**Reframing Masculinity in Nigeria: Communication Strategies for Promoting Positive Gender Norms**

### ****ABSTRACT****

Masculinity in Nigeria has traditionally been framed by societal norms that emphasize dominance, economic superiority, and emotional restraint. These rigid gender expectations have contributed to gender inequality, gender-based violence, and restrictive roles for both men and women. This study explores the role of communication strategies in reframing masculinity to promote positive and inclusive masculine norms in Nigeria. Using secondary research methodology, the paper examines how media representation, advocacy campaigns, educational initiatives, and interpersonal communication influence the perception and expression of masculinity. The findings reveal that strategic communication efforts, such as gender-sensitive curricula, community-based discussions, and media portrayals of progressive male role models, have been instrumental in challenging harmful masculine norms. However, achieving lasting change requires a multidimensional approach involving policymakers, educators, media practitioners, and cultural leaders. The study recommends integrating gender-sensitive education in schools, promoting positive male role models in media, engaging religious and traditional leaders in gender advocacy, establishing community-based men’s groups, and enforcing policies that promote gender equality. **Therefore, it is imperative for stakeholders at all levels to take decisive action in promoting positive masculinity through policy reforms, educational initiatives, and media advocacy to foster a more just and equitable society.**

**Keywords:** Masculinity, Gender Norms, Communication Strategies, Media Representation, Gender Equality, Nigeria.

**INTRODUCTION**

Masculinity, as a social construct, is shaped by cultural, historical, and institutional influences that define the expectations and behaviors associated with being a man. In Nigeria, dominant narratives of masculinity often reinforce patriarchal values, encouraging traits such as dominance, emotional suppression, and aggression while discouraging vulnerability and care (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). These hegemonic masculine norms contribute to gender inequalities, reinforcing systemic issues such as gender-based violence, limited male participation in caregiving roles, and resistance to gender equity initiatives (Jewkes et al., 2015). Given the socio-cultural significance of masculinity in shaping interpersonal relationships and societal structures, there is a growing need to reframe masculinity through strategic communication efforts that promote positive, inclusive, and healthy masculine norms.

Communication strategies play a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions and cultural attitudes (Ezeaka & Nwafor, 2022; Ezeaka & Nwodu, 2022). Mass media, social media campaigns, and community-based interventions have been identified as effective tools for challenging harmful stereotypes and fostering progressive gender norms (Casey et al., 2016; Nwammuo et al., 2023). In Nigeria, where traditional media and oral communication remain influential, leveraging storytelling, participatory communication, and edutainment can help reconstruct the image of masculinity to emphasize values such as empathy, responsibility, and gender equality (Olawale & Osakwe, 2021; Ezeoke et al., 2022). By integrating culturally sensitive messaging into public discourse, communication can facilitate a shift from rigid, hegemonic masculinity toward a more pluralistic and equitable understanding of manhood.

Moreover, global efforts to redefine masculinity have demonstrated the potential of media advocacy and policy-driven communication strategies in altering perceptions of gender roles (Adikuru, 2022; Ezeaka, 2019). Initiatives such as the United Nations’ "HeForShe" campaign highlight the power of strategic communication in encouraging men to take an active role in promoting gender justice (UN Women, 2014). In Nigeria, adopting similar approaches tailored to local contexts can contribute to dismantling harmful gender norms and fostering a more inclusive society (Ezebuenyi & Ezeaka, 2015).

This paper examines the role of communication strategies in reframing masculinity in Nigeria. It explores how media representations, public awareness campaigns, and interpersonal communication can challenge rigid masculine ideals and promote healthier, more equitable gender norms. Through an analysis of existing literature, this study aims to highlight effective strategies for transforming masculinity in a way that supports social justice and gender equity.

**Statement of the Problem**

Masculinity in Nigeria is predominantly shaped by deep-rooted socio-cultural and historical constructs that reinforce patriarchal norms. These norms often promote aggressive dominance, emotional suppression, and rigid gender roles that not only disadvantage women but also place undue pressure on men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity, as it exists in Nigeria, discourages men from expressing vulnerability, participating in caregiving roles, or advocating for gender equity, thereby sustaining systemic gender inequalities (Jewkes et al., 2015). The consequences of these rigid norms include high rates of gender-based violence, mental health struggles among men, and resistance to progressive gender policies (Olawale & Osakwe, 2021). Despite increasing advocacy for gender equity, the challenge remains: how can masculinity be reframed to promote positive, inclusive, and equitable gender norms?

While global campaigns such as the United Nations' *HeForShe* initiative have demonstrated the effectiveness of media-driven interventions in shifting perceptions of gender roles, these approaches often fail to address the unique cultural dynamics of Nigerian society (UN Women, 2014). Many existing communication efforts in Nigeria have focused primarily on women's empowerment, neglecting the importance of engaging men in gender transformation efforts (Casey et al., 2016). Without a deliberate effort to reframe masculinity through culturally relevant communication strategies, hegemonic norms will continue to hinder gender equity progress.

This study, therefore, seeks to address the gap in research on how communication strategies can be leveraged to challenge harmful masculine norms and promote positive, progressive models of masculinity in Nigeria. It aims to explore how various forms of media representation, public awareness campaigns, and interpersonal communication can be effectively used to reconstruct masculinity in a way that aligns with contemporary gender equity goals. By identifying effective communication approaches, this study contributes to ongoing discourse on gender transformation and provides insights for policymakers, media practitioners, and gender advocates in Nigeria.

Objectives of the study

The following objectives guided the study:

1. To identify the dominant masculine norms in Nigeria.
2. To examine the impact of masculine norms on gender relations in Nigeria.
3. To assess the role of communication strategies in reshaping perceptions of masculinity.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on Hegemonic Masculinity Theory, which provides a lens for understanding the construction and reinforcement of masculine norms in society. Developed by R. W. Connell (1995), the theory explains how certain forms of masculinity are privileged over others, creating a dominant standard that marginalizes alternative expressions of manhood. Hegemonic masculinity is not only about men’s dominance over women but also about the hierarchy among men, where some masculinities are deemed superior while others, such as those associated with emotional expressiveness or caregiving, are subordinated (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

In the Nigerian context, hegemonic masculinity manifests in cultural expectations that men should be authoritative, emotionally stoic, and economically dominant. These expectations contribute to gender inequalities, reinforcing harmful stereotypes that discourage men from participating in caregiving roles or showing vulnerability (Jewkes et al., 2015). As a result, efforts to promote gender equity often face resistance because they are perceived as threats to traditional masculinity.

Applying Hegemonic Masculinity Theory to this study helps in analyzing how communication strategies can be used to challenge and reconstruct these dominant masculine norms. By leveraging media representation, public awareness campaigns, and interpersonal communication, alternative models of masculinity—ones that embrace equality, empathy, and non-violence can be promoted. The theory, therefore, serves as a foundation for exploring how communication can facilitate a shift from rigid, patriarchal masculinity to a more inclusive and progressive understanding of manhood in Nigeria.

**The study also used Social Learning Theory. Albert Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (SLT) provides a relevant theoretical framework for understanding how masculinity is constructed and how communication strategies can reshape masculine norms in Nigeria. According to Bandura (1977), individuals learn behaviors, attitudes, and social roles through observation, imitation, and reinforcement from their environment. This theory suggests that people, particularly children and adolescents, acquire gendered behaviors by observing role models in their families, communities, and media.**

**In the context of masculinity in Nigeria, boys and young men often learn traditional masculine norms such as dominance, emotional suppression, and economic superiority by observing male figures in their homes, peer groups, religious institutions, and popular culture. These behaviors are reinforced through rewards (e.g., social approval, respect, or economic advantages) or punishments (e.g., ridicule for showing vulnerability or engaging in domestic responsibilities traditionally assigned to women).**

**However, communication strategies can be leveraged to challenge these traditional norms and promote positive masculinity. By presenting alternative male role models in the media, educational curricula, and advocacy campaigns, Social Learning Theory suggests that individuals can unlearn harmful gender norms and adopt more equitable and progressive masculine identities. For example, Nollywood films, social media influencers, and community-based gender initiatives can model behaviors that encourage emotional intelligence, shared responsibilities, and respect for gender equality. If these behaviors are consistently reinforced through positive social feedback and institutional support, they are more likely to be adopted by individuals and integrated into broader societal norms.**

**Thus, Social Learning Theory supports the argument that strategic communication can play a transformative role in reshaping masculinity by providing positive representations, reinforcing new behaviors, and creating an environment where alternative masculine norms are accepted and encouraged.**

**METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts the secondary research method, which involves the analysis of existing literature, scholarly articles, policy documents, media reports, and other relevant secondary sources. Secondary research is appropriate for this study as it allows for a comprehensive examination of how masculinity has been constructed and communicated in Nigeria, as well as the effectiveness of various communication strategies in promoting positive masculine norms.

Data for this study were sourced from peer-reviewed journals, books, reports from international organizations, and media content related to gender studies and masculinity. Particular emphasis was placed on literature that explores hegemonic masculinity, gender communication strategies, and societal perceptions of masculinity in Nigeria. By synthesizing existing knowledge, this research provides insights into the dominant masculine norms in Nigeria and evaluates the role of communication in reshaping these norms.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Dominant Masculine Norms in Nigeria**

Masculinity in Nigeria is deeply rooted in cultural, historical, and socio-economic structures that shape societal expectations of what it means to be a man. Traditional gender norms emphasize male dominance, authority, and economic responsibility, positioning men as providers and decision-makers while relegating women to subordinate roles (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). These norms are reinforced through family upbringing, religious teachings, media portrayals, and societal institutions, making them pervasive across different ethnic and regional contexts in Nigeria.

One of the most dominant masculine norms in Nigeria is the expectation of economic dominance. Men are traditionally seen as the primary breadwinners, and their societal value is often measured by their financial capacity to provide for their families (Olawale & Osakwe, 2021). This economic expectation creates immense pressure on men, leading to anxiety and distress when they are unable to fulfill this role, particularly in periods of economic downturn (Morrell et al., 2012). Additionally, financial instability can result in heightened aggression and frustration, sometimes manifesting in domestic violence or other forms of gender-based violence (Jewkes et al., 2015).

Another key aspect of masculinity in Nigeria is emotional stoicism and dominance. From an early age, boys are socialized to suppress emotions such as fear, sadness, or vulnerability, as these traits are often associated with weakness and femininity (Uchendu, 2007). Instead, men are encouraged to display toughness, aggression, and control in both private and public spheres. This expectation limits men's ability to express emotions constructively and contributes to poor mental health outcomes, as seeking psychological help is often stigmatized (Ogunleye, 2020).

Moreover, masculinity in Nigeria is closely linked to power and authority in relationships and society. Patriarchal structures reinforce the idea that men should be dominant in the household, workplaces, and political spaces. In many communities, decision-making power is concentrated in the hands of men, often marginalizing women from leadership roles and reinforcing gender inequalities (Adisa et al., 2021). The belief that a "real man" must exert authority over women and children has also contributed to high rates of gender-based violence and resistance to gender equality initiatives (Jewkes et al., 2015).

Additionally, heteronormativity and sexual prowess are central to dominant masculine norms in Nigeria. Heterosexual relationships are emphasized, and any deviation from this norm is often met with strong societal resistance. Masculinity is also linked to the ability to demonstrate sexual dominance, and men are often pressured to prove their virility through multiple sexual partners or fatherhood (Ratele, 2016). This contributes to risky sexual behaviors, high rates of unprotected sex, and the spread of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS (Orisaremi & Alubo, 2012; Ezeaka & Ochuba, 2024).

These dominant masculine norms have significant implications for gender relations and societal development in Nigeria. While they provide a sense of identity and social structure, they also contribute to harmful behaviors, limit emotional expression, and sustain gender inequality. Given these challenges, it is crucial to explore how communication strategies can be leveraged to deconstruct rigid masculine ideals and promote positive and inclusive masculinities that support social progress.

**The Impact of Masculine Norms on Gender Relations in Nigeria**

Masculine norms in Nigeria have a profound impact on gender relations, shaping societal expectations, interpersonal dynamics, and institutional structures. These norms, which are deeply rooted in patriarchy, often reinforce male dominance and female subordination, affecting power dynamics within families, workplaces, and governance (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The rigid enforcement of these norms creates an imbalance in gender relations, limiting opportunities for women while placing undue pressure on men to conform to traditional expectations.

One major consequence of masculine norms in Nigeria is the reinforcement of gender inequality in household and family structures. Men are traditionally regarded as the heads of households, while women are expected to take on caregiving and domestic responsibilities (Adisa, Gbadamosi, & Mordi, 2021). This division of labor limits women’s economic independence and reinforces their dependence on men for financial security. In many Nigerian communities, decision-making authority is concentrated in the hands of men, reducing women's agency in family matters, including reproductive health choices (Jewkes et al., 2015). This dynamic perpetuates unequal power relations and makes it difficult for women to assert themselves in both private and public spaces.

Furthermore, masculine norms contribute to barriers in women’s participation in leadership and governance. In Nigeria, political and corporate leadership remains male-dominated due to societal perceptions that men are natural leaders, while women are better suited for supportive roles (Morrell et al., 2012). Women who seek leadership positions often face resistance, discrimination, and even violence, as their ambition is perceived as a challenge to traditional gender roles (Onwuka, 2010; Onwuka, Nwokolo & Achebe, 2022). This exclusion from decision-making processes limits the representation of women's interests in policies and governance, further entrenching gender disparities (Olawale & Osakwe, 2021).

Additionally, rigid masculine norms fuel gender-based violence (GBV), as they encourage male dominance and control over women. Hegemonic masculinity normalizes aggression and the use of force in resolving conflicts, making domestic violence, sexual harassment, and other forms of GBV prevalent in Nigerian society (Jewkes et al., 2015). Cultural beliefs that reinforce male entitlement over women’s bodies contribute to high rates of sexual violence, while societal stigmatization discourages survivors from speaking out or seeking justice (Uchendu, 2007). The normalization of these violent behaviors makes it difficult to implement effective legal and social interventions to protect women.

Moreover, masculine norms also affect men negatively by limiting their emotional expression and well-being. Nigerian men are socialized to suppress emotions such as fear, sadness, and vulnerability, as these are seen as signs of weakness (Ogunleye, 2020). This emotional repression not only affects their mental health but also impacts their relationships with women and other men. Many men struggle with forming emotionally supportive partnerships due to the expectation that they must always project strength and dominance (Ratele, 2016; Abonyi, Ezeh & Onwuka 2019). This lack of emotional openness can lead to toxic relationships, depression, and even substance abuse as coping mechanisms.

The economic burden imposed by masculine norms also affects gender relations. Men are expected to be primary providers, and their worth is often tied to their financial success (Orisaremi & Alubo, 2012). This expectation can create resentment in relationships, especially when women become financially independent or assume the role of primary breadwinners. In some cases, financial struggles lead to frustration and conflict within marriages, further straining gender relations. Additionally, men who fail to meet societal expectations of economic dominance may experience social ridicule or be perceived as inadequate partners (Olawale & Osakwe, 2021).

 The dominant masculine norms in Nigeria shape gender relations in ways that reinforce inequality, restrict women’s opportunities, and place significant pressure on men to conform to rigid expectations. These norms contribute to gender-based violence, limit women’s participation in leadership, and create emotional and economic burdens for men. Addressing these challenges requires a re-examination of masculinity and the promotion of alternative models that encourage equality, shared responsibilities, and emotional well-being. Communication strategies, particularly those using media and public discourse, play a crucial role in reshaping these norms to create a more inclusive and equitable society.

**The Role of Communication Strategies in Reshaping Perceptions of Masculinity**

Communication plays a crucial role in shaping societal perceptions of masculinity. In Nigeria, where traditional masculine norms emphasize dominance, economic superiority, emotional stoicism, and control, strategic communication can be a powerful tool for redefining these norms to promote more inclusive and positive expressions of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Various communication strategies, including media representation, advocacy campaigns, educational initiatives, and interpersonal communication, have been used to challenge harmful gender stereotypes and promote alternative masculine identities that support gender equality (Ezeaka, Ochuba & Bartholomew, 2025; Onwuka, Ndubuisi & Abonyi, 2020).

**Media Representation and Masculinity**

The media, particularly television, film, music, and social media, plays a significant role in reinforcing or challenging masculine norms. Historically, Nigerian media has portrayed men as strong, dominant, and emotionally reserved figures, reinforcing traditional gender expectations (Olawale & Osakwe, 2021). However, recent shifts in media narratives have begun to challenge these stereotypes by showcasing men in nurturing, emotionally expressive, and egalitarian roles. Nollywood films and television programs, for instance, have increasingly featured male characters who reject toxic masculinity and embrace shared responsibilities in the home and workplace (Adisa, Gbadamosi, & Mordi, 2021; Obiora, 2025).

Social media has also emerged as a crucial platform for reshaping masculinity. Influencers, activists, and advocacy groups use digital platforms to challenge harmful gender norms and promote alternative masculinities that prioritize respect, care, and equality. Campaigns such as the **#**HeForShe movement have encouraged men to become allies in gender equality efforts, demonstrating how communication can be leveraged to change perceptions at both individual and societal levels (Jewkes et al., 2015).

**Advocacy Campaigns and Public Awareness Initiatives**

Public awareness campaigns have been instrumental in shifting perceptions of masculinity in Nigeria. Organizations working on gender issues, such as the United Nations Women and Women’s Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA), have used targeted communication strategies to educate communities about the harmful effects of rigid masculine norms. Campaigns focusing on gender-based violence, male involvement in caregiving, and emotional well-being have encouraged men to embrace a more holistic and positive understanding of masculinity (Ratele, 2016; Obiora & Adikuru, 2024).

One successful initiative is the MenEngage Africa Network, which works across several African countries, including Nigeria, to promote healthy masculinities. Through radio programs, community dialogues, and workshops, the initiative engages men and boys in conversations about gender equality, challenging the traditional notion that masculinity is defined by control and aggression (Orisaremi & Alubo, 2012; Obiora, 2022). These efforts highlight how structured communication can shift deep-seated cultural beliefs and encourage progressive gender relations.

**Educational Strategies and School-Based Interventions**

Education is a fundamental tool in reshaping masculinity. Schools play a critical role in socializing young boys and can be a platform for fostering positive masculine ideals. Incorporating gender-sensitive curricula that challenge stereotypes and promote emotional intelligence, respect, and shared responsibilities can help redefine masculinity from an early age (Morrell et al., 2012).

Programs that integrate gender discussions into school activities, such as debate clubs, mentorship schemes, and storytelling sessions, can provide young boys with alternative role models who embody positive masculine traits. Studies have shown that boys exposed to progressive gender education are more likely to reject harmful masculine norms and embrace equitable relationships in adulthood (Ogunleye, 2020).

**Interpersonal Communication and Community Engagement**

Interpersonal communication such as father-son relationships, peer group interactions, and community discussions also plays a significant role in shaping masculinity. Fathers and male mentors who model healthy masculinity by showing vulnerability, sharing responsibilities, and treating women as equals can influence younger generations to adopt similar behaviors (Uchendu, 2007).

Community-based discussions and forums allow men to openly discuss their struggles with societal expectations and explore healthier ways of expressing masculinity (Ezeaka & Bartholomew, 2025; Ezeaka, 2024; Ezeaka & Umennebuaku, 2024). Engaging religious and traditional leaders in these conversations is particularly important in Nigeria, where cultural and religious beliefs strongly influence gender norms. When respected figures advocate for alternative masculine identities, it increases the likelihood of widespread acceptance and behavioral change (Jewkes et al., 2015).

Communication strategies are essential in reshaping masculinity and promoting gender-equitable behaviors in Nigeria. Media representation, advocacy campaigns, education, and interpersonal communication all contribute to changing the narrative around what it means to be a man. By leveraging these strategies, society can move toward a more inclusive and flexible understanding of masculinity that supports equality, emotional well-being, and mutual respect. However, these efforts require sustained commitment and collaboration among media organizations, educators, policymakers, and community leaders to create lasting change.

**CONCLUSION**

Reframing masculinity through communication strategies is crucial for promoting positive and inclusive masculine norms in Nigeria. Traditional notions of masculinity, which emphasize dominance, emotional suppression, and economic superiority, have reinforced gender inequalities, contributed to gender-based violence, and placed undue pressure on men to conform to rigid societal expectations. However, strategic communication efforts including media representation, advocacy campaigns, educational initiatives, and interpersonal dialogue have demonstrated the potential to reshape these norms and foster a more equitable society.

Media platforms, particularly Nollywood films, social media, and public awareness campaigns, have begun challenging outdated gender stereotypes by portraying men in nurturing and emotionally expressive roles. Advocacy initiatives led by organizations such as MenEngage Africa and WRAPA have also played a key role in educating communities about healthy masculinities, encouraging men to embrace shared responsibilities and reject harmful behaviors. Additionally, gender-sensitive educational programs have shown promise in reorienting young boys toward positive masculinity, ensuring long-term societal transformation.

While progress is being made, sustained efforts are necessary to achieve widespread change. Policymakers, media practitioners, educators, and community leaders must collaborate to institutionalize gender-equitable communication strategies. Engaging religious and cultural leaders in these conversations is also critical, as they wield significant influence over societal norms and values.

Ultimately, reframing masculinity requires a multidimensional approach that challenges entrenched gender ideologies while providing men with alternative models of masculinity that promote emotional well-being, respect, and equality. By leveraging effective communication strategies, Nigeria can foster a society where both men and women thrive in an environment of mutual understanding and shared responsibilities.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. **Integrate Gender-Sensitive Curricula in Schools**
The Nigerian education system should incorporate gender-sensitive curricula that challenge harmful masculine norms and promote positive expressions of masculinity. Schools should introduce lessons on emotional intelligence, gender equality, and shared responsibilities from an early age to reshape boys' understanding of masculinity. Teachers should also be trained to model and reinforce these values in classroom interactions.
2. **Promote Positive Male Role Models in Media and Entertainment**
Nollywood, social media influencers, and content creators should be encouraged to portray men in diverse and positive roles that challenge traditional gender stereotypes. Storylines that showcase men as caregivers, advocates for gender equality, and emotionally expressive individuals can help reshape public perceptions. Government agencies and civil society organizations should support the production of media campaigns that highlight progressive masculinity.
3. **Engage Religious and Traditional Leaders in Gender Advocacy**
Religious and traditional leaders hold significant influence in Nigerian society. Targeted advocacy programs should engage these leaders to promote messages of positive masculinity in sermons, cultural gatherings, and community meetings. Encouraging these influential figures to challenge harmful gender norms can help shift deeply ingrained societal beliefs.
4. **Establish Community-Based Men's Groups for Gender Dialogue**
Creating safe spaces where men can openly discuss the pressures of masculinity, gender roles, and relationships will help promote alternative masculinities. Community-based organizations should facilitate men's groups that focus on gender equality, mental health, and non-violent conflict resolution. These groups can serve as platforms for peer education, mentorship, and behavioral change.
5. **Enforce Policies and Laws Promoting Gender Equality**
The Nigerian government should strengthen policies that promote gender equality and hold individuals accountable for gender-based violence and discrimination. Workplace policies should encourage paternity leave, equal pay, and non-discriminatory hiring practices to break down traditional masculine expectations. Additionally, public awareness campaigns should inform men about their legal and social responsibilities in fostering gender equity.

**Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)**

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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