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Gendered Perceptions of Boyhood: The Perceptions of Male and Female High School Learners in Eswatini

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how male and female high school learners in Eswatini have gendered views of masculinity and how these views influenced their identities and actions in school. A qualitative case study methodology was used to gather data from 24 purposefully chosen 16–18-year-old students (12 boys and 12 girls) from four coeducational high schools in the Hhohho region, Eswatini, through semi-structured individual and focus group interviews. According to the research, boys frequently viewed aggression and risk-taking as innate qualities, demonstrating how hegemonic masculinity shapes ideas of masculinity. While girls reported experiencing sexual harassment from male students and authoritative figures, boys voiced opinions that justified risky and violent behaviors as necessary components of their masculinity. This study demonstrates how both male and female learners have a negative view of boys and associate them with sexual aggression and possible criminal activity. The study recommends that educational institutions confront and eliminate harmful masculine stereotypes in order to create spaces that support equity and students' healthier gender identity expressions.

Keywords: Gender, Risk Taking, Masculinity, Hegemonic Masculinity, Sexual Harassment, Aggression.

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INTRODUCTION

The varied and complicated realities of boyhood in Eswatini's modern educational environment are greatly impacted by unique gendered perspectives, which mould the identities and behaviours of both male and female high school students. This study delves deeply into the ways in which these gendered perspectives create a framework of masculinity that is entwined with cultural narratives, peer relationships, and societal expectations. Notably, the study looks at how boys internalise aggressive behaviours, how risk-taking is normalised, and how peer pressure is widely visible as a sign of manhood in order to explore the effects of hegemonic masculinity in high school settings. At the same time, it examines the reactions and experiences of female students who deal with these gendered dynamics, frequently overcoming sexual harassment and the pressures associated with masculine conduct. According to recent research, boys are increasingly expressing their masculinity by engaging in risky behaviours, such as substance misuse and aggression, to gain approval from others. This is a concerning trend.[1] Conversely, girls are often confronted with the ramifications of this cultural context, often

[1] Robert W Connell and James W Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829–59; D. Hurst, "Masculinities in Transition: The Challenge of Gender Norms in South Africa and Eswatini. ," *Southern African Journal of Gender Studies,* 2021.

putting themselves in opposition to the normative expectations that regulate masculine behaviour. Therefore, the objective of this study is to explore how these overlapping ideas about boyhood affect not only the behaviour of male students but also the responses and feelings of female peers in high school environments throughout Eswatini. The main goal of this study was to explore how male and female and male students in Eswatini high schools experience boyhood in terms of gendered views. This study intends to provide important insights into how educational institutions can better address and navigate the complexities of gender dynamics by exploring the ways in which masculinity is defined, performed, and perceived. This will help to create environments that challenge harmful stereotypes and promote equity among students. A qualitative approach will be used with narratives from participants to elucidate the nuanced identity construction processes at play, bridging knowledge gaps around gender equity.

Definition of Technical Terms

Gender is a social practice that is closely related to power dynamics. Her focus is on the concept of gender as a spectrum, wherein masculinity and femininity can differ among countries and are influenced by cultural, historical, and political factors.[2]

Peer Pressure: A peer group's ability to influence people to alter their beliefs, values, or actions in order to fit in with the group's expectations.[3]

Masculinity: A collection of traits, actions, and roles that are frequently connected to boys and men and are influenced by social and cultural norms.[4]

Hegemonic Masculinity: The prevalent masculinity that validates men's dominance in society and explains why women and other marginalised masculinities should be subservient to men.[5]

Femininity: The collection of traits, actions, and roles that are typical of women and girls; they are influenced by social standards and frequently contrast with masculinity.[6]

Aggression: A variety of actions that are motivated by the desire to do harm or establish control; they can be verbal, physical, or relational, and they are frequently impacted by social and environmental circumstances.[7]

Boyhood: Boyhood is a culturally and socially controlled notion of what it means to be a male child, shaped by perceptions held by both males and females that impact how boys should behave, dress, and interact.[8]

LITERATURE REVIEW

Eswatini's cultural fabric is heavily influenced by Swazi traditions that prescribe specific roles and behaviors for boys and girls. Dlamini argues that traditional gender norms continue to shape perceptions of masculinity and femininity, frequently reinforcing stereotypes that associate masculinity with strength, independence, and dominance, while femininity is associated with submissiveness, nurturing, and domesticity.[9] These cultural expectations are reinforced by community activities, initiation ceremonies, and familial socialisation processes, which influence how students interpret "appropriate" masculine actions. However, recent research suggests a progressive shift led by exposure to global notions of

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[2] R. W. Connell, "Teaching the Boys: New Research on Masculinity, and Gender Strategies for Schools," *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education* 98, no. 2 (December 1, 1996): 206–35, https://doi.org/10.1177/016146819609800203.

[3] J. Smith and R. Jones, "Male Aggression and Mental Health: Understanding the Duality of Perception," *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* 25, no. 2 (2024): 285–99.

[4] Todd W Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction* (John Wiley & Sons, 2023).

[5] Nikki Wedgwood, Raewyn Connell, and Julian Wood, "Deploying Hegemonic Masculinity: A Study of Uses of the Concept in the Journal Psychology of Men & Masculinities," *Psychology of Men & Masculinities* 24, no. 2 (April 2023): 83–93, https://doi.org/10.1037/men0000417.

[6] Mattison Harvey and Patrick Morse, "Femininity," in *Encyclopedia of Religious Psychology and Behavior* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2025), 1–12, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-38971-9_240-1.

[7] Gerda Siann, *Accounting for Aggression: Perspectives on Aggression and Violence* (Routledge, 2024).

[8] Stephen Frosh, Ann Phoenix, and Rob Pattman, *Young Masculinities: Understanding Boys in Contemporary Society* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017).

[9] T. Dlamini, "Culture, Institutional Policies and Gender Equity in Physical Education: A Case Study of One Teacher Training College in the Kingdom of Eswatini" (2024).

gender equality and education.[10] These findings demonstrate that adolescents are increasingly questioning traditional standards, while deeply ingrained attitudes continue to endure, especially among older learners and in rural areas. According to research, male learners generally regard boyhood as a stage of resilience, independence, and power. Bhana et.al., discovered that many male students associate masculinity with emotional stoicism, physical strength, and the capacity to provide for others.[11] These beliefs are reinforced by peer interactions, media influences, and community norms that value toughness and risk-taking behavior. Interestingly, some recent research shows a more sophisticated understanding among younger male learners, who are beginning to question these established beliefs. For example, Duek et al. find that a subset of boy students in urban schools want to redefine masculinity by embracing emotional expressiveness and sensitivity as strengths rather than weaknesses.[12]

Increased exposure to gender-sensitive education programs and peer-led conversations about gender equality appears to be associated with this transition. Furthermore, views of boyhood influence academic and social conduct. DeGue et al. discovered that boys who internalize traditional masculine ideals participate less in class and are more likely to exhibit violent conduct, which can impede academic performance and social integration.[13] Female learners' perceptions of boyhood are influenced by gender expectations and socialization experiences. According to research findings, students frequently identify boyhood with characteristics such as aggressiveness, independence, and social dominance. However, many girl students see boyhood as a period of risky activities, such as substance misuse and involvement in violence, which are sometimes glorified by peers. According to recent research by Makamure and Morojele, female learners frequently perceive traditional conceptions of masculinity as both empowering and restricting.[14] While some admire boys' strength and assertiveness, others are concerned about their aggressive and domineering behavior, which can lead to gender-based violence or encourage toxic masculinity. The literature stresses how gendered notions of boyhood affect adolescents' psychological well-being, academic achievement, and social interactions. According to Bhana et al., boys who adhere to traditional masculine ideals frequently experience emotional repression, which is associated with a greater incidence of mental health concerns like sadness and anxiety.[15] In contrast, girls' conceptions of masculinity impact their expectations of male relationships, which might perpetuate gender inequities. Recent research emphasises the need for school-based programs that challenge detrimental gender stereotypes. For example, Bhana et al., show that gender-sensitive curricula and peer mentoring programs can help students have more positive and diverse conceptions of masculinity.[16] These programs encourage emotional literacy, respect, and empathy, resulting in healthy adolescent development. A significant trend in research is the growing understanding of the fluidity of gender identities and perceptions among high school students. According to researchers such as Mittal and Hendrickx et al., adolescents who are exploring multiple gender expressions are calling into question the traditional binary perspective of gender.[17] This emerging understanding has ramifications for how Emaswati think about and experience boyhood. Furthermore, digital media and social platforms have a significant influence on attitudes. Learners can now access global narratives that challenge local

[10] Alinda M. Young et al., "The 'Ideal Man': How Gender Norms and Expectations Shape South African Men's Masculinity, Sexual Identities, and Well-Being," *The Journal of Men's Studies* 33, no. 2 (June 27, 2025): 417–40, https://doi.org/10.1177/10608265241303734.

[11] Deevia Bhana, Morten Skovdal, and Kaymarlin Govender, *Young Masculinities and Sexual Health in Southern Africa* (London: Routledge, 2025), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003468394.

[12] Revital Duek, Ronit Kark, and Svetlana Chachashvili-Bolotin, "Macho or Nerd: Perceptions of Masculinity, Social Environment, and Science Capital Utilization Among Adolescent STEM Students," *Sex Roles* 91, no. 4 (April 14, 2025): 30, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-025-01569-3.

[13] Sarah DeGue, Robyn Singleton, and Megan Kearns, "A Qualitative Analysis of Beliefs about Masculinity and Gender Socialization among U.S. Mothers and Fathers of School-Age Boys.," *Psychology of Men & Masculinities* 25, no. 2 (April 2024): 152–64, https://doi.org/10.1037/men0000450.

[14] Gibson Makamure and Pholoho J Morojele, "Gendered Spaces: Students' Experiences of the Social School Spaces in High Schools in Hhohho Region, Eswatini," *African Perspectives of Research in Teaching and Learning* 7, no. 1 (2023): 76–83.

[15] Bhana, Skovdal, and Govender, *Young Masculinities and Sexual Health in Southern Africa*.

[16] Bhana, Skovdal, and Govender, *Young Masculinities and Sexual Health in Southern Africa*.

[17] Shalini Mittal, "Rethinking Gender: Beyond the Binary and into the Unknown," *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science* 59, no. 1 (2025): 19; Marie Hendrickx et al., "Same but Different? Comparing Attitudes Regarding Gender, Gender Diversity, and Sexual Diversity Among Early Adolescents in South Africa and Belgium," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 71, no. 4 (October 2022): 446–54, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2022.05.006.

preconceptions, resulting in a fusion of traditional and modern notions of masculinity. Future research should look into how digital influences combine with cultural norms to shape perceptions of boyhood.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Connell was the main theorist of hegemonic masculinity.[18] Hegemonic masculinities are a depiction of what it means to be a man in society, even if they differ depending on the context.[19] Hegemonic masculinities represent or show males as economic providers, as having a right to sex, and as being superior to women in everything else. In this study, this theory was appropriate in that boys strive to attain some of the attributes of hegemonic masculinity to identify themselves as not feminine. This is an endorsement of their status as males. Numerous Man Box-related messages and pressures place a strong emphasis on the superiority of masculinity over femininity and the dominance of males over women due to patriarchy. A rigid set of socially imposed "manly" and/or "real man's" behaviours, such as superiority, brutality, emotional repression, a lack of physical intimacy with other men, and expectations of socially aggressive and/or dominant behaviour, are referred to as the "Man Box" and are imposed on men by society.[20] Men are forced into limiting gender roles by this ‘gender box’, which ignores and denies their needs on an emotional, physical, and spiritual level.

METHODOLOGY

Geographical and Socio-economic context of the study

This research was conducted in four high schools in Eswatini's Hhohho region. Eswatini, formally the Kingdom of Eswatini and also known as kaNgwane, is a separate nation in Southern Africa that has a border with South Africa on all sides except the east, where it borders Mozambique. Eswatini's people speak the same language and maintain a traditional way of life based on Christianity and patriarchy that is both traditional and stagnant.[21] Manzini, Hhohho, Shiselweni, and Lubombo are the four geographically distinct regions of the country. The study was carried out in the Hhohho region, which carries the capital Mbabane. The schools covered in this research study are located around the capital. As such, they are all urban high schools. The schools are all coeducational.

Study Methodology and Data Collection Methods

The study's methodological design was based on a qualitative narrative approach. Lim says that in qualitative research, a small distinct group of participants is generally examined to gain an in-depth understanding of the topic, hence a research sample of 24 participants was sufficient.[22] The study included 24 Form 5 learners (12 boys and 12 girls) from four high schools, all of whom were between the ages of 16 and 18. Focus group discussions and face-to-face individual interviews were the data generation methods employed in this study. The focus groups allowed the researcher to corroborate the comments offered by learners during individual interviews, which aided in data triangulation.[23] The researcher urged the participants to have spontaneous, unstructured, natural, and open talks. As a result, inquiries were directed at one another, and responses were delivered in reaction to the comments made. Considering group dynamics, each member was given the opportunity to respond to the questions and issues addressed. Individual interviews were employed by the researcher to acquire data from the study's chosen sample. One participant was interviewed per research site. An affirmation is given by Barnwell that interviewing individuals allows them to speak what is on their minds and to give themselves to a profound investigation, especially when it comes to personal accounts of their feelings, together with

[18] Connell, “Teaching the Boys: New Research on Masculinity, and Gender Strategies for Schools.”
[19] Connell, “Teaching the Boys: New Research on Masculinity, and Gender Strategies for Schools.”
[20] Rula Odeh Alsawalqa, Maissa Nasr Alrawashdeh, and Shahedul Hasan, “Understanding the Man Box: The Link between Gender Socialization and Domestic Violence in Jordan,” *Heliyon* 7, no. 10 (October 2021): e08264, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e08264.
[21] Rebecca Fielding-Miller et al., “Epidemiology of Campus Sexual Assault among University Women in Eswatini,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 36, no. 21–22 (2021): NP11238–63.
[22] S. Lim, “Applying Grounded Theory in Education Research: Exploring Lecturer Experiences in Overcrowded Classrooms,” *International Qualitative Research in Education* 11, no. 2 (2024): 102–19.
[23] C. H. Meydan and H. Akkaş, “The Role of Triangulation in Qualitative Research: Converging Perspectives,” in *Principles of Conducting Qualitative Research in Multicultural Settings* (IGI Global, 2024), 98–129.

experiences.[24] Voice recording and writing of short notes during the generation of data ensured that the researcher produced a study that was authentic. Both English and SiSwati were allowed for participants to express themselves.

Data Analysis Procedure

Thematic analysis was used in this study. Braun and Clarke say that thematic analysis is a method that is systematic, utilised to classify, analyse and report data in a detailed manner with minimal organisation.[25] The researcher was actively involved in collecting the data using semi-structured focus group interviews and individual interviews as primary instruments in data collection. To comprehend the concerns and thoughts that were surfacing, the researcher listened to the voice recordings several times and read the documents. He transcribed the interviews while listening to the voice recordings over and over. This interaction with the data aided the researcher in absorbing the information and making sense of the meanings and patterns that emerged. Themes formed and were organized, and connected to the research as a result of reading through these written categories

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were observed in order to respect the participants' rights.[26] The Ministry of Education and Training in Eswatini was approached for permission through the Education Director's office. A written consent from the school principals was also secured via a written letter describing the study's goal. Following that, parents and participants received letters of consent outlining the issues of confidentiality, privacy, and voluntary involvement. For the sake of anonymity, pseudonyms have been employed to represent both the schools and the participants in this study.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Reading the participants' narratives makes it clear that distinct conceptions about what it means to be a boy have formed. These concepts demonstrated the strong impact of hegemonic discourses in influencing boys' conceptions of what it means to be a boy. While some of the boys adopted hegemonic ideals as their own, other boys embraced alternative voices of masculinity. Because they criticise macho fashion and disapprove of risk-taking behaviours connected to hegemonic masculinity norms and practices, the latter narratives offer some opposition to hegemonic masculinity. Male behaviour, namely that of young adolescent boys, is governed by masculinity, which, according to Khabibah, et.al., is a social construct.[27] Depending on the situation, the boys in this study appeared to create a variety of conflicting identity perspectives. Considering the subsequent sub-themes, the researcher will provide instances to illustrate this claim. In responding to the question of what it means to be a boy, the following sub-themes emerged.

Taking Risks

The stories of the participants point to a major societal perception that links risk-taking behaviour to masculinity. The prevalent belief that boys must engage in risk-taking behaviours also surfaced as a motif in the boys' narratives in relation to notions about being boys. By taking risks, we mean doing things that flout formal rules, may even flout the law or can be considered dangerous, like drinking while underage, or doing things that put boys at risk of facing poor outcomes, such as getting into trouble or operating a motor vehicle while intoxicated. For many boys, taking risks is just part of being a boy, as illustrated by Ashley below:

> *The boys are viewed as naughty by virtue that we are boys. There may be no reason for calling us naughty, but that is how society sees us.* (Ashley, FG2)

[24] Ashley Barnwell, "Listening to Interviews: Attending to Aurality, Emotions, and Atmospheres in Qualitative Analysis," in *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, vol. 26, 2025.
[25] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide," 2021.
[26] Tony Bertram et al., "EECERA Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers," *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 33, no. 1 (2025): 4–18.
[27] Siti Khabibah, Heppy Mutammimah, and Fajarman Fajarman, "The Social Construction of Gender in the Experience of Vocational School Adolescents. A Critical Approach," *Jurnal Dimensi Pendidikan Dan Pembelajaran* 13, no. 1 (January 13, 2025): 95–108, https://doi.org/10.24269/dpp.v13i1.10723.

Ashley's statement highlights the fixed societal perception of boys as "naughty," suggesting that society frequently categorises boys according to their gender. This discovery is consistent with research indicating that boys frequently internalise the expectations of society that shape their behaviour, which in turn causes them to participate in hazardous activities to fit in with these gender standards.[28] This assumption stems from a hegemonic masculine ideal that honours courage, recklessness, and defiance of authority. According to Ashley, boys find it very challenging to escape society's notion of what it means to be a boy. It appears that this construction forbids additional justifications for why boys engage in risky and hazardous behaviour.[29] Boys' inherent risk-taking and troublesome tendencies are seen as the root of the issue, which keeps the issue of risky behaviour at the individual level and ignores society's role in its construction. Furthermore, Frosh et al., criticise the way in which boys' behaviour is framed as simply "naughty" or "troublesome," contending that a more thorough examination that considers the social structures that encourage such behaviours is necessary.[30] These narratives restrict the discussion to the individual level by attributing boys' risk-taking to their masculinity rather than acknowledging the impact of their social environment. The ramifications are far-reaching; this strategy reinforces the dominant norms of masculinity by ignoring the larger social conditions and expectations that influence these behaviours.The next two excerpts further demonstrate how boys' risk-taking behaviour has become normalised:

I'm not sure, guys are just notorious for taking risks. (Bhekani, FG6)

In yet another instance, perhaps taking risks is just something that boys do naturally. (Khetsiwe, individual interview)

The idea that males are "notorious for taking risks," which implies that taking risks is part of an ingrained identity that boys adopt to conform to social standards, is further supported by Bhekani's comment. When Khetsiwe says that taking risks is "something boys do naturally," she conveys a sense of inevitability that alludes to the cultural scripts that boys are indoctrinated into from an early age. Whiteside explores this idea and contends that cultural standards create a conception of masculinity that elevates risky behaviour as a rite of passage, thereby sustaining a cycle that pushes boys to take risks in order to feel validated.[31] This suggests a common approach to comprehending why boys persist in participating in risky activities. Most of the participants framed their risk-taking behaviour positively, the researcher realised. This positive view of irresponsible behaviour translates to the boys seeing themselves as superior to girls and separating themselves by this kind of behaviour. Bhekani's claim that risk-taking behaviour includes "*things that you do not generally find girls doing*" is the best example of this. This statement alludes to the attitude among boys that engaging in risky behaviour detaches them from feminine attributes. It seems that feminine traits are once again regarded as inferior to those of masculine traits. It's crucial to note that the use of the word "usually" highlights the nuanced gender discourses that naturalise whatever behaviours are perceived as masculine as opposed to feminine.[32] In this sense, Lwazi (FG2) argued that "*I believe men have far lower risk than women."*

This reflects the belief that boys engage in dangerous behaviours more frequently than girls due to biological differences. The comment echoes the idea that boys are inherently superior to girls. The idea of competition was connected to yet another facet of risk-taking. The participants discussed boys' "natural desire" to be better, harder, and thus, more masculine. A boy can demonstrate that he is a man by outperforming other boys and, in doing so, demonstrating to other boys his toughness and what Menzie (FG4) referred to as "*hardcore*" qualities. Banelle (FG4) described it as follows:

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[28] Yvonne Skipper and Claire Fox, "Boys Will Be Boys: Young People's Perceptions and Experiences of Gender within Education," *Pastoral Care in Education* 40, no. 4 (October 2, 2022): 391–409, https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2021.1977986.

[29] Frosh, Phoenix, and Pattman, *Young Masculinities: Understanding Boys in Contemporary Society*.

[30] Frosh, Phoenix, and Pattman, *Young Masculinities: Understanding Boys in Contemporary Society*.

[31] Adam Whiteside, ""Guys Are Going to Be Guys": How Fraternity Men Discursively Construct Masculinity and Navigate Perceptions of Toxic Masculinity" (Kent State University, 2024).

[32] Michael S Kimmel, "The Contemporary 'Crisis' of Masculinity in Historical Perspective," in *The Making of Masculinities (Routledge Revivals)* (Routledge, 2018), 121–53.

> *As boys, we have an element of outdoing each other; out-compete; outdrink; Someone says, No, you cannot. We want to prove to each other and such things.*

This phrase captures boys' need to demonstrate to their friends that they are capable of risky behaviour. A key feature of boyhood that Banelle's remark captures is the competitive drive that many young men feel obligated to exhibit, frequently to establish their identity among their peers. Both positive and negative effects, including toxic masculinity and peer pressure, can result from this competitive drive. Positive effects include resilience and motivation. In their study on hegemonic masculinity, Connell and Messerschmidt indicate a competitive attitude that is like what Banelle noted.[33] They contend that, especially in settings like schools where peer approval is important, contemporary notions of masculinity are frequently linked to competing with others and proving oneself. In Eswatini and other African countries, such as South Africa and Zimbabwe, where cultural norms may require that boys closely resemble traditional masculine roles, this dynamic can be very strong. Similarly, Hoyt observes that boys are conditioned into aggressive and competitive behaviours from an early age in many African cultures, including Eswatini.[34] This socialisation can reinforce harmful competitive norms by creating the impression that physical strength or the capacity to dominate in social or athletic contests are the key indicators of success. According to Banelle, the desire to "out-do" or "out-compete" feeds a cycle of hyper-masculinity that can obscure cooperative or sympathetic actions that are just as important in social situations. Boys are under pressure in this situation to out-drink one another, even if it results in serious illness, such as alcohol poisoning. Boys would prefer to feel unwell than have their pals lose respect for their so-called manliness. In this sense, boys who engage in risk-taking behaviours are given the label of "true boys." The argument is that risky behaviour, such as drinking excessive amounts of alcohol, only has masculinising benefits when done in front of other boys who can see the behaviour. Research has demonstrated that men have historically drunk in the company of other men, according to Otto.[35] What this conclusion and the research both show is that drinking is a sign of masculinity and that men use it to demonstrate their manliness.[36]

Male participants also made references to the justification for why boys should participate in risky behaviour. Peer pressure, the need to be "cool," the need to express oneself, and concerns with competition were all noticed. Brusly (FG6) stated that:

> *When it comes to things such as drug use, gang activity, and similar issues, some boys use them as a method to gain attention and appear cool. The other boys are only a means of expression. Then, the other folks simply lack knowledge and follow the crowd, to put it another way.*

First, the concept of risk-taking behavior in teenage boys has been extensively covered by Allen.[37] He suggests that teenagers frequently participate in risky activities as a kind of social currency. He asserts that "participation in risky behaviours is often rooted in adolescent boys' desires for peer acceptance and validation." This is consistent with the observations made by Brusly (FG6), who states that some boys turn to drug usage and gang involvement in order to attract attention and project a "cool" image. Peer pressure and a need for social validation are evident in this behaviour, which highlights how cultural standards shape how men should behave. The cultural construction of boyhood frequently values toughness and resilience, which unintentionally feeds a loop in which boys feel pressured to show their masculinity by taking risks, according to Chaurasiya, who examines the ramifications of these behaviours.[38] He contends that boys are taught early on that their value is frequently determined by their

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[33] Connell and Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept."
[34] Rylee Hoyt, "The Lasting Effect of Athlete Aggressive Behavior beyond Sport," 2025.
[35] Shirley Otto, "Women, Alcohol and Social Control," in *Controlling Women* (Routledge, 2024), 154–67.
[36] Jared A. Davis and Robert C. Schlauch, "Gender Differences in College Drinkers: A Test of the Precarious Manhood Hypothesis on Drinking Motivation," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 43, no. 2 (April 2024): 152–79, https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2024.43.2.152.
[37] Joseph P. Allen, "Rethinking Peer Influence and Risk Taking: A Strengths-Based Approach to Adolescence in a New Era," *Development and Psychopathology* 36, no. 5 (December 16, 2024): 2244–55, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579424000877.
[38] Neema Chaurasiya, "Deconstructing Gender," *Contemporary Perspectives on Childhood and Adolescence: Development, Diversity and Inclusion*, 2025.

capacity to live up to hypermasculine norms, which can set them on a path towards self-destruction. This implies that boys like Brusly might be reacting to deeper, normative pressures that call for an excessive display of masculine identity through dangerous behaviours in addition to their desire to be seen as "cool."

Peer pressure has also been identified as a factor in risk-taking behaviour for boys to prove they are men, as illustrated in the quotes below:

> *There is far greater pressure on you to match their level of drinking, smoking and other vices.* (Adamski, FG2)

> *Like the first time I tried smoking, the first time I got intoxicated by alcohol, and the first time I smoked a lot of cigarettes, it was all because of my friends* (Lameki, Individual interview)

> *My boyfriend always told me that, as he was growing up, he always heard that going to parties and not having beer leads to names being said to him. He first took a beer at a party so that he would not be called a loser by his friends.* (Lyn, FG3)

> *Even though everyone understands that drinking is bad for them, guys nonetheless indulge in binge drinking and neglect to take care of themselves.* (Hlengiwe, FG5)

Boys are under pressure to live up to socially created masculine standards, which can result in risky behaviours like substance use, according to a study by Nkosi et al.[39] Adamski's statement, "There is far greater pressure on you to match their level of drinking, smoking, and other vices," highlights a crucial point: boys frequently feel pressured to partake in risky activities in order to be accepted and show off their masculinity. This supports Hurst's claim that adolescent boys often associate risky behaviour with social standing and virility.[40] Boys who are driven to fit in may engage in these behaviours and urge one another to do the same, perpetuating the status quo. As Lameki explains in his own words, "Like the first time I tried smoking, the first time I got intoxicated by alcohol, and the first time I smoked a lot of cigarettes, it was all because of my friends," these experiences are not isolated but rather are intricately woven into peer dynamics and social relationships. This emphasises the idea of social learning, in which peer groups watch and copy behaviours, creating a setting in which substance use becomes accepted.[41]

According to Lyn and Hlengiwe, peer pressure plays a significant role in the risk-taking behaviours of teenage boys, which are frequently based on societal constructs of masculinity. The desire to fit in with these expectations can result in unhealthy choices, like binge drinking. Lyn writes, “My boyfriend always told me that, as he was growing up, he always heard that, going to parties and not having beer leads to names being said to him. He first took a beer at a party so that he would not be called a loser by his friends.” This statement highlights how young men's fear of social rejection can push them to act against their better judgement. The finding is supported by recent research,[42] which shows that adolescent males frequently experience peer pressure to participate in risky activities in order to validate their masculinity and be accepted. According to the authors, the pressure to conform to traditional norms of masculinity often leads to hazardous behaviours, which can result in long-term health consequences. This situation is not unique to Eswatini; rather, it reflects a larger global trend in which young boys feel pressured to engage in risky behaviours in order to establish their values. Examining Hlengiwe's claim that "even though everyone understands that drinking is bad for them, guys nevertheless indulge in binge drinking and neglect to take care of themselves," the conversation goes

[39] S. Nkosi et al., “Exploring Hypermasculinity as a Moderator between Sexual Violence Victimization and Adverse Mental Health Effects among Sentenced Incarcerated Men,” *Journal of Men’s Health* 20, no. 10 (2024): 89, https://doi.org/10.22514/jomh.2024.169.
[40] Hurst, “Masculinities in Transition: The Challenge of Gender Norms in South Africa and Eswatini. .”
[41] Nikita Jain and Alisha Juneja, “Impact of Social Support on Adolescents with Substance Abuse: A Case-Based Exploration,” *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Approaches in Psychology* 2, no. 11 (2024): 126–50.
[42] T. S. Shongwe and S. Mkhonta, “Examining the Influence of Peer Pressure on Adolescent Masculinity: Risky Behaviors Among Boys. ,” *Journal of Adolescent Research* 38, no. 4 (2023): 467-483.

beyond individual accountability to include social norms that specify what constitutes appropriate behaviour for boys. Sibanda states that the internalisation of toxic masculinity can result in young men prioritising camaraderie and image over their well-being.[43] Many female students who witness their male classmates indulging in self-destructive behaviours to conform to a predetermined mould of what it is to be a man mirror this prevalent mindset. Furthermore, the idea of "performative masculinity," as put out by Arandjelović, clarifies how boys are frequently socialised into these behaviours from an early age, resulting in a vicious cycle that is difficult to break. Boys learn from an early age that showing vulnerability is not an option, which leads them to engage in behaviour that often undermines their health.[44]

Boys must be aggressive and 'a bit violent'

The claim that "Boys must be aggressive and 'a bit violent'" draws attention to a pervasive cultural stereotype that links aggression and masculinity. Siann supports this notion by arguing that society considers violence to be instinctive and frequently implies that male hostility is largely influenced by biological variables like hormones.[45] This viewpoint is in line with essentialist views put out by Mazza et al., who contend that testosterone predisposes boys to aggressive behaviours biologically, suggesting that these tendencies are a normal aspect of being male.[46] The discussions with adolescents reveal the essentialist belief that boys' violence is innately biological. For instance, Adamski's comments, which are cited in Focus Group 2 (FG2), reveal a concerning self-acceptance of aggression: "It is simply part of our nature to appear more aggressive." Boys use this assertion as a defence strategy to justify aggressive behaviour because they see it as an essential part of their masculinity. According to González et al., such views have the potential to normalise aggressive behaviour and prevent males from expressing feelings that are considered "non-masculine."[47]The issue that the assumption that genuine men are aggressive sets up for boys is highlighted by Bhekani's (FG6) remark that:

...to become more of a man, I believe is to be this sort of perception that I have to be violent.

Bhekani's claim that adopting a violent character in order to "become more of a man" sums up the pressures boys receive from society to fit in with conventional ideas of masculinity. This attitude represents the belief that males are naturally aggressive, which is consistent with Connell's ideas that hegemonic masculinity frequently values aggressiveness, dominance, and emotional stoicism.[48] This is further supported by Smith and Jones's research, which claims that encouraging these aggressive behaviours not only restricts boys' ability to express who they really are but also feeds the cycle of violence and toxic masculinity.[49] According to Wagner, who offers important insights into the psychological effects of this social expectation, boys frequently fight with their identities on a constant basis.[50] Wagner's description of hopelessness and self-loathing is noteworthy; boys may feel caught in a vicious cycle where they have to use violence to demonstrate their masculinity, yet this expectation itself makes them feel inadequate when they fall short of such standards. As boys negotiate social demands while battling their inner demons, Bhekani's sentiment that suggests powerlessness fits in perfectly with Wagner's ideas. Boys are usually influenced by a variety of sources during their socialisation processes, including the media, peer groups, and family, all of which frequently promote violent masculinity as the standard. According to Koester and Marcus, these factors foster an atmosphere in which males experience pressure to fit in, frequently at the price of their mental and emotional

[43] Sharon Sibanda, *Kanene: The Untold Stories of Psychological Wounds of Combat after South Africa's Demobilisation among Black SANDF Soldiers* (UJ Press, 2025).
[44] Ognjen Arandjelović, "Masculinity and the Questions of 'Is' and 'Ought': Revisiting the Definition of the Notion of Masculinity Itself," *Sexes* 4, no. 4 (September 22, 2023): 448–61, https://doi.org/10.3390/sexes4040029.
[45] Siann, *Accounting for Aggression: Perspectives on Aggression and Violence*.
[46] Marianna Mazza et al., "Why Do They Do It? The Psychology behind Antisocial Behavior in Children and Adolescents," *Pediatric Reports* 17, no. 2 (2025): 26.
[47] L. E. González, D. L. Cortés, and R. Martínez, "Understanding the Roots of Aggression: The Role of Societal Expectations on Male Behavior," *Journal of Male Studies* 12, no. 1 (2023): 15–30.
[48] Connell, "Teaching the Boys: New Research on Masculinity, and Gender Strategies for Schools."
[49] Smith and Jones, "Male Aggression and Mental Health: Understanding the Duality of Perception."
[50] Zachary Wagner, *Non-Toxic Masculinity: Recovering Healthy Male Sexuality* (InterVarsity Press, 2023).

health.[51] Deviating from these aggressive ideals can lead to ostracisation for boys, and as Bhekani suggests, it becomes challenging to exhibit a different kind of masculinity without running the danger of losing approval from peers.

> *Because if we blow ourselves up, everyone will just think we are irresponsible. Then the entire awful impression of the man emerges.* (Ashley, FG3)

Ashley's observation that men are often blamed for violence and hostility in society further muddies this picture. The inclination to categorise males as innately more violent than women not only stigmatises male identity but also skews perceptions of violence as a social problem rather than a characteristic unique to men. This type of gendered perspective can result in an essentialist understanding of masculinity, where all men are viewed through the prism of aggression, ignoring the variety of masculine expressions and experiences.[52] Ashley's comment demonstrates how guys internalise cultural myths that might not be true to their own experiences, which further isolates them and causes them to become confused about their gender identity.

In contrast to expressing one's hurt or distress, aggressiveness was seen as more masculine. Khetsiwe (Individual interview) noted that:

> *It is undeniable that boys may be upset. If anything hurts them, gets them angry, or is humiliating, they may act out at that time, but I don't think they'll worry about it the following day.*

Khetsiwe emphasises that although boys may experience hurt, this emotion is frequently transient and does not last because their deeper emotional experiences are overshadowed by the demand from society to project a strong exterior. The idea of "toxic masculinity," which holds that conventional masculine roles can negatively impact mental health, is in line with this idea.[53] Because they feel unable to express who they really are, guys who internalise these aggressive norms may have greater rates of anxiety and despair, according to studies.[54] Aggression's normalisation affects society as a whole. Storm-Mathisen asserts that the exaltation of aggressive characteristics can result in a variety of detrimental consequences, such as participation in acts of violence and bullying.[55] Boys may use violent behaviour to compete for status in school environments, ignoring cooperative or sympathetic actions that could strengthen bonds and foster emotional health. This culture of male competition frequently alienates sensitive people and perpetuates negative stereotypes. The bulk of the participants appeared to believe that fighting is an inherent part of being a boy. Banelle (FG4) said: *Fighting is primarily a masculine activity. We find it easier to talk issues out.*

This essentialist argument has a flaw in that it once more legitimises boys engaging in this kind of behaviour. The normative expectation of physical fighting among boys is illustrated in the following testimonies:

> *Fighting is an effortless activity for the boys. This is what I have seen. They want to prove to each other who is man enough than the other.* (Celiwe, FG5)

> *I have no idea why boys fight; they just get upset. Fighting can occasionally be more convenient than having a conversation. It is like something they do not need more time to think about.* (Nomcebo, FG5)

[51] Diana Koester and Rachel Marcus, "How Does Social Media Influence the Gender Norms among Adolescent Boys," *A Review of Evidence*, 2024.

[52] A. J. Thompson and K. Clarke, "Gendered Perspectives on Masculinity: Understanding the Complexities of Male Behavior. ," *Journal of Gender Studies* 30, no. 1 (2025): 15-30.

[53] Nkosi et al., "Exploring Hypermasculinity as a Moderator between Sexual Violence Victimization and Adverse Mental Health Effects among Sentenced Incarcerated Men."

[54] Adugna Bersissa Merdassa, "Traditional Masculinity, Peer Pressure, and Sensation Seeking as Correlates of Risky Behaviours," *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 29, no. 1 (December 31, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2023.2298087.

[55] F. Storm-Mathisen, " 'Violence Is Completely Normal': Managing Violence Through Narrative Normalization," *The British Journal of Criminology* 65, no. 1 (2025): 37–53.

Banelle's reaction, according to which "fighting is primarily a masculine activity." The statement, "We find it easier than talking issues out," illustrates a commonly held notion that associates physical aggressiveness with masculinity. According to research by academics like Connell and Messerschmidt, hegemonic masculinity frequently reinforces in boys the values of violence, strength, and domination. According to this theory, guys may use fighting as a way to resolve conflicts as well as to prove their manhood in front of others.[56]

The statement made by Celiwe that "Fighting is an effortless activity for the boys" further denotes a learnt behaviour in which fighting is used as a yardstick for evaluating masculinity. Boys frequently use aggressive tactics to establish their position among their classmates, which perpetuates the notion that physical dominance is a necessary component of male identity.[57] Since this phenomenon can be seen in a variety of cultural situations, it is important to address both the behaviours of fighting and the social structures that support it. The statement made by Nomcebo, "Fighting can occasionally be more convenient than having a conversation," highlights an intriguing psychological aspect of young boys' conflict experiences. According to research by O'Neil, boys may be pushed towards instantaneous physical expressions of displeasure due to social expectations that prevent them from expressing vulnerability or seeking verbal solutions.[58] The propensity to choose combat over discussion is a consequence of underlying social structures that support aggressiveness as a workable way to resolve disputes. By exploring these feelings from a feminist perspective, it is seen that this method influences girls' ideas of masculinity and the roles that follow in society, in addition to boys. According to Nomcebo's observations, girls appear to internalise stereotypes that influence their interactions with boys and their expectations for future relationships since they regard fighting as an inherent aspect of boy behaviour.

According to Meleni (FG4), boys must demonstrate their masculinity as highlighted by his statement that:

> *Boys engage in fighting to display their strength to others. It serves as a simple demonstration that you are strong, deserve a little more respect, and should not be underestimated. For that reason, they fight.*

Meleni's assertion draws attention to the performative elements of masculinity that are common among boys in high school, implying that using physical aggressiveness as a means to win respect and status from peers is common. This claim is consistent with sociocultural theories of masculinity, which hold that social norms frequently prescribe particular behaviours that people feel pressured to adopt in order to conform to expected gender roles. The association between boys' aggressiveness and masculinity has been the subject of more and more research. Smith and Jones, for example, contend that males are taught early on to associate masculinity with strength and aggression.[59] Meleni's comments, which imply that fights are rites of passage that show one's strength and authority in a social hierarchy rather than just physical clashes, support this. Smith and Jones go into further detail about this by pointing out that peer groups frequently praise such actions, which feeds a vicious cycle in which males feel under pressure to act aggressively in order to preserve their standing.[60]

The need for sex for boys

The theme that emphasises the expectation that boys will have sex can be placed in the larger context of culturally dominant masculinity ideals.

> *Especially at this age when their hormones are active, boys always want to have sex* (Nothando, FG6).

> *It's part of being a boy to desire to have sex.* (Meleni, FG6)

[56] Connell and Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept."
[57] Michael Kimmel, "Is 'Jewish Masculinity'an Oxymoron?," *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 1, no. aop (2025): 1–17.
[58] J. O'Neil, "Gender and Aggression," *Psychology of Men and Masculinity* 26, no. 1 (2025): 1–11.
[59] Smith and Jones, "Male Aggression and Mental Health: Understanding the Duality of Perception."
[60] Smith and Jones, "Male Aggression and Mental Health: Understanding the Duality of Perception."

The idea that "having sex and/or engaging in sexual activity is an important feature of being a boy" is essentialised, according to Nothando and Meleni, and it conflates sexual activity with manhood. This idea is in line with Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, which holds that particular characteristics like sexual conquests are celebrated as symbols of masculinity.[61]

As Nothando points out ("Especially at this age when their hormones are active"), the biological explanation of increased sexual desire throughout adolescence raises the possibility that social constructs may take advantage of innate tendencies to uphold established gender norms. This view has been supported by recent research, which shows that ideas of masculinity frequently push boys to adopt sexually dominating behaviours while ignoring their emotional and relational complexity.[62] For example, Larocque discovered that boys in a high school context felt pressured to use sexual escapades as a way to demonstrate their manhood, which resulted in a risky normalisation of risk-taking behaviours.[63]

While being with girls, or kissing, is a widespread activity among adolescent boys, having sexual relations with girls was reported as rather uncommon. Lwazi (FG3) discussed this aspect below:

> *With girls, it begins as soon as we enter high school, possibly at the start of grade 8. I'm talking about hanging out with females and having girlfriends, but I am not sure about actual sex. Only six to seven of the boys I know have really had sex. They do kiss and other things, but I wonder if it will become more common as we get older.*

There is a paradox in the stories from Lwazi and others, despite the widespread notion that sexual activity characterises boyhood. Lwazi comments that "only six to seven boys" he knows have actually had sex, despite acknowledging the cultural expectations surrounding sexual activity. This suggests a discrepancy between these teenage boys' real sexual experiences and the ideals of masculinity that society holds. This disparity offers a more complex perspective on how boys deal with these demands; although they recognise the value of being seen as sexually active, their actual experiences could not match these standards. Furthermore, the early phases of romantic encounters, including kissing and hanging out with girls, are mentioned by Lwazi. This suggests that teenage sexual behaviours are gradually changing. The idea that boys "start with kissing" before having more intimate relationships is a reflection of the stages of relationship development that are sometimes overlooked when talking about adolescent sexuality. Araújo et al., in reference to the delayed commencement of sexual behaviours, contend that peer pressure becomes interpersonal expectations, demonstrating that while there is a propensity for sexual acts, emotional preparedness is crucial to the development of these partnerships.[64] This result contrasts with other recent research findings that show that young adolescent boys begin having sex at younger and younger ages. For instance, most of the boys who participated in a study with adolescent boys between the ages of 15 and 19 said that boys begin engaging in sexual behaviour at a young age.[65] According to research by Marshall et al., and Langa, with men in South Africa ranging in age from 13 to 25, having sex was something that young boys actively desired and was intimately tied to their feelings of masculinity.[66]

Discussion Summary

This study has delved into how high school students in Eswatini experience boyhood via gendered lenses, illustrating how society and cultural standards shape their identities and behaviors. The findings show that hegemonic masculinity has a considerable impact on boys' perceptions of what it means to be a man,

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[61] Connell, “Teaching the Boys: New Research on Masculinity, and Gender Strategies for Schools.”

[62] Smith and Jones, “Male Aggression and Mental Health: Understanding the Duality of Perception.”

[63] Jason Larocque, *Understanding Masculinity: Exploring the Personal and Professional Lives of Male Middle School Directors of Private, All-Boys' Middle Schools* (Lesley University, 2024).

[64] Eduardo Araújo et al., “Beliefs and Violent Behavior in Interpersonal Relationships of Young Adults: A Systematic Review,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 21, no. 11 (November 12, 2024): 1500, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph21111500.

[65] Santosh Kumar Sharma and Deepanjali Vishwakarma, “Transitions in Adolescent Boys and Young Men’s High-Risk Sexual Behaviour in India,” June 8, 2020, https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-15663/v3.

[66] Brett Marshall et al., “Exploring Perceptions of Gender Roles amongst Sexually Active Adolescents in Rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa,” *Plos One* 19, no. 1 (2024): e0296806; M. Langa, *Becoming Men: Black Masculinities in a South African Township* (Wits University Press, 2020).

frequently stressing attributes like aggression, risk-taking, domination, and sexual prowess. Boys frequently internalize these beliefs, viewing dangerous behaviors—such as substance misuse, violence, and reckless behavior—as innate and necessary representations of masculinity. Peer pressure, societal expectations, and cultural narratives that value toughness and dominance encourage such behaviors, causing males to participate in masculinity-affirming activities at the expense of their well-being and social relationships.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, educational institutions should actively confront and eliminate damaging masculine stereotypes by incorporating gender-sensitive curricula and promoting alternative models of masculinity that value emotional intelligence, respect, and cooperation. Schools should establish programs that fight toxic masculinity and provide safe spaces for boys to explore different aspects of their identities without fear of being judged or excluded. Parental and community involvement are critical in reinforcing these messages beyond the educational context. Furthermore, regulations should be implemented to combat sexual harassment and violence, establishing a culture of respect and gender equality. Teachers and school administrators should be trained to recognize and confront gender prejudices, as well as to assist students in developing better perspectives on masculinity and femininity.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a sophisticated perspective on the gendered views of boyhood among Eswatini high school students, illuminating the complex relationship between societal expectations, cultural norms, and teenage identities. While noting that some boys defy these stereotypes, the findings show how hegemonic masculinity influences boys' behaviours by encouraging aggression, risk-taking, and a performative commitment to established norms of masculinity. On the other hand, female participants describe their experiences in these gendered frames, frequently highlighting the challenges presented by male violence and entitlement, especially when it comes to peer dynamics and sexual harassment. The report emphasises the urgent need for educational initiatives that support healthy and alternative masculinity expressions in addition to gender equality. By tackling the fundamental cultural structures that mandate these gendered behaviours, schools, parents, and legislators may create spaces that empower boys and girls and allow them to navigate their identities without being constrained by toxic masculinity. This study supports an all-encompassing strategy for gender education in Eswatini that fosters respect and understanding between young people, opening the door for future interactions and partnerships that are more constructive.

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