



**UNIVERSITY OF  
KWAZULU-NATAL**

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**INYUVESI  
YAKWAZULU-NATALI**

**AN ANALYSIS OF THE MEDIA AS A KEY  
SOCIALISING AGENT FOR GENDER AND GENDER STEREOTYPES**

**by**

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts  
in Sociology

University of KwaZulu-Natal, College of Humanities,

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## DECLARATION

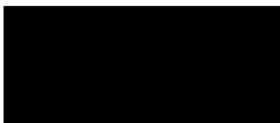
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I, Sindisiwe Zungu, declare that:

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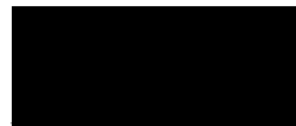
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## ABSTRACT

This study examines how the media influences gender identities among university students by studying harmful gender stereotypes toxic masculinities and femininities. Qualitative data were gathered through detailed interviews with students aged 18–26 at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College campus, using snowball and purposive sampling. The thematic content analysis involved coding the interview transcripts, identifying recurring themes, and analysing patterns in the data. The study revealed that the media significantly influences how students view themselves and others. Men are frequently shown in powerful roles, while women are often portrayed in submissive roles. This reinforces harmful gender stereotypes and unequal power dynamics. Participants observed that societal norms restrict women from independence and limit men from self-expression. These observations reflect entrenched, harmful gender norms. Moreover, male power dynamics and societal structures frequently contribute to gender disparities and reinforce damaging gender stereotypes.

Students encounter challenging stereotypes regarding women, which persist through the depiction of beauty norms and traditional gender roles. Furthermore, the media portrays hegemonic masculinity, which refers to the dominant form of masculinity that idealises traits like aggression and control. This perpetuates restrictive and harmful ideas of true masculinity. To promote gender equality, the media should prioritise equality in content, policy, and practice. To combat gender-based violence, address public health issues, and promote positive and constructive gender practices, it is critical to address gender stereotypes in the media. The media exerts a significant influence on societal norms and values. Therefore, it is essential to coordinate efforts to foster a deeper understanding of harmful forms of masculinity and femininity, while also promoting positive gender practices. Gender-based violence and problems with public health will only get worse if harmful gender stereotypes in the media are not addressed.

Future research should explore the impact of the media on gender identities across different cultures and promote positive representations of gender. Gender socialisation significantly shapes an individual's views on gender roles, beliefs, cultural norms, and societal expectations. This underscores the critical importance of implementing education programmes that integrate gender equality education into curricula and community initiatives that establish safe spaces for open dialogue, challenging traditional societal gender norms.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

<b>ADs</b>	Advertisements
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-Based Violence
<b>HIV</b>	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
<b>LGBTIQ</b>	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Questioning
<b>STEM</b>	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
<b>STIs</b>	Sexually Transmitted Infections
<b>TV</b>	Television
<b>UKZN</b>	University of KwaZulu-Natal
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organisation

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a study on how the media reinforces gender stereotypes and acts as a crucial agent of socialisation. The study analyses how advertising prioritises physical attractiveness over other traits, reinforcing harmful stereotypes (Antoniou & Akrivos, 2020), and draws on Goffman's theory of dramaturgy to understand how individuals perform gender roles in line with societal norms (Goffman, 1976). The goal of this study is to explore the impact of media on university students' perceptions of gender and stereotypes across various forms of media. The findings aim to provide insights for developing strategies to promote diverse and inclusive representations in the media and their effects on individuals' attitudes and behaviours. The research shows that students often consume media that reinforces traditional gender roles and harmful stereotypes, with some forms of media challenging these norms more than others. This highlights the need for a more critical and intentional approach to media consumption and production to promote more inclusive and respectful attitudes towards gender. Understanding the influence of media on gender stereotypes can aid in addressing and combating harmful societal norms and promoting more inclusive and respectful attitudes towards gender.

### 1.2 Background and Problem Statement

The World Health Organisation defines gender as “socially constructed behaviours and characteristics that society considers appropriate for men and women” (WHO, 2015). These characteristics, actions, and roles are acquired and reinforced through a process of socialisation that begins in early childhood and continues throughout an individual's life. While biological variances play a role in shaping gender, social interactions and cultural influences have a greater impact on the development of gender roles. The continual day-to-day production of gender has been called “doing gender,” which implies that individuals form gender in their daily interactions with others (West & Zimmermann, 1987).

Different socialising agents influence the formation of gender and gender stereotypes, including family, peers, mass media, schools, and religion (Mwangi, Gachahi, & Ndung'u, 2019). A socialising agent is an entity responsible for the replication of social structure and for

transmitting the rules, beliefs, norms, values, and folkways of a given social network. Gender socialisation teaches individuals how to behave according to society's expectations of men's and women's behaviour (Vazquez-Cupeiro & Sagebiel, 2013). Gender socialisation mainly happens during early childhood through interactions with primary contacts like parents and school (Bligh et al., 2012). Individuals from diverse backgrounds, social groups, age ranges, and religious beliefs may experience varying effects from media exposure, particularly about gender stereotypes. Intersectionality examines how various aspects of identity intersect and influence power dynamics within society. The term "intersectionality" describes how gender, race, and other categories of difference interact with one another in social practices, institutional structures, individual lives, and cultural ideas, as well as how these interactions affect power dynamics (Crenshaw, 1989). According to Collins and Bilge (2016), intersectionality looks at how different groups construct their identities. Intersectionality is a tool for evaluating how oppressive and unequal systems can interact and reinforce one another (Crenshaw, 1989). The concept of intersectionality questions how different kinds of institutions, such as those based on gender or race, can be used to maintain inequality. Intersectionality may examine how media exposure, particularly about gender stereotypes, may have varying effects on individuals of various racial, socioeconomic, age, and religious backgrounds.

Aspects such as culture, religion, and social class can influence the gender roles adopted within a family. Parents can either explicitly or implicitly teach their children what is deemed appropriate for their gender (Vazquez-Cupeiro & Sagebiel, 2013). Additionally, parents use the household as a framework to instil gender roles in their children. This can be seen in how they distribute labour, care, and housework, which can serve as a model for stereotyped male and female roles. Activities such as laundry and dishwashing are typically assigned to girls, while boys are given more physically demanding jobs such as mowing the lawn or picking up trash.

Children are encouraged to imitate parents of the same sex as theirs, their behaviours and interests, and to identify with them (Belle, Endendijk, & Mesman, 2018). Fathers serve as role models for boys, while mothers serve as role models for girls. Parents expect differences in abilities and qualities between boys and girls and reinforce their children's gender expectations through play (Gadzekpo, 2016; Vazquez-Cupeiro & Sagebiel, 2013). For instance, boys are given sports equipment and toy cars, while girls receive dolls and kitchen sets. Games for boys are expected to be more active, while games for girls are more passive; for example, girls are

encouraged to have tea parties while boys are encouraged to play war games and fight (Bligh et al., 2012).

In schools, teachers assign gender-specific activities and tasks, contributing to students' gender socialisation (Mwangi, Gachahi, & Ndung'u, 2019). Numerous studies on gender and educational disparities in Africa, such as those by Agha, Syed, & Mirani (2018) and Mutekwe & Modiba (2012a, 2012b), have examined the academic achievements of boys and girls, with boys being regarded as having a higher standard of academic excellence than girls. Teachers may subconsciously believe boys are more competent in mathematics and girls are better at reading. Peers also serve as gender role models for one another. Children who do not conform to traditional gender roles are at a higher risk of having their peers bully and socially exclude them (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2018).

Gender socialisation can emerge from various sources, such as the media and popular culture. The media is a communication channel that disseminates news, entertainment, education, data, or promotional messages (Chen, Park, & Breazeal, 2020; Youth Communication, 2014). The media communicates messages to targeted audiences through print, broadcast, and digital platforms. Print media includes newspapers, magazines, and books; broadcast media includes radio and television; and electronic or digital media includes internet blogs and websites.

Javani, Aghajani, and Alemi (2022) state that people of all ages actively watch television as one of their most popular leisure activities. Adolescents dedicate an average of 2 hours to the screen each day. The media reinforces gender stereotypes (Ter Bogt et al., 2010). The United Nations Human Rights Convention (2014) defines gender stereotypes as generalised views or preconceptions about the attributes, characteristics, and roles that women and men possess or ought to possess. Gender stereotyping involves assigning specific roles, attributes, or characteristics to women and men solely based on their membership in the social group of women or men.

Gender stereotypes in the media are crucial in shaping gender socialisation by defining individuals' gender roles through their behaviours, attire, and mindset. Men are often portrayed as strong, emotionless, messy, unclean, lazy, risk-takers, and dominant (Javani et al., 2022). The media often portrays women as less dominant, less powerful, domestic, not athletic, prettier, and calmer than men (Beasley, 2021; Cloete, 2017). Men are often portrayed in the media as more aggressive and violent than women, while women are often seen as victims. Men

are more likely to be portrayed as criminals or in business in the media, reinforcing and perpetuating gender stereotypes. This is seen in films and television programmes (Chen, Park, & Breazeal, 2020).

Mass media is increasingly pervasive, distributing or disseminating information to large groups of people (Bolin, 2016). Mainstream media provides a strong model for gender norms. To begin with, students have access to a greater number of role models through the media than through their families or peers. Characters in the media can also be more “appealing,” which increases the likelihood that people will consider them as role models. Gender theorists argue that the media perpetuates hegemonic messages about masculinity and femininity (Gadzekpo, 2016). The media plays a crucial role in shaping how people view gender roles and societal norms.

The media has a big influence on young people, especially students. There is a connection between social ills such as crime, mental health, public safety, substance abuse, and violence and the ideas of masculinity and femininity. Herber (2017) linked criminal activities, unhealthy behaviour, and interpersonal difficulties with the expectations of men in society. There is also a connection between women’s sexualisation and oppression and their expectations in society. What society expects of men and what men expect of themselves have been identified as sources of crisis. This also applies to women. Other factors that contribute to the identity and expectation crisis include contemporary uncertainty and instability in relation to gender roles, identity, and sexuality. Negative stereotypes that support negative conceptions of gender roles frequently influence gender. Society and the South African media fail to offer inclusive representation that supports the experiences of students, and by doing so, they create room for ignorant gender stereotypes.

The media’s emphasis on women’s sexuality and their portrayal as objects contribute to establishing gender-related biases, stereotypes, and media discrimination against women. According to Wolf (1990), women broke through the power structure over the past years, eating disorders increased significantly, and cosmetic surgery emerged as the healthcare field with the quickest expansion rate. Consumption doubled, and pornography overtook all other media types as the most popular category. The term “pornography” refers to content that is “explicit” and contains images of exposed genitals and depictions of sexual behaviours; it is intended to increase sexual arousal (Wright & Randall, 2012). For example, pornography contributes to the hyper-sexualisation of female characters by placing an excessive emphasis on their sexual

qualities and behaviours, which creates the perception of women as nothing more than sexual objects.

Wolf's (1990) "Beauty Myth" is a potent force that keeps women preoccupied with, and distracted by, body image. It gives men and women a basis for evaluating and limiting women based on their physical appearance. Accordingly, among the numerous channels used today to maintain beauty standards for both men and women are magazines, advertisements, and television commercials. Wolf (1990) argues that it is nearly impossible to escape these media outlets because of their constant existence and dissemination.

The media presents ideal body images for women, pressuring them to engage in excessive exercise to achieve a 'perfect' physique (Wolf, 1990; Chen et al., 2020). This has increased the production of weight-loss products geared towards women. The media's portrayal of women's ideal body images has also resulted in the dissemination of make-up and tutorials for women to maintain a perfect body structure (Herber, 2017). Women become targets of criticism and societal scrutiny when they do not uphold these norms.

Toxic femininity refers to societal expectations that pressure women to be submissive and passive in the face of male dominance. Basile (2004) proposed the "masculine gaze" concept concerning mass media, which refers to the male perspective on women in films and other forms of media. The masculine gaze is the reason why female actors in media and movies have made a point of emphasising their sexuality (Manisha & Mangla, 2019). Gender representation in films can potentially affect and maintain men's and women's gender power relations. In movies, women and girls are typically portrayed as primary caregivers, passive, submissive, or subservient, while men and boys are portrayed as more possessive and likely to succeed in their occupations (Chen et al., 2020).

"Gender advertisements," according to Jhal, Raj, and Gangwar (2017), refer to images that promote traditional gender roles and norms, such as women wearing skirts and men wearing trousers. The media reinforces these roles through movies and television shows, presenting images of how men and women should behave. Advertisers frequently use gender displays to establish one gender's superiority over the other, and some researchers believe that advertisers are obsessed with gender. Advertisers often portray women as sympathetic, humanitarian, sensitive, and mutually dependent, while men are more likely to be portrayed as primary breadwinners and as heroes who save or care for women (Valentova, 2016).

Traditional depictions of masculinity harm society's expectations of men and women's relationships, as they promote the belief that men should be tough and rigid while only expressing anger (Ranjan & Prasad, 2018). These attitudes impede gender equality, as traditional masculinity rarely allows men to express their emotions due to the discouragement of emotional expression. Conforming to traditional masculinity was found to be positively associated with depression among men. Toxic masculinity occurs when a man's conceptions about being a man harm him and those around him (Herber, 2017).

Toxic masculinity can cause depression or anxiety, substance abuse, violence, difficulties in relationships and interpersonal interactions, and discouragement from seeking professional help. There is a growing interest in how masculinities and femininities are portrayed in the media, particularly in films. Films are considered influential in shaping public opinion and driving social change due to their ability to mould or create societal perspectives (Bolin, 2016). A film, or motion picture, uses moving images and sounds to tell stories and evoke emotions and ideas. Films are a powerful or effective medium for communicating current society's values and perspectives (Cloete, 2017).

"The African woman has never owned her body," writes Bischoff (2009, p. 145). The female body has always been a battlefield for masculine concerns. Women are portrayed in films as primary caregivers, unemployed, and single mothers who attempt to provide for their children in a miserable environment. Women are more closely associated with their sexuality than men. The media has contributed to the sexual subordination of women through sexualised activities and the hyper-sexualisation of female characters (Burgess, Stermer, & Burgess, 2007). The clothing chosen for female characters in video games depicts the role of the media in hypersexualising women. Female characters in video games are frequently displayed in sexualised and absurd costumes.

Video games also contribute to the hyper-sexualisation of female characters by exaggerating the importance of their sexual characteristics or actions, creating the impression that women are nothing more than sex objects (Robinson et al., 2008). For instance, mainstream pornography represents erotic conduct in printed or visual media to elicit sexual arousal (Rea, 2001). Pornography instils fear in women, undermines their identities and relationships with men, and is perceived as encouraging sexist beliefs in men. Pornography also encourages acts of sexual assault against women.

Though television has been criticised for failing to provide healthy role models for adolescents (e.g., abstinence among teenagers is rarely portrayed positively), the lack of positive role models on television is more pronounced for lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender, intersex, and questioning (LGBTIQ) youth. Most lesbians and homosexual men grow up in a straight community with few LGBTIQ role models (Mkhize, Nunlall, & Gopal, 2020).

Television shows and advertisements frequently feature only heterosexual characters and love between a man and a woman is portrayed as the only romantic scenario available (Han & Tsai, 2016). Gendered stereotypes that are a product of hegemonic masculinity frequently overshadow the representation and portrayal of gay people (Ivory, 2019). These stereotypes reduce queer individuals to particular characteristics and behaviours. Gay characters on television are often depicted through stereotypes and subjected to ridicule. The most common way that homosexuality is portrayed on television is through a flamboyant, sexually aggressive, and funny gay male character (which feeds into the stereotypes people have about homosexuality).

Mainstream media frequently ignores and dismisses sexual minorities as if they do not exist. This exclusion has been proposed to keep sexual minorities invisible and powerless. According to Gross (1991), depictions of gay people and non-heterosexuals of any age are often negative and rare. A purely heterosexual environment is frequently depicted in adolescent shows. LGBTIQ adolescents may rely on the media to learn about their sexual orientation since friends and family often lack understanding. The absence of gay characters on television, especially adolescent ones, can make non-heterosexual youth feel isolated. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender characters have been historically underrepresented in the media. When they are depicted, they are usually depicted negatively (e.g., as villains and problems to be solved) (Gross, 1991; Han & Tsai, 2016).

Researchers in Critical Media Studies have highlighted how television and film frequently reinforce heteronormativity by portraying LGBTIQ characters in a way that normalises heterosexuality and marginalises homosexuality (Dyer, 2017). Society assumes that everyone is heterosexual, and the media reinforces this by portraying homosexuality as abnormal (Gross, 2019). To strengthen this depiction, gay men and lesbians are often associated with a lack of masculinity (Higgins, 2018), perpetuating the invisibility of the LGBTQ community unless identified through accessories or actions (Dyer, 2017). Gender traits can vary across cultures

and historical periods, often encompassing characteristics such as dominance and submission. Violence is a known male characteristic, while gentleness is a known female characteristic. These characteristics are associated with men and women in societies, but they are not conclusive. Further research is needed to understand people's perceptions of gender and the media's impact on social attitudes and gender construction.

This study explores how the media influences the perceptions of gender and stereotypes among young students. The student population was particularly appropriate because a lot of research on the influence of media on gender stereotypes focuses on traditional societies and schools. Students were also suitable for this study because they come from different societies where gender roles and gender stereotypes differ from other societies. The media plays a role in shaping students' identities as they navigate the influence of gender and media messages.

### **1.3. Purpose of the Study**

This study aims to investigate the impact of the media on constructing gender and reinforcing hegemonic or toxic ideas of masculinities and femininities. The intended sample size is 30 participants who are students registered at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), Howard College, aged between 18 and 30, years as this age group is most susceptible to media influence. The study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in the media, specifically in gender representations in films, and it focuses on societal problems such as gender-based violence, sexual assault, and public health.

### **1.4 Research Objectives and Research Questions**

#### **1.4.1 Research Objectives**

1. To explain the representation of masculinity and femininity as depicted in media outlets.
2. To explore the extent to which the media portrayals of masculinity and femininity align with societal notions of gender roles.
3. To examine how young individuals (students) perceive and interpret gender-based roles depicted in media representations.
4. To explore the potential individual and societal impacts of media portrayals of masculinity and femininity.

### **1.4.2 Research Questions**

1. In what ways are masculinities and femininities depicted in media outlets?
2. To what extent do media portrayals of masculinity and femininity align with societal notions of gender roles?
3. How do students perceive and interpret gender-based roles depicted in media representations?
4. What are the possible individual and societal impacts of media portrayals of masculinity and femininity?

### **1.5 Research Methodology**

This study utilised a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is a method that helps to uncover how and why individuals behave and think in certain ways, including their experiences and attitudes (Neuman, 2006). The qualitative approach aims to understand how individuals interpret and define themselves. This approach aims to explore and understand human behaviour rather than provide justification for it. It also tries to determine how people derive meaning from their environment and how that meaning affects their behaviour (Bernard, 2000).

The qualitative approach was chosen in this study because the research aimed to undertake an in-depth focus on masculine and feminine experiences in the media and how they affect students. The interpretive research paradigm supported this study. The interpretive research paradigm states that people are creative and that they actively construct their social reality. In interpretive methodology, researchers categorise and arrange research findings, providing explanations for their potential meanings (Gichuru, 2017). The sample for the study came from a nonprobability selection (purposive and snowball sampling). Purposive sampling is a method in which the researcher selects participants based on their judgement of their characteristics (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Snowballing is a method of identifying cases of interest by sampling people who know people who have similar characteristics. Participants were selected based on whether they were male or female, and the goal was to find people with direct knowledge of the studied phenomena (Babbie & Mouton, 2001).

In this study, the researcher first used their knowledge of where to find the desired sample (i.e., in the university's Local Area Networks (LANs), libraries, or university residences). The research participants who were located based on purposive sampling were then asked to refer the researcher to other students with the desired characteristics in terms of age and gender. How

well-suited the participants are to the research questions affects the sample size in qualitative research. Twenty-six participants were chosen to participate in the study, and they were individually interviewed at their residences and online (via Zoom and WhatsApp video calls). This may be seen as a relatively large sample. Also, a more extensive sample helps to reduce sample bias and improve research power (there is a better chance of finding important information). To avoid bias, the number of participants included an equal number of men and women. These participants were 18 to 26 years old because this is the age group that the media most influences.

An audio recording device was utilised (with the participant's consent), and notes were recorded during the interviews. The interviews were manually transcribed. In doing so, replaying the recorded audio helped to understand the participants' feelings and emotions and highlighted any punctuation used in the middle of the conversation. This type of transcription is known as "verbatim transcription." Participants were interviewed in both the IsiZulu and English languages. Participants who preferred to respond in IsiZulu were allowed to do so. The responses were, however, translated into English during data transcription.

This study used thematic content analysis, which is the most common type of qualitative research analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Thematic content analysis focuses on identifying, evaluating, and recording patterns or themes in data, such as human behaviour or belief systems (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic content analysis includes multiple steps in the process. First, the researcher carefully reads through all of the data, which can include interview transcripts, field notes, or any other type of data. During this reading, they take notes on any themes or patterns that seem to emerge. The researcher then groups these themes and determines which ones are most important or relevant to the research question. Finally, the researcher creates a code book outlining all of the themes and codes that will be used to analyse the data. The code book is used to systematically analyse all the data for evidence of each theme or code.

## **1.6 Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts the social construction of gender, which is a social theory that examines how meaning is formed through social interaction—that is, the things people say and do with others (Marcecek, Crawford, & Popp, 2004). Social constructionism theory asserts that reality is a social construct based on one's interpretation and meaning of the world. Gender, similar to other

social identities, is created through social processes. According to this theory, gender is not a fixed or innate reality but evolves with time and space.

UNICEF (2017, p. 2) defines gender as a social and cultural construct that differentiates between the attributes, roles, and responsibilities of men and women, girls and boys. Gender involves assumptions about the qualities, abilities, and behaviours associated with women and men (femininity and masculinity). Gender is influenced by what individuals are taught and learn. According to the social construction of gender theory, boys and girls actively form their masculinities and femininities through a socialisation process that begins early in childhood and continues throughout a person's life. Individuals continually learn how to successfully belong to new groups or adapt to changes in the existing groups to which they belong (Lober, 1994).

Numerous socialising agents programme children into gender roles that society deems appropriate from an early age (Genner & Suss, 2017). When a child is born and deals with “blue” or “pink” realities, blue is considered more masculine, and pink is more feminine. The social construction of gender can also be evident in how parents act and behave towards their children and the toys they buy. For instance, boys are socialised to be violent and logical and play with action figures (cars, guns, etc.), whereas girls are raised to be soft and sensitive and play with dolls or teddy bears to get used to nurturing. Boys are frequently socialised to believe they should be responsible for all aspects of their lives (income, relationships, workplace relations, etc.).

According to Gupta and Turban (2008), exposure to movies can influence children to mimic certain characters and shows. Children tend to idolise their heroes and heroines and aspire to imitate their actions. This can be problematic when children attempt to replicate violent activities portrayed by their heroes in action films. In addition, adults also adhere to a clothing code that distinguishes between genders in terms of colours, fabrics, and designs. As children grow older, the toys they play with, the clothes they wear, and the language they use reflect socially imposed gender expectations and norms.

“Through myriad activities, opportunities, encouragements, discouragements, overt behaviours, covert suggestions, and various forms of guidance, children experience the process of gender role socialisation” (Witt, 1997, p. 253). Behaviour that is considered appropriate in a particular environment is reinforced through rewards, whereas behaviour that is deemed inappropriate is punished. Children establish stereotypical gender beliefs early on and begin to

organise their knowledge and behaviour around these conceptions (or beliefs). According to Genner and Suss (2017), family, friends, religious organisations, and schools significantly impact children's socialisation as they grow up. How parents behave and act through the toys they buy for their children further shows how gender is socially constructed.

The social construction of gender theory examines how people create their perceptions of gender and the world (Gablin, 2014). People socially construct their perceptions through the use of agreed-upon and shared meanings of reality. Taking into consideration the aim of this study, people communicate their social constructs through media platforms. The social construction theory suggests that social realities are human developments, particularly in institutions like marriage, education, the economy, and gender, where individuals encounter significant others responsible for their socialisation.

The social construction of gender theory was selected to analyse how gender and gender stereotypes are portrayed in the media. Interactions with other people create and support gender stereotypes. Movies greatly influence society because gender is crucial in shaping the main characters' storylines and characteristics. Gender stereotypes have been innovatively designed in various forms of media. Social constructionism is essential to exploring gender and gender stereotypes, as it accounts for how reality is socially constructed (Burr, 2015).

## **1.7 Structure of the Dissertation**

This section focuses on how the chapters of the dissertation are structured and organised.

### **Chapter One: Introduction**

This chapter aims to introduce the reader to the study's context and background. It includes the study's objectives, and research questions and presents a brief discussion of why the topic is essential and how it was chosen. This chapter explains the research problem and describes the research's background.

### **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

The second chapter outlines the current research on the topic. It analyses and discusses the existing research, including academic journal articles and publications that help make the study feasible.

### **Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework**

This chapter discusses the theoretical assumptions and conceptual framework employed in the research. It also explains their relevance to the research questions and problem statements.

### **Chapter Four: Research Methodology**

This chapter elaborates on the methodology used in the research, including the research design, the rationale underpinning the research methodology, and the information processing and analysis procedures used in this study.

### **Chapter Five: Key Findings and Discussion**

This chapter presents the study's results and analyses them in line with the literature review, and the conceptual and theoretical framework. It also covers the interpretation of the research's results and concludes with the implications of these results for the theory.

### **Chapter Six: Summary and Recommendations**

The final chapter summarises the study's results regarding how well the participants responded to the research questions. Additionally, recommendations and suggestions for further research are included.

## **1.8 Conclusion**

This chapter presents a research study that aims to explore the impact of media on gender stereotypes, specifically in films, and its effects on society and individuals. The social construction of gender served as the guide for the qualitative approach used to study a sample of 26 students between the ages of 18 and 30. The study suggests that media strongly impacts how people view and understand gender roles. Toxic masculinity and the sexualisation of women in the media reinforce gender stereotypes, negatively impacting individuals and society. This study is significant as it contributes to current academic debates on gender inequality in the media. The study highlights the importance for media outlets to endorse positive gender roles, support gender equality, and present a diverse and inclusive representation of gender.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter focuses on the pervasive impact of media on the shaping and representation of gender and explores how media productions like television (TV) shows, movies, and advertisements tend to perpetuate harmful and dominant notions of what it means to be masculine and/or feminine. The chapter is divided into two principal sections: the first outlines key concepts of the study, and the second examines how the media shapes gender constructs. The media plays a significant role in society by educating, informing, and entertaining the public. While the media can be a powerful tool for promoting gender equality, it can also perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes that further embed into social norms. This chapter delves into the literature to examine how the media reinforces such negative gender representations in society. The goal of this study is to emphasise the importance of comprehending gender representation in the media and finding ways to improve the depictions of masculinity and femininity. It is imperative to acknowledge that the media holds significant influence over an individual's thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours.

#### **PART ONE: KEY CONCEPTS**

#### **2.2 Media**

Youth Communication (2014) noted that the media significantly shapes societal views on gender norms. Advertisers leverage the media to reach specific target audiences, developing gender and gender-based norms. Nayar (2017) added that communication technologies that influence perspectives and opinions shape debates and contribute to ideologies and political culture. On the other hand, Wood (1994) highlighted that media platforms reinforce gender-based cultural and social norms. The media reinforces negative gender expressions and emphasises the differences between men and women, promoting the concept of dominant femininity in various societies (Manisha & Mangla, 2019).

### **2.3 Key Socialising Agents**

The key socialising agents are individuals, organisations, or groups that influence one's sense of self and contribute to socially beneficial actions, customs, and beliefs that help individuals meet societal expectations (Mwangi et al., 2019). Agents of socialisation can be formal, such as religion, or informal, such as peer groups and the media, and they exist in both social and physical settings. The media is one of the key socialising agents that contributes to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in children and teenagers.

Agents of socialisation provide people with the skills required to contribute to society and help them meet societal expectations. The media's contribution to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes is a growing concern. Women are often portrayed in oppressive and degrading media roles, while men are portrayed in violent and powerful roles. Consequently, children may develop beliefs about what it means to be a boy or a girl due to gender stereotypes that the media reinforces.

### **2.4 Gender**

“Gender refers to the socially produced differences between being feminine and masculine” (Holmes, 2007, p. 2). Biological differences do not solely determine gender, given that culture, social relations, and the natural environment also help in its construction. People acquire and actively engage with gender through socialisation. Gender encompasses the roles, responsibilities, characteristics, capacities, and behaviours assigned to individuals based on their sex in various social contexts.

Power dynamics also play a significant role in shaping gender identities and relationships (Husinga, Yoder, & Martin, 2001; Newman, 2018). People acquire and actively engage with gender through socialisation, including the roles and responsibilities assigned to men and women. These roles and responsibilities are associated with expectations about men's and women's characteristics, capacities, and behaviours (UNESCO, 2003).

Gender (masculinity and/or femininity) is socially constructed (Holmes, 2007; Newman, 2018). Matthews (1984) coined the term “gender” in 1984 while researching the evolution of femininity. The concept of gender, according to Matthews (1984), distinguishes biologically established qualities (sex) from the set of expectations, behaviours, and attitudes taught about

becoming a man or a woman. Gender is so deeply embedded in people's beliefs, behaviours, and social structures that it appears normal (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). Every person is born into a sociocultural context that includes their family, community, culture, and social groups, which contribute to forming their identity. Social settings (e.g., family, community, culture, and media) influence how a person learns to think and act early in life. Interactions with family, community, and the media all contribute to a person's gender, and the social settings in which individuals are raised shape their actions and behaviours. These interactions can result in positive or harmful beliefs about an individual's behaviour.

## **2.5 Gender Stereotypes**

Gender stereotypes are harmful beliefs or assumptions about the roles and traits that men and women should have in society. The media often reinforces these stereotypes, perpetuating inequalities and harming individuals by limiting their ability to develop skills, pursue professions, and make life decisions. Blackstone (2003) argues that gender stereotypes affect both boys and girls from childhood to adulthood, and reinforce traditional gender roles that view women primarily as caregivers. This results in childcare responsibilities falling solely on women, leading to long-lasting effects on both genders. Beasley (2021) stated that gender stereotypes violate human rights in areas such as health, education, work, political participation, and freedom from gender-based violence. Traditional gender roles, where men are providers and protectors while women are caregivers and service providers, may affect an individual's gender identity, leading to discomfort and exclusion from limited gender roles. Therefore, gender stereotypes must be challenged to create an equitable society that benefits everyone regardless of their biological sex (Griffin et al., 2021).

The media's portrayal of gender roles perpetuates broader issues of power and inequality as it reinforces traditional gender norms and perpetuates sexism and patriarchal values. This prioritises male dominance through the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which marginalises individuals who do not fit within these norms, particularly those who identify as LGBTQ+. Therefore, it is crucial to challenge the media's depiction of gender and promote positive representations of gender diversity to create an inclusive and equitable society. Despite all genders being expected to conform to their respective gender stereotypes, men and boys receive more criticism when they deviate from these norms than girls and women.

## 2.6 Masculinities

Masculinity is a socially constructed set of behaviours, attitudes, and meanings expected of men, including strength, technical competence, ambition, self-sufficiency, and emotional control (Ranjan & Prasad, 2018). Hegemonic masculinity is culturally dominant and maintains male dominance over women, children, and other males who do not conform to prescribed norms. Various factors such as socio-economic status, race, physical traits, competition, aggression, pain tolerance, emotional detachment, and homophobia/heterosexism mould masculinity (Connell, 1998). Fathers or other male role models typically socialise boys into exhibiting masculine characteristics, and men measure their self-worth based on how effectively they embody masculine traits.

Connell (1987) argues that men's power might vary based on language, historical context, socio-economic class, race, ethnicity, and sexual preference, giving some males more control and influence over others. For example, white men may see themselves as having more power than black men; upper-class men have more power than working-class men; and heterosexual men have more power than homosexual men (Messerschmidt, 1993).

Heterosexuality refers to behaviours characterised by a sexual desire for someone of the opposite sex (Gounaridis, 2018). Homosexuality, on the other hand, refers to people who are sexually attracted to a person of the same sex. These varying degrees of authority among men significantly impact the masculinities that emerge. According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), hegemonic masculinity would be meaningless without subordinated and marginalised masculinities; thus, they are necessary for its survival.

Hegemonic masculinity, according to Connell (1987), marginalises or subordinates working-class, black, and gay men. While these men may be marginalised and subordinated in some situations, they may also adhere to hegemonic norms and demonstrate that men can hold various positions within the gender hierarchy, particularly masculinity (Wetherell & Edley, 1998). According to Connell (1995), "subordinate masculinities" refer to men at the bottom of the gender hierarchy because they do not fit the definition of "hegemonic masculinity." Physical weakness and expressing emotions such as sadness are considered characteristics of subordinate masculinity. Moreover, gay men may exhibit traits associated with subordinate masculinity. Homosexuality often serves as a repository for everything that is symbolically alienated from

hegemonic masculinity. Thus, from the standpoint of hegemonic masculinity, homosexuality may also easily be incorporated into femininity.

Sexuality plays a significant role in the social construction of masculinity. In Western industrialised countries, heterosexuality is ranked at the top of the hierarchy, while homosexuality is placed close to the bottom (Messerschmidt, 1993). Those who do not conform to the heterosexual identity are stigmatised, oppressed, and viewed as deviants. Heterosexuality has emerged as the defining quality of masculinity, particularly hegemonic masculinity. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) assert that subordinate masculinity deals with any form of political and cultural exclusion, including using legal force to rule over another masculine group. For example, subordination includes acts such as economic, social, and cultural discrimination, humiliation of any type, personal boycotts, and, in extreme cases, even the death penalty.

Masculinities evolve due to shifting cultural norms and values. Connell (1995) emphasises that there is no universal masculinity pattern. Consequently, it is critical to use the term “masculinities” rather than “masculinity.” Masculinities are frequently associated with men’s dominance over women. The various types of masculinity can only be fully understood in relation to femininity. Appropriate behaviour is reinforced and enforced in both public and private settings throughout a boy’s life. Young men who fail to replicate these are subjected to ridicule from their peers.

Toxic masculinity occurs when a man’s conceptions and ideas about being a man have negative consequences for him and those around him (Heber, 2017). Toxic masculinity is defined in terms of the cultural pressures on men to behave in a certain way, which affects all boys and men differently. For example, the belief that men must act tough and hide their emotions can harm their mental health and have significant societal consequences. Toxic masculinity entails more than simply behaving like a man (Yousaf, Popat, & Hunter, 2015). Toxic masculinity refers to extreme male characteristics such as sexual aggression towards women. These are tolerated or admired in many cultures and promote unhealthy behaviours.

Gender is demonstrated as a concept of power (Connell, 1987). Individual men benefit from the “patriarchal dividend,” which stems from women’s inferiority. Although masculinity is based on power, not all masculinities are equally powerful (Connell, 1995). Hegemonic masculinity is a more culturally valued and dominant version that exercises authority over other masculine identities and women (McVittie, Hepworth, & Goodall, 2017). The ideal hegemonic

masculinity is portrayed as a “macho” identity, which is, being (at least somewhat) aggressive, assertive, brave, almost impervious to threats and challenges, and calm in the face of adversity. As a result, the “macho” identity deters people from acting in certain ways, such as expressing their emotions or wanting to ask for help, and is associated with actions that show strength and courage, like refusing to admit weakness or giving in to adversity.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) believed that while men oppressed women, some dominated and subordinated other men. This is a manifestation of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is a gender-ordering notion or concept that influences masculine behaviours that maintain male dominance over women, children, and males who do not conform to their prescribed norms (marginalised masculinities) (Demetriou, 2001). According to the gender role debate, male sex roles, prescriptions, and power expectations are all part of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005; Morrell, 2005).

Connell’s (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity, or men’s complicity, has become a common way of thinking about masculinity. Connell’s work has been popular for understanding masculinity in three ways (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). First, Connell’s approach allows for diversity by studying masculine identities in the plural rather than the singular. Second, the system allows for careful analysis of problems specific to gender power. Third, the approach emphasises the importance of noting the relations within and among men as a group and between men and women. Hegemonic masculinity impacts society’s institutional, political, and economic spheres. Hegemonic masculinity proposes to explain how and why men maintain dominant social roles over women and other subordinate gender identities in a given society (Wetherell & Edley, 1999).

Beasley (2021) argued that men always struggle to prove their manhood. Hegemonic masculinity has been increasingly used to understand men’s health practices and determinants. Practices include playing through physical injuries and risk-taking sexual behaviours, such as unprotected sex with multiple partners (Coga et al., 2021). Men may engage in harmful behaviours, such as physical and sexual assault against women and gay men, to maintain gender dominance, eventually impacting the health of men, women, and children (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014).

Manhood in South Africa includes men who own guns (from “freedom fighters” to “family protectors”), participate in sports and competitiveness, and participate in traditional practices such as circumcision and initiation ceremonies (Cock 2001; Swart 2001; Wardorp 2001; Xaba 2001). These practices vary among ethnic groups, and rituals and teachings about masculinity and responsibility often accompany them. According to Scott (2015), older men are more powerful and influential than younger men in the African context. Sometimes, older men can decide when a boy transitions into a man by granting them property, cattle, or a marriage proposal.

Men who subscribe to hegemonic masculinity may experience high morbidity and mortality rates due to their refusal to seek early medical attention. Research has shown that men who uphold hegemonic masculinity standards are more likely to suffer from depression and suicidal thoughts due to the stereotype that men should be strong and not express emotions (Courtenay, 2000; Mahalik, Burns, & Syzdek, 2007). This can lead to a mental breakdown or suicide, or an outburst of aggression and a lack of healthy interactions with friends and family. Men who subscribe to hegemonic masculinity are more likely to abuse their partners and wield significant sexual power over women. Aggression can happen as a result of stress due to a man’s inability to live up to masculine expectations (discrepancy) or when he upholds normative male expectations (dysfunction) (Berke & Zeichner, 2016).

Most men see aggression and violence as acceptable forms of self-expression, power assertion, and conflict resolution. This is called “hyper-masculinity,” whereby men often try to compensate for their insecurity about their gender identity by being more violent and aggressive (Hong, 2000). Hyper-masculine men are always prepared to fight, never exhibit signs of fear, pain, or anxiety, and always portray a sense of power (Ratele, 2008). Given that men’s roles are normally outside the home and women’s roles are inside the house, women become more vulnerable to violence when they do not conform to their roles (Russo & Pirlott, 2006). In instances where women are disobedient and do not conform to the stereotype of homemakers, men may use violence to ensure women obey them. The Department of Social Development (2023) stated that many organisations (such as the African Union in Africa) have participated in various initiatives aimed at putting an end to violence against women and girls. Despite these vital initiatives, the rate of violence against women and girls continues to be unacceptable. Violence is the most common type of harm, affecting not only the lives and health of individual girls but also the relationships, health, and general well-being of women and society as a whole.

Hegemonic types of masculinity harm and humiliate both women and men who do not fit the typical masculine standard. Most women also uphold male-dominant notions of masculinity and femininity by instilling them in their children (Kachel, Steffens, & Niedlich, 2016). According to Xaba (2001), underprivileged black men in South Africa were given respect and status within their societies by being called “young lions” and “liberators.” This position was highly valued in the liberation movement against the apartheid state, and being called a “young lion” was an intoxicating and proud experience. In this environment, violence had a gender dimension and was often associated with great masculine pride. Young men who did not conform to the typical masculine standard faced exclusion (becoming outcasts or having no friends), street violence, being labelled as weak, a moffie, or girly, and other derogatory terms. Their fathers, grandparents, and others punished them, and girls mocked them. They were regarded as failures, and made to feel so (Chen, Park, & Breazeal, 2020).

Men were much less likely than women to make life choices that would improve their health and life expectancy (Courtenay, 2000; Hearn, 2007; Harris, 2008). This is true for both South Africa and Africa, with the latter having the highest rate of male HIV infection in the world (Hearn, 2007; Prinsloo, 2006). Some sexually active males are alleged to be uninformed about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Ampofo & Boateng, 2007). Even if they are informed about STIs, they endanger their lives due to denial and cultural constraints associated with being men.

### **2.6.1 Media Representations of Black Masculinity**

Black people watch more television than white viewers and tend to be especially attuned to representations of black life, culture, and experience, according to Beaudoin & Thorson (2006). Black Africans are negatively portrayed on television, which affects how other races view them, how they are treated, and how they interact with other black people. Young black males in South Africa are called “criminal predators” (Welch, 2007). Kennedy (1997) asserted that stereotypes about black people’s criminal tendencies are rooted in the enslavement of Africans in the United States. “Stereotyping of criminals based on race has been a persistent and unpleasant aspect of American culture” (Welch, 2007, p. 276). The criminal tendency was perceived in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as an African-American “biological defect.”

The ideal of hegemonic masculinity as a white, heterosexual man has led to different adaptations for black men, who lack access to the same economic and political power as elite white men

(Entman & Gross, 2008). Black men in the United States of America (USA) now view physical aggression and body use as essential components of masculinity. Contrary to white men in the USA, who established masculinity through business and political positions, black people have frequently been portrayed as criminals in the USA and South Africa (Drummond, 1990; Russell, 2002). According to studies conducted in the USA on race and incarceration, young Black men get longer sentences than people of other races or ethnicities. Studies on prosecutors show that they sometimes use and reinforce racial prejudices when they portray Black people as particularly prone to violent crime, leading to higher conviction rates (Higginbotham, 2002). This is also evident in South Africa, where black men are portrayed as violent criminals and face prejudices in the media.

The media contributes to the creation of stereotypes of young Black male criminals in the USA and in South Africa. When the general public sees the number of black people sentenced, they are led to believe that blackness is inextricably linked to criminality. In Chicago, a study of the racial content of television newscasts discovered that black suspects are frequently depicted in scowling mug photographs or videos while white police officers handcuff them (Entman, 1990). Violent crimes in the USA, for which Black men are more likely to be arrested, receive disproportionate media attention. The stereotype of young black men as violent criminals is reinforced regularly. Given that the media can shape how race is understood in society, it is evident that how Black people are frequently portrayed to readers and viewers plays a crucial role in how Blacks are defined as criminals.

Political ideals and the media often link race with crime, leading to a negative portrayal of young black men as criminals. The media presents a distorted view of the lives and realities of black men for various reasons, leading to a damaging impact on the public's attitudes and perceptions towards them (Welch, 2007). Negative stereotypes and biases about young black men that frequently appear in the media and political ideologies contribute to this harmful perception. These negative attitudes and actions towards black men contribute to the perpetuation of damaging stereotypes. Addressing this issue requires understanding the injustices faced by African American males and increasing the accountability of politicians and media organisations. Eliminating the link between race and crime is vital for creating a fair society that benefits everyone. The negative consequences of the public's attitudes and actions towards black men necessitate taking constructive transformative measures.

Although the number of characters of colour in video games has grown over time, blacks still tend to be underrepresented, especially in terms of being playable, active characters. Outside of sports events, African Americans are only marginally represented in popular video games and are frequently depicted as gangsters and street people (Williams et al., 2009). Blacks are overrepresented as perpetrators of violent crimes but underrepresented in the more sympathetic positions of victims and law enforcement (Entman & Gross, 2008). Clawson and Trice (2000) stated that African Americans are overrepresented in media articles about poverty. For instance, low-income black people in media articles are more likely than real-world averages to live in slums or urban areas rather than rural areas and are depicted as completely jobless and idle (as opposed to working).

The media exploits the negative perception of Black people (particularly Black men) and perpetuates it through various media platforms (Russell-Brown, 2006). Constant exposure to the criminal black stereotype has effectively become the accepted norm for Black men; other races fear becoming victims of Black perpetrators. For example, the film *Tsotsi* (2007) depicts traditional gender roles in which men, particularly Black men, are violent plunderers. *Tsotsi*, the film's focus, is a strong, well-respected gang leader. *Tsotsi* and his gang rob and kill an older man on a train. These scenes in this film portray Black masculinity as deviant, aggressive, and authenticated by a violent culture. Additionally, the media also use the negative portrayal of women (Black women) as nurturers, as the scene shows *Tsotsi* forcing Miriam to breastfeed and care for a baby he found in a hijacked car.

## **2.7 Femininities (Toxic and Hegemonic Femininities and Beauty Ideals)**

Femininity refers to a set of female characteristics, attitudes, and roles attributed to women, such as empathy, sensitivity, loyalty, a caring attitude, softness, submissiveness, and sympathy (Drydakis et al., 2017). Similar to masculinity, femininity is a social construct and not an inherent trait of women. Toxic femininity is defined as gender norms that lead to women's subordination, promote passivity and foster dependency. On the other hand, hegemonic femininity is a set of legitimising characteristics traditionally associated with women that reinforces men's dominance and subordination over women. Men, including fathers and husbands, sometimes view women as objects or possessions (Gilmore, 2018).

Feminist research has long been concerned with the social construction of femininity, particularly with gender inequality and power dynamics (Lorber, 1994). Early second-wave

feminist researchers such as de Beauvoir (1986) claimed that women's subordination in Western society was due to socialisation rather than any fundamental biological gender difference. This is as indicated in her frequently quoted phrase, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (de Beauvoir, 1986, p. 35). According to Cobuild (2010), subordination means having less power or influence than someone else. Women's subordination involves their lower status, limited decision-making authority, exclusion, discrimination, and the prevalent patriarchal control that women experience in many societies.

South Africa is largely a patriarchal country. Kumar and Khalaf (2021) define patriarchy as a societal system within a gendered hierarchical structure that employs specific social practices to reinforce social divisions and inequality. Patriarchy is a social structure in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women. Toxic femininity reinforces patriarchal, anti-Black, classist, and binary sex essentialist conceptions of femininity (Roberts, 1997). In the patriarchal system, women are classified as "exchangeable, possibly symbolic" property with the primary purpose of strengthening men's relationships with men (Sedgwick, 1985). This places femininity and masculinity as opposites and deems femininity inferior (Butler, 1999; Sedgwick, 1985).

Traditional or hegemonic femininity is the belief that there is an ideal, dominant representation of womanhood (Walter, 2020). Hegemonic femininity consists of characteristics traditionally associated with women and legitimises a hierarchical relationship with hegemonic masculinity, ensuring men's dominance and subordination over women (Schippers, 2007). In general, in society's eyes, a woman is expected to be a homemaker, obedient to her husband, capable of bearing children, and always available for her family. Carcano and Por La Saud (2018) argue that the relationship between hegemonic, or dominant, femininity, Black femininity, and toxic femininity is highly complex and linked to histories of colonialism and patriarchy.

White supremacist patriarchy classifies femininity and "woman" for white cisgender and heterosexual men's benefit. White-centred femininity, also called "traditional femininity," further marginalises black women by reinforcing and solidifying the stereotype that they are hypersexual, deviant, and incapable of being feminine (Roberts, 1997). It is therefore argued that Black communities adopt and conform to feminine identities that support oppressive and patriarchal ideas (Paechter, 2018).

According to Paechter (2018), toxic femininity prioritises cisgender and heterosexual ideals and bodies. There is a convergence of transphobia, racism, and misogyny. Black queer individuals (and queer people in general) frequently adopt anti-queer and anti-trans views because they are submissive bodies compelled to build their sexuality and gender identities within the oppressive confines of institutionalised white supremacist patriarchy.

It is important to consider the historical context when studying how women express femininity (Lloyd, 2016). Women's place was built on religion or piety. Women were traditionally expected to be more inherently pious than men. Women were considered responsible for providing the family's spiritual foundation for their children. Women were advised not to let intellectual activities, such as reading books or newspapers, divert them from God's message. This gender performance created the cult of "real" or traditional womanhood.

## **2.8 Intersectionality**

The concept of intersectionality refers to how social categories like gender, class, and race are interrelated and are thought to produce overlapping and interdependent systems of disadvantage or discrimination. Intersectionality recognises that individuals may face oppression and discrimination in unique ways, and anything that can marginalise people should be taken into account. For example, Black women may experience sexism in unique ways compared to white women.

Intersectionality focuses on how interconnected systems of power influence real-world situations, highlighting the relationships and fluid nature of power dynamics (Brown & Gershon, 2016). Power dynamics based on gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and identity can reinforce each other, leading to phenomena like sexism, racism, and heterosexism. Since these systems go beyond typical identification categories, various forms of oppression cannot be avoided. An intersectional approach can help examine the varied differences between men and women, including differences among men (Ann-Dorte & Sune, 2014). Gender is closely connected to other social systems as it helps structure social behaviours. It is common to say that race and class interact, or rather, intersect with gender; it also places the world in order. For example, white men's masculinities are produced not only in relation to white women but also Black men.

Intersectional frameworks allow for the understanding of racism and sexism in relation to one another by seeing power interactions through a lens of mutual production (Collins & Bilge, 2016). These interactions take place within interconnected power structures, including laws, regulations, governments, political and economic entities, the media, and religious institutions. These dynamics give rise to interrelated kinds of privilege and oppression that racism, homophobia, and patriarchy influence. The media shapes people's perceptions of gender by how it presents its characteristics, beliefs, and life experiences. The interplay between status and power produces images that propagate stereotypes and elicit strong emotions. For instance, when the impoverished are discussed in the media, working-age men in particular are frequently portrayed as being primarily Black. This draws attention to how intricately represented seemingly isolated groups can be.

Men are not always granted the same advantages and disadvantages based only on their gender identity, or what is known as "maleness." For example, gendered racism causes African-American males to face different types of oppression than nonracialised white men. When taking into account certain types of discrimination, including racial profiling, which Black men disproportionately experience, gender and race are inextricably linked. The binary ideas of privilege and disadvantage cannot adequately capture the complex experiences of groups (Mutua, 2013).

Evan et al., (2011) cover the varied ways masculinity interacts with other socio-economic determinants of health in childhood, middle age, and old age. They show how experiences related to socioeconomic position, colour, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, community, education, and work shape the definition and experience of masculinity over the course of an individual's life. As men grow older, they may be more prone to health issues, yet they also show greater resilience towards them. Neglecting the dynamic and multifaceted character of masculinity can lead to the omission and neglect of crucial factors that influence inequality.

## **PART TWO: MEDIA, GENDER STEREOTYPES, AND CONTROLLING IMAGES**

### **2.9 Media and Patriarchy**

The media is becoming increasingly pervasive and plays an essential role in shaping people's lives. Goodall (2012) suggested that dramatic shows on television, music videos, magazines, and newspapers significantly influence men's and women's views and attitudes. The media is evolving into an institution that perpetuates, reinforces, and changes cultural practices and ethics.

According to Wood (2019), gender ideology refers to widely held cultural beliefs that support gender inequality. Gender ideology refers to cultural beliefs that uphold gender inequality. Lober (1994, p. 30) describes gender ideology as "the explanation of gender statuses, specifically their differential appraisal." The dominant ideology suppresses criticism by making gender evaluations appear natural. Gender ideology suggests that patriarchal organisations prioritise and favour men over women. Repeated exposure to stereotyped gender representations can influence audiences, particularly children and teenagers, and these representations may influence their gender perception (Devi, 2018; Valentova, 2016). What teenagers and young adults see in movies profoundly impacts them, and they frequently mimic or identify with the personalities depicted in the programme's content.

Patriarchal culture creates distinctions between men and women regarding their roles, status, and importance, leading to the underrepresentation and undervaluation of women's voices (Murtiningsih, Maria Advenita, & Ikom, 2017). Women generally receive less attention from the mainstream media and face gender inequality in new media. Advertising and mass media display codes related to male and female characteristics, often presenting these as gender performance goals (Alzahrani, 2016). Men are often seen in positions of power, while women are sexualised in advertising, portraying them as frail and defenceless creatures (Jhally, 2009). These aspects reinforce women's social subordination and sustain traditional gender norms.

Advertising imposes irrational norms on gender roles, especially on female beauty (Jhally, 2009). The women, men, and children who appear in commercials from the past to the present must all be attractive and appealing for all advertisements. Such expectations may harm mental health, self-esteem, and body image (Wolf, 2013). For example, cellulite has become a significant issue for women due to evolving aesthetic standards and new market opportunities

in female beauty. This reinforces the stereotype that women are valued for their attractiveness, with men rejecting women's bodies if they do not conform to the stereotype of male attractiveness.

According to Van Hellefont and Van den Bulck (2012), advertisements may impact violence against women. In contrast, advertisements for women emphasise their physical characteristics, whereas advertisements for men emphasise their masculine traits of assertiveness and power. The portrayal of women as occasionally naked in advertisements exposes them physically and psychologically, reinforcing power dynamics.

Wood (2011) states that television programmes may negatively stereotype men, particularly heterosexual men, by portraying them as significant, confident, and assertive. Men who do not fit this stereotype, such as those who are unemployed, effeminate, or homosexual, may be harmed as a result. These programmes may also reinforce heterosexual behaviour to validate one's manhood, such as drinking excessively, driving while intoxicated, having unprotected sex, and not seeking medical attention for illnesses (Rich, Nkosi, & Morojele, 2015). Men's contexts and views on manhood influence their health behaviours, causing them to often reject positive attitudes and behaviours in pursuing manliness (Burnard, 2008; McKenzie et al., 2018).

The media has a significant impact on the psychosocial development of children. Numerous studies have examined how the media affects society, particularly children and teenagers, and noted that these can be both positive and negative (Reid et al., 2016). The developmental stage of each child influences whether or not the media has a positive or negative impact on them. Even though not all television programming is harmful, the evidence demonstrating the negative effects of exposure to violence, inappropriate sexual content, and objectionable language is compelling (American Academy of Paediatrics, 2001). Children's violent behaviour, for example, increases when they watch violent television shows (Gunter & Gunter, 2019). The media shapes societal norms, values, and ideas, which can have tangible effects on people's behaviour and perceptions in real life.

Violence in the media is becoming more prevalent (Anderson, 2016). Every year, 12,000 violent events are portrayed on television for children, including numerous murder and rape scenes (Sonu, 2011). Over 1,000 research findings establish that watching violent television programmes causes aggressive behaviour, particularly in men. Additional research reveals that

suicide risk increases when suicides are reported on television or in the newspaper. Adult sexual content on TV may normalise and suggest a minimisation of the risks involved (e.g., sexually transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancies), giving children the impression that these behaviours are commonplace (American Academy of Paediatrics, 2001). Teenagers prefer media-based sex education programmes to school-based sex education programmes as their primary source of sex information. The media may influence adolescent sexual attitudes and values.

Every year, between 1,000 and 2,000 alcohol advertisements are shown to teenagers, promoting beer as the beverage for “real” men (Lapierre et al., 2017). Research shows that advertising increases beer consumption. Alcohol and tobacco products are not always directly advertised on television. Passive advertising, for example, occurs when a movie star lights cigarettes in a “masculine” gesture. Although children can learn about smoking and drinking outside of the home, television portrayals of these behaviours are harmful (Mngadi & Senkubuge, 2014). In many music videos, advertisements, and films, drinking and smoking are depicted as normal behaviours, with minimal focus on their long-term consequences. These may have an impact on children’s formation of gender stereotypes and gender roles.

## **2.10 Stereotypes and Gender Roles in Advertisements**

Advertising and media play a significant role in shaping societal conventions and beliefs, often perpetuating gender stereotypes and reinforcing restrictive gender roles. These representations may misrepresent societal values and contribute to maintaining cultural hegemony (Akestam et al., 2021). Women are predominantly portrayed as dependents of men with limited roles in homemaking and child-rearing, ultimately contributing to their devaluation in society (Goldman & Smith, 1991). On the other hand, media representations of men often emphasise power and dominance, further reinforcing gender roles and ideals (Ward & Grower, 2020). According to Hall (2020), representation creates meaning through language. Media uses mass messages to represent societal realities and influence how people perceive their reality and how social categories like gender are perceived and depicted, allowing them to live their lives through social interactions. Media representations and advertising significantly shape cultural ideals and standards, promoting gender inequalities and restricting the roles and worth of women and men alike (Antoniou & Akrivos, 2020).

Media representations of gender significantly impact young viewers, perpetuating gender stereotypes and inequality as they portray women as sexual objects, which in turn encourages violence against them (National Clearinghouse on Family and Youth, 2006; Murtiningsih, Maria Adventita, & Ikom, 2017; Ward & Grower, 2020). To promote gender equality, individuals must challenge media representations of gender and recognise diverse gender expressions and identities. Advertisers must also take responsibility for the messages they perpetuate, producing advertisements that feature diverse representation and challenge traditional gender norms (Ward & Grower, 2020). Additionally, media literacy education equips individuals with the skills to critically analyse and resist harmful messages that the media and advertising perpetuate, thus promoting a more inclusive and just society (van der Linda, 2010; National Clearinghouse on Family and Youth, 2006). Overall, challenging and diversifying media representations of gender are crucial for promoting a more just and equitable society since women and men are sometimes not represented accurately in the media.

### **2.11 Representation of Men and Women in the Media**

Regarding gender, the underrepresentation of women and girls has often been the focus of efforts to address the representation gap (Makhuba, 2017). A lack of acknowledgement of women and girls in the media reflects the notion that women should have greater societal value. In societies where literacy is lacking, especially among women, the electronic media, which includes radio and television, naturally have an advantage over print media such as newspapers (Ward & Grower, 2020). The visual images that television uses to shape the minds and views of people spatially generate gender roles within their imaginary environment. These, in turn, affect how gender roles and stereotypes are constructed in the physical, nonvirtual world.

Studies often reveal that the media exclusively stereotype and define individuals of each gender, particularly women's appearance or behaviour in intimate relationships, and assign limited personality traits and roles to them (Ward & Grower, 2020). Many TV shows indicate that girls focus more on their appearance than boys and are more likely to be sexualised (Hentges & Case, 2013; Rousseau, et al., 2018). For example, female characters in a study of tween programming on the Disney Channel, Nickelodeon, and Cartoon Network were more appealing, more concerned with their appearance, and more likely to receive comments regarding their beauty than male characters (Gerding & Signorielli, 2014).

Movies often depict gender roles, portraying men as powerful and stoic, while women are shown as emotionally vulnerable individuals (Ward & Grower, 2020). Male characters are more verbally and physically aggressive than female characters, while female characters are better liked and more family-oriented. Studies show that men are more frequently depicted in the workplace, while women are more at home (Gilpatric, 2010; Martha, et al., 2008). When women are shown in the workplace, their jobs conform to gender stereotypes; for example, women are portrayed as cleaners.

Many believe that society often imitates what the media portrays, as these images and ideas are used in popular culture. Films show audiences the patterns of acceptable gender stereotypes that society shares (Ward & Grower, 2020). These films influence the audience's perception of the significance and value of gender. The media continues to strengthen traditional gender stereotypes by portraying men and women in stereotypical roles (Ward & Aubrey, 2017).

The extensive exposure of children and teenagers to stereotypical media portrayals raises concerns about the reinforcement of gender stereotypes (Ward & Grower, 2020). Television consistently delivers a distorted reality, and repeated exposure to these messages may cause more frequent viewers to adopt societal views that align with the presented information. Therefore, it is expected that individuals who regularly watch television programming that reinforces traditional gender stereotypes are more likely to believe that these preconceptions are accurate and to act accordingly.

Viewers' interactions with media content affect their routines, beliefs, and behaviour (Bandura, 2001). Exposure to media content may not always result in adopting the depicted beliefs or actions; instead, it depends on the information and the viewer's perceptions. Factors such as the attraction of the media models or their sense of identity, the importance of their actions, and the rewards or penalties they receive for their behaviour all influence how viewers are likely to learn and imitate certain behaviours. For instance, women are sexually objectified in the media, and viewers may imitate this act or behaviour.

## **2.12 The Sexual Objectification of Women**

According to Jutten (2016), sexual objectification is treating another person like an object. It entails admiring someone solely for their physical appearance (body) rather than their personality or uniqueness. How women are portrayed in the media is a typical example of

objectification. Being sexually objectified refers to having a societal meaning placed on your being that categorises you as being used for sexual purposes (MacKinnon, 1989).

Women, especially, receive messages that their bodies are seen as sexual objects through media like pornography or advertising and in their interactions with others (Calogero & Tylka, 2014; Fernandez et al., 2018). Pornography promotes sexual objectification by portraying individuals as bodies used exclusively for sexual pleasure. People learn about sexual norms when they view sexually explicit content.

Considering the sexual standards that pornography upholds, various content evaluations have revealed that this sexual medium frequently exhibits sexually objectifying representations of women (Bridges et al., 2010; Fritz & Paul, 2017; Klaassen & Peter, 2015). Women's bodies, particularly their genitals, have been the focus of pornographic content for many years in movies, periodicals, and the internet. According to Gorman, Monk-Turner, & Fish (2010), 47% of the movies in the USA had male characters giving sexually objectifying instructions to female characters, such as "Go down on your knees," "Get back up," or "Lean forward." These various portrayals of women as sexual objects are related to how pornographic viewers view women as sexual objects.

Sexualised advertising may influence expectations in intimate relationships and put women under pressure to please and satisfy men (Papadopoulos, 2010). For example, the depiction of women wearing intimate apparel while dressed men surround them demonstrates the pornographic nature of underwear. Most men expect women to please them by imitating what they see in pornography, and most women also believe they must wear sexy and seductive underwear to impress men.

Women in movies are often objectified and depicted as tools without emotions, autonomy, or rights (Dvir et al., 2021). This weakens the position of women rather than empowering them through strong and independent characters. For example, in the drama series "Uzalo," Nkunzi (a man) asks Lady Diniwe, "the distinctive dynamite Diniwe," to seduce a business rival (Mkhonto) to gain knowledge on how he successfully handles his business. The men in the scene reinforce the stereotype that women are temptresses and evil, leading to men's downfall. The portrayal of women as sex objects has become popular in South African media. One-dimensional female characters who are stereotypically "sexy" are common. Diniwe is a bright

businesswoman, but because of her attractiveness and her decision to use her body to enhance her profession, the men on the scene do not take her seriously or respect her.

Hip-hop music has contributed to the sexual subordination of women through the endorsement of sexualised behaviours and the hypersexualisation of female characters in regions where hip-hop is prevalent. "Hyper-sexualisation" alludes to treating or portraying girls as sexual objects (Cottais & Louvet, 2021). The inappropriate imposition of sexuality on girls is linked to media, marketing, or products marketed to them. This can also lead to girls engaging in adult sexual activities. In hip-hop music videos, body parts become hyper-sexualised by wearing clothing and accessories that emphasise certain body parts while attempting to cover up "flaws." In the 1990s, hip-hop music introduced a new dimension to the oppression of black women, especially in the United States. Men predominate in the hip-hop industry. In hip-hop videos, racialised women are commonly depicted as curvaceous, scantily clad, and often dancing provocatively. Surgical procedures, such as silicone breast implants, are employed to make the body look more 'artificial.'

Collins (1991) researched the recurring stereotypes that many black women come across in the US. Jezebel, who is portrayed as a seductive and hypersexual black woman, is an example of such a stereotype. Jezebel allegedly lives to entice men into sexual activity and is assumed to always be willing to participate in sexual activity. This stereotype has been used against black women throughout history (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016). Structural power has distinctly positioned Black women apart from white women. Recently on YouTube and other social media platforms, homemade films depict black women engaging in "twerking" activities where they shake and jiggle their buttocks to a musical beat. The hyper-sexualisation of women encourages harmful behaviours that can be damaging to young girls' self-esteem. Due to racism and patriarchy, Black women lacked a unique identity both inside and outside of slavery. Black women were treated as possessions rather than individuals.

Girls are more likely to experience low self-esteem, depression, and eating disorders because of the objectified pictures they consume (American Psychological Association, 2011). Sexual objectification encourages early sexual activity and a diet culture among girls. Diet culture is a set of beliefs that promotes thinness and associates it with happiness, health, and good character; encourages weight loss; praises an unattainable standard of beauty; criticises and shames

particular eating patterns and body types; and, finally, oppresses and discriminates against those who do not conform to thinness (Harrison, 2018).

The film “The Help” (2011) shows Black women as domestic workers and white women going to work. Black women are associated with hard labour. This film illustrates how real racial discrimination in the USA was in the 1960s. Overall, “The Help” successfully conveys the extent to which racial inequality affected the lives of many black people in the USA in the 1960s through various visual and aural approaches, such as shooting and visual design (Rusnanila, 2019).

The film (The Help) illustrates the vast social divide between blacks and whites in the USA. This is accomplished by presenting scenes demonstrating the differences in housing, clothing, lifestyles, and professions (Rusnanila, 2019). Black families sometimes led very simple and impoverished lives since they could not seek the same jobs or education that white families could. The camera pans along with the characters’ movements to highlight their social class. Hilly, her mother, Missus Walters, and Minny are strolling along the sidewalk in the movie.

Hilly and her mother are dressed nicely in heels, while Minny is dressed in a maid’s outfit. This tactic draws viewers’ attention to each character’s clothing choices, showing black women as maids working for whites. For example, the representation of black women as maids proves they are poor since domestic work is undesirable labour with low salaries. This has a real-life effect on how black women are viewed in society. Many black women work for whites as maids, and this has led to white people assuming that every black woman is poor and suitable to be a domestic worker. These stories often create barriers relating to black men and tend to strengthen stereotypes.

Traditional gender portrayals and sexualised images in media promote conformity, limiting stereotypes, impacting health, and potentially contributing to violence against women (McKenzie, Bugden, & Webster, 2018). These portrayals negatively affect women and contribute to the undervaluing of women in society.

### **2.12.1 Media and the Perpetuation of Westernised Representations of Beauty**

Men and women are depicted differently in various media forms. Ottosson and Cheng (2012) investigated gender representation in movies and found that women are often portrayed as being obsessed with their physical appearance, attempting to be attractive by applying make-up,

styling their hair, and wearing fancy outfits, high heels, and jewellery. Additionally, in a study examining how films support stereotypical ideas of physical beauty and desirability, Williams & Millington (2004) discovered that films reinforce concepts and messages that define certain types of women as societally acceptable. For example, attractive, blonde, light-skinned females are viewed as the societal norm, although they do not represent all women, resulting in body image and self-image issues.

There has always been an idealised representation of beauty throughout history, with the Westernised representation of beauty pervading all aspects of American life (Chiat, 2021). Teenagers, especially, are inundated with images promoting Western beauty ideals due to extensive media exposure. Research indicates that the slim body image promoted in fashion magazines and beauty pageants led to heightened weight loss, dieting, and exercise in popular women's magazines. According to Chen et al. (2020), the media portrays ideal body images for women, encouraging them to exercise excessively and build their bodies in ways that are acceptable in the media. Consequently, the production of weight-loss products for women has increased. This has also resulted in the sharing of make-up and tutorials for women to maintain an ideal body structure, as portrayed in the media (Heber, 2017).

From an early age, young girls are taught that having an attractive appearance is essential to fulfilling the feminine gender role, that beautiful women are admired more than less attractive ones, and that women should prioritise their physical attractiveness as a means to attain social status (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016; Chiado, 2015; Ogle, Reddy-Best, & Park, 2017). Hegemonic beauty standards include features linked to Euro-Western cultural ideals such as fair skin or complexions, blue-coloured eyes, long straight hair, smaller facial features, and thinner bodies (Awad et al., 2015). Characteristics associated with an African-centred image, such as darker skin; larger or curvier bodies, short, kinky, or curly hair, full lips, and broader noses, are perceived as less attractive and less feminine (Awad et al., 2015).

To maintain their appearance, women must invest time and money in clothes, cosmetics, and hair styling (Ciado, 2015). Women who do not meet conventional beauty standards may experience reduced self-esteem and body satisfaction. Moreover, black women's beauty standards are even more complex because they are socialised to conform to restrictive, hegemonic, and culturally specific beauty norms. For instance, studies have shown that black

women are viewed more favourably when they closely resemble whiteness, i.e., have a lighter skin complexion (Awad et al., 2015; Watson, Lewis, & Moody, 2019).

### **2.13 Streaming Platforms and Their Representation of Gender Across Popular Culture**

Cinema has been a beloved medium since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and has reflected real-life situations and structures (Rayappa, 2021). People use their everyday perceptual abilities to understand the societal meaning in films, using facial expressions and gestures to understand characters' thoughts, experiences, and emotions (Wilson, 2011). There are many different genres, such as comedy, horror, fantasy, crime, action, and drama. All these genres are distinct, but they all contribute to the stereotyping of gender. In films, dominance is frequently built on the maternal image, creating a stereotype of mothers who rely on men for support and finances.

Manatu (2003) argues that the images of men and women in films play an important role in inciting antisocial behaviours such as violence, crime, and delinquency. Films mainly promote violent acts by depicting violent behaviours, including shootings. Weapons are commonly seen in action movies. Researchers have recognised the link between virtual and real violence. Violence in films, particularly those depicting rape or sexual enslavement and the exploitation of women and girls as sex objects, perpetuates violence and hurts society, particularly children and young people (Rostad et al., 2019).

According to Mathur, Saxena, and Jorasia (2023), the portrayal of certain characters in films can reflect the political and social ideas of the time. Movies have a unique ability to reflect the complexity of politics and shape public opinion. Politics is concerned with the formation and distribution of power in society and the organisation's social life. The political perspectives are manipulative and enticing, demonstrating competition for real, tangible power and control. While both men and women work in vulnerable jobs, women frequently work in low-quality and vulnerable jobs and are forced to accept undesirable work (e.g., prostitution, part-time jobs, or low-paying jobs) to make a living. Women have greater difficulty finding work than men due to a lack of education and traditional gender roles that confine them to the home. Men have more employment opportunities and are often represented in positions of power (e.g., Chief Executive Officer).

Disney, Sony Motion Pictures, Warner Bros., Universal, and Paramount Pictures are the five major studios distributing films in the media industry. Most movies feature white, slim Disney

princesses, which may lead to misconceptions such as believing that being skinny and white makes you desirable, successful, decent, and attractive. This may be an example of racial prejudice, as non-white individuals (children and adults) may feel alienated. Hence, it is argued that the portrayal of characters in Disney movies fosters prejudice.

In the Disney film “Pretty Woman” (1990), Vivian, a young woman living on the streets, undergoes a life transformation after marrying Edward, a handsome and wealthy man who transforms her into an elegant and refined lady. Vivian is the film’s protagonist who, unfortunately, is portrayed as a lower-class prostitute who actively seeks out customers on the street and offers sexual favours to men in exchange for money (Blasdell, 2015). This portrayal perpetuates the notion that women are weak and reliant on men for a better life. Current trends in gender representation in media suggest that films continue to reinforce traditional gender stereotypes (Devi, 2018).

Traditional gender stereotypes are also prevalent in the movie ‘Man of Steel’ (2013), which stars a man named Superman as the main character. Superman possesses superhuman abilities such as strength, speed, and flight; he is depicted as the most powerful being on Earth. Lois, the main female protagonist, is portrayed as a damsel in distress who needs rescuing when she is in trouble; Superman always comes to her aid.

Knorr (2017) states that children are constantly bombarded with shows that depict gender-stereotypical models, from toys advertised for boys or girls to children’s television programmes and presentations. Children’s programming frequently emphasises the heroic male who saves the helpless female. Children interpret these messages as “real life,” influencing their reality, behaviour, and gendered expectations. Female characters, for example, are portrayed as beautiful, fearful, emotional, romantic, loving, and supportive. They expect men to rescue them from their unfortunate circumstances (e.g., Cinderella) (Manisha & Mangla, 2019). In cartoons aimed at men, men are portrayed as more intelligent, technical, and aggressive. Characters like Spiderman represent ‘natural’ or ‘typical’ masculine behaviour, with muscled and aggressive figures utilising aggression to defeat an opponent (Knorr, 2017). Men and women are portrayed in films as exaggerated versions of their real-life status, whether consciously or unconsciously.

In the 2004 movie filmed in South Africa, “Yesterday,” the film-makers portray women as housewives who live in rural areas and support their families by working on household chores

like gathering wood and water, washing clothes in the river, and farming (Singh & Roodt, 2004). The movie emphasises how women, particularly black women, face oppression and confinement in the home. Furthermore, the main character, Yesterday, shares all household duties with her daughter, perpetuating the stereotype that women take care of the home while men go to work and earn money. The perpetuation of traditional gender roles not only limits women's access to education and employment but also feeds the cycle of poverty in their communities. The movie emphasises the value of gender equality and empowerment in society by focusing on the hardships and sacrifices that women in the past made.

The portrayal of Black women as archetypes, such as the struggling single mother who raises her children without her spouse, as seen in *Yesterday* and *Jerusalema*, reinforces gender stereotypes and perpetuates the notion that women occupy a secondary role in society, reflecting the broader issues of gender inequality and marginalisation (Singh & Roodt, 2004). For instance, in a scene from 'Yesterday,' the husband scolds Yesterday for leaving their home without permission and tells her that her place is in the household, reinforcing the stereotype that women should be submissive and confined to domestic duties. Furthermore, when Yesterday seeks employment as a domestic worker, her employer's family discriminates against and mistreats her, highlighting the limited opportunities and marginalised positions that Black women face in South African society.

In films, single mothers, often unemployed, raise children alone while their husbands are away. Mama Kunene in *Jerusalema* (2008) represents single parenthood despite her seemingly hardworking behaviour to support her family. In the film, Mama Kunene, Lucky's mother, is not given a job description but is introduced as a devout Christian mom doing her best to raise Lucky according to Christian values (Naidoo, 2008). The portrayal of single motherhood in these movies raises questions about the stereotype of Black superwomen, potentially reinforcing the notion that their primary duty is childrearing.

In the film *Jerusalema* (2008), the filmmakers depict women's roles that provide sexual pleasure to the movie's characters and audience (Motsaathebe, 2018). For instance, Nomsa dropped out of university and followed Lucky to Joburg. When she arrived at Lucky's place, she seduced him and initiated sex. Some women are portrayed as strippers and prostitutes, while others are half-naked, fondling their bosses. Women in the film are "fetishised" as objects, while men are portrayed as violent and aggressive. Most men are portrayed as criminals; for instance, Lucky

and Zakes, teenagers in Soweto, face a Russian crime leader, Nazareth, who forces them into minor crimes. As they seek money, they commit widespread carjackings, leading to Nazareth's imprisonment and the deaths of his team. This shows hegemonic forms of masculinity and criminality. This scene portrays black masculinity as deviant, aggressive, and authenticated by a violent culture. While Lucky and Zakes work for hijackers and hijack cars, they get paid and buy food for Lucky's family. Boys and young men are shown on screen gambling, smoking, and drinking alcohol in public. Men are portrayed as strong people, whereas women are portrayed as weak and emotional. For instance, Lucky's mother cried when she saw Lucky in jail, whereas men do not cry even if they lose their loved ones.

Young women are frequently portrayed in fairy tales as attractive, passive victims that, powerful men must save from an evil crone (Danz, 2016; Wornoyaporn, 2016). According to Dominguez-Rue (2022), female characters, even those initially depicted as strong, often revert to traditional feminine roles. Women who do not conform to traditional femininity are frequently portrayed as "outsiders," "monstrous," "overpowering," or "awful" (Bird, 1996; Parsons, Sawars, & McInally, 2008). While these women might be seen as role models, they can also tell cautionary tales: girls and women who challenge heteronormativity do so at their own risk.

Russell-Brown (2006) claimed that the media perpetuates negative stereotypes about men through various media channels. Men may internalise the stereotype of the criminal male as normal due to repeated exposure, leading individuals of other genders to fear becoming victims of male perpetrators.

## **2.14 Understanding Gender Discrimination: Effects and Significance**

UNICEF (2019) explains that limiting women's access to education and opportunities diminishes their prospects for achieving social and economic equality. Patriarchal social and cultural norms dictate restrictive gender roles for women, perpetuating negative gender stereotypes (Huisinga, Yoder, & Martin, 2001). The media reinforces gender discrimination by promoting and solidifying societal gender norms. The depiction of women in media as deserving of violence or harassment, and as sexual objects or temptresses, promotes and normalises such behaviours, thereby reinforcing gender discrimination (Murtiningsih, Maria Advenita, & Ikom, 2017). Gender discrimination extends beyond women; men may also encounter discrimination related to their gender identity or sexuality. Not conforming to traditional masculine norms may result in ostracisation or ridicule (Courtenay, 2000), and gay

and transgender individuals may face exclusion, harassment, and violence (Connell, 1987; National Centre for Transgender Equality, n.d.).

Gender discrimination, whether direct or indirect, conscious or unconscious, significantly impacts individuals' well-being by limiting their opportunities and hindering their full participation in society. Addressing this discrimination is crucial to promoting gender equality. According to UNICEF (2019), restriction based on sex has the intent or effect of limiting or eliminating the enjoyment of rights, irrespective of marital status, and is grounded in the equality of men and women. This discrimination affects different facets of life and society, leading to issues such as harassment, unequal pay, and gender-biased workplace policies (Hosang & Bhui, 2018). Gender discrimination encompasses both structural and personal disadvantages, such as the possibility of women being granted less power at work and low levels of respect in communities where they are unprotected from abuse or discouraged from pursuing an education and living independently (Pokharel, 2008).

Poverty and other factors contribute to worsening the adverse effects of gender discrimination on both physical and mental health. Such discrimination limits women's freedom and their full participation in society, leading to negative psychological impacts (Hussain, 2019). Discrimination against women is prevalent across multiple nations, cultures, and social groups, as women experience constraints regarding mobility, education, marriage, partner preference, and overall behaviour (Hussain, 2019; Pokharel, 2008). For example, a traditional society may prioritise inheritance rights for male children (sons), resulting in fewer opportunities for female children (Grubbstrom & Soovali-Sepping, 2012). The mass media is partly responsible for perpetuating gender-based discrimination, including the extensive sexualisation of women, which can lead to women feeling self-conscious about their bodies, emotions, and inferiority in comparison to men (Hussain, 2019). Furthermore, such discrimination can limit women's access to good jobs and high-quality health care. Women who do not conform to sociocultural norms may be stigmatised, socially rejected, and face violence, including honour killings.

Gender discrimination is a deeply ingrained aspect of culture and society, as it has been practised and accepted as a cultural norm and belief (Hussain, 2019). Such discrimination falsely justifies women's roles as wives and mothers, although these roles are expected of them due to the nuclear family institution and social frameworks, which are further reinforced in the media. The challenge against media representations of Black women as matriarchs, Jezebels,

welfare mothers, and tragic mulattoes is a central theme in Black feminist thought (Wingfield, 2007). These assumptions influence the self-perception of Black women and shape how they are perceived by others. Furthermore, women may accept discrimination as a cultural tradition, while men may apply it as a social norm (Murtiningsih, Maria Advenita, & Ikom, 2017). Discrimination due to gender occurs throughout a person's life, with societal expectations dictating gender-specific behavioural roles.

## **2.14 Conclusion**

The media creates and perpetuates a hierarchical and hegemonic form of masculinity and femininity. An in-depth analysis conducted in this chapter indicates that commonly held conceptions about masculinity and femininity are deeply ingrained within various societies and cultures. The media shapes these ideals in relation to factors such as race, class, and gender. The use of language, behaviours, and attitudes reinforces and reproduces gender constructs socially. Advertisements and the media propagate stereotypes and enforce gender norms, distorting societal ideals. Women are often stereotyped in the media based on their behaviour and looks, while also being depicted as emotionally vulnerable. Men, on the other hand, are portrayed as strong and resilient. This reflects how the media constructs societal gender roles. As a result, it is critical to educate people about intersectionality and media literacy to resist the harmful messages that the media propagates. The review argues for a more positive representation of gender in the media to promote an equitable and just society. Society can promote a more inclusive and respectful environment for individuals of all gender identities by diversifying media representation of gender and challenging traditional gender norms. Additional research is necessary to comprehend the complexities of gender representation in the media, including exploring the role of social media and identifying positive examples of gender representation in media and advertising. Ultimately, it is vital to analyse and counteract harmful media messages to foster a positive portrayal of gender. Chapter 3 will concentrate on the portrayal and construction of masculinities and femininities in the media.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 3.1 Introduction

Social constructionism was used to critically analyse how gender is constructed in the media and how young people perceive gender. According to social construction theory, reality is a social construct based on one's interpretation of events and objects in the outside world. Social constructionism aims to explain how social phenomena are formed. Social constructionism originated as an attempt to understand the nature of reality. According to Cromby and Nightingale (1999), the world is primarily the result of social processes that include, principally, language and discourse.

#### 3.2 Social Constructionism

Galbin (2014) emphasises that social constructionism theory challenges positivism's interpretation of objectivity and highlights the production of meaning. Jones (2003) argued that the system of meaning influences the beliefs and behaviours of every individual from birth. Galbin (2014) defines social constructionism as a theory that studies how people create their worldviews through communication. Social constructionism holds that social and interpersonal factors play a significant role in defining human life's existence. Therefore, group engagement is essential for individuals to create their social reality. Burr (2015) contends that society creates anything that occurs within it, positive or negative, through social interaction. Berger and Luckmann (1991) explained that society exists as a shared reality with which people interact. According to social constructionism theory, human perspectives skew knowledge and other aspects of the world, resulting in biased understanding.

Andrews (2012) and Burr (2015) claimed that social constructionists consider knowledge and truth as products of societal interaction, not objective reality. Social constructionism theory challenges the notion that knowledge is an immediate sense of reality and that there are no objective facts because knowledge is based on a subjective interpretation of reality. Andrews (2012) noted that social constructionism theory emphasises the importance of context and culture in explaining behaviour. Social constructionism provides an understanding of topics such as race, gender, sexual orientation, emotions, and mental illness (Mallon, 2007).

According to the social constructionism theory, gender is a social construct; thus, biological sex differences do not influence how people view gender (Mallon, 2007). Social norms and gender roles differ across societies, demonstrating that notions of masculinity, femininity, and sexual norms are malleable and created through cultural, social, and psychological factors (Conrad & Baker, 2010). West and Zimmerman (1987) asserted that gender is achieved and created through social expectations and performance. According to the social constructionism theory, the perception of reality is largely socially constructed, and whatever society deems as reality is significant, such as money. Banknotes have no intrinsic value and are valuable only because people believe they are.

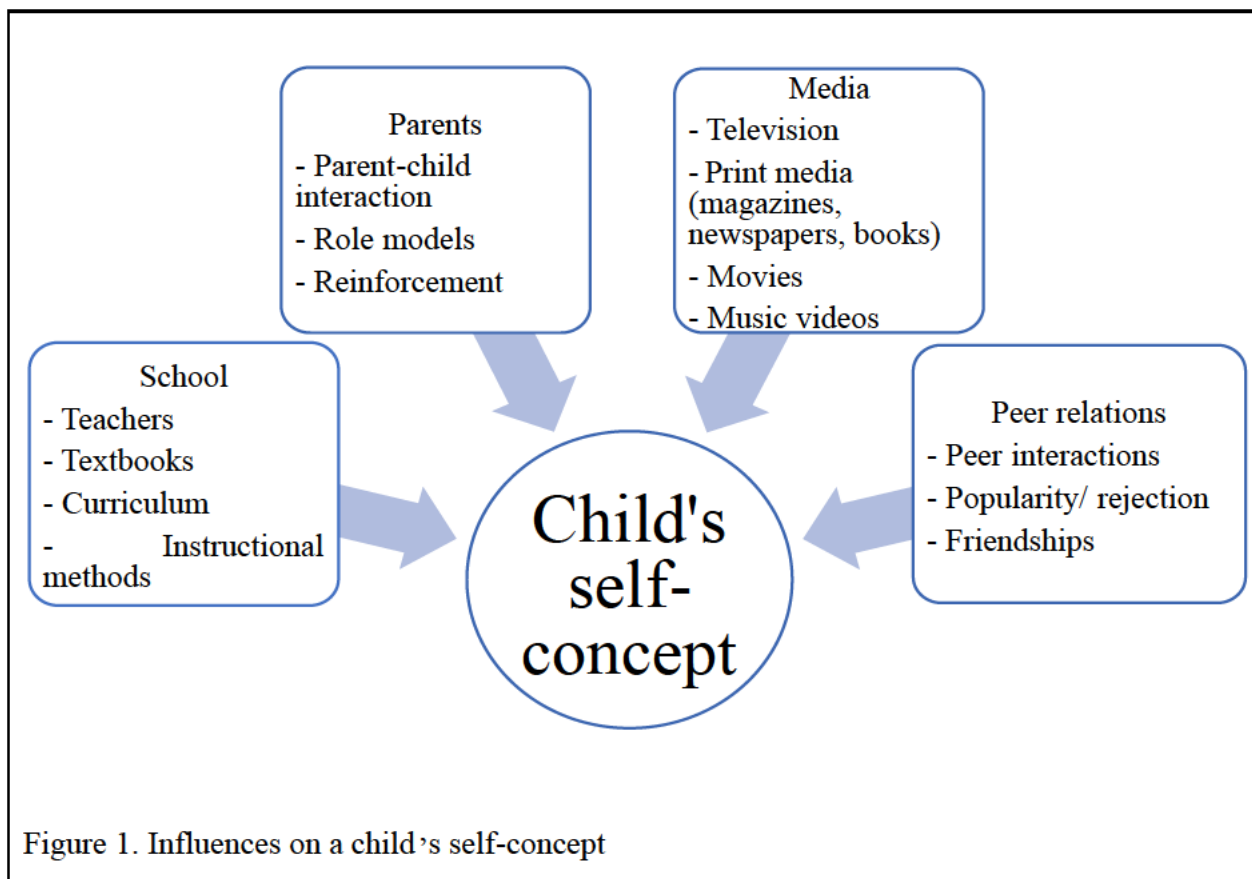
### **3.3 The Social Construction of Gender**

Social constructionism challenges the traditional division between binary male and female categories, or man and woman (Crawford, 2005; Marecek, Crawford, & Popp, 2004). According to the social constructionism theory, gender operates as a system of social categorisation that influences individuals' opportunities for status, authority, and material resources. For instance, gender roles may dictate the types of jobs or leadership positions individuals are encouraged to pursue. In the historical and social context, society has constructed and imposed gender. People are constantly exposed to different social environments such as family, school, peer groups, media, and popular culture, and these help to shape them. Individuals in these social settings consistently demonstrate and strengthen gender-specific attitudes and behaviours (Mwangi, Gachahi, & Ndung'u, 2019). For example, simple interactions, such as who completes indoor and outdoor chores during regular domestic tasks, are laced with gendered implications.

According to Lorber (1994), gender is constantly generated and recreated as a social structure through social interaction. As a result, society creates gender and depends on everyone consistently "performing gender." Educating people on how to act according to gender-specific social norms or gender roles is known as teaching individuals how to behave based on gender norms (McHale, Crouter, & Tucker, 1999). Teaching gender stereotypes is a component of how individuals learn about gender norms and roles through socialisation. Certain actions and attitudes are typical of boys or girls and are referred to as gender stereotypes. The idea that boys are aggressive and robust, and girls are nurturing and avoid dominance exemplifies gender stereotyping.

Children (by age 3 years) begin to form stereotypical ideas about both genders and use them to structure their knowledge and behaviour. Lorber (1994) and Valentova (2016) assert that parents give children their earliest exposure to gender expectations. For example, a child who grows up in a two-parent home with a mother who serves as the housewife and a father who serves as the provider may internalise these gender roles, regardless of whether the family is explicitly teaching them. Parents expose their kids to activities that are typically associated with their gender. Observing and participating in traditional practices significantly shapes the development of gender roles and identities, influencing individuals' perceptions of themselves and their expected roles within society.

Parents, the media, peer groups, and other sources of socialisation all play a role in teaching children about appropriate behaviour (Connell, 1987). One of the first questions expecting parents are often asked is about the gender of the baby. When a child's sex is disclosed, it partially shapes how the child is treated and perceived. Brown et al. (2015) suggest that children's early experiences play a significant role in shaping their self-discovery and personality development. Characteristics like personality traits, interactions with parents, peer groups, and media exposure affect self-perception (see Figure 1).



Society evolves and provides guidelines, models, and prescriptions for specific gender behaviours that the family, media, peer groups, schools, and churches concretise. According to Kung (2022), individuals internalise these social models and prescriptions by learning through processes such as conditioning, instruction, modelling, and identification. Rewarding or punishing a person is a process of conditioning, which changes behaviour by linking it with either pleasure or pain. The process of teaching knowledge, attitude, and skills is called instruction. Modelling occurs purposefully when a role model exhibits particular behaviours to a learner or spectator, who may then pick them up and repeat them. Individuals relate to others by identifying with their characteristics or perspectives (Bekes & Perry, 2020). Infants identify with their mothers; children adopt their parents' attitudes and values; and adolescents adopt their peer group's attributes. Gender socialisation, which is the start of a lifelong process of social categorisation, results in a gender identity that aligns with societal expectations.

Intersectionality is important for gender socialisation as it helps us see how different aspects of identity overlap and influence biases. According to Hopkins (2018), different groups have distinct conceptions of gender norms and how various media sources influence and shape them. Intersectionality takes into consideration how gender interacts and overlaps with different social identities. Intersectionality can also take into account the benefits or privileges that people enjoy as a result of their social identities, as well as how these advantages and disadvantages interact. Based on the power dynamics and context of a given society, culture, or environment, certain individuals or groups may have advantages over others.

The theory of social construction of gender is crucial for this research as it focuses on societal expectations, constraints on individuals based on gender, and the social challenges they face. This theory also highlights the pressures to maintain and conform to dominant/hegemonic ideas of what it means to be a man or a woman (Lober, 2018). The social construction of gender as a theoretical framework is appropriate because it has proven useful in analysing the influence of media representation on gender construction. This involves the male hierarchy that reinforces male superiority over women, leading to inequalities and power dynamics among men and the objectification of women.

Socialisation and societal norms shape students' conceptions of masculinity and femininity, which define and reinforce stereotypes through the use of gendered language. The media and social institutions reinforce these expectations, restricting authentic expression and perpetuating gender-based discrimination, which affects how students view masculinity and femininity.

### **3.4 Media Influence on Gender Construction**

Gender-stereotypical images and language have historically been present in educational products such as textbooks (Mwangi, Gachahi, & Ndung'u, 2019). De Beauvoir (1953) famously wrote in her book 'The Second Sex' that gender is a social construct and that individuals become the gender they are identified as. On the other hand, Mulvey's (1975) theory on the male gaze examines the objectification of women and societal pressures to conform to gender norms. Both Mulvey and de Beauvoir note the power inequality between men and women in marketing and observation. Butler's (1990) 'Gender Trouble' supports gender performativity, arguing that gender is not a necessary category. Doing gender involves adhering to, and believing in, certain gender norms, which further normalise gender categories.

Individuals choose a gender to influence how others perceive them (Holt, 2020). Gender is a social construct. Gender is internalised through socialisation and the division of labour, which in turn influence social behaviour. The media plays a significant role in reflecting and shaping people's lives, with media consumption levels among young people and teenagers being incredibly high (Rideout & Robb, 2019). Ongoing socialisation with evolving ideas about gender roles raises the question of whether one can fully identify with a specific gender. Gender is a social construct that is normalised through gender norms and media representations. Although not the sole influencer, the media significantly shapes societal values and perspectives on gender norms.

#### **3.4.1 The Impact of Gender Norms and the Social Construction of Gender**

Men outnumber women in films and ads, with the media often depicting female characters' appearances, bodies, and actions to fulfil specific goals. As a result, women experience adverse physical and psychological effects due to the misrepresentation of their natural appearances. According to Evans (2019), women frequently experience severe psychological conditions like depression due to their objectification. Women internalise this external characterisation and regard themselves as objects that can be compared or appraised based on their physical characteristics. Sarkar (2014) argued that the ideal portrayal of female beauty impacts how men view women and their self-worth, and men often judge women more harshly when comparing them to media ideals.

When women are objectified, misrepresented, and sexualised, they frequently adopt society's ideal body as their own. Snigda and Venkatesh (2011) stated that improper and unrealistic image-building practices among women frequently have detrimental psychological effects such as increased anxiety about one's appearance, decreased awareness of one's basic physical sensations, and body shame. Adolescent girls and young women who internalise and accept traditional feminine ideologies that emphasise passivity, nurturing, and beauty experience negative outcomes such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, potential eating disorders, and decreased sexual desire (Tolman et al., 2006; Zurbriggen et al., 2006).

Young men who adhere to traditional views of masculinity also experience negative outcomes, such as poor mental health, depression, psychological distress, and substance use (Santana et al., 2006; Wong et al., 2017). According to Giaccardi et al. (2016), more media consumption was associated with greater adherence to traditional masculinity, which, in turn, was associated with higher levels of sexual risk-taking, alcohol use, and drug use. Traditional masculinity is also linked to attitudes that are more supportive of dating and sexual violence, increased sexual aggression, and a higher likelihood of unprotected sex. These activities are sometimes linked to peer influence, where peers encourage one another to perform risky behaviours to prove their manhood or womanhood, but mostly manhood.

### **3.5 Peer Influence on Gender Construction**

Laursen (2018) stated that individuals experience influence when they act or think in ways they would not otherwise due to their interactions with friends and associates. Peer influence occurs when someone of a similar age group influences an individual, whether positively by boosting confidence or negatively by encouraging harmful behaviours such as smoking (Laursen & Veenstar, 2021).

Children normally develop significant relationships with their peers early on in their lives, leading to increased socialisation, modelling behaviours, and establishing norms that govern their actions (Laura & Richard, 2014). Peer influence can be direct, with individuals discouraging or supporting specific actions, or indirect, with children copying one another's interests, actions, and communication styles (Martin et al., 2013).

Children tend to socialise with peers of the same gender, and this reinforces gender segregation and encourages gender-specific behaviours (Martin et al., 2013). Peer groups teach members

about gender roles, which differ across cultures and histories, and significantly impact behaviour through social norms (Mulvey, Rizzo, & Killen, 2016). Girls typically engage in small group play with adults, while boys gravitate towards physically demanding activities in larger groups away from their parents. These patterns and traits reflect gender stereotypes within same-gendered communities. Children who do not fit into traditional gender roles may experience negative consequences, including teasing or exclusion on the part of their peers. For example, a girl who prefers karate class over dance lessons may be called a ‘tomboy’ and have difficulty fitting into both male and female friend groups, while boys who do not conform to gender norms may be mocked quite severely.

Gender and other social locations have an impact on people’s lives, and intersectionality is a system-oriented method for analysing this influence (Hopkins, 2018). Paying attention, assessing privileges, and addressing marginalisation can help address gender and social injustices by recognising disparities and implementing appropriate interventions. Not everyone conforms to traditional gender stereotypes; some individuals may want to challenge them. Using this perspective can help us address gender and social injustices more effectively.

### **3.5.1 Peers Challenge Traditional Gender Stereotypes**

Individuals promote gender equality by challenging traditional gender stereotypes through various means, such as training, public events, and community gatherings (Dicke, Safavian, & Eccles, 2019). These individuals encourage young men to develop gender-equitable attitudes and challenge traditional gender roles through the promotion of gender equality in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects, household chores, and friendships with people of all genders.

Despite Western societies experiencing changing gender dynamics, the societal expectation for men to prioritise generating income and for women to care for others persists (Morgenroth & Heilman, 2017). Vink et al. (2022) contend that couples who reverse traditional gender roles (i.e., where the man is the primary caregiver or the woman is the primary provider) are more likely to have unhappy marriages, higher divorce rates, and poorer-quality relationships.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

This chapter explored social constructionism, its role in gender construction, and the media’s impact on societal values. According to social constructionism, cultural, social, and

psychological factors influence gender more so than just biological sex differences. Gender norms and roles embedded in societal institutions such as schools, media, churches, and peer groups shape individual gender identities. The media particularly plays an essential role in framing gender norms, and historically, gender-stereotypical images and language were rampant in advertisements and educational products. In addition to media influence, peer interactions also contribute to reinforcing gender segregation and specific behaviours. Despite shifts in gender dynamics in Western societies, traditional gender roles continue to hold sway. Fortunately, individuals are challenging these stereotypes and promoting gender equality. To promote gender equality and challenge restrictive social norms, you need a thorough grasp of how gender is socially constructed and the application of further research and interventions. This can help to break down harmful gender stereotypes and create a more inclusive and equitable society.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the methodology used to gather and analyse data for a qualitative study investigating the impact of media on young people's perceptions of gender. The study utilised an interpretive paradigm and aimed to explore subjective experiences and meanings associated with the construction of manhood and womanhood among young people in the context of the media. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to select 26 participants, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in both isiZulu and English. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data. The study followed UKZN's research ethics guidelines, ensuring voluntary consent and informing participants of the study's purpose. This chapter presents the methodology used in the study, including the purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The chapter also discusses ethical considerations and limitations. Overall, this chapter establishes a comprehensive framework for understanding the methods used in the study and lays the foundation for subsequent chapters where the study's findings will be presented.

#### 4.2 Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative research approach. According to Newman (2011, p. 22), "qualitative research methodology is an approach that describes and gives meaning to particular social phenomena." Qualitative research provides precise descriptions, explanations, and procedures for a setting and social life (Dicicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The qualitative study explores the subjective experiences and meanings associated with the phenomena. According to Maree (2007), the qualitative research approach is ideal in that it allows a researcher to understand reality in a specific environment. This was beneficial for exploring and understanding the intricacies and interpretations of manhood and womanhood among university students, allowing participants to define these concepts based on personal and societal norms.

Dicicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) asserted that participants' personal biases are critically recognised and actively examined in qualitative research since reality is accepted as dynamic. The qualitative research approach is suited for this study on the media as a key socialising agent

of gender and gender stereotypes because it is in-depth and seeks comprehension of the context being studied. According to Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2006), qualitative research recognises reality as context-based. The study aimed to explore the portrayal of manhood and womanhood in the media and their societal influence. The research examined television shows, movies, and advertisements to assess the portrayal and reinforcement of gender roles. Additionally, this study explored how these portrayals impacted individuals' perceptions of gender and their behaviour in society.

### **4.3 Research Paradigm**

A paradigm is a way of “seeing the world that frames a research topic and influences the way that people think about the topic” (Hughes, 2001, p. 31). This study used the interpretivism paradigm. According to Bhattacharjee (2012), an interpretivism paradigm is an assumption about social reality that emphasises human experiences and social settings rather than being exclusive or objective. Interpretivism holds that since people differ from one another, they cannot be studied in the same way as phenomena in the natural sciences (Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis, & Bezuidenhout, 2014). Interpretivists maintain that people are not like matter (Haralambos, 1985). Humans are perceived to be actively creating their world, and they have a consciousness that allows them to think and feel, which gives them a sense of awareness (Babbie & Mouton, 2001).

The qualitative method is employed in interpretivism because it focuses on how ordinary people see and describe their daily lives (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). Interpretive research is a qualitative research approach that aims to explore the meaning behind social phenomena (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). In interpretive research, it is believed that social phenomena are complex and cannot be completely understood using only numbers. Instead, interpretive design focuses on deeply understanding the context, culture, and experiences of the participants in the research. Researchers use methods like interviews, observations, focus groups, and ethnography to gather rich and detailed information. The analysis process includes recognising patterns, themes, and concepts that appear in the data. Interpretivism was developed to better understand how humans and social reality are interpreted. In the interpretive approach, questions such as “how?” give the researcher greater scope for addressing the questions. The interpretivism paradigm was selected to better understand how the media reinforces harmful gender stereotypes and societal views on gender roles.

The primary goal of a researcher in the interpretivism paradigm is to achieve a deeper and more compassionate understanding of aspects of social life and human behaviour (Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2014). The interpretivism paradigm was used in this study to study the participants' experiences with how gender is constructed in media.

#### **4.4 Sampling**

A nonprobability sampling approach was used in this study. This approach means that not everyone had an equal chance of being chosen to participate in this research, which is a limitation of this study. The nonprobability sampling type also means that some individuals in a research population cannot be selected (Dolores & Tongco, 2007). One of the advantages of nonprobability sampling is that the researcher selects a small sample that provides detailed responses (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006). Thus, only those who met the specified criteria were chosen. Also, there are various approaches to nonprobability sampling. The most commonly used approaches are purposeful or judgmental sampling, snowball sampling, and quota sampling. The study employed purposive and snowball sampling approaches to enhance the interpretive nature of the study. Moreover, snowball sampling is primarily sociometric in nature. Snowball sampling is a sociometric method where individuals in a group identify their friends until a specific social pattern is observed. This can be described as having one member of a group or organisation name their associates. The researcher contacts and interviews prospective participants until the purpose of the researcher is achieved.

##### **4.4.1 Purposive and Snowball Sampling**

This study used purposive and snowball sampling. The researcher purposely considered students from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College Campus. These included participants with prior experience on the subject of the research. Purposive sampling also complements the interpretive research design (Neuman, 2014). According to De Vos et al., (2005), participants in purposive sampling are chosen based on the researcher's judgement to find participants with the desired characteristics. In this study, the researcher initially used their knowledge of where to find the desired sample, such as the university's LANS, library, or residence.

The participants were chosen because they possessed the characteristics that allowed for detailed examination and consideration of the study's primary themes. For example, the

researcher ensured that the selected participants had features that fit the criteria, such as students who are exposed to the media. The rest were ‘snowballed’ until the required number was acquired. This process involves participants referring the researcher to others with similar experiences until a specific pattern emerges. Snowball sampling starts with data collection from one or more contacts who are usually known to the person collecting the data. Snowball sampling entails approaching a single participant or a group of research participants and asking them to refer the researcher to others with similar life experiences (De Vos et al., 2005). According to Babbie and Mouton (2001), this sampling technique is frequently used if the samples are difficult to find.

#### **4.5 Participant Criteria**

The study’s initial sample size was 30 participants. Due to the difficulty of finding participants, the study consisted of 26 participants. The total of 26 participants included 13 males and 13 females. There were 21 undergraduate and 5 postgraduate students aged between 18 and 26. While the plan was to interview students between the ages of 18 and 30, it turned out that those interviewed were from 18 to 26 years of age. The data was collected from students registered at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College Campus, representing various faculties such as agriculture, engineering and science, humanities, law, and management.

#### **4.6 Data Collection Instruments**

This study used semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview is defined as a type of interview consisting of both closed and open-ended questions (Wilson & MacLean, 2011). “This kind of interview collects detailed information in a style that is somewhat conversational” (Harrell & Bradley 2009, p. 27). Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to examine the participants’ viewpoints through their life experiences (Creswell, 2014). The semi-structured approach makes provision for the interviewee to highlight additional areas of interest that are relevant to the research questions.

The interviews took 20–40 minutes. The interviews were conducted where the participants felt comfortable (in a place of their choosing). Because of COVID-19 restrictions, some interviews were conducted online using Zoom and WhatsApp. The interviews were conducted from April 2023 to May 2023 in Durban (UKZN Howard College Campus). During face-to-face interviews, COVID-19 protocols were observed. The protocols included maintaining a social

distance of 1.5 metres, wearing a mask, sanitising one's hands, and not allowing eating inside the venue.

#### **4.6.1 Recording and Transcription**

The data collected in this study were recorded during the interview sessions and then transcribed in June 2023. The analysis and representation of spoken language primarily rely on transcription. Data transcription is a technique that involves writing down the narratives of the recorded interviews with research participants (Stuckey, 2014). Data transcription captures and analyses the complexity and meanings of naturally occurring phenomena (such as values, beliefs, feelings, ideas, and experiences) in social interactions. Participants who preferred to respond in IsiZulu were allowed to do so. The responses were, however, translated into English during the data transcription process in June 2023. The researcher carefully observed the participant's tone of voice, silences, pauses, shutters, facial expressions, mannerisms, and body language, as they were essential in revealing information. The gathering of non-observable data is the term used to describe this procedure (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). An audio recording device was used (with each participant's consent), and notes were taken during the interviews. Interviews were manually transcribed. In doing so, replaying the recorded audio helped to understand each participant's feelings and emotions and highlighted punctuation (i.e., uhm, err, ahh, etc.) in the middle of the conversation. This type of transcription is known as verbatim transcription.

#### **4.7 Data Analysis**

This study utilised thematic content analysis, which is the most common type of qualitative research analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Thematic content analysis involves identifying, evaluating, and recording themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process allows for coding, organising, and categorising data into themes, which can be both inductive and deductive (Jansen & Warren, 2020).

The six stages of thematic content analysis, which include familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and final report production, were followed in this study (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The researcher read the transcribed data and repeatedly listened to the audio recordings to familiarise themselves with the data from July 2023 to September 2023. The

researcher then took notes, created initial codes and highlighted potential themes. The researcher relied on direct quotes from participants in the write-up of this thesis, and as a means to keep as close as possible to the respondents' original phrases and words.

The researcher searched for themes among the generated codes and used a mind map as an organising tool. They combined the themes to form overarching themes that accurately represented the data and the meaning of the themes. The themes were refined and defined, and the researcher comprehensively analysed how the themes contributed to understanding the overall data. Finally, the researcher selected the themes that contributed most meaningfully to answering the research questions and accurately conveyed the information from the data as the participants expressed.

Overall, the thematic content analysis allowed for identifying, evaluating, and recording patterns or themes in the data, which were crucial in answering the research questions in this study. The six stages of thematic content analysis were followed to ensure rigour and dependability in the analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Research ethical guidelines were also considered during the data analysis process.

#### **4.8 Ethical Considerations**

According to Wassenaar (2006) and Corey (2013), research ethics are essential to protect research participants, and avoid plagiarism and scientific misconduct. This study followed the UKZN's research ethics guidelines, including informed consent and voluntary participation. The research participants were informed about the study and given specifics, including what was expected of them during interviews. Moreover, the participants were informed that they were able to withdraw from the research process without suffering any consequences.

Thorough investigations and planning were done to ensure the research's quality and integrity. The study did not undermine the participants' religious or personal beliefs and respected their dignity. To guarantee the participants' anonymity and prevent any connection between their identities and their research responses, the researcher did not record the participants' names at any point during the research process.

#### **4.9 Trustworthiness and Credibility**

Du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014) assert that trustworthiness is a concept that qualitative researchers use to measure reliability and validity within qualitative studies. It refers to the accuracy with which the researcher interprets the data the participants provide. To enhance credibility, the researcher verified the participants' responses during and after interviews, addressed biases, and securely stored the recordings for future reference. This ensured that the interpretations of the data were constant and precise (Noble & Smith, 2015).

#### **4.10 Limitations**

The study aimed to explore how the media perpetuates harmful or dominant concepts of masculinity and femininity among students at the Howard College campus, University of KwaZulu-Natal. It is crucial to note that the research findings only apply to the specific demographic of Howard College students and may not be generalisable to other higher learning institutions or communities in South Africa or around the world. Additionally, the study's reliance on self-reports from participants may have led to skewed results that do not fully reflect the attitudes or behaviours of the participants. Quantifying the frequency or impact of the media on gender norms and attitudes was also challenging due to the qualitative research approach. Finally, the study did not investigate other relevant factors, such as cultural or socio-economic backgrounds, that may impact gender constructs.

#### **4.11 Conclusion**

This chapter outlines the methodology used to explore the impact of media on students' perceptions of gender. The study used qualitative methods to explore how the media reinforces negative gender stereotypes among individuals. Data was collected through purposive and snowball sampling, using semi-structured interviews in both isiZulu and English. Thematic content analysis was employed to analyse the transcribed interviews, with a focus on ensuring trustworthiness and addressing ethical considerations. Despite limitations like small sample sizes and specific participants, the study's results offer valuable insights into how media shapes the perspectives and behaviours of students on gender issues. These insights may support future studies on promoting positive gender portrayals in media and addressing harmful gender stereotypes in society. The chapter concludes by summarising the research methods and limitations, setting the stage for the upcoming presentation of the study's results.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the research findings of a study conducted on the Howard College campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. This study aimed to investigate the influence of media representation on gender roles. It also aimed to identify issues related to gender-based violence and toxic masculinity on campus. While the findings may be specific to the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Howard College Campus), the study discovered that the media can influence young people's understanding of gender. Furthermore, the study noted the students' unconscious adherence to traditional gender roles, gender-based violence, and toxic masculinity. This emphasises the need for universities like UKZN (and others in South Africa) to address these issues through education and support initiatives. This discussion is crucial for understanding how the media shapes gender norms and fosters safe and inclusive campus environments. This chapter explores key themes such as the impact of media representation on gender roles, gender-based violence, and toxic masculinity. It draws from the literature review, theoretical framework, and student responses, highlighting their connections and relationships.

#### 5.2 Sample Characteristics

The characteristics of the participants in this study are presented in Table 1. A total of twenty-six participants were sampled in April 2023 for this study, including 13 males and 13 females from UKZN Howard College, aged between 18 and 26. The sample included 6 postgraduate students and 20 undergraduate students, with 23 Black Africans and 3 Indian students. This sample had a larger proportion of Black African students, as they were primarily recruited from university residences where Black African students are predominant. The background information of the participants, including details such as age, race, sex, and place of origin, was collected. This information aimed to explore the correlation between their understanding of gender stereotypes and their susceptibility to media influence. Importantly, a student's upbringing plays a crucial role in shaping their perception of gender stereotypes and the impact of the media on them. Six participants originated from urban areas, ten from townships, and ten from rural areas, reflecting a diverse range of backgrounds in the study.

**Table 1.** University of KwaZulu-Natal (Howard College Campus) Student-Respondents – Study on Role of Media on Gender Construction (2023)

Participant Identifier	Age	Sex	Race	Level of Study	Primary Residential Area
Participant 1	20	Female	Indian	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Urban
Participant 2	20	Female	Black	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Rural
Participant 3	19	Male	Black	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Township
Participant 4	25	Male	Black	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Rural
Participant 5	18	Male	Black	1 <sup>st</sup> year	Rural
Participant 6	24	Female	Black	Masters	Rural
Participant 7	22	Female	Black	Honours	Rural
Participant 8	18	Female	Black	1 <sup>st</sup> year	Township
Participant 9	18	Female	Black	1 <sup>st</sup> year	Township
Participant 10	22	Male	Black	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Rural
Participant 11	23	Male	Black	Honours	Township
Participant 12	23	Male	Black	Postgraduate	Township
Participant 13	20	Male	Black	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Rural
Participant 14	19	Male	Black	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Rural
Participant 15	21	Female	Black	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Urban
Participant 16	18	Male	Black	1 <sup>st</sup> year	Township
Participant 17	21	Female	Black	1 <sup>st</sup> year	Township
Participant 18	21	Male	Black	Undergraduate	Township
Participant 19	20	Female	Indian	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Urban
Participant 20	19	Female	Black	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Rural
Participant 21	23	Male	Black	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Urban
Participant 22	20	Male	Black	1 <sup>st</sup> year	Township
Participant 23	19	Female	Indian	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Urban
Participant 24	20	Male	Black	4 <sup>th</sup> year	Rural
Participant 25	19	Female	Black	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Township

Participant 26	26	Female	Black	Masters	Urban
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### 5.3 Students' Understanding of Masculinity and Femininity

#### 5.3.1 Student Definitions of Masculinity and Femininity

When students were asked about their understanding of masculinity and femininity, two out of 26 students did not know the meaning of these terms. Sixteen out of the remaining 24 students had a similar understanding of masculinity and femininity. They expressed views that masculinity or manhood relates to the traits and socially acceptable behaviour that men exhibit, while femininity has to do with qualities or attributes regarded as characteristics of women or girls.

The students' definitions of masculinity and femininity focused on typical male and female behaviour (the characteristics of men and women). According to a study by Ranjan and Prasad (2018), masculinity includes typical male behaviour, social roles, and the expectations placed on men in society. The 16 participants' descriptions of men with dominant and aggressive behaviour supported this definition. Furthermore, according to Drydakis et al. (2017), femininity comprises behaviours, attitudes, and roles linked to women, such as sympathy, empathy, sensitivity, loyalty, nurturing, gentleness, and submissiveness. Participant 8 expressed that masculinity and femininity are behaviours or characteristics that define manhood and womanhood, respectively. This aligned with participant 26's response, which stated "What I understand about masculinity is that men are expected to do hard labour and femininity... it's women, and they are known to be fragile" (Participant 26, 2023). This definition also resonated with the 16 participants' belief that femininity involved nurturing and sensitive behaviour in women.

Well ... femininity, I know it's connected to women in general, like how women are nurturing, how women act, how women are sensitive, emotional people, and ... soft people. Masculinity is associated with men, who are maybe dominant, aggressive, and tend to have strength ... (Participant 2, 2023).

I think in my understanding, masculinity is where I can show my manhood, it could be physically, the way I carry myself, the way I present myself to people or at home, but as long it shows my manhood. I think the same goes for femininity, that you show being a woman, in a way ... (Participant 12, 2023).

... masculinity deals with characteristics which are traditionally associated with men, how a man should behave, whereby there are qualities under masculinity such as that a man must have confidence, must be independent, must have strength, and be the head of the family. And then femininity deals with characteristics of a woman traditionally, whereby women must have qualities whereby they must be like nurturing, have empathy, be sensitive, must not be aggressive like a man, but they must be sensitive because they deal with things such as nurturing (Participant 13, 2023)

Masculinity and femininity are social constructs that defines what it means to be a human being according to your sex. So, as a man you have certain socially expected behaviours and manners of acting that are expected which show masculinity or manhood, and then likewise as a female, you have certain societal expectations and norms that are expected of you as a female to be part of womanhood (Participant 18, 2023)

Some students confused masculinity and femininity with gender, gender roles and gender stereotypes. Participant 7 had a misconceived understanding of masculinity and femininity. Participant 7 believes that masculinity and femininity are synonymous with gender. Thus, Participant 7 stated that in their understanding, masculinity or femininity refers to someone's gender, where you identify a person as a woman or a man. The confusion of masculinity and femininity with gender, gender roles and gender stereotypes are also evident in the following responses of some of the respondents.

I'm not really sure. I can say that maybe manhood is something that is done by men in the area, like that they are the heads of the family and provide for their families. I can say womanhood refers to women who stay at home and take care of children when men are at work, I think it's something like that (Participant 16, 2023).

I can say masculinity is based on certain roles that men are expected to perform, like being the head of the family and being a provider for the whole family, not only providing money but also being there for security and for emotional well-being. The same applies to women, I think it is based on their roles in their community (Participant 22, 2023).

In summary, the interviewed students mentioned earlier considered masculinity and femininity to be social constructs. This is because society imposes certain expectations on men and women that create these gender identities.

### **5.3.1.1 The Social Construction of Gender in Students' Understanding**

Students' understanding reflects societal expectations and norms on how men and women should behave and present themselves. Participants' responses highlight that students associate masculinity with traits such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and independence, while femininity is linked to nurturing and emotional expression.

The term 'social construction of gender' refers to the process through which societal and cultural factors influence the development of gender roles and expectations (Marcecek, Crawford & Popp, 2004). This concept is important for understanding how socialisation and cultural norms influence how students see masculinity and femininity. For instance, socialisation through family dynamics can reinforce traditional gender roles, while cultural norms portrayed in media can influence perceptions of gender expression. This process includes using gendered language, symbols, and behaviours deliberately. For example, linking assertiveness with masculinity and nurturing with femininity, to establish and reinforce gender norms and stereotypes. For example, boys are expected to be assertive, competitive, and independent, while girls are expected to be nurturing, emotional, and passive in their behaviours. Mwangi, Gachahi, & Ndung'u (2019) argue that the media, through advertisements that depict gender stereotypes, TV shows that perpetuate traditional gender roles, peer pressure among friends to conform to societal expectations, and social institutions like schools and workplaces, frequently reinforce these gendered expectations. This reinforcement not only limits individuals' ability to express themselves authentically but also contributes to gender-based discrimination, creating obstacles to achieving equality and inclusion.

Recognising the social construction of gender involves actively challenging harmful gender stereotypes that restrict individuals' self-expression. This includes dispelling myths about gender roles, supporting gender equality through equitable policies, and creating safe spaces for marginalised gender identities. These findings underscore the critical need to raise awareness about the establishment and reinforcement of gender roles and expectations. Challenging and dismantling harmful gender norms is crucial for building a more inclusive and fair society. This fosters a culture of acceptance, respect, and equal opportunities for individuals of all gender identities. Creating inclusive and supportive environments includes setting up safe spaces like LGBTQ+ support groups and gender-inclusive communities. Here, individuals can freely express themselves, receive strong support from allies, and build a sense of belonging, respect, and inclusivity. In conclusion, challenging the social construction of gender is vital for

establishing a fair and inclusive society. Here, individuals can freely express their gender identity and help create a community that values diversity and respects all gender expressions. Individuals must engage in discussions about gender norms and advocate for policies that promote gender equality across society.

### **5.3.2 Students' Conceptions of Masculinity and Femininity**

Marecek, Crawford and Popp (2004) and Crawford (2005), stated that various social contexts, including their families, schools, peer groups, media, and a popular culture constantly shaped and influenced people. These factors played a significant role in shaping individuals' perceptions of appropriate behaviour for men and women. In this study, 13 students mentioned that their families shaped their views on what constitutes 'appropriate' masculine and feminine behaviour. According to Mwangi, Gachahi and Ndung'u, (2019), individuals in social contexts shape and reinforce gendered attitudes and behaviours. For example, Participant 1 emphasised that household tasks influenced the formation of gendered meanings.

So, actually, that would be my mom, like family members, like elder family members, they always said oh no, this is the way women should behave, this is what a woman should do. For example, like a woman should cook in the kitchen ... a man should go out to work, come home and then you must provide food for him and stuff like that, not that I agree but they basically taught me that (Participant 1, 2023).

Participants 13 and 15 shared the same experiences of learning how to behave "appropriately." They were taught a school subject called "Life Orientation," where they learned about proper behaviour. This suggests that the teachers played a role in shaping the participants' gender. This is demonstrated in Participant 13's response below:

Oh ... during the time we were studying life orientation, we were taught about gender roles, gender stereotypes and all those things; that a man should be like this and a woman should be like this, so we learned all those things from our Life Orientation teachers (Participant 13, 2023).

A total of 6 out of the 26 student-respondents in this study believed that their understanding of masculinity and femininity, and how they should behave, came from what their families, society, and the media taught them. Participant 26 contended that society contributed to their

understanding of masculinity and femininity, while Participant 12 shared their experience of being taught the “proper” way to behave, such as how they should play and dress.

I think it’s family and the society, because there’s a way of doing things at home, for example, the way boys should play, the toys they play with, the way they dress, the way they behave, that is for the family. And then on the society, it’s where I learnt that boys play soccer, this is how boys play, who do boys stay with, boys don’t hang out with women but with other boys and they teach each other about manhood. Sometimes growing up as a boy differs because others believe that to be seen as a boy, you have fight with other boys, whereas girls don’t fight.

So, that’s the difference that boys become boys through hardships, so that’s why I’m saying the society also taught me how to behave (Participant 12, 2023).

Participant 25 did not believe that people were taught the proper way to behave. This participant believed people learn by observing what is happening around them and in the media. Moreover, this participant believed that the media significantly impacted how people behaved. This is borne out in the following statement.

I think it’s something that we see growing up; we’re not necessarily taught at home that this is how a woman should behave, this is how a man should behave. It’s like we see it in the environment we grow up in, and I also feel that it is not only social media but that the media also has like a huge impact on how we think women and men should behave, so it’s something I saw in the media, it’s something I saw in the environment I grew up in (Participant 25, 2023).

### **5.3.2.1 How Socialisation Processes Shape Gender Roles and Expectations**

Understanding how socialisation processes in contexts like families, schools, peer groups, the media, and popular culture influence people’s perceptions of gender roles and expectations is crucial. Research by Marecek, Crawford, and Popp (2004) and Crawford (2005) demonstrates how socialisation processes in these contexts influence gender construction.

Participants in the study discussed how their families taught them specific gendered behaviours, like linking girls to nurturing roles and boys to assertiveness. Schools reinforced these gender norms through curricula that emphasised traditional gender roles in subjects like Home Economics and Woodshop. Participants also noted how their peers enforced gender stereotypes through peer pressure and how popular culture depicted idealised gender roles in the media. Mwangi, Gachahi, and Ndung’u (2019) and Lober (2018) emphasise how individuals in social contexts model and reinforce gendered attitudes and behaviours. Household chores, like

cooking, can have gendered implications, reinforcing stereotypes that associate women with domestic duties and men with financial responsibilities.

The study findings support the social construction of gender theory, indicating that gender is a social construct shaped and maintained through social interactions and cultural norms. This theory suggests that individuals gain an understanding of gender roles and expectations through socialisation, which includes the transfer of cultural norms and values in different social settings.

Gender construction significantly impacts the production and perpetuation of gender inequality in society (Connell & Wood, 2005). Understanding how gender roles and expectations are formed and strengthened enables you to devise effective strategies for confronting and reshaping gender norms. In summary, the study highlights the importance of recognising the social construction of gender in shaping individuals' perspectives on gender roles and expectations.

### **5.3.3 Students' Conceptions of Toxic Masculinity and Toxic Femininity**

Out of 26 student participants in this research, 25 understood toxic masculinity and femininity as detrimental behaviours linked to conventional gender roles. Toxic masculinities encompass unhealthy characteristics and traits that impact both individuals and society. Men often exhibit aggressive and domineering behaviour while showing a lack of empathy.

Yousaf, Popat and Hunter (2015) stated that toxic masculinity refers to the immense pressure and extreme male traits that are accepted or even praised in many societies and encourage destructive behaviour. Toxic masculinity can lead to women being controlled and dependent on men, while toxic femininity can lead to women relying on men for everything. Independent women may become dependent, while those who rely on men believe they will receive everything from them. These harmful behaviours can harm both men and women.

Women frequently engage in emotional blackmail, manipulation, and hyper-sexualisation. Participant 18 and Participant 23 stated that toxic femininity is where females empower themselves to believe they can be superior to males and make males their subordinates. This comparison aligns with radical feminism, where women assert their ability to be self-sustaining and independent of men. Participant 21 mentioned that toxic femininity limits women's

opportunities by promoting traditional homemaking and subordination roles, discouraging them from seeking educational and career progress. These opportunities include studying for a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree, becoming a boss, starting a business, and advancing in life. Participant 7 argued that toxic femininity involves women's enforced subordination, restricting their independence, while toxic masculinity involves men prioritising toughness and suppressing vulnerability. This is shown in the following statement.

I'd say toxic femininity is about women not speaking up, they should always obey, and all those things. And toxic masculinity is about males not showing emotions, they should act tough. At the end of the day, we are all human, we should show emotions, we should voice out things (Participant 7, 2023).

This is supported by one of the student respondents' responses (Participant 18) below.

I think toxic masculinity means abusing your role of being a male, so you see yourself as superior to females, and then you take advantage of that. I think that what make it toxic is that you physically abuse them maybe because you're physically stronger, or if you're the one providing for them you treat them as if they're your object or they belong to you. So, I think toxic masculinity is taking the fundamentals of being a male but abusing them and then abusing females. And then with toxic femininity, it's females empowering themselves to such a point that they think they can be superior to males and they can make males their subordinates. So, it can be equated to radical feminism in a way whereby women think that they can be sufficient and sustainable without males, so that's also toxic in a way (Participant 18, 2023).

Participant 6 stated that toxic masculinity is a gender norm that limits men's feelings and expression, resulting in an emotional disconnect. Men who subscribe to gender stereotypes are more likely to make sexual remarks, commit rape, and claim ownership of women's bodies. On the other hand, toxic femininity refers to gender roles that restrict women from being assertive and independent. Toxic femininity also includes being sexually submissive while pleasing men, such as the pressure to bear children. Russo and Pirlott (2006) explained that women were more susceptible to violence when they did not play the expected roles since men's roles were external to the household, and women's roles were inside the home. Men used violence to force women to obey them when they were disobedient and did not fit the stereotype of homemakers. Participant 6 explained this in their response below.

Traditionally for men to be masculine, they are expected to display qualities such as strength, while toxic masculinity refers to the traditional gender roles like limiting the emotions of boys

and men to comfortably express their feelings such as anger and sadness. Also, men who conform to these toxic masculinity gender roles are more likely to make sexual comments or jokes to women, commit rape and pretend that they are entitled to woman's body. Toxic femininity, on the other hand, refers to adherence to the gender roles that prevent women from being cooperative and sexually submissive, while being pleasing to men. For example, a parent will continually pressure you to have children because that's what women should do (Participant 6, 2023).

In contrast to Participant 6's views above, Participant 12 stated that toxic masculinity and toxic femininity were harmful behaviours that can lead to anger and self-destructive actions. Toxic masculinity involves individuals attempting to make others conform to their mentality. Toxic femininity involves promoting actions that are considered bold or self-destructive, even if they are wrong. Toxic masculinity can be observed in a community where people are not receptive to diverse viewpoints and actions. Conversely, toxic femininity can be observed in women pushing to be independent and not showing vulnerability, resulting in anger issues and hindering the formation of healthy relationships.

### **5.3.3.1 Students Understanding of Toxic Masculinity and Toxic Femininity**

The theory that gender is not biologically determined but is instead shaped by cultural and societal norms and expectations suggests that the idea of toxic masculinity and femininity, which results from gender norms and expectations that restrict people's behaviour and expression, lends support to this theory. Among the 26 student participants in this research, 25 recognised toxic masculinity and femininity as negative behaviours associated with traditional gender roles. Toxic masculinities involve unhealthy representations and traits that affect both society and individuals. Men frequently display violent, dominant behaviour and lack empathy.

Yousaf, Popat, and Hunter (2015) stated that toxic masculinity refers to the immense pressure and extreme male traits that are accepted or even praised in many societies and encourage destructive behaviour. Toxic masculinity can lead to women being controlled and dependent on men, while toxic femininity can lead to women relying on men for everything. Student responses support Murtiningsih, Maria Advenita, and Ikom's (2017) discussion stating that women frequently engage in emotional blackmail, manipulation, and hyper-sexualisation. Furthermore, the findings illustrate how traditional gender roles and stereotypes impact both men and women. Men are expected to be dominant, aggressive, and emotionally disconnected,

which can lead to harmful behaviours such as violence against women. Women, on the other hand, are expected to be submissive, nurturing, and dependent on men, which can lead to harmful behaviours such as emotional blackmail and hyper-sexualisation.

In conclusion, the findings in this text align with the social construction of gender theory and underscore the urgency for society to reassess traditional gender roles and expectations that foster detrimental behaviours and attitudes towards both genders. The concept of toxic masculinity and femininity highlights the detrimental effects of strict gender norms and underscores the crucial need to advocate for gender equality and embrace a wide range of gender identities.

#### **5.4 Stereotypical Assumptions about Men and Women**

When asked if they were familiar with gender stereotyping, all participants, except 2, were familiar with gender stereotyping. Six out of 26 participants heard about gender stereotyping from family members, 16 from school, 5 from society, and 3 from the media. One participant learned about gender stereotyping in their first year at university, in a sociology course.

##### **5.4.1 Students' Definitions of Gender Stereotyping**

Students' definitions of gender stereotyping centred on certain characteristics and behaviours associated with a person's gender. Such attributes are traditionally associated with being male or female. Students also believed that individuals should behave consistently with their gender.

According to Participant 8, gender stereotypes are "behaviours that may or may not be true, that are assigned to certain genders" (Participant 8, 2023). Some similar responses provided by 9 out of 26 participants are displayed below.

I think gender stereotypes are like the process where the traits and behaviours are associated with gender based on whether you're a male or female. The traits that because you are boy, you are supposed to do this, and you should do this because you're a girl (Participant 2, 2023).

Gender stereotypes are beliefs and cultural norms that a man or a woman, according to the society or community are expected to meet. The expectations and cultural norms are limiting because the society end up telling men and women or dictating that "as a woman, you must wear this, not this. As a man, you must do this, be aggressive, lead, or must firm, and not allow

women to control you or being misled by a woman, you must stand on the ground (Participant 13, 2023).

Seven out of the 26 participants interviewed stated what gender stereotypes look like in society and gave examples of stereotypes about men and women and explained. According to Ellemers (2018), gender stereotypes become harmful when they challenge men and women to pursue careers, personal growth, and life decisions. Harmful gender stereotypes promote injustices. For instance, childcare duties typically fall solely on women due to the stereotypical view of women as caregivers. From childhood to adulthood, gender stereotypes can have a major negative impact on young boys and girls. Participant 24 explained that gender stereotyping can be harmful when women are restricted from working and can only stay home and raise children, while men can work, lead, and care for the family. Some of the responses in this respective were:

I think gender stereotyping is just because a woman bears children, and that they cannot work, they always have to be at home and a man can work, lead and take care of the family whereas a woman is not. That's just gender stereotyping because at some point women are very capable and vice versa. A man can take care of the family, even though he can't bear children but he can do what women can do except bearing children (Participant 24, 2023).

Gender stereotypes are attributes or roles by reason only for a woman and man, to his membership on a social group, for example, women are regarded as nurturing and regarded as weak. Men are regarded as people who should be leaders, have power, courage and strength (Participant 6, 2023).

I would define gender stereotypes as, for example, girls should cook, like colour pink, play with dolls, and boys with toys such as cars, boys should like colour blue, be able to fix cars, and all those things (Participant 7, 2023).

P1 mentioned that gender stereotypes limit what women and men can do. The narrative below provides an insight into how this participant expressed how they felt about gender stereotypes, and believed that anyone can do anything, despite their gender.

It's basically defining or limiting what females can do, or what they are allowed to do; what males are limited and allowed to do. It's like saying a man is not supposed to cry but only females can show emotion and cry; which is not true. I think that both men and women should be allowed to express their emotion, it's the same for the household where a woman can also be a provider, she doesn't have to stay at home, cook and clean (Participant 1, 2023).

Five participants out of the 26 interviewed showed a lot of confusion about what gender stereotyping is. Participants 16 and 26 shared similar ideas on what they thought gender stereotyping was. Both participants indicated that gender stereotyping revolves around judging people based on their gender. According to Participant 16, gender stereotyping refers to “judging each other because of families, different families, different cultures, and different genders” (Participant 16, 2023).

When the participants were asked to list the stereotypes/or characteristics they have heard about men and women, similar stereotypes were that men are leaders, powerful, strong, aggressive, dominant, providers/ heads of the family, have courage and strength and are expected to do hard labour. For example, Participant 2 stated that “mostly that men are supposed to be leaders, breadwinners and bring the money home” (Participant 2, 2023). Participant 5 emphasised men’s power against women, stating that “Men are seen more powerful than women. So, there are decisions that they take against women just because they are powerful” (Participant 5, 2023). Participant 17 further stated that “Men are expected to do hard labour, lift heavy things, work and take care of the family financially” (Participant 17). Participant 20 additionally mentioned that men do not cry. This is presented in the following statement where the participant asserted that “I think the generalised views I’ve heard about men is that they should not show emotions like the phrase that says ‘indoda ayikhali’ (a man does not cry) (Participant 20, 2023).

Common stereotypes of women portray them as emotional, weak, needing to stay at home, cook, and clean the house, be nurturing, submissive, and patient. For example, Participant 2 stated “Females are supposed to be stay-at-home people, caring, submissive and not dominate me, and sometimes not go to work” (Participant 2, 2023). This is further stated in Participant 10’s response “It is believed that a woman has to get married, bear children, and have to listen to a man all the time” (Participant 10, 2023). These expectations are harmful and untrue. Women are capable of anything and everything they set their minds to and should not be held to limiting societal expectations and stereotypes.

The views expressed by the student respondents evidenced how families, society, and media contributed to circulating ways of thinking about what it means to be a man or a woman. The students’ responses shaped their perceptions of men’s and women’s ‘expected’ characteristics. This showed how ‘appropriate’ behaviour organised an individual’s sense of self. Through representations of gender and accepted behaviour, people recognised how certain characteristics were considered more or less socially appropriate or acceptable for males and females.

Twenty-three out of the 26 participants interviewed thought the stereotypical characteristics associated with men and women were 'normal'. The traditional gender role orientation strongly emphasised the differences between men and women and assumed that each sex was innately more prone to certain behaviours (Blackstone, 2003). The customs and traditions of the generations before them, including their parents and grandparents, were likely to impact people who maintained a traditional gender role orientation.

Students' responses show how each participant defines and associates male characteristics with the socially constructed roles of the breadwinner and the expectation that men will take care of and lead their families, and female characteristics with the socially constructed roles of a nurturer (Valentova, 2016). This study explores how social interactions with agents of socialisation, including family, the media, school, and others, shape people's identities and responsibilities. When considering the acquisition of gender roles using this framework, it is currently understood that a variety of messages serve as the foundation for the socialisation of gender identities and stereotypes. In addition to being implicit or subtle (such as the under-representation of women in science textbooks or the low participation rate of males in housework), these messages can also be obvious, like when a father tells his son, "Boys do not cry." Students' identities are formed within relationships, and social expectations become personal. Men are not afraid of responsibility, forming a manly identity. Contradictions were found in terms of manliness in relation to house chores, with most participants viewing them as feminine work.

The participants viewed men and women as two separate and opposite entities. The participants distinguished from one another based on physical characteristics (such as "boys wear pants and girls wear dresses"), behavioural characteristics (such as "men are independent and girls are dependent"), speaking manner (such as "males have a loud voice and females have a soft voice"), and personality traits (such as "boys are strong and girls are weak"). Only 2 male participants mentioned that despite the physical distinctions between women and men, each person was unique, which did not prevent an individual from doing certain things. These perspectives are highlighted in the following quotes from the 2 students.

I can say that I am masculine but at the same time, I do feminine things. First of all, I define myself masculine because of my appearance, not only facial appearance but my whole appearance. I also have the mentality that there are feminine things that I can do (such as

cooking, washing and caring for children) but not everything. Sometimes you can do things that are done by women but still define/ carry yourself as masculine (Participant 3, 2023).

Women do household work, like chores and kitchen work. So, I'm a boy who grew up in a family dominated by boys, so we did most of the things in the kitchen such as cooking, washing the dishes; and doing the yard. This recently changed because we started having girls at home. So, I don't believe that a woman has to do everything in the kitchen (Participant 14, 2023).

Two out of the 13 female participants showed that gender was not limited to certain characteristics. This is evidenced by the students' responses when they stated that they defined both feminine and masculine because they had both feminine and masculine characteristics.

### **Male Students' Responses**

It was not surprising that in response to the question that asked why students define themselves as masculine or feminine, Participant 5 believed that he was masculine because he was powerful and could face wars more than a woman.

Participants 13 and 14 stated that they defined themselves as masculine because they were men; they felt you could not be a man and have feminine qualities. Participant 13 emphasised that they were confident and independent in everything they did because a man should not depend on others.

The characteristics of men and women have been ingrained in people, so they followed what was socially acceptable and what they learned growing up. Gender stereotypes have become ingrained in society because they place a heavy emphasis on gender and gender prejudices (Worthy, Lavigne & Romero, 2020). For instance, young children were taught that there were different expectations for boys and girls. Men believed they had to provide for their families and women and protect them to be 'man enough.' This is evident from the student response.

I would say I'm masculine because I live the life of the male and I set myself as a male in society. I look for intimate companion in females for one, I'm attracted to females and I care and provide for them as a male counterpart. So, even with female friends, I see myself as a brother to them, and I'm obligated by my masculinity to help them, provide safety for them and help them from a male perspective (Participant 18, 2023).

Women, on the other hand, were expected to nurture and take care of their families. These gender biases were particularly problematic because they limited an individual's potential and inhibited them from being who they truly were.

Gender stereotypes are manifested in the workplace through the gender pay gap. Women were often paid less than men for the same job, which was based on a false belief that men were more competent than women. Additionally, women were often discouraged from pursuing certain jobs because they were seen as 'men's work.'

Many men believed that to be considered masculine, one must avoid engaging in activities considered "feminine." Nevertheless, in this study, two male participants expressed their belief that individuals should be free to engage in any activity they enjoy, regardless of whether it is considered traditionally masculine or feminine. These participants defined themselves as masculine based on their physical appearance but also participated in activities often considered feminine, such as cooking, washing dishes, and caring for their children. The participants explained that they could perform these tasks and did not view them as inherently gendered, unlike the female participants who stated that they do not cater to masculine roles.

### **Female Students' Responses**

Eleven out of 13 female students defined themselves as feminine because they did not adopt masculine roles but associated themselves with womanhood. The feminine qualities listed in their responses included clothing style, such as wearing women's clothes like skirts and being emotionally sensitive, gentle, and caring, which made them an obvious choice for taking the role of caregiver at home. Participant 15 stated "I act feminine more than masculine. The way I dress, the way I do things, I wear skirts; I dress in a feminine way" (Participant 15, 2023). Additionally, one participant stated that they were soft and fragile, as opposed to strong. The participant argued that "I am fragile, and there are some of the things that men can do that I cannot do like lifting heavy weights" (Participant 26, 2023). Participant 20 additionally stated that they identify as feminine due to possessing qualities and traits traditionally associated with females, including having breasts.

These responses were consistent with mainstream hegemonic phrases that socially defined a woman's appropriate characteristics as soft, nurturing, emotional, caring, and homemaking. At the same time, men were considered the essential wage earners or breadwinners of the family and strong. The previous sentiments could be linked to pictures of women's and men's societal

roles that were prominent in practically all types of media and influenced people's thinking and behaviour.

#### **5.4.2 At What Age did you learn to act Masculine or Feminine?**

The data obtained revealed that most participants learned to act properly between the ages of 13 and 17, with 13 out of 26 stating they learned this behaviour between these ages. Three out of 26 participants learned proper behaviour in primary school, with one in grade 3. Two learned at age 4, and 1 was uncertain about masculine behaviour. Five out of 26 participants learned to act 'properly' between 7 and 12 years old, while 2 out of 26 had been acting according to expected behaviour since birth. This is evident in the following comment from one of the students who was interviewed in this study.

... From the time you're born and the colours you wear, the things you do, the games you're allowed to play. So, dressing up in the colour pink or shine away from colours such as blue just because it was male colours or a new-born baby wearing pink so they can be seen as a female child, staying in the house and not running in the road (Participant 19, 2023).

Participant 20 stated that they learned to act feminine at around the age of 3 or 4 years. The participant further mentioned that they learned female behaviour by coping with their mother and watching cartoons. The participant's response is stated below.

I don't know the exact age, I think about 3 or 4, I'm not sure I think from the age I knew that I was a girl, from the age I caught gender concept, that I am a girl or I'm female, and a boy is like this, so I think that's when I copied my mom actually on how to act feminine (Participant 20, 2023).

Researcher: So how did you learn to act in a feminine way? Is it by only coping your mom or there are some things that you were told growing up or what your parents did to show that a woman behaves in a certain way?

Firstly, I copied from my mom and also from just watching cartoons seeing princesses, they showed feminine traits such as kindness and humanity. So that's how I also learned how to act feminine (Participant 20, 2023).

When students were asked about their childhood behaviour, those who reported learning to behave in a masculine or feminine way between the ages of 10 and 17 had varying responses regarding why they did not learn earlier.

## **Male Students' Responses**

Participant 3 and Participant 10 stated that they did not have a childhood memory. Conversely, Participant 5 emphasised that as much as they learned to act masculine at the age of 15, they were taught, growing up, how a man behaves. This participant further emphasised that they grew up wearing boys' clothes like shorts and trousers and playing with toys associated with boys, including cars and aeroplanes. Participant 5 also mentioned that playing with cars taught them that there are acceptable ways of behaving and, unacceptable ways of behaving. This participant's response is quoted below.

Age of 15. My behaviour was very good because of the way I was brought up, I was told how a man behaves. I was wearing boys' clothes, such as shorts and trousers. When it comes to toys,

I never had girls' toys, I always had boys' toys such as cars, and aeroplanes because girls play with dolls. This taught me that there are certain ways of behaving (Participant 5, 2023).

Participant 12 and Participant 14 mentioned that they grew up doing anything they thought was right, not conforming to any gender stereotype until they were 13. Participant 14 stated that they grew up playing both boys' and girls' games, such as playing sticks for boys and skipping rope for girls.

## **Female Students' Responses**

Participant 9 indicated an inability to recall their behaviour before age 12. Participant 1 attested to having acquired feminine manners at the age of 10 or 11 years upon experiencing their first menstrual cycle. The participant asserted that their actions during early childhood were not predicated on any particular gender since they were still in their formative years and consequently, no one seemed to be concerned with their behaviour. The participant's response is shown in the following statement.

I would say at the age of around 10 or eleven 11 when I started menstruating. I was told to act the certain way, to like carry myself out in a certain way, and behave like basically like a woman ... no one really told me or cared about whether I was masculine or feminine or the way to behave or act in my early childhood because I was still a child. I think people never really worried or cared about how a child behaves because you're young, you don't have as many responsibilities as an adult. Society's opinions and what people perceive of you doesn't matter

when you're a child. So, I was very playful, if you can say I was like both masculine and feminine cause (Participant 1, 2023).

Participant 6 stated that they learned to act femininely at a very young age during their primary school years because they were taught that a girl must stay home and do household chores, while boys could go out and have fun without supervision. Contrary to this, Participant 7 stated that they grew up in a male-dominated environment, so they acted in a masculine way to adapt to male behaviour. This is illustrated in the participant's response below.

I think I learned to act femininely when I was 15 years old because I grew up with a lot of boys. I was the only girl, so I adapted to male behaviour by playing bicycles (Participant 7, 2023).

This led the researcher to ask the participant an additional question: "Since you said you were taught by your grandmother about the 'proper' ways of behaving, did she only have an influence at the age of 15, since you started behaving in a feminine way at the age of 15?"

"Yes," Participant 7 replied, "because when I was 15, I was still playing bicycles with boys. So, I think she saw that I had grown, and she saw the need to explain that this is how I should act or behave as a woman. She saw that I was about to start my periods (menstruating) and explained that I should play with girls, play skipping ropes, play tennis, stop playing soccer and bicycles like boys, and be more feminine" (Participant 7, 2023).

Participants 8 and 15 also stated that they grew up acting masculine, played with boys, and gradually started to behave femininely as they got older. Participant 1 and Participant 7 shared the same experiences of learning to behave femininely. Both participants were only taught to act feminine when they started menstruating, so parents were concerned about the development of their bodies as teenagers and saw the need to teach them about women's behaviour.

Studies show that individuals acquire gender stereotypes at a young age, which leads them to act and think in ways that are consistent with their stereotypes because they are perceived to be true (Gupta & Turban, 2008). The social construction of gender emphasises how individuals develop their gender identity. As children observe men and women in social settings, they form their gender identity and associate behaviours and expectations with gender categories according to their personal experiences. Characters like Spiderman define "normal masculine behaviour," where an aggressive, muscular figure represents the idea of a real man who employs violence to overcome challenges.

Children's media exposes them to early instances of appropriate gender roles for men and women (Knorr, 2017). For instance, the toys that parents buy for their kids and the way parents act can both be indicators of the social construction of gender. Boys are raised to be violent and rational by being encouraged to play with cars, weapons, etc., whereas females are raised to be sensitive and sweet by being encouraged to play with dolls. Therefore, this study contends that children are more likely to learn and adopt social practices about gender behaviours from animated shows on television, which they watch most of the time.

#### **5.4.3 Why do Gender Stereotypes persist in Society, specifically regarding colour preferences such as boys liking blue and girls liking pink?**

Participant 1 and Participant 13 stated that society has already attached and defined blue as primarily associated with boys. Participant 13 believed that society advertised such products, for example, toys, clothes, and male products, that were always in blue. For women, things such as clothes, cosmetics, and sanitary products were usually packaged in the colour pink. Participants 2, 8, and 9 stated that concepts like "blue is for boys" and "pink is for girls" were deeply ingrained in people's minds and helped control or keep things in order.

According to Paul & Perry-Jenkins (2016), various settings for children were found in the household before birth. Various studies indicated how different colours were used in children's rooms, including various sorts of household items, decorations, and toys that emphasised the performative aspect of the usage of the room. Furthermore, household events with more traditional gender distinction of tasks influenced the child's acquisition of gender preconceptions.

Participant 3 believed that stereotypes, such as boys liking blue and girls liking pink, were still prevalent in societies because of the programs that were displayed on TV for children. Some programs targeted boys while others targeted girls. This participant gave an example of Power Rangers, wherein there were six Power Rangers in blue, red, green, black, pink, and yellow. It is demonstrated that pink and yellow were given to girls, suggesting that certain colours were reserved for females since female Power Rangers were given pink and yellow.

Children's popular culture, including television series and the internet, conveyed sexist messages, and gender stereotypes, and emphasised environmental impacts on their consumption (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004; Doring & Mohseni, 2019).

Participant 7 and Participant 20 believed that gender stereotypes continued to be extensively used because they were used in the olden days. Participant 20 further stated that the media influenced the differentiation of colours between boys and girls because pink had been associated with princesses and feminine qualities, while blue had been associated with masculine qualities. Participants responded as follows on the persistence of gender stereotypes in society.

I think they remain widely used because firstly, they've existed from the past, from the past days people would use colour pink for a girl if they are having a baby shower and use blue colours if it's a boy. I think pink has been associated with princess within the media, feminine qualities, patience, kindness etc., and blue has been associated with more of masculine qualities, superheroes like Superman wear blue and things like that. So, I think that's why they continue to be widely used in society (Participant 20, 2023).

Participants 10 and 24 shared that they were taught gender stereotypes during their childhood. For instance, if one was a boy, blue was preferred, and if one was a girl, pink was preferred. If a boy liked pink, they were perceived as deviating from manhood, and if a girl liked blue, they were seen as diverging from womanhood. Additionally, participant 18 noted that gender stereotypes were widespread in society, such as the expectation that boys like blue and girls like pink. Companies selling baby clothes catered to these stereotypes by providing blue items for boys and pink items for girls, making it easier to attract customers.

The participants believed that these stereotypes persisted in society because they were deeply ingrained in societal norms and practices, making it challenging to change. Family structures and the media reinforced these beliefs, contributing to their prevalence. Lober (1994) posits that the concept of girls liking pink and boys liking blue is socially constructed. Social constructions are influenced by cultural practices and societal conventions, which shape norms, practices, and guidelines on how they are used, perceived, and understood. Since we are all born into a gendered system, our ability to function in society depends on our ability to conform to the gender narrative.

#### **5.4.4 Teaching Individuals about Gender Roles**

When students were asked if people should be taught about gender roles, 22 out of 26 agreed, while 4 did not. One participant who disagreed mentioned that they did not believe there was a role for gender and that anyone could do anything. Out of the participants who said people

should be taught about gender roles, Participant 1 stated that gender roles should be taught so that genders could know their differences, but they should not be limited to specific roles.

Participant 13 suggested that educating individuals about gender roles was crucial as many people lacked a clear understanding of gender and its assigned roles. Participant 22 contended that educating individuals about gender roles was crucial since people had innate distinctions. The respondent opined that men possessed inherent physical and emotional superiority over females, hence limiting certain activities to men due to their strength. The respondent's comment is reflected below.

Yes, people should be taught about gender roles because if we turn to reality, we're not created the same. Men are stronger than women, even emotionally because there are certain actions that must be performed by men, and there are some to be performed by women. Judging from the way they are created, people are not created in the same way, which is something that we can never hide off (Participant 22, 2023).

Out of 26 participants, 11 believed that schools should be responsible for teaching individuals about gender roles, 17 believed it is the parents or elders at home, and 11 believed it is the school or teachers in school. This included participants who mentioned more than one institution that must be responsible for teaching individuals about gender roles.

Participant 1 stated that gender roles should be taught in schools because they might be biased if they are taught at home. This participant mentioned that individuals had to decide whether to accept or reject what they were taught in school.

Participant 26 suggested that parents and teachers at school had to teach individuals about gender roles but emphasised that everyone could do anything. For instance, a man could cook, and a woman could work outside the home. This is highlighted in the following response.

I think our parents, and our teachers in schools should be the ones responsible for teaching individuals about gender roles, but not only say women are supposed to be cleaning, and men are supposed to be working outside like do the garden. They should just teach us about gender roles that even if you are a man, you should cook, even if you are a woman, you need to go outside and work. (Participant 26, 2023).

Participant 3 proposed teaching gender roles in schools at an early age, where teachers could educate children about appropriate behaviour. This approach would enable parents to reinforce these teachings at home while assisting their children with their schoolwork.

On the other hand, Participant 13 believed that parents should be the primary educators of children when it comes to gender roles. Teachers at school and in society could then reinforce these roles after a child's understanding had been shaped at home.

#### **5.4.5 The Impact of Gender Roles on Men and Women**

When asked if gender roles affected men and women differently, only 1 student stated that they did not. This student argued that although gender roles used to affect men and women differently, they no longer did. The student responded as follows:

... In these times, not really. If we look at it in today's times, because nowadays are not the same as the old days, maybe looking at the old times yes, but now, no. It really doesn't matter, but the fact remains that I'm a woman, and someone else is a man, that I cannot change (Participant 15, 2023).

Twenty-five out of 26 students agreed that gender roles affected men and women differently. Tabassum and Nayak (2021) argued that harmful stereotypes supported injustices, whether they were explicitly hostile (such as "women are irrational") or appeared to be harmless (such as "women are nurturing"). For instance, since women were traditionally viewed as caregivers, childcare duties frequently fell solely on them. Participant 2 stated that men had an advantage over women, and were expected to have jobs, hold high positions, and earn more money than women. This participant believed that because men were not expected to cry, the stereotyped gender roles came with a lot of anxiety, which led to them burdening themselves and committing suicide. Women were impacted in a way that prevented them from the ability to work, studying, and earn a living for themselves.

Participant 11 stated that both genders were affected by gender inequality because traditional gender roles limited opportunities and potential for both men and women. This participant mentioned that men were expected to be primary breadwinners while women were expected to stay at home, which prevented them from pursuing their interests and achieving their full potential. Participant 12 mentioned that men also experienced pressure to provide financially,

which was a burden, while women felt discouraged from working outside the home. This perpetuated a cycle of dependence and limited both genders' freedom and options.

Participant 14 believed that women were affected by gender inequality as they sometimes became overly dependent on men and were unable to assert themselves or pursue their goals. Additionally, men sometimes felt entitled to control women due to the financial dependence that created a power dynamic.

Participant 19 noted that women sometimes hesitated to disclose experiences of abuse because they felt the pressure to be submissive and were unable to advocate for themselves as effectively as men. This illustrated how gender inequality perpetuated harmful power dynamics that affect everyone. Participants 16, 17 and 24 discussed how some women were natural leaders but discouraged from taking charge due to societal expectations that men should be in positions of power. For example, one student reported as follows:

I believe so. Because ehh....the term "gender roles", if you specify that a man should do this, a woman should do this, then in most cases, women suffer because they tend to be more dependent on men than they should be, and men always have this thing of thinking they should have authority, so a woman tend to be oppressed or suppressed in some way in a way that they end up suffering whereas they could do better if there was no specific gender roles (Participant 24, 2023).

This led to less effective leadership and limited women's opportunities to make positive changes in society.

### **5.5 The Impact of Media on the Participants' Views of Gender**

While referring to a set of behaviours, ideas, and values that individuals had developed due to the media, it was typically associated with how gender roles were stereotyped. Wood (1994) asserted that interactions between women and men were portrayed in ways that reinforced preconceptions. All students agreed that the media, mostly films and television shows, significantly influenced how they viewed gender and what was viewed as the ideal character type in the public sphere. Contemporary media pushes men and women to fit into "the roles they were born to fill," placing them into clearly defined gender categories. Naturally, this is not how humans are born. Through a variety of channels, including the media, both men and women are socialised to fill these roles.

## 5.6 The Influence of Media on Men and Women

When students were asked about the types of media they were interested in, it appeared that students liked films and television shows most. Out of the 26 participants interviewed, 8 were only interested in television shows, 7 were interested in both films and television shows, and 6 were only interested in films. Additionally, 2 participants indicated that they were only interested in print media, 1 was interested in television shows and social media, 1 in television shows and print media, and 1 was interested in films and print media.

When asked whether one could avoid the media's influence, 12 out of 26 stated that one could avoid the influence of media. Participants 1, Participant 6, Participant 15 and Participant 24 stated that one could avoid the influence of media because the media does not portray reality. One of the participant's responses is provided below.

... everything in the media is reality obviously. So, everyone has their own opinion, and you can choose whether to allow that to have a greater impact in your life like. Are you watching it to be influenced, to mimic or get any ideas to create a life like that of the character, or are you watching it basically for just entertainment purposes? So, I think, it's up to a person to decide whether the media can influence them or not, but actually, personally I can avoid being influenced (Participant 1, 2023).

Individuals could choose whether or not to allow it to impact their lives. The participants further stated that people could watch what was portrayed in the media for entertainment purposes without influencing them. Participant 19 stated that one could easily avoid the influence of media if they had their own beliefs and understanding of gender because they would not be easily influenced.

Fourteen out of 26 respondents stated that one could not avoid the influence of media because the media is very influential, especially to young people. Siapera (2010) argued that, compared to other socialising factors such as schools, families, and religious institutions, the media was a fundamental agent with simple functions. In addition to the internet, other media outlets that have played a significant role in socialisation include the radio, newspapers, and magazines, to name a few. One could use the internet to influence others or be influenced by others who share and trade ideas. Participant 8 believed that as long as an individual had access to the media, one could not avoid its influence. This participant stated "No, avoiding the influence of media is almost impossible unless you don't have access to the media" (Participant 8, 2023). Participant

21 believed that one could not avoid the influence of media because the media shaped people's lives; the entire system (including homes) operated with media. This participant further stated that everything began in the media, so it always better-influenced people's lives. Some students' responses are as follows:

I would try because the media plays a huge role in our lives because I think 90% of South Africa is exposed to the media. So, I won't say I cannot be influenced by the media because it plays a huge role in our lives. So, I think I would be affected by the media (Participant 7, 2023).

... In a way, I feel I can, but also, I feel like I can't because if I don't want to be influenced by the media, I can simply just cut off media, avoid it by all means, quit watching TV, reading newspapers, social media but in a way that's impossible because it's part of our daily lives. So, I don't think I can avoid it in a way (Participant 25, 2023).

In summary, most student-respondents asserted that the media is very influential and cannot be easily avoided. As a result, it has a profound impact on masculinities and femininities. This aligns with the social construction of gender theory, which asserts that people, especially children, young adults, and teenagers, are influenced by popular media. Oftentimes, they emulate or identify with the personalities presented in this media. Thus, the media can significantly influence how people perceive gender.

The media plays a crucial role in social transformation by mobilising distant audiences and shaping public opinion. Arif and Ehtesham (2013) emphasise the growing influence of new media, such as blogs and social networking sites, in mobilising mass support for men's and women's roles in different social spheres while highlighting their capabilities. Children are greatly influenced by the media they consume, including films and advertisements. As a result, frequent exposure to such media significantly affects how children form and develop their gender ideas.

### **5.6.1 The Impact of Media on “Toxic” Masculinities and Femininities**

The media could influence the views and actions of viewers regarding masculinity and femininity. The display of more traditional attitudes about how men and women should behave regarding jobs, family duties, and women's bodies was explicitly associated with greater consumption of gender-traditional films and television shows. Furthermore, these representations of gender roles on television had an impact on both attitudes and behaviour. Giaccardi et al., (2016) discovered that the masculine worldview influenced the association

between media use and risky behaviours in men. Due to the acceptance of preconceptions about risk, power, and danger for men, increased media consumption was thus linked to more participation in risk-taking activities in young men's lives.

Twenty-three out of 26 participants believed that the media promoted 'toxic' masculinity and femininity. Participant 4 stated that the media sometimes showed men who may have abused their power and women who wanted to be more powerful than men. Participant 5 stated that the media promoted 'toxic' masculinities and femininities because women were seen as powerless and unable to stand up for themselves, so they assumed they could say whatever they wanted. The media puts a lot of emphasis on caring for women but less on caring for men. This showed that the media promoted that only women should be treated well.

Participant 6 mentioned that traditional gender roles drove toxic masculinity, which limited men's ability to show their emotions, whereas there were men who believed in expressing how they felt about certain events. This participant's response is shown in the following statement.

Yes, I believe the media promotes 'toxic' masculinities and femininities. Toxic masculinity is adhered to tradition and gender roles that limit men to show emotions and men to comfortably express their feelings such as anger and sadness. So, which I also believe that what they portray in the media is actually false because there are men who are comfortable with expressing their feelings, there are men who are comfortable with showing their feelings such as anger and sadness, and there are men who actually cry (Participant 6, 2023).

Participant 7 felt that sometimes the media showed that it was acceptable for men to dominate and overpower women. For example, the media had normalised men dating or being sexually active with more than one woman, but women could not do that because it was a norm, and they were expected to submit to men even if they were not treated well. This is evidenced by the response below.

Yes, sometimes it does promote 'toxic' masculinities and femininities because, in some TV programmes, the media shows that it's okay for a man to overpower, to feel powerful over a woman. For example, in the TV show 'Uthando nesthembu', the media shows us that it's okay for a man to have multiple women, it's okay to treat them anyhow, just because you are a man. If roles were switched, the community, and society, and even the world would judge you because you are a woman. So, that's very much toxic, and women are not allowed to be expressive or vocal about their feelings, so they have to obey, suppress their feelings just because they are females, and that's very toxic (Participant 7, 2023).

Participant 8 believed that the media provided a platform for people to propagate their ideas, hence promoting toxic masculinity and femininity. People could spread their propaganda or toxic masculinity through the media, and it was promoted either way because someone could come to social media and say things like, “Boys should not dress a certain way,” and everyone could see it and agree, thereby encouraging negative behaviour. On the other hand, Participant 10 stated that toxic masculinity was portrayed more than toxic femininity because the media showed things that negatively affected women more than men.

Participant 15 pointed out that the media promoted that men should not report gender-based violence (GBV) but that women should. People took seriously reported cases of GBV from women but not men, which was toxic. This is illustrated in the statement below.

... it's being toxic when we say that a man shouldn't report GBV, a woman should report GBV, we take serious cases of women seriously but when a man reports that, we don't take it seriously. We expect that only women can be raped but a man can't be. Yes, yes, that's being toxic on both sides of like the females and the males. Well, I'd say we're the ones being toxic to the males, that it's always men who go through certain things, whereas they also feel the same pain as us. What's the difference? Is it because they're expected to be strong and we're expected to be weak? (Participant 15, 2023).

The media perpetuated the notion that only women could be raped, and not men. Similarly, Participant 17 noted that there was a common phrase, “Live however you want; someone else will adjust,” which was often used in the media to suggest that people should be happy with themselves, regardless of how others viewed them. Overall, the media significantly impacted how society viewed gender roles and expectations. It is crucial to critically examine the messages conveyed to avoid perpetuating negative societal beliefs.

Participant 12 asserted that most films propagate the notion that one must exhibit violent behaviour to instil fear and admiration in others. Participant 13 posited that the media endorses and perpetuates harmful norms of toxic masculinity and femininity. In the case of toxic masculinity, characters are often presented as assertive, domineering, and hot-tempered. Conversely, in the case of toxic femininity, characters are portrayed as submissive and easily manipulated, primarily driven by their heightened emotions. Participant 26 opined that the media is complicit in promoting toxic femininity, as it imbues women with a sense of obligation to take responsibility for their actions, project a positive image of themselves, and conform to societal expectations. Participant 26's response is provided below in support of this statement.

... For example, I can use this movie that is called ‘death saved me’, whereby a guy was busy telling his girlfriend to stay at home, hitting her and telling her not to go to work, clean whereas the guy didn’t want to help with the house duties at home, when it comes to toxic masculinity. And then when it comes to toxic femininity, I think it does as well, whereby they teach women that uhm, they have to work for themselves, they need to carry themselves well and behave in the way that the society expects them to. So, it does promote toxic masculinity and femininity (Participant 26, 2023).

Two out of 26 participants thought that the media did not promote “toxic” masculinity and femininity. Participant 19 stated that the media was no longer responsive to what was presented outside of it; however, there were instances of toxic forms of masculinity and femininity depicted in the media. Participant 20 stated that people were responsible for choosing what they wanted in life and that the media was used to entertain audiences rather than influence their thoughts about feminine and masculine behaviour.

... I think each person has a responsibility towards choosing what they want to do in life, not be limited by the rules of society on what is more masculine or what is more feminine. I think the media just shows us things that will entertain us and I don’t think it should affect the way you see things about how males and females should act (Participant 20, 2023).

One participant in the study believed that the media only promotes toxic femininity and not toxic masculinity. According to the participant, social media platforms significantly influenced women as people often shared their views and toxic information about women and their behaviour. Women tended to internalise these ideas and replicate them in real life.

The literature analysed in this study, as indicated by Thompson & Langendoerfer (2016), demonstrated that men are expected to be self-reliant. The ability to support and protect one's family may imply maturity and real manhood which is expressed in hegemonic masculinity. The participants in the study felt that these attributes characterise manhood. This further supports the literature reviewed, which shows that men who do not live up to the stereotypes of manliness are often called “sissy” and weak.

In societal settings, women's status is devalued based solely on their appearance and sexual orientation. Their bodies are sexually objectified, which is a sociocultural phenomenon. Objectification reduces women's worth to their appearance and sexuality and often leads to mental and health risks, as stated by Davis (2018). Objectification involves depicting women as objects of male sexual desire in advertisements, art, media, and professions like stripping or prostitution. Beauty contests are also an example of objectification, where women are purely aesthetically or sexually judged.

Women are often portrayed in less influential roles by the media, implying their worthlessness. Advertisements often feature men, and male characters receive more screen time in movies. Many female characters have unrealistic bodies, skin, or behaviours, negatively impacting females and causing serious issues. According to Evans (2019), internalisation of these experiences and self-objectification are common ways in which objectification contributes to serious mental problems in women, such as eating disorders, depression, and sexual dysfunction.

## **5.7 Gender Representation in the Media: Stereotypes, Inequality, and Inconsistencies**

### **5.7.1 Exploring Media Representations in TV Shows, Films, and Social Media**

When students were asked if men and women were represented equally in the media, 18 out of 26 participants stated that men and women were not represented equally. In contrast, 4 out of 26 participants stated that men and women were presently represented equally in the media. One of these 4 participants stated:

I'd say now, yes. Especially in the films that I normally watch, they're represented equally because there are certain movies, for example, where a girl is the main character. Back then, we knew that a main character is always a man, but now there are movies and films where a woman.... We are being taught that a woman... is almost the same as a man and can do the same things a man does. So, yes (Participant 7, 2023).

Three out of 26 participants believed that men and women were sometimes represented equally in the media, while other times they were not. Participant 23 stated that the media has started to represent men and women equally, but still believes that men are still portrayed as strong.

### **5.7.2 How the Portrayal of Men and Women Reinforces Harmful Attitudes and Behaviours**

Men were typically portrayed as having greater freedom in their roles; they could do many things and travel more, while women were generally limited to few options. Men were usually portrayed as more dominant and stronger, character-wise, whereas women were typically given the more subservient and laid-back depiction

The participants interviewed in this study agreed that there was external pressure on women to look good, including from family, friends, the media, and other sources. According to Ribane (2006), perceptions of beauty were rooted in culture; as a result, social discourses about how women should look were likely the source of pressure on women to be attractive. In addition, Participant 2 stated that women would sometimes be occasionally sexualised and painted as having perfect bodies and skin, which could impact viewers. This participant expressed that the media established standards for how men and women should appear. As a result, people portrayed themselves in a socially acceptable way.

The portrayal of gender in the media perpetuates harmful stereotypes that contribute to gender inequality. For instance, Participant 3 argued that men were often depicted as powerful, while women were portrayed as dependent, even if some female characters were independent. Films, in particular, perpetuated the view that women relied on men for protection. Participant 5 suggested that the media portrayed women as weaker and more emotional than men. Similarly, Participant 6 believed that men felt pressured to act tough and suppress their emotions due to their portrayal as powerful and responsible, while women were often submissive and responsible for domestic duties. Men were portrayed as leaders, while women were caretakers.

Wood's (1994) research indicated that the media idealised slim bodies, leading girls to feel dissatisfied with their bodies if they failed to meet the beauty standard. Participant 11 reiterated how the media perpetuated men's superiority over women and portrayed women as attractive and seductive while presenting men as wealthy, handsome, and calm. In summary, the media (TV shows, films and social media) perpetuated harmful stereotypes that reflected societal biases and contributed to gender inequality. The respondent's statement is presented below.

I think men are... are more like superior in the media than women. Women are portrayed as people who must be beautiful, sexy, and all that. Men are portrayed as people, mostly who have money, who are rich and handsome (Participant 11, 2023).

Participant 20 believes that men were portrayed differently in various forms of media. For example, on television shows, men were typically depicted as straightforward and reliable figures who had their lives together. Conversely, on social media platforms, men were frequently shown to lack self-awareness and are unreliable. In contrast, women were often portrayed as patient and loving individuals who enjoyed having children and taking care of their families. Women were also frequently depicted as not as business-minded but as having everything else figured out.

Participant 15 stated that upon examining the present day, women were considered tough. The participant believed that women were presently being acknowledged more, and less focus was placed on men as it was in the past. Thus, people recognised that a woman could accomplish everything a man could do. Participant 17 stated that men were often represented as strong, such as Superman or Spider-Man, while women were frequently portrayed as dependent on men and constantly needing their assistance.

Participant 18 stated that men were frequently shown in shows such as Police and Special Forces. This demonstrated the media's perception of males as stronger or better than women in certain aspects. On the other hand, women were presented as nurturing and playing important roles in various fields. Overall, it is essential for the media to accurately represent both genders in all their diversity and complexities to avoid stereotyping.

An in-depth examination of these descriptions revealed students' fundamental preconceptions about how men and women were portrayed. The students believed that males were physically and emotionally stronger while women were seen as physically and emotionally weaker and objects of men's desire. The students' mentions of "films," "TV," and "social media" brought to light the small but significant ways that the media affected students' ideas of their own (or others') bodies, as well as the appropriate way for men and women to present themselves.

#### **5.7.2.1 How Media Play Part in the Construction of Gender in TV Shows and Movies**

According to the findings, men are perceived as strong, bold, brave, career-oriented, independent, and resourceful, whereas women are thought of as primarily handling domestic tasks, taking care of the house, being attractive but also conscious of their weight, delicate, weak, and dependent. The analysis suggests that women are completely dependent on men for all of their tasks, and only men possess the ability to lead. According to the social construction

of gender, structures of knowledge help to maintain and transmit gender characteristics to other members of society. Thus, the idea that men should rule over women has been conveyed to the audience in this way, and animated films have a significant influence in this regard. The socialisation theory suggests that people acquire behaviours from being exposed to gender-specific media (Devi, 2018; Valentova, 2015). In conclusion, animated films and TV shows shape viewers' perceptions of men and women and serve as a socialising tool by highlighting and portraying specific characteristics associated with a particular gender.

### **5.7.3 An Analysis of the Student Respondents' Perspectives on the Media's Portrayal of Men and Women**

When the students were asked whether the media accurately portrayed women and men, 21 out of 26 participants stated that it did not, while only 3 participants claimed that it did. Participant 15 suggested that the accuracy of gender portrayal depended on the type of media, with some portraying men and women accurately while others did not. Participant 19 similarly noted that accuracy depended on the household, with some households portraying genders accurately and others not doing so.

The participants who said the media accurately portrayed women and men stated that what was presented reflected real-life issues. The audience could relate to what was shown in the media. According to Knorr (2017), children were constantly bombarded with shows that reflected gender-stereotypical images, ranging from toys marketed to boys or girls to children's television programs and presentations. The heroic male who saved the defenceless girl was often emphasised on television. For instance, female characters like Cinderella are often shown as terrified and relying on men to save them from horrific circumstances. Male characters like Spiderman are portrayed as strong and aggressive and use these features to save women. The messages portrayed in these shows were perceived as "real life" by the audience, shaping their attitudes, behaviours, and gendered expectations. Participant 21 below commented that men and women were accurately portrayed in the media.

Yeah, I think it is because it's like they studied a behaviour of women and men, and what you see in the media is something you can relate to, everything you see, that this is how a man behaves and this is how a woman behaves is what we come across all day and night in our daily life (Participant 21, 2023).

According to Eagly and Wood (2012), there were several examples of how men were negatively stereotyped in television requires having power. Unfortunately, these disadvantaged men did not fit the stereotype of a 'real man', such as those who are unemployed. Moreover, the shows often promoted bad behaviour like adultery and risky sexual behaviour, which further reinforced compulsory heterosexual behaviour. Concerning this issue, Participant 1 stated that the media did not accurately portray men and women because it often gave men strong characters and leading roles. As a result, both men and women were misrepresented in the media. Not all men could fulfil the 'appropriate' men's role, and not all women were homebodies who cared for the family. Women could be independent and perform roles that were considered masculine. Hence, it depended on each individual's abilities and interests.

Participant 3 observed that portrayals of masculinity on TV were exaggerated to attract viewers. This exaggeration created an illusion that anyone could do the same, leading to unrealistic expectations and unrealistic expectations of success. In contrast, Participant 13 noted that women increasingly played dominant roles in movies and TV shows. For instance, movies like 'The Woman King' portrayed Thuso Mbedu (Nawi) as the main character, indicating the progress towards accurately portraying both genders in media.

#### **5.7.4 The Portrayal of Gender in the Media: Student Respondents' Perceptions and Realities**

Nineteen out of 26 participants indicated that how women and men were portrayed in the media was inconsistent with their perception of gender. The portrayal of men and women in the media was inconsistent with students' understanding of gender because it limited the potential of both genders, as anyone could achieve anything. Additionally, it reinforced the inequality between the two genders. The media's negative representations of men and women harmed them in real life. Men were not always as dominant as they were depicted to be in the media. Men could sometimes show vulnerability and express emotions, despite the stereotype that men do not cry, making them more relatable and empathetic. Likewise, women could perform roles traditionally associated with men and benefit from more diverse and inclusive representations.

Seven out of twenty-six students agreed that the media's depiction of men and women aligned with their understanding of gender. This was due to the alignment of the media's narrative with the social changes and movements that advocated for gender equality and empowerment, including the promotion of diversity, inclusivity, and representation. Often, the media failed to

showcase the broad nuances and diversity of gender identities and expressions and instead perpetuated stereotypical expectations of what it meant to be male or female. While the media often reflected the prevailing cultural norms and values that shaped people's opinions about gender, it also had the potential to challenge and influence them. The responses of male students regarding whether the media's portrayal of men and women was consistent or not are given below.

### **Male Students' Responses**

... No it's not that consistent because now the media limits stereotypes about women and men, which can give like bad ideas which can contribute to inequality and discrimination so I don't think so. It's not consistent in that way (Participant 13, 2023).

I can say it is inconsistent because, from my understanding and the way I was taught, I believe that women have a better capability than what is expressed in the media and that there's more to men than what is expressed in the media because if you look at men, there are some things that are expressed in the media which are not good. (Participant 22, 2023).

No, it's not. I do not think the way men and women are portrayed in films is consistent with the way I understand gender, in films as I've mentioned, they say men are dominant whereas it is not reality, in reality sometimes men act like women, be weakling, cry because most of the time they say men do not cry, so they can be soft more than women, and a woman man up and do the roles that are performed by men (Participant 24, 2023).

Some female students' responses in this respect are illustrated below.

### **Female Students' Responses**

Yes, it is because like I said that I grew up with my grandmother, so my grandmother taught me to be a lady, do women things, cleaning, and all those things. So, in films, in media most of the time, they show that a man has power, he's the head of the family, and a woman obeys (Participant 7, 2023).

That is not true because men are also humans, they have emotions, they're allowed to feel an emotion, they're allowed to express how they feel, also with women that they are also human beings, they're supposed to work, they're supposed to stand up for themselves, be independent and some of... nowadays most women are like independent, so in some case, we don't see that, like they don't show that in the media (Participant 25, 2023).

Some respondents indicated that media representations of gender were inconsistent with their understanding of gender, highlighting the need to challenge gender stereotypes in the media. Representation can be viewed as the creation of meaning through language (Hall, 2020). Representation allows individuals who consume media to experience their lives in a social context with others. The media portrays the reality of people through mass messages, granting the media the power to shape the way individuals who receive these messages perceive reality. The media's portrayal and interpretation of social groups such as gender can be influential.

### **5.8 Challenging Gender Stereotypes in the Media**

Fourteen out of 26 students felt it was necessary to challenge gender stereotypes in the media. As the media continues to portray toxic forms of masculinity and femininity, the following generation may adopt these toxic traits as something they should embrace. Since people have learned through media, they tend to emulate what they see. Challenging gender roles in the media would help people understand that everyone is unique and that people's interests differ. Therefore, people should not be grouped into certain roles based on their gender or what is expected of them. Moreover, it is explained in the following statement that what is portrayed in the media can negatively affect people because they tend to conform to what they see.

Yeah, I think it's necessary because gender stereotypes never end well, it always have a bad effect just because a woman is known for cooking and a man is known for not wanting to learn anything related to cooking because they know that they will get married, and have women cook and wash for them, so we have to fight that because even at home you find that a man stays for the whole day and a woman is working, she has to cook after work and take care of the same person who was doing nothing the whole day. It's more or less gender abuse (Participant 24, 2023).

Two out of the 26 students interviewed in this study felt it was not necessary to challenge gender stereotypes in the media. These students believed that challenging gender stereotypes would be a waste of time since people had varying opinions, and the media's portrayal of these stereotypes was only to attract more viewers. They argued that changing toxic behaviour learned at home was more effective than challenging something that people saw in the media, given that people had their own beliefs. Participant 18 expressed confusion about challenging gender stereotypes and felt that they could be challenged since they are exaggerated in the media. This participant, however, also noted that some gender stereotypes portrayed in the media were valid and held their ground in society.

I think it could be both necessary and not necessary to challenge gender stereotypes in the media. I think gender stereotypes to a certain extent because they stem from somewhat of a truth, they're not completely false. I think it is the proportion of it where they take it out of context or exaggerate it that should be controlled but in terms of overall gender stereotypes, I think for the stability of society, socially and culturally, some gender stereotypes are valid and do stand (Participant 18, 2023).

### **5.9 Transforming Gender Roles in the Media: A call to improve the Representation of Men and Women**

Students were asked for their views on improving the portrayal of men and women in the media. They noted that the media should promote gender equality and debunk misconceptions about women. Both genders should be equally represented without diminishing either one. Moreover, the media should concentrate on depicting reality rather than reinforcing gender stereotypes. This approach would help young people see that everyone is equal and has leadership potential. The media should highlight positive aspects of men and women and avoid always portraying men as providers. Encouraging diversity in roles was crucial to providing women with opportunities to succeed in traditionally male roles. Participants highlighted that promoting content based on talent and skill rather than appearance or superficial qualities was essential.

One respondent proposed educating elderly individuals, including grandparents, about the presence of diverse genders and how individuals can exhibit both masculine and feminine traits. In contrast, another respondent believed that it is too late to enhance the portrayal of men and women in the media. Overall, the media is responsible for promoting positive images of all genders and challenging harmful stereotypes. By depicting reality and promoting talents and skills instead of looks, the media could help create a more equal and diverse society.

### **5.10 The Impact of Gender Conformity and Nonconformity in the Student Respondents' Urban, Rural, and Township Communities**

Based on the interviews conducted with students, it was found that conformity to traditional gender roles was often rewarded with respect, while nonconformity was met with exclusion and disrespect in many communities. This trend was observed in students coming from urban, rural, and township areas. According to research by Kane (1996), children grasped gender roles and were socially ingrained in culturally accepted roles by the age of 4 or 5. Nonconforming children experienced negative consequences, including discrimination, bullying, ridicule, and

peer rejection. For instance, girls who prefer dark colours and loose-fitting clothes over bright and form-fitting attire are often called “tomboys,” which can make it challenging for them to fit in with both female and male peers. Likewise, boys who do not conform to gender norms are frequently subjected to harsh teasing and mockery.

### **Urban Students’ Responses**

In this study, urban students’ responses indicated varying attitudes towards gender conformity in their communities. While some participants noted that gender conformity was rewarded at home, it was not necessarily the case in the wider community. Participant 1 indicated that they received compliments and respect for complying with gender roles at home; however, this was not the case in their community. Conversely, Participant 19 noted that their community did not reward gender conformity or punish gender nonconformity, allowing individuals to choose whether to conform or not. Nonetheless, for many participants, nonconforming individuals faced disapproving reactions and judgments from the community, making them feel unwelcome.

Participant 15 and Participant 21 mentioned that nonconforming individuals experienced disapproval within their communities, making them feel like outsiders. Participant 23 added that nonconforming individuals were often viewed as odd and failed to fit in while conforming individuals were respected and seen as normal in their communities. Additionally, Participant 26 stated that conforming individuals served as an excellent example to others, further emphasising the pressure to conform to gender roles.

In summary, these responses emphasised the intricate and varied perspectives on gender conformity in urban communities. While some individuals had the freedom to choose whether to conform or not, those who did not conform might have faced disapproval and social isolation from their communities.

### **Rural Students’ Responses**

Participant 2 argued that conforming to gender roles did not necessarily guarantee recognition or rewards, as it was the norm in their community. Those who conformed were simply expected to act appropriately, while those who did not face harassment, name-calling, and exclusion. On the other hand, Participant 4 noted that both men and women were responsible for teaching and enforcing proper behaviour, which could earn them respect. Despite the existence of negative

consequences for nonconforming individuals, South Africa values freedom and individual choice, which means that not all nonconforming individuals are penalised.

Participant 5 emphasised the importance of conforming to gender roles in their community, where women were expected to dress modestly and show respect to men, and men were expected to protect women. Traditional rituals, such as paying lobola, were performed for those who conformed, while nonconformity could result in the community ostracising the individual. Participant 6 echoed this sentiment, stating that conforming to gender roles was highly valued in their community. Women who dressed conservatively, exhibited respect, and attended church were seen as good examples and desirable partners, while men who participated in ceremonies and rituals were regarded as good husbands. Conversely, those who did not conform were often used as negative examples within the community and faced discrimination.

Participant 10 also argued that conforming to gender norms was highly respected in their community, and those who defied these norms were not given due respect. Participant 13 added that individuals who conformed to gender roles benefited from greater employment opportunities, social acceptance, personal safety, and access to resources such as education and legal aid. By contrast, those who did not conform experienced harassment and discrimination.

In Participant 14, conforming to gender roles had different implications for men and women. Women who complied with their gender roles earned respect and dignity, while men who conformed to gender roles earned the status of “isoka” or someone with multiple sexual partners, which brought honour to the family. If a man or a woman, however, deviated from their expected roles, it took away their dignity and the family’s respect.

Lastly, Participant 24 highlighted the praise given to those who conformed to gender norms, often being referred to as “real men” or “real women”. Those who did not fit into these categories were not recognised as such.

Overall, the perspectives shared by these participants suggest that conformity to gender roles is highly valued in many South African communities, and those who do not conform may face discrimination and ostracism. While conformity may bring certain benefits and rewards, it can also limit individual choices and perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes.

## **Township Students' Responses**

Participant 3 stated that if someone did not conform, they were labelled badly. For example, a man who did not conform to masculine roles was labelled as “gay.” Participant 8 stated that people who conformed were seen as superior to others, and if someone did not conform, they were excluded and treated poorly. Participant 11 stated that gender conformity was rewarded with praise and that those who did not conform were discriminated against and judged by the community. Participant 12 stated that people who conformed were seen as good examples and role models in the community and received high recognition, while those who did not conform were perceived as unintelligent.

Participant 16 stated that young men who conformed to gender roles were rewarded with a cow from the community chief, while young women who conformed were rewarded with “umemulo,” a coming-of-age ceremony to celebrate their good behaviour. Participant 11 also emphasised that “umemulo” was performed for women who behaved well until they reached age 21 without having children. If people did not conform, nothing happened. Those who did not conform were not taken seriously, did not receive recognition, and became isolated.

## **5.11 Conclusion**

This chapter presents the findings of a study on how media affects students' construction of gender at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College campus. The study reveals that students associate masculinity with qualities such as strength, power, aggression, and financial stability, while femininity is linked to staying at home, caregiving, being emotional, and being attractive. The study also discovered that students use hegemonic ways to develop their masculinity and femininity. Additionally, the chapter explains how students believe that the media significantly impacts their lives and they cannot resist its influence. They suggest that the media greatly shapes their gender perceptions, and what they see in the media mirrors real-world concepts of being a man or a woman. The following chapter presents a summary and conclusions drawn from the study's findings presented in this chapter.

## CHAPTER SIX

### SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the research study, discussing methodologies, research designs, conclusions, and recommendations, as well as the study's limitations and contributions. The study's findings show that the media has a significant impact on young people's gender identities. The media, by promoting traditional notions of femininity and masculinity, reinforces harmful stereotypes that are difficult to overcome, influencing individuals' self-perception. The study emphasises the importance of challenging such stereotypes, promoting diversity and inclusion, and educating people about the significance of gender equality. Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers must collaborate to challenge gender stereotypes in the media and promote positive representations of gender identity. This can contribute to the development of a more equitable and inclusive society.

#### 6.2 Summary and Conclusion

This study explores how the media shapes and strengthens gender identities in young individuals. The results indicate that the media strongly influences how individuals see themselves, reinforcing challenging stereotypes. The study shows that how women are portrayed in the media as having to do with beauty standards has a particular impact on them, perpetuating traditional gender roles that prioritise women as consumers over professionals and decision-makers in society. Moreover, the study highlights how hegemonic masculinity is reaffirmed through media channels, promoting a narrow and harmful image of "real men."

The study reveals significant anti-homosexual sentiments among the male participants, suggesting that traditional notions of heteronormativity continue to be prominent within society. The study emphasises the importance of socialisation in shaping gender identification, suggesting that family relationships and cultural norms heavily influence individuals' identities. The study underscores the impact of impression management on gender identities, revealing the extent to which social expectations influence individuals to conform to the appearance and behaviour of "real men" and women.

The study points out that the media often conveys contradictory messages, endorsing both damaging and empowering gender stereotypes. The study suggests that individuals should challenge the stereotypes perpetuated by the media, promoting a more diverse and inclusive representation of gender identities. The study underscores how media literacy can be a valuable tool in enabling individuals to challenge harmful stereotypes and advocate for positive representation. Furthermore, the study underscores the need for society to educate individuals on the importance of gender equality, promoting a more inclusive and diverse understanding of gender identity.

Overall, this study provides valuable insights into the role of media in shaping gender identities and perpetuating harmful stereotypes. The findings imply that the media has a significant impact on people's self-perception, which leads to the promotion of hegemonic masculinities and femininities. The study highlights the importance of challenging stereotypes, promoting diversity and inclusion, and educating individuals on the importance of gender equality. Ultimately, this study emphasises the fundamental role that media plays in perpetuating harmful stereotypes and underscores the importance of promoting positive representation of gender identities within society.

### **6.3 Recommendations for Addressing Gender Stereotypes and Promoting Equality**

Young men and women in a study expressed scepticism about achieving equality between men and women due to deeply ingrained societal norms and attitudes. Men typically hold onto hegemonic ideals of masculinity, even if they fail to fully realise them. This leads to negative mental health outcomes and perpetuates the cycle of reinforcing dominant ideals. To address this issue, education programmes and community initiatives must challenge harmful norms and create a safe space for dialogue. Breaking down toxic masculinity will benefit both men and women, leading to healthier relationships and a more fulfilling life. Achieving gender equality is a challenging journey that is worth taking to create a society where all individuals can express themselves freely.

#### **6.3.1 Challenging Gender Stereotypes in the Media**

It is essential to challenge how gender is depicted in the media. The next generation might embrace these toxic tendencies as something they should embrace as long as the media keeps portraying harmful masculine and feminine ways. Individuals tend to imitate what they see in the media, absorbing and replicating the information displayed. It will be easier for people to

recognise that everyone is different and that everyone has different interests if gender roles in the media are challenged. They cannot, therefore, be classified into particular roles depending on their gender or what is expected of them. Furthermore, because individuals tend to mimic what they see, what is portrayed in the media might harm them.

The media should prioritise promoting equality and erasing stereotypes about women. Without compromising either gender, there should be equitable representation for each. Instead of perpetuating stereotypes, the media should aim to depict real-life diversity and equality. This strategy will assist the next generation in learning that all people are equal and capable of leadership. The media must emphasise the good in both men and women and refrain from portraying men only as providers. It is vital to promote workplace diversity to enable women to excel in traditionally male-dominated positions. Participants also agreed that material promotion should be based on aptitude and expertise rather than appearances or other superficial qualities.

There could be gender-equitable and inclusive play for all children, regardless of gender. Girls and boys should have equal and adequate time to play and engage in home tasks to achieve gender equality, ensuring that kids use toys and games that promote the full range of social and cognitive abilities. It is crucial to expose children to books and media that showcase diverse cultures and portray gender roles positively. Such narratives should embrace all children and their uniqueness.

Parents should discourage children from playing dangerous games and guns, as the digital gaming industry is heavily sexualised and gender-biased. Instead, they should promote healthy physical activity like sports and outdoor games, promote cognitive and creative abilities, and ensure equal play between boys and girls.

### **6.3.2 Acknowledging and Understanding Sexism**

Sexism upholds patriarchy and male dominance, perpetuating gender stereotypes and discrimination against women and girls. Women are predominantly affected by this pervasive bias, and ordinary behaviours can lead to sexist violence, restricting their opportunities and freedoms. To address sexism, individuals must become more aware of their own beliefs and behaviours and challenge the structures that uphold gender inequality. This requires self-reflection, education, and collective action. People can create campaigns, promote programmes, and hold each other accountable to create safe and inclusive spaces where gender equality

thrives. Through ongoing reflection and action, society can work towards a more equitable and just society for all genders.

Eradicating sexism requires recognising the intersectionality of gender with other social identities, such as race, sexual orientation, and disability, and how women who belong to marginalised communities face compounded discrimination and violence. Taking an intersectional approach is vital to fostering inclusivity and justice for individuals of all genders and identities. Additionally, men have a crucial role to play in challenging sexism and promoting gender equality. They can work to unlearn harmful patriarchal behaviours and beliefs, become allies in the fight against sexism, and create safe spaces for women and girls. Achieving a fairer society requires acknowledging the varied experiences of women and girls and engaging men in combating gender inequality.

#### **6.4 Suggestions for Further Research**

Creating and accepting new male identities could advance future conversations and debates regarding gender and its construction. It would be more helpful when men appear to have less freedom to negotiate their senses because of the socio-economic situation, so they adopt what has already been developed. It would also be beneficial to reconsider the phenomenon of hegemonic masculinity since different viewpoints can result in various and diverse understandings of how to justify male privileges. Men's habits and privileges should likewise be the subject of future inquiry.

It is important to look at the origins of such practices to understand men and women better and work towards changing society. Researching techniques or approaches that help men become aware of their existing conceptions of manhood and women of their womanhood may also be beneficial so that they may spot ambiguities, misunderstandings, legal loopholes, and unfair practices.

#### **6.5 Policy and Practice Recommendations for Gender Equality**

Policy and practice can significantly benefit from this study, particularly in promoting gender equality. Education and media literacy programmes must prioritise empowering individuals to challenge harmful stereotypes and promote positive gender identity representation. Creating safe spaces for dialogue and challenging harmful societal norms should be prioritised through community initiatives and education programmes. To allow women to achieve their full

potential, the workforce should prioritise diversity and inclusion. Media and education practitioners are responsible for promoting equality and diversity by challenging gender stereotypes and ensuring equitable representation for both genders. These practitioners should strive to develop educational programmes that promote gender equality, challenge harmful societal norms, and create inclusive environments that encourage positive self-perception and celebrate diversity.

## **6.6 Study Limitations and Future Research Recommendations**

Future research should address the limitations of this study, which included using a small and homogenous sample size and focusing narrowly on traditional gender roles within a specific cultural context. To improve the generalisability and ecological validity of these findings, researchers should use larger and more diverse samples and investigate the impact of media on gender identities within different cultural contexts. Also, researchers should examine the impact of media representations on nonbinary and gender-nonconforming individuals and explore intersectionality to understand how media representations affect individuals with multiple marginalised identities. Furthermore, researchers should investigate how media industries perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes and promote hegemonic masculinities and femininities through economic and political structures.

## **6.7 Concluding Remarks**

Gender equality is a complex issue requiring collaboration between policymakers, practitioners, and media professionals. These groups must work together to challenge harmful gender stereotypes, promote diversity and inclusion, and create a more equitable society for all genders and identities by advocating for positive representations and inclusive practices. Media practitioners play a crucial role in shaping gender identities and attitudes. Policies should encourage positive representations of gender in the media. Education and media literacy programs are essential for challenging gender stereotypes and promoting a more inclusive media landscape. Additionally, promoting gender equality requires inclusive environments, collaboration between practitioners in various fields, and community initiatives. Future research should investigate the impact of the media on non-binary and gender-nonconforming individuals, marginalised communities, and different cultural contexts and age groups. Effective strategies for promoting positive representations of gender in the media, including social media, should also be explored. Policymakers should prioritise promoting diversity and

inclusion in the workforce and developing educational programs that promote gender equality. Practitioners should create inclusive environments and challenge harmful societal norms. To achieve gender equality, it is important to break down harmful societal norms and challenge gender stereotypes in the media through education programs and community initiatives. Future research should investigate media's impact on gender identities within different cultural contexts, as well as age groups and marginalised communities. Finally, research should explore effective strategies for promoting positive representations of gender in the media, including the role of social media in shaping gender identities and attitudes.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

#### 1. Background information on the research participants

- 1.1 Age:
- 1.2 Sex:
- 1.3 Race:
- 1.4 Level of study:
- 1.5 In what type of area do you live?
  - 1.5.1 Rural or village area
  - 1.5.2 Urban or suburban area
  - 1.5.3 Township

#### 2. Questions on masculinity and femininity

- 2.1 Do you know what masculinity (manhood) and femininity (womanhood) are?
  - 2.1.1 If yes, please elaborate.
  - 2.1.2 Who taught you about the “proper” way men and women should behave?
- 2.2 Would you define yourself as masculine or feminine? Why?
- 2.3 At what age did you learn to act masculine or feminine?
- 2.4 What do “toxic masculinities” and “toxic femininities,” in your opinion, mean? Elaborate.
- 2.5 Have you ever heard of gender stereotyping? If yes, where?
  - 2.5.1 What, in your opinion, are gender stereotypes?
  - 2.5.2 When did you first become aware of gender stereotypes?
  - 2.5.3 What are some of the stereotypes you have heard about men and women? Examples?

- 2.5.4 Why do you think gender stereotypes, such as boys liking blue and girls liking pink, remain widely used in society?
- 2.6 Do you think people should be taught about gender roles?
  - 2.6.1 If yes, who should be responsible for teaching individuals about gender roles?
- 2.7 Do you believe that gender roles affect men and women differently? Please explain.

### **3. Questions on the representation of gender in films and gender roles**

- 3.1 Between films, television shows, and print media (magazines and newspapers), what types of media are you interested in?
- 3.2 Do you believe the media has a significant impact on people's perceptions of gender?
- 3.3 Are men and women represented equally in the media?
- 3.4 How are men portrayed in the media?
- 3.5 How are women portrayed in the media?
- 3.6 Do you believe the media portrays women and men accurately? Explain.
  - 3.6.1 Is the portrayal of men and women in the media consistent with your understanding of gender?
- 3.7 Do you think the media promotes "toxic" masculinities and femininities? Explain.
- 3.8 What do you think should be done to improve the portrayal of men and women in the media?
- 3.9 Do you believe it is necessary to challenge gender stereotypes in the media? Why?
- 3.10 Do you think you can avoid being influenced by the media? If yes, how?
- 3.11 How is gender conformity rewarded in your community?
  - 3.11.1 What if someone chooses not to conform to gender roles?

## Appendix 2: Informed Consent Document

Dear Participant,

My name is Sindisiwe Zungu (217028118). I am a Masters candidate studying at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College. The title of my research is: An Analysis Of The Media As A Key Socialising Agent For Gender And Gender Stereotypes. The study aims to investigate the impact of media influence on the construction of gender and how the media may reinforce hegemonic or toxic ideas of masculinities and femininities. One of the objectives is to understand how young people position themselves against masculine and feminine ideas as portrayed by mass media. I am interested in interviewing you to share your experiences and observations on the subject matter.

Please note that:

- The information that you provide will be used for scholarly research only.
- Your participation is entirely voluntary. You have a choice to participate, not to participate or stop participating in the research. You will not be penalised for taking such an action.
- Your views in this interview will be presented anonymously. Neither your name nor identity will be disclosed in any form in the study.
- The interview will take about 20-30 minutes.
- The record as well as other items associated with the interview will be held in a password-protected file accessible only to myself and my supervisors. After 5 years, in line with the rules of the university, it will be disposed of by shredding and burning.
- If you agree to participate please sign the declaration attached to this statement (a separate sheet will be provided for signatures)

I can be contacted at: the School of Social Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College Campus, Durban. Email: 217028118@stu.ukzn.ac.za Cell: +27 60 871 5739;

My supervisor is Ms Sihle Lamula who is located at the School of Social Sciences, Pietermaritzburg Campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Contact details: email Lamulas@ukzn.ac.za Phone number: +27 33 260 5097.

My co-supervisor is ..... who is located at the School of Social Sciences,

Howard College Campus/ Howard College Campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Contact details: email ..... Phone number: .....

The Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee contact details are as follows:

HSSREC Research Office, Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za, Tel: 031 260 3587/4557/8350.

Thank you for your contribution to this research.

DECLARATION

I..... (full names of participant) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to participating in the research project.

I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time, should I so desire. I understand the intention of the research. I hereby agree to participate.

I consent/do not consent to have this interview recorded (if applicable)

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

DATE

.....

## Appendix 3: Ethical Clearance Approval Letter



27 July 2022

Sindisiwe Zungu (217028118)  
School Of Social Sciences  
Howard College

Dear S Zungu,

**Protocol reference number:** HSSREC/00003954/2022

**Project title:** An explorative study into the media as a key socializing agent of gender and gender stereotypes.

**Degree:** Masters

### Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 14 March 2022 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

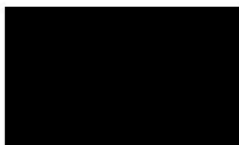
**Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have 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.**

This approval is valid until 27 July 2023.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

### Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 Email: [hssrec@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:hssrec@ukzn.ac.za) Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics>

Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

## Appendix 4: Turnitin Receipt

S. Zungu Masters Dissertation ?

### Match Overview

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