Young Masculinities and Sexual Health in Southern Africa

Edited by Deevia Bhana, Morten Skovdal and Kaymarlin Govender

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Chapter 12

Peer pressure and heterosexual norms among young black men in Somkhele, South Africa

Roselyn Kanyemba, Kaymarlin Govender and Guy Harling

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Introduction

Within the HIV response, it is imperative to gain a deeper understanding of the specific sexual cultures and contexts that impact and shape the sexual behaviours of young individuals – a group at exceptionally high risk of acquiring the disease. An essential aspect of this is addressing peer and friendship groups. Peer groups and their inherent cultures, norms and beliefs strongly influence young people, and it is strongly believed that one approach to behaviour change lies in peer renegotiation of dominant norms (Prentice, 2018). For young men, the focus is on masculinity norms (particularly hegemonic masculinity) and how these are engendered in peer friendship networks. Masculinity norms relate to how men should conduct themselves and are related to hegemony. Hegemonic masculinity is the norm in which men are expected to be aggressive, highly muscular and tough (Wedgwood et al., 2023). Hegemonic masculinity manifests in sexual behaviours through risk-taking, including through condomless sex and multiple sexual partners. Given that young adulthood is characterised by critical developmental experiences that include sexual awareness (Hegde et al., 2022), it is imperative to explore young men's sexual behaviours in highly masculine contexts, such as peer groups. As Rudgard et al. (2023) note, boys and young men are likely to engage in risky sexual behaviours such as premarital sex, multiple sex partners and unprotected sex, which expose them to adverse health risks, including sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV. Contributing to young men's risk of HIV infection is the influence of peer pressure during young adulthood, with high-risk behaviours being reinforced and supported through friendship networks. Therefore, it can be argued that young people's sexual behaviours are embedded within the system of social practices and are rarely motivated by solely biologically driven sexual desires.

This research aims to understand how masculinity norms and ideologies influence the sexual behaviour of boys and young men in a peer group context, which is crucial for HIV prevention. Studying how masculinity norms inform sexual behaviour in young men in a peer context is vital in understanding boys' and young men's self-perception and how they navigate sexual behaviour.

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Men's sexual behaviours are theorised to play an integral part in constructing their masculine identity. As Jewkes and Morrell (2012) note, understanding sexual practices as flowing from gender identities helps us to understand why they are so hard to change, as well as how change should be approached.

A key factor believed to drive HIV acquisition risk in boys and young men, particularly in patriarchal contexts such as much of sub-Saharan Africa, is the internalisation of traditional masculine values and misogynistic gender attitudes, which are closely linked to sexual practices that predispose young men to HIV acquisition (Gibbs et al., 2018.). These practices include (among others) having multiple sexual partners, perceived sexual entitlement to women, having unprotected sex and not seeking protective medical interventions – such as HIV tests or taking HIV medication – as a show of being a 'real man' (Millanzi et al., 2023). As Millanzi et al. (2023) note, these normative behaviours are endorsed and developed during formative stages in early adolescence and endure into adulthood. Therefore, understanding how hegemonic masculinity shapes sexual conduct in young men in a friendship context is likely to be central to HIV prevention efforts. We acknowledge that masculinities are not static as they are socially constructed and therefore different versions exist in different contexts. Consequently, diverse interpretations and manifestations of masculinity can arise in different settings.

Why is an understanding of how hegemonic masculinity shapes young men's sexual conduct in the context of peer groups important? According to Jewkes and Morrell (2012), understanding the impact of the social environment/context on sexual behaviour is crucial. This is because the creation, maintenance, modification, expression and manifestation of masculinities are all reflected in social interactions (context) (Connell, 1996). For young men, it is a period of learning masculine social norms in romantic relationships within a highly gendered peer culture. It is noted that gender, including masculinities, is performative and understanding masculinities as performance requires that there be an audience – and that audience is 'other men,' most crucially for young men, their peer group.

The significance of peer culture on young adults is notable, particularly in amplifying risky and impulsive behaviours (Mthembu et al., 2019). As Hodes and Gittings (2019) note, in the company of friends, young men may face more significant social pressure to validate gendered societal scripts and norms, leading to them engaging in sexual behaviours which place them at risk for HIV. Friendship networks can be sites for gendered expectations where aggressive urges are driven by peers in pursuit of some form of identity, including hegemonic masculinity. Young men are particularly vulnerable to adverse health consequences due to peer pressure.

As HIV prevalence levels continue to rise in sub-Saharan Africa, there is the realisation that a tangible impact on the disease will have to be made among young people, where infection rates are highest (Govender et al., 2021). The sixth South African National HIV, Behavioural and Health survey of 2024 notes that South Africa continues to have the largest number of people living

with HIV in the world, with HIV incidence remaining high (Zuma et al., 2024). Moreover, evidence showed that men were lagging behind women on most targets, and huge gaps exist across the cascade for adolescents (Zuma et al., 2024, p. 15). Simbayi et al. (2019) concur and note that although HIV prevalence has declined in Sub-Saharan Africa – due in part to successes in HIV prevention and improved uptake of antiretroviral therapy (ART) – adolescents and young people are still at risk. Makusha and Gittings (2024) further specify that despite progress in HIV prevention, young men are particularly underdiagnosed and have poor linkage to care and lower treatment adherence. Furthermore, there is a paucity of research on young men and the risk for HIV, which has resulted in them being an underserved population (Saul et al., 2018). While girls and young women are more likely to contract HIV at higher rates and at younger ages, men often experience more severe HIV-related outcomes and face a greater risk of mortality (Kanyemba et al., 2023). This is primarily because of their inadequate connection to medical care and lack of treatment adherence, which can be attributed to the influence of traditional masculine norms (see Phiri et al., 2021) that discourage them from seeking early treatment (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023; Chikovore et al., 2016). Poorer outcomes for men as compared to women across the HIV continuum of care represent a globally substantial, under-recognised burden of preventable morbidity and mortality related to HIV (Hegde et al., 2022). As such, attention is needed on boys, men and HIV prevention, and the key is the focus on young masculinities (performance) in peer networks.

Young masculinities and sexual behaviour

Masculinities are constructed in ways that reflect regional cultures and neighbourhood dynamics.

Barker and Ricardo (2005) point out that in the sub-Saharan region, one of the ways in which young men construct their masculinities is through rituals like initiation ceremonies that mark the transition to adulthood, common in many African cultures, including South Africa. Kometsi (2004) affirms the transition from boyhood to manhood as delineated during initiation ceremonies and notes how becoming a man entails undergoing circumcision and fulfilling initiation rituals. In the context of South Africa, Kometsi delved into the role of circumcision in shaping masculinity and the sexual experiences of initiates following the procedure. He elaborates on the isiXhosa initiation ritual, where young men (initiates) are encouraged to engage in sexual activity with women other than their partners, as abstinence is not recommended. It is reported that participants are motivated by the desire to 'test' their sexual prowess, as sexual performance is seen as a crucial aspect of transitioning into manhood (Kometsi, 2004). In Uganda, it is customary for a man to have sexual intercourse with a girl after initiation to rid himself of 'evil and boyish spirits' (Barker & Ricardo, 2005). This indicates how sex is a central component of grounding masculinity.

Within peer contexts, certain masculine positions hold more sway than others as young men consistently monitor each other to adhere to the idealised norms of masculinity. As a response, young men utilise avoidance, acceptance and outright rejection of these expectations. Nevertheless, these strategies do not completely upend the traditional gender hierarchy; they offer insights into how social change and resistance may manifest. Therefore, negotiating masculinity involves managing and selecting from competing expectations and priorities influenced by the social networks within which young men operate. Indeed, a growing body of literature is dedicated to examining hybrid masculinities (Gittings, 2019; Kharsany & Karim, 2016; Mfecane, 2016). These masculinities combine attributes of traditional femininity and masculinity, resulting in shifts in men's gender performance. This includes a greater expression of emotions and a more favourable stance on egalitarianism while still upholding the core elements of hegemonic masculinity. This demonstrates elements of fluidity and the inherent complexity of masculinities.

This chapter aims to explore the societal expectations of masculinity that young men are expected to follow in their sexual behaviours within peer networks. It also aims to shed light on the various alternatives to hegemonic masculinity that young men employ as they navigate the process of forming a masculine identity. Given the significance of peer relationships in influencing the behaviours of young men, examining interpersonal dynamics and social network attributes can offer valuable insights into HIV-related risk behaviours and the transmission of infectious diseases (Shushtari et al., 2018). This will involve an analysis of adolescents' patterns of relationships, friendship networks and the nature of such relationships to understand how they influence sexual risk behaviours among young men in the uMkhanyakude district of Northern KwaZulu Natal.

Theoretical approach

The study will draw upon Connell's (2005) theory of multiple masculinities to understand the complex interactions between adolescent development, sexual behaviour and male identity. The theory suggests that masculinities are not unitary; instead, masculinities are multiple with internal complexities and even contradictions. Understanding how friendship circles influence sexual behaviours in masculine contexts in the formative years of young men's identity formation is crucial.

Hegemonic masculinity is understood in various ways, emphasising its dynamic and disputed nature on the one hand and its role as the prevailing cultural ideal of manhood on the other (see Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Jewkes and Morrell (2012) purport that it is a frame used by individual men to judge their 'success' as men. While much research on masculinities implies that masculinities are relatively static (or only changing through longer processes of

historical transformation), there is growing evidence of much fluidity and complexity (Ammann & Staudacher, 2020). This is helpful because it shows that different masculinities compete for dominance, potentially altering power and influence balances (see Gibbs et al., 2018; Morrell et al., 2013). Additionally, the theory purports that masculinity is not permanently achieved, but men continually seek to prove their masculinity (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Social interactions and peer networks are spaces where different forms of masculinity are contested, shaping how young men construct their identities. This understanding is essential for exploring how these constructions relate to sexual risk. Several scholars (see Barker & Ricardo, 2005; Jewkes & Morrell, 2012) agree that hegemonic masculinities promote risk-taking behaviours, especially among young men striving to prove their manliness.

Methodology

Setting

The study was conducted between March and May 2020 among young men living within the Africa Health Research Institute's Population Intervention Platform surveillance area (AHRI PIPSA) in Hlabisa subdistrict, uMkhanyakude district, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, an area with 150,000 household members (Gareta et al., 2021). AHRI has conducted annual interviews in all PIPSA households since 2000, measuring socio-demographics, health behaviours and health status and conducting HIV testing. This is an area with high HIV prevalence and ongoing incidence. HIV prevalence in adults increased from 22% in 2005 to 37% in 2016 (Gareta et al., 2021). South Africa has the largest HIV epidemic in the world, and KwaZulu-Natal has the country's largest provincial burden (Satoh & Boyer, 2019; Vandormael et al., 2020). The current study was situated within a quantitative cohort study aimed at understanding how social networks generate and maintain high HIV-risk cliques in populations to effectively intervene in these at-risk groups (Nxumalo et al., 2022).

Materials and methods

The study used a qualitative approach and narrative methodology to examine how young men manage the challenges of transitioning from adolescence to adulthood, focusing on masculine identities, friendships, sexual relationships and HIV acquisition risk. The research prioritised male voices to capture authentic perspectives from young men's experiences. Narrative analysis reveals underlying ideologies in stories and the cultures that influence them (Ntinda, 2018). This study sought to understand how young men's perception of masculinity influenced their interpretation of sexual experiences within friendship networks and its connection to HIV risk.

The study sampled 20 young men aged 16–24 living within the AHRI PIPSA. The average age of participants was 18 years, and all were still in school. Most young men had initiated penetrative sex at the time of the interview (n = 14). Among those who were sexually active, most of them had had three or more sexual partners in their lifetime (n = 11). Table 12.1 below illustrates the respondents' demographics based on self-reports. Pseudonyms instead of real names were used to protect the participant's confidentiality.

Initially, four seed participants were purposively sampled in Somkhele, a settlement within the PIPSA, through the help of peer researchers. The inclusion criteria were that each study participant should have been a resident of Somkhele for the last five years and be able to refer us to four close male friends. Data were collected telephonically between August and December 2021 using in-depth individual interviews following an interview guide with open-ended questions. The first step involved interviewing the seed respondents and asking them to describe their sexual behaviours and to refer us to four close male friends. This allowed us to create four friendship networks of five members

Table 12.1 Respondents' demographics

Name	*Age*	*Sexual status*	*Age of sexual debut*	*Number of partners to date*
Ayanda	17	Commenced	15	4
Banele	22	Commenced	15	6
Bernard	17	Yet to commence		
Dumisani	17	Yet to commence		
Godfrey	20	Commenced	15	4
Gojiwe	18	Commenced	15	3
Jabu	19	Commenced	15	4
Khwezi	18	Commenced	16	4
Lebo	18	Yet to commence		
Menzi	18	Yet to commence		
Mfanafuthi	18	Commenced	15	4
Mike	19	Commenced	15	1
Mulondo	18	Yet to commence		
Muzi	20	Commenced	15	5
Phila	17	Commenced	16	1
Sinaye	18	Commenced	16	2
Tebelo	18	Commenced	14	2
Themba	18	Commenced	15	2
Thomas	18	Commenced	15	3
Tshiamo	18	Yet to commence		

each (including seed participants). Referrals were also contacted for interviews using the same interview guide as the seed participants.

Before implementation, the interview guide was translated into isiZulu and then back-translated into English to ensure that the questions retained their original meaning. After that, the guide was piloted in the PIPSA to ensure the questions made sense in the local dialect. Conducting interviews in a local dialect is important as it helps build trust and rapport with study participants (Rolland, 2023). Two trained male, native isiZulu-speaking interviewers conducted telephonic interviews. The choice of male interviewers was intentional, as it was assumed that young men would be more likely to share their experiences and perspectives when speaking to same-gender interviewers. Interviews were telephonic due to safety protocols relating to COVID-19. Contact between individuals was prohibited. The interviews lasted 90 minutes on average and were held at the respondents' convenience, engaging over two to three appointments depending on the participant's preference. The study team monitored the quality of the data obtained in the interviews during the study.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and included detailed nuances such as pauses, intonation and emotional expression as expressed by the participants. These non-verbal cues can provide rich insights into the participants' attitudes, emotions and social dynamics, thus giving the researcher a deeper understanding of the data. Transcripts were checked for accuracy before translation. Pseudonyms rather than actual names were used. Data were then grouped into themes related to the masculinity theory for easy identification. Themes were identified through commonalities in the data and then organised into overarching groups. The software NVIVO was used to explore, organise and manage the data. Constant comparative techniques were used to analyse the data, as Bingham (2023) suggested. Individual research team members then scrutinised themes, and discrepancies in the data's categorisations were identified, discussed and resolved during research team meetings.

Ethical considerations

The study protocol was approved by the Biomedical Research Ethics Committee of the University of KwaZulu Natal (BREC/00002597/2021). Participants were voluntarily recruited and informed of the research goals. Further, they were asked to give their informed consent verbally, and the interviewer recorded it in addition to noting it for their own records and for the participants. Participants were assured that they had the right to withdraw from the research without any consequences, that their answers would be kept confidential, and that their data would be analysed anonymously. Pseudonyms will be used to protect participants' identities.

Findings

Relationships of young men within social networks

Friendship was delineated by asking respondents who their close friends were and the length in years of their friendship. The proximity and salience of a group are important factors in establishing the level of influence norms may have on individuals and their behaviour (Teh et al., 2019). Participants reported having known their friends for a period ranging from two to ten years, suggesting a range in length of friendship interactions. The study went further and attempted to understand the strength of these friendship ties. The number of interactions between the individuals gauged this. Participants reported meeting regularly with their friends (at least two times a week) to share secrets, general socialising and frequent phone calls to check on each other.

Four seed participants described their referrals as close friends. Close friends are those you know well; friendship is based on trust, emotion and affection over time.

> Dumisani is my close friend. I know him very well. We chat regularly over the phone, visit each other's homes, and interact even on social media. We have the same interests, and we have a good conversation when we meet. I trust him with my life.
>
> (Thomas, 18)

> Gilbert *ungumngane wami omkhulu* (Gilbert is my close friend). We have the same interests and aspirations. When we are together, the conversation flows. It's not awkward or forced.
>
> (Dumisani, 17)

Of the referrals, two described their referees as acquaintances rather than close friends.

> I have known Barnabas for two years at the same college. However, it is only now that I am getting to know him closely because we are sharing a room at the college residence units. Because we are together during the evenings, we share our life histories and discuss general issues. He is a good person; hopefully, with time, we will be good friends.
>
> (Lebo, 18)

Although not all reported network relationships were classified as strong friendships, weaker ties were included in the study as they can also provide significant support to individuals (Krämer et al., 2021).

None of the seed participants were related to the friends they had mentioned. When participants were asked from whom they get information, e.g., people they could speak to and disclose to when they are angry or going

through a rough patch, 17 of 20 indicated that they prefer to confide in their friends rather than family.

> I prefer speaking to my friends because we have a lot in common. We discuss our problems as men, and in a way, we understand each other as men until we reach a mutual decision. Usually, we discuss our changing bodies, romantic relationships, sexual encounters, and how we are supposed to take care of ourselves as men in general.
>
> (Bernard, 17)

> I would speak to my friends first. They would also speak to me first if they were going through something and needed a shoulder to lean on. I will be that shoulder anytime they need me; I will be that support.
>
> (Tshiamo, 18)

Preference for confiding in friends suggests a relationship supported by trust, compassion, caring and empathy. It also suggests a friendship bond based on mutual interest, which is vital in a friendship network.

However, findings suggested that what is discussed within friendship networks depends on the trust level between network ties. On more sensitive issues, such as sexual behaviours, interviewees preferred talking to their friends. Findings indicated that young men consulted their families mostly on issues that portrayed them as responsible, such as borrowing money for small projects and asking for information about which courses to enrol in at school. These were the only times they typically confided in or sought information from family members.

Sex and peer pressure

For young men in the sample, sex was perceived as a significant means to assert their masculinity and differentiate themselves from boys. For individuals like Thabo and Jabu, masculinity was closely linked to the idea of sexual entitlement, taking the initiative and using sex as a defining aspect of manhood.

> Thabo, my friend, once mentioned that I needed to have sex to prove my manhood. He jokingly proposed love to a girl on my behalf, and to my surprise, she agreed. We ended up having sex on our first date when I was 15.
>
> (Jabu, 19)

> I did not want to engage in sexual activity; I wanted to wait until I was sure. However, my friends were sexually active. I knew this because it was all we talked about, and whenever I visited them, I saw packs of unused condoms in their bedrooms with some condoms missing, indicating that they had been used. I felt pressured to engage in sexual activity because I

> was the only one in my friend group who was not doing so. I was worried that if my friends found out I was still a virgin, they would make fun of me and not want to be friends with me because, according to them, boys should not associate with 'men.'
>
> (Phila, 18)

Phila is grappling with the conflict of not wanting to engage in sexual activity while feeling the pressure to do so to prove his masculinity. The expectations of manhood dictate that men should avoid behaviours perceived as childish or unmanly and, instead, actively participate in sexual activity to establish power and domination. The cultural association of sexual activity with social acceptance and the dominant norms of masculinity places pressure on young men to be sexually active as a measure of their masculinity. This societal pressure can make young men feel like they have to have sex even if they don't really want to, just to avoid being judged for not doing it.

Young masculinity and unprotected sex

At the time of the study, 14 of the 20 participants were sexually active, with an average age of early sexual debut at 15 years. Early sexual debut is when one engages in sexual intercourse before or by age 15 (Kushal et al., 2022). Sexual behaviour at first intercourse is of particular interest because early entry into sexual activity is associated with contraceptive non-use and a heightened risk of contracting HIV (Nxumalo et al., 2023).

> My friends told me that for the first sexual encounter, I should not use a condom or else my virginity will remain intact. They said there was no need to use a condom if you were both virgins. Therefore, I had unprotected sex to mark my entry into manhood.
>
> (Tebelo, 18)

> My friends organised a sex worker to initiate sex with because they said someone with sexual experience would teach me how to do it. I was 15 years old at the time. She taught me how to do it, and we did not use a condom. They said a first sexual encounter has to be 'bare' so that I feel all the sensations and experience the goodness of sex. Using a condom was like 'eating sweets in their plastics.
>
> (Themba, 18)

> Sinaye told me that condoms make you lose sensation and get floppy. That will be the worst thing, and you will not recover from the embarrassment. It is better not to use a condom.
>
> (Mfanafuthi, 18)

Condom use is problematic, especially when the atmosphere surrounding peer group culture is loaded with performance pressure. Reputations can be won and lost depending on sexual conquest. Losing an erection while trying to use a condom poses a risk to the young man's status not only with his female partner but also among his peers and the community if information about his 'failure' leaks out or if he is subsequently exposed when interrogated by his peers. According to Mfanafuthi, part of being accepted as a real man is to avoid being ridiculed and 'eating sweets in plastic,' and other such pejorative condom-related analogies. Young men's experience of condoms as 'desensitising' is not the simple outcome of physiological and pre-social sensation but is informed by cultural meanings in a social context. This demonstrates a privileging of the penis as an essential site of sexual sensation and erotic pleasure and, subsequently, masculinity. This is central to young men's constructions of masculinity to the extent that they are reluctant to use condoms.

However, some young men used condoms, although their use of condoms use was associated with perceptions of other men's attitudes and behaviours. Findings showed that young men were highly aware of the importance of contraception.

> I know the importance of using condoms because I do not want to contract HIV. The only instance when I do not use a condom is when having sex with a girl I trust.
>
> (Muzi, 20)

On further probing, Muzi was asked which criteria he used to determine the trustworthiness of a girl. He said:

> I can know whether my girl can be trusted. My friends also support me; they are always on the lookout and can tell me if they see my girl in a suspicious place. Because of this, you are assured that your girl is trustworthy if you do not hear stories about her. In this instance, you can have sex with her without a condom.

Based on Muzi's response, it can be argued that consistent and correct condom use was associated with the perception of trust. It is also interesting to note how male peers closely police the behaviours of girls and provide information to determine whether a girl is trustworthy or not. Nevertheless, the significance lies in the use of condoms, which goes against the expected tradition. These alternative perspectives emphasise that performing masculinity and engaging in related sexual practices is more complex, uncertain and infused with vulnerability than merely being simple, physical and uncontested. However, these alternative perspectives were influenced by and clouded by the words and actions of other young men (including the community) and how they upheld dominant perspectives. The formation of brotherhood bonds reinforces the

discourse on masculinity as young men support one another and demonstrate mutual commitment.

In their peer groups, young men demonstrated masculinity by showing expertise and leadership in sexual encounters, aiming to be perceived as knowledgeable and skilled by their peers in experiencing and imparting pleasure through understanding arousal techniques.

> Dumisani and Peter said they had lukewarm sexual experiences while using condoms compared to when they did not. Now, their girlfriends prefer sex without a condom. I have only had one sexual encounter, and I used a condom. I think l also need to try without a condom and see if what my friends are saying is true.
>
> (Mike, 19)

These findings offer an example of how peer interactions can shape sexual behaviours. Note how peers supported their friends by reinforcing the belief that condoms reduce sensation and, therefore, should not be used.

Weekend specials: heterosexual masculinity and casual or multiple-partner sex

Connected to proving and endorsing masculinity was the necessity to be constantly eager and never turn down a sexual opportunity. This was partly driven by the fear of being labelled as gay or as somehow a lesser man, but it was also viewed positively as a reflection of a strong sexual drive and attractiveness to women. Sticking to one partner can attract critical attention from peers, and the importance of securing a reputation can outweigh precautions against sexual risk.

> On weekends, we go out as friends to drink and get 'weekend specials' where we have no strings attached sex. They are just friends with benefits. We agreed as friends to do this at least once a month because real men must eat from different dishes [sex with different women]. It is our secret among friends; our regular partners will never know of this.
>
> (Sinaye, 18)

> When we go out, we dare each other to have sex with girls that are considered 'hot' at the time. We give feedback to the next friend, who in turn also has sex with the same girl. The cycle is continued until everyone in our group has had their share. You would not dare refuse this challenge because that will be proof that maybe you are gay, or the girl is too strong for you, and you cannot handle her. Then we move on to the next girl because the current one will be cheap.
>
> (Mulondo, 18)

> It is expected to take 'piece jobs'. This is how we operate as boys. You should be able to juggle relationships. We usually discuss what to do as boys so that your partner does not catch you cheating.
>
> (Phila, 18)

In narratives, young men exemplify that exhibiting active heterosexuality, particularly by engaging in relationships with multiple sexual partners, is crucial for adhering to societal expectations of masculinity. Narratives also suggest that there is power in achieving a particular kind of masculinity that is also shaped by access to a particular kind of femininity – the 'hot' girls. Male sexuality is depicted as uncomplicated and detached from emotional involvement, playing a significant role in defining gender norms during heterosexual interactions to attain a perception of successful manhood. Referenced as 'weekend specials' or 'piece jobs,' casual sexual encounters serve as a yardstick for measuring masculinity. This highlights how young men frequently engage in risk-taking behaviours as a customary part of their passage into adulthood. The act of having casual or multiple female sexual partners is upheld as a defining characteristic of being a 'real man,' and failing to meet this standard can lead to feelings of shame, particularly in environments that are hostile towards non-traditional views of masculinity, potentially even posing a threat to one's well-being.

Young masculinity: extravagance, transactional sex and alcohol and drug abuse

Findings suggested that masculinity was also proven through shows of extravagance.

> We do not use the free condoms from clinics or public toilets because they are a disgrace and make one look cheap. Instead, buy the flavoured ones to show you are a real man. How can you say you are a man if you cannot afford flavoured condoms? I can imagine what my friends will think of me using free condoms; they will disown me [laughs].
>
> (Gojiwe, 18)

Gojiwe constructs his masculine identity through acts of extravagance, i.e., buying expensive condoms compared to buying cheaper brands or getting free ones. Cheapness was not associated with masculinity as propounded in Gojiwe's peer network. Tied to this was the issue of flashy, branded and expensive clothing as proof of masculinity. Some young men resorted to transactional sex to afford these branded clothes.

> I am in a sexual relationship with an older woman. She is married, but she wants regular sex with me, so she buys branded sneakers and t-shirts for me as a reward.
>
> (Ayanda, 17)

For Ayanda, risking his health and safety in the pursuit of proving extravagant masculinity is a priority because risk-taking is an essential component of masculinity and plays an integral part in the performance of young masculinities. Extravagance is also exhibited through constant partying where there is plenty of alcohol and drugs.

> That usually happens at parties where there is plenty of alcohol and marijuana. You would find that there is only one girl you know or want, and then you would tell her to bring her friends, and we would have a party. Usually, we end up having sex because we will be drunk.
>
> (Mike, 19)

> At one point, we went out for a party with my friends, and to show that I am not a sissy, I had to drink hard alcohol past my limits. I do not remember what happened, but they told me I was drunk and I was dancing nonstop. They say I had sex with a sex worker, and they paid her. I do not remember anything at all.
>
> (Kwezi, 18)

The pressure to demonstrate masculinity often leads to increased risk-taking behaviour through alcohol abuse. Within social circles, peers closely monitor each other and individuals seek to validate their masculine identity through the misuse of alcohol and drugs. This can result in impaired judgement and lead to engagement in condomless sexual activity while intoxicated.

Sexually transmitted infections

The research indicated that young men who reported inconsistent condom use were more likely to contract STIs at some point during their sexual lives. The most prevalent STIs included gonorrhoea (referred to as 'the drop') and pubic lice. Furthermore, the acquisition of STIs served as proof of masculinity among young men.

> Would you be a man if you have not contracted an STI at any point in life? STIs are badges of honour. Your friends will respect you if you have had an STI. It means you are a true soldier.
>
> (Ayanda, 17)

Ayanda's use of war metaphors is consistent with hegemonic masculinity, exhibiting his bravery as a man by wilfully engaging in sexual acts that expose him to danger and putting up with the sacrifices that result, all in the name of masculinity and the norm that real men are not fearful.

> Yes, it happened once, and then I found myself with drop because I had sex with a casual partner. My privates were itching and painful, and I

> had this yellowish discharge. I panicked and asked my friends, who told me not to worry because it was expected and a sign that I was a real man.
>
> (Gojiwe, 18)

Further, in proving masculinity, Gojiwe, concerning the treatment of STIs, said:

> You will not dare risk being seen at the clinic. The clinic is for sissies; real men endure pain. If your friends see you at the clinic, they will think you are not man enough. My friends told me that if you have drop, use Betadine [povidone-iodine solution] to bath – the same when you have pubic lice. The betadine will kill the lice; you will be okay with that. One of my friends had pubic lice, and he used a pumice stone to brush his privates and used Betadine to wash them off.
>
> (Gojiwe, 18)

Gojiwe's response indicates how friendship circles uphold the idea that authenticity as a heterosexual man is enacted through a tendency to self-position as someone who endures pain and disease, thereby presenting as the face of successful heterosexuality. Enduring pain and illness without displaying fear or weakness stems from the societal expectation that men should not show vulnerability to prove their masculinity, which often leads to risky behaviour, putting both themselves and others in danger.

Alternative youth masculinity: resistance and protest

The young men did not simply embrace the prevailing ideals of masculinity but were fraught with tension and resistance, highlighting the sometimes fluid and contested nature of masculinities. Banele (22) shared how seeking help at the clinic after contracting an STI led to the loss of some friendships, but he knows he did the right thing and feels his friends should also do the same. Similarly, Godfrey (20) confessed to having multiple partners but desired to be more committed to his girlfriend. He emphasised the importance of obeying his decisions and not succumbing to popular opinion. Thus, Godfrey is confronted with diverse and conflicting expectations concerning his masculinity – to demonstrate virility through multiple partnerships and to be a stable and faithful partner.

Resistance was sometimes hidden but could be out in the open.

> I agree with my friends when they say we should do something which I know will expose me to HIV risk. I find a way to excuse myself. I am lucky because I have a part-time job, so I just lay the blame on work commitments.
>
> (Kwezi, 18)

> We are friends, but I do not follow blindly. I do not operate like that. I confidently say no when I do not want to do anything and am not apologetic. I get free condoms from the clinic; I go for regular HIV tests, and I do not take drugs. They talk about me and say I am stubborn, but this does not affect our friendship.
>
> (Tshiamo, 18)

The resistance displayed by these young men emphasise differing versions of masculinity that, to a greater or lesser degree, aspire to hegemonic norms – an attempt to portray themselves as mature and sensible heterosexual men, which reinforces the patriarchal belief that men are rational and, therefore, more progressive in their masculinity.

Discussion

In our study, we aimed to explore the dynamics that influence the connection between masculinity and sexual risk-taking within peer networks. Specifically, we focused on how prevailing or 'hegemonic' ideologies of heterosexuality shape the beliefs, identities and sexual conduct of young men. We focused on peer groups as they are pivotal in shaping and perpetuating notions of masculinity and are thus crucial arenas for seeking and receiving approval and acceptance regarding gender. Our research established that the representation of masculinity within peer groups profoundly impacts the sexual behaviours of young men. The narratives of these young men often revolved around the concept of a 'real man' and the pressures associated with conforming to traditional masculine norms.

The findings indicate that a complex web of obligations and taboos influences masculinity. Characteristics such as virility and strength are commonly attributed to masculinity and are often required in specific contexts to attain masculine status. Men demonstrate these traits through behaviours such as sexual activity, drinking and displays of force, which can also be risk factors for HIV. This creates a conflict between traditional ideals of masculinity and health and safety measures, making HIV control a challenging issue. Young men in the study and their peers engaged in sexual behaviours that increased their vulnerability to HIV to conform to societal notions of masculinity. These behaviours include having multiple partners, casual sex and unprotected intercourse. According to Connell (2005), the prevailing concept of masculinity is characterised by heterosexuality and sexual activity. This phenomenon is not specific to the studied population; it is also prevalent in the wider world. In African nations like Uganda, men are known to use sexual encounters and partners as a means of establishing status among their peers (Fleming et al., 2014; Siu et al., 2013). The behaviours employed by men to assert their status within the masculine hierarchy have implications for their health, including the risk of contracting HIV.

The findings suggest peer groups were often unforgiving, critical and intimidating, especially when individuals deviated from accepted behaviour. The young men in this study knew the power of their male peers, whom they saw as having the power to humiliate and punish them. They also articulated their association of such humiliation and shame with violent male behaviour. Navigating peer groups was challenging due to fluctuating expectations and the delicate balance between acceptance and criticism. As Shefer et al., (2015) note, young men often felt compelled to conceal desires and vulnerabilities that ran counter to traditional male norms by actively participating in dominant male sexual practices. Even the language used in their accounts distanced them from their true feelings and presented an idealised model of masculinity rather than expressing their own genuine experiences. This distancing language may have allowed these young men to speak more confidently in a group setting and conform to a dominant masculine identity. However, it also hints at potential discomfort and tension as they portrayed themselves in this dominant way, reflecting alternative and contradictory experiences and perceptions of vulnerability.

The study revealed that the concept of 'brotherhood' among young men could influence their peers' behaviour and serve to exert pressure on young men to conform to heterosexual norms. Brotherhood bonds were found to encourage sexual activity and establish guidelines for partners and conduct. These brotherhood networks were characterised by masculinity and operated based on mutual understanding and implicit rules that dictated behaviour. King & Swain (2024) reinforce this notion by stating that the 'male code,' like the brotherhood code, promotes harmful behaviours that uphold masculine dominance through idealisation. This aligns with Ritchwood et al. (2015), who found that adolescents engage in risky behaviours to garner peer admiration.

Possession and accumulation in friendship circles proved to be inherent symbols of masculine and sexual appeal supported by a pervasive male peer culture where harmful male stereotypes require visible proof or acts to prove one's masculinity. Flashy designer clothing and extravagance were markers on which masculine identities were negotiated in peer networks and where sexual behaviours that exposed young men to risk were established. This is consistent with Richards and Langa's (2018) study in the Kathlehong township of South Africa, where a group of stylish young men known as '*izikhothane*' are primarily concerned with music, fashion, dance and linguistic prowess to construct their masculinity of class. The continuous struggle to appear expensively dressed and have greater sexual appeal than peers represents the considerable power of masculinity, which is a continuous struggle to exercise power over other men in their peer groups. Possession and accumulation were standard ways against which to evaluate self and others.

However, the young men in this study were not all the same in their display of masculinities. While some men adhered to hegemonic masculinity ideals, some resisted by choosing to avoid sexual behaviours that put them at risk of HIV and other STIs. Agency is a personal ability to act and make free and

informed choices to pursue a specific goal independent of external influence (Vijayaraghavan et al., 2022). While these acts of resistance were not frequent, this probably reflects the ability of young men to assert their individuality by distancing themselves from the aggressive male stereotypes of their peers. This multiplicity in performances of masculinities and male sexualities has been well illustrated in contemporary research (Gittings, 2019; Mfecane, 2016). This is an indication of more progressive masculine identities that are being advocated for the world over. This illustrates that masculinities are not always static; they can be fluid and subject to change over time.

Although some young men in this study rejected the concept and practice of hegemonic masculinity and distanced themselves from certain ideals regarding male sexual behaviours, such as multiple partner sex and unprotected sex, these values remained the standard measure of manhood among most young men in friendship networks. This resonates with Connell's (2005) multiple masculinity theory, which suggests that masculinities are not necessarily static. Young men with dominant masculinities chose to have their sexual behaviours known, while some chose to have it shrouded in secrecy. Both serve as expressions of masculinity; however, they are contextualised within performances that are grounded in differing ideals of publicity and privacy. These less hegemonic discourses of masculinity, often hidden from public view, illustrate how young men, at times, navigate their masculinity in more constructive ways, contrasting with the dominant emphasis on negative expressions of masculinity found in risk literature. It is noteworthy, however, that most of these discourses, evidenced in this study, still uphold the traditional heteronormative and dominant modes of male power. Acknowledging some level of fluidity and contestation of masculinity, it becomes evident how local and contextually embedded discourses emerge and can resist dominant markers of masculinity that impact young men. The study has illustrated that young men are not merely irrational risk-takers but grapple with competing expectations to establish themselves as recognised men in the community.

Conclusion

The study suggests that risk-taking and sexual prowess are crucial in defining manhood yet expose young men to HIV risk. Current sexual safety measures, like condom use, partner reduction and abstinence, are seen as challenging traditional masculine norms and linked to emasculation. The narratives of the young men in this study made it evident that their behaviours and attitudes were primarily influenced by the constructed risks associated with their identities. Rather than being preoccupied with the actual sexual risks, they were more focused on avoiding anything that could be perceived as contradictory to approved performances of masculinity within their peer group. The paper also shows the nuanced nature of young masculinity and sexuality. It has illustrated how conflicting accounts, vulnerabilities and anxieties are deeply embedded within widely accepted ideas, challenging the prevailing notion of young men

as simply engaging in a straightforward, powerful and risky masculine performance. Recognising and acknowledging these contestations and vulnerabilities is crucial in resisting the deterministic and unitary representation of young men. Findings also illustrate how young men navigate through various expressions of masculinity and respond to conflicting societal expectations differently. We suggest that this insight can serve as a valuable tool in working with young men, as it is only through their recognition of their vulnerability and acknowledgement of their challenges that they can begin to address and transform potentially harmful behaviours. The narratives shared by young men are essential for cultivating more contextually grounded and sophisticated scholarship, as well as strategically engaging young men and women in HIV prevention and intervention initiatives. The study findings reinforce our hypothesis that their peers influence the sexual risk behaviour of young men within the context of prevailing traditional masculinity and peer group norms, exposing young men to HIV risk. We also present this research as a perspective within the growing body of research on how traditional masculinity norms are upheld and contested within peer and friendship groups.

Study limitations

The study has a few drawbacks that need to be noted. Due to the self-reported nature of the data on the attitudes and behaviours of teenagers, social desirability may have influenced the results. Adolescents were asked to recount their sexual behaviours, and some might be tempted to sensationalise their experience, which affects the authenticity of the study. Recounting risky sexual behaviour may also lead some adolescents to report information which they think is appropriate or expected, which compromises the quality of the data. Although the study's findings may be local and specific, the emerging themes can be carried elsewhere. Replication of the approach taken in other settings could help triangulate our findings.

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