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Exploring Heteronormativity and the Illusion of the “Real Man”: A Case Study of Sivuyile (Siv) Ngesi

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we aim to explore public reactions to non-normative expressions of masculinity within South African society. We argue that although society has become more accepting of such expressions, there still exists public criticism and heteronormative labelling of sexuality and gender. The case study of a local entertainment celebrity, Sivuyile Ngesi, is used to interrogate the illusion of the “real man” and the construction of heteronormative masculinities in the South African context. Ngesi’s personal portrayal of his masculine identity is unconventional and provides an example of an atypical expression of a Black African heterosexual identity. In the paper we draw on a range of local media sources, as well as an in-depth interview with Ngesi himself, to discuss an idiosyncratic vision of an alternative Black African masculine identity and the realities and implications around it.



KEYWORDS

masculinity;
heteronormativity;
heterosexuality; “real man”;
South Africa

Introduction

Expressions of Black African masculinities in South Africa have their roots in heteropatriarchy and heteronormativity. These expressions are further complicated by cultural and religious convictions that form the basis of an idealised masculine performance among Black African men (Ratele 2011, 2014). The construction of normative masculine identities is then often deeply ingrained in the socialisation of young boys along the lines of society’s expectations (Langa 2020). There is evidence that highlights the widespread phenomenon wherein various societal institutions promote a particular type of masculinity that favours heterosexuality. Men are discouraged from exhibiting any behaviour deemed feminine because femininity is perceived as a sign of weakness and going against the heteronormative “ideal” of what it means to be a man (Kiguwa and Langa 2017; Maake, Rugunanan, and Smuts 2023). These dominant masculinity tropes perpetuate normative gender norms and drive the gender binary.

Considering these societal expectations and pressures to conform to a specific normative masculine identity, little space is given to men who long to go against this norm.

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Although the South African society has become more accepting of non-normative expressions of masculinities, heteronormative discourses continue to remain which aim to disqualify certain men from being considered a “real man” (Siswana and Kiguwa 2018; Smuts 2020). It is this very notion of what it means to be a “real man” that this paper wants to unpack through the critical analysis of South African citizens’ reactions to the lifestyle of Sivuyile (Siv) Ngesi, a popular 38-year-old South African male actor, comedian, producer, and television presenter.

Ngesi is a prominent Black African celebrity known for, among other things, appearing in various South African rugby advertisements and for being the presenter on a lifestyle magazine show called “The Man Cave”, which first appeared on South African television in 2015. As the name suggests, “The Man Cave” caters to a male audience and features segments on cars, sport stars, outdoor adventures, and competitive challenges—activities normatively associated with the male sex. Ngesi also has a strong online social media presence. He regularly shares his personal interests on platforms such as X (previously Twitter) and Instagram, often posting photos of himself in a Springbok rugby jersey, lifting weights, or boxing.

It is Ngesi’s interests in non-conventional gendered expressions, however, that have sparked public conversations regarding his sexual and masculine identities. His participation in pole-dancing and ballet, which are socially considered to be female interests, have raised discussions of what constitutes a “real man”. More notably, though, his adoption of a drag persona, i.e. wearing make-up and female clothes, has made many people question his sexual identity. Ngesi has publicly shared his journey in drag with pictures and videos, documenting his transition from a male to a female appearance. Ngesi has named his drag queen persona “Sivanna”, which is a play on his given birth name. In January 2021, he even participated in the #bussitchallenge, which rapidly gained traction on X (previously Twitter), featuring women transitioning from casual to formal clothing, and in some cases lingerie, with make-up. In his version of the challenge, Ngesi is seen assertively lifting weights in a Superman shirt before transitioning into female drag and posing gracefully in a manner that is stereotypically considered soft and feminine.

Ngesi identifies as heterosexual and questions the notion that there is such a thing as a “real man”. He also rejects the idea that men should be forced to act in typically (hetero)-normative ways. Although some have praised Ngesi for challenging gender stereotypes and for his bold expression of a non-normative gender identity within the public sphere, many have criticised him, claiming that he is gay and does not conform to what is socially considered to be a “real man”. Others have interpreted Ngesi’s drag performances as his way of “coming out” as gay and have applauded him for doing so, despite him identifying as a heterosexual man.

The data presented in the paper are derived from a variety of social and print media content and radio interviews, as well as from an in-depth interview conducted with Ngesi by the authors. In this paper, we use Siv Ngesi’s personal journey to reimagining his own masculine identity as a case study to illustrate how alternative expressions of masculinity are shaped within a broader heteronormative context, which ultimately brings into question the conventional societal definition of what constitutes a “real man”. Ngesi’s bold redefinition of his own masculinity undeniably opens an intellectual space for contemplating discussions on gender performance; the privilege associated with being able to transgress from conventional gender norms; and the significance of intersecting identities.

“What is a “real man” really?”: interrogating dominant conceptions of masculinity

Author 1: What does being a “real man” mean to you?

Ngesi: I think ... even that question. What is a *real man* really?

(Personal interview with Ngesi, 24 May 2022).

The construction of masculinity, particularly the pervasive concept of hegemonic masculinity, as introduced by Connell (1987; 1995), reveals the immense societal pressures imposed on men. Hegemonic masculinity gains dominance from the normative social conceptions of manhood in a particular space at a specific point in time (Connell 1987). This compels men to adhere to predefined gender expectations that govern the conduct and demeanour of a so-called “real man”. These expectations, prevalent in diverse cultures, predominantly endorse heterosexuality (Connell 2000). In alignment with Connell’s (1987, 1995) framework, it perpetuates a hierarchal structure wherein heterosexual men, who conform to heteronormative ideals of masculinity, assume positions of power over non-heterosexual men. Furthermore, the inability of certain heterosexual men to conform to these normative gendered constructs may result in their exclusion from the esteemed notion of what it means to be a “real man”.

Within these complex societal constructions, the framework of masculinity plays a vital role in shaping the identity of men. However, this construct is not an inherent quality but rather a set of cultural norms and expectations that significantly influence individuals’ self-perception and social status. Heteronormative societies often dictate a narrow definition of masculinity, creating an idealised archetype that serves as the standard for male behaviour and expression.

Culturally specific conceptions of a “real man” commonly revolve around strict heteronormative norms, where heterosexual men who conform to these ideals are granted a position of dominance and authority (Connell 2005). This narrow definition creates an imbalance of power, perpetuating a hierarchical structure where non-heterosexual men are marginalised and often rendered invisible. By exclusively valuing heterosexuality, society perpetuates the notion that masculinity is inherently tied to a specific sexual identity, leaving those who deviate from this norm to navigate a society that does not fully recognise or appreciate their experiences and identities (Ratele 2013; Speice 2020). African cultural practices such as the Xhosa *ulwaluko*, the rite of passage that initiates young boys into manhood, reinforce the dominant traditional ideas of a hegemonic heterosexual masculinity because they are rooted in heteropatriarchal gender norms (Ratele 2006, 2011, 2016; Scott 2021). However, the pressure to conform to heteronormative gender roles and expectations can have a detrimental impact on heterosexual men as well. Those who do not meet the expectations imposed by these normative standards of masculinity may find themselves excluded or stigmatised, falling short of the idealised version of a “real man” (Msibi 2009).

Research conducted in South Africa has shed light on the prevailing notion of a “real man” within certain communities, highlighting characteristics such as aggression, bravery, strength, leadership, provider status, and protectors of the family, with a predominant emphasis on heterosexuality (Langa 2020; Meyer 2017; Ratele 2014; Siswana and Kiguwa 2018). In many South African communities, masculinity is then typically constructed within the framework of heterosexual gender norms, which place significant

emphasis on marrying women (including multiple wives, as polygamy is traditionally acknowledged and supported by law), desiring to have children, and perpetuating one's family or clan lineage (Ratele 2013, 2011; Siswana and Kiguwa 2018). Morrell's (2006) qualitative investigations on fatherhood and masculinity in South Africa revealed that the performance of masculinity among boys and young men in impoverished communities is contingent upon heterosexual success and participation in specific activities such as having multiple sexual partners, engaging in violence, and dominating women and minority groups. Similarly, in their qualitative study conducted in KwaZulu-Natal, Gibbs, Sikweyiya, and Jewkes (2014) explored young men's constructions of masculine identities within informal urban settlements. They found that men's understanding of masculinity is deeply rooted in their heterosexual identities, intertwined with the presence of violence (Gibbs, Sikweyiya, and Jewkes 2014). A participant in Meyer's (2017) study, which focused on the meanings that young male orphans attach to manhood, revealed: "Money makes a man, and gives a man power". This remark underscores the reality that a man's authority and control often hinge upon his material ability to be a provider, and ultimately hold more power in society. Within this context, power, and the expectation of respect from women and children are considered virtues inherent to the concept of being a "real man" (Meyer 2017).

When we asked Ngesi what he would consider to be a "real man", he responded:

I think ... even that question. What *is* a real man really? You know? What men were taught what a real man is, is a load of crap. I think for me, being an authentic vulnerable man, I've gotten more attention than when I wasn't this guy. To be able to find the strength and vulnerability within masculinity has gotten me more attention from women and men than I have ever received when I wasn't. You know what I mean? I think ... Toxic masculinity isn't just pushed upon people by men—it's a systematic fuck-up! That people don't want to admit. That *women* don't want to admit. Patriarchy is a system that has no gender, in my humble opinion. Because there are women who are continuously pushing rape culture. And patriarchy is just a fuck up—I'm sorry. It is the only way to put it. And I feel like it will not change until everyone realises that it's a systematic flaw, but I wish that when I was younger, I was taught the strength of vulnerability, the strength of accountability, and the strength of consent. I don't think the system is built in a way to tell us as men this thing.
(Personal interview with Ngesi, 24 May 2022).

Ngesi expresses a critical view of masculinity, and especially toxic masculinity, attributing it to a systemic problem rather than solely the actions of individual men. He further argues that the effects of patriarchy, often associated with male dominance, is a flawed system impacting on and perpetuated by both men and women. Within the same vein, the ways in which toxic masculinity manifests in society tend to stereotypically frame men as aggressive, prone to violence and restricted from displaying emotion, which is tied to macro societal structures (Gray 2021). Despite there being plenty debates around how the term "toxic masculinity" could be understood within scholarly work, the ways in which this term serves to reproduce gender hierarchies are particularly relevant to the discussion presented in this paper (Waling 2019; Harrington 2021).

Ngesi further conveys dissatisfaction with the concept of a "real man", going as far as to question if there is such a thing as a "real man"—and if there is, what would that man look like? Bringing attention to the notion of the "real man" raises concerns around contemporary gender norms that have been perpetuated for centuries, and which is not

exclusively designed to oppress women; instead, both men and women find themselves negatively impacted by these gendered roles (Gray 2021). In his personal life, Ngesi rejects traditional patriarchal notions of what it means to be a “real man” and firmly believes that what he was taught about masculinity as a young person was problematic.

From an early age, Black boys are socialised into heteronormative constructions of gender that emphasise a traditional heterosexual masculinity (Kimmel 1994; Langa 2020). They spend their adolescent years and adulthood working towards achieving this hegemonic form of masculinity and trying to live up to this notion of being a “real man”. The fear of being perceived as gay encourages young boys and men to exaggerate the heteronormative directives of masculinity (Kimmel 1994; Msibi 2009). This fear is articulated in Langa’s (2020) study with young adolescent boys from Alexander township in Johannesburg, South Africa, where he found that the young boys were preoccupied with attaining manhood from an early age. Often these boys would use African cultural traditions and religion to invalidate non-heterosexual masculinities and justify homophobia (Langa 2020). For instance, they avoided association with gay boys and bullied them at school to prove their masculinity (Langa 2020). Ngesi can relate to this type of gender narrative but actively attempts to undo the heteronormative gender socialisation that shaped his early perceptions of masculinity and what it meant to be a man.

In his view of being a man, Ngesi emphasises allowing oneself to be authentically vulnerable, accountable, and respecting consent; attributes he did not learn in his younger years. His dogma contradicts a lot of dominant conceptions of masculinity prevalent in South Africa, as well as in other parts of the world. Men are not usually taught to allow themselves to be vulnerable, and, in their socialisation, emphasis is often placed on being superior, exploiting women and other men while enforcing their dominance (Morrell 2006; Myrtilinen, Khattab, and Naujoks 2017; Ratele 2014). As mentioned, this experience rings true outside of South Africa as well. For instance, Kerman and Betrus (2019) conducted a study in Turkey on young men’s conceptions of masculinity and gender roles and found that these men considered superiority, toughness, and self-sufficiency as ideal characteristics of a “real man”. Superiority was related to perceived dominance over women, being heads of households, and having the final say in their homes, whereas toughness referred to strength and being physically stronger than women, and self-sufficiency was related to self-confidence and the ability to overcome (Kerman and Betrus 2019). Similarly, in a study that was undertaken in Philadelphia, in the United States, on ideologies of masculinity and sexual risk among Black heterosexual men, it was found that, first, having multiple concurrent sexual female partners was considered by participants intrinsic to being a “real” Black man. Second, the participants held the notion that Black men should be heterosexual and did not consider gay men or men who have sex with men (MSM) as “real men” (Bowleg, Teti, and Tschann 2011). The participants’ descriptions of gay men and MSM perpetuated the stereotype that they are like women and that they are weak, which is notably different from “real” Black men (Bowleg, Teti, and Tschann 2011).

Likewise, Barker and Ricardo (2005) undertook an extensive qualitative study in Sub-Saharan Africa focusing on the construction of masculinity among young men and found that achieving the status of being a “real man” was closely linked to their sexual experience, financial independence, securing employment, and starting a family. Sexual identity also played a role in young men’s construction of masculinity; however, it was

not explored extensively in this study because most countries, except South Africa, do not recognise same-sex relationships. The argument was that being a “real man” was not about being gay but was associated with not behaving like a woman, further reinforcing heteronormative gender binaries. Ultimately, the heteronormative and heteropatriarchal conceptions of masculinity informed the questions raised by the public too about Ngesi’s sexual identity when he took on a female drag queen persona.

Heterosexual male drag and notions of masculinity

Drag is associated with individuals who adopt exaggerated characteristics typically associated with a gender unlike their own. Drag queens, in particular, are typically men who present a hyper-feminine appearance, featuring elaborate makeup, glamorous outfits, and exaggerated feminine behaviours. According to Moncrieff and Lienard (2017), drag queens are more common among the gay male culture, as it defies gender-normative stereotypes that dictate that “real men” should not engage in such behaviour. However, some drag queens do not identify as gay men. Despite this reality, Ngesi’s participation in drag have challenged people’s perceptions around (hetero)sexuality and around traditional notions of masculinity in South Africa.

Historically, in South Africa, drag has predominantly been considered as a gay phenomenon, and many people still think that to be true. The history of drag in South Africa can be traced back to the 1950s and 1960s. During this time, popular tabloid magazines presented sensationalised coverage of drag queens, often painting them in a negative light, while also demonising gay men (Chetty 1994). This does not come as a surprise, as apartheid South Africa had numerous restrictions on homosexuality and gender non-conformity (Gevisser and Cameron 1994). *Moffie* drag queens, as they were popularly known, dressed in female clothes, wore exaggerated make-up, and performed extravagant personas, which were typically regarded as socially unacceptable (Chetty 1994). Regardless of these unconventional expressions of gender, the public was fascinated by the entire spectacle of drag. Chetty (1994) argues that drag became synonymous with gay culture and identities and perpetuated the stereotypes that gay men, specifically drag queens, wanted to become women and needed sex change operations. Although the history of drag in South Africa is more vast than what is covered in this paper, the main objective of this brief historical overview is to demonstrate how the early constructions of drag were labelled as a gay phenomenon and not something that heterosexual men would, or *should*, be engaging in.

Drag is still prevalent in this country and is undoubtedly more visible after the end of apartheid. However, the perception that the performance of drag is an exclusively gay phenomenon persists; hence there was immense disapproval and discomfort when Siv Ngesi, a heterosexual Black man, deviated from the socially acceptable “real man” image when he publicly posed in female clothing and embraced a drag persona.

Author 1: I also wanted to talk to you about the whole process of Sivanna. I’ve seen several videos of Sivanna. There was this time when she was wearing this rugby T-shirt at a stadium, and she became popular so fast. There were a whole lot of questions that were raised about Siv now. People were questioning, “what is going on with Siv?” You know? And people were particularly interested in your sexuality. Why do you think it is important for people to ask about your sexuality? Or why do you think they started raising that question that came

out a lot and comments with people saying, “Siv needs to come out” others would say, “it’s a shame” ... Why do you think that came about?

Ngesi: I think it’s the uncomfortability. People are uncomfortable with the unknown and the unlabelled. I think me being quite heterosexual in my actions when it comes to boxing, rugby, you know ... But on the same hand, on my public profiles, you will never see me with women. You will never see me out and about with women. I made a conscious decision about that. Uhm, you’ll never see me walking hand in hand with women. Uhm, that’s just me. I’m quite a lone wolf. And I think people just wanna be able to label me because I am a bit of a contradiction, and I’m a bit of a confusion for them. I think they wanna put me in a box, and I have never ever liked being in a box. And I think it makes them uncomfortable not to know, but they keep on asking, and they keep on challenging that. And that’s their business.

(Personal interview, Ngesi, 24 May 2022)

This discomfort raised by Ngesi, underscores the extent to which many individuals in society find it challenging to transcend the confines of heteronormative boundaries. A consequence of heteronormativity is that it restricts individuals within societal boundaries, perpetuating a normative framework that often hinders the exploration of diverse identities and experiences. This constraining influence results in a limited understanding and acknowledgment of non-conforming perspectives, contributing to a widespread discomfort when confronted with alternative expressions of gender and sexuality, which was the case in the public reactions towards Sivanna.

Although some hateful posts were deleted on X (previously Twitter), some of the criticisms directed towards Ngesi, following his posts of him in female drag on social media, appear below:

“A lot of Siv’s mates & fans are homophobes, but due to fear of online persecution & being on the wrong side of political correctness, they chose to not comment here. It’s the quiet ones, I swear. I personally don’t support drag coz I wouldn’t want our fathers dressed like this” (23/01/2021).

“Now you see, this is why h*mophobia is still necessary”. (22/01/2021).

“stop embarrassing us please” (22/01/2022).

“Yoh and we suppose to take you serious you are a joke bro” (02/08/2023)

“I introduce you to mental black slavery. Dress up as a woman to wipe away your masculinity. Cape Town nightclubs are gonna eat you up strong” (22/01/2022).

“I give up guys.who is going to marry Xhosa woman when such good breed of Xhosa man is turning Gay. Xhosa nation you have pandemic on your hands.ake nihlale nixoxe ngoba isizwe saka Xhosa Siya phela [please sit down and talk because the Xhosa nation is ending]🤔🤔🤔” (12/06/2022).

“Chief, are you gay?” (22/01/2021).

“Weird is considered normal nowadays. I’m cringing!” (21/01/2021).

Ngesi’s case is reflective of the fragility of masculinity within a heteronormative society because he was heavily criticised by what appears to be heterosexual people who heavily questioned his sexual identity. The reactions serve as further proof that many perceive Ngesi’s drag persona as deviating from what is considered acceptable within the

Xhosa community. He has consequently faced accusations of cultural pollution, reflecting a sentiment that his expression challenges established traditional norms within the Xhosa culture.

A lot of misconceptions also transpired around why Ngesi engages in drag. In an interview with *Sowetan Live* (Seemela, 2021), a South African online magazine, Ngesi was asked:

Seemela: You see your drag queen persona Sivanna as a way to show how homophobic South Africa is?

Ngesi: False; no, I didn't create Sivanna to make any point. She's not an activist. I've always wanted to do drag. I've always been passionate about drag; people have always known that about me, but I'm not trying to make a statement at all. I just want to be a man in a dress and makeup when I want to, and from there, I can go pole dancing, and then I can box and play rugby.

Ngesi insists that Sivanna, his drag persona, is not an act or a political statement but rather something he has always wanted to do and an alternative way in which he can express himself. The interviewer's question reflects the persistent narrative that speaks to the notion that only gay men perform drag and that the only reason a heterosexual man would go as far as to impersonate a female is to make a political statement, such as raising awareness about homophobia. However, Ngesi's response demonstrates that he believes that as a heterosexual man he can engage in traditionally male sports as well as in drag—a reality that is not always conventional in a heteronormative context like South Africa.

When asked about his drag persona by *Drum* magazine in February 2021, he explained:

As soon as I'm in drag, I feel stronger, I feel more confident, I feel empowered ... For me, drag is the ultimate expression, it's pure authenticity. Not paying any mind to what anyone has to say or what anyone thinks of you. When you put on that makeup and put on that hair, you just become someone else. (Interview in Mbendeni and Peloo 2021)

Ngesi's feelings about being in female clothes and makeup contradict the traditional hegemonic notions of heterosexual masculinity as the opposite of femininity. This can potentially discredit him as a "real man" in the eyes of other people who have already started questioning his sexual identity. Nevertheless, Ngesi refuses to give in to the pressures of conforming to hegemonic notions of heterosexual masculinity, which he argues are violent and toxic. The reconstruction of his masculinity is rooted in his deep desire to challenge patriarchy and unlearn the toxicity that he was socialised into as a young man.

Drag itself can mean different things to the people who engage in it. Some drag performers perceive it as a form of exaggerated, comedic entertainment, although others see it as a means of exploring and expanding gender and sexual identities (Rupp, Taylor, and Shapiro 2010). In the latter interpretation, drag serves as a tool to deconstruct rigid gender norms and challenge heteronormativity (Rupp, Taylor, and Shapiro 2010). This perspective strongly resonates with Siv Ngesi, although he maintains that his involvement in drag is primarily a personal pursuit. For Ngesi, drag becomes, to borrow from Judith Butler (1990), a mode of gender performance, wherein he continuously redefines gender through his own embodiment. Despite Ngesi's individual motivations, his

participation in drag has garnered broader societal attention, given his status as a public figure openly challenging conventional notions of masculinity among heterosexual men in his country.

“This is a personal journey”: a Black man rediscovering his masculinity

During a local talk radio interview about redefining masculinity and femininity, Ngesi explained that he is trying to redefine his masculinity to himself because he grew up in toxic masculine spaces (Radio 702 2021). He explained that his childhood teachings of what makes a “real man” are problematic, as such, he seeks to disrupt normative gender binaries that he was socialised into throughout his entire life. Ngesi referred to his experiences of masculinity in rugby, highlighting that the masculinity he was exposed to was toxic because it emphasised the dominance of men and discouraged any characteristics socially defined as feminine in men. Feminine terms such as *sissies* in the sport are used in a derogatory manner to signal weaknesses in men (Parry et al. 2022). This marginalisation of femininity that Ngesi refers to is evident in South African studies, which have found that hegemonic conceptions of masculinity within the society are aligned to heterosexual gender normative binaries that encourage men and women to see each other as the opposite in relationships categorised by dominance and subordination (Langa 2020; Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger 2012; Ratele 2006, 2011).

Ngesi explains that the unyielding gendered teachings from school informed his earlier understandings of what being a man meant to him. He argues that these teachings lend themselves to toxic masculinity. In rediscovering his masculinity, however, he interrogates the dominant ideas of what is considered a “real man”.

I think all the teachings that I got about masculinity were pretty negative to be truthfully honest. I was always the rugby-playing, first team captain, water polo captain, provincial boxing ... typical masculine kind of kid. Raised very masculine. But interestingly enough, when I was younger, I really wanted to do ballet, but I was just like “wow, no way, I am just like, you know this ... , this macho boy”. So there were always like these internal things. I was always interested in dance, and things that are quite feminine, but the world I lived in was always very very toxic and macho. I was always bigger than everyone, the macho one. You know, I spoke fluent violence. I think I still do. I think I still speak fluent violence. As much as I am going on this journey of rediscovering masculinity, there is a part of me that is still ready for violence, and it is always an internal conversation in me about trying to learn that violence is never the answer, but I was raised in a very toxic/man environment. I see it now the older I get.

(Personal interview with Ngesi, 24 May 2022)

Although Ngesi grew up in a home that he defines as a “very, very feminine household” where there were no divisions between what boys and girls do, his external environment embodied a toxic masculine culture. Although his father was present in the home, Ngesi explained that his mother was the dominant voice in the household. He grew up in a home environment of choice, where he was allowed to engage in activities that were defined as “girlie” such as *poppie-huis* (doll-house). However, through external interactions with men and boys in his community, he learned that violence was an essential element of being a man, which informed how he viewed himself and the selection of

activities he could engage in while growing up. Outside his home, he engaged in masculine sports such as rugby and boxing and ignored his interests in ballet because external discourses did not allow boys to engage in sports traditionally defined as feminine.

Considering these complex understandings of masculinity in the South African context, and the multiple messages he was exposed to about what it means to be a man, Ngesi went on a personal journey to redefine his masculinity:

This is a personal journey. A few years ago, I was uncomfortable of what masculinity was to the world, you know what I mean? When you say masculinity, there is always negative connotations, right? And I was always like “no man, I’ve seen the beauty of masculinity, and I’ve seen the toxicity of masculinity”. *Let me just go on a journey of redefining, reimagining, and just re-wording what masculinity means to me.* Right? So, I went out, and I tried to do things that are in inverted commas very “feminine”. Pole dancing, drag, ballet, I started reading up on GBV, consent, and understanding consent. It has been this thing of, a personal journey to try and understand this thing called masculinity. (Personal interview with Ngesi, 24 May 2022, emphasis added by author)

Ngesi’s views on redefining masculinity highlights an awareness of heteropatriarchal gender stereotypes that inform violence against women and sexual minorities within South African communities. Hence, Ngesi implies that there is a need to redefine masculinity and eliminate heteropatriarchal gender binaries into which young boys are socialised. As evidenced in research, heteropatriarchal gender socialisation that asserts men’s power over women and gay men informs the persisting homophobic violence against gay men and violence against women (Ratele 2014).

In 2013, Ngesi continued his journey of self-discovery by delivering a powerful message during the TedX TableMountain talk series. In his segment titled “Man the F Up”, he addresses the pervasive issues of rape and violence against women and children in South Africa. While advocating for collective male action against gender-based violence, he underscored the toxic manifestations of aggression rooted in societal expectations of masculinity:

We men will fight because someone spilled our drink; we men will fight because someone said something; we men will fight because someone looked at us in a way we did not like; we will fight because we just want to fight or we want to show that we can fight but we’re not joining the fight that we need to join. Why don’t we men jump head first into a fight worth fighting for? A fight that we, I repeat, that we are losing. A fight that we men have always thought is not our fight, it’s their fight. Dear men, remember something very clearly, when some men rape, all of us men pay the price.

At the same time, he admits to engaging in dangerous behaviours that ultimately perpetuates heteropatriarchy:

I feel I have failed. It hurts me deeply to admit that I am part of the problem. That I have laughed at rape jokes, that I’ve made rape jokes, that I have commented, that I have stared a few seconds too long, that I’ve turned a blind eye to men crossing the line, that I have crossed the line and gotten away with it. (TedX TableMountain, Ngesi 2013)

With these words, Ngesi acknowledges that he remains trapped in the very system he strives to dismantle. Despite his efforts, he has not completely managed to free himself from the tentacles of heteropatriarchy, underlining the immense power of gender socialisation on individual identity. This recognition highlights the complexity of the effort to

redefine oneself within societal constructs. It also reveals the daunting struggles inherent in challenging ingrained norms and expectations.

Discussion: challenging gender boundaries within the public domain

I think they wanna put me in a box, and I have never ever liked being in a box. (Personal interview, Ngesi, 24 May 2022)

The intention in penning this discussion paper transpired from our own curiosities around the influence of heteronormativity on public perceptions and individual decisions regarding the transgression or adherence to normative gendered expressions. As mentioned in the introduction, the fear of being perceived as weak or not a “real man” drive some men to engage in behaviours that are normatively associated with the ideal of hegemonic masculinity, seeking validation through patriarchy, violence, and homophobia (Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger 2012; Ratele, 2014). For example, Kerman and Betrus (2019) study revealed how some of their participants viewed women as sexual objects and equated sexual promiscuity with being a “real man”. Additionally, they demonstrated a need to distance themselves from anything they considered “gay” as a strategy to avoid being labelled gay themselves (Kerman and Betrus 2019). Subsequently, opposing female domination and being homophobic are strategies that some heterosexual men use to avoid having their masculinity questioned (Msibi 2012; Ratele 2014).

Similarly, Msibi’s (2012) study in the KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa, found that young men feared being perceived as gay and took deliberate steps to avoid appearing “gay” through their clothing and behaviour. This avoidance was driven by the threat of homophobic violence toward those who deviate from heteronormative masculinity (Msibi 2012). Ratele (2014) also argued that homophobia serves to protect hegemonic African masculinities, which are exclusively heterosexual, and exclude gay men from the concept of a “real man”. This suggests that although occupying a dominant position, the hegemonic heterosexual masculinity is often in a state of crisis because it requires constant reinforcement and a certain level of defence from gender non-normative forces that may destabilise its dominance.

The public’s reaction to Ngesi’s drag persona and the projection of a gay identity onto him reflects an effort (by many of the public) to preserve the dominant idea of a “real man” and maintain the hegemony of heteronormative masculinities. Unlike many heterosexual men, Ngesi defies societal expectations and embraces both socially defined feminine and masculine activities without feeling the need to justify his masculinity. The playfulness of Sivanna, and the autonomy in which Ngesi chooses to embrace this persona, is just one way through which he wishes to challenge institutionalised gender binaries especially for himself. However well-intentioned Ngesi’s motivations may be in embracing Sivanna, his actions risk being perceived as a problematic attempt to redefine masculinity at the expense of women, in particular through drag. Bindel (2022) argues that drag, with its hypersexualised and ultra-feminine portrayal of women, is offensive and merely perpetuates sexist stereotypes regarding women’s appearance and behaviour. Moreover, his actions also carry the potential for identity appropriation, as noted by a guest and some members of the public during his Radio 702 (2021) interview. During our personal interview with Ngesi, he addressed questions about exploitation of gay identities or appropriation of queer culture through his involvement in drag. He stated, “That’s a great question ... the modern-day drag has essentially

been shaped by the LGBTIQ+ community, and what I've learned is that as long as it's done respectfully." The case of Siv Ngesi thus ignites significant debates, prompting reflection on individual interpretations of drag and its profound implications for those seeking to redefine their gender performance and understandings of gender.

Although some members in society continue to see Ngesi's engagement with drag as defiant, it is his desire to break away from the narrow definition of masculinity and the limitations imposed by the current system that should receive critical attention. Ngesi highlights what scholars have been arguing for decades, that the system fails to teach men about the importance of vulnerability, accountability, and consent. Instead, society's insistence on upholding the values of hegemonic masculinity leads to harmful behaviours and restrictions on men's personal growth.

In this paper we critique both heterosexuality as an institution and the complex ways in which heteronormativity shapes societal views. Despite efforts by feminist and queer theorists to acknowledge multiple experiences and expressions of heterosexuality, i.e. *heterosexualities*, the institution tends to promote homogeneity in the name of a particular political, cultural or social agenda (Richardson 1996). Conforming to such an institution privileges those who abide by the "rules of conduct", and marginalises others who do not conform to its norms. This process then becomes the root cause of "othering" and exclusion. Supporters of such an institution would then critique someone like Ngesi for not being loyal to his gender and sexual identity. This is evident in some of the heteronormative reactions towards Ngesi on social media. In general, public reactions to Ngesi's gender performance tended to fall into two distinct camps: those characterised by progressive acceptance and those rooted in more conservative viewpoints. Resistance from groups upholding heteronormative structures persists, highlighting the privilege afforded to individuals like Ngesi who can transgress from gender and heteronormative constraints to an extent. Despite facing negative responses, Ngesi remains determined in challenging gender and sexual binaries within the institution of heterosexuality for himself.

The case study highlights the interconnectedness of masculinity and sexuality, suggesting that challenging heteronormativity requires rethinking both constructs. The goal of this paper was then to bring some of these discourses into open dialogue to begin thinking through further efforts that need to be made to dismantle heteronormativity and promote inclusivity, while being cognisant of the immense challenge of confronting socially constructed institutions. Although the insights drawn from Ngesi's experiences may not be universally applicable, they offer valuable perspectives on subversive hetero-masculine identities within the South African context. This needs to undoubtedly be seen at the backdrop of a society and societal discourses that continue to promote and preserve a view of what a "real man" is supposed to be or look like. Ngesi's ability to transcend these boundaries underscores the privilege afforded by his middle-class social and professional socioeconomic status, prompting reflection on who has the freedom to transgress from gender and heteronormative constraints. And even then, as Ngesi's case has shown, it is still challenging to fully free oneself from a patriarchal, heteronormative system.

Conclusion

We provided a nuanced examination of a particular type of gender performance and representation focusing on a case study involving a South African celebrity, Sivuyile Ngesi.

Ngesi's deliberate efforts to challenge traditional notions of masculinity underscores the immense pressure imposed by constructs like hegemonic masculinity, which demand conformity to normative ideals of manhood. Rooted in heteronormative paradigms, these expectations afford heterosexual men dominance over men who do not identify as heterosexual, while marginalising those who deviate from prescribed standards. While urging men to confront toxic masculinity and gender-based violence, Ngesi's personal journey highlights the necessity of resistance and unlearning ingrained gender socialisation to disrupt entrenched notions of masculinity within some Black African communities.

In conclusion, transgressing from gender normative ideals of masculinity and (hetero)sexuality entails liberation from societal constraints, although Ngesi's own journey illustrates the ongoing struggle. The personal journey depicted in this paper evokes questions around how we can disrupt these entrenched heteronormative notions of masculinity on a much larger scale. How can we change the narrative around expressions of gender and sexualities that do not fit into the status quo? And who must lead this resistance? Further research is needed to address these critical questions and catalyse meaningful change.

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