construction of identity.

Although the young men in Soweto should not be assumed to behave in only one specific way, typical township life is characterised by socioeconomic and social conditions such as high levels of unemployment and low household income that may influence their being and perspectives (Davis, 2016). Although there has been some increase in economic growth in Soweto over recent years (Davis, 2016), these conditions are still prevalent for most residents. This variation allows the study to

explore different masculine traits and what defines them. By focusing on this particular context, the study aims to generate findings that are both academically enlightening and of practical value (Connell, 2020).

Young men's thinking and feeling about being a man is also strongly influenced by the social values and cultural practices of the Soweto communities. Often described as a "melting pot" of culture, Soweto's demographics show that approximately 37% of residents speak isiZulu, 15% Sesotho, 12% Setswana and isiXhosa and Xitsonga both at 8% (Bogatsu, 2014; Statistics South Africa, n.d). This represents the cultural diversity present in Soweto. Additionally, approximately 99% of the population in Soweto are Black African (Statistics South Africa, n.d). The study investigates the cultural influences that come together and interact with broader social laws to create the ways men think and feel about themselves as men.

Therefore, the research site facilitates access to the specific problems and solutions young men face in this context. Taking the time and effort to engage with the residents and use their data and perspective makes the research easier to relate to and meaningful, guiding the process closer to making sure that the results contribute something concrete to the understanding of masculinity within Soweto (Connell, 2020). The research strives to allow individuals to better make sense of culture, identity, and social expectations together through real-life, everyday events drawn from the residents.

3.9 Validity and Reliability

Several procedures are employed to enhance the validity and reliability of the study. Validity refers to the truth and accuracy of the results, the extent to which what is being done actually reflects what is being measured. Reliability, however, relates to the accuracy and validity of the study method and findings. The study's use of narrative interviews as a data collection method allowed for a thick description of data. As a result, the description and portrayal of participants experiences and contexts may become meaningful to readers of the study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). This in turn allows readers to gauge the level of transferability of the results to other settings that may be similar.

Another central approach for confirming findings as accurate and reflective of participants' perspectives is member checking (Knott et al., 2022). Here, preliminary findings and interpretations are fed back to participants to try to validate that their narratives and perspectives are represented correctly. Member checking participants not only confirms the accuracy of their data but also empowers and partners them in the study process, reducing barriers and helping establish trust and ownership. It allows for adjustments to be made and for further clarifications to be added to ensure that the end analysis truly reflects the genuine experiences and perceptions of the participants. After transcription of the data, one participant (Sifiso) was invited for this process and his narrative interview transcription was shared with him for review. Sifiso was able to confirm the accuracy of the transcription which ensures credibility in integrating his experiences into the findings and analysis of the study. This process was only done with Sifiso and not the other participants, due to logistical challenges such as time constraints, distance and participant availability. Involving more or all of the participants would have been ideal however, the feedback gathered from Sifiso was of great value and added to the trustworthiness of the study's interpretations.

3.10 Limitations

The study acknowledges that we have some limitations that may affect external validity. The first issue is that the study only covered young men ages 15 to 23 who lived in Soweto. This specificity provides a richer understanding of participants lived experiences, yet it may impede transferability of findings to different populations or contexts (Berndt, 2020; Mirza et al., 2023). The participants' experiences and views might not fully capture those of young men in other areas or settings.

Also, using self-reported data opens the door to bias, since participants may show themselves in a certain way, whether they are aware of it or not (Clark et al., 2021). This bias can come from wanting to fit in, remembering things wrong, or having a personal view of what happened. To get around this problem, the study uses careful questioning methods that are meant to build trust and encourage people to be honest and open.

Another problem is that qualitative research is inherently subjective; the researcher's views and readings play a big role in how the data is analysed and shown. It is important to be aware of these limits in order to put the results in context and fully grasp their scope and usefulness. It also shows how important it is to do more study in the future that asks similar questions in different settings and with a wider range of people in order to get a fuller picture of masculine identities and psychosocial challenges.

Another issue is that researchers have their biases, and this affects how data is collected and analysed. Regarding my own position during this study, I am aware that my position as a Black man from a middle-class area outside of Soweto informs my view and interpretations. So, whilst I do share a racial and gender identity with my participants which may have helped to build rapport during the study, my different socio-economic status and lack of direct experience with Soweto's specific context and pressures may have influenced my interpretations of participants' stories. My shared identity does not necessarily remove differences and my position geographically, economically and even regarding my age being older than all participants must be considered. Additionally, my understanding of masculinity may also differ to that of the participants as it is influenced by my educational and professional background which may have emphasised some norms that are not prevalent in the context of the participants. For example, my exposure to academic lectures and discussions on masculinity might lead me to frame it in theoretical terms which may not align with the lived experiences of the participants.

This then facilitated the need for reflexivity on my part throughout the study. Researchers periodically re-evaluate their perspective and potential biases throughout the research process to control for this, known as reflexivity (Hennink et al., 2020). So, even these controls cannot eradicate bias from qualitative research as the process is subjective in nature. Complicating things further, as masculinity is dynamic and about time, research can miss the flow of change altogether (Connell, 2020). However, as the participants shared their narratives of being and becoming men, it is my belief that this study has adequately captured the lived experiences and interpretations of those experiences in the present moment at which they have been gathered.

Chapter 4 Results and Analysis

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I provide a thematic analysis of the narrative interviews with the young men from Soweto. A thematic analysis was conducted in order to identify and understand key themes and sub-themes that demonstrate how these young men navigate masculinities, familial and community expectations, and their future aspirations. The narratives from the participants demonstrate how personal lives, cultural beliefs, and social forces converge in the construction of masculinities in contemporary society. Thus, to become masculine is to become a different identity of a transformative and transitory process (Connell, 2020; Patel & Mavungu, 2016).

To capture the subtleties of participants' experiences, the chapter is organised around six main themes, each of which is further subdivided into subthemes. The first theme looks at masculine identity formation, including how role models and individual reflections effect the process of transitioning to manhood. With an emphasis on household structure, family relationships, and gendered responsibilities in the home, the second theme explores family dynamics and responsibilities. The third theme examines peer and community influences, emphasising how peer groups, school environments, and larger community contexts shape masculinity.

The fourth theme discusses gendered divisions of labour in the home and in public spaces, as well as expectations for masculine roles and gender norms. It contrasts traditional and emerging masculine roles. The fifth theme, aspirations for studies and future careers, examines how participants envision their future paths and the tension between their academic objectives and personal interests. The sixth theme, which addresses emotional expression and mental health, includes the participants' experiences of vulnerability and resilience, as well as their reactions to changing gender narratives in contemporary discourses, and cultural and media influences.

Furthermore, it should be noted that although five of the six participants are school-going adolescents, the inclusion of one slightly older participant with a different schooling experience enhances the study, broadening understandings of how different institutional contexts may influence masculine identity.

Cumulatively, these themes provide a detailed examination of the ways in which young men in Soweto navigate the shifting landscape of masculinity. The empirical contributions of this research contribute to broader debates on gender identity, socialisation, and the policy and intervention implications of supporting healthier and more inclusive masculinities (Christofidou, 2021; Levant & Pryor, 2020; Sharp et al., 2022).

4.2. Masculine Identity Formation

This theme looks at how young men acquire learning to be "a man" in the interplay between cultural, social, and personal factors. There were two subthemes that were linked: the role of role models (both familial and popular culture figures) and personal boy-to-man transitions.

4.2.1 Role Models and Masculine Identity

Role models serve as critical reference points in shaping masculine identity. Interviews indicate that young men are influenced by a range of figures, including immediate family members and media representations. These role models provide diverse behaviours and value systems that inform notions of responsibility, respect, and success (Ratele et al., 2012; Shefer et al., 2010).

Many participants reflected positively on family figures who exemplified responsibility, care, and protection. The absence of a traditional father figure or the presence of a substitute, such as an uncle or stepfather, often prompted a re-evaluation of manhood (Morrell et al., 2012). Sifiso described his grandfather as embodying a "fatherly role" through his caring nature, which profoundly influenced the participant's own sense of responsibility:

“*He's always had that caring quality in him. Even as an adult, I remember how he would pick me up from school and provide for us without expecting anything in return. That quality of giving without expecting anything back is what I try to copy*.”

This narrative illustrates how values are transmitted through family caregiving, shaping a young man's concept of responsibility. Sifiso further highlighted his mother's dual role as both mother and father, noting that her perseverance and resourcefulness redefined his understanding of manhood beyond physical strength:

“*My mom had to be both a mother and a father. Seeing her do everything on her own, from cooking to paying for school, made me realise that being a man isn’t just about physical strength it’s about being resourceful and caring too*.”

These testimonies also point out that role models within the family are not solely restricted to traditional father figures. Where there is no father, other males in the family or social fathers, have critical social value (Mkhize, 2006). Ntokozo likened the influence of his stepfather to his biological father who was absent:

“*My stepdad took me as his own. He was overprotective and made sure I understood what it meant to be responsible. I owe my sense of duty to him*.”

Sifiso also speaking about the influence of other men in the house: “*Being around adults, like my grandfather and uncle, made me grow up fast. I had to learn to take care of myself and not be a headache. That’s when I realised I had to start being a man, not just a boy*.”

Beyond family, sporting and celebrity idols were also role models. For example, Sifiso admired Kanye West due to his passion for his craft but lost admiration for him due to the artist's polarising behaviour:

“*I used to be a big fan of Kanye West because of how seriously he took his work, but his later actions changed my perspective. It taught me that a role model isn’t perfect and that I must choose my influences carefully*.”

Similarly, the remainder of the group mentioned names like Andrew Tate, XXXTentacion, and Alexander Arnold, though admiration was often tempered by critical reflection. As Mandla is quoted, celebrities can offer blueprints for success, though their own lives can sometimes appear to be “fake” or not aligned with his own values.

“*I have looked up to several celebrities for certain qualities, but I find that many of them lead a fake life. I prefer to take bits and pieces of what inspires me, rather than follow someone blindly*.”

This standpoint contends that young men are not internalising hypermasculine ideals passively but actively negotiating their meanings in relation to their lived experiences (Gibbs et al., 2020; Mkhize, 2006).

4.2.2 Personal Insights and the Transition to Manhood

Beyond external role models, personal experiences play a pivotal role in shaping masculine identity. Many participants discussed taking on responsibilities at home, school, or within their communities as pivotal moments marking their transition from boyhood to manhood. These changes were often associated with significant life events such as moving away from home, experiencing loss, caring for younger siblings, or managing increased academic and social demands (Ratele et al., 2012).

Ntokozo reflected on an academic setback as a catalyst for change:

“*After collecting my second term results, I knew I was not what my family wanted me to be, and hence I had to pull up my socks, I had to stop acting all the fool. That was the moment I started thinking about what it truly means to be a man*.”

This statement highlights a moment of self-awareness and a drive for personal growth, suggesting that personal failure or disappointment can prompt young men to reconstruct their identities in more mature ways (Clowes et al., 2013; Makusha, 2024; Morrell et al., 2012).

Thato discussed the weight of being one of the few males in his household:

"*Being a second male in the house, it's- it’s a tough job because of when my uncle's not home. I'm the one who's taking care of the whole family. I have other siblings to keep an eye on, ensuring that the gate is locked, and even helping with chores. Make sure that the dog is fed and my siblings are safe, everything in the house is locked. So, you know, what everyone is safe in the house. Not that I have done the work, it’s acting as an example. That was when I thought I had to stop blaming others and start taking responsibility*."

This narrative demonstrates a gradual shift from being a passive recipient of care to an active provider and protector. Such transitions are central to developing norms around masculinity that value responsibility over entitlement (Shefer & Ratele, 2023).

While many participants embraced responsibility, they also expressed a desire to redefine masculinity beyond rigid stereotypes. The young men reflected on distancing themselves from hypermasculine ideals that promoted emotional suppression. Sifiso articulated this shift:

"*I wish that the conversations happened more about what it means to be a man. Gender isn't so hard, I think you create it in your actions and choices. For me, being a man is not about just being tough, but how I handle my responsibilities and emotions*."

This perception challenges traditional masculinities that construct strength through the lack of emotional expression (Oliffe & Han, 2016). Sifiso further spoke of his struggle with social norms:

"*Hypermasculinity has always been imposed on men to some degree. High school was all about toughness and domination. But I realise that if I live my life like that, I am not being true to myself. I want to be a man who cares for his family, friends, and himself.*"

Societal expectation versus personal authenticity was a common theme within the stories. Most of the young men did not see masculinity as a fixed binary but as a negotiated space, between being tough and sensitive (Morrell et al., 2012).

The narratives of the Masculine Identity Formation theme prove that young men are involved in an active process of creating and redefining their recognition of masculinity. If they turn to family members or cultural models for guidance, they also assess and negotiate these influences against the backdrop of their own experience. The transition from boyhood to manhood brings increasing responsibility, reflection, and a new drafting of gender responsibilities. Instead of a narrow adherence to rigid traditional ideals, most of the young men in this study articulate a more nuanced sense of masculinity that encompasses responsibility, emotional integrity and fluidity.

4.3 Family Dynamics and Responsibilities

Family remains a primary location for masculinity construction and contestation. Family structure and gendered domestic roles were, in participants' words, a primary source of influence on young men's masculinities. Two general subthemes were: (1) the influence of family structure and domestic relationships and (2) negotiation of gendered domestic roles.

4.3.1 Household Structure and Family Relationships

The narratives record a range of family formations, ranging from single-parent or female-headed families to extended family forms and step-relationships. Some interviewees reflected on how growing up outside the traditional nuclear family household influenced their understanding of gender roles and responsibilities (Morrell et al., 2012).

A common experience among the participants was being raised in a female-headed or single-parent household. Being raised without the conventional father figure seemed to accelerate taking on adult roles at an early age. Participants described how being raised by a single mother and other female relatives affected their independence. Sello stated:

"*She's showing a good thing because she's providing for the family financially. My mom has to be both a mother and a father, so I learned early that being a man means caring for your family emotionally and providing them financially*"

Ntokozo discussed being raised by women, and his resulting values:

"*Being raised by my mother and grandmother taught me that care isn't just about physical strength, it's about emotional support and resilience. It made me realise that I have to step up for my siblings even if there isn't a father around*."

The narrative is also a reference to how the absence of a masculine figure creates a vacuum that, adolescent males perceive, needs to be filled. Among the respondents, the majority stated that because they had to do things that adults usually do, this kind of responsibility and initiative made them see masculinity or being a man was about responsibility (Mkhize, 2006; Shefer, Ratele, 2023).

Highlighting this point, Traditional masculinity discourse emphasises the domination and muscular power aspect, and young men in these settings engage with both care and emotional hardness as parts of masculinity (Ratele et al., 2012).

During their upbringing, participants also had extended family and step-relations play important roles in their lives. Some interviewees reported receiving positive contributions from stepfathers or uncles who filled the fatherly role:

Ntokozo:

“*My stepdad took me as his own. he was overprotective and made sure I understood what it meant to be responsible. I owe my sense of duty to him*.”

This quotation illustrates that non-traditional family structures can provide good male role models and promote responsible and caring values. Ntokozo, however, described confusion and emotional problems associated with the step-relationship initially:

“*Growing up, I was told that my stepdad was my real father, and it took me a while to understand the difference. That confusion forced me to think about manhood and not who is just (biologically) present*.”

These narratives demonstrate that family environments are not inert backgrounds, but dynamic spaces in which masculinity is reconfigured and renegotiated (Makusha, 2024). Having multiple father figures both biological and social can create a fluid and sometimes contradictory understanding of masculinity.

4.3.2 Negotiation of Gendered Responsibilities at Home

The second subtheme discusses the roles and division of labour in the domestic arena. The narratives showed that cultural expectations of domestic roles were strongly embedded in cultural norms and personal experiences.

Most of the participants defined becoming a man as taking on practical home responsibilities, such as chores, providing financially, and looking after younger siblings. Thato explained how his contribution at home extended beyond day-to-day chores:

“So *being a second male in the house, it's- it’s a tough job because of when my uncle's not home. I'm the one who's taking care of the whole family. I have other siblings to keep an eye on, ensuring that the gate is locked, and even helping with chores. Make sure that the dog is fed and my siblings are safe, everything in the house is locked. So, it's- it’s a tough job though. It is not just restricted to chores it is about inspiration*.”

This observation underscores the fact that for many young men, domestic work is not just seen as a duty but as performances of masculinity (Shefer et al., 2010). Sello linked masculinity to economic provision:

"*My mom has to be both a mother and a father, so I learned early that being a man means caring for your family emotionally and providing for them financially*."

This view aligns with traditional constructions of masculinity, where men are expected to be both providers and protectors (Gibbs et al., 2020). The expectation to assume financial responsibility from an early age was a recurring theme, reinforcing the notion that economic contribution is a key marker of manhood (Ratele et al., 2012).

At the same time, some participants described their struggles with balancing emotional and protective responsibilities. Ntokozo shared his perspective on caring for his younger sister:

"*So, maybe I'll say, I'll be overprotective for her. Maybe to stay away from guys because of, I'm a boy. So, there are some things I do, there are some things I don't do. So, to- for her to be protected. It's for me to show her the right way to go*"

This quotation points to how young men work through traditional gender boundaries, balancing protective tendencies with care work. Thato discussed at length his double role as an older brother:

"*Yoh and almost being the second oldest male in the house. So, it's a tough job because my brothers look up to me most of the time because I have to be the example. I have to lead by example as I'm the oldest. So, most of the things that I do, I have to think, you know what, I have siblings who are watching me. So, I have to play a role of being a big brother to them and showing them the right way. And what to do and what not to do*."

These stories show domestic roles as negotiated rather than static within families. It is not just about dominance but responsibility and role modelling (Govender, Bhana, 2023). This assertion supports the reality that masculinity is enacted in everyday performances of protection and guidance, claiming legitimacy of identity through self-identification and recognition by others (Makusha, 2024).

Ntokozo discussed the social expectation of men as the future breadwinners of the family, relating his plans for university to this role:

“Yeah, so, I see myself finishing school. Let me say, like, what can I say? With good results, you see, so, I can go to university and eventually provide for my family. *Because of now, education is the key of success, as they said. To break the cycle of poverty I see at home***.”**

This statement highlights the economic pressures placed on young men, where success in education is tied not just to personal achievement but also to fulfilling the role of provider (Mkhize, 2006).

The findings indicate that family dynamics significantly shape young men's masculine identity formation. While role models whether biological fathers, stepfathers, or extended family members, provide guidance, young men actively interpret and redefine these influences based on their lived experiences.

Similarly, responsibilities within the household serve as key sites where masculinity is performed and negotiated. The duty to provide for and protect family members remains a dominant idea, yet most young men also claim emotional support, care, and role modelling to be at the centre of their evolving idea of masculinity.

These results suggest that contemporary masculinities are not fixed but fluid, created in a nexus between cultural demands, human agency, and shifting family structures (Langa, 2010; Ratele et al., 2012; Shefer et al., 2010).

4.4 Peer and Community Influences

This theme explores how peers and the broader community play a role in young men’s understanding of masculinity. Participants described how their lives at school, in friendships and in neighbourhood settings influenced their sense of identity, their futures, and their actions. These were diverse influences, reflecting both the imperatives of the school setting and the realities of their communities, which in many instances subjects them to violence, crime, and poverty. Together, they influence the negotiation of masculinity in complex and sometimes contradictory ways (Morrell et al., 2012; Shefer et al., 2010).

4.4.1 Peer Influence in School Settings

The majority of participants described school as an environment that reinforced traditional masculine norms. Schools, and in particular single-sex schools, were

mostly described as places that privileged toughness and competitiveness. Sifiso, who had been schooled in an all-boys school, recalled:

"*In high school, it was all about toughness and dominance. You had to toughen up or be left behind***."**

This remark speaks to the implicit pressure on boys to fit into narrow definitions of masculinity based on physical strength and emotional distance (Ratele et al., 2012). Social pressure in such environments would have tended to mute vulnerability and promote aggressiveness as the strategy for social survival.

By contrast, some of those who had attended mixed-gender schools described less rigid masculine expectations. Sello explained that when girls were present, more emotional openness was possible:

"*When I'm with girls, we are talking and they love judging people and they are... Yeah, they gossip too much, yeah. But we talk and share our thoughts rather than (competing). It's a break from always having to be tough***."**

This would imply the gender structure of schools matters for the enactment of masculinity and that boys benefit more from being in mixed-sex environments regarding emotional expression (Gibbs et al., 2020). Sifiso further elaborated on the pressure to conform in single-sex spaces:

"*There's this constant push to be the strong, silent type. If you show any weakness, you risk being judged or even bullied***."**

This account serves as an example of the ways in which social pressures in school cause teenage boys to embody hypermasculine mindsets that are possibly not in their own interest. As Mkhize (2006) writes, the requirement to present a strong front is symptomatic of larger societal forces that associate masculinity with toughness and the repression of emotion.

4.4.2 Community Influences on Masculine Identity

Outside of the school, young men's identities are also created by their communities. Participants noted that growing up in townships such as Soweto or Bram Fischerville exposed them to violence, crime, and poverty, and this influenced their notions of masculinity. Ntokozo described the realities of his neighbourhood:

“*Some of my peers in Bram Fischer are stabbing each other. You see, gang life is real out here, and it forces you to constantly look back***.”**

This reflection illustrates how community violence creates a heightened sense of vigilance and self-protection. In such environments, toughness and aggression are often necessary for survival, reinforcing traditional masculine traits (Morrell et al., 2012). When safety is a daily concern, the performance of masculinity becomes a strategic adaptation rather than a mere social expectation.

However, not all community influences were negative. Some participants described their environments as motivating factors that shaped their aspirations. Rele explained how growing up in a disadvantaged area encouraged him to seek a different future:

“*Living in Soweto makes you aware of how different life can be. It forces you to dream big because you know you have to break free from these limitations***.”**

This statement highlights a paradox in community influence, while local conditions often reinforce hypermasculinity, they also inspire young men to pursue education and career success as a means of escape (Makusha, 2024).

This demonstrates that while community pressures may enforce hypermasculine traits, they can also serve as a catalyst for positive change. The desire to move beyond the limitations of one's environment reflects an active resistance to the constraints imposed by crime and poverty (Shefer & Ratele, 2023).

4.4.3 Peer Groups as Reinforcers and Challengers of Masculinity

Participants also discussed how peer groups influence individual behaviour, often reinforcing traditional masculine stereotypes. Mandla described the social expectations within his friendship circle:

*"My friends and I often talk about how we should be the providers and protectors, and if you don’t live up to that, you're not really a man. It's like an unspoken rule that everyone follows***."**

This sentiment reflects how peer groups function as echo chambers, reinforcing dominant ideas of masculinity (Ratele et al., 2012). The expectation to be a provider

and protector aligns with cultural norms that position men as responsible for economic and physical security (Morrell et al., 2012).

However, not all peer influences were restrictive. Some participants described moments where friendships allowed them to explore alternative understandings of masculinity. Rele reflected on how close male friendships enabled emotional expression:

"When I'm with my close male friends, we actually open up about our problems, about being real with each other"

This account shows that while dominant peer norms encourage emotional suppression, there are counter-narratives in which young men are comfortable with vulnerability. These counter-narratives are, nevertheless, less visible or less acceptable, and it is therefore difficult for young men to use them on a consistent basis (Morrell et al., 2012).

The accounts highlight the powerful role of peers and local contexts in the construction of young men's masculinity. School contexts, particularly all-boys schools, are likely to support hypermasculine norms of competitiveness and toughness. Mixed-sex contexts, however, provide alternative settings where young men can challenge such norms and experiment with more emotionally expressive relationships.

Similarly, neighbourhoods that are marked by poverty and crime produce pressures to become involved in protective and aggressive actions. Yet such neighbourhoods are also inspirational sources, encouraging young men to pursue education and career lines as an escape route.

Peer groups also reinforce or challenge masculine ideals. While prevailing expectations privilege provision, protection, and emotional stoicism, some young men create space within their friendships to be vulnerable and renegotiate masculinity on more inclusive terms.

Lastly, these findings show that masculinity is not a fixed construct but a fluid negotiation between human agency and social pressure (Mkhize, 2006; Ratele et al., 2012). While hegemonic norms dominate, there is growing evidence that young men

actively reshape masculinity in manners that consolidate both traditional and shifting values.

4.5 Masculine Role Expectations and Gender Norms

The interviews also revealed a broader societal theme of masculinity and shifting arguments about traditional and modern gender roles. Two overarching subthemes emerged: (1) the conflict between traditional masculine expectations and shifting identities and (2) the gendered division of labour in the private and public spheres. While the majority of participants conformed to traditional masculine ideals, others actively critiqued and redefined them due to their lived experiences.

4.5.1Traditional vs. Evolving Masculine Roles

Most participants defined traditional masculinity in terms of men's roles as providers, protectors, and emotionally stoic men. These ideals remain firmly entrenched in most communities, where a man is judged on the basis of his financial and physical inputs. Thato described this traditional perspective:

"*Being a man means you have to be a provider. You must protect your family and never show any weakness. That's what everyone expects***."**

This response illustrates a prevalent cultural expectation based on the equivalence of masculinity with breadwinning and emotional unavailability. Such expectations are usually sustained through socialisation in families, peer pressure, and societal expectations (Mkhize, 2006; Reeser, 2023).

However, an emerging story among participants challenges these static assumptions. The majority of young men talked about aspiring to merge traditional masculine attributes with emotional expressiveness and nurturance. This self-reflection shows the internal struggle of most young men between traditional masculine expectations and contemporary values of emotional intelligence and expressiveness (Pattman, Bhana, 2021). With hypermasculinity being ever more condemned by society, young men are creating novel expressions of strength that incorporate vulnerability and empathy (Pattman, Bhana, 2021).

Sifiso who had attended an all-male high school described how his previous adherence to hypermasculine norms gave way to a healthier approach:

“I'll speak more so about my high school. Um, but I feel like the- the kind of like the- the rigid idea of like a- like a dominant kind of like hyper-masculine like macho man is like what everyone should strive to be kind of thing. Um, and then that also tied to like a bit of homophobia and all of that stuff. So, I guess it was just, um… Again, coming back to the whole thing of like having just a rigid idea of what a man is and that, um, at least now at my, at- at this point in my life, it's like, you don't have to be this like hyper-masculine, like dominant.”

This shift is the manner in which exposure to diverse experiences whether through introspection, education, or broader social forces can lead young men to recreate masculinity on their own terms. This is consistent with recent work on young men's resistance to hegemonic gender scripts, and how they work with and actively reshape masculinity in contextually relevant ways (Gibbs et al., 2020; Roy & Ayalon, 2023).

Participants also engaged in critical discussions of how popular media defines masculine ideals. Some remarked that figures such as Kanye West and Andrew Tate once represented qualities that they admired and wished for themselves, such as confidence and success, but went on to model toxic masculinity.

Sifiso:

“I used to admire Kanye West for his passion, but I can’t overlook the negative aspects of his behaviour. He has taught me that a role model isn’t always perfect. We have to choose them carefully.”

Rele:

“*Andrew Tate, he fits the aspect of of having, like the money in general, how to survive the society, how to survive the world, how to think for yourself*.”

This critique is one facet of a more general sceptical discourse around normative media portrayals of masculinity, in which the symbols of power and material success are often conflated with masculinity itself (Langa, 2020). Many young men are forging more nuanced constructions of masculinity that value ethical behaviour and emotional sensitivity over material achievement and domination (Morrell et al., 2012). Such self-examination is consistent to a new positive masculinity trend which is

based on self-reflection, emotional intelligence and respect of the other in interpersonal relations (Moolman, 2013).

4.5.2 Domestic and Public Spheres: Gendered Division of Labour

Closely intertwined with evolving expectations around roles are also, concerns about the gendered division of labour in the home and society. Several young men recognised that traditional norms still define “proper” roles for men and women. Thato offered a description of such expectations:

“*So, a role of a man in his home is to be a provider, a leader, a supporter mostly, and a protector in the house. So, in the community, a role of a man is to be a leader and serve the community, you understand, by all means, yeah***.”**

Sello:

“*Like providing their family financially and caring for them. And show some respect to their children. And they (men) must be protective, yes*.”

This answer reflects a patriarchal model of labour division that remains prevalent in the majority of communities (Patel, Mavungu, 2016). Several of the participants remarked, however, that economic and social conditions are increasingly disrupting this model.

Sello who grew up in a single-mother family spoke about how growing up in that environment questioned his understanding of gender roles:

“*My mom has to be both a mother and a father, so I learned early that being a man means caring for your family emotionally and providing them financially*.”

This response shows how life experience tends to challenge societal expectations. When the conventional roles are switched, young men are forced to reconsider what it is to be masculine. The literature indicates that exposure to non-traditional families tends to lead to a more fluid understanding of gender roles (Morrell et al., 2012; Makusha, 2024).

Several of the respondents expressed that they desired a more balanced home situation in their own future families. Rele presented the following opinion:

"A man who is providing, I will also like (to) be providing support towards my my partners goals, partners want and needs, because marriage like is a two way thing. like me and you joining two families. Me and you having a family so sharing the love, the support, the community. And everything so, I also think that my partner should have her own career and contribute equally. It's not about one person doing everything it's about sharing the load."

This is a step towards gender egalitarianism, whereby roles within a household are negotiated on the grounds of partnership rather than predetermined gender expectations (Ratele et al., 2012). However, some of the participants spoke about how cultural and community expectations still emphasise the reproduction of traditional gender roles. As Rele explained:

"*In my culture, a man is not supposed to do the dishes or show weakness***."**

This mindset highlights the tension between internal mindset and external pressure. Despite increasing support for gender role flexibility, the majority of young men continue to feel pressured to conform to traditional norms due to cultural scripting and social conditioning (Shefer et al., 2010).

Others, however, were optimistic about the possible benefits of flexibility and shared responsibility. Sifiso provided the suggestion that gender role redesign would liberate not only women, but also men from unrealistic expectations:

"I feel like when it comes to household roles, um, it can be dynamic. I feel like it should be dynamic. It should change according to what has to be fulfilled at a specific time and it doesn't have to be a gender kind of thing, yeah."

This shift in attitude shows that some young men are moving towards a model of masculinity that focuses on partnership and collaboration rather than predetermined, fixed roles.

The findings show that masculine role expectations remain firmly entrenched yet are undergoing significant change. While the majority of young men still feel the social pressure to be the traditional provider, protector, and emotionally restrained individual, life experience is challenging them to examine and redefine these expectations.

In similar fashion, the gendered division of labour is another site of contestation. Although traditional expectations still tell men and women they're supposed to have different roles, the new economic realities and day-to-day experiences are leading young men to call for a more equitable and balanced relationship with women.

More broadly, the research reinforces the argument that masculinity is not a fixed phenomenon but instead is fluid, produced in a negotiation between past cultural expectations and new individual and collective directions (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Langa, 2020). Men are building masculinity in new ways that blend the best of traditional power with emotional intelligence, adaptability and mutuality.

4.6 Aspirations for Studies and Future Career

Education and career aspirations were a common thread throughout the interviews. The young men were candid about navigating the tension between the obligations of schoolwork and extracurriculars, like soccer. Most also discussed at length the important role that education could play in bringing about greater opportunities and social mobility. Their narratives also revealed detailed schemes of post-secondary studies, career aspirations, and the strategic planning required to navigate their futures.

4.6.1 Balancing Academics and Personal Interests

Students regarded academic performance as a high-stress activity, moulded by acute test stress and the necessity to maintain excellent scores. Mandla explained the psychological anxiety of exams:

"The final exams are increasing in difficulty every second I go into the exam centre. I feel the pressure increase and sometimes it feels like there's no escape from the stress I'm going through"

This remark encapsulates the crushing pressure educational environments tend to create, with the outcome that self-doubt and anxiety are amplified. Young men from poor socioeconomic backgrounds have been found through research to frequently endure school stress because they perceive education as their primary avenue of upward mobility (Langa, 2020).

Despite these pressures, there was an unshakeable belief in the power of education. Ntokozo reflected on the function education serves in shaping individual futures:

"*In our day life is hard, so without education or without a plan you are nothing."*

"Because of now, education is the key of success, as they said. To break the cycle of poverty I see at home."

Rele added:

"*I wanna pursue psychology. I see education as a way out*."

This observation foregrounds the idea that education is not solely an individual pursuit but a means to ensuring economic security for one's family. The same observation has been noted in studies of South African youth, where education is widely interpreted as a family investment, and success is framed within the context of benefit to the family and the individual (Langa, 2020; Morrell et al., 2012).

However, personal interests, like soccer most particularly, often compete with schoolwork, creating a dilemma between practicality and passion. Ntokozo described this internal dilemma:

"I love soccer too much. I love soccer more than anything, but education has to come first. It's hard to balance both because sometimes it feels like I'm sacrificing one dream for another"

This quote outlines the common dilemma of young men having to weigh up future security against immediate pleasure. This mirrors work in sports psychology, where researchers have frequently found young athletes torn between academic and sporting aspirations (Gibbs & Scothorne, 2020).

Ntokozo emphasised the necessity for discipline and time management in order to achieve balance between academic work and extracurricular activities:

"*Because of anything is possible. I can play maybe, Saturday. And get a leg injury and it over with me. So now after I'm left with what, nothing. So now that why I'm saying I will prioritise school before soccer, you see. Let me be a educated soccer player then we will see.*"

This finding suggests that education for most young men is not viewed as a limiting factor but as a long-term investment. Recent studies have also pointed to the importance of structured time management schedules for students who engage in dual pursuits of academics and sport (Bhana et al., 2021).

Academic setbacks are also moments of self-reflection and motivation. Mandla reflected on how a bad exam score led to a shift in priorities:

"*After some very difficult exam results, I woke up to the fact that I was not living up to my expectations. It made me sit down and rethink what I want for my future, I decided that I need to put much more time into studying if I'm going to change my life*."

This self-realisation point also aligns with educational resilience research, where failure experiences are often the catalysts that drive students to greater commitment and goal-direction (Langa, 2020).

4.6.2 Future Planning and Career Aspirations

Beyond immediate academic concerns, participants expressed detailed plans for their futures, explaining college plans and career aspirations. A number wanted to become doctors, psychologists, and businessmen, suggesting their view of education as not merely a means of personal improvement but also as a vehicle for social change. Mandla described his lifelong dream:

"*In the next ten years, I want to be at a good university whether it's studying medicine, psychology, or business. But during the process of studying for that medicine, I wish I can be able to, like, squeeze in my trading side. So that at least in, like, eight years' time, I am, like, a focused forex trader and a, um, medical student. I know that the knowledge I gain will help me not only provide for my family but also uplift my community. Because I believe that for me to be where I want to be in the next 10 years, I have to have multiple incomes***."**

This claim shows that career planning is not solely a personal matter but is normally linked to broader community aspirations. Youth development research shows that the majority of South African students see higher education as a path of collective advancement rather than sheer individual success (Langa, 2020).

Additionally, Ntokozo indicated the desire to balance recreational interests with career advancement, in this case, with regards to soccer:

“*So, when I finish school, I want to know I have a plan- I have a plan. So, as I said I want to be an educated player. And I want to own business also … I know I play soccer and I have businesses. I have a business that generate income for me.”*

This pragmatic approach shows an awareness of the unpredictability of career paths. The starting point for most of the young men was contingency: it allows them to flexibly navigate many paths to success. This corresponds to the research on career adaptability, in which people increasingly look for various routes to economic stability (Langa, 2017).

Family obligations also loomed large in making future plans. Ntokozo described the sensation of responsibility he experienced for family members:

“Yeah, so, see myself finishing school. Let me say, like, what can I say? With good results, you see, so, I can go to university and eventually provide for my family. I’m doing it for everyone, they sacrificed a lot.”

This reaction solidifies the collectivist success culture, where personal achievement is couched in the context of paying back the debt to one's support network. Literature has shown that this kind of family obligation can be both pressure and motivation and can shape students' academic and career choices (Makusha, 2024).

There was also the symbolic power of university education as a means of overcoming socio-economic limitations. This reflects the manner in which young men perceive education as a liberating force, one capable of breaking poverty cycles and creating new possibilities. Educational mobility scholarship resonates with this, quoting that for the majority of South African youth, higher education is considered the most viable means of economic poverty exit (Langa, 2020).

The descriptions of academic and career aspirations demonstrate a justified confidence in the power of education as a transformative force. In spite of academic pressure and competing interests such as sports, most respondents remain attentive to academics as the key to future success.

Future planning is an intentional and systematic process, and young men make specific plans to attend college, diversify their careers, and become financially independent. Most also strongly desire to better the lives of their families and communities, reasserting the collective value of their success.

Ultimately, these young men are actively constructing their futures through a strategic and adaptive orientation, negotiating ambition and pragmatism in pursuit of both academic and personal success (Langa, 2017; Langa, 2020).

Overall, the research emphasises that masculinity is not stable but instead fluid, constructed upon a negotiation between received cultural expectations and evolving personal and social understandings (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Langa, 2020). Young men are actively reconstructing masculinity in ways that weave together traditional strengths with emotional intelligence, flexibility, and mutual responsibility.

4.7 Emotional Expression and Mental Health

A prevailing theme of the interviews was the complex dynamic between emotional expression and mental health. In a cultural landscape in which traditional masculine ideals privilege stoicism and independence, a group of young men were found navigating cultural expectations of toughness and a growing awareness of the importance of self-reflection, emotional openness, and mental health. The resilience-vulnerability paradox was especially evident, with the participants describing internal tensions with the expression of emotions versus the show of strength. This theme was further divided into the following subthemes: emotional resilience versus vulnerability; self-reflection and growth; cultural influences, and media and social movement influences.

4.7.1 Emotional Resilience vs. Vulnerability

To the majority of the participants, masculinity was the same as emotional restraint, a value highly promoted by family expectations and societal norms. The young men described how they were socialised into hiding emotions at a very early age, reaffirming the fact that resilience was silence rather than speaking out. Rele described the extent of the pressure:

“*Doesn't mean when I have mental problems, I have to point them out. I don't have to talk because that will make me less of a man. It's tough because if you show any*

weakness, especially at home, you feel like people will just laugh at you or judge you, so I've learned to keep my feelings to myself."

This quotation demonstrates the negative influence of peer pressure, whereby emotional expression is discouraged in the interest of presenting toughness. It has been proven in research that young men who hold such beliefs are likely to experience heightened stress, anxiety, and depression due to the fact that they lack healthy emotional release systems (Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022; Langa, 2020).

The necessity of being emotionally controlled was also reinforced within family structures, and that too by the example of men. Rele discussed how his own concept of masculinity had been influenced by his father's behaviour:

"*I guess growing up with a father who never cried or showed any emotion, I learned early that men don't really express. It's tough sometimes to break away from that and do things differently***"**

This reflection shows how intergenerational ideas of masculinity are involved in young men's emotional issues. Studies have documented that fathers who adhere to traditional masculine beliefs discourage their sons from being emotionally expressive, thus perpetuating cycles of emotional repression and psychological distress (Ratele et al., 2012; Seidler, 2006).

A common thread through the participants was the hope to redefine masculinity within the context of future family life. The majority of the young men wanted to be open and emotionally expressive fathers, not distant or emotionally repressed, as modelled in the examples of family members. As put by Sifiso:

*" I want to be the kind of father who's really there for his kids not just to provide, but to be present emotionally. I want my children to know it's okay to cry, to talk, to feel share thoughts***."**

This answer reflects a broader cultural shift in masculinity in which emotional openness is now being adopted as a central component of healthy family relationships. Research in contemporary times has found that men who practice emotional expression build healthier family relationships and sound mental health for themselves and their children (Connell, 2020; Seidler, 2006).

Self-reflection also related to increased emotional resilience. Rele explained how facing emotions head-on allowed him to develop inner strength:

"*I've actually learned that facing my feelings head on makes me stronger in the long run. It's not about not feeling pain. It's it's about understanding it, learning from it, and moving***."**

This perspective is substantiated by emotional intelligence theories that contend that resilience is not about, not, being vulnerable but about attending to emotions positively (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Oliffe & Han, 2016).

However, some of the participants were beginning to challenge these deeply held assumptions, realising that emotional suppression was not a feasible long-term solution. Sifiso explained his shifting perception:

"I've come to realise that being strong doesn't mean you have to shut your emotions away. Sometimes, real strength is admitting when you're hurting and asking for help."

This statement reflects a shift in attitude where vulnerability is being reclaimed as strength, rather than weakness. Emerging research supports this reclamation, arguing that emotional openness enhances psychological resilience and overall well-being (Hearn, 2019).

Peer groups were also recognised as important arenas where young men could experiment with emotional expression, though in a selective way. Rele explained how close friends were a space where he could defy the norm of emotional control:

"When I'm with my close male friends, we actually open up about our problems, about being real with each other."

This reflection demonstrates the value of peer support in facilitating emotional expression. While hegemonic masculine norms suppress vulnerability, close friends can establish safe spaces where young men will be more comfortable with emotional expression (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Connell, 2020).

4.7.2 Self-Reflection and Growth

This study's accounts show that most teenage boys experience some process of change in which they reflect on their past trajectories, learn to adapt to new circumstances and develop a wider emotional repertoire. At the most basic level, as highlighted, it occurs when students experience critical incidents, i.e., academic failure, personal failure or emotional setback that brings about a reconsideration of their self-image.

Some of the respondents also shared about turning point experiences where they realised, they needed to resource themselves emotionally instead of avoiding it. This reflection is a moment of self-awareness where external pressure and academic stress is a prompt for self-reflection. The literature on education and masculinity suggests that emotional repression has a deleterious impact on academic success, while emotional intelligence and self-awareness are accountable for resilience and subsequent success (Di Bianca, Mahalik, 2022; Langa, 2020).

Mandla explained how self-reflection led to greater personal responsibility:

*"Then, because you are not man enough, you don't think that far, you just think that I am enjoying. I'll see books maybe tomorrow or maybe two days before my exams. That way you get to fail, then blame other people. That makes you a boy, not a man. I used to be the guy who blamed everyone else for my failures but as I got older, I realised I had to take responsibility for my own actions. That's when I began to see that being a man also means being honest with yourself and learning from your mistakes***.**

This reflection also brings out the link between self-reflection and responsibility. It has been established in literature that young men who engage more in self-reflection have healthier coping abilities, emotional control, and more constructive interpersonal relationships (Langa, 2020). Rele described the paradox of masculinity in which invincibility as a social expectation conflicted with the value of vulnerability:

"If I will have a son, emotionally I will try to be very available, as I said about being a psychologist. Its either a daughter or son I will be emotionally available. I used to think that showing any emotion would be my weakness, but now I believe that being genuine in how I feel is actually my strongest point."

This realisation captures the changing concept of masculinity. Instead of seeing vulnerability as weakness, more and more young men are seeing it as a central aspect of emotional strength. There's research to support this, noting that true self-expression leads to more satisfying relationships and improved psychological health (Hearn, 2019; Pattman, Bhana, 2021).

Participants also indicated that self-reflection was consistently supplemented by caring social networks. Ntokozo discussed how discussing challenges with friends helped to process feelings:

" You see, our peers are stabbing each other. Gang life is real out here, you constantly have to look back."

He continues*: "You see, so yeah, but then to, um, keep myself away from those things, I've chosen some good friends. You see, five friends for me that I'm playing soccer with them. Talking with them opened my eyes that I'm not alone."*

This claim aligns with the function of peer relationships in the development of emotional functioning. While vulnerability is stigmatised in the context of traditional masculine ideals, the research has shown healthy social relationships to be protective for mental illness as well as fostering healthier emotional expression (Pattman, Bhana, 2021).

Thato described how learning from past mistakes allowed him to grow:

"Yeah, I have many fears. You understand, as a person, most of the times you do have fears, because of life is a journey. I realised some of the things I did wrong in the past were lessons, now every setback is an opportunity to grow and improve so I can be better tomorrow."

This sentiment aligns with research on resilience, which suggests that viewing challenges as opportunities for growth leads to greater long-term success and well-being (Langa, 2020).

4.7.3 Cultural influences on masculinity

Concepts of masculinity are deeply intertwined with ethnicity, cultural heritage, and the social realities of local communities. The interviews revealed that young men's perceptions of manhood are shaped by their cultural backgrounds whether BaPedi,

Zulu, BaSotho, or other ethnic identities, along with the traditional expectations and rites of passage that define the transition from boyhood to manhood. At the same time, urban environments, particularly in townships such as Soweto, impose new challenges and influences that intersect with these cultural norms. The resulting masculine identity is thus a dynamic negotiation between tradition and contemporary realities.

Ethnic identity was a key element for most participants in the formulation of masculinity. Cultural expectations within their heritage dictated standards of strength, responsibility, and respect. Sello explained how his heritage shaped his idea of masculinity:

" Being a Pedi man is like, the man is the head of the family. And he provides for the family. And he plays a role whereby he has respect for the family and cares for the family. And as boys, they told them that when they grow up, they must know what they want. Part of that meant you were strong and respectable. Not just physical strength, but also tradition and values as we go about life."

This quotation illustrates how some ethnic groups' masculinity is not only an issue of physicality but also of assuming social and family responsibilities. The perspective is shared in literature, which outlines how traditional African masculinities are more likely to be framed in terms of leadership, responsibility, and respect for elders (Langa, 2020; Mfecane, 2018). Such values are usually transmitted through family structures, communal teachings, and cultural practices.

A recurring theme amongst participants was how significant traditional rites of passage are to masculine identity formation. The young men discussed how initiation ceremonies are formative experiences, entrenching in them their idea of manhood. Rele elucidated:

"There's different, like there's cultures or tribes that believe that (for) a boy to be a man (he) needs to go to to the mountains. There is a rite of passage where a boy is taken to the mountains. It's a time for learning what it truly means to be a man. That experience stays with you."

This claim highlights the long lasting psychological and cultural impact of initiation rituals. Traditional male initiation among the majority of South African societies

involves physical and emotional challenges intended to instil resilience, discipline, and responsibility (Ratele et al., 2012). The rituals are structured transitions, reinforcing the idea that masculinity is achieved through adherence to community standards.

However, Rele also questioned the rigidity of such traditions, particularly in contemporary urban existence:

"*I respect the traditions, but I also think being a man is more than just going through initiation***."**

This claim reflects a growing shift among young men in which they attempt to reconcile cultural expectations and modern interpretations of masculinity. While the majority still find initiation practices worthwhile, they are also redefining them in terms that align with modern values of emotional intelligence and moral leadership (Pattman, Bhana, 2021).

The life experiences of young men living in townships such as Soweto added another dimension to their construction of masculinity. A majority of them described how financial problems, crime, and gang violence shaped their conceptualisation of what it means to be a man. Rele explained:

"Being in face of all these struggles in your everyday Soweto life it somehow makes you tough because you have to defend yourself. It also creates a dream. where you would live somewhere else without all these challenges. City or overseas…."

This observation speaks to the double-edged character of urban masculinity. Young men, on the one hand, are socialised into hardness and toughness as survival mechanisms in risky environments. On the other hand, risk exposure often provokes upward mobility aspirations and a desire to disengage from violence and poverty cycles (Makusha, 2024; Morrell et al., 2012).

Sello, who had moved from a rural to an urban region, described the cultural conflict he encountered:

“I grew up in Limpopo, so, I stayed. So, they took me from Limpopo and came with me here. Being here is not the thing that I love, yeah. Because there are many things, so, this life here is too fast compared to there, Limpopo. Because when I was

living in Limpopo, the traditions were clear." When probed further he added "*Yeah. It forces me to think what parts of my culture I want to keep and how I can survive in a different place*."

This comment sums up the tension between preserving old values and meeting the demands of urban life. When young men migrate from rural areas to urban regions, they are propelled towards renegotiation of their masculinity vis a vis their cultural expectations at origin and those of modernity (Connell, 2020; Mfecane, 2018).

Culture is also expressed through our appearance such as the way we dress and present ourselves. A few of the participants said that masculinity in their cultures is expressed in highly visible markers of respectability. As Ntokozo said:

"Dressing up is not just about being fashionable, when you well matched, then you say, I want to show people that I am serious "

This claim resonates with the reality that masculinity is just as much a matter of representation as it is of doing. Researchers have found that conventional African masculinities tend to invest in aesthetics and fashion, and personal presentations are external markers of social standing, discipline, and adherence to cultural norms (Seidler, 2006).

While the majority of participants appreciated cultural traditions, they also recognised the need to adapt to the advancements of modern society. Rele expressed this balance:

"(I) want to respect my roots and the traditions, but I also know that the world is changing and I want to be open to new ways of thinking."

This claim recognises a new tendency among young men who attempt to reconcile traditional and modern masculinity. Rather than rejecting cultural heritage entirely, they are remodelling it in ways that are compatible with contemporary realities, such as gender equality, emotional expression, and career aspirations (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Connell, 2020).

4.7.4 Influence of Media and Social Movements

The second central impact on young men's constructions of masculinity is the media and social movements. Media portrayals from social media narratives to film,

television, and advertising powerfully shape the reinforcement or disruption of hegemonic masculine ideals. At the same time, social movements, particularly those addressing gender relations and toxic masculinity, have prompted young men to critically reflect on their identities and practices.

The interviews revealed that media is not homogenous; while it tends to reinforce limited masculine ideals, it also creates space for counter-narratives that promote alternative, more inclusive masculinity models. Social movements such as #MeToo and #MenAreTrash have also generated diverse reactions, from defensiveness to introspection and behavioural change.

4.7.5 Reactions to Social Media Narratives

Most young men mentioned their perception of social media campaigns, especially hashtags such as “men are trash” a catchphrase that has circulated on social media as a critique of gender-based violence and toxic masculinity. Although some respondents were personally offended by such terminology, others took it as an invitation for self-reflection. That was how Thato described his response:

“It hurt because it made me think about all the things that I’ve been taught to do. But it also forced me to ask, what exactly makes a man? But as me, as a man, I try to put myself in her shoes and try to figure out why is she saying that men are trash”

This response captures the ambivalence with which young men respond when confronted with social critiques of masculinity. For as much as the term may be insulting, it is also an invitation to introspection, as it challenges men to examine social norms and their own behaviour. Scholars have shown that social media has become a hub for gender discussion, enabling the visibility of feminist activism but also eliciting defensive reactions from men who feel implicated in these debates (Christofidou, 2021).

Ntokozo gave a more reflective answer, allowing both for the validity of the criticism but also for its expansion:

“So, supporting- supporting what they say, that men are trash, maybe thinking of it, of what my father did, I'll say that yeah, really men are trash. So, as I said, I really support, but at the same time I feel disappointed because I'm a boy. So, I fall under men, you see..” “Because of, as you said, after 10 years, maybe I'll be a father, you

see. Maybe I'll get married, you see. So, yeah, so, to me, not all of them are trash, you see. Not all of them but what I can say, as- as I'm saying that, not all of them. Because as a man, you know what you want"

This remark recognises the conflict between individual identity and collective responsibility. While young men may not see themselves as perpetrators of problematic attitudes, they recognise the broader social patterns that these movements are attempting to address. Scholars have argued that social media hashtags, while polarising, have achieved an unprecedented scale of youth engagement with issues of gender-based violence and male responsibility, which has called forth both resistance and transformation in young men's self-identities (Christofidou, 2021; Morrell et al., 2012).

Besides social media hashtags, movements such as #MeToo have also influenced the mindset of young men. Sifiso explained how hearing these campaigns influenced him:

"Because at the end of the day I feel like these- these movements were really just like, um, [pause] it was- it was- it was a call to say that we have to have these conversations about whether it be like gender-based violence. Well, it's basically in this country, uh, with like the femicide rates and so on and so forth. It was like okay we have… Irregardless of how as a man maybe you might feel offended by- - might feel offended by those like hashtags but we have to have a conversation."

This response shows that rather than rejecting these movements outright, some young men are engaging critically with them and using them as a path to self-improvement. Researchers have demonstrated that young men who engage critically with online gender discourse are more likely to cultivate reflexive masculinity, whereby they recognise, and question received gender norms (Christofidou, 2021; Keddie, 2019; Levant & Pryor, 2020).

Beyond social media, broader media portrayals in news, advertising, television, and film also shape young men's perceptions of masculinity. Several participants noted how mainstream media portrayals reinforce ideals of aggression, dominance, and emotional restraint. Mandla made this point effectively:

“I prefer to take bits and pieces of what inspires me, rather than follow someone blindly. The media shows us these guys as these tough people who never back down. It's hard not to believe that image, even if you know the truth."

This quotation reflects the pervasive influence of hypermasculine portrayals in the mass media. Researchers have documented how action films, advertisements, and sports media often depict men as powerful, emotionally stoic, and in charge, reinforcing traditional gender scripts (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Pascoe, 2017).

However, there are young men who seek out counter-narratives that challenge these traditional representations. Rele described his consumption of celebrities who promote various kinds of masculinity:

"He passed away in 2018. He was a celebrity. He was music artist. Just just dream known as as XXX Tentacion. So, he taught me mostly about mental health. One of my few influences who talk about mental health and vulnerability in men. He taught me how to evolve spiritually, mentally and physically, how I should think positive or true, treat people with love”

This statement elucidates the ways digital platforms have created new forms of masculinity for young men. Compared to the mainstream media prone to reinforce traditional gender ideals, social media provides a space for more diverse and nuanced portrayals of masculinity that push men to channel emotional vulnerability and mental consciousness (Connor et al., 2021)

4.7.6 The Contradictions of Media Messaging

When it comes how media plays into the construction of masculinity, the messages are somewhat conflicting. Rele felt confused by the conflicting expectations:

"*You see news stories about violence and crime, but then I also see ads for big cars, and success. Like people are feeling like the same thing, fine. They're very same things. Very exciting. But the the mental like health is very low”*

The media messages men are put against are full of contradiction and this quote illustrates that. Some of those messages skate dangerously close to the ethos of “thinspiration,” while others espouse the alpha male and “bro” tropes that push masculine identity into a capitalist corner, where success is defined in financial

terms. Academics point out that these contradictions create unrealistic pressure on young men that creates internal conflict and pressure to simultaneously meet competing ideals (Langa, Leopeng, 2022).

Overall, the theme of expressing emotion and an awareness of mental health shows how differently the young men are negotiating society's demands of masculinity versus their emerging understanding of emotional health. This tension between models of masculinity in older paradigms that emphasise strength and emotional stoicism versus newer models that celebrate introspection, vulnerability, and mental health flows through each of the subthemes, emotional resilience vs. vulnerability, self-reflection and growth, cultural influences, and media and social movement influences.

The interviews also underline that many young men still say they feel pressure to conform to traditional models of masculinity that prize toughness and emotional control and independence. For some, these expectations create internal dilemmas, and manifest in solitude and anxiety. But many participants also say there is a growing awareness that emotional strength doesn't come from lacking vulnerability, but is best represented in the ability to navigate and express feelings in healthy ways. This acknowledgment reflects a move towards a more integrated and sustainable model of masculinity that incorporates the acknowledgement of emotional health along with traditional indications of strength and endurance (Young et al, 2024).

The other key finding is that self-reflection is a catalyst for emotional development. Young men recounted transformative experiences such as academic failure, personal setbacks and social confrontations that had prompted them to reassess their beliefs about masculinity. In the process, journaling, peer discussion, and more introspective ruminative activities demonstrated themselves as helpful mechanisms that enabled men to transition from narrow, external notions of manhood to more self-authored models. This reflection aids personal growth and helps young men gain the socio-emotional groundwork necessary for healthier relationships in the future (Bhana & Pattman, 2021; Langa, 2020).

Interviews indicate that despite the persistence of cultural traditions defining masculinity, young men actively rearrange such traditions through negotiations

occurring in the everyday world. But it's also becoming more common for them to speak of rites of passage, ethnic identity, and community narratives that shape masculinity, with consideration for how to reconcile those traditions with more progressive interpretations of emotional openness and gender equality. The difference between rural and urban based experiences serves to further delimit this changing conception of masculinity, as young men find themselves balancing between the cultural practices of traditions and modern urban life (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Mfecane, 2018).

Lastly, we cannot overemphasise how media and social movements affect the overall outcome. But the homogenous masculinity that mass media strives to maintain is challenged by the mental health narratives that exist in our ever-more digital existence. Although prompting defensive responses, #MeToo and #MenAreTrash have opened up necessary conversations that encourage young men to examine how they think and act. The majority of participants agreed that exposure to these (and other similar online movements) has caused them to be more reflective and, in some cases, wish for more thoughtful and ethical versions of masculinity (Connor et al., 2021; Maledu, 2017).

Altogether these findings present an image of young men at an impasse navigating between traditional masculine ideals and more contemporary articulations of emotional well-being. The archaic expectation of emotional suppression is still potent, but many young men are embracing a re-definition of masculinity that includes vulnerability, self-awareness, and a broader engagement with mental health.

So, development of masculine identity implies a slow cultural progress where strength is not the paradox of feeling but the salute between toughness and transparency. As they embrace self-reflection, cultural adaptation and critical media-watching practices, young men are constructing the rudiments of a masculinity that is not only sustainable in the emotional sense, but one that will lead to healthier relationships, greater individual satisfaction and broader societal change.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This chapter gives a very detailed and synthesised account of the research findings from narrative interviews that were conducted with young men in Soweto. Three major purposes sparked the concern of this study design: to examine the process of masculine identity creation in the young men; to unravel the intricacies in the psychosocial challenges they have to face; and to try to grasp their hopes, despairs, and fears in the context of their present lives and imagined futures. The argument further breaks down these three objectives, linking the major findings of this research to the theories, research, and other scholarship sources expounded in Chapter 2. The discussions substantiate the title's focus on the construction of masculinity amongst the youthful participants, be it mentioned as resultant of familial, peer, or culturally peeped norms, thus while reflecting on the emotional and psychological costs of its realisation. The chapter also reflects on how educational aspirations, career goals, and community contexts interact with personal identity development. After an account of the results, the chapter then separates into all concluding remarks for the study, reflections on limitations of the research terms, recommendations for policy and practice, suggestions for directions for future research, and a brief chapter recap. Such an integrated discussion would facilitate an understanding of the complexities of male identity and the necessity for more inclusive and supportive civic interventions aimed towards a more hopeful understanding of manhood.

5.2 Summary of Findings

5.2.1. Narration of Masculine Identities

This study examined the varied and intricate ways through which young men in Soweto navigate their masculinities amid the limitations and opportunities presented by their socio-cultural contexts. Based on detailed narrative interviews, it was evident that masculine identity is not a static endpoint, but a fluid and frequently contradictory process influenced by family dynamics, peer interactions, community context, educational ambitions, and emotional maturation.

A principal finding is that young men critically engage with and oppose conventional masculine norms. Even though cultural norms still expect men to be the "provider" or "protector," the boys who took part in the study said they wanted more open and flexible ideas of what it means to be a man. This resonates with contemporary South African literature advocating for a departure from hegemonic and detrimental masculine narratives (Pattman & Bhana, 2021; Ratele, 2014).

The narratives of participants also illustrated how masculinities are influenced by structural inequalities and individual circumstances. Township settings, characterised by poverty, crime, and historical marginalisation, exert pressure to adopt defensive and hypermasculine behaviours. Nonetheless, these contexts also cultivate aspirations for transformation, especially via educational and caregiving responsibilities within the domestic sphere.

Importantly, women played a big role in shaping men's identities. Mothers, grandmothers, and older sisters were characterised not solely as carers, but as exemplars embodying strength, responsibility, and resilience. Their impact challenges the idea that masculinity is transmitted exclusively through male role models, resonating with the research of Shefer et al., (2010) and Mkhize (2006), that emphasises the relational and gendered construction of manhood.

Instead of passively accepting cultural norms, the young men in this study actively constructed meaning by negotiating between prevailing expectations and their individual experiences.

5.2.2. Psychosocial Challenges in Soweto

The second objective touched upon the difficulty regarding the psychosocial challenges that young men in Soweto undergo. It was noteworthy that many of the participants were acutely aware of the emotional costs of adhering to traditional masculine ideals, such as emotional suppression and toughness, even though they frequently discussed the pressure to do so.

The young men talked about the fears they felt while navigating settings that were influenced by peer pressure, socioeconomic insecurity, and acts of community

violence. These stressors were deeply internalised as well as external, and they frequently showed up as a need to seem unflappable. This is consistent with research by Langa (2020), who shows how young Black men in South Africa frequently bear unsaid emotional burdens as they grow up.

Participants, however, weren't merely helpless or overburdened. Resilience and critical self-awareness were evident in their narratives. While many emphasised the value of education as a means of achieving social mobility, others discussed the pressure to succeed as a burden rather than an emancipatory objective. These results are consistent with Pattman and Bhana's (2021) research on the paradoxes faced by boys who are supposed to be strong but are in vulnerable situations.

The psychological burden was increased by unstable families, financial strain, and a lack of supportive male role models. Nonetheless, a lot of boys mentioned having close bonds with their mothers or grandmothers, who served as emotional support systems.

5.2.3. Hopes, Despairs, and Fears Regarding Present Lives and Imagined Futures

A dual sense of anxiety and aspiration was seen in the narratives. Many young men talked about their aspirations for a better future, which were frequently based on success in school or the workplace, as a means of getting away from the constraints of township life. However, these aspirations were usually dampened by worries about failing, being let down, and not living up to expectations from family or the community.

Crucially, participants did not use oversimplified language when expressing their fears. Instead, they provided incredibly insightful perspectives on how familial and societal influences affect their sense of value. Many were still attempting to resolve the internal conflict caused by the fear of not being able to provide or of not living up to conventional standards of masculinity.

As a number of boys pointed out, they aspired to be both emotionally present and providers, which goes against traditional dichotomies of what it means to be a man. These conflicts reflect the internal conflicts brought about by outside social forces,

which Ratele (2014) refers to as the "psychopolitics" of masculinity in South Africa. In a similar vein, Shefer et al., (2010) point out that boys and young men frequently internalise contradictory messages about expectations from their families, schools, and the media.

According to the study, these anxieties and hopes shouldn't be interpreted as signs of illness or dysfunction. Instead, they highlight young men who are actively attempting to balance their own changing identities with traditional ideals of manhood.

5.3 Conclusion of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate how young men in Soweto create, negotiate, and internalise their masculine identities in the face of a variety of psychosocial difficulties and changing goals. The narratives present a number of flexible, contextually based, and frequently disputed masculine identities rather than a single, fixed definition of masculinity. The young men in this study show the intricate relationship between tradition, expectation, resistance, and individual agency through their lived experiences, challenging the traditional dichotomies of masculine identity.

This study shows that household dynamics and gendered responsibilities play a significant role in shaping masculinity, in addition to peer group interactions and cultural norms. Crucially, women (mothers, grandmothers, and even sisters) have a significant but frequently overlooked role in the formation of these masculinities. Participants talked about how the women in their lives redefined manhood for them beyond emotional stoicism and physical dominance by modelling resilience, strength, and caring. This is in line with research by academics like Mkhize (2006), Shefer et al., (2010) and Ratele et al., (2012), who contend that masculinity in South African contexts is relational and frequently influenced by interactions with femininity.

The participants' struggle between ingrained gender norms and the realities of modern urban life was a recurring theme in their narratives. According to the study, a lot of young men want to succeed, especially in school and in their careers, not just for personal benefit but also as a means of redefining their worth in societies where traditional masculinity associates being a man with protection and provision.

However, as Langa (2020) points out, these goals are usually at odds with the systemic limitations of violence, poverty, and subpar educational systems.

The results point to a more nuanced and hopeful story rather than seeing these boys as simply caught up in hegemonic ideals or at risk of perpetuating cycles of dysfunction and violence. These are young men who, frequently in silence and against prevailing masculine scripts, are making meaning in a thoughtful, emotionally aware manner. Reductionist narratives portraying Black township youth as innately violent, emotionally distant, or hypermasculine are challenged by their testimonies and lived experiences. This is consistent with the work of Pattman and Bhana (2021), who make the case for acknowledging boys' vulnerabilities as well as their capacity for self-reflection and care.

Therefore, it is crucial that academic research and policy resist the temptation to impose strict fixes for "fixing" township boys. Instead, a listening posture is required, one that honours their contradictions, listens to their voices, and creates room for alternative masculinities that demonstrate relational responsibility, empathy, and adaptability. In this way, masculinity is a dynamic negotiation influenced by gender, class, community, and familial ties rather than a final destination.

Researchers from South Africa, including Ratele (2014) and Morrell et al. (2012), have long supported methods that take into account the relational, social, and emotional aspects of masculinity. This study contributes to that increasing demand. It presents young men as active agents navigating uncertain futures while contending with the inherited weight of tradition, gender scripts, and socioeconomic constraints rather than as problems to be solved.

Their lived experiences serve as a reminder that stoicism, independence, and dominance are not inherently associated with masculine identity. Because they are frequently influenced by the women in their lives, the young men of Soweto exhibit the ability to care for others, reflect on themselves, and be emotionally vulnerable. These results push academic and public discourses to view young men not as lacking but as capable of change and complex human beings.

5.4 Limitations

Though a study priding itself on understanding the construction of masculine identity and psychosocial challenges of young men in the context of Soweto, it would be inept not to acknowledge several limitations including the qualitative design. The data is invaluable since it allows understanding of matters to an in-depth extent. It was apparent that the accounts of these interviewees are extremely contextual. The life experiences narrated might not be entirely representative of young men in other locations with diverse cultural backgrounds (Berndt, 2020; Connell, 2020; Reeser, 2023).

The next limitation is the small sample size, weighing against in-depth narrative interviewing. While the data was saturated, the diversity within the group of participants might have been limited, which may possibly exclude the existence of variations in different demographic segments, such as varying ages beyond the 14 - 25 range (Gill, 2020; Hennink et al., 2020; Knott et al., 2022).

Self-report data by the very clarity of the term inherently brings social desirability bias into the context. The explanation is that the responses of the interviewees might have shaded to sound more socially desirable or expected by society concerning sensitive issues concerning emotional vulnerability and gender roles. The limitation calls for cautious interpretation of findings that might represent, in their entirety, their participants' inner experiences (Mirza et al., 2023; Pietilä et al., 2020).

Furthermore, it is importantly paramount that the design of the study does not allow the tracking of masculine transformations over time. If further inquiry is laid on longitudinal research designs, together they can afford a more complete picture of identity transformation and psychosocial educational adversities on the lives of young men in a long-term perspective (Clark et al., 2021; Lester et al., 2020; Taherdoost, 2021).

5.5 Recommendations

Recommendations for the promotion of healthier masculine identities in Dobsonville/Soweto among young male individuals spring from the considerations as stated in the study. These suggestions cover many stakeholders, such as educators, policymakers, community leaders and mental health professionals.

5.5.1 Education Interventions

Education programs should dwell into the double pressures of academic achievements and personal development. One can bring attention to emotional literacy and gendered norms while engaged with the normal subjects in academic performance. Teachers should be encouraged to nurture an environment that makes everyone feel safe to share their vulnerabilities without fear of being made to feel lesser, as pointed out in the work of Keddie (2019), Di Bianca and Mahalik (2022), and Christofidou (2021). Workshops and peer-led discussions may provide further scope for disadvantaged communities to critically reassess traditional masculine norms and enhance the notion of resilience and dialogue.

5.5.2 Community Programs

A joint effort between local authorities and community organisations to establish programs should compensate for identified psychosocial issues. These programs would provision counselling, mentoring, and support networks. Community support groups set up by organisational structures can aid bringing down crime and violence shaky from economic stagnation.

In addition, association with local role models who exhibit a balanced masculinity approach could assist in reshaping and producing new relationships in the narratives of the youth.

5.5.3 Mental Health

The great amount of emotional distress the participants reported, make available culturally sensitive mental health services necessary. Therefore, schools and community centres with the right ethos could offer qualified, confidential therapies and establish support groups with reference to the main problem factors in youth masculine identity. Works from Levant & Pryor (2020), underscore the necessity of programs that tackle mental health stigma among young men. This should afford them opportunities to reach out for necessary help.

5.5.4 Policy Changes

This study makes the argument that township boys' stories provide important insights for the application of current gender and youth policies, rather than advocating for the development of new ones. Boys lived experiences in this study indicate that implementation has not always been contextually grounded, despite the Gender Equity Task Team laying the groundwork for many school-based interventions.

The need for policies that are sensitive to boys' actual social contexts is highlighted by the participants' stories of juggling emotional distress, peer pressure, and household duties. The emotional burdens they bear, which are frequently unsaid, point to a disconnect between the goals of policy and the actual operations of support systems. Schools and community organisations may be able to more effectively target interventions if these narratives are incorporated into implementation efforts.

This study supports integrating mental health and masculinity-focused support into current policy frameworks, which is consistent with Levant and Pryor's (2020) call for gender-sensitive emotional education. Furthermore, these findings are better understood in light of the historical legacy of apartheid and ongoing economic exclusion thanks to McLean's (2021) concept of "post-crisis masculinities." These deeper histories must be taken into consideration when implementing policies, particularly when attempting to engage Black boys in townships.

For example, the economic objectives of the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) Act (2003) have an indirect impact on the development of masculine identity. Implementing such policies could promote healthier masculine development by providing genuine opportunities for agency and dignity. The boys in this study frequently associated their sense of manhood with future economic independence.

5.5.5 Media and Advertising Campaigns

The traditional media portrayals, media campaigns and public campaigns should dismantle toxic ideas of masculine characters and endorse portrayals of different types of masculinity. New media should feature inspirational stories of resilience, empathy, and balanced masculinity; these initiatives have to incorporate the perspectives of the youth in conjunction with noted local influencers, as postulated

by Christofidou (2021), Keddie (2019), and Roy and Ayalon (2023). These efforts may induce changes in societal norms and foster the wider acceptance of alternative masculinity.

5.5.6 Families and Parental Education

These efforts should entail the assistance of families; parents should be trained to create a warm space in which youngsters can exhibit their emotions. Parent workshops and family counselling services can help mar the previous model's transition into the modern feelings, as given recommendations from Levant and Pryor (2020) and McLean (2021). These programs may improve family communication, further nurturing intergenerational and healthier generational partnerships while buffing away at pressures of outdated norms that are imposed on the youth.

5.5.7 Monitoring and Evaluation

Frameworks for monitoring and evaluation are essential for comprehending the long-term effects of interventions meant to assist young men. However, the narrative and emotional changes that young men go through may be overlooked by current evaluation strategies, which frequently rely on quantitative outcomes or broad behavioural-metrics.

According to this study, assessment instruments ought to include qualitative, narrative-based techniques that monitor changes in self-perception, emotional expression, and identity negotiation in addition to behavioural changes. Programs that focus on youth development and gender issues should evaluate how well they help boys define and express masculinity according to their own standards.

Additionally, evaluations ought to be adaptive and iterative in order to address the shifting social and emotional environments that young men exist in. This study demonstrates that masculinity is not constant and that its manifestations vary depending on time and place. The implementation of intervention programs can be kept current, respectful, and successful by consistently involving the voices of young men.

5.5.8 Future Studies

The need for future research to take on longitudinal designs in tracking young men's evolution of their masculinities over time is paramount. Such studies promise a live handicap to split up on how educative, psychosocial, and cultural factors mix and wane to provide a subtle interpretation of identity transformation. Researchers should be, in additional regard, beseeched to enlarge and cover more and more diverse samples in order to encompass differences in socioeconomic background, cultural groups, and age groups. Comparison studies set across different townships or between urban–rural settings may help elaborate the contextual influences on masculinity. Future research is thus invited to probe more deeply into the impact of digital media and evolving social movements, particularly on how online interactions and global narratives influence local notions of manhood. The application of mixed method designs that combine traditional statistical methods with qualitative narratives would yield a more comprehensive perspective on the challenges facing young men today. Tightening up such soon-to-be research efforts will definitely add to the importance of this study. They will also serve as a guide capable of homing in on policies and interventions specifically targeting activities designed to allow young men to work on fusing their multifaceted selves and identities.

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Appendices

Appendix A



UNIVERSITY OF THE
WITWATERSRAND,
JOHANNESBURG

Interview Schedule

The interview session will begin with a preamble whereby permission to record and consent to partake in the interview is discussed.

Introduction and questions to be asked: Demographic section

- What is your age?
- What is your gender?
- What is your ethnicity?
- What grade are you in? / What is your highest education level?
- What is your occupation?
- What is your religion?
- What is your marital status?

Questions

- Could you share some details about your experiences and things that happened to you while you were growing up in Dobsonville or Soweto as a young man? What are your favourite memories of growing up here?
- What are your least favourite memories of growing up here?
- Do you have a father? Do you have brothers? Please tell me about them.
- Which men are your role models and why?
- What roles should men play in their homes? In their Communities?
- What roles should women play in their homes? In their Communities?
- What role do you play in your home?
- Where do you see your life in 10 years from now? What will you be doing, where will you be living and who will be in your life?
- Is there a difference between being a boy and a man? Why do you say so?
- What do you think about the term “Men are trash?”

Appendix B

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

Research Office

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

R14/49 Mathivha

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE PROTOCOL NUMBER: H23/07/26

PROJECT TITLE	What does it mean to be a man? A narrative study of young masculine identities
INVESTIGATOR(S)	Mr V Mathivha
SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT	Human and Community Development/
DATE CONSIDERED	21 July 2023
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	Approved

Risk Level: Minimal

EXPIRY DATE	04 October 2026



DATE 05 October 2023 **CHAIRPERSON**

(Professor J Watermeyer)

cc: Supervisor : Professor J Bradbury

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 authorised 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**

Appendix C

Participant Information Sheet For Participants

My name is Vusani Mathivha. I am a Master's in Community-based counselling psychology student in the School of Human and Community Development at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. My supervisor is Professor Jill Bradbury. I am conducting a narrative research study about young masculine identities in Dobsonville, Soweto. The study title is, “What does it mean to be a man? A narrative study of young masculine identities.”

I am asking permission from you as a participant to take part in an interview where you will share stories about your life and your narrative of your masculine identity will be explored. If you choose to take part in this study, your participation will only last about 45 - 60 minutes. The interview will be held at the Youth Of The South (YOTS) site at the Forte Secondary School in Dobsonville. The interviews will take place in the afternoon afterschool. The final date will be agreed upon by the researcher and parents and participants.

With your permission, I would like to audio record the interview. This recording will be stored in a password-protected folder which only I and my supervisor will have access to until the duration of my research is complete.

During the interview, I will be asking you questions about your life as a young man growing up in Dobsonville and Soweto. I will also ask questions about your hopes and fears for the future. The narration of your stories will not be relayed to anyone else for the duration of the study. However, my supervisor will have access to the audio and will be able to hear the conversations. When I share the results of the research study, I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you. Pseudonyms (fake names) will be used in place of your real name.

If you decide to take part in the research study, it should be because you want to volunteer. You do not have to take part in the study if you do not want to. You are not forced to participate and you can stop being in the study at any time. You do not have to answer any questions if you do not want to. You will not get any direct benefits if you choose to join the research study. You will not lose any services, benefits, or rights you would normally have if you decided not to join. Taking part in the research study will not cost you anything. The date and time for the discussion will be agreed upon by both the researcher and parent and the participants themselves.

The risks for this research study are minimal. However, if some of the questions asked make you feel sad or upset, I will stop the interview and continue another time. Referrals to psychological support will be provided, if necessary, after the interview. These services are free of charge and can be accessed by contacting 0800 567 567 from Monday to Sunday 8 am-8 pm (The South African Depression and Anxiety Group) or 0861 322 322 Lifeline Pretoria 24-hour line.

This research study will be written up as a research report for my dissertation as a requirement to obtain my Masters’ in Community-based counselling psychology degree. The data will be available on the Wits university library website archives and on the NEST archives.
If you have any questions about this research study, feel free to contact me or my supervisor at the details listed below. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), by telephone at +27(0) 11 717 1408, or email at hrecnon-

medical@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely,
Vusani Mathivha

Researcher:
Vusani Mathivha, 1054847@students.wits.ac.za

Supervisor: Jill Bradbury
Jill.bradbury@wits.ac.za

Participant Information Sheet For Parents/guardians

Dear parent/guardian

My name is Vusani Mathivha. I am a Master's in Community-based counselling psychology student in the School of Human and Community Development at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. My supervisor is Professor Jill Bradbury. I am conducting a narrative research study about young masculine identities in Dobsonville, Soweto. The study title is, “What does it mean to be a man? A narrative study of young masculine identities.”

I am asking permission from you as a parent/guardian to allow your son to take part in an interview where he will share stories about his life and his narrative of his masculine identity will be explored. If he decides to take part in this study, his participation will only last about 45 - 60 minutes. The interview will be held at the Youth Of The South (YOTS) site at Forte Secondary School in Dobsonville. The interviews will take place in the afternoon afterschool. The final date will be agreed upon by the researcher and parents and participants.

With your permission, I would like to audio record the interview. This recording will be stored in a password-protected folder which only I and my supervisor will have access to until the duration of my research is complete.

During the interview, I will be asking your son questions about his life as a young man growing up in Dobsonville. I will also ask questions about his hopes and fears for his own future.
The narration of his stories will not be relayed to anyone else. However, my supervisor will have access to the audio and will be able to hear the conversations. When I share the results of the research study, I will not include his name or anything else that could identify your son. Pseudonyms (fake names) will be used in place of their real name.

If you decide to allow your son to take part in the research study, it should be because they want to volunteer. They do not have to take part in the study if they do not want to. They are not forced to. You as the parent and your child can stop being in the study at any time. Your child does not have to answer any questions if they do not want to. They will not get any direct benefits if they choose to join the research study. They will not lose any services, benefits, or rights they would normally have if they decided not to join. Taking part in the research study will not cost you or them anything. The date and time for the discussion will be agreed upon by both the researcher and parent and the participants themselves.

The risks for this research study are minimal. However, if some of the questions asked make your son feel sad or upset, I will stop the interview and continue another time. Referrals to psychological support will be provided, if necessary, after the interview. These services are

free of charge and can be accessed by contacting 0800 567 567 from Monday to Sunday 8 am-8 pm (The South African Depression and Anxiety Group) or 0861 322 322 Lifeline Pretoria 24-hour line.

This research study will be written up as a research report for my dissertation as a requirement to obtain my Masters' in Community-based counselling psychology degree. The data will be available on the Wits university library website archives and on the NEST archives.
If you have any questions about this research study, feel free to contact me or my supervisor at the details listed below. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), by telephone at +27(0) 11 717 1408, or email at hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely,
Vusani Mathivha

Researcher:
Vusani Mathivha, 1054847@students.wits.ac.za

Supervisor: Jill Bradbury
Jill.bradbury@wits.ac.za

Appendix D

Assent Form for participants

Title of project: What does it mean to be a man? A narrative study of young masculine identities

I,..... , agree to participate in this research project.

I agree to the following:

(Please circle the relevant options below)

The research study was explained to me. I understand what this study is about.	YES	NO
I understand that I can volunteer to take part in the study	YES	NO
I agree that the interview may be audio recorded	YES	NO
I agree that direct quotations from my interview may be used by the researcher in their research report	YES	NO
I agree that my participation will remain anonymous (my name or other identifying data will not be used by the researcher in their research)	YES	NO
I agree that the data obtained in this research will be archived in the NEST and Wits library archives and that other researchers may use the information I provide in my interview (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)
….....(name of participant)
….....(date)

….....(signature)
….....(name of researcher/person seeking consent)
….....(date)

Consent Form for Parents

Title of project: What does it mean to be a man? A narrative study of young masculine identities. Name of researcher: Vusani Mathivha

I ……., agree that my child ....., can
participate in this research project. (Only to be filled in by parents of minors).

I agree to the following:

Please circle the relevant options below

The research study was explained to me. I understand what this study is about.	YES	NO
I understand that my child can volunteer to take part in the study	YES	NO
I agree that the interview with my child may be audio recorded	YES	NO
I agree that direct quotations from my child's interview may be used by the researcher in their research report.	YES	NO
I agree that my child's participation will remain anonymous (His name or other identifying data will not be used by the researcher in their research report.)	YES	NO
I agree that the data obtained in this research will be archived in the NEST and Wits library archives and other researchers may use the information my child provides in their interview (depending on their own ethics clearance being obtained) but their name and any personal information will not be used or passed on.	YES	NO

….....(signature)
….....(name of participant)
….....(date)