



Exploring cultural initiation into manhood: Tertiary educators' experiences with male students in South African classrooms

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ABSTRACT

In South Africa, the cultural initiation of young men into manhood is a significant rite of passage, yet its impact on male students' experiences in tertiary education remains under-explored. This desktop and theoretical article explores tertiary educators' experiences with male students in South African classrooms, focusing on the intersections of traditional manhood, cultural initiation and higher education. The study draws on feminist, postcolonial and masculinity theories to examine how male students' experiences of manhood initiation shape their engagement with education and their masculine identities. The article argues that educators' understanding of cultural initiation into manhood is crucial to creating inclusive and supportive learning environments. However, navigating traditional cultural practices and modern educational contexts poses significant challenges for educators. Through a critical analysis of existing literature, this study highlights the tensions between traditional notions of masculinity and the values of inclusivity and diversity promoted in higher education. The key finding of this study is that educators' lack of understanding of manhood cultural initiation can perpetuate problematic masculine norms and marginalise male students who do not conform to traditional masculinity. The recommendation for policy and practice is that tertiary institutions should train and support educators to understand and address the complex needs of male students navigating manhood initiation, and to promote inclusive, supportive learning environments that value diverse masculinities.

Keywords: Manhood Initiation, Masculinity, Higher Education, Cultural Capital, Inclusivity.

INTRODUCTION

The cultural initiation of young men into manhood is a significant rite of passage in many African societies, including South Africa.¹ This traditional practice prepares young men for their roles and

¹ Nolwazi Mkhwanazi, "Making Men: The Cultural Politics of Male Initiation Rites in South Africa," in *Global Masculinities* (Routledge India, 2018), 10–22; Sakhumzi Mfecane, "Decolonising Masculinities," in *The Routledge Handbook of Feminist Anthropology* (Routledge, 2024), 509–19.

responsibilities in society, teaches cultural values, and instils a sense of identity and belonging.² However, there is growing concern about the challenges tertiary educators face in dealing with male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation, as it often inculcates problematic behaviours and attitudes that impact their academic and social lives.³ Traditional manhood initiation, also known as "ulukuleko" or "umhlanga", is a cultural practice in which young men undergo a series of rituals and teachings to mark their transition from boyhood to manhood.⁴ The practice is prevalent in many South African communities, including among the Xhosa, Zulu, and Sotho.⁵ Mohlaloka et al. and Diko further argue that while the initiation is intended to instil positive values such as respect, responsibility, and masculinity, there is evidence that it often promotes problematic behaviours such as aggression, dominance, and sexism.⁶

Tertiary educators in South Africa are increasingly reporting challenges in managing male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation.⁷ These students often exhibit behaviours such as entitlement, aggression, and disrespect towards female peers and authority figures, which can create a hostile learning environment and undermine academic performance.⁸ Furthermore, these behaviours are often reinforced by societal expectations and cultural norms that emphasise male dominance and aggression.⁹ This study is grounded in social constructionism, which posits that masculinity is socially constructed and shaped by cultural and societal norms.¹⁰ The traditional manhood initiation can be seen as a mechanism for constructing and reinforcing dominant forms of masculinity, which often prioritise aggression, dominance, and sexism.¹¹

However, Reidy et al. argue that this construction of masculinity is problematic as it can lead to the marginalisation and oppression of women and other marginalised groups.¹² Despite the growing concern about the challenges faced by tertiary educators, there is a dearth of research on the experiences of educators with male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation. This study aims to explore the experiences of tertiary educators of male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation rites, with a view to understanding the challenges they face and identifying strategies to support these students.

- What are the experiences of tertiary educators with male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation?
- What challenges do tertiary educators face in managing male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation?

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- ² Tumiso Mankwekwe. Dolamo, "Understanding Masculinity from an African Perspective" (University of South Africa (South Africa), 2024); John Ringson, "Gender Equality Paradox: Affirmative Action Versus Patriarchal Structures in Zimbabwe's Political Landscape," *Gender and Behaviour* 23, no. 4 (2025): 24608–23.
- ³ Abisha Kaseke and Loyiso Mennon Luvalo, "Culture for Education: Influence of Initiation Rites on the Behaviour of Male Learners at Schools.," *Journal of Culture & Values in Education (JCVE)* 8, no. 1 (2025): 32; Sello M B Mohlaloka, Lynette Jacobs, and Corene de Wet, "The Influence of Traditional Male Initiation (Lebollo) on School Discipline: Educators' Perspectives," *Deviant Behavior* 37, no. 6 (2016): 709–21.
- ⁴ T.D. Mdhluli et al., "The Challenges Experienced at Male Initiation Schools: The Case Study of Mthatha District in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa," *African Renaissance* 17, no. 4 (2020): 167.
- ⁵ Mfecane, Sakhumzi. "Decolonising masculinities." In *The Routledge Handbook of Feminist Anthropology*, pp. 509-519. Routledge, 2024.
- ⁶ Mohlaloka, Jacobs, and de Wet, "The Influence of Traditional Male Initiation (Lebollo) on School Discipline: Educators' Perspectives"; Mlamli Diko, "Constructing Masculinity through Ulwaluko: A Scoping Literature Review," *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 12, no. 1 (2025): 2457828.
- ⁷ Thanduxolo Nomngcoyiya and Simon Murote Kang'ethe, "The Impact of Traditional Male Circumcision Challenges on Newly Initiated Men's Advancement in Education: Implications for Human Rights and Social Work in South Africa," *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work* 6, no. 3 (2021): 204–12; Mdhluli et al., "The Challenges Experienced at Male Initiation Schools: The Case Study of Mthatha District in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa."
- ⁸ Kaseke and Luvalo, "Culture for Education: Influence of Initiation Rites on the Behaviour of Male Learners at Schools."
- ⁹ Dolamo, "Understanding Masculinity from an African Perspective."
- ¹⁰ Brittany Everitt-Penhale and Kopano Ratele, "Rethinking 'Traditional Masculinity' as Constructed, Multiple, And≠ Hegemonic Masculinity," *South African Review of Sociology* 46, no. 2 (2015): 4–22.
- ¹¹ Giulia Valsecchi et al., "Men's Gender Norms and Gender-Hierarchy-Legitimizing Ideologies: The Effect of Priming Traditional Masculinity versus a Feminization of Men's Norms," *Gender Issues* 40, no. 2 (2023): 145–67.
- ¹² Dennis E Reidy et al., "Masculinity and Violence against Women from a Social-Ecological Perspective: Implications for Prevention," in *Handbook of Interpersonal Violence and Abuse across the Lifespan: A Project of the National Partnership to End Interpersonal Violence Across the Lifespan (NPEIV)* (Springer, 2021), 2353–74.

- What strategies can be employed to support male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation?

This study employs a qualitative research approach, using desktop and theoretical methods to explore the educators' experiences with male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation. The study used grey literature, documentary reports, and purposively sampled articles from South Africa. This study has significant implications for policy and practice, particularly in the context of higher education in South Africa. The findings inform strategies to support male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation and contribute to developing inclusive, culturally sensitive policies and practices. The study begins with a comprehensive contextual background, followed by the research problem and research questions. The following presents the literature review and the theoretical framework. The study then presents the research methodology, discusses the findings, and concludes with implications and recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review brings out an extensive and detailed analysis of the critical topics, such as the conceptualisation of manhood cultural initiation in South Africa, the construction of masculinity in South African contexts and tertiary educators' experiences with male students: challenges and opportunities in response to the three critical research questions that this study seeks to address.

Conceptualising Manhood Cultural Initiation in South Africa

Several scholars, including Mfecane, Dolamo, and Diko, agree that in many South African societies, the cultural initiation of male children into manhood is a significant rite of passage.¹³ Ismail argues that this cultural practice prepares young men for adult responsibilities in society and instils a sense of identity and belonging.¹⁴ Typical South Africans who practice these rituals include the Xhosa, Zulu, and Sotho communities.¹⁵ According to Chansa and Ngulube, manhood initiation encompasses rituals, practices, and values that aim to transform boys into men.¹⁶ The initiation process typically involves a series of rituals, including circumcision, seclusion, and teachings on masculinity, responsibility, and community expectations.¹⁷ Kaseke & Luvalo posit that these rituals are often shrouded in secrecy, with details revealed only to initiates.¹⁸

The cultural significance of manhood initiation is deeply rooted in African philosophy, particularly the concept of Ubuntu, which emphasises interconnectedness and community.¹⁹ Lateef et al., Ismail, and Dlamini argue that manhood initiation socialises young men into their roles and responsibilities within the community, teaching them the values of respect, responsibility, and reciprocity.²⁰ It is on those premises that, when a male child in South Africa passes that phase, his behaviour towards women becomes hostile to demonstrate masculine responsibilities. However, manhood initiation has also been criticised for promoting patriarchal values and reinforcing dominant forms of masculinity that prioritise aggression, dominance, and sexism.²¹ Mfecane further argues that

¹³ Mfecane, "Decolonising Masculinities"; Dolamo, "Understanding Masculinity from an African Perspective"; Diko, "Constructing Masculinity through Ulwaluko: A Scoping Literature Review."

¹⁴ Aminah Binti Ismail, "Tradition and Social Identity Formation in Society," *Journal of Social Science Studies* 1, no. 2 (2021): 221–26.

¹⁵ Thelma Chanda Chansa and Loveness Ngulube, "Women in Leadership: Examining Barriers to Women's Advancement in Leadership Positions," *Asian Journal of Advanced Research and Reports* 18, no. 6 (2024): 273–90.

¹⁶ Chansa and Ngulube, "Women in Leadership: Examining Barriers to Women's Advancement in Leadership Positions."

¹⁷ Mfecane, "Decolonising Masculinities."

¹⁸ Kaseke and Luvalo, "Culture for Education: Influence of Initiation Rites on the Behaviour of Male Learners at Schools."

¹⁹ Thabang R Motswaledi and Phemelo Olifile Marumo, "Utilizing Ubuntu Philosophy in the Deconstruction of South African Politics through Sex, Gender, and Masculinity," *Gender and Behaviour* 20, no. 3 (2022): 19806–14.

²⁰ Husain Lateef et al., "Masculinity and Afrocentric Worldview: Assessing Risk and Protective Factors of Self-Reliance and Ubuntu on Young Black Men's Suicide Ideation," *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* 12, no. 5 (2025): 2904–14; Ismail, "Tradition and Social Identity Formation in Society"; Nonhlanhla Dlamini, "Metamorphosis of Xhosa Masculinity in Thando Mgqolozana's A Man Who Is Not a Man," *Safundi* 21, no. 2 (2020): 176–89.

²¹ Mariana Gonçalves Farias et al., "Structural Patriarchy and Male Dominance Hierarchies," in *Encyclopedia of Domestic Violence* (Springer, 2023), 1–14; L Aissa and M Mkinsi, "Sexual Violence as a True Weapon of Male Dominance and Control: A Review of the Literature," *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Studies* 6, no. 4 (2024): 67–78.

the initiation process often emphasises the suppression of emotions, vulnerability, and femininity, which can lead to the marginalisation and oppression of women and other marginalised groups.²²

In South Africa, the cultural practice of manhood initiation has been linked to high levels of violence against women and girls, including rape and domestic violence.²³ The perpetuation of dominant forms of masculinity has also been linked to the spread of HIV/AIDS, as men are socialised to engage in risk-taking behaviours and prioritise their masculinity over their health.²⁴ The South African government has attempted to regulate the practice of manhood initiation, particularly in response to concerns around the safety and well-being of initiates.²⁵ However, traditional leaders and communities have resisted regulation, arguing that the government is interfering with their cultural practices.²⁶ Thus, manhood initiation is a complex, multifaceted practice deeply rooted in South African culture and tradition. While the practice is aimed at socialising young men into their roles and responsibilities in the community, it has also been criticised for promoting patriarchal values and reinforcing dominant forms of masculinity that prioritise aggression, dominance, and sexism.

The Construction of Masculinity in South African Contexts

Cultural, social, and economic factors shape the complex construction of masculinity in South Africa.²⁷ Letsoalo argues that the development of masculinity that prioritises aggression, dominance and sexism was caused by the country's history of colonialism, apartheid and patriarchy.²⁸ This literature explores how cultural and social norms shape the performance of masculinity among young men in South Africa. Traditional masculinity in South Africa is often associated with physical strength, bravery, and providing for one's family.²⁹ These ideals are often linked to the country's history of warrior cultures, such as the Zulu and Xhosa kingdoms, where men were expected to be fierce warriors and protectors of their communities.³⁰ The performance of traditional masculinity is often tied to the concept of "ubuntu", which emphasises community and social responsibility.³¹ However, Reidy et al. argue that traditional masculinity has also been criticised for promoting patriarchal values and reinforcing dominant forms of masculinity that prioritise aggression, dominance, and sexism.³²

The suppression of emotions, vulnerability, and femininity is often seen as a key aspect of traditional masculinity, which can lead to the marginalisation and oppression of women and other marginalised groups.³³ In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the need to challenge traditional forms of masculinity and promote more inclusive, equitable ones.³⁴ This has led to the emergence of new forms of masculinity that prioritise emotional expression, vulnerability, and social responsibility.³⁵ The rise of the "new man" in South Africa has been linked to the country's transition to

²² Mfecane, "Decolonising Masculinities."

²³ Farias et al., "Structural Patriarchy and Male Dominance Hierarchies"; Aissa and Mkinsi, "Sexual Violence as a True Weapon of Male Dominance and Control: A Review of the Literature."

²⁴ Deevia Bhana, Morten Skovdal, and Kaymarlin Govender, *Young Masculinities and Sexual Health in Southern Africa* (Taylor & Francis, 2025).

²⁵ 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 (2025): 417–40.

²⁶ Young et al., "The 'Ideal Man': How Gender Norms and Expectations Shape South African Men's Masculinity, Sexual Identities, and Well-Being."

²⁷ Mkhwanazi, "Making Men: The Cultural Politics of Male Initiation Rites in South Africa"; Mfecane, "Decolonising Masculinities."

²⁸ Koketso Sophia Letsoalo, "Absent Masculinity and Feminine Resilience: A Post Colonial Analysis of Media Discourses of Female-Headed Households in South Africa" (2022).

²⁹ Mfecane, "Decolonising Masculinities."

³⁰ Mthandeni Patric Mbatha and Mxolisi Bongumusa Prase God Cebekhulu, "The Concepts of 'Zulu Tribe and 'Zulu Nation' and Their Use towards Political Aspirations in South Africa," *ScienceRise* 6, no. 83 (2022): 32–41; Hlonipha Mokoena, *The Nightwatchman: Essays on Portraiture and the Black Male Figure in Colonial South Africa* (NYU Press, 2025).

³¹ Motswaledi and Marumo, "Utilizing Ubuntu Philosophy in the Deconstruction of South African Politics through Sex, Gender, and Masculinity."

³² Reidy et al., "Masculinity and Violence against Women from a Social-Ecological Perspective: Implications for Prevention."

³³ Mfecane, "Decolonising Masculinities."

³⁴ Farias et al., "Structural Patriarchy and Male Dominance Hierarchies"; Kathryn Sturman and Aïssatou Hayatou, *The Peace and Security Council of the African Union: From Design to Reality* (London: Routledge, 2010).

³⁵ Chansa and Ngulube, "Women in Leadership: Examining Barriers to Women's Advancement in Leadership Positions."

democracy and the growing recognition of human rights and gender equality.³⁶ Patriarchal masculinity is characterised by a rejection of traditional patriarchal values and an emphasis on emotional expression, vulnerability, and social responsibility.³⁷ Pinkett and Roberts further posit that educational institutions also shape the construction of masculinity, playing a critical role in socialising young men into dominant forms of masculinity.³⁸

Schools and universities often reinforce traditional masculine norms, such as aggression, competition, and dominance, which can create a hostile environment for women and other marginalised groups.³⁹ However, Sivakumar & Manimekalai argue that educational institutions can also challenge traditional forms of masculinity and promote more inclusive and equitable ones.⁴⁰ They can do this by incorporating gender-sensitive curricula, promoting positive male role models, and creating safe, inclusive learning environments.⁴¹ Masculinity in South Africa is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon shaped by cultural, social, and economic factors. While traditional masculinity has been criticised for promoting patriarchal values and reinforcing dominant forms of masculinity, there is a growing recognition of the need to challenge these norms and promote more inclusive and equitable forms of masculinity. Educational institutions play a critical role in shaping masculinity among young men and promoting positive social change.

Tertiary Educators' Experiences with Male Students: Challenges and Opportunities

Tertiary educators in South Africa face a range of challenges when working with male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation. This literature review explores tertiary educators' experiences with male students, highlighting the challenges and opportunities that arise in the classroom. Research suggests that tertiary educators often struggle to engage with male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation.⁴²

These students may exhibit behaviours such as aggression, dominance, and sexism, which can create a hostile learning environment and undermine academic performance.⁴³ In this view, Bhana, Skovdal, and Govender argue that tertiary educators may feel unprepared to address these behaviours, particularly if they have not received training on gender-sensitive pedagogy.⁴⁴

Male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation may also be more likely to resist feminist or critical perspectives on masculinity, which can create tension in the classroom.⁴⁵ This resistance can be particularly challenging for female educators, who may be perceived as challenging traditional masculine norms.⁴⁶ Despite these challenges, there are also opportunities for tertiary educators to engage with male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation. Research suggests these students are often eager to explore and challenge traditional masculine norms, especially when they have a safe, supportive learning environment.⁴⁷

³⁶ Mdhluli et al., "The Challenges Experienced at Male Initiation Schools: The Case Study of Mthatha District in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa."

³⁷ Mfecane, "Decolonising Masculinities."

³⁸ Matt Pinkett and Mark Roberts, *Boys Don't Try? Rethinking Masculinity in Schools* (Routledge, 2019).

³⁹ Maria M Majerski, "A Union's and University's Responses to Violence against a Woman Professor: Neoliberal Restructuring, Hypermasculinity, Male Privilege and Hegemonic Inequality," *Review of Education* 12, no. 1 (2024): e3447; Mila Zhu, "Empowering Female Students through Esports Programs: Insights from a Vocational High School," *Current Issues in Education* 26, no. 1 (2025).

⁴⁰ I Sivakumar and K Manimekalai, "Masculinity and Challenges for Women in Indian Culture," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 22, no. 5 (2021): 427–36.

⁴¹ Mfecane, "Decolonising Masculinities."

⁴² Mfecane, "Decolonising Masculinities."

⁴³ Farias et al., "Structural Patriarchy and Male Dominance Hierarchies"; Aissa and Mkinsi, "Sexual Violence as a True Weapon of Male Dominance and Control: A Review of the Literature."

⁴⁴ Bhana, Skovdal, and Govender, *Young Masculinities and Sexual Health in Southern Africa*.

⁴⁵ Robert William Connell, "Teaching the Boys: New Research on Masculinity, and Gender Strategies for Schools," *Teachers College Record* 98, no. 2 (1996): 206–35; Martin Mills, *Teaching Boys: Developing Classroom Practices That Work* (Routledge, 2020).

⁴⁶ S Rafiq et al., "The Challenges and Opportunities of Female Leadership in Educational Institutions in Punjab Pakistan," *Remittances Review* 9, no. 2 (2024): 4245–62.

⁴⁷ Mfecane, "Decolonising Masculinities."

Tertiary educators can play a critical role in promoting positive masculinity and challenging patriarchal values, particularly when they establish strong relationships with their students.⁴⁸ This can involve incorporating gender-sensitive curricula, promoting critical thinking and reflection, and creating opportunities for male students to engage with feminist and queer perspectives.⁴⁹ Research suggests that tertiary educators can employ a range of strategies to support male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation. These strategies include, first, providing a safe and supportive learning environment that encourages critical thinking and reflection; second, incorporating gender-sensitive curricula that challenge traditional masculine norms; third, promoting positive male role models and mentors who can provide support and guidance; fourth, creating opportunities for male students to engage with feminist and queer perspectives; and lastly, providing training and support for educators on gender-sensitive pedagogy.⁵⁰

Thus, tertiary educators play a critical role in shaping the performance of masculinity among male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation. While working with these students presents challenges, it also offers opportunities for engagement and positive social change. By incorporating gender-sensitive curricula, promoting critical thinking and reflection, and creating opportunities for male students to engage with feminist and queer perspectives, tertiary educators can help to challenge patriarchal values and promote positive masculinity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The intersection of culture, education, and masculinity is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon shaped by historical, social, and economic factors.⁵¹ In the context of South Africa, the legacy of colonialism, apartheid, and patriarchy has created a unique set of challenges and opportunities for understanding the construction of masculinity among male students.⁵² Feminist theory provides a critical lens for understanding how patriarchal masculinity is constructed and performed in South African classrooms.⁵³ The concept of patriarchy highlights how men, as a group, hold power and privilege over women, and how this power is exercised and maintained through social and cultural norms.⁵⁴ In the context of education, feminist theory argues that patriarchal masculinity is often reinforced through the curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional culture, perpetuating the dominance of men and the subordination of women.⁵⁵

Postcolonial theory offers a critical lens for understanding how colonialism has shaped the construction of masculinity in South Africa.⁵⁶ The concept of coloniality highlights how colonial power relations have been internalised and reproduced through cultural and social norms, perpetuating the dominance of Western epistemologies and ontologies.⁵⁷ In education, Sande, Ringson, and Chirongoma argue that postcolonial theory shows how colonial masculinity is often reinforced through the

⁴⁸ Majerski, "A Union's and University's Responses to Violence against a Woman Professor: Neoliberal Restructuring, Hypermasculinity, Male Privilege and Hegemonic Inequality"; Zhu, "Empowering Female Students through Esports Programs: Insights from a Vocational High School."

⁴⁹ Rafiq et al., "The Challenges and Opportunities of Female Leadership in Educational Institutions in Punjab Pakistan."

⁵⁰ Connell, "Teaching the Boys: New Research on Masculinity, and Gender Strategies for Schools"; Mills, *Teaching Boys: Developing Classroom Practices That Work*; Letsoalo, "Absent Masculinity and Feminine Resilience: A Post Colonial Analysis of Media Discourses of Female-Headed Households in South Africa."

⁵¹ Connell, "Teaching the Boys: New Research on Masculinity, and Gender Strategies for Schools."

⁵² Sindisiwe Zungu, "Interrogating Gender Identity and Stereotypes in South African Higher Education: A Qualitative Study of Student Narratives at Howard College, University of KwaZulu-Natal," *De-Centre: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 1, no. 1 (2025).

⁵³ Floretta Boonzaier, Monique Huysamen, and Taryn van Niekerk, "Men from the South," *Men, Masculinities and Intimate Partner Violence*, 2020, 52.

⁵⁴ Connell, "Teaching the Boys: New Research on Masculinity, and Gender Strategies for Schools."

⁵⁵ Carmen Luke, "Feminist Pedagogy Theory in Higher Education: Reflections on Power and Authority," *Feminist Critical Policy Analysis II*, 2020, 189–210.

⁵⁶ Letsoalo, "Absent Masculinity and Feminine Resilience: A Post Colonial Analysis of Media Discourses of Female-Headed Households in South Africa."

⁵⁷ Walter D Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of de-Coloniality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 449–514.

curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional culture, perpetuating the dominance of Western knowledge and the subordination of indigenous knowledge.⁵⁸

Masculinity theory offers a critical lens for understanding how masculinity is constructed and performed in South African classrooms.⁵⁹ The concept of hegemonic masculinity highlights how certain forms of masculinity are privileged and normalised, while others are marginalised and subordinated.⁶⁰ In the context of education, masculinity theory argues that traditional masculinity is often reinforced through the curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional culture, perpetuating the dominance of men and the subordination of women.⁶¹ Intersectionality theory offers a critical lens for understanding how multiple forms of oppression intersect and compound, creating complex, nuanced experiences of masculinity.⁶² In the context of South Africa, intersectionality theory highlights how racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism intersect to create unique experiences of masculinity among male students.⁶³

The intersection of culture, education, and masculinity has significant implications for education in South Africa. The curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional culture must be critically examined to challenge patriarchal and colonial masculinity and to promote more inclusive and equitable forms of masculinity.⁶⁴ This requires educators to reflect critically and develop pedagogies that promote critical thinking, empathy, and social justice.⁶⁵ The intersection of culture, education, and masculinity is complex and multifaceted, requiring a nuanced, critical approach. By engaging with feminist, postcolonial, and masculinity theories, educators can better understand how masculinity is constructed and performed in South African classrooms and develop pedagogies that promote more inclusive and equitable forms of masculinity.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, desktop-theoretical methodology to critically analyse the literature on tertiary educators' experiences of male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation in South African classrooms. This approach was chosen because it provides an in-depth, nuanced understanding of the complex, multifaceted nature of masculinity and its intersections with culture and education.⁶⁶ The study involved a comprehensive review of existing literature on traditional manhood initiation, masculinity, and education in South Africa. This included academic articles, books, and policy documents, which were analysed thematically to identify patterns and themes.⁶⁷ This study used thematic analysis to examine the existing literature on traditional manhood initiation, masculinity, and education in South Africa. The analysis involves several stages, including first familiarising the researchers with the existing literature. The researchers become familiar with the data by reading and re-reading the literature. Secondly, the researchers code the major recurring themes in the existing literature. The researchers code the data by identifying patterns and themes. Third, the researchers categorise the themes extracted from the literature. The researchers in this study categorised the codes into broader themes—ultimately, an analysis and discussion of the themes identified in the existing literature. The researchers analysed the themes to identify patterns and relationships.

⁵⁸ Nomatter Sande, John Ringson, and Sophia Chirongoma, "Collective Intelligence's Precursor for Multidisciplinary Research in Africa: An Appreciative Inquiry Perspective," in *Multidisciplinary Knowledge Production and Research Methods in Sub-Saharan Africa: Language, Literature and Religion* (Springer, 2023), 103–19.

⁵⁹ Connell, "Teaching the Boys: New Research on Masculinity, and Gender Strategies for Schools."

⁶⁰ Zungu, "Interrogating Gender Identity and Stereotypes in South African Higher Education: A Qualitative Study of Student Narratives at Howard College, University of KwaZulu-Natal."

⁶¹ Judith I Ani and Lucky Norah Katende-Kyenda, "Norms of Masculinities and Gender Socialization among Young Boys in South Africa: Implications for Gender-Based Violence, Policies, and Interventions," *Sexes* 6, no. 4 (2025): 54.

⁶² Rema Reynolds Vassar and Tyrone C Howard, "Examining Black Male Identity through a Prisms Lens: Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality, and the Complexities of Black Males' Experiences," in *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education* (Routledge, 2021), 136–52.

⁶³ Sakhumzi Mfecane, "Towards African-Centred Theories of Masculinity," *Social Dynamics* 44, no. 2 (2018): 291–305.

⁶⁴ Tamara Shefer and Kopano Ratele, "South African Critical Masculinities Studies: A Scan of Past, Current and Emerging Priorities," *Norma* 18, no. 2 (2023): 72–88.

⁶⁵ Ndumiso Daluxolo Ngidi and Melusi Andile Dlamini, "Becoming 'Fully a Boy': Ukufikisana and the Construction of Masculinities in a South African Urban Township High School," *Men and Masculinities* 29, no. 2 (2026): 215–35.

⁶⁶ Norman K Denzin and Yvonna S Lincoln, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (sage, 2011).

⁶⁷ Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "Using thematic analysis in psychology." *Qualitative research in psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

This study poses no ethical concerns, as it does not involve human participants. The study relied on a review of publicly available literature and did not require consultation with institutional bureaucrats for ethical clearance. The study was conducted within a relatively short timeframe because it involved a literature review. This approach allows rapid analysis without lengthy data collection or analysis. As the study did not involve human participants, it did not require institutional bureaucratic consultation for ethical clearance. This approach enables rapid, efficient completion of the study without lengthy ethical clearance procedures. The qualitative desktop theoretical methodology employed in this study provides a rigorous and systematic approach to exploring tertiary educators' experiences with male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation in South African classrooms. The use of thematic analysis allows for a nuanced, in-depth understanding of the complex, multifaceted nature of masculinity and its intersection with culture and education.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The literature review identified four recurring themes critical to understanding tertiary educators' experiences with male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation in South African classrooms. The themes are discussed below.

Theme 1: The Complexity of Traditional Masculinity

The complexity of traditional masculinity emerged as a major recurring theme in the literature on tertiary educators' experiences with male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation in South African classrooms. This theme highlights the multifaceted nature of traditional masculinity and its intersections with culture, education, and society. Traditional masculinity is often associated with physical strength, bravery, and emotional suppression.⁶⁸ In South African culture, traditional masculinity is deeply rooted in patriarchal values and societal expectations.⁶⁹ Male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation are often socialised into these traditional masculine norms, which can create challenges for educators in the classroom.

The findings suggest that traditional masculinity is complex and multifaceted, encompassing both positive and negative aspects. On the one hand, traditional masculinity can provide male students with a sense of identity and belonging.⁷⁰ On the other hand, it can also perpetuate patriarchal values and reinforce dominant forms of masculinity that prioritise aggression and dominance.⁷¹ The complexity of traditional masculinity is a critical issue in South African education, as it can impact male students' academic performance and social development. Educators may struggle to engage with male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation, as they may exhibit behaviours that are perceived as aggressive or dominant. The findings suggest that educators need to develop nuanced understandings of traditional masculinity and its intersections with culture and education.⁷² This requires educators to move beyond simplistic notions of masculinity and engage with the complexities of male students' experiences.

This study's findings align with existing literature on traditional masculinity in South Africa. Studies have shown that traditional masculinity is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon deeply rooted in cultural and societal expectations.⁷³ The study also highlights the need for educators to develop nuanced understandings of traditional masculinity and its intersections with culture and education. The findings of this study also suggest that educators are not adequately equipped to address the complexities

⁶⁸ Kaseke and Luvalo, "Culture for Education: Influence of Initiation Rites on the Behaviour of Male Learners at Schools."; Mohlaloka, Jacobs, and de Wet, "The Influence of Traditional Male Initiation (Lebollo) on School Discipline: Educators' Perspectives."

⁶⁹ Nomngcoyiya and Kang'ethe, "The Impact of Traditional Male Circumcision Challenges on Newly Initiated Men's Advancement in Education: Implications for Human Rights and Social Work in South Africa."

⁷⁰ Mfecane, "Decolonising Masculinities."

⁷¹ Majerski, "A Union's and University's Responses to Violence against a Woman Professor: Neoliberal Restructuring, Hypermasculinity, Male Privilege and Hegemonic Inequality"; Zhu, "Empowering Female Students through Esports Programs: Insights from a Vocational High School."

⁷² Ani and Katende-Kyenda, "Norms of Masculinities and Gender Socialization among Young Boys in South Africa: Implications for Gender-Based Violence, Policies, and Interventions."

⁷³ Motswaledi and Marumo, "Utilizing Ubuntu Philosophy in the Deconstruction of South African Politics through Sex, Gender, and Masculinity."

of traditional masculinity in the classroom. This highlights the need for ongoing professional development and training for educators on issues of masculinity and culture.

The complexity of traditional masculinity has significant implications for education and social development in South Africa. The perpetuation of patriarchal values and dominant forms of masculinity can contribute to gender-based violence and reinforce existing power dynamics. Educators play a critical role in challenging these values and promoting positive masculinity. The complexity of traditional masculinity is a critical issue in South African education, requiring educators to develop nuanced understandings of masculinity and its intersections with culture and education. This study's findings highlight the need for ongoing professional development and training for educators on masculinity and culture. By promoting positive masculinity and challenging patriarchal values, educators can help build more equitable and just societies.

Theme 2: The Impact of Cultural Expectations

The impact of cultural expectations emerged as a major recurring theme in the literature on tertiary educators' experiences with male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation in South African classrooms. This theme highlights how cultural expectations shape male students' behaviours, attitudes, and academic performance. Cultural expectations play a critical role in shaping male students' understanding of masculinity and their place within the community.⁷⁴ In South Africa, cultural expectations around masculinity are often rooted in traditional patriarchal values, which emphasise physical strength, bravery, and emotional suppression.⁷⁵ Male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation are often socialised into these cultural expectations, which can create tension between their cultural identity and their academic identity.

The findings suggest that cultural expectations can affect male students' academic performance, as they may feel pressure to prioritise cultural obligations over academic responsibilities.⁷⁶ Additionally, cultural expectations can influence male students' attitudes towards education, with some viewing it as a means to achieve economic success. In contrast, others see it as a threat to their cultural identity. Cultural expectations significantly affect male students in South African education, influencing their academic success and social development. Educators may struggle to engage male students grappling with cultural expectations, who may exhibit behaviours perceived as resistant or uncooperative.⁷⁷ The findings suggest that educators need to develop cultural sensitivity and understanding to support male students better as they navigate cultural expectations. This requires educators to recognise the complexities of cultural identity and how cultural expectations can affect male students' academic performance and social development.

The findings align with existing literature on the impact of cultural expectations on male students in South Africa. Studies have shown that cultural expectations can significantly shape male students' understanding of masculinity and their place within the community.⁷⁸ The study also highlights the need for educators to develop cultural sensitivity and understanding to support male students as they navigate cultural expectations. However, the findings also suggest that educators are not adequately equipped to address how cultural expectations affect male students.⁷⁹ This highlights the need for ongoing professional development and training for educators on issues of cultural sensitivity and masculinity.

Cultural expectations significantly affect male students and have important implications for education and social development in South Africa. The perpetuation of patriarchal values and dominant forms of masculinity can contribute to gender-based violence and reinforce existing power dynamics. Educators play a critical role in challenging these values and promoting positive masculinity. Cultural

⁷⁴ Farias et al., "Structural Patriarchy and Male Dominance Hierarchies."

⁷⁵ Mbatha and Mxolisi Bongumusa Prase God Cebekhulu, "The Concepts of 'Zulu Tribe and 'Zulu Nation' and Their Use towards Political Aspirations in South Africa."

⁷⁶ Connell, "Teaching the Boys: New Research on Masculinity, and Gender Strategies for Schools"; Mills, *Teaching Boys: Developing Classroom Practices That Work*.

⁷⁷ Shefer and Ratele, "South African Critical Masculinities Studies: A Scan of Past, Current and Emerging Priorities."

⁷⁸ Diko, "Constructing Masculinity through Ulwaluko: A Scoping Literature Review"; Connell, "Teaching the Boys: New Research on Masculinity, and Gender Strategies for Schools."

⁷⁹ Bhana, Skovdal, and Govender, *Young Masculinities and Sexual Health in Southern Africa*.

expectations significantly affect male students in South African education, requiring educators to develop cultural sensitivity and understanding to help them navigate these expectations effectively. This study's findings highlight the need for ongoing professional development and training for educators on cultural sensitivity and masculinity. By promoting positive masculinity and challenging patriarchal values, educators can help build more equitable and just societies.

Theme 3: The Need for Inclusive Pedagogy

The need for inclusive pedagogy emerged as a major recurring theme in the literature on tertiary educators' experiences with male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation in South African classrooms. This theme highlights the importance of creating a learning environment that acknowledges and values the diversity of male students' experiences and promotes positive masculinity. Inclusive pedagogy refers to teaching practices that recognise and value all students' diverse experiences, identities, and perspectives.⁸⁰ In South African classrooms, inclusive pedagogy is critical for promoting positive masculinity and challenging patriarchal values. Tertiary educators have reported that male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation often struggle with issues of identity and belonging and may exhibit behaviours that are perceived as aggressive or dominant.

The findings suggest that inclusive pedagogy can address these challenges by creating a safe, supportive learning environment that promotes positive masculinity and challenges patriarchal values.⁸¹ Inclusive pedagogy involves using diverse texts and materials, promoting critical thinking and reflection, and creating opportunities for students to engage with a range of perspectives. Inclusive pedagogy is critical in South African education because it can affect male students' academic performance and social development.⁸² Educators play a critical role in promoting inclusive pedagogy by creating a learning environment that acknowledges and values the diversity of male students' experiences.

The study suggests that educators may face challenges in implementing inclusive pedagogy, particularly in contexts where patriarchal values and dominant forms of masculinity are prevalent. Educators may need training and support to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to promote inclusive pedagogy and challenge patriarchal values. This study's findings align with existing literature on inclusive pedagogy in South Africa. Studies have shown that inclusive pedagogy is critical for promoting positive masculinity and challenging patriarchal values.⁸³ The study also highlights the need for educators to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to promote inclusive pedagogy and challenge patriarchal values. The findings of this study also suggest that educators are not adequately equipped to promote inclusive pedagogy, particularly in contexts where patriarchal values and dominant forms of masculinity are prevalent.⁸⁴ This highlights the need for ongoing professional development and training for educators on issues of inclusive pedagogy and masculinity. The need for inclusive pedagogy has significant implications for education and social development in South Africa. By promoting inclusive pedagogy, educators can help build more equitable and just societies. Inclusive pedagogy can help to challenge patriarchal values and promote positive masculinity, which can contribute to a reduction in gender-based violence and the promotion of more equitable relationships. The need for inclusive pedagogy is a critical issue in South African education, particularly in contexts where patriarchal values and dominant forms of masculinity are prevalent. This study's findings highlight the importance of inclusive pedagogy in supporting male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation. By promoting inclusive pedagogy, educators can help develop more equitable and just societies.

⁸⁰ Thokozani Masuku, Mandisi Matyana, and Sandile Mkhwanazi, "A Critical Review of Education System in South Africa: Prospects and Challenges," *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science* (2147-4478) 14, no. 7 (2025): 537–44; Sakhumzi Mfecane, "Decolonising Men and Masculinities Research in South Africa," *South African Review of Sociology* 51, no. 2 (2020): 1–15.

⁸¹ Young et al., "The 'Ideal Man': How Gender Norms and Expectations Shape South African Men's Masculinity, Sexual Identities, and Well-Being."

⁸² Rafiq et al., "The Challenges and Opportunities of Female Leadership in Educational Institutions in Punjab Pakistan."

⁸³ Boonzaier, Huysamen, and van Niekerk, "Men from the South."

⁸⁴ Mdhluli et al., "The Challenges Experienced at Male Initiation Schools: The Case Study of Mthatha District in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa."

Theme 4: The Importance of Contextual Understanding

Contextual understanding emerged as a major recurring theme in the literature on tertiary educators' experiences with male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation in South African classrooms. This theme highlights the significance of understanding the cultural, social, and historical contexts in which male students' experiences are embedded. Contextual understanding means recognising and appreciating the cultural, social, and historical contexts that shape individuals' experiences and perspectives.⁸⁵ In South African classrooms, contextual understanding is critical for educators to support male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation effectively.⁸⁶ Tertiary educators have reported that male students' experiences are often shaped by cultural expectations and traditional masculinity norms, which can impact their academic performance and social development.

The findings suggest that educators need contextual understanding to develop culturally responsive teaching practices that acknowledge and value the diversity of male students' experiences. Contextual understanding involves recognising the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism and apartheid on South African communities and understanding how these impacts shape male students' experiences and perspectives.⁸⁷ Contextual understanding is critical in South African education, as it can affect male students' academic performance and social development. Educators play a critical role in developing contextual understanding by recognising and valuing the cultural, social, and historical contexts that shape male students' experiences. The findings suggest that educators may face challenges in developing contextual understanding, particularly in settings with high cultural and linguistic diversity. Educators may need training and support to build the skills and knowledge needed to cultivate contextual understanding and culturally responsive teaching practices. This study's findings align with existing literature on the importance of contextual understanding in South African education. Studies show that contextual understanding is critical for educators to support students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds effectively.⁸⁸ The study also highlights the need for educators to develop culturally responsive teaching practices that acknowledge and value students' diverse experiences.

The findings also suggest that educators are not adequately equipped to develop contextual understanding, particularly in highly culturally and linguistically diverse contexts. This highlights the need for ongoing professional development and training for educators in contextual understanding and culturally responsive teaching practices. Contextual understanding has significant implications for education and social development in South Africa. By developing contextual understanding, educators can help build more equitable and just societies.⁸⁹ Contextual understanding can help challenge dominant narratives and promote diverse perspectives, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and equitable education system. Contextual understanding is critical in South African education, particularly in contexts with high cultural and linguistic diversity. This study's findings highlight the importance of contextual understanding for educators seeking to support male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation effectively. By developing contextual understanding, educators can help build more equitable and just societies.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY TO EDUCATION AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

This study's findings have significant implications for education and social development in South Africa. The four major recurring themes highlight the complexities and challenges associated with tertiary educators' experiences with male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation. The complexity of traditional masculinity suggests that educators need to develop nuanced understandings

⁸⁵ Pinkett and Roberts, *Boys Don't Try? Rethinking Masculinity in Schools*.

⁸⁶ Ngidi and Dlamini, "Becoming 'Fully a Boy': Ukufikisana and the Construction of Masculinities in a South African Urban Township High School."

⁸⁷ Sivakumar and Manimekalai, "Masculinity and Challenges for Women in Indian Culture."

⁸⁸ Farias et al., "Structural Patriarchy and Male Dominance Hierarchies"; Aissa and Mkinsi, "Sexual Violence as a True Weapon of Male Dominance and Control: A Review of the Literature."

⁸⁹ Ismail, "Tradition and Social Identity Formation in Society"; Dlamini, "Metamorphosis of Xhosa Masculinity in Thando Mgqolozana's *A Man Who Is Not a Man*."

of masculinity and its intersections with culture and education.⁹⁰ This requires educators to move beyond simplistic notions of masculinity and engage with the complexities of male students' experiences. Cultural expectations highlight the need for educators to be culturally sensitive and responsive to male students' needs. This requires educators to develop contextual understanding and adapt their pedagogies to accommodate their students' diverse cultural backgrounds.

Inclusive pedagogy suggests that educators should prioritise creating supportive learning environments that promote academic success and personal growth for all students.⁹¹ This requires educators to challenge patriarchal values and promote positive masculinity. The importance of contextual understanding highlights the need for educators to develop culturally responsive pedagogies that acknowledge the complexities of male students' experiences.⁹² This requires educators to engage with the cultural and social contexts in which male students are socialised. These findings have significant implications for social development in South Africa. By promoting inclusive pedagogy and challenging patriarchal values, educators can help build more equitable and just societies. This requires a commitment to ongoing professional development and a willingness to engage with the complexities of masculinity and culture.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this study's findings, the following recommendations are made for policy and practice in education and social development in South Africa: first, cultural sensitivity training for educators. Provide ongoing cultural sensitivity training for educators to develop nuanced understandings of masculinity and its intersections with culture and education. This training should promote inclusive pedagogy and challenge patriarchal values.

Secondly, inclusive pedagogy. Develop and implement inclusive pedagogies that acknowledge and value the diverse experiences of male students. This includes incorporating diverse perspectives and texts into curricula and promoting critical thinking and reflection.

Thirdly, a shared understanding of context among teachers and students. Encourage educators to develop contextual understanding of the cultural and social contexts in which male students are socialised. This includes engaging with community leaders and families to promote understanding and collaboration.

Fourthly, support for male students. Provide targeted support for male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation, including counselling and mentorship programs. This support should focus on promoting positive masculinity and challenging patriarchal values. Fifthly, policy development. Develop policies that promote inclusive education and challenge patriarchal values, including policies on gender-based violence and harassment, and lastly, community engagement. Engage with communities and families to promote understanding and collaboration around issues of masculinity and education. These recommendations aim to promote inclusive education and challenge patriarchal values in South African classrooms. By implementing these recommendations, educators and policymakers can help build more equitable and just societies.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study explored tertiary educators' experiences with male students who have undergone traditional manhood initiation in South African classrooms. The findings highlight the complexities and challenges of teaching male students socialised into traditional masculine norms. The study shows that educators face significant challenges in navigating masculinity and culture in the classroom. The four major recurring themes that emerged from the study- the complexity of traditional masculinity, the impact of cultural expectations, the need for inclusive pedagogy, and the importance of contextual understanding- underscore the need for educators to develop nuanced understandings of masculinity and its intersections with culture and education. The study suggests that educators have a

⁹⁰ Everitt-Penhale and Ratele, "Rethinking 'Traditional Masculinity' as Constructed, Multiple, And≠ Hegemonic Masculinity."

⁹¹ Dlamini, "Metamorphosis of Xhosa Masculinity in Thando Mgqolozana's *A Man Who Is Not a Man*"; Ringson, "Gender Equality Paradox: Affirmative Action Versus Patriarchal Structures in Zimbabwe's Political Landscape."

⁹² Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of de-Coloniality."

critical role to play in promoting positive masculinity and challenging patriarchal values in South African classrooms. By developing inclusive pedagogies and promoting contextual understanding, educators can help build more equitable and just societies. Ultimately, this study highlights the need for a more nuanced, contextually grounded understanding of masculinity and its intersections with culture and education in South Africa. By prioritising inclusive education and challenging patriarchal values, we can work towards creating a more just and equitable society for all. This study's findings have significant implications for policy and practice in education and social development in South Africa and highlight the need for ongoing research and dialogue on masculinity and education.

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