

Girls' Constructions of Love in Dating Relationships: A Narrative Study in a Rural KwaZulu-Natal Secondary School

by

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RESEARCHER'S DECLARATION

I, **Praisewell Nonhlanhla Dube,** declare that:

i. the research reported in this thesis, except where otherwise indicated, is my original research;

ii. this thesis has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university

iii. this thesis does not contain other persons' data, pictures, graphs, or other information unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from such persons

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Student: Praisewell Nonhlanhla Dube

STATEMENT BY SUPERVISOR

This thesis is submitted with my approval.



Prof. Relebohile Moletsane

ABSTRACT

Premised on the understanding that adolescent girls tend to construct love in ways that make them vulnerable to gender-based violence (GBV), this thesis reports on a narrative inquiry that addressed the research question: How might rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships influence their vulnerability to gender-based violence? Conducted in a rural secondary school in the province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) in South Africa, the study involved 23 girls aged 13-20 across grades 8-11. The study was located within the interpretivism paradigm and framed by social constructionism as the analytical lens. To generate data, the study used three participatory data generation methods: letter writing, collage-making, and artefact retrieval. Data were analysed using both narrative analysis and thematic analysis. Firstly, the findings highlight six discourses of love that dominate rural schoolgirls' constructions of love, namely: (1) love as a beautiful feeling; (2) love as material care; (3) love as being cherished, belonging, and emotional well-being; (4) love as loyalty and jealousy; (5) love as virginity; and (6) love as sex and childbearing. Secondly, they indicate that the socio-economic context intersects with oppressive systems of power such as unequal gender norms, social class, and patriarchy, and the participants' understandings and performance of femininity. Notably, the participants in this study demonstrated significant agency as they proposed various strategies for addressing GBV in their community. However, some of the strategies they identified seemed to be informed by a desire for further violence, including a proposal to have perpetrators of GBV killed. This thesis concludes that unless we understand GBV as multidimensional and complex, and as produced and reproduced within a particular social and gender order and specific gender regimes characterised by unequal gender norms and endemic violence, the aggression that we seek to address might become entrenched in communities. Thus, interventions that solicit young people's voices on contextually relevant and peaceful strategies, including comprehensive sexuality education, are critical if we are to realise effective GBV prevention and ultimately, its elimination in all spaces.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to two extra-special persons in my life whose untimely deaths prevented them from witnessing the confirmation of the Doctoral title on me. These two special women who shared my dream and helped me to reach it are my mother, Mgidi, and my mother-in-law, Isabel Mhlongo. Both were pillars of unending support in my pursuit of advanced education. Despite the time it has taken me to reach this point, I am proud that I finally attained the dream the three of us shared. These special mothers will always be adored and remembered for being a source of motivation and support throughout all my endeavours. It was always their dream that I should not suffer the way they had under the oppressive patriarchal gender order and gender regimes. Although they are not here to witness this special, emotional moment, I am extremely happy and proud that I finally crossed the finishing line.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

DH	Departmental Head
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
STIs	Sexually Transmitted Infections
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
KZN	KwaZulu-Natal
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
PVM	Participatory Visual Methodology

CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

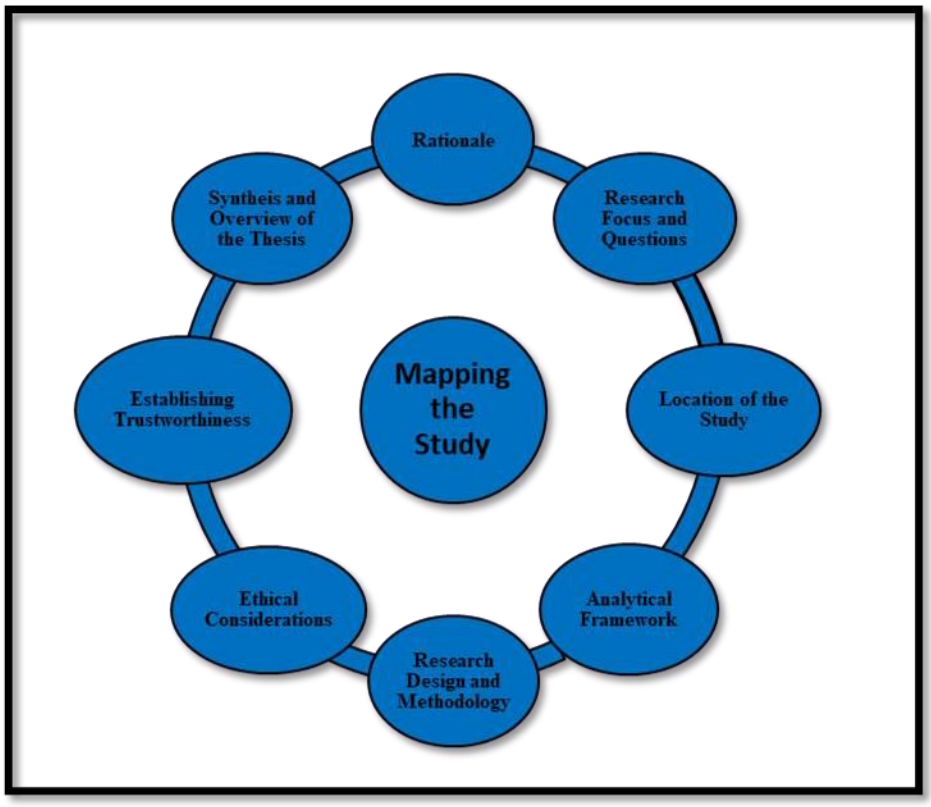
The study that is reported in this thesis aimed to examine schoolgirls' constructions of love in dating relationships. The study was conducted in these young peoples' environment around a rural secondary school in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The study was premised on the understanding that, in the context of unequal gender norms, teenage girls tend to understand and construct notions of love in particular ways, and often to the point that their constructions of love often make them vulnerable to gender-based violence (GBV) (Parker et al., 2015). For instance, a study conducted by Bittar and Nakano (2017) in Brazil found that adolescents tended to associate love with suffering, particularly as they viewed violence as a version of love. When they embraced this perspective, they tended to view a relationship in which the couple did not argue or fight as 'loveless'. Moreover, many adolescents believe that being jealous is a form of love. Bhana (2018) affirms this notion as her study, which was conducted in the Inanda area near Durban, South Africa, found that GBV was often explained as an expression of jealousy and therefore of love. Bhana explains that when men or boys do not have the means to impress girls financially, they sometimes resort to violence as "an expression of power" (p. 96). In some relationships, girls and young women construct love in relation to access to money and, when they adopt this notion, they tend to fall prey to older men (commonly referred to as 'sugar daddies') who exploit them sexually (Bhana, 2018; Groes-Green, 2013). The fact that young people tend to have diverse perspectives of love often translates into conflict within dating relationships (Furphy, 2012; Karandashev, 2015). For example, in a relationship where one partner views the expression of love as sex and the other views love as purity and virginity, conflict may arise between the two.

Research relationships have a long-term impact on people's lives (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021). It is against this background that the current study explored how schoolgirls understood and constructed love within their dating relationships, particularly in a setting where GBV was rife.

This chapter maps the study and introduces the thesis. As Figure 1.1 below illustrates, the chapter is organised into eight sections.

1

Figure 1. 1: ***Mapping the Study***



1.2 Rationale for the Study

My interest in exploring schoolgirls' constructions of love against the background of GBV in a rural setting was originally triggered by my own origins and early socialisation experiences. My mother grew up in the deep rural district of Ngoje (commonly known as Louwsberg) where she was abandoned by her mother at birth. Bushin et al. (2007) assert that, due to the circumstances that abandoned and rejected young people in rural settings find themselves in, they have "no option but to take on the role of worker at a young age" (p. 78). It is common in rural settings that young girls drop out of school early to do care work at home or to find paid work, often as domestic workers (Beazley, 2007; Carpena-Méndez, 2007; Hunter & Rinehrberg, 2007). When this happens, these "children perform a myriad of duties, sometimes at the expense of their schooling" (Hunter & Riney-Kehrberg, 2007, p. 62). Similarly, due to abandonment, my mother and other children in the same situation (Kifle, 2002) had to leave school in the third grade at the age of 12 years to find work as domestic workers.

It was while she was working as a domestic worker in Durban that my mother met a man 20 years her senior. It was while she was working as a domestic worker in Durban that my mother met a man 20 years

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her senior. Worth noting is that in various communities, the socio-cultural context continues to influence girls' constructions of love. For instance, poor socio-economic conditions often expose girls to age-disparate relationships where they have a limited control about whether and how to have sex (Bhana, 2018; Groes-Green, 2013; Mkhwanazi, 2011; Selikow & Mbulaheni, 2013). This in turn exposes them to SITs, including HIV as well as unwanted teenage pregnancy. To illustrate, I was born out of wedlock, which was regarded as taboo in those days. This is because when my own mother fell pregnant with me, my father abandoned her. Yet, she bore the brunt of the stigma and shame, and my father continued to live his life uninterrupted. As Bhana (2017, p. 255) avers, "strong sanctions were placed on premarital pregnancy", arguing that this was and remains a situation that is "frowned upon". Unfortunately, my mother could not raise me at her employers' residence, and she was forced to leave me with her aunt in the deep rural district of Ndwedwe, which is located on the outskirts of Durban. Leaving children with a relative was common practice due to the continuing migrant labour system, which was a legacy of apartheid (Ansell & Van Blerk, 2007). My mother's situation was not unique, as affirmed by Jewkes and Morrell (2012) and Leclerc-Madlala (2008) who state that it is the norm for young women to date older men in the southern African region.

When I was seven years old, my mother married a man from Mtubatuba, which is also located in a deep rural area more than 200 km from Durban. She moved there and took me with her to live in her in-laws' homestead. I was socialised in this rural environment to accept that a girl was born, grew up, reached puberty, fell in love with a man, and then got married. Many girls in this community got married at a young age, and here "cultural values such as virginity were prized and celebrated through the payment of *ilobolo,* or bride price" (Bhana, 2017, p. 255).

When I was 12 years old, my family and I moved from Mtubatuba to Esikhawini township where life was quite different. I was introduced to the Christian way of life and church became my new 'socialisation agent', as Van Eck (2015) describes it. Here I was taught that a girl had to adhere to the Christian way of life, which meant abstaining from any dating relationship until a man who loved her chose her, got engaged to her, and married her. Bell (2007) corroborates this custom in a study that was conducted in three rural districts in Uganda, where the communities believed that:

> …boyfriend-girlfriend relationships [were] unacceptable, whether or not relationships [were] sexual…[as they were deemed] destructive and [leading] to promiscuity. All parents [agreed] that the stage when a friendship [developed] into a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship [was] forbidden until they [had] left school and [were] ready to marry (p. 181).

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This notion of love and marriage was also prevalent in other parts of the Western world, such as in England where, as early as the 12th century, Christianity influenced people's understandings of love (Karandashev, 2015). As I look back with some sadness, I now believe I was a victim of this culture of either abstinence or early marriage, and I was only 18 years old when I entered matrimony (see Figure 1.2 below).

Figure 1. 2: ***Getting Married when I was 18 years old***



Leclerc-Madlala (2008) avers that, in Southern Africa, it is a norm for young women to get married young as men claim that a woman is never too young for marriage. Thus, once girls reach puberty, they are regarded as sexually mature and are "considered to be ready for courtship and marriage" (S22).

A second interest in schoolgirls' constructions of love regardless of GBV stemmed from my teaching experiences. I have been a teacher and later a principal for 27 years in the South African public education system. others, early dropout from school due to early marriages, unplanned pregnancies, and GBV in their dating relationships and in the community. As principal of a secondary school, I witnessed girls dropping out of school for these reasons, and it saddened me. School dropout has a detrimental effect on girls, particularly as "socioeconomic factors in South Africa...permit male privilege and violence" (Bhana, 2018, p. 37). Therefore, leaving school prematurely implies that girls and young women are compelled to engage in long-term dependence on men, and their vulnerability to GBV is often exacerbated by their youthful relationships (Dako-Gyeke et al., 2019). In my informal conversations with girls over the years, they often declared that they were in love with the boys who were the cause of their plight. It was obvious that unequal gender

norms and GBV influenced their constructions of love, and these led to unprotected sex, unwanted pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among girls. Hence, my interest in their plight led to my in-depth inquiry and the scholarly investigation that is reported in this thesis. In essence, informed by my experiences and observations, I felt compelled to investigate how schoolgirls understand love and dating relationships.

Research has affirmed that the exposure and vulnerability of young people to violence are severe concerns not only in South Africa, but globally, as their health outcomes and future prospects are affected (Bhana, 2018; Furman et al., 1999; Giddens, 1997; Wood et al., 2007). The violence most young girls experience is gender-based as power relations are commonly negatively skewed against girls and young women. For example, a study conducted by Bagnol and Mariano (2008) in Mozambique found that women suffered physically and emotionally because of genital mutilation. The latter study highlights the unending battles women fight to protect themselves from STIs and unwanted pregnancies as men refuse to use condoms during sexual intercourse. For men, different expectations and social norms govern relationships and behaviour (Amin et al., 2018).

GBV also affects girls' future prospects, as affirmed by Bittar and Nakano (2017) who studied adolescents in Brazil. The latter authors established that GBV left lasting scars such as "emotional disturbances, low self-esteem, depression, anger, anxiety, suicidal ideation, school failure, substance abuse, eating [behaviour] disorders, post-traumatic stress, and risky sexual [behaviours]" (p. 2). GBV also results in girls dropping out of school due to unwanted pregnancies, STIs, particularly the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (Gervais et al., 2009). A study in rural Tanzania reported harassment by teachers of girls who fell pregnant, encouraging them "to drop out of school and begin working" (Klocker, 2007, p. 89). Bhana and Mcambi (2013) corroborate this finding, stating that South African girls are often forced to drop out of school because of pregnancy.

Girls and young women in rural communities are particularly vulnerable to GBV due to the numerous and complex challenges they are exposed to in this environment (Milligan, 2014; Panelli et al., 2007). Factors that contribute to girls' and young women's vulnerability to GBV are unequal gender norms in and around their communities. For example, a study conducted in a rural district in Kenya established that boys tend to be sent to the best schools while girls are denied opportunities to learn (Milligan, 2014). Similarly, the study conducted by Mabala and Kamazima (1995) in Tanzania attributes the prioritisation of boys in the educational sphere to the mindset that girls do not need to be educated beyond the basics as they will

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eventually get married and join their husbands' families. In South Africa, a study conducted by Zondi (2010) in the rural Zwelibomvu community found that, while girls were expected to be at home by a particular time of the day, boys could arrive home any time.

The empirical literature cited above has indicated that girls' constructions of love have a bearing on their exposure to GBV. This seems particularly true for girls in rural settings, where living in such contexts affects the choices available to them and also adds to their vulnerability (Moletsane et al., 2015). Girls' exposure to GBV that emanates from their dating relationships further impacts their prospects. It was on this basis that I wanted to study girls' constructions of love and the impact of GBV on their dating relationships and future prospects. I wanted to listen to girls' voices and their narratives of their perceptions of love, and I wanted to explore the factors that influence girls' constructions of love and experiences of GBV in their dating relationships. I envisaged that the findings might contribute to addressing the global concern of girls' vulnerability to GBV, particularly as it is associated with adolescents' dating relationships and their prospects for their adult lives, which include their access to and success in education.

1.3 Research Collaboration

This study was part of a larger project titled *Transnational gender and rurality action network (T-GRAN)* that was initiated by Moletsane and Gillander Gådin (2015-2021). South African scholars thus collaborated with scholars in Sweden to produce a manuscript emanating from this project, titled: *Intersections of rurality and gender in relation to violence against girls and young women.* Employing participatory visual methodology (PVM), T-GRAN documented the perspectives of girls and young women in rural contexts concerning GBV and its intersections with rurality, socio-economic and educational conditions, and physical factors. In addition, suitable methodology was used to engage participants to share their understandings and perspectives of the challenges and solutions to GBV in their respective rural communities. Related research that reviewed suggests that women's and girls' understandings of love often tend to put them at risk of GBV (Bhana, 2018; Bittar & Nakano, 2017; Parker et al., 2015; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021). Against this background, the current study focused on rural schoolgirls' understandings of love and its association with GBV. The study took cognisance of well-documented instances of GBV against young women in South Africa, particularly in rural communities and schools.

As alluded to above, girls and young women tend to have multiple understandings of love within dating relationships. Influenced by unequal gender norms, these understandings tend to make them more

vulnerable to GBV generally, and to sexual violence in particular. Thus, located within the larger T-Gran project, this study aimed to understand rural schoolgirls' constructions of love within dating relationships as well as the factors that serve as drivers of their notions and vulnerability to GBV.

1.4 Main Research Question and Key Questions

The main research question the study posed was: *How might rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships influence their vulnerability to gender-based violence?*

Two key research questions were also posed:

1. *How do rural schoolgirls understand love in dating relationships?*
2. *What factors influence rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships?*

The study was premised on two assumptions: We will only understand how girls construct love when we understand: (1) what forces influence their constructions of love in dating relationships; and (2) how these constructions of love influence their lives. When we understand these key factors, we can offer support to traumatised girls and young women and curb GBV which is detrimental to their well-being. Furthermore, addressing and answering these questions in a scholarly study will add to the literature pool that addresses the global concern of GBV against girls and young women (Connell, 2014; Jiménez-Picón et al., 2023; Wood et al., 2007).

1.5 Location of the Study

This study nearby, this village is generally characterised by high unemployment rates and poverty (Dhlodhlo, 2010; Mandeni Municipality, 2020). There is also "limited to no facilities or infrastructural services" (Mandeni Municipality, 2020, p. 7), which means lack of access to basic services (Dhlodhlo, 2010). Added to these challenges is a very high crime rate in the community, and maintaining safety and security is among the municipality's main concerns (Mandeni Municipality, 2020).

The school enrols learners from grades 8 to 12. As a reflection of the socio-economic context in which it is located, the school is poorly resourced. At the time of data generation, it had a learner enrolment of 1 200. These learners were accommodated in 25 classrooms, some of which were overcrowded. It had 36 teaching staff and 5 support staff members. Although 96% of the Jeqeza village population is African (Mandeni Municipality, 2020), the school enrols 100% of this population group. The municipality reports that the majority of community members "cannot read and write and are not numerate [and experience] food insecurity, malnutrition, declining life expectancy, [and] an increase in sickness and deaths related to preventable diseases" (Mandeni Municipality, 2020, p. 18). The school has high numbers of HIV-infected

and affected learners. Some learners come from either female-headed or child-headed households in the area.

1.6 Overview of the Analytical Framework

Recognising that knowledge is socially constructed (Andrews, 2012; Kinnunen, 2022; Rorty, 2009; Stam, 2002) and that all "phenomena [including love] are socially constructed" (Edley, 2001, p. 433), I chose the social constructionism theory as the analytical lens through which I would view the data. Social constructionism holds that how one views reality depends on shared meanings that result from socialisation. These meanings are prone to change from individual to individual and are contextual. It is on this premise that social constructionism challenges "most of our common-sense knowledge of ourselves and the world we live in" (Galbin, 2014, p. 83). By questioning taken-for-granted knowledge, social constructionism advocates inquiries into how individuals make sense of reality. I therefore explored girls' multiple perspectives of love in dating relationships. By analysing the girls' stories (N=23) through a social constructionist theoretical lens, I aimed to honour the participants' multiple perspectives of love in dating relationships that they shared with me.

Additionally, by drawing on previous research that utilised the social construction of gender (Agrawal, 2008; Connell, 1987; Connell, 2012; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005;Lorber, 1994, 2000), femininities (Hussein, 2005; Shabane, 2011; Wiebesiek, 2021), and girlhood (Kinnunen, 2022), I acknowledge that the girls' meaning-making would be influenced by dominant gender norms in their communities. To augment the findings that were premised on social constructionism, I also drew on the social constructionist theory of gender as advanced by Connell (1995), which posits that gender is socially constructed and relational. In our everyday lives, informed by cultural norms, meanings, expectations, and relations, gender is an organising principle of the overall social order that is (Lorber, 1994). From this perspective, gender identities, institutional beliefs and norms are all context-specific rather pre-determined or fixed. Critical of the common-sense view of reality, the social constructionist theory of gender holds that, as the agents of socialisation (e.g., parents, adults, peers, the media, schools, and others) "create and reinforce expectations about how men and women should behave" (Hussein, 2005, p. 59), they perpetuate the gender order and gender regimes that tend to be taken for granted, to the extent that these regimes are normalised and remain unquestioned (Agrawal, 2008; Connell, 1987; Connell, 2012; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Lorber, 1994, 2000). These gender regimes include inequality between men and women which has been institutionalised (Walby, 2020). Consequently, as I analysed factors that influenced the participants'

constructions of love, I was always critical of the gender norms at their disposal.

1.7 Overview of the Research Design and Methodology

This study was located within the interpretivist paradigm. This means that informed by this paradigm, ontologically, the way I viewed reality (Mack, 2010) was that there would be multiple truths (Taylor & Medina, 2013) and "meanings of [the] phenomenon [for] people who experienced it as well as multiple interpretations of the data" (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 130). Epistemologically (i.e., how one acquires knowledge) (Mack, 2010, p. 5), the interpretivist paradigm holds that "reality is socially constructed" (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 131). This is because the construction of phenomena is influenced by "multiple everyday life interactions" between two and among people (Belli et al., 2010, p. 258). Therefore, I explored the ways in which schoolgirls constructed their social reality of love in dating relationships. The study thus allowed me to learn *together with* the girls about their notions of love and how these meanings shaped their everyday lives.

In line with the interpretivist paradigm, the study employed a qualitative approach. This research approach was chosen to understand "the essential nature of [the] phenomenon within a particular context" (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p. 195), which in this case was a rural school. I was also able to deepen my understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon under focus (Bittar & Nakano, 2017). I drew from Kinnunen's (2022, p. 53) understanding that "[b]lack [girls'] freedom of speech has been more limited than [that of] others throughout history". I therefore wanted to address the concern that South African history had institutionalised the silencing of the voices of girls and women (Hofmeyr, 1994; Murray, 2017).

Qualitative studies focus on "participants' personal meanings [that enable] the voices of people who have been historically silenced or marginalized" to be heard (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p. 199). I therefore provided opportunities for the girls to freely express their perspectives on their constructions of love and to give them a safe space to voice both different and similar views (even to mine) with a certain level of safety. The qualitative approach also allowed me "the flexibility to probe initial participant responses – that is, to ask why or how [thereby allowing the participants] to elaborate on their answers" (Mack et al., 2005, p. 4).

Based on the premise that "people are storytellers who lead storied lives" (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p. 197), the study adopted a narrative inquiry approach to enable the girls to recount their lived experiences and personal narratives of love. Narrative inquiry is defined as "the study of the ways humans experience the

world" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2), and it enables honest and authentic narratives of these encounters in the form of stories (Hamilton et al., 2008). By engaging in the living, telling, and retelling of stories from several perspectives, a narrative inquirer can make sense of the phenomenon under study (Clandinin et al., 2007). I had recruited 23 schoolgirls and I, together with the girls, explored their narrative accounts of the nature of the love they experienced in their dating relationships.

In the data generation process, I aligned myself with scholars who argue for "a young person-centred research methodology" (Bhana, 2018, p. 21) and the use of "good, reliable, youth-friendly resources" to generate responses that were directly provided by the girl participants (Parker et al., 2015, p. 3). Data generation therefore involved participatory research methods to enable a conducive research environment for the girls so that they readily shared their experiences and understandings of love and relationships (Clark, 2010). Scholars have argued that the expression of emotions does not always rely on spoken language alone (De la Rey & Owens, 1998; Rogers, 2007). Rogers (2007) advises that people should be allowed to communicate their experiences in any medium they may be comfortable with. Heeding this advice, I used arts-based methods, namely collage-making, artefact retrieval, and letter writing as my data generation instruments. Giddens (1997) advises that one should "combine several methods in a single piece of research, using each to supplement and check on the others" (pp. 548-549). I therefore employed multiple data generation methods (see Appendix A to Appendix F for both English and IsiZulu versions). These were supplemented by one-on-one, unstructured face-to-face member check interviews (see Appendix G and Appendix H for both English and IsiZulu versions).

As discussed earlier, data analysis was informed by social constructionism, which meant that I had to honour my participants' views of reality rather than reproduce an uncritical common-sense view of how they might understand love in dating relationships. Moreover, I could not assume that they would view the phenomenon of love the way I had done four decades before when I was their age. I always kept in mind that my co-researchers (i.e., the participants) were experts of their own lived experiences and in their story-telling (Caine et al., 2013). However, I still had to pay attention to how the prevailing 'taken for-granted' views could impact the girls' sense of reality. This called for a robust analysis of the girls' stories, and I made sure that I was guided by the tenets of the social constructionist theory. Thus, to generated data from the field texts, I utilised narrative analysis. I needed to be aware of the fact that when individuals tell their stories, they often "do not present them in a chronological sequence" (Creswell, 2007, p. 56). Therefore, scholarly narrative analysis was my responsibility as the researcher, and I had to navigate this role carefully

and sensitively in the re-storying process when I had to provide links among ideas. To do this, I had to rely on re-storying the girls' accounts by re-organising the stories from the different data sources we had generated and position them in a framework that made sense (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Creswell, 2007; Nadar, 2014). The data sources were the girls' letters, collages, and visual representations of artefacts. These data sources were supplemented with transcripts of the recordings of the discussions of their visual artefacts and of the unstructured face-to-face member-check interviews that had been conducted. I recorded field notes and kept a research journal throughout the data generation and analysis processes, and these also served as rich data sources (Mitchell, 2011). The first part of the data analysis phase thus entailed my reconstruction of the girls' stories of love using these data sources. In the second phase of the data analysis process, I employed thematic analysis to analyse the 23 stories that I had developed through the re-storying process.

1.8 Ethical Considerations

Throughout this study, I was mindful of the fact that the participants, or "objects of inquiry…were human beings, [and] extreme care [had to] be taken to avoid any harm to them" (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 372). The first issue I considered was the possible marginalisation of any of the 23 participants as withdrawal could be imposed by intersecting factors such as age, gender, race, and rural background (Piper & Sikes, 2010). Moreover, linked to their marginal position in society, the girls were likely to be vulnerable to GBV. To ensure their safety, I maintained their confidentiality throughout the research process. First, I requested the girls to always keep everything we discussed confidential. Secondly, I informed them of their right to anonymity and asked them to choose their own pseudonyms and that of the school. Concealing the identity of the participants was imperative as any leaked information could be embarrassing if attached to the name/s of any of the girls. Thirdly, I adhered to all ethical standards that guide research involving minors (Department of Health, 2015). I only commenced this research after receiving approval from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Committee (SSHREC) (see Appendix I). I also obtained the informed consent of the participants' parents/guardians prior to the field work (see Appendix J and Appendix K for both English and IsiZulu versions). I clearly informed the research participants of their right to voluntary participation, the right to withdraw from the study, the right to respect and confidentiality, and their right to have access to the findings (Murray & Beglar, 2009). I shall address these ethical considerations in more detail in Chapter Four.

1.9 Establishing Trustworthiness

As I was aware that the quality of the study would depend on its trustworthiness (Loh, 2013) and that data

generation and analysis had to be consistent and exhaustive (Nowell et al., 2017). I therefore relied on methodological triangulation, member checking, audience validation, and reflexivity. Triangulation entails using multiple data generation methods and triangulating the data to corroborate or refute certain findings (Birt et al., 2016; Chowdhury, 2015; Giddens, 1997; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Mayburg & Poggempoel, 2007). Thus, data were generated using letter writing, collage-making, and artefact retrieval. These methods allowed me to gain a deep and rich understanding of the girls' constructions of love, which added rigour to the study (Stewart et al., 2017, p. 2). To ensure the credibility of the data that were generated, I retained and secured evidence of the sources such as the original letters, collages, the participants' notes of their artefacts and collages, and interview recordings. I also recorded and secured the field notes I had taken to add to the rigour of the research study (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). Birt et al. (2016) emphasise that researchers should allow participants to validate their data to ensure dependability. Therefore, before I transcribed the audio recordings of the sessions with the participants, I requested them to provide written records of the meanings they attached to each of their visual artefacts (see Appendix L). I also conducted one-on-one unstructured member check interviews to clarify some issues I encountered in the data, particularly in the letters they had written to their imaginary pen pals. I relied on audience validation to "keep my researcher's biases in check" during data interpretation (Loh, 2013, p. 9). I did this by enlisting input on the data I had generated and analysed from the principal of the school where I conducted the study, the Departmental Head (DH) who assisted me during data generation, the colleagues of my previous school, my colleagues at my new place of employment (at district level), my PhD supervisor, and my postgraduate peers. Understanding that reflexivity minimises research subjectivity (Zulfikar, 2014), I was consistently reflexive throughout the research process. In response to the principles of social constructionism, rather than rushing ahead based on a 'taken-for-granted' view of reality, I paid attention to the participants' tales to deepen my understanding of their conceptions of love. This meant that I could not "make assumptions about any situation" (Hauser, 2019, p. 23). Keeping a reflexive journal throughout the study played a crucial role as I documented how I negotiated my researcher bias and ensured that it did not influence the research outcomes.

1.10 Synthesis

In this chapter, I introduced the study and presented the rationale, the main research question, and the two key research questions that gave impetus to this study. I also gave a brief overview of the location where the study was conducted. I further presented an overview of the analytical framework, the research design, and the methodologies I employed for data generation and analysis. I also highlighted that the requirements for ethical considerations and trustworthiness were suitably and effectively addressed. I located the study

within the interpretivist paradigm, which holds that multiple truths (Taylor & Medina, 2013) and meanings are attached to a phenomenon by people who experience it, and therefore there are multiple interpretations of the targeted phenomenon (Ponterotto, 2005). This means that reality is socially and situationally constructed (Ponterotto, 2005). In line with this paradigm, I adopted a qualitative research approach to focus on the personal meanings that the participants attached to the phenomenon of love in dating relationships (Brantlinger et al., 2005). To generate data, I utilised narrative inquiry as it elicits information about personal experiences of a story (Hamilton et al., 2008). Hence, I considered my participants as the storytellers of their own lived experiences (Brantlinger et al., 2005). To engage the girls in generating their narrative accounts of love, I used multiple data generation methods (letter writing, collage-making, and artefact retrieval) as these supplement one another (Giddens, 1997). To analyse the data, I used narrative and thematic analyses which were underpinned by the social constructionism lens, and I particularly drew on the social constructionist theory of gender.

1.11 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is presented in nine chapters. **Chapter One** introduces the study, presents the background to the investigation, and a general overview of the thesis. In **Chapter Two,** I review literature related to young people's constructions of love in dating relationships, with particular focus on earlier scholars' views of the influences that are associated with young people's constructions of love. The chapter further discusses the links between young people's understandings of love and their vulnerability to GBV. I conclude the chapter by presenting the conceptual framework that guided the data generation and analysis processes that were utilised in the study. **Chapter Three** focuses on the analytical lens that I used to analyse the data. I explain that I merged the tenets of social constructionism with the social constructionist theory of gender to explore rural schoolgirls' constructions of love. In **Chapter Four,** I discuss the research design and methodology in more detail. Four chapters **(Chapter Five to Chapter Eight)** are dedicated to the findings that emerged from the data that were elicited from 23 participants. The data analysis process occurred in two phases. First, to make sense of the data, I used a form of narrative analysis in which I reconstructed the 23 participants' stories. To do this, I synthesised the texts the 23 participants had generated by means of letters, collages, and artefacts during the data collection (field) phase. The re-storying process illuminated links among the ideas as I reorganised the stories into a framework that made sense (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Creswell, 2007). The re-storied accounts of the 23 participants are covered in **Chapter Five.** This analysis phase laid the foundation for the second analysis level in which I address the critical research questions of the study.

In the second phase of data analysis, I used thematic analysis to explore the 23 stories that I had constructed in the re-storying process. To respond to the key research questions, I utilised an inductive process, which is defined as "reasoning from [the] specific to [the] general" (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p. 196). I analysed each participant's narratives to extract data that responded to the research questions. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) advice, I then looked across the 23 stories for data that captured common patterns and shared meanings. Thereafter, I organised the emerging data into various categories, moving from the specific data of each participant to general ideas. This process helped me to identify, analyse, organise, describe, and report the themes that emerged from the participants' narratives.

Thematic analysis was a three-step process. First, from the 23 stories I had developed in Phase One, I analysed the data that addressed the first critical research question: *How do rural schoolgirls understand love in dating relationships?* This step is discussed in **Chapter Six** where I draw on the reconstructed stories generated in Chapter Five to explore how the girls understood love in dating relationships. The outcomes of the second step of thematic analysis are presented in **Chapter Seven,** where I analyse and discuss the data that focused on the second critical research question: *What factors influence rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships?* I explore and highlight the factors that influenced the girls' discourses of love that emerged from my analysis in Chapter Six. **Chapter Eight** presents the third and the last step of the thematic analysis process, as I highlight the outcomes of the analysis processes across the two critical research questions. Informed by the literature and the theoretical framework, I explore the links between rural schoolgirls' understandings of love and their vulnerability to GBV. Thus, Chapter Eight addresses the main research question which was: *How might rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships influence their vulnerability to gender-based violence?* **Chapter Nine** concludes the thesis. I reflect on the theoretical and methodological choices I made and highlight some personal-professional lessons that emerged from the study. I discuss its envisaged contributions to the pool of knowledge as well as its implications for practice and future research.

In the next chapter, I review related literature to explore how young people generally understand love in dating relationships.

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CHAPTER TWO

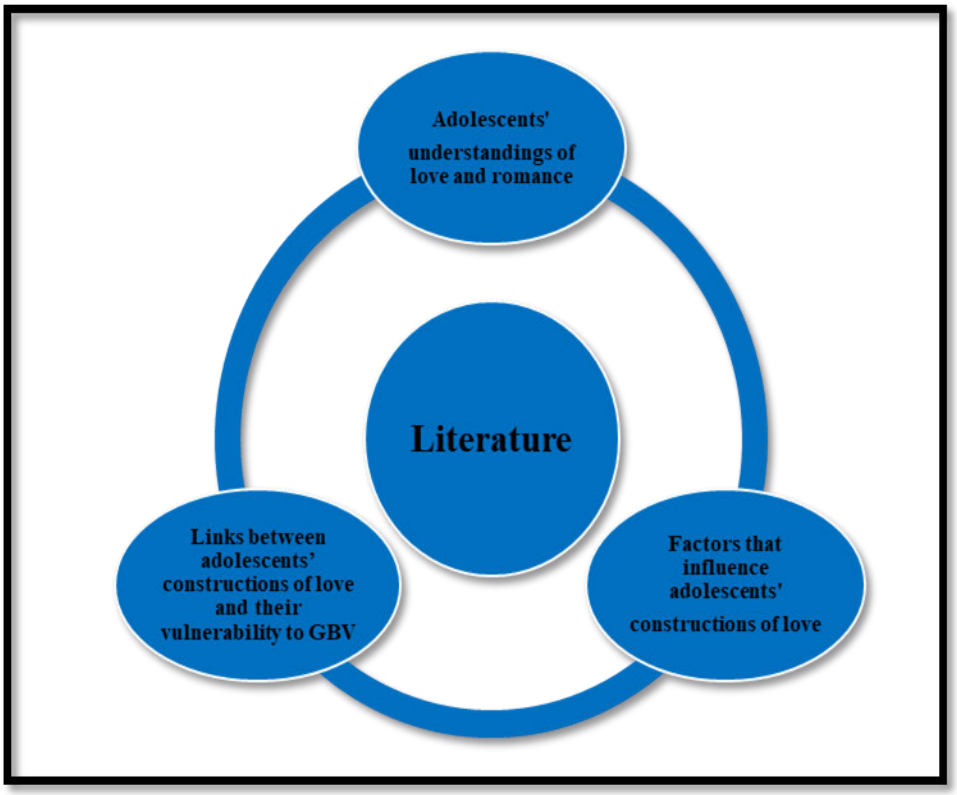
SCHOOLGIRLS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF LOVE IN DATING RELATIONSHIPS: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The study's main research question was: *How might rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships influence their vulnerability to gender-based violence?* In the preceding chapter, I introduced the study and presented the rationale, outlined the background, and highlighted the aim and key research questions that underpinned the study. I also gave a brief overview of the location of the study and the research design and methodology that I had employed. Given my interest in exploring how rural schoolgirls understood love as they navigated their dating relationships, with particular interest in gender-based violence (GBV), the starting point for this research project was to review the literature to understand how young people commonly view love in dating relationships. I therefore examine scholarly debates on how the youth construct the phenomenon of love in dating relationships. I also integrate relevant literature information with the findings in the rest of this thesis where appropriate.

The literature that informed this study is presented according to three broad areas of scholarship: (1) adolescents' understandings of love and romance; (2) factors that influence adolescents' constructions of love; and (3) the links between adolescents' constructions of love and their vulnerability to GBV (Refer to Figure 2.1).]

Figure 2. 1: ***Literature Informing the Study***



2.2 Adolescents' Understandings of Love and Romance

Research has revealed that young girls and boys are not devoid of feeling of love as the "conception of being in love is already present during early adolescence" (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021, p. 134). However, love remains a mysterious, fluid, complex, and abstract emotion that is difficult to define as it is contextual in nature (Bhana, 2018; Ngabaza et al., 2013). Despite their complexity, romantic relationships are very important to adolescents (Firmin, 2013; Van Eck, 2015), as young people "feel, think and act on love as they navigate the turbulent conditions of [their] everyday lives" (Bhana, 2018, p. 2). Several decades ago, De Beauvoir (1972, (p. 192) wrote that "the word love has by no means the same sense" for young people as it has for more mature people who have had more experience of relationships. The literature suggests several discourses in which girls' understandings of love are predominant. These include love as sex and childbearing, love as purity, love as money, love as companionship, love as marriage, love as force and fear, love as jealousy, and love as omnipotent (Bhana, 2018; Bittar & Nakano, 2017; Furphy, 2012; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021; Soto et al., 2024; Van Eck, 2015; Willan et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2007; Wood et al., 1996).

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2.2.1 Love as Sex and Childbearing

For some young people, love is synonymous with sex (Bhana, 2015; Bittar & Nakano, 2017; Ferriani et al., 2019; Jewkes & Morrell, 2012; Ngabaza et al., 2013; Sathiparsad & Taylor, 2011; Wood et al., 2007). The common discourse of this form of love advocates that "real love should be proved through sex" (Jewkes & Morrell, 2012, p. 1 733). This perspective is generally common among boys, who often claim that it is difficult to abstain from sex if they love someone (Sathiparsad & Taylor, 2011), and consequently girls are viewed as objects of boys' desire (Bittar & Nakano, 2017). Girls' male partners who embrace this notion of love go as far as telling them that "sex is the purpose of being in love, [and] that people in love must have sex as often as possible" (Wood et al., 1996, p. 8). In addition to this perspective, other discourses exist where boys justify wanting sex to please the girl and ensure that she does not turn to someone else for sex. Some also want to avoid being demeaned by girls for not having sex with them, and they want to ensure that the girl does not feel rejected and alone (Sathiparsad & Taylor, 2011).

While sex is commonly perceived as love, research has revealed a different perspective as well, which is that some boys embrace the perception "that sex is not linked to intimacy but serves as a relief for boredom, a means of attaining warmth" (Sathiparsad & Taylor, 2011, p. 77). While girls are often "punished for being sexually active and may be construed as 'loose' or promiscuous", they sometimes give in to sex "just to please and retain" their boyfriends (Sathiparsad & Taylor, 2011, p. 79). Contrary to the general claim that girls view love as sex, one girl in a research study argued that "even if they are involved with young boys, [girls] must know that love is not about sex. Girls must have a strong NO because they are the ones that face [the] consequences at the end'' (Sathiparsad & Taylor, 2011, p. 80).

The notion that love is synonymous with sex is sometimes coupled with childbearing as a natural demonstration of love (Ferriani et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2007). The literature records instances where some girls deliberately fell pregnant "to fulfil a need − be it to keep a boyfriend…or to have someone (a child) who will love them" (Mkhwanazi, 2011, p. 5). In such instances, girls consider pregnancy as a strategy to secure and sustain a relationship.

2.2.2 Love as Purity

Conversely, the notion that love as abstinence, respect, and virtue also exists among young people. This notion of love adheres to virginal purity, where "proof of purity is female virginity" (Bhana, 2018, p. 150). For some girls, a boy's patience in waiting for sex is proof of his love. Where virginity is valued, "strong

sanctions [are] placed on pre-marital pregnancy [which is] frowned upon" (Bhana, 2017, p. 255). The notion that love is synonymous with purity often results in the subjection of girls to virginity testing (De Robillard, 2009; Leclerc-Madlala, 2001; Parla, 2001). In principle, this implies that girls and unmarried women must "distance themselves from girlfriend-boyfriend relationships" (Bhana, 2018, p. 84) and stay 'pure' until marriage. The following words in a poem by 18-year-old Vilakazi (2011) are evidence that some young girls value purity: "You used me, you corrupted my purity… you left without a trace" (p. 85).

2.2.3 Love as Money

In some dating relationships, girls and young women construct love in relation to access to money and even wealth (Bhana, 2015, 2018; Mkhwanazi, 2011; Ngabaza et al., 2013; Singh & Myende, 2017; Willan et al., 2019). Girls and women who are obsessed with this materialistic notion of love maintain that "there is no romance without finance" (Smith, 2010, p. 133). Hence, such love relationships are characterised by material generosity which may be demonstrated in the form of gifts, clothes, food, cosmetics, hair care, mobile phone airtime, or actual money (Furman et al., 1999; Ngabaza et al., 2013; Selikow & Mbulaheni, 2013; Singh & Myende, 2017; Willan et al., 2019; Wood et al., 1996).

Young men and older people criticise this notion of love and they label such girls as "gold diggers" (Bhana, 2015, p. 5). Due to their financial dependence and their view that love is synonymous with affluence and the gifting of material possessions, young girls are often subjected to relationships with 'sugar daddies' who can afford the material resources they desire. In these money-aligned relationships, young women willingly exchange sex for the gifts they receive from older men (Luke, 2005; Selikow & Mbulaheni, 2013). Surprisingly, the literature discloses that while the 'sugar daddies' in these relationships are always depicted as capitalising on their superior financial situation to exploit younger women sexually, the latter have been found to "actively use their sexuality to exploit older men's sexual drive in order to gain access to the resources [they] possess" (Mkhwanazi & Macleod, 2011, p. 40). Hence, while some hold the notion that older men abuse unwilling young girls sexually, these men are often deliberately exploited by girls for financial gain.

A slightly different dim men who were the traditional providers in "marital households" but have nown taken on a role in which they "can support multiple unmarried girlfriends" (p. 17) for their personal gratification. Traditionally, the man was the provider and he would even pay for his bride, marry her, and take care of her and the family financially. However, things have taken a turn in the economic and love arenas. Hunter concludes that the notion of the man as the provider in a relationship of love no longer

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dominates as the notion of marriage has diminished and has become rare in modern societies. The provider roles referred to by Hunter (2010) categorise males with multiple partners as "ministers of finance, transport, and entertainment" (Hunter, 2010, p. 192), depending on what their money is spent on by their respective girlfriends. Based on this premise, Hunter (2010) categorises 'sugar daddies' as the secondary lovers of young girls who normally have a main (much younger) male boyfriend. Given that girlfriends in provider-love relationships persist in maintaining their concurrent romantic relationships on the side, it is apparent that there still is a place for romantic love.

Some women engage in multiple relationships because they have no money. They love their main boyfriend, but the problem is that he does not do anything for her. Then another man will 'shela' [meaning propose to] her, and when she discovers that this one has money, she will 'love' him too (Hunter, 2010, p. 190). It is noteworthy that while the notions of love as sex and money usually go hand-in-hand, when money is exchanged for sex, some girls view this a form of love as strength and agency.

2.2.4 Love as Companionship

While some girls associate love with men's ability to provide for their material needs, conversely, others view it as being caring and finding a soulmate, irrespective of material possessions. Many girls view love as having strong feelings for another person (Bhana, 2018; Ngabaza et al., 2013; Soto et al., 2024). Therefore, adolescents who advocate this notion of love are in a situation where they "search for support or companionship" (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021, p. 127). For these young people, romantic love is emotionally rewarding (Firmin, 2013; Parker et al., 2015). Their love is characterised by "intimacy…[and] a special kind of friendship" (Furman et al., 1999, p. 4). Consistent with this notion of love, research has repeatedly established that young people value commitment through their willingness to sacrifice and devote time to a partner (Bhana, 2015; Furphy, 2012; Willan et al., 2019; Williams & Hickle, 2010). Adolescents outside romantic relationships have often stated that it is stressful not to have a boyfriend or girlfriend (Parker et al., 2015). This is why, when they are deserted by their partners, girls become heartbroken and traumatised (Van Eck, 2015; Vilakazi, 2011). A young woman who participated in Jewkes and Morrell's (2012) study boldly stated: "I can love him even if he has no money" (p. 1732). In the same vein, Willan et al. (2019) state that their participants argued that no matter how much a man would do for his girlfriend, what mattered the most was spending time with her.

2.2.5 Love as Marriage

Research has revealed that adolescents embrace love as a precursor to marriage (Ferriani et al., 2019;

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Jiménez-Picón et al., 2023; Soto et al., 2024; Wood et al., 2007). Those who advocate this notion of love believe that "love must lead to the couple's stable union through marriage as the maximum [or ultimate] expression of true love" (Jiménez-Picón et al., 2023, p. 839). They also aspire for a relationship that is declared publicly and that ultimately culminates in engagement and marriage (Furphy, 2012; Willan et al., 2019). Most adolescents view marriage as a long-term commitment and this notion is thus heavily influenced by the 'eternal passion myth' of love as a means to finding a soulmate (Soto et al., 2024). This form of love goes beyond companionship as it is based on the belief that true love lasts forever. According to Ferriani et al. (2019, p. 4), this understanding of love seems to perpetuate an ideal that "leads adolescents to live for the other, losing their individualities".

2.2.6 Love as Force and Fear

To some boys and girls, love is coercive as it co-exists with suffering and abuse (Soto et al., 2024). They view force as an expression of love and, ultimately, violence seems desirable to adolescents in a power relationship (Soto et al., 2024) as it is "accepted and seen as a trade-off for being loved and respected" there is any girl who has never been beaten up by her partner (Furman et al., 1999; Wood et al., 1996).

When love has been normalised as force, it is also associated with the prevalence of fear. This commonly occurs in relationships where patriarchy is dominant as it entrenches women's and girls' subordination in dating and even more permanent relationships (Moletsane & Ntombela, 2010). It has been strongly argued that male dominance and masculinity subject women to fear (Jewkes et al., 2010). Unfortunately, a dominant social norm in South Africa adheres to patriarchy and contributes to the construction of fear and force in love relationships and legitimises high levels of controlling behaviour that lead to violence (Willan et al., 2019). The purpose of such violent outbursts is commonly to silence women, and they then live in fear in such relationships. Jewkes and Morrell (2012, p. 1734) found that "many women were afraid of their boyfriends even if they had not been beaten by them, reflecting awareness of the power and violent potential of men."

2.2.7 Love as Omnipotent

The notion of love as omnipotent is based on the belief that true love can cope with all difficulties (Ferriani et al., 2019; Jiménez-Picón et al., 2023; Soto et al., 2024). Therefore, those who embrace this notion feel bound to stick with each other through thick and thin (Karandashev, 2015). The assumption that "love can overcome any obstacle or problem" (Jiménez-Picón et al., 2023, p. 852) is driven by the notion that love

must persevere. Couples who embrace this understanding of love demonstrate their resilience and loyalty to their intimate partners, even in the face of violence, because of their commitment to conserve gender roles and stay in a dating relationship. According to Ferriani et al. (2019, p. 3), adolescents who embraced this notion of love stated that "love supports everything", even to the point that women stayed in abusive relationships regardless of pain and humiliation. Many young girls are involved in relationships that are characterised by insecurities, lack of trust, cheating, and physical and mental abuse; yet, they tolerate this humiliation as they fear losing their boyfriends and being on their own (Firmin, 2013).

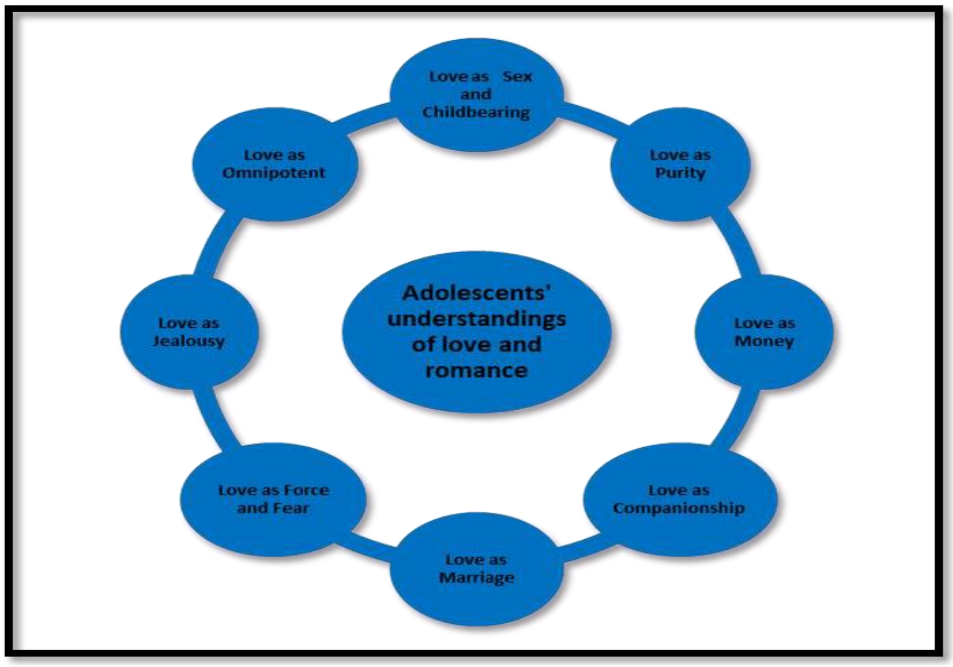
2.2.8 Love as Jealousy

Jealousy as a notion of love is discussed in several studies (Bhana, 2018; Bittar & Nakano, 2017; Ferriani et al., 2019; Jiménez-Picón et al., 2023; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021; Soto et al., 2024; Wood et al., 2007). Where this notion of love is embraced, jealousy is perceived as an "indispensable requirement of true love" (Jiménez-Picón et al., 2023, p. 839). This notion of jealousy has emerged from the perception that the appearance of a third person on the love scene presents a threat to the relationship (Ferriani et al., 2019). Therefore, those who embrace this notion of love are driven by the obsession that they will lose their partner, and they thus behave accordingly (Bittar & Nakano, 2017, p. 5) by adopting jealousy as a "tool for control and domination" (Bittar & Nakano, 2017, p. 2) in the relationship. This occurs to the extent that a boyfriend will even decide what the girlfriend will and may wear, where she may or may not go, and what entertainment she may enjoy (Bittar & Nakano, 2017). In some studies adolescent boys stated that if they loved a girl, they would not allow her to wear revealing clothes in their absence. Some jealous boyfriends admitted that they went so far as locking their girlfriends up in their shacks or rooms for many hours, if not all day and night (Jewkes & Morrell, 2012; Willan et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2007). As proof of love, young persons in dating relationships who are driven by jealousy even demand that their partners share their electronic passwords for social networks like WhatsApp (Ferriani et al., 2019).

While there is considerable societal concern about the subjection of girls to such untoward control, young women in these relationships view their boyfriends' jealousy as "evidence of passion" (Jewkes & Morrell, 2012, p. 1 732). In principle, the notion of love as jealousy is associated with a strong sense of ownership (Ferriani et al., 2019). Some boyfriends become so possessive that they even resent it when a girlfriend speaks to a cousin. In a study by Ferriani et al. (2019, p. 5), One boy stated: "Dating can go through some kind of fight like this; if you talk to someone else, you're cheating on me, [so] I get jealous."

The above discourses of love are summarised in Figure 2.2 below:

Figure 2.2: ***Adolescents' Understandings of Love and Romance***

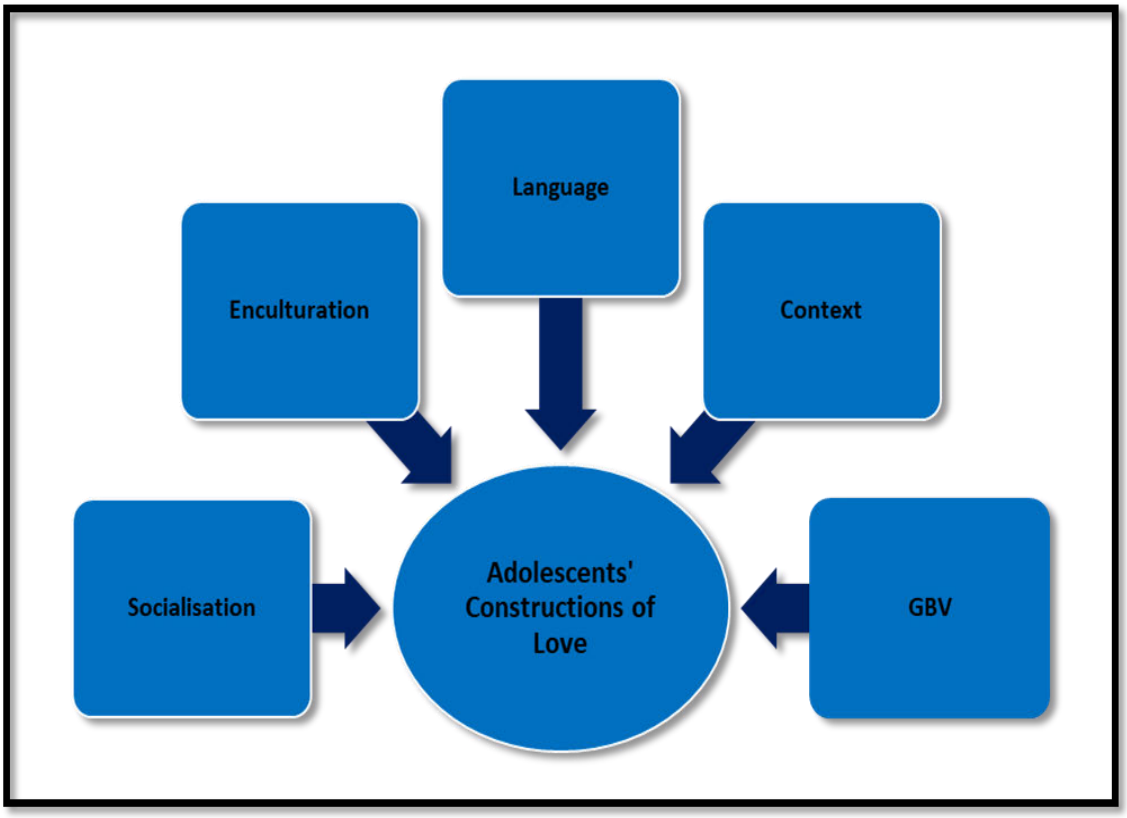


2.3 Factors that Influence Adolescents' Constructions of Love

Individuals' constructions of reality, including romantic love, are influenced by several factors. Furphy (2012) argues that "the beliefs and behaviours of young people are influenced and shaped by cultural, ethnic, historic, economic, familial, social, and environmental factors that…inform expectations for relationships" (p. 37). The literature suggests that how adolescents understand love is influenced by factors such as socialisation, enculturation, language, context, and gender-based violence (GBV). These factors are summarised in Figure 2.3.

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Figure 2. 3: ***Factors that Influence Adolescents' Constructions of Love***



In the following section, I elaborate on how each factor accounts for adolescents' understanding of love in dating relationships.

2.3.1 The Influence of Socialisation on Adolescents' Constructions of Love

Individuals are born and bred within families and societies with established rules, behavioural norms, and socialisation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, 1991; Lorber, 2018). As young ones make sense of reality, including love, they are influenced by these general rules of social life and societal norms (Lorber, 2000, 2018; Singh & Myende, 2017). Below, I discuss the influence of the gendered nature of social norms and the role of agents of socialisation in one's constructions of love.

2.3.1.1 The Gendered Nature of Social Norms: Scholars agree that, due to socialisation, boys' and girls' constructions of love are gendered (Bhana, 2013; Ngabaza et al., 2013; Soto et al., 2024). This occurs because the construction of any phenomenon is influenced by gendered norms (Agrawal, 2008; Connell, 1987; Connell, 2012; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Hussein, 2005; Kinnunen, 2022; Lorber, 1994, 2000; Shabane, 2011; Wiebesiek, 2021). Given that these norms tend to divide people into "two unequally valued categories" (Lorber, 2000, p. 80), these binaries result in gender inequalities, which are even

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manifested in the subordination of women by men and, as a result of what they observe, the subordination of girls by boys. Therefore, there is no way of dissociating gender from socialisation. Consequently, as individuals learn and adopt social norms as they go through socialisation, they tend to naturally conform to social gender stereotypes (Eagly & Wood, 2012). This process of instilling gender stereotypes is referred to as gender socialisation. While the literature emphasises a discourse of love associated with danger among the youth, there has been a focus

> on teenage discourses of love whilst paying attention to gender and broader social and cultural norms that reproduce versions of femininities and masculinities based on unequal relations of power (Bhana, 2015, p. 2).

Adolescents construct love "within the context of entrenched socio-cultural notions about male superiority and privilege" (Wood et al., 2007, p. 278). Behaviour that is in line with a particular society's gender stereotypes "garners approval and continued interaction, [while] behaviour [that is] inconsistent with gender roles is often negatively sanctioned and tends to disrupt social interaction" (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 469). Therefore, as they interact and conceptualise their romantic relationships, adolescents tend to "conform to romantic scripts that are traditional, such as those adhering to traditional gender roles" (Furphy, 2012, p. 37). Evidence of the power of gender socialisation emerged in a study by Ngabaza et al. (2013), who found inconsistencies in the prevailing norm among university students when analysing and discussing the data. While in most studies the provider role in love is associated with men, in the latter study there emerged a case where a female student was the one offering money to her boyfriend in order to ensure that he would never leave her. Due to the prevailing social norm of masculinity, the students who were critical of this girl's actions adhered to the gender norm of provider love as the privilege of men (Lorber, 2000, 2018; Ngabaza et al., 2013).

Due to the gendered divisions between men and women and boys and girls, adolescents' constructions of love are influenced by gender inequalities, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinities that are emphasised in feminist discourse. In the next section, I discuss how each of these factors influences how adolescents make meaning of romantic love in dating relationships.

2.3.1.1.1 Gender Inequalities in Adolescents' Constructions of Love: Adolescents construct love "within relations of power and privilege" (Kinnunen, 2022, p. 21), where groups that are considered inherently inferior endure multiple oppressive categorisations that are polarised. This means that any behaviour that is acceptable or appropriate for one group is not acceptable for their contrasting counterparts (Bem, 1993).

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These oppositional dichotomies tend to label one group as superior to the other, thereby leading to the subordination of the 'other' that is considered inferior (Collins, 2000). Adolescents construct love under the influence of gender inequalities. As the agents of socialisation "create and reinforce expectations about how men and women should behave" (Hussein, 2005, p. 59), they perpetuate gendered order and gendered regimes (Agrawal, 2008; Connell, 1987; Connell, 2012; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Lorber, 1994, 2000). These gender regimes include institutionalised inequality between men and women (Walby, 2020). Given the dominance of certain understandings and the subordination of others, the prevailing social order tends to "work in the interests of more powerful groups and against those in weaker positions" (Cohen et al., 2004, p. 410).

Bhana (2010), Moletsane and Ntombela (2010), Milligan (2014), Ruiz-Palomino et al. (2021), and Jiménez-Picón et al. (2023) aver that gender socialisation accounts for adolescents' understandings of gender and gender order and, ultimately, their relationships in dating. For them, how adolescents understand, and construct love and romance is influenced by how they have been socialised according to unequal gender norms. This is even more so in rural settings where unequal gender norms are more pronounced and are strictly monitored and enforced (Bhana, 2010). According to Leclerc-Madlala (2008), "girls and young women [in rural areas] are more directly subjected to traditional rules that guide relations between the generations and between men and women" than boys or young men (S19). That is why girls in these areas easily get hooked on relationships that are driven by male domination and control. These include subjugation to love as jealousy and love as force and fear.

2.3.1.1.2 Patriarchy and Hegemonic Masculinities in Adolescents' Constructions of Love: Due to institutionalised gender inequalities, men are positioned as privileged by patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity. Patriarchy is a tool of control that is in favour of men/boys and it legitimises them "to exercise their power over women [and girls] to sustain the latter's subordination" (Hussein, 2005, p. 60). Aligned with emphasised femininities that are also gendered in nature, patriarchy impacts how girls construct love in dating relationships. Take perseverance, for instance. This is a factor in femininity that is associated with being tolerant of any situation, including abusive relationships. Therefore, girls and women have to tolerate male domination and control in dating relationships based on the notions of love as jealousy and love as force and fear. The same applies to respectfulness, as this is a femininity factor that impacts how girls and women tolerate different violence regimes by boyfriends who feel entitled and revert to abuse if they are not obeyed. This implies that women and girls in such relationships do not question the abusive acts of their husbands/boyfriends (Wiebesiek, 2021). In terms of this femininity, it is a norm that a woman has to "obey

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her man's rules" (Shabane, 2011, p. 60).

Hegemonic masculinity refers to "the material and social representation of the psychological, social and physical potency of men in a sexist society" (Hussein, 2005, p. 67). The gendered norms about "how men and women should behave in their society are the most fundamental distinctions made between people rooted in patriarchy" (Hussein, 2005, p. 59). Under the influence of hegemonic masculinity, it is a norm for men to "dominate and hold power over women" (Monk, 2011, p. 126). Girls are not exempted from these norms as they get socialised to adhere to them from a young age. Moreover, their internalisation of the norm of female's inferiority to their male counterparts influences their notions of love which they begin to view as force and fear and jealousy in situations where boyfriends naturally feel empowered to control their girlfriends.

2.3.1.1.3 Emphasised Femininities in Adolescents' Constructions of Love: Privileging "the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell, 1995, p. 77), hegemonic masculinities are always constructed or produced in relation to femininities. Among the femininities that have been found to be embraced by women, particularly in rural contexts, are the notions of always being 'a good woman', marriage, childbearing, dignity, perseverance, respectfulness, sexual passivity and obedience, and having good manners (Hunter, 2010; Jewkes & Morrell, 2012; Shai, 2018), to mention a few. In African oral traditions, femininity is of particular importance as an indication of a woman's "warmth and all- goodness" (Hussein, 2005, p. 60). Conversely, negative femininity is usually associated with a woman having one or multiple lovers (Hunter, 2010; Shai, 2018). This form of femininity is termed 'isifebe', meaning a 'loose woman'. Because this form of femininity is often associated with material gain, Hunter (2010) refers to it as the 'provider-notion' of love. Given that girls are socialised and encultured by women who are under the influence of the emphasis on femininity, the chances are that these girls are likely to construct love under this influence. The gendered social norms are so deeply entrenched among adolescents that they influence their understandings of love to the point that young girls feel committed to remaining in relationships, irrespective of circumstances such as subjugation and abuse (Singh & Myende, 2017). This situation often reaches a point where a girl may be beaten by a man who accuses her of disrespect.

2.3.1.2 The Role of the Agents of Socialisation in Adolescents' Constructions of Love: Gender socialisation depends on one's interaction with others who are deemed the agents of socialisation. Therefore, many adolescents construct love under the influence of these agents who may include parents, partners, family members, peers/friends, teachers, strangers, social networks, social institutions such as

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schools and religious institutions, and the media (Bhana, 2015; Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Dako-Gyeke et al., 2019; Hoominfar, 2021; John et al., 2017; Kang et al., 2017; Kretchmar, 2009; Lorber, 2018; Ngabaza et al., 2013; Saxena, 1971; Soto et al., 2024; Storer, 2017; Van Eck, 2015). As these agents of socialisation structure and shape young people's thoughts and behaviour (Amin et al., 2018; Kang et al., 2017), they tend to act according to their opinions and directions (Kinnunen, 2022). While individuals go through secondary socialisation as they interact with agents outside the family circle, the gender norms instilled in them during primary socialisation appear to strongly influence and stay with them. For example, research has demonstrated that one's socialisation has a strong impact on how one constructs love (Singh & Myende, 2017). Even when other factors may influence the meanings one attaches to one's world, socialisation has a strong hold and directs the course one takes. Female university students in Singh and Myende's (2017) study demonstrated more maturity compared to their secondary school counterparts as they questioned the omnipotent notion of love; yet, they were bold enough to acknowledge the difficulty in challenging the prevailing gender norms that were informed by cultural teachings. Below, l foreground the influence of the media and peers/friends on adolescents' constructions of love.

2.3.1.2.1 The Influence of the Media on Adolescents' Constructions of Love: Various media platforms have been found to play a significant role in gender role acculturation (Barker, 2012; Del-Teso-Craviotto, 2006; Hoominfar, 2021; John et al., 2017; Kang et al., 2017; Storer, 2017; Van Eck, 2015) as they have the potential to "form a child's self-concept and gender identity and teach gender roles to children" (Hoominfar, 2021, p. 4). Given that "what children watch and read may shape their gender schemas" (Leaper & Farkas, 2015, p. 545), the media is deemed a significant factor in the process of gender socialisation. It has been found to "teach gender stereotypes and attitudes through the characters which reflect traditional gender identities" (Hoominfar, 2021, p. 6). In the process of socialisation, the media is also accused of perpetuating gender myths (Johnston & Swanson, 2003) by misrepresenting women's social life as they are "shown in gender roles [that] reproduce gender stereotypes for society" (Hoominfar, 2021, p. 6). Ultimately, the "media imagery of glamorous and prosperous lives [has been] found to be an important influence in shaping the aspirations of many contemporary young women" (Leclerc-Madlala, 2008, p. S20). For instance, such aspirations may be viewed as perpetuating the notion of love as money, normalising and romanticising abusive relationships, and justifying men's use of abusive and controlling tactics against women in romantic relationships (Storer, 2017).

2.3.1.2.2 The Influence of Friends and Peers on Adolescents' Constructions of Love: As children interact, they socialise and influence one another (Kretchmar, 2009; Stockard, 1999). Through interactions,

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friendships, and group norms, peers account for the formation of self-concepts and gender stereotypes (Hoominfar, 2021). Therefore, peers and close friendships have an impact on an individual's understandings of dating relationships (Connolly et al., 2000; Furphy, 2012; Van Eck, 2015). Research has revealed that girls' networks are always engaged in conversations that inform their choices of acceptable or unacceptable behaviours (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999). Hence, it is a norm for female friends to offer one another advice on romantic relationships, while they also tend to place more value "on a friend's opinion than a parent's opinion" (Van Eck, 2015, p. 66). Some adolescents are pressured to adopt the notion of love as sex as their peers posit that "you get clever if you have sex" (Bhana, 2015, p. 7).

2.3.2 The Influence of Enculturation on Adolescents' Constructions of Love

Enculturation is a process through which society teaches and transfers its culture from one generation to the next, thereby conscientising young people about the expectations for their acceptable cultural roles (Hoominfar, 2021; Lorber, 2000). Research has revealed that cultural values and traditional behaviours shared beliefs. A study by Van Eck (2015) established that, while girls aspired to move in with their boyfriends, their parents' traditional beliefs prevented them from doing so as they considered it taboo to live together before marriage. Another example of a link between the notion of love and culture is a tradition that is embraced by African communities regarding virginal purity and a cultural practice where the future husband pays '*ilobolo*' (a bride price) to the family of the prospective bride (Hunter, 2010; Shai, 2018). This payment may be in the form of cattle or money. Even in modern society, virginal purity has an impact on a girl's reputation and worth and determines the bride price (Hussein, 2005).

2.3.3 The Influence of Language on Adolescents' Constructions of Love

It is an accepted fact that socialisation and enculturation are constituted through language (Andrews, 2012; Berger & Luckmann, 1966, 1991). Speech or language are thus central to the social construction of reality as a medium through which knowledge is conveyed or communicated to individuals who are being socialised or encultured (Kinnunen, 2022). Moreover, research has emphasised the role of language in expressing love (Belli et al., 2010). In the process of imparting messages that influence one's understanding of love, the use of proverbs (or sayings) has been found to be a powerful way of perpetuating the gender order (Hussein, 2005; Zungu, 2016). Here, I cite two examples of proverbs that inculcate certain notions of love while they also carry gendered messages. To instil the understanding that a woman is incomplete without a husband, the proverb goes: "*The husband is the beauty of a woman*" (Hussein, 2005, p. 70). The second proverb states: *"The smaller the entrance to a bride's vagina, the greater her reputation"* (Hussein,

2005, p. 65). Both these sayings convey the objectification of women while perpetuating men's control of their bodies through the ideology of promoting female sexual passivity or purity. Reinforcing the view that men are intelligent over women, an isiZulu proverb spells "*izwi lendoda liyabhekwa.* Loosely transited, this means that in a relationship, "you must heed a man's advice" (Zungu, 2016, p. 228). From an early age, proverbs also teach boys not to allow girls (and later as men, women) any sort of freedom. This is exemplified in proverbs such as: "The lady whose husband spoils her, slips from the tanned hide" (Hussein, 2005, p. 70). As many girls grow in communities where such proverbs are common, they construct love while being exposed to the knowledge that men have the right to exercise power and control over women. In this way, the messages that are embedded in traditional proverbs and sayings influence how girls understand love.

2.3.4 The Influence of Context on Adolescents' Constructions of Love

How individuals make sense of reality (including romantic love) is context-dependent (Cislaghi & Shakya, 2018). Among these contexts are socio-political locations, race, sex, age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, social class, and community context, such as urban vs. rural settings (Baderoon et al., 2013; Cislaghi & Shakya, 2018; Mollborn, 2010; Ngabaza et al., 2013; Wharton, 2005). Janak et al. (2022) emphasise "the surrounding materialities [that are] at play" (p. 79) when individuals make sense of love in dating relationships, arguing that they are influenced by assemblages such as spaces where they make meaning of reality. As discussed earlier, the study by Singh and Myende (2017) on intimate partner violence among female university students revealed that, compared to their counterparts in secondary schools, the former students' constructions of love appeared to be influenced by their growing maturity. This was evident in how these university students challenged matters like the unidirectional benefits of love relationships. In contrast to women who remain in abusive relationships as they fear being alone (see, for example, Hayes, 2015), these female university students demonstrated intolerance of abuse and even declared that they would end a love relationship with an abusive partner. They also dismissed the romantic view of love as being blind, arguing that this notion "undermines the capacity of women to avoid abusive partners and to leave violent partners" (Singh & Myende, 2017, p. 27). These participants demonstrated resilience by "positioning love and partners as choices" (Singh & Myende, 2017, p. 27), and they were adamant that women should take control of their choices. In this way, these students questioned the omnipotent notion of love. The mentality of university students who appear more mature than their secondary school counterparts has been corroborated by various studies that emphasise the influence of secondary socialisation on one's sense of reality (Furphy, 2012; Kinnunen, 2022; Storer, 2017; Van Eck, 2015). It

therefore seems evident that the tertiary education level may indeed be an agent of re-socialisation and that it has the potential to challenge the prevailing gender order.

Janak et al. (2022) and Ferriani et al. (2019) aver that the long-established lack of attention by parents has an impact on girls' understandings of love. For instance, girls are prone to embrace the notion of love as companionship, while Ferriani et al. (2019) argue that there are certain circumstances within families that account for adolescents' understandings (or lack of understandings) of love. These include conflict between parents, which can influence what adolescents consider acceptable in love relationships and may lead them to understand love as force and fear.

While numerous factors account for adolescents' constructions of love, the rural focus of the current study directed this literature review to highlight the outcomes of past studies that illuminate the impact of rurality and its associated issues on adolescents' constructions of love. For instance, rurality is associated with poverty and entrenched gendered norms related to patriarchy. Clearly, socio-economic circumstances are among the factors that have a strong impact on young women's constructions of love in dating relationships (Ngabaza et al., 2013), to the extent that Firmin (2013) posits that "love and desire interlock with social circumstances" (p. 47). Various studies (Bhana, 2010; Leclerc-Madlala, 2008; Moletsane & Ntombela, 2010) have revealed that rurality influences how young people in these settings understand and negotiate love. Given that rurality is usually associated with the low socio-economic status of women and girls in particular, poverty has been flagged as a key contributing factor of the perception of love as money. This is because poor rural young girls tend to interpret the gifting of material resources by men as love, and they are then coerced into exchanging sex for such basic necessities as food, sanitary towels, and new clothes (Milligan, 2014). This situation ultimately exposes young girls to 'sugar daddies', as poor rural settings push the former into "age-disparate sexual partnerships with potential economic benefits" (Leclerc-Madlala, 2008, S19). In such relationships, gendered poverty limits a girl's ability to negotiate condom use (Hunter, 2010; Mkhwanazi, 2011). As indicated earlier, the notion of love as money exposes girls to risky behaviours that result in abusive love as a form of force and fear, and many begin to normalise abusive treatment by their boyfriends as love. For instance, in the study by Jewkes and Morrell (2012), some young women expressed that they would tolerate being beaten by their men because they were supported financially. Consistent with this finding, Willan et al. (2019) reported that "three women [who participated in their study] stayed with their violent partners because of poverty and a lack of alternative ways to survive" (p. 1233). Research has also revealed that, in the pursuit of 'socioeconomic security and status' (Leclerc-Madlala, 2008, p. S 19), girls in poor rural settings may embrace the notion of love as marriage and may

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also be pressured to settle for abusive partners. It is therefore befitting that Firmin (2013) concludes that "poverty is a key contributor to intimate partner violence" (p. 51).

Rurality entrenches women's and girls' subordination in relationships, including dating relationships (Moletsane & Ntombela, 2010), which is a factor that is normally due to the gender order in this setting. Traditional rural communities' gendered roles view men as the authoritative figures and decision-makers, while women are expected to be submissive to men both in their households and in society (Dako-Gyeke et al., 2019; Shefer et al., 2008). For instance, gender socialisation, which is entrenched in rural areas, instils the constructions of femininities that are in the interest of the patriarchal gender order. This view of femininity demands respect and socialises women to be passive and submissive, even in sexual encounters that they do not want (Furphy, 2012). This inculcates the notion of love as force and fear as girls are influenced by the demand for respectfulness, which in turn subjects them to beatings by men when they believe that they are disrespectful.

The silencing of women from expressing their sexual desires is also described by Haanyama (2011), who argues that this phenomenon is entrenched in the rules that distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' girls. In addition to the emphasised femininities of respectfulness, good manners, and virginal purity, are the femininities that revere perseverance, marriage, and fertility (Hunter, 2010; Jewkes & Morrell, 2012; Shabane, 2011; Shai, 2018). These traditional gendered prescripts determine what is expected of girls and boys (Furphy, 2012) and manifest in every sphere of human life (Burr, 1995), including adolescents' constructions of love in dating relationships. In the same vein, Willan et al. (2019) assert that the gender order accounts for how girls and women construct love under the influence of institutionalised controlling violence regimes by men. These scholars further advance that, due to poverty and intense patriarchal norms, girls and women are left with very limited options other than finding themselves hooked to oppressive love relationships. Based on these circumstances, it is impossible to absolve GBV from being a contributory factor in adolescents' constructions of love in dating relationships. Below, I discuss how GBV influences adolescents' constructions of love in dating relationships.

2.3.5 The Influence of Gender-Based Violence on Adolescents' Constructions of Love

GBV refers to any violation of one's human rights and infringements on one's safety and dignity based on gender (Human Sciences Research Council, 2014; Singh & Myende, 2017). These actions may be "physical, sexual, psychological and/or economic violence against women by their partners or ex-partners or by those who were in affective relationships with them, with the objective of establishing a relationship

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of inequality, control, and domination over them" (Jiménez-Picón et al., 2023, p. 837). In the school context, Leach (2008) asserts that violence experienced by girls:

> may involve aggressive or unsolicited sexual advances, other forms of sexual harassment such as touching, pinching, groping and verbal abuse, and acts of intimidation, assault, forced sex and rape… boys cornering and groping girls or shouting demeaning obscenities, and male teachers making sexist or derogatory comments to female students or teachers, or making physical contact with girls during lessons (pp. 29-30).

GBV may also come in other forms, such as virginity testing for girls, genital mutilation, early and forced marriages, and domestic violence (Bhana & Anderson, 2013a, 2013b; Bhana & Pattman, 2009, 2010; Mugo & Antonites, 2014; Young, 2013). The literature suggests that young people in rural contexts, in particular girls and young women, are vulnerable to GBV due to the numerous and complex challenges they are exposed to in this environment (Milligan, 2014). The exposure of young girls (and sometimes boys) to GBV impacts their constructions of love in romantic relationships. Where violence is normalised, any act of intimate partner violence, such as beating, whipping, and caning, is regarded "as an interpersonal act, which may be used to communicate love" (Dako-Gyeke et al., 2019, p. 13). Given the impact of socialisation and oppressive gender regimes, particularly in rural contexts, girls and women in this setting face gender inequalities as men assert a lot of power over them, especially in poverty-stricken contexts (Jewkes & Morrell, 2012). Consequently, girls and women are subordinated and coerced to agree to any sexual demands by men (Moletsane & Ntombela, 2010). It is due to such experiences that girls perceive love as force and fear. Jewkes et al. (2010) conclude that:

> Violence is a consequence of gender power inequities, at both a societal and relationship level…Gender inequity and gender-based violence lie in the patriarchal nature of society and ideals of masculinity that are based on the control of women that celebrate male strength and toughness (p. 41).

Walby (2020) affirms that the prevailing gender order and gender regimes that impact the construction of reality include gendered violence. Under gendered oppression, girls are bound to conform to stipulated social gender stereotypes as deviation from the social norm invites exclusion or other sanctions that are violent in nature (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Hearn et al. (2022) assert that women and girls are subjected to a variety of violent gendered regimes. Amongst these are domestic violence, intimate partner violence, emotional violence, and violence emanating from impeding their access to fundamental rights. The latter includes women's experiences of unemployment, risk of poverty, and social exclusion (Hearn et al., 2022). In the interest of honouring dominant cultures, girls are also subjected to a violence regime that is exerted

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to control their bodies (Brown et al., 2009). It is because of these violence regimes that girls construct love in ways that expose them to danger.

Past studies have revealed that reiterated oppressive sexual advances by men over girls and women have been normalised to the extent that "women are led to believe that men assaulting women is an unchangeable condition" (Kinnunen, 2022, p. 42). Therefore, girls are hooked to the abusive notions of love as force and fear and love as jealousy. Love as omnipotent is also influenced by violence as it is based on the view that love can overcome any obstacle. Therefore, girls who embrace this notion of love are influenced by the normalisation of GBV in dating relationships. Where GBV has become normalised, "young people are routinely exposed to violence and crime in the family, in schools, and in their immediate environment, so much so that they have come to think of it as normal and have internalised the social norms surrounding violence" (Mkhwanazi, 2011, p. 6). Therefore, being in abusive love relationships becomes a norm for them (Firmin, 2013). When adolescents' understandings of love are entrenched in GBV, these young people become even more vulnerable to this travesty. Below I deliberate on how adolescents' constructions of love make them susceptible to GBV.

2.4 Links Between Adolescents' Constructions of Love and their Vulnerability to GBV

While some scholars dismiss the existence of a link between romantic relationships and GBV (see Yuste et al., 2014), Storer (2017) notes that:

> Between 10% and 25% of adolescents have reported enduring some form of physical violence within a dating relationship…and 33% of adolescents are estimated to have experienced non-physical types of abuse such as mental or verbal abuse (p. 293).

Aligned with Storer's point, Firmin (2013) concludes that love hurts. While my view is that love as a phenomenon cannot hurt, the literature proposes that it is how one understands it that can indeed cause hurt. In this section, I elaborate on how girls' constructions of love influence their vulnerability to GBV, which is a scourge that has been a matter of serious concern for a long time both in South Africa and internationally (Abrahams et al., 2010; Dako-Gyeke et al., 2019; Jiménez-Picón et al., 2023).

Due to the powerful influence of prescribed gender norms, girls have been subjected to various forms of violence, and this has shaped their constructions of love. Girls and women feel bound to conform to the societal gender order (Ngabaza et al., 2013), and this feeling of being confined due to gender inequality "reduces women's ability to negotiate out of the situations which place them at risk of harm" (Firmin, 2013,

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p. 51). This shows how the "socially constructed ideals of love contribute to women's commitment to forming and remaining in relationships, even if they are abusive" (Singh & Myende, 2017, p. 22). Consequently, girls tend to justify, tolerate, and normalise violence in dating relationships (Dako-Gyeke et al., 2019; Jiménez-Picón et al., 2023). For instance, research has revealed that, due to the notion of love as force and fear, reiterated oppressive sexual advances by men over girls and women have been normalised to the extent that "women are led to believe that men assaulting women is an unchangeable condition" (Kinnunen, 2022, p. 42). In alignment with this notion, Firmin (2013) argues that teenage relationships are "fertile grounds for the reproduction of gender inequalities and pain, hurt and disillusionment [as] these relationships are highly charged, emotional sites where love hurts" (Firmin, 2013, pp. 48, 50).

Young people tend to have different perspectives of love, and this may translate into conflict within dating relationships (Furphy, 2012; Karandashev, 2015). For example, in a case where one partner views love as sex while the other one views it as purity (and, therefore, virginity), conflict may arise between the two. In such situations of conflict, men tend to be violent towards women and girls. Besides, this notion of love as

purity subjects girls to GBV through virginity testing, thereby invading their privacy (De Robillard, 2009; Parla, 2001). Abstinence and virginity testing "restrict sexuality and reinforce gender inequality" (Harrison, 2008, p. 186). While the expectation of virginity and the practice of virginity testing reinforce gender subordination (Leclerc-Madlala, 2001), they also imply that girls and unmarried women must "distance themselves from girlfriend-boyfriend relationships" (Bhana, 2018, p. 84) and stay 'pure' until marriage. Ultimately, this cultural practice is a way of regulating and policing young women's sexuality while male virginity remains un-interrogated (Bhana, 2018; Mkhwanazi, 2011). Giddens (1997) therefore pertinently concludes that GBV is manifested in ways in which males "use their superior social or physical power against women" (p. 196).

As argued earlier, the notion of love as sex has been found to expose girls and women to GBV. For instance, research has established that this notion of love tends to subject girls to "sexual objectification" by males, which is a form of abuse and GBV (Sathiparsad & Taylor, 2011, p. 78). In an earlier study, young boys confessed that they felt "entitled to use women as objects for sexual pleasure" (Sathiparsad & Taylor, 2011, p. 76). Sometimes, girls are exposed to sexual abuse in the name of love as sex, unaware that boys are just playing their masculinity game.

Young people who associate romantic love with marriage are susceptible to GBV due to a desperate need

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to “establish a steady union” (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021, p. 126). Obsession with the ideal of love as marriage is also bound to subject girls and women to violence as it is coupled with the perception of a woman as “a symbol of passivity, submission, instability and affectivity; [she is deemed] an inferior being who dreams about finding true love and attaining marriage as proof of love” (Jiménez-Picón et al., 2023, p. 838). Because this notion of love “is associated with the idea of eternal marriage, [it leads] some adolescents to live for the other, losing their individualities” (Ferriani et al., 2019, p. 4). This ultimately exposes these youngsters to GBV as it means tolerating any adversities in the name of love, and it manifests in the reality that many girls/women do not report the violence they experience in a dating or marriage relationship (Dako-Gyeke et al., 2019; Mannell et al., 2016). Consequently, many girls and women protect their abusive love partners even if they are beaten or sexually assaulted (Singh & Myende, 2017).

The notion of love as marriage is also coupled with femininity viewpoints that expose girls to forms of GBV. Among these are the demands for respectfulness, fertility, and perseverance (Hunter, 2010; Jewkes & Morrell, 2012; Shabane, 2011; Shai, 2018). The feminine notion of respectfulness results in women being beaten by men if they consider them disrespectful, and this behaviour is normalised by women who tolerate being beaten by men (Dako-Gyeke et al., 2019). Normalisation of this kind of violence is closely related to the femininity notion of perseverance. Girls and women also face abuse emanating from the association of marriage with the femininity of fertility. In one study, a participant expressed how women were dehumanised as he narrated how a man likened his wife to an animal as she had not borne him any children. According to him, " If I knew you would behave this way in marriage, I should have rather bought a goat and reared it… by now, it would have brought forth a lot of offspring and given [me] so much more profit than marrying [you]" (Dako-Gyeke et al., 2019, p. 9).

The level of violence experienced by women as exemplified in the above case also seems to emanate from African communities’ view of the bride price. This practice is “criticised for perpetuating the notion that men ‘own’ women and therefore have authority over them” (Stern & Heise, 2019, p. 869). Even when a woman may live up to the ideal of fertility, where this is coupled with love as marriage it exposes her to a high risk of GBV. For instance, research has established that, in circumstances where women want to quit abusive relationships, it is not easy if there are children to be taken care of (Mannell et al., 2016). Men’s sense of ownership that goes with bride price and marriage also exposes girls and women to the danger of being viewed as sex slaves due to the notion that marriage means “men’s unrestricted sexual access to their wives” (Stern & Heise, 2019, p. 873).

There is a close connection between the femininities of respectfulness and perseverance and the notion of love as omnipotent. Given that the omnipotent notion of love advocates the belief that love must cope with all difficulties, it also perpetuates the normalisation of violence as it "involves accepting and tolerating violent behaviours in the couple's [relationship]" (Jiménez-Picón et al., 2023, p. 839). Considering that this notion is built on the view that "love can overcome all obstacles" (Hayes, 2015, p. 2), it implies that, no matter what adversity the woman is facing, she is bound to stay in the abusive relationship in the hope of a miraculous solution to the challenges she must endure. This happens when girls and women commit to a relationship and sustain resilience while being subjected to intimate partner violence. The omnipotent view of love pressurises a girl or woman to "do almost anything in the name of love" (Singh & Myende, 2017, p. 26), suggesting that they become even more vulnerable to any violent acts by their partners in dating relationships. This does not only result in tolerance, but girls have been found to go as far as protecting abusive love partners from facing arrests even if they beat them (Singh & Myende, 2017).

As discussed above, research has revealed that the notion of love as jealousy is "a trigger for violence" (Ferriani et al., 2019, p. 4), and in my view particularly so in adolescent dating relationships. This leads to horrific behaviours as evidenced in a study by Ferriani et al. (2019), who recorded an incident of a 17-year-old boy who killed his 14-year-old girlfriend because of jealousy. Therefore, when boys normalise jealousy and abuse as meaning true love, girls are rendered highly susceptible to GBV (Bhana, 2018; Bittar & Nakano, 2017; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021; Soto et al., 2024). As I discussed earlier, jealousy can be a "tool for control and domination" in a relationship (Bittar & Nakano, 2017, p. 2). This may manifest when boyfriends decide what their girlfriends' dress styles should be, and where they may go and where they may not go for entertainment (Bittar & Nakano, 2017). Some jealous boyfriends go as far as locking their girlfriends up in their shacks or rooms for long periods (Jewkes & Morrell, 2012; Willan et al., 2019). This notion of love subjugates girls to violence and social exclusion and impedes their freedom of movement and association. Violence regimes also manifest in the control of girls' and women's bodies (Brown et al., 2009; Kinnunen, 2022; Willan et al., 2019).

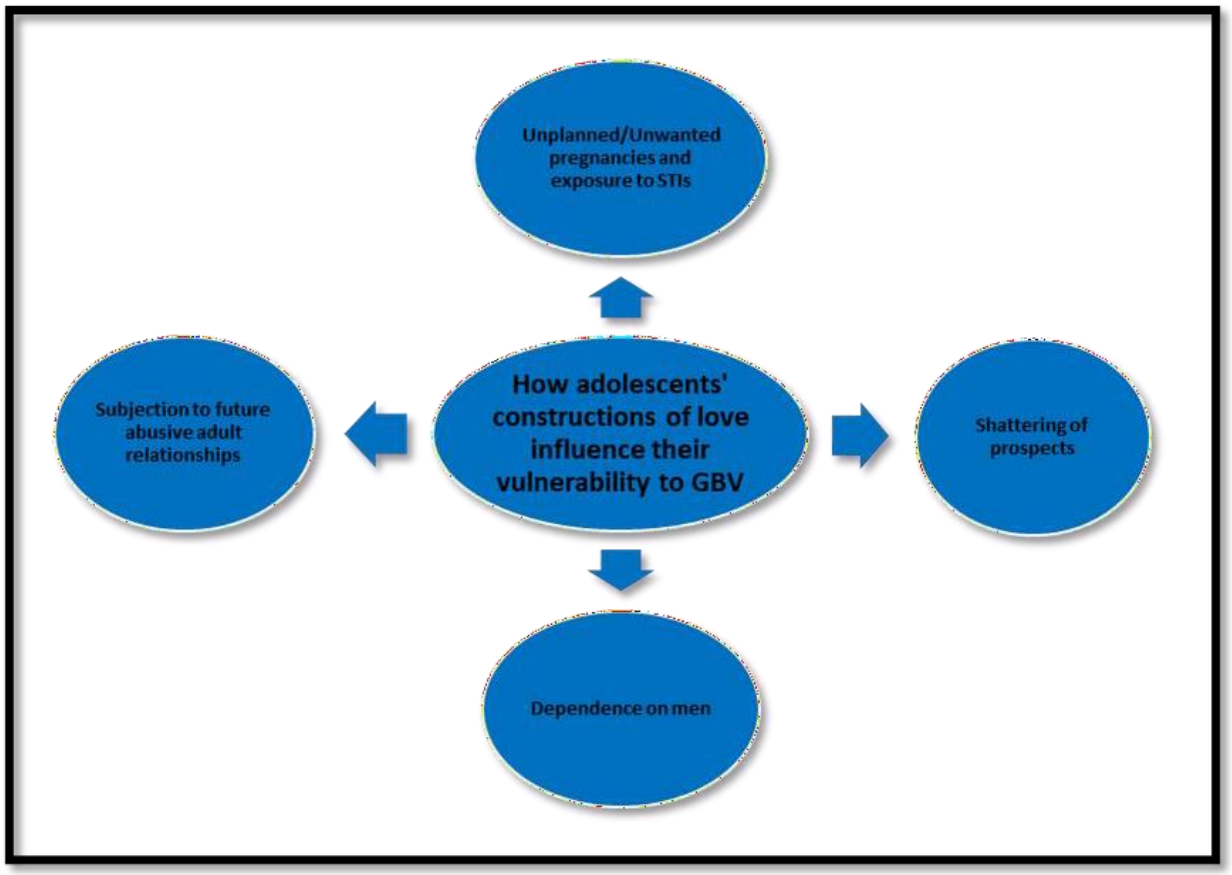
The notion of love as money has also been reported to expose girls and women to danger. Leclerc-Madlala (2008) notes that, as they exchange "sex for gifts or any service by men, women [and girls] …are drawn or even lured into vulnerable situations, if not directly coerced or manipulated" (S23). Once girls endorse the provider notion of love, they are at risk of gender-based violence due to the reinforcement of masculinity that is enabled by men's economic power over women (Bhana & Pattman, 2011). Girls are at risk of abuse

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when they normalise the abusive treatment they are exposed to by their boyfriends. To illustrate, in Jewkes and Morrell's (2012) study some young women stated that they would tolerate a beating by their boyfriends as they were supported by them financially. Because of this notion of love as money, young girls are lured by 'sugar daddies' as schoolboys who have no money have no attraction (Bhana, 2015). It is in these age-disparate relationships where these girls have no control and are highly vulnerable to GBV in various forms.

As summarised in Figure 2.4 below, there are numerous consequences of girls' constructions of love in relation to GBV. These include unplanned/unwanted pregnancies, exposure to STIs, shattering of future prospects, dependence on men, and subjection to abusive future adult relationships.

Figure 2. 4: ***Consequences of Girls' Constructions of Love Leaving Them Vulnerable to GBV***



2.4.1 Unplanned Pregnancies and Exposure to Sexually Transmitted Infections

When young women understand love as money, they are prone to fall in love with older men; hence, they fall prey to these 'sugar daddies' who exploit them sexually (Bhana, 2018; Groes-Green, 2013; Mkhwanazi, 2011; Selikow & Mbulaheni, 2013). This practice is common throughout sub-Saharan African countries

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and is fraught with many risks (Luke, 2005). For instance, age disparities and economic dependence compromise young women's power to negotiate condom use. Many women reported that they could often not insist on safe sex practices as doing so would jeopardise their economic comfort (Leclerc-Madlala, 2008). It is noteworthy that the notion of love as money often results in unprotected sex, and when this practice is coupled with controlling sexual practices by males, girls are susceptible to STIs and unplanned pregnancies (Mkhwanazi, 2011). Research has also recorded the sad reality of the deliberate act by boys to impregnate girls to prove their masculinity through "successful sexual performance" (Sathiparsad & Taylor, 2011, p. 78).

Earlier, I indicated that where love as childbearing is embraced, pregnancy could be a girl's choice. In such cases, girls expose themselves to risk by deliberately falling pregnant "by having unprotected sex in order to please and keep their partners" (Sathiparsad & Taylor, 2011, p. 77). In such instances, girls consider pregnancy as a strategy to secure a relationship. What is unfortunate about this behaviour is that the contraction of STIs and pregnancy have long-lasting consequences, such as dropping out of school, and these compromise girls' futures. The above circumstances align with the point that GBV has always been associated with risky sexual behaviours that result in the increased risk of contracting STIs and HIV (Jewkes & Morrell, 2012). Below, I discuss how girls' exposure to GBV shatters their prospects.

2.4.2 Disrupted Future Prospects

Violent intimate relationships impact the prospects of young women as their experiences leave lasting scars such as "emotional disturbances, low self-esteem, depression, anger, anxiety, suicidal ideation, school failure, substance abuse, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress, or risky sexual behaviors [sic]" (Bittar & Nakano, 2017, p. 2). Once girls have fallen pregnant, they may be harassed by some teachers and other students and ultimately resort to dropping out of school (Bhana & Mcambi, 2013; Klocker, 2007). School dropout has a detrimental effect on girls as their dreams of improving their lives are shattered. Their condition jeopardises their chances for a better future and improved quality of life (De Lange, 2018). Research has suggested that "socioeconomic factors in South Africa...permit male privilege and violence" (Bhana, 2018, p. 37); therefore, if a girl drops out of school prematurely, she may be compelled to depend on men in the future, which exposes her to GBV (Dako-Gyeke et al., 2019). The next section elaborates on how dependence on men aggravates further violence against girls.

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2.4.3 Girls' Dependence on Men

Dropping out of school due to pregnancy (often caused by the mentalities discussed in the preceding paragraph) leads to insufficient or lack of education for the girl in question. This, in turn, compromises her employment opportunities and will most likely result in her dependence on more than one man for her and her child's survival. The situation is even worse for girls in rural settings where limited survival choices add to their vulnerability (Moletsane et al., 2015). Unemployment and dependence on men expose girls and women to a high risk of GBV as they have limited or no options for a different lifestyle (Dako-Gyeke et al., 2019; Mannell et al., 2016). Sadly, no matter how tortured most girls are, they cannot report the violence they endure as the arrest and imprisonment of the abuser will diminish the family's income. Hence, these women are stuck in such violent situations. On the other hand, abusive men capitalise on women's dependence on them, as they know that they have no choice but to stay in the relationship (Mannell et al., 2016). One young woman admitted that her boyfriend was so cruel that if he was angered, he would pick up whatever tool was in front of him and hit her. She described her tragic circumstances as follows:

> I do not like to stay here but I am just staying because he is taking responsibility for my schooling, and I also became pregnant. Things like that, I want him to take care of me (Jewkes & Morrell, 2012, p. 1734).

The above quote exemplifies the financial dependence of many women and girls on men. Such dependent girls are objectified by men who dehumanise their girlfriends, and this in turn results in various forms of violence, including financial, sexual, and verbal abuse, and even insults (Dako-Gyeke et al., 2019). Once they are compelled by circumstances to depend on men, women tend to normalise men's abusive behaviours and consequently remain vulnerable to GBV throughout their adulthood, as is outlined below.

2.4.4 Potential for Subjection to Abusive Adult Relationships in the Future

The literature suggests that the dating relationships young adolescents form inform their future relationships as adults (Bhana, 2018; Bittar & Nakano, 2017; Ferriani et al., 2019; Furphy, 2012; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021; Soto et al., 2024; Willan et al., 2019). This occurs because they "absorb and internalise the roles and styles of interaction in intimate relationships that they may carry into adulthood" (Sathiparsad & Taylor, 2011, p. 72). Given that adolescent girls' understandings of love "lay the foundations" for adult relationships (Parker et al., 2015, p. 2), many experience unequal power in the relationships they forge in the future (Abdool-Karim, 2005). If this reality is ignored and not adequately understood and addressed, girls who mature into women are bound to be exposed to GBV later in life (Sathiparsad & Taylor, 2011).

Existing literature reports that when adolescent girls are exposed to violence, they tend to view it as a norm in dating relationships (Firmin, 2013; Soto et al., 2024). For instance, Ruiz-Palomino et al. (2021) caution that the notion of love as force reduces the perceived severity of abusive behaviours, thereby normalising violence in dating relationships. Where violence is normalised, any form of intimate partner violence, such as beating, whipping, and caning, is regarded "as an interpersonal act, which may be used to communicate love" (Dako-Gyeke et al., 2019, p. 13). Horrible experiences of violence in adolescent dating relationships have demonstrated that once women normalise violence as a sign of love, abuse becomes their daily bread (Dako-Gyeke et al., 2019; Willan et al., 2019). One participant's mother was quoted as justifying the abuser as she argued that her daughter's partner "was only possessive, jealous, and violent towards her because he loved her so much" (Willan et al., 2019, p. 1231).

The adverse effects of the notion of love as force and fear are a serious concern because the impact of the exposure of young people to scenes where men beat their wives or girlfriends as a "sign that they care or a way to show love" is quite severe (Mkhwanazi, 2011, p. 6). When youths are exposed to such an environment, they might be prone to replicating such behaviours when they reach adulthood and may repeat the vicious cycle of GBV in their own relationships.

Wood et al. (1996) recorded experiences of young girls who had to put up with violent and coercive sex practices by their male partners who understood love as sex. These girls maintained that sex was "the purpose of being in love, [and] that people in love must have sex as often as possible" (p. 8). As many girls seem to embrace the notion of love as sex, the extent of the sexual violence they may have to endure as adults is unthinkable.

2.5 Gaps in the Literature

The literature reviewed in this thesis to explore young people's understandings of love in dating relationships exposes several research gaps. These gaps include the contexts in which the studies were conducted, the methodologies employed, and contextual gaps as the studies tend to focus on urban and peri-urban contexts. Furphy (2012) focused on a semi-rural context while Willan et al. (2019) focused on informal settlements. It is noteworthy that most of the studies explored the experiences of both boys/young men and girls/young females (see Bhana, 2018; Bittar & Nakano, 2017; Furphy, 2012; Ngabaza et al., 2013; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021; Soto et al., 2024). Only a few researchers focused only on girls (see Firmin, 2013; Singh & Myende, 2017; Van Eck, 2015; Willan et al., 2019; Wood et al., 1996). I was therefore

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curious to learn how schoolgirls in a rural setting understood this phenomenon, particularly where GBV was a factor in their daily lives. This study therefore listened to the voices of rural schoolgirls, which is a group that is often silenced in their families, community structures, and classroom settings (Kuchah et al., 2022; Leander, 2002). In the South African context where girls and women are silenced in patriarchal communities and where GBV is rife, enabling schoolgirls' voices to be heard, as proposed by Murray (2017), was a crucial consideration.

To contribute to research that addresses the gap(s) discussed above, I heeded Furphy's (2012) suggestion that a qualitative study "could provide a deeper understanding of adolescents' experiences within their romantic relationships" (p. 2). Many of the sources I reviewed had employed qualitative research approaches and most had utilised in-depth interviews (Bittar & Nakano, 2017; Ferriani et al., 2019; Firmin, 2013; Furphy, 2012; Ngabaza et al., 2013; Singh & Myende, 2017; Willan et al., 2019), focus group discussions (Bhana, 2018; Bittar & Nakano, 2017; Ferriani et al., 2019; Firmin, 2013; Singh & Myende, 2017; Van Eck, 2015), photo voice and participant observation (Van Eck, 2015; Willan et al., 2019), and collage-making (Van Eck, 2015). A few studies studies had used youth-friendly methods. I decided to use arts-based data collection methods, namely collage-making, letter writing, and artefact discussions to unearth the perspectives of adolescent girls and their perceptions of love.

Some scholars are dismissive of the link between romantic love and gender-based violence (see Yuste et al., 2014) and aver that the "youngsters [in their study] questioned the connection between romantic love and gender violence and instead suggested a link to freedom of choice, respect, and equality" (Yuste et al., 2014, p. 851). While they acknowledge a growing concern about GBV among the youth, they blatantly dismiss the view that such violence might be linked to how girls and boys, and men and women construct romantic love in their relationships (Yuste et al., 2014)). Therefore, I wanted to understand how rural schoolgirls constructed love in dating relationships and to explore if their understandings of love exposed them to GBV.

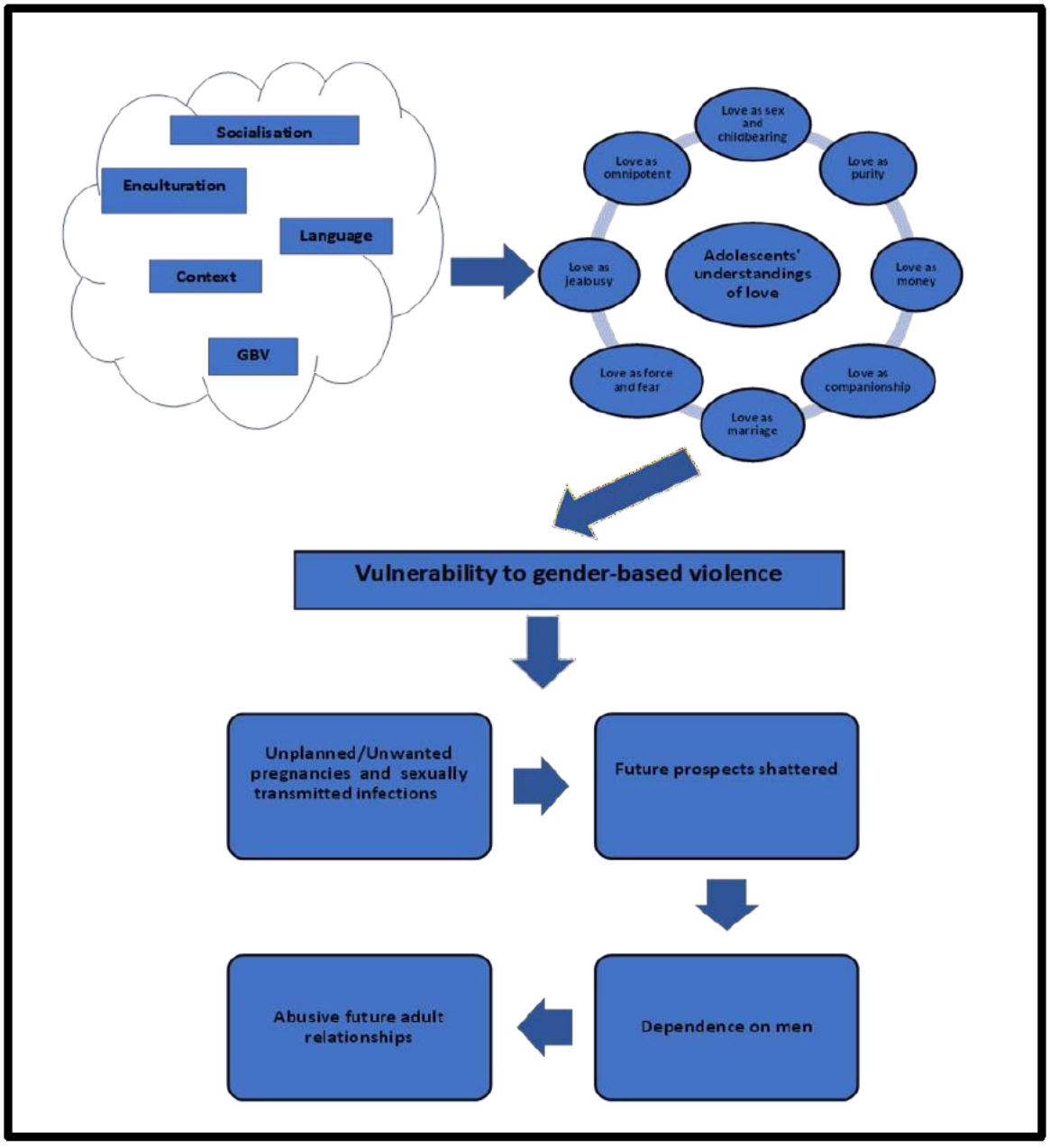
In the past two decades, there has been a paucity of scholarship on love in African countries (see Bhana, 2013; Cole & Thomas, 2019). My aim was to contribute to addressing this gap in the literature. Given that the freedom of speech among Black women, and particularly among rural Black girls is extremely due to unequal gender norms, the study analysed in this thesis involved 23 Black schoolgirls as participants. Focusing on this population as schools have emerged "as contexts that expose adolescents to vulnerability" (Ferriani et al., 2019, p. 1) (eg., to GBV).

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2.6 Discussion: Towards a Conceptual Framework

Informed by the literature and empirical debates reviewed in this chapter, several key themes emerged from my analysis. I used these themes to develop a conceptual framework that guided my data generation and analysis processes. The conceptual framework is diagrammatically presented in Figure 2.5 below:

Figure 2. 5: ***Conceptual framework***



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As Figure 2.5 shows, first, girls (and boys) grow up and socialised in a context characterised by unequal gender norms, where language is gendered (and organised according to age, class, etc), and where patterns of behaviour are governed unequally. These factors in turn generate conditions for GBV. Second, governed by their socialisation and norms, they develop particular understandings of phenomena such as love (e.g.,

love as jealousy, love as fertility and childbearing, love as force, and love as heterosexual marriage). Some of these understandings have the potential to expose the girl (woman) to vulnerability, including to GBV (for example, understanding of love as force, or as jealousy). These patterns of belief, unless disrupted (e.g., through comprehensive sexuality education) could endure well into adulthood, exposing the adult woman to a continuing cycle of violence throughout her life. In this study, I wanted to understand how girls in this rural community understood love, and how their understandings might expose them to GBV.

2.7 Synthesis

This chapter has reviewed literature related to the research phenomenon: The review suggests that, depending on their context and socialisation, girls tend to understand love in particular ways that are related to a host of internal and external forces and elements. Their constructions of love and how these might influence their vulnerability to GBV, are the focus of analysis in this thesis.

In the next chapter (Chapter Three), I discuss the theoretical framework that guided the data generation and analysis processes in this study.

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CHAPTER THREE

UNDERSTANDING RURAL SCHOOLGIRLS' CONSTRUCTIONS OF LOVE: TOWARDS AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

This thesis reports on my exploratory study that addressed the research question: *How might rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships influence their vulnerability to gender-based violence?* Aligned with this research question, in the previous chapter I reviewed literature on young people's understanding of love in dating relationships, and how their understandings of love might expose them to GBV. The literature informed the conceptual framework for understanding rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships. The findings from the literature suggest that, due to factors such as rurality, poverty, cultural norms, and GBV, schoolgirls are socialised and positioned in relation to boys, men, and life in general (Carter, 2014). This positionality coerces them to understand and enact love in particular ways. These include love as sex and childbearing, love as purity, love as money, love as companionship, love as marriage, love as force and fear, love as jealousy, and love as omnipotent (Bhana, 2018; Bittar & Nakano, 2017; Furphy, 2012; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021; Willan et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2007). The literature further reveals that these discourses of love among girls often influence their vulnerability to STIs, unplanned/unwanted pregnancies, future dependence on men (as their dreams get disrupted), GBV in dating relationships GBV, and in future abusive adult relationships (Abrahams et al., 2010; Dako-Gyeke et al., 2019; Jiménez-Picón et al., 2023).

Informed by the conceptual framework presented in the previous chapter, I entered the research field filled with curiosity to learn how the participants understood love and what influenced their understandings of love. I was also curious to learn if their understandings of love were likely to influence their vulnerability to GBV. To generate data, two key research questions guided my fieldwork:

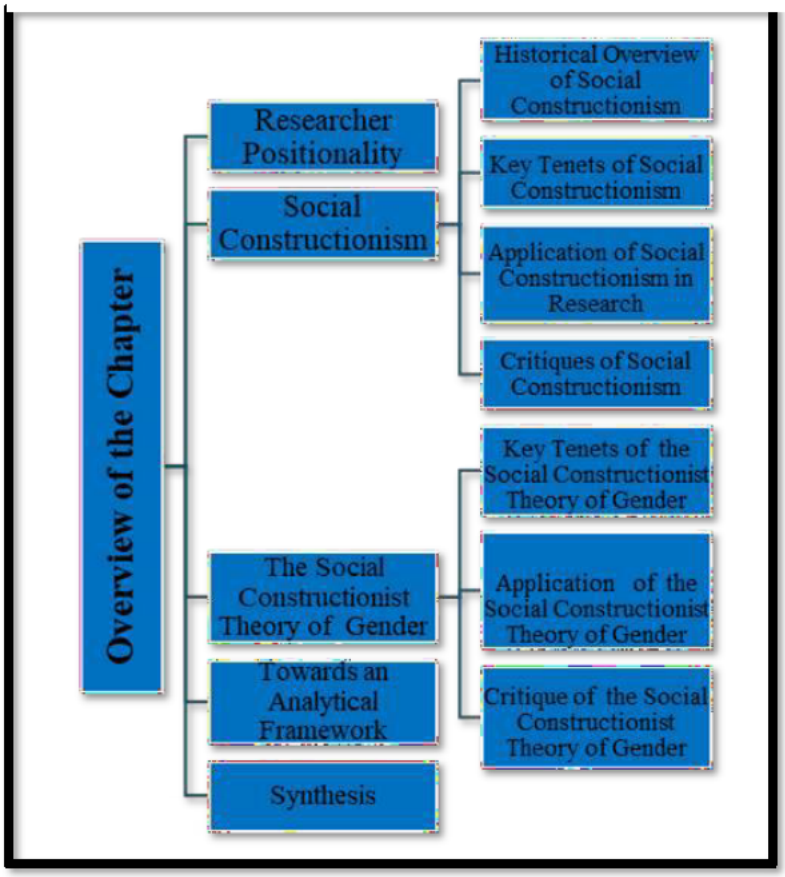
1. *How do rural schoolgirls understand love in dating relationships?*
2. *What factors influence rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships?*

This chapter presents the theoretical framework that informed my methodological choices and analysis of the data.

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3.2Overview of the Chapter

Figure 3. 1:*Diagrammatical Overview of the Chapter*



This chapter is presented in four parts. First, I commence the discourse by positioning myself as the researcher to highlight what triggered my interest in this study and to reflect on how my ontological position influenced my methodological choices. In the second section, I discuss social constructionism as the theoretical lens I adopted to explore rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships. In the third section, I discuss the social constructionist theory of gender as it complemented my use of social constructionism to frame the current study. Together, the two theories formed the theoretical framework I used to analyse the findings emerging from the data. In the fourth section, I synthesise the key arguments and tenets of the theoretical framework and how I used it in this thesis.

3.3Researcher Positionality

In this section, I position myself as the researcher to highlight what triggered my interest in this study. I also reflect on how my ontological position influenced the theoretical lens I adopted for my exploration of rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships. I also present my theoretical positioning

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about knowledge and how my social position may have influenced how I understand the world (Kang et al., 2017). I align myself with Wiebesiek's (2021) view, which posits that this kind of positionality ensures that the researcher reflects about herself and critically examines her positionality in relation to her participants. On this premise, I took the stance of a narrative researcher in my discussion of the participants' stories. I was constantly aware of my social positioning as a middle-class education ministry official and an adult woman, and I constantly reflected upon how I should shape my re-telling of the participants' stories and accounts of their experiences without the interference of my own biases (Creswell, 2007). I therefore attempted to continually reflect on my positionality and how this should impact my analysis and knowledge generation in this study (Suffla et al., 2015).

As discussed in Chapter One, my interest in exploring rural schoolgirls' understandings of love was triggered by my personal and professional backgrounds. Up to the age of 12, I grew up in a rural environment where I was socialised into the idea that a girl was born, grew up, and when she reached puberty, she would fall in love and marry a man. At the age of 12, my family moved to a township where I was introduced to Christianity, which confirmed and validated the above notions. This new social setting taught me that a girl had to be pure and abstain from any sort of dating relationships, particularly sexual relationships before marriage. When I was 18 years and barely out of high school, I understood that a marriage proposal was a declaration of love, and when the man in my life proposed, I got married. My experiences soon taught me that early marriage can expose a girl to danger in the home and that most are related to GBV (Bhana & Anderson, 2013a, 2013b; Bhana & Pattman, 2009, 2010; Mugo & Antonites, 2014; Young, 2013). These and my teaching experiences prompted my interest in the topic of the current study. Prior to conducting the study, I had had 27 years of service as a teacher and principal in the South African public education system, and, in this period, I had been exposed to thousands of girls who, like me, came from rural backgrounds. Part of my teaching service in the mid-1990s was in a deep rural school in the province of KwaZulu-Natal where I witnessed the many challenges schoolgirls experienced. These included early dropout from school due to issues such as early marriages, unplanned pregnancies, and GBV within their dating relationships and in the community. I was deeply concerned as in my informal conversations with them; they declared that they were in love with their abusive boyfriends. My assumption was that the girls' understandings of love were exposing them to unequal gender norms and GBV in their dating relationships, which might lead to their inability to negotiate safer sex, thus resulting in unwanted pregnancies and STIs.

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Thus, informed by my experiences and assumptions, I was interested in investigating how rural schoolgirls might understand and negotiate the love they experienced in their dating relationships. I was also curious to explore what factors influenced modern girls' constructions of love. The 23 participants who participated in the current study were aged between 13 and 20 years. They were all Black African girls enrolled across Grades 8 to Grade 11 in one rural secondary school in the province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. Approaching this study as a Black African woman of rural origin, I shared IsiZulu as a home language with the participants. This meant that, in a way, I could claim to be one of them and I was even tempted to assume that their views of love would be similar to mine when I was their age. However, my research design, including the social constructionist theoretical lens I adopted, urged me to remain conscious of my social and professional positioning and the need to be constantly reflexive as I listened to the girls' narratives of love. As I outline in the next chapter, the analytical framework and methodology I used in this study helped me to guard against allowing my own assumptions to impact my analyses and interpretations during the re-storying of the girls' narratives.

3.4 Social Constructionism

The thesis adopts social constructionism as a theoretical lens. Social constructionism is a theory of knowledge that explains how we create shared meanings and understandings about phenomena in our respective worlds. The theory holds that what we tend to leave unquestioned as conventional ways of life are rooted in historical and cultural power relationships within our social spaces (Kang et al., 2017). Therefore, people with whom we interact socialise us to ultimately reproduce "ways of thinking and behaving from our families and communities" (Kang et al., 2017, p. 36). As a result, even "characteristics typically thought to be immutable and solely biological—such as gender, race, class, ability, and sexuality—are products of human definition and interpretation shaped by cultural and historical contexts" (Kang et al., 2017, p. 20). These shared meanings of phenomena that are produced and re-produced through interaction and repetition are now viewed as normal and natural. These social conventions ultimately create our sense of reality, irrespective of whether this occurs consciously or unconsciously (Segre, 2016).

Epistemologically, social constructionism "asserts that knowledge is historically and culturally specific" (Young & Collin, 2004, p. 377). It also holds that knowledge is socially constructed (Andrews, 2012; Kinnunen, 2022; Rorty, 2009; Stam, 2002), and therefore even "phenomena [including love] are socially constructed" (Edley, 2001, p. 433). Therefore, how one views reality depends on shared meanings that result from socialisation. These meanings also differ from individual to individual and are contextual. This

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means that I needed to understand that there might be multiple understandings of love among the study participants. For example, how girls understand love is influenced by the shared meanings at their disposal. Therefore, as I explored the girls' constructions of this phenomenon, I paid attention to the prevailing meanings of this phenomenon in the girls' community and school, and I was cognisant of how these might impact their understandings of love in dating relationships.

3.4.1 Historical Overview of Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is derived from multidisciplinary sources, including sociology, literary studies, and postmodern approaches (Young & Collin, 2004). This theory of knowledge "originated as an attempt to come to terms with the nature of reality" (Andrews, 2012, p. 39). In view of its epistemology which holds that knowledge is socially constructed, the origins of social constructionism can be partly traced to "an interpretivist approach to thinking" (Andrews, 2012, p. 40). While social constructionism tends to be used interchangeably with social constructivism due to their focus on the social construction of reality, the latter:

> focuses on meaning making and the constructing of the social and psychological worlds through individual cognitive processes while [the former] emphasises that the social and psychological worlds are made real (constructed) through social processes and interaction (Young & Collin, 2004, p. 375).

Thus, while constructivism has an individual focus, social constructionism has a social focus (Young & Collin, 2004). In principle, social constructionism may be viewed as a move from limiting how one makes meaning to the individual. Consequently, as it emphasises the critical role of social processes in how people make sense of reality, social constructionism "is less interested…in the cognitive processes that accompany knowledge" production (Young & Collin, 2004, p. 376). Social constructionism has evolved from and remodels grounded theory in several ways (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Gergen, 1985, Elder-Vass, 2012). Grounded theory understands "knowledge as beliefs in which people can have reasonable confidence; [thus, it elicits] a common sense of understanding of reality" (Andrews, 2012, p. 39).

3.4.2. Key Tenets of Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is underpinned by four key tenets. First, the theory challenges the common-sense view of reality, or more specifically the ordinarily 'taken-for-granted' nature of reality (Burr, 2006; Cohen et al., 2004; Galbin, 2014; Gergen, 1985; Kang et al., 2017; Stam, 2002). Social constructionism "begins with radical doubt in the taken-for-granted world" (Gergen, 1985, p. 267) by challenging "most of our common-sense knowledge of ourselves and the world we live in" (Galbin, 2014, p. 83). This theory further posits that the meanings and understandings that we create and share about phenomena are produced and

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reproduced through repetition to the extent that they come to be seen as normal or natural. Therefore, human imagination "is embedded within a praxis; a praxis that begins with the… taken-for-granted" (Stam, 2002, p. 573). Such taken-for-granted practices continuously restructure our social world. We ultimately end up taking reality at face value and reach a point where we tend to leave things unquestioned. This is the bone of contention for social constructionists, and they therefore advocate that we have to guard against taking social reality for granted by leaving phenomena that are reproduced in part through socialisation processes unquestioned (Kang et al., 2017). It is on this premise that social constructionism emphasises reflexivity among human beings (Galbin, 2014). Therefore, as I explored how the girls expressed their experiences and interpretations of love in dating relationships, I was also interested in what knowledge was normatively viewed as reality by analysing the girls' narrative accounts. This enabled me to identify how their taken-for-granted realities influenced these young persons' understandings of love.

Secondly, social constructionism holds that reality is socially constructed and is therefore sustained by social processes constituted through language (Andrews, 2012; Berger & Luckmann, 1966, 1991; Burr, 2003; Burr, 2006; Cohen et al., 2004; Edley, 2001; Galbin, 2014; Gergen, 1985; Kang et al., 2017; Kinnunen, 2022; Nightingale & Cromby, 2002; Rorty, 2009; Segre, 2016; Stam, 2002). Social constructionists hold that, rather than being an unmediated mirror of reality (Rorty, 2009), knowledge is socially constructed "by the interactions of individuals within society" (Andrews, 2012, p. 40). This implies that the construction of knowledge is an interactive process among people during which they create and recreate multiple versions of reality through social practice. The social construction of reality is influenced and sustained by social processes such as socialisation and enculturation, and is constituted through language (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, 1991). Socialisation is a process of institutionalising and internalising the established societal rules and norms of behaviour and expectations (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, 1991). On the other hand, enculturation is a process through which society teaches and transfers its culture from one generation to the next, thereby conscientising young ones about expectations regarding their acceptable cultural roles (Hoominfar, 2021; Lorber, 2000). Therefore, when I analysed the data in the current study, I noted the potential influence these processes of socialisation and enculturation might have on how these girls understood love in dating relationships. One's sense of reality specifically depends on others who are

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agents of socialisation for the individual in question. Therefore, girls tend to construct love based on the influences of their interactions with the agents of socialisation. These agents may be parents, other children, partners, family members, peers, friends, co-workers/colleagues, teachers, strangers, social networks, other social institutions such as schools and religious institutions, and the media (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Hoominfar, 2021; John et al., 2017; Kang et al., 2017; Kretchmar, 2009; Lorber, 2018; Saxena, 1971; Van Eck, 2015). These agents of socialisation structure and shape our thoughts and behaviour by enforcing societal rules on us that prescribe inclusion and exclusion (Kang et al., 2017). Ultimately, we act according to the opinions of the agents of socialisation (Kinnunen, 2022). Therefore, in everyday life, socialisation is "a common, shared stock of knowledge which provides instruction on the appropriate conduct in a variety of circumstances" (Segre, 2016, p. 94).

Due to the dynamic, ongoing, and never-ending nature of the process of socialisation, there is a distinction between primary and secondary socialisation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, 1991). The former refers to the first level of socialisation by significant others who are present in the environment into which we are born (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). This environment "sets the base for the child's worldview" (Kinnunen, 2022, p. 20). This level is influenced by the proximal agents of socialisation such as parents and family members. Secondary socialisation kicks in when individuals begin to socialise with other agents of socialisation outside the basic family structure and in the broader society. In certain instances, the 'knowledge' gained through primary socialisation continues to be smoothly shaped by social interactions with others. For instance, one engages in everyday conversations with 'significant others' and 'less significant others', and these interactions serve to maintain and reaffirm the subjective reality one has internalised. Hence, the new information that is harmonious with this reality builds on the internalised knowledge that is taken for granted (Kinnunen, 2022).

However, as one interacts with different agents of socialisation, the latter may sometimes "present views of reality which are mutually incompatible" (Segre, 2016, p. 95). For instance, the media "present children with different expectations [and] images of how girls or boys are supposed to behave [compared to the directives] received from a parent" (Wharton, 2005, p. 132). This is bound to contribute to the inconsistencies and disruptions in one's choices; hence, they form the contradictions that are faced by the individual in question. This is where the first level of socialisation normally gets challenged and where secondary socialisation is viewed as a re-socialisation process. This is because, at this level, one forges relationships with people who guide one into a new reality against primary socialisation. For instance,

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forging friendships is one of the processes of re-socialisation that has the potential to change one's reality that was adopted in primary socialisation (Kinnunen, 2022). It is for this reason that, as I analysed girls' narratives, I paid attention to the types of relationships in which they were involved. I also paid attention to the girls' socialisation and re-socialisation processes and what factors were at play, and I particularly focused on the agents of their socialisation at different stages of their lives. Furthermore, I also tried to determine if these relationships influenced the girls' constructions of love in any way.

Kinnunen (2022) argues that, where the realities that are constructed during the two first levels of socialisation are incoherent and contradictory, these contradictions may result in feelings of guilt and confusion (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Kinnunen (2022, p. 54) further reveals "the difficulty of fully altering knowledge attained in primary socialisation". Therefore, while they get influenced by secondary socialisation, individuals somehow remain attached to the originally socially constructed notions of reality. In my analysis of the girls' narratives, I was mindful of the potential confusion that could arise as they navigated their dating relationships.

Thirdly, social constructionism emphasises the historical and cultural specificity of the world in which we make meaning of reality (Burr, 2006; Cohen et al., 2004; Galbin, 2014; Segre, 2016). It holds that how we understand the world is "historically and culturally situated, meaning that reality changes and develops across time and space" (Cohen et al., 2004, p. 410). Therefore, given that our creation of reality is influenced by factors such as history, culture and context, the shared meanings of phenomena we tend to view as a norm are prone to change since they vary from "person to person, group to group, time to time, place to place, and context to context" (Segre, 2016, p. 94). This is so because individuals and groups create shared meanings and understandings about phenomena in their worlds in ways that do not pre-exist, or they exist independently of the processes of their production and reproduction. Social evolution, which influences reality, also impacts a society's culture because at any given point culture is determined by the prevailing dominant order that is not exempted from change. This, in turn, influences individuals' sense of reality at a point and time where knowledge is created. Therefore, as I explored what it was that influenced the rural schoolgirls' constructions of love, I paid attention to what their stories revealed about the prevailing dominant culture, and how these influences informed their understandings of love.

As social construction of reality occurs within changing institutions, what a particular phenomenon means at one point or place in history might mean something else at another point, time, and place (Kang et al.,

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2017). This means that what was considered taboo years ago might not be viewed in the same light today. Therefore, as I explored what influenced the rural schoolgirls' constructions of love, I was mindful that each participant's history, culture, and context had a story to tell about why she viewed love the way she did. As I was mindful that the construction of reality is "context-dependent" (Cislaghi & Shakya, 2018, p. 39), I acknowledged that the context and characteristics of the population group being socialised was crucial. For instance, the influence of socialisation on knowledge production rests on issues such as socio-political locations, race, sex, class, age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, social class, and community context (e.g., urban or rural) (Baderoon et al., 2013; Cislaghi & Shakya, 2018; Mollborn, 2010; Wharton, 2005). Therefore, I could not overlook the potential influence of factors like the 23 participants' ages, childhood experiences, gender/girlhood, socio-economic status, and rurality if I wanted to make sense of their understandings of love in dating relationships. I paid careful attention to these factors as they emerged in the girls' narrative accounts.

Fourthly, social constructionism posits that the construction of reality occurs within relations of power (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Burr, 2006; Cohen et al., 2004; Galbin, 2014; Kang et al., 2017; Kinnunen, 2022; Segre, 2016). How we understand phenomena and the meanings that we attach to them occurs "within relations of power and privilege" (Kinnunen, 2022, p. 21). The interplay of culture and institutions creates social structures that comprise "socially constructed ideas, principles, and categories" (Kang et al., 2017, p. 61). There are numerous power relational factors that account for the nature of reality. These relations of power are so diverse that groups that are thought of as inherently inferior in one way or another endure multiple oppressive categorisations that are polarised. This means that what is an ideology or behaviour that is acceptable or appropriate for one group may not be acceptable for another (Bem, 1993). It is for this reason that I paid careful attention to the possible network of power relations to which my participants had been or were subjected.

3.4.3 Social Constructionism in Social Science Research

Taking a critical stance on the common-sense view of reality, several scholars have employed social constructionism as an analytic lens to examine various phenomena. These phenomena range from career (Cohen et al., 2004; Young & Collin, 2004), to safety (Blazsin & Guldenmund, 2015), gender (Agrawal, 2008; Connell, 1987; Connell, 2012; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Lorber, 1994, 2000), femininities (Shabane, 2011; Wiebesiek, 2021), girlhood (Kinnunen, 2022), masculinity and femininity (Hussein, 2005), and love (Belli et al., 2010). These authors concur with social constructionists' view that social

processes play a pivotal role in how people construct reality. They conclude that social constructionism enables access to "the parts [of knowledge generation] that other approaches cannot reach" (Cohen et al., 2004, p. 407). In principle, social constructionism unearths the otherwise hidden realities concealed under the auspices of the 'taken-for-granted' views of reality, and I considered these realities in the constructions of love by the rural schoolgirls who participated in the current study.

Of particular importance to this thesis is that several scholars have shown interest in the notion of love as a social. For example, Belli et al. (2010) focused on the relationship between love and language, and historical trends on love as an emotion. The scholars highlight the significance of context in relation to the understanding of love. However, while they emphasise the role of language in the expression of love, their analysis seems to overlook the influence of the prevailing gender order and gender regimes in society and its institutions. As emphasised by social constructionists, in this study, I foreground the role of language and its role in mediating the gendered social processes of socialisation and enculturation as they impact how individuals construct love.

3.4.4 Critique of Social Constructionism

While social constructionism provides an analytical frame for this study, it can, like any theory, be subjected to some criticism. The first criticism of this theory is its view that there are multiple realities and that this results in multiple interpretations of those realities. On this basis, opponents of this theory claim that it supports "no notion of what constitutes truth [and therefore] there is no way of judging one account of reality as better than another" (Andrews, 2012, pp. 43-44). They therefore question and doubt the usefulness and relevance of the results of social constructionist research (Andrews, 2012). However, this thesis is premised on the belief that being open to multiple views of reality, is what actually renders the findings of social constructionist analysis trustworthy.

A second criticism that faces social constructionism is what is termed "double participation" as scholars "interpret the worlds in which they participate as researchers" (Stam, 2002, p. 575) while at the same time bringing their own interpretations into the sphere of academic, theoretical discourses. Hence, Stam (2002) raises the question of "whose interest is represented in our debates" (p. 575) as researchers and asserts that this double participation calls for the moral responsibility of the researcher. Thus, for scholars who adopt a social constructionist lens in research, being conscious of their positionality and being reflexive throughout

the research process is key to privileging participants' perspectives and voices, and to ensuring the rigour of their analysis.

A third criticism is that social constructionism is "theoretically parasitic and politically paralyzing" (Edley, 2001, p. 434) the theory lacks any ability to change things because there is nothing against which to judge its findings. Methodologically, this results in "political inertia because of [constructionists'] reluctance to make any recommendations [from their research]" (Andrews, 2012, pp. 43-44). For this reason, Martin and Sugarman (1999) question the feasibility of human agency and change if the reality is socially, historically, and culturally constructed. However, as Andrews (2012) argues, "far from being neutral, social constructionism can generate real debate and lead to change" (p. 44). Taking this stance, in a recent study, Wiebesiek (2021) sought to investigate girls' and young women's construction of femininities in a rural KwaZulu-Natal school. Using the findings from the study, a protocol for reporting and responding to early and forced marriages was developed and adopted at community level. In this way, the study not only made recommendations, but it also led to the development of a protocol that is likely to benefit the participants and their community in real terms.

Notwithstanding the various criticisms again social constructionism, this theory is helpful for exploring how people make sense of particular phenomena. By stimulating a reflexive stance to the common-sense view of reality, social constructionist research enables the critique of traditional societal practices and their cultural implications. In this way, it contributes to the transformation of the gender order and gender regimes. At the same time, this approach not only encourages democratic and collaborative knowledge production between researchers and the participants but also extends the outcomes of studies to the wider community. In this way, it transforms research practice by moving away from "expertise-based, rational, hierarchical, and result-focused models and going toward more participatory, co-creative, and process-centred ones" (Galbin, 2014, p. 91). In essence,

> the constructionist invitation is to comprehend how aspects of the world that are taken for granted are socially constructed, thereby opening up spaces for a variety of alternative intelligibilities. Methodologically, the challenge is not to prove and persuade others about the correct interpretation of a phenomenon, but it is to broaden the possibilities of understanding. This fluid and dynamic approach has helped to foster communication, dialogue, and integration of perspectives (Galbin, 2014, p. 90).

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In this study, this analytical lens assisted me to arrive at a nuanced understanding of how girls interpreted the research phenomenon and to identify the factors that influenced their understandings thereof. Specifically, it enabled an in-depth analysis of the prevailing common-sense view on reality and the dominant gender norms that informed the girls' understandings of love in their dating relationships. The theory helped make the invisible visible, and enabled data generation that other approaches would not have achieved (Cohen et al., 2004).

3.5 The Social Constructionist Theory of Gender

Social constructionist theory of gender posits that as a social construct, gender is socially constructed and relational. In our everyday lives, gender is an organising principle of the overall social order that is informed by cultural norms, meanings, expectations, and relations (Lorber, 1994). From this perspective, gender identities, institutional beliefs and norms are all context-specific rather pre-determined or fixed. Critical of the common-sense view of reality, the social constructionist theory of gender holds that, as the agents of socialisation "create and reinforce expectations about how men and women should behave" (Hussein, 2005, p. 59), they perpetuate the gender order and gender regimes that tend to be taken for granted, to the extent that these regimes are normalised and remain unquestioned (Agrawal, 2008; Connell, 1987; Connell, 2012; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Lorber, 1994, 2000). These gender regimes include inequality between men and women which has been institutionalised (Walby, 2020).

According to Connell (2012), the gender order refers to the "the [overarching] structure of gender relations in a given society at a given time" and how these shape how individuals and groups live (p. 1677). The gender order is informed by social norms, beliefs, and power linked to gender in a particular context, and therefore, shapes how individuals (men and women) are expected to and live their lives. Gender regimes refer to how gender relations are organised and reproduced within specific institutional settings, including families, schools, or neighbourhoods, and others (Connell, 2012).

Given the dominance of certain understandings and the subordination of others, the prevailing social order tends to "work in the interests of more powerful groups and against those in weaker positions" (Cohen et al., 2004, p. 410). Based on this premise, Burr (2003) advances that "all knowledge is derived from looking at the world from such perspective or other and is in the service of some interests rather than others" (p. 6). Where inequality is the order of the day, the devalued gender has less power than the valued gender (Lorber, 1994). The social order, which is the product of social construction of gender (Lorber, 1994), ultimately

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influences individuals' sense of reality (Galbin, 2014). Therefore, in my analysis I acknowledged that the prevailing social order might influence how girls viewed love as a phenomenon of emotional expression in their lives.

The study analysed in this thesis was premised on my understanding that rural schoolgirls' constructions of love are influenced by societal norms (Lorber, 2000) which they learn from childhood through processes of socialisation in the various institutions. For example, through gender socialisation, "individuals develop, refine and learn to 'do' gender through internalizing gender norms and roles as they interact with key agents of socialization", (John et al., 2017, p. 6), for example, from mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers and other family members in home. Similarly, in most cases, community structures and institutions such as the church and schools reproduce and reinforce what children learn in the home. This way, 'doing gender' follows the norms and roles learned and refined in these institutions, and ultimately becomes the norm.

3.5.1 The Role of Socialisation and Unequal Power Relations

Furthermore, social constructionism is premised on the notion that how individuals and groups construct reality is influenced by multiple relations of power in each context. Linked to this, according to the social constructionist theory of gender, gender relations are arranged hierarchically and characterised sexual division of power, the sexual division of labour, and the structure of cathexis (with a focus on men) (Connell, 1987; 1995). As the oppositional dichotomies tend to label one as superior to the other, this results in the subordination of the 'other' that is considered inferior (usually girls and women, but also LGBTQI identifying individuals) (Collins, 2000). Due to the focus on men's position of power, women and girls and other marginalised groups, are always on the inferior end of the societal gender order. In this thesis, my analysis explored whether and how the girls participating in the study acquiesced or resisted the prevailing or dominant ideologies in the community in their constructions of love.

Aligned with social constructionists' view that reality is socially constructed through interactive processes of socialisation and enculturation, the social constructionist theory of gender posits that a gendered society transfers its culture from one generation to the next through a process of enculturation. Enculturation is a process that conscientises young people about the expectations for their acceptable cultural roles based on their gender (Hoominfar, 2021; Lorber, 2000). This study was premised on my understanding that families and other socialising agents draw on the African gender ideology to socialise children, which is a process that "shapes different lives for men and women by placing them in different social positions" (Hussein,

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2005, p. 60). This ideology is mobilised through rituals and ceremonies that perpetuate gendered cultural traditions (Hussein, 2005). To analyse the data in this study, I paid attention to the cultural traditions that might emerge from girls' narratives, and I endeavoured to understand how these influenced the girls' constructions of love in their dating relationships.

3.5.2 The Role of Language

Additionally, social constructionist gender theorists emphasise that individuals use language to mediate their reality, and this occurs differently from one individual to another (Andrews, 2012; Berger & Luckmann, 1966, 1991). This renders speech and language central to the social construction of reality as they are the media through which knowledge is conveyed or communicated to individuals who are being socialised (Kinnunen, 2022). Using proverbs as 'general truths' is a powerful way to perpetuate the gender order (Hussein, 2005; Zungu, 2016). In many communities, proverbs are used to carry gendered messages and they end up in everyday language to subordinate girls and women, and even to communicate the gender order and gendered division of labour that favours men over women. Hussein (2005, p.70) quotes the proverb: "*The man dies in his field, the woman in the house*", arguing that it is among the proverbs that communicate the gender-based divisions of labour in rural African societies. Such expressions of language result in the gendered mentality of a man as the provider, while the woman is limited to domestic and reproductive roles. Sadly, in the interest of male privilege, some proverbs "convey women's tolerance of physical and mental humiliation. [For example], *Women and donkeys do not complain about burden"* (Hussein, 2005, p. 66).

According to Zungu (2016), "Proverbs are the core of the Zulu society's language, thought patterns, and interpretation of the world" (p. 225). He continues: "They paint a vivid picture of what Zulu society expects from women. They also warn women about difficult situations they will encounter in marriage (p. 226). These proverbs include, *Ukwenda wukuzilahla* (getting married is throwing one's life away) and *Akuqhalaqhala lahlula isidwaba* (even the most assertive woman surrenders in marriage)" (p. 226).

Similarly, in other cultural contexts, Hussein (2005) writes about proverbs that emphasise the dominance of men over women, such as: *"The husband is the beauty of a woman"* (p. 70). From an early age, proverbs also teach boys not to allow girls (and later as men, women) any sort of freedom, such as: *"The lady whose husband spoils her, slips from the tanned hide"* (p. 70). In turn, through proverbs, for women the adage is, *"What my husband says is what I say"* (Hussein, 2005, p. 61). This further perpetuates the idea of a

woman's psychological dependence on a man (Hussein, 2005, p. 81). According to Hussein, proverbs are viewed as "repositories of social and cultural wisdom" (Hussein, 2005, p. 61) and language is used to construct gender stereotypes in society. In other words, through proverbs, gendered cultural traditions and ideologies are expressed. Some proverbs objectify women, express control of women's bodies and reproductive organs, and promote the notion of female sexual passivity or purity. Such sayings include: *"The smaller the entrance to a bride's vagina, the greater her reputation"* (Hussein, 2005, p. 65), *"The satiety of a pregnant woman is their offspring"* (Hussein, 2005, p. 66), and *"To have children is to strengthen your bones"* (Hussein, 2005, p. 73). These gendered expressions are aligned with some "cultural rituals of conformity to patriarchal demands" (Hussein, 2005, p. 66). Similarly, some Zulu communities, including the one where the study was conducted, consider girls as virgins only after virginity testing, and only 'pure' girls are allowed to participate in the Zulu cultural reed dance.[2]

From a young age, girls (and boys) grow up hearing and using proverbs, including those that relate to love and dating. These common sayings influence how they come to understand and construct gender concepts. In my study, I analysed schoolgirls' collages and letters to understand the power of language, particularly the proverbs they had grown up hearing in their families and community. I thus explored these expressions to understand if they had been part of the girls' constructions of love in their dating relationships.

3.5.3 The Influence of Masculinities and Femininities

The social constructionist theory of gender further posits that because of the normative focus on men, the gender order propagates patriarchy through dominant masculinities, commonly referred to as hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 2012; Connell, 1995). Due to institutionalised gender inequalities, men are positioned in privilege by hegemonic masculinities and patriarchy. Hegemonic masculinity means "the material and social representation of the psychological, social and physical potency of men in a sexist society" (Hussein, 2005, p. 67). The gendered norms about "how men and women should behave in their society are the most fundamental distinctions made between people rooted in patriarchy" (Hussein, 2005, p. 59). Patriarchy is a tool that legitimises "men to exercise their power over women to sustain the latter's

[2] This is a traditional cultural ceremony that is celebrated by African groups in South Africa to celebrate girls' virginal purity; hence, only virgins are expected to participate in this event (Nkosi, 2013).

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subordination" (Hussein, 2005, p. 60). Men in particular fight to maintain patriarchal stability and to perpetuate this gendered order. This is to ensure what Connell (1987) calls the patriarchal dividend as men have something to gain from oppressing the female gender and the patriarchal order. An example of this is the cultural practice where a future husband pays '*ilobolo*' to the family of the prospective bride in African families (Hunter, 2010; Shai, 2018). This payment may be in the form of cattle or money. Normally, the family of the bride will only allow her to get married after the payment of the bride price. This bride price is normally paid to the father or brother/s of the bride.

As they privilege "the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell, 1995, p. 77), hegemonic masculinities are always constructed or produced in relation to femininities. Therefore, Connell (1987) asserts that there are no hegemonic femininities "in the sense that the dominant form of masculinity is hegemonic among men" (p. 183). Instead, there is emphasised femininity which is "defined around compliance with subordination and is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men" (Connell, 1987, p. 183). As they succumb to the terms of men, girls and women in general are shaped by patriarchy (Impett et al., 2006). This includes conforming to cultural practices and ideologies around femininity, as these manifest in women's subordination by their male counterparts (including their male siblings) (Barker, 2012).

Among the femininities that have been found to be embraced by women, particularly in rural contexts, are the notions of 'being a good woman,' marriage, childbearing, dignity, perseverance, respectfulness, sexual passivity, and having good manners (Hunter, 2010; Jewkes & Morrell, 2012; Shai, 2018), to mention a few. In African oral traditions, femininity is "warmth and all-nourishing goodness" (Hussein, 2005, p. 60). Conversely, negative femininity is associated with having multiple love partners (Hunter, 2010; Shai, 2018). This femininity is termed '*isifebe*', meaning 'a loose woman'. Because this femininity is associated with material gains, Hunter (2010) also calls it 'provider-notion' of love. Given that girls are socialised and encultured by the same women who are under the influence of emphasised femininities, the chances are that these girls are likely to construct love under their influence. Thus, when I explored what influenced girls' constructions of love, I was interested in the prevailing femininities to which they were exposed.

As for the hegemonic masculinities, emphasised femininities work in favour of men. Take *perseverance* for instance. This femininity is associated with being tolerant of any situation, including abusive relationships. The same goes for *respectfulness* as a femininity which is in the main meant to revere men's

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social status. This implies that women do not question abusive acts by their husbands (Wiebesiek, 2021). Adhering to femininity is thus a norm that women have to obey according to their men's rules (Shabane, 2011).

The cultural consent that normalises and institutionalises oppressive gender norms occurs to the extent that, as marginalised individuals construct reality, they feel "less important and their needs less worthy of attention" (Kinnunen, 2022, p. 27). Therefore, the naturalised cultural consent and the oppressive systems of discrimination or disadvantage may limit self-determination and the agency of marginalised groups (Connell, 2012; Kinnunen, 2022). However, aligned with the social constructionist view of multiple truths, these masculinities are locally specific and therefore formed in a particular context. They are also prone to change and actually do change over time (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Marginalised groups then tend to adhere to the prevailing dominant social order that is self-maintaining (Segre, 2016) and, if they resist it, the outcome is the transformation of shared meanings (Kang et al., 2017). In this way, the deviant conception of reality gets incorporated into the main order (Segre, 2016). It is worth noting, though, that challenging the prevailing social order is not a process that is welcomed by those in power because the social order always aims at maintaining stability (Giddens, 1984). The reason why those on the powerful side of the gender order and gender regime fight for stability is well expressed by Connell (1987), who calls it the patriarchal dividend. Considering that maintaining masculinities and femininities benefits patriarchal gain, it makes sense that men will always fight for what they believe they are entitled to. Therefore, if women talk back or express their views, they are not aligned with the social norm as they engage in "a political gesture that challenges the politics of domination" (hooks, 1986, p. 126). After all, within the gender hierarchy, masculinities tend to be always above femininities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Therefore, in the event that the gender order gets disrupted by an individual or group, it is "constantly stabilized" (Lorber, 2000, p. 86). That is why resistance against succumbing to the social order is accompanied by negative consequences. Research has recorded that, "despite the social consequences around these internalized constructs, they may still be challenged" (Kinnunen, 2022, p. 22). Consequently, as I analysed the girls' stories, I explored if there were any elements of the culture of resistance in the girls' narratives.

3.5.4 The Influence of Gendered Violence

The social constructionist theory of gender recognises that, as violence is connected to power and inequality, it is a deep-rooted cause of gender inequality (Hearn et al., 2022). Given that they stand

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alongside the normatively hierarchical gender regimes, violence and violent regimes are also hierarchical in nature (Hearn et al., 2022). Therefore, as the gender order and gender regimes promote inequality, they subject girls and women to gendered violence (Walby, 2020). There are numerous gender violence-related regimes that affect women and girls. These include domestic violence, intimate partner violence, emotional violence, and violence emanating from denying them access to fundamental rights, thereby subjecting them to unemployment, risk of poverty, as well as social exclusion (Hearn et al., 2022). In principle, approaching violence in the sense of regimes goes beyond paying attention to physical injury (Walby et al., 2017). In the interest of honouring dominant cultures, women are also subjected to a violent regime that controls their bodies (Brown et al., 2009). Therefore, my analyses of the data also explored the possibility of the influence of violent regimes on the girls' constructions of love.

The social constructionist theory of gender also holds that societal gendered divisions structure our daily lives to a point that they are perceived as normal and natural by most people (Lorber, 2000). This oppressive and patriarchal social gendered order becomes normalised as it becomes taken for granted as it is reproduced by repetition. The patterned system of power relations resulting from oppressive hegemonic masculinities and emphasised femininities are particularly enabled and maintained by the consent marginalised of groups, particularly women and girls (Connell, 2012; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). As it is part of the taken-for-granted reality, dominance is perpetuated by consent, and the oppressed are not even aware that it is happening (Paechter, 2018). It is for this reason that Paechter (2018) advances the notion that the normalisation of oppressive gender norms "makes it appear to those oppressed by them that such forms are not just how things are but how they ought to be" (p. 123). Consequently, they tend not to challenge their subordination, but simply resort to submitting and conforming to the prevailing social order (hooks, 1982; Kinnunen, 2022). In this way, they fulfil the intention of the gender order which is to "construct women as a group to be the subordinates of men as a group" (Lorber, 1994, p. 116). Therefore, power relations informed by hegemonic masculinities are not necessarily "a pattern of simple domination based on force" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 846).

3.6 Use and Critiques of the Social Constructionist Theory of Gender in Research

Dominant among the studies that have employed social constructionism for exploring the construction of phenomena among girls (Kinnunen, 2022; Shabane, 2011; Wiebesiek, 2021) is the realisation that meaning-making of any sort amongst this population group cannot be divorced from their construction of gender (Lorber, 2000). This is so because girls construct reality under the influence of the prevailing gender order

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and gender regimes (Connell, 2012). Scholars who have explored the social constructionist theory of gender (Agrawal, 2008; Connell, 1987; Connell, 2012; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Lorber, 1994, 2000) argue that, in a particular context, both the gender order and gender regimes tend to be taken for granted and, as a result, they are normalised and remain unquestioned. They contend that gender is socially constructed, "encompasses the social construction of masculinities as well as femininities, [and] the interrelations of women and men" (Lorber, 2000, p. 84). Given that the gendered social organisation has been found to impact how young people construct sexuality (Harrison, 2008), this suggests that this may also account for how rural schoolgirls make sense of love in dating relationships. It is on this premise that I found the social constructionist theory of gender appropriate for the analysis of data in this study. As the current study explored rural schoolgirls' constructions of love in their heterosexual dating relationships, I wanted to capture their common-sense views on gender, as these were bound to influence how they made sense of love as a phenomenon in their relationships.

Although the social constructionist theory of gender effectively complemented social constructionism in helping me to understand my participants' constructions of love, I this theory has faced some criticism and debate. For example, useful as it is, the concept of emphasised femininity is criticised for "not adequately account[ing] for the different forms of femininities or the complexities and nuances in gender relations" (Wiebesiek, 2021, p. 60). Paechter (2018) argues that "femininity cannot be conceptualised at all without masculinity" (p. 121). She therefore contends that, "like hegemonic masculinities, hegemonic femininities have to be thought of as local phenomena" (Paechter, 2018, p. 124), irrespective of the fact that they still perpetuate the gender order in favour of men. Notably, in her work she uses the concept of hegemony, as she argues that the gender order functions in favour of men. In this thesis I align myself with Connell's understandings and use emphasised femininities.

While the social constructionist theory of gender asserts that a naturalised cultural consent inhibits agency of marginalised groups (Connell, 2012), researchers who have employed social constructionism to explore various phenomena within these population groups established that, as these marginalised groups were not dupes, they identified with their own sense of reality once they had undergone re-socialisation. This means that they ultimately cultivated a culture of resistance and they fought back against the dominant social order (Kinnunen, 2022). In bell hooks' terms, to resist subordination, the oppressed group learns to talk back by "speaking as an equal to an authority figure" (hooks, 1986, p. 123). In such events, the individual deconstructs the views imposed by her family and other agents of primary socialisation and uses her agency

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to resist previously enforced beliefs (Kinnunen, 2022). This means that gendered oppression does not necessarily stop the oppressed and marginalised from making attempts to gain agency. Therefore, "social structures are not immutable or completely resistant to change" (Kang et al., 2017, p. 19). It is on this basis that social constructionists call for "a critical stance in relation to taken-for-granted assumptions about the social world, which are seen as reinforcing the interests of dominant social groups" (Galbin, 2014, p. 83). Given that girls are not exempted from the contesting forces of power and resistance as they construct love in dating relationships, the participants in the current study were also active participants in a constant interplay of power and resistance in a society where these forces coexisted (Foucault, 1977, 1978, 1988). Hence, when I analysed the data, I also paid attention to any elements of resistance that could prevail in my participants' lives as they made meaning of love in dating relationships. I was interested in understanding how these forces featured in the girls' stories of their experiences as they navigated dating relationships.

3.7 Towards an Analytical Framework

Social constructionism was used as the theoretical lens to examine how the 23 participating girls understood love in dating relationships. Drawing on previous research, particularly on the social construction of gender (Agrawal, 2008; Connell, 1987; Connell, 2012; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Lorber, 1994, 2000), femininities (Shabane, 2011; Wiebesiek, 2021), masculinity and femininity (Hussein, 2005), and girlhood (Kinnunen, 2022), I acknowledged that girls could make meaning of reality based on any phenomenon influenced by taken-for-granted gender norms. I was therefore mindful that studying any phenomenon with this population group could not be divorced from their construction of gender. It was on this premise that I adopted social constructionism as my theory of choice to make sense of the data and to develop an analytical framework, while I also drew on the social constructionist theory of gender as advanced by Connell (1995).

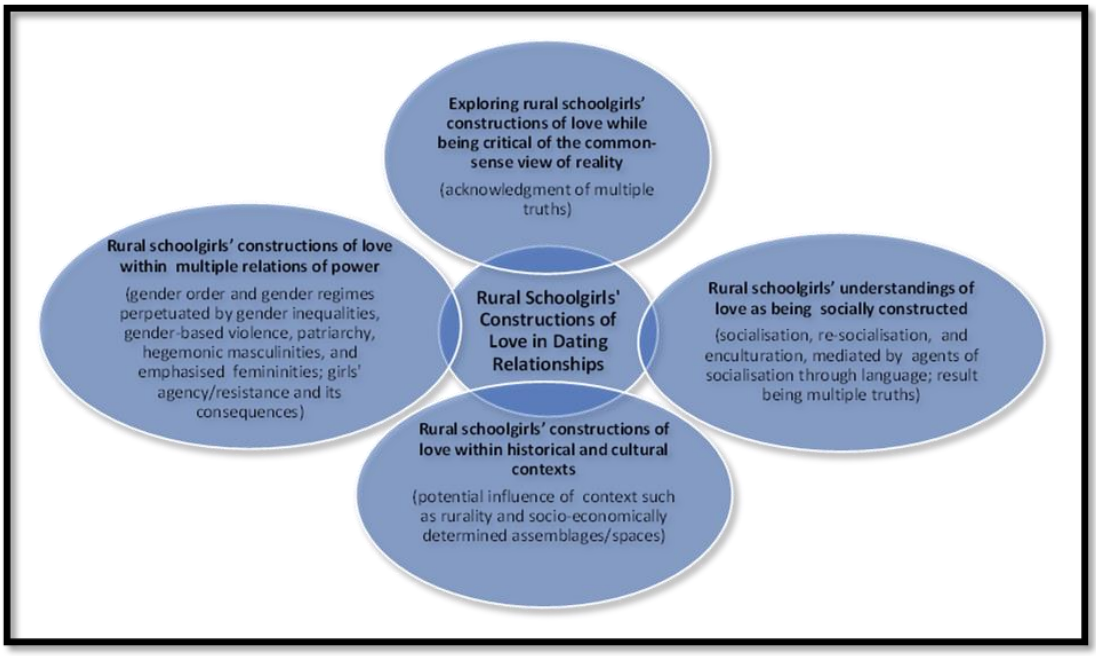
The main research question of this study was: *How might rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships influence their vulnerability to gender-based violence?* To address this question, two key research questions informed the data generation processes:

1. *How do rural schoolgirls understand love in dating relationships?*
2. *What factors influence rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships?*

Aligned with the questions posed above, I merged the tenets of social constructionism and the social constructionist theory of gender to develop the analytical framework that informed data generation and analysis. As summarised in Figure 3.2 below, four propositions guided the data analysis process.

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Figure 3. 2:*Diagrammatical presentation of the analytical framework developed for the study*



Firstly, informed by the social constructionists' "radical doubt in the taken-for-granted world" (Gergen, 1985, p. 267), I went into the field conscious of the call to take a critical stance towards the common-sense view of reality. I therefore acknowledged that there was no single objective truth or reality (Stam, 2001). Rather, I understood that what we know about things changes as we encounter or develop new information. Based on this premise, I accepted that how we understand things and the meanings we share about them can change. Therefore, our experiences of the world or a phenomenon (such as love) as individuals are subjective. Thus, I went into the field conscious that "social constructionists maintain that the goal of research and scholarship is not to produce knowledge that is fixed and universally valid, but to open up an appreciation of what is possible" (Galbin, 2014, p. 83). In response to this view on social reality, I explored how the girls expressed their experiences and interpretations of love in dating relationships. I was also interested in what knowledge was normatively viewed as the reality that emerged from the girls' narrative accounts. This proposition paved the way for addressing the first research question as I was conscious that there was a possibility for multiple views of love among the 23 participants. Consequently, I paid attention to what the participants revealed about their understandings and experiences of love. However, rather than jumping to conclusions based on the normative views of this phenomenon, I examined the influence of the prevailing taken-for-granted realities on their constructions of love. This reflexive process on my part also

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included being aware of the frames of meaning that I brought to the research process as I recognised "that these assumptions and values [were] themselves only versions of reality, echoing, competing, and colliding with the versions presented by [my] participants" (Cohen et al., 2004, p. 410). Therefore, rather than assume that the girls might view love the way I did at their age four decades ago, I paid attention to the discourses of love as presented by their narrative accounts.

Secondly, rural schoolgirls construct love under the influence of social interactions through the processes of socialisation, re-socialisation, and enculturation (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Agents of socialisation mediate these processes through language. Just like other social phenomena that are socially constructed, how love is understood is also influenced by "multiple everyday life interactions" with agents of socialisation (Belli et al., 2010, p. 258) as well as what is repeated over time and what eventually becomes standard and viewed as natural (Belli et al., 2010). Considering that the agents of socialisation tend to change over time (Berger & Luckmann, 1991), I understood that the girls' sense of love would also evolve. Therefore, I paid attention to who they associated with at every level of their development. I understood that social practices influence individuals' sense of reality (Kinnunen, 2022); thus, as I analysed the girls' stories, I also paid attention to their practices within their social spaces and of their families and social lives. I also analysed the kind of messages that were mediated to the girls as such messages are prone to influence constructions of love in dating relationships. This proposition guided my analysis process towards addressing the second research question, which was to determine what it was that influenced these rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships.

Thirdly, mindful that the construction of reality is "context-dependent" (Cislaghi & Shakya, 2018, p. 39), I accepted that rural schoolgirls' constructions of love could not be separated from their socio-cultural contexts but should "be understood in a historical perspective in order to see their changes in time" (Belli et al., 2010, pp. 262-263). I therefore acknowledged and examined "the diversity of [the girls'] experiences" (Baderoon et al., 2013, p. 5). I could not overlook the potential influences of factors such as age/childhood, gender/girlhood, socio-economic status, and rurality on how they made sense of love in dating relationships. Aligned with the social constructionists' disposition that "the way we understand the world is a product of a historical process of interaction and negotiation between groups of people," (Galbin, 2014, p. 83), I also paid attention to the girls' historical and cultural perspectives on their lives to explore how these influenced their understandings of love. Therefore, considering the significance of context when researching individuals' construction of reality, I explored the girls' constructions of love while being mindful of how

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rurality might have impacted their views of this phenomenon. I also employed the theoretical lens while I respected assemblages such as materialities and spaces where these young people made meaning of love in dating relationships. This proposition contributed to the second research question as it addressed how historical and cultural contexts influenced the girls' constructions of love.

Fourthly, I understood that rural schoolgirls' constructions of love would have occurred within multiple relations of power. Therefore, I focused on the prevailing gender order and gender regimes characterised by gender inequalities and gender-based violence in the context. Informed by social constructionists' view of different and unique forms of resistance often exercised by marginalised groups, I analysed the girls' stories cognisant of their potential agency against the ideology of dominant groups in their community. Acknowledging that agency/resistance against the gender order and gender regimes tends to be accompanied by negative consequences from the challenged social order, I paid attention to how the girls' narratives recognised such risk and how they negotiated it. This process addressed the second research question.

3.8 Synthesis

In this chapter, I presented the theoretical framework that informed the data analysis process. The discussion commences with how my identity and the literature review steered me towards social constructionism as the overall theory for my research project. Furthermore, informed by previous research, the chapter merges social constructionism with the social constructionist theory of gender and discuss the key tenets of each theory to develop a theoretical frame that provides an analytical tool for understanding the factors that influenced rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships. Importantly, the framework reminded me to heed the call to challenge the 'taken for-granted' view of knowledge. Finally, the chapter considers the use and critiques of social constructionism as analytical framework in research.

In the next chapter, I present and critically reflect on the research design and methodology that I employed in this study.

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CHAPTER FOUR
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

The study analysed in this thesis aimed to explore how a group of rural schoolgirls might understand the notion of love in dating relationships, and how their various understandings of this concept might influence their vulnerability to gender-based violence in the community. To generate data, the study addressed two key research questions:

1. *How do rural schoolgirls understand love in dating relationships?*
2. *What factors influence rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships?*

The previous chapter provided the theoretical background to the study and I articulated how I came to identify the social constructionism theory as an appropriate framework for making sense of the data in this research project. Mindful that gender influences how people understand various phenomena (Lorber, 2000), I recruited a group of rural schoolgirls based on the understanding that their meaning-making could not be divorced from their construction of gender. Consequently, I explored how these rural schoolgirls constructed love guided by the four propositions I developed from my analytical framework informed by the key tenets of the social constructionism and the social constructionist theory of gender (see Chapter Three). Informed by the analytical framework, I approached the research with four key considerations. Firstly, I was critical of the common-sense view of the nature of reality, and I approached the field conscious of the fact that there would be no single objective truth. Therefore, I understood that it was possible that the 23 participants could each have different and multiple views of love. Secondly, various social processes of socialisation, re-socialisation, and enculturation influence how people, including rural schoolgirls construct phenomena (e.g., love). Thirdly, participants' constructions of phenomena cannot be separated from their socio-cultural context. Fourthly, participants' constructions of phenomena occur within multiple (and unequal) relations of power**.**

This chapter presents the research design and methodological approach that I employed to address the research questions.

This chapter is organised into four sections. In the first section I discuss the research site, followed by a discussion of the qualitative research design. Thereafter, I discuss how I ensured rigour and trustworthiness

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throughout the research process through the lens of a narrative inquirer. The fourth section deals with the limitations of the study which were central to the self-reflexive nature of this narrative inquiry.

4.2 Location of the Study

This study was located in a public secondary school in the rural district of Ilembe in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa. When I conceptualised this research project, I was the principal of a secondary school in the same district where the school in which I conducted my study is located. I refer to this school as VM Secondary School, which is a pseudonym. I felt strongly that I could not conduct my PhD research in the school where I was the principal among familiar learners as my participants. This is a sentiment that is shared by Hauser (2019) and Zulfikar (2014). I felt that, as the principal of the school, no girl would be able to refuse to participate in my study if I asked, and once in the study, they would want to tell me, the person who wields the most power in the school, what they thought I wanted to hear. Therefore, participation in the study would not be voluntary, and the information I obtain on the topic might not reflect their actual perspectives as participants. It was on this premise that I opted for a school which was more than 50 km away from my school.

The literature suggests that conducting research where we work is prone to complications (Malone, 2003) and that conducting research in one's 'own backyard' may invite being criticised and accused of being subjective (Zulfikar, 2014). This is even more so when one is researching marginalised populations, such as the girls who participated in my study (Hauser, 2019). Moreover, this study explored adolescent love, which is a complex issue to discuss with girls in a rural community as they, because of dominant social norms, occupy a marginal position because of their age and gender. Being a researcher and woman in my 50s complicated matters even further, given that the literature suggests that "the discontinuity of experience between the researcher and the research[ed] easily leads readers to question bias or subjectivity in the work produced" (Hauser, 2019, p. 22). For example, as Hauser suggests, the reader may doubt whether the researcher understood the experiences of the population sample enough for them to accurately interpret and represent them. This may, in turn, result in doubts about the credibility of the findings.

Considering the above arguments, I approached Mr Vezi,[3] the principal of a neighbouring secondary school whom I had known for some time through meetings and professional development workshops we attended together over a 14-year period.[4] He agreed to give me access to his school as the location for the study. The school is situated in Jeqeza village, which is located next to Isithebe industrial area. Due to the influx of

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workers to the neighbouring industrial area, this rural village is now in the middle of an informal settlement (Mandeni Municipality, 2020) and is characterised by high unemployment and poverty rates (Dhlodhlo, 2010; Mandeni Municipality, 2020). It is also characterised by "limited to no facilities or infrastructural services" (Mandeni Municipality, 2020, p. 7) and the community lacks access to basic services (Dhlodhlo, 2010). Added to these challenges is a very high crime rate in the community, hence safety and security are among the municipality's main concerns (Mandeni Municipality, 2020). The municipality reports that the majority of community members "cannot read and write and are not numerate. [They also experience] food insecurity; malnutrition; declining life expectancy; [and] an increase in sickness and deaths related to preventable diseases" (Mandeni Municipality, 2020, p. 18).

VM Secondary School enrols learners from grades eight to twelve. At the time of data generation, it had a learner enrolment of 1 200 that were accommodated in 25 classrooms. It had 36 teaching staff and 5 support staff members. Considering that the norms and standards for public schools regulate that 40 should be the maximum number of learners per class (Department of Basic Education, 2013), this school was over-crowded with an average of 48 learners per classroom, but in certain classes exceeded 60, particularly in Grades 8 and 9. Under these circumstances (with 36 teachers responsible for the education of 1 200 learners), a further challenge was that the school exceeded the 1:23 teacher: learner ratio by more than 10 learners per teacher (Department of Education, 2009). In particular, these circumstances revealed a serious contradiction to the norms and standards for public schools where a 1:23 teacher to learner ratio must be realised in 40-learner classrooms. These imbalances are bound to negatively impact quality service delivery in VM Secondary School. This includes addressing GBV that is rife in the country (Abrahams et al., 2010; Ferriani et al., 2019), and hence in the area and the selected school.

[3] To protect the identity of the participants, all the names of people and places used in this thesis are pseudonyms.

[4] This was after I had obtained official permission to conduct research in the school from the Provincial Department of Education and the school principal (see Appendix M and Appendix N respectively).

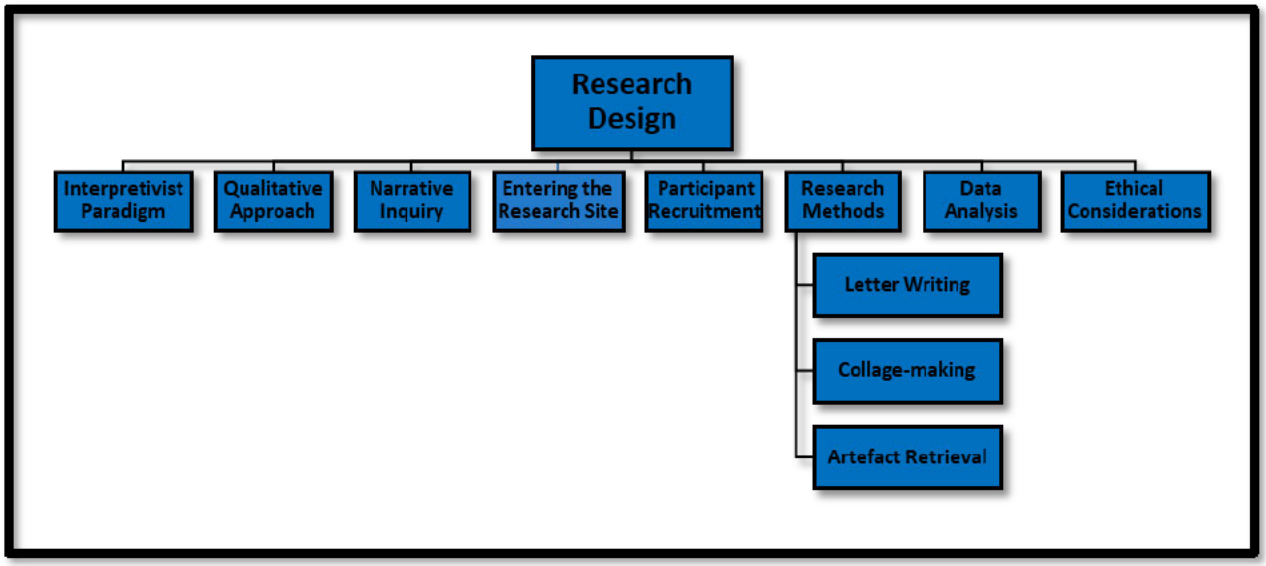
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VM Secondary School also has a high record of HIV-infected and -affected learners. Many learners come from either female-headed or child-headed households in the area. Past research has revealed that, under such circumstances, young women are tempted to involve themselves in love relationships where the motive is material and financial security (Jewkes & Morrell, 2012). These dire circumstances create the notion of love as money or provider love (Hunter, 2010). I approached the research field curious about these conditions and how they might influence and shape how rural schoolgirls understood love in their dating relationships.

4.3 The Research Design

Figure 4.1 below outlines the research design of this study.

Figure 4. 1: ***The Research Design***



4.3.1 Research Paradigm

Aligned with social constructionists' call; Rorty, 2009; Stam, 2002), and therefore even "phenomena [including love] are socially constructed" (Edley, 2001, p. 433). This is because the construction of phenomena is influenced by "multiple everyday life interactions" (Belli et al., 2010, p. 258) and thus daily interactions involve agents of socialisation. Given that these agents are prone to change over time (Berger & Luckmann, 1991), phenomena that are influenced by different agents are also subject to change among the individuals that are being socialised. It is on this premise that social constructionists advocate for multiple truths and openings for multiple understandings of a studied phenomenon, which in the current

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study was love.

In interpretivist research, "epistemology is concerned with the relationship between the 'knower' (the research participant) and the 'would-be knower' (the researcher)" (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 131). As reality is socially constructed, the dynamic interaction between researcher and participant is central to capturing and describing the 'lived experiences' of the participant. Therefore, nurturing the relationship between myself and the girls to ensure that they felt comfortable sharing their stories of dating and love with me was central to the data generation and collection processes in this study. Because research in the interpretivist tradition is concerned with the social construction of reality, I paid attention to how the girls' social interactions influenced how they made meaning of love in their dating relationships.

4.3.2 The Qualitative Research Approach

Aligned with the interpretivist paradigm V is rife, enabling and listening to rural schoolgirls' voices was crucial (Murray, 2017). Using narrative inquiry offered a space for these girls to voice their perspectives and to express their constructions of love in dating relationships.

4.3.3 Narrative Inquiry

Aligned with the interpretivist paradigm, this study used narrative inquiry to generate and produce the data to address the formulated research questions that drove the focus of the study. Narrative inquiry identifies experience as a story (Hamilton et al., 2008) and is defined as " the study of the ways humans experience the world" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Bringing to the surface schoolgirls' perspectives and experiences of love in dating relationships was the central focus of this research inquiry.

Narrative inquiry pays close attention to three commonplaces that require the researcher's attention (Clandinin et al., 2007). These are "temporality, sociality, and place, [and this methodology requires] a simultaneous exploration of all [these] commonplaces" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 479). Firstly, temporality means that "events under study are in temporal transition" (p. 479). This implies that "events and people always have a past, present, and a future" (Clandinin et al., 2007, p. 23). In principle, temporality calls for the researcher to pay attention to the past, present, and future of participants' lives. In this study, as will be discussed later, data generation sought to understand the participants' stories about their past, present, and future aspirations of dating and love. Secondly, sociality emphasises the relationship between the participants and the researcher (Hamilton et al., 2008), meaning that the narrative researcher must pay close attention to the participants' "personal and unfolding existential events" (Caine et al., 2017, p. 216).

For narrative inquirers, their own and on understanding the research site (a secondary school) where the participants were selected. Because I was not interested in the school as a case study but rather as the environment in which the girls understood and sometimes performed their dating relationships, I wanted to have a good understanding of it as a socio-cultural milieu. The questions I asked myself as I interacted with the girls included: *What values, norms and attitudes inform dating relationships in this environment? What factors inform the girls' understandings of these relationships and love in particular? How do these factors and their understandings make them vulnerable to GBV?*

The narrative inquiry methodology seeks to understand and deepen the complexity of the phenomenon of focus (Bittar & Nakano, 2017). Therefore, by reliving and retelling the girls' stories from several perspectives (Clandinin et al., 2007), I was able to make sense of the phenomenon of love in dating relationships. The success of the study involving rural adolescent schoolgirls rested on my consideration of narrative inquiry as:

> a way of understanding experience [through] collaboration between myself as the researcher and my participants over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with the chosen milieu (Caine et al., 2017, p. 215).

The collaboration between myself and the girls called for establishing an atmosphere that was conducive to knowledge generation through my engagement with them. However, getting the girls to feel at ease and trust me enough to participate in the activities I had planned for them around the topic of dating and love was not easy at first. One reason for this was the general lack of open communication on sex and sexuality between children and adults (Bennett & Harden, 2019; Stone et al., 2013; Stone et al., 2017). Researching schoolgirls' views in the South African rural context meant that I had to think creatively about how to approach the research process. Due to prevailing socio-cultural and gender norms, it is generally taboo to talk openly about these issues, particularly for young people to talk to adults about sex and related topics (Mkhwanazi, 2011; Moletsane et al., 2021; Ngabaza, 2011; Sathiparsad & Taylor, 2011; Wiebesiek & Treffry-Goatley, 2017). At the time of data generation, I was an adult woman and the principal of a neighbouring secondary school. Thus, it was understandable that the girls would be "reluctant to discuss their romantic interests and relationships with [an adult]" (Brown et al., 1999, p. 8). To mitigate this challenge, I assured the girls of their confidentiality and used a variety of methods and activities that helped

them to tell their stories creatively without feeling at risk. (I shall discuss these methods later in the chapter).

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4.3.4 Entering the Research Site

After receiving ethical approval and the permission of the principal, I gained entry to VM Secondary School where a Departmental Head (DH) assisted me to arrange a meeting with the girls. Coincidentally, this DH had also enrolled to do a PhD at a different institution in South Africa. We immediately forged a strong supportive, professional, and social relationship. We also became critical readers of each other's work and are likely to remain strong pillars in each other's lives beyond our PhD studies.

4.3.5 Participant Recruitment

I requested my contact DH to assist me in recruiting girls from Grades 8-11 who were interested in issues affecting adolescents to an information meeting. The recruitment meetings happened over two days (23rd and 24th March 2021) during COVID–19 and I had to ensure that all safety and social distancing protocols were observed (Lobe et al., 2020).

In the first session with the girls, I used a recruitment document I had developed (see Appendix O) to inform them about the project. The document contained information about the study's focus and purpose, the intended participants, planned activities, time frames, and the participants' rights. I introduced the project and invited questions and discussion. I followed this up with a survey which I had printed at home to distribute to each girl at the meeting (see Appendix P). I collated the data from the survey for three reasons. Firstly, I wanted to identify the number of girls who showed interest from each of the grades. This would ensure that participants would be selected across all grades. Secondly, I wanted to determine the number of girls who had cell phones, in particular, smartphones. I would therefore know at this stage of the research whether I would be able to conduct some of my field work via digital platforms should COVID-19 protocols pose serious challenges to face-to-face data generation.[5] Thirdly, I wanted to identify the forms of transport available to the learners to and from school (including walking). This information was meant to assess the feasibility of data generation sessions after school hours and on weekends. I had promised the school that my research would not interfere with the teaching and learning program. Over the two days, I addressed a total of 80 girls. The responses I received from the survey I distributed over the two days of recruitment at the school (see Table 4.1 below) are presented below:

[5] At this stage, the university had already issued a notice permitting online fieldwork: University of KwaZulu-Natal. (2020). *HSSREC (Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee) Notice: COVID-19 Lockdown level 2 guidelines to researchers and postgraduate students.*

Table 4. 1: ***Pre-fieldwork Survey Responses***

POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS' BIOGRAPHICAL DATA												
GRADE	NUMBER	CELLULAR PHONE DATA						TRANSPORTATION DATA				
		CELL PHONES			SMARTPHONES							
		Y	N	%Y	Y	N	%Y	WALK	TAXI	SCHOLAR	PRIVATE	WALK
8	9	1	8	11,1	0	1	0,0	9	0	0	0	100
9	21	10	11	47,6	8	2	80,0	19	0	0	2	90,5
10	24	12	12	50,0	12	0	100,0	23	0	1	0	95,8
11	26	17	9	65,4	15	2	88,2	25	1	0	0	96,2
Total	**80**	**40**	**40**	50,0	**35**	**5**	87,5	**76**	**1**	**1**	**2**	95,0

Of the 80 girls who attended the information sharing meetings, 45 showed interest in participating in the study, 40 (50%) had cell phones and 76 (95%) walked to school. I was now faced with a huge problem. Initially, I had intended to recruit a total of 20 participants. How was I going to tell 25 young, enthusiastic girls that they could not participate in a study they had shown so much interest in? I secretly hoped that some of the parents would not give their consent for their under-age children to participate in the study. Nevertheless, should the numbers remain high, I had to develop a strategy to respond appropriately.

Considering the age range of the potential participants (13 to 20 years), I was mindful of the Children's Act (Republic of South Africa, 2005) clause which categorises individuals below the age of 18 as minors. According to the Act, children under 18 are "legally incapable of performing legal transactions without assistance from a parent or guardian" (Department of Health, 2015, p. 27). Therefore, by law, anyone under the age of 18 years needs a parent's/guardian's consent to participate in research. Therefore, to obtain parental/guardian consent for girls to participate in the study was critical for determining the final number of selected participants. Each girl who had shown interest in participating in the study had to take an information letter and a consent form home for her parents or guardians to sign to return the form to my contact DH the following week (see Appendix J).[6] I explained the importance of completing and signing

[6] The information letter and consent forms for parents/guardians were translated into IsiZulu, the girls' home language (see

Appendix K). the assent form (Appendix O) and the participants' "right to freedom and self-determination" (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 77) as contained in the Bill of Rights (Republic of South Africa, 1996). I also advised the girls that assent forms were a condition for them to be formally accepted into the study. (I address ethical considerations later in the chapter).

A total of 34 girls submitted signed consent and assent forms. I invited all 34 girls to participate in the study. In preparation for the data generation process, and to facilitate my planning for all the data generation sessions that were forthcoming, I developed another survey to collect more data from the 34 participants (see Appendix Q). The second survey included information about the participants' preferred language and days/times for data generation sessions. My next step was to analyse the responses I received from the survey (see Appendix R). Although only 23 of the 34 selected participants submitted responses to this survey, the results did serve the intended purpose. For instance, informed by the results of the survey, I realised that, in relation to the days/times for data generation sessions, of the 23 girls, 17 (74%) preferred Saturdays while only 1 (4%) preferred 'after school' and 5 (22%) indicated that they were fine with all the options in the survey. Informed by the majority rule, I settled for Saturdays for data generation sessions involving the whole group of 34. Furthermore, 100% of the potential participants were isiZulu home language speakers, but in terms of the language preference for data generation sessions, of the 23 girls, 4 (17%) preferred isiZulu while 5 (22%) preferred English and 14 (61%) preferred both isiZulu and English. Considering that my home language is isiZulu, I conducted all the data generation workshops in isiZulu, and audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then translated the transcriptions into English. However, I had to be open to both languages. Consequently, I ensured that all the data generation tools were furnished in both languages. This also allowed the girls the freedom of choice regarding the language they could use during the workshops.

Regrettably, over time the numbers dwindled, and by the end of the data generation and analysis period in September 2021, only 23 participants remained, but this number was still above my original intended number of 20. Attrition rates varied across the grade levels. For example, of the 23 who remained in the study, only one participant was in Grade 8, two were in Grade 9, 12 were in Grade 10, and 8 were in Grade 11. Reasons for the attrition may have included many issues and challenges such as COVID-19 or the parents/guardians being uncomfortable with the topics and issues we were discussing in the workshops and therefore, asked their daughters to withdraw from the project. After all, available research suggests that topics such as sex, sexuality, love, dating, and others are regarded as taboo in many communities in South Africa, particularly in rural contexts where parents are often reluctant to engage young people in open

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discussions about sensitive issues (Mkhwanazi, 2011; Moletsane et al., 2021; Ngabaza, 2011; Sathiparsad & Taylor, 2011; Wiebesiek & Treffry-Goatley, 2017).

4.3.6 Data Generation Methods

Data generation in this study involved a series of workshop sessions over a period of six months. Aligned with the interpretivist paradigm and qualitative narrative inquiry, the data generation strategies I used aimed to privilege and honour rural girls' stories of love in their dating relationships. Echoing Baderoon et al. (2013), the strategies aimed to showcase these girls' "everyday experiences [of love] as a powerful intellectual resource" (p. 7) and as a tool for examining how they experienced, understood, and made meaning of the research topic under study. Consequently, I recognised the importance of using "good, reliable, youth-friendly resources … generated directly by young people" (Parker et al., 2015, p. 3). This approach was aligned with Bhana (2018), who advocates for a "young person-centred research methodology" (p. 21) when involving adolescents in a study. As I aimed to emphasise the participants' voices, I heeded Monk's (2011) advice that "it is more detrimental to have someone from a privileged position speak [on behalf of participants] than to not be heard at all" (p. 121). Monk further asserts that the problem includes "not only speaking for others but also, inevitably, speaking about others" (p. 122).

Given that I was working with adolescent girls who were members of a vulnerable population in this rural context and society, I had to be particularly sensitive and careful when I approached the research process. Therefore, I employed methodologies that allowed the participants to make sense of their own world (Thompson, 2003). In line with social constructionism, which encourages researchers to go beyond common-sense reality, the methods used in this study ensured that the girls' voices were heard. This aligns with Janak et al. (2022), who advocate for research methods that challenge dominant ideologies that reduce girls to "passive and submissive roles" (p. 70). Thus, the data generation methods I used enabled me to focus on the girls' voices as expressed in their stories.

In line with my two research questions and the, collage-making, and artefact retrieval. Using these varied methods enabled me to explore sensitive topics that might otherwise have been difficult to address through regular interviews and focus group discussions. Table 4.2 below summarises the data generation process I adopted.

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Table 4. 2: ***Research Methods and Data Sources***

Main research question: *How might rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships influence their vulnerability to gender-based violence?* **Methodology**: Narrative inquiry			
Sub-Questions	**Method**	**Participants**	**Data Sources**
Question 1 *How do rural schoolgirls understand love in dating relationships?*	Letter writing Collage-making Artefact retrieval	23 Girls in grades eight to eleven from VM Secondary School	Letters Collages, transcripts of audio-recordings of the girls' presentations, and brief notes on their collages Artefacts, transcripts of audio recordings of girls' presentations, and brief notes on their artefacts
Question 2 *What factors influence rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships?*	Letter writing Artefact retrieval	23 Girls in grades eight to eleven from VM Secondary School	Letters Artefacts, transcripts of audio recordings of girls' presentations, and brief notes on their artefacts

As Table 4.2 above indicates, I addressed the two key research questions by using multiple data generation methods that facilitated the girls' storytelling. These methods had the potential to reveal layers of emotion that could coexist and contradict one another in each person. Hence, I was able to reveal complexities that would otherwise have remained silent about the persons being studied (Connell, 1994). Before the girls started engaging with these three research methods, I carefully explained each method.

4.3.6.1 Letter Writing: As a research method, letter writing enables the generation of data that would have been silenced had I relied only on conventional research methods such as interviews or questionnaires (Ringrose & Regehr, 2023). In particular, writing a letter to an imaginary pen pal as a genre allowed the participants from marginalised populations to freely express themselves about issues that impacted their lives, including those they would otherwise not have talked about freely, especially in the presence of an

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unfamiliar adult and researcher. Appendix S presents an example of a letter written by one of the participants.

Given that letter writing generates unique data that present the perspectives of the writer (Barton & Hall, 2000), I decided to begin with this activity in our first data generation workshop. The girls used letter writing to respond to two critical questions: *How do rural schoolgirls understand love in dating relationships?* and *What factors influence rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships?* Starting with this method assured the participants of my ethical commitment to honour their perspectives and voices. They expressed their excitement in loud jubilation when I announced that they were at liberty to complete the letters at their own pace, as long as they submitted them within two months. However, requesting the girls to submit their letters to the contact DH raised an issue of trust. The girls unanimously objected to that, stating that they were comfortable with submitting their letters to me in person. I was thrilled to learn that I had already gained their trust and had developed the rapport needed for the research process to proceed smoothly (Galman, 2018). We then agreed that I would collect the letters during our data generation sessions scheduled for Saturdays. The freedom to complete this exercise at their own pace enabled some of the girls to even send me WhatsApp messages advising me that I could come to the school to collect their letters before the scheduled data generation workshops. To ensure no interference with teaching and learning time, I used school lunch breaks for this purpose. This enabled me to start with data analysis while simultaneously proceeding with the generation of field texts.

Aligned with the research questions, the analysis of the letters was divided into two parts. To address the first research question, the focus was on how the girls understood love. To address the second question, the interest was on the forces and conditions that influenced their understandings of love. Although this exploration was both interesting and worthwhile, generating data through letter writing proved challenging. The young participants often struggled to understand the instructions. Despite several explanations regarding the confidentiality ensured by using pseudonyms, some letters still included the participants' real names and their school's name. Additionally, some participants found it difficult to write a letter, and there were mix-ups in labelling; for example, letter 1 might be labelled as letter 2. Fortunately, it was possible to analyse the content of all the letters.

Recognising that research is a co-creation between the researcher and the participants (Ashworth, 2003), I respected the girls' contributions immensely. I continually reminded myself that my participants were invaluable sources of the data I needed. As Caine et al. (2013) assert, participants are experts in their own

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lived experiences. This perspective helped me appreciate the rich data they provided, despite any accompanying technical challenges.

4.3.6.2 Collage-making: Collage-making is an arts-based participatory research method that involves "cutting and sticking found image fragments from popular print/magazines onto cardstock" (Butler-Kisber et al., 2008, p. 265). This arts-based participatory research method enables participants to easily communicate their experiences and understandings of the research phenomenon while also building a relationship with the researcher (Clark, 2010). While the expression of emotions is usually "inhibited for social and psychological reasons" (Pain, 2012, p. 307), collage-making is efficient and effective in the elicitation of data that would have been hard to generate otherwise. Using this method in research helps to "elicit communication talents that otherwise remain hidden" (Butler-Kisber et al., 2008, p. 266). This visual tool puts the participants at ease, thereby facilitating communication, especially for "less articulate [individuals]" (Pain, 2012, p. 306).

While I had conducted my Master's study in schools, this PhD study was my first experience of conducting research involving adolescent girls. Therefore, I was worried about the nature of the responses I would receive when I introduced collage-making to the girls. To my surprise, this appeared to be the most exciting session for them. I sensed the girls' excitement from the time I arrived at the research site when they met me and assisted by carrying the collage-making material from the car to the workshop venue (see Appendix T).

To respond to the first critical research girl to select and cut pictures and words from the newspapers and magazines and to make a collage that captured/reflected the words**:** *"Oh Gosh! This girl is really loved!"* Drawing from Pain (2012) who advances the idea that brief captions should accompany the images so that they are understood in the way the author intended, each girl was requested to write brief notes on the images in her collage. Lastly, each participant was allowed to briefly present her collage to the whole group, stating why she thought her collage showed a girl that she considered to be really loved.

I was gratified to see how immersed the girls were as they were selecting material to create their collages (see Appendix U). Seeing each girl independently working and concentrating on the collage-making activity was a relief as my objective for the day was being realised (see Appendix V). The most exciting moment was when each girl was afforded the opportunity to talk about the collage she had created (see Appendix W). I audio-recorded each girl's presentation of her collage for transcription and analysis and

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collected the captions and notes each girl had written on her collage (see Appendix X). The excitement amongst the girls reflected claims in previous studies that participatory visual methods such as collage-making facilitate engagement among participants. As an element of fun accompanied by this activity, it was particularly useful in my research involving young girls (Pain, 2012).

4.3.6.3 Artefact Retrieval: Artefacts are objects of any kind that have meaning for individuals. These may be textual or non-textual and may include old pictures, old documents, newspapers (Chang, 2008), or clothing items (Mitchell, 2011). The use of artefacts enhances other data as these objects evoke memories (Allett, 2010). The introduction of artefact retrieval as a research method was not easy for the young girls who were not familiar with this concept. For the participants to be at ease with sharing their artefacts and to be mindful that "people are motivated by reciprocity" (Dufwenberg & Kirchsteiger, 2004, p. 268), I shared some of my artefacts with them and told the stories behind them. I did this so that they could make sense of the method and what I was asking them to do (see Appendix Y, my artefact which was a wall clock that I had received as a gift from a Grade 12 learner in 1997).

I used artefact retrieval to address the two critical research questions: *How do rural schoolgirls understand love in dating relationships?* and *What factors influence rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships?* As the use of "object memory involves the use of a physical prompt[ing] as a means of digging more deeply into the subject" (Cole, 2011, p. 227), the prompt for this activity was as follows:

> *Choose an object or artefact (a picture, a present you were given for a holiday or an occasion, or that your family owns) that means something or has great value to you or your family. Think of any three events/functions/ceremonies your chosen artefact reminds you of and why you value it* (see Appendix E).

While visual methods may generate rich data, "the polysemic nature of images [means] that extra care has to be taken to faithfully represent the participants' intentions both in analysis and in the presentation of findings" (Pain, 2012, p. 312). Therefore, explanatory words or captions are needed "to accompany any image so that it is understood in the way its author intended" (Pain, 2012, p. 312). I requested the participants to share the meanings of their artefacts verbally and to submit brief written narratives on these artefacts (see Appendix L for an example of a participant's narrative). This ensured that I did not lose the rich data generated from the pieces of symbolic art which are known to enable participants to articulate the unsayable (Rogers, 2007). Using artefact retrieval, three data sources were generated: (1) textual data in the form of summaries that the girls attached to their respective artefacts; (2) transcripts of audio recordings of

the girls' presentations of their artefacts; and (3) transcripts of the group discussions that followed each presentation and that were collected after all the presentations.

I included artefact retrieval in this study to "facilitate participant engagement and communication in order to gain richer data" (Pain, 2012, p. 309) by providing an alternative for the less communicative girls in the group. The richness of the data that are elicited from this research tool is influenced by "the thought and reflection required by participants to plan and execute visual artefacts" (Pain, 2012, p. 309). It was notable that some girls chose to speak about artefacts by offering information that was not easy to share. For instance, some used letters from their boyfriends, underwear they had received as gifts by special people in their lives, and other sensitive objects. I present and reflect on these in the findings chapters that follow.

4.3.7 Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study was a two-phase process. First, I used a form of narrative analysis in which I reconstructed the 23 participants' stories by synthesising the texts generated with each girl in the field. As Creswell (2007) observes, when individuals tell their stories, they often "do not present them in a chronological sequence" (p. 56). Thus, to elicit the 23 participants' views and experiences through their stories, Phase One of data analysis entailed a process of re-storying, which involved reorganising the participants' stories into a framework that made sense (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Creswell, 2007). In this inquiry, the re-storying process provided a link among ideas in the various stories the girls had told through the methods we had used throughout the data generation period. Each of the 23 re-storied accounts was informed by the respective participants' collages, visual and retrieved artefacts, and letters to an imaginary pen pal (see Appendix A, Appendix C, and Appendix E). These data sources were further supplemented by the respective participants' brief written but evocative descriptions of their artefacts and collages (see Appendix L and Appendix X). Additional data sources were transcripts of recordings of unstructured face-to-face member check interviews to clarify some issues in the data with the help of the participants (see Appendix G). The reconstruction of stories called for my careful decisions as the researcher to ensure that the outcomes responded to the research questions, "rather than attempting to provide a complete account of everything every participant conveyed" (Wong & Breheny, 2018, p. 258). Aligned with the social constructionist framework, in this first phase of analysis I highlighted the issue of voice by enabling the girls to tell their stories through their respective visual creations and artefacts. These re-storied accounts of the girls' narratives are presented in Chapter Five of this thesis. This level of analysis laid a foundation for the subsequent level (i.e., level two) which addressed the critical research questions posed at the beginning of this study.

Secondly, I used thematic analysis to analyse the 23 stories that I had developed through the re-storying process. I also analysed the letters, collages, artefacts, transcripts of my audio recordings of the girls' presentations, and brief notes on their collages and artefacts, as well as audio recordings of the one-on-one unstructured face-to-face member check interviews I had conducted with the participants. I opted for thematic analysis for two reasons. First, it was relevant for this study since it is recommended for analysing a large body of data in qualitative research (Nowell et al., 2017). Analysing 23 narratives would otherwise have been a nightmare. Secondly, thematic analysis is commended by researchers for its potential to produce rich, detailed, and complex data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). This phase of my analysis of the participants' narratives to respond to the key research questions followed an inductive process, which is defined as "reasoning from specific to general" (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p. 196). In line with this, I analysed each participant's narratives to extract data that responded to the research questions. As Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) advise, I then looked across the 23 stories for data that captured common patterns of shared meanings. Thereafter, I organised the emerging data into various categories, moving from the specific data from each participant to the more general findings. This helped me to identify, analyse, organise, describe, and report themes that emerged from the participants' narratives.

In this inquiry, thematic analysis was a three-step process. First, from the 23 stories developed in Phase One, I analysed data that addressed the first critical research question: *How do rural schoolgirls understand love in dating relationships?* I did this by extracting data that responded to the first research question and pasted such excerpts together (see Appendix Z). From these excerpts, I then looked for data that captured common ideas and assigned particular colour codes to these according to shared meanings (see Appendix AA). This helped me to organise, describe, and report themes to identify the discourses of love shared by the rural schoolgirls who participated in the study. These discourses are presented in Chapter Six. Secondly, I employed the same procedure to analyse data that focused on addressing the second critical research question: *What factors influence rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships?* For example, Appendix BB illustrates excerpts of data that responded to the second research question. I explored these contextual factors in Chapter Seven. Thirdly, I analysed the data across the two critical research questions and, informed by the literature and the theoretical framework, I explored links between rural schoolgirls' understandings of love and their vulnerability to GBV. These data are discussed in Chapter Eight, which addresses the main research question, which was: *How might rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships influence their vulnerability to gender-based violence?* Table 4.3 summarises the data analysis process.

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Table 4. 3: ***Summary of Data Analysis***

Phase 1: Re-Storying	**Phase 2: Thematic Analysis**		
Data Sources: Letters Collages, transcripts of audio recordings of girls' presentations, and brief notes on their collages. Artefacts, transcripts of audio recordings of girls' presentations, and brief notes on their artefacts. Transcripts of audio recordings of one-on-one unstructured face-to-face member check interviews.	**Data Sources:** 23 Girls' storied accounts Letters Collages, transcripts of audio recordings of girls' presentations, and brief notes on their collages. Artefacts, transcripts of audio recordings of girls' presentations, and brief notes on their artefacts. Transcripts of audio-recordings of one-on-one unstructured face-to-face	**Data Sources:** 23 Girls'-storied accounts: Letters artefacts, transcripts of audio recordings of girls' presentations, and brief notes on their artefacts. Transcripts of audio-recordings of one-on-one unstructured face-to-face member check interviews.	**Discussion** I used the theoretical framework and literature for this inquiry to analyse data across the two critical research questions.

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	member check interviews.		
Who are the rural schoolgirls in this study?	To identify the discourses of love shared by the rural schoolgirls who participated in the study.	To explore contextual factors that influenced the girls' understandings of love.	To explore links between rural schoolgirls' understandings of love and their vulnerability to gender-based violence.
Developing girls' reconstructed stories. These stories lay a foundation for thematic analysis that responded to the critical research questions in this study. **(Chapter Five)**	Addressing the first research question: *How do rural schoolgirls understand love in dating relationships?* **(Chapter Six)**	Addressing the second research question: *What factors influence rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships?* **(Chapter Seven)**	Addressing the main research question: *How might rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships influence their vulnerability to gender-based violence?* **(Chapter Eight)**

4.3.8. Ethical Considerations

In this thesis, I align myself with scholars who believe that a researcher should be mindful of the fact that where "objects of inquiry…are human beings, extreme care must be taken to avoid any harm to them" (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 372). Thus, I recognised that the girls in this study were more susceptible to harm when addressing sensitive topics than older women. Also, they were more at risk of GBV and other forms of abuse where they would need protection (Koffman & Gill, 2013, p. 89). Thus, their well-being was a priority. To ensure their safety, I considered the ethical standards that guide research involving minors (Department of Health, 2015). These included that my field work would not begin until it had been approved by an independent ethics committee, in this case the University of KwaZulu-Natal Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Committee (SSHRC) (see Appendix I). Only then was I able to begin data generation.

While I recognised that I had an ethical commitment to maintain anonymity on any information supplied by the participants, as an *adult* researcher I could not disregard my obligation to report any child abuse or neglect I heard about or witnessed (Department of Health, 2015). This legal responsibility bound me to prescripts established by the Child Justice Act (Republic of South Africa, 2008) and he Children's Act

(Republic of South Africa, 2005). While conducting research with schoolgirls who were vulnerable participants (some were minors), I also had to consider ethical guidelines that state that "protective safeguards and measures [must be in place]" (Department of Health, 2015, p. 20). Given that "emotional distress is a likely side effect of research procedures" (Department of Health, 2015, p. 21), I made sure that help was available during the data collection time. The nature of the investigation was likely to elicit recollections of traumatic experiences, which could cause emotional distress. As a result, I established contact with a local social worker in case counselling was required.

Furthermore, as discussed above, I organised a meeting (the second at the school) to advise confirmed participants on ethical considerations, which was "an important part of conducting research" that could not be ignored (Murray & Beglar, 2009, p. 32). I informed them of their rights, including voluntary participation and withdrawal from the study without penalty; their right to respect and confidentiality; and access to the findings of the study (Murray & Beglar, 2009). To preserve their anonymity, the girls were given the freedom to choose their pseudonyms, including one for their school. To preserve the participants' confidentiality, I carefully stored all the data sources so that they could not be accessed by people who would not understand the context of the study and its ethical requirements.[7]

Finally, to address the participants' language preference (which was established from the biographical data survey they had completed (see Appendix Q), I provided the participants with both English and isiZulu versions of all the data generation instruments (see Appendix A to Appendix H). I let them choose their preferred days and times for the data generation sessions. I then adjusted my dates to accommodate their preferences. According to Munhall (1988), such consideration on my part demonstrated "a profound reverence for human beings" (p. 152) as I avoided subjecting them to undue stress and pressure. Furthermore, for data collection sessions that took place outside school hours, I contacted parents ahead of time and asked them to allow their children to attend the research sessions and informed them how long the meetings would last (see Appendix CC).

The next section details how I maintained rigour and trustworthiness in this investigation.

[7] The data were digitised and stored in a password-protected folder only accessible to myself and my PhD supervisors. The visual data/artefacts were all returned to the participants when data generation ended.

4.4 Establishing Rigour and Trustworthiness

Loh (2013) posits that the quality of a study rests on its trustworthiness, while Nowell et al. (2017) assert that for any research to be considered trustworthy, data generation and analysis must be consistent and exhaustive. In this study, I ensured trustworthiness by relying on four strategies: methodological triangulation, member checking, audience validation, and reflexivity.

4.4.1 Triangulation

Triangulation entails using multiple data generation methods to augment and validate one another (Birt et al., 2016; Chowdhury, 2015; Giddens, 1997; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Mayburg & Poggenpoel, 2007) as this process advances our knowledge of the phenomenon of attention (Birt et al., 2016). Multiple data generation methods ensure the rigour, richness, complexity, and depth of the investigation, thus offering multiple perspectives about the phenomenon of focus (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Moreover, using multiple data generation strategies helps to elicit rich and nuanced stories that help to address the research goals (Elo et al., 2014). In this study, I used letter writing, collage-making, and artefact retrieval to gain a "deeper and richer understanding" of rural girls' love constructs, which added rigour to this study (Stewart et al., 2017, p. 2). The data that I generated by using these methods enabled me to get a nuanced understanding of how the rural schoolgirls constructed love in dating relationships.

I further ensured the credibility of data by keeping evidence of the sources from which they were elicited, namely original letters, collages, participants' notes and presentations/reports on their artefacts and collages, and recording of the interviews I had conducted with the participants. The field notes and reflexive journal I kept also served as rich data sources (Mitchell, 2011) as I generated these during data analysis. These sources collectively added rigour to the study (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018).

4.4.2 Member Checking

Member checking, also known as participant validation, is a process during which "data or results are returned to participants to check for accuracy…[thereby ensuring] the credibility of results" (Birt et al., 2016, p. 1802). To ensure dependability in this study, I requested the participants before transcription of the audio recordings from the sessions to provide written meanings attached to each of their visual artefacts and collages. I also had some one-on-one unstructured face-to-face member check interviews to clarify some issues in the data, particularly the letters they had written to their imaginary pen pals. For each participant, I had notes on what needed to be clarified. I conducted these sessions during school breaks in a private space the principal and the contact DH had provided for this purpose. These member check

interviews were invaluable as I was able to get relevant additional data and clarify grey areas from the original draft transcripts. Therefore, in addition to filling in gaps, these interviews enabled member checking and enhanced rigour in this study.

4.4.3 Audience Validation

To further ensure the trustworthiness of this study, I also used audience validation. According to Patton (2002), audience validation is the endorsement of the research data and findings by the "primary intended users and readers of the study" (p. 561). In this study, this included the principal of the school in which I conducted the study, the DH who assisted me during data generation, my colleagues in my school, my colleagues at my new place of work (at district level), my PhD supervisor, and postgraduate peers. Audience validation helps to keep the researcher's "biases in check" during data interpretation (Loh, 2013, p. 9). Engaging peers was invaluable, particularly because they had experience in a similar field or worked in a similar branch of research and thus had some familiarity with the relevant research literature and research methods. I found that my peers provided some corroboration with regard to the interpretation of the data (Loh, 2013, p. 8). Furthermore, peer debriefing ensured researcher honesty (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

4.4.4 Reflexivity

The fact that I as the researcher was responsible for both data generation and data analysis created room for researcher bias (Huberman, 1994). With so much involvement in the study, my personal beliefs and interests were bound to influence the research, thereby inadvertently dominating the voices of the participants (Mason, 2002). As the participants in this study were adolescent girls who were part of a marginalised population from a rural context and I was the researcher and an adult woman principal from a middle class background as well as an outsider, it meant that power imbalances could emerge (Zulfikar, 2014). As discussed earlier, involving such a marginalised population group in research was bound to invite criticism and allegations of researcher bias and subjectivity. Given that reflexivity minimises researcher subjectivity (Zulfikar, 2014), it was therefore imperative for me to be consistently reflexive throughout the research process. Reflexivity is a conscious effort by the researcher to explicitly identify power relations and the exercise of power in the research process. It refers to attempts to identify what knowledge is contingent upon, the social location and positionality of the researcher, and how the research process is constituted (Sader, 2014, p. 109).

This meant that I could not "make assumptions about any situation" during data generation or analysis (Hauser, 2019, p. 23). To ensure that, in line with the social constructionist lens I adopted in the study, I

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avoided a common-sense interpretation of reality, I attempted to be reflexive about every situation and decision I took in the research process. In essence, I had to pay attention to the participants' tales to deepen my understanding of their conceptions of love rather than relying on any 'taken-for-granted' understanding of reality. This entailed carefully considering the types of data generation tools that would enable the girls to freely communicate their thoughts, experiences and conceptions of love in dating relationships, and how I made sense of their understandings and honoured their voices. This consideration on my part corroborated the view by Lazard and McAvoy (2020) that reflexivity "facilitates our questioning and moves us beyond our own taken-for-granted assumptions and sense-making of the social world" (p. 159).

In this study, two challenges that required deep reflexivity emerged. First, I was constantly concerned about the potential conflict that could arise from my outsider status as an adult and a departmental official with a professional interest in the lives of girls. Ensuring that these two insider/outsider aspects did not influence the data gathering and analysis processes remained a struggle throughout the project, and it was challenging for me to distinguish between my insider and outsider positionality as the researcher (Thompson, 2014). Secondly, I could not avoid the reality that, in narrative inquiry, I as the researcher would become a co-participant "to co-construct knowledge alongside the participants" (Gavidia & Adu, 2022, p. 1). Hatch and Wisniewski (1995) caution on the danger posed by researchers' position as co-authors of the participants' stories. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) argue that, "as they receive stories from participants, researchers shape the nature of field texts and establish their epistemological status." Thus, if they are not cautious about their role in the analysis of participants' stories, "researchers tend to become characters in their stories" (pp. 419,422), thereby changing the original stories.

To respond to these challenges throughout the study, I maintained a reflexive journal to document how I would negotiate my researcher bias and ensure that it did not influence the research outcomes. One revealing moment occurred while I was printing the letter writing research tool in preparation for the meeting with the girls. I was surprised to discover my gendered response when I referred to a pen pal as "her", assuming that the girls' friends would always be other girls. I corrected this error immediately, which made me acutely aware of the need to avoid displaying my biases to the participants. When one of the girls asked if I accepted the transgender perspective for collage-making, I was already cautious and prepared.

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Although I avoided conducting research in my own backyard, being reflexive kept me aware and vigilant about the power imbalances between me, the researcher, and the participants, even when the study was conducted away from my personal spaces (Hauser, 2019). Hauser (2019) points out that under the authority of gatekeepers, research participants can feel trapped, making their participation less voluntary than it might seem. Unequal power dynamics are inherent in institutional settings (e.g., a school). In hindsight, in this study the participants were recruited with the assistance of the DH and the school principal. This could have led some participants to feel coerced to participate or reluctant to withdraw, fearing they might disappoint their teachers, especially those in management positions. However, as many of the original 80 potential participants did not follow through, I might safely assume that the 23 who eventually participated did so voluntarily and with commitment.

Hauser (2019) makes the point that whether conducting research in one's own or someone else's backyard, what matters most is the integrity required in the researcher-researched connection. The author adds that addressing honesty, teamwork, and being especially sensitive/caring "in working with people whose culture [the researcher does] not represent" (p. 27) are critical. Thus, throughout this research effort, I had to continually check for these imbalances to assure the integrity of the research; hence, I employed data generation approaches that gave the girls the power to influence the knowledge generation process.

Despite all attempts to ensure rigour and reliability, this study was not exempt from limitations and unforeseen challenges.

4.5 Limitations and Unanticipated Challenges

Murray and Beglar (2009) assert that acknowledging the limitations of any study is crucial. This practice helps the reader to understand the challenges associated with a specific research project (Vithal & Jansen, 2010). Therefore, researchers need to document every aspect of the research process, including its highs and lows, tensions, and surprises (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008). The limitations and challenges I encountered can be categorised into three areas: common issues experienced in previous studies, unforeseen challenges, and specific difficulties arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and power outages in South Africa. In this section, I will also discuss the strategies I employed to address these challenges.

Tuli (2011) notes that every research methodology has inherent strengths and weaknesses, and none is ideal. I employed narrative inquiry in this study which posed challenges such as interpreting others' stories understanding the relationship between the narrative account, interpretation, and retelling. To address this

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limitation, I conducted one-on-one unstructured face-to-face member check interviews that allowed the participants to validate their data sources. As Stern et al. (2016) point out, translation bias could have affected the accuracy of the data presented by the participants in IsiZulu and translated by me into English. Fortunately, as my mother tongue is also isiZulu, translation was manageable but required additional time.

Building trust with young participants as an adult researcher was challenging. However, engaging arts-based and visual methods (collage-making and artefact retrieval) eased the tension between my young participants and myself as an adult and the researcher (Pain, 2012). Supporting the use of visual methods with children, Galman (2018) suggests that these methods "make the child more comfortable, the results more evocative, and the rapport-building process a bit smoother" (p. 173). It was heartening to observe that the authority my participants gained by presenting their artefacts and collages also facilitated a collaborative data generation process. This collaborative relationship produced "richer data than a more directive approach" (Pain, 2012, p. 312), aligning with Denzin and Lincoln's (2018) assertion that increased face-to-face interaction helps place participants at ease with the researcher.

In the same vein, Rudrum et al. (2022) advise that the emergence of remote data generation during COVID-19

> had the potential for connection and solidarity in face-to-face interviews. They argued that this was a strength that researchers should not overlook [considering that] there [were] aspects of being physically face-to-face with participants or observing interactions in the field that [were] invaluable (pp. 5,10).

I noted that the more face-to-face sessions I bridge the gap between me and the participants. These shared characteristics positioned me as part-insider, which I assume contributed to the girls' willingness to share their experiences and thoughts with me. However, the age difference and my position as a researcher still made me an outsider.

Working with minors posed an additional challenge, including access to the girls for data generation sessions. Most participants preferred Saturday sessions (see Appendix R). Consequently, I wrote to parents each time I needed to meet the girls (see Appendix CC). It was difficult to contact the girls for clarification on their data sources during transcription and analysis due to telephone rules in most households and some participants not having cell phones. This required in-person visits to the school, which was more than 50 km away, while also respecting teaching hours and my work obligations. This underscored the strain of

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being a postgraduate student in full-time employment. I recall an incident where I called a cell number a girl had provided, only to find her mother answering. Fortunately, the mother was aware of her daughter's participation, thanks to the parental consent I had obtained.

Managing the pace at which participants completed data generation activities required patience due to ethical considerations preventing me from pressuring them. To track progress, I developed a form (see Appendix DD) to record submissions, ticking off each participant's checklist as submissions came through. This allowed me to identify gaps and follow up on outstanding data sources. Each girl's materials were kept in a separate folder along with this checklist.

Distractions during data generation sessions were another hurdle. Secondary schools, including my research site, had weekend classes which posed challenges for Saturday sessions due to the curiosity of non-participating students. Boys were particularly disruptive as some tried to join the group. Managing these distractions was crucial in maintaining a good relationship with the teachers who had arranged weekend lessons and ensuring the research was not perceived as problematic by the school community.

COVID-19 presented additional first semester of 2020. Furthermore, the university advised postgraduate students unable to undertake fieldwork due to COVID-19 to deregister by 10 July 2020. This compelled me to deregister for the second semester, as I could not conduct contact research. The second wave of COVID-19 in December 2020 further delayed fieldwork as both my husband and I contracted the virus which affected our health and my ability to work during the holidays. The second wave's impact continued into 2021, delaying the school reopening to mid-February. To adhere to COVID-19 safety protocols, I considered digital data generation platforms, but the socio-economic circumstances of my participants posed challenges, as not all had cell phones or smartphones (see Appendix P and Table 4. 1). Using personal protective equipment (Greene & Kahn, 2003) was time-consuming. I had to disinfect furniture before sessions and take participants through COVID-19 safety protocols, manage mask-wearing, and ensure an adequate stock of masks. Each session began with a screening process to prohibit girls with flu symptoms from joining (see Appendix FF for a picture of a screening process at the beginning of one of the sessions).

The study faced challenges due to inconsistent attendance and poor adherence to safety protocols. Despite the possibility of abuse, I accommodated the participants and explained activities that had been done in their absence. The study had 30 collages, but seven participants withdrew. The loss of rich data, including collages and other data sources, was particularly heart-breaking for the girls who dropped out, resulting in

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a loss of rich narratives.

While the issues mentioned in the preceding paragraphs ultimately resulted in a delay in data generation, COVID-19 also denied me the opportunity to meet with my supervisor and other PhD students in person. As of March 17, 2020, the institution announced the start of remote teaching and learning. Digital platforms provided an immediate response, taking over face-to-face encounters. Webinars became commonplace. I depended heavily on these to preserve academic contact (see Appendix GG for a screenshot I took while attending a webinar on 24 September 2020). While these virtual platforms were supportive, they were fraught with challenges and, in my view, can never replace face-to-face PhD supervision and support. Besides the demand for learning how to participate in virtual meetings, these required additional resources like good technological gadgets with web cameras and data bundles[1].[8] Issues of internet connectivity either kicked me out of the sessions or made attending totally impossible. This meant missing out on much-needed academic support. In addition, the struggles imposed by power outages emanating from load-shedding also impacted access to effective PhD support sessions during this research project (see Appendix HH, Journal entry:18 February 2023 - load-shedding during my PhD journey).

To mitigate the challenges brought by COVID-19, I attended several webinars on how to approach fieldwork, which gave me some ideas. Some of these materialised, while others did not. As discussed above, I learned to develop electronic forms to collect biographical data for potential and selected participants (see Appendix P and Appendix Q respectively). Although the success of these tools was hampered by the lack of smart gadgets for most girls, I managed to use the data generated through these tools to make informed decisions about data generation.

4.6 Synthesis

In this chapter I presented the research design and methodology I employed to address the two research questions in the study. I outline and reflect on the research paradigm, participant recruitment, and data generation and analysis methods. Finally, I reflect on the steps I took to ensure trustworthiness of the study and the limitations of the study and how I attempted to address them.

The next chapter (Chapter Five) presents the findings of Phase One of the data analysis process during which I reconstruct the 23 participants' stories by synthesising the texts generated by each girl in the field.

[1] Thankfully, the University subsequently provided every student with a monthly 30G data bundle.

The chapter lays the foundation for the subsequent layers of analysis which will be presented in Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight.

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CHAPTER FIVE

RURAL SCHOOLGIRLS' VIEWS ABOUT LOVE IN DATING RELATIONSHIPS

5.1 Introduction

As discussed in detail in Chapter Two, the literature suggests that, due to factors such as socialisation, enculturation, language, context, GBV, and how girls are positioned in relation to boys and men (Carter, 2014) and adults in general, they tend to understand and enact love in particular ways. The literature further reveals that girls' understandings of love render them vulnerable to GBV (Dunne et al., 2006; Parker et al., 2015). Of concern in this thesis is that GBV has been found to impact girls' educational and health outcomes (Bhana, 2018; Furman et al., 1999; Giddens, 1997). Thus, the thesis focuses on how rural schoolgirls understand love in dating relationships and how their understandings might influence their vulnerability to GBV. To generate data, two critical questions informed the data generation:

1) *How do rural schoolgirls understand love in dating relationships?*
2) *What factors influence rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships?*

In Chapter Four, I presented the research design that I employed to address the research questions and explained the methodological choices I made. I accepted that I would unearth multiple truths and meanings attached to the phenomenon by the people who experienced it (Taylor & Medina, 2013; Ponterotto, 2005). Consistent with the research design, the conceptual framework, and the theoretical framework of this study, as I approached the fieldwork, I was open to the possibility of multiple understandings of love among the 23 participants. I was conscious that I, as the researcher, had to be critical of the common-sense view of reality, and that multiple truths might emerge from the data. I thus paid careful attention to how these young people narrated their stories and avoided embracing my own assumptions based on taken-for-granted reality. As I explored the ways in which the schoolgirls constructed their social reality in respect of love in dating relationships, I learned about their realities and notions of love along with them to understand how the meanings they attached to their lived experiences of love shaped their everyday lives.

This chapter provides the baseline for the two-phase process of data analysis that I employed. In the first phase, I use a form of narrative analysis in which I reconstruct the 23 participants' stories by synthesising

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the texts that each girl generated during the workshop sessions and even at home. Unfortunately, when people tell their stories, tey often "do not present them in a chronological sequence" (Creswell, 2007, p. 56). Therefore, as the researcher, I counted on the re-storying process that I employed to illuminate links among the ideas in the stories. Re-storying means reorganising the stories into a framework that makes sense (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Creswell, 2007).

5.2 Unpacking the Re-Storying Process

I reconstructed the 23 stories by synthesising the massive data corpus that was generated during the various activities and my interactions with each girl and the group in the field. The data sources were the letters each respective participant addressed to her imaginary penfriend, collage-making to express how the participants envisaged a girl that is loved, and artefacts that the participants chose and explained for me to understand more about their lives (see Appendix A to Appendix F for the prompts that accompanied each data generation tool). As articulated in Chapter Four, in addition to these data sources that informed the re-storying process, I utilised audio recordings of the participants' presentations of their collages and artefacts. The participants were also requested to describe the meanings they attached to the images in the collages and artefacts by attaching brief written descriptions to the products of their efforts. I also relied on one-on-one unstructured face-to-face member check interviews to seek clarity on some issues in their data sources, particularly the letters they wrote to their penfriends. Hence, each story reflects how the individual participants expressed their experiences and thoughts through multiple data sources.

Throughout the re-storying process, I was conscious that the 23 re-storied accounts were a foundation for the second phase, as they would be the objects of thematic analysis. Therefore, I was always aware of my position as an inquirer while I was also continuously mindful of love as the phenomenon in this research project. I was also conscious of the research questions the study needed to address. All these important considerations called for my careful decisions as the researcher to ensure that the reconstructed narrative accounts provided answers to the research questions, "rather than attempting to provide a complete account of everything every participant conveyed" (Wong & Breheny, 2018, p. 258). Therefore, in this first phase of the data analysis process, I identified texts focused on issues that were of relevance to this study. Thus, the textual data of interest that I present address how the rural schoolgirls understood love (research question 1) and what influenced their understandings of love (research question 2). Consequently, these re-storied accounts do not cover every single piece of data that was generated.

For the re-storying exercise, rich data that responded to the study's research questions were identified from

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among the multiple data sources. Considering the prompts going with each data generation activity, one collage, one artefact, and five letters, on average, reflected each girl's stories. However, given the limited space in a thesis, it was not feasible to attach evidence of each data set provided by the 23 participants. For two reasons, I thus decided to choose collages and attach these to each respective girl's story. First, I did this because I found that each collage addressed the research questions of this study and, secondly, this would ensure uniformity in the discourse. This does not imply that the data generated from other sources were ignored. In fact, examples of all the data sources are attached as appendices, including the participants' brief notes on their collages and written narratives about their artefacts (see Appendix S for a letter, Appendix X for notes on a collage, and Appendix L for notes on an artefact). Below, I present these re-storied accounts of the 23 participants.

5.3 Rural Schoolgirls' Re-Storied Narrative Accounts

The pseudonym that is attached to each story was chosen by the participant herself. While using pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality is described as a light form of fictionalisation (Gough, 2014), other than the names of participants and their school pseudonym decided on collectively by the participants, every aspect of the stories presented below was drawn from the data sources the girls generated. Furthermore, the stories were constructed as close to the original verbatim ones as possible; hence, there may be unintentional linguistic and idiomatic inaccuracies in them. For the sake of authenticity, these were not edited.

5.3.1 Alwande's Story: How much fun it is to be in love

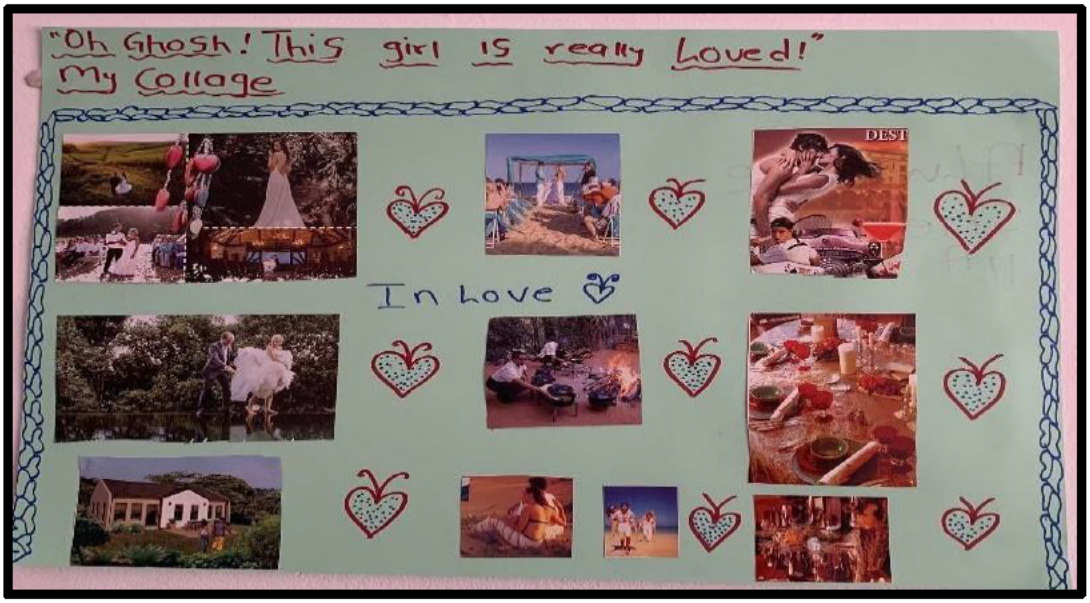
Alwande: *Greetings to you. My name is Alwande. I am 17 years old. I am doing Grade 11A at VM Secondary School. I was born in Manguzi and now I live in Mandeni, Jeqeza, Ezavutha. I live with my mother, father, and my two little sisters. Here is my story.*

My Love Relationship

How much fun it is to be in love! My love's name is Mazwi Gumede. He is seventeen years old and he is doing Grade 10 at KwaMshudu High School. I met Mazwi in a nearby tavern because my grandmom does allow us as kids to go there. In this tavern, anybody is allowed to buy. He is a good guy. He treats me like a queen. He always makes me feel special and I am really loved like the girl in my collage, which shows romantic pictures of a married couple.

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Figure 5. 1: ***Alwande's Collage***



The girl looks happy to spend time with her husband. They go to hotels. They do forest dating and romantic dinners in the house. The time I get to be with Mazwi is very short. Sometimes I even think of leaving home so that I can live with him. My parents won't even let me go to live with him and I won't even run away from home because I want to achieve my dreams, and I want to make my parents happy and proud of me one day. If I run away from home to live with Mazwi, my parents will be disappointed because they are always thinking of good things for me. Besides that, at his home, they do not know me, and he has not paid any bride price for me. So, this is just bad, I can never do it.

I see myself sitting with Mazwi, the one I am in a relationship with, in our upstairs apartment in Cape Town with our three children. I wish we could get married and live happily in our home with our children. Also, to have expensive, beautiful cars. My mother will have everything she wants in her life and so will my sisters.

Future Anthropologist, Pilot, and Bandit

I want to live the high life and make my parents happy. The yourself to death. But I was fascinated by MaNgcobo doing this when I watched *Uzalo*. Anything with action just fascinates me. Before I become an anthropologist or pilot, I will steal cars first and then go study.

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I Wish These Could Change

I don't want to be a girl who loves boys. I don't want to be a girl who loves money when I don't have it. I don't even want to date old people even if I want money. I don't want to go to parties at night at my current level. I hope we will make it in life if we behave ourselves and be good girls with manners. In my community, we have a show where local artists compete when they perform their dancing or singing. This show is usually in small local taverns. It always happens at night from 6 pm until 6 am. The DJ plays the *gqom* (loud) song after the performance, and then everyone dances and enjoys themselves. Alcohol is also allowed. What I hate is that when people are drunk, they end up fighting and stabbing each other, while some beat up their girlfriends. I think if there was no alcohol, there would be no GBV in the world. People will also behave well if there were no alcohol. I think if someone does GBV, he/she should be arrested and never return. He/she must die in jail.

5.3.2 Anelle's Story: The worst Valentine's Day in my Life

Anelle: *My name is Anelle. I am 17 years old. I am doing Grade 10 at VM Secondary School. I am from Jeqeza, Ezavutha. I love my parents so much. Here is my story.*

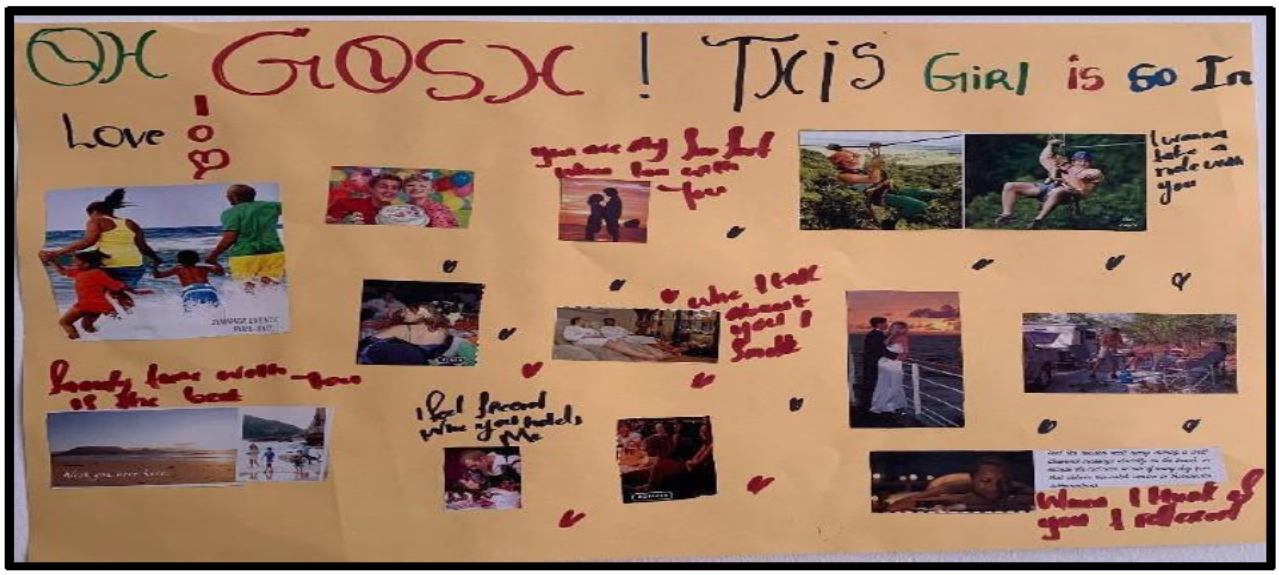
My First Love, My First Kiss, My First Everything in The Dating World

I loved my first boyfriend so much. The first gift I got from him was a letter he gave me on Valentine's Day. I have kept this letter from my boyfriend, my first love, my first everything in the dating world. We were not rich at all, but our love was real.

My collage reminds me of my first boyfriend. Family time with my boyfriend was the best. I wish he was here. I was so in love with him. I was feeling special whenever he was holding me. Whenever I thought of him, I was relaxed.

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Figure 5. 2: ***Anelle's Collage***



Losing My Boyfriend on Valentine's Day

Valentine's Day always brings good and bad memories. The earth and its shenanigans just had to take away my love from me on 14 February 2016 in the evening under the tree (sobbing). I loved my boyfriend so much. When Valentine's Day arrived, I thought it was a good day for lovers to enjoy and celebrate their love. On that day, he just told me whatever brought us together was over. My day was so painful. When I got home, I could not even eat. Even though I had lost my boyfriend, I still love him, and I am still keeping the letter he wrote me. This letter has been really special to me. I kept this letter framed so it can be safe. It comforts me in sorrowful times. He loved me so much; he phoned me all the time, even checked on how I was and even wished me a good trip to school. Even when he did not go to his school on a particular day, he would tell me and accompany me to school. Because he could drive, he even used his father's car to drive me to school.

I have a new boyfriend, but my heart is still on my first love I lost on Valentine's Day. My new boyfriend is short-tempered. He gets irritated very fast when I have done anything that is wrong. Before any action, I always wonder if it is going to make him angry. If it happens that he gets annoyed when we are together, he leaves me because he can't even speak. Even if he stays, it does not help because he will be silent one way. Although he is that short-tempered, I still love him so much. I wish we could get married because he loves me. He also hopes that we will get married.

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My Dreams for the Future

When I grow up, I wish to teach children and to appear on TV. I don't want to die having not appeared on TV. I don't want to disappoint my parents. Both my mom and dad always tell me to focus on my studies. When I finish school, I wish to go and study and then get a job so that I can provide for my parents. I want them to stop working. I want them to enjoy good food and have everything they need on this earth. I want to drive a very expensive car that has not been driven by anybody else at Mandeni. When I have my own car, I will go to all the places I have never visited. I will build a beautiful house where I will stay with my parents whom I love so much. When I start working and have a lot of money, I want to get a man who will love me genuinely, not the one who will love me for my money.

My Community

In my community, there are always events such as weddings, parties, and sangomas' dancing and the Reed Dance. I like these events because they bring people together to enjoy. What I do not like is that during these events, community members get drunk and end up fighting, which is so wrong. Some of them even kill others. There are lots and lots of rape cases in my area and that is a bad thing. Men are responsible for this because they lack self-respect, and they blame young girls for wearing short things. I think this situation can be improved if the community members can come together and talk about these things. It can help if there is a meeting for men only where they talk and teach each other about self-control and respect.

5.3.3. Anersh's Story: True love is gentle

Anersh: *My name is Anersh. I live at Mandeni in Jeqeza area. I am 16 years old. I am studying at VM Secondary School and I am doing Grade 10. I live with my mother and my four siblings. I like spending time with my friend, Nelly. We communicate on Facebook and WhatsApp. I also enjoy spending time with my mother because she is so funny. Here is my story.*

My Dreams

In years to come, I want to be a doctor. I will continue to work hard until I get a distinction and make my parents proud of me. They encourage me to carry on and work hard so that I find a job that pays so that I can save money and go to university to carry on with my studies. I can see that my parents will not have enough money for my studies. I will study and become a dentist. I want to help my parents with the money and change my home situation, or I can say my family situation. My family situation is not right, and I

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would like to change that if I can. But I am young, and I can't do anything to change the situation. I amonly looking up to my parents, waiting for them to change, but they can't because they don't have the power to change the situation. This is why I am working hard to achieve my dreams so that I can fix things at home because they always say education is the key to success.

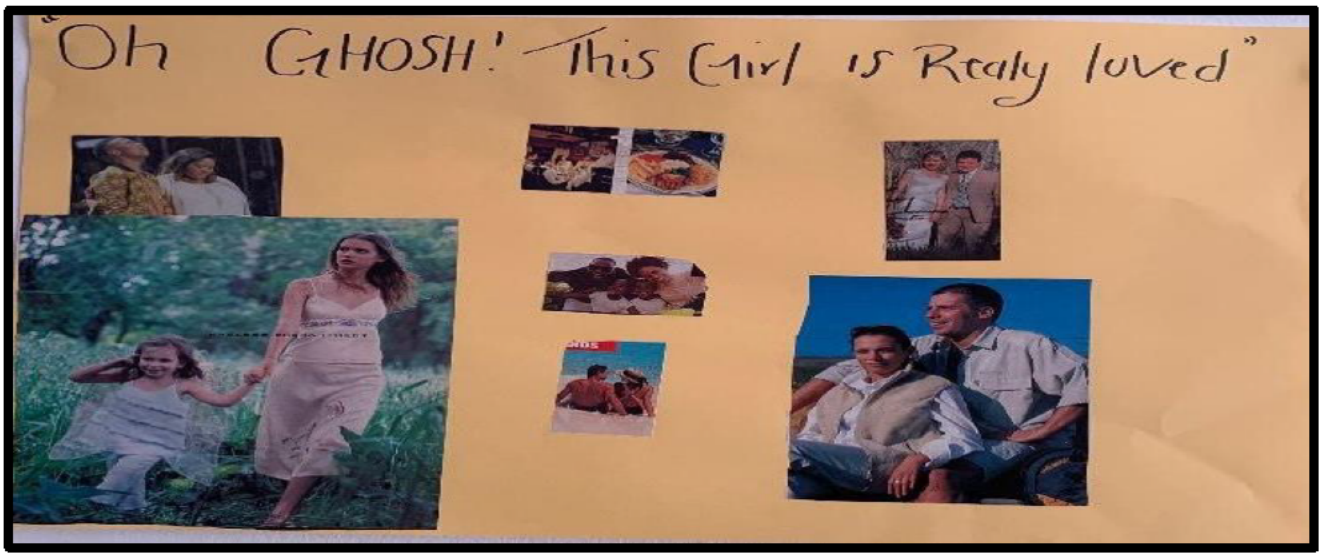
Bad Boys in My Area

A group of boys who are dancing always host events. I do not like it because these boys are making noise at night and we can't sleep. Other people who are going to work are getting disturbed. Even us who are going to school get disturbed. The same group of boys also causes GBV because they invite some girls to come to their events. They give them alcohol and drug them. I think the councillor should remove them to go somewhere else because when they have drugged girls, they do stupid things like raping them. Because of this, some girls end up committing suicide. I wish these boys would be arrested because kids in our area are unable to do other things because of their actions.

He Treats Me Nicely and Gently

I am so much in love that I wish to move in with my boyfriend because I love him so much. My parents do not want us to be together. They always beat me because I don't want to break up with him. They say I am too young to be in a relationship, but I refuse to break up with him. I am always happy when I am with my boyfriend. He treats me nicely and gently, just like the couples in my collage.

Figure 5. 3: ***Anersh's Collage***



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As my collage shows, the man really loves the girl and they have been together for a very long time. They are married. They do everything together and they are always happy. There is no fighting; they spoil each other and they love their children and families.

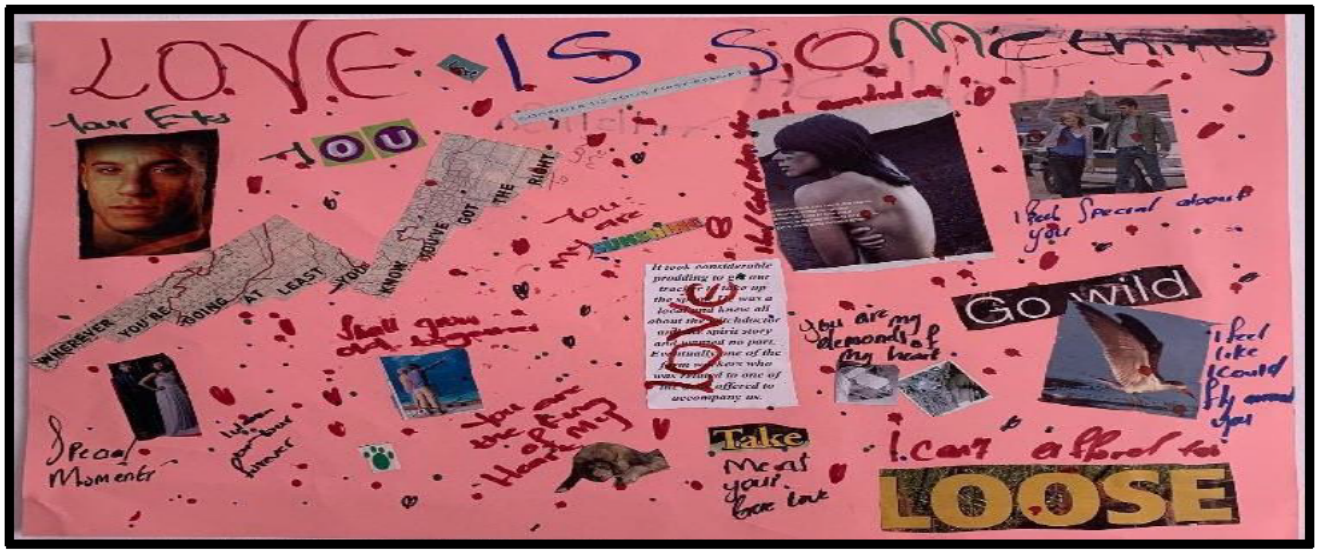
5.3.4 Arhshish's Story: True love stories never have endings

> ***Arhshish:*** *My name is Arhshish. I am 16 years old. I am doing Grade 10 at VM Secondary School. My family has been staying in the Jeqeza area since I was born. Jeqeza is like a rural area but there are many people; even 'parasite' people. I'd love to become a doctor and really want to. I want to study hard and focus on my studies because "what you put in, is what you get out." I am very poor, and I want to change that. Here is my story.*

I Can't Afford to Lose My Man

I love this damn man! He makes me feel like the world and he is only mine. I never loved a man like this. Just as my collage shows, I can't afford to lose my man. He is my sunshine and the king of my heart. I think lovers must grow together.

Figure 5. 4: ***Arhshish's Collage***



My Community

There are always sports, especially ladies' soccer and '*bhadus'* (parties) in my community, and I like them. I wish to go to them, but my family will not allow me to go because I go late and come back late. I play

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ladies' soccer and come back late too. I feel my parents are unfair but are also protecting me if they do not allow me to go out at night. They want to make sure that, as a child, I grow up well, right, and protected. In my area, there are people who steal and also rape small children. I wish they could be killed because they are violent and they keep doing it over and over again. And what they do to the kids is really bad. Even in my home, there is someone who once got raped.

5.3.5 Asbonge's Story: No romance, no love

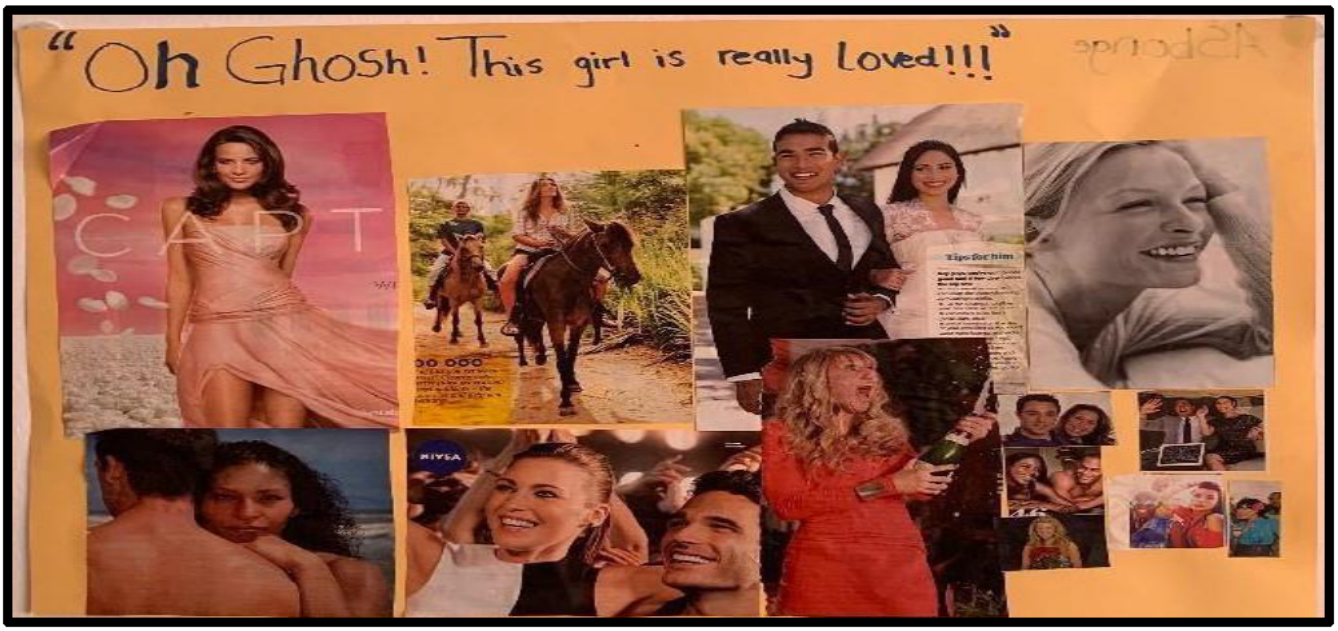
Asbonge: *My name is Asbonge. I am 20 years old. I am doing Grade 10 at VM Secondary School. My family originated from Nkandla. For now, I'm at Mandeni and I grew up there. Where I stay right now is a very good place, but people are not as good as the place. They party on Fridays. Here is my story.*

Love Is Shown by Romance

As my collage shows, couples that are in love do romantic things. A girl is riding a horse, and this is one of the ways to show that the girl is loved by her boyfriend. She is also popping champagne. You can see that her eyes show that she is in love. This couple also ends up getting married to show how serious they are.

Figure 5. 5: ***Asbonge's Collage***

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A Saturday I Shall Never Forget

It was a gloomy Saturday when people were waiting for a game between Kaizer Chiefs and Orlando Pirates. They were blowing vuvuzelas non-stop. So, my boyfriend was in the same kasi (township). He asked if I was able to come and watch soccer together because I also love it and am so passionate about it. It was quarter past one in the afternoon. I went to his house.

There was a lot to catch up on since it was a long time since I had last visited my boyfriend. Jokingly, he asked: "If I ask to marry you now, will you agree?" I replied without hesitation: "Absolutely, because I love you!" Then he said: "When are you moving in with me?" I was like, he was crazy because he knew my parents very well, especially my uncles. And I replied: "That won't happen, and you know that." Then he asked if I could sleep in his house, just for one night at least. I was like, they wouldn't mind this at home, so I agreed.

We watched soccer and Kaizer Chiefs won. He insisted on cooking, so I let him. We went to shower together. It became a good day indeed, but there was a morning when I was going to explain to my family where I was. In the morning, when I woke up, I was so ashamed of myself. It was my first time sleeping away from home, and I knew very well that I was going to be punished for this. I immediately went to the bathroom, bathed, and got dressed very quickly while the guy was busy with breakfast in the kitchen. I told him: "I'm leaving." He asked me to stay for breakfast. So, there I was, smiling at him and going to the dining room to sit on a sofa. He brought the food, and we ate.

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Then I asked him to accompany me. He did exactly that. When I was about to enter the gate, I ran back to my friend's place. Shawn told me: "Your uncle was here looking for you." I panicked! It took courage to go home. They asked many questions, such as "Who is this guy? Where does he stay?" All those questions were coming from different people in the house. I was punished, and I told myself that I would never do that again.

My Friends Are a Bad Influence

My best friends are Shawn and Candice. My friends are very nice, open, and friendly. I usually visit them on Saturdays to catch up on what was going on during the week. I make sure when we meet on Saturdays that we are drinking, no matter what. Well, I don't drink every day, I would like to stop drinking alcohol. I misbehave after having it and my family always warns me about it. I act cool when alcohol is not around but when I get it, I even forget that I promised Mom that I won't take it again. I really wish there was a way I could stop doing it because sometimes I say rude things, and when they remind me, I know nothing. This hurts my mother even more. I wish I can get help as soon as possible as it is getting worse.

5.3.6 Ayanda's Story: Me and my Bae

Ayanda: *My name is Ayanda. I am 17 years old. I am doing Grade 11 at VM Secondary School. Here is my story.*

My Family

There is my mom, the woman of the house, and yeah, she is a lovely person when she is in a good mood. She is a funny person, nice to be around, and caring. She can yell at you when you do something wrong. She sometimes switches the place of a mother to become a friend or a sister. You know there are those times and moments you wish there were some things you could change about your life. Well, I also have those moments. There are those parts like Mom's nagging. Then there is my big brother, also known as Man Q. Well, he is fun to be with, especially when you are in things like The Amazing World of Fun Ball or Dragon Ball Z. Then you are at the right place. And then there is his protective side. It is sometimes nice to have it and also annoying. And then the dad's side and he will sometimes scold me just like a father does.

Well, about my dad, he is not dead, but from 2016 he has been separated from Mom. They divorced. My dad is not there in our lives. He occasionally gives money to us, but the person who really takes care of us

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is Mom. Although he does not have a new family, my father is renting the place where he lives and is in love with any woman at any moment. He keeps separating from one woman and getting involved with another.

Me and My Bae

My complicated journey started when I told my mother, father, and big brother that I was thinking about staying at my boyfriend's house with him. My mother slapped me three times and threw her shoe at me and it hit me in my face. Dad did stop her but not before giving me a painful slap on the cheek. My brother just told me I was not his young sis whom he knew.

They locked me in my room for two days only to go out to bathe and use the toilet. But when I had had enough, I escaped from there. Out of the window I went with my clothes to my love's house. When I got there, he let me in and asked me if I was hungry. I agreed so he gave me food and I ate. When it was time to sleep, he asked me if we could sleep together on the bed or if he should sleep on the floor. I said we could share the bed only if he could make a barrier with pillows. He also said he was thinking about the same thing. I had lived with him and his mother for two days before my brother and father came and took me away from them forcefully. When we got home, they beat the hell out of me and locked me in my room.

After some days, I heard people yelling in the living room, but I didn't mind it at first but then I heard my boyfriend's voice pleading with my parents to let me live with them. After some time, my door opened and I was brought out. I ran into his arms, crying about what they did to me. At the end of the day, they agreed for us to continue seeing each other, but we would have to wait until they paid my family *lobola* for me to start living with them.

My collage shows moments my love and I spend together. The moments that remind me that he truly does love me. It also reminds me that the outings, the jokes we make, and the special moments he has with me are truly cherished.

Figure 5. 6: ***Ayandaa's Collage***

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My Community

I like events that happen in my community. The common events are weddings or *umgonqo* or *umemulo* when the family thanks the girl for keeping her virginity. In this event, other girls are invited, and they dance. I also love this *umemulo* a lot as that is when you can showcase virginity as a girl, and you show that you are proud that you have maintained it till that particular time.

There are many problems in my area, such that we had this social meeting where we talked about the rate of GBV. The parents are not at rest due to the rate at which their girls, mostly those who are in school, are getting pregnant in their teens. They are even complaining about their children who are experiencing some kind of pressure like they have someone who rapes them, and they get pregnant. Now the kids will not say because the other kids are also in competition for pregnancy.

5.3.7 Babyface's Story: He treats me like a queen

Babyface: *My name is Babyface. I am 15 years old. I am doing Grade 10 at VM Secondary School. I live in a small area called Msunduze at Jeqeza and it is a very nice place. Here is my story.*

Partying Makes Me A Bad Girl

I have three friends, Senamile, Lumka, and Olwethu. They are very nice people. We do things together. In my community, there is this place we call "Kwadlul' Jeqeze." We mostly like to go and have fun there. We

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even braai meat and have a few drinks there. There are DJs there and we dance. I like to go partying a lot. I wish I could change my bad behaviour towards my parents because it affects most of my life. I don't want to live with that for the rest of my life, knowing that my parents are not happy about my bad behaviour. So, I also like to change that so that my parents can be proud of me one day.

He Treats Me Like a Queen

I am so much in love that I have decided to move in with my boyfriend. When you meet someone who treats you nicely and always shows you love, you always feel for that person at the end of the day. Well, I have someone who treats me like a queen and always values me. I fell in love the first time I saw him. He always talks about how much he loves me so much that he can do anything to make me very happy. When I am sad, he always tells jokes so that I can smile. The way I love him, I have decided to move in with him just to stay with him. But my parents are against it. They don't want me to live with him. I could do anything to be with him. I always love him although my parents are against it. Just as my collage shows, love is the key to success and to fall in love is a blessing.

Figure 5. 7: ***Babyface's Collage***

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To love someone is the most important thing in your life. The girls in my collage are loved. Spending quality time together when you date someone is very important. Sharing some stories together is also important, such as doing things together, going out and sharing your thoughts together, and looking beyond the future. Always forgive each other when you had a fight. Always go out. Talk about your love.

My Lovely and Caring Community

I love my community. GBV is rare in my community because we respect each other. Community members don't beat children or women or kill them. We love each other and we help each other. There was a year when there were so many criminals, and the situation was so bad that, as early as 5 p.m., everyone was supposed to be home. These criminals were so bad that they would shoot anyone, whether small or old, man or woman. There was this boy who lived at Thembeni, an area not very far from ours. One night he robbed a family where there was a very poor woman. He shot a small Grade 6 girl in the mouth, and she died. He shot her because she said she knew him.

Our community works together to make sure that no one is abused. They even phone the police. Now, no one is bullying women because if community members find out that you have killed your woman, they will

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beat you till you are dead. Actually, it is usually "paras," who are boys; I've never heard of a girl who dies at the hands of the community. So, in our community, no one is allowed to beat and abuse women and children. They all observe love, and we are all equal.

5.3.8 Candy's Story: In good and bad times

Candy: *My name is Candy. I was born in the Free State Province. I lived in Mbombela City and in 2020 we moved to Mandeni in Jeqeza area. I am 15 years old. I am doing Grade 10 at VM Secondary School. I enjoyed participating in this study. What I liked the most was writing letters. I love writing and also enjoyed making a collage. Here is my story.*

I Can't Imagine Life Without My Babee!

When my family moved from the Free State to Mandeni in 2020, I found a guy who drove me crazy. His name is Bayanda Manqele. At first, I didn't want him to be part of my life, but as time went on, I started to develop untouchable feelings for him. We met at school and we became friends on Facebook. He used to check up on whether I was okay every day, and he started to ask me out. I told him I was not ready to be in a relationship. He said: "I'll wait for you." It wasn't that I didn't have feelings for him. It was just that I was afraid of the disappointment that I would have when we broke up.

I then fell in love with him, and we dated for a long time. He broke my virginity and that made me love him more. My parents found out about that, and they said if I didn't leave that 'nyaupe' (drug-addict) boy, I "will have to pack my things and go." I couldn't imagine my life without him. So, I told him what my parents had said. He said if they were giving me trouble, I was free to come and stay with him. When I got back home, Mom asked me where I was coming from, and I just told her to leave me alone. She slapped me and I ran to my room. I packed my things and left. I love my boyfriend so much that I can't imagine the pain I'll have when I lose my Babee. I feel just like a girl in my collage who said: "Aargh, I'm so damned in love with this man, I can't wait to go out on a date with my boyfriend. You're mine now and forever, till death do us part."

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Figure 5. 8: ***Candy's Collage***



Just like me, the girl in my collage is damn in love because she is laughing and she is busy planning the future with him. Aargh! She just sees the future with this guy, and you can see that if everything goes her way, he will ask for marriage. Best couple ever.

My Dreams

When I grow up, I want to become a doctor for my parents and the community. I want to help them because I saw how they suffer in public hospitals. But I won't see my success without my boyfriend, Bayanda. I want to grow up with him, build our future together, cherish the most wonderful moments with him, and love each other in bad and good times, till death do us part. I want to build a family with him 'coz he's the man of my dreams. When I see him, I see the future. My life without him is a complete mess and I don't want to lose that person. The most joyful part is that we have the same goals that we want to achieve, and we have the same ambitions and destinies. We are on the same road 'coz everything that we do is alike.

My Community is a Shame

Every Friday at KwaBusane Tavern, there is a dance competition that is attended by all types of drunkards. The thing that irritates me the most is that even small children escape from their homes just to have fun. What is not good is that others have small babies, and they go with them to drink alcohol.

Even if we are going to school, every night some families just play music and turn the volume higher than ever; and we fail to sleep well. Studying is very hard even if we have a class test to write. Every Saturday

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we find dead girls and the rate is high now, but justice is unavailable since there are no prime suspects.

5.3.9 Cellphone's Story: Love is the key to success

> ***Cellphone:*** *My name is Cellphone Nxumalo. I am 18 years old. I am doing Grade 11 at VM Secondary School. I live in Jeqeza, Ezavutha. I live with my family. I also have a friend who also lives here at Mandeni. I chose her as a friend because she is right, lovely, and kind-hearted. When we miss each other; we phone each other. Here is my story.*

My Dreams

If I had powers, I would change the way my home is and make it what I wish it to be. I know I will change it by God's will and by my dreams and wishes. I can see that even my parents have hopes that I will change the situation in our home. I even wish to change the kind of food we eat at home. I also wish I could go to a different school, not the one I am going to now.

I wish to do photo framing or to become a teacher or a doctor. Since I am a hard worker, I will achieve my dreams. My parents have all the hope in me because I am the eldest child. I am dreaming of myself having my own beautiful house and a beautiful car when other people will be jealous of me because of my achievement of my goals. I am dreaming of a time when I will be staying in my house with my own family. I see my mom eating everything she wishes for. It doesn't matter where I will be staying as long as I will be having a good life with my family and the man I am so much in love with. I can imagine when we live with my kids and their dad, and I have no doubt that he is going to marry me in years to come when we are grown up. I also wish to send my children to the best schools, unlike me.

I also wish to become a criminal. Of course, I know that it is dangerous because one can end up being arrested for a crime. But I get very fascinated when I watch *Uzalo* seeing MaNgcobo and Nkunzi stealing cars. I just imagine myself doing this job although it is not right, but I love it very much. My friend also likes crime, and we always talk about it.

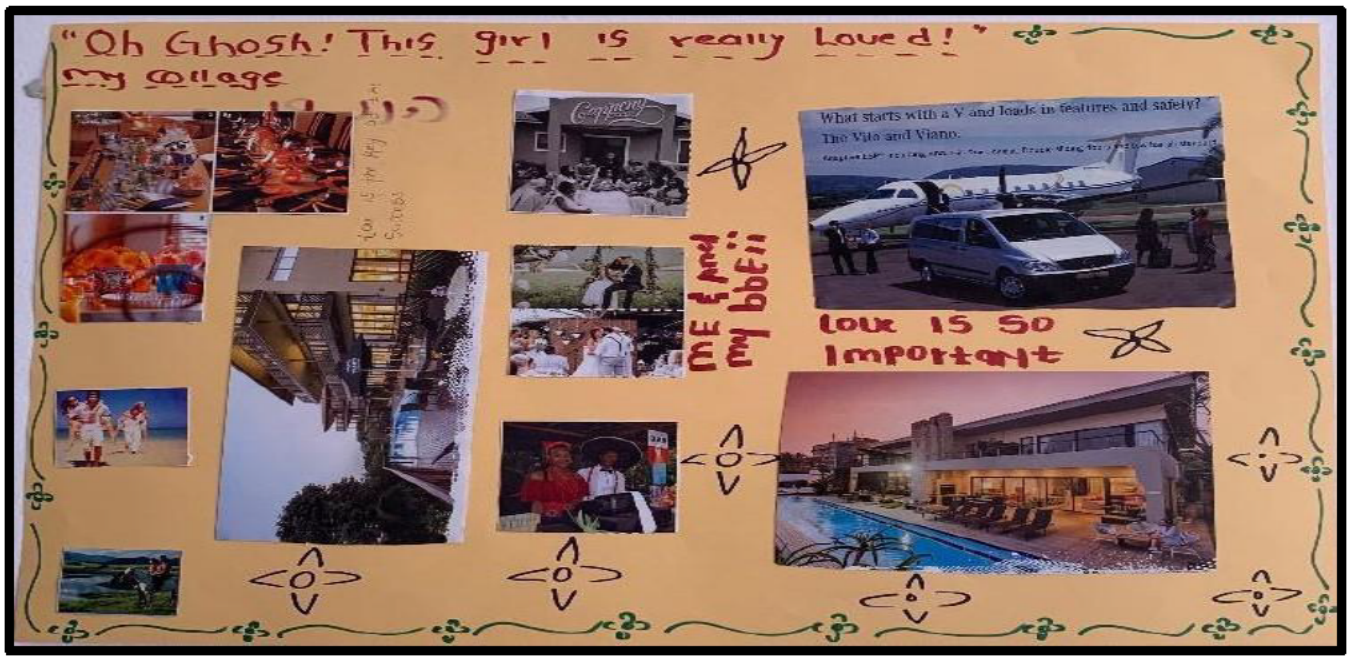
Love Is the Key to Success

Love is so important in my life. My boyfriend's name is Khulasande Ndlovu. I love him so much that I can even make the decision to go and stay with my man because we really love each other. He is doing Grade 10 in Durban, and he lives there for now, but when schools are closed, the two of us go to his home at

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Eshowe in Mbongolwane area. I am so happy that even his sisters know that there is a person like me in their brother's life. The way my boyfriend loves me is just like the girl that is shown in my collage.

Figure 5. 9: ***Cellphone's Collage***



She is really loved. They go to different places. They play their favourite games. They eat delicious food. That is why I say this girl is really loved.

5.3.10 Coolkid's Story: He loves only me

Coolkid: *My name is Coolkid. I am 16 years old. I am doing Grade 9 at VM Secondary School. I live at Jeqeza. Here is my story.*

My Family

In my family what we do, we all do it together. My family and I are good and sometimes not good. My grandparents are so strict. No one is allowed to go outside to play. They always say: "If you go out, you are not going out to play, but you are out for men, and you are going to fall pregnant, and we will throw you out." What I don't like at home is that they don't treat us the same. Boys are given better treatment. They do not do any home chores. It is my grandmother that shows preferential treatment among the children. I wish I could grow up and afford my own home and business where I will have no time for shit. I don't have

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a friend. My friend is my phone. I spend time on my phone. When I am with my phone, I am able to think.

My Boyfriend

My boyfriend is one person who makes me feel free when I am with him. If I have any problem, he is able to help me and calm me down. Whenever I am with him, I don't have time to think about all the bad things that happened to me in the past. That is why I can even move in with him. He always reminds me that he loves me alone and our love is so important to him.

One morning at our home, my dad's brother discovered that my boyfriend had slept there. Funny enough, he also had a girlfriend at home, yet he is married. And he asked me not to tell anyone about his secret. My boyfriend slept at my home three times, and my mom caught him the fourth time. Luckily, he is very lovely, good-looking, and very respectful. My mom accepted him, and he did not leave but slept for three more days. My love for my boyfriend is like the love that is shown by the couple in my collage.

Figure 5. 10: ***Coolkid's Collage***



They are showing how they love each other, and they even have family trips together. How they stroll together to make their love work and support each other!

5.3.11 Enzorh's Story: Love is about being pampered

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Enzorh: *My name is Enzorh. I am 17 years old. I am doing Grade 10 at VM Secondary School. I live at Jeqeza, next to Lindayiphi Primary. Here is my story.*

My Sad Family Story

I am very sad because of the things that are happening in my home. My father does not love my mom anymore. He is also not taking care of us. He does not visit us. He only came last week Friday. It was the first time in many years he was here last. His visit was not even a good one, because he came to demand that we go and live with him at Nquthu, only because the woman he was living with had died. He is doing this because he wants to humiliate our mom. He has always been abusing mom from the time we were small. We felt that he wanted to divorce our mom because of the way he was speaking, and he ended up saying he was going to do it.

=My friends

I have three friends. They are Aphelele, Luyanda, and Sisanda. I love them so much because we tell one another the facts as they are. We don't mislead one another. Since Aphelele and I have phones, we are able to phone each other or use WhatsApp.

My Dreams

I wish to succeed in everything I do. That is why I am studying very hard so that I can get good results and get admitted to university. I wish to become a doctor and help community members. I also wish to get married and have two children, a boy and a girl. I want my children to wear expensive brands from the time they are born. I want everybody to see that they are a doctor's children. I also want them to have everything they need; I don't want them to suffer.

My Ex-Boyfriend

I used to love that guy, Senzo. He bought me a beautiful umbrella dress on my birthday on 05 May 2018. He gave me this dress as a gift and a sign of his love and appreciation. I have had this dress for four years. It has been really special, and it is still special to me. I wear it whenever I go out to expensive and classy places. I love this dress as it brings happiness and sorrow at the same time, because it reminds me of Senzo. The guy really broke my heart after all those lovely, happy, and unforgettable moments. Love is so important in my life. My collage is about a girl who is really loved.

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Figure 5. 11: ***Enzorh's Collage***



It reminds me of the special moments I had with Senzo. The lovers in the collage are happy. The mother, her children, and the whole family are happy. They have a beautiful big house with a swimming pool. Their bedroom is beautiful and neat. They have three beautiful cars. They eat out in hotels and drink champagne. They are taking pictures of animals in the forest. They go to the beach. This lady is really loved because she is taken to a spa for a body massage and is riding a horse.

My New Boyfriend

After losing Senzo, I got another boyfriend. It was the 20th of March 2020 when I was coming back home from my boyfriend when my mother asked me where I was coming from. I said: "Leave me alone." It was new love. When my mother beat me up, I called my boyfriend and told him what had happened. He told me I had to come and stay with him, and he would do anything for me. I then started to develop more feelings for him. I wished I could move in with him, but I continued to stay with my mom. I love my boyfriend so much. If I lose him, my life will be miserable 'coz he's taking care of me. I can't afford to lose him because he's my soulmate and I adore him.

5.3.12 Langelihle's Story: He is meant for me, and only me

Langelihle: *My name is Langelihle. I am 16 years old. I am doing Grade 11 at VM Secondary School. I live in Mandeni at Jeqeza. Here is my story.*

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My Family and Friends

I live with my mother, my sister, as well as my four brothers. My best friends who have turned out to be my other two sisters are Nongcebo Vilakazi and Nqobile Zungu. I love to spend time surrounded by the people who love me. I spend time with my mother. She is a very understanding person and a very listening person. She is my friend because I am free to ask and tell her most things, and at that point, she will give me some advice.

My Dreams

I like medicine so much. It has always been my dream that when I have to come to the stage of being an adult and an independent lady, I see myself as a successful and very high-profile doctor who will be helping people in many ways and in different towns. I wish to serve the community what they have always been longing for. I want them to have hope of living again. I want to be a doctor who is not working for money, but who is working to save the lives of South Africans and make sure our country doesn't suffer many losses.

I see myself as a person who is providing for the people who raised her to be the responsible woman that she is today and also offering them a lavish life before they leave this earth. I also like to be treated like I am the only person existing in the whole, entire world. I like to be heard when I am talking. I also see myself as a very happily married woman with two children, a boy and a girl with their father working as a businessman providing for his family, sticking with it through times of hardship, and also creating a very comfortable home for my kids to be safe and where they can be raised.

Love Is Great and Adorable

I fell in love with this guy the first time I saw him, and at that time I knew he was meant for me, and only me. Many people were against our love, telling us, "This is going to end in tears." But we ignored all of that because we weren't the ones making decisions, but we had to follow our hearts. We were very happily in love, and everybody could see that. Loving him closed my eyes in such a way that I never thought of losing him. We made sure that we were loyal and simply true to each other to avoid fighting for something that is not important. We weren't always together but we made sure that the times we got we made it memorable.

My family found out about this guy when we had eventually planned to move in together and rent a room

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very far from our homes because we didn't want a lecture and conflict. But before moving in with my boyfriend, I remembered that I had to leave the people who raised me. What nearly made me leave my family was so much love I had for my boyfriend; just like my collage shows a happily married couple on their journey off to vacation.

Figure 5. 12: ***Langelihle's Collage***



They have a very beautiful family of their own, including a very beautiful girl and boy. They celebrate every adorable and incredible moment they share daily. They make sure that their kids are raised in a very comfortable and safe home, and that they are raised very well to respect and learn to love people.

My Community

In my community, there are many places that sell alcohol. People make themselves happy weekly and they forget one thing, that no kind of medicine can take away poverty, but only your actions can do so. Women are raped daily, slaughtered like animals, and are left on the street or in some sort of bushes, dead. What I don't like about the community events is that they take place very late. This leaves women with no choice but to walk in the dark just because they want to make themselves happy but end up being harmfully raped and brutally murdered. There are men who are happy to see a woman suffering. For GBV to decrease, there

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must be fewer events and nightclubs; and there must be arrests for men who abuse women physically and sexually because there is no woman-to-woman abuse. Lastly, men must also learn to understand how to love in their relationships.

5.3.13 Loyalt's Story: Love is about romance

> ***Loyalt:*** *My name is Loyalt. I am 16 years old. I am doing Grade 10 at VM Secondary School. I live at Mandeni, at Makhempini. I enjoy spending my time watching TV and on my cell phone. I like to sing, act, and model. My role model is Rihanna. I wish to have a better life and change the situation at home and have things I like. I like to live a good life, have money, cars, and a house. My dream is to be a doctor because I like to help people. Here is my story.*

My Family and Friends

I love my family. My mom and dad work in Durban. I have three friends, and they are Lungile, Sethabile, and Thobeka. Sethabile is as good as my sister. Lungile and I are coming from far, we have been friends with her for a long time. She is kind-hearted and patient, that's why we became friends. Since my friend Sethabile stays very far from school, I asked my parents to allow my friend to stay with me so that we can attend school together. Therefore, they allowed me to live with my friend. On certain days and weekends, I am also allowed to go visit her.

My Love Life

I am so much in love with my boyfriend, such that I have decided to move in with him. My parents didn't know that I was staying with him. I told them I was staying with my friends. When they found out that I was with my boyfriend, they warned me, but I continued because I was in love. Of course, I realised that I was wrong for not listening to my parents. I was so attracted to my boyfriend, just like the girl in my collage.

Figure 5. 13: ***Loyalt's Collage***

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This collage shows a girl who is much loved by her man because they are doing romantic things. They are married and they go on picnics. They go on dates. They spend time together, e.g., on Valentine's Day.

Community events

There are clubs and taverns in my area. I like to go to clubs because sometimes they host celebrities and artists. I don't like taverns because when some people drink too much, they fight and kill each other, and there are no security guards there. There is too much GBV in my area. They kill and rape women and children. Women are so scared to walk at night. I think the police should arrest these criminals. We must also have some community meetings to talk about GBV.

5.3.14 Lufuno's Story: He is my eternal partner

Lufuno: *My name is Lufuno. I am 15 years old. I am doing Grade 10 at VM Secondary School. Teachers in our school make sure that they teach us very well. I live in Mandeni, Jeqeza. Here is my story.*

My Interests and My Dreams

I love my parents. I love going to school and having a good relationship with everyone. I like going to parties and movies and playing netball. I dream of myself being successful in life. I know where I come from, and I dream of myself being able to take care of my family's needs. When I get older, I want my

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parents to be proud of me. I want to have a bright future. I wish to change the situation in my home so that we get out of poverty so that we can have food every day. I also wish that my parents stop relying on the government child support grant.

I wish to be a doctor to take care of everyone in my community. I even wish to assist poor people by opening a place for orphans so that they can also feel like having a home. I also want to make sure they have a bright future. Actually, I wish my parents and my community to be happy to have a person like me in their lives because I want no one to suffer in my presence.

My Loving Boyfriend

I am so much in love with my boyfriend that I wish my parents would allow me to move in with him. He shows by every means how much he loves me. All the time, he reminds me that he loves me. I wish to stay with him because I can clearly see marriage with him. I have no doubt that he is my eternal partner. In him, I see the father of my children because of the amount of love he shows to me. When I think of him, I just feel like the girl in my collage.

Figure 5. 14: ***Lufuno's Collage***



She is really loved because she is always smiling. She is always carrying gifts. She is always deep in her thoughts and smiling. Her eyes tell the story of love. She goes out a lot. She always talks about love.

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Community Events

I do not like community events because that is where people get alcohol. And when they are drunk, they abuse women and beat them. When people are drunk, they can't listen to anyone because they are controlled by alcohol. Because of this, other community members get abused sexually. To reduce GBV, these cases must be reported to the police so that they intervene. This will reduce the rate at which women are abused.

5.3.15 Mbali's Story: I feel like I am in my own world

Mbali: *My name is Mbali Mthethwa. I am 18 years old. I am doing Grade 11 at VM Secondary School. I live in Jeqeza. I live with my family. I am the only girl at home, so I live with boys only and my parents. I have three friends. They are Amahle, Thandeka, and Akhona. I enjoy spending time with my friends. Our friendship started when we were doing Grade 7. The thing I like best in my life is to spend time with my family and to spend time with my boyfriend and my friends. I like ladies' soccer because at home I live with only boys. Here is my story.*

My Grandmother's Memories

Although my grandmother is no more, her wedding pictures are a good memory for me. Sometimes I cry when I remember her. I found her pictures in a secret box when we were doing spring cleaning in the bedroom that used to be hers. The album I found is very old because my granny got married in 1962. This means this has been in this secret box for 59 years.

I like my grand mom's album because it reminds me of how much she loved her family. This triggers a feeling of joy and pain because she is no more. Seeing her wedding pictures and her marriage certificate makes my heart very sore because my grandma gave me a beautiful name, "Sizophila", but my mom said it was too long. I love my name so much because it means exactly what I am; I am always healthy.

A special gift that my grandmother gave me are panties. I shall never forget this gift. Every time I see my panties, I feel down and sometimes cry. I also feel happy when I see my gift which is three years old. My grandmother gave this gift to me when it was my birthday. I was very happy to see how much she loved me. I am even keeping some of my grand mom's own panties which do not fit me yet.

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My Dreams

For me, family comes first. I want to have my own house, a family, and be married to my husband. When I have my own money, I want to take care of my family and give them the support that they gave me since my childhood.

A Girl Who Is Loved Is Treated Like a Queen

I have a boyfriend. He is Sphamandla Msomi. I love him so much. I don't know how to describe the love I have for this person, 'coz when I am with him, I feel like I am in my own world. So, I decided to live with him because I think that it will make me feel better 'coz even if I try to sleep at night, I can't because he's always in my mind. I know that my parents are angry with me about that decision. When I am at home, I just think of myself and him sleeping in bed, giving each other strawberries and sweets. I just think I can't lose this man because we have that thing you can't describe or explain. I can say that he has tender love. I know it is hard for everyone to understand or to see that thing I see.

Sometimes I think of myself and Sphamandla getting married 'coz of the strong love that we have for each other. The reason why I chose to move in with him is because I love him very much and I think moving in with him can change a lot of things. If he is not around me, I miss him too much. Sometimes I don't fall asleep at night just thinking about when we will meet again and do some romantic things that we usually do when we are together. I really, really love this man. I hope my parents will see how much or how deep our love is and understand our love relationship. Our love is exactly like the one that is shown in my collage, which is about how a girl needs to be treated or how a girl must be loved.

Figure 5. 15: ***Mbali's Collage***

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A girl deserves to be treated like a queen so that she can't have any doubts about her relationship. Love is so important! No girl deserves harmful love. All girls need to be treated in a lovely way. My collage also has romantic pictures of couples to show how girls must be loved.

You Touch a Woman, You Touch the Whole Community

The place where I live at Jeqeza is rural. A lot of things do not come easily, e.g., water. In my community, GBV is not high because we respect each other. We have people who make us feel safe because they make sure that if you touch a woman, you touch the whole community. In our community we are united. All we need are just more men that respect us and that will show us how important we are as women. I so much wish I could stay in a safer environment.

5.3.16 Ncazelo's Story: No happiness, no love

Ncazelo: *I am Ncazelo Magwebu. I am 16 years old. I am doing Grade 11 at VM Secondary School. I live in Mandeni, in Thembeni area. I live in a family of seven people. Four of them*

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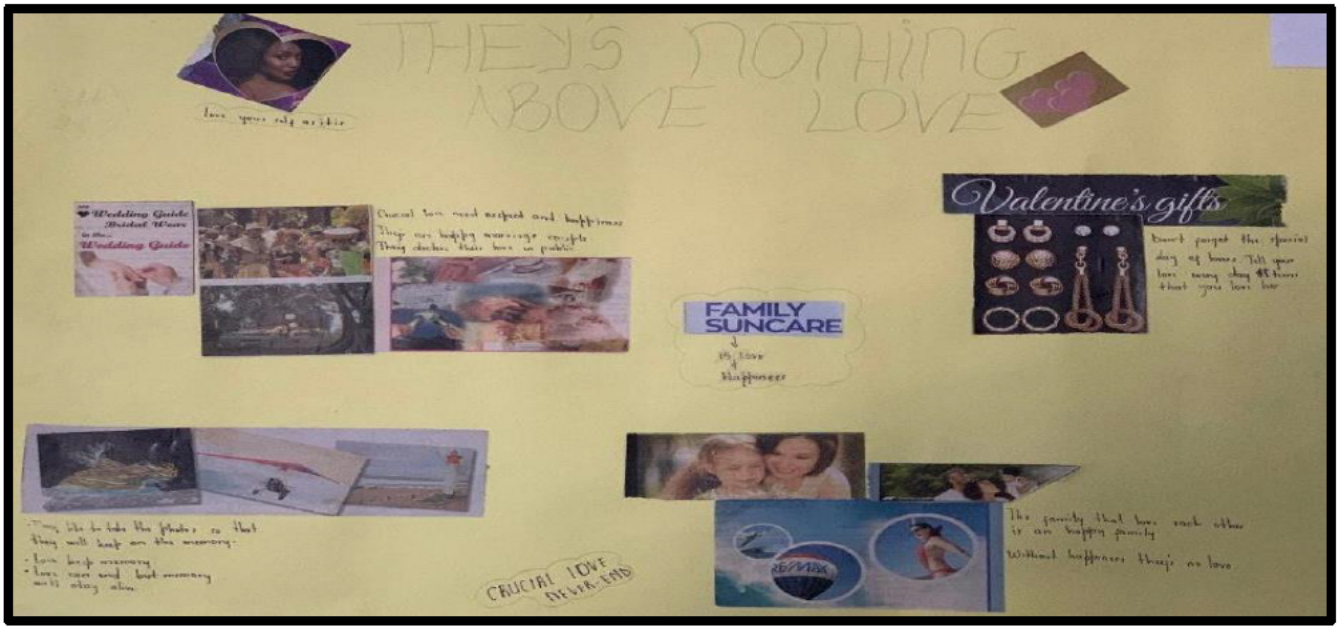
are my siblings and two are my parents. It is a great family with love, and we are patient with one another. My friend is Asiphelele Galela. I like to mingle with people that I love. Here is my story.

There Is Nothing Above Love

I have taken a crucial decision to move in with my boyfriend. This is against the will of my parents. I have decided to do this because I love him a lot. My parents want nothing to do with this. They guard me like a prisoner because they don't even want me to go alone to the shop or river. They always say I must come back early from school. They always pressure me.

The love I have for my boyfriend is a crucial and deep love. What I know is that we are going to live together until the last day of our lives. Since I am so happy with my relationship with my boyfriend, I know it is crucial love. Without happiness, there is no love. A family that loves each other is a happy family. My collage shows a happily married couple.

Figure 5. 16: ***Ncazelo's Collage***



They declare their love in public. They like to take photos so that they keep memories. Love keeps memories. Love can end but memories stay alive. Crucial love never ends. Lovers never forget Valentine's Day, the special day for lovers.

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5.3.17 Nothando's Story: Lovers grow together

Nothando: *My name is Nothando Mthimkhulu. I am 13 years old. I am doing Grade 8 at VM Secondary School. I live in Jeqeza at Mhambuma. I have a good heart. We are a family of five. My big brother has a girl child. My sister has 3 boys who are troublesome. I have two friends, Nthabiseng and Olwethu. I spend my leisure time with my friends going around our area looking at nature or playing netball. What made us friends is the reading of novels. We communicate with our cell phones. Here is my story.*

My Mom and Dad's Wedding

My mom was very young when she got married, but she was told to go because she would have a good time. They had a big wedding. After a year they got twins. After two years they got another baby and ended up having a big family. It is quite chaotic because of too many children fighting one another, but there are good moments sometimes.

My Boyfriend

I love my boyfriend so much. He has done a lot for me. He has changed my life. I don't know how I can thank him. He treats me so well, and I am always happy whenever I am with him. That is why I now wish to move in with him. My parents have to accept my decision because I want to spend my life with him. My collage shows lovers who enjoy life.

Figure 5. 17: ***Nothando's Collage***

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They are swimming at the beach. They grow together just like I wish to grow together with my boyfriend. The collage shows Grandpa and Grandma laughing, showing they are happily in love.

5.3.18 Sanele's Story: He means the world to me

Sanele: *I am Sanele Mntungwa. I am 15 years old. I am doing Grade 10 at VM Secondary School. I live in South Africa in KwaZulu-Natal, Mandeni Jeqeza. Here is my story.*

My Family and Friends

I live with my big family. My parents are both alive but separated. I usually stay with my grandmother. We are not allowed to go out with friends, and I am always studying or sleeping because I have nothing better to do. I have two friends, Emihle and Ntando. I connect with my friends on Facebook.

My family and I love and care for each other, but we are very poor. My mom works hard just to take care of us. If I were in control, I would change my home situation. I would make a better and more classy lifestyle for us.

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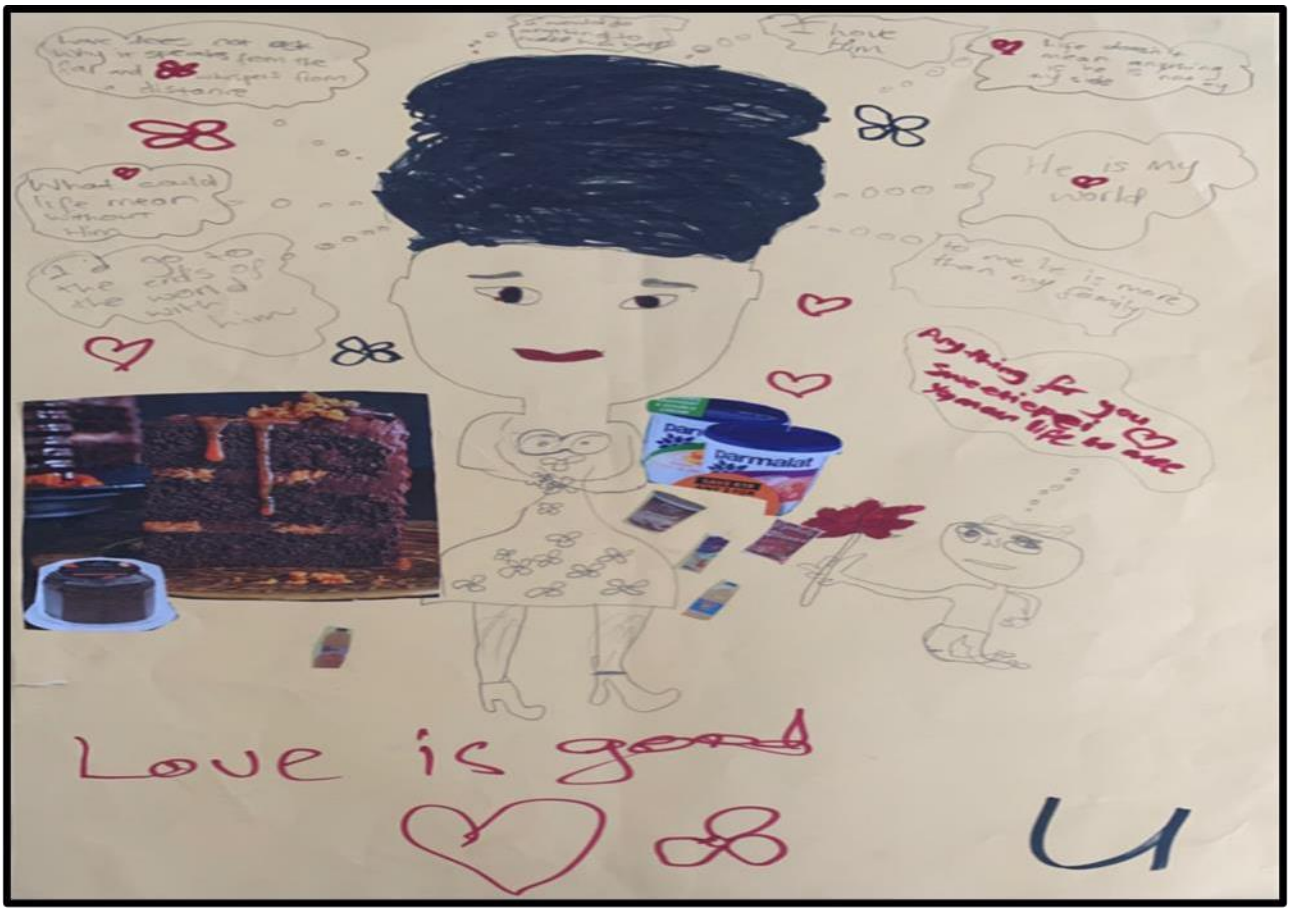
My Goals

I have long and short-term goals in life, and I plan to achieve them. My short-term goal is to pass high school with flying colours and impress my mother and make her proud of the genius she gave birth to. My long-term goal is to go to university and study medicine and become a doctor. In the future, I want to get married, have two kids, and live a happy life.

My Love Life

My love life is so perfect. I have this new boyfriend that I just moved in with. I love this boy very much. He means everything to me. My parents were against it, but I did it. That guy is the love of my life. He means the world to me. I just don't know what life could mean without him. I love that boy. He supports me in everything that we do when we are together. I just want to be with him every moment until my last breath. Just like I feel, my collage shows a girl who is loved because of her physical appearance and emotional appearance.

Figure 5. 18: ***Sanele's Collage***



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Her eyes can tell she is in love. The eyes tell her emotions out loud. The gifts she gets can tell that she is loved. Everything about her means love, even the smile she makes alone like there is someone in front of her.

Community Events and GBV

I dislike social events like *umemulo, umhlonyane, umkhehlo* and *umgonqo*. I dislike these events because they are traditional events and I'm not a big fan of traditions. I don't like them because they are too controlling and silly. Oh! The hate I have for traditional stuff and their silly rituals! I hate them because they are discriminating. If you are no longer a virgin, for instance, you are not allowed to participate in the traditional dance. Girls in the area gossip about one another. The old women too are judging. This happens mostly if you do not have an interest in going to the Reed Dance or when you are no longer interested in participating in it, they gossip about you.

The ratings for GBV in my area are very high. People/men in my area take GBV as if it is a trend. The police and local political parties are in charge of fighting against GBV in my area. To improve the situation, women and children should be taught self-defence. They must also learn to speak up if they do not feel comfortable.

5.3.19 Sgqeh's Story: Love has no age

Sgqeh: *My name is Sgqeh. I am 20 years old. I am doing Grade 11 at VM Secondary School. It is my first year at this school. My previous school was Bhamu High School. I live at Mandeni, at Jeqeza, in the Nsimini area. Most of the time, I like to watch TV. Here is my story.*

My Friend and My Role Models

I am new at this school. My previous school was Bhamu High School. My new friend at this school is Nkuleh. She is a kind person and she likes people. The easy way to contact my friends is by chatting on Facebook.

I have two role models. The first one is Noxolo Mathula, who is an actor in *Uzalo*. I love her because she shows me that a person needs to be strong and that I should chase my dream. The other one is Thandeka

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Dawn King who also acts on *Uzalo* as MaNgcobo. I like her because she is a brave woman.

Bad Luck, Getting Pregnant

In 2018 when I was doing grade 10, I had bad luck at the end of the year as I got pregnant. The following year, I didn't go back to school. I decided to drop out. I thought my schoolmates were gossiping about me. I stayed at home until I had delivered my child. I stayed with him another two years because I had no one who would stay with him while I went to school. My child is two years old now. This year, I decided to go back to school to chase my dream, because I know you are nothing when you don't have education.

Motivated by My Certificate of Excellence

I got a Certificate of Excellence from my principal at my previous school, Bhamu High School. My principal wanted learners to do well in the first term and he awarded them certificates. My certificate is three years old. It means a lot to me because, if I see it, I tell my mind that I can succeed when I pull up my socks and I can make my dream a reality when I finish school. There was no day I felt as happy as the day when I got this certificate. When I see my certificate, I also get bad feelings because I accuse myself that if I did not get the baby, I would be at university now. But I have hope that one day I will go to university like my old friends.

My Dreams

I dream of being a nurse in a few years. I imagine myself being called Mrs. Ngcobo when I get married. I want to take care of my family and make sure that they get all the things they like and get a beautiful and expensive car. I know that I will achieve my dreams because I am determined. To make my dream a reality, I will finish school and pass with flying colours, get bursaries to get an education because my parents died a long time ago. I only have an uncle.

I wish to stop drinking alcohol because it doesn't do me any good. I'm told that when I'm drunk, I'm very stubborn and I don't want to listen to other people. Although I want to drop alcohol totally, it is not easy because I stay with people who love it too much. Sometimes they force me to drink it. I hope I will manage to stop drinking and stop being influenced by people who have no goals in life.

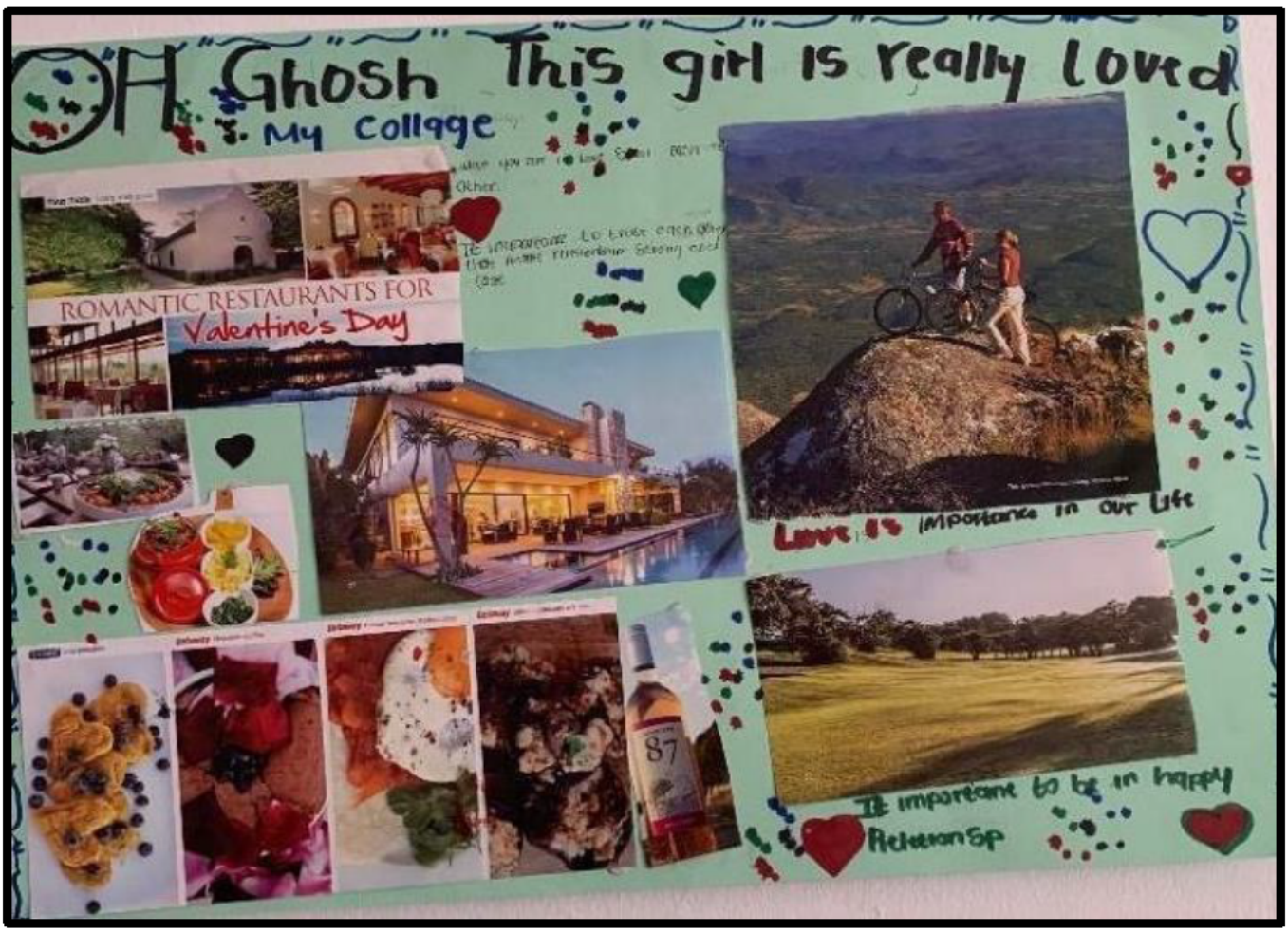
Love Is Not About Age

Msah, my new love, has made me forget about my home and go stay with him. He changed my life. He is all I need in a man in the world. Because my family members do not like him, they say a lot of things about

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him. They say he is older than me. Love is not about age. Whatever they say, I take it like I don't hear them. They don't realise that when you love a partner of the same age, it is hard because you do not respect each other. In that relationship, you fight all the time, which is bad. Ey! Msah takes me out for dining at hotels. He also takes me out to the park. We are very happy. I get things I did not get when I was staying at home. He makes me feel like the girl that is shown in my collage.

Figure 5. 19: ***Sgqeh's Collage***



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This girl is really loved because, on Valentine's Day, her boyfriend takes her to a romantic restaurant. They eat delicious food. They go to different places. They play games.

Community Events

In my community there are ceremonies, especially *umemulo* and Zulu traditional weddings. It is nice to attend these ceremonies because people are happy, they drink, sing, and dance. There is competition for traditional dance. What kills my heart when we are at these ceremonies, is that people get drunk and lose self-control. Then we see all the scandals, such as people grabbing girls and taking them by force. Some want to rape girls.

5.3.20 Simthandile's Story: Being loved is the most beautiful feeling

Simthandile: *My name is Simthandile Shezi. I am 17 years old. I am in Grade 11 at VM Secondary School. I'm from Mandeni, Angola area. Here is my story.*

My Dreams

In years to come, I dream to be an actress and accountant. The actress is my first career choice because I love acting and I also love to be on TV doing something that inspires others, or something that will change people's lives. I plan to pass matric with higher levels so I can go to study the course of my choice, and be the top achiever at university so I can make my dreams a reality and make my family proud of me. I will be the second child in my family to go to study at university. I wish I could make my dreams come true and change my background.

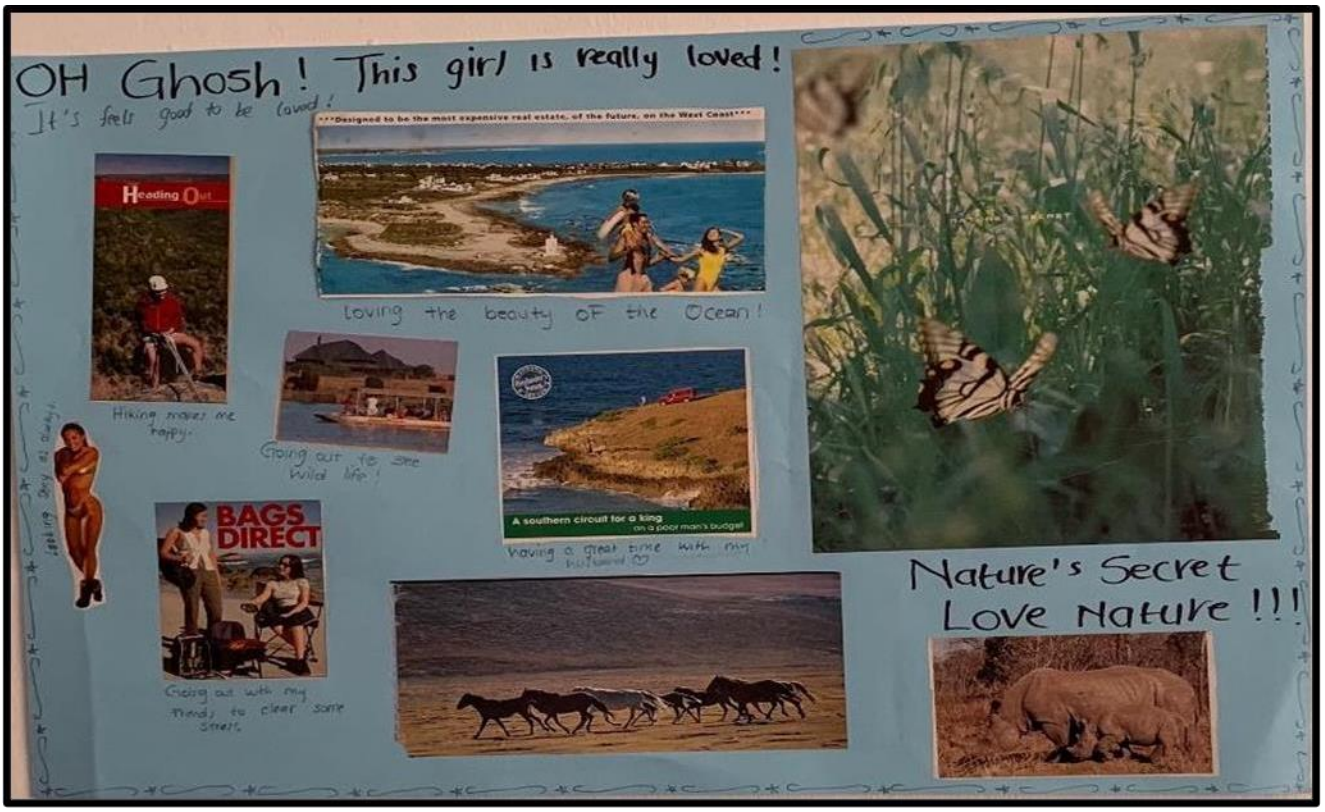
I wish I could change the way my family lives so that I change the situation back at home. I wish I could make my family live better. I want them to have a good life so that my mother will never work for the Chinese ever, because I will be supporting them with food and money. I am not happy with my mom working for Chinese people, because she gets very little pay for the work she does. I will make sure that my family never suffers again and that they live a good life.

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My Opinion of Love

My opinion on why young people are so much in love so that they decide to move in with their boyfriends against the will of their parents is that they fall in love easily and they believe their boyfriends more than their families. They choose to stay with their partners because they are so in love with them, and they trust them. Another thing is that they enjoy spending a lot of time with them, but they spend less time with their families. Being loved is the most beautiful feeling in the world. My collage shows that people who love each other love to go out and see the beauty of nature.

Figure 5. 20: ***Simthandile's Collage***



They often go out hiking or go out with friends for fun. They are happy and love each other and their child too, so their family is in a safe and comfortable zone.

Bad Community Events

In my community, my peers formed a group of dancers. This group dances at parties or anywhere [there is a celebration]. Sometimes they plan a trip to Durban. So, they buy drugs and alcohol and say that girls will not pay for the trip, they go for free, but boys do not go for free. What I like about them is that they dance

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very well, and they make money from dancing, and people love them when they are dancing. What I dislike about them is that they drink too much alcohol and do drugs. When they are drunk, they do bad things like fighting with each other, and they even stab others. Sometimes they fight because of girls. They also take advantage of those girls when they are drunk by sleeping with them on the trip. What is worse is that other girls go without their parents' permission, just because they want free alcohol.

As a solution to GBV, I wish parents will never allow their children to go on these trips. They must also not allow their children to leave home at night, because some lie and say they are visiting friends, yet they are going on these trips to Durban. If they allow their child to visit a friend to sleep over, they must not only phone the other mother, but must also meet them in person, because on the phone, they may be speaking to fake parents. Parents must also stop giving their kids money to buy alcohol. Another solution to protect girls from GBV is to invite people to address the boys who are abusing girls so that they can stop what they are doing.

5.3.21 Yezorh's Story: No stress, no pain in love

Yezorh: *My name is Yezorh. I'm a talented young lady. I am 15 years old. I am at VM Secondary School. I'm in grade 10 in the Physics class. I live in KwaZulu-Natal, at Mandeni Jeqeza. I got Thando as my one and only friend. She is like a sister to me. I love writing so much and creating new things. I do write poems, songs, and stories. Here is my story.*

My Dreams

As I love music and am also doing music, in years to come, I see myself as a TV/radio presenter, not forgetting acting and doing music. I see myself having my own studio, studio equipment, having my own company which pays me good money. I like living the best life in the world. If I were in control of my life, I would be living the best life by now. I mean, having a good and beautiful home with fancy things and furniture. I would be the breadwinner by now, while I'm still at school getting a good education.

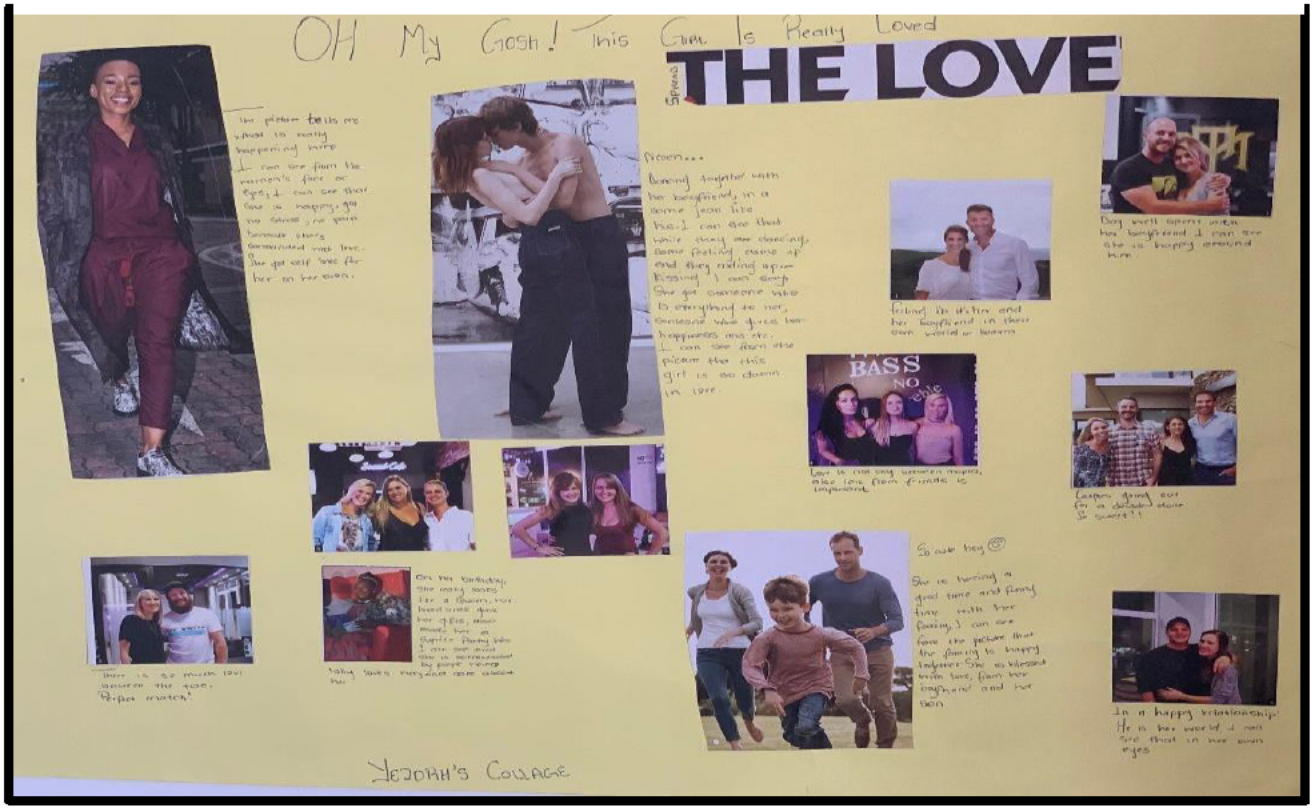
In the future, I see myself being around people who love me and care about me. I see myself having a family and husband; having my cute three girls and two boys who are twins. I love twins. So, yeah, I see myself living a soft life, being a well-known woman all over the world, as I love being famous.

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No Stress, No Pain Where There Is Love

I have decided to move in with my boyfriend and I don't want to be judged. My parents are always against the decisions I make or take, while my boyfriend is always supportive. My parents found out that I was in love. Trust me! You don't want to know about the drama. They even beat me and took my phone. I didn't sleep well; actually, I didn't sleep at all. I was busy thinking, asking why they did this instead of supporting me. In the morning, I decided to take my clothes and I went to my boyfriend's house. Now, I've started living my soft life, without judges and rulers in it. Now, I'm around someone who really loves me and who will never lay a hand on me. We are happy together. Just like my boyfriend and I, my collage shows a couple that is really in love.

Figure 5. 21: ***Yezorh's Collage***



From the woman's face, I can see that she is happy and has no stress, and no pain because she's surrounded by love. She is in a happy relationship. He is her world; I can see that in her eyes. She is dancing together with her boyfriend, in the same jeans as his. I can see that while they were dancing, some feelings came up and they ended up kissing. On her birthday, she looks like a queen. Her loved ones gave her gifts and also made her a surprise party. I can see that she is surrounded by people who really love her and care about her. So cute, hey! She is having a good time and a fun time with her family. I can see in the picture that the

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family is happy together. She is blessed with love from her boyfriend and her son. Love is not only between couples, as love from friends is also important.

Alcohol Messing Up Community Events

In my community, they do support the youth with their talents, even though they do not usually do it that much. Every year on 24 December, we usually have an event called 'Home Coming'. This event is to support upcoming artists. We have performances by underground music artists. What I dislike is what people do when we are having this event. All they care about is getting drunk and forgetting why they are in the event. When they get too drunk, they fight and even break alcohol bottles. What irritates me is that the municipality doesn't help the undergrounds to be popular.

5.3.22 Zeynep's Story: Love is blind

Zeynep: *My name is Zeynep. I am 15 years old. I am doing Grade 9 at VM Secondary School. I'm from Mandeni in Thembeni area. Here is my story.*

My Dreams

The life I want is very expensive. In my life, since I was young, I have always dreamt of having my own house, company, and job, and bearing kids for my husband who will be perfect for me, who won't judge me, and who will love me the way I am. I have always wished to become a doctor as my dream job. I don't love the house that I call home. I stay in it because I do not have a choice. I wish I could remove it and build a new one. Sometimes, I even sit and wish I could win a jackpot or the Lotto that is advertised on TV so that I could change the situation at home. There are a lot of things that need to be changed in my community. If I were the councillor, the first thing I would do is build houses for every poor person, provide food parcels, provide water taps in each home, build roads, provide clothes for poor families, provide electricity, and put pressure on children to go to school so that they can have a bright future.

Love Is Blind

Love is blind in such a way that when your partner asks for something from you, you just agree before he has even finished asking. In the first days when you just start dating, love just closes your eyes, you just don't see anything else, except him. Every time you see him, it makes you feel like you could melt. And when he touches you, you just feel like you are entering heaven. But we girls, look at how the guy is treating you or how he is when he is with you. Then the decision comes there. You just sit alone and think about

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how it would be if you stayed with him. Then you just start visiting him on weekends. Then the next thing you decide is to just be with him full time even though it is not nice to your parents. But just because you are in love, you don't listen; you continue with your decision. It looks like the girl in my collage is experiencing the same.

Figure 5. 22: ***Zeynep's Collage***



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She appears to be really loved because her boyfriend/husband is really taking good care of her. She gets everything she wants. I also wish to have such a relationship.

5.3.23 Zotho's Story: Lovers spend quality time together

> ***Zotho:*** *My name is Zotho. I am 15 years old. I am doing Grade 10 at VM Secondary School. I live in Mandeni. Here is my story.*

My School

My school is big and old. It has a long history. It has produced some teachers, lawyers, doctors, and many careers that have come from VM Secondary. It is a public school, it is in a rural place, which is Mandeni. My school is supported by the municipality and the Education Department. We eat free food and learn with free books from the Department.

My Dreams

I've always dreamt of myself as a dentist and part-time actress. I also see myself as a mother of three beautiful children and a wife. I have wanted to be a dentist since I was young because I really care about teeth. I see myself as Dr. Lee. I think she is also one doctor who keeps making me wish to be like her one day because I don't miss her shows. I really enjoy watching her helping others. Even if I am angry, once I have watched her shows, I always feel good, cool, and calm. I also see myself as a famous actress but doing that job when I'm off from my serious dentist career. I think I'll do acting for fun to entertain people and also to make extra cash.

Lovers Spend Quality Time Together

I love my boyfriend so much. Every time I'm with him, I always feel loved and protected. I don't mean that my parents are not protective of me or what; it is just that he is my everything. He cares about me and he is such a blessing to me. He is overprotective. I moved in with him because it was my dream to wake up next to him every day of my life. My collage shows a girl who is really happy and loved by her partner, just like I am loved by my boyfriend.

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Figure 5. 23: ***Zotho's Collage***



Discussing your future with your partner can really make both your futures so bright and full of success. Experiencing new things in a relationship can keep a relationship healthy and stable.

Gender-Based Violence in My Community

There is a lot of violence in my area. Sometimes women are killed brutally. Children are also raped in daylight. What is even worse is that some of these children are raped by their own family members. To fight GBV, I suggest that means be made available to avoid these incidents. Conferences should be

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organised for men to be brought together to be reminded about their roles. Men are the ones who should protect us as women and children. They must not be the ones who take our precious souls. This GBV must end now, and all of us must be the ones who end it.

5.4 Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the first phase of the data analysis, which was the reconstruction of a series of 23 participants' re-storied accounts. I composed these stories from the data that had been generated by each participant through letters to penfriends, collages depicting girls they considered to be loved, and artefact retrieval. These data sources were supplemented by one-on-one unstructured face-to-face member check interviews to seek clarity on some issues in the participants' data sources, particularly the letters they wrote to their imaginary pen pals. This phase laid the foundation for the subsequent phase of data analysis, that was thematic analysis.

In Chapter Six, I present the first layer of the three-step thematic analysis process where I draw on the 23 participants' stories I reconstructed and presented in this chapter to address the first research question. By utilising thematic analysis, Chapter Six explores how the 23 rural schoolgirls who participated in this study understood love in dating relationships.

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CHAPTER SIX

SCHOOLGIRLS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF LOVE IN DATING RELATIONSHIPS

> As we know, love is variable and changes continuously. It is never the same. We cannot find a single common definition of love that is shared by everyone. Performance is continuous and constant. Each individual has a version of love, which changes continuously over time, while the person who is in love also changes (Belli et al., 2010, p. 265).

6.1Introduction

Concurring with the above notion, the literature suggests that adolescent girls tend to have multiple understandings of love in dating relationships, including love as sex and childbearing, love as purity, love as money, love as companionship, love as marriage, love as force and fear, love as jealousy, and love as omnipotent (Bhana, 2018; Bittar & Nakano, 2017; Furphy, 2012; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021; Willan et al., 2019). Earlier studies on young people's understandings of love in dating relationships tend to focus on youth in urban and peri-urban contexts (for example, see Bhana, 2018; Bittar & Nakano, 2017; Ferriani et al., 2019; Firmin, 2013; Wood et al., 1996). Informed by this trend and my rural background, I decided to focus on girls from much neglected and marginalised rural settings. This study therefore examined how rural schoolgirls understood love in dating relationships and how their understandings influenced their vulnerability to GBV. The main research question was: *"How might rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships influence their vulnerability to gender-based violence?"* To address this question, two sub-questions informed data generation in the study:

1) *How do rural schoolgirls understand love in dating relationships?*
2) *What factors influence rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships?*

From data generation to analysis, I was always mindful of the importance of considering appropriate methods for engaging with the girls' stories, so that they would be encouraged to "participate more fully in the research by offering their interpretations of their life experiences and contexts" (Messias & DeJoseph, 2004, p. 43). Therefore, to address the two research questions, I offered the 23 participants the opportunity to share their stories through multiple data sources. For example, the collage inquiry activity allowed the participants to create collages that portrayed a girl they deemed to be really loved. Secondly, they wrote to

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their imaginary penfriends and shared their lived experiences, aspirations, and their thoughts about love in dating relationships. Thirdly, they shared artefacts that were of significance to them and to write brief but meaningful narratives describing the meanings of these objects for them. Data were also generated by means of one-on-one unstructured face-to-face member check interviews for clarity and to probe for more data if required (see Appendix A to Appendix H for the English and IsiZulu versions, respectively). Employing these multiple data generation methods ensured "the collection of multiple perspectives" (McElhinney & Kennedy, 2021, p. 267) through narrative inquiry involving the 23 girls. These participants were introduced to the reader in Chapter Five. Throughout the fieldwork, I kept a record of my field notes, which also served as a rich data source that supported the data analysis in this study.

I remained cognisant of the importance of sensitivity and exercised care when interacting with the girls as I needed to allow them to express how they made sense of the world in an authentic manner (Thompson, 2003). As Gilligan (2015) advises, my aim was to use research methods that would priviledge the voices of the participants. As discussed in the previous chapters, data analysis in this thesis was a two-phase process. In Chapter Five, I presented the first phase of the narrative analysis process by presenting the re-storied accounts shared by the 23 girls.

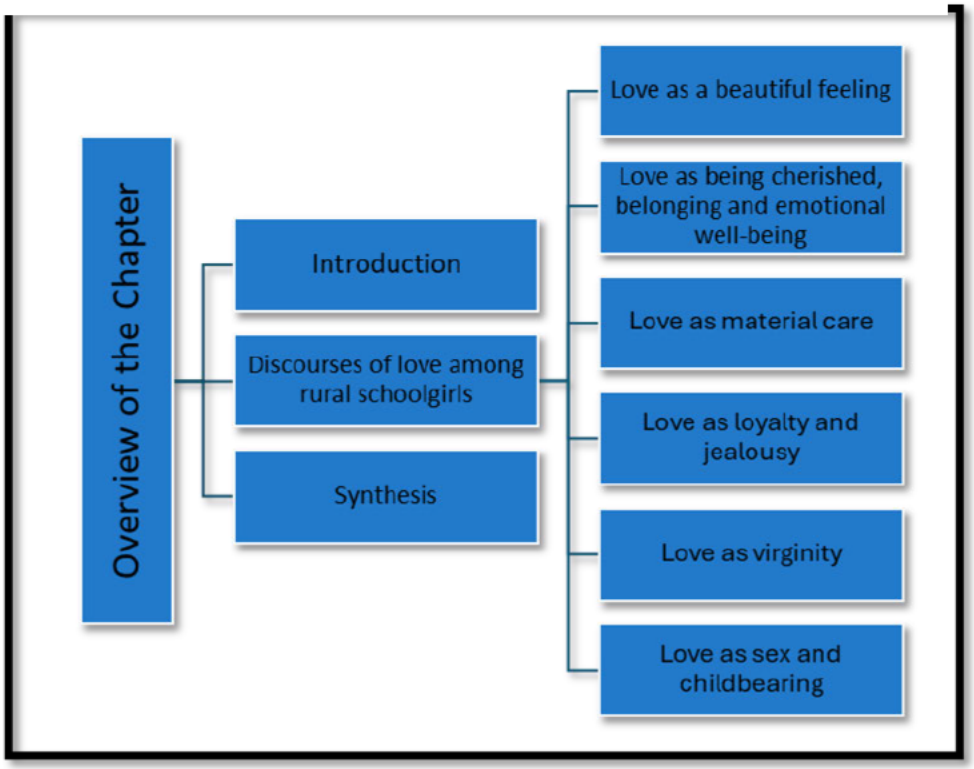
Building on the foundation laid in Chapter Five, this chapter presents the first of three steps of the thematic analysis process. As discussed in Chapter Four, following an inductive process, which was "reasoning from specific to general" (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p. 196), a thematic analysis of the participants' narratives was conducted to respond to the key research questions. I analysed each participant's narrative to extract data that responded to the research questions. As Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) advise, I looked across the 23 stories for data that captured common patterns of shared meanings. Thereafter, I organised the data into various categories, moving from the specific to the general. This helped me to identify, analyse, organise, describe, and report themes that emerged from the participants' narratives.

To present the first step of thematic analysis in this chapter, I drew on the 23 stories developed in Phase One to analyse data addressing the first critical research question: *How do rural schoolgirls understand love in dating relationships?* From each of the 23 re-storied accounts, I extracted data that responded to the first research question and pasted such excerpts together (see Appendix Z). From these excerpts, I then looked for data that captured common ideas and assigned these colour codes according to shared meanings (see Appendix AA). This helped me to organise, describe, and report themes to identify the discourses of love as shared by the rural schoolgirls who participated in the study. This step allowed me to identify the

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six discourses of love as they emerged from the rural schoolgirls' narratives. These discourses are presented below.

Figure 6. 1: ***Overview of the Chapter***



6.2 Participants' Discourses of Love in Dating Relationships

Six discourses of love were identified from the first step of the thematic analysis: 1) love as a beautiful feeling; 2) love as material care; 3) love as being cherished, belonging, and emotional well-being; 4) love as loyalty and jealousy; 5) love as virginity; and 6) love as sex and childbearing.

6.2.1 Love as a Beautiful Feeling

The literature suggests that young girls are not loveless, as the "conception of being in love is already present during early adolescence" (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021, p. 134). The literature further reveals that romantic relationships are very important to adolescents (Firmin, 2013; Van Eck, 2015). In line with these assertions, it was found that romantic love was very important for the girls who participated in this study. They expressed their reverence and desire for love in their collages and the letters addressed to their imaginary penfriends. The following capture the general expressions of love the girls shared:

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How much fun it is to be in love! Love is a very great and adorable feeling you share with your lover. To love someone is the most important thing in your life. Love is so important! To fall in love is a blessing. There is nothing above love. Being loved is the most beautiful feeling in the world.

I love my boyfriend so much. He is my everything. That guy is the love of my life. He means the world to me. I love this damn man! I fell in love with this guy the first time I saw him. He makes me feel the world. He is my sunshine and the king of my heart. He means everything to me. When he approached me at first, I told him I was not ready to be in a relationship. He said: "I'll wait for you." It wasn't that I didn't have feelings for him, it was just that I was afraid of the disappointment that I would have when we broke up.

I found a guy who drove me crazy. His name is Bayanda Manqele. At first, I didn't want him to be part of my life, but as time went on, I started to develop untouchable feelings for him.

What was evident in the above extracts was that quite a few of the girls referred to love at first sight. These girls articulated feelings that concur with Karandashev's (2015) point that "when a man or woman is in love they know about this from their gut feelings, without words" (p. 3). Moreover, how the girls described love is corroborated by Bhana's (2018) view that romantic love is "a mysterious, compelling and inexplicable" phenomenon that is complicated and difficult to define (p. 101). The girls expressed this feeling in their letters to their friends as follows:

I have a boyfriend. He is Sphamandla Msomi. I love him so much. I don't know how to describe the love I have for this person, 'coz when I am with him, I feel like I am in my own world. I just think I can't lose this man because we have that thing you can't describe or explain. I can say that he has tender love. I know it is hard for everyone to understand or to see that thing I see.

Love is blind in such a way that when your partner asks for something from you, you just agree before he even finishes asking. In the first days when you just start dating, love just closes your eyes, and you just don't see anything else except him. Every time you see him, it makes you feel like you could melt. And when he touches you, you just feel like you are entering heaven.

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Parker et al., 2015) found that girls placed such a high value on romantic love that they could not imagine themselves without being in a dating relationship, and many suggested that it was stressful not to have a boyfriend. The literature also asserts that many women prefer suffering in an abusive relationship rather than being without the man of their affection (Hayes, 2015). The same sentiment was expressed by some schoolgirls who participated in the current study. For example, through a collage-making activity to depict a girl that is really loved and in the letters they wrote, this is how they referred to love and being in love:

> *Love is the key to success. I won't see my success without my boyfriend. I can't afford to lose my man because he's my soulmate and I adore him. He makes me feel the world. I love my boyfriend so much that I can't imagine the pain I'll have when I lose my Babee. If I lose him, my life will be miserable. I can't imagine my life without him. My life without him will be a complete mess. I just don't know what life could mean without him*.

Losing a boyfriend was perceived as a *"complete mess"* and being *"miserable"* by one of the current study's participants. More than a decade ago, similar feelings of dismay were registered poetically by 18-year-old Vilakazi (2011) who was heartbroken when her partner had deserted her. This is how she expressed her pain in her poem: "You promised to love me. Now I'm sitting here alone with tears running down my face … you left me. . . you left me here alone" (Vilakazi, 2011, p. 85).

As a further indicator of love as a beautiful feeling, it seems that girls never stop moving on despite the pain resulting from the plight of a breaking-up. A participant articulated this in a letter to her imaginary friend: "*After losing Senzo, I got another boyfriend."* However, although girls moved on, they lived with the scars when deserted by their boyfriends who remained in their memories. This is how one participant shared the pain she felt in her notes about her collage and artefact (which was a letter she had received from her ex-boyfriend):

> *My collage reminds me of my first boyfriend. Family time with my boyfriend was the best. We were very happily in love, and everybody could see that. Loving him closed my eyes in such a way that I never thought of losing him. I wish he was here. I was so in love with him. On that day, he just told me whatever brought us together was over. My day was so painful. When I got home, I could not even eat. Even though I lost my boyfriend, I still love him and I am still keeping the letter he wrote me. This letter has been really special to me. I kept this letter framed so it can be safe. It comforts me in sorrowful times. The guy really broke my heart after all those lovely, happy, and unforgettable moments. I have this new boyfriend, but my heart is still on my first love I lost on Valentine's Day.*

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Feelings of distress emanating from breakups of adolescent relationships were recorded in a study that revealed horrible results that manifested in "strong emotional and physical reactions" (Van Eck, 2015, p. 68). Van Eck reported that the situation with one of the participants was so bad that this girl who had been rejected by her boyfriend was so upset that she experienced an extreme physical reaction that resulted in loss of appetite and, ultimately, loss of weight. Just like the participant in the current study, this girl also had to force herself to eat. The tendency not to let go was also described in earlier study and by Vilakazi (2011), who wrote in her poem: "You left without a trace and I know that I have been easily replaced, easily replaced by another young girl like me. Sadly, in my heart you still have a place (p. 85).

6.2.2 Love as Material Care

Some girls' stories revealed that they desired finding a provider to realise their dream of love in a dating relationship. For these girls, the provision of material resources by their boyfriends meant love. Consequently, they expected to be spoiled by their partners through gifts on special occasions. A similar sentiment was shared by women in previous studies, who suggested that:

> love and feelings of closeness are associated with giving gifts or taking a partner out, which invariably involves spending money. Spending money on a partner can be a reflection of care and love and elicit feelings of closeness because to these people, of limited means, it may demonstrate the lengths a partner will go to for the other (Furphy, 2012, p. 95).

Similar views were shared by the girls in the current study through their letters and writings about their collages. The following excerpt reflects their views:

> *Ey! Msah takes me out for dining at hotels. He also takes me out to the park. We are very happy. I get things I did not get when I was staying at home. He makes me feel like the girl that is shown in my collage. The collage shows that the man really loves a girl. They spoil each other. She is always carrying gifts. The gifts she gets can tell that she is loved. On her birthday, she looks like a queen. Her loved ones gave her gifts and also gave her a surprise party. This girl is really loved because, on Valentine's Day, her boyfriend took her out to a romantic restaurant. They eat delicious food. She appears to be really loved because her boyfriend/husband is really taking good care of her. That is why I say this girl is really loved as we see in my collage. She gets everything she wants. I also wish to have this relationship. I also see myself as a very happily married woman with two children, a boy and a girl with their father working as a businessman providing for his family.*

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The above views were consistent with those expressed in previous studies (Firmin, 2013; Furphy, 2012; Ngabaza et al., 2013; Pattman, 2005), where several participants declared that their partners had shown their love and caring by buying them gifts like chocolates, teddy bears, and roses. The above articulations also suggested that the scale at which the rural schoolgirls valued the provision of material resources in their relationships resulted in them comparing their boyfriends with their home environments where they would not get everything they wanted. Their happiness as partners in dating relationships was obviously associated with the material resources provided by their boyfriends. Some girls even envied their peers who were given all they wanted by their partners. Some narratives also revealed that girls aspired for future husbands who would be able to provide for their future families. The desire to receive gifts from their boyfriends affirmed an earlier finding that demonstrated women's attachment to gifts as a demonstration of romantic love (Jewkes & Morrell, 2012).

The perception that gifts are a sign of appreciation and love suggests that the girls felt that they were offering something in return to their boyfriends for their material support, which was evident in what one participant said about her artefact:

> *I used to love that guy, Senzo. He bought me a beautiful umbrella dress on my birthday on 05 May 2018. He gave me this dress as a gift and a sign of his love and appreciation.*

For a long time, it has been a tradition in southern Africa for:

> men to redistribute wealth on a scale appropriate to their standing and to demonstrate love, commitment, or appreciation for sex through material giving. The other prescribes for women to expect to receive a material compensation for sexual favours as a validation of their worth and as a sign of a partner's love, commitment, or appreciation. A woman's dignity and sense of self-worth when 'giving' sex is tied to an implicit expectation that her giving will be reciprocated through a gift, money or service (Leclerc-Madlala, 2008, p. S 22).

6.2.3 Love as Being Cherished, Belonging, and Emotional Well-Being

The girls' narratives revealed that they adored being cherished and experiencing a sense of belonging, emotional well-being, and demonstrations of love in a dating relationship. This viewpoint was shared by a participant in another study who declared: "I like it when he is understanding; he must understand you and do things that make you happy and feel loved and welcomed" (Willan et al., 2019, p. 1234). Likewise, the narratives of the girls who participated in the current study revealed that they expected to be treated in a

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way that made them feel special. For example, the girls they depicted in their respective collages and their comments in the letters to their imaginary penfriends revealed that the participants shared the same expectations of their boyfriends:

> *Love is about being pampered. This lady is really loved because she is taken to a spa and is being massaged. A girl deserves to be treated like a queen so that she can't have doubts about her relationship. All girls need to be treated in a lovely way. We girls look at how a guy is treating you or how he is when he is with you. Then the decision comes there.*

> *When you meet someone who treats you nicely and always shows you love, you always feel for that person at the end of the day. Well, I have someone who treats me like a queen and always values me. He always makes me feel special. He treats me nicely and gently. He treats me so well. He shows by every means how much he loves me. All the time, he reminds me that he loves me. He always talks about how much he loves me so much that he will do anything to make me very happy. When I am sad, he always tells jokes so that I can smile.*

Similar expressions of feeling special were recorded by Ferriani et al. (2019), who reported that their participants pronounced that being in a dating relationship transformed an adolescent girl into a 'princess'. The girls in the current study also valued being given attention when their boyfriends checked up on them by phoning them early in the morning, throughout the day, and until they would go to sleep. Triggered by her artefact (a letter from her ex-boyfriend) and the images in her collage, one participant stated in a follow-up interview that she had valued her ex-boyfriend who had checked up on her all the time:

> *My collage reminds me of my first boyfriend. Even though I lost my boyfriend, I still love him. Family time with my boyfriend was the best. I wish he was here. I was so in love with him. I felt special whenever he was holding me. Whenever I thought of him, I was relaxed. He used to check whether I was okay every day. He loved me so much; he phoned me all the time, even checked up on how I was even when I went to sleep, wishing me good sleep. He phoned me every morning before I went to school, wishing me a good trip to school. Even when he did not go to his school on a particular day, he would tell me and accompany me to school. Because he could drive, he even used his father's car to drive me to school.*

Similar sentiments about the high value girls placed on soothing messages from their boyfriends emerged in a study by Jewkes and Morrell (2012). For instance, one participant said: "He used to send me some messages in the morning, during the day, and when I was about to go to sleep he sent me some nice messages, hey, I was also swept away and I admitted him" (p. 1732). According to this cited narrative, a

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loving partner has to show care. Hence, girls value love partners to check on their well-being time and again.

Research has repeatedly established that young people value commitment and willingness to devote time to them (Furphy, 2012; Giordano et al., 2005; Ngabaza et al., 2013; Willan et al., 2019; Williams & Hickle, 2010). Consistent with this notion, spending quality time with a lover is also deemed a sign of love, and this emerged in several narratives the girls who participated in the current study shared. They even expressed high regard for a series of activities they envisaged doing together with their lovers. In their collages and letters, the participants suggested a list of activities they wished to do with their boyfriends. For instance:

> *The thing I like best in my life is spending time with my boyfriend. I feel just like the girl in my collage who says: "Aargh, I'm so damn in love with this man. I can't wait to go out on a date with my boyfriend".*
>
> *This collage shows a girl who is much loved by her man because they are doing romantic things. They go on dates. They celebrate every adorable and incredible moment they share daily. They spend time together, e.g., on Valentine's Day. They go on picnics.*
>
> *Discussing your future with your partner can really make both your futures so bright and full of success. Experiencing new things in a relationship can keep the relationship healthy and stable. Spending quality time together is so important in a relationship. My collage shows a girl that is really happy and loved by her partner, just like I am loved by my boyfriend.*

The girls further stated that they adored:

> *Sharing some stories together… doing things together, going to the park, going to the beach, swimming together, going out for a date, going to hotels, going out to see the beauty of nature, traveling to vacations, going out with friends for fun, going to different events together, going to the parties, playing games, riding horses, mountain hiking, drinking champagne, romantic dinners, eating delicious food, wearing matching outfits, kissing, taking a shower together, going out and sharing your thoughts together, and looking beyond the future.*

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This strong drive of lovers wanting to be together was also recorded in a review by Karandashev (2015), who established that it appeared common in all cultures that romantic love is such a "strong feeling that lovers ultimately want to be together" (p. 13). Furphy (2012) also found that girls valued spending time with their boyfriends, and that they adored spending time together as a way of engaging with a romantic partner.

As articulated above, previous studies also revealed that young women expected their boyfriends to be prepared to spend time alone with them and to engage in the activities such as walking along the beach or going to a movie (Furphy, 2012; Willan et al., 2019). It emerged that no matter how much a man does for his girlfriend, what matters the most is spending time with her. This notion was exemplified in the following statement: "I like it when he spends time with me…he must understand you and do things that make you happy... But the most important thing is time" (Willan et al., 2019, p. 1234).

Despite often going on outings, the girls felt that the time they spent with their boyfriends was not nearly enough, and 13 of the 23 participants shared their desire to either move in with their boyfriends or stated that they had already moved in with their boyfriends. This is how one of the participants narrated this desire in her letter to her penfriend:

> *The time I got to be with Mazwi was very short. I moved in with him because it was my dream to wake up next to him every day of my life. I decided to live with him because I thought that would make me feel better, 'coz even if I tried to sleep at night, I couldn't because he was always in my mind. The reason why I chose to move in with him is because I love him a lot and I think moving in with him can change a lot of things. If he is not around me, I miss him too much. When I am at home, I just think of myself and him sleeping in bed, giving each other strawberries and sweets. My collage shows moments me and my love spend together; the moments that remind me that he truly does love me.*

Girls' desire to move in with their boyfriends is also described in the literature. Mkhwanazi (2011, p. 5) describes the practice of girls cohabiting with their boyfriends as stemming from a desire to "wake up for school at their boyfriends' homes". The girls in the current study also argued that moving in with their boyfriends was a way of returning a favour for the things that their boyfriends did for them. A participant shared the following in her letter:

> *I love my boyfriend so much. He has done a lot for me. He has changed my life. I don't know how I can thank him. My boyfriend is one person who makes me feel free when I am with. He treats me so*

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well, and I am always happy whenever I am with him. That is why I now wish to move in with him. I want to spend my life with him.

In several of the participants' letters to their imaginary friends, the girls in the current study mentioned that they were aware that moving in with their boyfriends was against their parents' will:

I have taken a crucial decision to move in with my boyfriend. This is against the will of my parents. I know that my parents are angry with me about that decision. I have decided to do this because I love him a lot. You just start visiting him on weekends. Then the next thing you decide is to just be with him full time even though it is not nice to your parents. But just because you are in love, you don't listen; you continue with your decision.

My love life is so perfect. I have this new boyfriend that I just moved in with because I love him so much. He means everything to me. My parents found out that I am in love. Trust me! You don't wanna know about the drama. My parents were against it. They do not want us to be together. When they found out that I was with my boyfriend they warned me, but I continued because I was in love. They even beat me and took my phone. I didn't sleep well; actually, I didn't sleep at all. I was busy thinking, asking why they did this instead of supporting me. In the morning, I decided to take my clothes and I went to my boyfriend's house.

Whatever they say, I take it like I don't hear them. I have decided to move in with my boyfriend because I don't want to be judged. My parents are always against the decisions I make or take, while my boyfriend is always supportive.

Of course, I realised that I was wrong for not listening to my parents. But I was so attracted to my boyfriend. They always beat me because I don't want to break up with him. They say I am too young to be in a relationship, but I refuse to break up with him. I am always happy when I am with my boyfriend. He treats me nicely and gently.

My opinion on why young people…decide to move in with their boyfriends against the will of their parents is that they fall in love easily and they believe their boyfriends more than their families. This is because they spend more time with them. So, when their families find out about their relationship, instead of listening to them, they choose to stay with their partners because they are so in love with

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them, and they trust them. Another thing is that they enjoy spending a lot of time with them, but they spend less time with their families.

The above narratives reveal that the girls acted against their parents' wishes by moving in with their boyfriends because they trusted their boyfriends more than they trusted their families. Previous studies have recorded the same attitude among girls, for instance: "I was too wild and spent most of [my] time with my boyfriend instead of my family" (Chohan & Langa, 2011, p. 93).

Participants who viewed love as belonging also aspired to declare their love publicly and to make the relationship culminate in marriage (Furphy, 2012; Willan et al., 2019). The girls viewed their relationships as a long-term commitment, which suggests that they adhered to the 'eternal passion myth' of love and dreamed of finding their soulmate (Soto et al., 2024). The fact that the participants desired to publicly declare their love was well articulated by one of the girls in a letter she wrote to her penfriend: "*I am so happy that even his sisters know that there is a person like me in their brother's life".*

Girls' aspiration to publicly declare their relationship culminated in their desire to get married. Many envisioned themselves as wives living with their future husbands and children in the images they included in their collages and in letters they wrote to their imaginary friends:

My collage shows a happily married couple. They declare their love in public. For me, family comes first. I want to have my own house with my family, [and be] married to my husband. I am so much in love with him. I wish we could get married because he loves me. In the future, I see myself being around people who love me and care about me. I see myself having a family and husband. I also see myself as a mother of three beautiful children, and a "wife". I have no doubt that he is going to marry me in years to come when we grow up. Sometimes I think of myself and Sphamandla getting married one day 'coz of the strong love that we have for each other. I imagine myself being called Mrs. Ngcobo when I get married.

The images that the participants included in their collages revealed marriage narratives such as the following:

This collage shows a girl who is much loved by her man because this couple also ends up getting married to show how serious they are. I also wish to get married and live a happy life. Just like my collage shows a happily married couple, I also see myself as a very happily married woman. I see

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myself having a family and husband.

Associating a comfortable home with marriage suggests that getting married provided some sense of security for the girls. Previous research has also recorded the aspiration of young girls to get married (Ferriani et al., 2019; Jiménez-Picón et al., 2023; Soto et al., 2024; Wood et al., 2007). Leclerc-Madlala, 2008, p. S 19) states that those "in rural settings across southern Africa were found often to be anxious to acquire the socioeconomic security and status associated with marriage and subsequent motherhood". Similarly, referring to a couple in her collage, one participant in the current study wrote about her dream in her letter:

> *They make sure that their kids are raised in a very comfortable and safe home. I also see myself as a very happily married woman with two children, a boy, and a girl with their father, and also creating a very comfortable home for my kids to be safe and raised in.*

In addition to marriage, some participants who viewed love as spending time together also aspired to engage in a long-lasting relationship. This aspiration is evidence that these girls desired relationships where partners age together and spend their lives together. They envisaged that genuine love relationships would be unending, as evidenced by the following excerpts:

> *The man really loves a girl if they are together for a very long time. The love I share with my boyfriend is a crucial and deep love. Crucial love never ends. What I know is that we are going to live together until the last day of our lives. I think lovers must grow together. The collage shows grand-dad and grand-mom are laughing, showing they are happily in love. They grow together just like I wish to grow together with my boyfriend, build the future together, cherish most wonderful moments with him, love each other in bad and good times, till death do us apart. I want to build a family with him coz he's the man of my dreams. When I see him, I see the future. I just want to be with him every moment until my last breath. I have no doubt that he is my eternal partner.*

The evidence of so many young girls aspiring to marriage aligns with previous research. For instance, Leclerc-Madlala (2008) argues that, in Southern Africa, it is the norm for young women to get married, as men claim that a woman is never too young for marriage. Hence, once girls have reached puberty and attained sexual maturity, they are "considered to be ready for courtship and marriage" (S22).

Girls who perceive love as emotional well-being tend to characterise dating relationships with expressions

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such as cheerfulness, harmony, caring, a sense of safety and security, and being stress-free. For such young people romantic love is emotionally rewarding (Ngabaza et al., 2013; Parker et al., 2015). Girls in the current study expressed romantic love as a feeling of 'happiness' on several occasions. This was evident in various notes on the collages and in the letters where they stated the following:

> *A family that loves each other is a happy family. Since I am so happy with my relationship with my boyfriend, I know it is crucial to love. Without happiness, there is no love. I am always very happy when I am with my boyfriend. We are very happy together. My collage shows a girl that is really happy and loved by her partner because of her physical appearance and emotional appearance. She is always deep in her thoughts and is always laughing and smiling. The eyes tell her emotion out loud. Everything about her means love, even the smile she makes alone like there is someone in front of her.*

The girls who participated in the current study understood that dating relationships should be characterised by harmony and peace. Hence, they posited that there would be no fighting and that no harm would befall the lovers. In her reference to a couple depicted in her collage and also in her letter about her relationship with her boyfriend, one participant stated:

> *They are always happy. There is no fighting. No girl deserves a harmful love. She is happy, got no stress, and has no pain because she's surrounded by love. My boyfriend and I don't want conflict. We make sure that we avoid fighting for something that is not important and [we] always forgive each other when we had a fight.*

The girls in this study also argued that caring was a sign of love:

> *I love my boyfriend so much 'coz he's taking care of me. If I have any problem, he is able to help me and calm me down. When I am sad, he always tells jokes so that I can smile. Every time I'm with him, I always feel loved and protected. I don't mean that my parents are not protective towards me or what; it is just that he is my everything. He cares about me; he is such a blessing to me, he is overprotective.*
>
> *My collage shows people who love each other. They are happy. Their family is in a safe and comfortable zone. The girl appears to be really loved because her boyfriend is really taking good care of her.*

It was noteworthy that where love as caring dominated, the materialistic view of love seemed to diminish.

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This was evident in what a participant wrote about her dream husband and her narrative of an artefact that reminded her of her ex-boyfriend:

> *I want to get a man that will love me genuinely, not the one that will love me for my money. I loved my first boyfriend so much. The first gift I got from him was a letter he gave me on Valentine's Day. I have kept this letter from my boyfriend, my first love, my first everything in the dating world. We were not rich at all, but our love was real.*

This girl's reference to *'not rich at all'* yet experiencing love as *'real'* (i.e., love as caring) was not necessarily valued as a materialistic notion of love. This girl appeared to value what others might consider insignificant as she valued a letter as a gift of warmth and caring. Despite not being rich materialistically, this couple was rich in their relationship, even to the point that the girl guarded this letter safely. She stated: *"I am still keeping the letter he wrote me. This letter has been really special to me. I kept this letter framed so it can be safe".*

Unlike other girls who attributed love to men's ability to provide for their material needs, this girl viewed love as caring and the joy of finding a soulmate irrespective of material possessions (Bhana, 2018; Ngabaza et al., 2013; Soto et al., 2024). Research has shown that when girls embrace caring as love, their focus is on "support or companionship" (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021, p. 127). Their love is characterised by "intimacy [and] a special kind of friendship" (Furman et al., 1999, p. 4). This participant's view of loving her boyfriend even though he was not rich was also articulated by a girl in another study who stated: "I can love him even if he has no money" (Jewkes & Morrell, 2012, p. 1732).

6.2.4 Love as Loyalty and Jealousy

Young women articulate a need for men to show loyalty and support as an expression of love (Willan et al., 2019). Similarly, the girls who participated in the current study posited that, when a dating relationship was characterised by loyalty, lovers were devoted to each other. They argued that such lovers would be able to rely on each other and were trustworthy. This is what they said about their dating relationships and dream husbands in their letters:

> *We make sure that we are loyal and simply true to each other. In my life, since I was young, I have always dreamt of my husband who will be perfect for me, who won't judge me, who will love me the way I am, and who will provide for his family, sticking with it through times of hardship. The couple in my collage are showing how they love each other to make their love work and support each other.*

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I have decided to move in with my boyfriend and I don't want to be judged. My parents are always against the decisions I make or take, while my boyfriend is always supportive. He supports me in everything that we do when we are together. Now, I've started living my soft life, without judges and rulers in it. Now, I'm [with] someone who really loves me and who will never lay a hand on me. We are happy together. We don't want a lecture.

A similar desire for lovers to be non-judgemental and to support each other through thick and thin also emerged in a study involving Filipino romantic partners who revealed their love "by sharing a laugh or listening to each other's problems in non-judgemental ways, or by working through hardships and keeping their promises to remain by each other's side" (Karandashev, 2015, p. 14). In the same vein, the girls in this study voiced their reasons for being inseparable from their boyfriends as follows:

My parents do not want us to be together. They always beat me because I don't want to break up with him. They say I am too young to be in a relationship, but I refused to break up with him. I am always happy when I am with my boyfriend.

My opinion on why young people are so much in love such that they decide to move in with their boyfriends against the will of their parents, is that they fall in love easily and they believe their boyfriends more than their families. They choose to stay with their partners because they are so in love with them, and they trust them.

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Due to the happiness, trust, and loyalty they shared with those whom they loved, the girls vowed that they would not break up with their partners, irrespective of the pressure their parents exerted upon them. This is mainly because adolescents who embrace loyalty as a sign of love are influenced by the omnipotent view of this phenomenon that true love will cope with any difficulty (Ferriani et al., 2019; Jiménez-Picón et al., 2023; Soto et al., 2024).

Aligned with love as loyalty is the notion of love as jealousy, which is expressed when girls are possessive of their partners. The literature often refers to the belief that "jealousy is a demonstration of love" (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021, p. 134). Some statements that emerged from the participants' collages and letters suggested that they cherished their boyfriends but were jealous and wanted them only for themselves:

> *I fell in love with this guy the first time I saw him. I knew he was meant for me, and only me. I love this damn man! He is only mine. He always reminds me that he loves me alone and our love is so important to him. I like to be treated like I am the only person existing in the whole, entire world.*

The above assertion aligns with reports in the literature that jealousy as a symbol of love emerges due to obsession when a girl fears that she will lose her partner (Bittar & Nakano, 2017). Expressions such as *"he is only mine"* and *"he loves me alone"* suggest the possible fear of the appearance of a third person on the scene who will present a threat to the love relationship (Ferriani et al., 2019).

6.2.5 Love as Virginity

The girls' narratives revealed that some embraced the notion of love as virginity. This notion of love stresses female virginal purity which implies that girls must "distance themselves from girlfriend-boyfriend relationships" (Bhana, 2018, p. 84). If they are in relationships, it means abstinence from sex so that they stay 'pure' until they get married. In a letter to her friend, a participant articulated how she embraced virginity as her girlhood pride:

> *I like events that happen in my community. One of the common events is "umemulo", where the family thanks the girl for keeping her virginity. In this event other girls are invited and they dance. I also love this "umemulo" a lot as that is when you can showcase virginity as a girl, and you show that you are proud that you have maintained it till that particular time.*

The tradition of celebrating virginal purity is in line with the finding by Leclerc-Madlala (2008) that girls in rural areas are "subjected to traditional rules that [guide] relations between the generations and between

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men and women" (S19).

6.2.6 Love as Sex and Childbearing

The narratives of some girls who participated in this study revealed that they viewed love as sex. This is evident in the following excerpt from a participant's letter to her imaginary friend: "*I then fell in love with him and we dated for a long time. He broke my virginity and that made me love him more".*

Many pictures in the participants' collages depict romantic love as half-naked couples. Some participants echoed the following view of love as sex:

> *My collage shows a couple that is really in love. The girl is in a happy relationship. He is her world; I can see that in her own eyes. She is dancing together with her boyfriend in a same jean as his. I can see that, while they are dancing, some feelings come up and they end up kissing. My collage also has romantic pictures of couples to show how girls must be loved.*

This sentiment of love expressed by the participants in the current study resonates with existing literature (Bhana, 2015; Bittar & Nakano, 2017; Ferriani et al., 2019; Jewkes & Morrell, 2012; Ngabaza et al., 2013; Sathiparsad & Taylor, 2011; Wood et al., 2007). In an earlier study, a girl was quoted as saying "Love is only good for sex" (Sathiparsad & Taylor, 2011, p. 79). Contrary to the previous narrative which revealed that girls embraced virginity, the above narrative suggests that, once a boy has broken a girl's virginity, she may experience her love for him as growing stronger.

Aligned with the literature (Ferriani et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2007), the participants in this study associated love as sex with love as childbearing. In a letter to her friend, one participant wrote: "*Other [some] kids are also in competition for pregnancy"*.

It is common practice in some communities in the southern African region to stress the importance of "fertility and having children" (Leclerc-Madlala, 2001, p. S 22). Mkhwanazi (2011) found that some girls deliberately fell pregnant to keep their boyfriends. Some girls in the current study shared their dreams with their penpals and in their comments about their collages as follows:

> *People in my collage are happy and love each other and their child too. In the future, I see myself being around people who love me and care about me. I see myself having a family and husband;*

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having my cute three girls and two boys which are twins. I love twins. I can imagine when we live with my kids and their dad. In him, I see a father of my children because of the amount of love he shows to me. I have always dreamt of bearing kids for my husband.

The scale at which girls in this study embrace pregnancy, is despite that teenage pregnancy and motherhood are accompanied by negative perceptions (Mkhwanazi & Macleod, 2011), as these are "very much frowned upon in … poor communities" (Mkhwanazi, 2011, p. 6). Some of the girls in the current study even dreamed of the number of children they would have, with one envisaging being a mother of five and one wanting twins.

6.3 Synthesis

In the first step of my thematic analysis in this chapter, I drew on the reconstructed stories of the 23 rural schoolgirls to explore their understandings of love in dating relationships. The findings suggest that the girls who participated in this study had multiple understandings of love in dating relationships. In fact, I was able to develop six discourses of love in dating relationships as expressed by these participants, namely: (1) love as a beautiful feeling; (2) love as material care; (3) love as being cherished, belonging, and emotional well-being; (4) love as loyalty and jealousy; (5) love as virginity; and 6) love as sex and childbearing.

My analysis of the data revealed that the most popular notion of love was love as being cherished, belonging, and experiencing emotional well-being. This understanding of love emerged in most of the 23 re-storied accounts that were presented in Chapter Five. Other popular notions of love were love as a beautiful feeling, love as material care, and love as sex and childbearing. The notions that were not so popular among the 23 girls were love as loyalty, love as jealousy, and love as maintenance of virginity. The latter was the least popular of all.

This phase of the data analysis aligned with the conceptual framework and the literature that I reviewed when I commenced the study. I understood from the outset that adolescent girls tend to have multiple understandings of love in dating relationships (Bhana, 2018; Bittar & Nakano, 2017; Furphy, 2012; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021; Willan et al., 2019). Surprisingly, while some of the findings of this study are consistent with those reported in the literature, some discourses that one had expected to emerge in this study (such as love as force and fear) were not identified in any of the girls' narratives. Considering that some participants' stories revealed elements of GBV, I was curious to determine what accounted for this

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striking finding.

In Chapter Seven, I present the second step of my thematic analysis and address the study's second research question by exploring the factors that influenced the girls' understandings of love that emerged from the analyses in this chapter.

CHAPTER SEVEN

EXPLORING THE FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE RURAL SCHOOLGIRLS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF LOVE IN DATING RELATIONSHIPS

7.1 Introduction

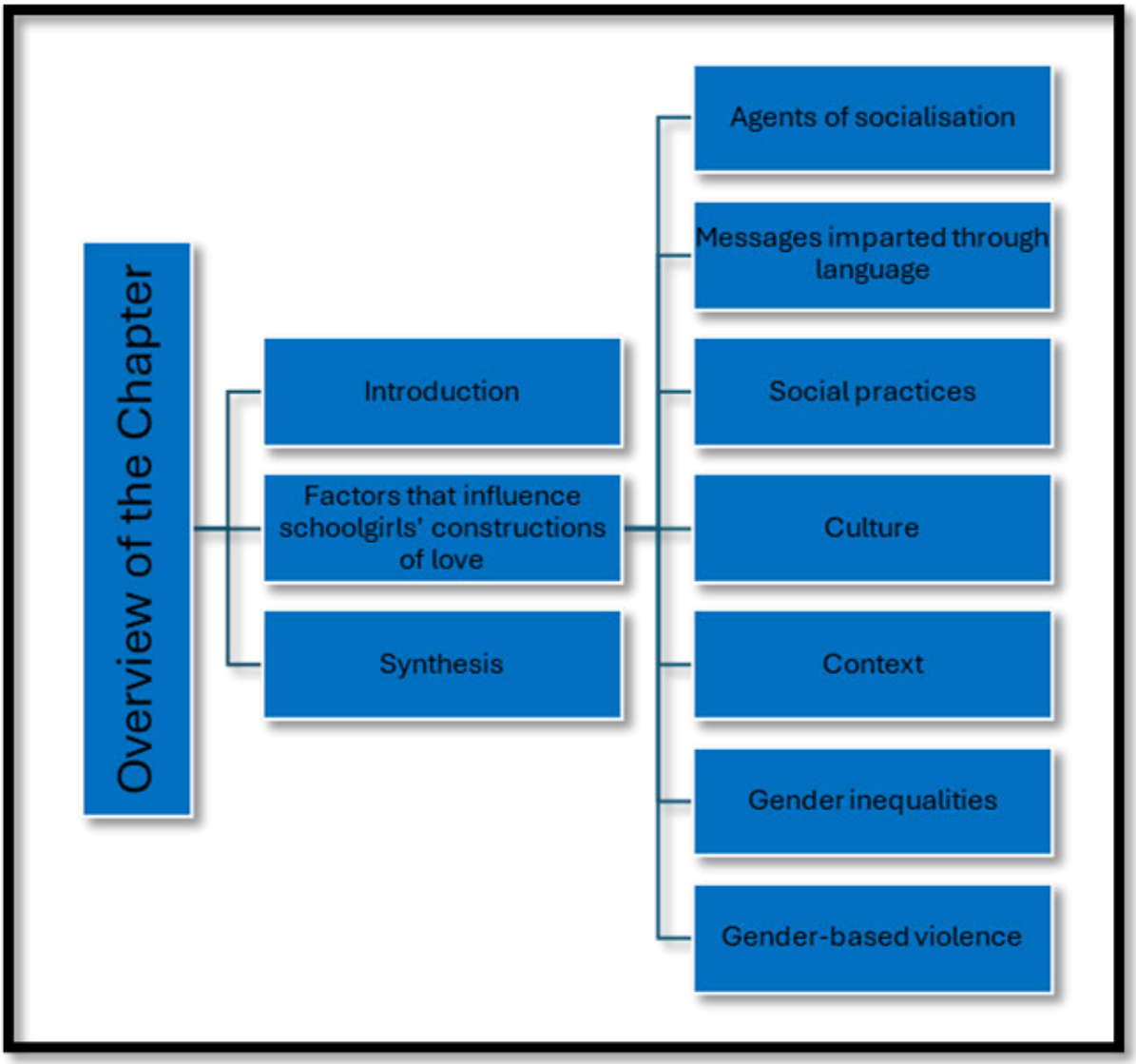
As discussed in Chapter Four, data analysis in this study was a two-phase process. First, I used a form of narrative analysis in which I reconstructed the 23 participants' stories by synthesising the texts generated with each girl in the field. These re-storied accounts were presented in Chapter Five. Secondly, to address the critical research questions I posed, I used thematic analysis to unpack the 23 stories that I had developed during phase one of the data analysis process. In this inquiry, thematic analysis was a three-step process. In Chapter Six, I presented the first step of thematic analysis and explained how I had developed the discourses of love presented by the participants, thereby addressing the first research question of this study which explored the question: *How do rural schoolgirls understand love in dating relationships?*

In this Chapter, I present the second step of the thematic analysis by focusing on findings that addressed the second research question: *What factors influence rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships?* The analyses of the data presented in this Chapter also followed an inductive process (i.e., "reasoning from specific to general") as posited by Brantlinger et al. (2005, p. 196). Thus, based on the data analysis in Chapter Five, I extracted data that responded to the second research question and pasted these excerpts together (see Appendix BB). As Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) advise, I then looked across the 23 stories for data that captured common patterns of shared meanings to determine what informed the six discourses of love that emerged from the first step of thematic analysis in Chapter Six. Therefore, from the excerpts that addressed the second research question, I looked for data that captured common ideas and assigned these particular colour codes according to the shared meanings they indicated (see Appendix II).

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This method helped me to organise, describe, and report themes to identify the contextual factors that influenced the rural schoolgirls' discourses of love that emerged from the first step of the thematic analysis process as discussed in Chapter Six. This second step of thematic analysis helped me to identify the seven factors that influenced the girls' constructions of love as they emerged from the first thematic analysis reported in Chapter Six. These are: (1) the agents of socialisation; (2) messages imparted through language; (3) social practices; (4) culture; (5) context; (6) gender inequalities; and (7) gender-based violence. Figure 7.1 presents an overview of this chapter.

Figure 7. 1: ***Overview of the Chapter***



7.2 Factors that Influence Schoolgirls' Constructions of Love in Dating Relationships

7.2.1 Agents of Socialisation in Rural Schoolgirls' Constructions of Love

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The girls' stories revealed the influence of agents of socialisation on their constructions of love. For instance, one girl described her attachment to the memory of her grandmother as follows:

> *Although my grandmother is no more, her wedding pictures are a good memory for me. Sometimes I cry when I remember her. I found her pictures in her album that was hidden in a secret box when we were doing spring cleaning in the bedroom that used to be hers. The album I found is very old because my grand mom got married in 1962. This means this album has been in this secret box for 59 years. I like my grand mom's album because it reminds me of how much she loved her family. This album triggers a feeling of joy and pain because she is no more. Seeing her wedding pictures and her marriage certificate makes my heart very sore.*

The influence of the girl's memories was expressed by what she wrote to her penfriend: "*For me, family comes first. I wish to grow together with my boyfriend. I want to have my own house, with my family, and be married to my husband".*

Another girl shared the following about her mother's history:

> *My mom was very young when she got married, but she was told to go because she would have a good time. They had a big wedding. After a year they got twins. After two years they got another baby and ended up having a big family. It is quite chaotic because of too many children fighting one another, but there are good moments sometimes.*

It was therefore no wonder that this girl as young as 13 years of age was among the girls who aspired to get married.

The above two scenarios (the grandmother's marriage story revealed by artefact retrieval and the knowledge of the girl's mom who got married at a young age) reflect how the primary agents of socialisation effectively perpetuate the notion of love as marriage. The fact that the girl's *"mom was very young when she got married but she was told to go because she would have a good time"* affirms the notion expressed in the literature that the agents of socialisation structure and shape young people's thoughts and behaviour (Kang et al., 2017). Ultimately, they act according to the opinions expressed by their more mature 'agents' (Kinnunen, 2022). The influence of the grandmother and mother is thus aligned with the assertion that, through socialisation, children learn what is deemed appropriate gender-typed behaviour by observing and modelling (or imitating) the behaviour of same-sex adults (Bandura & Walters, 1963; Barker, 2012). Hence, it is assumed that "a girl learns what it means to be female by observing her mother, whereas a boy learns

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what it means to be male by observing his father" (Kretchmar, 2009, p. 2). Kinnunen (2022) argues that "girls' realities are largely constructed by their mothers' [and grandmothers'] knowledge which is passed on to girls in [the process of] socialisation" (Kinnunen, 2022, p. 56).

Other than parents and grandparents as proximal agents of socialisation, the findings of the current study also revealed multiple other agents as drivers of socialisation, particularly within the family structure. This was evident in the following excerpts from the participants' letters to their penfriends:

> *It took courage to go home. They asked many questions, such as, "Who is this guy? Where does he stay?" All those questions were coming from different people in the house.*
>
> *My complicated journey started when I told my mother, father, and big brother that I was thinking about staying at my boyfriend's house with him… My brother just told me I was not his young sis whom he knew.*

The brother's attitude in the excerpt above may suggest he was disowning his sister. This resonates with the point advanced by Eagly and Wood (2012) that behaviour that is in line with a particular society's gender stereotypes "garners approval and continued interaction [while] behaviour inconsistent with gender roles is often negatively sanctioned and tends to disrupt social interaction" (p. 469).

The literature (Furphy, 2012; Storer, 2017; Van Eck, 2015) also avers that the media has emerged as one of the agents of secondary socialisation as it informs girls' beliefs, expectations, and behaviours in dating relationships. In this study, the media clearly emerged as an influencer of the schoolgirls' views and perceptions of love. This was evident in the following letter excerpts:

> *Most of the time, I like to watch TV. I have two role models. The first one is Noxolo Mathula, who is an actor in Uzalo. I love her because she shows me that a person needs to be strong and that I should chase my dream. The other one is Thandeka Dawn King who also acts on Uzalo as MaNgcobo. I like her because she is a brave woman.*
>
> *I want to live a high life and make my parents happy. I also wish to be a bandit, a car bandit, but this is the most catastrophic thing. I know that this job of stealing cars means that you sacrifice yourself to death. But I was fascinated by MaNgcobo doing this when I watched Uzalo. Anything*

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with action just fascinates me. Before I become an anthropologist or pilot, I will go steal cars first and then go study.

I enjoy spending my time watching TV and [being] on my cell phone. I like to sing, act, and model. My role model is Rihanna. I wish to have a better life and change the situation at home and have things I like. I like to live a good life and have money, my cars, and a house.

The above narratives were analysed with reference to Kretchmar's (2009) and Storer's (2017) assertions that the media is proving to be very influential in socialisation as it communicates ideas about what is gender-appropriate or inappropriate behaviour for boys and girls. The literature further proposes that "what children watch and read may shape their gender schemas" (Leaper & Farkas, 2015, p. 545), thereby playing a significant role in gender socialisation. This is more so since it has been found to "teach gender stereotypes and attitudes through the characters which reflect traditional gender identities" (Hoominfar, 2021, p. 6). What is evident in the above narrative is that, in the process of socialisation, the media is accused of perpetuating gender myths (Johnston & Swanson, 2003) by misrepresenting women's social lives as they are "shown in gender roles and it reproduces gender stereotypes for society" (Hoominfar, 2021, p. 6).

"Media imagery of glamorous and prosperous lives was found to be an important influence in shaping the aspirations of many contemporary young women" (Leclerc-Madlala, 2008, p. S20). One participant even saw herself marrying a character in a TV series named Ngcobo as she stated: *"I imagine myself being called Mrs. Ngcobo when I get married".* The impact of the media on their aspirations caused these girls to dream of a glamorous life which could only be attained if they became involved with rich sugar daddies. This means that the media contributes to girls' proclivity to embrace the provider-love notion as well as marriage as an expression of love.

Social media has been found to influence how adolescents think about romantic relationships (Storer, 2017; Van Eck, 2015). In the current study, the girls' narratives revealed that they were also on social media platforms, and the vignette from a letter to an imaginary penfriend demonstrated how this influenced their perception of love:

I like spending time with my friends. We communicate on Facebook and WhatsApp. At first, I didn't want him to be part of my life, but as time went on, I started to develop untouchable feelings for him. We met at school, and we became friends on Facebook. He used to check up on whether I'm okay every day, and he started to ask me out.

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Peers and close friendships also impact young individuals' understandings of dating relationships (Connolly et al., 2000; Furphy, 2012; Van Eck, 2015). Research has revealed that girls' networks are always engaged in conversations that inform their choices of acceptable or unacceptable behaviours (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999). The following excerpt from a letter written by a participant to her imaginary friend suggests that a girl's understanding of love as childbearing could be promoted by peer pressure:

> *The parents are not at rest due to the rate at which their girls, mostly those who are in school, are getting pregnant in their teens. They are even complaining about their children who are experiencing some kind of pressure. The other kids are also in competition for pregnancy.*

First, this extract revealed that parents were worried about the rate of teenage pregnancy, particularly as pre-marital pregnancy is frowned upon in African communities (Bhana, 2017). Secondly, it appeared that parents might assume that some pressure could be at play, while it also emerged that girls were competing to see who could fall pregnant, as if it was a trophy that had to be won.

Moreover, the fact that crime is glamorised by the media (as cited above) emerged as a driver of teenagers' desires for a better and more exciting life**.** This was revealed by the following statement by one of the girls who participated in this study and who aspired to be a criminal like MaNgcobo and Nkunzi in the series *Uzalo*:

> *I also wish to become a criminal. Of course, I know that it is dangerous because one can end up being arrested for a crime. But I get very fascinated when I watch Uzalo seeing MaNgcobo and Nkunzi stealing cars. I just imagine myself doing this job although it is not right, but I love it very much. My friend also likes crime, and we always talk about it*.

The above finding resonates with research that has revealed that it has become a norm among female adolescents to offer one another advice about their romantic relationships and also to place more value "on a friend's opinion than a parent's opinion" (Van Eck, 2015, p. 66). The finding that a girl's peers understand her love aligns with the scholarly assertion that, as they interact, children socialise one another (Kretchmar, 2009, p. 2). Hence, Stockard (1999) concludes that "both boys and girls successfully influence others in their interactions" (p. 221). Interactions, friendships, and group norms, therefore, influence peers to form self-concepts and gender stereotypes (Hoominfar, 2021).

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7.2.2 The Impact of Agents' Messages on Girls and their Constructions of Love

As they interact with the younger generation, the agents of socialisation mediate messages that perpetuate the social norms that influence how girls construct love. For instance, all the participants shared stories that reflected a heterosexual normative view of love which was reflected in the language they used. This was exemplified in the letter one girl wrote:

> *My grandparents are so strict. No one is allowed to go outside to play. They always say: "If you go out, you are not going out to play, but you are out for men and you are going to fall pregnant, and we will throw you out.*

The above extract conveys the heterosexual normative view of reality which suggests that the "desire towards men is traditionally expected of women due to the male/female binary" (Kinnunen, 2022, p. 47). Due to this heteronormativity, grandparents view girls as heterosexual; hence, they are assumed to be sexually oriented towards the male gender. The sexual orientation of the girl was thus socially constructed and taken for granted and she had internalised this heterosexual norm. This finding resonates with the experience of a girl in Kinnunen's (2022) study whose sexual expression was "directed by the heterosexual matrix [and she was thus] indoctrinated in the supposition that she, as a female, was to be sexually orientated towards men, thus conforming to the norms of compulsory heterosexuality" (p. 46).

Moreover, as the girl in this study was accused of going out to meet men and threatened with the potential risk of falling pregnant, heteronormativity was institutionalised and enforced (Collins, 2000). This finding also aligns with Furphy's (2012) finding that young participants' "mothers' voices and their families' expectations [could] clearly be heard in their decisions on dating matters" (2012, p. 93). In corroboration of Furphy's (2012) finding, the grandparents of the participant referred to above seemed to "equate sex with pregnancy and endangering [girls'] future and academic prospects" (p. 93). Narratives such as these clearly align dating relationships with the heterosexual normative view that 'going out' equates with a desire for sex which ultimately results in pregnancy. This view clearly influenced some girls' understanding of love as sex and childbearing.

In conjunction with the heterosexual normative view expressed above, the extract below suggests that judgemental messages that demean girls are commonly transmitted by their parents, which highlights that gender stereotypes are instilled by "parental definitions of acceptable behavior [sic]" (Carter, 2014, p. 244). For instance, one participant noted:

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I have decided to move in with my boyfriend and I don't want to be judged. My parents are always against the decisions I make or take, while my boyfriend is always supportive. Now, I've started living my soft life, without judges and rulers in it. Now, I'm around someone who really loves me... We are happy together.

This girl's experience of parental judgement seemed to push her to understand love as loyalty as she relied on her boyfriend (who was not judgemental) more than on her parents. The current study also revealed that the voices of siblings as agents of socialisation could be quite loud and judgemental, as exemplified in the following extract: *"My brother just told me I was not his young sis whom he knew".* This statement affirmed that the girl knew and was expected to feel guilty because she had acted against her brother's wishes.

Moreover, how the participants expressed their admiration of love in their collages and letters further confirmed how far language could go in mediating the gender order among the youth:

To fall in love is a blessing. I love my boyfriend so much. He is my everything [and] *he means the world to me. He is my sunshine and the king of my heart. He means everything to me… Love is blind… love just closes your eyes... It makes you feel like you could melt. And when he touches you, you just feel like you are entering heaven… Love is the key to success… Well, I have someone who treats me like a queen… Love each other in bad and good times, till death do us apart… He is such a blessing to me… He is my world.*

The above are a compilation of proverbs and expressions that emerged from the girls' stories and was evidence that, once the subjective reality of others had been communicated to the socialised individual, it became part of the recipient's consciousness, as affirmed by Berger and Luckmann (1991). In this study, these expressions were captured in the collages and letters and suggested that the messages that were mediated about love to the participants were gendered and patriarchal to the point that these girls saw the love they had for their boyfriends and older men as the ultimate achievement of their dreams. It is through such proverbs and expressions that gendered cultural traditions sustain gender legacies and ideology (Hussein, 2005; Zungu, 2016), as they propose that women are nothing without men.

7.2.3 Social Practices in Rural Schoolgirls' Constructions of Love

Earlier research has revealed that social practices influence how girls make sense of reality (Kinnunen, 2022). In this context, the participants viewed routine social practices in their social spheres as follows:

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In my community, there are always events. I like events that happen in my community. The common events are weddings, parties, a sangoma's dance, the Reed Dance, umgonqo, and umemulo when the family thanks a girl for keeping her virginity. In this event, other girls are invited, and they dance. I also love this umemulo a lot as that is where you can showcase virginity as a girl, and you show that you are proud that you have maintained it till that particular time.

The emphasis on weddings as a social ideal in the above narrative exemplifies the finding that the participants' aspiration to get married was an expression of love. The reference to *umemulo* and its association with virginity also revealed that some participants expressed love as virginity. The fact that there is a traditional custom (*umemulo*) during which the family thanks a girl for her virginity is in line with how the social gender order advances socially acceptable behaviour by reinforcing it through social rewards and approval (Barker, 2012; Hoominfar, 2021).

7.2.4 The Role of Culture in Rural Schoolgirls' Constructions of Love

Cultural values and traditional behaviours influence girls' expressions and experiences of love (Karandashev, 2015). The following extract from a letter to a penfriend demonstrates that some girls understood and negotiated romantic love as a cultural family tradition:

The time I get to be with Mazwi is very short. Sometimes I even think of leaving home so that I can live with him. My parents won't even let me go to live with him…If I run away from home to live with Mazwi, my parents will be disappointed because they are always thinking of good things for me. Besides that, at his home they do not know me and he has not paid any bride price for me. So, this is just bad; I can never do it.

The above narrative exemplifies how some girls tend to navigate dating relationships within the controlling social order that is imposed by cultural traditions and beliefs. While the girl embraced the notion of love as "spending time together" to the point that she aspired to move in with her boyfriend, cultural values like the payment of *ilobolo* mattered to her, and this belief informed her decision not to leave home. Her reference to her parents' 'disappointment' meant that she was conscious that it would be taboo to live together before marriage, as affirmed by Van Eck (2015). The respect that some girls showed for the traditional practice of the bride price also concurred with the scholarly debate that culture has a profound impact on an individual's constructions of love as these beliefs influence how people "feel, think, and behave in romantic relationships" (Karandashev, 2015, p. 2).

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7.2.5 Contexts Within Which Rural Schoolgirls Construct Love

Rural schoolgirls construct reality within certain socio-cultural contexts (Cislaghi & Shakya, 2018; Mollborn, 2010) that influence how they understand love in dating relationships. In this section, I start by highlighting how social norms in the rural context under study impacted some girls' constructions of love. I then highlight the impact of poverty on the girls' sense of reality, and I also foreground how individual girls' family circumstances and abandonment influenced them to make sense of reality. I also highlight the impact of changing social norms in spaces where the girls made sense of love. Finally, I focus on the socio-economic materialities and spaces within which the girls constructed their perceptions of love.

7.2.5.1 The Influence of Oppressive Social Norms on Rural Schoolgirls' Constructions of Love: Hegemonic masculinities that are enforced in rural contexts influence girls to subscribe to emphasised femininities that inform their submission to men, thereby impacting how they construct love in dating relationships. Research has recorded that rurality entrenches women's and girls' subordination in relationships, including dating relationships (Moletsane & Ntombela, 2010). This was also revealed in the girls' narratives in the current study, as evidenced by what one girl wrote to her imaginary friend:

> *Love is not about age. They don't realise that when you love a partner of the same age, it is hard because you do not respect each other. In that relationship, you fight all the time, which is bad.*

The above assertion suggests that this girl had been socialised to believe that a man must have authority in the relationship; hence, she was prone to submit to the advances of an older man. This girl's viewpoint is corroborated by Leclerc-Madlala (2008), who posits that it is a norm for younger women to be in relationships with or even to marry older men in the belief that a man who "is older than the girl [is] in a better position to assert authority in the home" (S 22). Traditional rural communities' gendered roles view men as the authoritative figures and decision-makers, while women are expected to be submissive to men within their households and in society (Shefer et al., 2008). The above finding thus aligns with previous research that states that "when interacting in and conceptualizing their romantic relationships, adolescents largely conform to romantic scripts that are traditional, such as those adhering to traditional gender roles" (Furphy, 2012, p. 37).

7.2.5.2 The Influence of Poverty on Schoolgirls' Constructions of Love: The participants in this study constructed love under the influence of the views and practices of the rural communities in which they

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lived. It is pertinent to highlight the economic contexts within which the participants made sense of love. As poverty is always associated with rurality, it ultimately seemed to impact some girls' construction of love as money. The literature that I reviewed (Dhlodhlo, 2010; Mandeni Municipality, 2020) about the area surrounding the study site presented a worrying picture of the economic standing of the community from which the current study's participants were selected. This community experiences rife socio-economic circumstances such as high unemployment and poverty rates, a low life expectancy, a lack of basic infrastructural facilities, high crime rates, and high illiteracy and innumeracy rates. The following extract from a girl's letter concurs with how the literature describes the socio-economic conditions in the area where the participants of this study lived:

> *There are a lot of things that need to be changed in my community. If I were the councillor, the first thing I would do is build houses for every poor person, provide food parcels, provide water taps in each home, build roads, provide clothes for poor families, provide electricity, and put pressure on children to go to school so that they can have a bright future.*

During my visits to the school, it was apparent that the high unemployment rate in the area surrounding Jeqeza village contributed to poverty. A Mandeni Municipality (2020) report states that most of the community members experience food insecurity and malnutrition. In affirmation of the prevalence of poverty in the community, one girl's letter revealed the following:

> *My school is supported by the municipality and the Education Department. We eat free food and learn with free books from the Department.*

The feeding scheme referred to above is the National School Nutrition Programme that was introduced by the South African Department of Education in 2004 to ensure that learners in the poorest schools get nutritious meals (Department of Basic Education, 2010). "If it was not for this program, most learners from poor families would be going to school on empty stomachs, which would make learning very difficult for them" (Dube, 2016, p. 119). Poverty has been found to influence how girls think about love in dating relationships. For instance, Milligan (2014) reported that poverty contributed to the perception of love as money. She attributed this to the fact that poor rural girls sometimes interpret the provision of material resources by men as love, and such girls are easily coerced to exchange sex for such basic necessities such as food and clothes. Pattman (2005) and Bhana and Pattman (2011) agree that, due to poverty, young girls are attracted to older men who offer gifts and money in exchange for sexual favours. Research has also revealed that poor parents are often powerless against the magnetism of sugar daddies. For instance, a young woman stated: "Parents…don't give their children money. These children look for people who can give them money and these people have sex with them and pay for it. The majority of us like cell phones

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and if someone says that I must have sex with him [and he] will give me a cell phone, I will simply have sex to get the phone (Jones, 2006, p. 154).

Some girls who participated in the current study also embraced provider love, which was evident in the following narratives regarding their collages and in their letters:

> *If I had powers, I would change the way my home is and make it what I wish it to be. I know I will change it by God's will and by my dreams and wishes. I can see that even my parents have hopes that I will change the situation in our home. I even wish to change the kind of food we eat at home. I am dreaming of a time when I will be staying in my house with my own family. I see my mom eating everything she wishes for.*
>
> *I dream of myself being successful in life. I know where I come from, and I dream of myself being able to take care of my family's needs. When I get older, I want my parents to be proud of me. I want to have a bright future. I wish to change the situation in my home so that we get out of poverty so that we can have food every day. At home, we are not good because of financial problems. I am very poor, and I want to change that. I want them to enjoy good food and have everything they need on this earth. I also wish that my parents could stop relying on the government child support grant.*
>
> *I don't love the houses that are at home. I stay in them because I do not have a choice. I wish I could remove all of them and build new ones. Sometimes, I even sit and wish I could win a jackpot or the Lotto that is advertised on TV so that I could change the situation at home. Love is the key to success. My collage shows a couple that is in love. They eat delicious food. She is really loved because she is always smiling. She is always carrying gifts. She gets everything she wants. That is why I say this girl is really loved as we see in my collage. I also wish to have this relationship.*

Mandeni Municipality (2020) reports that the majority of community members "cannot read and write and are not numerate" (p. 18), and this jeopardises their eligibility for employment. Consequently, due to extreme poverty and unemployment, some girls' collages contained pictures of foodstuffs like yogurt, juice, and cake, which they considered a token of love gifted to them by the provider. It was therefore very clear that the provider notion of love was embraced by several girls in the study.

My field notes revealed that every time I went to the school for data generation, I noted the evidence of rife

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poverty among the learner population, particularly during lunch sessions. Some students who attended Saturday classes and who did not participate in the study would look through the room's windows and ask for food. I also took pictures at random as I believed it was important to have evidence of the data generation sessions. To my surprise, when I analysed these pictures later, I was shocked by what they revealed about the refreshments that I had supplied for the participants. Much of the food they were supposed to enjoy was hidden under desks or stowed away in jackets or bags. This confirmed the point advanced by Mitchell (2011) that photos tend to reveal much about the research site of a study. These photos elicited my understanding of the snack shortages experienced during the sessions I would otherwise not have understood (see Appendix JJ). The girls took the food home to share with their families, and I realised that the poverty situation in the area was worse than I had imagined. A field note that I recorded on Saturday, 15 May 2021 after a data generation session affirmed the sad reality of dire poverty and unemployment in a particular participant's family. I wrote:

Another fruitful but hectic session with the girls

What a session with the girls!

***Poverty prevails**. I was called by a participant's mother who extended her gratitude for the feast they had enjoyed as a family. She stated:*

"Thank you so much for so much food my girl has brought us. We are all full now! Even last week, she brought us some food. Are you subsidised by the government to supply food for the girls? Are you getting paid for the research you are doing? I am so desperate for a job. I am working at a crèche. Life is so hard. Please tell me if you hear of anything." This call suggests this girl took food home to share with the family.

While I welcomed the compliment, I remembered that an inexplicable shortage [of food] was experienced today. Only then, I had the answer to what had bugged me during lunchtime, since I always prepared more than enough food for the girls.

(My journal entry – 15 May 2021)

The pictures in Appendix JJ as well as the above field note completed a puzzle that helped me obtain a real sense of the poverty in which the girls lived, and I then better understood why so many viewed love as material care.

7.2.5.3 The Influence of Family Circumstances and Abandonment on the Schoolgirls' Constructions

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of Love: By analysing the context within which the girls navigated their dating relationships, I learnt that their family backgrounds and circumstances influenced their notions of love. This was evident in the letters the girls wrote to their penpals about their stories as members of families who had been abandoned by their fathers. The following excerpts exemplify their emotions in such an event:

> *I am very sad because of the things that are happening in my home. My father does not love my mom anymore. He is also not taking care of us. He does not visit us. He only came last week Friday. It was the first time in many years he was here last. His visit was not even a good one, because he came to demand that we go and live with him at Nquthu, only because the woman he was living with had died. He is doing this because he wants to humiliate our mom. He has always been abusing mom from the time we were small.*

> *Well, about my dad, he is not dead, but from 2016 he separated from mom; they divorced. My dad is not there in our lives. He occasionally gives money to us, but the person who really takes care of us is Mom. Although he does not have a new family, my father is renting the place where he lives and is in love with any woman at any moment. He keeps separating from one woman and getting involved with another. We are very poor. My mom works hard just to take care of us. If I were in control, I would change my home situation. I would make a better and more classy lifestyle for us.*

Earlier studies also found that "men don't look after [their] children if they don't live with them" (Willan et al., 2019, p. 1234), which seemed to be the norm. Ferriani et al. (2019) argue that the lack of fatherly attention and care pushes adolescent girls to seek and find affection from their boyfriends. For instance, a participant in a previous study stated: "…my father does not pay attention to me; my mother is that person who is not even here. My boyfriend talks to me [and when] I come [home] from school, [it is] he who sees my notebook and asks how my day was (Ferriani et al., 2019, p. 6).

It was also evident in the narratives of this study's participants who had been abandoned by their fathers to be influenced to embrace the notions of love as material care and love as being cherished, belonging, and emotional well-being. For instance, two girls offered the following comments:

> *I love my boyfriend so much 'coz he's taking care of me. He means everything to me. That guy is the love of my life. He means the world to me. I just don't know what life could mean without him. He supports me with everything else.*

> *I used to love that guy, Senzo. He bought me a beautiful umbrella dress. He gave me this dress as a*

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gift and a sign of his love and appreciation. I have had this dress for four years. It has been really special, and it is still special to me.

Having been abandoned by their fathers, some girls' circumstances appeared to dictate their understandings of love. The collages (see Chapter Five) these girls made to portray a girl that is loved contained images of delicious treats such as cake, yogurt, and many other delicacies. One of the remarks about a collage was: *"The gifts she gets can tell that she is loved".*

The same girl also expressed her dream of a man who provided food and took her out to restaurants. This finding is in line with the narrative inquiry's tenet of sociality, which emphasises that the researcher should give attention to participants' "personal and unfolding existential events" (Caine et al., 2017, p. 216). This implies giving attention to the time and place where the experiences in question were lived (Barker, 2012). However, the picture was less than positive for these girls. Rife socio-economic challenges and poverty in Jeqeza village, the area where the research site was located, had prompted the municipality to report that the majority of community members experienced "declining life expectancy [and] an increase in sickness and deaths related to preventable diseases" (Mandeni Municipality, 2020, p. 18). It was affirmed by this study that abandonment by either mother or father, and sometimes by both, caused children to live and try to survive in child-headed households. This ultimately caused some girls to embrace the provider notion of love, which subjected them to sugar daddies who provided for them and satisfied their materialistic needs.

In another tragic case, an orphaned participant wrote the following:

To make my dream a reality, I will finish school and pass with flying colours; get bursaries to get an education because my parents died a long time ago.

Due to her circumstances, this participant was a captive in a love relationship with an older man. She believed that this was the best outcome for her and stated this as follows:

Love has no age. Msah, my new love, has made me forget about my home and go stay with him. He came with a change in my life. He is all I need in a man in the world. They say a lot of things about him. They say he is older than me. Love is not about age. Whatever they say, I take it like I don't hear them. Ey! Msah takes me out for dining at hotels. He also takes me out to the park. We are very happy. I get things I did not get when I was staying at home. He makes me feel like the girl that is shown in my collage. This girl is loved because, on Valentine's Day, her boyfriend takes her to a romantic restaurant. They eat delicious food. They go to different places. They play games.

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The impact of this girl's situation on how she constructed love was expressed by her collage in which pictures of food and delicacies abounded. This revealed that her orphaned state had caused her to embrace provider love.

Kang et al. (2017) acknowledge that "there is a multiplicity of family forms … throughout the world" (p. 64); therefore, rather than assuming that the 23 participants were all constructing the phenomenon of love in dating relationships under the care of a traditional common family structure with two parents and/or grandparents would be erroneous. It was therefore crucial to recognise that some girls were from single-parent families, some from extended families, and some from child-headed families. These different settings impacted how these respective girls constructed love in their dating relationships. For instance, while some had to navigate oppressive family conditions where members ill-treated them due to boys' privileged position, an orphaned girl faced the challenge of being in charge of a child-headed family where she was confronted with a myriad of adversities. She had to deal with the abuse that emanated from her orphaned situation, and therefore she depended on someone older for her (and possibly her siblings') survival. The findings thus suggest that a girl who grows up in a common family structure with parents who are taking care of their children could construct love as companionship, while a girl who is in charge of a child-headed family may be pushed to embrace the provider notion of love in a dating relationship.

7.2.5.4 Influence of Changing Norms on the Schoolgirls' Constructions of Love: As the social construction of reality occurs within changing institutions, what a particular phenomenon means at one point or place in history might mean something else at another point, time, and place (Kang et al., 2017). For example, due to changes within societies, what was considered taboo years ago, might not be viewed in the same light today. For example, in African rural communities it has always been taboo to move in with a boyfriend without the payment of *ilobolo* (Karandashev, 2015). However, in this study it emerged that parents and other adult relatives accepted what had been unthinkable in the past:

> *I had lived with him and his family for two days before my brother and father came and took me away from them forcefully. At the end of the day, they agreed for us to continue seeing each other, but we would have to wait until they paid my family ilobolo for me to start living with them. One morning at home, my dad's brother discovered that my boyfriend had slept there. Funny enough, he also had a girlfriend at home, yet he is married. And he asked me not to tell anyone about his secret.My boyfriend slept at my home three times, and my mom caught him in the fourth instance.*

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Luckily, he is very lovely, good-looking, and very respectful. My mom accepted him, and he did not leave but slept for three more days.

The extent to which the participants admitted to their imaginary friends that they were looking forward to moving in with their boyfriends affirmed that the traditional 'rules' according to which girls had constructed love no longer held true for these modern young girls. In a number of instances the participants had moved in and were living with their boyfriends regardless of their young age and unmarried status. For instance:

I have taken a crucial decision to move in with my boyfriend. I have decided to do this because I love him a lot. You just start by visiting him on weekends. Then the next thing you decide to just be with him full time just because you are in love.

My complicated journey started when I told my mother, father, and big brother that I am thinking about staying at my boyfriend's house with him.

The fact that the girl had the courage to tell her parents and her brother that she was moving in with her boyfriend suggests that this practice had become the norm in her society.

7.2.5.5 The Influence of Assemblages and Materialities on Rural Schoolgirls' Constructions of Love:

In corroboration of a study by Janak et al. (2022, p. 79) that found that "girls' experience[s] of sexual violence [within] the surrounding materialities at play" had become common, there is evidence that Jeqeza village and Mandeni are generally characterised by "limited to no facilities or infrastructural services" (Mandeni Municipality, 2020, p. 7). A lack of basic infrastructural facilities normally propels the youth to frequent taverns that are the only places of entertainment in their neighbourhood. However, a matter of serious concern is that there appears to be unregulated access to these taverns where alcohol is freely consumed by under-age children. This was evident in the following narratives that emerged from the letters written to penfriends:

I met Mazwi in a nearby tavern because my grandmother does allow us kids to go there. In this tavern, anybody is allowed to buy alcohol. In my community, we have a show where local artists compete when they perform their dancing or singing. This show is usually in small local taverns. It always happens at night from 6 pm until 6 am. Then everyone dances and enjoys it. Alcohol is also allowed.

I have three friends. We do things together. In my community, there is this place we call "Kwadlul

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Jeqeze". We mostly like to go and have fun there. We even braai meat and have a few drinks there. There are DJs there and we dance. I like to go partying a lot. I wish I could change my bad behaviour towards my parents because it affects most of my life. I don't want to live with that for the rest of my life, knowing that my parents are not happy about my bad behaviour. So, I also like to change that so that my parents can be proud of me one day.

Every Friday at KwaBusane tavern there is a dance competition that consists of all types of drunkards. Even small children escape from their homes just to have fun. What is not good is that others have small babies, and they go with them to drink alcohol.

The above excerpts suggest that schoolgirls have easy access to taverns where they meet men and spend time with their boyfriends. This also explains why some participants dreamed of "drinking champagne" as one of the activities lovers share. Taverns and shebeens are highlighted as major informal economic enterprises by Mandeni Municipality (2020). Due to a lack of other entertainment facilities such as sports fields, youths (boys and girls) tend to participate in risky ventures in these spaces, as described below:

In my community, my peers formed a group of dancers. This group dances at parties or anywhere. Sometimes they plan a trip to Durban. So, they buy drugs and alcohol and say that girls will not pay for the trip, they go for free, but boys do not go for free. What is bad is that other girls go without their parents' permission just because they want free alcohol.

The above excerpt indicates that the girls embraced the provider notion of love as they enjoyed free trips and free alcohol. The above narrative aligns with the emphasis Janak et al. (2022) place on considering assemblages in studies of girls' lived experiences. This means giving attention to materialities such as spaces where these young people make meaning of love in dating relationships. These assemblages somehow contributed to the creation of the provider notion of love by some girls who participated in the current study. This finding shows how important it is to attend "to the surrounding materialities at play" that Janak et al. (2022, p. 79) refer to. These materialities revealed that the girls' constructions of love were a "constellation of human and more-than-human elements co-existing in an affective relationship" (Janak et al., 2022, p. 79).

7.2.6 Gender Inequality as a Factor in Rural Schoolgirls' Constructions of Love

Due to the social gender order that influences institutional gender regimes, girls experience oppression that

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starts at family level where it is institutionalised by their parents' and other family members' expectations regarding their decisions on dating matters (Furphy, 2012). The 23 participants in the current study were no exception to these societal dichotomies as their narratives revealed negative experiences associated with their girlhood and their constructions of love in dating relationships. Due to being subjected to an African gender ideology that "shapes different lives for men and women by placing them in different social positions" (Hussein, 2005, p. 60), one participant wrote:

> *I and my family are good and sometimes not good. My grandparents are so strict. No one is allowed to go outside to play. They always say: "If you go out, you are not going out to play, but you are out for men, and you are going to fall pregnant, and we will throw you out." What I don't like at home is that they don't treat us the same. Boys are given better treatment. They do not do any home chores. It is my grandmother that shows preferential treatment among us children.*

The unequal gender norms expressed in the above vignette are not uncommon in rural southern African communities (Mabala & Kamazima, 1995; Milligan, 2014; Zondi, 2010). Gender stereotypes are instilled by "parental definitions of acceptable behavior [sic]" (Carter, 2014, p. 244). Hence, parents set "different rules and sanctions and expectations from boys and girls" (Amin et al., 2018, p. 4). The above referenced patriarchal order that perpetuates better treatment of boys over girls influenced how the participants understood love, as described in the following excerpt:

> *I don't have a friend. My friend is my phone. I spend time on my phone. When I am on my phone, I am able to think. My boyfriend is one person who makes me feel free when I am with. If I have any problem, he is able to help me and calm me down. I am so much in love that I wish to move in with my boyfriend because I love him so much. He always reminds me that he loves me alone and our love is so important to him.*

It seems unfortunate that girls are treated badly by siblings who are better placed, particularly because they are boys and occupy a better social position than girls in the household and in society. This was the experience of a girl as she described it in the following excerpt:

> *Then there is my big brother… And then there is this protective side of his. It is sometimes nice to have it and also annoying. And then the dad's side and he will sometimes scold me just like a father would do.*

Where inequality exists, the person of the devalued gender has less power than the one with the valued

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gender (Lorber, 1994). The social order, which is the product of social construction of gender (Lorber, 1994), ultimately influences individuals' sense of reality (Galbin, 2014). Even the taken-for-granted issues that might appear to have nothing to do with love actually impact how girls view this phenomenon. For instance, consider what Agrawal (2008) advances on "the differences, inequalities and the division of labor [sic] between men and women" (p. 1). This scholar contends that these issues are treated as consequences of 'natural' differences between men and women. This ultimately informs common understandings of expectations associated with men and women. As a result, some discourses of love that emerged from the girls' narratives appeared to be influenced by this common-sense view of reality that prevailed in their society. For example, some girls seemed to be tempted to embrace the provider notion of love influenced by the ideology of the social division of labour, which advances the notion that men are natural providers in dating relationships and in their families. In this context, this is how a participant described her dream husband:

> *I also wish to have this relationship. I also see myself as a very happily married woman with two children, a boy and a girl with their father working as a businessman providing for his family*.

History has affirmed that, globally, Black women and girls have always been in "the most vulnerable position when it comes to economic exploitation compared to other groups" (Collins, 2000, p. 74). This was affirmed by the study as one participant wrote the following about her mom's experiences at work:

> *I wish I could make my dreams come true and change my background. I wish I could change the way my family lives so that I change the situation back at home. I wish I could make my family live better. I want them to have a good life so that my mother will never work for Chinese people ever because I will be supporting them with food and money. I am not happy with my mum working for the Chinese, because she gets very little pay for the work she does. I will make sure that my family never suffers again and that they live a good life.*

Given that girls are socialised and encultured by older women who have been influenced by emphasised femininities, the participants' narratives portrayed the prevalence of some emphasised femininities within which they made sense of love in dating relationships. Femininities that emerged from the girls' narratives included sexual purity, marriage, fertility, respectfulness, perseverance, and good manners, which are qualities that other scholars also mention (Hunter, 2010; Jewkes & Morrell, 2012; Shabane, 2011; Shai, 2018). It is noteworthy that these femininities are buttressed by other (older) women. For instance, a participant wrote about the femininity of sexual purity or sexual passivity, implying that virginity was extremely important to her, as was discussed by Shabane (2011) in an earlier study. The girl in the current

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study stated:

> *If you are no longer a virgin, for instance, you are not allowed to participate in the traditional dance. Girls in the area gossip about one another. The old[er] women too are judging. This happens mostly if you do not have an interest in going to the Reed Dance or when you are no longer interested in participating in it, they gossip about you.*

7.2.7 The Influence of Gender-based Violence on Rural Schoolgirls' Constructions of Love

The prevailing gender order and gender regimes that impact the construction of reality include gendered violence (Walby, 2020). As the victims of gendered oppression, girls are bound to conform to long-established social gender stereotypes as deviation from the social norm invites exclusion and other forms of sanctions that are violent in nature (Eagly & Wood, 2012). For instance, as discussed earlier, the heterosexual normative view of love, which is perpetuated by the agents of socialisation, subjugates girls to GBV. This is reflected in the following extract from a girl's letter:

> *My grandparents are so strict. No one is allowed to go outside to play. They always say: "If you go out, you are not going out to play, but you are out for men, and you are going to fall pregnant, and we will throw you out."*

This narrative highlights the manner in which girls are often passively subjected to gender-based violence as they are denied the right to play and mingle with other children because their elders fear their attraction to males. This situation infringes on girls' fundamental rights as it denies them freedom of movement, association, and the ability to enjoy childhood. The threat of abandonment if a girl falls pregnant is also a form of violence against them as boys who are complicit in any pregnancy are not equally affected by the situation. It was interesting to note that the outcome of the 'domestic imprisonment' experienced by the girl was that she turned to her phone for friendship, as she wrote:

> *I don't have a friend. My friend is my phone. I spend time on my phone. When I am on my phone, I am able to think.*

However, attachment to cellular phones and their easily accessible applications exposes young people to the risk of another form of violence, which is cyberbullying. The girls' narratives also revealed a form of violence that aimed to control their bodies (Brown et al., 2009). A participant wrote the following to her penfriend:

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I dislike social events like umemulo, umhlonyane, umkhehlo and umgonqo. I dislike these events because they are traditional events and I'm not a big fan of traditions. I don't like them because they are too controlling and silly. Oh! The hate I have for traditional stuff and their silly rituals! I hate them because they are discriminating. If you are no longer a virgin, for instance, you are not allowed to participate in the traditional dance. Girls in the area gossip about one another. The old women too are judging. This happens mostly if you do not have an interest in going to the Reed Dance or when you are no longer interested in participating in it, they gossip about you.

The above experience suggests that if girls defy one violent regime, they are subjected to another. This occurs in a vicious cycle. For instance, in the case of the girl above, her refusal to be subjected to sexual passivity resulted in her exclusion from other social events as she was not allowed to participate in a traditional dance. Moreover, she was also exposed to emotional abuse as older women and people gossiped about her. Similar emotional violence was experienced by another girl who participated in the current study:

In 2018, when I was doing grade 10, I had bad luck at the end of the year as I got pregnant. The following year, I didn't go back to school. I decided to drop out. I thought other schoolmates were gossiping about me. I stayed at home until I delivered my child.

It was shocking to note that the narratives of the participants revealed subjugation to and even tolerance of intimate partner violence. One girl stated in a letter:

My new boyfriend is short-tempered. He gets irritated very fast when I have done anything that is wrong. Before any action, I always wonder if it is not going to make him angry. If it happens that he gets annoyed when we are together, he leaves me because he can't even speak. Even if he can stay, it does not help because he will be silent one way. Although he is that short-tempered, I still love him so much. I wish we could get married because he loves me. He also hopes that we will get married.

Over and above the demeaning forms of violence that impacted the girls' constructions of love, high levels of drug and substance abuse in Jeqeza village (Mandeni Municipality, 2020) also exposed the girls to horrific violent situations as they were exposed to the risk of social ills such as rape. The village has a very high crime rate, to the extent that safety and security are among the municipality's main concerns (Mandeni Municipality, 2020). The following vignettes that were extracted from the letters to penfriends and follow-up interview transcripts illustrated the horrifying degree of GBV the schoolgirls who participated in this

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study were exposed:

> *In my community, there are always events. In these events community members get drunk. When they are drunk, people end up fighting and stabbing each other, while some beat up their girlfriends. Some of them even kill others.*
>
> *Some scandals happen when we are at ceremonies. What kills my heart when we are in these ceremonies, is that people get drunk and lose self-control. Then we see all the scandals, such as people grabbing girls and talking to them by force. Some rape girls. There are lots and lots of rape cases in my area and that is a bad thing. Men are responsible for this because they lack self-respect, and they blame young girls for wearing short things.*
>
> *I don't like taverns because when some people drink too much, they fight and kill each other, and there are no security guards there. There is too much GBV in my area. They kill and rape women and children. Sometimes women are killed brutally. Children are also raped in daylight. What is even worse is that some of these children are raped by their family members. In my area, some people steal and also rape small children. And what they do to the kids is really bad. Even in my home, there is someone who once got raped.*
>
> *Women are raped daily, slaughtered like animals, and left on the street or in some sort of bushes, dead. What I don't like about the community events is that they take place very late. This leaves women with no choice but to walk in the dark just because they want to make themselves happy, but [they] end up being harmfully raped and brutally murdered. Some men are happy to see a woman suffering. Every Saturday we find dead girls and the rate is high now, but justice is unavailable since there are no prime suspects.*
>
> *A group of boys who are dancing always host the event. The same group of boys also causes GBV because they invite some girls to come to an event. They give them alcohol and drug them. When they have drugged the girls, they do stupid things like raping them. Because of this, [some] girls end up committing suicide.*

The above narratives collectively suggest that girls living in the community are subjected to controlling power relations (Kinnunen, 2022; Willan et al., 2019) as they are subjected to men who dictate how they

should dress. In fact, girls are blamed for encouraging men to rape them if they wear revealing clothes. Previous research has revealed similar experiences of young women who lacked agency over their bodies against "predatory men", to the extent that girls are not free to walk the streets alone (Kinnunen, 2022, p. 52).

The extent to which the girls who participated in the current study were exposed to violence in their community appeared to normalise the scourge of GBV. Research has recorded that "poor young people are routinely exposed to violence and crime in the family, in schools, and in their immediate environment, so much so that they have come to think of it as normal and have internalized the social norms surrounding violence" (Mkhwanazi, 2011, p. 6). In the current study, it was evident that the exposure of girls to the normalisation of GBV influenced their constructions of love in romantic relationships. In one letter to a friend, it was suggested that girls' exposure to GBV was so rife and normalised that rape was sometimes not reported:

> *The parents are not at rest due to the rate at which their girls, mostly those who are in school, are getting pregnant in their teens. They are even complaining about their children who are experiencing some kind of pressure like they have someone who rapes them, and they get pregnant. Now the kids will not say [that they were raped] because the other kids are also in competition for pregnancy.*

According to this participant's assertion, there appeared to be an interplay of forces between GBV and 'childbearing as an expression of love'. Research has established that girls sometimes deliberately fall pregnant "to fulfil the need [to] keep a boyfriend or to have someone [a child] who will love them" (Mkhwanazi, 2011, p. 5). Based on the evidence that the current study presented, it may be concluded that the normalisation of crime somehow impacts girls' constructions of love in dating relationships. The normalisation of crime was also affirmed by a participant who made this statement: *"The [rates of] GBV in my area are very high. People/men in my area take GBV as if it is a trend".*

Past research has revealed that reiterated oppressive sexual advances by men over girls and women have been so normalised that "women are led to believe that men assaulting women is an unchangeable condition" (Kinnunen, 2022, p. 42).

7.3 Discussion

In this Chapter, I presented the second step of thematic analysis which enabled me to address the second research question which explores the *factors that influence rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in*

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dating relationships. The findings indicate that the girls' understandings of love are influenced by, among others: (1) agents of socialisation; (2) messages imparted through language; (3) social practices; (4) culture; (5) context; (6) gender inequalities; and (7) gender-based violence. The findings resonate with those of previous studies to some degree. For instance, a decade ago, Furphy (2012) reported that "the beliefs and behaviours of young people are influenced and shaped by cultural, ethnic, historic, economic, familial, social, and environmental factors that define appropriate behavior [sic] and inform expectations for relationships" (p. 37). The findings also resonate with Van Eck's (2015) study. While Van Eck's study focused on White adolescent girls attending a private school, the current study focused on African girls in a rural school setting. Yet, both studies affirm that parents and peers are key agents of socialisation.

The impact of historical specificity and how it guided people to make sense of reality also emerged as a factor. However, the evidence suggests that the evolution of rural cultural traditions has led to some adults to succumb to young girls' terms that were in contradiction to their normative beliefs and culture. For instance one of the letters noted:

> *boyfriend slept at my home three times, and my mom caught him the fourth time. Luckily, he is very lovely, good-looking, and very respectful. My mom accepted him, and he did not leave but slept [there] for three more days.*

A similar deal was struck by a girl and her dad's brother (her uncle):

> *One morning at home, my dad's brother discovered that my boyfriend had slept there. Funny enough, he also had a girlfriend at home, yet he is married. And he asked me not to tell anyone about his secret.*

Normally, adult relatives adhere to cultural traditions, but it was different in this case. Instead of admonishing the young girl for her transgression of a cultural tradition, the older man affirmed it due to his own guilt of infidelity.

Also, when I reflected on the factors that influenced the girls' constructions of love, I noted that time in history tended to impact one's sense of reality. For instance, I realised that, in as much as I shared a rural background and context with the girls, some factors that influenced the girls' constructions of love were foreign or different when I was their age. Four decades ago, access to media and social media platforms that are highly accessible to young people today through their cell phones was not even a consideration in the rural environment where I grew up. The same applies to assemblages such as taverns and shebeens that

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girls are now exposed to.

The above and many more reflections made me enjoy the data analysis process as I was interacting with the girls' stories. One idea that emerged was that the generation gap appeared to have a bearing on the girls' understandings of love against the social norms at their disposal. This awareness took me back to the tenets of narrative inquiry that highlight sociality, place, and temporality. In consideration of the fact that social norms are not necessarily static, I became aware of the historical perspective against which I studied the participants. This means that I paid attention to the time and place where the experiences in question were lived (Barker, 2012). Hence, the impact of social norms clearly differed depending on the time and place of the individuals' histories. As highlighted by Harrison (2008), this meant paying attention to the impact of the generational differences between the young girls and their parents.

The impact of context on how the girls made sense of reality was also noted. Apart from the general rural context they all shared, I noted the importance of acknowledging the context within which the individual girls had learnt to navigate their socio-economic circumstances as they made sense of love. As I explored the multiple relations of power that were at play as the girls constructed their understanding of love, I noticed the complexity of their lives as they were subjected to inequalities due to gender order, gender regimes, as well as their low social position as children. These findings align with those of researchers like Wiebesiek (2021) who argues that opportunities and choices for girls "are constrained and limited by gendered inequality, [and] are further constrained by its intersection with other forms of inequality" (p. 68).

In the next chapter, I present the third and last step of my thematic analysis.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

RURAL SCHOOLGIRLS' VULNERABILITY TO GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

8.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes the three-phase process of data analysis that is presented in this thesis. First, I draw on the data I had generated from the 23 participants' letters, collages, and artefacts and that I had reconstructed as their stories of love in dating relationships. In Chapter Five, the re-storied accounts of the 23 participants laid the foundation for the three-step thematic analysis I conducted to address the research questions. Chapter Six addressed the first research question: *How do rural schoolgirls understand love in dating relationships?* Using thematic analysis, this chapter was aligned with the conceptual framework (see Chapter Two, Figure 2. 5) and I was able to identify six discourses of love that emerged from the girls' narratives: (1) love as a beautiful feeling; (2) love as material care; (3) love as being cherished, belonging and emotional well-being; (4) love as loyalty and jealousy; (5) love as virginity; and (6) love as sex and childbearing.

In Chapter Seven, I presented the data and findings related to the second step of thematic analysis which enabled me to respond to the second research question: *What factors influence rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships?* Resonating with previous studies (for example, Furphy, 2012; Hussein, 2005; Shabane, 2011; Van Eck, 2015; Wiebesiek, 2021; and Zungu, 2016), the findings suggested that the girls' understandings of love had been influenced by: (1) agents of socialisation; (2) messages imparted through language; (3) social practices; (4) culture; (5) context; (6) gender inequalities; and (7) gender-based violence.

Available literature suggests that girls' understandings of love expose them to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unplanned/unwanted pregnancies, future dependence on men (as their dreams get shattered), and future abusive adult relationships. In this chapter, I address the question: *What is it about these girls' discourses of love that might render them vulnerable to gender-based violence and femicide as adolescents and even later in their adult relationships?* The chapter presents the third and final step of thematic analysis where I bring the theoretical framework and literature to this inquiry to re-visit the six discourses of love and the girls' potential vulnerability to GBV. In essence, I address the central research question: *How might rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships influence their*

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vulnerability to gender-based violence?

8.2 Rural Schoolgirls' Understandings of Love and Gender-Based Violence

Consistent with existing research, the findings from this study suggest that the participants' understandings of love may indeed expose them to GBV. In this section, I highlight the relationship between the six discourses of love and the girls' vulnerability to GBV.

8.2.1 Love as Virginity

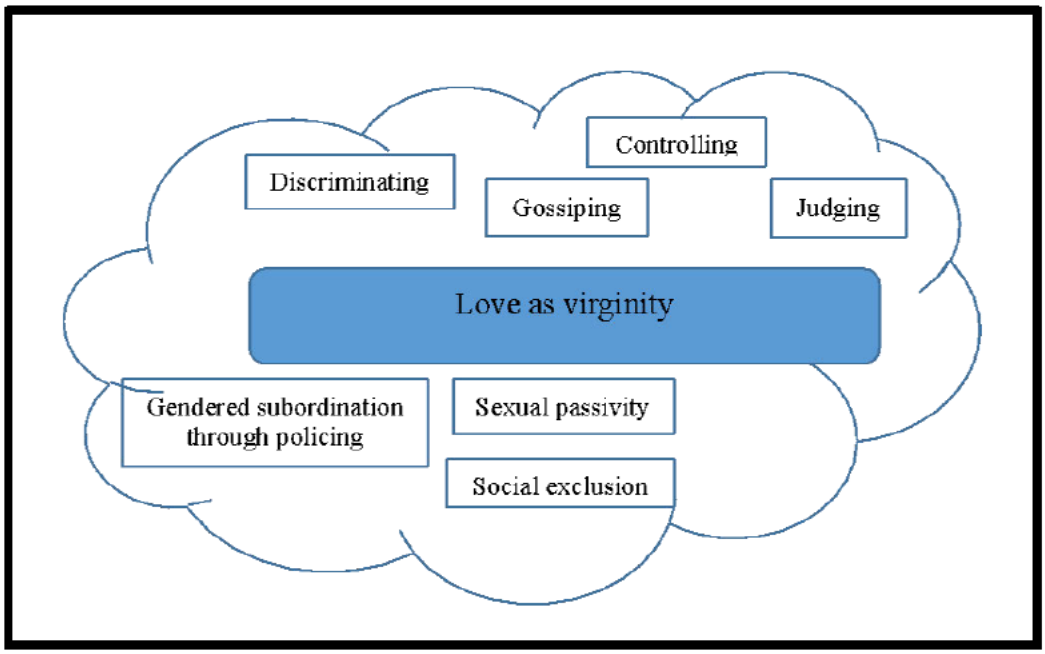
The participants' understanding of love as virginity exposed them to GBV, as evidenced by the vignette below:

> *I dislike social events like umemulo, umhlonyane, umkhehlo, and umgonqo. I dislike these events because they are traditional events and I'm not a big fan of traditions. I don't like them because they are too controlling and silly. Oh! The hate I have for traditional stuff and their silly rituals! I hate them because they are discriminating. If you are no longer a virgin, for instance, you are not allowed to participate in a traditional dance. Girls in the area gossip about one another. The old women too are judging. This happens mostly if you do not have an interest in going to the Reed Dance or when you are no longer interested in participating in it, they gossip about you.*

Due to dominant social and gender norms in a community, including those that promote notions of love as virginity, girls who oppose these may experience discrimination, exclusion, and even violence against them by their peers, partners, and various adults (Hearn et al., 2022). Similarly, the notion of love as purity may also subject girls to GBV. This may occur due to practices such as virginity testing that invades the personal privacy of a girl and reinforces gender subordination (De Robillard, 2009; Parla, 2001; Leclerc-Madlala, 2001). This practice asserts that girls and unmarried women "must distance themselves from girlfriend-boyfriend relationships" (Bhana, 2018, p. 84) and stay 'pure' until marriage. Ultimately, this regulates and polices young women's sexuality (Mkhwanazi, 2011), while "male virginity remains un-interrogated" (Bhana, 2018, p. 80). Figure 8.1 summarises the intersections among understandings of love as virginity and girls' vulnerability to GBV.

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Figure 8. 1: ***How Love as Virginity Could Expose Rural Schoolgirls to GBV***



8.2.2 Love as Sex and Childbearing

In a letter to a penfriend, one of the participants wrote: *"He broke my virginity and that made me love him more"*. This behaviour was in direct opposition to the notion of love as virginity, which showed that some participants embraced the idea of love as sex. Previous research has revealed that, when girls understand love as sex, they may be abused by boys or older men who use their 'love' and submission to satisfy their sexual urges and prove their masculinity, which have nothing in common with love. This is illustrated in a comment by a schoolboy in a previous study:

> Sometimes we enjoy doing sex because you just want to pump up your friend who also wanted that girl, but you want to show that you can get her first and we as guys, we do plan and pressure each other to have sex with the girls in the area; not that you love them, but to prove the point to your friends and we exchange turns with the same girl and she doesn't know we have planned it on her (Sathiparsad & Taylor, 2011, p. 78).

This quote confirms that the notion of love as sex exposes girls to "sexual objectification" (Sathiparsad & Taylor, 2011, p. 78), which is a form of GBV. Young boys even confessed that they felt "entitled to use women as objects for sexual pleasure" and as trophies to affirm their ability to make sexual conquests, and not for the slightest feeling of love (Sathiparsad & Taylor, 2011, p. 76).

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In this study, the notion of love as sex was often coupled with the notion of love as childbearing. Research has recorded a concern about early childbearing or adolescent pregnancy in South Africa, linking it to "adverse life outcomes for both the young mother and her child, [and] to [exposure of] young women's vulnerability to HIV infections and to gender-based violence" (Mkhwanazi, 2011, p. 5). Girls and young women often think that childbearing will make their male partners love them and prove their fertility to their future in-laws. The latter is because infertility among African women is accompanied by shaming and scorn by relatives or in-laws. This belief exposes girls/women to stress and subjugation. As a result, even if "a woman may not want to have a child she could not afford to raise, the strong meaning attached to children in her society may cause her to change her decision" (Hussein, 2005, p. 73).

In this study, the notion of love as sex and childbearing was pertinently illustrated in the excerpt below:

> *The parents are not at rest due to the rate at which their girls, mostly those who are in school, are getting pregnant in their teens. They are even complaining about their children who are experiencing some kind of pressure like they have someone who rapes them, and they get pregnant. Now the kids would not say because the other kids are also in competition for pregnancy.*

As the excerpt suggests, some girls' understanding of love as sex and childbearing tended to evoke competition for early pregnancy and childbearing among girls in the community where this study was conducted. This exposed the girls to several risks, such as vulnerability to STIs, as competing with others to see who would first fall pregnant meant having unprotected sex. This excerpt also shockingly suggests that girls who were raped (which was reportedly a severe and rife form of GBV in the community) did not report it, and even if the assault resulted in pregnancy, it was not exposed to the authorities. This lack of accountability encouraged the normalisation of GBV, including rape. This study thus corroborates the notion that "young people are routinely exposed to violence and crime in the family, in schools, and in their immediate environment, so much so that they have come to think of it as normal and have internalised the social norms surrounding violence" (Mkhwanazi, 2011, p. 6).

In addition to GBV, early pregnancy, and childbearing, the various discourses of love that emerged from the findings reported in this study also exposed girls and young women to STIs and HIV. One of the girls who was an orphan wrote in one of her letters:

> *In 2018, when I was doing grade 10, I got bad luck at the end of the year as I got pregnant. The following year, I didn't go back to school. I decided to drop out. I thought other schoolmates were*

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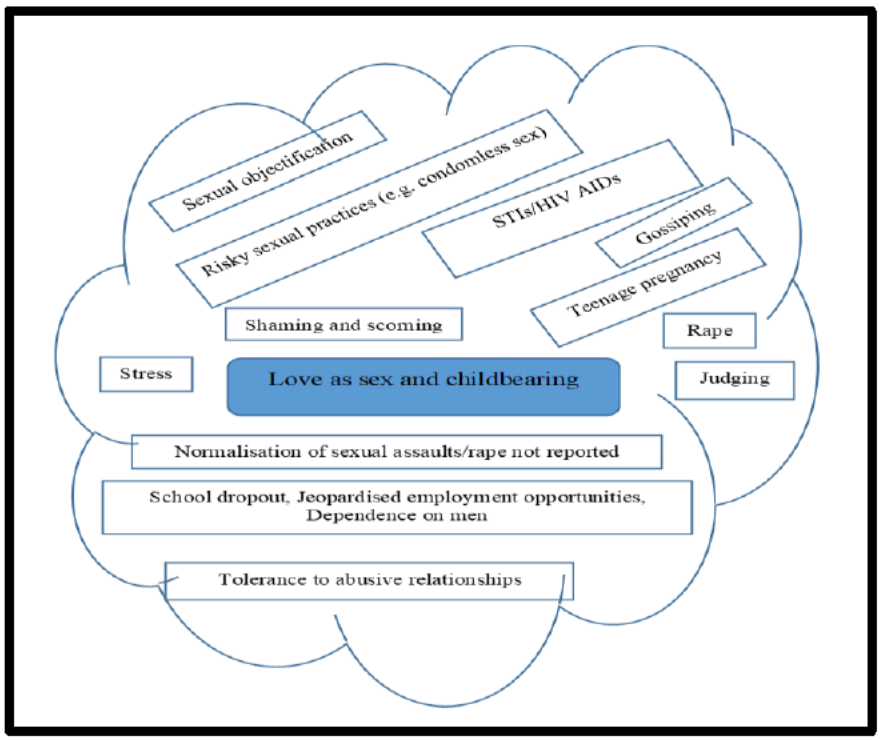
gossiping about me. I stayed at home until I delivered my child.

The harsh reality of the emotional violence that gossip about teenage pregnancy causes was clearly implied in the excerpt above. The fact that this girl's decision to drop out of school was based on her assumption that she had become the object of gossip and judgement (*"I thought…"*) indicates that her behaviour had been informed by the common stock of knowledge around this matter; i.e., that pregnancy and early childbearing at school should be blamed on the girl and not the male involved. Unfortunately, this blame may result in violence ranging from emotional violence and bullying to actual physical violence. The social constructionist theoretical framework asserts that one's view of reality is informed by the prevailing gender order and gender regimes.

Another risk faced by girls who experience teenage pregnancy as they view love as sex and childbearing means that they drop out of school untimely. This means that abusive men capitalise on girls' and women's dependence on them as they know that they have no choice but to stay in the relationship or will be alone in taking the responsibility for the child (Mannell et al., 2016). It is undeniable that dropping out of school jeopardises girls' employment opportunities, especially in contexts where unemployment is rife. Jewkes and Morrell (2012) state that a young woman admitted that her boyfriend was so cruel that if he did not like something, he would grab any dangerous tool and beat her. She further stated: "I do not like to stay here but I am just staying because he is taking responsibility for my schooling…and I also became pregnant. Things like that [happen, but] I want him to take care of me" (p. 1734). Figure 8.2 summarises the potential intersections among the notion of love as sex and childbearing and GBV against girls.

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Figure 8. 2: ***How Love as Sex and Childbearing Could Expose Rural Schoolgirls to GBV***



8.2.3 Love as Material Care

The findings revealed that some rural schoolgirls viewed love as money, and the literature reports that this notion of love exposes girls and women to danger. Leclerc-Madlala (2008) in particular notes that, as they exchange "sex for gifts or any service by men, women [and girls] are drawn or even lured into vulnerable situations, if not directly coerced or manipulated" (S23). Research has also found that, in relationships where girls constructed love in relation to access to money or other material resources, they tended to fall prey to older men (sugar daddies) who exploited them sexually (Bhana, 2018; Groes-Green, 2013). This notion of love was expressed in her collage by a participant who identified herself as an orphan:

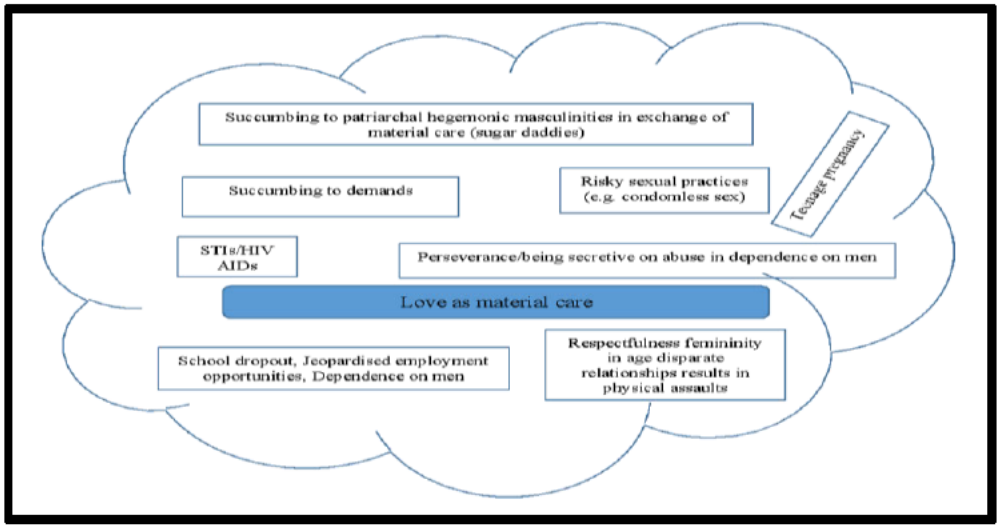
> *Love has no age. Msah, my new love, has made me forget about my home and go stay with him. He came with a change in my life. He is all I need in a man in the world. They say a lot of things about him. They say he is older than me. Love is not about age. They don't realise that when you love a partner of the same age, it is hard because you do not respect each other. In that relationship, you fight all the time, which is bad. Whatever they say, I take it like I don't hear them. Ey! Msah takes me out for dining at hotels. He also takes me out to the park. We are very happy. I get things I did not get when I was staying at home. He makes me feel like the girl that is shown in my collage. This girl is loved because, on Valentine's Day, her boyfriend takes her to a romantic restaurant. They*

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eat delicious food. They go to different places. They play games.

This participant's case demonstrated that girls who are influenced by patriarchal gender regimes (including the femininity of respectfulness) may tend to embrace the love as provider notion as they believe that an older man has the right to be in control of the relationship. Embracing the ideas of respect and respectability, such girls also acquiesce to men's demands for sex, including unprotected sex and in such relationships, GBV in the form of manipulation and control is normalised (Dako-Gyeke et al., 2019). Hence, men tend to "dominate and hold power over women" in such relationships (Monk, 2011, p. 126). This leads to unsafe sex and unplanned/unwanted pregnancy. Unable to tolerate the ensuing emotional violence caused by gossip, the targeted girl may ultimately drop out of school. With the added baggage of being a teenage mother, this leads to further dependence on the current or another older man. The above story is a clear illustration of many girls' concept of love without any understanding of their exposure to GBV. Similarly, the research notes that girls' endorsement of the provider notion of love tends to normalise and reinforce men's abusive behaviour and the GBV they inflict on girls and women (Bhana & Pattman, 2011), especially if they support them financially (Jewkes & Morrell, 2012). Figure 8.3 summarises the intersection between the notion of love as material care and GBV against girls.

Figure 8. 3: ***How Love as Material Care Could Expose Rural Schoolgirls to GBV***



8.2.4 Love as Being Cherished, Belonging, and Emotional Well-Being

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Each notion of love that was exposed by this study resulted in a cycle of violence. For instance, love as being cherished, belonging, and emotional well-being was closely related to love as marriage. When these notions were embraced, the girl was pressured to settle for an abusive partner in the pursuit of a socially acceptable image and "socioeconomic security and status" (Leclerc-Madlala, 2008, p. S 19). One participant stated:

> *My new boyfriend is short-tempered, but I still love him so much. I wish we could get married because he loves me. He also hopes that we will get married.*

As the literature suggests, this girl was at risk of harm due to her determination to retain her relationship with this short-tempered (hence abusive) boyfriend and her hope of marrying him. Research suggests that young people who associate romantic love with marriage tend to be susceptible to GBV (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021). This understanding of love puts girls at high risk in abusive relationships, particularly if there are children and it becomes difficult to leave or give up (Mannell et al., 2016). A related risk when love is linked to marriage is that a married woman is often sworn to a code of secrecy about her in-laws and family affairs, particularly her husband's. This means that she cannot report the violence she experiences as she is compelled by a code that demands her silence and loyalty at all costs (Dako-Gyeke et al., 2019; Mannell et al., 2016). Considering the high rates of GBV and femicide in South Africa, particularly in rural communities (Deane, 2024), girls' and young women's obsession with marriage and the payment of a bride price as expressions of love exposes them to oppression. The latter practice is "criticised for perpetuating the notion that men 'own' women and therefore have authority over them" (Stern & Heise, 2019, p. 869). Similarly, the girls in this study stated that once the bride price had been paid, they could move in and live with the boyfriend and his family. For example, one participant explained why she would not move in with her boyfriend: *"He has not paid any bride price for me. So, this is just bad, I can never do it".* Yet, the girl's family agreed that she should continue the relationship:

> *...to continue seeing each other, but we would have to wait until they paid my family ilobolo for me to start living with them.*

Men's sense of ownership (of women and their bodies) that is coupled with paying the bride price and offering marriage exposes girls to the danger of men's "unrestricted sexual access to their wives" (Stern & Heise, 2019, p. 873) which renders many women nothing better than sex slaves. In this study, a 13-year-old participant was among the girls who expressed the wish to move in with their boyfriends. She cited her mother's experience as a reason for her desire:

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My mom was very young when she got married, but she was told to go because she would have a good time.

Unaware of the dangers of early marriage, early pregnancy, childbearing (e.g., negative health outcomes), and GBV (Bhana & Anderson, 2013a, 2013b; Bhana & Pattman, 2009, 2010; Mugo & Antonites, 2014; Wiebesiek, 2021; Young, 2013), the girl wanted to emulate her mother at a very young age. This girls' wish and her actions also demonstrated the notion of love as being cherished, belonging, and emotional well-being, leading to the view held by some girls that their relationships will be never-ending. This belief exposes them to GBV, particularly in the form of emotional violence when they are unable to escape an abusive marriage or fail to deal with a breakup when the man abandons her and the children. For example, one participant referred to her collage and her artefact (a letter she had received from her ex-boyfriend) as follows:

My collage reminds me of my first boyfriend. Family time with my boyfriend was the best. We were very happily in love, and everybody could see that. Loving him closed my eyes in such a way that I never thought of losing him. I wish he was here. I was so in love with him. On that day, he just told me whatever brought us together was over. My day was so painful. When I got home, I could not even eat. Even though I lost my boyfriend, I still love him, and I am still keeping the letter he wrote me. This letter has been really special to me. I kept this letter framed so it can be safe. It comforts me in sorrowful times. The guy really broke my heart after all those lovely, happy, and unforgettable moments. I have this new boyfriend, but my heart is still on my first love I lost on Valentine's Day.

The literature reviewd in this thesis suggests that breakups result in "strong emotional and physical reactions" (Van Eck, 2015, p. 68). This was corroborated by the strong emotions that drove the girl to lose her appetite to the point where she had to force herself to eat as a result of being rejected by her boyfriend.

Another threat associated with love as being cherished, belonging, and emotional well-being is that such girls are exposed to GBV when they agree (or demand) to live with their boyfriends. In this study, 13 of the 23 participants either shared their desire to move in with or confirmed that they were cohabiting with their boyfriends. Some also admitted to having slept with their boyfriends and then "woke up for school at their boyfriends' homes" (Mkhwanazi, 2011, p. 5). This behaviour exposes young girls to patriarchal control and dependence on men as they risk either performing poorly at school or entirely dropping out of school. Moreover, it jeopardises their future opportunities for employment.

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The participants outlined various reasons for cohabiting with their boyfriends, citing reasons other than love as belonging in the letters they wrote to their fictitious penfriends. For example, they also cited experiences of domestic and gendered violence as reasons that compelled them to leave their homes. One participant stated:

> *They [her parents] even beat me and took my phone. I didn't sleep well; actually, I didn't sleep at all. I was busy thinking, asking why they did this instead of supporting me. In the morning, I decided to take my clothes and I went to my boyfriend's house."*

A related reason is the sense of discrimination girls often feel in families where boys receive preferential treatment and girls and young women feel mistreated. In her letter, one participant explained this as follows: *What I don't like at home is that they don't treat us the same. Boys are given better treatment. They do not do any home chores. It is my grandmother that shows preferential treatment among children.*

The excerpt below illustrates that such preferential treatment often escalates into violence:

> *My mother slapped me three times and threw her shoe at me and it hit me in my face. Dad did stop her but not before giving me a painful slap on the cheek. My brother just told me I was not his young sis whom he knew. They locked me in my room for two days only to go out to bath and use the toilet. But when I had had enough, I escaped from there. Out of the window I went with my clothes to my love's house... When my mother beat me up, I called my boyfriend and told him what had happened. He told me I must come and stay with him, and he will do anything for me. I then started to develop more feelings for him. I wished I could move in with him. I am always happy when I am with my boyfriend. He treats me nicely and gently*.

As the excerpts above illustrate, discrimination and violence in the home might push a girl into the arms of men where the environment may also become violent. Furthermore, silence around adolescent sexuality does not guarantee children's sexual safety in dating relationships (Ngabaza, 2011). Instead, what girls desire are belonging and love which they seek from boys and men. This might expose them to the risk of violence as they come to accept a man's control over her and see it as "a trade-off for being loved and respected" (Willan et al., 2019, p. 1235). The following excerpt illustrates the notion of love as spending time together and doing things together, particularly drinking:

> *In my community, my peers formed a group of dancers. This group dances at parties or anywhere. Sometimes they plan trips to Durban. So, they buy drugs and alcohol and say that girls will not pay*

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for the trip, they go for free, but boys do not go for free. What I dislike about them is that they drink too much alcohol and do drugs. When they are drunk, they do bad things like fight with each other, and they even stab others. Sometimes they fight because of girls. They also take advantage of those girls when they are drunk, by sleeping with them on the trip. What is worse is that other girls go without their parents' permission, just because they want free alcohol. Every Saturday we find dead girls and the rate is high now, but justice is unavailable since there are no prime suspects. A group of boys who are dancing always host the event. The same group of boys also causes gender-based violence because they invite some girls to come to the event. They give them alcohol and drug them. When they have drugged the girls, they do stupid things like raping them. Because of this, other [some] girls end up committing suicide.

This trend is not unique to this community. Alcohol abuse has been flagged as one of the factors that result in risky sexual practices and even rape, which in turn may result in suicide. Such behaviours may also ultimately result in the risk of further social ills like contracting HIV or unplanned pregnancy (Sathiparsad & Taylor, 2011).

The degree of trust that accompanies girls' notion of love as being cherished, belonging, and emotional well-being also makes girls vulnerable to GBV. This is what a participant wrote to her imaginary penfriend:

My opinion on why young people are so much in love such that they decide to move in with their boyfriends against the will of their parents, is that they fall in love easily and they believe their boyfriends more than their families. This is because they spend more time with them. So, when their families find out about their relationship, instead of listening to them, they choose to stay with their partners because they are so in love with them, and they trust them. Another thing is that they enjoy spending a lot of time with them, but they spend less time with their families.

The impact of the notion of love as happiness and emotional well-being on girls' vulnerability to GBV emerged in how a participant wrote to her pen pal about her relationship with her boyfriend and how she described a couple in love that she depicted in her collage:

They are always happy. There is no fighting. No girl deserves a harmful love. She is happy, got no stress, and has no pain because she's surrounded by love. My boyfriend and I don't want conflict. We make sure that we avoid fighting for something that is not important and always forgive each other when we had a fight.

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Her assertion suggests that she embraced love as perseverance (which is associated with being tolerant of any situation) and forgiveness (including forgiving an abusive partner).

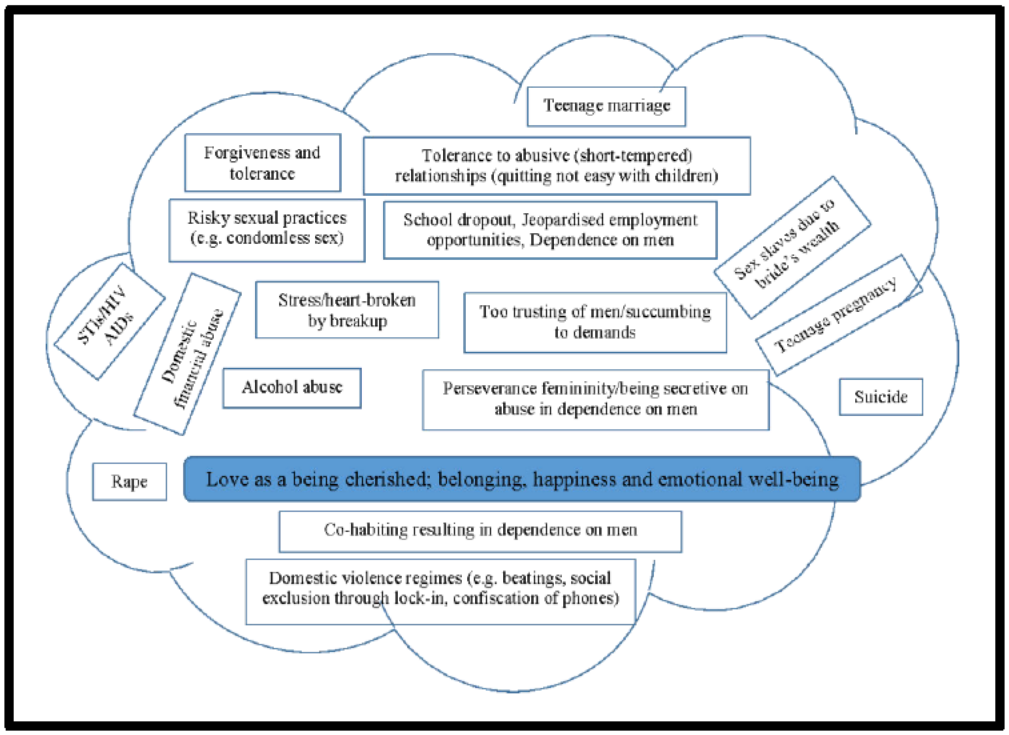
Related to the participants' notion of love as happiness and emotional well-being was the significance of their view of care in a dating relationship. It was noteworthy that where love as caring dominated, the materialistic view of love seemed to diminish. Referring to her artefact, which was a love letter from her ex-boyfriend, one participant wrote about her dream husband as follows:

> *I want to get a man that will love me genuinely, not one that will love me for my money. I loved my first boyfriend so much. The first gift I got from him was a letter he gave me on Valentine's Day. I have kept this letter from my boyfriend, my first love, my first everything in the dating world. We were not rich at all, but our love was real.*

Research suggests that when girls embrace love as caring, their focus is on a "search for support or companionship" (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021, p. 127), and their love is then characterised by "intimacy [and] a special kind of friendship" (Furman et al., 1999, p. 4), "even if he has no money" (Jewkes & Morrell, 2012, p. 1732). However, this notion of love as care may expose girls to future domestic financial abuse if their partners were to depend on them for support in the relationship or marriage (Dako-Gyeke et al., 2019). Figure 8.4 summarises the notion of love as being cherished, belonging, and emotional well-being and how it could expose girls to GBV.

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Figure 8. 4: ***How Love as Being Cherished, Belonging, and Emotional Well-Being Could Expose Rural Schoolgirls to GBV***



8.2.5 Love as a Beautiful Feeling

The element of trust that was evident in love as being cherished, belonging, and emotional well-being also emerged in the notion of love as a beautiful feeling. Such love may expose girls to the risk of various forms of violence, including GBV. A letter to a fictitious penfriend in this study illustrated this most pertinently:

> *Love is blind in such a way that when your partner asks for something from you, you just agree before he even finishes asking. In the first days when you just start dating, love just closes your eyes, and you just don't see anything else, except him. Every time you see him, it makes you feel like you could melt. And when he touches you, you just feel like you are entering heaven.*

The above excerpt suggests that, because of trust, girls may be exposed to various forms of GBV, including unprotected sex, which may lead to a vicious cycle of STIs, HIV, and other negative health outcomes. The literature corroborates the finding that the notion of love as a beautiful feeling may result in girls' inability to imagine themselves outside a dating relationship. According to the participants, life without a boyfriend is stressful and unthinkable (Parker et al., 2015). To illustrate, one of the participating girls referred to her collage and wrote in her letter to a penfriend as follows:

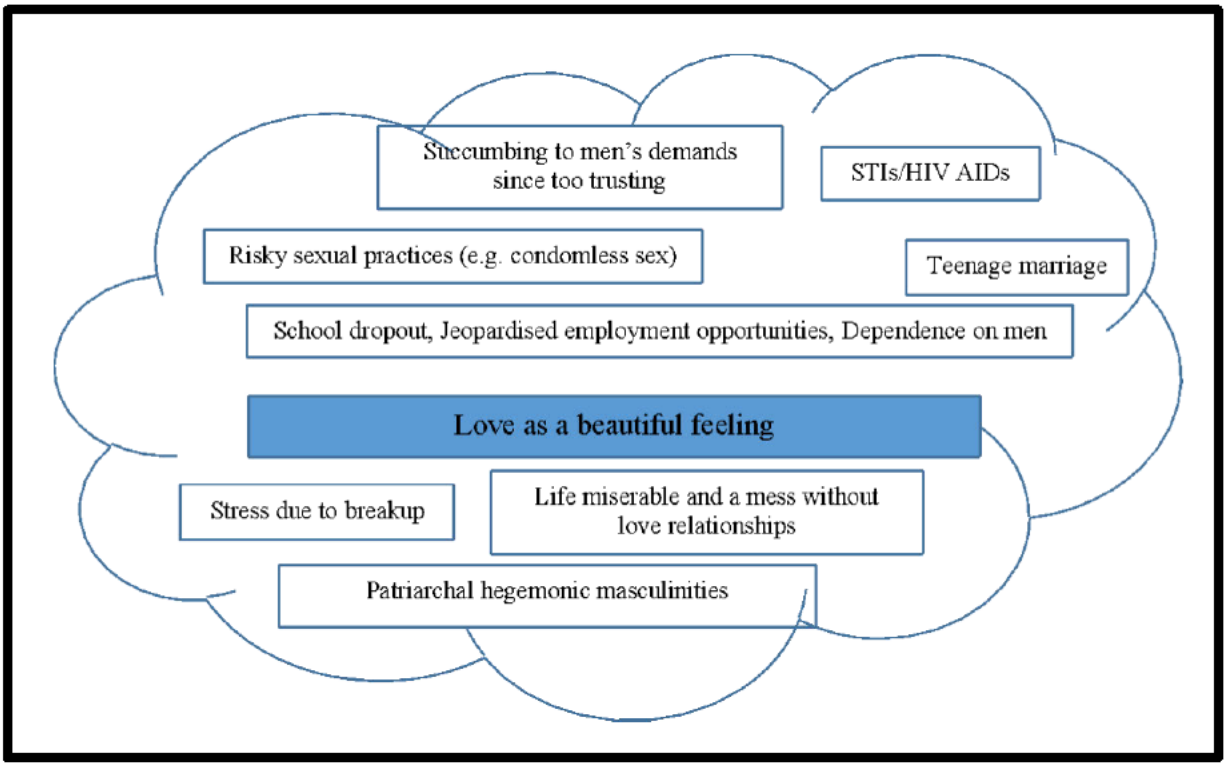
> *Love is the key to success. I won't see my success without my boyfriend. I can't afford to lose my*

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man because he's my soulmate and I adore him. He makes me feel the world. I love my boyfriend so much that I can't imagine the pain I'll have when I lose my Babee. If I lose him, my life will be miserable. I can't imagine my life without him. My life without him will be a complete mess. I just don't know what life could mean without him.

Collectively, the participants' responses indicated that the notion of love as a beautiful feeling meant that if they should lose their boyfriends, they would suffer serious emotional trauma. More than a decade ago, an 18-year-old who was heartbroken when her partner deserted her recorded deep feelings of dismay and a sense of abandonment in a poem: "You promised to love me. Now I'm sitting here alone with tears running down my face … you left me … you left me here alone" (Vilakazi, 2011, p. 85). Therefore, viewing love as the key to success and life as meaningless without a boyfriend renders girls prone to emotional dependence on men and boys and potentially exposes them to abuse. Figure 8.5 summarises the notion of love as a beautiful feeling and how it may expose girls to GBV.

Figure 8. 5: ***How Love as a Beautiful Feeling Might Expose Rural Schoolgirls to GBV***



8.2.6 Love as Loyalty and Jealousy

In this study, notions of love were powerfully communicated through language, particularly through figures

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of speech like locally used proverbs and idioms. In corroboration with the literature, this study confirmed that proverbs perpetuate gender norms (Hussein, 2005; Zungu, 2016). Some of these expressions support the notion of love as loyalty. This thesis argues that this understanding is among those that may expose girls to GBV, particularly when they stay in abusive relationships because they were socialised by sayings that express the notion that love means persevering and staying in a relationship regardless of hardships and abuse (Karandashev, 2015). For example, sayings such as 'Love each other in bad and good times, till death do us part' are widespread in many contexts, including in the community where this study was conducted. Other idioms that perpetuate a romantic view of love as loyalty include 'love is blind' and 'love is trusting'. These discourses negatively impact girls' capacity to "avoid abusive partners and to leave violent [relationships]" (Singh & Myende, 2017, p. 27).

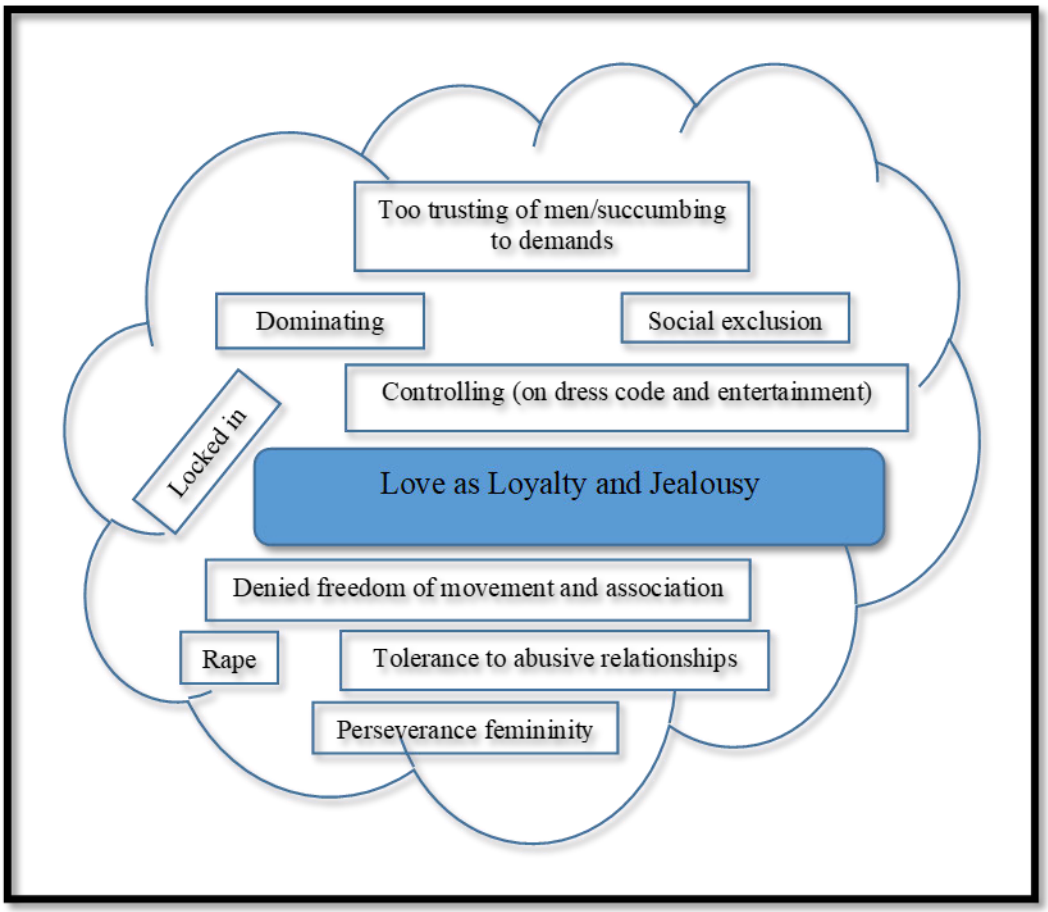
The girls in this study also understood love as jealousy. As the literature suggests, this understanding may make girls more susceptible to GBV, particularly when their male counterparts also hold a similar perspective (Bhana, 2018; Bittar & Nakano, 2017; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021). In some relationships, jealousy as an expression of love tends to be coupled with "the fear of losing the partner" (Bittar & Nakano, 2017, p. 5) and often serves as "a tool for control and domination" (Bittar & Nakano, 2017, p. 2). For example, as discussed in Chapter Two, some male partners even decide what their girlfriends must and must not wear and where they may and may not go for entertainment (Bittar & Nakano, 2017). Some scholars noted examples of controlling behaviours where men locked girls up inside houses, sometimes for days (Jewkes & Morrell, 2012; Willan et al., 2019). In this manner they excluded them socially, impeded their freedom of movement and association, and generally took control of their bodies and will (Brown et al., 2009; Kinnunen, 2022; Willan et al., 2019). A participant described this phenomenon as pervasive in her community:

> *There are lots and lots of rape cases in my area and that is a bad thing. Men are responsible for this because they lack self-respect and they blame young girls for wearing short things.*

Figure 8.6 summarises the understanding of love as loyalty and jealousy and how it may expose girls to GBV.

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Figure 8. 6: ***How Love as Loyalty and Jealousy Could Expose Rural Schoolgirls to GBV***

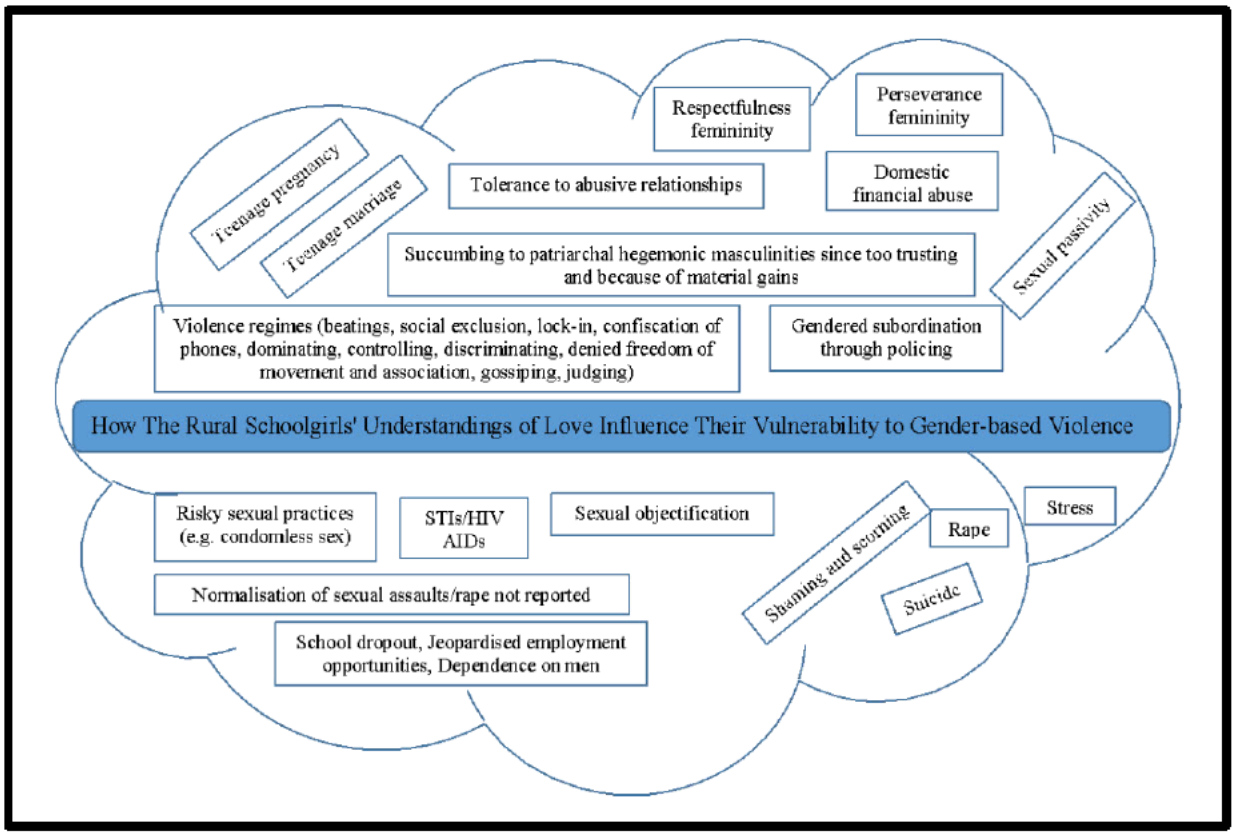


8.3 Discussion

The discourse addressed the central research question that was posed to give impetus to the study: *How might rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships influence their vulnerability to gender-based violence?* The findings suggest that the participants' constructions of love tended to expose these girls to GBV, including physical beatings, social exclusion, lock-ins, confiscation of their phones, and denial of freedom of movement and association. These restrictions were not only imposed by their dating partners, but also by their families. Figure 8.7 summarises the findings to address the question: *How do girls' understandings of love expose them to GBV?*

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Figure 8. 7: ***Summary of How Girls' Understandings of Love Expose Them to GBV***



As Figure 8.7 illustrates, the outcomes of GBV for girls and women are often dire, including early school dropout, early and unwanted pregnancy, STIs, HIV, poor mental health, unemployment, and a continuing cycle of poverty for women and their children.

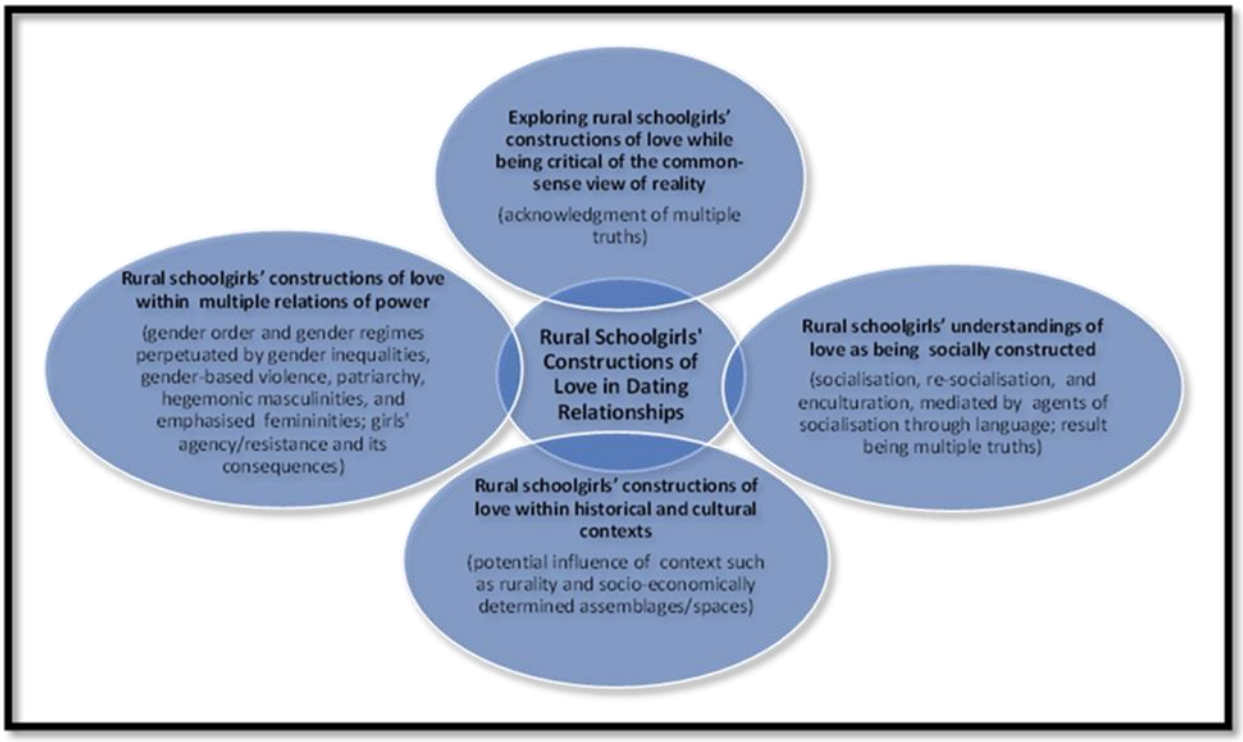
The two critical research questions in this study were:

1. *How do rural schoolgirls understand love in dating relationships?*
2. *What factors influence rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships?*

As discussed in Chapter Three, the data analysis process was informed by both social constructionism and the social constructionist theory of gender. Figure 8.8 below is the analytical framework I developed for Chapter Three:

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Figure 8. 8: ***An Analytical Framework for Exploring Rural Schoolgirls' Constructions of Love in Dating Relationship***



Four propositions guided the data analysis process. The first was that of "radical doubt in the taken-for-granted world" (Gergen, 1985, p. 267). I was thus conscious of the need to take a critical stance towards the common-sense view of reality, acknowledging that there is no single objective truth or reality (Stam, 2001). Consistent with this understanding, the findings suggest that the 23 rural schoolgirls understood or conceptualised love in their dating relationships in multiple ways. These understandings produced multiple discourses of love with different meanings attached to them, as was discussed in depth in section 6.2.

Secondly, I understood that the participants' conceptions of love would be influenced by their "multiple everyday life interactions" with the agents of socialisation (Belli et al., 2010, p. 258), and that these might change over time (Berger & Luckmann, 1991) through the processes of socialisation, re-socialisation, and enculturation (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). I also accepted that these processes would be mediated through language. Hence, the findings suggest that the participants constructed love under the influence of multiple agents of socialisation, such as their parents, siblings, and peers, as demonstrated in the letters they wrote to their penfriends. For instance:

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It took me courage to go home. They asked many questions, such as "Who is this guy? Where does he stay?" All those questions were coming from different people in the house.

My complicated journey started when I told my mother, father, and big brother that I am thinking about staying at my boyfriend's house with him… My brother just told me I was not his young sis whom he knew.

A strong influence of the agents of socialisation was also noted in instances where the girls made decisions about dating matters while mindful of the expectations of their families. For instance, one participant wrote the following to her imaginary friend:

The time I get to be with Mazwi is very short. Sometimes I even think of leaving home so that I can live with him. My parents won't even let me go to live with him…If I run away from home to live with Mazwi, my parents will be disappointed because they are always thinking of good things for me. Besides that, at his home, they do not know me, and he has not paid any bride price for me. So, this is just bad, I can never do it.

The above excerpt affirms that the impact of cultural traditions directed how the participants acted in their dating relationships, while the power of enculturation was also evident in how they made sense of reality. In instances where girls acted against their parents' wishes, they expressed feelings of guilt. For example: *"Of course, I realised that I was wrong for not listening to my parents".*

The feeling of guilt this girl expressed demonstrated that, despite re-socialisation, her decisions were taken while conscious of what her parents would approve of or disapprove of (Cialdini et al., 1991, p. 203). This finding thus corroborates the literature that parents have a major and powerful influence on their children's lives and even their decisions (Kretchmar, 2009; Wharton, 2005). The findings also concur that "the difficulty of fully altering knowledge attained in primary socialization" (Kinnunen, 2022, p. 54) is a factor that influences girls' decisions. This is pertinently expressed by Harré (2002) through the analogy that people are made to fit well and "reproduce the society in which they were manufactured. [Therefore], once created, it seems to be very hard to re-create a human being" (p. 619). As a result, while girls are influenced by secondary socialisation, to some degree, they remain hooked on their original socially constructed notions of love.

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Aligned with the social constructionist theory, the findings also demonstrated the impact of social practice on how the girls made sense of reality. For instance, one girl stated:

> *In my community, there are always events. I like events that happen in my community. The common events are weddings, parties, the sangomas' dance, the Reed Dance, umgonqo, or umemulo where the family thanks the girl for keeping her virginity. In this event, other girls are invited and they dance. I also love this umemulo a lot as that is where you can showcase virginity as a girl, and you show that you are proud that you have maintained it till that particular time*.

Due to their exposure to various cultural practices, some participants had developed understandings of love aligned with their daily experiences. For example, informed by the above social practices, besides constructing love as maintaining virginity, the participant also articulated the wish for marriage: *"I also wish to have this relationship. I also see myself as a very happily married woman"*.

Suggesting the significance of language in the processes of socialisation and enculturation, the messages that were mediated by the agents of socialisation to the participants emerged as powerful determinants of how these young people constructed love. A participant wrote:

> *My grandparents are so strict. No one is allowed to go outside to play. They always say: "If you go out, you are not going out to play, but you are out for men, and you are going to fall pregnant, and we will throw you out.*

The above extract conveys the heterosexual normative view of reality which suggests that the "desire towards men is traditionally expected of women due to the male/female binary" (Kinnunen, 2022, p. 47). Due to this heteronormativity, the grandparents treated the participant as a heterosexual girl; hence, she was assumed to be sexually oriented towards the male gender. Her sexual orientation was thus socially constructed and taken for granted, and she internalised the heterosexual norm.

The significance of messages imparted through language in the girls' constructions of reality was also demonstrated through idioms and proverbs as this was how the participants expressed their admiration of love through their collages and letters addressed to their imaginary penfriends:

> *To fall in love is a blessing… I love my boyfriend so much. He is my everything… He means the world to me... He is my sunshine and the king of my heart. He means everything to me… Love is blind… Love just closes your eyes... It makes you feel like you could melt. And when he touches you, you just feel like you are entering heaven… Love is the key to success… Well, I have someone who*

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treats me like a queen… Love each other in bad and good times, till death do us part… He is such a blessing to me… He is my world.

The above expressions are enriched with metaphors that suggest that the messages mediated about love to the participants were gendered and patriarchal to the point that these girls saw men as the objects of their dreams that would fulfil their lives. However, such proverbs and idioms sustain gendered cultural traditions that maintain gender legacies and ideology (Hussein, 2005; Zungu, 2016), as these figures of speech express that women are nothing without men.

The third proposition is that the construction of reality is "context-dependent" (Cislaghi & Shakya, 2018, p. 39). As a result, I approached the field by recognising that rural schoolgirls' constructions of love could not be separated from their socio-cultural contexts. The girls' stories consequently demonstrated this proposition beyond doubt in several ways. For instance, this proposition was corroborated in terms of how social norms in the rural context impacted the participants' constructions of love. Research suggests that rurality entrenches women's and girls' subordination in relationships due to the hegemonic masculinities that are enforced in rural contexts (Leclerc-Madlala, 2008; Moletsane & Ntombela, 2010). The current study also recorded cases where girls submitted themselves to age disparate relationships:

They say a lot of things about him. They say he is older than me. Love is not about age. They don't realise that when you love a partner of the same age, it is hard because you do not respect each other. In that relationship, you fight all the time, which is bad. Whatever they say, I take it like I don't hear them.

The above assertion suggests that this girl had been socialised to believe that a man should have authority in the relationship; hence, she submitted herself to an older man.

The high rate of poverty in the area where the current study was conducted (Dhlodhlo, 2010; Mandeni Municipality, 2020) aligned with how the girls' narratives portrayed how their decisions about dating were influenced by their dire circumstances. For instance, a girl in an age disparate relationship wrote:

Ey! Msah takes me out for dining at hotels. He also takes me out to the park. We are very happy. I get things I did not get when I was staying at home.

Consistent with the third proposition, the study further foregrounds the role of context in the girls'

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constructions of reality, particularly in cases where families had been abandoned by fathers:

> *I am very sad because of the things that are happening in my home. My father does not love my mom anymore. He is also not taking care of us. He does not visit us. He only came last week Friday. This was the first time in many many years he was here last. His visit was not even a good one, because he came to demand that we go and live with him at Nquthu, only because the woman he had been living with had died. He is doing this because he wants to humiliate our mom. He has always been abusing Mom from the time we were small.*

> *Well, about my dad, he is not dead, but from 2016 he separated from mom; they divorced. My dad is not there in our lives. He occasionally gives money to us, but the person who really takes care of us is mom. Although he does not have a new family, my father is renting the place where he lives and is in love with any woman at any moment. He keeps separating from one woman and getting involved with another. We are very poor. My mom works hard just to take care of us. If I were in control, I would change my home situation. I would make a better and more classy lifestyle for us.*

The literature asserts that it is a norm that "men don't look after [their] children if they don't live with them" (Willan et al., 2019, p. 1234), and it was evident that some girls experienced abandonment by their fathers which influenced them to embrace the notions of love as material care and love as being cherished, belonging, and emotional well-being. Other expressions that demonstrated this finding are found in the following excerpts:

> *I love my boyfriend so much 'coz he's taking care of me. He means everything to me. That guy is the love of my life. He means the world to me. I just don't know what life could mean without him. He supports me with everything else.*

> *I used to love that guy, Senzo. He bought me a beautiful umbrella dress. He gave me this dress as a gift and a sign of his love and appreciation. I have had this dress for four years. It has been really special, and it is still special to me.*

Similarly, Ferriani et al. (2019) assert that the lack of attention and care within the family pushes adolescent girls to seek and find affection in the arms of a boyfriend.

In affirmation of the rife socio-economic circumstances in and around Jeqeza village where the research

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was conducted, the municipality reports that the majority of community members in the area experience "declining life expectancy [and] an increase in sickness and deaths related to preventable diseases" (Mandeni Municipality, 2020, p. 18). The current study established that these conditions, among others, had resulted in child-headed households. An orphaned participant wrote:

> *To make my dream a reality, I will finish school and pass with flying colours; get bursaries to get an education because my parents died a long time ago.*

Poverty compelled most of the participants to embrace the provider notion of love, which subjected them to clinging to their boyfriends or turning to sugar daddies as these males were able to provide for these girls' needs. The orphaned girl linked herself to an older man, believing that what she felt was love:

> *Love has no age. Msah, my new love, has made me forget about my home and go stay with him. He came with a change in my life. He is all I need in a man in the world. They say a lot of things about him. They say he is older than me. Love is not about age. Whatever they say, I take it like I don't hear them. Eay! Msah takes me out for dining at hotels. He also takes me out to the park. We are very happy. I get things I did not get when I was staying at home.*

The findings are in agreement with the literature which claims that the social construction of reality occurs within changing institutions; thus, what a particular phenomenon means at one point or place in history might mean something else at another point, time, and place (Kang et al., 2017). For example, what was considered taboo years ago might now be viewed as acceptable today due to changes within societies. An example is the girls' decision to move in with their boyfriends even at very young ages. In African rural communities it has always been taboo to live with a man without payment of *ilobolo* (Karandashev, 2015). However, even some mothers and an uncle deviated from the social norm, and this impacted the girls' constructions of love to the point where they conceptualised living with a boyfriend as the norm. (See my discussion in section 7.3).

Consistent with the literature that emphasises the consideration of "surrounding materialities at play" as we try to understand how individuals make sense of reality (Janak et al., 2022, p. 79), this study discloses that the socio-economic materialities and spaces within which the girls constructed love impacted their understandings of this phenomenon. One girl wrote:

> *Every Friday at KwaBusane tavern, there is a dance competition that consists of all types of drunkards. Even small children escape from their homes just to have fun. What is not good is that*

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others have small babies, and they go with them to drink alcohol.

The revelation of young schoolgirls' easy and uncontrolled access to alcohol explains why participants in this study regarded 'drinking champagne' among the activities they desired as a couple. Taverns and shebeens are major informal economic activities in the area under study (Mandeni Municipality, 2020) due to a lack of other entertainment facilities, and it is at these venues where youths participate in risky adventures and activities:

> *In my community, my peers formed a group of dancers. This group dances at parties or anywhere. Sometimes they plan a trip to Durban. So, they buy drugs and alcohol and say that girls will not pay for the trip, they go for free, but boys do not go for free. What is bad is that other girls go without their parents' permission, just because they want free alcohol.*

It was notable that it was in these spaces where some girls constructed love as material care, as they valued access to free alcohol and free rides. Unfortunately, there was also evidence that the providers of alcohol abused these willing girls sexually once they had drunk too much. It is therefore in these spaces where different kinds of GBV occurred−even murder and girl suicides. The girls' narratives revealed that GBV had been normalised in this village and its surrounds. In essence, GBV emerged as a taken-for-granted reality in this community, as stated by one participant: "*People and men in my area take GBV as if it is a trend".*

This study's fourth proposition was that rural schoolgirls' construction of love occurred within multiple relations of power. This proposition suggests that girls construct love under the influence of the prevailing gender order and gender regimes perpetuated by gender inequalities, GBV, patriarchy, hegemonic masculinities, and emphasised femininities. The findings are aligned with this proposition in several ways. For instance, Furphy (2012) states that the social gender order influences institutional gender regimes, and the study found that the participants experienced oppression that started at family level where it was generated by their parents' and other family members' expectations of their decisions about their dating practices. Due to their subjection to an African gender ideology that "shapes different lives for men and women by placing them in different social positions" (Hussein, 2005, p. 60), the girls were subjugated to preferential treatment in favour of boys. One girl stated:

> *What I don't like at home is that they don't treat us the same. Boys are given better treatment. They do not do any home chores. It is my grandmother that shows preferential treatment among children.*

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This finding corroborates that of earlier studies that such discriminatory acts against girls are not uncommon in rural southern African communities (Mabala & Kamazima, 1995; Milligan, 2014; Zondi, 2010). According to one study, gender stereotypes are instilled by "parental definitions of acceptable behavior [sic]" (Carter, 2014, p. 244). Hence, parents establish "different rules and sanctions and expectations [for] boys and girls" (Amin et al., 2018, p. 4).

The findings also suggest that some girls are tempted to embrace the provider notion of love because they are influenced by the ideology of the social division of labour which avers that men are natural providers in dating relationships and in their families. A participant described her dream husband as follows:

> *I also wish to have this relationship. I also see myself as a very happily married woman with two children, a boy and a girl with their father working as a businessman providing for his family*.

The naturalisation of gender inequalities was notable in the participants' narratives as they portrayed the prevalence of some emphasised femininities that encouraged them to make sense of love in dating relationships. The femininities included sexual purity, marriage, fertility, respectfulness, perseverance, and good manners (Hunter, 2010; Jewkes & Morrell, 2012; Shabane, 2011; Shai, 2018). For example, one participant wrote: "*I hope we will make it in life if we behave ourselves and be good girls with manners".*

It was also evident that the girls supported patriarchy through cultural consent as they reinforced the oppressive gendered orders they were exposed and subjected to (Sa'ar, 2005; Wiebesiek, 2021). For instance, a participant wrote:

> *I dislike social events like umemulo, umhlonyane, umkhehlo and umgonqo. I dislike these events because they are traditional events and I'm not a big fan of traditions. I don't like them because they are too controlling and silly. Oh! The hate I have for traditional stuff and their silly rituals! I hate them because they are discriminating. If you are no longer a virgin, for instance, you are not allowed to participate in the traditional dance. Girls in the area gossip about one another. The old women too are judging. This happens mostly if you do not have an interest in going to the reed dance or when you are no longer interested in participating in it, they gossip about you.*

What is evident in the above excerpt is that the femininity of purity is reinforced by older women through virginity testing and through the exclusion of girls from participating in the traditional dance if they are not perceived as virgins. Aligned with previous research (Brown et al., 2009; Kinnunen, 2022; Willan et al.,

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2019), the girls in the current study were also exposed to controlling gender norms as they were subjected to men's power that dictated how they should dress. A participant narrated the following:

> *There are lots and lots of rape cases in my area and that is a bad thing. Men are responsible for this because they lack self-respect, and they blame young girls for wearing short things*.

I became conscious of how the girls navigated their dating relationships under oppressive patriarchal and hegemonic masculinities when their brothers and fathers affirmed their patriarchal superiority (Connell, 1987). For instance:

> *My complicated journey started when I told my mother, father, and big brother that I was thinking about staying at my boyfriend's house with him. My brother just told me I was not his young sis whom he knew. At the end of the day, they agreed for us to continue seeing each other, but we would have to wait until they paid my family lobola for me to start living with them.*

Aligned with the social constructionist theory of gender, which posits that the common-sense view of reality as prescribed by the prevailing gender order and gender regimes influences how girls make sense of love in dating relationships, the gendered order was found to limit their agency in several circumstances. For instance, while their narratives expressed their views and wishes, due to their subjection to multiple relations of power, the girls' agency was limited. Thus, due to their cultural consent (willingly or inadvertently) to the oppressive gender order, these girls tended not to challenge their subordination but simply resorted to submitting to the prevailing social norms, as discussed by hooks (1982). One girl stated:

> *Sometimes I even think of leaving home so that I can live with him. My parents won't even let me go to live with him. If I run away from home to live with Mazwi, my parents will be disappointed because they are always thinking of good things for me.*

Consequently, as a marginalised group, the girls tended to perceive themselves "as less important and their needs less worthy of attention" than those of their parents and male siblings (Kinnunen, 2022, p. 27). Ultimately, they succumbed to the terms of other people or submitted to "being put into boxes by them…to the point that they may not have regarded their own interests as worth bringing up" (Kinnunen, 2022, p. 28). This was clearly reflected in the above excerpt that demonstrated how a girl acted against her parents' wishes, and she felt guilty for that and did not want to disappoint her family.

On the other hand, consistent with the social constructionist's recognition that different and unique forms of resistance are exercised by marginalised groups, the participants' stories revealed a lot of resistance

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against the oppressive social order. However, this resistance was accompanied by negative consequences (Lorber, 2000). For example, the decision to live with their boyfriends were instituted despite the negative consequences of challenging the social order. In one instance, a girl was subjected to physical violence by her parents:

> *My mother slapped me three times and threw her shoe at me and it hit me in my face. Dad did stop her but not before giving me a painful slap on the cheek. They locked me in my room for two days only to go out to bathe and use the toilet.*

The participants were not always bound by the prescripts of the gender order and gender regimes. On several occasions, their narratives revealed that they were conscious of the taken-for-granted nature of reality; yet, these participants showed agency by acting against it. The above participant responded as follows:

> *But when I had had enough, I escaped from there. Out of the window I went with my clothes to my love's house.*

Therefore, while aligned with the theoretical framework in that the oppressive gender order and gender regimes limited the girls' agency (Connell, 1987), it was not always the case that institutionalised cultural consent diminished their agency. In fact, the girls' narratives showed that they were conscious of gendered regimes, but they were still able to make their own decisions, even if these were against the gender order. Therefore, despite their exposure to experiences of gendered violence, to some degree, some girls still emerged as the drivers of their agency against the gender order and gender regimes. This study thus records the girls' patriarchal bargaining at a level where they showed a great degree of agency as they maintained that they would not succumb to the patriarchal order. This bargaining is defined as tactics or strategies that are employed by women (and girls) to challenge patriarchy, and this happens under very constraining conditions (Kandiyoti, 1988).

8.4 Synthesis

In this chapter, I presented the third and last step of the thematic analysis process by analysing the findings of the two sub-questions of this study to answer the central research question. To establish a correlation between the six discourses of love and the participants' vulnerability to GBV, I drew on the literature and the findings presented in Chapters Six and Seven. I also brought the analytical framework to this inquiry to analyse data across the two critical research questions. Guided by the four propositions of the social constructionist theoretical framework, I was able to analyse and understand the girls' constructions of love

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in their dating relationships. Also aligned with the conceptual framework that I had developed from the literature I had reviewed in Chapter Two, I learned that girls' understandings of love potentially exposed them to STIs, unplanned/unwanted pregnancies, future dependence on men (as their dreams got shattered), and abusive future adult relationships. Therefore, the current study will add to the literature on how rural schoolgirls' constructions of love influence their vulnerability to GBV.

In the next chapter, I consolidate the thesis to present my methodological and personal-professional reflections on the findings of the study. I also review the study's contributions and implications that may inform future research.

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CHAPTER NINE

RURAL SCHOOLGIRLS' CONSTRUCTIONS OF LOVE IN DATING RELATIONSHIPS: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

9.1Introduction

As discussed in Chapter One, my interest in the main research question I addressed in this study had been motivated by my own life story – i.e., from my childhood as a young girl to a teenage bride in rural KwaZulu-Natal. Growing up in a rural village, I was socialised to believe that when a girl reached puberty, she would fall in love with a man and get married. When my family later converted to Christianity, these traditional ideals were confirmed and validated, with the addition that a 'good Christian girl' would abstain from any sort of dating relationship and, of course, sexual intercourse, until a man who loved her chose her, engaged her, and married her. Informed by this understanding, I became the victim of an early marriage when I was only 18 years old.

Later, as a teacher and a principal in the South African public education system where I had been employed for 27 years, I observed the same pattern among many rural schoolgirls under my care. However, I also noted that school dropout was rife due to GBV, unplanned and mostly unwanted pregnancies, and unequal gender norms that continued to link the value of girls to *ilobolo*. To my dismay, in my informal conversations with girls in my school, they often declared that they were in love with the boys or men who were the cause of their plight.

Informed by my own life story and my observations of the schoolgirls as a teacher and a school principal, I was curious to understand how and why the situation seemed to have stayed the same decades after my own childhood and schooling. My curiosity was premised on the understanding that, in the context of unequal gender norms, teenage girls tend to understand and construct notions of love in particular ways. I also suspected that these constructions of love make them vulnerable to gender-based violence (GBV), but I had no scholarly background to affirm this hypothesis. I therefore started reading related literature and conceptualised first my Master's, and then my PhD projects. The current study thus examined how contemporary rural schoolgirls in a public rural secondary school in KwaZulu-Natal constructed love in their dating relationships. The central question that drove this investigation was: *How might rural*

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schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships influence their vulnerability to gender-based violence?

The two sub-questions that I developed to inform data generation and analysis, were:

1. *How do rural schoolgirls understand love in dating relationships?*
2. *What factors influence rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships?*

In the previous four chapters, I analysed the findings of the two sub-questions to address the main research question in Chapter Eight. This final chapter consolidates the thesis with my reflections on the theoretical and empirical strands that informed my methodological and personal-professional choices. I give an overview of the consecutive development of the information in the thesis, consider the contributions this study will offer as a scholarly investigation, and discuss the implications of the findings for practice and future research.

9.2Methodological Reflections on the Study

This study was located within the interpretivist paradigm. Informed by this paradigm, ontologically, my view was that there are (and therefore would be in the study) multiple interpretations of reality (Ponterotto, 2005; Taylor & Medina, 2013). When I approached the field, I was mindful that the rural schoolgirls that this investigation targeted would have multiple views of love, particularly in their dating relationships. Epistemologically, I acknowledged that one acquires knowledge under the influence of multiple, everyday interactions (Belli et al., 2010). This means that reality, knowledge, and phenomena such as love are socially constructed (Andrews, 2012; Kinnunen, 2022; Ponterotto, 2005; Rorty, 2009; Stam, 2002; Edley, 2001). Therefore, given that research in the interpretivist tradition is concerned with the social construction of reality, I paid attention to how the girls' social interactions influenced what meanings of love they made in their dating relationships. Also, being cognisant that interpretivist research acknowledges that "epistemology is concerned with the relationship between the 'knower' (the research participant) and the 'would-be knower' (the researcher), I recognised that the dynamic interaction between myself as the researcher and the participants "would be central to capturing and describing the 'lived experiences' of the participant[s]" (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 131). Therefore, nurturing the relationship between myself and the girls to ensure that they felt comfortable sharing their stories of dating and love with me was central to the data generation and collection processes.

In the methodological context, I was mindful from the onset that doing research with young people would require "a young person-centred research methodology" (Bhana, 2018, p. 21) and that they might better

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"understand the world narratively" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 17). Therefore, I used a narrative inquiry approach to engage the participants in understanding the complexity of girls' constructions of love and what these might mean as they negotiated their dating relationships as adolescents. By employing this methodology, I managed to collect the 23 girls' "personal narratives based on recognition that people are storytellers who lead storied lives" (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p. 197). As this methodology enabled the girls to voice their perspectives on their constructions of love, I simultaneously addressed my concern that South African history and patriarchal society had institutionalised the silencing of girls' and women's voices (Hofmeyr, 1994; Murray, 2017). The qualitative approach also allowed me "the flexibility to probe initial participant responses – that is, to ask why or how [thereby allowing participants] to elaborate on their answers" (Mack et al., 2005, p. 4).

I located this study in a public secondary school in the rural district of Ilembe in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) Province in South Africa. I recruited 23 girls aged 13 to 20 years across grades 8 to 11 in one school as the participants. Considering the age range of the participants, I was aware that the data generation methods should be aligned with the nature of the population being studied. I thus heeded Ringrose and Regehr's (2023) warning that working with young people would require data generation tools that would enable me to access data that would otherwise have been difficult to generate through a more conventional approach, such as interviews. I was conscious that, for the girls to express their understandings of love and for me to understand and learn about their notions of love and how these meanings shaped their everyday lives, spoken language alone would not be sufficient (De la Rey & Owens, 1998; Rogers, 2007). Thus, to generate the data, I utilised "good, reliable, youth-friendly resources [that were] generated directly by [the participants]" (Parker et al., 2015, p. 3). They completed tasks related to letter writing, collage-making, and artefact retrieval. Hence, combining "several methods in a single piece of research [enabled] each to supplement and check on the others' work" (Giddens, 1997, pp. 548-549). My reason for employing participatory research methods was to forge a relationship of trust between me and among the participants and to guide them to comfortably share their understandings and experiences of love in dating relationships (Clark, 2010). In this process, I succeeded in unearthing, listening to, and honouring the voices of my participants.

9.3 Reflections on the Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The literature I reviewed in this thesis (see Chapter Two) suggests that factors such as socialisation, enculturation, language, context, gender-based violence (GBV), and how girls are positioned in relation to

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boys, men, and adults in general influence them to understand and enact love in particular ways (Carter, 2014). These include, among others, love as sex and childbearing, love as purity, love as money, love as companionship, love as marriage, love as force and fear, love as jealousy, and love as omnipotent (Bhana, 2018; Bittar & Nakano, 2017; Furphy, 2012; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021; Willan et al., 2019). However, these discourses of love influence girls' vulnerability to GBV, which is a scourge that has been of serious concern for a long time in South Africa and internationally (Abrahams et al., 2010; Dako-Gyeke et al., 2019; Jiménez-Picón et al., 2023). In turn, GBV exposes girls to STIs, unplanned or unwanted pregnancies, future dependence on men (as their individuality is compromised and their dreams are shattered), and abusive adult relationships. Informed by the literature, I approached the field interested in investigating how the rural schoolgirls understood love, what it was that had informed (and were still informing) their understandings, and how their understandings might influence their vulnerability to GBV.

Informed by the interpretivist paradigm as I analysed the data and scrutinised the findings, I adopted social constructionism as my analytical lens. Social constructionist theorists believe that knowledge is socially constructed and therefore phenomena such as love are constructed in social settings (Andrews, 2012; Kinnunen, 2022; Rorty, 2009; Stam, 2002), Edley, 2001, p. 433). Scholars have argued that the construction of phenomena is influenced by "multiple everyday life interactions" (Belli et al., 2010, p. 258) that involve agents of socialisation who may change over time (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Therefore, constructions of a phenomenon will change from one context to another and lead to multiple truths about that and even other phenomena.

Drawing on the social construction of gender (Agrawal, 2008; Connell, 1987; Connell, 2012; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Lorber, 1994, 2000), femininities (Shabane, 2011; Wiebesiek, 2021), masculinity and femininity (Hussein, 2005), and girlhood (Kinnunen, 2022), my assumption as I commenced the study was that girls made meaning of the reality of love based on the taken-for-granted gender norms that they imbibed in their communities. It was on this premise that, to develop an analytical framework, I also drew on the social constructionist theory of gender as advanced by Connell (1995). Therefore, informed by the social constructionist theory of gender and the key tenets of social constructionism, I developed a theoretical framework that was informed by four key propositions to analyse the data. First, being critical of the common-sense view of the nature of reality, I approached the field recognising that there would be no single objective truth or reality (Stam, 2001). Therefore, I was conscious of the possibility of multiple understandings of love among the 23 participants. Secondly, I understood that the rural schoolgirls' constructions of love would have been influenced by processes of socialisation and enculturation, which

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would have been mediated by language. Thirdly, I accepted that the rural schoolgirls' constructions of love would have occurred within multiple power relations mediated by factors such as age, gender, rurality, family dynamics, and others. I therefore paid attention to how the gender order (power relations between men and women and girls and boys) in the community and the gender regimes (the gender structures and relations) in their families, the school, churches, and other institutions of which the girls were members influenced their constructions of love in their dating relationships. Lastly, I understood that the girls' constructions of love could not be separated from their socio-cultural contexts. Approaching the study with these propositions in mind enabled me to set appropriate tasks and ask the participants pertinent questions throughout the data generation process and to engage in a continuous reflexive process throughout the study.

9.4Personal-Professional Reflections

As discussed in Chapter One, my interest in exploring rural schoolgirls' understandings of love was triggered by my personal and professional biographies. For this reason, reflexivity was essential throughout the study as I was aware of Atkinson and Whitaker's (2019) advice that reflexivity should be central to a study of this nature as it enhances awareness "that the researcher and the object/s of the study exist in a mutual relationship [with one another]. Thus, reflexivity would require my attention to understand how thinking is generated and "how it is shaped by pre-existing knowledge, and how research claims are made" (n.p.). While I could not totally ignore my own life story during the data generation and analysis processes, I had to draw on tools that would enable me to keep some sort of "perspectival distance between [myself as] the researcher and the topic [I was] studying, unbiased by [my] human emotion or attachments" (Lazard & McAvoy, 2020, p. 163). For Lazard and McAvoy, a reflexive stance to research is necessary in recognition of the fact that perspectival distance is not, in any straightforward sense, possible. They argue that the:

> reflexive consideration of our role in our research, the investments we have in it, and the relationships we have with our participants, texts, or the research field mean that we become the objects of our own gaze. There is no total detachment as 'I' is both the subject and object, viewed and viewer, knower and known (2020, p. 164).

To circumvent researcher bias, scholars recommend engaging in a "reflexive process [that] is predicated on the broad questions of 'what is the research process?' and 'how am I influencing it?' [This requires] a method of illumination, broadly characterized by a persistent questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions through conversational processes or dialogue" (Lazard & McAvoy, 2020, p. 167). In this research, the theoretical framework and the propositional questions I posed enabled me to engage in this dialogic process

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throughout the study. For example, I paired the tenets of social constructionism with those of the social constructionist theory of gender to explore the girls' understandings of love. I also acknowledged the importance of being critical of the common-sense view of reality, including the common stock of knowledge I brought to the research. Therefore, I was cautious about my philosophical positioning about knowledge and how my social positioning could influence how I understood the world that I was studying (Kang et al., 2017). Hence, I align my views with those of Wiebesiek (2021), who argues that the researcher must reflect on herself and critically examine her positionality in relation to her participants. Therefore, as a narrative researcher, I remained aware of my social positioning and how this would shape their accounts as I developed (re-storied) the participants' narratives (Creswell, 2007). I also attempted to continually reflect on my positionality and how this could impact my analyses and knowledge generation in this study (Suffla et al., 2015).

As a Black African woman of rural origin whose mother tongue was also IsiZulu, I was 'an insider' in the research setting. In fact, my own life story of love and marriage had also been shaped in and by the Zulu culture. However, as 'an insider' I had to be mindful of the multiple perspectives on the phenomenon of love that the participants and I could have. I also had to be mindful that decades had passed since my own adolescence in a different rural context and that people's understandings of a phenomenon tend to change over time due to socialisation and changing contexts. Therefore, the perspectives of my participants in the studied environment would not only be different from mine, but would also have changed over time.

In a way, as a principal of a neighbouring school, an adult, and the researcher I was also an outsider in the research setting. The fact that I was responsible for both data generation and data analysis created room for researcher bias (Huberman, 1994). With so much involvement in the study, my personal beliefs and interests were bound to influence my reflections, thereby inadvertently dominating the voices of the participants (Mason, 2002), and this meant that power imbalances could emerge (Zulfikar, 2014). I addressed these threats through consistent reflexivity as this minimised my researcher subjectivity (Zulfikar, 2014). This meant that I could not "make assumptions about any situation" during data generation or analysis (Hauser, 2019, p. 23). To ensure that I remained as unbiased as possible and remain in line with the social constructionist lens which argues for avoiding a common-sense interpretation of reality, I attempted to be reflexive about every situation and decision I took in the research process. In essence, I focused on the participants' tales to deepen my understanding of their conceptions of love rather than rely on the 'taken-for-granted' understanding of reality. This entailed carefully considering the types of data generation tools that would enable the girls to freely communicate their thoughts, share their experiences, and elicit their

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conceptions of love in dating relationships. It also helped me to make sense of their understandings and to honour their voices. I also maintained a reflexive journal to document how I negotiated my potential researcher bias and to ensure that, where it emerged, it did not influence the research findings.

Using the theoretical framework to reflect on these issues and questions throughout the data generation and analysis processes enabled me to effectively reflect on and guard against my researcher positionality that might have influenced my interpretations of the findings. I therefore re-storied the actual narratives of the participants as honestly and as authentically as I knew how. Guided by the theoretical framework, I obtained a nuanced understanding of how the rural schoolgirls constructed love in their dating relationships. This study was indeed instrumental in producing a different person and researcher, perhaps mostly because I realised how significant it was to utilise theory in my scholarly research. In fact, I can say emphatically that the social constructionist theoretical lens enabled me to make the invisible visible (Cohen et al., 2004) as it challenged me to be honest about the 'taken-for-granted' norms that had often been unnoticed, unquestioned, and unchallenged in my life, in the participants' community, and even in other settings in South Africa and beyond. (Here I acknowledge that 'other settings' were beyond the immediate scope of the study.)

9.5 Review of the Thesis

To present the information, data, findings, and arguments in this thesis in a chronological and constructive manner, I organised it into nine chapters. In **Chapter One,** I introduced the study by discussing the background and giving a general overview of the thesis. In **Chapter Two,** I reviewed the literature on young people's constructions of love in dating relationships. It was through my robust engagement with the literature that I approached the data collection and analysis processes while being mindful that, influenced by several factors, girls enact love in particular ways. The literature I reviewed further revealed that these young persons' understandings of love might make them vulnerable to GBV. The conceptual framework that I developed based on this review informed the main research question and the two sub-questions that I posed. In **Chapter Three,** I deliberated on how I would merge the tenets of social constructionism with the social constructionist theory of gender to develop a theoretical framework that would guide my data analysis process. This merger ultimately enabled me to explore how rural schoolgirls understood love in dating relationships. In **Chapter Four,** I presented the research design and discussed the methodological approach I had used to address the research questions.

I dedicated **Chapters Five to Eight** to the findings that emerged from the data. Although 80 girls originally

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showed interest in the study, 23 participants were ultimately recruited. The process of data analysis was organised into two phases. First, to make sense of the data, I used a form of narrative analysis in which I reconstructed the 23 participants' stories by synthesising the texts that each girl generated based on the letters they had written, the collages they had created, and the artefacts they had discussed. When people tell their stories, they often "do not present them in a chronological sequence" (Creswell, 2007, p. 56). Therefore, I utilised the re-storying process to extract the links that existed among the ideas expressed in the girls' texts. Re-storying meant reorganising the stories into a framework that made sense (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Creswell, 2007). Throughout my interaction with the girls' data sources, I never lost sight of the phenomenon of focus, which was their understanding of love in dating relationships. Therefore, the reconstruction of their stories called for my careful decisions as a researcher to ensure that the reconstructed narrative accounts provided answers to the research questions. I therefore did not attempt "to provide a complete account of everything every participant [had] conveyed" (Wong & Breheny, 2018, p. 258). These re-storied accounts of the 23 participants are presented in Chapter Five, which was the foundation for level two of the data analysis process (Chapters Six, Seven and Eight) that addressed the critical research questions.

In the second phase of data analysis I employed thematic analysis. In this process, data were extracted from the 23 stories that I had developed through the re-storying process to respond to the key research questions. I followed an inductive process, which is defined as "reasoning from specific to general" (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p. 196). After I had analysed each participant's narratives to extract data that responded to the research questions, I looked across the 23 stories for data that captured common patterns of shared meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). I then organised the data into various categories, moving from the specific to the general. This helped me to identify, analyse, organise, describe, and report the themes that were generated from the participants' narratives.

Thematic analysis was a three-step process. First, I transcribed and scrutinised the 23 stories I had developed in Phase One, and I analysed data that addressed the first critical research question: *How do rural schoolgirls understand love in dating relationships?* This step was covered in **Chapter Six** where I drew on the reconstructed stories generated in Chapter Five to explore how the girls understood love in dating relationships. This step produced multiple discourses of love as they emerged from the schoolgirls' narratives. The data that emerged from the second step of thematic analysis were presented in **Chapter Seven.** The findings that emerged addressed the second critical research question: *What factors influence*

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rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships? In this step, I identified and discussed the factors that influenced the girls' discourses of love that had emerged in Chapter Six. The data that emerged from the third and last step of thematic analysis were presented and discussed in **Chapter Eight**. I analysed these data across the two critical research questions and, informed by the literature and the theoretical framework, I explored the links between rural schoolgirls' understandings of love and their vulnerability to GBV. Thus, In Chapter Eight I addressed the main research question: *How might rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships influence their vulnerability to gender-based violence?*

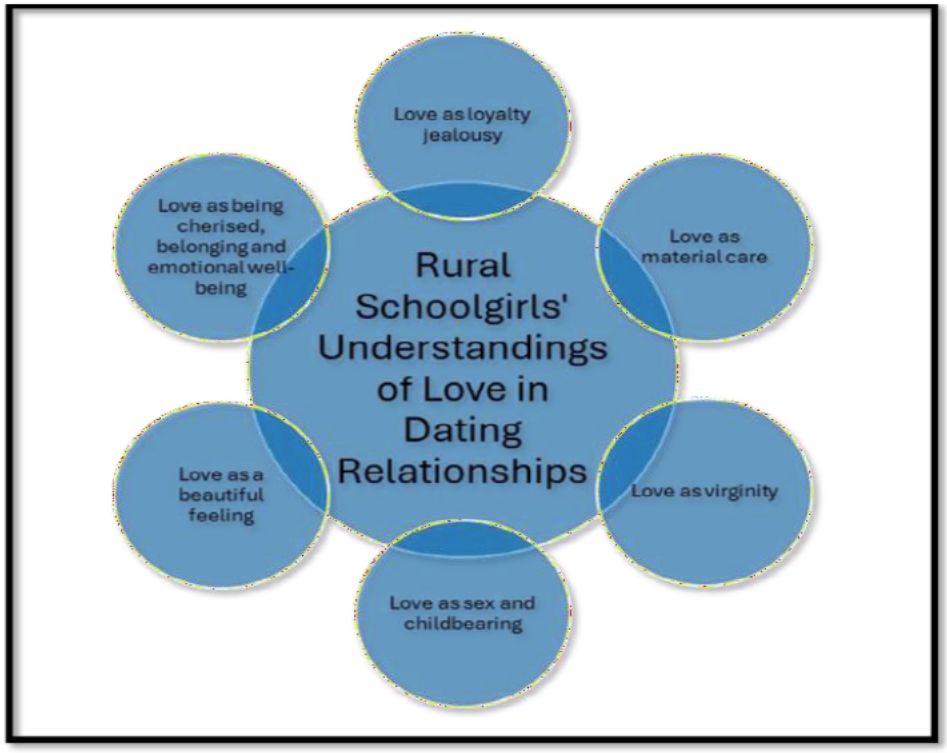
Chapter Nine concludes this thesis with my reflections on the study's contributions and implications for policy, practice, and future research.

9.5.1 Rural Schoolgirls' Understandings of Love in Dating Relationships

To address the first research question (*How do rural schoolgirls understand love in dating relationships?*), I first engaged the participants in a series of workshops using letter writing, collage-making, and artefact retrieval. From the girls' notes on their collages and artefacts, transcripts of audio recordings of their presentations, and their letters, I developed the 23 re-storied accounts. In line with the social constructionist view of reality which maintains that there is no single objective truth or reality (Stam, 2001), the thematic analysis of the participants' stories allowed me to identify evidence of the six discourses of love in their stories (see **Chapter Six**). Figure 9.1 summarises these discourses.

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Figure 9. 1: ***Rural Schoolgirls' Discourses of Love in Dating Relationships***



Surprisingly, while the findings resonated with the existing literature, there were discourses that were not there that one would have expected to emerge (particularly love as force and love as fear). For instance, one participant even stated:

> *Now, I've started living my soft life, without judges and rulers in it. Now, I'm around someone who loves me and who will never lay a hand on me. We are happy together. We don't want a lecture.*

Whether this was true and will remain so was beyond the scope of this study. However, as discussed above, some of the naivety and the entanglement with cultural scripts of femininity and masculinity that were evident in the discourses of love elicited from the participants' narratives (e.g., love as jealousy, love as loyalty, and others) could potentially expose the girls to or make them vulnerable to GBV in their current or future relationships. This is particularly possible in the context of high GBV rates in rural communities across South Africa.

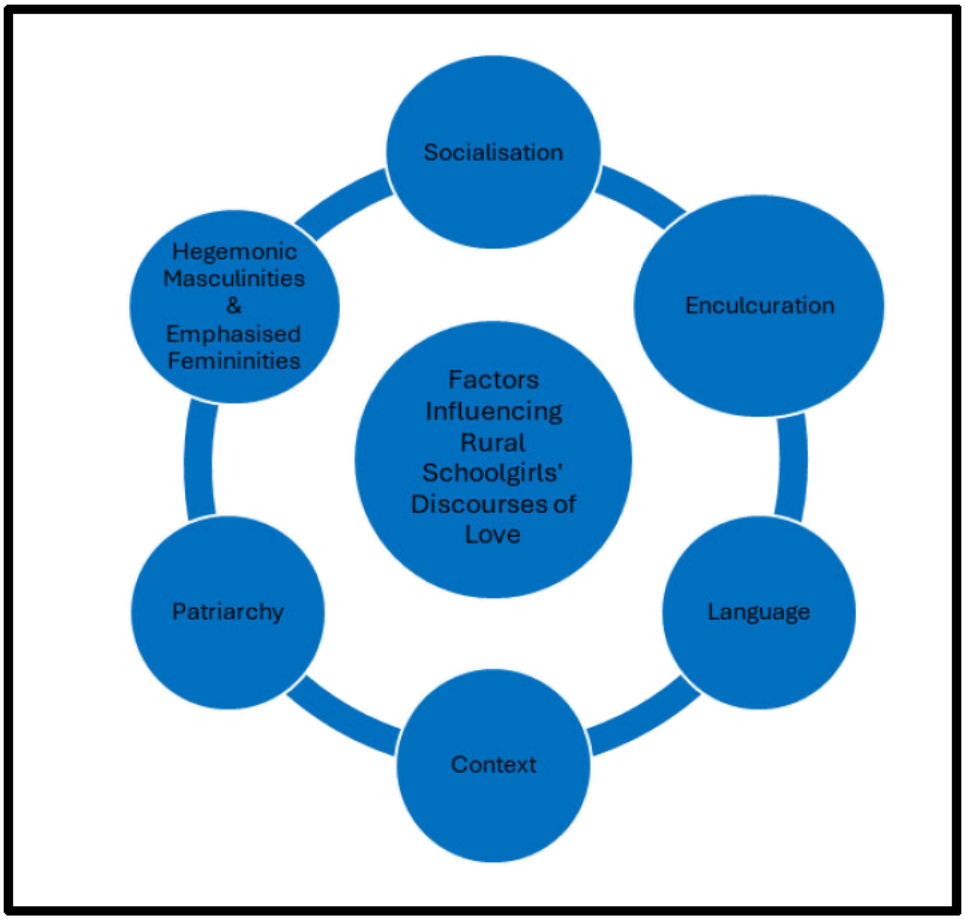
9.5.2 Factors that Influenced the Schoolgirls' Understandings of Love

To address the second research question in the study (*What factors influence rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships?*), I used thematic analysis to analyse data from the collage

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images and fieldnotes, as well as the participants' letters, and the transcripts of the discussions in the artefact retrieval workshops (see Chapter Seven). The findings largely resonated with those of previous researchers, with three broad factors emerging that influenced girls' understandings of love in dating relationships: 1) social interactions; 2) historical and cultural specificity; and 3) the multiple relations of power in the community, the girls' families, and entertainment venues, particularly taverns and shebeens. These in turn accounted for the factors that influenced the discourses of love among the 23 girls in this study, with socialisation, enculturation, language, context, patriarchy, hegemonic masculinities, and emphasised femininities emerging as common themes in their perspectives. Just more than a decade ago, Furphy (2012) reported that "the beliefs and behaviors [sic] of young people are influenced and shaped by cultural, ethnic, historic, economic, familial, social and environmental factors that define appropriate behaviour [sic] and inform expectations for relationships" (p. 37). These factors are summarised in Figure 9.2 below:

Figure 9. 2: ***Factors that Influenced Rural Schoolgirls' Discourses of Love in Dating Relationships***



Surprisingly, while the girls' narratives identified rape and its links to spaces of entertainment where alcohol

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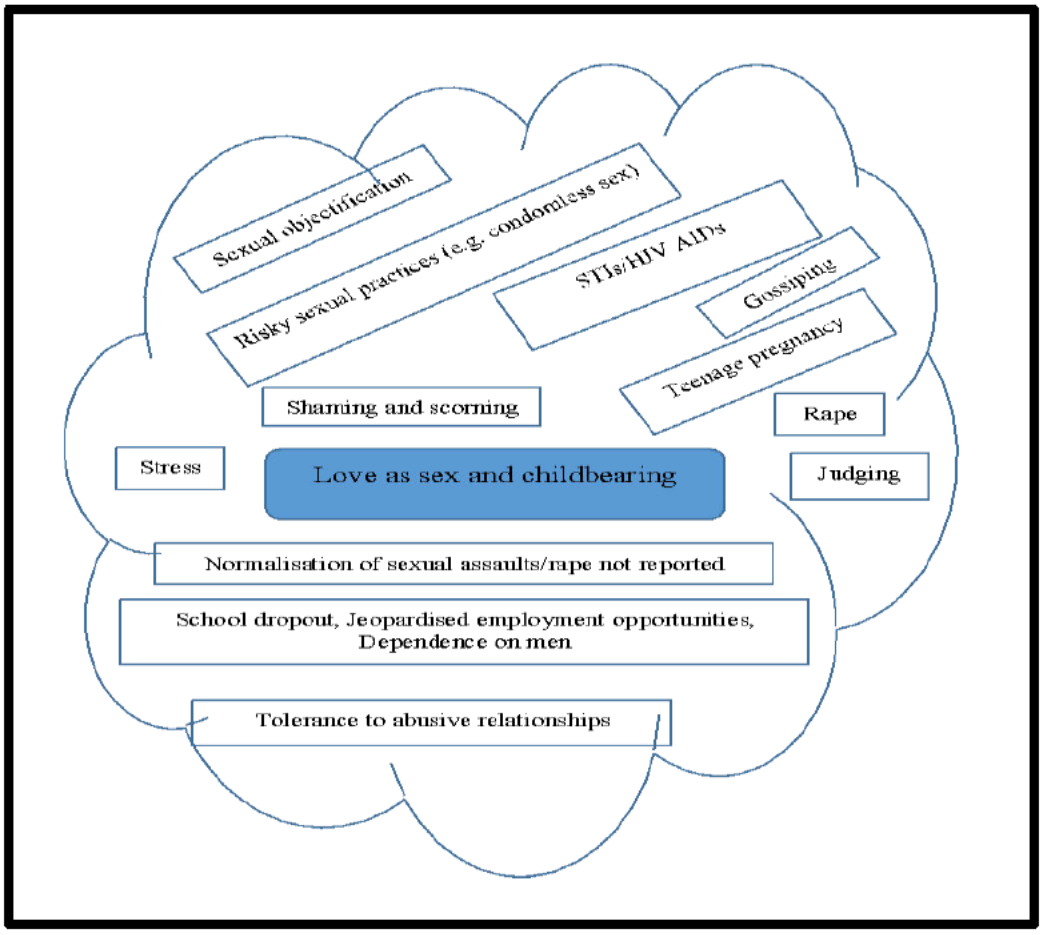
was commonly consumed as a contributing factor, none of the participants reported their boyfriends as perpetrators of any forms of violence. In fact, they were collectively referred to as kind, supportive, desirable, understanding, and handsome.

9.5.3 Discourses of Love and their Influence on Girls' Vulnerability to GBV

The main research question that I posed was: *How do rural schoolgirls' understandings of love influence their vulnerability to gender-based violence?* In the last step of thematic data analysis (see Chapter Eight), I utilised the findings related to the two sub-questions in conjunction with the tenets of the theoretical framework and the findings from the literature to enrich this inquiry that explored how the participants' understandings of love exposed them to GBV. Informed by earlier research, the findings suggest that the participants' understandings of love might expose them to GBV in several ways. To highlight a potential link between the participants' discourses of love and their vulnerability to GBV, one illustrative example from Chapter Eight is reiterated (see Figure 9.3: *How love as sex and childbearing exposes rural schoolgirls to GBV).*

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Figure 9. 3: ***How might the notion of Love as Sex and Childbearing Expose Rural Schoolgirls to GBV?***



Most of the girls in the study understood love as sex, or love as marriage, and both these conceptions implied that proving your love for your partner should culminate in living together, having sexual intercourse, and/or having a child or children, which were concepts that exposed these girls to GBV and potentially negative relational outcomes later in life. For example, such beliefs might lead to unsafe sexual practices and result in unwanted and/or unplanned pregnancies, STIs, and other negative health outcomes for the girl and her baby. Most of the girls desired to move in or had moved in to live with their boyfriends against their parents' wishes, and without family support and resources these girls might drop out of school. This phenomenon has been shown to lead to a lack of access to further educational opportunities, poor educational outcomes, poor economic outcomes, and long-term dependence on men (Dako-Gyeke et al., 2019). Dependence on a man or multiple male partners later might expose girls to GBV, resulting in the repetition of a vicious cycle: poor health and economic outcomes for the mother and poor educational, economic, and health outcomes for the child/ren.

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A surprising finding was the participants' silence around violence perpetrated by their male partners in their own dating relationships, whether fictional or real.

On one hand, it is plausible that the participants in this study might not have personally experienced any violence in their dating relationships. For example, the participants' narratives and visual artefacts identified unknown males in the community as perpetrators of various forms of violence against girls and young women who had deviated from the prevailing social order in this rural community (Dako-Gyeke et al., 2019; Firmin, 2013; Janak et al., 2022; Karandashev, 2015; Moletsane & Ntombela, 2010). On the other hand, their silence on the phenomenon or even the possibility of it occurring stood in stark contrast to the well-documented endemic GBV, particularly against girls, women and other marginalised groups in various communities and institutions in South Africa, including rural neighbourhoods (Jewkes et al., 2010; Mandeni Municipality, 2020; Singh & Myende, 2017). More research is needed to better understand this phenomenon.

9.6 Contributions of the Study

Given the wide scholarly interest in the topic of adolescent love and its threats and outcomes in rural settings, this study offers several contributions to the literature. These include methodological and conceptual contributions that might enhance scholarly insight into the research phenomenon.

9.6.1 Methodological Contributions

My experience in this study have reinforced the importance of creating synergy between the research design and the analytical framework. Such coherence enhances the smooth generation and analysis of data. For example, in line with the interpretivist paradigm and ontology (i.e., how one views reality) (Mack, 2010), I adopted the social constructionist theory which holds that there are multiple truths, and that there might be several understandings about a phenomenon (e.g., love) among participants in the same context (Taylor & Medina, 2013). Epistemologically (i.e., "how one acquires knowledge") (Mack, 2010, p. 5), reality is socially constructed (Edley, 2001; Ponterotto, 2005). To achieve a smooth and meaningful data analysis and knowledge production process, I ensured congruence between the theoretical framework and the research design, including the methods for generating data.

Informed by the research questions, the profile of my participants, my paradigmatic and theoretical location, and my desire to privilege the voices and perspectives of the participants about the phenomenon, I adopted

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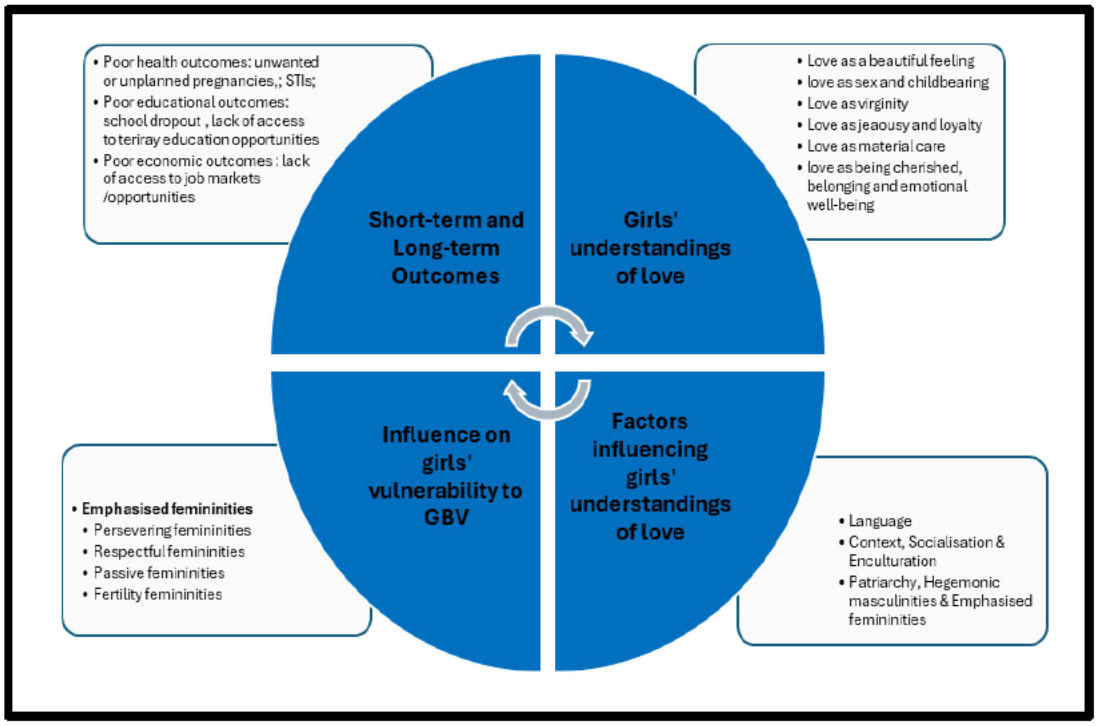
narrative inquiry as a methodological approach and used methods that would be youth friendly. This study, therefore, contributes to the literature on methodologies that facilitate research with young people, particularly when researching challenging issues in contexts of violence where participants might not always feel safe to freely share their perspectives. Using youth-friendly participatory methods such as collage making, artefact retrieval and letter writing proved essential not only as a tool for investigation, but also as an approach for honouring the voices of the youth participants throughout the research. Furthermore, the study contributes to literature that illuminates the importance of carefully selecting data generation methods that are aligned with the needs of young people, particularly those of rural schoolgirls who are the most marginalised population in society. As young people are commonly keen to share their stories with someone they trust, I chose narrative inquiry as it is deemed "a young person-centred research methodology" (Bhana, 2018, p. 21). Considering the age of my participants, it was important to select "good, reliable, youth-friendly" and participatory data generation methods (Parker et al., 2015, p. 3). The letter writing, collage-making, and artefact retrieval workshops enabled them to freely express themselves without the restrictions might be posed by an interview situation with an adult researcher. To illustrate, as they wrote to their imaginary penfriends and engaged in collage-making to depict how they imagined a girl who was loved, the participants generated narratives that would not have been possible if I had relied on the traditional approaches such as interviews and focus group discussions. Using artefact retrieval, the young participants told their stories of love, including how gender norms influenced their understandings of this phenomenon. However, compared to collage-making and letter writing, the narratives generated through artefact retrieval were minimal. In retrospect, and based on my experience of a massive body of data I had to manage during my Master's study (Dube, 2016) and this current study, this method would have worked better with adult participants who would have had a longer history with objects and artefacts.

9.6.2 Conceptual Contributions

First, the study adds to the literature on rural schoolgirls' constructions of love in dating relationships. These conceptual contributions are summarised in Figure 9.4 below:

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Figure 9. 4: ***Conceptual Contributions of the Study***



As Figure 9.4 illustrates, the findings of this study collectively contribute to the literature on girls' discourses of love in dating relationships. The findings corroborate those contained in the conceptual framework that was presented in Chapter Two. Literature reviewed in this thesis suggests that girls, informed by what they learn through socialisation, construct multiple perceptions of love in their dating relationships. Similarly, the participants in this study had diverse understandings of love and generated different discourses about it (Bhana, 2018; Bittar & Nakano, 2017; Furphy, 2012; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021; Willan et al., 2019). Their discourses included love as sex and childbearing, love as purity/virginity, love as money/material care, love as companionship/being cherished, belonging and emotional well-being, love as marriage, love as a beautiful feeling, love as jealousy, love as loyalty, and love as omnipotent.

Second, the thesis specifically identifies patriarchal bargaining as a factor that influences girls' vulnerability to GBV. Patriarchal bargaining refers to the tactics or strategies that are employed by women to challenge patriarchy, and this happens under very constraining conditions (Kandiyoti, 1988). As bargaining is entrenched in the rules that are imposed by men, the latter always resist women's efforts to achieve equity so that they maintain patriarchal stability and perpetuate the gendered order to ensure patriarchal dividends (Connell, 1987). It was clear that the participants had to navigate their dating relationships while "bargaining with patriarchal systems" (Alwedinani, 2017, p. 11), while men tended to gain from the oppressive gender and patriarchal order (Kandiyoti, 1988). This was evident in the numerous occasions

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when the participants had to adhere to patriarchal terms when they navigated their dating relationships. This ensured that men never lost their patriarchal dividend as fathers, adult caregivers, and male siblings. It was noteworthy that brothers also engaged in patriarchal bargaining regarding girls' heterosexual dating. Moreover, every instance of patriarchal bargaining was always at the expense of the girl's happiness, as fathers and brothers manipulated the girls so that they would maintain their patriarchal dividend. Girls faced harsh sanctions when their fathers and brothers intervened in their romantic choices, and they insisted on the payment of *ilobolo* as they and not the girl would benefit from it. Harsh sanctions by the girls' families included confiscation of their cell phones, being beaten by multiple members of the family, and being locked in for days. On several occasions, young the girls reported delaying their dating plans (moving in with their boyfriends) as they succumbed to their families' demands and wishes.

This study also recorded instances where the girls' bargaining demonstrated a great degree of agency as they maintained that they would not succumb to the patriarchal order. For instance, some participants stood their ground against the oppressive gendered demand for virginal purity by not participating in rituals or ceremonies meant only for girls who had maintained their virginity. This was accompanied by harsh and demeaning sanctions as discussed above. On the other hand, due to the embedded and internalised gender order, even where participants were engaged in patriarchal bargaining, they were caught in the middle of gender regimes. For example, a girl felt compelled to drop out of school as she was pregnant. However, while bargaining against dependence on men by picking up the pieces and going back to school so that she could find employment one day and afford caring for her child, she was still adamant to stay in an age-disparate relationship as she deemed it important that the man should maintain his authority in the relationship. This demonstrated mixed feelings during the bargaining process, which exposed the girl's vulnerability to GBV.

Thirdly, the study contributes to deepening and contextualising our understanding of emphasised femininities (as first conceptualised by Connell, 1987) and their influence on rural schoolgirls' understandings of love and their vulnerability to GBV. As Figure 9.4 suggests, discourses of love constitute and are constituted by prevailing gender regimes and various forms of emphasised femininities (Connell, 1987; Connell, 2012) that inspire and encourage girls and young women. These include, among others, persevering femininities, respectful femininities, passive femininities, and fertility femininities. First, persevering femininities perpetuated by the omnipotence view encourage the girls to tolerate any hardships in their love relationships. Consequently, they build resilience to intimate partner violence in dating relationships as they maintain that "love supports everything" (Ferriani et al., 2019, p. 3). Secondly, due to

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respectful femininities, girls believe that a man must have authority in the relationship. Thirdly, passive femininities that are closely associated with respectful femininities render girls and women submissive to men as the latter are viewed as the authoritative figures and decision-makers. Hence, girls tend not to question any decisions imposed by their male partners. This form of femininity also entails sexual passivity, which is enforced through the demand for girls' virginal purity. Fourthly, fertility femininities stress the importance of having children (Leclerc-Madlala, 2001).

Due to these emphasised femininities, girls succumb to patriarchal hegemonic masculinities and normalise and expose themselves to various forms of GBV. These include teenage marriage, gendered subordination, risky sexual practices, unprotected sex, and sexual objectification. In turn, these circumstances further expose girls to STIs, rape, shaming, scorning, teenage pregnancy, and other many more violent sexual-related experiences. Particularly, the fertility femininity that informs the notion of love as childbearing has sadly been found to lead to the normalisation of sexual offenses like rape. It was interesting to note that none of the participants alluded to rape or any other form of GBV or harm, but some admitted that rape was rife in this rural community. Conversely, the girls admitted that many young females wished to fall pregnant and admitted that many competed for 'this honour'. The study also revealed that, due to respectful femininities, girls subjected themselves to age-disparate love relationships in which the male asserted authority. This means that these girls were highly vulnerable to GBV as they would have no say in critical matters that negatively impacted their prospects for a good future.

Passive femininities were closely associated with respectful femininities as this perspective also potentially exposed the girls to GBV. They were so trusting of their boyfriends that they respected and trusted their wishes, irrespective of the consequences for their future. In fact, the girls were so vulnerable due to passive femininities that none had reported any violence imposed on them. Similarly, persevering femininities made the girls tolerant of any form of GBV, regardless of their awareness of incidences of rape and violence in their community.

9.7 Reflections on the Study

As I approach the finishing line of this doctoral journey, I pause, look back, and reflect on every strip of the long road, starting from putting together the research proposal to the completion of the thesis. If I had the privilege of again addressing the panel of lecturers and professors who sat for my proposal defence on 1 August 2019, I would boldly exclaim: "I did it, just as I pledged I would!" While I acknowledge some of

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limitations in this, nothing excites me more than observing how the synergy between my research design and my analytical framework made this research journey a success story. Having addressed all the research questions and provided the evidence (a collection of appendices), this study has been a worthy effort. As I reflect on my research proposal defence report, almost six years later, I am still thrilled that the panel declared that my proposal showed great potential for being an original contribution.

Of course, I cannot shy away from the ups and downs of the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, less than a month after receiving my long-awaited authorisation to commence data generation. This was the most frustrating moment as it implied unanticipated delays and restrictions on data generation sessions as well as the additional management of pandemic-related protocols. This was a trying time that taught me to think outside the box. Due to COVID 19 regulations, I learnt to explore electronic tools for analysing some of the data (e.g., my participants' biographic data). Despite these limitations, involving young girls in this study who had all the zeal I required for co-generating the knowledge addressing the research questions was the most rewarding experience in my doctoral journey. Using participatory methods such as collage making and letter writing, unearthed voices and stories I believe I would never have accessed had I used the traditional methods such as interviews or surveys.

Finally, this doctoral experience has inspired me to view reality differently. Since I began this journey, I have been conscious, both in my doctoral studies and in my work as an educational manager, of the social constructionist call to be critical of the common-sense view of reality and to be continuously reflexive and constructively critical. This research has indeed initiated my academic, professional, and social metamorphosis.

9.8 Implications

Consistent with available research, the findings from this study affirm that the vulnerability of girls and young women to gendered violence is a major concern in South Africa, including in rural areas in as it impacts their health outcomes and future (Bhana, 2018; Furman et al., 1999; Giddens, 1997; Wood et al., 2007). In particular, a key finding from the study captures a troubling portrait of a group of rural schoolgirls' notions of love in their dating relationships and the discourses they generated, which seems to normalise unequal gender norms that privilege boys over girls. Informed by the theoretical framework and the literature reviewed in thesis, my analysis of these discourses suggests that unless these trends are disrupted, the participants and others around them could become vulnerable to GBV, if not in their current dating

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relationships, later as adult women. Thus, the findings from this doctoral study have several important implications for policy and practice.

9.8.1 Implications for Improving Policy and Practice

To disrupt the everyday discourses of love like the ones the girls in this study communicated, several policy interventions are needed. These include, among others, ensuring adequate and appropriate training of teachers for the implementation of the Life Skills and Life Orientation curricula, especially the Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) component, which many teachers often find challenging to teach (see for example, Macleod, & du Plessis, 2024; Venketsamy, 2023). As the literature suggests, such interventions would have to start by interrogating the teachers' own values and sexualities, and their influence on how they might understand their learners' needs and the curriculum (Vanwesenbeeck,.et al., 2016).

Linked to the CSE curriculum is the need for a multi-pronged approach that involves non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community leaders, and law enforcement agencies, parents, community members and learners (boys and girls) who come together to learn about young people's sexual and reproductive health (SRH) needs and co-develop
strategies that directly respond according to the context and the expressed needs of the target population.

A worrying but not surprising finding from the study is that in their narratives of love, the girls identified schools as spaces of violence as they compel pregnant girls to drop out of school. This is despite the South African policy of the Prevention and Management of Learner Pregnancy in Schools, gazetted in 2021, which aims to ensure that pregnant and mothering girls and young women are not excluded in school. This gap between policy and practice in school suggests that School Governing Bodies (SGBs), School Management Teams (SMTs) and the teachers themselves need to be better informed and trained in the proper implementation of this policy.

A further finding from the study suggests the spaces within which girls (and boys) navigate their dating relationships might expose them to GBV. These include taverns and shebeens (where alcohol is sold, including, often to minors), or spaces that are hidden from adults in the family and community (as unsanctioned dating is often frowned upon in this and other rural communities). This has implications for quality LO curriculum, better policing and law enforcement, and community involvement and monitoring. Linked to this, as part of the responsibility of the local government and community leaders, poor

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infrastructure and resources in the community, especially for young people (e.g., entertainment spaces, safe transportation, etcetera) need to be prioritised if young people are to make choices about where to go and what to do for leisure.

9.8.2 Implications for Future Research

The study analysed in this thesis focused on a small group of girls in one rural school in KwaZulu-Natal. The girls' understandings of love in their dating relationships and the discourses emanating from them have painted a worrying picture about the normalisation of unequal gender norms and GBV in this rural community. While the findings have the addressed the two research questions posed in this study (1) *How do rural schoolgirls understand love in dating relationships? 2) What factors influence rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships?*), several questions remain unanswered and new ones have emerged, implications for future research.

First, the findings suggest a need for longitudinal research. In this study, the link between the girls' understandings of love in dating relationships (and related discourses) and unequal gender norms and their potential vulnerability to GBV is associative (i.e., it is associated with their understandings of love) and not empirically based. Further research is needed that will examine the link. Such research could involve longitudinal studies that follow a cohort of girls over time to ascertain whether and how their understandings of love in their dating relationships might make them vulnerable to GBV.

Second, from the findings in this study, a need for participatory action research has become apparent. While participants in this study displaced some agency in identifying strategies for preventing and addressing GBV in their community, some of the strategies they recommended were reflective of, normalised and reproduced the very violence they were seeking to eradicate (for example, suggesting that perpetrators of GBV be killed). This suggests a need for action research that will involve girls in understanding the nature, causes and consequences of violence more generally, and those of GBV specifically. From these understandings, participants could then co-develop strategies for social change, including community-level policymaking and programming. It is only when GBV is understood in context, and from the perspectives of those affected that strategies that work can be developed and successfully implemented.

9.9 Conclusion

Premised on the view that girls' understandings of love are likely to make them vulnerable to GBV, the

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study analysed in this thesis addressed the question: *How might rural schoolgirls' understandings of love in dating relationships influence their vulnerability to gender-based violence?* The literature reviewed in the thesis suggests that multiple factors such as, among others, context, socialisation, enculturation, language, and social norms (e.g., how girls are socialised and positioned in relation to boys, men and adults in general), impact the way they understand and enact romantic love (Carter, 2014).

The study used youth-friendly participatory methods (collage-making, letter writing and artefact retrieval) to investigate the participants' constructions of love in dating relationships and the factors that influence their understandings. Replacing traditional interviews with youth-friendly participatory methodologies ensured the generation of rich data and allowed my participants to freely express their views. The methods enabled me to question "the normative assumptions that could have been taken at face value" and to step "out of a cultural framework" and interrogate the truth as the girls perceived it (Gilligan, 2015, p. 73). Given that the participants in this study are among the most marginalised groups in the country (and the world) as Black women and rural girls, as their "freedom of speech has been more limited than others' throughout history" (Kinnunen, 2022, p. 53), I had to think carefully about my research design and methods. The participatory methods I used in this study enabled the girls to voice their understandings of and to challenge some commonly held beliefs about love, dating and other issues in the community.

Drawing on the social constructionist theory of gender, my analysis of the 23 participants' understandings of love in their dating relationships yielded six discourses of love:

1. love as a beautiful feeling
2. love as material care
3. love as being cherished, belonging, and emotional well-being
4. love as loyalty and jealousy
5. love as virginity and
6. love as sex and childbearing.

Further, confirming findings from available literature, in this study, understandings of love were influenced by such factors as context, socialisation, enculturation, language, unequal gender norms that privilege men and boys over women and girls, hegemonic masculinities and emphasised femininities. Informed by these discourses and the theoretical framework in this study, this thesis asserts that the girls' understandings of love in their dating relationships are likely to expose them to GBV. Unless these understandings and discourses are disrupted and alternatives taught and practiced, unequal gender will remain entrenched and consequently, GBV will continue unabated.

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I conclude this doctoral journey as a different person than when I started. The lessons I learned from conducting this research, not only from the broad and deep reading of the literature, but more importantly, the invaluable conversations I held with the 23 participants, have forever changed my outlook on life and ways of doing and being in the various professional and personal spaces I navigate. These experiences have disrupted and continue to unsettle many of my taken-for-granted perspectives on issues (Biesta, 2008), unearthing intriguing contradictions, multiplicities, and complexities in the lived experiences of the participants in this study. It is from this unsettling knowledge (Foucault, 1988) that my growth as a scholar became possible and will hopefully continue to grow.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Letter Writing

Project title: Girls' Constructions of Love in Dating Relationships: A Narrative Study in a Rural KwaZulu-Natal Secondary School.

Dear Participant

Assume you have just received a letter from a penfriend who lives overseas. Over the next two months, you are requested to write her/him letters covering the following:

Letter 1

- Accepting her/him as a friend
- Introduction of who you are (e.g. name, age, family history, hobbies, how you spend your leisure time, etc.)
- Describing the place where you stay
- Your school
- Your friend or friends you wish to introduce to him/her. You may talk more about the relationship you enjoy with your friend or friends. This may include things that make you to be friends.
- Other than letter writing, indicate if there is another form of communication means you would prefer in future. If there is, what is it?

Letter 2

- Why would you be so much in love, such that you decide to move in with your boyfriend, even if this could be against the will of your parents?

Letter 3

- Where/Who do you dream to be in years to come as an adult?
- How do you plan to achieve your dreams?

Letter 4

- The things you like the best in your life and that you wish your friend could experience.
- Things that you would wish to change in your life if you were in control.

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Letter 5

- Share social events that are common in your community. Do you have any specific likes or dislikes for these? Also, give reasons for your feelings about these events.
- Describe the situation regarding gender-based violence in your area. What is responsible for the situation? What do you think should be done to improve this?

In your letters, you may include photos you would like your friend to see. In case of this, use a camera to take those pictures of those photos, so that you do not send/lose your original photos.

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Appendix B

Ukubhala Incwadi

Isihloko socwaningo: Izindlela amantombazane aluqonda ngazo uthando ebudlelwaneni bokuqomisana: Ucwaningo lokulandisa esikoleni sasemakhaya samabanga aphezulu KwaZulu-Natali.

Mfundi othandekayo

Zicabange ngamehlo engqondo usanda kuthola incwadi evela kumngani ohlala phesheya kwezilwandle. Ezinyangeni ezimbili ezizayo, uyacelwa ukuba umbhalele izincwadi ezihlanganisa lokhu okulandelayo:

Incwadi yokuqala

- Ukumemukela njengomngane
- Ukuzethula ukuthi ungubani (isb. Igama, iminyaka yakho, umlando womndeni, izinto ozikhonzile zokuzilibazisa, ukuthi usichitha kanjani isikhathi sakho sokuzilibazisa, njll.)
- Ukuchaza indawo ohlala kuyo
- Isikole sakho
- Umngane okanye abangani bakho ofisa ukubethula kuye. Ungaxoxa kabanzi ngobudlelwane obujabulela nalo mngane okanye abangani bakho. Lokhu kungahlanganisa nezinto ezenza nibe abangane.
- Ngaphandle kokubhala izincwadi, bonisa ukuthi ngabe ikhona yini enye indlela yokuxhumana eningayisebenzisa esikhathini esizayo? Uma ikhona, ngabe iyiphi?

Incwadi yesibili

- Kungani ungaba sothandweni kangangokuba uze uthathe isinqumo sokuhlala nesoka lakho, noma isithandwa sakho, noma lokhu kungase kuphambane nentando yabazali bakho?

Incwadi yesithathu

- Uziphupha ukuphi okukanye ungubani eminyakeni ezayo njengomuntu omdala?
- Yini ohlela ukuyenza ukuze kufezeke leli phupho lakho?

Incwadi yesine

- Izinto ozithanda kakhulu empilweni yakho futhi ofisa ukuba nomngane wakho azazi okukanye azijabulele naye.

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- Izinto obungafisa ukuzishintsha empilweni yakho ukube bekusemandleni akho.

Incwadi yesihlanu

- Ake umxoxele ngemicimbi okanye izenzakalo ezivamile emphakathini wakho. Ingabe kukhona okuthandayo noma ongakuthandi ngalezi zenzakalo noma imicimbi/imigubho? Chaza izizathu ezidala le mizwa onayo ngalezi zenzakalo/imicimbi/imigubho.
- Chaza isimo mayelana nobudlova obusekelwe ebulilini endaweni yangakini. Yini ebangela lesi simo? Ucabanga ukuthi yini okufanele yenziwe ukuze isimo sibe ngcono?

Ezincwadini zakho, ungafaka nezithombe ongathanda ukuba umngane wakho azibone. Uma kwenzeka lokhu, sebenzisa ikhamera ukuthatha lezo zithombe, ukuze ungathumeli futhi ulahlekelwe izithombe zakho zoqobo.

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Appendix C

Collage-Making

Project title: Girls' Constructions of Love in Dating Relationships: A Narrative Study in a Rural KwaZulu-Natal Secondary School.

Dear Participant

Please take a few minutes and try to reflect on what you consider to be the best ways you could be shown love as a girl. Use the supplied charts and marking pens; and cut words from the newspapers and magazines to make a collage that captures the following words:

"Oh Gosh! This girl is really loved!"

When you have completed the collage, you will be given an opportunity to briefly explain why you think it shows a girl that you consider to be loved. In preparation for your presentation, briefly write your explanation in writing and attach it to your collage.

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Appendix D

Ukwenza Ikholaji

Isihloko socwaningo: Izindlela amantombazane aluqonda ngazo uthando ebudlelwaneni bokuqomisana: Ucwaningo lokulandisa esikoleni sasemakhaya samabanga aphezulu KwaZulu-Natali.

Mfundi

Uyacelwa ukuba uthathe imizuzu embalwa, uzame ukucabanga ngezindlela ongakhonjiswa ngazo uthando njengentombazane. Sebenzisa amashadi ahlinzekiwe namapeni okumaka; futhi usike amagama emaphephandabeni nakomagazini wenze ikholaji evumelana nala magama alandelayo:

“Ish’ mame! Le ntombazane ithandwa ngempela!”

Uma usuqedile ukwenza ikholaji, uzonikwa ithuba lokuchaza kafushane ukuthi kungani ucabanga ukuthi ikholaji yakho iveza isithombe sentombazane ethandwa ngempela.

Uyacelwa ukuba ubuye ube yingxenye yezingxoxo zeqembu lapho nicwaninga wonke ama-kholaji enizobe seniwenzile nozakwenu. Njengeqembu niyocelwa ukuba nichaze mayelana ne-kholaji ngayinye ukuthi kungani nithi iveza isithombe sentombazane ethandwa ngempela.

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Appendix E

Artefact Retrieval

Project title: Girls' Constructions of Love in Dating Relationships: A Narrative Study in a Rural KwaZulu-Natal Secondary School.

Dear Participant

Artefacts are objects that have a meaning to individuals associated with them. These may be pieces of objects of any kind, including old pictures, old documents (such as letters, cards, certificates, etc.), newspapers, to mention a few.

Choose an object or artefact (a picture, a present you were given for a holiday or an occasion, or that your family owns) that means something or has great value to you or your family. Think of any three events/functions/ceremonies your chosen artefact reminds you of and why you value it. Use a camera to take a picture of that artefact in case you are not able to bring it to our session.

Tell a story related to your artefact, covering the following:

1. The event/function/ceremony it is related to.
2. What it symbolizes to you in respect of your life history.
3. Where and how you got it.
4. From whom it is.
5. How old it is.
6. Why you chose it.
7. What feeling/s is/are brought by the artefact in question.

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Appendix F

Ukubuyisa Ubuciko

Isihloko socwaningo: Izindlela amantombazane aluqonda ngazo uthando ebudlelwaneni bokuqomisana: Ucwaningo lokulandisa esikoleni sasemakhaya samabanga aphezulu KwaZulu-Natali.

Mfundi

Ama-Artefacti yizinto ezisho okuthile okubalulekile kubantu ezibathintayo. Angahlanganisa noma yini kulokhu okulandelayo: kungaba izinto zanoma iluphi uhlobo okuhlanganisa izithombe, amadokhumenti amadala (njengezincwadi, amakhadi, izitifiketi, njll.), amaphephandaba, nokunye.

Khetha into okanye i- artefacti (okungaba isithombe, isipho owasiphiwa ngeholide limbe noma isenzakalo, noma okungesomndeni wakini) esisho lukhulu noma esiyigugu kuwe noma emndenini wakini. Zama ukucabanga nganoma yimiphi imicimbi/imigubho/imikhosi emithathu oyikhumbulayo uma ubona uma ubona le-artefacti, noma isizathu esenza ibe yigugu kuwe noma emndenini wakini. Sebenzisa ikhamera ukuthwebula le-artefacti uma ungeke ukwazi ukuza nayo lapho sihlanganyela khona.

Xoxa indaba ehlobene ne-artefacti, ihlanganise lokhu okulandelayo:

1. Umcimbi/isenzakalo/umgubho ohlobene nayo.
2. Isho ukuthini kuwe mayelana nomlando wakho?
3. Wayithola kuphi futhi kanjani?
4. Wayithola kubani?
5. Inesikhathi esingakanani?
6. Kungani ukhethe yona?
7. Yimuphi umuzwa noma imizwa evuswa yile-artefacti?

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Appendix G

Unstructured Face-to-Face Interview

Project title: Girls' Constructions of Love in Dating Relationships: A Narrative Study in a Rural KwaZulu-Natal Secondary School.

Dear Participant

You are kindly requested to avail yourselves at least once in the next three months so that you can give me clarity on some of the things that I may have not understood in your collage, letters, or artefacts.

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Appendix H

Ingxoxo Evulekile

Isihloko socwaningo: Izindlela amantombazane aluqonda ngazo uthando ebudlelwaneni bokuqomisana: Ucwaningo lokulandisa esikoleni sasemakhaya samabanga aphezulu KwaZulu-Natali.

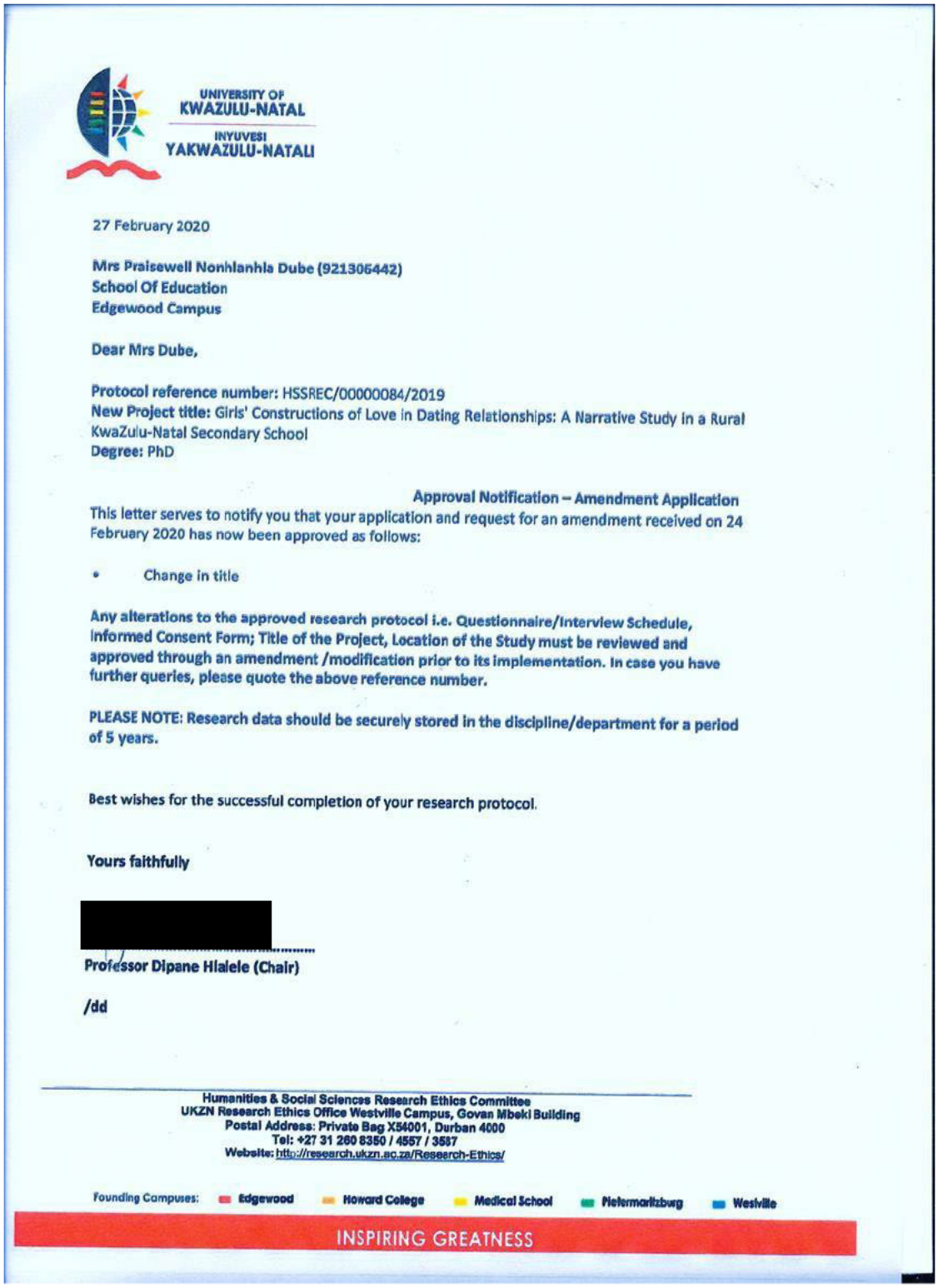
Mfundi

Ezinyangeni ezintathu ezizayo, uyanxuswa ukuba uzenze utholakale okungenani kanye, ukuze ungicacisele noma yini engingase ngingayiqondi kahle nge-kholaji, izincwadi noma ama-artefacti akho.

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Appendix I

Ethical Clearance



UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL
INYUVESI YAKWAZULU-NATALI

27 February 2020

Mrs Praisewell Nonhlanhla Dube (921306442)
School Of Education
Edgewood Campus

Dear Mrs Dube,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00000084/2019
New Project title: Girls' Constructions of Love in Dating Relationships: A Narrative Study in a Rural KwaZulu-Natal Secondary School
Degree: PhD

Approval Notification – Amendment Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application and request for an amendment received on 24 February 2020 has now been approved as follows:

- Change in title

Any alterations to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form; Title of the Project, Location of the Study must be reviewed and approved through an amendment /modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research protocol.

Yours faithfully

[redacted]
Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
UKZN Research Ethics Office Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building
Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000
Tel: +27 31 260 8350 / 4557 / 3587
Website: http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics/

Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

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Appendix J

Parent's/Guardian's Consent Form

[redacted]

Warrenton

KwaDukuza

4449

03 March 2021

Dear parent/guardian of …….....….....

Request for permission for child to participate in research.

My name is Nonhlanhla Dube. I am a student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I am conducting research on girls' constructions of love in dating relationships in a rural KwaZulu-Natal Secondary School. The purpose of conducting research is to get answers to questions. In this case, the question I would like to get an answer for is: *In what ways do girls' constructions of love in dating relationships influence their vulnerability to GBV?*

I hereby kindly request you to allow your child to participate in this research. If you agree to my request, I will further request that you give written consent to your child to participate. Once you have granted her permission, she also has the right to decide whether she would like to participate or not.

The need to conduct this study has arisen because girls in South Africa are subjected to gender-based violence. This is a societal concern, since this deprives girls of opportunities to enjoy childhood and sometimes it even takes their lives. We can only be in a position of helping girls if we understand how their constructions of love influence their vulnerability to gender-based violence.

During this study, your child will participate in the following: letter writing, collage inquiry, artefact retrieval and unstructured oral interview. All these will be explained in detail to your child. I assure you that the study will not compromise your child's learning time as it will be conducted after school hours. These activities will be completed during a period of four months, commencing in April 2021 and will take place at a time and venue convenient to you and your child.

Your child's name will not be written anywhere, except in the assent form she will sign if she agrees to participate. Even your name, will only appear on the consent form that you will sign to give permission for your child to participate. Not writing your name and your child's name anywhere ensures anonymity and confidentiality.

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There are no risks associated with participating in this study. Participation is entirely voluntary, and if the participant refuses to participate there will be no penalty. She is also free to discontinue participation at any time without any penalty or punishment. Every effort will be made to keep personal information confidential. The results for this study may be published, but as earlier stated; names of participants will not appear in the findings.

Thanking you for your assistance

…….

Praisewell Nonhlanhla Dube (Mrs.)

Contact Details:

Email : [redacted]

Tel (Work) : [redacted]

Cell : [redacted]

Supervisor's details:

Name : **Prof. Relebohile Moletsane**

Institution : **University of KwaZulu-Natal (Edgewood)**

Email : **moletsaner@ukzn.ac.za**

Tel (Work) : [redacted]

Cell : [redacted]

Manager Research Ethics' details:

Tel. No. : [redacted]

Email : [redacted]

PARENT/GUARDIAN INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of study: Girls' Constructions of Love in Dating Relationships: A Narrative Study in a Rural KwaZulu-Natal Secondary School.

Authorization:

I…… (Full Names), hereby confirm and agree that my child .....can take part in the study on: Girls' Constructions of Love in Dating Relationships: A Narrative Study in a Rural KwaZulu-Natal Secondary School.

I fully understood the information that has been provided by the researcher about the study and was given the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions about the study.

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I fully understand that my child's participation in this study is voluntary, and she can withdraw from the study at any time and will not be questioned why she no longer wants to take part.
I understand that the findings of this study can be published, but my child's names will not be used.
I grant my child permission to participate in the study.

Signature of the Parent/ Guardian_____

Date_____

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Appendix K

Isicelo Semvume Yomzali /Yomqaphi Womntwana Ukuba Abambe Iqhaza Ocwaningweni

[redacted]

Warrenton

KwaDukuza

4449

03 March 2021

Mzali / Mnakekeli othandekayo ka …….....

Isicelo semvume yokuthi umntwana abambe iqhaza ocwaningweni.

Igama lami nginguNonhlanhla Dube. Ngingumfundi eNyuvesi yaKwaZulu-Natali. Ngenza ucwaningo olumayelana nokuthi amantombazane aluqonda kanjani uthando lokuqomisana esikoleni sasemakhaya samabanga aphezulu KwaZulu-Natali. Inhloso yalolu cwaningo ukuthola izimpendulo zemibuzo. Kulokhu, engingathanda ukuthola impendulo yawo uthi: Izindlela amantombazane aqonda ngazo uthando ebudlelwaneni bokuqomisana zinamthelela muni ekuchayekeni kwawo ebudloveni obusekelwe ebulilini?

Nginesicelo sokuba uvumele umntwana wakho abambe iqhaza kulolu cwaningo. Uma uvumelana nesicelo sami, ngizocela nokuba unikeze umntwana wakho imvume ebhalwe phansi yokuba abambe iqhaza. Lapho usumnikezile imvume, umntwana unelungelo lokunquma ukuthi angathanda yini ukubamba iqhaza noma cha.

Isidingo sokwenza lolu cwaningo siphakanyiswe wukuthi abantwana bamantombazane lapha eNingizimu Afrika babhekene nobudlova obusekelwe ebulilini. Le yinkinga yezenhlalo, ngenxa yokuthi inciphisa amathuba okuba amantombazane ajabulele ubuntwana, kwesinye isikhathi ithatha nezimpilo zawo. Singaba sesimweni sokusiza amantombazane kuphela uma sinomqondo wokuthi izindlela aqonda ngazo uthando ebudlelwaneni bokuqomisana zinamthelela muni ekuchayekeni kwawo ebudloveni obusekelwe ebulilini.

Kulolu cwaningo umntwana wakho uzobamba iqhaza kulokhu okulandelayo: ukubhala izincwadi, ukuphenya nge-Collage, ukubuyisa ubuciko kanye nengxoxo. Konke lokhu kuzochazwa ngokuningiliziwe kumntwana wakho. Ngiyakuqinisekisa ukuthi lolu cwaningo ngeke luphazamise isikhathi somntwana sokufunda, njengoba luzokwenziwa ngemva kwamahora esikole. Le misebenzi izophothulwa esikhathini esiyizinyanga ezine, kusukela ngo-April 2021, futhi izokwenzeka ngesikhathi nasendaweni elungele wena

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nomntwana wakho.

Igama lomntwana wakho angeke libhalwe ndawo, ngaphandle kwalapho esayina evuma ukubamba iqhaza ocwaningweni. Ngisho negama lakho njengomzali, lizovela kuphela kwifomu ozolisayina lapho unikeza umntwana imvume yokuba abambe iqhaza ocwaningweni. Lokhu kungabhalwa kwegama lakho nelomntwana kuqinisekisa ukugcina imininingwane yenu iyimfihlo.

Azikho izingozi ezihambisana nokubamba iqhaza kulolu cwaningo. Ukubamba iqhaza kungokuzithandela ngokuphelele. Kuzokwenziwa konke okusemandleni ukugcina imininingwane yomuntu siqu iyimfihlo. Umntwana ukhululekile ukuyeka ukubamba iqhaza nganoma yisiphi isikhathi. Uma lokhu kwenzeka akunanhlawulo ayoyikhokha futhi akunasijeziso ayobhekana naso. Imiphumela yalolu cwaningo ingashicilelwa, kepha njengoba kushiwo ngaphambili; amagama ababambi-qhaza angeke avezwe embikweni wokutholakele.

Ngiyabonga ngosizo lwakho

…….

Praisewell Nonhlanhla Dube (Nkk.)

Imininingwane Yokuxhumana:

Imeyili: [redacted]

Iselula: [redacted]

Imininingwane ka-Supervisor:

Igama : Prof. Relebohile Moletsane

Inyuvesi : KwaZulu-Natal (Edgewood)

Imeyili : [redacted]

Ucingo : [redacted]

Iselula : [redacted]

Imininingwane yeMenenja yocwaningo (Manager Research Ethics):

Ucingo : [redacted]

Imeyili : [redacted]

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ISIVUMELWANO ESIVELA KUMZALI/KUMQAPHI

Isihloko socwaningo: Izindlela amantombazane aluqonda ngazo uthando ebudlelwaneni bokuqomisana: Ucwaningo lokulandisa esikoleni sasemakhaya samabanga aphezulu KwaZulu-Natali.

Ukugunyaza:

Mina …… (Igama eligcwele nesibongo) ngiyaqinisekisa ukuthi ngiyavuma ukuthi umntwana wami u.....…… ..... angalibamba iqhaza ocwaningweni olumayelana nokuthi:

Izindlela amantombazane aluqonda ngazo uthando ebudlelwaneni bokuqomisana: Ucwaningo lokulandisa esikoleni sasemakhaya samabanga aphezulu KwaZulu-Natali.

Ngiyiqonda ngokugcwele imininingwane enikezwe umcwaningi mayelana nalolu cwaningo, futhi nginikiwe ithuba lokucubungula imininingwane, ngibuze imibuzo mayelana nalolu cwaningo.

Ngikuqonda ngokuphelele ukuthi ukubamba iqhaza komntwana wami kulolu cwaningo kungokuzithandela, nokuthi unelungelo lokuhoxa kulo nganoma yisiphi isikhathi futhi angeke abuzwe ukuthi kungani engasafuni ukuba yingxenye yalo.

Ngiyaqonda ukuthi okutholwe kulolu cwaningo kungashicilelwa, kepha amagama omntwana wami ngeke asetshenziswe.

Ngiyamnika umntwana wami imvume yokubamba iqhaza ocwaningweni.

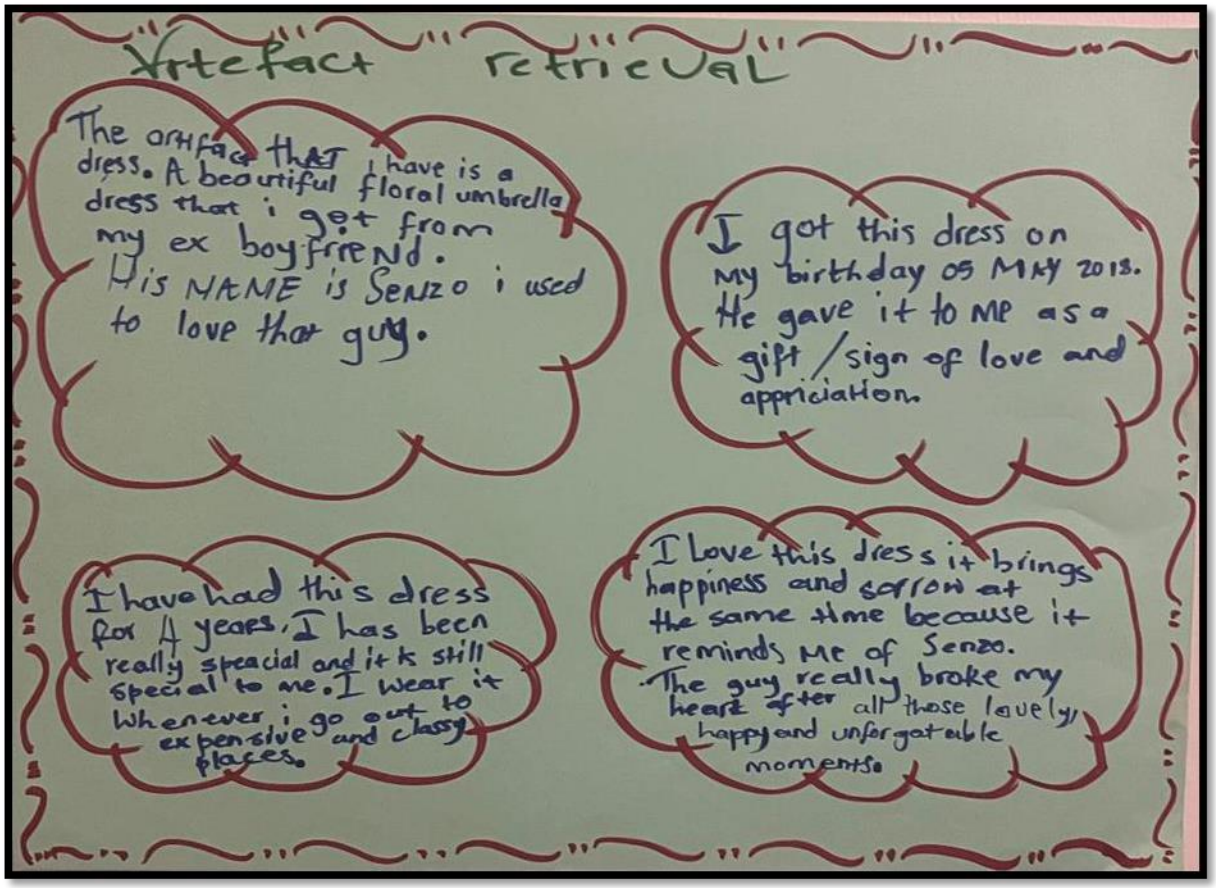
Isiginesha yomzali / umqaphi _____

Usuku_____

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Appendix L

A Participant's Brief Narrative about her Artefact



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Appendix M

Permission from KZN Department of Education

education

Department:
Education
PROVINCE OF KWAZULU-NATAL

Enquiries: Phindile Duma Tel: 033 392 1063/51 Ref.:2/4/8/4010

Ms Praisewell Nonhlanhla Dube
[redacted]
Warrenton
KWADUKUZA
449

Dear Ms Dube

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DoE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: "GIRLS' CONSTRUCTIONS OF LOVE IN DATING RELATIONSHIPS: A NARRATIVE STUDY IN A RURAL KWAZULU-NATAL SECONDARY SCHOOL)", in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education Institutions has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the Intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The period of investigation is limited to the period from 10 January 2020 to 10 January 2022.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Miss Phindile Duma at the contact numbers below.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report/dissertation/thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.

[redacted]

Dr. EV Nzama
Head of Department: Education
Date: 10 January 2020

_Championing Quality Education - Creating and Securing a Brighter Future

KWAZULU-NATAL DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Postal Address: Private Bag X9137 • Pietermaritzburg • 3200 • Republic of South Africa
Physical Address: 247 Burger Street • Anton Lembede Building • Pietermaritzburg • 3201
Tel.: +27 33 392 1063 • Fax.: +27 033 392 1203• Email: Web:www.kzneducation.gov.za
Facebook: KZNDOE....Twitter: @DBE_KZN....Instagram: kzn_education....Youtube:kzndoe

Appendix N

Request for Permission to Conduct Research: School Principal

[redacted]

Warrenton

KwaDukuza

4449

The Principal

.....

.....

.....

.....

25 January 2021

Dear …….....…

Request for permission to conduct research.

I am currently pursuing studies towards a PhD Degree at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. My specialization is in Teacher Development Studies. To fulfil the requirements of the degree I will be conducting a research study titled: *'Girls' Constructions of Love in Dating Relationships: A Narrative Study in a Rural KwaZulu-Natal Secondary School.'*

The objectives of the study are to better understand girls' constructions of love in dating relationships; to understand factors that influence girls' constructions of love in dating relationships; as well as to understand girls' experiences of gender-based violence in their dating relationships. I hope that the findings of my study will assist teachers as well as others interested in girls' lives, figure out how they can assist curb the gender-based violence that they experience. … ..... School, which is under your supervision, has been identified through voluntary inclusion process as a possible site of research for this project to produce data that will help us understand how the schoolgirls' constructions of love affect their learning. I hereby humbly request that you grant me permission to conduct the study.

The data production process will involve thirty girls from your school, drawn from grades eight to eleven. This process will involve personal narratives of the schoolgirls, letter writing, collage inquiry, artefact retrieval and unstructured focus group discussions. I assure you that the study will not compromise teaching and learning time as it will be conducted after school hours. Therefore, it will not interfere with the day-to-day activities of the school. The data collection will extend over a period of four months, commencing in April 2021 and will take place at a time and venue convenient to the schoolgirls as participants. The participants will be apprised of the research process, their participation and their rights in the research processes, through the informed assent form. Their assent as well as the

permission will be sought from their parents prior to their participation in the data collection process. The research is scheduled to take place once permission has been granted by you and the parents of participants. Permission has also been granted by the Department of Education to conduct the study.

Please note that:

- All confidentiality will be guaranteed by using the pseudonyms to protect the school and the participants' anonymity.
- Any information given by the participants cannot be used against them, and the collected data will be used for purposes of this research only.
- Data will be stored in secure storage and destroyed after 5 years.
- The choice to participate, not participate or stop participating in the research is left on to the participants and their parents. They will not be penalized for taking such an action.
- The participants' involvement is purely for academic purposes only, and there are no financial
- benefits involved.
- If you require any information about this study upon its completion, I will be most willing to provide you with this.

Please feel free to contact me or my supervisor at the following contact details for any inquiries.

Thanking you for your assistance

…….

Praisewell Nonhlanhla Dube (Mrs.)

Contact Details:

Email : [redacted]

Tel (Work) : [redacted]

Cell : [redacted]

Supervisor's details:

Name : **Prof. Relebohile Moletsane**

Institution : **University of KwaZulu-Natal (Edgewood)**

Email : **moletsaner@ukzn.ac.za**

Tel (Work) : [redacted]

Cell : [redacted]

Manager Research Ethics' details:

Tel. No. : [redacted]

Email : [redacted]

Title of study: Girls' Constructions of Love in Dating Relationships: A Narrative Study in a Rural KwaZulu-Natal Secondary School.

Authorization

I……. (Full Names), Principal of …….. …….. School, hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project. Provided parents give consent for their children to participate, I give permission for 30 girls, who are students in the school under my supervision to participate in the research project.

I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw the school under my supervision from participating in the project at any time, should I so desire. I also understand that the participants are free to withdraw from the study at any time if they want to, without negative or undesirable consequences to themselves.

Signature of School Principal: ……. Date: ……

STAMP

Appendix O

Invitation to Participants

[redacted]

[redacted]n

KwaDukuza

4449

03 March 2021

Invitation to participate in a research project

Hello (name of student)…….....….....

My name is Nonhlanhla Dube. I am a student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I am doing a study on how girls understand love in dating relationships under the current conditions where there is a lot of violence against women. The aim of my study is to get answers to questions such as: How does the way in which girls understand love in dating relationships put them at a risk of gender-based violence?

I am inviting you to participate in this study. You should first get permission from your parents or guardian on whether you can take part or not. You will be given forms for your parents or guardians to read and sign. When you have returned the forms that have been signed by your parents, you can decide whether you want to take part in the study. If you decide to take part, I will request that you sign a form as a way of showing that you have agreed to take part.

The need to do this study is that girls in South Africa are experiencing a lot of gender-based violence. This is worrying in societies because girls no longer enjoy childhood and sometimes die because of violence. As adults, we can only be able to help girls if we understand how the way in which they view love, puts them at a risk of gender-based violence.

During this study you will do the following activities: letter writing; draw or make charts; use old objects or documents that have some historical memories for you; an interview and be part of group discussions with other girls that will take part in the study. All these activities will be explained clearly to you. I will always be there to answer any questions you would like to ask during the study. Therefore, you have no reason to worry and be afraid to take part. I will also make sure that taking part in the study does not affect your schoolwork, because we will only do these activities after school hours. These activities will be

completed in four months, starting in April 2021 and will be done in a place and at a time that will be chosen by you and your parents.

You will not be asked to write your name anywhere, except on the form that you are going to sign if you agree to participate. This is to make sure that nobody finds out that information in the study is about you. There is no danger in taking part in this study. You can only take part if you want to. Therefore, you will not be forced to be part of this. So, if you refuse to participate, no one will punish you for that. If you no longer want to take part, you will be free to stop at any time without any punishment. The results of this study may be published, but as earlier stated, your name will not appear in the results of the study.
Thank you for your assistance

…….

Praisewell Nonhlanhla Dube (Mrs.)

Contact Details:

Email : [redacted]

Cell : [redacted]

Supervisor's details:

Name : Prof. Relebohile Moletsane

Institution : University of KwaZulu-Natal (Edgewood)

Email : moletsaner@ukzn.ac.za

Tel (Work) : 031 260 3023

Cell : [redacted]

Manager Research Ethics' details:

Tel. No. : 031 260 4557

Email : hssrec@ukzn.ac.za

PARTICIPANT INFORMED ASSENT DOCUMENT

Title of study: Girls' Constructions of Love in Dating Relationships: A Narrative Study in a Rural KwaZulu-Natal Secondary School.

Authorization:

I…… (Full Name), hereby confirm that I agree to take part in the study on:

Girls' Constructions of Love in Dating Relationships: A Narrative Study in a Rural KwaZulu-Natal Secondary School.

I fully understood the information that has been provided by the researcher about the study and was given the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions about the study.

I fully understand that my participation in this study is voluntary, and I can withdraw from the study at any time and will not be questioned why I no longer want to take part. I understand that the findings of this study can be published but my name will not be used.

I agree to participate in the study.

Signature of the Participant_____

Date_____

Appendix P

Potential Participants' Biographic Data Tool

Potential Participants' Biographic Data

Girls' Constructions of Love in Dating Relationships: A Narrative Study in a Rural KwaZulu-Natal Secondary School.

Required

1. What is your Name and Surname?

2. In which grade are you?

- Grade 8
- Grade 9
- Grade 10
- Grade 11

3. How old are you?

4. Do you want to take part in this research?

- Yes
- No

5. Do you think your parents will allow you to take part in this research?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

6. Do you have a cell phone?

- Yes
- No

7. If your answer to number 6 is yes; is it a smart phone?

- Yes
- No

- Not applicable

8. If you have a phone, what is your Cell Number?

9. How do you get to school?

- Walk
- Taxi
- Bus
- Scholar Transport (Umalume)
- Private

Appendix Q

Selected Participants' Biographical Data Tool

Selected Participants' Biographic Data (April 2021)

Girls' Constructions of Love in Dating Relationships: A Narrative Study in a Rural KwaZulu-Natal Secondary School.

Required

1. What is your Name and Surname?

2. Which False Name would you like to use for this study?

3. In which grade are you?

- Grade 8
- Grade 9
- Grade 10
- Grade 11

4. How old are you?

5. What is your Cell Number?

6. With which cellular company is this cell number (e.g. MTN, Vodacom, Cell C, etc.) of yours?

7. What is your Home Language?

8. Which Language would you like to use for this study?

- IsiZulu

- English
- Both IsiZulu and English

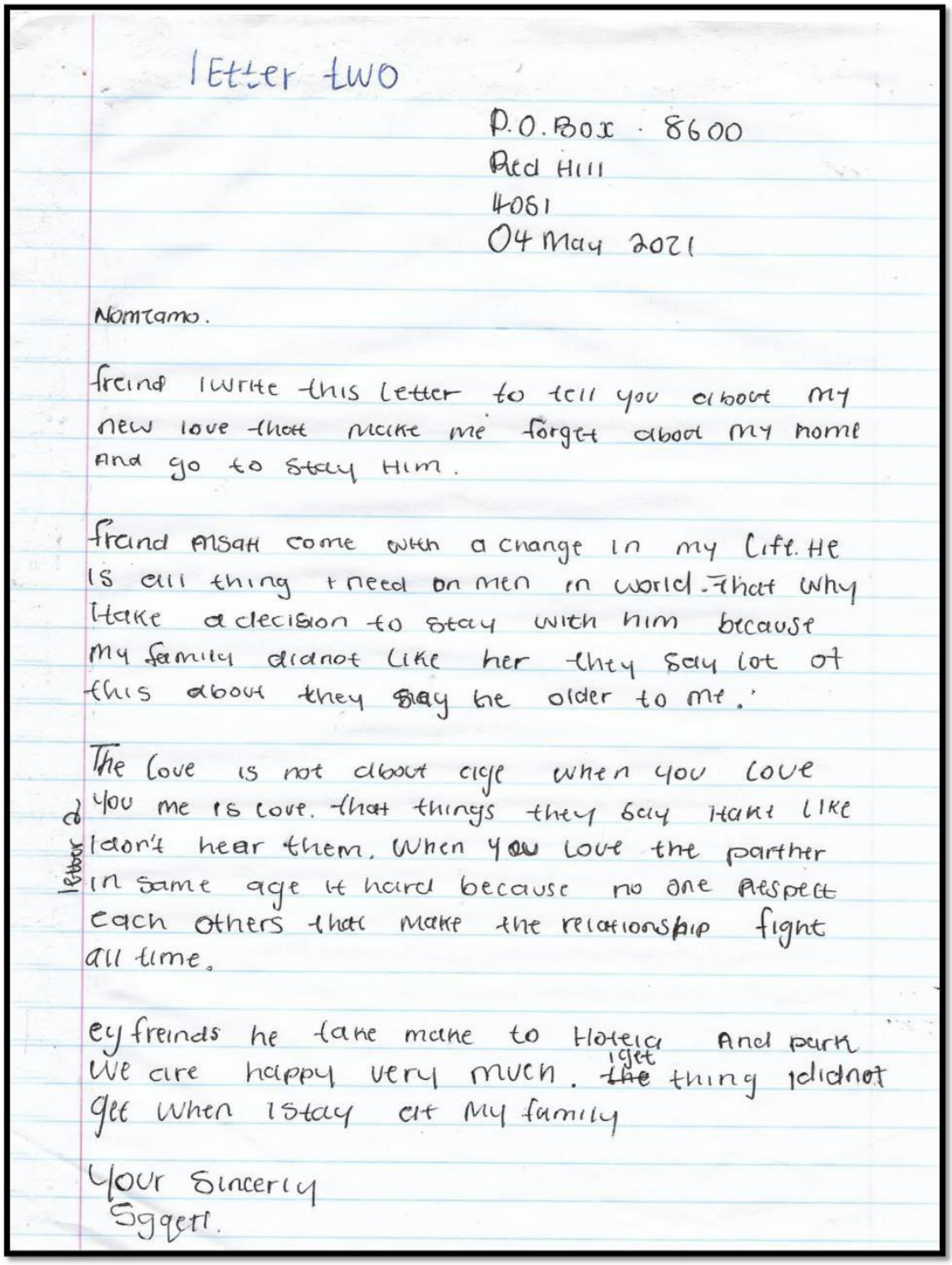
9. When will you be able to take part in the study? (You may choose more than 1 option). If you choose OTHER, please indicate your day/time in the box provided.

- [ ] During school break
- [ ] After school
- [ ] On Saturdays
- [ ] All of the above
- [ ] Other

Appendix R
Analysis of Responses of Sampled Participants

PSEUDONYM	GRADE	AGE	CELL NO.	CELL COMPANY	HOME LANGUAG	LANGUAGE PREFERENCE	STUDY DAY PREFERENCE
Alwande	11	17	[redacted]	Vodacom	IsiZulu	Both IsiZulu and English	On Saturdays
Anele	10	17	N/A	N/A	IsiZulu	IsiZulu	All of the above
Anersh	10	16	[redacted]	Vodacom	IsiZulu	Both IsiZulu and English	On Saturdays
Arhshish	10	16	N/A	N/A	IsiZulu	English	All of the above
Asbonge	10	20	[redacted]	MTN	IsiZulu	Both IsiZulu and English	On Saturdays
Ayanda	11	17	[redacted]	Vodacom	IsiZulu	English	On Saturdays
Babyface	10	15	N/A	N/A	IsiZulu	IsiZulu	On Saturdays
Candy	10	15	[redacted]	Vodacom	IsiZulu	Both IsiZulu and English	All of the above
Cell Phone	11	18	[redacted]	Vodacom	IsiZulu	IsiZulu	On Saturdays
Coolkid	9	16	N/A	N/A	IsiZulu	IsiZulu	On Saturdays
Enzo	10	17	[redacted]	Telkom	IsiZulu	English	After school
Langelihle	11	16	[redacted]	Cell C	IsiZulu	Both IsiZulu and English	On Saturdays
Loyalt	10	16	[redacted]	Vodacom	IsiZulu	Both IsiZulu and English	On Saturdays
Lufuno	10	15	N/A	N/A	IsiZulu	Both IsiZulu and English	On Saturdays
Mbali	11	18	[redacted]	Vodacom	IsiZulu	Both IsiZulu and English	On Saturdays
Ncazelo	11	16	[redacted]	Vodacom	IsiZulu	English	On Saturdays
Nothando	8	13	[redacted]	MTN	IsiZulu	Both IsiZulu and English	On Saturdays
Sanele	10	15	[redacted]	MTN	IsiZulu	English	On Saturdays
Sgqeh	11	20	[redacted]	MTN	IsiZulu	Both IsiZulu and English	All of the above
Simthandile	11	17	N/A	N/A	IsiZulu	Both IsiZulu and English	On Saturdays
Yezorh	16	15	[redacted]	Vodacom	IsiZulu	Both IsiZulu and English	On Saturdays
Zeynep	9	15	N/A	N/A	IsiZulu	Both IsiZulu and English	All of the above
Zotho	10	15	[redacted]	Vodacom	IsiZulu	Both IsiZulu and English	On Saturdays

Appendix S
Sample from a Participant to her Penfriend



letter two

P.O.Box · 8600
Red Hill
4081
04 May 2021

Nomtamo.

freind I write this letter to tell you about my new love that make me forget about my home and go to stay Him.

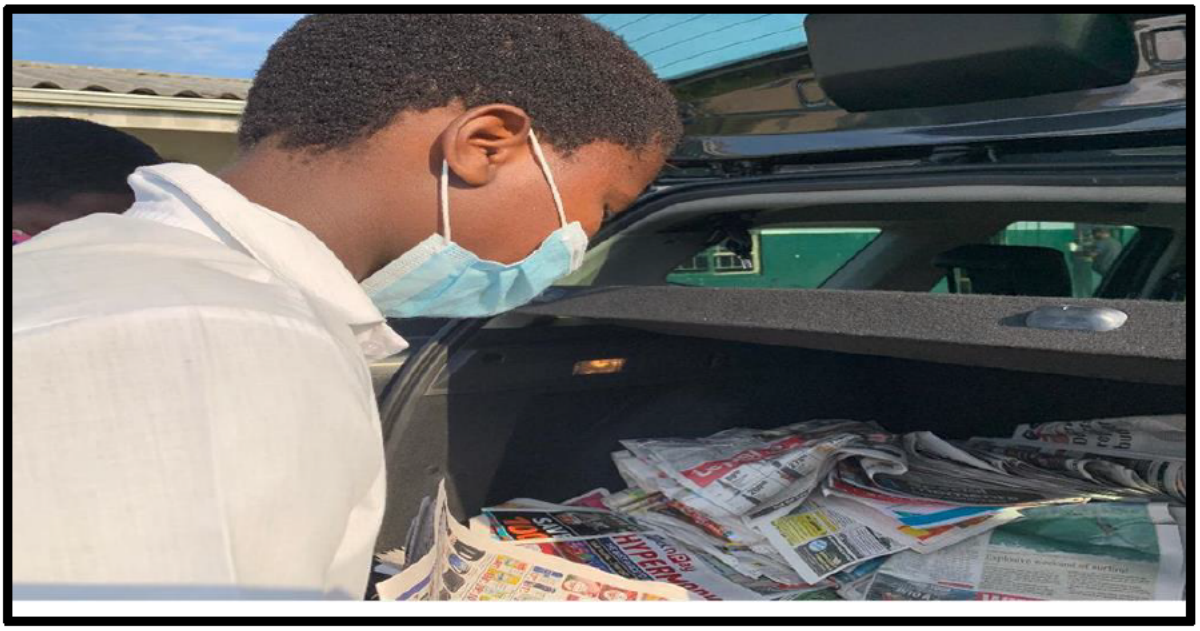
frand ANSAH come with a change in my life. He is all thing I need on men in world. That why I take a decision to stay with him because my family dianot like her they say lot of this about they say he older to me.'

The love is not about age when you love you me is love. that things they say I dont like I don't hear them. When you love the parther in same age it hard because no one respect each others that make the relationship fight all time.

ey freinds he take mame to Hotels And park We are happy very much. I get the thing I didnot get when I stay at My family

Your Sincerly
Sgqeti.

Appendix T
Sample Participant Collecting Collage Support Material from the Car



Appendix U
Girls Selecting Visual Material for their Collages

Appendix V
Girls Constructing their Collages Individually

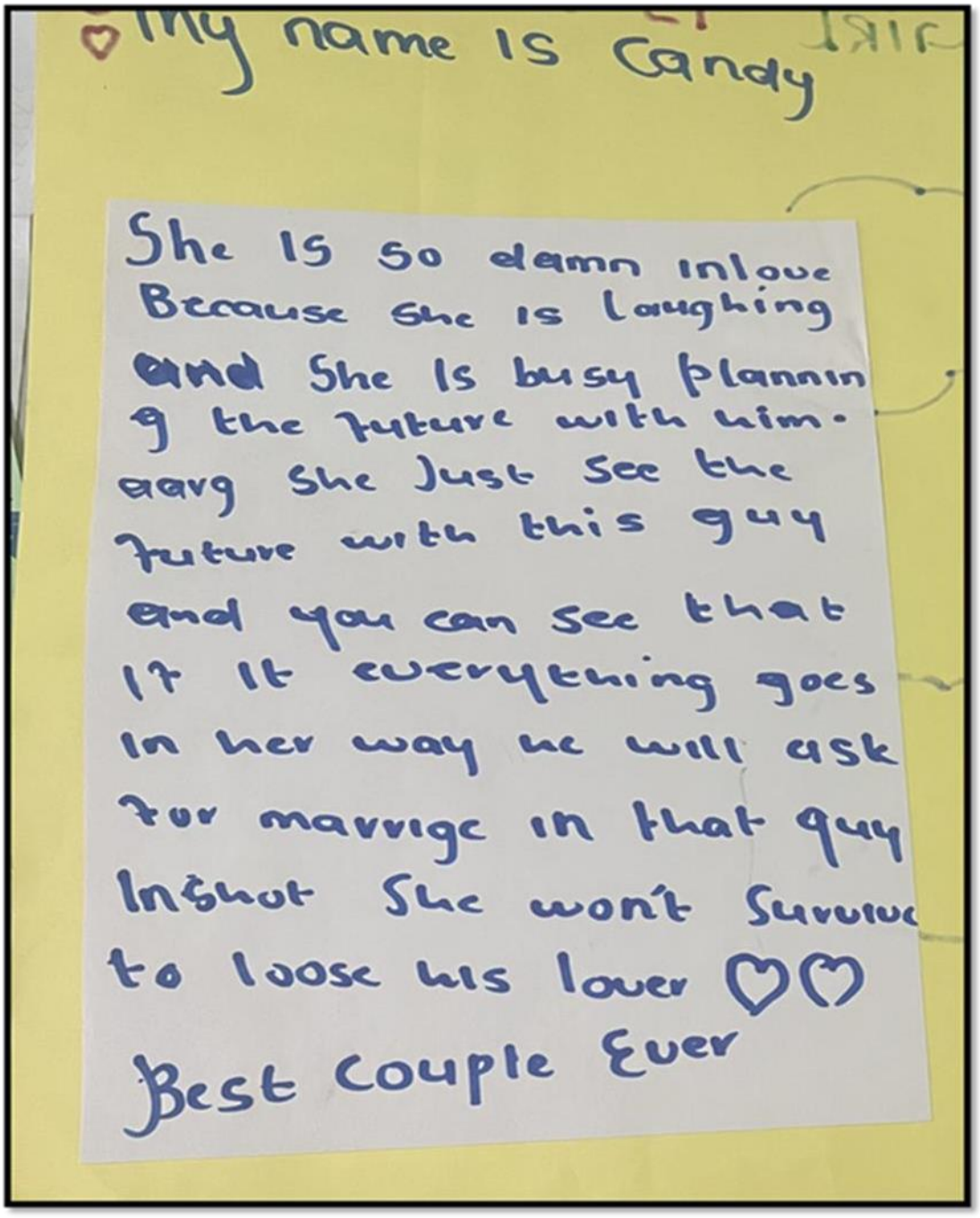


Appendix W

Girl presenting her Collage to the group



Appendix X
Participant's Brief Narrative of Her Collage

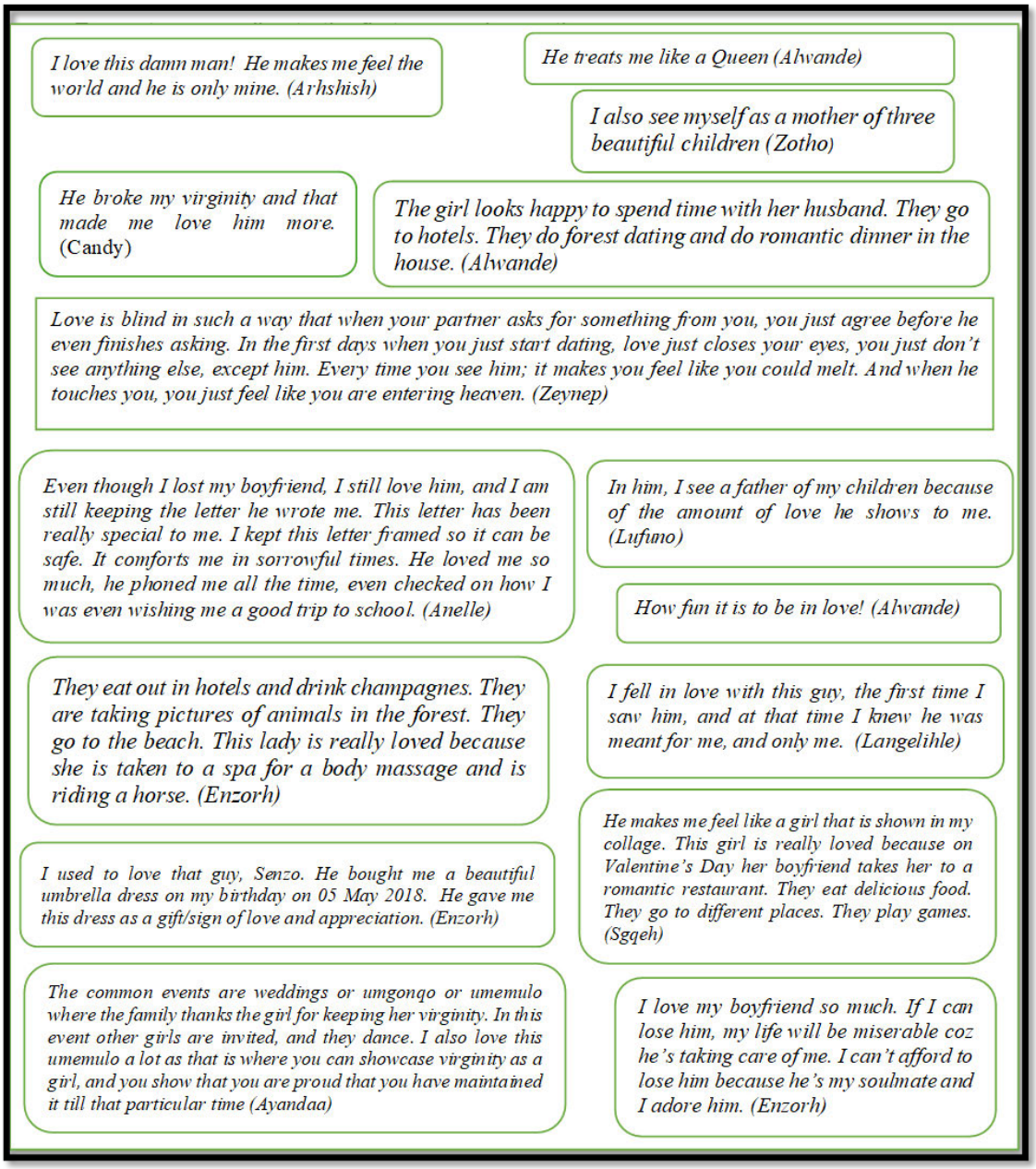


Appendix Y: My 28-year-old Artefact



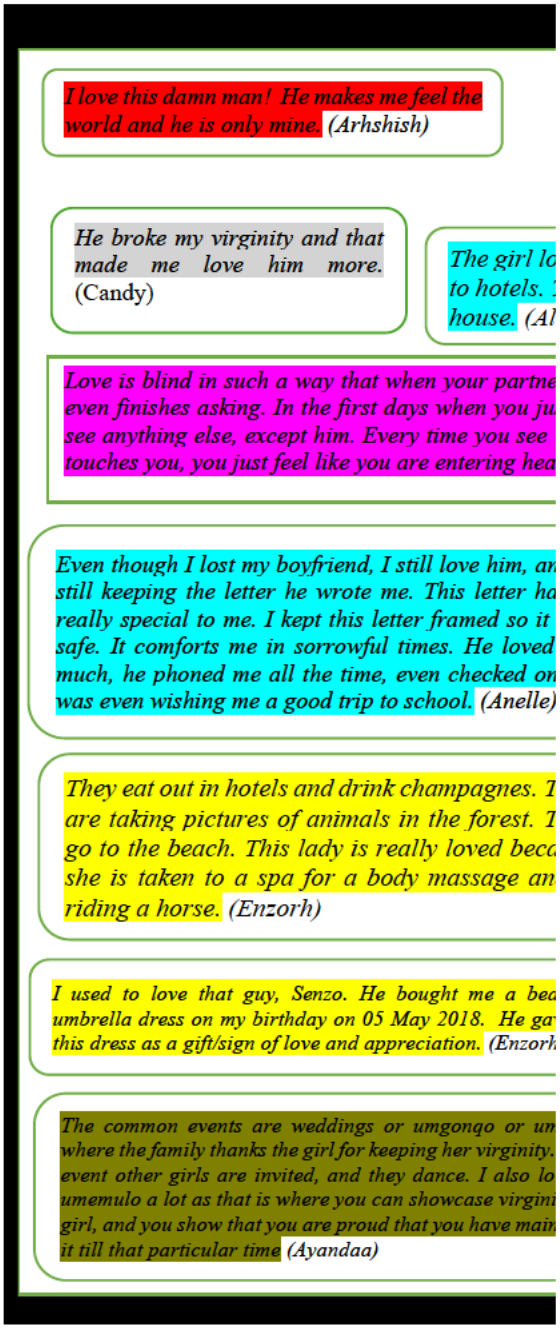
Appendix Z: Excerpts in Response to the First

Research Question



Note: This is some of the excerpts which illustrate the first level of themes identified from girls' narratives presented in no specific order

Appendix AA: Coding to Address Research Question 1



Note: Colour coding of related data

Inexplicable feeling	
Material care	
Emotional well-being	

Second Research Question



Note: Some of the excerpts which illustrate the first level of themes identified from girls' narratives presented in no specific order

Appendix BB: Excerpts in Response to the

Appendix CC: Permission for Minor to Attend a Research Meeting

[redacted] KwaDukuza 4449

10 May 2021

Mzali / Mnakekeli othandekayo ka …….....……

Isicelo semvume yokuba umntwana abe semhlanganweni wocwaningo ngoMgqibelo mhlaka - 15 May 2021

Ngithatha leli thuba ukwedlulisa ukubonga kakhulu ngokuvumela umntwana wakho ukuba abe yingxenye yomhlangano wocwaningo ngoMgqibelo, mhlaka- 08 May 2021.

Ngicela ukuba uphinde ungeboleke yena umntwana (ukuze siqedele ingxenye yomsebenzi ebesiwenza ngoMgqibelo odlule) ngokumvumela ukuba abe semhlanganweni omayelana nocwaningo, ohlelwe kanje: **Usuku : 15 May 2021 (NgoMgqibelo)**

Isikhathi : 08h30 - 13h00

Indawo : [redacted] Secondary

Ngiyojabula kakhulu uma isicelo sami samukelekile. Ozithobayo

……. Praisewell Nonhlanhla Dube (Nkk.) Imininingwane Yokuxhumana: Imeyili: [redacted]

Appendix DD: Participants' Submission Records

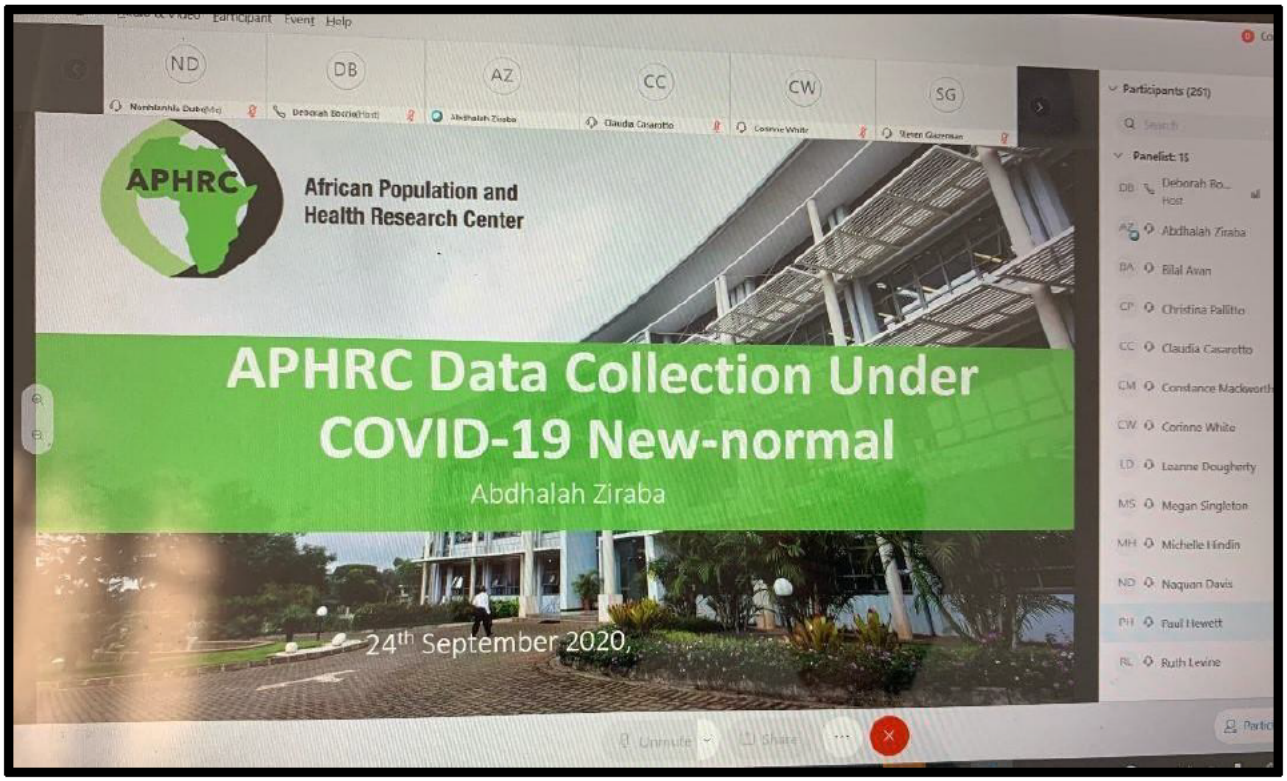
Project title: Girls' Constructions of Love in Dating Relationships: A Narrative Study in a Rural KwaZulu-Natal Secondary School.

GRADE					
SURNAME					
NAME/S					
PSEUDONYM					
CELL NO					
CELLULAR NETWORK					
POTENTIAL PARTICIPANT FORM					
SELECTED PARTICIPANT FORM					
CONSENT FORM					
ASSENT FORM					
LETTER WRITING	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
COLLAGE					
ARTEFACT RETRIEVAL					

Appendix EE: COVID-19 Screening Process



Appendix FF: Screenshot of a Webinar I attended on 24 September 2020



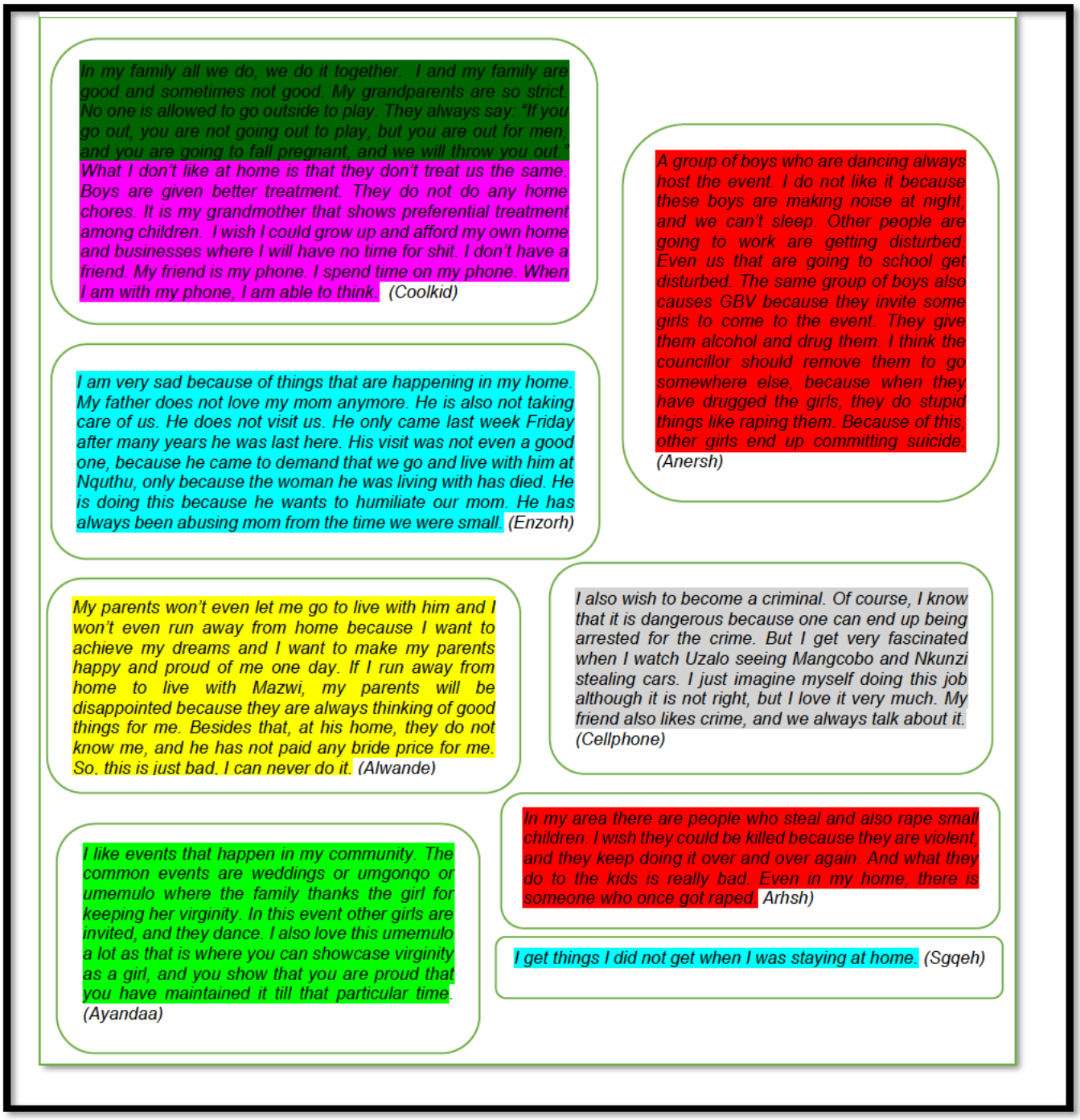
Appendix GG: My Journal Entry on Load Shedding

Impact of loadshedding on the postgraduate student!

I wonder if anybody understands the impact of the country's political and economic landscape on the students. Just to think of the scale at which my study was affected by massive power outages! I had to learn to plan my writing schedule in line with the loadshedding schedule. I had to learn to work in the dark, until I realised I had to tweak my budget by securing backup rechargeable lights to use in the dark. My home fibre connectivity did not work during power outages. This meant additional costs in terms of securing Cellphone data so that I could count on hotspot when writing in the dark. I had to risk my computer and Cellphone battery lives by keeping them charged all the time, in the eventuality of any abnormal power outages. It is really frustrating to be a postgraduate in a country like mine. How I wish politicians had an idea of how their irresponsible decision making and actions impacted student lives!

(My journal entry – 18 February 2023

Appendix HH: Coding of Data in Response to the Second Research Question



Note: Colour coding of related data

Inequalities	Gender-based violence
Culture	Social practice
Context	Agents of socialisation
Messages imparted through language	

Appendix I I : Photos captured during a data generation meeting



Appendix J J : The Editor's Report

Linda Coertze

Proof Reading Services

[redacted]
Amanzimtoti
4126

[redacted]

DATE: 28 April 2025

DECLARATION OF PROOF-READNG

TO:
The Research Ethics Committee
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Durban

Sir/Madam

I, Nicolina D. Coertze, declare that I meticulously perused the PhD manuscript referred to below for language editing and proof-reading purposes. I identified and corrected linguistic and stylistic inaccuracies to the best of my knowledge and ability. Using the *Word* Tracking system, I kept track of the changes that I made. I also offered additional annotations for consideration by the author should she deem it necessary to address areas that I considered might need attention. I declare that I adhered to the general principles that guide the work of a language editor and that I remained within my brief as had been agreed with the author of the manuscript.

TITLE: Girls' constructions of love in dating relationships: A narrative study in a Rural KwaZulu-Natal Secondary School

NAME OF CANDIDATE: Praisewell Nonhlanhla Dube

PROPOSED QUALIFICATION: PhD
DEPARTMENT/SCHOOL: School of Education
SUPERVISORS: Prof. Relebohile Moletsane & Co-supervisor: Professor Daisy Pillay
TERTIARY INSTITUTION: University of KwaZulu-Natal

Yours sincerely

[redacted]

(MRS) N.D. COERTZE
LANGUAGE EDITOR

Disclaimer: The Editor was not responsible for the final formatting of the manuscript, the juxtaposition of citations in-text and the refences in the Reference List, the positioning of images and captions in-text and in the Appendices, and the page numbers of Figures and Tables.

Appendix K K : Turnitin Report

Girls' Constructions of Love in Dating Relationships: A Narrative Study in a Rural KwaZulu-Natal Secondary School

by Nonnhlanhla Dube

Submission date: 03-Jun-2025 10:22AM (UTC+0200)
Submission ID: 2691204865
File name: Nonhlanhla_Dube_Turnitin_03_02_2025.docx (17.88M)
Word count: 92388
Character count: 468842

Girls' Constructions of Love in Dating Relationships: A Narrative Study in a Rural KwaZulu-Natal Secondary School

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