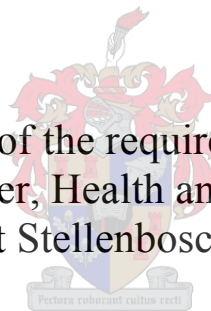


# Superman: The Man and the Myth – A Theological Exploration of the Influence of Popular Culture on Masculinity

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Thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Practical Theology (Gender, Health and Theology) in the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University



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March 2017

## **Declaration**

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## Abstract

This study explores the influence of popular culture on male adolescents' construction of masculinity. A theoretical engagement with the concepts of culture and ideology is linked to the concept of popular culture. The notion of culture and ideology, connected to popular culture, is unpacked, and the various definitions of the concept reflected upon in an attempt to arrive at a more holistic understanding of the term. Using the terms of culture, ideology and popular culture as a foundation, the study explores Superman as an example of popular culture, taking into account the history of the creators of Superman, the evolution of the character as well as a fictional biography of Superman as a mythical hero. This also includes a deliberation on the Christological aspect of Superman, and a discussion of Superman situated in the sphere of culture and more specifically, popular culture.

This study also encompasses a reflection on the history of masculinity development. Specific attention is devoted to the impact of feminist theory on masculinity studies. A brief discussion of gender – the overarching notion that includes masculinity and femininity – is integrated in this consideration, as it establishes the foundation for the discussion of masculinities. The connection is made between masculinities and popular culture in South Africa, functioning as a theoretical basis to discuss and reflect upon the type of masculinity that Superman presents and the influence this character has on male adolescents. To comprehend the construction of the current concept of adolescence, the literature review considers the historical context of the concept of adolescence and the changes in social reality over the centuries. Different viewpoints exist on the development of adolescence, which necessitates an overview of physiological, psychological and sociological factors. This, in turn, offers the groundwork for a discussion of male adolescence and the influence of these factors on the developmental process of male adolescence. The influence of popular culture, referring to Superman as an example, demonstrates the impact this character has on male adolescents' construction of masculinity.

Following the discussions on popular culture, masculinities, adolescent development and Superman, the normative approach of practical theological interpretation is applied, thereby contemplating on popular culture as the context, masculinities as the situation and male adolescent development as the episode. Included in this discussion are the circumstances of South Africans and the influence of these circumstances on male adolescent development.

Furthermore, the study reflects on the religious comparisons between Superman and Jesus Christ, deliberating between the distinctions of the sacred and profane and how these concepts intertwine in the context of popular culture. This introduces the theological exploration that includes a discussion of practical theological interpretation, feminist theory, feminist theology and the feminist theology of praxis. This study also considers alternative, transformative and redemptive masculinities as a means to combat the hegemonic and hypermasculine ideal perpetuated by popular culture, concluding with suggestions that can aid male adolescents that are divulged to the periphery of society.

## Opsomming

Hierdie studie ondersoek die invloed van populêre kultuur op die manlikheidskonstruksie van manlike adolessente. 'n Teoretiese betrokkenheid by die konsepte van kultuur en ideologie word in verband gebring met die konsep van populêre kultuur. Die idee van kultuur en ideologie, gekoppel aan populêre kultuur, word ondersoek, en die verskillende definisies van die konsep oordenk in 'n poging om te kom tot 'n meer holistiese begrip van die term. Met behulp van die gebruik van die terme kultuur, ideologie en populêre kultuur as 'n basis, ondersoek die studie Superman as 'n voorbeeld van populêre kultuur, met inagneming van die geskiedenis van die skeppers van Superman, die evolusie van die karakter Superman sowel as 'n fiktiewe biografie van Superman as 'n mitiese held. Dit sluit ook 'n oorweging van die Christologiese aspek van Superman, en 'n bespreking van Superman binne die gebied van kultuur en meer spesifiek, van populêre kultuur in.

Hierdie studie sluit ook 'n besinning oor die geskiedenis van die ontwikkeling van die konsep manlikheid in. Spesifieke aandag word ook gewy aan die impak van feministiese teorie op manlikheidsstudies. 'n Kort bespreking van geslag - die oorkoepelende idee wat manlikheid en vroulikheid insluit - is geïntegreer in hierdie oorweging, aangesien dit die grondslag vir die bespreking van die konsepte van manlikheid vorm. Die verband tussen manlikheid en populêre kultuur in Suid-Afrika word aangedui. Dit funksioneer as 'n teoretiese basis waaruit die tipe manlikheid wat Superman verteenwoordig en die invloed wat hierdie karakter het op manlike adolessente bespreek word. Ten einde die bou van die huidige konsep van adolessensie te verstaan, word die historiese konteks van die konsep van adolessensie en die veranderinge in die sosiale werklikheid deur die eeue heen oorweeg. Verskillende standpunte bestaan ten opsigte van die ontwikkeling van adolessensie, wat 'n oorsig van fisiologiese, sielkundige en sosiologiese faktore noodsaak. Dit op sy beurt, bied die grondslag vir 'n bespreking van manlike adolessensie en die invloed van hierdie faktore op die ontwikkelingsproses van manlike adolessensie. Die invloed van populêre kultuur, met verwysing na Superman dien as 'n voorbeeld van die impak wat hierdie karakter het op die manlikheidskonstruksie van manlike adolessente.

Aan die hand van die bespreking oor populêre kultuur, manlikheid, adolessente ontwikkeling en Superman, word die normatiewe benadering van praktiese teologiese interpretasie gevolg en daardeur is populêre kultuur die konteks, manlikhede die situasie en manlike adolessente

ontwikkeling die episode. Aandag word ook gegee aan die omstandighede van Suid-Afrikaners en hoe hierdie omstandighede manlike adolessente ontwikkeling beïnvloed. Daarbenewens besin die studie oor die godsdienstige vergelykings tussen Superman en Jesus Christus, en word ondersoek ingestel na die onderskeidings van die heilige en die onheilige, en hoe hierdie konsepte mekaar ontmoet in die konteks van populêre kultuur. Dit lei die teologiese verkenning in aan die hand van 'n bespreking wat praktiese teologiese interpretasie, feministiese teorie, feministiese teologie en die praktyk van feministiese teologie insluit. Hierdie studie oorweeg ook alternatiewe, transformerende en versoenende manlikhede as 'n manier om die hegemonese en hiper-manlike ideale, voortgesit deur populêre kultuur, te bestry en sluit af met voorstelle wat manlike adolessente wat uitgeskuif is na die rand van die samelewing, kan help.

## Acknowledgements

I wrote a poem in 2013, titled ‘*A letter to Africa*’, which is dualistic in that it is both a letter to Africa and to God. I never realised then that it would, three years later, express exactly what I feel about this topic and my research journey with God:

*...The enormity of what I feel takes my breath away, but I just have to say it. You entice, you seduce, you take prisoners, you capture the hearts and minds of rational human beings, you are a mystery, you keep secrets, you are possessive, you are dangerous, you challenge and yet you move me beyond what I know or think I know. I may never understand your complex nature but I've seen a part of your heart. I've experienced a part of your pain, I've seen the tears you cry for those who have suffered and are still suffering, I've felt your touch on my skin, the sunlight dancing on my face, I've stood in awe of your silver moonlight, I've drowned in your starlit sky, I've heard your stories, seen your tragedies, I've seen the joy of your children, the simplistic way they love and celebrate you, I've looked into the eyes of the broken, which is a part of you. You've forced me to confront my demons, you challenged me to truly experience every possible emotion and just when I think you cannot take any more you force me to do it all over again. You inspire emotion beyond the emptiness, the hopelessness...Dear Africa I wondered who you are, but then I discovered you are all of us, those looking for love, acceptance, understanding, grace, passion, meaning, forgiveness...God...You are now a part of me and I of You. I've stared into Your eyes. I've seen the light (and darkness) and still I knowingly let You take hold of my heart. Willingly I've let You close Your hands around my heart. I know now that it was never mine to give away, You had it all along. And beyond all these emotions I want more.*

I would like to thank my wonderful parents, Chris and Marinette Hendriks, for the unwavering belief and support not only during these past two years but also from the day I was born. You held my hand when I needed it the most; you supported, inspired and challenged me to follow my head and my heart, when I was working towards my dreams. You gave me the courage to move beyond my comfort zone and become the person I am today. Thank you for teaching me to rise in the most difficult times and to fight for what I believe in. Thank you, Ouma Marie, for all the cookies and rusks that you sent from Upington. It was sustenance for the body and soul. I'd also like to thank my brother Tiaan, for his support, for being a great flatmate, a ‘partner in crime’, a friend, and for his shoulder to cry on. Thank you for sharing my love for Superhero movies and for being the mostly peaceful Batman to my Superman. I'd also like to thank Ma'am Ingrid Kotze, your passion for your students and for English that opened a world that I never knew existed. Thank you for being my fairy godmother.

I'd like to acknowledge the Church of Sweden, for funding the Gender, Health and Theology Masters programme and for providing the opportunity for students, and me, to take part in the expansion of this field.

To my supervisors, Prof Anita Cloete and Dr Charlene van der Walt, thank you for your patience, encouragement and guidance. Thank you for asking insightful questions and for offering invaluable wisdom. Thank you for creating a space where I could discover my theological voice and grow as a person. Thank you for challenging and inspiring me to do more, read more, think more and write more. Thank you even for the pressure and assertiveness when I did not adhere to deadlines. I have learned so much from you both.

Thank you to Angelique, Corlia, Conroy, Dewald, Erika, Estian, Farren, Floris, Gerhard, Madelein, Stefan, Plantjie and Wynand, for your support and motivation. Thank you for your acceptance and understanding, for teaching me the value of friendship, for becoming family and sharing in my fears, hopes and dreams. Thank you for inspiring me to be the best version of me and never to give up. Thank you for being part of the late night or all night study sessions, the five-minute dance parties at the faculty, the coffee breaks and Brazens dates and reminding me to breathe while moving forward. Thank you to the extended breakfast club: Byron, Chanté, Lynshay, Scherlize, Sheldon, Siphokazi, and Quinton, for also sharing my journey.

I would like to acknowledge the library personnel, Tannie Annemarie, Beulah, Heila, and Theresa, for your assistance, commitment and enthusiasm for helping students, and me, find our way around the obstacles of research, referencing and submitting.



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# *Chapter 1:*

## *Contextualising this study*

### **1.1 Introduction**

This chapter aims, firstly, to contextualise this study by exploring the concepts of popular culture, superman, masculinities and male adolescents. An outline of the background and rationale follows this literature review, as well as a deliberation on how this study is rooted in practical theology and feminist theology of praxis. Next, I formulate the problem statement, along with the research question, as well as the aims and objectives of the study. Brief reference to the research methodology and delimitation of the study follows, and this chapter ends with a concise summary of the chapters to follow.

### **1.2 Review of Literature and Core Concepts**

#### **1.2.1 Popular Culture**

According to Milestone and Meyer (2012:3), popular culture refers to the cultural practices or lived culture that people engage in, such as holidays away or religious festivals. The authors also describe the main function of cultural texts as symbolic and instrumental in the production of meaning. Milestone and Meyer (2012:1) explain that popular culture is media culture, which includes mass media such as radio, the press, film, television and new media, such as those on the internet. Popular culture matters, according to Storey (2009:xvi), and the deconstruction of popular culture, in that popular culture is an arena of consent and resistance, partly where hegemony arises or is secured. It is not a sphere where socialism or a socialist culture is at present completely formed. Rather, it is simply a showground for expression or a place in which to establish socialism.

Woven into our daily lives, the media bombards the consciousness with messages and expressions at every turn (Wood, 1994:231). Van der Walt and Louw (2012:353) explain that *“Human identities in general – including gender and sexual identities – have recently become more diverse and malleable. This is to a great extent because of the pervasive influence of the mass media and popular culture... influencing our socialised schemata of interpretation of*

*gender identities.*” Gauntlett (2008) also refers to the influence of popular culture, suggesting that “*our relationships with our bodies, our sexual partners and our own emotional needs will all also be influenced by media representations, but (of course) in complex ways which will be swayed and modified by our social experiences and interactions*” (Gauntlett, 2008:113-114). Younger generations in particular are becoming more accepting of sexual diversity and popular culture is an important source of information on minorities, while mass media plays a central role in the rejection of tradition and the transformation of society (Gauntlett, 2008:65).

The concept of popular culture has a quantitative dimension, expressing the dynamic sphere of influence not only to gender but also to economic systems with a fundamental political quality (Milestone & Meyer, 2012:5). Milestone and Meyer (2012:6) elaborate that this is particularly important when studying a phenomenon like gender, which is deeply political, contentious and complex. Viljoen (2012:138), writing from a South African context, mentions the influence that the influx of international magazines has had on the understanding of the masculine ideal. With this, Viljoen (2012:138) establishes that magazines such as *FHM*, *GQ* and *Men’s Health* propagate the globalising of identity and that their commodification of sex influences masculinities, thereby adding to the existing crises of masculinity in a post-apartheid context. Delaney and Madigan (2016:1) define popular culture as the product and method of expression and identity frequently encountered or widely accepted, commonly liked or approved, and characteristic of a particular society at a given time. Delaney and Madigan (2016:2) point to an important element of popular culture, namely that popular culture allows large heterogeneous masses of people to identify collectively. This serves as an inclusive role in society that may unify the masses and offer a sense of belonging. This study thus considers what would happen if an individual cannot reconcile with the identity of the masses.

Cobb (2005:3) indicates that popular culture also has a religious dimension, explaining that symbols that were once inseparable from religious myth and rituals have begun to digress, often disguised in popular cultural expression, carrying with them an inherent aura and an authority once derived from religion. Cobb (2005:6) argues that theology can help to bring about a better understanding of popular culture and that its fascinations might assist theology to overcome some of the prejudices and breaking through some of its impasses. Lynch (2005:126) contributes to the argument saying that one of the benefits of studying religion

and popular culture is the perspective it gives of religion in everyday life. Additionally, Lynch (2005:127) notes that theology is concerned with different dimensions or issues of life, such as truth, goodness, evil, suffering, redemption and beauty, and as popular culture engages with similar themes, it becomes clear that it is an important field of investigation for theologians. This study uses ‘Superman’, a cultural hero, as an example of popular culture and examines the influence he has on the different dimensions of life.

### 1.2.2 Superman

Betz, Browning, Janowski and Jüngel (2007:264) explain the concept of a cultural hero by saying that in mythology throughout the world we encounter figures who are first to introduce the cultural knowledge that is critical to human survival. These figures, beheld as hybrids and not as wholly divine, are intermediates between gods and human beings. In their never-ending variations, these cultural heroes have served as great transformers of the world since the beginning of human civilization (Betz *et al.*, 2007:624). Kittelson (1998:7) also indicates that mythology shows us basic patterns of vital aspects of our lives: how to relate to love, how to come into mature femininity or masculinity, how to deal with change, how to deal with God or fate, and how to deal with wounds. These mythologies find expression in hero myths, telling stories of how people gain control and mastery over their own energies, and offer rational understanding of how to achieve divine purposes. In today’s popular culture these heroes are pictured as strong, conquering, all good and always winning (Kittelson, 1998:7).

The mythological figure or cultural hero used in this study is Superman. “*Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound!*” (The Adventures of Superman, 1940). Daniels (1998:11) indicates that Superman is the first, the strongest and the most enduringly popular superhero, one who has enchanted audiences around the world for more than seventy years. Since his modest comic book beginnings in 1938, Superman has dominated every element of media entertainment, from radio and television shows, foremost motion pictures, books, toys and more (Daniels, 1998:11). Empire magazine named Superman the greatest comic book character of all time (*The 50 greatest comic-book characters*, 2016). Superman, a fictitious superhero in comic books made public by DC Comics, is a worldwide American cultural icon (Daniels, 1998,11). When writers Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created this character in 1934, they intended him



to be like Samson, Hercules and all the strong men ever heard of combined into one ultimate superhero (Babka, 2008:119). Babka (2008:116) asserts that popular culture has made Superman into a 'Christ figure'. Adding to this statement, Babka (2008:116) explains that superhero mythology provides a modern archetype against which Christians might measure the honesty of the dogma of the personification of Christ. Pecora (1992:61) maintains that superheroes are simply the paraphernalia of little boys' fantasies and young girls' dreams.

Darowski (2012:66) elucidates that comic book creators, in essence, uphold hegemonic masculinity as the ultimate gender order. By creating logical flaws hegemonic masculinity weakens the feminist content and thereby allows men to retain the dominant social authority. Superman is indeed a perfect example of Darowski's (2012:66) assertion. Superman is not from earth - he arrived as an infant from the planet Krypton and grew up on earth, gifted with superhuman powers (Eco, 1984:107). Eco (1984:107) elaborates, "*His strength is practically unlimited, he can fly through space at the speed of light, and he has X-ray vision and super hearing. He is also kind, handsome, modest and helpful.*"

Superman demonstrates the traits of hegemonic masculinity and presents characteristics of hypermasculinity. Scharrer (2005:354) explains that hypermasculinity is a personality construct that occurs primarily in males, in which stereotypically 'macho' traits are the ideal. Hypermasculine males display intense and overstated forms of masculinity, virility and physicality, and they view emotions to be associated with weakness or femininity. The contrast of this character is the masculinity presented by Clark Kent, Superman's alter ego. This alter ego is fearful, timid although intelligent, an awkward, bespectacled and submissive male, particularly in the presence of his matriarchal colleague, Lois Lane (Eco, 1984:108). These contrasting characteristics displayed by Superman and Clark Kent as an example of popular culture necessitate a review of the concept of masculinities using Connell's (1995) model of multiple masculinities.

### **1.2.3 Masculinities**

Connell (1995:3), appropriating the work of Freud, argues that concepts such as 'masculine' and 'feminine' are among the most diverse that occur in science. "*There is abundant evidence that masculinities are multiple, with internal complexities and even contradictions. Masculinities changed in history and women have a considerable role in them, especially*

regarding the interaction with men and boys” (Connell, 1995:68). Connell (1995) explains that to speak of masculinities is to speak about gender relations. “*Masculinities are not equivalent to men; they concern the position of men in a gender order. They are the patterns of practices by which people (both men and women, but predominantly men) engage that position*” (Connell, 1995:68). Studies of masculinities developed as a research field in the social sciences and humanities during the 1980s, with two key developments: the appearance of much more refined empirical work; and the theoretical analysis that went beyond the sex role theory, putting emphasis on power multiplicity and hegemony (Connell, 2014:219).

Connell (1995:3) makes it clear that masculinities are a complex concept. This concept includes not only social and cultural influences but also biological factors. Creighton and Oliffe (2010:410) explain that biological frameworks dominated early work on masculinities linked to men’s health, and when disputed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it resulted in a review of the male-female dualism. A solely biological focus on the implications of masculinities adheres to biological essentialism, thus reinforcing the belief that our created nature is to be either male or female (Thatcher, 2011:20). Connell (2005:45) notes that the concept of masculinity usually proceeds from men’s bodies, is inherent in a male body, or expresses something of the male body. Connell (2005:52) explains that the body is obvious in our culture; the physical sense of maleness and femaleness is central to the cultural interpretation of gender. Masculine gender is a certain feel to the skin, certain muscular shapes and tensions, certain postures and ways of moving, and certain possibilities in sex (Connell, 2005:53). It is important to note that the bodily experience is often predominant in memories of our own lives and thus in our understanding of who and what we are.

Social constructionism, on the other hand, has actively conceptualised gender (masculinities and femininities) as intersecting with culture, social class and history (Connell, 1995, 2005, 2014; Creighton & Oliffe, 2010; Thatcher, 2011). Masculinities are not a fixed concept but change with time in different social and cultural contexts, making masculinity inherently relational in that it does not exist except in contrast with femininity (Connell, 1995:68). Men are not born to grow from infancy to boyhood to manhood by following a fixed biological rule encoded in their physical make-up. To be a man is to participate in social life as a man, as a gendered being. Therefore, men make themselves, actively constructing their masculinities within a social and historical context (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004:xxiv). Connell (1995:68) indicates that when speaking of masculinity, we are “doing gender” in a culturally

specific way. According to Tolbert (2000:101), feminist analysis of the late 1980s revealed gender (masculinities and femininities) as a social construct that could differ significantly amongst societies and even in subgroups within the same society. Butler (2004:10) establishes the concept of doing gender, describing gender as performative. Butler (2004:1) explains that, while gender is a *“kind of doing, a continuous activity performed, in part, without knowing and without will”*, it is for that reason not automatic or mechanical. Rather, it is a practice of creativeness within a scene of constraint. Butler’s assertion (1990:8) affirms the concept of gender as constructed within a certain context.

We cannot speak of any single masculinity as normative since this will result in the exclusion of other types of masculinities (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004:xxvi). Kimmel and Aronson (2004:xxvi) suggest that without understanding the matrix of masculinities we risk collapsing all masculinities into one hegemonic version. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the gender norm found within any given society (Connell, 1995:77). Connell (1995:77) organises different masculinities in categories of hegemonic masculinity and subordinate masculinities. Connell (1995:77) presents the multiple masculinities model, which establishes that men enact and embody different configurations of masculinity, depending on their positions within a social hierarchy of power. Hegemonic masculinity, the type of gender practices that, in a given space and time, support gender inequality, is at the top of the hierarchy (Connell, 1995:77). Complicit masculinity on the other hand, describes men that benefit from hegemonic masculinity but do not enact it. Subordinate masculinity describes men oppressed by definitions of hegemonic masculinity. Marginalised masculinity describes men who may position powerfully in terms of gender, but not in terms of race and class. These multiple masculinities inform each other, seen as a circular yet hierarchal process dominated by hegemonic masculinity and thereby reinforcing subordinate masculinities.

Van der Watt (2007:91) explains that the majority of men are unlikely to display hegemonic masculinity, but hegemonic masculinity is what they are encouraged to admire and embody. Superman serves as a model of hypermasculinity within the sphere of popular culture, the ultimate embodiment of the male ideal. As the man of steel, Superman adheres to the hyper-masculine ideal found within the hegemonic category of masculinities (Darowski, 2012; Eco, 1984; Pecora, 1992; Scharrer, 2005). In the context of hegemonic masculinity and this study, certain questions arise. Could it be possible to find an alternative masculinity? What would the antithesis of Superman look like?

Chitando and Chirongoma (2012:5) remind us that masculinities are also fragile as they break down and new ones develop. In religious and theological terms, this suggests that men are able to become colleagues in the struggle (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012:5). Masculinities and redemption are not synonymous and Chitando and Chirongoma (2012:5) advocate for a redemptive hypermasculinity, propagating the freedom of masculinities that set men and others free. Although, as the literature reveals, not all men fit into the hegemonic category, they do ultimately strive or try to embody hegemonic masculinity (Van der Watt, 2007:91). I therefore raise the question of what will happen if the alternative is a redemptive masculinity as described by Chitando and Chirongoma (2012:1).

It is my understanding from the literature that masculinities connect fundamentally to the matrix of cultural and societal experiences and personification. It is not a fixed entity. Along with the development of cultural and societal evolution, masculinity develops a forceful and flowing concept inseparably linked to our existence as gendered beings and as an expression of our sexuality. Our sexuality, captured at the essence of our identity, influences how we see ourselves, and how and why we interact with and relate to others in various ways (Kelly, 2012:51). Edwards and Brooks (1999:49) indicate that sexual identity is a complex concept that involves biological factors, gender roles, sociocultural influences and sexual orientations as fundamental features in the formation of sexual identity. Van der Watt (2007:48) postulates that gender is a vital concept in societal life and its relation with the concept of masculinity necessitates better transmission. This study explores the masculinity and the hypermasculine portrayal of Superman, and the influence on young male adolescents and their understanding of themselves as gendered beings.

#### **1.2.4 Male Adolescents**

Gentry and Campbell (2002:7) explain that adolescence is at the same time a social construct, a psychological experience and a biological reality. Cultural practices and biological occurrences define this phase of human development as a period when behavioural abilities and expectations change. Gentry and Campbell (2002:7) highlight the physical, cognitive, emotional, social and behavioural development of adolescence as an integrated process. Christie and Viner (2005:1) elaborate by saying that *“young people will exchange puberty and the completion of growth, take on a sexually dimorphic body shape, develop new cognitive skills, develop a clearer sense of personal and sexual identity, and develop a degree*

*of emotional, personal and financial interdependence from parent relationships.*” Steinberg and Morris (2001:97) add to this statement by emphasising the importance of comprehending adolescent development in context. Prior to the mid-1980s, research on adolescent development focused on describing individual development and functioning (Steinberg & Morris, 2001:97). Research in recent years moved the focus from the individual to the contexts in which development takes place, may it be familial, peer groups, the workplace, schools or, most recently, mass media (Gentry & Campbell, 2002; Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

Stang and Story (2005:5) explain that teens develop a stronger recognition during adolescence of their own personal identity, including the recognition of a set of personal moral and ethical values, and a greater perception of feelings of self-esteem or self-worth. An increased awareness of sexuality and a heightened preoccupation with the body image are fundamental during adolescence (Stang & Story, 2005:5-6). Adolescents are highly conscious of their physical appearance and social behaviours, seeking acceptance within a peer group. Male adolescents entering puberty at a later stage may consider themselves as late bloomers and may feel physically inferior to their peers who matured earlier on. Resulting dissatisfaction may lead to the use of anabolic steroids and other supplements in order to increase linear growth, muscle development, and weight, and it may lead to lower self-esteem (Stang & Story, 2005:6). This is important when considering the influence of popular culture on the male physique, according to Cruz (2014) who refers specifically to the impact of cultural ideals on adolescents images, in the article, *Body-image Pressure inceasingly Affects Boys*.

Field (2014:37) indicates that, in recent studies, nearly 18% of male adolescents were highly concerned about their weight and build, and these male adolescents were more likely to be depressed, and to engage in high-risk behaviours such as overindulgent drinking and drug use. As adolescents grow up in a world shaped by new technologies, young men can feel caught between different realities, thus wanting to define their own existence especially regarding their understanding of masculinity (Seidler, 2006:19). Seidler (2006:100) indicates that young men’s understanding of masculinity and their relationship with their bodies greatly influences the emotional connections formed in relationships.

Masculinities are relational and influenced by social and cultural contexts. Milestone and Meyer (2012:1) explain that gender, masculinity and femininity as well as popular culture interconnect in inseparable, pervasive and complex ways. Pascoe (2005:15) explains that the intense identity process that occurs during adolescence is a particularly fruitful site for revealing and developing the theoretical issues of sexuality, gender and masculinities. Pascoe (2005:16) argues that given the connection between adolescence, sexuality and gender, it seems a fitting life phase in which to study the formation of gendered identities and masculinities. Millington and Wilson (2010:1672) indicate that, although the media represents diverse masculinities, research confirms strength, aggression and heterosexuality as overriding masculine traits.

Media representations of these characteristics commonly accompany limited depictions of femininity and 'alternative' masculinities (Millington & Wilson, 2010:1672). Such representations of dominant masculinities can have shifting, contradictory meanings, in particular when they interconnect with ethnicity, race and class (Millington & Wilson, 2010:1672). These portrayals of the masculine ideal have the potential of contributing to processes whereby these attributes are normalised for male adolescents (Millington & Wilson, 2010:1673). Millington and Wilson (2010:1673) make it clear that the process of coding popular culture involves the intention of attracting particular audiences as commodities. In the case of the media, that promotes stereotypical masculine traits, generally male adolescents are the targeted consumers. This study therefore also explores what happens when the traits of the masculine ideal are not met in terms of race, class, ethnicity, physicality, gender construction and emotionality.

### **1.3 Background and Rationale**

Popular culture has the ability to ascribe meaning to cultural lives and practices (Milestone & Meyer, 2012:3), to inform hegemonic expressions in society (Storey, 2009:10), and to influence identity, bodily experiences and relationships (Delaney & Madigan, 2007; Gauntlett, 2008; Van der Watt & Louw, 2012). This makes popular culture part of economic and political systems, with quantitative and religious dimensions (Cobb, 2005; Lynch, 2005; Milestone & Meyer, 2012). With these definitions in mind, this study considers the comic book and mythological character Superman, and how he situates within the intersections of gender, religion and popular culture.

Mythology shows us basic designs regarding vital facets of our lives: how to connect to love, how to develop mature femininity or masculinity, how to deal with change, how to deal with God or fate, and how to deal with wounds. This aspect of mythology adds to the philosophical and theological level of how we approach transcendence in our daily lives. This aspect of popular culture makes the study of Superman an ideal vantage point from which to examine mythology's impact, since Superman, as an example of popular culture, combines the ideas of mythology that are integrated in every aspect of our daily lives (Kittelton, 1998:7).

Superman is the archetypal male role model; he is a success, he has power and control, he is the ultimate man (Pecora, 1992:63). These mythological characteristics reinforce a stereotype and a certain construction of hegemonic masculinity. Complemented with a wide range of powers and varying degrees of success, Superman, as predominant male, presents a particular ideal of masculinity to readers and viewers. Superman's adherence to hegemonic masculinities and his presentation of hypermasculinity make him an appropriate popular culture character from which to approach masculinity and to study his masculine influence on male adolescents. Ben-Zeev, Scharnetzki, Chan and Dennehy (2012:54) exemplify that the hypermasculine male is characterised by the idealisation of stereotypical masculine traits such as virility and physicality, and the simultaneous rejection of feminine traits like compassion or even emotional expression, which are considered antithetical and even inferior to manliness.

Using the example of Superman, or any superhero construction, demonstrates the influence that hypermasculine males have on male adolescents. The preceding literature review has indicated that male adolescents are at the precious age that offers them the opportunity to choose the type of person they want to be (Cobb, 2005; Delaney & Madigan, 2016; Gauntlett, 2008; Kittelson, 1997; Lynch, 2005; Milestone & Meyer, 2012; Seidler, 2006; Van der Watt & Louw, 2012; Pecora, 1992). Recent studies (Field, 2014; Stang & Story, 2005) demonstrate the influence of popular culture on male adolescent perspectives relating to masculinity and the embodiment thereof. However, certain questions remain. How do we deal with Superman's hegemonic masculinity and his influence on male adolescents that do not fit into this particular scope of masculinity construction? Is it possible that a practical theological critique of Superman can aid in understanding the need of male adolescents to aspire to this type of masculinity? What are the alternatives? How can a feminist theology of

praxis offer marginalised masculinities the opportunity to contribute to the discussion of masculinity?

The literature review indicates an ever-growing need to engage with popular culture and masculinities from a theological perspective, so that we do not revert to the systems that have silenced people on the periphery. Considering the impact of popular culture on male adolescents and especially in an age where the world is ‘a click away’, this study of Superman as a popular culture example is a very important undertaking. It is also meaningful to note that this study is rooted within the discipline of practical theology; hence the following discussion on practical theological methodology and feminist theology of praxis.

#### **1.4 Practical Theological Methodology of Study and Feminist Theology of Praxis**

Osmer (2008:4) explains that practical theological interpretation comprises four tasks. Firstly, the descriptive-empirical task consists of gathering information to help us discern patterns in particular episodes, situations or contexts. Secondly, the interpretive task draws on theories of the arts and sciences to better understand and explain why these patterns and dynamics occur. Thirdly, the normative task focuses on the interpretation of particular episodes, situations or contexts through theological concepts. This enables us to construct ethical norms to guide our responses and to learn from good practices. Fourthly, the pragmatic task allows us to determine strategies of action that will influence situations in ways that are desirable, so that we can enter into reflective conversations (Osmer, 2008:4). These tasks formulate a hermeneutical spiral, which portrays interpretation as composed of distinct but interrelated moments (Osmer, 2008:10).

This study explores the tasks as explained by Osmer (2008:132) and, specifically, focuses on the normative task of practical theological interpretation. The normative task creates the opportunity to explore models of cross-disciplinary dialogue in which practical theology as a normative discipline enters into conversation with other fields. Theological interpretation, founded within practical theology, focuses on the interpretation of present episodes, situations and contexts with theological concepts (Osmer, 2008:132). Betz *et al.* (2007:624) explain that the task of practical theology is to identify religious themes in cultural domains apart from the church, especially those in the mass media and the popular culture they



disseminate, and to employ these themes in the church's ministry of communication. In addition, Betz *et al.* (2007:624) mention that practical theology must have a broad definition of popular culture, so that it includes religion as a symbolic interpretation of conscious life against the background of absolute meaning. These explanations by Betz *et al.* (2007:624) emphasise the necessity for the study of popular culture and Superman, and demonstrate the active role of practical theology in shaping popular culture and vice versa.

Feminist theology of praxis critically analyses the given context (i.e., gender and sexual identity) and engages with contextual situations from a liberating and transformative practice in order to encourage human flourishing, instilled with the belief that such theology is done in the service of furthering God's reign on earth (Ackermann, 2006:227). Practical theological interpretation engages with discerning elements that influence our cognitive thinking and practices within a given context. This is a key characteristic of the feminist theology of praxis that serves as motivation to employ practical theology and feminist theology of praxis as conversation partners within this study. Feminist theology of praxis gives a voice to the marginalised, working towards the liberation and transformation of society that places people and, in this study, masculinities on the periphery. With these perspectives in mind, this study theologically reflects on Superman as an example of popular culture, taking into consideration his presentation of masculinity and how it influences male adolescents' understanding and embodiment of their masculinity.

## **1.5 Problem Statement**

The literature review in this study thus far indicates that popular culture can contribute to the already existing hegemony found in society. Superman in this study is an example of popular culture that demonstrates hegemonic masculinity as well as the hypermasculine ideal. Considering the influence of popular culture, this can be problematic in male adolescents' understanding and embodiment of masculinity. A more nuanced approach may ask how we aid male adolescents who aspire to Superman's hegemonic masculinity and hypermasculine ideal, but do not fit into this specific construction of masculinity. With this question in mind, the study draws from academic literature, and specifically from practical theology and feminist theology of praxis, to comment on this type of masculinity and to move forward to a space where the intersections of gender, health, and theology can aid in the search for redemptive masculinity.

### **1.5.1 The Research Question**

How could a theological critique of Superman's representation of hegemonic masculinity in popular culture assist male adolescents in finding an alternative, redemptive masculinity?

### **1.5.2 Aims and Objectives of the Study**

The aims and objectives of this study are the following:

- A discussion of popular culture with the focus on Superman and his influence on male adolescents' understanding of masculinity.
- A discussion of masculinity construction and how it is influenced by popular culture.
- Reflection on the intersection of gender (male adolescents' masculinity) and popular culture (using Superman as the example).
- Using practical theology and feminist theology of praxis as a lens through which to critically reflect on the influence of Superman/popular culture on masculinities.
- Exploring the possibility of the development of alternative liberating constructions of masculinity in adolescents.
- Conclusions and recommendations from practical theological interpretations and a feminist theology of praxis to assist peripheral masculinities.

### **1.5.3 Anticipated Contribution of the Study**

When one addresses 'so-what' questions, one should emphasise the importance and consequence of the study for the broader field of interest, research and/or practice in which it is situated (Schram, 2006:176). The specific contribution of this study lies in the supplementary insight it provides to practical theology through the lens of feminist theology of praxis. It further conceptualises the influence of popular culture and specifically Superman as mythological hero, and the impact of his presentation of masculinity on male adolescent development.

## **1.6 Research Methodology**

The research methodology for this research was a literature study. According to Mouton (2012:78), a literature study is "*a study of the academic or scholarly texts (articles, monographs, chapters in books) relevant to your empirical research problem (question) and*

*which forms part of (and frames) the remainder of your study.*” A literature study provides a synthesis of prior research in anthropology, psychology and, specifically, theology on the role of the media on male adolescent development. This literature study identified conceptual linkages among ideas and authors that further contributed to a better understanding of the research topic.

## **1.7 Outline of this study**

This chapter has contextualised the study by presenting a brief overview of literature on the key concepts under study, and has explained the research problem and the relevance of this study. The anticipated contribution of this study in practical theology in a Southern African context is briefly mentioned.

**Chapter 2** comprises a theoretical engagement with concepts like culture and ideology. It further explore the concept of popular culture, reflecting on various definitions thereof to create a holistic understanding of the terms. Exploring Superman as an example of popular culture includes the history of the creators, the evolution of the character and a fictional biography of Superman as mythical hero. Examining the Christological reference to this superhero situates Superman within the sphere of culture and more specifically popular culture.

**Chapter 3** explores the history of masculinity development, along with the ways in which feminist studies have influenced it and how it is shaped by gender history. Studying gender as part of masculinities serves as the foundation for the discussion of masculinities and the multiple masculinities model, as presented by Connell (1995). This informs the background and type of masculinity Superman presents, within the larger context of popular culture.

**Chapter 4** focuses on the historical context of the concept of adolescence, to arrive at a better understanding of the construction of the current concept. This serves as groundwork for discussing the physiological, psychological and sociological factors of adolescent development. The focus is specifically on male adolescent development and the study uses different factors that influence adolescent development to establish if popular culture has an influence on male adolescents’ masculinity construction, using the popular culture icon, Superman, as an example.

The next, **chapter**, presents an integrated discussion on Osmer's (2008) four tasks for practical theological interpretation: What is going on? Why is this going on? What ought to be going on? How might we respond? In answering these questions, the study relies on established theoretical perspectives regarding popular culture, masculinities and male adolescent development. The author connects these three concepts making use of feminist theory, feminist theology and feminist theology of praxis and the concept of alternative, transformative and redemptive masculinity. This establishes the influence of popular culture from a theological perspective and determines appropriate responses.

Finally, **chapter 6**, reviews the literature findings and discusses both theoretical and practical implications. Proposed recommendations for further studies and for practical theologians to consider concludes this chapter and the study.

# Chapter 2:

## *Exploring Popular Culture*

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter comprises a theoretical engagement with the concepts of culture and ideology, linked to the concept of popular culture. Following a discussion of culture and ideology, the concept of popular culture is explained, and the various definitions of the concept reflected upon in order to arrive at a more holistic understanding of the term. Using the terms of culture, ideology and popular culture as a foundation, I explore Superman as an example of popular culture, taking into account the history of the creators of Superman, the evolution of the character, as well as a fictional biography of Superman as mythical hero. After a reflection on the Christological aspect of Superman, the chapter ends with a reflection on Superman as situated in the sphere of culture and, more specifically, popular culture.

### **2.2 Theoretical Clarification of Concepts**

#### **2.2.1 Culture**

The concept of culture is an integral part of the definition of popular culture, but the concept of culture also exists on its own (Storey, 2009:2). Culture is a broad and intricate concept that requires a holistic review in order to understand popular culture. Ortner (1999), the editor of *The Fate of 'Culture': Geertz and Beyond* states that Geertz (1973), a cultural anthropologist, is one of the foremost figures in the reconfiguration of the boundaries between social sciences and humanities. Geertz (1973:89) revived and transformed the concept of culture and made it relevant to the humanity disciplines. Geertz (1973:89) establishes that culture is a pattern of meanings embodied in symbols; a system of hereditary concepts articulated in figurative forms. Geertz (1973:4) confirmed the necessity to consider the symbolic meanings of culture and to identify the structures found within the definitive meaning of culture.

Scholars (for example, Betz *et al.*, 2007; Hofstede, 1983; Sakenfeld, 2008; Storey, 2009) from different disciplines conceptualised this concept from Geertz (1973) in defining culture. Sakenfeld (2008:808) writes from a theological perspective and explains that the term

‘culture’ refers to the material substances, norms of behaviours, values, beliefs and expressive symbols or representations. Cultural changes over time and space indicate a change of cultural identities of persons and collectively of people. Sakenfeld (2008:808) establishes that culture in its broadest sense refers to the world of the interpreter and the context of the text; both the interpreter and the text seek to understand each other and both have the power to articulate meaning. For the survival of human society, compelled by nature, we impose meaningful order upon reality. Subsequently, Sakenfeld (2008:809) defines “*culture as the way of life that offers systems for explaining meaning in all the experiences, activities and contacts made up in the world of an individual or society.*”

The argument of Betz *et al.* (2007) aligns with Sakenfeld’s (2008) concept of the cultural relationship between interpreter and text. Betz *et al.* (2007:616) describe the significant theoretical construct of culture as an interpretive model. Although the concept of culture as interpretive model adds structure to how we interpret human life and society, we must be attentive to the advice that deconstructed individuals and distinctive elements are part of human nature and thus of culture (Betz *et al.*, 2007:617). Betz *et al.* (2007:617) state that it is impossible to identify a structure that runs through all cultures, alongside systemised and ordered areas, since culture represents a wealth of alternatives, discrepancies and disorganised fragments.

Storey (2009:1-2) defines culture, firstly, as a universal process of rational, spiritual and artistic development. Secondly, culture can refer to a distinct way of life of a person, a period or a group. Culture thirdly proposes the workings and traditions of rational and specific artistic activities and thus signifies cultural texts and practices. Reference to culture as signifying artistic practices permits us to include soap operas, pop music and comics as examples of culture (Storey, 2009:2).

Hofstede (1983), a social psychologist, builds on Geertz’ interpretation of culture, and Geertz’ (1973) argument that scholars should consider the various elements and structures that exist within the network of culture, understanding each element that empowers us in order to understand the meaning that is found within culture. This reflects in Hofstede’s (1983) systematic framework for evaluating the difference between nations and cultures. Hofstede (1983:46) developed the cultural dimension theory within the organisational domain. Organisation theory is a product of a national culture nurtured in families and

educated in schools and people soak up the values dominant in a specific society. Accordingly, organisation theory is intricately connected and replicated by culture and includes experiences within societal culture. Hofstede's (1983:48) cultural dimension theory primarily assists us to understand the different ways in which people in diverse countries translate their world. Hofstede (1983) describes five dimensions of culture, outlined below, which formulate the pillars of his cultural dimension theory.

The first dimension is the Power-Distance index and Hofstede (1983:50) explains that the power distance is the degree to which the less powerful members of organisations and establishments accept and expect the uneven distribution of power. This dimension does not measure the level of power distribution in a given culture, but rather analyses the way people feel about it. De Mooij and Hofstede (2011:182) elaborate that in high levels of power distance each person has a rightful place in a social hierarchy, whereas in low power distance people expect and accept that power relations are democratic and view members as equal. The second dimension is Individualism versus Collectivism, which involves the extent to which individuals integrate with groups (Hofstede, 1983:53). This dimension makes the distinction between cultures that are individualistic versus those that are collective, where the goals of the group and its well-being are valued over those of the individual (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2011:182-183).

The Uncertainty-Avoidance index is the third dimension, which refers to a society's broadmindedness towards uncertainty and ambiguity. This dimension measures the way a society deals with unknown situations, unexpected events, and the stress of change. Cultures that score high on this index are less tolerant of change and tend to minimise the fear of the unknown by implementing strict rules, regulations and laws. Societies that score low on this index are more open to change and have fewer rules and laws, and more relaxed guidelines (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2011:182-183).

The fourth dimension, Masculinity versus Femininity, entails the distribution of emotional roles between genders (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2011:183). This dimension measures the level of importance a culture places on conventional masculine values such as assertiveness, ambition, power and materialism as well as conventional feminine values such as human relationships. Cultures high on the masculinity scale generally have noticeable differences between genders and tend to be more competitive and ambitious. Those that score low on this

dimension have fewer differences between genders and place a higher value on relationship building (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2011:183).

The final dimension considers Long-term Orientation versus Short-term Orientation and describes a society's time horizon (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2011:183). Short-term oriented cultures value traditional methods, take considerable time to build relationships, and view time in general as circular. This means the past and the present interconnect and tomorrow is there to complete that which was not done today. The opposite is long-term orientation where time is linear, looking to the future rather than the present or the past, with a high value on goal-orientation and rewards (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2011:183).

These five dimensions make available an approach to understand the differences found within cultures and specifically in organisational settings. Hofstede (1983:47) makes it clear that these perceived differences could also define variables within societies. In defining culture, Hofstede (1983:47-64) thus uses organisations to outline the dimensions of culture and explains that organising is a symbolic activity. It involves the manipulation of symbols which have meaning only to the initiated (Hofstede, 1983:64), consequently building on Geertz' (1973) theory of the symbolic meaning of culture and the systems that exist within culture.

From the literature overview above, it could be concluded that culture manifests as a complex entity that expresses itself as part of the environment. It is evident in the way we perceive the world around us and how we respond to the circumstances of everyday life. Culture refers to a way of life, founded in norms, values, beliefs and behaviours, and includes time and space, confined within the consistency of change (Sakenfeld, 2008; Storey, 2009). Culture is also an interpretive model that helps us understand the world in which we live (Betz *et al.*, 2007; Sakenfeld, 2008). It articulates the intellectual, spiritual and practical substance of human society (Storey, 2009:2). Culture has distinctive dimensions: Power-Distance, Individualism-Collectivism, Uncertainty-Avoidance, Masculinity-Femininity, and Long-term Orientation-Short-term Orientation. These collaboratively demonstrate the differences found within organisations and, hence, in societies (Hofstede, 1983:47-64).

Equally important, culture expresses itself within our very identities by way of images, symbols or structures. Culture also ascribes meaning within a certain context, which makes



the concept of culture important when discussing popular culture (Storey, 2009:1). It is crucial to understand that culture is something produced in the construction of music, stories and other forms of expression, long before the distinction existed between culture and popular culture (Dansei, 2008:7). With the development of technology came the ability to communicate across boundaries. The global village was born and with the merging of people and majorities, human experiences became commercialised commodities (Leventman, 2006:2) and popular culture became a commercial endeavour. The following discussion will engage with the concept of popular culture to understand just what, as Storey (2009:1) puts it, this “*empty conceptual category, one that can be filled in a variety of often conflicting ways, depending on the context of use*”, entails.

### **2.2.2 Popular Culture**

Storey (2009:1) states that the concept of popular culture is inadequate since it is a dissolving vessel of confused and opposing meanings able to misdirect analysis into a number of theoretical, visionless pathways. It is a complex concept that may confuse any rational human being, defined continuously, indirectly or obviously, in contrast to prevailing conceptual categories (Storey, 2009:1). The term ‘popular culture’ holds different meanings depending on who is defining it and in which context of use, though it is generally recognised as the language or people’s culture that predominates in a society at a given time. The goal of this discussion is not to define popular culture but rather to consider existing definitions of the concept, to arrive at a holistic understanding of popular culture and its influences on masculinity construction.

Finding the origins and extent of present popular culture is not an easy effort, since various forms of folk culture have existed from the beginning of time. Communal societies have always emitted music, stories and other forms of articulation used for their own leisure and engagement (Dansei, 2008:7). In the late eighteenth century, right through the nineteenth, and into the early part of the twentieth century, diverse groups of philosophers, working under distinctive standards of patriotism, idealism, folktale and folksong, created the first concepts of popular culture (Storey, 2009:1).

These first attempts at defining the concept of popular culture directed two arguments. The first perceived popular culture as quasi-mythical or rather folk culture, were the second

viewed popular culture as the ‘other’ or the lowered ‘mass culture’ of the working class (Storey, 2009:1). Storey (2009:6) and Delaney and Madigan (2007:3) postulate that the difference in the two arguments transpires in high culture versus popular culture, which creates a class distinction. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as influential and lesser classes began to crumble under the all-encompassing power of industrialisation, urbanisation and the appearance of an urban-industrial working class, many European and American philosophers started to notice the rise of the ‘folk’ culture or, as we know it, popular culture.

Dansei (2008:2) declares that popular culture refers fundamentally to a kind of culture that ascertains categorical distinctions not worth mentioning. The term appeared in the United States in the 1950s when the non-categorical culture became a general social reality (Dansei, 2008:2). Dansei (2008:2) explains that the rise in popular culture in that era was mainly due to post-war prosperity and a subsequent ‘baby boom’, which gave people, irrespective of class or educational background, substantial purchasing power. This thrust them into the unparalleled position of influencing trends in fashion, music and lifestyle. Dansei (2008:4) makes it clear that in the history of human culture, popular culture stands out as uncharacteristic; it is the culture by the people for the people. In comparison to historic culture, it equally discards the domination of tradition and many of the communally social practices of the past, as well as the pretexts of distinctive movements within existing conventional cultures (Dansei, 2008:4).

Leventman (2006:2), on the other hand, indicates that popular culture in itself is a creation of history and, once formed, creates its own history. In pre-modern Western history, popular culture as we know it did not exist. In its place was folk culture, a concept directly related to everyday life and fundamental human matters and experiences. Leventman (2006:2) concurs that human experiences became commercial products after industrialisation, experienced and expressed as mass-produced inventions rather than through unpretentious life happenings. Cultural experiences and practices in the global village of contemporary society also have the flavour of produced and distributed commodities. It is a type of colossal cultural engagement and ultimately all expressions of life becomes popularised and people come to experience, reason, visualise and even dream in popular culture terms (Leventman, 2006:2).

Hermes (2005:10) discusses popular culture in terms of cultural citizenship, defining it as a process of bonding and community building. Bonding suggests the involvement of the content-related practices of reading, consuming, celebrating and censoring offered in the space of popular culture. Popular culture offers an imaginary community or, maybe more accurately, a collective historic imagining. This imagined community may offer a feeling of belonging, a sense of duty and identity (Hermes, 2005:1). Hermes (2005:2) confirms that popular culture has the power to connect and to create a feeling that people belong. Popular culture also holds a certain attraction, providing the space where we can fantasise about the ideals and hopes that we have for society (Hermes, 2005:3). The author further explains that popular culture connects the domains of the public and the private, and makes vague the boundaries that we use for age, gender or ethnicity. The concept of cultural citizenship linked with popular culture thus highlights the political characteristic of popular culture. It is the space where the presence of those who do not have the power to take part in the political and economic sphere, is made known (Hermes, 2005:11).

To summarise, popular culture is a counterforce; it provides a sense of belonging and identity, and refers to the cultural practices in which people engage. It also refers to the cultural text that is symbolic with the foremost function of creating meaning (Milestone & Meyer, 2012:3). Popular culture is thus a space that establishes symbolic meaning, may it be in images, values, behaviours, identity development or gender (Dansei, 2008; Delaney & Madigan, 2007; Hermes, 2005; Leventman, 2006; Storey, 2009). Systems and ideological philosophies influence, establish, and perpetuate popular culture (Storey, 2009). The following section considers the concept of ideology and its relation to popular culture.

### **2.2.3 Ideology**

The French philosopher Antoine Destutt de Tracy created the term 'ideology' around 1796 to describe the '*science of the formation of ideas*' (Kennedy, 1979:353). Thompson (1990) in *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication* debates the relationship between ideology and mass communication. Subsequently, a review of the theory of ideology in the light of the development of mass communication transpired. Thompson (1990:7) criticised the assumptions made by critical Marxists, who adopted the term ideology to describe a false consciousness that perpetuates in impartial class relationships and assumed the media to be an instrument of social control. This indicates a

simplified understanding of the overall role of the mass media in relation to power and domination. Thompson (1990:7) defines ideology as “*meaning in the service of power*” and declares that symbolic forms, including media messages, are not ideological as such, although understood in specific social context they contribute to our understanding of who we are.

Thompson (1990:32) describes ideology as a body of ideas, presumed inaccurate and disconnected from the everyday actualities of political life. Thompson (1990:5) mentions that, in the last decades of social and political theory, two public reactions have emerged around the vague legacies of the concept of ideology. The first response attempts to conquer the concept of ideology by removing negative perceptions and includes ideology into a body of descriptive concepts used by social sciences (Betz *et al.*, 2009; Thompson, 1990). This attempt brought about an unbiased concept of ideology, with the critical element of ideology removed from the analysis of systems, ideas, beliefs and values. The second response deems the concept too vague, too contentious, and disputes the use thereof in the analysis of social and political systems (Thompson, 1990:6). Thompson (1990:6) argues that, irrespective of the second response, the concept of ideology remains a useful and important concept in the academic vocabulary of social and political analysis and, irrespective of the first response, requires the negative, critical intellect.

Thompson (1990:7) indicates that the concept of ideology also refers to ways in which meaning functions in specific circumstances and states that it determines and maintains relations of power that are logically unbalanced. Thompson (1990:71) supports the concept of ideology that demands attention to the manner in which meaning flourishes in the service of dominant individuals and groups. It refers to the way in which the meaning of constructed and conveyed symbolic forms operates in specific circumstances to establish and sustain structured social relationships. Certain individuals and groups benefit more than others do, while some individuals and groups have an interest in conserving the status quo and others may seek to oppose it. An important notion to consider in this study with regard to Thompson’s (1990:6) definition and approach to ideology is that of the symbolic meanings found in social and political systems. The meaning we attach to symbolic entities in our given context governs how we see and interpret the world around us. This captures the essence of ideology; it can be a structure, a system or a mind-set, used to criticise and analyse our social and political relations.

Sakenfeld (2008:7) affirms that the concept of ideology generally refers to a complex system comprising ideas, values and perceptions held by a particular group. Ideology provides a structure for the members of a group to understand their place in societal order. Ideology thus refers to a systematic body of ideas articulated by a group of people and indicates how cultural texts and practices can present distorted images of reality. Storey (2009:3) elaborates on four definitions of ideology. The first definition demonstrates how ideology may conceal the reality of domination from those in power; the dominant class does not see itself as oppressor or exploiter. Secondly, ideology can subdue the reality of subordination from those who are powerless. Storey (2009:4) thirdly defines ideology in terms of ideological forms, suggesting how texts (television, fiction, pop songs, novels, feature films and so on) always present a particular image of the world. The fourth definition indicates that ideology is part of the practices of everyday life and does not exist simply in certain notions of life (Storey, 2009:5).

Betz *et al.* (2009:402) attach the meaning of the word ‘ideology’ to its historical use. It signifies, as an epistemological term, the general theory of perceptions, ideas and concepts. It implies, as a politico-philosophical term, general critique of knowledge, an analysis intended to clear up false or distorted forms and objects of understanding. Ideology is thus part of the historical development of thoughts and reasoning surrounding perceptions, ideas and concepts found within society. The term ideology incorporates political and philosophical structures in analysing knowledge, thus providing the necessary tools to prevent falsehoods and subjective forms of reasoning. Marxist critics indicate that ideology enforces biased class relationships and their understanding of ideology revolves around elements of dominance and distortion (Milestone & Meyer, 2012; Thompson, 1990). Marxist critics view ideology as a set of ideas that are dominant in three ways. Firstly, dominant groups in society produce ideology, therefore perpetuating hegemony. Secondly, ideologies pretend to be neutral, hence the element of distortion, but in fact they work in the interest of the dominant group. Thirdly, ideologies are the dominant way of thinking in society; even subordinate social groups believe in dominance, because those in power enforce it (Milestone & Meyer, 2012:16).

Thompson (1990:7) argues that ideology operates in the service of power as comprehended in a specific social context that enables ideological structures. With the development of ideological thought, it is important to bear in mind that ideology has various functions; it connects to a system of interpretation and a structure that determines how we interpret the

world around us (Betz *et al.*, 2009; Sakenfeld, 2008; Thompson, 1990). Thompson (1990:7) suggests conscious consideration of ideologies within society removed from power, whether political, economic or individualistic, and stresses awareness of the context that enables ideologies. Against the preceding scholarly viewpoints, the next paragraphs review the media as a key ideological force, creating meaning endorsed within society and culture.

#### **2.2.4 Mass Media**

The mass media have always been a key partner of modern day popular culture (Dansei, 2008:7). Milestone and Meyer (2012:4) confirm that mass media are central to popular culture in many ways. Mass media institutions are symbolic in that their products signify and construct meaning through language and images. Milestone and Meyer (2012:17) postulate that, within popular culture, the media are key ideological forces. As institutions, they are concerned with the production of symbolic material, of generating meanings and messages by summarising the dominant view through which consumers understand the world. In an exploration of the role of the media in children and adolescents' identity development, Matthews (2003:233) found that the media makes available positive role models for children and adolescents and, as such, can exercise a positive influence on their social lives. However, the media can also exercise a damaging influence on children and adolescents by presenting negative role models and by exposing children to disturbing content. Matthews (2003:220) concludes that media experiences contribute to individuals' development of their sense of self and that these experiences remain salient in young adulthood and possibly beyond.

The media, and in particular television, have been endorsed with remarkable powers to change people and have been accused of contributing to the majority of social evils. The media have been criticised for the weakening trust in politics, the relapse in religion, the rise in crime and violence in the world, the oversimplification of intellectual content in popular culture, the increase in liberalism and for wielding the power to corrupt and ruin (Dansei, 2008; Gauntlett, 2008; Matthews, 2003; Milestone and Meyer, 2012; Van der Walt & Louw, 2012; Wood, 1994). Van der Walt and Louw (2012:357) refer to the power of the media and indicate that media networks can alter power relationships. One of the leading debates around the social impact of the media focuses on the question of whether the mass media have substantial power over its viewers or whether viewers eventually have more power than the media.

According to Wood (1994:231), of the many stimuli exerted on the way in which we view men and women, media are the most invasive and one of the most influential. Woven right through our everyday lives, media suggest messages into the consciousness at every single opportunity. All forms of media communicate images of the sexes, many of which are idealistic, clichéd and restricting. Wood (1994:231) illustrates three themes of how the media embody gender. The first diminishes women, incorrectly suggesting that men are the cultural standard and women are insignificant or non-existent. Secondly, men and women as represented in conventional ways signify and support the socially recommended views of gender. Thirdly, the portrayals of relationships between men and women give emphasis to traditional roles and regulate violence against women (Wood, 1994:231). Important to note is that Wood wrote *The Influence of Media on Views of Gender* in 1994, which demonstrates the long history of negative influence of the media on gender. Gauntlett (2008) in the second edition of *Media, Gender, and Identity: An Introduction* mentions that society had noticeably changed its views on gender in the second half of the twentieth century and that, today, equal opportunity is a model for which most people in positions of power at least state their support. Men and women demand equal treatment and are annoyed if this is not reflected in today's movies and television shows.

Regardless of continuous bias and prejudice in opposition to lesbians, gays and bisexuals, there is scientific evidence that mostly younger age groups are more and more approving of sexual diversity (Gauntlett, 2008:66). Gauntlett (2008:107) indicates that the media was and is a crucial supplier of information about minorities. Mass media plays an essential role in the negative response towards tradition and the change of society. Culture is an important entity that articulates elements of society and how we experience and express ourselves within society. It is the practices of actions, images, texts, behaviours and values wherein we immerse our identity and the expression of self, which gives credibility to popular culture and, in turn, establishes the meanings and symbols produced and consumed.

In summary, there are certain ideological concepts that influence how we produce symbols of meaning; a system that gives structure to how we interpret the world, a lens that determines the meanings found within symbols. One of these ideologies found within popular culture is the media; an ideological perspective that influences and reflects how we perceive society. Media refers to multiple mediums, which include television, internet, magazines, comic books, newspapers, film and radio, to mention a few (Milestone & Meyer, 2012:1). The focus

of this study is on the comic book character Superman. In answer to the question of how Superman has retained his popularity for so long, Harris, (2013) in the blog: *'Why is Superman still so popular?'* suggests that the continuous updating of Superman's image has maintained his relevance. Superman, as comic book character, has the ability to change himself according to social circumstances and yet, at the same time, succeeds in projecting the impression of unchanged virtues (Harris, 2013). Before exploring Superman as an example of popular culture, it is worth noting this character's impact on the African and South African comic book scene. It is, after all, the continent and country from which this study originates.

### 2.2.5 African and South African Superheroes

Gordon (2012:121) suggests the many interpretations of Superman amongst the various media platforms use nostalgia to link the character with multiple ideologies of individuality, consumerism and democracy. This is relevant when considering the influence that the ideal of Superman has on African and South African superheroes. Nigerian author Ozo Ezeogu and illustrator Jide Martin (2016) created their own version of an African Superman – Guardian Prime (*Who is the quintessential African Superhero*, 2016).



Guardian Prime (Ezeogu & Martin, 2016)



The intent of the designers was to create a superhero with whom Nigerians could connect. The character description of Guardian Prime reads as follows:

*“Tunde Jaiye is the fifth element, one of the five essential elements on earth (earth, air, water, fire and man). He is the perfect man created how God intended man to be (in his image). He can do everything a normal man can do only magnified to almost godlike levels. He is the Guardian born to the human race as is customary every 2000 years. He is Nigerian. He is Guardian Prime”* (Comic Republic, 2016).

Another example of comics moving to the foreground in South Africa is the graphic novel *Kwezi* created by Loyiso Mkize (*Meet Kwezi-Africa’s cartoon Superhero*, 2014). It depicts the story of a teenage superhero in Gold City, a metropolis parallel to Johannesburg. It infuses the creative and unique local slangs and cultural references found in South Africa, while focusing on a strong moral code as well as an emphasis on education. According to Mkize (2014), it is *“a coming of age story about finding one’s heritage.”*



Kwezi by Loyiso Mkize (Okupe, 2016)

*Guardian Prime* and *Kwezi* are only two examples of African and South African comic book superheroes. These examples demonstrate the transcending nature of Superman as an example of popular culture. It also confirms that popular culture is a significant space where symbolic images and meanings communicate something of the present-day realities

experienced in society. The growing popularity of the superhero genre creates a precedent for engaging with the concept of popular culture and, in this case, Superman. The following section discusses the journey of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster as the creators of Superman, the evolution of the character, Superman as a mythical hero and the comparisons between Superman, Jesus Christ and Moses.

## **2.3 Superman – the Man and the Myth**

### **2.3.1 The Journey of Two Boys**

Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the writers of Superman, were both born in 1914. They first met in 1931 as students at Glenville High School in Cleveland, United States, and their friendship formed out of a shared interest in science fiction and comic books (Daniels, 1998; Goulart, 1990; Rizzotti, 2010). Most of their energy was initially directed at working for their school paper; Shuster went on to sketch entertaining cartoon features for the Glenville Torch, while most of Siegel's writing style had a similarly jesting character (Daniels, 1998:11). Shuster and Siegel worked together on a series of short stories called *Goober the Mighty*, which was an impersonation of Tarzan, although the caricature indicated a certain amount of ambiguity about the idea of aggressive, powerfully built heroes (Goulart, 1990:331).

Their stories from 1931 introduced an initial theme of a powerful character. However, Siegel and Shuster reverted to the opposite: the superman they created would be a villain (Daniels, 1998:12). Daniels points out that Siegel and Shuster were typical nerds outside their fantasy worlds – bespectacled, un-athletic and nervous around girls. Many of their dreams centred upon omnipotence and they started envisioning a man of limitless might. The creators had an unarticulated agenda of creating a modern myth that would both embody adolescent anxiety and offer a balm for its pains.

The first Superman story, titled *The Reign of Superman*, appeared in *Science Fiction*, the magazine that Shuster and Siegel created in 1932 (Daniels, 1998:12). Set intentionally in the Great Depression of the 1930s, it features the power-hungry Bill Dunn, a homeless man, snatched from his breadline existence by Professor Ernest Smalley, who needed a subject for research (Daniels, 1998:13). The first Superman was born from a science experiment, the ultimate goal of which was to achieve wealth and world domination (Daniels, 1998:14).

Fortunately, in this story, the effects of the experiment wear off and Dunn disappears from the world, as we know it. Daniels (1998:14) comments that it seems like Siegel's way of saying that the power he could imagine would be too much for any meagre human being to handle. That was the end of Superman, for the time being.

As *Science Fiction* expired after its fifth issue in 1933, Shuster and Siegel focused on a new medium – the comic book. Later in that same year, Siegel and Shuster submitted a comic book story to Consolidated Book Publishers, titled *The Superman*. This character had no superpowers; although big and strong, he was completely human and his name served only as hyperbole, suggesting that Siegel was not comfortable to award uncanny powers as part of the heroic ideal. Upon agreement, this Superman would be a good person (Daniels, 1998:12). Rizzotti (*Superman: A Mythical American*, 2010) asserts that the German philosopher Fredrick Nietzsche originally coined the term 'Übermensch' in 1883, which designates a character willing to risk all for the sake of enhancing humanity. Although previous comic book writers loosely used the term 'superman', Shuster and Siegel found a personality to match the concept and create a version of the character called Superman.

Late in 1934, Siegel created a new formula for the ultimate Superman, captured in the tradition of the mighty heroes who were legendary in every culture, from Samson to Hercules (Daniels, 1998; Goulart, 1990). The new character's inherent superpowers would make him the ultimate entertainer and strongman, fighting against crime, tyranny and social injustice. As an immigrant of classes, Superman became the champion of the American way (Watt-Evans, 2006:1). The new Superman came from another planet (as the previous supermen born on earth were either fools or villains), which further provided the hero with immunity against human weaknesses. Thus, with the creation of this otherworldly being, Siegel touched upon a mythic theme of universal significance (Goulart, 1990:352).

Daniels (1998:19) suggests that the creators Siegel and Shuster modelled Clark Kent, Superman's other self, after themselves as timid, biased, working class and socially awkward. They presented him with good qualities, like intelligence, integrity and diligence. The idea was to create a counterpart, a dependable Superman. Daniels (1998:19) mentions that Siegel and Shuster also used Clark Kent as a mockery of the adolescent environment that never quite accepted them. To solidify this twist, Siegel and Shuster created a witness in the form of journalist Lois Lane – Superman's disguise as Clark Kent was intended to be a joke on

Lois Lane (Daniels, 1998:20). Her character is seen as a shallow girl who sets aside a decent person on one level, while dreaming about the more muscular members of society, even though Lane was emancipated with many positive qualities, including courage, independence and ambition (Daniels, 1998:20).

### 2.3.2 The Evolution of Superman

A worldwide icon, Superman means different things to numerous people: he encourages, he is an alien, an immigrant from a distant land just looking to serve, or a country boy combatting the endless war for truth and justice (*DC Comics Characters: Superman*, 2016). Eco (1984:107) describes Superman's abilities as "...*practically unlimited, he can fly through space at the speed of light, and he has X-ray vision and super hearing, he is also kind, handsome, modest and helpful.*" He is an impressive force from outside humanity, yet perfectly human in many ways. He is a representation of the hopes and aspirations of humankind. In every era since his creation, Superman has embodied those qualities admired the most. Morrison and Morales (*Superman VS The City of Tomorrow*, 2011) affirm that Superman is the modern man's dream of the ultimate ideal.

Since his debut, Superman has evolved, and been interpreted and presented in several ways. Superman was a powerful crusader for social justice in his early years during the Great Depression, fighting for the poor and oppressed. This Superman was ferocious, tearing through doors and demanding justice for the innocent. The viewpoint of creators Shuster and Siegel reflects this in the early storyline (Daniels, 1998:22). Daniels (1998:64) traced the different personifications of Superman through the decades, from his 1930s fights against crime, throughout the 1940s and World War II, a time in which Superman helped to sell war bonds, and into the 1950s where the Superman comics reflect an era of relevancy and the awakening of social consciousness. Superman was simply someone honest and true, when in 1979 following Watergate and Vietnam in 1979, he claimed to stand for truth and justice (Carter, 2010; Watt-Evans, 2006). Superman in his present day format is a crusader for social justice, demanding fair play for the poor, battling the rich and fighting for the underprivileged. This Superman emerged during a time of great recession when men and women across America lost jobs, further widening the gap between rich and poor (Morrison & Morales, 2011).

Wallace, Beatty and Greenburger (2006:92) explain that the current presentation of Superman and his immigrant status is a key characteristic of his appeal. With a dual identity, Superman allows immigrants to identify with both their cultures. Clark Kent represents the assimilated individual, allowing Superman to express the immigrant's cultural heritage for the greater good (Wallace *et al.*, 2006:92). When considering the evolution of Superman's character and his story, as well as the parallels found within the social environment, it is clear that Superman serves as a reflection of societal trials and tribulations. Harris' (2013) answer to the question '*Why is Superman still so popular?*' demonstrates the impact of Superman's moral teachings, seeing the powerful philosophical concept of the spiritual ideal of the good.

### 2.3.3 The Mythical Hero

*"Star-Child will leave a death world, for the Systems of the Rings, where the child will grow to legend as his life the singer sings. When the conqueror wants his secret, with the Star-Child he'll contend; and when day of battle's over, then the legend's life will end"* (Maggin, 1978:6).

This quotation from Maggin (1978) contains a prophecy of Superman as mystical hero. Throughout the ages, heroes have occupied an honourable position in the teachings of almost every chronicled society. Even when heroes did not have the favour of the gods in earliest times they were divine or at least viewed as semi-divine (LoCicero, 2007:3). Likewise, in some cultures the line between hero and god was so elusive as to be non-existent. LoCicero (2007:5) argues that gods or demigods, for example Osiris, Seth, Horus, Thor, Loki, Achilles, Odysseus, Hercules and others, were born from mythology. These mythological icons transcend into our modern day society in the form of superheroes. Superman, Captain Marvel, Wonder Woman, James Bond, these, and other superior figures are the equivalent of the immortal superheroes of the past (LoCicero, 2007:5). The mythic hero is a combination of a number of archetypal metaphors, which articulates our society's mental legacy and moral reference point, a universal continual that exceeds culture and time (LoCicero, 2007:5; Wandtke, 2007:6).

Superman is the flawless example of a contemporary mythical hero; no other character better represents myth as archetype, a mythical model that personifies the cultural realism of an era. Superman - like any mythical hero - has a supernatural origin and is perhaps the most visibly

mythic superhero in the entire pantheon of impressive characters (Rizzoti, 2010). As the most documented superhero in popular culture, Superman has risen to epic folk hero status (*DC Comics Characters: Superman*, 2016). With the sequential nature of comic book publication and the extent of the character's continuation, the specifics of Superman's origin, relations and capabilities have changed considerably throughout the years (Lloyd, 2006:182; Wandtke, 2007:13). Superman as a character continues living in a larger creation of comics, called the DC Comics multiverse. The differences and variations explained in the character's life story to the reader are as adaptations of Superman living in independent parallel universes (Friedrich, 1988:6; Wallace *et al.*, 2006:20-21). Wallace *et al.* (2006:20) demonstrates this statement with an example: the first Superman of the Golden Age of comic books is not the same individual as the second Superman of the Silver Age of comic books; these manifestations subsist in different universes with alternative editions of planet Earth, referred to as Earth-Two and Earth-One, respectively. The Superman of present-day permanence continues living in the leading DC Universe, referred to as "New-Earth" in the comics (Wallace *et al.*, 2006:21).

Vanier (2016) in the blog *Diametrically Opposed: #Superman / #LexLuthor - The world's most powerful hero vs. its most intelligent villain*, verifies the latest adaptation of Superman's biography:

*“Born on the planet Krypton, Kal-El was the son of Lara Lor-Van and Jor-El, a respected scientist who discovered that the planet was approaching imminent destruction. Unable to convince anyone of his claims, he placed Kal-El in a spaceship and sent him away from the dying planet, travelling through space until it reached Earth and crash landed in a farmer's field in Kansas. There, the boy was found by John and Martha Kent, who took in the alien infant, hid the evidence of his crash landing, and named him Clark. As he grew older, he discovered that he had abilities far beyond those of his peers – the result of his Kryptonian physiology absorbing the radiation from Earth's yellow sun. He began to dedicate himself to saving lives and protecting humanity, eventually learning the mystery of his origin and donning the colourful garb of his biological family. As Superman, Clark became not only the protector of Metropolis, where he made his home as an adult, but also the entire world, all the while disguised as a mild-mannered reporter for the Daily Planet.”*

ComicBookMovie.Com. (2013), elaborates on Superman's origin and refers to his departure from Krypton, saying that "*A desperate father, whose world is dying around him, and whose people have, for ignorance and pride, ignored his warnings until the very end, sends his only son to Earth. The infant is taken up by a kindly, farming family.*" The unknown writer, known as 'aresww3', remarks that this portrayal more or less echoes the descriptions of an ancient myth (ComicBookMovie.Com, 2013).

Morrison and Morales (2011) assert that Superman is an epitome outside the scope of humanity, the protector sent from the heavens, coming forth to save humankind. Superman is captivating as a mythic hero for his physical power, inner strength and godlike qualities, but also because at the heart of Superman's character he is, nevertheless, very human (Morrison & Morales, 2011). The Man of Steel was born on another planet but nurtured by human parents and this may have influenced his perspective of humanity. Morrison and Morales (2011) suggest that he grapples emotionally with problems such as the always-present weight of the world pressing on his shoulders, and, physically, with rivals even more formidable. Jurgens, Jones, Ordway, Kesel, Simonson and Stern (2007), the authors of *Superman: The death and return of Superman Omnibus*, demonstrate this struggle within Superman. Throughout the story, Superman fights to save the world as he combats the cold-blooded monster known as Doomsday, whose only purpose is to cause destruction and death (Jurgens *et al.*, 2007:35), taking beating after beating and in spite of that, never giving in. Superman finally sacrifices his life to save the world from the overpowering beast, but through a combination of prevailing alien technology and the reluctance to give in to his fate, Superman returns to save the world from an vicious villain and thereby resumes his place as the defender of mankind (Jurgens *et al.*, 2007; Wandtke, 2007).

#### **2.3.4 Jesus Christ, Moses and Superman?**

Milestone and Meyer (2012:1) explain that popular culture is media culture, which includes mass media such as radio, the press, film and television and encompasses new media such as the internet. This is relevant in the discussion of the parallels drawn between Superman, Moses and Jesus Christ. Various writers, filmmakers, philosophers and scholars (Anders, 2006; Babka, 2008; Engle, 1987; Harris, 2013; Kozlovic, 2002; Peebles, 2006; Skelton, 2006; Tye, 2012; Wandtke, 2007) refer to the parallels between Superman and Jesus Christ or Moses. Popular culture provides a platform for people to engage on a global scale with one

another on varying topics on the internet, and these include discussions of the parallels between comic book and biblical figures. There are multiple blogs and commercial articles on the internet, for example, *Similarities between Superman and Jesus Christ: Jesus vs. Superman Comparison* (Goodwyn, 2016); *That Superman debate: Moses or the Messiah* (Mattingly, 2014); *10 Reasons Superman is Jesus Christ* (Anderson, 2015); *It's a God! It's a Man! It's Super-Jesus!* (Ebert, 2006); *Superman isn't Jesus* (Cohn, 2013) and *Why is Superman still so popular* (Harris, 2013), that discuss the parallels found between Jesus Christ, Moses and Superman.

Superman, considered a universal icon, the apocalyptic hero and the most all-powerful hero ever invented (Daniels, 1998:11), is possibly a modern interpretation of Jesus Christ. Babka, (2008:116) refers to the contribution of popular culture in making Superman a Christ-like figure and explains that legends make a modern-day prototype available against which to measure the embodiment of Christ. Several authors (Anders, 2006; Kozlovic, 2002; Peebles, 2006; Wandtke, 2007) agree that there are certain parallels between the stories of Superman and Jesus Christ. Phillips (2016) in the blog, *Superman's Origin and Parallels Are Based on Moses and NOT Jesus* refers to Goyer, the screenwriter for *Man of Steel*, saying, “we didn't come up with these allusions of Superman being Christ-like. That's something that's been embedded in the character from the beginning.”

The parallel drawn between Jesus Christ and Superman becomes clearer when considering the following line of comparison that surfaced on the internet. Superman or Kal-El is the only begotten son of Jor-El, as Jesus is the only begotten Son of God. Superman was an alien immigrant and, like a diaspora Jew, he had to leave his lustrous home to find a new life amongst strangers in a strange land (Vanier, 2016). Later on, he would again leave his home, Smallville, to live in the arctic wilderness, shielded inside the fortress of solitude, and for a third time he would leave his arctic home to live in an urban city (Metropolis) going about his heavenly father, Jor-El's, work (Anders, 2006; Kozlovic, 2002). This compares with Jesus who left His celestial home in heaven to come to the earthly realm. Later on, He left his rural home Nazareth to wander through desert wildernesses, shielded by God to withstand the onslaught of Lucifer. Throughout His life, He executed missionary work all over the Roman-dominated world, doing His heavenly Father's work. The need for a deliverer “is expressed in the biblical messianic hope that God would send his Messiah in the form of a single human being, a person just like us, who could speak to us and show us, through human words and



*deeds, the way to the truth and the life*” (Short, 1983:42). Superman was the fictional, materialistic equivalent of that sacred hope and Koslovic (*Superman as Christ-Figure: The American Pop Culture Movie Messiah*, 2002) indicates:

*“Some have seen the Superman image as a substitute, pop image messiah. Yet the value of Superman is that he is a messianic symbol, as valid for our time as Charlemagne or Sir Galahad were in the medieval period. The symbol doesn’t substitute as an alternate reality, but points to a greater reality, albeit one it never fully expresses.”*



Scene from Man of Steel playing on the existing comparisons of Superman and Jesus Christ  
(Henry Cavill News, 2013)

Various references draw the parallel between Superman and Moses (Beatty, 2006; Brod, 2012; Harris, 2013; Schenck, 2005; Skelton, 2006). The story of Superman saved from certain doom as an infant, his parents placing him in a starship and sending him drifting in space, resonates with Moses’ own rescue in a basket on the banks of the Nile River (Schenck, 2005:30). Both Superman and Moses are foreigners adopted by foster parents from an unfamiliar culture whilst maintaining their identities. Harris (2013) comments that it is not much of a jump to align the story of a Jewish refugee in Egypt with that of Superman. According to Beatty (2006:9), the author of *The Superman Handbook, The Ultimate Guide to Saving the Day*, this strong reference to the Biblical story of Moses was not a coincidence. Siegel and Shuster deliberately decided that Superman would emerge from his modest beginnings to steer his people, the residents of Smallville and the millions of Metropolis, to a

better world (Beatty, 2006:9). Nonetheless, this is essentially where the hypothetical parallels stop. The claims that Superman is a Moses-figure, initially based upon the fascination of the story and the cultural inheritance of his creators, are scarce and debatable when placed under inquiry (Christoforidis, 2014:36).

*“Look! Up in the sky! It’s a bird! It’s a plane! It’s Superman!”* (Daniels, 1998:1-7). Superman was one of the first superheroes ever published; his incredible power, unyielding goodness and protection of humanity have made him a constant presence in popular culture for more than seventy-five years of publication. Quentin Tarantino (2004) writer and director of *Kill Bill* Volume 2, discusses the idea of Superman and Clark Kent with regard to humanity in the following statement:

*“As you know, I’m quite keen on comic books, especially the ones about superheroes. I find the whole mythology surrounding superheroes fascinating. Take my favourite superhero, Superman...the mythology is not only great, it is unique. A staple of the superhero mythology is that there is the superhero and the alter ego. Batman is actually Bruce Wayne. Spiderman is actually Peter Parker. When that character wakes up in the morning, he’s Peter Parker. He has to put on a costume to become Spiderman. And it is in that characteristic that Superman stands alone. Superman didn’t become Superman. Superman was born Superman. When Superman wakes up in the morning, he’s Superman. His alter ego is Clark Kent. His outfit with the big red S—that’s the blanket he was wrapped in as a baby when the Kent’s found him. Those are his clothes. What Clark Kent wears, the glasses, the business suit—that’s the costume. That’s the costume Superman wears to blend in with us. Clark Kent is how Superman views us. What are the characteristics of Clark Kent? He’s weak, he’s unsure of himself, he’s a coward. Clark Kent is Superman’s critique on the whole human race”* (Tarantino, 2004:44).

According to Babka (2008:114), Tarantino (2004) crystallises the difference between superheroes in the comic book pantheon. Whereas Spiderman needed an external accident, a bite from a radioactive spider, to transform himself into a superhero, and must put on a costume to become Spiderman, Superman required no external event to make him super; he was born super because he is not human. Babka (2008:114) further explains that Superman is to a certain extent an alien who on planet earth is super, while living in this environment, and

is super when compared to human beings. The explanation by Tarantino (2004) on the characteristics of a superhero, may demonstrate something Christological in his description of Superman. Babka (2008:114) explains the Christological aspect by referring to Jesus as “*Word made flesh.*” Ultimately, Jesus has superpowers: he can control the forces of nature, wake the dead, dispel demons and change water to wine, one of the many reasons why popular culture made the connection between Jesus and Superman (Babka, 2008:114).

Detweiler (2013:7-8) refers to CS Lewis when noting how exciting and inspiring such myths can be. Lewis wrote:

*“I suspect that men have sometimes derived more spiritual sustenance from myths they did not believe than from the religion they professed. We love our superheroes. Yet, Jesus’s life, death and resurrection were far more than a myth. His sacrifice was far more than an example. It was the central act of history, the transformative moment when humanity was freed from the deadly mark of sin. The Man of Steel shows us what sacrifice looks like in the mythical Metropolis. Jesus Christ shows us what sacrifice looks like in the historical Jerusalem. As acknowledged by faithful Christians for centuries, this perfect person made a complete sacrifice to save imperfect people.”*

## **2.4 Chapter Summary**

The preceding discussions and literature review of culture have made it clear that culture is a complex concept. Culture is captured in the very essence of human society and reflects interpretations of the world around us in the expression of emotions, beliefs and understandings. It transcends the social and political history of humanity in our past, present and future, with a language that communicates hopes, dreams and even our fears. Culture refers to a way of life, comprehended in our norms, values, beliefs and behaviours. It encompasses time and space captured within the consistency of change (Sakenfeld, 2006; Storey, 2009). Culture is an interpretive model that helps us understand the world we live in (Betz *et al.*, 2007; Hofstede, 1983; Sakenfeld, 2006).

Ideology is the justificative dimension of culture, referring to that part of culture that is actively concerned with the establishment and defence of patterns of beliefs and values

(Geertz, 1973). Ideology names the structures of situations in such a way that the attitude towards them is one of commitment, and it seeks to motivate action. This demonstrates the interconnectedness of the concepts of culture and ideology. A most intriguing and informing concept of ideology presents ideology as a structure or a perspective, and as images with symbolic meaning (Thompson, 1990). This is specifically relevant when using Superman as an example of popular culture.

Popular culture is a complicated and complex concept, especially when considering the pivotal nature of culture and ideology in defining popular culture. Popular culture ascribes meaning to a context, mind-set, structure and, especially, humanity (Storey, 2009). Popular culture as a citizenship consists of diverse meanings, because of the human element. We may have multiple theories of popular culture, but at the very heart of the concept is the human component. Humankind is multifaceted, diverse, complex, compelling and beautifully intricate (Hermes, 2005). It is a reflection of society; the same is said about Superman.

From his small beginnings in 1933 to that of a cinematic giant, Superman captured the hearts and minds of people all around the world. He is daring and defiant against social injustices, he is a voice that often screams questions because the answers are always changing. The young and old still believe in the values he fights for: truth and justice. He is the ultimate hero and icon that gives hope and is willing to fight the good fight. Superman reflects the social and political circumstances of society. He is an ideal example of the comic book creators' adherence to hegemonic masculinity as the ideal gender order and presents characteristics of hypermasculinity (Darowski, 2012:66). Contrariwise, what happens when we have dignified Superman so much that he no longer portrays the embodiment of adolescent anxiety or offers a calmativ for its pains, as Siegel and Shuster intended? The question remains whether Superman, at his very essence, may exclude people and specifically male adolescents from society.

The following chapter considers the history of the development of masculinity, the ways in which feminist studies influence it and how it was shaped by gender history. Gender is discussed as an integral element of masculinities, along with the multiple masculinities model presented by Connell (1995). These considerations inform the background and type of masculinity that Superman presents within the larger context of popular culture.

# *Chapter 3:*

## *A Reflection on Masculinities*

### **3.1 Introduction**

Chapter 3 is a reflection on the history of masculinity development. Specific attention is devoted to the impact of feminist theory on masculinity studies. A brief discussion of gender, the overarching notion that includes masculinity and femininity – is included in this consideration, as it establishes the foundation for the discussion of masculinities. The connection between masculinities and popular culture in South Africa transpires from this reflection on masculinities, and functions as a theoretical basis from which I discuss and reflect upon the type of masculinity that Superman presents, within the larger context of popular culture.

### **3.2 The Maze of Masculinities**

#### **3.2.1 A Historical Review of Masculinity**

Harvey (2005:296), writing from a sociological perspective, explains that the history of the concept of masculinity is relatively new and intersects with the exploration of meaning in representation. This line of thinking necessitates an overview from Connell (2005:186-189), a recognised sociologist in the field of masculinity and gender development. Connell (2005:191) mentions that from 1450 to 1650, the modern capitalist economy established around the North Atlantic coincided with the modern gender order that began to develop in that region. This is especially relevant for the development of the concept of masculinities as we know it today. According to Connell (2005), four essential historical developments sprang from this period.

The first was the cultural change that shaped new understandings of sexuality and personhood in urban Europe. With the changes in Catholicism, the rise of a worldly Renaissance culture and the Protestant reformation, powerful new standards disrupted men's lives (Connell, 2005:186). The second development was the creation of overseas empires, which was a gendered enterprise from the outset (Connell, 2005:187). The third key

development was the growth of cities as centres of commercial capitalism (Connell, 2005:188) and the fourth, the start of the European civil war. Connell (2005:189) explains that the sixteenth and seventeenth century wars of religion merged into the imperial wars of the seventeenth and eighteenth century and disturbed the legitimacy of gender order. These developments, although not the start of the concept of masculinity, greatly influenced the types of masculinities that we perceive today.

Mankowski and Maton (2010:73) propose that men have power because of their gender, but that their access to that power differs based on individual characteristics such as social class, income, education, ethnicity, sexual orientation or physical strength. Mankowski and Maton (2010:73) confirm that psychological studies typically view men as generic rather than gendered beings. This suggests a gendered analysis of men that highlights the ways in which men experience masculinity, and how behaviour contributes to health and social problems. Psychologists first perceived masculinity to be a static, biologically-based individual personality trait (Terman & Miles, 1936:17), then more commonly as a social role (Pleck, 1981:27) and, most recently, as a dynamic, socially constructed and institutionally backed form of power, independent of an individual's sex (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005:835).

Boyd, Longwood and Muesse (1996:xv) explain that men's studies have developed as an academic enterprise and significant movements and discussions have become part of this development. These movements include conservatism, pro-feminism, men's rights, men's spiritual movements, socialism and group-specific movements. In conjunction with academic enterprises, these movements may at times contradict or agree with academic studies. What is clear is the need for critical analysis of the concept of masculinity and the suggestion of more constructive ways of being (Boyd *et al.*, 1996:xix). Krondorfer (2009:xiii) states that defining and describing the contours of men's studies in religion is a distinct field with some difficulties.

Krondorfer (2009:xiii) asks with regard to men's studies:

*“is it a study of patriarchy from men's perspective, is it a constructive attempt at rebinding men to the church, is it a feminist critique forwarded by non-patriarchal male scholars, is it the advocacy for men's rights, is it political activism that addresses practical concerns of marginalized men, is it constructive theology of gay*

*or men of color, should it focus on theoretical musings on masculinity from a religious perspective?”*

These questions postulated by Krondorfer (2009:xiii), demonstrate firstly, the magnitude of masculinity studies. Secondly, they indicate the complexity in the already existing field of study and finally, when engaging with these questions, they serve as a reminder that masculinity is not a generic term, but rather an expanding field of inquiry. Various scholars confirm that masculinity studies have evolved over the centuries (Boyd *et al.*, 1996; Connell, 1995, 2005, 2014; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Krondorfer 2009; Mankowski & Maton, 2010; Nelson, 1992). This evolution aligns with the effect of feminist theory on masculinity studies, which the following section briefly explores.

### **3.2.2 The Impact of Feminist Theory**

According to Edwards (2006:25) and Connell (2005:191), it is arguable that the entire canon of critical men’s studies of masculinities constitutes little more than a reaction to second-wave feminism. In *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory* (2002), Gardiner (2002:iv) presents masculinity studies as both in dialogue with and in alliance with feminist theory. Gardiner (2002:36) substantiates this presentation by explaining that men and masculinity play a crucial role in feminist theory, “*the body of thought that seeks to understand women’s social situation and to articulate justice from a woman-centered perspective*”. Furthermore, Gardiner (2002:36) expands by stating that feminist thinking has been “*fundamental to the formation of contemporary men’s and masculinity studies as intellectual endeavors, academic subjects and social movements.*”

Messerschmidt (2016:1) adds that various forms of feminist theory have constantly questioned the masculinist character of academia by interpreting the configurations of gendered power that social theory has ignored for centuries. Messerschmidt (2016:1) establishes that feminist theory has secured a permanent role for sex, gender and sexuality in popular culture and “*thereby moved analysis of sex, gender and sexual power to the forefront of social thought.*” The growth and maturing of obvious theoretical developments and empirical research on masculinities has trailed understandably behind this feminist work (Messerschmidt, 2016:1).

Wiegman (2002: 32) explains that there are three trajectories regarding the impact of feminist theory on masculinity studies. The first involves the questions of differences (in race and class) amongst women, thereby requiring a reshaping of feminist hegemonic understanding of gender. These questions of differences have highlighted the inequalities found amongst women and men and the production of alternative masculinities. The second trajectory addresses the post-structuralism challenge when defining women and men according to the binary. This thinking caused a reconfiguration in the normative understandings of gender and sex, taking into consideration the performativity of gender (Butler, 2004:63). The third trajectory has taken the post-structuralist critique to the extreme, making it evident that masculinity does not connect to men only, and thereby creating the space to consider female masculinity, transsexuality and intersexuality. With these three trajectories and with the help of critical feminist theory, Wiegman (2002:33) disassembles the normative cultural discourse that views masculinity as a male domain and confines women to femininity. This is helpful in understanding the differences found amongst men and the alternative masculinities (Wiegman, 2002:33).

Another noteworthy impact of feminist theory on masculinity is the concept of the male body and power. Wedgwood (2009:338) states, “*feminist theory has made a significant contribution to the study of the male body.*” Through feminist analyses of power, gender and sexuality and with the help of Foucault<sup>1</sup>, the body has become a critical subject in understanding the mechanisms of power (Foucault, 1998; Van der Walt, 2014; Wedgwood, 2009). The male body plays a crucial role in reinforcing the authority of hegemonic masculinity and the subordination of women and some men as lesser forms of humanity.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Van der Walt (2014:863), Foucault abridges the concept of power as follows: (i) Power is co-extensive with the social body; (ii) the relations of power are interwoven with other kinds of relations (production, kinship, family, sexuality) for which they play at once a conditioning role and a conditioned role; (iii) these relations don't take the sole form of prohibition and punishment, but are of multiple forms; (iv) these forms are interconnected that delineate general condition of domination; (v) power relations do “serve” but are not “in service of”, because they are capable of being utilised in strategies; (vi) there are no power relations without resistances.



Therefore, the attention given to the male body elucidates the power of hegemony still attached to the male body.

Robinson (2013:142) indicates that when feminist theorists engage with masculinity studies, they are cognisant of the relationship that exists between the oppressor and the oppressed. The generalisation of this relationship may create a binary view that reproduces the same narrative as the binary distinction between the 'sexes' (Robinson, 2013:142). Robinson (2013:152) explains that feminist theory aims to empower women while masculinity studies must come to terms with the fact that masculinity relates to power and this power negatively affects both men and women. Feminist theory challenges the existing divide created within the power dimension without oversimplifying the reality of women oppressed by the patriarchal structure, and provide masculinity studies with an alternative to understand masculinities.

Further contributions in understanding masculinities include both performative and corporeal feminist theories. Butler (2004:63), a performative feminist, views gender as the central principle, thus marking masculinity as a performative action. This indicates that the existence of the male body connects solely with the meaning given through the lens of social or symbolic construction (Wedgwood, 2010:346). What Butler (2004:59) achieves with this perspective is to challenge biological essentialism, which indicates that the body gives meaning rather than creating meaning (Wedgwood, 2010:346). Corporeal feminism, in contrast, focuses more on embodiment as a specific experience; thus the body creates meaning in social circumstances and, for that reason, the male body forms an integral part in trying to understand the matrix of masculinities (Wedgwood, 2010:347).

It is evident that feminist theory has contributed greatly to the broadening of masculinity studies. It is also clear, from deducing the discussed scholarly contributions thus far, that the notion of gender is imperative to the formulation and understanding of masculinities. Gender is the overarching term for referring to masculinity and femininity, but gender in itself equates to the complex models of essentialism, constructionism and performativity. Thus, the discussion on gender in the following section aids in the process of reflecting on masculinities.

### 3.2.3 The Gender Movement

Harvey (2005:296) clarifies that gender is “*the knowledge that establishes meanings for bodily differences.*” In addition, gender utilises images, texts and practices to form meanings and these meanings frame people’s understandings and experiences (Harvey, 2005:297). To shape meaning is thus a political act involving the exercise of power that affects peoples’ lives and gender has provided a fundamental way of indicating power relationships and a contributing element in social relations (Harvey, 2005:297). Boyarin (1998:117) asserts that gender is the array of social roles or symbolic functions ascribed to the bodily differences between the sexes in different cultures or societies. Boyarin (1998:117) indicates that the concept of gender is not simply a cultural label of meaning about a given sex; it must point to the actual mechanism of production whereby the sexes determine themselves. Van der Watt (2007:48) indicates that many competing explanations exist for viewing gender with a number of models in history that have guided our understanding of gender.

The first of these models is essentialism. Thatcher (2011:20) establishes that in a theological discussion of gender ‘essentialism’ lies the doctrine that believes that God created humanity in two distinct sexes, one made for the other, and that therefore our created nature is either to be male or female. This suggests that our nature cannot change, our desires meant for the opposite sex, and thus same-sex desire cannot conform to our created nature (Thatcher, 2011:20). Tolbert (2000:99) explains that a modernist perspective views gender as established within essentialist social mannerisms connected to a biological sexual role. Therefor gender correlates with the binary distinctions made between the male/female sexes (Tolbert, 2000:99). From the social science<sup>2</sup> perspective, Courtenay (2000:1387) indicates that early explanations of masculinity focused predominantly on the dangerous influence of “the male sex role”, which substantiates Thatcher’s (2011) description of essentialism. These explanations relied on theories of gender socialisation that use the understanding that the

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<sup>2</sup> The Merriam Webster dictionary defines social sciences as a branch of science that deals with the institutions and functioning of human society and with the interpersonal relationships of individuals as members of society. Social sciences include history, politics, economics, psychology, sociology, geography, anthropology and religion. For the purpose of this research, the focus is placed specifically on sociology, psychology and theology.

concept 'gender' represents the two sexes, male and female, and assumes that women and men have innate psychological needs for gender-stereotypic traits (Courtenay, 2000:1387). Sex role theory also fosters the notion of a singular female or male personality, a notion that has been disputed, and that obscures the various forms of femininity and masculinity that women and men can and do demonstrate (Connell, 1995). Essentialist models thus describe gender in terms of the permanent internal essential features, usually disconnected from the on-going experience of interaction with the day-to-day socio-political settings of life (Bohan, 1993; Connell, 1995; Courtenay, 2000; Thatcher, 2011; Tolbert, 2000).

The second view of gender as explained by Thatcher (2011:20) adheres to social constructionism. This indicates that nothing about gender is fixed; everything is constructed. This theory assumes that God does not disclose relations of gender, and neither are they discerned and interpreted from nature. Societies and social groups shape the concept of gender and it becomes a historical construction. According to Tolbert (2000:101), gender (masculinities and femininities) in feminist analysis of the late 1980s reveals itself as a social construction that could differ significantly between societies and even in sub-groups within the same society. Courtenay (2000:1387) mentions that from a constructionist perspective, women and men think and act in the ways they do because of concepts about femininity and masculinity that they adopt from their culture and not because of their role identities or psychological traits. It is culture and biased meanings subject to time, place, and frequent change that construct gender (Kimmel, 1995).

The social constructionist movement conceptualised gender (masculinities and femininities) as actively constructed and produced through intersecting with culture, social class and history (Connell, 1995; Creighton & Oliffe, 2010; Thatcher, 2011). Most importantly, gender does not reside within the person but rather in social transactions defined as gendered. This perspective views gender as a dynamic social structure. Constructionists reason that it is useless to study gender because gender is inseparable from its context (Bohan, 1993; Connell, 1995; Courtenay, 2000; Creighton & Oliffe, 2010; Kimmel, 1995; Thatcher, 2011; Tolbert, 2000). Constructionism uses a postmodernist perspective when viewing gender, thereby challenging the modernist perspective of the binary (Tolbert, 2000:99). Postmodernist thinking engages gender from a socially constructed framework that takes into consideration the context created in historical and local settings (Tolbert, 2000:99).

Helgeson (2016:18) mentions that constructionists maintain that the perceiver creates gender. Facts about gender do not exist only in their interpretations. Constructionists therefore challenge the use of scientific methodology to study gender, arguing that an objective view of the world cannot be; as our history, experiences and beliefs affect what we observe (Helgeson, 2016:18). Accordingly, gender is a dynamic social construct that is ever changing, a social category created by society (Helgeson, 2016:18). The difference between the essentialist and constructionist views of gender lies in the qualities of their location and not in the origin of gender. The essentialists view gender as inhabitant within the individual, while constructionists view gender as the interactions that socially construct a gendered person (Bohan, 1993:7).

Gender in itself equates to a complex concept that requires further clarification, according to Judith Butler, a philosopher and gender theorist with an aligning constructionist thinking. Butler regards gender as a performance rather than as an essence and reasons that “*if gender is a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one’s knowing and without one’s willing*”, is must be, for that reason, automated or unconscious and a practice of making do with an act of control (Butler, 2004:1). Butler (1990:8) understands the concept of gender as constructed within a certain context and view individuals not as robots destined to practice the social and linguistic roles assigned at birth, but as individuals who can resist and throw off the shackles of control. This viewpoint creates a new configuration of gender (Butler, 1990:1-8).

Thatcher (2011:21) clarifies that when we ‘do’ or perform gendered actions, there is an underlying assumption that we are individual subjects free to choose what we do. Performativity, however, makes evident that there is ‘performing’ going on that we are not aware of; it is constructed, repetitive and unreflective in character. When we become aware of the performative nature of gender and gendered actions during interactions with peers, family, friends and others, we knowingly make our actions more our own by self-consciously affirming, modifying or rejecting them. In this sense, freedom of thought can begin to make a difference (Thatcher, 2011:21).

In summary, the concept of gender is, in itself, a complex entity with a social, cultural, biological, political and economic nature. Various scholars (Butler, 2004; Courtenay, 2000; Thatcher, 2011; Tolbert, 2000) have interpreted and contributed to the existing knowledge

and meaning of gender on an interdisciplinary level. Various points of departure exist when considering gender (in terms of essentialism and constructionism or performativity), which also influence how we view masculinities. According to Butler (2004:13), performativity is especially important in view of masculinity. This understanding of gender provides a strong move away from the essentialist confinement ascribed to men of only a biological sexual role. Recognition of the repetitive actions and historically normative cultural influences on masculinity constructions will enable the deconstruction of the binary.

Connell (1995:68) explains that to speak of masculinities is to speak about gender relations. Masculinities are not equivalent to men, but relate to the position of men in a gender order. Defining masculinity as the pattern of practice by which people, both men and women engage that position, makes it clear that, when speaking of masculinity, we are “doing gender” in a culturally specific way (Connell, 1995:68). Masculinities form part of the concept of gender (Boyarin, 1998; Connell, 1995; Harvey, 2005; Van der Watt, 2007) and in doing gender; we are trying to understand the concept. Beynon (2002:1) mentions numerous forms and expressions of gender, of being masculine and feminine, as elaborated in the section that follows.

### **3.3 Masculinity or Masculinities**

Beynon (2002:1) explains that masculinity is a collection of multiple alternative masculinities, founded in certain contexts and influenced by cultural, historical and geographical location. Feminist theory challenged the traditional belief of men as delineated into a singular category of masculinity. Beynon (2002:2) establishes that masculinities overthrow the notion of a standardised masculinity fixed to a biological sexual category. Masculinities consider the diversity found and influenced by culture, society, class, race, ethnicity and power.

Beasley (2008:86) mentions that masculinity is nearly invisible in shaping social relations. Its pervasive quality of being specific and important covers in its structure the universal, the accepted and the neutral. Masculinity assumes the obviousness of the unspoken norm. By not calling for commentary and staying away from interpretation, it indiscernibly signifies its privilege (Beasley, 2008:86). Connell (2005:185) establishes that masculinities come into existence at particular times and places and are always subject to change. There is ample

evidence that masculinities are multiple, with internal involvedness and even ambiguities, the more they change in history (Connell 1995:68).

Masculinities are part of the gender history and, in turn, demonstrate the essentialist as well as the constructionist approach (Butler, 2004; Courtenay, 2000; Thatcher, 2011; Tolbert, 2000). Masculinities are a complex concept that encompasses social and cultural influences and biological factors (Connell, 1995, 2005, 2014). Creighton and Oliffe (2010:410) mention that initial studies on masculinities related to male well-being were biologically orientated, but since it was challenged in the twentieth century it led to a review of the male-female binary. Focusing solely on the genetic effects when studying masculinities follows the biological essentialism and underpins the conviction that our created character is either masculine or feminine (Thatcher, 2011:20).

The constructionist approach establishes that masculinities are not a fixed concept but change with time in different social and cultural contexts, making masculinity inherently relational, existing only in contrast to femininity (Connell, 1995:68). Kimmel and Aronson (2004:xxiv) explain that men are not born, growing from infants through boyhood to manhood, to follow a predetermined biological need encoded in their physical make-up. According to Kimmel and Aronson (2004:xxvi), to be a man is to participate in social life as a man, as a gendered being, and therefore men make themselves, actively constructing their masculinities within a social and historical context.

Many scholars (for example, Bohan, 1993; Connell, 1995; Courtenay, 2000; Creighton & Oliffe, 2010; Helgeson, 2016; Marecek *et al.*, 2004; Thatcher, 2011; Tolbert, 2000) assert that the concept of masculinities is not an either/or, but instead it is a combination of essentialism and constructionism. Biological factors and social and cultural elements influence the construct of masculinities. From an essentialist perspective, the biological, or rather the bodily, experience is important. Nelson (1992:45) indicates that our bodily experience is always sexual, though not always genital; it is our way of being in the world as bodily selves, gendered, biologically and socially. Nelson (1992) combines the ideas of essentialism and constructionism in the concept of the embodied being, illustrating the different aspects that influence masculinity construction. Connell (2005:45) confirms the understanding of masculinity as inherent to a man or to some degree as that of the male physique. The physical view of masculinity and femininity inform the social understanding of

gender. Male masculinity has a definite quality and powerfully built contours and pressures, clear stances and ways of moving around with assured options in sex (Connell, 2005:52-53). Nelson (1992:42) concludes by demonstrating the importance of our bodies<sup>3</sup> and the omission, for centuries, to recognise the human body as an active source of meaning.

Kimmel and Aronson (2004:xxvi) state that we cannot speak of a singular masculinity as normative, as this will exclude other types of masculinities. Kimmel and Aronson (2004:xxvi) believe that knowledge about the matrix of masculinities will avoid the integration of all masculinities into one hegemonic type. Connell (1995:77) classifies masculinities as hegemonic or subordinate masculinities in the multiple masculinities model. This determines that males endorse and personify diverse shapes of manliness dependent on their statuses in a collective chain of command. The concept of hegemony relates to the concept of power, specifically power in relation to gender (Hearn, 2004:51).

Hearn (2004:52) validates that male power and dominance can be structural and interpersonal, and found in both the public and private areas of men's lives. Male power also perpetuates violations and violence in relation to women, children and other men (Connell, 1995; Hearn, 2004; Kimmel & Aronson, 2004; Thatcher, 2011). Hegemony thus perpetuates a position of power, thereby giving men the ability to construct the world for themselves and others in order to guarantee that the power dynamic stays unchanged (Paechter, 2006:259). Power is inherently present; not only in hegemonic masculinity, but also in the patriarchal system that separates the construction of masculinity and femininity, as well as in all masculinities (Paechter, 2006:259). As a result, different power relations inherently transpire in the ways that individuals relate to hegemonic masculinities, as compared with the multiple masculinities model of Connell (1995, 2005, 2014).

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<sup>3</sup>The task of body theology is to reflect on bodily experience as a fundamental realm of experiencing God (Nelson, 1992:43). This discussion refers to the concept of body theology, and specifically focuses on the relevance it has to the greater discussion of masculinities. It is imperative to note that we know the world and respond to it through our embodiment, the way we feel about our bodies significantly conditions the way we feel about the world (Nelson, 1992:42). This contribution specifically adds to the discussion of Superman and male adolescents later on in the chapter.

The multiple masculinity model of Connell (1995:77) describes main types of masculinity, namely hegemonic, complicit, subordinate, and marginalised masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity is the highest hierarchy and endorses gender differences in a set area and period (Connell, 1995:77). Complicit masculinity designates men that benefit from hegemonic masculinity but do not advocate it. Subordinate masculinity depicts men subdued by descriptions of hegemonic masculinity, while marginalised masculinity refers to men who project a convincing sexual role, but are lacking in their cultural class or societal status. These multiple masculinities influences one another in a circular yet hierarchal manner directed by hegemonic masculinity, which acts to underpin subordinate masculinities (Connell, 1995:77). Van der Watt (2007:91) indicates that the majority of men are unlikely to display hegemonic masculinity, but hegemonic masculinity is what they will be encouraged to admire and embody.

Consalvo (2003:29) suggests that scholars have analysed the way in which society constructs masculinity in a particular time and place, which differentiates between various forms of the masculine. This confirms the notion of multiple masculinities. All variations seem natural and inevitable, thus becoming ideological and seemingly trans-historical (Beynon, 2002:2). Consalvo (2003:29) argues that, although Western culture views masculinity and men as dominant, most men really are in dominant positions. More precisely, multiple masculinities exist in a hierarchy and, within the hierarchy, race, class, sexual orientation and other factors such as education or social interests demarcate different masculinities (Connell, 1995:77). The same hierarchies are found within male adolescence - male adolescents who take part in physical sports (such as rugby, hockey and soccer) have a better social standing than male adolescents who take part in non-physical activities (for example, debating, chess, drama, music and the arts), even though they may later reach positions of greater power and influence (Consalvo, 2003:30).

Kimmel (2012:38) argues that manhood (hegemony) is only achievable for an obvious minority and the constructed definition prevent others from achieving it. Consalvo (2003:30) affirms that, in spite of these differences in constructs, all versions of masculinity work together to ultimately retain the dominance of masculinity as a whole, defining and redefining what is masculine in order to retain its privilege. Consalvo (2003:30) furthermore questions whether the domination of masculinities in the “lesser” forms by those occupying hegemonic might prove harmful for those in the hegemonic position. In this way, if



masculinity becomes too threatened or too subordinated by those that inhabit the dominant form, masculinity may become self-destructing.

Keeping Consalvo's (2003) argument in mind, I have to ask the question of whether it is possible that masculinity in itself could become obsolete. Consequently, considering the hierarchy of the multiple masculinities, I wonder whether society will set the limits on either hegemonic masculinity or subordinate/marginalised masculinity, and is there a possibility that both masculinities could exist simultaneously without the consideration of one as dominant and the other as subordinate. Kimmel (2005:15) suggests that hegemonic masculinity will constantly shift its definition to maintain its dominance, which opens debate as to whether the definition of hegemonic masculinity can change to support the minority. The definition of hegemonic masculinity inherently connects to the social, political, economic and cultural elements that govern our society, and, at a leap, suggests that hegemonic masculinity could change and conform to what society first perceived as subordinate/marginalised - minority and peripheral masculinities (Connell, 1995:77).

It is evident that various factors like societal, cultural, political and economic influences construct a variety of masculinities thereby adding to the existing complexity within the theoretical landscape. The following section considers masculinity in South Africa and the influence that popular culture had and still has on the construction of masculinities, thereby delineating the scope of masculinities to the South African context as affected by popular culture.

### **3.4 Masculinities and Popular Culture in South Africa**

Gennrich (2013:iii) affirms that more than twenty years into the democratic era of South Africa, the process of transformation to social justice had just begun. Unfortunately, the social injustices against women, children and sexual minorities are still a major challenge. Male domination persists in society with patriarchal tradition felt most acutely. Although male dominance is still commonplace in the world, it is also evident that not all men benefit from this arrangement of power and that not all men hold on to male dominance. Since the end of Apartheid in 1994, the culture of gender equity and human rights has had an important influence on gender relations (Gennrich, 2013; Viljoen, 2008).

Regrettably, not all men are open to the changing demographic of gender relations in South Africa. Hadebe (2013:7) mentions three main responses to the changing expectation of being a man, which go hand in hand with the changing landscape. The first draws attention to men taking a defensive position and a response that reiterates their traditional power. This often leads to violence to confirm male dominance. The second response points to men who submissively accommodate the changes in gender relations, but simultaneously endorse the patriarchal ideal of masculinity without resorting to violence. The third response accepts the changing context and supports the sexual minorities.

Festus and Gennrich (2013:29) explain that the involvement of women in the social, political and economic spheres in South Africa deeply influences the men, causing them to feel vulnerable. This response has resulted in some men reaffirming their power, especially in close relationships (Festus & Gennrich, 2013:29). Another reality is the growing economic disparity, as evidenced in an unemployment rate of 26,6 percent for the second quarter of June 2016 (South African Unemployment Rate, 2016). Poverty and HIV/Aids have further contributed to the struggle of redefining masculinity in South Africa (Festus & Gennrich, 2013:37). These challenges indicate the influential nature of context on the construction of masculinities.

The changing demographic of South Africa from 1994 has allowed the expansion of worldviews, influenced by technological advances and globalisation. As a result, an influx occurred on the subject of popular culture mediums, made evident in the article *Masculine Ideals in Post-Apartheid South Africa: The rise of men's glossies* (Viljoen, 2008). In this study, Viljoen (2008) examines male magazines, like *Men's Health*, *FHM*, *GQ*, *MaksiMan* and *BL!NK*, which reflect the changing perception of the masculine ideal. The analysis also illustrates how popular culture mediums contribute to the construction of masculinities (Viljoen, 2008:312). Narunsky-Laden (2008:124) suggests that we should consider masculinity in commercial popular dialogues, consumer culture and patterns of consumption, and their influence on the understanding of masculinity.

Popular culture originated in the theory of culture and culture in itself is a representation of the traditions of people. It is in the languages we use to communicate and part of the texts and practices, an entity that gives credibility to a person's identity (Betz *et al.*, 2007; Hofstede, 1983; Sakenfeld, 2008; Storey, 2009). In culture we also find the hierarchies in society, and

thus the differentiation between the elite's and the people's cultures. Popular culture is the voice of the masses, representing society's views of the world. It originates in the social, cultural, political and economic constructs of that which society deems acceptable (Hermes, 2005; Leventman, 2006; Milestone & Meyer, 2012; Storey, 2009). The complexity of popular culture is evident when bearing in mind that it is the culture of many and simultaneously represents the traditions and transformations of society as determined by the few. Popular culture is born from the concept of culture, but its intricate nature, grounded in the many spheres of life, also adheres to an ideological structure or mind-set.

Ideology is a perspective or understanding of systems that gives structure to how we perceive the world around us (Geertz, 1973; Thompson, 1990). Within popular culture, we find various ideological notions that influence how we construct society. The prominent ideological concept, explicitly important to this study, is that of hegemony. Hegemonic ideology is the mind-set that only the dominant class in society will stay in power and that the characteristics that form part of this notion will perpetuate the continuation of hegemony. Popular culture influences how we perceive and understand the world around us, the context in which masculinities exist and develop. Superman is at the intersection of both these concepts. As an example of popular culture and as a character that adheres to hegemonic masculinity as well as hypermasculinity, Superman is the ideal character to demonstrate the influence of popular culture on masculinity construction. The following section considers the masculinity construct of Superman as an example of popular culture.

### **3.5 The Masculinity Construct of Superman**

Masculinities relate to the matrix of cultural and societal experiences and embodiment. It is not a static entity and with the progression of cultural and societal evolution, masculinities develop. Masculinities are a dynamic and fluid notion, intricately linked to our understanding of existence as gendered beings and the ways in which we express ourselves. We know that masculinities develop within a specific context, influenced by cultural and societal norms (Butler, 2004; Connell, 2005; Courtenay, 2000; Kimmel & Aronson, 2004; Thatcher, 2011; Tolbert, 2000). Popular culture serves as the main context of influence within this study. It has the ability to ascribe meaning (Dansei, 2008; Delaney & Madigan 2007; Hermes, 2005; Leventman, 2006; Storey, 2009), whether in the form of images, texts, cultural expressions or ideological perspectives, or more specifically in the production and representation of

masculinities (Gauntlett, 2008; Milestone & Meyer, 2012; Van der Watt, 2007). Superman is seen as the ultimate hero, the mythical legend, the saviour of mankind, an immigrant fighting for truth and justice, the universal icon (Carter, 2010; Daniels, 1995; Gordon, 2007; Harris, 2013; Rizzotti, 2010; Wallace *et al*, 2006) but beyond these descriptions, the character also represents the development of masculinity in the twentieth century according to Mcquillan (2014), in the blog titled *Superman as an American icon of masculinity*.



The evolution of Superman in The DC Cinematic Universe  
(Comic Book – DC, 2016)

With the outbreak of the Second World War, Superman opposed and overpowered Hitler at the side of the armed forces. This was a symbolic action from a character created by Jewish authors in that the character promoted the protection of freedom in the face of oppression (Carter, 2010; Daniels, 1995; Mcquillan, 2014). Mcquillan further explains that, while women were working hard in factories and domestically, in terms of developing gender roles, Superman<sup>4</sup> maintained the image of masculine dominance during wartime. During the Cold War, the character further evolved to represent less radical ideals and his role changed to that of global peacekeeper (Harris, 2013; Morrison & Morales, 2011).

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<sup>4</sup> Although Superman's character and identity developed within a deeply patriotic American context, he is an ideal that transcends his country of origin. His popularity in the last 75 years is proof of the character's ability to move beyond the American influence.

When writers Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created this character in 1934, they intended him to be a combination of Samson, Hercules and all the strong men ever known, all rolled up into one ultimate superhero (Babka, 2008:119). Darowski (2012:66) explains that comic book creators fundamentally upheld hegemonic masculinity as the ideal gender order through the creation of logical flaws. This serves to undermine the feminist content and allows men to retain the dominant social authority. Superman is thus an ideal example of the adherence of comic book creators to the statement made by Darowski (2012:66). Eco (1984:107) confirmed the physical abilities of Superman and his unlimited strength, kindness, modesty and attractiveness. When considering the multiple elements that influence masculinity construction, essentialism, constructionism and performativity (Butler, 2004; Connell, 1995; Courtenay, 2000; Thatcher, 2011; Tolbert, 2000) Superman's physicality and emotional characteristics, along with the progression of masculinity from 1934 until 2016, become a parallel for the universal development in masculinity.

Superman's physical body is that of a strong, white, heterosexual, hegemonic male (Babka, 2008; Daniels, 1995; Darowski, 2012; Eco, 1984; Mcquillan, 2014), while the characteristics that he displays augment that of a dominant masculine (Mcquillan, 2014). More specifically, such dominance can be defined as hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995:77), which refers to a form of masculinity in a certain historical and societal setting that organises and legitimates hierarchical gender relations between men and women and between men and men (Beasley, 2008; Messerschmidt, 2016). According to Connell (1995:77), hegemonic masculinity retains an authoritative status over other masculinities and it will lead other forms in any distinct historical and social context.

Superman also presents characteristics of hypermasculinity. Scharrer (2005:354) clarifies that hypermasculinity is a behaviour concept that emerges primarily in men, in which generalised "macho" traits are the ideal. Hypermasculine males display excessive and overstated forms of masculinity and heroism with an intense focus on the physical body, and the view that emotions relate to softness or femininity. Scharrer (2005:355) explains that cultural norms and socialisation are contributing factors of the development of hypermasculinity. Butler (1990:140) comments on the performative and patterned nature of gender as an identity created in time, and established in an external space through a conventional recurrence of actions. Gender is therefore "not a noun" but, to a certain extent, something repeatedly shaped through recurrent acts (Butler, 1990:24).

In Superman, with his popularity of seventy-five years, we have seen the recurrence and development of a hypermasculinity that has become part of his character. Despite having developed over time and various social challenges, there are certain qualities that are still part of Superman's identity and, in particular, his presentation of masculinity (Wood, 2016:3). Wood (2016) discusses the concept of hypermasculinity as a scenario of power, indicating that hypermasculinity is an overstated set of cultural norms and behaviours that commands acceptability and is itself a scenario of power. What makes Superman special are his phenomenal powers: flying, super-strength, X-ray vision, super breath and super speed, to mention but a few. These characteristics are important elements to his identity and transform to his performative masculinity and to hypermasculinity. Superman presents the idealised hegemonic masculinity as well as hypermasculinity; he is the epitome of the ideal hero and, more specifically, the 'ideal' man.

In juxtaposition to this character is the masculinity presented by Clark Kent, the alter ego of Superman, a fearful, shy, intelligent, tongue-tied, near-sighted and compliant person in the presence of his matriarchal colleague, Lois Lane (Eco, 1984:108). Hegemonic masculinity influences the hierarchical structure of multiple masculinities, which include those that are subordinate, marginalised and complicit (Connell, 1995). This is especially valid when considering the type of masculinity that Clark Kent, the alter ego of Superman, displays. Superman and Clark Kent are polar opposites in their presentation of masculinity. Clark Kent demonstrates subordinate masculinity whereas Superman adheres to hegemonic masculinity. This, then, begs the question: is Superman's interpretation of human masculinity established in the character of Clark Kent?

Paris (2011:13) might answer this question by sharing some background information on the original creators and authors, Siegel and Shuster. Siegel developed the central ideas and themes around the character, whereas Shuster was responsible for the physical character of Superman. Shuster, like Siegel, enjoyed pulp fiction and bodybuilding magazines and stated: *"I was really small, and I was always pushed around by bullies and so forth so that was one of my dreams . . . I took courses in weightlifting and bodybuilding and I don't know if it helped, but I made an effort"* (Secret Origins: The Story of DC Comics, 2010). The Superman character became a way for Shuster to express not only who he was, but also who he wanted to be (Paris, 2011:13). The hierarchical structure of masculinities dictates that multiple masculinities inform one another (Connell, 1995:76) and, therefore, Superman's

hegemonic masculinity informs Clark Kent's subordinate masculinity, a notion which is further evidenced when considering the context of the writers. Both Siegel and Shuster strived to be more than what they were and this desire found its expression in the development of Superman (Daniels, 1995; Paris, 2011). Superman therefore fulfilled the ultimate ideal of two adolescent males trapped by society's standard of what it meant to be a man.



Superman VS Clark Kent: Humble Perseverance (Flowers, 2011)

Superman exercises a powerful influence on adolescents, who look up to him, want to be him, and may even have seen a piece of him reflected in the mirror (Paris, 2011:4). The process of development within adolescence is a critical period in human growth (Gentry & Campbell, 2002; Steinberg & Morris, 2001; Stang & Story, 2005). It is the age between childhood and adulthood, when cultural and societal as well as biological maturity is at the pinnacle point, and male adolescents experience particular pressure regarding masculinity constructions. The progress and influence of feminist studies within the development of masculinities has challenged traditional hegemonic masculinity (Cunningham & Meunier, 2004; Oransky & Fisher, 2009; Reidy, Smith-Darden, Cortina, Kernsmith & Kernsmith, 2015).

### 3.6 Chapter Summary

Starting with the history of masculinity, this chapter demonstrated the progress made in the development of masculinity. The concept of masculinity expanded with the influence of feminist studies from a singular concept to a matrix of multiple masculinities. Masculinities have also progressed in line with the development of societies and culture, as well as economic change. The need to understand the perspectives of women within cultures and societies has also given birth to the need to understand the position of men in society, more specifically, of what constitutes masculinity (Connell, 2005; Edwards, 2006; Gardiner, 2002). This development originates from the grassroots of the daily lives of men and women and reflects in the sphere of academia (Messerschmidt, 2016).

The theoretical development of masculinities evolved from feminist work, which greatly influences how we understand sex, gender and sexuality from the perspective of men's studies. The cultural changes perceived in world history and specifically in Europe (Connell, 2005; Harvey, 2005) with the spread of the Renaissance secular culture, the creation of overseas empires, the growth of commercial capitalism and the religious wars, to name but a few, prompted the revaluation of contemporary masculinity. The power discourse of gender and the paradigm shift of binary gender suggest the changes that occurred in masculinity norms (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Mankowski & Maton, 2010; Pleck, 1981; Terman & Miles, 1936). Even though great leaps of development occurred, there are suggestions that the concept of masculinities still necessitates a revaluation.

This chapter considered the multiple perspectives of gender in order to better comprehend the concept of masculinities. Gender has the ability to establish meaning within bodily experiences and is a social, cultural, political, economic and biological construct (Boyarin, 1998; Harvey, 2005; Van der Watt, 2007). Beyond these influences, multiple perspectives interpret the concept of gender. The first perspective is essentialism, which focuses on the biological composition of male and female bodies. This perspective views gender from a binary point of view, suggesting that human beings consist solely of their biological orientation (Bohan, 1993; Connell 1995, 2005, 2014; Courtenay, 2000; Thatcher, 2011). The second viewpoint illustrates that gender is a social construction, one that is constructed within society, culture, history, industrialisation, globalisation and politics (Connell, 1995, 2005; Courtenay, 2000; Creighton & Oliffe, 2010; Harper & Harris, 2010; Thatcher, 2011; Tolbert,



2000). The third perspective suggests that gender is performative, as it reinforces the repetition of gendered actions (Butler, 1990, 2004; Thatcher, 2011). These perspectives or theories each apply when considering masculinity or established masculinities.

There is no singular masculinity that can be patented and applied to all gendered beings and masculinities suggest that what we perceive as masculinities are influenced by biological, social and cultural factors. This expands to include how we consider masculinity and offers a galaxy of infinite possibilities with Connell's (1995, 2005, 2014) multiple masculinities model as one of the possibilities. This model suggests that there is more than that perceived as traditional or hegemonic masculinities. Subordinate, marginalised and complicit masculinities form part of Connell's larger model of masculinities. This model demonstrates that each type of masculinity can exist on its own merit, but the hierarchical structure also informs what is dominant in hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995, 2005, 2014; Kimmel & Aronson, 2004; Van der Watt, 2007). This theoretical structure and understanding is useful in understanding Superman and his presentation of masculinity.

Humanity needs superheroes and their mythology on a personal and cultural level since the myth is a generalised dream and an objective assortment of subjective views (Shaw, 2015:1). The myth of Superman is both a reflection and a diversion of people and culture; the one cannot exist without the other (Shaw, 2015). This is especially true for the creators of Superman, Siegel and Shuster, who at the time were male adolescents finding their expression in the ultimate male – Superman. He represents what they could not be. Superman is the ultimate hero, the defender of the weak, the advocate of truth and justice, and the mythical creation of Siegel and Shuster brought to life (Carter, 2010; Daniels, 1998; Gordon, 2007; Harris, 2013; Rizzotti, 2010; Wallace *et al.*, 2006).

Superman adheres to hegemonic masculinity construction in his physical as well as his emotional characteristics (Babka, 2008; Daniels, 1995; Darowski, 2012; Eco, 1984; Mcquillan, 2014). He demonstrates traits of hypermasculinity as the macho man, with an extremely strong physical body, performing feats of valour. Gender is performative (Butler, 1990, 2004) and the repetitive acts that Superman exhibited during his seventy-five years of existence have established his hypermasculinity (Scharrer, 2005; Shaw, 2015; Wood, 2016). The masculinity of Clark Kent, the alter ego of Superman, has been illustrated as subordinate or marginalised masculinity, and reflective of the masculinity of writers Siegel and Shuster

(Daniels, 1998; Eco, 1948; Paris, 2011). This detail is of particular importance for this study, as explained in the next paragraph.

Connell's (1995, 2005, 2014) multiple masculinities model demonstrates that there is no longer a linear masculinity that is the ultimate expression of being male. The view of gender as performative and masculinities as not just biological, cultural or societal constructs, alters how gendered beings develop and portray masculinities (Butler, 2004). The challenge presents itself when considering the existing masculinity norm of hegemony and the expanding space created for the alternative. Male adolescents, at present, adhere to the dominant masculinity in their social lives, which holds definite risks for developing male adolescents (Courtenay, 2000; Oransky & Fisher, 2009).

The following chapter considers the influence of popular culture on male adolescent masculinity construction, utilising the theories of masculinities and male adolescent development as influenced by societal and cultural contexts. Popular culture ascribes meaning to cultural lives and practices (Milestone & Meyer, 2012), and informs hegemonic expressions in society (Storey, 2009) by influencing our identity, bodily experiences and relationships (Delaney & Madigan, 2007; Gauntlett, 2008; Van der Watt & Louw, 2012). All of which makes popular culture an important context of influence upon which to reflect.

# Chapter 4:

## *Adolescent Development*

### 4.1 Introduction

To comprehend the construction of the current concept of adolescence, the literature review in this chapter considers the historical context of the concept of adolescence and the changes in social reality over the centuries. Different viewpoints exist on adolescent development, which necessitates an overview of physiological, psychological and sociological factors. This, in turn, provides the foundation for a discussion of male adolescence and the influence of these factors on the developmental process. Finally, I discuss the influence of popular culture on male adolescents' construction of masculinity and pay attention to Superman as an example of popular culture.

### 4.2 A Historical View of Adolescence

Gullotta, Adams and Markstrom (2000:5) indicate that each new generation has its own concept of social reality and it should come as no surprise that views of adolescence have changed over centuries. Arnett (2010:xiii) stipulates that, given the differences between adolescence now and in the past, knowledge of the historical context of adolescent development is crucial for a complete understanding of the current period. An emphasis on the historical context of adolescent development is perhaps especially important at present considering the accelerated pace of cultural changes around the world as a result of globalisation (Arnett, 2010:xiii). This is important in the context of popular culture, because the pace of change in recent decades has been dramatic, and young people often find themselves growing up in a culture that is much different from the one in which their parents grew up (Arnett, 2010; Hermes, 2005; Leventman, 2006).

Gullotta *et al.* (2000:5) indicate that medieval societies had a modest view of children as not especially different from adults. When children were able to function without the care of an adult, they became adults themselves. Consensus among scholars is that childhood is a modern phenomenon (Archard, 1993; Gullotta *et al.*, 2000; Koops & Zuckerman, 2012).

Koops and Zuckerman (2012:346) explain that in the middle ages childhood and adolescence were two sides of the same coin. Philosophers, like Montaigne<sup>5</sup> and Locke<sup>6</sup>, never noted the essential incoherence between childhood and adulthood and only with the help of Rousseau<sup>7</sup> the gap was identified and referred to as adolescence (Koops & Zuckerman, 2012:346). Koops and Zuckerman (2012:346) argue that Rousseau's view of adolescence as an essential time when humanity, compassion and consciousness develop, should be considered as the foundation of our present-day understanding of adolescence. From ancient times until around the 13th century, parents frequently resolved their economic and personal difficulties by abandoning their children to a monastery or nunnery, or reduced them in importance to service in another house (Gullotta *et al.*, 2000:5). Viewed as physical objects and moulded like soft wax or clay into shape through strict and often harsh training - that was the life of teenagers then (Phillips, 2014:661).

During the 17th and 18th centuries, parents began to view their children in more empathic and nurturing ways. Raising children became less a process of conquering their spirits and more a process of training and socialising. These years gradually emerged in the minds of scholars as a distinctive period of development, thus generating the concept of adolescence (Gullotta *et al.*, 2000:5). Hall (1844-1924) published the first article on adolescence, thereby launching the scientific study of adolescence and introducing the field to evolutionary

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<sup>5</sup> Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) was a philosopher of the French Renaissance, and child education was among the psychological topics he wrote about (King, Viney and Woody, 2009:112). Montaigne introduced the defining progressive pedagogical idea to instruct children indirectly by means of their interaction with the social, cultural and physical environments (Phillips 2014:661).

<sup>6</sup> John Locke (1632-1704), an English philosopher and physician, viewed the mind as a blank slate and held that all knowledge resulted from experience (Phillips 2014:661).

<sup>7</sup> Montaigne and Locke influenced Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), a Francophone Genevan philosopher. Rousseau cautioned traditional educators that their intense preoccupation with preparing the child for mature adulthood causes them to neglect the intervening and formative years. He reminded them that the disposition of humane adulthood, compassion and conscience could develop only if the individual experienced infancy, childhood and adolescence (Phillips 2014:661).

thinking (Brown & Prinstein, 2011:231) and believed that the concept of adolescence signifies a specific period after childhood during which individual maturity develops. However, it would take until the late 19th century before the concept of adolescence became a social reality even though it had evolved over thousands of years (Gullotta *et al.*, 2000:6).

Technological and economic changes resulting from industrialisation and migration were amongst the social realities that stimulated the development and study of adolescence (Gullotta *et al.*, 2000:6). Research on adolescence before the mid-1980s considered personal development and performance (Steinberg & Morris, 2001:97). Contemporary studies focus on the contexts in which individual development transpires, may it be family, equal social groups, places of work, educational institutions and lately, popular culture (Gentry & Campbell, 2002; Reiss & Collins, 2004; Rutter, Bishop, Pine, Scott, Stevenson, Taylor & Thapar, 2008; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Various factors influence the context in which adolescent development takes place as discussed in the next section.

### **4.3 Factors That Influence Adolescent Development**

Gentry and Campbell (2002:7) suggest that adolescence is, at the same time, a social construct, a psychological experience and a biological reality. Christie and Viner (2005:301) suggest three main categories in the adolescent development stage, namely biological, psychological and social, which aligns with Gentry and Campbell's (2002:7) classification of adolescences into three main categories. Gullotta *et al.* (2000:14) propose that adolescence consists of principle definitions, which are physiological, psychological and sociological.

Gentry and Campbell (2002:7) postulate that the physical, cognitive, emotional, social and behavioural development of adolescents is an integrated process. Christie and Viner (2005:1) explain that during adolescence young people will develop and become sexually matured, complete their physical growth, change to a different body shape, learn new reasoning skills, have a clearer awareness of personal and sexual identity, and obtain new emotional, personal and financial freedom from their parents. Steinberg and Morris (2001:97) highlight the importance of understanding adolescent development in context, as discussed in the sections that follow under physiological, psychological and sociological development.

### 4.3.1 Physiological Development

A complex physiological process begins in childhood and slowly unfolds to highly visible changes during the teenage years. This can happen within 18 months or can take five years or even longer, depending on the source (Christie & Viner, 2005; Steinberg, 2014). In discussing adolescence, most people fail to differentiate between the concepts of adolescence and puberty, using them synonymously. Puberty suggests the physiological changes involved in the sexual maturation of a child and the related physical changes that may occur during this stage (Christie & Viner, 2005; Lewis, 2016; Steinberg, 2014). Adolescence includes the stages from puberty to adulthood, with puberty occurring at the beginning of adolescence.

According to various authors (for example, Christie & Viner, 2005; Gullotta *et al.*, 2000; Lerner & Castellino, 2002; Lewis, 2016; Steinberg, 2014), puberty has various stages, referred to either in chronological years or in the broader descriptions of prepubescent, pubescent and post-pubescent periods. Due to different but relevant scholarly viewpoints, this study uses both descriptions. A number of publications and authors (for example, Gullotta *et al.*, 2000; Lewis, 2016; Radzik, Sherer & Neinstein, 2002) have related views on biological development during puberty. They describe the prepubescent stage as comprising the first indication of sexual maturation or fundamental sexual characteristics, and ending at the first arrival of genital hair. For the duration of this stage, procreation is almost impossible. During the pubescent stage, the growth spurt starts to speed up; boys encounter their first secretion of sperm and the first menstruation takes place in girls. The post-pubescent stage includes the slowing of the growth spurt and the full development of the main and sexual characteristics, when reproduction becomes possible.

Lewis (*The Physiological and Psychological Development of the Adolescent*, 2016) offers an inclusive yet condensed explanation of sexual maturation in boys and girls, which begins when the pituitary gland releases accelerating drivers, termed gonadotropins, into the blood. When this arrives at the testes in boys and the ovaries in girls, a number of changes take place. Even though the development differs from child to child, a chronological pattern exists for boys and girls (Christie & Viner, 2005; Gullotta *et al.*, 2000; Lewis, 2016; Radzik *et al.*, 2002; Lewis, 2016; Steinberg, 2014). Lewis (2016) provides a summarised version of the distinctive development for boys. The testes and scrotum start to increase in size and genital hair appears; the penis expands and the adolescent growth spurt activates; the larynx begins

to grow and the voice becomes deeper; facial hair appears on the upper lip and ejaculation of sperm takes place as sperm production intensifies. Pubic hair develops into darker shades; the growth spurt attains its ultimate level and the prostate gland expands. Hair growth appears in the armpits and sperm production becomes adequate for fertility. Finally, the growing speed reduces and physical power is at its highest.

A similar chronological pattern occurs in girls (Christie & Viner, 2005; Gullotta *et al.*, 2000; Lewis, 2016; Radzik *et al.*, 2002; Steinberg, 2014). The adolescent growth spurt activates and pubic hair appears; the breasts start to swell and the rounding of the hips goes together with the appearance of feathery axillary hair. The uterus, vagina, labia and clitoris enlarge and pubic hair growth is rapid and becomes slightly darker. Development of the breasts progresses, nipple darkening occurs and the areola grows. Axillary hair darkens and the growth spurt attains its highest level and then declines. Menstruation takes place and pubic hair development ends, followed by ripened breast maturity and reaching the finishing point of axillary hair development. At this point, barrenness ends and females are now capable of conception.

In summary, puberty signifies the physical changes that take place in the emergent girl or boy as they move through childhood into adulthood. Adulthood is realised with the full maturation of the reproductive system (Gullotta *et al.*, 2000:14). Typical and important physical changes during puberty are the maturation of secondary sex characteristics, which are noticeable outward changes that indicate the inception of reproductive maturity. These changes during puberty can have an emotional impact on adolescents' behaviour and their psychological functioning (Brooks-Gunn, Graber & Paikoff, 1994:36) as discussed in the following section.

### **4.3.2 Psychological Development**

Brooks-Gunn *et al.* (1994:36) mention three major changes during puberty that may have emotional and psychological influences on adolescent behaviour. Firstly, biological changes can directly influence behaviour as added testosterone increases sexual desire and sexual action amongst adolescents. Secondly, biological changes can influence an adolescent's self-perception, which, in turn, may affect behaviour. Thirdly, biological changes alter the outer appearance of the teenager, which may cause others to react differently towards the

adolescent, with responding changes in the behaviour of the teenager. These changes may influence the psychological or cognitive development of the teenager (Brooks-Gunn *et al.*, 1994; Christie and Viner, 2005; Gullotta *et al.*, 2000; Lewis, 2016; Steinberg, 2014; Styne, 2004).

Christie and Viner (2005:302) explain that young people gradually begin to develop abstract thinking during adolescence, which is the ability to use internal symbols or images to represent reality. In terms of both psychological and cognitive development, the aforementioned authors refer to the development of the thinking processes, independent of concrete and observable objects in the immediate environment but including abstract thoughts and metacognition (Gullotta *et al.*, 2000:15). It is important to recognise the effect of puberty on the psychological development of an adolescent, particularly in developing a sense of sexuality and body image. Body image and self-esteem are vulnerable in the timing of puberty among peers (Christie & Viner, 2005:302).

Lewis (*The Physiological and Psychological Development of the Adolescent*, 2016) suggests that adolescent maturation is a personal phase of development in which children have to establish their own beliefs, values and what they want to accomplish in life. Subsequently adolescents constantly and convincingly appraise themselves, and are therefore often characterised as extremely self-conscious (Lewis, 2016). Lewis (2016) identifies three distinct stages in the psychological development of the adolescent, even though these stages may overlap a great deal and development may not occur during the age span indicated. In early adolescence (ages ten to thirteen), development usually centres on the creation of a new self-image because of the physiological changes that are experienced (Radzik *et al.*, 2002:35).

Teenagers acquire a deeper appreciation of their individual personalities together with establishing a set of individual and ethical moralities, and an elevated awareness or feelings of self-esteem or self-worth (Stang & Story, 2005:7). During this period, the pre-frontal cortex of the brain develops further, influencing cognitive ability, and affecting skills and proficiency of thinking, which may lead to volatile temperaments, the need to eat, and thrill-seeking tendencies (Casey, Getz & Galvan, 2008; Steinberg, 2014). Heightened sexual attentiveness and an intensified fixation with physical appearance are essential for the duration of this phase in adolescence (Stang & Story, 2005:6).



Adolescents need to make use of their newly acquired skills of logical thinking and the ability to make rational judgments. Between the ages of fourteen and seventeen (the period known as mid-adolescence), adolescents strive to loosen their ties to their parents, their emotions and intellectual capacities increase, and they are more diverse, demanding and driven (Arnett, 2000; Eccles & Roeser, 2003; Lewis, 2016). Adolescents are extremely conscious of their bodily image and public manners, looking for acknowledgment in their peer group (Lewis, 2016; Stang & Story, 2005). The adolescent also begins to take on more control of educational and vocational pursuits and benefits. It is during this time that adolescents' self-dependence and sense of responsibility become apparent, along with their quest to contribute to society and find their place in it (Lewis, 2016; Petersen & Leffert, 1995). Research has indicated that on time and even late development is better than early maturation. Early maturing girls seem more emotionally challenged than girls who 'grew up' on time or later, with a lower self-image and higher occurrences of nervousness, eating disorders, melancholy and anxiety outbreaks (Ge, Conger & Elder, 1996; Graber, Brooks-Gumm & Peterson, 1997).

During late adolescence, ages range from eighteen to twenty-five, and these young adults (Arnett, 2000:469) have a more stable sense of their identity and place in society. The inclusion of late teens and early twenties in demarcating the duration of adolescence reflects the present view on adolescent development. People between eighteen and twenty-five years old may seem fully grown, although medical research establishes that the frontal lobe and limbic system of the brain keep developing throughout the late teens into the early twenties (Steinberg, 2005:69). Arnett (2000:477) suggests the removal of the ages eighteen to twenty-five years from the concept of adolescence and prefers the term 'emerging adults'. At this stage in life, emerging adults is at the most heterogeneous phase in their lives and they try out different experiences (Arnett, 2007:69). Related to the physiological development is the ability to think beyond concrete and observable phenomena and to think abstractly. The physiological and psychological development of adolescents and emerging adults takes place within specific contexts, hence the discussion of the sociological development of adolescents in the next section.

### **4.3.3 Sociological Development**

The sociological development of adolescence considers different standards for defining adolescence, referring to sexual maturity measured according to societal standards (Gullotta

*et al.*, 2000:16). Adolescence ends when young people have established behaviours consistent with the demands of their social world and when society starts to recognise them as adults (Gullotta *et al.*, 2000:16). Christie and Viner (2005) confirm that adolescence describes a period in which young people achieve independence and change the balance between independence and dependence. The timing of these changes is dependent on the different social and cultural expectations of the environment in which young people live (Christie & Viner, 2005:302). During this process, adolescents start to redefine themselves in relation to others and then move to a position where they define other people in relation to themselves (Christie & Viner, 2005:303).

Chambliss and Eglitis (2014:79) explain that the birth of the ‘social self’ takes preference during adolescence. Socialisation is the process by which we learn the culture of society. Socialisation is the primary way of reproducing culture, including norms and values as well as the belief that our culture represents ‘normal’ social practices and perceptions (Chambliss & Eglitis, 2014:79). Johnson (2015:11) asserts that there are socialising agents that influence adolescent development, among the most influential of which are family, teachers, religion, peers and popular culture<sup>8</sup>.

#### **4.3.3.1 The Family as Socialising Agent**

According to Chambliss and Eglitis (2014:79), family plays a key role in transmitting norms, values and culture across generations. Zain and Yew (2014:294) affirm that parents serve as role models in the family context, influencing the development of consumer behaviour in adolescents. Esau and Roman (2015:2) maintain that family is a key socialising agent regarding political orientation, as seen in South Africa with the emerging democracies. Gentry and Campbell (2002:23) postulate that the concept of family may consist of a variety of family structures: single, divorced, adoptive, foster, and the traditional two-parent relationships, to mention but a few. This is especially relevant when considering the family

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<sup>8</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, popular culture is a broad term that includes mass media found in multiple mediums such as television, Internet, magazines, comic books, newspapers, film, radio etc. (Milestone & Meyer, 2012).

demographic of South Africa. Holborn and Eddy (2011:1) explain that family life in South Africa has never been easy to describe or understand.

The nuclear concept of family in South Africa is influenced by various factors including the history of Apartheid and the travelling labour system, absent fathers, poverty and the HIV/Aids pandemic (Holborn & Eddy, 2011:1). These factors leave adolescents with single parents or as orphans (Holborn & Eddy, 2011:1). Holborn and Eddy (2011:1) demonstrate this by using astonishing statistics – there are 9,1 billion orphans in sub-Saharan Africa and 5,2 million have lost their parents from HIV/Aids. This indicates that adolescents have numerous contextual challenges that contribute to their developmental processes.

As a socialising agent, family contributes to the social development of adolescents, whether it be in terms of values, norms, consumer behaviour or politics (Chambliss & Eglitis, 2014; Esau & Roman, 2015; Zain & Yew, 2014). It is also clear, considering the context of South Africa, that adolescents face poverty, orphanhood, HIV/Aids and the absence of one or even both parents (Holborn & Eddy, 2011:1). This reality suggests that adolescents will look to alternative role models for their social development, for instance, teachers.

#### **4.3.3.2 Teachers as Socialising Agents**

Gentry and Campbell (2002:24) suggest that school is an imperative part of adolescents' daily lives. The school environment offers the opportunity for adolescents to establish peer and teacher relationships. In the absence of parents, the school environment might offer safety and stability, thereby creating the likelihood of bonding with teachers (Holborn & Eddy, 2011). Zain and Yew (2014:294) use the concept of the role model to illustrate the influence teachers can have as socialising agents. This suggests that adolescents will model their behaviour according to individuals who inspire and motivate them (Zain & Yew, 2014). Avalos (2004:2) mentions that teachers perform actions that can influence the process of obtaining knowledge and can affect the attitudes and behaviour of students. The performed actions of teachers can model characteristics that have an impact on the social development of the adolescent.

Helleve, Flisher, Onya, Mukoma and Klepp (2009:191) suggest that teachers contribute to the education of South African adolescents with regard to sexuality and HIV/Aids. Life

Orientation is a compulsory subject during secondary school and educators play a pivotal role in creating awareness of the consequences of being sexually active and the realities of HIV/Aids (Helleve *et al.*, 2009). Avalos (2004:2) postulates that after parents, teachers are the leading educators since most students come from unstable socio-cultural backgrounds. Steyn, Badenhorst and Kamper (2010:179) reflect on the impact teachers have on adolescents' perspectives of the future in South Africa. This study suggests that the home and school environment may be conducive to either negative or positive attitudes towards the future. Teachers as socialising agents demonstrate the influence they can have on adolescent development. In addition to this the school environment is a space where adolescents develop peer relationships, as discussed in the next section.

#### **4.3.3.3 Peers as Socialising Agents**

Sociological theories propose that peer relationships play an important role in behavioural patterns, including the development of self-esteem and self-image (Chambliss & Eglitis, 2014:86). Gentry and Campbell (2002:21) inform that peer groups serve a number of important functions, which are the changing points of reference when developing an identity. During their association with a peer group, adolescents will begin to develop moral judgements and values (Gentry & Campbell, 2002:21). Peer groups also serve as a source of information beyond the circle of family life, thus contributing to the development of identity in adolescents (Gentry & Campbell, 2002:21).

Arnon, Shamai and Ilatov (2008:374) mention that peer groups are a source of behavioural patterns, especially when parental influence is weak. Acceptance by peer groups is important for adolescents and this leads to accepted conformity in return. Arnon *et al.* (2008) elaborate that peer pressure enforces the norms established within the group and adolescents will more frequently move away from leisure time spent with family and replace it with peer interactions, even if these interactions may be in the streets, the mall, bus shelters or other public places. Public places serve as spaces for self-display, observation and the development of the group identity (Arnon *et al.*, 2008:375). Selikow, Ahmed, Flisher, Mathews and Mukoma (2009:107) mention that South African adolescents are extremely vulnerable to the risk of HIV infection and that peer pressure may promote high-risk sexual behaviour during the phase of sexual experimentation (Selikow *et al.*, 2009:107). Understanding the underlying

forces of peers as socialising agents could help with the education of adolescents and change the path of negative peer pressure (Selikow *et al.*, 2009).

#### **4.3.3.4 Religion as Socialising Agent**

Religion is a fundamental part of the lives of many people around the world and the role of religion, noted by sociologists, is to promote social harmony (Chambliss & Eglitis, 2014:88). These authors assert that religion plays a key role in teaching essential values and beliefs that add to a communal and normative culture. Gentry and Campbell (2002:27) suggest that spiritual values influence adolescents and that religion serves as a space in which they can reflect on positive moral values and conduct. Zain and Yew (2014:292) mention that religious leaders can guide adolescents in the direction of thoughts and actions that is encouraging to a morally sound and socially acceptable individual. Religious socialisation is also a life-long process in which individuals interact and connect (Zain & Yew, 2014:293) also to a faith-based community.

Religion contributes to the moral formation of adolescents, teaching them to recognise the importance of what is good, right and wise (Koopman, 2007:108). Koopman (2007:108) indicates that moral formation is conducive for a society that strives toward human rights. This is especially important in South Africa where poverty, HIV/Aids, economic inequality and gender-based violence is the current reality that adolescents face, along with women, children and men. Religion as a socialising agent creates the opportunity and space for adolescents to face these realities with the appropriate support and understanding. Cloete (2012:4) suggests that faith communities can become hermeneutical spaces in which adolescents can come to understand God, themselves and others. It is therefore the responsibility of faith communities to engage with adolescents in a loving and accepting manner on these difficult realities (Cloete, 2014:4).

One of these difficult realities is the influence and explosion of technological growth in South Africa and around the world, as adolescents have almost unlimited access to popular culture mediums. This suggests that it is crucial in today's technologically advanced world to consider popular culture as a socialising agent (Chambliss & Eglitis, 2014; Cloete, 2014; Gentry & Campbell, 2002; Milestone & Meyer, 2012).

#### 4.3.3.5 Popular Culture as Socialising Agent

Chambliss and Eglitis (2014:89) state that media studies during the past 20 years have reached a common agreement on media as having the potential to socialise adolescents, especially in terms of gender stereotypes. Johnson (2015:12) explains that there are messages encoded within popular culture mediums. These mediums are film, television, advertising, magazines, comic books and the internet, which adolescents interpret and which leads to an adoption of certain gender constructs and identities. Johnson (2015:12) further indicates that adolescence is, for the most part, a receptive period influenced by these messages. Pascoe (2005:15) mentions that, because of the intense identity work that occurs during adolescence, it is a fertile site for clarifying and developing the theoretical notions of sexuality and gender. Pascoe (2005:16) further argues that, given the relationship between adolescence, sexuality and gender, it seems a fitting life phase in which to study the formation of gendered identities.

Johnson (2015:12) indicates that popular culture and the messages it emits influences adolescence and, the researcher therefore reasons that it influences more specifically male adolescents, since it shapes the attitudes that reinforce patriarchy and support hegemonic masculine ideals. The following section considers the development of male adolescents and the influence of popular culture on the construction of masculinity.

#### 4.4 Male Adolescent Development

Stang and Story (2005:6) note that male adolescents who enter puberty at a later stage may consider themselves ‘late bloomers’, and may feel inferior to their peers who matured earlier (Courtenay, 2000; Cruz, 2014; Cunningham & Meunier, 2004; Field, 2014; Millington & Wilson, 2010; Oransky & Fisher, 2009; Reidy *et al.*, 2015; Seidler, 2006). This may result in dissatisfaction and could show the way to the usage of steroids and other supplements, which promote tissue growth, strength development, add mass, and could lead to reduced self-respect. How adolescence addresses this dissatisfaction is significant bearing in mind the impact of popular culture on the masculine body (Cruz, *Body-image Pressure increasingly Affects Boys*, 2014).

Modern-day scholarly work indicate that approximately 18% of male teenagers are very concerned about their mass and build, are more prone to be depressed and display high-risk manners such as overindulging in drinking and drug usage (Field, 2014:36). As teens become adults in a world shaped by modern technologies, adolescent men could feel stuck between diverse realities, and aspire to define their individual existence and their perception of masculinity (Seidler, 2006:19). A young male's awareness of masculinity and his connection with his physique significantly affects the emotional bonds created in relationships (Seidler, 2006:100).

Courtenay (2000:1387) asserts that men and boys experience more social pressure than women and girls and are more likely to endorse gendered societal directives, such as the strong beliefs that men are independent, self-reliant, strong, robust and tough. Courtenay (2000:1387) postulates that it is not surprising that the behaviour of male adolescents and their beliefs about gender are more conventional than the behaviour and beliefs of women and girls. Oransky and Fisher (2009:57) confirm that although masculine norms may vary according to cultural, historical and local contexts, philosophers and scientists agree that a collective group of masculine norms exist as 'traditional' or 'hegemonic' in contemporary societies. Cunningham and Meunier (2004:219) explain that identity development becomes more prominent during adolescence. Male adolescents, especially, develop a heightened awareness of the expectations for adult males and larger cultural expectations of what it means to be a man, which influences the development of their self-understanding. Oransky and Fisher (2009:57) affirm that a male adolescent is socialised to give up his emotional and interdependent self in exchange for a veneer of stoicism and emotional self-control. Reidy *et al.* (2015:619) verify that gender role expectations affect male adolescents, compelling them to demonstrate attributes of strength, toughness and dominance.

Millington and Wilson (2010:1672) indicate that although the media represents diverse masculinities, research has demonstrated that strength, aggression and heterosexuality are typically portrayed as the required masculine traits. Although masculinities developed during the last decades, dominant masculine traits prevail within the sphere of popular culture. Millington and Wilson's (2010:1672) preceding statement finds its expression in popular culture and especially in the masculinity of Superman. Two teenage boys did not fit into the prescribed masculine standard and created Superman rather than challenging the norm, thereby enforcing hegemony as part of male adolescents' ultimate standard. Media

representation of dominant masculine traits goes along with limited illustrations of femininity and alternative masculinities (Millington & Wilson, 2010:1672). Inconsistent and conflicting meanings may result from these illustrations of dominant masculinities as they interconnect with traditions, people, and social standing. The representations of the male ideal may influence the processes by which these characteristics are normalised for masculine adolescence (Millington & Wilson, 2010:1673).

#### **4.5 The Influence of Popular Culture on Male Adolescent Masculinity Construction**

Adolescents experience intense developmental challenges, greatly influenced by popular culture in the form of mass media in contemporary society (Milestone & Meyer, 2012). For the purpose of this discussion and study, popular culture will include mediums such as film, television, advertising, magazines, comic books and the internet. Anderson and Taylor (2008:86) mention that the average adolescent spends 6.75 hours per day engaged in popular culture in various forms, often using multiple forms simultaneously. Chambliss and Eglitis (2014:89) indicate that by the time adolescents reach the age of eighteen they will have consumed eighteen thousand hours of some form of popular culture.

Johnson (2014:60) suggests that the consumption of popular culture shapes lives, forms identities and plays an important role in the construction, maintenance and classification of masculinity and that it primarily comes from stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity (Johnson, 2014:70). This consumption also represents cultural perspectives and ultimately dictates male masculinity<sup>9</sup>. Johnson (2014:71) postulates that understanding the consumption of popular culture gives a better insight into how popular culture advances beliefs about masculinity. Systems and symbols create beliefs and lead to the acceptance of a universal interpretation of masculinity. Johnson (2014:71) argues that a defined masculinity comes through demand and adherence to the messages that popular culture perpetuates, and which adolescents internalise.

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<sup>9</sup> Sexual beliefs, behaviours, sexuality and gender formulate part of the overarching and complex concept of masculinity, as discussed in Chapter 3.



Brown (2002:42) notes that popular culture provides increased and frequent portrayals of sexuality and yet little knowledge exists on how the content is used and how it affects sexual beliefs and behaviours. Furthermore, Brown (2002:42) states that the few available studies suggest that popular culture has an impact on sexual beliefs and behaviours because it keeps sexual behaviour on public and personal agendas. Popular culture reinforces a relatively consistent set of sexual and relationship norms, and rarely portrays sexually responsible models. Brown (2002:42) argues for more longitudinal research, especially regarding early adolescents and the ways in which popular culture content attends to, interprets, and incorporates the development of sexual lives. Most research to date indicates the influence of popular culture on male adolescent construction of masculinity to be of a violent and sexualised nature (Cantor, 2000; Consalvo, 2003; Kivel & Johnson, 2009). Superman as the example of popular culture in this study is and was the expression of two male adolescents at the cusp of discovering their own masculinity construction (Daniels, 1998:11).

Following the journey and rationale of Superman, creators Shuster and Siegel were perceived as lesser males, or subordinate, according to society's standards. Superman thus serves as the ultimate escape and is utilised to fulfil the ideals of Shuster and Siegel (Daniels, 1998:11). This is the main reason for using Superman as an example of popular culture; he is the manifestation of two male adolescents' fantasies. The following section explores Superman as an example of popular culture and discusses his influence on male adolescent masculinity construction. The heading (see 4.5.1) *The Darkseid* is a reference to a supervillain and demonstrates the violence found in the comic genre. The second heading (see 4.5.2) *The Man of Steel* is an alternative name for Superman and used to establish the sexualisation of the male body in popular culture, while conveying the standard of Superman as the physical representation of steel.

#### **4.5.1 The 'Darkseid'**

He is the ruling dictator of the world Apokolips, he commands a legion of powerful creatures known as Parademons, and he has limitless might matched by his immeasurable intelligence. He wants to enslave all life in the universe, reshape existence in his image, and exert ultimate control. He is Darkseid, one of Superman's ultimate villains (<http://www.dccomics.com>). Darkseid perpetuates violence to which Superman responds by justifying the use of violence for good: "*Believe me when I say I wish violence wasn't necessary. But violence is the price*

*we pay to accomplish a greater good. As heroes, we chose to protect that good with our lives”* (Campbell, 2011:quote nr. 27).



Violence: a fight scene between Superman and Darkseid (Kubert, 2015)

Consalvo (2003:27) mentions that studies that explore how popular culture represents gender tend to focus primarily on women described as victims of male violence. Studies of men and popular culture are few and, until recently, the influence of popular culture on men's experience of mediated violence received little attention (Consalvo, 2003:27). Kivel and Johnson (2009:109) point out that, in spite of an abundance of transdisciplinary research about adolescence and youth development, there is no closer understanding of male adolescent violence.

Feminist media theorists who examine the descriptions of violence argue that popular culture serves as a normalising force in society, illustrating what is different and what is not (Consalvo, 2003:28). Consalvo (2003:28) also mentions that past studies of mediated masculinities focus on adult men and fail to interrogate constructions of male adolescents. Kivel and Johnson (2009:109) postulate that, in the context of sociological development male adolescents consume large quantities of popular culture, which warrants an investigation on how popular culture consumption can influence the ways in which adolescents construct their identity, especially their gender identity. Kivel and Johnson (2009:110) mention that,

notwithstanding more than 30 years of feminist advocacy for the eradication of rightly defined gender roles, hegemonic masculinity is still firmly entrenched in society.

Kivel and Johnson (2009:110) elucidate that through the consumption of popular culture male adolescents actively construct and maintain impressions of masculinity based on notions of heroism, violence and 'macho images'. Thus, popular culture is critical in the production and reproduction of hegemonic masculinity. Cantor (2000:31) elaborates that a great deal of research demonstrates that violence committed by protagonists is more justified than violence shown by other contextual figures. This is especially pertinent when considering the violence perpetuated by Superman in the name of good.

Consalvo (2003:31) indicates a tension between popular culture and male adolescents, which has important consequences for male adolescents who are still learning and perhaps experimenting with expressions of masculinity, and who make an effort to determine how violence might fit into their particular construction. Kimmel (2012:36) states that violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood or, rather, the willingness to fight. According to Cantor (2000:30), meta-analyses suggest that media-violence viewing is consistently associated with higher levels of antisocial behaviour, ranging from minor to serious criminal violence. Cantor (2000:31) proposes another side of mediated violence, which suggests that some of the effects of violence increase physiological arousal and thereby intensify subsequent emotional responses. Adolescents often imitate new behaviours they see both in their real environment and in popular culture (Cantor, 2000:31).

Funk, Baldacci, Pasold and Baumgardner (2004:23) propose that exposure to violence is one cause of subsequent aggression and violence. Repeated exposure to real-life and entertainment violence may alter cognitive, affective and behavioural processes. Funk *et al.* (2004:24) explain that during adolescence, such exposure may undermine the development of emotional regulatory skills. Impaired emotional regulation may lead to desensitisation and undermine natural triggered empathic response, increasing the likelihood of aggressive or violent behaviour (Funk *et al.*, 2004:24). Cantor (2000:32) states that desensitisation is another well-documented effect of viewed violence, evident in reduced arousal and emotional disturbance while witnessing violence, a reduced tendency to intervene in a fight and less sympathy for the victims of violence.

Funk *et al.* (2004) clarify that desensitisation causes a decrease or elimination of cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses to provocation and points to the alarming notion that manipulation of the process of desensitisation can happen directly and purposefully (Funk *et al.*, 2004:25). Desensitisation to violence is a subtle, almost incidental process, which may occur from repeated exposure to real-life media violence. Emotional desensitisation is evident when there is numbing or blunting of emotional reactions to events that would typically elicit a strong response. Cognitive desensitisation is also a result of exposure to violence and is evident when the belief that violence is uncommon and unlikely becomes the belief that violence is mundane and inevitable (Funk *et al.*, 2004:25).

Consalvo (2003:31) states that violence or the threat of violence can transpire into multiple constructions of masculinity in different ways. Miedzian (2002:179) writes that we live in a society that celebrates violence, condoning its use in many instances, some found in fictional popular culture. Mediated violence can thus perpetuate violent behaviours and attitudes (Cantor, 2000; Consalvo, 2003; Funk *et al.*, 2004; Kivel & Johnson, 2009; Miedzian, 2002). These exposures to violence found in popular culture mediums can also greatly contribute to the desensitisation of male adolescents, still at the cusp of understanding their own construction of masculinity (Cantor, 2000; Funk *et al.*, 2004). Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2013:284) suggest that popular culture can also disseminate the sexualisation of male adolescents, which in turn influences the masculinity construction of male adolescents, as is evident when considering Superman as the man of steel.

#### **4.5.2 The Man of Steel**

Cronin (*Comic Book Legends Revealed* #323, “*Comics Should Be Good!*”, 2011) explains that the reference to *The Man of Steel* is one of Superman’s nicknames, and touches on his invulnerability, which makes him the Man of Steel. The term is also a tribute to the reboot of the character by author and artist John Byrne (Cecchini, 2016). In 1986 Byrne rewrote the story of Superman and during this process, while keeping some of the original characteristics, created a more ‘realistic’ Man of Steel (Cecchini, 2016). Hart (*Superman, Batman and the Evolution of the ‘Perfect’ Hero Body*, 2016) indicates that the changing bodies of superheroes, such as Superman, illuminate the way the ideal male physique has evolved in popular culture over decades.

Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2015:3) verify that contemporary Western society prescribes a thin body for girls and a muscular body for boys as main standards of appearance. These standards serve as the prototype for sexual attractiveness and disregard the potential in individual growth, thereby delineating presupposed standards towards adolescent development. The emphasis on and promotion of appearance ideals within the context of sexual attractiveness refers to sexualisation (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2015:3). The focus of society on male appearance runs parallel with the prevalence of popular culture to focus on handsome men, which present unrealistic appearance ideals and ignore men's personalities and individuality (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013:284). This supports the hegemonic construct of masculinity, thereby perpetuating the standard that only the minority can be part of the dominant ideal (Kimmel, 2012:38).



This illustration exemplifies the Man of Steel as bulletproof (Comic Vine, 2014)

Ricciardelli, Clow and White (2010:65) indicate that the representation by popular culture of the male body, aesthetics and manner have changed over time. Popular culture increasingly foregrounded and sexualised the male body (Ricciardelli *et al.* 2010:66). Ricciardelli *et al.* (2010:66) suggests that the male body became central to consumer culture, no longer seen as a biological entity but instead as a sociocultural construct that intricately connects to the male identity. Transformation and sexualisation of the male body do more than transform the physical, they affect the way the body is lived in (Ricciardelli *et al.*, 2010:66). Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2013:284) state that the focus on male appearance in popular culture is a

possible reason why male adolescents worry about their appearance. This raises questions about whether popular culture influences male adolescents' body images. Sexualisation is a regular phenomenon in modern Western popular culture and traditionally focuses on and elaborates on female sexualisation, although Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2013:285) suggest that it is possible that sexualisation also occurs among men.

Thompson and Stice (2001:181) claim that exposure to the content of sexualised popular culture relates to a process of endorsing the appearance standards promoted by popular culture as own standards. Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2013:287) explain that when confronted with sexualisation male adolescents gain knowledge about society's preference of the ideal appearance. Male adolescents learn about the promoted physical features, internalise these standards and consider them as their own personal ideals to pursue (Thompson & Stice, 2001:181). This argument is especially relevant when considering the creators of the Superman character, Siegel and Shuster, who viewed themselves as classic geeks and shy around girls (Daniels, 1998:12). Unable to obtain the ideals set by society, these male adolescents internalised the expectations of society and created the ultimate fictional example of the hegemonic male and, at the same time, paid homage to their own "lack" by creating Superman's alter ego as a near-sighted, shy, uncoordinated geek (Daniels, 1998:19).

The internalisation of apparent popular culture standards also perpetuates the self-objectification of male adolescents (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013:287). Self-objectification occurs when placing a higher level of importance on those body features perceived to be essential in the ideal male body and masculinity construction (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997:188). Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2013:287) build on Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) self-objectification theory, and postulate that self-objectification propagates body surveillance. Hence, male adolescents show higher levels of monitoring their appearance to ensure that they achieve the set standards of the male body, as presented in popular culture content (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013:287). Popular culture has the capacity to impart information and understanding in relation to our gender identities through the transmission of cultural values and social norms (Kivel & Johnson, 2009:111). Research suggests that the cumulative impact of popular culture makes it one of the most influential forces in the lives of male adolescents (Kivel & Johnson, 2009:111).

Although the bulk of research on adolescence focuses on influencing factors (physiological, psychological and sociological) and contributes to development and identity formation, a shift appears when examining the contexts (for example, family, teachers, religion, peers and popular culture). In this field of research, few empirical investigations explicitly address socialisation processes around gender and none exclusively examines masculinity (Kivel & Johnson, 2009:113). Researchers postulate that popular culture and specifically mediated violence could influence the attitudes and behaviours of the participating audience (Cantor, 2000; Consalvo, 2003; Funk *et al.*, 2004; Kimmel, 2012; Kivel & Johnson, 2009). It can desensitise viewers to both violent popular content and real-life violence. Relying on the theory discussed, one can analyse the impact of Superman on male adolescents' construction of masculinity.



Jason Ratliff's abstract depiction of the impact of Superman on the imagination of male adolescents (Romano, 2015)

Superman is the ideal example of the hegemonic masculinity construction, and his overt expressions of masculinity and violent behaviour when defending humanity from super villains demonstrate traits of hypermasculinity. His physicality as superhero, especially in today's society where the body has taken centre stage, is idealised (Ricciardelli *et al.*, 2010; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013). As the 'Male of Steel', he sets an idealised standard of male muscularity. Hart (2016) explains that superheroes move toward a point of such severe bodily perfection that they linger alarmingly close to the mystical abyss of artificial

humanity. This ideal might end up with disengaged consumers, because it abandons what is truly captivating about superheroes: “the place where ‘super’ and ‘human’ intersect” (Hart, 2016). This is problematic when taking into account the physical development of male adolescents. The focus of popular culture on the male image could have a deconstructive influence on healthy development amongst male adolescents. The extreme sexualised and idealised nature of the Superman character can propagate body surveillance amidst male adolescents. This could influence the health of developing adolescents, with a profound effect on emotional growth.

The juxtaposition of the Superman character is his alter ego Clark Kent, the *Daily Planet* journalist and ultimate geek. Here, Clark Kent adheres to subordinate or marginalised masculinity traits. At this point several questions materialise, for example, is this simply a disguise for the god-like immigrant or is the character as a whole more complex than simple glasses, hunched posture and oversized clothes? Will the Man of Steel realise the need for kryptonite? These two questions, when phrased in the context of this discussion ask whether it is possible that hegemonic masculinity and subordinate/marginalised masculinity can coexist in peace for the greater good. Alternatively, will the battle for dominance constantly shift between the minority and majority of constructs of masculinity?

## **4.6 Chapter Summary**

Starting with a historical review of adolescence, this chapter has considered its development and changes over centuries in social reality. This enhanced the realisation of adolescence as an important period in any person’s life and demonstrated the vulnerability and significance of adolescent development (Arnett, 2010; Gullotta *et al.*, 2000; Hermes, 2005; Leventman, 2006). Adolescent development consists of physiological, psychological and sociological factors, with each meriting a separate discussion, although these factors function as an integrated whole (Chambliss & Eglitis, 2014; Christie & Viner, 2005; Gentry & Campbell, 2002; Gullotta *et al.*, 2000; Lewis, 2016; Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

The process of adolescent development is thus in a constant state of integration and evolvment, especially relevant in male adolescent development for this study. Research indicated that male adolescents experience intense pressure to conform to the societal norms of hegemonic masculinity construction, which influences their cognitive, emotional and



physical development (Cruz, 2014; Cunningham & Meunier, 2004; Field, 2014; Millington & Wilson, 2010; Oransky & Fisher, 2009; Reidy *et al.*, 2015; Seidler, 2006; Story & Stang, 2005). Popular culture functions as a socialising agent for acceptable masculinity behaviour, especially true in the case of Superman. The ‘Man of Steel’ displays the dominant masculine ideal in an overly aggressive and physical manner even in the name of good.

Popular culture contributes to masculinity constructions and it is noteworthy that media violence influences male adolescents to become more aggressive in nature or it perpetuates desensitisation towards violent popular culture content (Kimmel, 2012; Ricciardelli *et al.*, 2010; Thompson & Stice, 2001; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013, 2015). The focus of popular culture on the male body image or sexualisation, impacts on male adolescents’ self-objectification, which in turn supports an extreme focus on body analysis (Hart, 2016; Ricciardelli *et al.*, 2010; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013). As a result, popular culture sets an idealised standard of hegemonic masculinity, which becomes the focus during male adolescent development, leaving little room for individualised growth. Consequently, hegemonic masculinity is only possible for the minority and the majority only obtains subordinate or marginalised status. The following chapter considers the influence of popular culture on male adolescents’ construction of masculinity through the lenses of practical theology and feminist theology of praxis. The aim thereof is to arrive at a concept of popular culture that communicates the transformation and liberation of all constructions of masculinity.

# *Chapter 5:*

## *A Theological Reflection:*

### *Practical Theology and Feminist Theology of Praxis*

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter endeavours to apply the normative approach of practical theological interpretation, thereby contemplating on popular culture as the context, masculinities as the situation and male adolescent development as the episode. Also, I consider the circumstances of South Africans and how that influences male adolescent development. Furthermore, I reflect on the religious comparisons between Superman and Jesus Christ, whereby I consider the distinctions made between the sacred and profane and how these concepts intertwine in the context of popular culture. This section introduces the theological exploration that includes a discussion of practical theological interpretation, feminist theory, feminist theology and feminist theology of praxis. This section also considers alternative, transformative and redemptive masculinities as a means to combat the hegemonic and hypermasculine ideal perpetuated by popular culture, concluding this chapter with a discussion on the ‘Clark Kent Effect’.

#### **5.2. A Normative Approach**

The focus of this thesis is to determine how a theological exploration of the influence of popular culture on the masculinity construction of male adolescents can assist in finding redemptive masculinity. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the social sciences have played an important role in the field of practical theology, indicating the interdisciplinary nature of practical theology (Miller-McLemore, 2012:472). Osmer (2008:4) explains that the core tasks of practical theological interpretation include the descriptive-empirical task, the interpretive task, the normative task and the pragmatic task. The descriptive-empirical task involves collecting information to distinguish patterns in particular episodes, situations or contexts (Osmer, 2008:4). The interpretive task uses existing theories

of the arts and sciences to better comprehend and describe why these patterns and dynamics occur (Osmer, 2008:4). The normative task values theological concepts to understand particular episodes, situations, or contexts, to create ethical norms to guide our reactions and to learn from good practice. The pragmatic task enables us to delineate strategies of action that effect situations in appropriate ways, so that we can arrive at reflective conversations (Osmer, 2008:4). These tasks formulate a hermeneutical spiral, which defines interpretation as comprised of distinctive but interdependent moments (Osmer, 2008:10).

The literature review done in chapter 2, 3 and 4 was the beginning of the hermeneutical spiral used to answer the descriptive empirical and interpretive tasks' questions of "*what is going on?*" and "*why is this going on?*" During this study the researcher used the social sciences to understand the main concepts of popular culture, masculinities, and male adolescent development better. Within Osmer's (2008) tasks of practical theological interpretation the delineation of information is divided into three subsections in order to understand the problem and we therefore consider the context, situation and episode. Using this structure, the researcher distinguished popular culture as the context, masculinities as the situation and male adolescent development as the episode, with a brief reflection below before continuing with the hermeneutical spiral to the normative task.

### **5.2.1 Popular Culture as Context**

I combined the viewpoints from various scholars (Betz *et al.*, 2007; Geertz, 1973; Hofstede, 1983; Sakenfeld, 2008; Storey, 2009) which suggest that popular culture is a pattern of meaning, expressed in systems (structures) of symbolic images and ideas, which give meaning to life within a relationship of interpretation. This element of popular culture served as the motivation to engage with the concept from a practical theological perspective, thus encouraging the researcher to consider the sacred and profane dichotomy (section 5.3). Using this combined 'definition' of popular culture, I subsequently reflect on the different patterns of meaning. Firstly, an existing pattern in popular culture is the differentiation between the dominant and subordinate classes of popular culture, which relates to the distinction between high culture and popular culture (Storey, 2009). Secondly, as Dansei (2008:4) cited popular culture as the culture 'by the people for the people' it reflects an atypical notion that rejects historical influences. Thirdly, Leventman (2006) indicated that popular culture is a product of history and creates its own history. Fourthly, the view of Hermes (2005) that popular culture

is culture of citizenship reflected on/as a platform for developing a collective identity within a community. These four patterns of meanings within popular culture indicate that popular culture has a strong element of distinction between classes. Furthermore, this is evident in the sometimes nonconforming nature of popular culture, which tries to move away from historical influences but at the same time creates its own history captured within the collective identity of society. This pattern of meaning is influenced by systems, which informs the concept of ideology.

Authors (Milestone & Meyer, 2012; Thompson, 1990) viewed the concept of ideology as a notion that perpetuates the uneven distribution of power within societal structures. Thompson (1990) explicitly viewed ideology as being in the service of power and therefore removed from the political sphere. Thompson (1990) explained that there are two ways of viewing the concept of ideology. The first tries to equalise the negative, critical and analytical aspects of ideology, thereby presenting the concept from a neutral perspective implemented by the social sciences. The second approach views ideology as too ambiguous and controversial when analysing social and political systems. Thompson (1990) advocated that ideology should be used in analysis precisely because of the very aspects that cause the social sciences to move away from its negative, critical and analytical characteristics. This will enable us to understand the meanings found within structures. In my own words and derived from the various perspectives that social sciences scholars provided on culture, popular culture and ideology, popular culture thus emerges as a concept that perpetuates patterns of meaning within the systems or structures found in the symbolic images and ideas that give meaning to our interpretations of the world around us. Ideology therefore provides the perspective to view the structures found within symbolic metaphors and philosophies.

### **5.2.2 Masculinities as Situation**

The reflection on masculinity in chapter 3 illuminated three important viewpoints that are pertinent to understanding masculinities. The first indicated the prominence of the male body (Bohan, 1993; Connell, 1995; Courtenay, 2000; Thatcher, 2011; Tolbert, 2000) and how the body is an extension of given masculinities. The second viewpoint highlighted the importance of social and cultural circumstances that contribute to the definition of masculinity as relational (Bohan, 1993; Connell, 1995; Courtenay, 2000; Creighton & Oliffe, 2010; Kimmel, 1995; Thatcher, 2011; Tolbert, 2000). This is specifically indicative of

relational power extending from the male body and that exists between men and women and men and men. It also serves as the foundation for reinforcing hegemony and patriarchy (Foucault, 1998; Van der Walt, 2014; Wedgwood, 2010). The third viewpoint demonstrated that masculinities are a performative action influenced by certain contexts (Butler, 2004; Connell, 1995, Thatcher, 2011).

It is important to note that hegemonic masculinity as the dominant masculine ideal is set as the standard against which all other masculinities is measured (Connell, 1995, 2005; Viljoen, 2008). Kimmel and Aronson (2004) propagated the importance of understanding the matrix of masculinities that prevents a collapse within the hegemonic norm. Connell (1995) clarified that within society exists heteronormative masculinity and a variety of different configurations of masculinity. The multiple masculinities model consists of hegemonic masculinity, which is the dominant norm of perpetuated masculinities, complicit masculinity, which enables the hegemony. The third masculinity indicated the subordination of men under the influence of hegemonic masculinity. Marginalised masculinity is the periphery based on inadequate statuses in race and class. With the model, Connell (1995) created awareness that masculinities are a hierarchy of power and positions the concept of a singular masculinity excluding the differentiating and individual characteristics of all who experience masculinity.

Masculinities encompass an extremely complex notion that progresses within certain contexts on every level of human development. It is captured in texts, practices, images, symbolic meanings, systems and structures. It is a biological construct, a social experience, cemented in performative actions and behaviours. This understanding of masculinities enable the researcher to consider the necessity of feminist theory, feminist theology and feminist theology of praxis (section 5.3.2). During this study specific focus was given to the masculinity construction of male adolescents. As already indicated in chapter four the process of adolescent development involves extreme physical, social and emotional changes and with these changes comes a susceptibility to societal expectations.

### **5.2.3 Male Adolescent Development as the Episode**

Male adolescents experience extreme social pressure to conform to the norm of masculinity construction, because of the intense identity development expectations set by society regarding their emotional and physical growth (Courtenay, 2000; Oransky & Fisher, 2009;

Seidler, 2006). There is a heightened awareness among male adolescents considering adult male role expectations. In view of the influence of popular culture and the societal standard of hegemonic masculinity, male adolescents will give up their emotional and physical well-being to achieve the perceived characteristics of manhood, including prominent physicality, dominance, stoicism, toughness, strength and emotional restraint (Cunningham & Meunier, 2004; Oransky & Fisher, 2009; Reidy, Smith-Darden, Cortina, Kernsmith & Kernsmith, 2015). This is where popular culture as context is paramount. Popular culture persists in perpetuating an idealised standard of hegemonic masculinity. Researchers (Brown, 2002; Cantor, 2000; Chambliss & Eglitis, 2014; Kivel & Johnson, 2009; Milestone & Meyer, 2012; Taylor, 2008) established that popular culture influences the construction of male adolescent masculinity in various ways.

The most prominent indicators of popular culture's influence point to violent behaviour and attitudes (Consalvo, 2003; Kimmel, 2012; Kivel & Johnson 2009), which present desensitisation towards mediated violence that reflects in real life situations (Funk *et al.*, 2004; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2015). The sexualisation of the male body is also a concept that influences male adolescents (Ricciardelli *et al.*, 2010; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013, 2015; Wells *et al.*, 2016). In recent years the body became one of the focal points in popular culture mediums, thus endorsing the standard appearance of the physically strong and attractive male (Thompson & Stice, 2001). Male adolescents are internalising the standards presented by popular culture, causing self-objectification that, in turn, fosters body surveillance. The consumption of popular culture is the context in which the situation of masculinity construction replicates the everyday life of male adolescents. Because of the dominant presentation of hegemonic masculinity, male adolescents will consume this construction and attempt to reproduce it as closely as possible, regardless of their individual uniqueness. This result and effect popular culture has on male adolescents development, inspired the researcher to consider alternative, transformative and redemptive masculinities (section 5.3.3), as a means to aid adolescents that are exiled to the periphery of society and to formulate a practical theological response (section 5.4). This brief overview brings us to the current circumstances in South Africa - although it is not an extensive overview of the current context, it is important to be cognisant of the factors that can contribute to the masculinity construction of male adolescents.

#### 5.2.4 The South African Circumstances

The theoretical descriptions of the influence of popular culture on male adolescents' masculinity construction are also relevant in the South African context. Cloete (2012:1) explains that in present-day society adolescents live in complex popular cultural circumstances, influenced by multiple forms of media. The media intricately connects with their daily lives creating the world in which they live (Cloete, 2012:1). Ndlangamandla (2006:7) states that post-apartheid South Africa opened the gates to an increased utilisation of popular culture mediums, as the country's reintegration into the world brought greater access to such material. Globalisation serves as transportation for the various symbols and meanings found within popular culture and connects people living in different countries who share the consumption of popular culture mediums (Hall, 1992; Ndlangamandla, 2006).

Ndlangamandla (2006:7) also reflects that post-apartheid South African youth bear similarities to youth globally and although South Africa is perceived as a third-world country, the consumerist phenomenon found around the world also reflects in South Africa's consumption of popular culture (Klein, 1999; Ndlangamandla, 2006). Nuttall (2004:92) mentions that in post-apartheid South Africa the consumption of global forms of popular culture escalated, although the youth culture in South Africa still alludes to an Apartheid past, which gives a unique perspective on the impact of popular culture on South African masculinities. It is important to take note of the reality of HIV/Aids and the impact it has on the masculinity construction of male adolescents. Although popular culture is the main context regarding masculinity construction in this study, it would be remiss not to acknowledge that the country's history, global movements, HIV/Aids and the rape culture in South Africa also influence the construction of masculinities.

HIV occurrence among youth aged 15-24 years has declined steadily from 2,8% in 2002-2005 to 2,3% in 2005-2008 and 1,5% in 2008-2012. An encouraging finding was the decline in incidence among young females aged 15-24 years, from 5,3% in 2002-2005 to 2,1% in the period 2008-2012, a statistically significant reduction of 60% in HIV incidence. These statistics indicate that incidents of HIV/Aids is declining, although South African adolescents still face this reality. Additionally, according to Gennrich (2013:iii), the SA Medical Research Council's (SAMRC) Gender Research Unit have found that 30% of women are sexually abused in South Africa, with one in four men acknowledging that they have raped a

woman. The research also indicated that a large proportion of men align themselves with an oppressive type of masculinity. The SAMRC refer to South Africa as the rape capital of the world. These factors in the South African context, in conjunction with popular culture, collectively influence the masculinity construction of male adolescents’.

### **5.2.5 The Intersection: Superman**

Superman is found at the intersection of popular culture, masculinities and male adolescent development. Firstly, Superman started as a comic book character, but with the technological advances he evolved into a household name found in various popular culture mediums such as games, movies, television series, music and merchandise to name but a few. Secondly, Superman as an example of popular culture presents certain masculinity constructions as described by the creators and as illustrated by the various mediums mentioned before. Finally, Superman is the creation of two male adolescents, Siegel and Shuster, as a means to compensate for their masculinity (Daniels, 1998). As a reflection on the creators’ experience of masculinity, this character represents both the ideal and the angst of two adolescent boys struggling with their own masculinity construction. These perspectives make adolescence a crucial time in which to explore masculinities from a theological perspective. The masculinity model of Connell (1995) is important when considered within the context of popular culture, masculinities and male adolescents and provides the necessary theoretical guidelines with which to reflect on the type of masculinity presented by Superman.

Superman is an iconic superhero, the ultimate modern mythological character and the champion of humanity. He is also a man with godlike powers and abilities and demonstrates characteristics of hegemonic masculinity: physically attractive, super strong and decidedly heterosexual. Superman holds an authoritative position within the hierarchy of manhood. What makes this character so interesting is that Superman is the hegemonic ideal, with hypermasculine traits. Hypermasculinity is described as complex personality characteristics, which includes the overt display of masculinity, the belief that violence is manly and the view that danger is exciting (Bartolucci & Zeichner, 2003:76). It is also a means to create and confirm legitimacy as being male and a strategy to endorse the position of power (Wood, 2016:2). Hypermasculine men also reject traits that are seen as feminine such as emotional and compassionate displays (Ben-Zeev *et al.*, 2012:54). According to these characteristics of



hypermasculinity, we can infer that Superman displays these traits. Therefore, as an example of popular culture Superman sets an idealised standard that would be difficult to achieve.

Juxtaposed to this we find the alter ego Clark Kent, the stumbling personification of the ultimate geek. Clark Kent is the public identity of Superman; he is described as a ‘mild-mannered’ journalist working for the *Daily Planet* (Yeffeth, 2006:19). He is the adoptive son of Jonathan and Martha Kent, who lived in Smallville, Kansas. Hopkins (2006:19) explains that as a child Superman was Clark Kent, he was not just an alter ego. Thus the characteristics displayed by both Superman and Clark Kent cannot be seen as different personalities; rather, it is that of one person, but influenced by different circumstances (Hopkins, 2006:19). It has been argued that Clark Kent is the persona that embodies the values taught by his earthly parents and this enables Superman with the necessary knowledge to distinguish between right and wrong (Waid & Ross, 1996:193). The characteristics of Clark are the moral compass that guides Superman in his fight for truth, justice and liberation. Clark, the supposedly subordinate male is the humanity found in Superman. This juxtaposition of Superman/Clark Kent is what makes this study so interesting. On the one hand Superman perpetuates this hypermasculine ideal and on the other hand Clark Kent as a subordinate male is an integral part of Superman. Thus the hegemonic and subordinate male characteristics exist in one personality as seen in Superman. Various scholars (Babka, 2008; Christoforidis, 2014; Clanton, 2016) have also marked the similarities in the mythology of Superman with Jesus Christ. When taking this into consideration, I am not appropriating Superman as a modern-day Christ or Christ as Superman; instead it is a further indication of the importance of engaging with popular culture from a theological perspective.

### **5.2.6 Religious Comparisons: Superman and Jesus Christ**

Freedman (1993:952) affirms that the function of a myth is to cement social bonds that bring different people together as a group and then supports the identity of the group. Reid (2007:80) explains that “*mythology that resides and operates within popular culture representations and the mass media reveals valuable insights into the way in which audiences interact with the social world.*” Christoforidis (2014:i) says that displays of the sacred creates the foundation upon which the world’s religions rest, and the respective mythologies serve as a means through which to explain people’s experience, thus creating various original archetypes. Among these myths found in various cultures throughout

different times, an archetypal mythology stands out: the rise of a god-like hero commissioned to fight for the greater good of humanity (Christoforidis, 2014; LoCicero, 2007; Rizzotti, 2010).

Superman is the ideal example of contemporary society's mythical hero since his introduction in *Action Comics #1* in 1938 (Daniels, 1998). Superman had served as the archetypal superhero, a mythical ideal that personifies the cultural reality of an era. With his supernatural origin and his constant presence in various forms of popular culture mediums, he achieved the status of a mythical folk hero (Rizzotti, 2010; Wallace, 2006). Superman renewed mythic themes within the unique literary genre of the comic books and his story transcended to modern mainstream audiences (Christoforidis, 2014:i). Clanton (2016:40) indicates that from the beginning, Superman stories contained potentially religious or scriptural references or echoes, leading interpreters to suggest that there are religious meanings or subtexts within Superman. The parallels found within the Superman story emphasise three phases; Jor-El as heavenly father; Kal-El (Clark) as the only son sent with a divine mission and a hidden identity; and the view that Superman is a kind of Christ figure (Clanton, 2016; Babka, 2008).

Christoforidis (2014:ii) argues that Superman emerged, through the recognition of the parallels between the story of Superman and Jesus Christ as the quintessential, pop-culture Christ-figure. Babka (2008:118) implies that the superhero mythology, especially Superman's story, offers a present-day standard whereby Christians could assess the validity of the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ. Hitherto, I have determined that within the symbolic meanings and images found in popular culture mediums, mythological viewpoints exist that influence our interpretation of religion (Babka, 2008; Christoforidis, 2014; Clanton, 2016). Babka (2008:131) explains that Superman's concern with human justice and the alleviation of human suffering indicates an external act towards the repair of the world; he is an outsider and not part of this world. Babka (2008:131) argues that this eventually limits the effectiveness of his ethical activity because his actions are impossible for us to imitate.

Superman's understanding and application of justice cannot be established by anyone other than Superman himself, which suggests that he functions within a world of his own removed from reality. In comparison, Babka (2008:131) designates that Christ does not act within his own world; Christ acted to establish the Reign of God. Subsequently, Babka (2008:131) asks

“*Is Christ’s humanity so different from our own that we see his actions as ‘miracles impossible on earth?’*” and responds that Jesus is not ‘sinless’ because he is God, he is sinless because he has fully actualised human nature as created in the image of God. Although the mythology of Superman and the story of his origin present some comparisons to the Christ narrative, it seems superficial (Christoforidis, 2014). Superman should not replace our view of Christ. His stories could become the starting point of a discussion regarding Christ but cannot replace the impact of Christ’s story in our lives.

Today’s superheroes, through their related mythologies, could allude to Christ within what has debatably become part of popular culture’s religion (Christoforidis, 2014:ii). Superhero stories in general and Superman’s story in particular may present traces of the Christian proclamation of Jesus Christ’ teachings, especially as taught in the Gospels to today’s audiences, and Christians therefore have a responsibility to engage with popular culture. The significance of this mythical hero may inform perceptions of Christ and surely imparts symbolic meaning and images in terms of masculinity.

### **5.3 A Theological Exploration**

In light of the discussed literature on popular culture as a context, it is seen that popular culture perpetuates symbolic images and meanings. By using the predominant hegemonic ideological notion, popular culture influences how male adolescents align their understanding of masculinity constructions in the process of identity development. As an example of popular culture Superman presents hegemonic and hypermasculine traits (Bartolucci & Zeichner, 2003; Ben-Zeev *et al*, 2012; Wood, 2016), which establish a standard that is difficult to achieve. Male adolescents might respond to this unobtainable standard by overt expressions of violence, dominance, emotionlessness, body surveillance, and self-objectification (Ricciardelli *et al.*, 2010; Thompson & Stice, 2001; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013, 2015; Wells *et al.*, 2016) as a means to achieve this ideal. By attempting to attain these masculine ideals, male adolescents can move into the sphere of dangerous masculinities (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012:17). Uzodike and Isike (2012:48) explain that dangerous masculinities are often a result of misguided concepts of ideal manhood further endorsed by hegemony and patriarchy.

Adding to the existing complexity are the comparisons made between the mythology of Superman and Jesus Christ (Babka, 2008; Christoforidis, 2014; Clanton, 2016), Cobb (2005:123) explains that our myths feed our scripts; we imitate the quests and struggles of the dominant figures in the myths and rehearse our lives informed by these mythic plots. Thus, the mythical aspect of popular culture is a pertinent thought in which to engage theologically. Lynch (2007:1) explains that the growing field of studying religion, media and popular culture, offers the possibility of deepening our understanding of religion and the sacred in relation to the cultural lives we live. Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), a French sociologist in search of understanding the impact of society on the collective identity of people, considered the distinction between the sacred and the profane (Southerton, 2011:481). The sacred refers to representations that transcend everyday life, whereas the profane refers to everyday practices and actions (Southerton, 2011:482). Eliade (1957) builds on Durkheim's distinction by propagating the sacred with religion as the central point in the universe of the religious and profane as the sphere of the nonreligious (Eliade, 1957:23).

When considering the example of Superman and the mythological as well as the religious themes found within this example of popular culture, we can see that the sacred and profane intertwine. According to Eliade (1957:23), the profane maintains the homogeneity and relativity, whereas the sacred provide a fixed point in the chaos of homogeneity. This raises the question of how we deal with the merging of the profane and the sacred? Petrof (2015:94) mentions that the dualism of the sacred and profane cannot be used as long as hierophany can be reproduced in the context of popular culture. Lynch (2007:4) suggests that the study of religion and popular culture can inform a better understanding of religion and the sacred. By exploring the nature and significance of the sacred in human cultures we might better comprehend religion.

Hitherto, the process of practical theological interpretation guided the gathering of necessary information and theoretical perspectives on the context, situation and episode. This enabled an analysis of the influence of popular culture on male adolescents' masculinity constructions. The existing ideal of hegemonic and hypermasculinity as seen from the example of Superman causes male adolescents to align themselves with this archetype of masculinities. Problematically, this alignment banishes the majority of male adolescents to reside on the periphery of society, in that most male adolescents cannot conform to the heteronormative, white, elite class, physically strong, androcentric standard. Consequently, a

divide exists within the essence of identity and within society and culture. This study looks to practical theological interpretation and feminist theology of praxis as well as perspectives on alternative masculinities to aid male adolescents that do not fit in the hegemonic and hypermasculine ideal.

### **5.3.1 Practical Theological Interpretation**

In broad terms, practical theology can be defined as a place where religious belief, tradition and practice meet contemporary experiences, questions and actions, and conduct a dialogue that is mutually enriching, intellectually critical and practically transforming. Practical questions related to faith in a fast-changing world falls within the field of practical theology (Van den Berg, 2012:3). The intent of practical theology is to explore and understand praxis empirically, in order to generate a theological framework with which to evaluate representations of practice for potential conduct and improvement (Osmer, 2006:329). The researcher thus considered any altered practices that influence the individual within the spheres of practical theology, since the Christian belief is both transcendent and practical.

According to Smith (2008:203), practical theology refers to the application of theology to life and ministry. Smith (2008:204) explains that a key characteristic of practical theology is that it seeks to apply theological reflection to solve real-life problems, thus its point of departure is that of a problem in the real world, a real-life situation that is not as it should be. Ballard (2012:164) argues that practical theology finds its consistency in a contextual approach to the theological task. Therefore, practical theology is a way of doing theology that takes into account the spirit and message of the gospel, the Christian tradition, the culture in which theology is being done and the changes that take place in the said culture (Ballard, 2012:164). Practical theology has a commitment to theological endeavours and to biblical studies to understand how the Bible is acknowledged and viewed in church and in the world (Ballard, 2012:170).

The normative task of practical theology attempts to understand the will of God for present-day realities discovered in the framework of the descriptive-empirical and interpretive tasks (Osmer, 2008:139). Osmer refers to the normative task as *prophetic discernment*, and the concept derives from the Old Testament prophets who spoke normatively for God. The term 'prophetic discernment' involves both divine disclosure and the human shaping of God's

word (Osmer, 2008:134-135). Prophetic discernment uses three approaches to discover the word of God for the current reality, namely theological interpretation, ethical reflection, and good practice (Smith, 2008:107).

Theological interpretation focuses on the interpretation of present episodes, situations, and contexts by means of theological concepts (Osmer, 2008:139). Ethical reflection refers to the use of ethical principles, rules, or guidelines to steer action in the direction of moral conclusions (Osmer, 2008:161). Current practices may be filled with values and norms that are in conflict and interpretive ‘conductors’ must develop ethical principles, guidelines and rules to guide behaviour in episodes, situations, and contexts towards moral conclusions (cf. Browning 1991, in Smith, 2008:107). The ‘conductor’ can pull from their societies own traditions for principles to guide behaviour and conduct. Smith (2008:108) indicates that Osmer recommends and praises the ‘three-part account of moral life’ by Ricoeur (1992), which will assist with ethical reflection.

The first part is the *philosophy* of a moral community that shapes its identity, represented in its practices, narratives, relationships, and models. The second part is the *universal ethical principles* that a just community uses to examine its moral practices and vision against, and to consider the moral contentions of those outside the community. The third is *practical moral reasoning* needed for the application of moral principles and words to particular situations (Osmer, 2008:149). Good practice is the third and last approach used to enable prophetic discernment and consists of two diverse elements. The first is the interpretive guide, which draws on representations or models of good practice from the past or present in order to reform the current actions of a congregation. The second concerns an analysis of present examples of good practice that can “*generate new understandings of God, the Christian life, and social values beyond those provided by the received tradition*” (Osmer, 2008:153).

Popular culture disseminates an idealised standard of hegemonic and hypermasculinities that negatively affect male adolescents’ understanding and lived experiences of these masculinity constructions. It fosters a continuation of dangerous masculinities (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012:17). It also impedes the holistic development of one’s identity. Hoeft (2012:419) explains that people use these categories of identity, because we need the recognition, understanding and acceptance, but at the same time this identification causes unholy

restrictions and constraints. Thus, practical theology is ideally situated to consider these predicaments (Hoeft, 2012:419). Practical theology is found at the intersection of culture, popular culture, church, academy and theology, enabling a critical discourse (Hoeft, 2012:419). Also, the interest of how theology functions in people's lives encourages new considerations of gender. A practical theological interpretation of these delineations with regards to identity can enable an authentic and meaningful life on the boundaries of church and society (Hoeft, 2012:419).

Claassens and Viljoen (2012:v) argue that directly naming the impact of popular culture is the first step to alleviating the negative influences, especially with regards to gender. In this study it applies to the negative impact of the hegemonic and hypermasculine ideal. By being cognisant of religions notions and literalistic readings of the bible that have influenced harmful understandings of gender and by engaging with this intersection of gender, religion and popular culture may express that religions can also comprise helpful means (Claassens & Viljoen, 2012:v) to aid, in this case, male adolescents with the harmful effects of popular culture. This is in essence the normative task of practical theological interpretation. As Osmer (2008:4) suggests, the normative task uses theological concepts to consider specific episodes, situations, or context. Osmer summarises the overall normative question that needs answering as "*How is the worldly wisdom of the arts and sciences appropriately related to the Wisdom of God?*" (Osmer, 2008:162). The already discussed theories of popular culture, masculinities, and male adolescent development established the foundation for the normative task, while the nature of feminist theory, feminist theology, and feminist theology of praxis addresses Osmer's (2008) normative question.

## **5.3.2 Feminist Theology of Praxis**

### **5.3.2.1 Feminist Theory**

Feminist theory studies the consequences of sociological issues on individual development while accepting differences in the development of male and female roles, parenting, and social and sexual youth development (Sharf, 2008). Feminist theory promotes self-understanding relative to social influences. Grosz (2010:100) deliberates feminist theory as a formation of innovative notions, related with "*women, men, femininity, masculinity, and their historical and conceptually associated values, practices and objects, including identity,*

*sexuality, work, the state*” and other exploited groupings such as ethnicity, race, religion, class and sexual orientation. Feminist theory is concerned with attending to and changing injustices in civilisation in order to establish an improved social system by means of novel ideas (Grosz, 2010:100).

Feminist theory examines both gender inequality and the constitution of gender; it is understood as an intellectual and normative project (Carson & Ray, 2011). Feminist theory engages with themes such as sexual objectification, structural and cultural oppression, systems of patriarchy and hegemony, politics, economy, media studies, to name but a few. Feminist theory challenges the systems of patriarchy and hegemony, which is especially imperative to this study. McHugh (2007) clarifies that patriarchy is an ideological concept that enforces the systematic oppression of women by social constructions such as marriage, heterosexuality, laws, policies and even language. Feminist theory has critically analysed patriarchy to combat this system of oppression, to ultimately alleviate, transform and liberate society (Jones, 2000; McHugh, 2007; Turner, Abercrombie & Hill, 2006). It also endeavours to interact with the various social science and theological disciplines (Beasley, 1999; Jones, 2000; Klage, 2012). Feminist theory also critically analyses the sex/gender distinction thereby establishing that this distinction, is not only founded in the biological construct. Thus the sex/gender distinction is incorporated as a cultural, social, performative and historical phenomenon (Bohan, 1993; Butler, 1995, 2004; Connell, 1995; Courtenay, 2000; Creighton & Oliffe, 2010; Hughes, 2011; Kimmel, 1995; Thatcher, 2011; Tolbert, 2000). Jones (2000:2) demonstrates that theology can learn from feminist theory, it can deepen our knowledge of humanity and society, which can expose new possibilities of Christian theology and its views on divine grace.

### **5.3.2.2 Feminist Theology**

Feminist theology is an extension of feminist theory and, more specifically, views cultural and societal issues from a critical and liberated theological perspective (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1975:612). It is also imperative to take note of the characteristics of feminist theology. Ackermann (1993a:21-23) demonstrates that feminist theology is, firstly, critical theology, and therefore this critique points out that nature and biology are not the destiny of people but rather they are the result of culture and socialisation. Secondly, feminist theology is



contextual, in that it recognises all theology as historically and culturally conditioned. Thirdly, feminist theology is liberation theology, interested in the liberation of all people. Feminist theology is thus dynamic and inclusive, inviting people into the on-going process and development of practical theology. Finally, feminist theology is a communal enterprise, rooted in the concept of community.

Schüssler Fiorenza (1975:612) argues that feminist theology not only advocates for the entrance and minor integration in the patriarchal male-dominated hierarchal institutions of the church and theology, but also calls for a radical transformation of these institutions and structures. This implies that the church and theology have to be liberated and humanised in order to move beyond the oppression of people (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1975:612). Feminist theology challenges Christian theology that shares in cultural sexism and patriarchies (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1975:13). Koopman (2004:191) explains that feminist theology represents a search for the liberation of all forms of dehumanisation irrelevant of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. In *Introducing African Women's Theology* Oduyoye (2001:17) emphasised the importance of doing theology from women's experiences and locations. This contributes to the argument that women's theology is a theology of relations, favouring mutuality instead of hierarchies, thereby emphasising the inter-relationships of men and women. Van der Watt (2007:75) asserts that patriarchy has robbed men of their prescribed identity and humanity. It also delineates both men and women under the hierarchical structure of patriarchy and deconstructs what it means to be human (Van der Watt, 2007:76).

From a theological perspective, feminist theology challenges patriarchal theology and suggests liberating alternatives, which contribute to the perceived understanding of masculinities (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998:7). Although feminist theology commenced with the context and realities of women it transcends into the realm of the experience of men, and by no means does this mitigate the importance of liberating women. It does indicate the importance of feminist theology when engaging with the consequence of patriarchy (Jones, 2000; Koopman, 2004; Oduyoye, 2001; Schüssler Fiorenza, 1975; Van der Watt, 2007).

Nelson (1992:76) mentions that feminism illustrated that institutions, language, and the thought patterns of Western culture and religion have excessively reflected the dominant male experience. These assumptions have consistently perpetuated further injustices against

women and marginalised men that do not fit into the dominant masculine ideal (Nelson, 1992:76). It has also prevented men from critically examining their own individual masculine experiences. While the body refers to the physical or material frame of man, it is deeply symbolic in human culture and is a means by which and through which individuals and communities express themselves (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998:10). With the impact of feminist studies on masculinity theories, Nelson (1992) indicates that it is important to deliberate on the negative identity men associate with the male body. While ascribing to the dominant ideal of masculinity, men have conformed to the designate characteristics of hegemonic masculinity by ascribing to the stoic machismo over and against the emotionality and connectedness attributed to femaleness and homosexuality (Nelson, 1992:79). Hence the negativity associated and connected male body alienation.

Isherwood and Stuarts' (1998:31) concept of body theology suggests that theology can originate from the body, thereby reconnecting reason and feeling. Body theology holds the hope of healing the cruel rapture that patriarchal thinking introduced into theology. It aspires to integrate the body, mind and emotions in order to see once again the glory and goodness of all creation (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998:31). The concept of a theology from the body enables us to consider the bodily experiences of men and the influences it has on masculinities. Thatcher (1993:41) argues that patriarchal dualism severs the connection of divine grace in and through the body by creating the expectancy that divine awareness is immaterial, abstract and confined by the soul. The rekindling of the body as a foundation of spirituality is a liberation of women and men alike (Thatcher, 1993:42). By engaging with the bodily experience of masculinity and being cognisant of the significance of the body, men are enabled to reconnect with the source of what it means to be human removed from the expectations and constrictions of patriarchy and hegemony (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998; Nelson, 1992; Thatcher, 1993). The endeavours of feminist theory (Beasley, 1999; Bohan, 1993; Butler, 1995, 2004; Connell, 1995; Jones, 2000; Klage, 2012; McHugh, 2007; Tolbert, 2000; Turner, Abercrombie & Hill, 2006) and feminist theology (Jones, 2000; Koopman, 2004; Oduyoye, 2001; Schüssler Fiorenza, 1975; Van der Watt, 2007) enables the continuation of the normative task of theology also reflected in feminist theology of praxis.

### 5.3.2.3 Feminist Theology of Praxis

According to Ackermann (2006:227), a feminist theology of praxis is explicitly concerned with ethical issues such as sexuality, reproduction, violence against women and children, relationships between men and women, and relationships between human beings and nature. A feminist theology of praxis is concerned with present-day realities within given contexts, situations and episodes. Feminist theology arose as a grassroots challenge to the traditional views of women's roles in religion and society but at the heart of feminist theology is the liberation of all broken people (Jones, 2000:14). This perspective embraces the liberation of people who find themselves on the margins of our society and who know the violating effects of discrimination (Ackermann, 2006:226). Ackermann (2003:27) explains by quoting Dorothee Sölle, saying, "*all true theology starts with pain, it is concerned with the very stuff of life, our questions, our experiences of alienation, our search for meaning.*" Theology demands an engagement with the heart and the mind (Ackermann, 2003:27). Ackermann (2003:40) reminds us that stories are a source of self-knowledge. Ackermann (2006: 277) explains:

*"The task of feminist theology of praxis, is to critically analyse the given context, particularly on how gender roles are understood and lived out, furthermore to seek to engage with these contextual situations with a liberating and transformative praxis in order to encourage human flourishing, instilled with the belief that such theology is done in the service of furthering God's reign on earth"* (Ackermann, 2006:227).

The theological concept of the reign of God is specifically a feminist standpoint that moves away from 'the Kingdom of God'. The latter phrase refers to the hierarchal structure and predominantly male understanding of the Christian faith; the word 'kingdom' is also a gender-specific word (Ackermann, 1993a:29). By consciously referring to the reign of God, we are reminded of the good news, which speaks about justice, love, freedom and peace. In doing so it calls for the priority of a praxis that is just, loving, freeing and which leads to peace and wholeness (Ackermann, 1993a:21). Ackermann (1993a:21) uses this theological concept of the reign of God to argue that within this concept we find ethical demands, which leads to liberating praxis. It is a praxis that is founded in the example of Jesus that reveals the critical and transforming vision of what it would mean for the fullness of God's being to be known on earth (Ackermann, 1993a:30). According to Ackermann (1993a:30) this calls us to

a profound love and ways of being present in the world that extends relationships, personifies and encompasses community, and that safeguards the gift of life.

This key characteristic of feminist theology is especially pertinent in the light of the theories discussed in this study. Within the context of popular culture lies ideological notions that not only oppress women but also oppress men. The presentation, production and consumption of hegemony and hypermasculinity is a prison that demands the social and cultural conformation of individuals within a set standard - in this case, male adolescents' masculinity construction. Popular culture serves not only as the context that perpetuates this conformity; it also influences the images and meanings that we ascribe to humanity. The pertinent question, then, is whether this is just, loving and freeing. Practical theological interpretation engages with discerning elements that influence our cognitive thinking and practice within a given context. In this study, practical theological interpretation provided the opportunities to engage with the social sciences to better understand the given context, situation, and episode at hand.

Feminist theory, feminist theology and feminist theology of praxis aid in this normative endeavour of practical theological interpretation and challenges the life-denying structures of patriarchy and hegemony, which served as motivation to engage practical theology and feminist theology of praxis as conversation partners within this study. A feminist theology of praxis gives a voice to the marginalised, working towards the liberation and transformation of society that places people and, as demonstrated in this study, masculinities on the periphery. By conceptualising masculinities in chapter three, with the guidance of practical theological interpretation and feminist theology of praxis, we became cognisant of the changing definitions of masculinities. Kaunda (2014:4) argues that this provides the prospect to acknowledge the chance of intervening in the principles of masculinity to foster masculinities that are more serene and harmonious. This brings us to the following section, which considers alternative, transformative and redemptive masculinities

### **5.3.3 Alternative, Transformative and Redemptive Masculinities**

When considering the body of literature discussed with regards to popular culture, masculinities and male adolescent development (see Chapter 2, 3 & 4) the researcher established that popular culture perpetuates an idealised hegemonic and hypermasculine

standard that influences male adolescents' construction of masculinity (Brown, 2002; Cantor, 2000; Chambliss & Eglitis, 2014; Kivel & Johnson, 2009; Milestone & Meyer, 2012; Taylor, 2008). This indicated that the concept of dangerous masculinities is a very real present-day reality that we are faced with (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012; Uzodike & Isike, 2012). It also demonstrated that patriarchy and hegemony directly influence all of society and special attention was given to the fact that these systems impede on the humanity of women and children and men that live on the periphery (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998; Jones, 2000; Koopman, 2004; Nelson, 1992; Oduyoye, 2001; Schüssler Fiorenza, 1975; Thatcher, 1993; Van der Watt, 2007).

Considering the South African context, we are faced with the HIV/Aids pandemic, gender-based violence, and gender inequality (Cloete, 2012; Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012; Gennrich, 2013; Hall, 1992; Klein, 1999; Ndlangamandla, 2006; Nuttall, 2004; Viljoen 2007). Additionally, religion and culture have been the main tools used to justify gender-based violence (Ackermann, 1993; Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012; Schüssler Fiorenza, 1975). This is the background against which all concerned citizens and scholars search for ways to foster alternative, transformative and redemptive masculinities.

Owino (2010:2) argues that we should pay closer attention to the social, religious and cultural constructions of masculinities, with the intent to develop alternative masculinities. Owino (2010:2) advocates for a theology of hope based on the premises of a transformative missiological paradigm. Considering our present-day realism of HIV/Aids and dangerous masculinities, it is imperative to challenge dehumanisation from a strategic theological perspective that will transform masculinities into life-giving reality (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012; Uzodike & Isike, 2012; Owino, 2010). Koopman (2004:197) advocates that by understanding humankind in terms of relationality, dependence and vulnerability it provides an opportunity for coming to grips with the separations that both males and females suffer.

Thus, by re-evaluating what our humanity means, we become capable of exploring the journey of re-humanisation (Koopman, 2004:197). Dube (2016:2) suggests that alternative masculinities can be used as a tool to challenge cultural patterns of meaning that breed patriarchy and hegemony. It also serves as a critique against economic inequality that hinders the lived human dignity of people (Dube, 2016:2). Alternative masculinities advocate against

the essentialism of cultural and societal expectations of what it means to be a man, thereby encouraging alternative sexuality (Dube, 2016:2). Oduyoye (Dube, 2016:3) suggests that viewing Jesus Christ as the mother is an attempt to describe alternative masculinities from African women's theology, thereby advocating for the deconstruction of patriarchy and calling for new images of manhood based on care and love (Dube, 2016:3).

Van Klinken (2012:215), on the other hand, makes the suggestion for transformative masculinities based on the social vulnerabilities of men. Togarasei (2013:2) mentions that religion and culture should be used to facilitate transformative masculinities, thus challenging the socially, culturally and historically constructed masculinities. Chitando (2012a:7) explains that transformative masculinities seek to challenge boys and men to contribute towards more helpful and life-giving ideas about what it means to be a man. In doing so this challenges the negative and harmful ideas constructed by societal and cultural expectations (Chitando, 2012a:7). The concept is used to motivate boys and men to be 'born again' with regards to their attitude and behaviour towards women and children and other men (Chitando, 2012a, Togarasei, 2013; Van Klinken, 2012). Van Klinken (2013:179) explains that the study of men, masculinities and religion is not only analytical and deconstructive it also has an agenda of transformation, searching for liberate and redemptive masculinities.

Chitando and Chirongoma (2012:5) elaborate that a gender analysis of young men indicates a plurality of masculinities within sub-Saharan Africa. These differentiating examples of manhood reveal that there are urban and rural masculinities that are changing historically. The analysis includes versions of manhood associated with war, the construct of warriors, and others that associate with farming or cattle herding. There are native definitions and versions of manhood, defined by tribal and ethnic group practices, and newer versions of manhood shaped by Islam, Christianity, Western influences and popular culture (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012; Gennrich, 2013; Ndlangamandla, 2006; Nuttall, 2004; Viljoen, 2007). Chitando and Chirongoma (2012:6) assert that, although hegemonic masculinities portrayed men as having power over women and children, not all men truly have that power and thus many men may be under social pressure to behave in a domineering and sexually aggressive way. The link between masculinities and (hetero-) sexual performance is deep-seated and reinforces the hierarchical structure of dominant to lesser peripheral masculinities (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012; Connell, 1995, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2016).

Chitando and Chirongoma (2012:7) mention that existing scholarly reflections on masculinities in sub-Saharan Africa overlook the impact of religion in the formation of masculinities. The two main causes of this neglect suggest, firstly, that scholars who have been pioneers in this field were not educated in theology and religious studies. Secondly, African women theologians who brought the dialogue on gender to the fore have not focused specifically on masculinities and, as a result, theological and religious perspectives on masculinities have been absent (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012:7). Chitando and Chirongoma (2012:7) highlight the importance of religion and theology in forming and challenging masculinities.

Chitando and Chirongoma (2012:28) clearly state that masculinities can and do change. The impact of hegemonic masculinity, which is perpetuated within the context of popular culture and the destructive consequences of the hegemonic standard on male adolescents' humanity and on society, necessitates the emergence of redemptive masculinities. Chitando and Chirongoma (2012:1) advocate the notion of redemptive masculinities, suggesting that society does not consider men as supermen who swoop in and save the day, but rather engages with redeeming masculinities from the set standard dominating the world in which we live. Chitando and Chirongoma (2012:1) embrace and employ the concept of redemptive masculinities to depict and recognise masculinities that are 'life-giving' in a world suffering from the effects of violence and AIDS. This concept includes the necessity to develop masculinities that promote health and well being for all. With the development of feminist theory and feminist theology the focus has been on the liberation of women and the transformation of society into an equal-opportunity environment in which all can flourish.

Chitando (2012b:249) creatively used the story of Siphiwo Mahala's *When a Man Cries* to demonstrate the process of redemptive masculinity, briefly reproduced to emphasise the value of this story towards liberating masculinities. The main protagonist is the character of Temba. At first, Temba ascribes to the idealised standard of hegemonic masculinity, propagating the stoic, fearless, dominating, misogynistic type of masculinity. However, Temba undergoes life-transforming experiences that change his perception of masculinity (Chitando, 2012b:250), thus transforming him from a man who rejects tears as weakness to one who accepts tears as part of what it means to be a man, and becoming redeemed in the process.

From this discussed literature with regard to alternative (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012; Dube, 2016; Koopman, 2004; Uzodike & Isike, 2012; Owino, 2010), transformative (Chitando, 2012b, Togarasei, 2013; Van Klinken, 2012, 2013), or redemptive masculinities (Chitando and Chirongoma, 2012), a key theme of humanity comes to mind. Each of these concepts endeavours to deconstruct the life-denying and dehumanising consequence of patriarchy and hegemony. These efforts are especially pertinent when considering the influence popular culture has on the masculinity construction of male adolescents. The question arises: what does this mean for Superman?

#### 5.4 The Clark Kent Effect <sup>10</sup>

I would like to postulate a scenario with regards to the story and background of Superman. We know that Superman is the ideal of two male adolescents', Siegel and Shuster, as a means to move beyond their own marginalised masculinity (Daniels, 1998). The scenario is first phrased as a question: What if Siegel and Shuster grew up in a society that embraced alternative, transformative or redemptive masculinities, a society that deconstructed patriarchy and hegemony? Would Superman still exist? Who would Superman be? As seen from the literature study, Superman and Clark Kent's presentation of masculinity is influenced by differentiated circumstances. This confirms the theoretical perspectives that masculinities are socially, culturally, historically constructed and established by repetitive performative actions (Bohan, 1993; Butler, 2004; Connell, 1995; Courtenay, 2000; Creighton & Oliffe, 2010; Kimmel, 1995; Thatcher, 2011; Tolbert, 2000).

Consequently, in a world devoted to life-giving humanity Superman will no longer be needed. Instead, Clark Kent, the mild-mannered reporter from the Daily Planet, the intelligent, shy, courageous man from Smallville, Kansas would continue living - not a hero, not a godlike figure, not a hegemonic or hypermasculine ideal - as Clark Kent. What is more,

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<sup>10</sup> The *Clark Kent Effect* is an already existing reference used to investigate the role of familiarity and eyeglasses in recognising distinguished faces, as study based in vision sciences (Moniz, Righi, Peissig & Tarr, 2010). The phrase has not been used in the context of theology.



this figure devoid of any superpowers will be an example to strive towards. It is Clark Kent's inherent qualities to fight for truth, justice and liberation that makes Superman the ultimate hero. Not the Superman with his unlimited power, but it is the humanity found in this character that inspires scholars, adolescents, students and consumers to continuously investigate his relevance. Unfortunately we live in a society still captured by patriarchy and hegemony, which is reflected in the construction of Superman as an example of popular culture (Brown, 2002; Cantor, 2000; Chambliss & Eglitis, 2014; Kivel & Johnson, 2009; Milestone & Meyer, 2012; Taylor, 2008). Superman's presentation of hegemonic and hyper-masculinity is a reflection of societal standards (Betz *et al.*, 2007; Geertz, 1973; Hofstede, 1983; Milestone & Meyer, 2012; Sakenfeld, 2008; Storey, 2008), thus indicating the still lurking presence of patriarchal and hegemonic ideologies. So how do we move forward to establish a world where only the Clark Kent's will exist? I'd like to term this endeavour the 'Clark Kent Effect', rather than embracing the notion that all men strive to be Superman (Connell, 1995, 2005; Kimmel & Aronson, 2004; Van der Watt, 2007). The answer is to work towards a society that values the strength of character, integrity, compassion, and commitment to serving others, that is found in Clark Kent.

Practical theological interpretation, feminist theory, feminist theology and feminist theology of praxis, as well as the discussed theory of alternative, transformative and redemptive masculinities, all contribute to the establishment of the 'Clark Kent effect'. In conclusion: firstly, practical theological interpretation provided a theoretical framework to critically engage with the concepts of popular culture, masculinities and male adolescents as the context, situation and episode, respectively. This enabled the identification of the problem at hand, which is the fact that popular culture presents an idealised standard of hegemony and hypermasculinity that isolates male adolescents that cannot achieve this standard to the periphery of society. Secondly, feminist theory, feminist theology and feminist theology of praxis aided conscientisation of the life-denying effects of patriarchy and hegemony. Thirdly, the discussion on alternative, transformative and redemptive masculinities enabled the formulation of ways to combat patriarchy and hegemony by providing different perspectives on masculinity.

Manda (2012:471) affirms that religion and religious beliefs, values and principles are the building blocks upon which to construct what it means to be a good human being. Manda (2012:480) emphasises that the duty of theologians is to construct approaches to masculinity

that are liberating and redemptive. This process can start with central teachings and shared values that are significant to Christian life (Manda, 2012:481), and which are based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Manda (2012:482) encourages men not to conform to the violence of dominant masculinity by the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ and appeals to congregational leaders to emphasise and encourage an ethics of responsibility by pointing to what Jesus Christ stands for (Manda, 2012:482).

Churches and faith-based organisations can contribute by working towards understanding the influence of popular culture on male adolescents' masculinity construction, in order to achieve the full liberation of women, children and fellow male adolescents and men (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012). Owino (2010:6) suggests that the church and its educators should educate and involve men and young men in the process of deconstructing patriarchy and hegemony. Owino (2010:6) also mentions that our theologies must seek to bring hope in a context of meaninglessness, hopelessness and abandonment by challenging structural and social violence. It requires us to include men and male adolescents in an effort to bring forth gender equality by focusing on what it means to be a man. This includes challenging violent behaviour towards women and children and other men (Chitando, 2012b).

## **5.5 Conclusion**

This chapter took the normative approach of practical theological interpretation, and reflected on popular culture as the context, masculinities as the situation, and male adolescent development as the episode. I considered the current circumstances of South African and how this influenced male adolescent development. Furthermore, I reflected on the religious comparisons between Superman and Jesus Christ, which introduced a discussion on distinctions that are made between the sacred and profane and how these concepts intertwine in the context of popular culture. This section informed the theological exploration that included a discussion on practical theological interpretation, feminist theory, feminist theology and feminist theology of praxis. It also deliberated on alternative, transformative, and redemptive masculinities as a means to combat the hegemonic and hypermasculine ideal perpetuated by popular culture. The chapter concluded with a discussion on the 'Clark Kent Effect' and strategies to alleviate the impact of patriarchy and hegemony on men and male adolescents.

# Chapter 6:

## *Conclusions and Recommendations*

### 6.1 Introduction

The title '*Superman: The Man and the Myth – A Theological Exploration of the Influence of Popular Culture on Masculinity*', reflects the complexity of culture and ideology, and the complicated nature and influence of popular culture on masculinity and adolescent development. Especially the scarcity of practical theological perspectives in South Africa on current media representations, like comic heroes made this study very relevant. A literature study was the choice of inquiry for this journey, mainly for the following reason. The complexity of each of the main concepts of culture, ideology, popular culture, masculinity construction and male adolescent development, was already referred to. Adding an iconic figure like Superman as an example of popular culture widened the scope of the study, motivating the investigation, comprehension and integration from a practical theological perspective and through the lens of feminist theology of praxis. The main intention of this literature study was to place these concepts of popular culture, masculinities, male adolescent development and the character of Superman, within the larger context of existing scholarly literature.

This final chapter comprises a précis of this study. Consequently, I reflected on the intended objective of each chapter and then reviewed the key findings integrated with conclusions and recommendations applicable to each of the four main chapters, excluding the introductory outline and this concluding section. The initial chapter (Chapter two) dealt with the concept of popular culture and connected culture to ideology as a theoretical notion in popular culture. Superman, the iconic hero, was introduced as an example of popular culture. Chapter three focused on masculinities, reflecting on the history of masculinity development, the influence of feminist theory and how masculinities form part of the gender concept. These theoretical perspectives were then used to discuss the masculinity construction of Superman as an example of popular culture. Chapter four explored adolescent development and the various factors that affect it. The influence of popular culture on male adolescents' construction of masculinity was determined, utilising Superman as a point of reference.

Chapter five concluded the study by engaging with popular culture and the masculinity construction of male adolescence through the normative task of practical theological interpretation and feminist theology of praxis. In addition, chapter five deliberated on the value of alternative, transformative, and redemptive masculinities when faced with hegemonic masculinity perpetuated in the context of popular culture.

In this chapter the discussion around the literary viewpoints integrated with the derived, findings, scholarly and own conclusions, and recommendations are made in the light of the aims and objectives of this study, stated in chapter 1 as:

- A discussion of popular culture with the focus on Superman and his influence on male adolescents' understanding of masculinity.
- A discussion of masculinity construction and how it is influenced by popular culture.
- Reflection on the intersection of gender (male adolescents' masculinity) and popular culture (using Superman as the example).
- Using practical theology and feminist theology of praxis as a lens through which to critically reflect on the influence of Superman/popular culture on masculinities.
- Exploring the possibility of the development of alternative liberating constructions of masculinity in adolescents.
- Conclusions and recommendations from a practical theological interpretation and a feminist theology of praxis to assist peripheral masculinities.

These aims and objectives and the research question of “*(H) how could a theological critique of Superman's representation of hegemonic masculinity in popular culture, assist male adolescents in finding an alternative, redemptive masculinity?*” forms the background for the conclusions and recommendations in this chapter.

## **6.2. Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **6.2.1 Chapter 2 – Exploring Popular Culture**

Chapter 2 was constructed around the aim and objective of “*a discussion of popular culture with the focus on Superman and his influence on male adolescents' understanding of masculinity.*”

### 6.2.1.1 Conclusions

The following conclusions were derived from the scholarly work applicable to this aim and objective. **Firstly**, to create a holistic understanding of popular culture requires a consideration of culture and ideology. The reason is that each concept exists on its own merit and contains individual theoretical perspectives that exhibit the complexity of every notion. The concept of culture is a multifaceted idea; it is captured in the essence of human society expressed in emotions, beliefs, and understandings, transcended in the social and political history of humanity in the past, present, and future. It communicates hopes, dreams, and fears and refers to a way of life, comprehended in norms, values, beliefs, and behaviours. Within the consistency of change, it encompasses time and space. Since it is interpretive in nature, it helps to create an understanding of the world we live in by articulating the intellectual, spiritual, and practical substances of human society. This translates to the different ways in which people in diverse countries interpret their world.

Popular culture proceeds from culture and establishes the notion of cultural citizenship, which acknowledges the presence of those who do not have the power to take part in the political and economic sphere. It has a human component, which is a reflection of society and is multidimensional, diverse, complex, compelling, and beautifully intricate. Popular culture, in essence, is the cultural practices in which people engage and is the space that establishes symbolic meaning through images, values, behaviours, identity development and gender. Ideology is found in structures, perspectives, and images with symbolic meaning. The concept of ideology confirms a structure for the members of a group and assists these members to understand their place in societal order. In other words, it refers to a systematic body of ideas articulated by a group of people. The interconnectedness between the concepts of culture and ideology are essential for defining popular culture, since it ascribes meaning to context, mind-sets, structures, and especially humanity.

**Secondly**, a corresponding pattern is found in culture, popular culture and ideology. The pattern in culture is the practices, texts and experiences of everyday life, which establishes meaning in participation. Popular culture extends from culture and inaugurates meaning by ways of images and symbols, whereas ideology utilises systems, structures and patterns to create meaning. These three concepts intersect to establish meaning and - although this happens by means of different approaches - the functions of culture, popular culture and

ideology are collectively shaping meaning within a given society. In this study a corresponding notion found in cultural practices, popular culture images (Superman), and ideology is that of hegemony. This was the golden thread that influenced the consideration of specifically masculinities (Chapter 3) and how the construct of hegemony impedes the process of male adolescent development (Chapter 4).

**Thirdly**, the icon Superman is a dynamic representation of popular culture. Superman still serves as a reflection of societal trials and tribulations during the past seventy-five years of his existence. His popularity is a reflection of moral teachings with a powerful philosophical concept on the spiritual ideal of the good. The story of Superman is associated with the practical and real-life value and knowledge of popular culture and mystical heroes. It contributes to a better understanding of the role of culture as it manifests as a complex entity in real life. The discussion of the journey of two boys indicated that Superman is a suitable example of popular culture and of the comic book creators' adherence to hegemonic masculinity as the ideal gender order. It also presents characteristics of hypermasculinity, which is a difficult-to-achieve standard. This insight was a confirmation to engaging with the development of male adolescents' as a means to understanding the impact that the cultural environment had on, and which motivated Siegel and Shuster to create the character of Superman. In addition, the influx of the media as popular culture enhanced and made possible the evolution of Superman, his representation as a mystical hero, and the Christological comparison with Moses and/or Jesus Christ. The growing role of popular culture and the effects it may have on society prompted the engagement with practical theological interpretation as a means to identifying the problem and formulating a response based in theology. Likewise, the changing demographic of the sacred and profane that are intertwined in today's society, requires theologians to engage with the meaning that popular culture establishes in today's society (Chapter 5).

### **6.2.1.2 Recommendations**

Current popular cultural representations (radio, the press, film, television and new media like the internet) have an overload of pictures of hegemonic masculinity. This indicates the importance of engaging with the complexity of the concept of popular culture as Christians to understand the interrelated power of structures (ideology), perspectives (culture) and images (popular culture) as meaning-creating entities. This allows for an exploration and review of

these structures, perspectives, and images to create opportunities for influencing that which affect us. Such an engagement with especially popular culture from a practical theological perspective will designate this phenomenon in theological language, and would thus improve interaction and dialogue with this meaning-creating and symbolising driving force.

Superman's representation as mystical hero in comparison with Jesus Christ serves as forerunner for other iconic superheroes, considering the growing popularity of the superhero era in present-day society, also in terms of African and South African superheroes. This necessitates the urgency to understand the 'rationale' of popular culture, as representing society, to compare superheroes with Jesus Christ or any other biblical figure or event. In so doing, further theological dialogue and studies are required to facilitate a practical Christian spirituality and relationship with God, involving the superheroes in popular culture, especially in the diverse and currently uncertain South Africa. Furthermore youth workers, church leaders, teachers and any facilitators that work with adolescents can utilise popular culture mediums as a means to establishing a dialogue to discuss difficult realities. Using popular culture as a metaphor could provide a safe space for adolescents to acknowledge a challenging reality and to work towards an alternative and healing response.

## **6.2.2 Chapter 3 – A Reflection on Masculinities**

Chapter 3 addressed the following aim and objective: *A discussion of masculinity construction and how it is influenced by popular culture.*

### **6.2.2.1 Conclusions**

From Chapter 3 the following conclusions can be made. **Firstly**, the reflection on the history of masculinity explicated that the study of masculinity is a relatively new field of inquiry. Four main historical developments signified the changed understanding of gender and especially masculinity. These developments included cultural changes that shaped new understandings of sexuality, the creation of (overseas) empires, the growth of commercial capitalism, and the American civil war. These historical changes demonstrated that the concept of masculinity is influenced and shaped by societal and cultural events. This also connects with the discussed theoretical perspectives in Chapter 2 with regards to culture,

popular culture and ideology. Consequently, the construction of masculinity as in the case of popular culture reflects societal viewpoints.

**Secondly**, gendered analysis contributed to the advantageous changes in masculinity studies, which indicated that men used to be perceived as static, biological beings, but more recently have begun to be viewed as gendered beings. This confirms the importance of studying men's experiences of masculinity in social circumstances. A further reflection on the history of masculinity clarified the study of masculinity as an academic discipline, influenced by conservatism, pro-feminism, men's rights, men's spiritual movements, socialism and group-specific movements. These movements firmly position the need to continuously evaluate the concept of masculinity and constructive ways of being. The developments in the study of masculinities highlighted the engagement of feminist theory, feminist theology and feminist theology of praxis (Chapter 5). This again emphasised that masculinity studies, initially seen as a reaction to second-wave feminism, is now in dialogue and in alliance with present-day feminist theory.

Feminist theory secured focus on the role of sex, gender and sexuality in popular culture as part of the academic endeavours of masculinity studies and in the understanding of hegemony. It emphasised the inequalities experienced by women and men and confirmed the construction of alternative masculinities. Feminist theory challenged the binary and determined that masculinity is also a performative action. Scholarly articles placed the focus on the male body as a concept of power and confirmed the importance of this concept that is connected to the male body and the impact it has on the oppressor/oppressed relationships. The nature of the oppressor/oppressed relationship is indicative of the need to formulate alternative measures to combat the life-denying effect of hegemony and patriarchy, found in and perpetuated by popular culture and the traditional views on masculinities.

**Thirdly**, gender informs the experiences of people expressed through images, texts and practices. Gender as a set of social roles or a symbolic function ascribes bodily differences between sexes in different cultures or societies, and is a mechanism of production for the sexes to define themselves. The three main approaches to gender are important to note, since it ensures and integrates a three-dimensional viewpoint of the same concept. The first is the essentialist viewpoint that supports the relation of gender to the biological sexual role, which is the binary of male and female sexes. The second views gender as a social construct and not



bound by biological orientation. The third viewpoint describes gender as a performative action determined by the repetitive actions of individuals within a certain context. As masculinities form part of the gender notion, the essentialist, constructionist, and performative gender models therefore apply to masculinities.

**Fourthly**, an important point was emphasised in that there is no singular masculinity but rather multiple masculinities, influenced by cultural, historical and geographical locations in a certain context that creates internal complexities and contradictions. Multiple masculinities confirm that men experience various masculinities including hegemonic, complicit, subordinate and marginalised masculinity. Three important notions regarding multiple masculinities were confirmed from the accessed literature. The first is that hegemonic masculinity constantly redefines its definition to maintain the dominant form of masculinity with negative implications for men that cannot obtain the hegemonic ideal. The second is the validation that male power and dominance is structural and interpersonal. The third notion is that masculinity is a nearly invisible construct that shapes social relations with a pervasive quality of being specific, and in its structure is the universal, the accepted and the neutral.

**Fifthly**, South African masculinities in general perpetuate social injustices against women, children and sexual minorities, set against a prevailing strong patriarchal tradition. The accessed literature emphasised a reality not to be ignored, which is the growing uncertainty of the position of men in society in the changing demographic of South Africa after the end of apartheid and the growing involvement of women in politics, social changes, economic inequality, poverty and the HIV/Aids pandemic.

Popular culture contributed to this situation in that it ascribes meaning to people's identity, thereby influencing the construction of masculinity through symbolic images and patterns that perpetuate hegemonic and patriarchal meanings. This elucidated that popular culture uses ideological notions to promote patterns of meaning and create hegemonic masculinity as the masculine ideal. The complexity of popular culture as the culture of many simultaneously represents the traditions and transformations of society as determined by the few. This is especially relevant in the changing demographics of post-apartheid South Africa. This chapter also explicated hegemonic ideology as a mind-set that projects the dominant class in society to stay in power and that the characteristic that forms part of this notion perpetuates the continuation of hegemony. This confirms the position of the popular culture example of

Superman at the intersection of popular culture and masculinities that adhere to hegemonic masculinity.

**Finally**, building on the discussed conclusions the masculinity construction of Superman was confirmed as an example of popular culture and its main context of influence. Superman, as a strong, white, heterosexual male adheres to hegemonic masculinity and presents characteristics of hypermasculinity. This prompted the questions of whether it is possible that masculinity in itself could become obsolete, and in considering the hierarchy of the multiple masculinities, whether society will set the limits on either hegemonic masculinity or subordinate/marginalised masculinity, or whether both and all masculinities can exist simultaneously without the consideration of one as dominant and the other as subordinate. These questions were partly addressed by referring to the simultaneous embodiment of hegemonic masculinity in the person of Superman and his alter ego Clark Kent, who presents subordinate masculinity. This comparison is important since one can conclude that Clark Kent is the moral compass for Superman. Clark Kent grew up as a normal person modelled after the masculinity of the two adolescent creators, Shuster and Siegel. This confirmed that the ideal of these two male adolescents was a key part of this study and the main motivation for reflecting on male adolescents' construction of masculinity in Chapters 3 and 4.

### **6.2.2.2 Recommendations**

As masculinities form part of the gender notion informed by essentialism, constructionism, and as a performative action, studying masculinities in social circumstances from a gendered perspective should ensure a more inclusive concept. Such an inclusive concept could also positively sway the patriarchy in South Africa and some of the aftereffects in the form of violence (against women, children and other men) influenced by popular culture presentations of hegemonic masculinity. Practical theological interventions and collaborations between men and women across cultures can establish forgiving, accepting and nourishing relationships, thus assisting in changing destructive gendered habits, especially in a changing and post-apartheid South Africa. Further and alternative interpretations of the visible popular culture tendencies are needed in order to understand multiple masculinities from a spiritual perspective in a globalised culture.

Using the context of popular culture and the example of Superman and Clark Kent as a means of demonstrating the distinctions made within the hierarchal structure of masculinities, can aid and challenge male adolescents with regards to the heteronormativity found in our society. Doing empirical research and by using Superman/Clark Kent as the focal point of the research, can provide adolescents with a model whereby they can discuss the differentiation made between hegemonic and subordinate masculinity and the real value of subordinate masculine traits. This could enable and equip male adolescents to openly discuss their understanding of the construction of masculinity without the fear of criticism from their peers.

### **6.2.3 Chapter 4 – Adolescent Development**

Chapter 4 concentrated on the following aim and objective: *Reflection on the intersection of gender (male adolescents' masculinity) and popular culture (using Superman as the example).*

#### **6.2.3.1 Conclusions**

The study of adolescent development in Chapter four was motivated by the intriguing discovery that Superman was the creation of two male adolescents, Siegel and Shuster (Chapter 2). This inspired the exploration of the development of adolescence, to better understand the factors that influenced the two adolescents to create a character that reflects an ideal masculinity (hegemonic) as opposed to their own masculine experience (marginalised). From chapter four the following conclusions can be made. **Firstly**, the term adolescence is socially, culturally and historically constructed. This also mirrors the theoretical perspectives with regards to masculinities (Chapter 3). The existing understanding of the concept of adolescence differs from the past, which clarified the tendency in historic times to view children as adults as soon as they could function as adults. This changed when the French philosopher Rousseau designated that humanity, compassion and consciousness develop during adolescence. Likewise, technological and economic changes resulting from industrialisation and migration stimulated the development and study of adolescence. This further enhanced the concept of adolescence as an important life span and simultaneously emphasised the vulnerability and significance of adolescent development.

**Secondly**, there are three main factors that influence the development of adolescence, namely physiological, psychological, and sociological factors working together as an integrated whole. Physiological development differentiates between the concepts of adolescence and puberty, indicating that physiological change refers primarily to the sexual maturation of a child. Also, the changes that happen during puberty may have an emotional and psychological impact on adolescent behaviour and may influence self-perception. Consequently, psychological factors that encompass the development of cognitive reasoning increase awareness of sexuality, body image, self-esteem and a sense of self as a moral and ethical being. Sociological development takes place at the end of adolescence when behaviours transpire that are consistent with the demand of the social world and when adolescents are recognised as adults. This factor also elucidated the role of various socialising agents in shaping the social self, of which family, teachers, religion, peers, and popular culture are the most influential. These socialising agents discussed in a South African context confirmed existing challenges that adolescents face: an emerging democracy, HIV/Aids, poverty, absent fathers, single-parent relationships, orphaned children, peer pressure and the influx of popular culture mediums.

The **third** conclusion is that the development of adolescence is in a constant state of integration and evolvment. This is especially evident during the development of male adolescents due to the intense pressure to conform to the societal norms of hegemonic masculinity construction. This, in turn, influences their cognitive, emotional, and physical development. Also, the growing significance of popular culture and the accessibility of the multiple mediums serves as an important socialising agent regarding acceptable masculine behaviour during adolescent development, especially in relation to the character of Superman.

A **fourth** conclusion relates to the intricate nature of the relationship found between popular culture and adolescents. Superman was the creation of two male adolescents as a means to escape and compensate for their own masculinity. Superman was created to fill the gap in Siegel and Shuster's marginalised masculinity, so that they could achieve on an existential level the hegemonic and hypermasculine ideal. Seventy-five years later Superman is no longer just the fantasy of two boys, he is the ideal that is being strived towards in today's reality.

The **final** conclusion from chapter 4 relates to the ‘Man of Steel’ as the dominant masculine ideal that expresses an overly aggressive and physical manner of masculinity construction, even in the name of good. Noteworthy is that mediated violence influences male adolescents and causes more aggressive behaviour, which perpetuates desensitisation towards violent popular culture content. Popular culture affects the dynamics of the male body image, causing sexualisation, which in turn makes an impression on male adolescents’ self-objectification. This also supports extreme focus on body analysis. Superman sets an idealised standard of hegemonic masculinity and becomes the focus during male adolescent development, leaving little room for individualised growth. Consequently, hegemonic masculinity is only possible for the minority while the majority obtains subordinate or marginalised status. This pushes male adolescents that do not fit into this ideal to the periphery of society.

### **6.2.3.2 Recommendations**

Defined masculinity comes through demand and adherence to the messages that popular culture perpetuates. Therefore, longitudinal research regarding early adolescents and the ways in which popular culture content attends to, interprets, and incorporates the development of sexual lives, is required. Additionally studies could concentrate on how the consumption of popular culture can influence the ways in which adolescents construct their identity, especially gender identity. Further investigation should focus on the influence of popular culture on male adolescents’ experiences of mediated violence, and to determine whether the nature of negative influences could be changed to a positive influence. A further suggestion is a renewed focus on the moral, positive and spiritual development of adolescence in conjunction with popular culture mediums, due to the integrative and evolving nature of adolescent development.

In practical theological terms, this indicates that Christians seize the opportunity of the popular cultural attraction for superheroes by developing and organising interventions in which individuals can explore these superheroes in a safe space through interaction and discussions in open dialogue. This then serves as a prelude to deeper dialogue on the comparison with and what Jesus Christ stood for.

## 6.2.4 Chapter 5 – A Theological Reflection

Chapter 5 addressed the following aims and objectives:

- Using practical theology and feminist theology of praxis as a lens through which to critically reflect on the influence of Superman/popular culture on masculinities.
- Exploring the possibility of the development of alternative liberating constructions of masculinity in adolescents.

### 6.2.4.1 Conclusions

From Chapter five the following conclusions can be made. **Firstly**, Superman is found at the intersection of popular culture, masculinities and male adolescent development and presents hegemonic and hyper-masculinity traits. Important is that the two adolescent males who created the superman icon themselves experienced marginalised masculinity. This illuminated the importance of Clark Kent who was endowed with perceived ‘subordinated’ masculine traits and a significant part of the Superman/Clark Kent personality. Clark Kent, the mild-mannered reporter for the *Daily Planet* is in reality the moral compass that enables Superman to fight for truth, justice and liberation and is the humanity found in Superman.

**Secondly**, practical theology is ideally situated at the intersection of culture, popular culture, church, academics and theology and enables a critical discourse on Superman as the Man and Myth, and his influence on the masculinity construction of adolescent males. Practical theological interpretation in layman’s terms thus enabled the identification of the present-day realities that male adolescents experience. This was the first step to alleviating the life-denying effects of patriarchal and hegemonic ideologies. Within the context of popular culture the sacred and profane intertwine, and if hierophany is produced in this context, the distinction between the sacred and profane can no longer be made. This means that as long as we find religious content in popular culture, we have a responsibility to challenge its presence as a way of establishing the authenticity of the message and to determine the impact it may have in our present reality. A theological exploration of popular culture with the help of practical theological interpretation and feminist theology of praxis and the normative task of practical theological interpretation enables us to re-establish and deliberate on the will of God.

**Thirdly**, feminist theory, feminist theology and feminist theology of praxis expand on the normative task of practical theological interpretation. Feminist theory critically analysed the sex/gender distinction and demonstrated that biology is not the only starting point, and that gender is influenced by cultural, societal, performative and historical experiences. In addition, feminist theory confronted the ideological notions of patriarchy and hegemony, perpetuated by institutions and structures. Feminist theology questioned the cultural and societal issues and consequences of patriarchal and hegemonic ideologies and formulated critical and liberated theological perspectives. Building on feminist theory, feminist theology objected to the prejudiced understanding of the body and the negative connotation made with the male body regarding the conformance and expression of hegemony and hypermasculinity. This supports the process of reclaiming the body as a foundation of spirituality that provides the opportunity to reconnect with the source of what it implies to be human. Furthermore, feminist theology of praxis is the locus of theological praxis as a means to bringing forth the reign of God founded in the example of Jesus Christ.

The **fourth** conclusion is that alternative, transformative and redemptive masculinities can aid male adolescents pushed to the periphery of society. When considering the social, religious and cultural constructions of masculinity, the alternative, transformative and redemptive masculinities confront the dehumanising effects of patriarchy and hegemony. Alternative masculinities is a tool by which to contest the patterns of meanings found in systems of patriarchy and hegemony, and serves as critique against cultural and societal essentialism and towards a new way of viewing what it means to be a man. Transformative masculinities, on the other hand, focuses on the social vulnerabilities as a means to facilitating a change in masculinity constructions, and uses the notion of being born again to motivate men and male adolescents to take part in changing their attitudes towards women, children and other men. The notion of redemptive masculinities suggests a process of deconstructing dangerous masculinities influenced by patriarchy and hegemony as a means to liberate and transform men.

#### **6.2.4.2 Recommendations**

This discussion on alternative, transformative and redemptive masculinities informed the ‘Clark Kent effect’ and serves as both a recommendation and contribution to the growing field of popular culture, theology and gender studies. The theological exploration of the given

context, situation and episode aided in this study and practical theological interpretation, feminist theory, feminist theology and feminist theology of praxis enabled the formation of the theological ‘Clark Kent Effect’. This formation started with a philosophical question of ‘what if’ the creators of Superman, Siegel and Shuster, grew up in a world where patriarchal and hegemonic masculinity was not perceived as the ideal. This informed the questions: “Would Superman still exist?” and “Who would Superman be?” The answer suggests that Clark Kent would be present, and not Superman, since the characteristics of Clark Kent is the true ideal to strive for; qualities such as intelligence, strength of character, integrity and service-mindedness. The ‘Clark Kent Effect’ in essence, thus refers to any effort or initiative that contributes to the current philosophical notion of alternative, transformative, or any other form of masculinity, as the ideal. With the ‘Clark Kent Effect’ I proposed a process of establishing a reality where alternative, transformative and redemptive masculinities are the ideals. This, in effect, proposes practical and integrated suggestions and initiatives based on the discussed premises of practical theological interpretation, feminist theory and feminist theology and feminist theology of praxis: alternative, transformative and redemptive masculinities.

Finally, it is suggested that spiritual beliefs, values and principles should be the basis for constructing the meaning of what it means to be a good human being. Theologians can contribute to a concept of masculinities that are liberating and redemptive, starting with central teachings and shared values that are significant to Christian life. This will encourage men and male adolescents not to conform to the violence of dominant masculinity. Churches and faith-based organisations can contribute by working towards engaging and understanding the influence of popular culture on male adolescents’ construction of masculinity.

### **6.3 Final Reflections**

Chapter 6 addressed the following aim and objective:

- Conclusions and recommendations from practical theological interpretation and a feminist theology of praxis to assist peripheral masculinities.

This study attempted to answer the research question of “*How could a theological critique of Superman’s representation of hegemonic masculinity in popular culture assist males in finding an alternative, redemptive masculinity?*” A reflection on this question indicated that



this literature study helped to understand popular culture and the world from a different viewpoint and by completing this study, I believe that I added knowledge on the influence of popular culture from a practical theological perspective. By completing this study I contributed to a better understanding of how popular culture influences the masculinity construction of male adolescents. I am also convinced that this literature study provided a synthesis of prior scholarly articles in culture, ideology, popular culture, masculinities, practical theology, feminist theory, feminist theology as well as a feminist theology of praxis and on alternative, transformative and redemptive masculinities and specifically how, in conjunction, these fields influenced male adolescent development.

This study process was indicated as a combined effort to be made in the context of religion and popular culture, with the intention to promote masculinities that support the health and well-being of society. Superheroes and, in this case, Superman, have the ability to inspire and change the world, but are constricted by the set standards of society (hegemony and patriarchy), making it difficult to fully utilise the potential of superheroes. From the literature I have discovered that masculinities both perpetuate and are victim to hegemony, as is the case with Superman: he perpetuates hegemony and hypermasculinity, but he is also victim to a hegemonic and patriarchal society. In the end, this study illustrates the importance of the hero myth and the influence thereof on society. Superman and Clark Kent as a metaphor in theological reflection has the potential to change how we see the world of masculinities and, more so, how we live in this world. This characters (Superman and Clark Kent) transcend the mythical and fantastical world of popular culture and speak to the spirit of humanity to take a stand against the injustices in this world.

To conclude: *“There is a shadow inside all of us. But that doesn’t mean that you need to embrace it. You decide who you are. And I know you’ll make the right choice and become the hero you are destined to be.”* – Clark Kent (2014).

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