

Research Article

Interrogating Gender Identity and Stereotypes in South African Higher Education: A Qualitative Study of Student Narratives at Howard College, University of KwaZulu-Natal

Sindisiwe Zungu 

University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa 

Abstract

South African universities, while shaped by a progressive constitutional ethos, remain deeply influenced by the historical and socio-cultural legacy of gender inequality. This study explores how students at Howard College, University of KwaZulu-Natal, conceptualise gender roles, identities, and stereotypes within a context of entrenched norms and evolving ideals. Using interpretive qualitative methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with students across various faculties to explore their understandings, and experiences of masculinities, femininities, and gender-related "toxic" traits in university spaces. The study involved 26 participants, selected through purposive and snowball sampling, comprising 20 undergraduate and six postgraduate students aged 18 to 26. Findings suggest that students view gender identities as socially constructed but still constrained by traditional binary, and prescriptive expectations. Socialising agents such as family, media, religion, and education were identified as key to shaping these norms. While the participants acknowledged the concept of gender fluidity, they also highlighted the persistence of rigid binaries, reflecting a tension between recognising fluidity and living within entrenched categories. Gendered inequalities were often framed in interpersonal terms, such as "toxic" behaviours, which risk overshadowing the deeper structural legacies of patriarchy and apartheid that continue to influence gendered power dynamics in South Africa. This study contributes to understanding how young people in higher education both reproduce and resist dominant gender discourses while navigating the psychological dissonance created by contradictory messages of equality and hierarchy. It emphasises the need for gender sensitisation and media literacy in higher education, alongside institutional action to address gendered power dynamics. Such interventions can challenge restrictive norms, address cultural and structural inequalities, and foster more inclusive debates on masculinity and femininity in South Africa.

Keywords: gender identity; gender stereotypes; gender socialisation; identity negotiation; gender norms



1. Introduction

Gender is one of the most dynamic and contested aspects of identity in modern society (Skyba and Tkachenko, 2021:18). In South Africa, cultural diversity, post-apartheid transformation, and international gender equality movements have created a changing landscape where young people develop their ideas about gendered expectations, masculinity, and femininity (Oldfield and Tucker, 2019:1244; Young et al., 2025:418). Gender stereotyping involves preconceived thoughts and attitudes about gender based on perceived characteristics, roles, and behaviours (Omojemite et al., 2024:78). These stereotypes often lead to inequity, discrimination, and limited opportunities for those who do not conform to societal expectations. Social norms, the unspoken principles and expectations that guide behaviour within a specific group, also play a significant role in shaping these stereotypes (Omojemite et al., 2024:78; Cislighi and Heise, 2020:409). While many countries and cultures view gender stereotyping differently, global efforts are being made to combat these stereotypes. In South Africa, societal norms that differ from traditional gender roles continue to perpetuate discrimination, stigma, and violence against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer plus (LGBTQ+) individuals, despite a progressive constitutional framework.

Although some studies have examined South African youth and gender norms (e.g. Mdunge, 2023; Mokhesi, 2024; Smuts et al., 2015), the ways in which university students interpret gender and negotiate stereotypes (and the influence of socialisation agents such as family, peers, the media, education, and religion) remain underexplored. In a context like South Africa, where issues such as toxic masculinity, gender-based violence, and gender inequality are central, understanding these students' perspectives can inform gender sensitisation programmes. This study, therefore, investigates how university students conceptualise gender, focusing on masculinity, femininity, toxic gender traits, and stereotypes, while critically analysing the role of socialisation agents in shaping these perceptions. The study adopts a social constructionist perspective to examine how gender is constructed in the media and understood by students. Social constructionism views gender and related behaviours as socially produced and maintained rather than biologically fixed (Burr, 2015). In exploring students' conceptualisations of masculinities, femininities, and "toxic" gender traits, the analysis is guided by Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity, which highlights the dominant norms and power hierarchies shaping gendered behaviours and expectations. Additionally, an intersectional lens is applied to examine how race, class, sexuality, and other social identities intersect with these processes, revealing the complexity of lived experiences and the ways structural inequalities shape individual understanding (Collins and Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989). This theoretical framework underpins the interpretation of findings and provides a coherent lens for understanding how socialisation agents influence gender conceptualisations.

Research questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal conceptualise masculinities, femininities and notions of "toxic" gender traits?
2. In what ways do socialisation agents, such as family, peers, media, education, and religion, influence these conceptualisations?

2. Beyond binaries: gender as a socially constructed and intersectional practice

The conceptualisation of gender among university students is a complex and multifaceted issue, shaped by various socialising agents and cultural contexts. Research indicates that individuals' understandings of gender are influenced by societal norms, cultural expectations, and personal experiences (Butler, 1990; Connell, 1995). Studies reveal that young people often conform to traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, with men expected to display traits such as strength and aggression, while women are expected to embody traits such as nurturing and submissiveness (Connell, 1995; Young et al., 2025:430). This study is grounded in an analytic framework comprising social constructionism, hegemonic and multiple masculinities, emphasised femininities, and intersectionality. Connell (2016) and Butler (1988) both define gender as a socially constructed and performative practice. However, Connell (2016) emphasises the hierarchy of masculinities, whereas Butler (1988) highlights its fluidity. Social constructionism challenges positivist notions of objectivity by asserting that meaning, knowledge, and truth are products of social interaction rather than fixed realities (Burr, 2024). From birth, individuals' beliefs and behaviours are shaped by interpersonal and societal influences. Social constructionists argue that concepts, whether positive or negative, are created, sustained, and transformed through cultural and social processes (Berger and Luckmann, 1967:15).

This perspective highlights the role of culture in shaping categories such as race, gender, sexuality, and emotions. Gender is understood as a social construct, performed through repeated actions that align with societal expectations (Butler, 1990). These theoretical distinctions are crucial for understanding how students engage with or resist dominant gender norms in university contexts. Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, and attributes that society deems appropriate for men and women (Skyba and Tkachenko, 2021). It encompasses the cultural, historical, and social characteristics associated with being male or female. Intersectionality is vital in understanding gender socialisation, as it reveals how overlapping aspects of identity shape experiences, privileges, and biases (Collins and Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989). Hopkins (2018) observed that different social groups hold distinct understandings of gender norms, partly shaped by media and cultural factors. Intersectionality posits that social categories such as gender, race, class, and sexuality intersect to create complex experiences of privilege and oppression (Collins and Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989). It highlights how power relations, perpetuated by institutions such as law, media, and religion, reinforce systems of sexism, racism, patriarchy, and heterosexism, affecting both representation and lived experience. Gender interacts with other social identities, producing varied experiences of advantage and disadvantage. The media portrays gender through its characteristics, beliefs, and life experiences, propagating stereotypes and eliciting strong emotions.

Power dynamics within a society, culture, or context can lead to systemic advantages or compounded marginalisation. In South Africa, colonialism and apartheid have resulted in systemic advantages for white men in property ownership, education, and employment (Helman and Ratele, 2016; Presidency SA, 2014:2), while Black women face considerable racial and patriarchal discrimination (Morrell, 1998). Men in South Africa experience varying advantages and disadvantages influenced by gender identity, race, class, and history. White men have historically been privileged, while Black men from disadvantaged communities encounter systemic oppression, creating hierarchies that reinforce power imbalances and societal inequality. These issues continue to influence present disparities in healthcare, justice, and economic engagement, with Black women from disadvantaged neighbourhoods enduring even greater marginalisation. Apartheid was a patriarchal society that promoted gender inequity and white male privilege, resulting in gender role tensions between South African men and women (Mdunge, 2023:13). This was intensified by "racist sexualisations," which reinforced the Black community's traditional gender roles. During the early 1950s, constraints on Black South African women forced many to remain in their homelands, focusing on childrearing and household tasks while their husbands sought jobs in cities (Berger, 1992). Women who followed their spouses were frequently involved in housework or low-wage domestic employment in nearby white communities (Mdunge, 2023).

Research indicates that Black people watch more television than white people and are acutely aware of their cultural representation (Beaudoin and Thorson, 2006). Negative portrayals of Black Africans contribute to societal stereotypes linking young Black men, particularly in South Africa and the USA, to criminality, a bias rooted in historical racial stereotypes (Kennedy, 1997; Welch, 2007). These perceptions manifest in harsher treatment and longer sentence in the justice system for young Black men, as societal associations equate them with violence and criminal behaviour, exacerbated by the concept of hegemonic masculinity that challenges their power compared to white men (Welch, 2007). Connell (1987) argues that multiple femininities and masculinities coexist within a socially constructed gender hierarchy at any given time. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity provides a framework for understanding the relational and hierarchical nature of gender, particularly in student narratives (Connell, 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). It asserts that hegemonic masculinity represents a structural and relational form of dominance, contrasting with the individualistic conception of "toxic masculinity". In this study, hegemonic masculinity is understood as a structural and relational pattern that legitimises men's domination over women and subordinated masculinities (Connell, 1987), whereas "toxic masculinity" refers to a popular discourse characterising detrimental individual behaviours or qualities. Hegemonic masculinity is a dominant cultural construct that perpetuates male superiority over women, children, and non-conforming men (Connell, 1995:77). It is influenced by factors such as socio-economic status, race, and emotional detachment (Connell, 1998).

Connell (1987) posits that men's power varies across different contexts, leading to a hierarchy where white, upper-class, and heterosexual men typically hold more influence. This framework marginalises working-class, Black, and gay men, who may still engage with hegemonic norms even if they occupy subordinate positions in the gender hierarchy. "Subordinate masculinities" are characterised by traits such as physical weakness and emotional expression, often associated with gay men, who represent attributes conflicting with hegemonic masculinity and may also be easily incorporated into femininity. Hegemonic masculinities exhibit common characteristics across contexts, including expectations for men to be primary providers, possess a high sex drive, and demonstrate physical strength, often involving the use of violence (Graaff and Heineken, 2017). These traits contribute to a propensity for aggression, as evidenced by the fact that most violent crimes are committed by men against other men (Peacock, 2013). A study by Graff and Heineken (2017) showed that violence, particularly gender-based violence (GBV), is perceived as normal in South African communities due to its prevalence. The participants described South Africa as "very violent", while some likened the commonality of GBV to casually buying chips, emphasising its ubiquity in their lives. Young men often view violence as a significant means to demonstrate power and assert their masculinity within their communities.

In the study by Ndhlovu et al. (2021), it is revealed that gangs fight for power and recognition through violent means, such as public killings and rape, often to affirm hegemonic masculinity in marginalised communities. Young men, lacking socio-economic opportunities, turn to gangs to engage in violence, perceiving it as a demonstration of strength and dominance. This behaviour leads to devastating consequences, including death and the endangerment of loved ones, as the cultural understanding of masculinity is intertwined with aggression and power dynamics. These findings illustrate how hegemonic masculine norms shape people's behaviours and experiences. These studies highlight the intersection of masculinity with race, class, and institutional power, showing how gendered expectations influence peer dynamics, hierarchies, and incidences of gender-based violence. GBV remains a pervasive issue within South African higher education institutions, reflecting broader societal patterns of gender inequality and violence (Quirk and Dugard, 2024). Notable incidents include the University of the Witwatersrand's sexual harassment claims against lecturers in 2012 and the list of alleged rapists released by students at Rhodes University in 2016 (Quirk and Dugard, 2024). These incidents reflect broader societal problems. Campus abuse is indicative of greater societal difficulties, implying that education-related issues are linked to bigger structural challenges in society.

Connell (1987:188) discusses "emphasised femininity", which serves as a subordinate counterpart to hegemonic masculinity, closely linked to white, heterosexual, socially elite women. She does not use the term "hegemonic femininity" since she believes no femininity can attain hegemony in a patriarchal context. Instead, all forms of femininity are portrayed as subordinate to masculinity, as they operate within the broader framework of women's overall subordination to men. Women embodying "emphasised femininity" face less marginalisation than those displaying other femininities (e.g., Black or physically strong women), yet they still conform to subordination, catering to men's interests and desires. Emphasised femininity refers to culturally dominant ideals that privilege women's compliance, caregiving, and attractiveness in ways that sustain male dominance (Connell, 1987), whereas "toxic femininity" is a popular discourse surrounding individual behaviours deemed problematic yet framed as feminine. Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of the patriarchal bargain explains how women can conform

to or strategically utilise these norms to achieve limited authority or protection. A patriarchal bargain is an approach in which women navigate and adapt to patriarchal standards to improve their security, position, or agency during male dominance, exhibiting pragmatic agency within structural constraints rather than remaining passive victims. The patriarchal bargain shows how women strategically manoeuvre within patriarchal systems by emphasising caregiving and compliance to gain family support and social respect, while leveraging community engagement, religious roles, or educational successes for influence and protection (Ruslin, 2022:144). This reflects women's adaptive negotiation of constraints in both domestic and public arenas without overtly challenging gender hierarchies.

Gender and race are inextricably linked, and binary ideas of privilege and disadvantage cannot fully capture the complex experiences of groups. An intersectional approach is critical for examining both differences between men and women and differences among men and among women. Gender is not an isolated category but is produced in relation to other social systems. For example, white men's masculinities are constructed not only in relation to white women but also in relation to Black men, illustrating how race and class intersect with gender to structure hierarchies of power. Socialisation agents, including family, peers, media, and education, play a significant role in shaping students' understanding of gender. Research has shown that family and peer influences can reinforce traditional gender norms, while media representations can perpetuate stereotypes and limit the range of acceptable gender expressions (Bussey and Bandura, 1999:683). These stereotypes influence students' behaviours, emotional expressions, and relational dynamics. The examination of these processes is conducted through an intersectional lens, acknowledging how race, class, and sexuality intersect with socialisation and identity. This intersectionality results in varied experiences of masculinities and femininities within the university setting.

3. Methodology

Study design

This study employed an interpretive research paradigm (qualitative design), which posits that individuals are creative and actively construct their social reality (Gichuru, 2017). This paradigm aligns with the study's aim to explore in-depth university students' life experiences (Pervin and Mokhtar, 2022:424). Qualitative interpretivist design is well-suited to understanding participants' subjective experiences of masculinities, femininities, and "toxic" gender traits. It facilitates an in-depth exploration of how socialisation agents shape these perceptions, focusing on students' lived experiences within their university and societal contexts to capture the complex ways they interpret and negotiate gender norms.

Participants

A total of 26 participants were sampled in this study. Data were collected from students registered at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College Campus, representing various faculties, including agriculture, engineering and science, humanities, law, and management.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race	Level of study	Primary residential area
Nikko	20	Female	Indian	3 rd year	Urban
Mbali	20	Female	Black	2 nd year	Rural
Buhle	19	Male	Black	2 nd year	Township
Sfundo	25	Male	Black	3 rd year	Rural
Sbonga	18	Male	Black	1 st year	Rural
Lukholo	24	Female	Black	Masters	Rural
Thuli	22	Female	Black	Honours	Rural
Zama	18	Female	Black	1 st year	Township
Zinhle	18	Female	Black	1 st year	Township
Bahle	22	Male	Black	3 rd year	Rural
Syanda	23	Male	Black	Honours	Township
Xolani	23	Male	Black	Postgraduate	Township
Biggy	20	Male	Black	3 rd year	Rural
Senzo	19	Male	Black	2 nd year	Rural
Mila	21	Female	Black	3 rd year	Urban
Thuba	18	Male	Black	1 st year	Township
Onke	21	Female	Black	1 st year	Township
Melo	21	Male	Black	Undergraduate	Township
Kiarra	20	Female	Indian	3 rd year	Urban
Luncedo	19	Female	Black	2 nd year	Rural
Sbu	23	Male	Black	3 rd year	Urban
Sizwe	20	Male	Black	1 st year	Township
Fatima	19	Female	Indian	2 nd year	Urban
Menzi	20	Male	Black	4 th year	Rural
Amahle	19	Female	Black	2 nd year	Township
Tutu	26	Female	Black	Masters	Urban

Source: Researchers compilation (2025)

The sample had a higher proportion of Black African students, as most participants were recruited from university residences where Black African students are predominant. Participants' demographic details, including age, race, sex, and place of origin, were collected. The study involved individuals from diverse backgrounds, including six from urban areas, ten from townships, and ten from rural locations. This information was analysed to examine the relationship between participants' upbringing and their perceptions of gender roles, identities, and stereotypes. A student's upbringing significantly influences their perception of gender stereotypes and identities, as well as the impact these have on them.

Data collection

Participants were recruited through direct approaches at university LANs, the library, and student residences, supplemented by referrals from initial contacts. Due to the challenges of engaging students during the COVID-19 shift to online learning, a snowball sampling strategy was employed. Snowball sampling facilitates access to hard-to-reach populations by relying on networks of individuals with similar characteristics (Etikan, 2016). In this study, eligibility was determined by age and gender. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting between 20 and 40 minutes, conducted from April to May 2023. Interviews were held in locations chosen by participants (most commonly student residences, both university-owned and private) or on digital platforms such as Zoom and WhatsApp. To ensure participants could express themselves comfortably, interviews were conducted in English and in isiZulu. Those who chose isiZulu were accommodated, with translations completed during transcription and cross-checked by a bilingual reviewer. This reviewer's involvement was limited to language support and did not extend to data collection or analysis.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and manually transcribed by the researcher. The study complied with the University of KwaZulu-Natal's research ethics guidelines, with ethical clearance obtained from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (protocol reference: HSSREC/00003954/2022). Written consent was secured for face-to-face interviews, while online participants completed electronic consent forms. Confidentiality and data security were ensured by storing audio files, transcripts, and consent forms on encrypted, password-protected devices. Identifiable details were removed during transcription, and pseudonyms were assigned to all participants. The study poses minimal psychological risks. No participants expressed distress, although all were informed of their right to withdraw or pause participation at any stage without consequence. Careful attention was given to respecting participants' personal and religious beliefs. These measures demonstrate the study's commitment to ethical integrity, participant well-being, and methodological rigour.

Data analysis

This study employed reflexive thematic analysis to identify, evaluate, and interpret themes within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Transcripts were read and audio recordings were listened to, to ensure familiarity with the material. This process involved note-taking, coding, and marking potential themes. Direct quotations were retained to preserve participants' original expressions. Codes were then organised into broad themes, which were iteratively refined and defined to capture both semantic content and conceptual meaning. The six phases of reflexive thematic analysis (data familiarisation, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report writing) were systematically followed to enhance rigour and dependability. Ethical research guidelines were observed throughout the analysis process.

Trustworthiness and credibility

Trustworthiness is central to ensuring reliability and validity in qualitative research (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Credibility was enhanced through member checking during and after interviews, addressing potential biases, and ensuring the secure storage of recordings, thereby safeguarding interpretive accuracy (Noble and Smith, 2015). Reflexive journaling further supported confirmability by documenting my assumptions and reflections, reducing subjectivity (Rose and Johnson, 2020). Peer debriefing with colleagues provided additional verification of interpretations and helped mitigate researcher bias (Amin et al., 2020). Transferability was fostered through detailed contextualisation of participants and the study setting, enabling readers to evaluate findings' relevance to other contexts. Dependability was reinforced by maintaining a comprehensive audit trail that documented methodological decisions, ensuring transparency and traceability.

Researcher positionality

My interpretations are shaped by my positionality as a Black South African woman and a postgraduate social science researcher. My scholarly engagement with gender roles is informed by my personal experiences of societal gender expectations. A feminist intersectional framework guided the analysis, highlighting the intersections of gender, race, class, and culture. Although I shared certain social and experiential commonalities with the participants, I remained conscious of my role as a researcher and the authority it entails. Reflexive journaling and supervisory dialogue helped challenge assumptions and maintain critical reflexivity. My dual position at UKZN (as both an insider and an outsider) provided contextual access while maintaining analytical distance (Alabi, 2023). To address potential power dynamics, I conducted interviews in neutral, comfortable settings, using rapport-building strategies and open-ended questioning to encourage candid discussion.

Limitations and strengths

The study examines how students at UKZN Howard College conceptualise gender, focusing on masculinity, femininity, toxic traits, and stereotypes, while accounting for the influence of socialisation agents. The findings are specific to this context and are not intended for broad generalisation. Limitations include reliance on self-reported data, which may be subject to bias or social desirability, and the qualitative design, which does not allow for media impact quantification on gender perceptions.

Additionally, some online interviews may have constrained the depth of responses, and the use of terms such as “toxic masculinity” and “toxic femininity” may have influenced participant feedback. Despite these limitations, the study demonstrated notable strengths. It included participants from diverse faculties and backgrounds, offering a wide range of perspectives. Reflexive practices, such as journaling and peer debriefing, enhanced transparency and critical interpretation. Finally, the collection of rich personal narratives provides valuable qualitative insights into how young people negotiate gender in contemporary South Africa.

4. Findings and discussion

Toxicity, trauma, and gender label trouble

The findings revealed that almost all participants understood “toxic masculinity” and “toxic femininity” as harmful behaviours rooted in conventional gender roles. Participants typically described toxic femininity in terms of emotional manipulation, dependence, or the strategic use of sexuality, while toxic masculinity was associated with violence, dominance, and the repression of emotional expression. These conceptualisations reflect a widespread awareness of the “toxic” terminology in student discourse but reveal a tendency to frame it in individual behavioural terms rather than as a systemic phenomenon. Participants commonly viewed “toxicity” as a set of individual characteristics, while theoretical perspectives regard hegemonic masculinity as a widespread structural pattern that is ingrained within institutions and cultural norms (Connell, 1987). By focusing on individual harm, participants may overlook the role of systemic norms in maintaining unequal gender relations. Some participants reject the “toxic” label associated with masculinity, emphasising care, vulnerability, and responsibility as integral to men’s identities. These counter-voices demonstrate the fluidity of gender meanings and highlight the significance of locating student perceptions within larger discourses on gender, trauma, and power. As one of the participants, Menzi, explained: *“That’s just gender stereotyping because at some point women are very capable and vice versa. A man can take care of the family, even though he can’t bear children, but he can do what women can do except bearing children (IDI/Menzi/2023i).”*

Participants’ association of dominating male behaviours with toxicity can be explained by Connell’s (1995) idea of hegemonic masculinity. Many participants described toxic masculinity as the abuse of male privilege, where men see themselves as superior and entitled to control over women. This aligns with Yousaf, Popat, and Hunter’s (2015) assertion that toxic masculinity is reinforced by societal acceptance of extreme male traits such as dominance, toughness, and control. However, participants’ emphasis on interpersonal behaviour, such as emotional repression, abuse, or controlling tendencies, often overlooks the structural dimensions of hegemonic masculinity, such as institutionalised gender violence and systemic inequality. Toxic femininity, by contrast, emerged as a more contested and misunderstood term. Some participants view it as traditional, involving women conforming to submissive roles or prioritising pleasing men. Others view it as a form of women’s empowerment taken too far, comparing it to women positioning themselves as superior to men or rejecting male partnerships. This mirrors critiques that popular uses of “toxic femininity” often conflate assertiveness or independence with destructiveness, reflecting patriarchal discomfort with women’s autonomy (Alabi, 2025; 2020). Importantly, a few participants resisted this framing, noting that toxic femininity more accurately refers to the reinforcement of restrictive gender norms that limit women’s opportunities in education, leadership, and independence.

The South African context shaped these interpretations in notable ways. Participants’ descriptions were deeply embedded in everyday experiences of gendered cultural expectations, such as familial pressure on women to marry or bear children (as described by Lukholo), and normalised male dominance. Russo and Pirlott (2006) assert that women have often faced violence when resisting traditional gender roles, highlighting a dichotomy between men’s societal roles and women’s domestic expectations. In this context, violence served to enforce compliance among women viewed as non-conforming to the homemaker stereotype. This dynamic was echoed by Lukholo, who explained:

Traditionally for men to be masculine, they are expected to display qualities such as strength, while toxic masculinity refers to the traditional gender roles like limiting the emotions of boys and men to comfortably express their feelings such as anger and sadness. Also, men who conform to these toxic masculinity gender roles are more likely to make sexual comments or jokes to women, commit rape and pretend that they are entitled to woman’s body. Toxic femininity, on the other hand, refers to adherence to the gender roles that prevent women from being cooperative and sexually submissive, while being pleasing to men. For example, a parent will continually pressure you to have children because that’s what women should do (IDI/Lukholo/2023).

However, race, class, and sexuality also emerged as underlying factors. Black male students, for instance, reported that discussions of ‘toxic’ masculinity sometimes reinforced racialised stereotypes of aggression, whereas women from working-class backgrounds highlighted the economic pressures that perpetuate traditional gender dependencies. These insights highlight the importance of analysing student discourses on toxicity within the framework of intersectionality and structural gender norms.

Socialisation, surveillance, and gender norm architecture

The study found that participants’ gender perceptions are influenced by early socialisation processes, with family, peers, media, and educational environments being key sites for learning and reinforcing ideas about masculinity and femininity. This social constructionist view suggests that identity is formed through interaction and cultural context, rather than fixed biological traits. The findings suggest that families play a foundational role in shaping gender identity and expectations. Participants’ experiences highlight how gender ideologies are often passed down through generations, with parents, whether

consciously or unconsciously, reinforcing gendered behaviours and roles through their interactions with children. This supports existing literature, which emphasises the family as a key site for early gender socialisation (Undelikwo et al., 2019). One of the participants stated the following: *"Firstly, I copied from my mom and also from just watching cartoons seeing princesses, they showed feminine traits such as kindness and humanity. So that's how I also learned how to act feminine (IDI/Luncedo/2023)."* The statement highlights the subtle and overt ways mothers convey gender messages, which children internalise and translate into behaviour. The socialisation process, as described by Poole (2023), is the most salient aspect, as it involves patterning thoughts, feelings, or actions after a model, as evidenced by statements like *"I copied from my mom and also from just watching cartoons, seeing princesses (IDI/Luncedo/2023)."* Male participants also highlighted how their upbringing reinforced distinctly "masculine" behaviours. For example, Sbonga explained:

Age of 15. My behaviour was very good because of the way I was brought up; I was told how a man behaves. I was wearing boys' clothes, such as shorts and trousers. When it comes to toys, I never had girls' toys, I always had boys' toys such as cars, and aeroplanes because girls play with dolls. This taught me that there are certain ways of behaving (IDI/Sbonga/2023).

His account illustrates that masculinity is taught and enforced through daily practices, such as clothing and play, which distinguish acceptable from unacceptable behaviours. This aligns with social role theory and highlights how ordinary practices produce and regulate gendered identities over time (Eagly and Wood, 2012). Participants also highlighted how schools shaped their sense of "appropriate" gendered behaviour and promoted gendered divisions through specific subjects, such as Life Orientation. Both Biggy and Mila recalled that lessons on "proper behaviour" reinforced expectations of how boys and girls should act. As Biggy explained: *"Oh ... during the time we were studying life orientation, we were taught about gender roles, gender stereotypes and all those things; that a man should be like this and a woman should be like this, so we learned all those things from our Life Orientation teachers (IDI/Biggy/2023)."* This suggests that teachers conveyed gender norms through the curriculum, leading students to adopt different ideals for masculinity and femininity. Boys were encouraged to value strength and assertiveness, while girls were directed towards compliance and care. This reflects social role theory and highlights how "Life Orientation" served as an active space for the construction and regulation of gender identities.

The study found that participants' understandings of gender roles were strongly shaped by early and ongoing socialisation within families, schools, peer groups, media, and popular culture. Family emerged as the primary site of initial gender learning, where participants recalled being socialised into differentiated expectations. Girls were encouraged to adopt nurturing, relational roles, while boys were encouraged towards assertiveness and leadership. These patterns reflect the process identified by Marecek, Crawford, and Popp (2004) and Crawford (2005), where familial contexts act as the earliest transmitters of gendered values. Schools reinforced these norms through both explicit curricula and hidden cultural expectations (Donovan et al., 2023). Participants referenced school subjects, such as Home Economics being associated with girls and Wood-shop with boys, which implicitly taught gendered divisions of labour. This aligns with Lorber's (2018) observation that educational environments function as powerful institutions for reproducing gender ideologies.

Peers served as another key mechanism for enforcing gender norms. Participants described how peer pressure shaped behaviour, dress, and social participation, reinforcing stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. Popular culture and media amplified these constructions by circulating idealised images of gender, often linked to beauty standards, romantic relationships, and success. These findings align with Mwangi, Gachahi, and Ndung'u's (2019) assertion that individuals in social contexts model and reward conformity to gender expectations. Moreover, these findings align with the social constructionist perspective (Berger and Luckmann, 1991), which posits that gender is produced and maintained through ongoing social interaction and cultural practice. As Connell and Wood (2005) argue, such processes not only shape personal identity but also reproduce structural gender inequalities.

Stereotypes, selfhood, and recognition politics

Gender stereotypes have a profound impact on how students perceive themselves, their aspirations, and their relationships with peers. For instance, stereotypes such as the belief that men should be assertive or that women should prioritise beauty create implicit boundaries around acceptable self-expression, influencing students' self-perception. These expectations manifest both in terms of individual selfhood and in the dynamics of interpersonal power relations.

Self-effects: identity, emotion, and aspiration

Several participants noted that stereotypes significantly impacted their inner lives, with men feeling pressured to avoid vulnerability, leading to anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. Women mentioned the pressure to appear beautiful and nurturing, which hindered their pursuit of personal and professional goals. One participant, Mila, suggested that these stereotypes might be losing their influence: *"... In these times, not really. If we look at it in today's times, because nowadays are not the same as the old days, maybe looking at the old times yes, but now, no. It really doesn't matter, but the fact remains that I'm a woman, and someone else is a man, that I cannot change (IDI/Mila/2023)."*

Relational effects: dependence, leadership, and control

Despite Mila's position, almost all participants concurred that harmful stereotypes perpetuate inequality. Women were often seen as financially dependent on men, leading some men to perceive this dependence as a claim to authority in relationships. This behaviour undermines women's confidence and autonomy, discouraging them from asserting themselves or resisting abuse. Consequently, such stereotypes reinforce unequal power dynamics between genders and restrict women's opportunities to shape their own futures. Participants highlighted that women often hesitate to report abuse due to societal expectations of submission, which limits their self-advocacy and maintains harmful power dynamics. It was noted that such

dynamics also inhibit women's leadership and decision-making roles, as men are traditionally viewed as the rightful leaders. Additionally, women's financial dependence on men contributes to oppression, restricting their opportunities to effect societal change.

Media as a reinforcing mechanism

Most participants felt that the media inaccurately portrayed both women and men, with only a few believing the representations were realistic. Accurate portrayals were said to depend on household experiences and the type of media consumed. Mila and Kiara noted that accuracy varied across platforms, while others emphasised that media distort everyday realities.

Uhm....it depends...which media we're looking into, uhm...what... what are we looking at for that day, but some do, some don't. Sometimes they....they change, one day they can say "a woman is a rock", then tomorrow say "you sometimes forget that your role is to give birth and do this, and do this..." (IDI/Mila/2023).

Not always, to some extent yes, uhm but not always because it depends also from the household like if a woman is coming from a female-dominated household, they are going to be more dominating so they often take on uhm what roles men are portrayed in (IDI/Kiara/2023).

No, like I said... no, it's not accurate. Reason being... uhm... there are things that you watch on TV, like you see that even if it's being done by a man, but my mentality will tell me that even if...no matter what, you can't do that because here they... sometimes they exaggerate a person's masculinity.... they show it in a way that it can be able to attract viewers, right? So, the more it attracts viewers, they can't use exactly how a m... a man is really is cause if I watch TV and I see someone like me, busy... like they make a movie with someone like me, I wouldn't watch that movie. Because it's not interesting. But if they portray in a way they portray it, like they use the things they use, they put... they show this person as if the thing he does you can also do, but if you can work to a certain point. But still, like...ehh they portray someone with masculinity just to attract the viewer's attention that "I also want to be like this". If they portray femininity, in the same way they can do it in a way that a woman can say "If I could be like this" or portray femininity that if I can have money like this person, find someone who will take care of me like this person, you see? Things like that (IDI/Buhle/2023).

Several participants indicated that media portrayals misrepresented both genders. Nikko criticised the prevalence of strong, heroic male roles, arguing that they foster unrealistic expectations and overlook men's diverse experiences. Buhle added that media masculinity is exaggerated for viewer attraction rather than reflecting reality. Similarly, many women expressed feeling limited by portrayals of female characters as homemakers or caregivers, which do not align with their aspirations for independence and leadership.

So, basically in society like, a woman can do as much as a man can do, vice-versa. Not everything, but most things, and also there is no uhm gender, like men and women, which is better. Both are equal, uhm, there's no... there shouldn't be such like such a thing as, uhm... like a strong character like a male leading role, or like a female like you know... who's sitting in the back, both are... both have that talent and both have goals instead, to... you know, be equal, so... yeah (Nikko, 2023).

This pattern reflects Eagly and Wood's (2012) observation regarding media stereotypes, where men are often depicted as powerful but morally flawed, while women are frequently relegated to domestic or supportive roles. However, participants acknowledged signs of progress in gender representations, citing Thuso Mbedu's leading role in *The Woman King* as a positive example of change. Buhle highlighted that television portrayals of masculinity are frequently exaggerated, leading to unrealistic expectations regarding success and behaviours. In contrast, Biggy observed positive trends, noting increased visibility of women in significant roles in film and television, exemplified by Thuso Mbedu's lead role in *The Woman King*. These insights illustrate that students perceive media representations as both constraining and, occasionally, evolving. Overall, participants described media depictions of men and women as inconsistent with their own understandings of gender. They argued that such portrayals reinforced inequality by presenting men as perpetually dominant and women as confined to caregiving or supportive roles. Several emphasised that this mismatch harms both genders in everyday life: men were not always as powerful as depicted, and women were capable of independence and leadership beyond traditional roles. Some participants stressed that men, too, could be vulnerable and expressive, while women could succeed in domains traditionally reserved for men. Yet, few participants felt that certain portrayals did resonate, reflecting ongoing social change and movements toward gender equality.

Despite these nuances, participants agreed that the media often failed to capture the diversity of gender identities and expressions, instead perpetuating narrow stereotypes of what it means to be male or female (Shamim and Rafek, 2024). This underrepresentation connects directly to questions of recognition. As Amer and Obradovic (2022) argue, social recognition is central to how individuals form a sense of self. When media and cultural institutions reproduce reductive stereotypes, they restrict the range of identities that can be valued and understood. Participants' reflections illustrate how such misrecognition limits their ability to craft and perform gender identities on their own terms, reinforcing boundaries set by broader cultural norms.

Disrupting the binary: student reflections on change and continuity

Media reform: contesting stereotypes

Participants highlighted the media's pivotal role in reinforcing and contesting gender norms, citing the need to change media representations to disrupt entrenched binaries. They argued that depictions of toxic masculinity and femininity risk normalising harmful behaviours and influencing future generations' perceptions of gender. As Menzi explained: "*What is portrayed in the media can negatively affect people because they tend to conform to what they see (IDI/Menzi/2023)*," emphasizing the perceived connection between representation and the perpetuation of restrictive norms. Participants highlighted everyday examples of how these stereotypes manifest. Media portrayals suggest that women are primarily responsible for domestic work, reinforcing the notion that men should not engage in such tasks, as "women will cook and wash for them" in marriage. Participants associated these depictions with wider gender inequalities, emphasising the necessity to confront narratives that normalise male dominance and female subordination.

Household socialisation: shaping attitudes at home

A minority of participants questioned the effectiveness of targeting media portrayals. They argued that transformation is more likely to occur by addressing toxic gender attitudes learned at home rather than through media reform. Melo expressed confusion, acknowledging that while some stereotypes in the media are problematic, others reflect enduring social realities and therefore may not require the same level of challenge.

I think it could be both necessary and not necessary to challenge gender stereotypes in the media. I think gender stereotypes to a certain extent because they stem from somewhat of a truth, they're not completely false. I think it is the proportion of it where they take it out of context or exaggerate it that should be controlled but in terms of overall gender stereotypes, I think for the stability of society, socially and culturally, some gender stereotypes are valid and do stand (IDIMelo/2023).

This perspective aligns with research indicating that gender roles are reinforced through everyday socialisation, shaped by cultural standards, family expectations, and early experiences (Dicke, Safavian and Eccles, 2019). For instance, fostering more gender-equitable attitudes can involve encouraging boys to engage in traditionally feminine tasks or promoting equitable household labour; however, such changes depend on consistent social reinforcement within households.

Role reversals

Some literature examines role reversals in caregiving and income generation, highlighting instances where men assume primary caregiving responsibilities while women earn income (Pinho et al., 2021). Research suggests that these role reversals can result in varied relational outcomes, but these outcomes should not be interpreted as causal. For instance, Vink et al. (2022) found that couples reversing traditional roles may experience differing levels of satisfaction and face specific challenges, which are influenced by broader cultural and contextual factors rather than direct causality. Traditional expectations of men as providers and women as caregivers continue to shape relationship dynamics and household negotiations in diverse contexts, including post-apartheid South Africa.

Media and social structures

Participants' reflections indicate that disrupting gender binaries requires addressing both media and household socialisation. Media reform can challenge visible stereotypes, while interventions in household, cultural, and institutional settings tackle the deeper reinforcement of gender norms in daily life. As argued by Bina (2020:4), transformation necessitates a critique of harmful cultural messages and an understanding of the broader systems that perpetuate them. Students suggest that efforts to challenge the binary must operate on multiple levels, targeting both representation and the social structures that sustain inequality.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The study highlights how university students internalise and perpetuate traditional gender norms, associating masculinity with authority and strength, and femininity with caregiving and attractiveness. These beliefs are not merely personal but are deeply embedded in cultural narratives, particularly those shaped by media representations. Students' difficulties in challenging or reinterpreting these norms reflect the structural nature of gendered socialisation within higher education. The persistence of binary gender frameworks underscores the need for universities to move beyond superficial inclusivity and critically address how gendered power dynamics are embedded in everyday practices, discourses, and institutional cultures. To create truly equitable learning environments, universities should incorporate critical gender and media literacy into first-year orientation programmes, enabling students to critically examine the social construction of gender and its intersections with race, class, and sexuality. Expanding this learning beyond the campus through residence-based and community-linked dialogues (engaging families and local leaders) can promote a shared responsibility for cultural transformation.

Additionally, staff and faculty training should address the distinction between structural forms of gender inequality, such as policy biases or curricular exclusions, and interpersonal harms, including microaggressions or inequities in relationships. Student support services should focus on the emotional and relational aspects of gendered experiences, encouraging men to challenge restrictive emotional norms and supporting women in addressing power imbalances in social and academic settings. Peer-led initiatives can offer safe, reflective spaces for solidarity and dialogue. Finally, regular campus climate assessments using an intersectional lens, combined with qualitative engagement with non-binary and gender-diverse students, can provide

nuanced data for policymaking. These measures will enable universities to design evidence-based, inclusive interventions that not only address gender disparities but also actively transform the social conditions that perpetuate them.

Declarations:

- **Originality Statement:** I, Sindisiwe ZUNGU, confirm that this manuscript is original, has not been previously published, and is not under review elsewhere.
- **Author Approval Statement:** I, Sindisiwe ZUNGU, confirm that I have read and approved the submitted manuscript.
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