

Ukushela: Men's ways of initiating romantic relationships.

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Dedication

Firstly, I would like to give thanks to God for His grace and strength throughout this academic journey. I would also like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Refiloe, for her support, dedication, guidance, and belief in my abilities throughout this journey. Your mentorship has been instrumental in shaping this thesis, and I am truly grateful for your time, encouragement, and constructive feedback. I am sincerely grateful to the Building Research Active Academic Staff (B.R.A.A.S.) grant from the University of Cape Town for supporting my studies and to Dr. Refiloe for her role in helping me secure this funding. Without this financial support, this research would not have been possible. I extend my heartfelt thanks to the young men from the University of Cape Town who participated in this study. Your willingness to share your experiences, insights, and perspectives was crucial to completing this research. My family and friends, thank you for your endless love, belief, and support. Your encouragement has been my pillar of strength throughout this process, and this achievement is as much yours as it is mine. Finally, to my sweet daughter, Okuhle, thank you for being such a calm and patient presence during my long hours working on this research. Your sweet temperament and peaceful nature made those late writing nights much easier. You have been my greatest joy and motivation. This thesis is dedicated to you.

Abstract

The initiation of romantic relationships has undergone significant transformation, especially with the rise of online platforms that have reshaped traditional courtship practices. Despite these evolving methods, gender roles continue to shape relationship formation, with societal expectations positioning men as initiators and women as responders. This qualitative study explored how men navigate the initiation of romantic relationships to see whether their approaches will reinforce or challenge dominant discourses of masculinity. Through focus group discussions with thirty male university students (ages 18-35) at the University of Cape Town, the research found that relationship initiation has shifted from formal, structured processes to more casual, everyday interactions. While participants acknowledged the potential benefits of equal participation in relationship formation, they also expressed resistance to changes in established gender practices, particularly regarding emotional expression and financial responsibilities. Young men experience significant pressure to conform to societal expectations of masculinity, both in face-to-face interactions and on digital platforms. These findings highlight how young men both reinforce and challenge dominant masculine discourses during relationship initiation, underscoring the tensions between evolving social norms and persistent gender expectations.

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Ukushela: Men's ways of initiating romantic relationships.

“Bekindaba yakho icace, ixace okgcina [Make your point very clear]

Ngithi shela ndoda [I said, court me, man]

Shela ngikumamele [Court me, I am waiting]

Musuku moshi xesha [Do not waste time]

Musuk' moshi xesha ngemibuzo engacacanga [Do not waste time with your unclear questions]

Shela ndoda [Court me, man]

Ngimise njengasemandulo [Ask me like how it was done in the olden days]”

Bucie (2014), Shela

In her song *Shela* (2014), Bucie captures the evolving nature of relationship initiation in the contemporary world. She calls on men to pursue her through *ukushela*, a traditional courtship practice that remains vibrant and meaningful in modern life. By expressing this desire to return to old-fashioned approaches, Bucie speaks to the significant shifts in how romantic connections begin, particularly in a world where casual modern approaches have become common. Her request to be approached through this traditional courtship practice reveals the enduring value of culturally meaningful courtship alongside newer methods. This tension between traditional and modern approaches to relationship initiation reflects broader questions about how men navigate masculinity in contemporary relationship formation.

Ukushela is a Nguni word that alludes to the process of initiating relationships, often involving men doing the initiation (Harrison, 2008; Ratele, 2022). The process of initiating romantic relationships is gendered, reflecting broader societal expectations and serving as a

critical space where gender differences are prominently displayed (Sassler & Miller, 2011; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003). The practice of ukushela establishes clear expectations about who initiates courtship, how they should approach it, and what behaviours are considered appropriate during the process (Hunter, 2010). Through respectful gestures and regular demonstrations of commitment, men show genuine interest and dedication to a woman, making ukushela a structured approach to relationship formation (Sassler & Miller, 2011; Zibane, 2021). These efforts demonstrate how relationship formation requires more than initial attraction, demanding dedication and persistence from men seeking to form romantic relationships with women.

The formation of romantic relationships serves fundamental human needs and social functions. These relationships fulfil individuals' emotional needs by providing love, companionship, fulfilment, and meaning to life (Forrest, 2010). Being in a relationship helps satisfy individuals' needs for belonging and attachment while providing physical and psychological benefits (Adams & Gillath, 2024). While these relationship needs are universal, the ways individuals pursue and form relationships are fundamentally shaped by gender norms and expectations. For men, romantic relationships become spaces where masculine identities are constructed, performed, and validated (Hunter, 2010; Ragnarsson et al., 2010).

The intersection between masculinity and romantic relationships influences men to adopt behaviours that align with masculine norms, such as restraining emotions (Forrest, 2010). The dynamics between masculinity and relationship formation highlight how personal relationships serve as crucial sites for masculine identity expression.

Masculinity is a socially constructed phenomenon that defines attributes and behaviours associated with being a man (Gibbs et al., 2011; Mfecane, 2016; Mshweshwe, 2020). It is not

static but somewhat fluid, meaning it changes and evolves as societies change (Khumalo et al., 2021; Meyer, 2017). Within this understanding of masculinity, Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant form of masculinity that legitimizes men's dominant position in society and justifies the subordination of women and other marginalized ways of being a man. This dominant form of masculinity represents the currently accepted male attributes and practices that maintain men's power and authority in society (Mfecane, 2016). Despite hegemonic masculinity's cultural dominance, it is not the only form of masculinity; instead, multiple forms exist, reflecting diverse cultural and social contexts (Lamont, 2014; Moolman, 2017). Ratele (2022) argues that viewing masculinities as changing allows for recognising that the notions and discourses surrounding masculine identity are debatable. This perspective fosters societies where different expressions and interpretations of masculinity can be explored and embraced.

The expression of masculinity varies significantly across social contexts (Moolman, 2017), as cultural background, race, class, and sexuality fundamentally shape how masculine ideals are understood and performed (Meyer, 2017; Moolman, 2013). While dominant discourses generally prioritize traits like strength, dominance, and emotional restraint (Isaacs & Swartz, 2022), these expectations create complex and often contradictory pressures that men must navigate in pursuing romantic connections (Moolman, 2013).

The intersection between masculinity and relationship initiation reflects these dominant norms, particularly in how men approach romantic connections. Traditional masculine expectations dictate that men should take the lead in initiating romantic relationships (Harrison, 2008; Marshall, 2010; Volpe, Morales-Alemán & Teitelman, 2014), creating pressure to demonstrate confidence and assertiveness in their approach. Studies by Bhana and Pattman (2011) and Hamlall (2018) demonstrated how cultural expectations and modern social pressures shape men's approaches to relationship initiation. Similarly, research by

Manyaapelo et al. (2019) documented how masculine identity influences men's courtship behaviours and relationship-seeking strategies. These studies collectively reveal contemporary society's complex interplay between cultural norms, masculine identity, and relationship formation practices.

While understanding relationship initiation is crucial, research on masculinity in romantic relationships has predominantly focused on problematic aspects, particularly in addressing gender-based violence and toxic masculinity (Barker & Ricardo, 2005; Jewkes & Morrell, 2010). Research demonstrates how adherence to hegemonic masculine norms can perpetuate toxic masculinity within relationships, manifesting in harmful behaviours and power imbalances (Boonzaier, 2023). The impact of toxic masculinity in relationships is illustrated by cases like that of Karabo Mokoena, a 22-year-old woman brutally murdered by her boyfriend in 2017 (Monama, 2022). This case not only highlighted the devastating consequences of toxic masculinity but also intensified societal discussion about men's roles in romantic relationships. Such incidents have increased attention to how masculine identities are expressed in intimate relationships, resulting in greater scrutiny of masculine norms and behaviours.

In response to incidents of gender-based violence and toxic masculinity, social movements have emerged on social media platforms to monitor men's behaviour, listen to women's experiences, and promote egalitarianism (PettyJohn et al., 2019). Movements like #MenAreTrash and #AmINext have created a digital surveillance culture where men's actions in relationship contexts are constantly observed, critiqued, and judged (Flood, 2019; Reneses & Bosch, 2023). While these movements serve crucial social justice purposes, they significantly impact how men approach relationship initiation, creating heightened awareness and sometimes anxiety about how their courtship behaviours might be perceived or criticized publicly (PettyJohn et al., 2019; Reneses & Bosch, 2023). Additionally, movements like

#IndodaMust (man must) actively prescribe and monitor specific behaviours men should exhibit, particularly in relationship initiation (Ngwenyama, 2022). This public monitoring of men's behaviour creates additional pressure in a complex social context that men must navigate when forming romantic relationships.

These dynamics of social media surveillance and public critique of men's behaviour have sparked scholarly interest in understanding masculinity in relationships. While existing research has extensively examined problematic aspects of masculinity in relationships, there remains a significant need to understand how men actively negotiate and navigate discourses surrounding toxic masculinity in romantic relationships. Understanding men's relationship initiation strategies is particularly crucial in this context of heightened social scrutiny, as it reveals how men practically engage with competing masculinity discourses in their daily lives (Reneses & Bosch, 2023). The pressure to conform to hegemonic masculine norms while responding to contemporary social movements' critiques significantly impacts men's experiences, as those who struggle with these competing expectations often face questioning about their masculine identity (Malinga & Ratele, 2012). This tension between hegemonic masculinity and social movement demands reveals how deeply intertwined relationship initiation is with masculine identity formation.

Given the pervasive influence of dominant discourses of masculinities on romantic relationships, this study explored the different strategies men use to initiate romantic relationships. The primary objective was to examine how men's initiation strategies reflect, reinforce, or challenge dominant discourses of masculinity. More specifically, the study aimed to understand how young men make sense of their roles in romantic initiation, what pressures and expectations they navigate, and how they position themselves within or against traditional masculine norms. Moving beyond approaches that focus solely on the harmful aspects of masculinity, this research investigated men's lived experiences and perspectives,

acknowledging the complex interplay between societal expectations and individual agency. The study revealed both the constraints and possibilities that dominant masculine discourses present to men in relationship initiation, particularly around who is expected to initiate and how. It examined men's varied approaches and documented how they embraced, negotiated, or resisted these discourses while pursuing romantic connections.

Research Questions

In what ways do men reinforce or challenge dominant discourses of masculinities as they initiate romantic relationships with women?

1. What are the approaches and strategies men use to initiate romantic relationships?
2. From whom and where do men learn strategies for initiating romantic relationships?
3. What are the dominant discourses of masculinities do men associate with romantic relationships?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review explores the dynamics between romantic relationships and dominant discourses of masculinity. Beginning with an examination of relationship initiation fundamentals, the review investigates internal and external factors that shape relationship formation outcomes. The review then traces how relationship initiation has evolved, particularly focusing on technological advancements' impact on these processes. Through examining gender dynamics in relationship formation, the review explores how men navigate and perform masculinity through their initiation strategies. The review analyses three dominant discourses of masculinity: provider roles, power dynamics, and emotional expression that shape men's approaches to initiating romantic relationships. Through this examination, the review identifies gaps in how these discourses are reinforced or challenged within the romantic relationship initiation process, highlighting the need to explore the roles of discourses when men initiate romantic connections with women.

Introduction to Relationship Initiation

Relationship initiation marks the first stage where potential partners interact and evaluate compatibility (Wright & Sinclair, 2012). During this phase, individuals assess and approach those they find appealing, while forming crucial first impressions (Sprecher et al., 2021). These early interactions often determine whether relationships develop further (Clark et al., 1999), highlighting how initial approaches and communication strategies are pivotal in relationship formation (Rauer et al., 2013).

Factors Influencing Relationship Initiation

Recent research by Hughes and colleagues (2020) has identified that relationship initiation success is influenced by both internal and external factors, with particular

implications for men's performance of masculinity. Internal factors involve an individual's interpersonal capabilities, including their ability to initiate and maintain conversations, display appropriate nonverbal behaviour, regulate emotions, and manage social anxiety responses (Tidwell, Eastwick & Finkel, 2013). These internal factors often create tension with masculine ideals, as men must balance showing the vulnerability necessary for connection while maintaining the appearance of masculine confidence (Barhana & Büyükaşahin-Sunal, 2015). External factors include the characteristics of social environments, such as opportunities for interaction, the presence of mutual physical attraction, the accessibility of compatible partners, and prevailing cultural relationship norms (Adams & Gillath, 2024). These external factors often reinforce traditional masculinity discourses, expecting men to take the lead in creating opportunities for interaction while managing rejection risks (Sassler & Miller, 2011). The interplay between internal and external factors reveals how men must navigate complex social expectations while initiating relationships, often balancing personal authenticity with societal expectations of masculine behaviour.

Internal and external factors can also influence an individual's decision to initiate relationships (Hughes et al., 2020; Moore, 1985). While factors like physical attraction and perceived compatibility can motivate relationship initiation, personal barriers such as low self-esteem, fear of rejection, or perceived disinterest from potential partners often discourage relationship initiation attempts (Apostolou et al., 2018; Sprecher et al., 2021). These barriers are closely tied to the emotional dimension of relationship initiation, which involves complex experiences of excitement, hope, fear, and disappointment (Apostolou et al., 2018). Such emotional experiences are shaped by societal expectations, particularly gender norms where men face pressure to suppress emotions while displaying confidence (de Boise & Hearn, 2017). How individuals process these experiences influences their approach to future

relationship initiation attempts (Rauer et al., 2013), highlighting how psychological, emotional, and social factors shape decisions to pursue romantic connections.

Relationship Initiation Approaches in Past Years.

The process of initiating romantic relationships has undergone significant changes over the years, reflecting evolving social dynamics, cultural norms, and technological advancements (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). Research by Biyela (2015) and Karandashev (2023) has revealed notable generational and societal differences in how people begin romantic relationships. For instance, while previous generations often met through family introductions or local social gatherings, modern couples frequently connect through dating apps and social media platforms (Karandashev, 2023).

In many societies from the past, particularly collectivist ones, families played an active role in relationship initiation (Braboy Jackson et al., 2011). The selection of partners was influenced by factors such as a man's social status and capabilities (Haywood, 2018). When young women reach what is considered a culturally appropriate age for marriage or courtship, their families often play an active role in the process by inviting potential suitors to their homes. (Biyela, 2015). Parental figures, particularly the mother or other female relatives, were responsible for overseeing the contact and engagement (Haywood, 2018). This overseeing role of relationship initiation to women revealed how this process is gendered, reinforcing traditional notions of nurturing and caregiving as feminine traits (Bhana & Pattman, 2011). By placing mothers and female relatives in charge of evaluating potential suitors, society extended women's caregiving responsibilities into the domain of relationship formation

During these visits to women's households, male suitors would convey their intentions through various activities such as dancing, singing praises, or reciting poem to

demonstrate affection and make a strong impression on the prospective partner's family (Karandashev, 2023; Ratele, 2022; Thetso & Kolobe, 2022). Furthermore, gift-giving was another method men employed to convey their intentions toward women. For example, in the Zulu culture, gifts consisted of beads of various colours or love letters to express one's intentions and interests (Biyela, 2015). Presenting gifts functioned as a means for males to highlight their capacity to provide financial support before a relationship could progress (Thetso & Kolobe, 2022). This suggests that the expectation for men to prove their economic capability before or during relationship formation remains influential in many societies. Braboy Jackson and colleagues argue that these traditional practices shape modern relationship dynamics. Men face ongoing pressure to demonstrate financial stability through activities like dinner dates and gift-giving, highlighting how economic success remains crucial in contemporary relationship formation.

Contemporary Spaces and Methods of Relationship Initiation.

In the past, the process of initiating relationships involved public display and participation in communal events, community gatherings, or festivals, which was required to facilitate this process (Biyela, 2015). This public nature of relationship initiation made romantic relationships a communal affair rather than a solely private matter between the individuals involved (Haywood, 2018; Karandashev, 2023). The emergence of online platforms for seeking potential partners has transformed olden approaches to relationship formation (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012; Samp & Palevitz, 2009). The process has become more individualized and private (Braboy Jackson et al., 2011), making relationship initiation less formal and unstructured, reflecting the changing dynamics of the contemporary world (Karandashev, 2023). This suggests that initiating romantic relationships has evolved alongside societal developments, moving from communal, public practices to more individualized, technology-mediated approaches that reflect modern ways of living.

Following this transition toward private relationship formation, individuals rely less on families and take greater responsibility for romantic decisions (Samp & Palevitz, 2009). With decreasing family and community involvement, friends have assumed more influential roles, often serving as primary sources of advice and guidance (Wright & Sinclair, 2012). However, despite the growing influence of friends, individuals still seek advice from various sources for different quality (Branch & Hall, 2018). Eaton and Rose (2011) note that relationship guidance now comes from popular magazines, books, and television shows for insights into relationship norms. These relationship advice sources change to demonstrate how modern individuals navigate romantic relationships through multiple sources while moving away from family-centered approaches.

Alongside these changes in relationship advice sources, the physical spaces where relationships begin have also evolved. In the past, relationship initiation occurred in the woman's home, with parents and other family members present, or within community activities (Karandashev, 2023). More recently, relationship formation has moved into public spaces such as restaurants, parks, and churches (Adams & Gillath, 2024). Research shows that many everyday locations now serve as potential spaces for meeting potential partners (Sassler & Miller, 2011). Sprecher and colleagues (2015) emphasize that these environments are crucial in facilitating relationship initiation.

The characteristics of spaces like restaurants, clubs, bars, or schools shape people's perceptions of appropriate actions and efforts to initiate relationships (Adams & Gillath, 2024). The social norms and formality levels associated with these spaces influence expected behaviours (Sassler & Miller, 2011), suggesting that while relationships can form in various settings, specific environments may be more conducive to relationship initiation than others.

Digital Evolution of Relationship Initiation

Beyond physical spaces, digital platforms now enable individuals to initiate romantic connections beyond geographical boundaries (Adams & Gillath, 2024; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). Online platforms have become a default communication method for everyday life (Gibbs, Ellison & Lai, 2011). Social media and dating applications such as Tinder, Grindr, and Facebook have emerged as primary spaces for initiating romantic relationships over the decade (Ovadia, 2016; Sharabi & Dykstra-DeVette, 2019). Existing literature suggests that these digital spaces have significantly transforming how relationships begin by changing communication patterns, partner selection methods, and initial interaction approaches (Gibbs, Ellison & Lai, 2011; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). These platforms have eliminated the reliance on face-to-face contact (LeFebvre, 2018) while introducing new possibilities for connection. They enable individuals to connect with potential partners based on shared interests or values, regardless of geographical distance (Gibbs, Ellison & Lai, 2011; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). According to Hampshire et al. (2011), this move from common meeting spaces has expanded the pool of potential partners beyond local communities. This transformation suggests that relationship initiation has become more accessible and flexible, adapting to contemporary technological and social changes while fundamentally altering how people meet and connect with potential partners.

Online platforms facilitate relationship formation beyond physical surroundings while offering more convenience than standard meeting methods (Baym, 2015; Gibbs, Ellison & Lai, 2011). Displaying information about one's relationship status has become a regular feature of social network profiles among adults and teenagers (Chambers, 2013). However, the social stigma surrounding online platforms persists, as in the past, such activities were viewed as deviant and often concealed their use (Ovadia, 2016). Recent shifts indicate growing social acceptance of online dating (LeFebvre, 2018). As relationship

initiation practices evolve, the normative expectations governing these practices also transform (Haywood, 2018). This suggests that society's acceptance of new relationship formation methods changes as these practices become more common and normalized.

Limitations of Online Platforms

Sharabi and Dykstra-DeVette (2019), have argued that online platforms can negatively impact relationship development by hindering new connections. Supporting this view, LeFebvre (2018) notes complications in existing relationships. Users encounter challenges such as unmet expectations, harassment, cyberstalking, and privacy violations, creating barriers to forming genuine connections (Sharabi & Dykstra-DeVette, 2019). These safety concerns have prompted changes in user behaviour, leading to protective measures like carefully curated public information and prioritizing in-person verification through video calls or in-person meetings (Ovadia, 2016). While online platforms offer convenience, physical meetings remain crucial for relationships to progress, as they enable partners to build trust and verify authenticity in ways that digital platforms cannot (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). This implies that online platforms typically require a transition to offline interaction for meaningful relationship formation.

The need for face-to-face interactions when initiating relationships, even in the presence of online platforms, is further reflected in the various contemporary approaches individuals use to initiate romantic relationships. These approaches include dressing up and going on dates, watching movies or listening to music together, and participating in shared activities, which remain common ways for individuals, especially young people, to form relationships (Marshall, 2010). These shared activities allow potential partners to assess compatibility and form relationship through natural interactions (Braboy Jackson et al., 2011). Additionally, speed dating has emerged as a popular method for quickly meeting and assessing potential romantic partners, demonstrating how face-to-face interactions remain

crucial in relationship initiation (Tidwell, Eastwick & Finkel, 2013). Speed dating has become widespread among young people in Western cultures who desire efficient ways to meet potential partners (Marshall, 2010; Rauer et al., 2013). According to Samp and Palevitz's (2009) research, speed dating events create a structured format designed explicitly for relationship initiation, creating a comfortable environment where individuals can approach each other without the typical anxiety of making the first move. These modern approaches that indicate the need for face-to-face interactions originate primarily from Western culture and have become increasingly popular among young adults globally (Lesch et al., 2016; Ratele, 2022), showing how relationship initiation approaches are not bound to a single culture but can be adopted and used across different cultural contexts.

Strategies and Approaches in Relationship Initiation.

The strategies or approaches employed in relationship initiation can be categorized as direct or indirect, encompassing specific activities and behavioral patterns individuals use when pursuing romantic relationships. Direct strategies include explicit verbal expressions of interest and precise requests for dates, while indirect approaches involve subtle hints or using mutual friends as intermediaries (Moore, 1985). Research by Sprecher et al. (2021) revealed significant gender differences in these strategies, finding that men typically employed more straightforward approaches, such as explicit date requests or clear expressions of romantic interest, while women often utilized subtle approaches like nonverbal cues or indirect communication. These gender differences in relationship initiation strategies align with broader social expectations, as Sharabi and Dykstra-DeVette's (2019) research revealed that societal norms shape not only the choice of strategies used by individuals but also how potential partners interpret and respond to these approaches. This suggests that relationship initiation strategies are not merely personal choices but are deeply embedded in and shaped by cultural and social expectations regarding appropriate romantic behaviour.

Men's direct approaches reflect social norms and expectations of masculinity, particularly traits like confidence and assertiveness (Eaton & Rose, 2011; Pan & Jacobs, 2021). While confidence facilitates direct expression of interest and protects against rejection fears (Apostolou et al., 2018), overly assertive pursuit can be perceived as inappropriate and lead to unsuccessful attempts (Sprecher et al., 2021). Women typically employ indirect strategies, including prolonged eye contact, smiling, physical touch, and flirtation (Clark et al., 1999; Moore, 1985), reflecting traditional gender norms that discourage female assertiveness in romantic pursuits (Barhana & Büyükşahin-Sunal, 2015). However, these indirect approaches and nonverbal gestures can lead to misunderstandings and disappointment (Braboy Jackson et al., 2011), particularly when clear verbal communication is lacking. These gendered approaches to relationship initiation demonstrate how traditional social norms continue to influence romantic interactions (Sprecher et al., 2021), while highlighting the need for more effective communication strategies that balance cultural expectations with clear expressions of interest.

Despite these direct and indirect approaches, Stinson and others (2022) found that the friends-first approach emerges as the most prevalent method of relationship initiation across genders. Their research revealed that men and women frequently prefer to develop romantic connections from existing friendships. Clark and colleagues' (1999) study showed how this approach enables individuals to build emotional intimacy and mutual understanding through friendship, creating alternative ways to form relationships. This method represents a shared approach that both men and women utilize in relationship initiation.

Gender Dynamics in Relationship Initiation

Relationship initiation practices revealed how gender significantly shaped these interactions. While both men and women can initiate romantic relationships, societal expectations continue to place men in the leading role (Pan & Jacobs, 2021). Malinga and

Ratele (2014) and Sassler and Miller (2011) argue that society expects men to express interest and pursue women first, while women are expected to be receptive and responsive to men's advances. Despite an emerging trend of women taking more initiative in relationship formation (Lamont, 2014), women who challenge these norms often face stigmatization, being labeled as sexually available, desperate, or promiscuous (Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003; Zibane, 2021). Mensah's (2022) research revealed how these negative responses stem from deeply rooted social beliefs about appropriate gender roles, where women's initiation of relationships is seen as a deviation from traditional feminine behaviour. Given these negative consequences, fear of social judgment may discourage women from taking the initiative, suggesting they have limited control over the early stages of romantic relationships (MacGregor & Cavallo, 2011). Eaton and Rose (2011) and Haywood (2018) suggest that this imbalance in relationship initiation reflects broader social structures where men maintain control over relationship progression while traditional expectations and fear of societal disapproval constrain women's agency.

Women who initiate romantic relationships often view their actions as resistance against patriarchal structures and social norms despite potential stigmatization (Mensah, 2022). This active challenge to traditional norms reflects a growing movement toward egalitarian approaches in romantic relationships (Tofts, 2013). While some men oppose women's initiation of relationships, others view these women as empowered and enlightened (Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003), with many men appreciating their courage and directness in relationship pursuit (Mensah, 2022). This shifting perspective aligns with Pan and Jacobs's (2021) observation of increasing acceptance of egalitarian relationships where both partners can initiate romantic connections.

Gender roles continue to significantly shape romantic relationships, with changes in established patterns remaining slow (Cameron & Curry, 2020). Research demonstrates how

these roles prescribe specific behaviours and communication styles during relationship initiation, where men are expected to be assertive initiators while women are expected to be passive recipients (Eryilmaz & Atak, 2011). These gender-based expectations establish a framework that guides individuals' choices in approaching potential partners, often limiting the range of acceptable actions based on gender identity (Fielding, 2023). These gendered expectations not only influence how individuals initiate relationships but also shape how their approaches are perceived and received by potential partners, highlighting the persistent impact of socially prescribed gender roles in modern romantic interactions

Gender roles and expectations manifest throughout all relationship stages, from initiation to maintenance, through behaviours dictated by discourses specific to or culturally attached to an individual's gender (Bhana & Pattman, 2011; Fielding, 2023). For men, discourses on masculinity dictate that men must prove their worth by taking charge, initiating conversations, planning dates, making romantic gestures, and bearing financial responsibilities (Clark et al., 1999; Volpe, Morales-Alemán & Teitelman, 2014). This performance of masculinity through provider and decision-maker roles reinforces power dynamics that constrain women to passive, supportive positions (Fielding, 2023). As relationships develop, these gendered power dynamics often lead women to subordinate their aspirations to relationship demands (Sassler & Miller, 2011) and prioritize their partner's needs over their development (Pan & Jacobs, 2021). The pressure to conform to discourses of masculinity creates enduring constraints through financial provision and leadership expectations, burdening men with constant performance pressure while limiting women's autonomy

Discourses of Masculinity in Romantic Relationships

The examination of gender dynamics in relationship initiation reveals three dominant discourses of masculinity that significantly influence men's approach to forming romantic

connections: provider roles, power dynamics, and emotional expression. While these discourses continue to evolve with societal changes, many remain deeply entrenched despite broader shifts toward gender equality (Isaacs & Swartz, 2022). This creates a complex landscape where men must navigate between traditional gender roles of provision and protection while simultaneously engaging with modern expectations of emotional openness and equality (Tofts, 2013). These discourses create a framework within which men must carefully position their relationship initiation strategies

Provider Role in Romantic Relationships

The discourse of men as providers remains one of the most prevalent discourses in the contemporary world. The prevalence of provider discourse is evident in everyday practices that shape gender dynamics. According to Makama (2020), the provider discourse dominates contemporary understandings of romance and love, evident in practices such as bridal price payments and marriage expenses (Hunter, 2010). These financial obligations position men as primary breadwinners, reinforcing their authority in relationships and societies (Morrell, Jewkes, & Lindegger, 2012; Samp & Palevitz, 2009). The persistence of provider discourse reveals how deeply entrenched gender expectations influence relationship dynamics despite social changes.

Dlamini (2023) and Hunter (2010) point out that the provider discourse in South Africa reflects colonial conditions and apartheid, where men were expected to leave their homes to work and return to provide financial support to the family. This arrangement reinforced the notion of men as providers and positioned financial contributions as the primary measure of men's capabilities (Hamlall, 2018; Morrell et al., 2012).

Men's role as providers has become a dominant discourse of masculinity in many African societies (Hunter, 2010). This focus on male provision has subsequently shaped how

Western scholarship views and understands romantic relationships in African contexts, revealing how provider discourse shapes masculine identities and relationship dynamics (Cole & Thomas, 2009). Achebe (2018) argues that by connecting relationships primarily to economic aspects, Western perspectives often overlook or minimize Africa's emotional and romantic dimensions, portraying it as purely transactional, where men provide material resources in exchange for love. These misconceptions and stereotypical views fail to capture the complexity and diversity of love in Africa (Bhana, 2013). However, these perspectives are currently being challenged by scholars such as Cole and Thomas (2009) and Hunter (2010). They argue that love in Africa, like anywhere else, is complex and multifaceted and cannot be reduced to merely economic transactions (Bhana, 2013; Cole & Thomas, 2009; Hunter, 2010). Love in African societies involves a range of emotions, experiences, and expressions that go beyond men being providers (Achebe, 2018). This emerging scholarship reveals how the excessive focus on provider discourse has limited our understanding of the multifaceted African romantic relationships.

Both women and men are increasingly challenging the prevalence of provider masculinity discourse. Economic changes in modern society, including the rising participation of women in the workforce, have challenged gender roles and expectations (Moolman, 2013). Women's increased contribution to household finances has led to re-evaluating the provider masculinity discourse, with many couples now sharing financial responsibilities more equally (Ratele, 2014). The change toward shared financial responsibility challenges dominant notions of masculinity and highlights the evolving nature of romantic relationships. Changes in social norms and the reduction of gender inequalities have also contributed to challenging the belief that men are the only providers (Jewkes et al., 2010). As individuals' attitudes towards gender roles change, they create spaces for gender equality. According to Ratele (2016), gender equality is not just about improving the status of

women but also about transforming how men understand and perform masculinity. This transformation can redistribute power within relationships, fostering more equitable partnerships where both partners contribute to decision-making and emotional support (Kim et al., 2019).

Power and Dominance in Relationship Dynamics

Discourses on masculinity continue to be strongly implicated in the exercise of power (Allen, 2007). Power dynamics play a crucial role in initiating and maintaining romantic relationships, with gender often shaping who holds power in the early stages of courtship (Kim et al., 2019). Karandashev (2023) points out that women typically have more power during the initiation process as they decide whether to accept or deny the man's proposal. However, once a relationship is established, men often assume more power by managing the financial aspects of the relationship and determining sexual intimacy levels (Haywood, 2018). Furthermore, the discourse about men's power in romantic relationships is evident in the gender role of men as decision-makers (Makama, 2020), influencing everyday interactions in relationships. Men often decide when to live together, get married, and determine the future direction of the relationship (Sassler & Miller, 2011). These patterns of male dominance in financial and decision-making processes demonstrate how power imbalance between genders continues to shape the nature and progression of romantic relationships.

The power imbalance in romantic relationships negatively impacts both men and women. For women, male control over financial and decision-making processes can lead to feelings of disempowerment, dependency, and diminished self-esteem (MacGregor & Cavallo, 2011). For men, the pressure to maintain financial control and make significant relationship decisions creates stress, anxiety, and relationship dissatisfaction while also restricting their emotional expression and vulnerability when they fail to maintain this

pressure (Tofts, 2013). These impacts are perpetuated by masculine norms and ideas of male power that limit the potential for shared power in relationships (Kim et al., 2019). However, Denker (2021) notes that power dynamics between men and women within romantic relationships are shifting in the contemporary world. As societal attitudes toward gender roles evolve, men increasingly embrace more equal power relations, recognising the benefits of shared decision-making and emotional openness with their partners (Mensah, 2022). These shifts in masculine behaviour demonstrate how evolving gender attitudes enable more equitable power dynamics in romantic relationships, challenging dominant notions of male dominance while promoting shared decision-making and emotional expression.

Emotional Expression in Romantic Relationships

In addition to provider and power discourses in romantic relationships, emotional restraint emerges as another dominant discourse that dictates how men perform masculinity in their relationships. Dominant ideas of masculinity discourage vulnerability and emotional expression, reinforcing the stereotype that men should remain stoic and unemotional (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Men are socialized to suppress feelings and prioritize rationality and control in their intimate relationships, while women are expected to be more nurturing and expressive (Holmes, 2015). This pattern creates an imbalance of emotional labour between partners, with women often shouldering the responsibility for providing emotional support. Many men avoid expressing feelings due to fears of being judged as unmanly, as such expression is often associated with irrationality and weakness (de Boise & Hearn, 2017). However, contemporary shifts in masculinity discourses encourage men to embrace self-awareness and acknowledge vulnerability. Understanding one's emotions as a man has become increasingly recognised as essential for challenging dominant norms of masculinity and addressing gender inequality between partners (Jewkes, Flood & Lang, 2015; Holmes, 2015). This growing awareness creates opportunities for men to develop new ways of

expressing emotions as they move beyond restraints to embrace more open and vulnerable forms of expression.

Discourses surrounding masculinity play a significant role in shaping how men perceive and navigate romantic relationships. The three dominant discourses of masculinity include: provider masculinity, power dynamics, and emotional restraint, demonstrating how gender roles persistently influence men's performance of masculinity (Fielding, 2023). Through exploring historical and contemporary approaches, the literature reveals how online platforms and societal changes have transformed initiation practices, even as gender expectations continue to shape men's pursuit of romantic connections. Men not only internalize these discourses but actively perpetuate them through their initiation behaviours (Isaacs & Swartz, 2022). However, these dominant discourses face increasing challenges as men move towards more inclusive and equitable expressions of masculinity (Ratele, 2015). The intersection between initiation strategies and masculinity discourses reveals how men navigate between established norms and evolving expectations in relationship initiation.

Research Gap

Despite extensive research on both relationship initiation and masculinity discourses, significant gaps remain in understanding how men's relationship initiation strategies or approaches specifically reinforce or challenge dominant masculinity discourses. While studies examine relationship initiation strategies (Sprecher et al., 2021) and masculinity, separately (Ratele, 2022), limited research explores how these intersect in men's lived experiences. Additionally, while digital platforms have transformed relationship initiation practices (LeFebvre, 2018), there is insufficient investigation into how these new spaces influence men's engagement with discourses of masculinity. This study addresses these gaps by examining how men's relationship initiation practices either perpetuate or challenge

dominant discourses of masculinity, contributing to a deeper understanding of the relationship between masculine identity and romantic relationship formation.

Conclusion

This review of literature traced the evolution of relationship initiation from traditional communal practices to contemporary individualized approaches. The emergence of digital platforms has transformed how relationships begin while creating new spaces for expressing and performing gender. Throughout these changes, gender dynamics remained central to relationship initiation, with men's practices being shaped by established societal expectations and emerging progressive values. The examination of discourses of masculinity provided a framework for understanding how men's relationship initiation practices reflect broader social patterns and transformations. These insights establish a foundation for investigating how men's contemporary approaches to relationship initiation might be contributing to evolving understandings of masculine identity and behaviour.

Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in two theoretical frameworks: Social Constructionism and Critical Feminist Theory. These theoretical frameworks provided an understanding of how societal norms and expectations shape gendered interactions, such as the initiation of romantic relationships. Social Constructionism helps examines how gender roles, including romantic relationship practices, are shaped by the particular social, cultural, and historical moment in which we live (Burr, 2015), while Critical Feminist Theory examines how social institutions and practices maintain gender-based power imbalances, this helps identify how these power structures operate at both individual and societal levels (Geisinger, 2011). Through these theoretical approaches, this study investigated men's romantic relationship initiation strategies to understand how these practices either reinforce or challenge dominant discourses of masculinity.

Social Constructionism

This study was situated within the social constructionist paradigm, which posits that reality is socially constructed through shared meanings, beliefs, and practices within specific cultural and social contexts (Berger & Luckmann, 2021; Burr, 2015). Therefore, this approach implies that our understanding of gender, such as masculinity, is socially constructed rather than biologically determined. The social constructionism approach highlights the influence of social and cultural factors such as societies, norms, discourses, and power dynamics in shaping individuals' behaviours, identities, and relationships with others (Meyer, 2017). This suggests that men's strategies and approaches to initiate romantic relationships are learned behaviours shaped by various cultural and social factors.

Furthermore, social constructionism highlights no single objective or ultimate truth concerning a specific phenomenon. However, there are multiple perspectives and interpretations of understanding the world (Berger & Luckmann, 2021), acknowledging the ever-changing nature of our societies. This viewpoint of multiple perspectives and interpretations when it comes to initiating romantic relationships suggests that the approaches men use to initiate romantic relationships are neither universal nor innate but instead socially prescribed and culturally specific. Therefore, the ways men initiate romantic relationships are mediated by their social positionality, including their class, cultural background, education, and social context (Haywood, 2018).

Moreover, the social constructionism approach underscores individuals' agency in challenging, resisting, or embracing social norms, behaviours, or discourses (Berger & Luckmann, 2021). This approach recognises that while men may draw from different discourses of masculinity when initiating romantic relationships, they also have the choice to choose whether to challenge and reinforce these discourses through their actions. Social constructionism points to the significance of social interactions in shaping individuals'

experiences and their perception of the world (Burr, 2015). In the context of this study, this spoke to how men initiate romantic relationships influenced by their interaction with other individuals.

Critical Feminist Theory

This study also draws from critical feminist theory, which examines power dynamics, social inequalities, and gendered oppressions within society (Geisinger, 2011). Rooted in feminist scholarship, this perspective seeks to understand how gender norms, stereotypes, and patriarchal structures shape individuals' lives and interactions with others (Denker, 2021). A central aspect of critical feminist theory is its focus on power dynamics in societies. This theory highlights how power operates within social structures and interactions, shaping individuals' access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making processes (Denker, 2021). In romantic relationships, this approach acknowledges how these relationships are constrained by gender and power, revealing the unequal power distribution between men and women (Denker, 2021). Gender norms and societal expectations influence these power dynamics, manifesting in various ways within relationship dynamics, such as decision-making authority and the division of tasks (Kim, Visserman & Impett, 2019). When examining the approaches and strategies men use to initiate relationships, this perspective highlights how these strategies may either reinforce or challenge existing gender hierarchies and power dynamics within relationships.

Critical feminist theory highlights the importance of resistance and agency in challenging oppressive power dynamics and negotiating more equitable relationships (Denker, 2021; Geisinger, 2011). For instance, when men initiate romantic relationships, some may resist dominant gender norms and embrace more equitable approaches to relationships. This suggests that men's approach to initiating romantic relationships could

contribute to social changes and potentially reshape our understanding and perspectives of masculinity in romantic relationships. Moreover, critical feminist perspectives acknowledge and value intersectionality, recognising that individuals' experiences and understanding of masculinity are different (Denker, 2021). Recognising the diversity of experiences, this theory helped us to understand how factors such as race, class, and sexuality intersect with gender to influence men's choices and their ability to resist dominant norms during relationship initiation (Geisinger, 2011). Therefore, critical feminists provided insight into how men may reinforce dominant discourses of masculinity, such as these, and move towards equitable gender relations in romantic relationships.

These two theoretical frameworks guided this study, allowing us to explore the complex ways in which men navigate societal expectations, power dynamics, and changing gender norms in their approaches to initiating romantic relationships. They also allowed us to examine how these strategies contribute to the ongoing efforts to promote equitable relationships.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodologies used in conducting the research presented in this paper. The methodology is critical for establishing the research findings' validity, reliability, and rigor (Mishra & Alok, 2011). In the following section, I outline the research design, followed by a detailed description of the sampling procedures, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures employed in this study. I conclude with a discussion of the ethical considerations employed in carrying out this study and a reflection on reflexivity.

Research Design

Research design aims to outline the procedure for consistently and logically combining study components (Mishra & Alok, 2011). This study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore men's strategies and approaches to initiate romantic

relationships. Qualitative methods allowed for a deep, nuanced understanding of these strategies, offering insights into how men may reinforce or challenge dominant discourses of masculinity (Willig, 2008). By examining individuals' lived experiences and narratives, qualitative research enabled a comprehensive exploration of complex social dynamics and interpersonal interactions that quantitative methods may not capture as effectively (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006). A qualitative approach enriched the depth of analysis and provided a platform for exploring the fluidity and diversity within masculine identities and relationship contexts (Willig, 2008).

This approach suited the study's objectives, which involved exploring how young men understand their roles in romantic initiation, identifying the pressures and expectations they navigate within dominant masculine norms, and examining how they position themselves in relation to traditional discourses of masculinity—whether reinforcing, negotiating, or resisting these norms. By integrating these objectives into the research design, the study ensured that data collection and analysis were aligned with understanding both the constraints and possibilities that dominant masculine discourses present in relationship initiation.

Sampling Procedure

The recruitment process began with obtaining permission from the UCT Department of Student Affairs. The Department of Student Affairs (DSA) aims to help students succeed academically, become engaged citizens, and reach their full potential. The DSA achieves these aims by providing services such as student wellness, student development, student funding, and student housing. Upon approval, the study advertisement (Appendix A) was distributed to students via university email and shared on the researcher's residential WhatsApp group. Additionally, participants were recruited through word of mouth. Following their participation in focus group discussions, participants were encouraged to

share the study advertisement and invite others who met the criteria to participate. This approach facilitated a broader reach and ensured the inclusion of participants beyond the initial recruitment process.

Interested individuals were encouraged to contact the researcher via WhatsApp or email at love&masculinity@gmail.com. Initial screening questions were administered to determine participant eligibility, and they served as the inclusion criteria for the study. These screening questions verified that potential participants identified as male were in a relationship, or had previous romantic relationship experience, and were above 18 years of age.

Although 38 participants initially expressed interest, 30 met the inclusion criteria for the study, with eight being excluded as they identified as female. The 30 male students who met the inclusion criteria were offered different time slots and days. Appointments were scheduled with different participants at a suitable timeslot. A spreadsheet was created to keep track of participants' schedules, listing their names, chosen time slots, and days. Reminders were sent to participants via their preferred mode of communication before their scheduled day.

Participants

The study consisted of a diverse group of male participants, aged 18-35, who were either in a relationship or had been in one before. All participants were based in Cape Town during the study period. As the table below indicates, participants included undergraduate and postgraduate students, encompassing various academic levels from first-year undergraduates to PhD candidates. Additionally, there was representation from all six faculties at the University of Cape Town (UCT): Commerce, Humanities, Law, Science, Engineering, and Health Sciences. Participants reflected three out of the four racial groups recognised in South

Africa, including individuals who identified as White, Black, and Coloured. There were no Indian participants represented in the sample. This absence might be attributed to Indian cultural norms around courtship and dating, where relationships are often more private or family-mediated (Mody, 2002), which may have affected willingness to participate in research about romantic relationship initiation. While these different racial groups provided a multifaceted perspective on the research topic, it created a language challenge. To accommodate this, the focus group discussions were primarily facilitated in English. However, there were instances where participants would use vernacular languages.

Table 1: Participants Information.

| Group | No | Pseudo Name | Study Level | Study Field | Race |
|--------------|-----------|--------------------|--------------------|---|-------------|
| Group 1 | 1 | Siya | 4th year | Law | Coloured |
| | 2 | Mandla | Honours | Finances | Black |
| | 3 | Ntu | 3rd year | BCom in Accounting | Black |
| | 4 | Tumi | 3rd year | BSc in Computer Science and Mathematics | Black |
| | 5 | David | 1st year | BCom in Business Science | Coloured |
| | 6 | Senzo | 2nd year | BCom Accounting | Black |
| Group 2 | 7 | Yanga | 4th year | BSc in Computer Science and Applied Mathematics | White |

| Group | No | Pseudo Name | Study Level | Study Field | Race |
|--------------|-----------|------------------------|------------------------|---|-------------|
| | 8 | Lucky | PhD candidate | Economics | Black |
| | 9 | Monde | 3rd year | BSc in Genetics and Anatomy | Black |
| | 10 | Sthe | 3rd year | BCom in Accounting | Black |
| | 11 | John | Honours | Geographic Information Systems | Black |
| Group 3 | 12 | Zakes | 2nd year | BSc in Chemical Engineering | Black |
| | 13 | Zweli | 2nd year | BSc in Chemical Engineering | Black |
| | 14 | Lihle | 1st year | BA in Psychology & Philosophy | Black |
| | 15 | Steve | 3rd year | Bachelor of Social Work | Black |
| | 16 | Hloni | 3rd year | Law | Black |
| | 17 | Sifiso | 3rd year | BSc in Applied Mathematics and Astrophysics | Black |

| Group | No | Pseudo Name | Study Level | Study Field | Race |
|--------------|-----------|------------------------|------------------------|--|-------------|
| Group 4 | 18 | Thabis o | 3rd year | BA in Law & Sociology | Black |
| | 19 | Leo | 3rd year | BCom in Accounting and Economics | Black |
| | 20 | Mzi | Final year | Fine Art | Black |
| | 21 | Vovo | 2nd year | BSocSci in Psychology and Social Development | Black |
| | 22 | Dom | 4th year | BSocSci in Gender Studies and Anthropology | Coloured |
| | 23 | Fisto | 3rd year | BSocSci in Political Science and Philosophy | Black |
| | 24 | Banele | 4th year | BA in Political Science and Psychology | Black |
| | 25 | Tebza | 3rd year | BSocSci in Political Science and Sociology | Black |

| Group | No | Pseudo Name | Study Level | Study Field | Race |
|--------------|-----------|--------------------|--------------------|---|-------------|
| Group 5 | 26 | Randel | 2nd year | Bachelor of Medicine and Surgery (MChB) | Black |
| | 27 | Bandile | 1st year | Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering | White |
| | 28 | Zola | 1st year | Architectural Studies | Coloured |
| | 29 | Kwezi | 2nd year | Bachelor of Science in Applied Biology & Biochemistry | White |
| | 30 | Xola | 2nd year | Bachelor of Business Science in Actuarial Science | Coloured |

Data Collection

This study collected data through five focus group discussions (FGDs), each with 5 to 8 participants. Focus group discussions were chosen because they facilitated participant interaction, allowing men to freely express their viewpoints and engage with each other's contributions (Gundumogula & Gundumogula, 2020). This mutual engagement created a supportive environment where participants felt comfortable sharing personal experiences. This level of interaction would have been difficult to achieve in one-on-one interviews, where

the lack of peer interaction might have limited the collaboration and engagement in the discussions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). However, while one-on-one interviews were not selected for this study, they were going to be beneficial because of their ability to maintain order and avoid instances where participants spoke over each other (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), which was present during the focus group discussions.

These discussions took place in the Psychology Department building at the University of Cape Town, each lasting approximately 45 minutes. A focus group schedule (Appendix B) containing questions reflecting the research topic and objectives guided the discussions. Furthermore, the discussions were recorded using an audio recording device to ensure the accurate capture of discussion content for analysis. These audio recordings were transcribed. During the transcription, participants were assigned pseudonyms, which was done to anonymize the data and protect participants' identities. The data, including the anonymized transcription and audio recordings, were securely stored on Google Drive and an external hard drive to prevent loss.

Similarities and differences were observed during the focus group discussions. One noticeable similarity among the participants was their willingness to engage and share advice. However, differences emerged in the depth of the discussions, which were influenced by the participants' academic levels and age. Regardless of their disagreement, participants were interested in contributing to the discussion and learning about each other's experiences. Groups 1, 2, and 4, consisting of final-year and postgraduate students, provided more detailed and straightforward answers.

In contrast, Group 5, primarily composed of first- and second-year students, often gave more playful responses that tended to deviate from the main questions. Group 3, which included a mix of first, second, final-year, and postgraduate students, there was a sense of

guidance, with younger students often seeking advisors from their senior peers, who were eager to offer support and share their experiences. Overall, the focus group discussions highlighted the collaborative and supportive nature of the participants.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study employed thematic narrative analysis, a method well-suited for examining qualitative data, particularly narrative data from interviews or focus group discussions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data collected for this study was narrative, consisting of participants' personal experiences, views, and observations presented in detailed, story-like formats. Thematic narrative analysis facilitated the exploration of patterns, themes, and meanings within these narratives, providing insights into men's initiation of romantic relationships and their connection to discourses of masculinity. This approach effectively uncovers the complexities and nuances of individual experiences and perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006), making it ideal for understanding how men navigate and negotiate dominant masculinity discourses.

NVivo software was utilized to facilitate the analysis. NVivo is a qualitative research tool designed to assist with managing, coding, and analysing qualitative data systematically and efficiently (Zamawe, 2015). Before uploading the data into NVivo, the audio recordings from the focus groups were manually transcribed. This involved listening to each recording and transcribing it to ensure accurate textual representation. After transcription, a familiarisation process took place, during which I thoroughly reviewed the transcripts to gain an initial understanding of the content and become familiar with the data. Once this familiarisation was complete, the transcripts were uploaded into NVivo.

In NVivo, the initial coding was performed using its features to capture significant aspects of participants' experiences and perspectives on initiating romantic relationships and

negotiating masculinity. For instance, codes were created for various initiation settings (e.g., social events, online platforms), sources of advice (e.g., friends, personal experience), views on women initiators, social expectations (e.g., masculine roles, pressure to initiate), strategies for initiating relationships (e.g., social media, straightforward approaches), challenges in initiating relationships, and the use of online platforms. After generating these initial codes, NVivo's tools were used to organise them into potential themes. Similar codes were grouped to reflect broader patterns and relationships within the data. For example, codes related to societal norms, expectations, and views on women initiators were combined to explore how gender norms influence perceptions and behaviours in relationship initiation. Codes on initiation settings, strategies, and challenges were examined to understand various social dynamics in initiating relationships. In contrast, codes on sources of advice and online platforms were analysed to investigate changes in the initiation process.

These potential themes were then reviewed and refined through manual analysis. This stage involved removing irrelevant or repetitive codes and enhancing each theme to ensure it accurately represented the complexities of the participants' experiences and perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This manual review process also ensured that the themes remained relevant to the research questions. I also discussed the potential themes with my supervisor. This discussion helped in refining the themes, ensuring that each theme aligned with the study's objectives.

Following the refinement of themes, detailed descriptions were written to capture the content and meaning of each theme. These descriptions were then integrated into a comprehensive narrative. Finally, the findings were documented and presented in a structured narrative that included detailed descriptions of each theme, supported by participant quotes, to thoroughly examine how men navigate and negotiate dominant discourses of masculinity when initiating romantic relationships. In addition to participants' narratives and the detailed

descriptions of the themes, existing literature on masculinity and relationship initiation was used to support the findings. The theoretical frameworks of social constructionism and critical feminist theory were also used to analyse and interpret the data, providing a deeper understanding of how masculinity is constructed and negotiated within romantic relationship initiation.

Ethics

This section examines the ethical considerations that guided the research process, ensuring that ethical standards were upheld at every stage. It outlines the steps taken to obtain ethical clearance, recruit participants, and obtain informed consent. Additionally, this section discusses the measures implemented to guarantee the confidentiality and privacy of participants and the ethical handling of data. Upholding these ethical standards was essential in protecting the participants' rights and well-being and maintaining the research process's integrity (Willig, 2008). This study received ethical clearance from the Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Humanities (Appendix C). The reference number is PSY2024-002.

Informed Consent

Informed consent is a fundamental ethical requirement for research involving human participants (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006). Informed consent ensures that participants are fully aware of the nature of the study, including its purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their rights to participate voluntarily or withdraw at any time without penalty (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006). The process of obtaining informed consent is crucial to respect the autonomy and dignity of the participants. In this study, informed consent was obtained through a two-step process. The first step included participants being given the informed consent form (Appendix D) to read and sign. This was done before they would participate in the focus group discussion. The form included

information about the study's objectives, the procedures involved, any potential risks and benefits, the confidentiality of their data, and a request for permission to record the discussions.

The second step included giving participants time to read the consent form and ask any questions they might have. Participants were reminded that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. Additionally, verbal informed consent was obtained before the discussion commenced. All signed consent forms are securely stored in a locked filing cabinet within the researcher's room.

Handling Sensitive Topics

Given that the central objective of this study was to explore whether men reinforce or challenge dominant discourses of masculinity through their initiation of romantic relationships, it was important to anticipate the possibility that participants might share experiences involving control, coercion, or other sensitive relational dynamics.

Although no participants disclosed engaging in violent or coercive practices, the study incorporated precautionary strategies to manage such possibilities had they arisen. These measures were intended to ensure that participants felt safe to speak openly while also protecting their well-being and upholding ethical responsibilities.

Had sensitive disclosures occurred, I, as the researcher, was prepared to adopt a non-judgmental stance to preserve the openness of the discussion; maintain confidentiality within the limits of mandatory reporting obligations; and, if necessary, refer participants to appropriate psychological or social support services. These strategies were developed after ethical clearance had already been granted and were therefore not formally approved by the

Ethics Committee, though they aligned with best practices for ethically navigating complex personal and relational topics.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality refers to the ethical principle of keeping information shared by participants private and secure, ensuring that their identities and personal data are protected from unauthorized access or disclosure (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006). It is a fundamental aspect of ethical research practice, fostering trust between researchers and participants and safeguarding participants' privacy and dignity. In this study, the confidentiality of the participants was ensured through several measures. Before the focus group discussion, participants were informed that their responses would remain disconnected from their identities and would be held in strict confidence. To ensure this level of confidentiality, each participant was assigned a pseudonym.

Additionally, participants were requested not to discuss any information shared within the group with external parties. This instruction was clearly stated in the informed consent form, and participants were reminded of this request before the discussion sessions. However, it was acknowledged that absolute compliance with these requests could not be guaranteed. According to Willig (2008), complete confidentiality in research is impossible because the purpose of gathering data is to obtain new knowledge, which serves as one of the reasons why participants might discuss the research with others. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym during the analysis stage to protect their identities further.

Furthermore, to protect participants' information, the audio recordings from the group discussions were securely stored on a password-protected device, accessible only to myself,

the researcher. Each focus group audio recording was saved with the number of discussions, for example Focus Group 1.

Risks and Benefits

Participation in this study did not offer any direct material benefits to the participants. However, refreshments were provided after each focus group discussion as a token of appreciation for participants' time and contribution. One potential risk involved the emotional sensitivity of sharing personal experiences in a group setting. To mitigate this, all participants received an information sheet for counselling services (Appendix E), which included contact information for support services available on campus and in the surrounding community. This ensured that participants could access professional help if they experienced any distress or discomfort as a result of their participation.

In addition to these precautions, the study also offered an important reflective benefit. By creating a space in which men could speak openly about their experiences with love, relationships, and gender expectations, the research enabled participants to express vulnerability, develop self-awareness, and critically engage with dominant norms of masculinity. These opportunities for reflection, though not the primary aim of the research, represent a significant ethical benefit for participants.

Reflexivity

As a female researcher studying how men initiate romantic relationships, I felt a strong sense of discomfort at the beginning of this study. Being a woman in an all-male setting made me aware of my outsider status. I questioned whether my presence might affect the openness of the discussion and influence the participants' responses. This discomfort made me self-conscious about how I presented myself in front of the participants.

Initially, some participants expressed that they were hesitant to come, jokingly suggesting that I wanted to uncover their secrets as men indicating that some information is exclusively shared within a specific gender. This highlighted their awareness that I was not one of them, which made me feel even more like an outsider. However, as the conversations unfolded, participants gradually began to accept me as part of their group, mainly due to the nature of the questions and open dialogue between them. Their willingness to share their experiences and perspectives, often accompanied by laughter and moments of vulnerability, enriched the data and reshaped my understanding of male attitudes toward relationships.

As I listened to the participants' stories, I empathized with them and how often society overlooks the challenges men face in romantic relationships, including their fears of rejection, societal expectations, and the pressures they experience. This research made me reflect deeply on my own biases and assumptions about heterosexual relationships. I realized that my understanding had been shaped mainly by female perspectives, experiences, and media portrayals. Hearing men talking about their struggles expanded my viewpoint. It highlighted how often society overlooks men's emotional challenges in romantic relationships.

To engage critically with this process, I drew on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of epistemic reflexivity, as interpreted by Maton (2003). Epistemic reflexivity involves turning a critical gaze onto one's own position within the research field and critically examining how one's assumptions, background, and social positioning shape the research process. As Maton (2003) explains, it "requires that researchers reflexively examine the social conditions of possibility of their own knowledge claims and how their position-taking within the field affects the knowledge produced" (p. 56). Rather than aiming for a detached or "objective" stance, this approach acknowledges that the researcher's position shaped by habitus and broader social conditions inevitably influences the construction of knowledge.

An unexpected challenge arose when participants began asking about my personal life. While they were open about their experiences, I struggled with sharing my own. It felt unfair to expect them to be vulnerable without reciprocating. This tension highlighted the complex power dynamics at play in qualitative research (Willig, 2008). This experience was transformative. It challenged my assumptions, deepened my empathy, and enhanced my understanding of gender dynamics in relationships. While my presence as a female researcher may have influenced the discussions. Drawing on Bourdieu's epistemic reflexivity enabled me to account for how my own position shaped the study and to embrace the situated nature of knowledge. This awareness ultimately contributed to a richer, more nuanced account of how men experience the initiation of romantic relationships.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

This chapter presents the analysis and discussion of data collected during the focus group discussions on the initiation of romantic relationships. The analysis is organised around three main themes. The first theme, *Changing Trends in Men's Ways of Initiating Romantic Relationships*, outlines how traditional approaches to relationship initiation have evolved in contemporary dating practices, including the impact of online platforms, everyday casual interactions, and the role of friendship networks and parents in relationship formation. The second theme, *Social Dynamics in Initiating Romantic Relationships*, explores young men's diverse strategies when initiating romantic relationships and the significant barriers they encounter in this process, revealing how these men balance dominant discourses of masculinity with evolving social norms while pursuing potential romantic partners. The last theme, *Negotiating Masculinities: Power, Control, and Resistance in Romantic Relationships*, investigates how young men perform and negotiate their masculinity through relationship initiation and development, revealing patterns of power dynamics and resistance to change in contemporary dating contexts. Each theme is further explored through relevant subthemes detailing the complexities of initiating romantic relationships.

Changing Trends in Men's Ways of Initiating Romantic Relationships

This theme explored how young men approach and investigate the initiation of romantic relationships in the contemporary world. It consists of three subthemes that collectively demonstrate how relationship initiation practices have shifted from formal, structured processes to more casual, individualized approaches influenced by online platforms.

Initiating Relationships: An Everyday Activity

This subtheme examines how young men in this study perceive the initiation of romantic relationships as a casual, everyday activity rather than a formal, planned process.

These young men described their encounters with women as spontaneous, often driven by immediate attraction and occurring unexpectedly in daily life. As Siya mentioned:

Siya: I remember seeing this beautiful girl standing in the UCT shuttle. I approached her and started talking to her, eventually asking for her number. It wasn't planned; it just happened.

This portrayal of the casual nature of relationship initiation is further supported by the experiences of another participant, Thabo, who described meeting his ex-girlfriend at a coffee shop.

Thabo: I was grabbing a coffee, and she was there. We started chatting, and the rest is history. It was completely unplanned.

The casual nature of initiating aligns with Seal and Ehrhardt's (2003) research, which characterizes initiating romantic relationships as a game that often involves men randomly approaching women with the hope that one would respond. This behaviour reflects dominant gender norms, with men typically initiating contact and pursuing, while women evaluate the men's approaches and decide whether to accept or deny the offer. This dynamic is rooted in societal norms and expectations of heterosexual courtship, where men are cast as active pursuers and women as selective gatekeepers (Eaton & Rose, 2011)

In the past, courtship was often a structured, formalized process involving specific rituals and expectations (Karandashev, 2023). However, the experiences of Siya and Thabo suggest a contemporary landscape where relationships are increasingly established through spontaneous, casual interactions. Braboy Jackson and colleagues (2011) further support this trend, suggesting that modern relationship initiation unfolds through loosely defined stages characterized by spontaneous actions. This aligns with participants' descriptions of casual rituals emerging within these encounters. Collectively, these findings highlight the changes in the formal process of initiating relationships. This change in relationship initiation processes

disrupts dominant notions of men, allowing for more diverse expressions of masculinity that focus less on fixed masculine roles but more on a fluid approach to relationship formation.

However, the everydayness of this casual nature can also be viewed negatively. Today, spontaneous and informal attempts to initiate romantic relationships may sometimes be perceived as harassment or unwanted advances (Sprecher et al., 2021). The line between casual, friendly interaction and inappropriate behaviour can be blurred, leading to negative perceptions and experiences. This highlights the complexity of modern relationship initiation, where the casual nature of approaching someone may not always be well-received and can lead to misunderstandings or discomfort.

Furthermore, the emergence of various settings further supports the everydayness of initiating romantic relationships. These ranged from social gatherings and familiar locales to modern online platforms, highlighting the diverse contexts in which romantic relationships are formed. Sassler and Miller (2011) argue that socially acceptable settings for initiating romantic relationships have broadened. These changes in societal norms now allow for a broader range of environments where romantic connections can begin, reflecting a more flexible approach to initiating relationships. Participants like Kwezi have noted that online platforms are another significant setting for initiating romantic relationships. Kwezi shared:

Kwezi: I met my current girlfriend on Tinder, and we have been dating for three years now. The relationship is going well.

Kwezi's successful experience of meeting their partner on Tinder illustrates the growing acceptance and effectiveness of online platforms for finding potential partners. According to Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012), the percentage of couples who met online has significantly increased in recent years, reflecting a broader societal movement towards digital dating. These digital spaces have become familiar places for forming relationships, offering

seemingly effortless access to a broad pool of potential partners (Baym, 2015). However, participants expressed mixed feelings about these platforms.

Mandla highlighted the platform's potential to expand one's dating pool, stating:

Mandla: Social media has given me the opportunity to meet people from different places, unlike in the past, when you were only limited to the people in your surroundings.

In contrast, Lihle and Zozo expressed concerns about these platforms:

Lihle: Social media, although it helps speed up the process of initiating a romantic relationship, creates false perceptions about someone. It can be misleading.

Zozo: There are too many options, making it harder to take any interaction seriously.

Following these concerns, David offered a different perspective, highlighting digital platforms' nuanced nature in modern relationships:

David: I believe that online platforms, especially social media, can be used to continue the interaction that started in person.

David's perspective aligns with Baym's (2015) argument that digital platforms can complement and enhance face-to-face interactions rather than simply replace them. This demonstrates how online platforms simultaneously facilitate and complicate the formation of romantic relationships (Chambers, 2013).

These experiences shared by participants align with Ovadia's (2016) findings regarding accessibility and convenience of social media and online dating apps. By removing traditional barriers such as geographic distance and limited social circles, these platforms have fundamentally altered how people meet potential partners. However, the design of these platforms, characterized by easy access to communication, creates a complex environment where distinguishing between genuine and superficial connections becomes challenging (LeFebvre, 2018).

Furthermore, these online platforms have become sites where traditional gender dynamics and expectations are both reinforced and challenged. The digital dating landscape has created opportunities to question conventional dating norms, such as men's traditional role as initiators or financial providers (Lamont, 2014). However, these same platforms can simultaneously pressure users, particularly men, to perform idealized versions of masculinity online (Gibbs, Ellison & Lai, 2011). This tension between traditional and evolving gender roles reflects broader societal shifts in dating norms and expectations, demonstrating how online platforms serve as both catalysts and mirrors for changing relationship dynamics.

While social media and online platforms have transformed how romantic relationships begin, their impact is multifaceted. As shown through the participants' varied experiences and supported by research, these platforms offer both opportunities and challenges, requiring users to navigate between digital convenience and authentic connection.

Despite online platforms having become increasingly common for initiating romantic relationships, some individuals prefer to connect in more familiar settings. For example, Thabiso expressed a preference, stating,

Thabiso: I usually approach women in familiar places like my neighbourhood or local hangouts because I feel more comfortable in these environments.

Thabiso's preference for familiar environments for initiating romantic relationships highlights the importance of comfort and control in social interactions. By approaching potential partners in settings like his neighbourhood or local hangouts, Thabiso leverages his familiarity with these environments to enhance his confidence and interaction quality. Research by Adams and Gillath (2024) supports Thabiso's claim by showing how environmental factors like familiarity with a space can reduce anxiety and increase social confidence. Similarly, Sassler and Miller (2011) emphasize how context influences relationship formation, aligning with Thabiso's experience of smoother interactions and increased comfort in familiar settings. Ntu, another participant in the study, also reflects on how specific environments can foster more relaxed and open social interactions. He explains:

Ntu: I often meet potential partners in clubs or parties because it's fun and everyone is relaxed and open to socializing.

Ntu's insight illustrates how the characteristics of specific environments can enhance the likelihood of forming romantic relationships. He asserts that the club space naturally encourages social interactions, creating an atmosphere conducive to meeting potential partners. His perspective is supported by research from Sprecher and colleagues (2015), which indicates that specific settings are particularly conducive to initiating romantic relationships due to their social dynamics and welcoming atmosphere. Adams and Gillath (2024), further elaborated on this concept by identifying several key environmental factors that contribute to romantic initiation, such as proximity, shared interests, and familiarity. However, the characteristics of the environment are not the only factors that can influence the

success of romantic relationship formation. Individual differences and the ability to engage effectively with others play crucial roles in this process (Tidwell et al., 2013).

While environmental factors and individual differences play significant roles in romantic relationship formation, they are deeply intertwined with dominant discourses of masculinity. In familiar environments, men like Thabiso navigate societal expectations of masculine behaviour while initiating romantic relationships. These environments influence how men express their masculinity, for example, a familiar local hangout might allow men to display confidence more naturally compared to unfamiliar settings where the pressure to perform traditional masculine roles might feel more intense. Environmental familiarity can either reinforce or help men challenge these traditional masculine norms, allowing them to choose how they present themselves when approaching potential partners.

This subtheme demonstrates how the process of initiating romantic relationships has shifted from formal courtship rituals to casual, everyday interactions. As evidenced by participants' experiences, relationship initiation now occurs spontaneously across various settings, from physical spaces to digital platforms. This transition aligns with recent scholarly work suggesting that modern relationship formation practices are becoming increasingly informal and context-dependent (Sprecher et al., 2021; LeFebvre, 2018). However, while the settings and methods have evolved, traditional gender dynamics in relationship initiation persist, with men primarily taking on the role of initiators. These findings indicate that young men are navigating relationship initiation within a complex landscape where casual approaches intersect with enduring masculine expectations.

The shift toward casual and spontaneous initiation practices may seem to disrupt formal courtship rituals; however, these evolving trends often continue to privilege male agency in romantic initiation (Jewkes & Morrell, 2010). The persistence of men as initiators, even in relaxed settings or online platforms, reflects a subtle reinforcement of patriarchal

gender roles where men are positioned as active agents and women as passive recipients (Jewkes et al., 2015). This dynamic upholds a gendered power imbalance where women's roles remain reactive, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies in heterosexual relationships. In the South African context, these practices mirror broader social structures that maintain male dominance under the guise of romantic spontaneity or modern individualism (Ratele, 2016). Despite appearing progressive, such changes often mask the continuity of patriarchal norms that shape who is expected to act, and who is expected to wait, in romantic pursuits.

Ask the Gents First: Friendship Networks in Relationship Initiation

Asking friends for advice and guidance is a common approach among young men before making that first move to initiate relationships. This subtheme points out the significance of peer influence, which became evident in focus group discussions. The young men openly shared their experiences, demonstrating how peer influence plays a central role in shaping their approaches to initiating relationships. Leo and Steve shared:

Leo: The gents are my go-to sources, especially when we just chill around and talk about our experiences. (laughing) Gents know the street and they have been in the same situation.

Steve: Friends usually have files about the women, making them the best source.

Leo and Steve's perspectives demonstrate the nature of male friendships, suggesting that these friendships are functional. By sharing information, experiences, and perspectives, friends play a significant role in shaping men's strategies and attitudes toward initiating romantic relationships. Furthermore, advice from friends appears to be valued for its basis in similar beliefs, values, and experiences (Branch & Hall, 2018). These findings align with the social constructivism approach, which posits that individuals learn behaviours and attitudes through observation and interaction with others, particularly those in their immediate social

circles (Berger & Luckmann, 2021). The dynamics within these peer groups can often lead to the reinforcing of the dominant notions of masculinity. Whereby some men may feel the need to conform to prevailing ideas of manhood to fit in with their peers (Marshall, 2010), potentially perpetuating dominant masculine norms in the context of romantic relationships (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

However, not all young men in the study agree about relying on their peer groups for advice; participants such as Monde and Ntu offer a different perspective, noting the potential limitations of relying on friends for advice and the need to rely on other sources. They stated:

Monde: I usually look up stuff online rather than friends because they can mislead you sometimes.

Ntu: Sometimes you need to look for advice on YouTube videos because friends can give you wrong information.

Monde and Ntu's perspectives highlight the diverse settings and platforms that men now rely on for initiating romantic relationships. Moreover, Monde and Ntu's reliance on online platforms for advice reflects the changes in how men initiate relationships, whereby they take full ownership in forming their relationships. Scholars like Karandashev (2023) have noted this trend, emphasizing that individuals increasingly take autonomous roles in initiating and shaping their romantic relationships. This represents a significant change in how individuals navigate their relationships, moving towards individualism, whereby they take autonomous approaches to various aspects of their lives (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2004), moving away from primarily relying on their social networks, such as friends and family, for assistance.

The romantic relationship initiation and advice-seeking process is evolving, reflecting broader societal changes. While scholars like Marshall (2010) and Wright and Sinclair (2012)

have emphasized peers' crucial role and influence in shaping romantic behaviours and partner selection, particularly during adolescence and early adulthood, a new trend is emerging. Individuals increasingly turn to online platforms like YouTube for relationship advice and guidance. This move towards online platforms represents a significant change from more formal relationship initiation rituals, where family or community played more prominent roles in matchmaking (Karandashev, 2023). Men's willingness to seek relationship advice from various sources challenges dominant discourses of masculinity that position men as naturally competent in relationship formation. This suggests that men are acknowledging the complexities of romantic relationships and recognising that relationship skills are learned rather than inherent characteristics of masculinity.

These changing patterns in how men seek relationship advice reflect the broader transformation in relationship initiation practices, where the coexistence of friendship networks and contemporary digital platforms as sources of relationship guidance demonstrates how masculine scripts are being renegotiated within contemporary social contexts.

Keeping Parents on the Side in Early Relationship Formation

Parents were deliberately kept on the side during the initiation of romantic relationships by young men in this study. In this subtheme, the desire for independence from parental influence becomes evident, as young men felt that parental advice did not align with modern dating practices. They believed involving parents too early could make the relationship appear more serious than it was, creating unnecessary pressure and expectations, as Zweli and Lihle's narratives revealed:

Zweli: The game has changed. Parents are clueless and will give you advice that worked for them in their time.

Lihle: I agree with Zweli, bro; parents will advise you as if you want to marry the person.

Zweli speaks to how initiating relationships has evolved, making parental advice irrelevant during this stage. Zweli's reference to parents as clueless reflects a generational gap between older people and young people in understanding contemporary relationship initiation dynamics. The perception of parental advice as irrelevant during the initiation stage suggests that the young generation is exposed to newer ways of relationship formation, which are different from those of previous generations. This reflects the changing trends in initiating romantic relationships, whereby men move towards more casual, individualized, and online focus platforms-focused ways of forming romantic relationships.

Lihle's characterization of parental advice as marriage-focused further supports Zweli's view, suggesting that parents' advice contrasts with the more casual nature of contemporary dating dynamics. These viewpoints illuminate the reasons behind young men's unwillingness to involve parents during the initiation process, as they perceive parents' advice as misaligned with contemporary dating norms and focused on long-term commitment. This aligns with broader scholarly findings indicating a decline in parental and communal influence over partner selection, affording young adults' greater autonomy in navigating romantic relationships (Sassler & Miller, 2011). This reflects the changing trend where men increasingly view their romantic choices as private decisions rather than family or community matters (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2004)

Meanwhile, participants do not prioritize parental involvement when navigating the process of initiating relationships. Research indicated the potential benefits of parental involvement in relationship development (Wright & Sinclair, 2012). They argue that parent's guidance and support during the development of the relationship can predict relationship

stability, satisfaction, and commitment (Wright & Sinclair, 2012). Some men in this study also supported this acknowledgment of the positive values of parental involvement in their relationships, mentioning that it becomes essential once the relationship is established.

Participants Bandile and Yanga shared similar perspectives:

Bandile: I usually involve my parents when I am serious about someone.

Yanga: Once you are serious about someone, parents' input can be valuable.

These perspectives suggest that while parental involvement may not be crucial in the initiation stages of a relationship, it can offer valuable support and insights as relationships deepen, potentially contributing to relationship stability. This highlights the existing positive influence of parents on romantic relationships despite the evolving nature of relationship initiation.

These findings reveal broader shifts in how young men navigate the initiation of romantic relationships in contemporary society. As university students, they adopt increasingly casual and spontaneous approaches in informal social settings while maintaining strong connections to their support networks. This transformation underscores their adaptability as they embrace new ways of forming connections while navigating the complexities of modern dating.

Their preference for spontaneous interactions and digital platforms reflects a redefinition of common approaches to relationship initiation driven by changing social norms. At the same time, young men negotiate complex expressions of masculinity, maintaining conventional roles like being the initiator while incorporating more fluid and flexible practices in relationship formation.

While their initial approach to forming relationships emphasizes personal agency, whether online or offline, they strategically seek advice from friends and online resources and

eventually involve parental guidance when relationships become more serious. This pattern illustrates a generation balancing independence with social support, using these resources deliberately at different stages of relationship formation.

The diversity of settings where relationships form, from shared physical spaces to digital platforms, highlights an expansion of acceptable venues for romantic connections. However, this shift, particularly in online spaces, also introduces challenges in establishing authentic relationships. These trends signify a broader societal movement toward more flexible, individualized, and digitally influenced approaches to romantic connection while retaining elements of everyday practices.

Social Dynamics in Initiating Romantic Relationships

How young men approach and navigate the initiation of romantic relationships reveals complex intersections between masculinity, social expectations, and personal vulnerabilities. This theme explored young men's diverse strategies when initiating romantic relationships and the significant barriers they encounter during this process. Through analysing their narratives, we gained insight into how these young men balance discourses of masculinity with evolving social norms while pursuing potential romantic partners. This examination of relationship initiation approaches and barriers provided insights into how young men construct and perform their masculine identities in romantic contexts while highlighting the psychological, social, and cultural factors that influence their behaviour.

First Moves: Young Men's Relationship Initiation Strategies

Young men described employing different approaches when initiating romantic relationships in this subtheme. These strategies reveal complex negotiations between dominant masculinity and evolving social norms. They also reported seeking a balance

between indirect, non-aggressive strategies and more direct approaches. This balancing act reflects an awareness of the need to avoid appearing overly aggressive or lacking confidence.

One participant, Lihle, expressed this need for balance, stating:

Lihle: There is no one way to approach different women instead find a balance. You do not want to show too much interest and be pushy, but you also should not be unclear or too indirect about your intentions.

Lihle's comment, viewed through a social constructivist framework, demonstrates that social reality is not fixed but actively constructed through human interaction and interpretation (Berger & Luckmann, 2021). His statement also highlights the pressures men feel when initiating relationships whereby, on the one hand, they need to be clear and confident in expressing interest while maintaining a respectful and considerate approach. This tension demonstrates what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) describe as the dynamic nature of masculinity, where men must constantly negotiate between different and sometimes conflicting social expectations. This behavioural adaptation that men express when approaching women stems from the increased societal awareness and monitoring of men's behaviour in romantic contexts, revealing the power dynamics inherent in modern dating practices. For instance, in Flood's (2019) study, men reported heightened consciousness about maintaining appropriate physical distance, carefully choosing their words, and avoiding actions that might be misinterpreted as threatening when initiating conversation in social spaces. As a result, men are increasingly aware that their behaviour in romantic relationships is being monitored and judged by potential partners and society (PettyJohn et al., 2019). Hence, they consciously avoid behaviours that perpetuate negative stereotypes about male aggression or disrespect in romantic relationships.

Other young men in this study also mentioned gravitating toward casual and playful strategies when initiating relationships. Young men like Randel, Vovo, and Sifiso described using approaches such as flirting, humour, and compliments. These methods allowed them to express interest while fostering a light-hearted, less pressured dynamic, aligning with their preference for natural and adaptable strategies (Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003). They shared:

Randel: I usually try to make her laugh, you know. Jokes break the ice and create a positive first impression.

Vovo: I usually start off by complimenting her to see if she is interested.

Sifiso: For me, playful flirting always gets women's attention.

These approaches and strategies mentioned by these young men are categorized as non-aggressive expressions of romantic interest (Clark, Shaver & Abrahams, 1999) and have become central in relationship initiation for both genders (Moore, 1985). These casual and common strategies can be seen as a response to various factors in the modern romantic context, including avoiding disappointment or being perceived as problematic (Barhana & Büyükşahin-Sunal, 2015). They reveal how men actively interpret and respond to new social narratives about acceptable masculine behaviour. By engaging in these approaches, men navigate the complex societal expectations of romantic initiation while attempting to present themselves as non-problematic. This reflects the ongoing negotiation between traditional gender roles and evolving social norms in relationships (Eaton & Rose, 2011). The utilization of non-aggressive strategies by young men challenges dominant norms of masculinity, which historically emphasized aggressive and assertive behaviour. These approaches demonstrate how masculine performance in relationship contexts is reconstructed to align with contemporary social expectations while maintaining agency in relationship initiation.

Additionally, DiDonato and Jakubiak (2016) found that humour plays a complex role in romantic initiation, with positive humour being particularly favourable and effective in attracting potential partners. This is supported by Randel's approach of using humour to make a positive first impression, suggesting that humour not only helps to break the ice but also enhances the appeal of the person employing it.

Another approach described by young men involves initiating relationships by first establishing a friendship, as expressed by Banele:

Banele: I prefer starting as friends; it is a good strategy to avoid disappointments.

This preference for building a foundation of friendship before moving into a romantic relationship aligns with research by Stinson and colleagues (2022), who found that friendships can often serve as a strong foundation for long-lasting romantic relationships. Their findings suggest that romantic feelings can develop over time, sometimes emerging only after individuals have had the opportunity to know each other deeply as friends. Moreover, starting as friends can help mitigate the risk of disappointment, particularly if romantic interests are not reciprocated, sometimes leading to discomfort or misunderstandings (Cameron & Curry, 2020). The friends-first approach could be seen as a way for men to maintain the dominant discourses of masculinity, such as a sense of control and lack of vulnerability in the face of potential rejection, aligning with dominant masculine ideas of emotional detachment (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Therefore, the practice of consulting friends first serves to reinforce rather than challenge hegemonic masculinity norms.

While initiating friendships before pursuing romantic relationships might seem safer, this strategy can present significant challenges. Sprecher and colleagues (2021) argue that moving from friendship to a romantic relationship can be problematic. The strategy can

damage the established friendship and ruin the chances of successful romantic relationship formation. This suggests that while non-aggressive approaches may help avoid immediate rejection or being perceived as problematic, they may also create challenges in the long term.

Another issue raised by participants regarding using the friends-first strategy was the potential of being friend-zoned. Fisto, responding to Banele, stated:

Fisto: I do not agree with Banele. If you start by initiating a friendship, you will end up in the friend zone. It is better to be upfront about your feelings.

Fisto's perspective suggests that being straightforward about one's romantic intentions from the beginning can prevent the possibility of being placed in the "friend zone." The "friend zone" refers to a situation where one-person desires to pursue a romantic or sexual relationship with a friend, but that friend only wants a platonic relationship. Fisto's view is supported by Seal and Ehrhardt (2003), who argue that a slow or indirect approach to initiating a relationship can increase the likelihood of ending up as just friends rather than progressing into a romantic relationship. Fisto believes one can avoid misunderstandings and communicate romantic intentions by being upfront about his feelings, reducing the risk of being placed in the friend zone. Other participants like Tebza and Yanga also shared this preference, saying that being straightforward would help avoid misunderstandings.

Tebza: You must be honest and straightforward when approaching women because they appreciate the confidence and clarity.

Yanga: Direct approaches are better for avoiding misunderstandings and wasting your time.

According to Clark and colleagues (1999), being direct about romantic interest is often seen as more genuine and less confusing. Tebza highlights that straightforwardness conveys confidence and is appreciated by potential partners, while Yanga notes that direct

approaches help avoid misunderstandings and save time. Their insights on direct communication align with the findings by Moore (1985), which suggest that a transparent and honest expression of romantic intentions can make the initiation process more efficient and effective. By avoiding ambiguity, direct communication ensures that both parties understand each other's intentions, reducing the likelihood of confusion and enhancing the overall experience of starting a romantic relationship.

The preference for honesty and clarity in romantic initiation, while seemingly progressive, also reinforces specific dominant masculine ideas. The notion that men should take initiative and display confidence in romantic relationships aligns with long-standing patriarchal norms (Lamont, 2014). This approach can be seen as the performance of gender roles, where men take the initiative to approach women to display or affirm traits traditionally associated with masculinity, per societal expectations and gender norms.

Young men in the study demonstrated a range of strategies, from non-aggressive, standard, and friendship-based approaches to more straightforward methods. These strategies for initiating romantic relationships continue to be shaped by and interact with dominant discourses of masculinity. This reflects the interplay between evolving social norms and persistent masculinity ideals. Critical Feminist Theory reveals that the strategies young men use whether humorous, indirect, or direct, remain situated within dominant gender discourses that frame men as initiators and women as responders. Even when these approaches are non-aggressive or respectful, they sustain a structure where men are expected to perform confident heterosexual masculinity, while women are assigned passive roles. This asymmetry reflects what Bhana and Pattman (2011) describe as the persistence of normative gender roles in young people's romantic and sexual engagements, where boys are expected to initiate and girls to comply. In the South African context, such scripts are reinforced through peer culture, social media, and broader patriarchal norms, limiting the potential for more equitable gender

relations (Morrell, 2002; Ratele, 2016). As a result, even seemingly progressive or self-aware approaches to relationship initiation may inadvertently uphold the patriarchal expectation that men should lead, while women follow.

Unspoken Barriers: What Holds Men Back in Establishing Relationships

In this subtheme, young men revealed various barriers, often unacknowledged, in their attempts to establish romantic relationships. These hidden barriers ranged from internal struggles to societal pressures, collectively shaping how they approach and experience relationship formation. While some young men openly discussed challenges related to confidence and communication, others highlighted more profound psychological obstacles. Lihle, for instance, expressed what many identified as their greatest internal struggle, the fear of rejection:

Lihle: For me, every time I have to approach a woman, I think about them rejecting me, so fear of rejection is the big one, definitely.

The fear of rejection expressed by Lihle speaks to a common experience among men when approaching potential romantic interests. His description of how this fear dominates his thoughts whenever he considers initiating contact with a woman shows the profound psychological impact of potential rejection. This aligns with the findings of Barhana and Büyükşahin-Sunal (2015), who demonstrated that the fear of rejection generates significant anxiety in men, often resulting in discomfort and reluctance to approach women. Cameron and Curry (2020) further support Lihle's view, suggesting that individuals who are fearful of the heartache associated with rejection may avoid social interactions entirely to prevent potential rejection. Lihle's insight reveals that the fear of rejection impacts men's willingness to start romantic relationships and has psychological effects, such as the discomfort of

constantly worrying about it whenever they encounter a potential partner (Hughes et al., 2020). However, fear is not only associated with rejection. Sometimes, the fear of women themselves can also pose a significant obstacle. As one participant, Leo noted:

Leo: Sometimes, igwababa [fear of women], especially when the woman is beautiful, makes you afraid to talk to her.

Leo uses the Zulu term *igwababa* to describe fear when approaching a woman, particularly one perceived as very attractive. His expression aligns with previous research by Hughes and colleagues (2020), who found that men and women often reported experiencing anxiety and fear during initial encounters with someone they found attractive. Such fears can act as significant obstacles, making it difficult for individuals to initiate conversations or connect with potential partners (Cameron & Curry, 2020). From a social constructivist perspective, this fear stems from the internalization of societal expectations regarding masculine performance in relationship initiation. When men internalize dominant social norms about masculine behaviour in relationship formation, particularly the expectation to demonstrate confidence and competence as initiators, the perceived inability to meet these standards generates fear (Berger & Luckmann, 2021). Through socialization processes, men learn that taking charge and showing dominance are essential masculine traits, making any hesitation feel like a failure to perform proper masculinity (Ratele, 2016). This creates a tension where dominant masculine norms expect men to be confident initiators, particularly in romantic pursuits, while the acknowledgment of fear of rejection, women, or stepping in reveals the profound vulnerability that men experience, challenging these rigid expectations of masculine behaviour.

The experiences shared by Lihle and Leo reveal more than just individual struggles within contemporary men. Their narratives demonstrate the complex ways masculine norms,

which demand confidence and taking charge in romantic pursuits, simultaneously generate the very vulnerabilities men are expected to overcome. Through their expressions of fear, we see how men grapple with meeting societal expectations of masculine performance while navigating genuine emotional challenges these expectations produce.

In addition to fear, participants identified male competition as another significant barrier when initiating romantic relationships. Two participants, Muzi and Xola shared:

Muzi: Competition amongst us as agents can also be a challenge. Now, you have to find ways to distinguish yourself from the other guys.

Xola: The fact that you know that you are not the only guy she is talking to makes it hard.

The competition described by participants reveals how initiating romantic relationships becomes a critical site for negotiating and performing masculinity. Men must constantly prove their masculinity values by competing with other men, through displaying material success, social status, or physical attractiveness (Haywood, 2018). As Muzi mentioned, the pressure to make yourself different demonstrates how relationship initiation can result in specific performances of masculinity. At the same time, Xola's observation about knowing that you are not the only guy highlights how awareness of competition intensifies these performances. These performances potentially lead to problematic expressions such as aggression and dominance, traits often associated with toxic masculinity (Mlamla et al., 2021). This competition in initiating relationships reinforces dominant discourses of masculinity by encouraging traits such as dominance and superiority when pursuing romantic relationships with women.

According to Hughes and colleagues (2020), the perception of competition, especially among the same sex, can heighten feelings of jealousy and insecurity. However, these

negative emotions are not the only consequence; the competition that men experience when initiating relationships speaks to broader social structures where women are positioned as objects to be pursued and won rather than equal participants in relationship formation (Hooks, 2004). Therefore, men's focus on competing with other men rather than considering women's agency demonstrates how they view relationship initiation as a game that must be won, with women positioned as the prize rather than active participants in the relationship formation process (Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003). This competition in initiating relationships reinforces dominant discourses of masculinity by perpetuating a hierarchy where men must demonstrate superiority and dominance over other men when approaching women, thereby reproducing dominant masculine ideas in heterosexual romantic relationships.

While the awareness of competition among men presents a significant barrier to forming relationships, Zozo and Joe point out another challenge: difficulty maintaining conversation and experiencing shyness during the first encounter with a potential partner.

Zozo: Sometimes, difficulties in creating or maintaining conversations and awkward silence can turn a woman off.

Joe: Being shy during first interactions can make things go wrong.

Zozo and Joe's observations align with Hughes and colleagues' (2020) findings that individuals often appear awkward, clumsy, and uncomfortable during relationship initiation, creating barriers to forming connections. Zozo's point about difficulties in maintaining conversations resonates with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2004) research, which demonstrates how speech fluency becomes compromised when approaching potential romantic partners. These challenges exposed the complex negotiation of masculine identity in romantic contexts, particularly as they contradict with traditional masculine ideals that position men as naturally confident and socially adept (Apostolou et al., 2018). These participants' narratives

also reveal how men must navigate between societal expectations of masculine social dominance and their lived experiences of the struggles they face. Through acknowledging their struggles with shyness and maintaining conversation, these men actively challenge dominant discourses of masculinity, exposing the disconnect between idealized masculine performance and the complex reality of men's lived experiences in romantic interactions.

Other young men also mentioned that a lack of confidence and self-trust when approaching a potential partner can be another barrier, further complicating the relationship initiation process. Lucky and Zweli shared:

Lucky: Lack of confidence is also a huge challenge when asking a woman out.

Zweli: Looking insecure and not trusting yourself.

The accounts from Lucky and Zweli specifically point to internal struggles with self-worth and trust in one's abilities rather than fear of external consequences. Their insights regarding confidence and self-trust reveal critical psychological dimensions in relationship initiation, particularly how feelings of insecurity and self-doubt shape relationship development (Hughes et al., 2020). Apostolou and colleagues (2018) research supports these reflections, which demonstrates how low self-esteem and negative self-perception fundamentally hinder the formation of romantic connections.

Furthermore, according to Apostolou et al. (2018), individuals with low self-esteem often struggle with self-doubt and insecurity, undermining their ability to initiate and sustain romantic connections. This aligns with Lucky and Zweli's observations, demonstrating how a lack of confidence and self-trust can further complicate the relationship initiation process. These findings suggest changes in the discourses of masculinity surrounding romantic relationship initiation. While elements of hegemonic masculinity persist, particularly in the confidence aspect, there's an emerging recognition of the emotional complexities involved in

approaching potential partners. As de Boise and Hearn (2017) suggest, this transformation signals a more nuanced understanding of masculinity that validates diverse emotional experiences and vulnerabilities in relationship initiation processes.

Young men's experiences show how they adapt their approach to starting romantic relationships in modern society. While they still feel pressure to display hegemonic masculine traits like being initiators, they also recognise the need to be more emotionally aware and respectful. Their behaviour reflects an understanding that society now pays closer attention to how men act in relationship contexts, leading them to carefully consider their approaches to potential partners. The complex navigation of social expectations is particularly evident in young men in a contemporary world defined by social media, mental health awareness, and rapidly evolving gender dynamics (Ratele, 2016). These young men's accounts reveal the persistent tension between societal expectations of masculine confidence and their lived experiences of vulnerability and insecurity. Their strategies in navigating romantic pursuits further show the evolution of masculine identity. Their experiences with challenges such as fear of rejection, competition, and communication difficulties represent more than individual struggles, and they reflect the significant emotional and social barriers characteristic of contemporary dating culture (Lamont, 2014). From a social constructivist perspective, these findings reveal how young men actively participate in redefining masculinity through their dating behaviours, while operating within established frameworks of courtship. Ultimately, their experiences show how initiating romantic relationships remains a profoundly social process, where young men continuously reconstruct their identities while adapting to the contemporary dating landscape. By managing personal vulnerabilities, navigating competitive dynamics, and challenging perspectives, these young men contribute to an evolving narrative of modern masculinity that acknowledges emotional complexity and the need for more equitable relationship dynamics (de Boise & Hearn, 2017).

Negotiating Masculinities: Power, Control, and Resistance in Romantic

Relationships

In this theme, the young men in this study demonstrated a selective engagement with progressive ideals while retaining traditional gender dynamics in their relationships. While they supported modern values, such as sharing responsibilities within relationships, they continued to uphold certain aspects of traditional gender roles, particularly in relationship initiation, decision-making, and emotional expression. The analysis of masculinity performance, power dynamics, and resistance to changing gender roles underscores how these young men navigate the balance between social expectations and contemporary relationship values.

Masculinity on Stage

The sub-theme of masculinity on stage emerges from shared expression in the FGDs. The young men shared that they felt like they were constantly watched in their romantic relationship interactions, as though they were performers on a stage. This sense of being on stage involves the pressure to meet societal expectations, such as the ability to provide and be initiators of relationships. The weight of these expectations creates a constant burden of performance in romantic relationships. When men struggle to meet these social expectations attached to performing masculinity, some may resort to controlling behaviours or withdraw from authentic emotional connection, perpetuating patterns of gender inequality in relationships (Moolman, 2017). This reveals how, despite social progress, expectations surrounding masculinity continue to constrain how young men navigate their romantic relationships, often preventing authentic connection and expression. As participants shared:

Zweli: There is this need to prove oneself as the man by paying for dates, buying gifts and showing chivalrous gestures like opening doors for women, and if you don't do that, you're not a real man.

Mzi: These expectations are unfair and put a lot of pressure on men.

The staging of masculinity reveals how provider masculinity manifests in relationship contexts, as evident in Zweli's case, where men express their masculine identity through prescribed behaviours (Moolman, 2017). When Zweli states that 'you are not a real man' if you fail to perform expected behaviours like paying for dates, his statement demonstrates how masculine identity is validated through financial provision, suggesting that manhood can be denied when men fail to meet these social expectations (Moolman, 2017). This creates significant barriers to relationship initiation for men who cannot meet these financial demands. Zweli's linking of manhood to financial provision reinforces how provider discourse positions masculinity as an achievement to be performed through social interaction, aligning with the social constructivism perspective, which argues that gender identities are created and maintained through social interactions and cultural practices rather than being natural or fixed (Burr, 2015). The performative demands of masculinity, as described by Zweli, contribute to reinforcing gender roles in romantic relationships. Men demonstrate provider masculinity through visible actions such as paying for dates and taking on financial responsibilities. These practices establish a common provider-recipient dynamic, positioning men as financial providers and women as receivers in heterosexual relationships (Eryilmaz & Atak, 2011). This interplay between performances of masculinity and romantic relationships reveals how intimate spaces become sites where traditional gender hierarchies are maintained and reproduced

The performance of masculinity gains additional dimension through Mzi's direct response to the social expectations and performance requirements that Zweli describes. His critique reveals how the social expectations described by Zweli, such as buying gifts and showing chivalrous gestures, create emotional strain, as men must constantly fulfil these

performative demands despite recognising them as unfair and pressuring. While these socially expected masculine behaviours may create an outward sense of masculine validation, they also often inhibit men from expressing their true emotional selves in romantic relationships (Holmes, 2015). The pressure Mzi describes indicates how maintaining specific performances, such as being financially capable, often results in men suppressing their vulnerability, as these discourses of masculinity demand continuous adherence to prescribed behaviours regardless of their emotional impact (Holmes, 2015). Together, Zweli and Mzi's statements show both the demands of masculine performance and the emotional burden the social expectations create in romantic relationships.

While both men and women engage in performative actions to demonstrate their gender identity, men's performances take on additional significance as public displays of approval and attraction (DiDonato & Jakubiak, 2016; Sprecher et al., 2021). Allen (2007) argues that men must continuously prove their masculinity through observable actions, as evidenced in Zweli's description of validating behaviours. These young men's responses demonstrate how the performance of masculinity in romantic relationships involves recognizing both the specific demands and their constraining nature. Young men may recognize prescribed masculine behaviours as problematic while still feeling compelled to perform them (Morrell, 2002). This contradiction persists because the social validation of masculine identity remains deeply tied to these performative acts, making it difficult for men to reject these practices even when they understand their problematic nature

The participants' narratives show how dominant discourses of masculinity extend beyond external social pressures, becoming internalised scripts that shape men's behaviour in romantic relationships. This internalisation process reveals how performances of masculinity persist not only through social validation but also through how men understand and engage in

relationships, even when they recognize their problematic nature. This tension between recognition and continued performance demonstrates the enduring power of discourses of masculinity in maintaining gendered relationship practices despite men's awareness of their negative impact.

The performance of masculinity in romantic relationships becomes more evident through Senzo and Tebza's contributions. While Zweli and Mzi discussed the financial and chivalrous aspects of performing masculinity and the pressure these create for men, Senzo and Tebza reveal additional expectations men must perform across different relationship stages. They shared:

Senzo: Also, as a man, you are expected to take the lead, especially in the early stages, like planning dates.

Tebza: There is an expectation that men are responsible for their partners' happiness; if you can't make her happy, then you are not good enough.

Senzo points out how men's performance of masculinity extends beyond the expectations of initiation and provision, including men's role in taking the lead in relationship interactions, mainly through planning dates and determining romantic progression. His reference to "early stages" points to how the performance of hegemonic masculine roles is exaggerated during relationship initiation. This stage is critical as men must demonstrate they can meet dominant masculine expectations through visible performances like planning dates and taking the initiative (Eaton & Rose, 2011). These initial interactions, as Haywood (2018) argues, shape whether men will be accepted as potential romantic partners by women, determining their success in initiating romantic relationships.

Lamont (2014) argues that relationship practices where men are expected to take initiative persist despite changing gender norms, demonstrating how discourses of

masculinity continue to position men as dominant partners in romantic relationships. The men as leaders discourse, which emerges in Senzo's narrative about planning dates and Tebza's statement about being responsible for their partner's happiness, reveals how men's expected dominance in relationships extends from initiation to maintaining relationship satisfaction. These expectations not only shape how men begin relationships but continue to define their roles throughout the relationship, requiring constant leadership performance among men. The growing pressure on men to both lead relationships and provide emotional support, as seen in Tebza and Senzo's statements, reflects what Hunter (2010) describes as an increase in men's responsibilities without disrupting traditional gender power dynamics. This means that while men are now expected to take on additional emotional roles, these new expectations do not challenge men's dominant position in relationships but add to their perceived control over relationship outcomes.

Senzo and Tebza's statements reveal how men's gender roles change across different relationship stages. While Senzo talks about early-stage expectations of "taking the lead" and planning dates, Tebza underlines how men must maintain their partner's happiness once the relationship is established, showing how men simultaneously navigate these varying demands (Lamont, 2014). These expectations men meet in romantic relationships are continuously reinforced through various social channels. For instance, trending hashtags like #IndodaMust (a man must) on platforms like X (formerly known as Twitter) perpetuate and reinforce common masculine expectations, often prescribing rigid guidelines for what constitutes authentic manhood in relationships (Ngwenyama, 2022; PettyJohn et al., 2019). Such expectations not only place pressure on men, but the consequences of not meeting these performance expectations are significant, with men being labelled as less of a man, as Tebza suggested. This corresponds to Zweli's earlier concern about not being seen as a "real man," demonstrating how the performance of masculinity continues to operate as a standard against

which men's relationship behaviours are evaluated (Moolman, 2017). Adding to this, Siphospoke to the social consequences men face when they deviate from dominant masculine performances in relationships:

Sipho: But when you challenge these expectations, people judge you especially If you express your emotions, they will call you a simp.

Siphos narrative shows how men who attempt to express emotions in romantic relationships face social judgment for challenging performances of masculinity. The term "simp" (a slang term used to mock men who show too much care or attention to women they are romantically interested in) shows how men's emotional expressions are policed in relationships. Meyer (2017) argues that the policing of men's emotional expression in relationships maintains rigid performances of masculinity by stigmatizing men who express vulnerability to their partners, as evident in Siphos description of judgment. Using terms like "simp" reinforces expectations of emotional distance in romantic relationships (Bhana & Pattman, 2011). Siphos view about facing judgment for emotional expression, together with Tebzas concern about being "not good enough" and Zweli's fear of not being seen as a "real man," demonstrates how relationships are a stage where performances of masculinity take place, constraining men emotional experiences and self-understanding through deeply internalized social expectations. The fear of these social labels reveals how deeply embedded masculine expectations are in controlling men's performance of masculinity in relationships, operating not just through explicit rules but through subtle forms of social regulation (Allen, 2007). This stigmatization leads men to perform their masculinity by suppressing their emotions to avoid judgment, thereby reinforcing restrictive norms around emotional expression in heterosexual relationships.

Despite the stigmatization and social pressures to conform to traditional performances of masculinity, some participants, like Mandla and Don, acknowledge the need for alternative ways of performing masculinity in relationships. They mentioned:

Mandla: Men and women need to collaborate, like meeting each other halfway in relationships.

Don: I feel it's time to challenge these gender norms that limit us to express ourselves honestly.

The views expressed by Mandla and Don reflect what Ratele (2015) identify as working through resistance, where men actively participate in challenging gender norms and expectations in relationships. Through Mandla's call for collaboration between men and women and Don's statement about challenging limiting gender norms, their narratives show what Jewkes, Flood, and Lang (2015) describes as men's engagement in developing more progressive ways of performing masculinity in relationships. Their call for challenging discourses of masculinity that position men and women unequally in relationships and restrict men's emotional expression connects to what Shefer, Kruger, and Schepers (2015) identify as young men's growing resistance to restrictive masculine performances. As university students, their narratives correspond with Hamlall's (2018) findings that young men in higher education contexts constantly construct their masculine identities through how they position themselves in romantic relationships. This shows that men's performance of masculinity in romantic relationships is not fixed but can be negotiated and reshaped rather than simply conforming to discourses of masculinity.

Masculinity is constantly on stage in romantic relationships, revealing complex dynamics between dominant discourses of masculinity and emerging resistance. Young men's narratives demonstrate how romantic relationships become a space for masculine

performance, where they must navigate expectations of performing provider and initiator roles while simultaneously seeking to embrace emotional expression and collaborative relationship practices. This creates a space where attempts to challenge these dominant discourses of masculinity are often met with social monitoring, as evidenced by terms like "simp" that work to maintain gender hierarchies. These findings suggest that while university spaces enable some men to question and resist dominant gendered discourses, the broader social structure continues to demand performances that align with established gender norms (Allen, 2007). The pressure to maintain performances of masculinity stems not only from women but also from broader societal expectations (Korobov, 2009). While social structures perpetuate dominant discourses of masculinity, like being an initiator and a provider and maintaining emotional restraint through monitoring, some men actively resist these dominant norms by advocating for shared responsibility in relationships. The tension between men's continued performance of provider, initiator, and emotional restraint discourses and their simultaneous efforts to embrace emotional expression and shared responsibility demonstrates how men both reinforce and challenge dominant discourses of masculinity in romantic relationships, revealing both the resilience of these discourses and the emerging possibilities for redefining masculinity in contemporary romantic relationships

Waiting for Her to Define Us: Power at Play in Relationship Formation.

In this subtheme, young men described a pattern in initiating romantic relationships in which they actively pursue women by going on dates and expressing their feelings but then choose to wait for women to inquire about the relationship's status. This approach reflects a dynamic of power, where men seem to share power while simultaneously exercising control by deciding when and how women should take an active role in relationship initiation.

Monde, Yanga, and Sthe shared their experiences:

Monde: I once told her I liked her and wanted to be in a relationship. I usually wait for her to make the next move and ask if we are an item.

Yanga: I totally agree with Monde. After I have done all the work to show her that I want us to be in a relationship, I can't be the one who asks about the status of the relationship. That is the one thing she has to do.

Sthe: After I tell her how I feel, I let her be the one who has to ask, "What are we?"

The narratives shared by these young men show a significant power dynamic in the relationship initiation stage. When Yanga states he has "done all the work" but insists defining the relationship is "the one thing she has to do," this speaks to the idea of how men have the power to dictate who does what and when in relationship initiation while maintaining their role as primary initiators. The participants' narratives also point to the fact that while men have the power to initiate relationships, they do not necessarily hold the power to confirm the relationship status, which is left to the woman to define. This aligns with Kim et al.'s (2019) argument that power in relationships often manifests through one partner's ability to influence when and how relationships progress through different stages. Furthermore, when Yanga states, "that is the one thing she has to do," this reveals the limitations in the gender roles women can take during relationship initiation. This practice reinforces dominant discourses of masculinity that position men as leaders and decision-makers in relationships (Meyer, 2017), where they determine not only their roles but also prescribe the roles that women should play. In this case, the men decide what constitutes "all the work" they must do first and then assign women the specific task of defining the relationship status. When Monde says, "I usually wait" and Sthe says "I let her," their word choices position them as the authority figures who determine the appropriate timing for relationship progression. As Sassler and Miller (2011) note, even when women are given

specific roles in relationships, these roles are often prescribed and controlled by those who maintain power over the overall relationship development. Yanga's comment "doing all the work" reflects what Malinga & Ratele (2012) describe as a performance of masculinity, which creates an unspoken expectation that men must demonstrate their worthiness through sustained efforts of pursuit and provision. This is evident in how these men control the relationship initiation process whereby they initiate interest, determine when they have fulfilled their roles and responsibilities, and then specifically dictate when and how women should take an active role in the relationships since women are expected to be passive in relationships (Pan & Jacobs, 2021). This distribution of roles and responsibilities in the relationship initiation process perpetuates unequal power relations, positioning women as subordinate in relationship initiation and progression.

While these young men's approach to waiting on women to define the relationship status appears to give women the role of defining the relationship, it also reveals how power operates in more subtle ways. By expecting that their role in pursuing and expressing romantic interest is complete and assigning women the responsibility of defining the relationship, these men reinforce dominant discourses that position men as leaders and decision-makers not through overt displays of power but through prescribing and limiting women's roles in the relationship initiation process.

Masculinity in Control: Resisting Role Reversals

This theme reflects how young men reinforce masculine norms by maintaining control in romantic relationships and resisting shifts in gender roles. While these young men acknowledged the potential benefits of evolving gender roles, they exhibited significant resistance to letting go of control in relationship contexts. Their views highlight a reluctance to embrace role reversals, such as women initiating relationships or taking on financial

responsibilities in dating. Their resistance emerges clearly in their perspectives on women's relationship initiation, as demonstrated in their responses:

Lihle: I like it because it boosts my confidence, but sometimes women do not know what they are doing; they rush things or skip important steps in the process.

Hloni: It's nice to be approached by women. I like to know that someone is interested in me without you constantly having to chase them.

Senzo: Women do not have the etiquette of initiating romantic relationships.

Participants expressed contradictory attitudes toward women initiating romantic relationships. While these young men initially appeared supportive of women taking the initiative, their responses revealed deeply embedded traditional gender beliefs about men's dominance in relationship formation. This dynamic is evident in Lihle's response, stating, "I like it because it boosts my confidence," but immediately questions women's abilities by asserting, "Women do not know what they are doing; they rush things or skip important steps." Similarly, Senzo's statement that "women do not have the etiquette of initiating romantic relationships" reinforces assumptions about women's inadequacy in this domain. These responses reflect masculine norms that position men as primary initiators of romantic relationships. Sprecher and colleagues (2021) findings support this observation that gender differences in initiation strategies persist across various settings, reflecting societal assumptions about men's exclusive possession of essential relationship initiation skills. The participants' perspectives align with MacGregor and Cavallo's (2011) study on women's agency in relationship initiation. This reveals that despite increasing support for gender equality, deeply rooted roles continue to influence perceptions and behaviours, affecting who is seen as appropriate for initiating relationships. The tension between acceptance while maintaining gender hierarchies indicates the complex ways men adapt to protect their

position as dominant figures in a relationship context. For instance, even when expressing positive views like Lihle's statement, "I like it," these affirmations are immediately followed by conditions about women's inadequate capabilities, demonstrating how common gender expectations constrain support for women's initiative. Culture emerges as another way to justify resistance to women's relationship initiation. This is evident in Lucky's statement:

Lucky: It feels a bit off. Culturally, men should take the lead in relationships. She is stepping into a role that is not hers.

When Lucky states, "Culturally, men should take the lead in relationships," he explicitly defines relationship roles through cultural expectations (Hamlall, 2018; Mshweshwe, 2020). This cultural justification demonstrates what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) describe as hegemonic masculinity, where men maintain dominance through culturally accepted practices and beliefs. By framing relationship initiation as culturally prescribed for men, Lucky's statement reinforces gendered hierarchies that position women's initiation as culturally inappropriate. As Allen (2007) demonstrates, such cultural justifications reinforce dominant discourses of masculinity that privilege men's control in intimate relationships. Lucky's perspective further reveals that initiating romantic relationships is not an isolated, individual act but one deeply embedded within shared cultural norms, values, and expectations (Hunter, 2010). Using culture to legitimize men's control over relationship initiation aligns with Isaacs and Swartz's (2022) findings on how men employ cultural discourses to construct masculine identities. Thus, culture becomes a tool for maintaining men's control in relationships while appearing to uphold values.

While Lihle, Senzo, and Lucky revealed resistance to women initiating relationships through questioning competence and cultural justifications, Zola and Ntu's responses

demonstrate how men feel when women take on the role of financial provider, demonstrate how resistance to role reversals extends to financial aspects of dating:

Zola: When she pays on the first date, it makes me feel like I'm not doing my part. I feel the need to make up for it later.

Ntu: If she pays for our dates, my ego is crushed for real.

The responses from Zola and Ntu reveal how young men wish to maintain control through finances, particularly during relationship initiation. Their discomfort with this role reversal demonstrates how maintaining control through financial provision remains central to masculine identity performance during courtship (Dworkin et al., 2012; Hunter, 2010). Zola's need to "make up for it later" when a woman pays aligns with Tofts (2013) observation that men often employ compensatory practices to reassert control when gender roles are challenged. These responses reflect how the discourse of men as providers and financial controllers shapes their resistance to role reversals in relationship contexts. Furthermore, their reactions align with Shefer and colleagues (2015) findings that men often resist changes threatening their control during relationship formation, even while navigating modern dating expectations. While contemporary dating contexts offer opportunities for shared financial responsibilities, these young men's responses reveal how maintaining financial control serves to resist role reversals (Cameron & Curry, 2020). These findings and earlier responses about relationship initiation illustrate how men employ various strategies to resist changes that challenge dominant masculine roles in romantic relationships. Whether through questioning women's competence in initiation, invoking cultural justifications, or maintaining financial control, these responses demonstrate consistent patterns of resistance to role reversals. The patterns of maintaining control extend to how men manage their emotional expression during relationship initiation. This is evident in Mzi's response:

Mzi: I don't like showing too much emotion in a relationship. At the start, I put in a lot of effort, but as time goes on, I ease off. It's like a piggy bank, you save up at the beginning, then stop.

Contemporary dating culture increasingly expects men to display emotional vulnerability and expressiveness in relationships (de Boise & Hearn, 2017). However, Mzi's approach of initially investing in high emotional effort and then deliberately withdrawing demonstrates resistance to sustaining these new expectations. This calculated display of emotional engagement aligns with Holmes's (2015) findings that men often manage emotional vulnerability tactically during relationship formation to maintain their position of power. His deliberate withdrawal of emotional engagement shows how men resist changes to dominant masculine norms that associate manhood with emotional restraint. By initially displaying emotional availability before moving to emotional distance, this approach enables men to appear as meeting contemporary expectations while ultimately reinforcing dominant discourses that link masculinity with emotional control in relationships.

Exploring how men negotiate their masculine identity when initiating romantic relationships reveals how men's power adapts rather than diminishes in contemporary relationships. While some of these remarks appear light-hearted, they reflect a deeper discomfort with disruptions to traditional gender roles. Participants framed women's attempts to initiate as inappropriate, or culturally misaligned, suggesting that men remain the legitimate initiators of romantic engagement. From a feminist perspective, these responses illustrate how dominant gender ideologies are maintained through everyday interactions. Drawing on Critical Feminist Theory, this discomfort can be interpreted as a defence of patriarchal scripts where the act of initiating is not merely about starting a relationship, but about asserting and affirming masculine control (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2008). By resisting role reversals, participants actively police women's agency in romantic contexts, maintaining

men's power over the pace, direction, and legitimacy of romantic relationships (Butler, 1988; Hooks, 2004). This aligns with Butler's (1988) notion of gender performativity, where young men engage in practices that reproduce gender hierarchies, even as social norms evolve. Similarly, Hooks (2004) argues that such discourses uphold relational power imbalances by casting women as passive and men as active, legitimising male dominance and female submission in romantic relationships. However, emerging voices of resistance among some participants suggest the potential for authentic transformation in how masculinity is expressed during relationship formation. This tension between preservation and progression reflects broader societal struggles in redefining gender roles, highlighting how relationship initiation remains a critical site where dominant discourses of masculinity are both reinforced and occasionally challenged.

Chapter Five: Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study explored how young men navigate the initiation of romantic relationships, specifically examining whether their strategies reinforce or challenge dominant discourses of masculinity. Drawing on Social Constructionism and Critical Feminist Theory, the research reveals how masculinity is actively constructed through social interactions, where power dynamics between men and women shape relationship initiation. Through focus group discussions with thirty male university students, the study uncovered how men actively construct their masculine identity through their relationship initiation choices, demonstrating both adherence to and resistance against traditional gender norms. The three main themes from the young men's narratives are evolving trends in relationship initiation, the social dynamics they navigate, and the negotiation of masculinity, which reflect how gender practices are actively constructed and negotiated in contemporary relationship contexts. These findings indicate that the process of initiating romantic relationships both reinforces and challenges dominant discourses of masculinity, showing how young men simultaneously adhere to and resist traditional gender norms in their relationship practices.

This study demonstrates how initiating romantic relationships is a critical site where young men construct their masculinity actively. The findings provide significant insights into how young men present relationship initiation as casual while being acutely aware of pressures created by discourses of masculinity. What is particularly interesting from this inquiry is how young men reinforce dominant discourses through their strategic approaches to relationship initiation. The research notably reveals previously unexplored dimensions of power in these interactions, where women exercise power, particularly in defining relationship status and progression. This challenges assumptions about passive female participation in relationship formation. This power movement between men and women

during relationship initiation demonstrates how forming romantic relationships is a crucial space for understanding evolving gender dynamics among young men in the contemporary world. Young men maintain established gender roles while appearing to embrace contemporary dating practices. They perform masculinity through strategic management of emotional expression, displaying vulnerability initially but withdrawing as relationships progress, demonstrating how they negotiate between modern expectations of emotional openness and traditional masculine control (de Boise & Hearn, 2017). Despite adopting casual approaches to relationships, men maintain control over relationship progression by determining when and how status gets defined, revealing how informality can mask existing power dynamics. The research notably revealed how men's resistance to role reversals operates through questioning women's competence or invoking cultural justifications, showing how gender hierarchies are maintained through seemingly progressive practices (Morrell, Jewkes, & Lindegger, 2012). Moreover, men's insistence on financial control in dating contexts, despite acknowledging women's economic independence, demonstrates how provider masculinity adapts to contemporary settings while maintaining gender roles (Hunter, 2010).

The social dynamics of relationship initiation reveal specific pressures on men to perform confidence and emotional restraint. Peer networks and online platforms, while appearing as modern spaces for guidance, often reinforce traditional masculinity through shared narratives about proper masculine behaviour in relationships (Marshall, 2010). Notably, men's limited engagement with critical discourses like #MenAreTrash indicates a gap between the public critique of masculine practices and men's everyday experiences of relationship formation. This absence of critiques of masculinity indicates a broader gap in men's awareness of changing societal expectations of masculinity. Despite being aware of evolving norms, young men avoid engaging with critiques and discourses that challenge

traditional gender practices, highlighting the need for more deliberate efforts to engage them in critical discussions about masculinity (Ratele, 2015).

The significance of this study lies in revealing how masculinity is constructed and explicitly negotiated through relationship initiation practices. This research explains why gender hierarchies persist by showing how men's relationship practices maintain power dynamics through adaptive rather than overt means. These insights suggest the need for specific interventions: creating facilitated discussion spaces where men critically examine their relationship practices, developing peer education programs that challenge established masculine norms, and promoting alternative expressions of masculine identity in relationship contexts. By understanding how masculinity shapes relationship dynamics through subtle practices of control and resistance, we can better address gender inequality in romantic relationships and promote more equitable approaches to relationship formation.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into young men's experiences of initiating romantic relationships, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample was restricted to students from the University of Cape Town, which limited the representation of experiences from young men with different educational, socio-economic, and regional backgrounds. This narrow sampling frame may have excluded perspectives that could significantly enrich the understanding of masculinities and romantic practices in broader South African contexts.

Second, the sample did not include any Indian participants, which meant that key cultural perspectives particularly those shaped by South Africa's diverse racial and cultural landscape were absent from the findings. While the inclusion of Black, white, and coloured participants provided some degree of racial diversity, the absence of Indian men limited the study's ability to engage with a more plural and inclusive set of relational experiences.

Third, the exclusive use of focus group discussions, although useful for encouraging dialogue and interaction, may have limited participants' willingness to disclose deeply personal or sensitive experiences. Some men may have felt uncomfortable sharing stories of vulnerability, confusion, or non-conforming behaviours in a group setting particularly when those narratives challenged dominant ideals of masculinity.

Fourth, while the sample size of 30 participants allowed for meaningful group discussions, it may have limited the range of experiences and perspectives captured in the study. A larger and more diverse sample might have revealed additional patterns or contradictions in how young men approach romantic initiation across different contexts.

Lastly, the use of the term *ukushela* in the title *Ukushela: Men's Ways of Initiating Romantic Relationships* while contextually meaningful, may have unintentionally shaped how the study was perceived and who felt invited to participate. Rooted in isiZulu, the term may have led some potential participants, particularly those unfamiliar with Nguni languages or cultural references, to view the study as relevant only to Black South African men who are familiar with the term. Although the sample included some participants who did not identify as Black, the majority 22 out of 30 did, suggesting that the framing may have affected its accessibility to a broader demographic. While *ukushela* resonated with many participants' descriptions of romantic initiation, its use in the title may have introduced a perceived specificity that was not fully aligned with the study's broader aims or diverse sample.

Recommendations for Future Research

To address the limitations outlined above, future research should aim to broaden the demographic scope by including young men from a variety of educational backgrounds, including those who are not enrolled in university. This would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of romantic initiation practices and how they intersect with class, region, and differing access to social resources.

In terms of racial and cultural diversity, future studies should strive to include participants from underrepresented groups, such as Indian South African men, to offer a fuller picture of how masculinity and romantic practices are shaped across South Africa's racialised social landscape. Attention to these differences is especially important in a society where race, class, and gender intersect in complex ways.

Methodologically, combining focus groups with individual interviews could improve the depth and nuance of the data collected. While focus groups are useful for observing group dynamics and shared cultural narratives, individual interviews may offer a more comfortable space for participants to reflect on sensitive or emotionally charged experiences that they may be reluctant to share in a group.

Finally, future research should also be attentive to the framing of titles and recruitment materials, particularly when using context-specific language. While terms like *ukushela* can capture important local meanings, researchers should consider how such language might affect the perceived inclusivity of the study. Using more inclusive or widely understood terms may help ensure that individuals from different racial and cultural backgrounds, as well as those who do not speak the language from which the term originates, feel that the study is relevant to them. Future studies building on these foundations will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of masculinities and romantic practices across South Africa's diverse social landscape, ultimately enriching both scholarly knowledge and practical interventions aimed at promoting healthy relationships.

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Appendices

Appendix A- Study Advertisement



INVITATION TO MEN TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

HEY MEN. ARE YOU GOOD OR BAD AT INITIATING ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS?
DO YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT?

IF YES.

WE INVITE YOU TO PARTICIPATE IN A GROUP DISCUSSION WITH OTHER MEN TO SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES OF INITIATING A ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP.

THIS DISCUSSION WILL INFORM A STUDY CONDUCTED TOWARDS AN MA IN PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH AT THE UCT PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT. THE STUDY AIMS TO EXPLORE MEN'S PRACTICES OF INITIATING ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS WITH WOMEN IN TODAY'S COMPLEX DATING WORLD.

✔ Who can participate?

1. Men 18 years or older.
2. Currently or previously been in a romantic relationship with a woman
3. You must be a registered student at the University of Cape Town

📍 Where and when will the discussions take place?

Discussions will take place at the University of Cape Town, Psychology Department and will take approximately one hour. Time and date to be confirmed.

If you meet the above criteria and are interested in participating in the study, please contact Sizakele Ndhlovu using the details provided below.

☎ Contact Details:

Call, SMS, or WhatsApp: 079 4846 228
Email: NDHSIZ001@myuct.ac.za Or LoveMasculinity@gmail.com

Feel free to invite others who might be interested

Appendix B –Focus Group Guide

| Focus area | Questions and Activities |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Introduction | <p>Introduction:</p> <p>Start by introducing ourselves and thank the participants. Explain what this study is about and what we hope to learn.</p> <p>Describe how we'll proceed, mentioning the main things we will discuss about</p> <p>Cover practical details like how long we'll talk, planned breaks, and guidelines for respectful discussion.</p> <p>Make sure everyone is comfortable participating. Clarify the approach to recording, emphasizing the confidentiality of their contributions.</p> |
| Experiences of romantic relationships | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Where do people usually meet others these days to start a relationship? 2. Can you share your most recent or memorable relationship experience? 3. What are the social and cultural expectations when it comes to starting relationships? 4. How have the ways people start romantic relationships changed over the years, and has your approach changed? 5. What challenges have you faced in initiating romantic relationships? 6. Can you share any experiences of unsuccessful attempts at starting relationships, and what do you think went wrong? 7. Can you share any experiences of relationships that were not initiated by you? 8. Are there any strategies you believe guarantee the success of a relationship? 9. Where do boys or men usually learn how to initiate relationships? 10. Who do you typically talk to about starting relationships? |

| | |
|----------|--|
| Wrap -Up | Before we wrap up, any last thoughts or insights you'd like to add? Your input has been great, thanks for sharing! It's been awesome chatting with all of you! |
|----------|--|

Appendix C-Ethical Approval Letter



UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

Department of Psychology

University of Cape Town Rondebosch 7701 South Africa
 Telephone (021) 650 3417
 Fax No. (021) 650 4104

06 February 2024

Sizakele Ndlovu
 Department of Psychology
 University of Cape Town
 Rondebosch 7701

Dear Sizakele

I am pleased to inform you that ethical clearance has been given by an Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Humanities for your study, *Ukushela: Men's ways of initiating romantic relationships*. The reference number is PSY2024-002.

I wish you all the best for your study.

Yours sincerely

Lauren Wild (PhD)

Associate Professor

Chair: Ethics Review Committee

Appendix D- Informed Consent Form



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Informed Consent Form

You are invited to take part in the research project titled "Ukushela: Men's Ways of Initiating Romantic Relationships." This study seeks to explore men's (18 years and older) practices of initiating romantic relations with women in today's complex dating world, with the aim of understanding how these practices are shaped by ideas or beliefs about being a man in the context of romantic relationships.

Please read the following information carefully and feel free to ask any questions you may have. The researcher will also be available to discuss any concerns or provide clarification.

1. Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore how the methods, strategies, or practices that men use to start romantic relationships relate to their ideas and beliefs about being a man in the context of romantic relationships.

2. Procedures

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in a one-hour focus group discussion. The focus group will involve discussing your experiences, observations, and opinions about how men start romantic relationships with women. These discussions will be recorded to ensure accurate data collection for research purposes.

3. Confidentiality

The researchers will maintain strict confidentiality regarding all information shared during the focus groups. Your real name will not be used, and any personal information or individual responses will not be reported in a way that could identify you. All collected information will be securely stored on a password-protected laptop. Access to this stored data

will be limited to the researcher and the supervisor. While we cannot ensure that other participants will keep the information discussed confidential, we request that participants **do not** share any information discussed during the session with individuals outside the discussion group.

4. Voluntary Participation

Participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time. Your decision to participate or withdraw will not have any impact on your relationship with the researcher or with UCT.

5. Risks and Benefits

Taking part in this study involves very low risk. The main thing to keep in mind is that you might feel a little sad or uneasy when talking about personal experiences with others in the group. Just remember that you are not required to answer any questions or share anything you are not comfortable sharing. To make sure you have access to support, we will provide you with a sheet with information on where you can find free or low-cost counselling if you feel like you need someone to talk to. It is important to note that participating in this study may not benefit you directly.

1. Refreshments:

After the focus group discussion, light refreshments will be offered to all participants as a gesture of appreciation for your time and contribution to the study.

7. Consent for Data Use:

By agreeing to participate in this research project, you give your consent for the researcher to record, transcribe, and use the data collected during the focus group discussions for research purposes only.

8. Contact Information:

If you have questions about the study, please feel free to contact the following people:

Sizakele Ndhlovu (Researcher): 079 4846 228

Dr Refiloe Makama (Supervisor): 021 650 1749

If you have any questions, comments, or complaints about your rights as a study participant, please contact Ms Mia Karriem at the Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town: 021 650 3417 or email mia.karriem@uct.ac.za

I, _____ (participant name), confirm that I have read and understood the information provided above. I willingly consent to participate in this study.

Thank You

SECTION B

Permission to Audio Record and Confidentiality Agreement

I, _____ (participant name), understand and agree that:

(Place a tick [✓] in the boxes to indicate your agreement)

- The focus group discussions may be recorded for research purposes only.

- I commit to keep all the information shared during the focus group session confidential and will not share or repeat any details discussed during the session with others.

Appendix E- Counselling Services Information Sheet



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Counselling Support Resources

If you feel upset or concerned about something discussed during our group discussion, these are places where you can seek counselling support. Your well-being is important, and these organizations are here to help.

1. University of Cape Town Student Wellness Service (SWS): Counselling Services

- Book an appointment on the SWS online booking platforms, accessible via the SWS pages on the DSA website <https://uct.ac.za/dsa/student-wellness-service/appointments-SWS>

SWS's 24-hour telephonic counselling services are available during weekends and after hours. Reach them at:

- ICAS counselling line: 0800 872 676
- Higher Health Counselling: 0800 36 36 36

2. South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) UCT Student Careline

- Offers 24/7 telephonic counselling, advice, referral facilities, and general support to individuals facing mental health challenges or contemplating suicide.

- Call: 0800 24 25 26 (free from a Telkom line)
- SMS: 31393 (for a call-me-back)

3. Family and Marriage Society of South Africa (FAMSA) Western Cape

- Offers relationship counselling.

- Appointments:

- Call: 021 447 0170
- Email: appointments@famsawc.org.za
- Office: 9 Bowden Road, Observatory, Cape Town

4. Lifeline Western Cape

- Counselling Line: 021 461 1111

- WhatsApp Call: 063 709 2620

- To book in-person counselling (Cape Town): 021 461 1113

- To book in-person counselling (Khayelitsha): 021 461 9197

- Email: info@lifelinewc.org.za

- Website: [Lifeline Western Cape] (<https://lifelinewc.org.za>)

Remember, seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness. As Oprah Winfrey wisely said, "It's not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters." Take care of yourself.