

Societal factors impacting young Black men in South Africa

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Abstract

Purpose – This study employs the social ecology model to comprehensively explore the complex challenges young Black men face in South Africa and aims to highlight the importance of collaboration in addressing these multifaceted issues.

Design/methodology/approach – A multidisciplinary approach combines insights from sociology, education and the health literature with regard to government reports and academic data, and provides a holistic analysis of challenges faced by young Black men. Furthermore, it emphasises formal and informal learning, social and environmental influences and health disparities.

Findings – Young Black men in South Africa encounter complex challenges throughout their developmental journey, including limited family support, educational barriers, financial constraints, societal expectations and health disparities. Therefore, collaboration among stakeholders is essential for creating an equitable and inclusive environment that supports their development.

Originality/value – This research provides a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by young Black men in South Africa by emphasising the interconnectedness of informal education, economic empowerment and healthcare. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies, cultural influences and international comparisons, informing evidence-based interventions for a more equitable society.

Keywords Challenges, Young Black men, Unemployment, Societal factors, Cultural transformation

Paper type Literature review

Received 27 August 2023

Revised 24 October 2023

6 December 2023

12 December 2023

24 December 2023

Accepted 25 December 2023

1. Introduction

Like many societies, South Africa faces various challenges that impact the lives of its youth, particularly young Black men (Bataliack *et al.*, 2022; Langa, 2020; Mlamla, 2021; Mputing, 2019). These young Black men experience various difficulties that impact their lives profoundly, including substance abuse, crime, peer pressure and a frustrating lack of opportunities (Mputing, 2019). As the World Health Organisation recognises the gravity of the situation, it seeks significant mortality reduction by 2030, and emphasises the urgency of comprehensive support (Luvhengo, 2022). This study investigates these multifaceted struggles across their developmental journey, from early childhood to higher education and adulthood.

The intersection of race, age, culture, economics, and health creates unique obstacles that demand in-depth exploration. South Africa's history, affected by colonialism and apartheid, has had a profound effect on the nation's social fabric (Amira, 2023; Seroto, 2019). While equality and freedom were emphasised during the transition to democracy in 1994 (Pistorius, 2023), the country's rich cultural diversity remains a source of both pride and complexity (Chaka and Adanlawo, 2023) and affects its coexistence and integration.



This study emphasises the necessity of addressing the multifaceted challenges facing young Black men in South Africa, in the light of which “Black” inclusively is defined, while accommodating expanded post-apartheid inclusivity (Gradín, 2019). It also addresses the age range of the “young,” concept, in this case, it refers to the period spanning late adolescence to 35 years (Statistics South Africa, 2023a, b, c), in line with the United Nations’ youth definition (Bersaglio *et al.*, 2015). The complexities extend to measuring “poverty,” often benchmarked using currencies like USD or EUR, like the World Bank’s international line of USD 1.90/day for extreme poverty (Berten and Leisering, 2017). However, in the South African context, access to services, nutrition, and housing are regarded as vital components in understanding their circumstances (Rao and Min, 2018).

Prior research highlights the necessity of holistic approaches and targeted interventions regarding which the unique challenges young Black men face are targeted. Gumede’s (2021) study focuses on post-apartheid poverty and economic weakness among the African/Black population, while Hofman and Katuu (2022) discuss how legal frameworks influences the responsibilities of archives and records management (ARM) in Botswana, Kenya, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. In turn, Madhavan and Crowell (2014) explore the role model construction that emphasises family support; while Ratele *et al.* (2021) examine global welfare policies. Accordingly, this study aims to address the research gap by exploring the life journey and societal factors influencing the progress of young Black men.

This study challenges stereotypes about young Black men, emphasising their agency and resilience while moving beyond the perception of sole reliance on societal aid (Reeves *et al.*, 2020). It shifts the focus from individual shortcomings to systemic factors, including the legacy of apartheid and ongoing socio-cultural dynamics (De Kock *et al.*, 2018). Through a comprehensive examination of various aspects of their lives, the research adopts a sensitive and academic approach, facilitating understanding and constructive dialogue among stakeholders, including policymakers and educators, to address systemic issues. By fostering increased awareness and dialogue, the study aims to challenge prevailing attitudes, promote inclusivity and equity, and dispel unfair stereotypes, ultimately empowering young Black men with comprehensive support from all concerned parties (Langa, 2020).

This study aims to comprehensively understand and address the challenges young Black men face in South Africa through three key questions. The first question focuses on identifying the primary challenges these individuals encounter. The second question delves into the complex interplay of societal factors, including race, gender, health, economy, and cultural norms, impacting the struggles, mental health, and well-being of young Black men. Lastly, the study explores how a nuanced understanding can inform targeted interventions, policies, and support mechanisms to mitigate obstacles and foster positive development effectively.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a literature review methodology that is recognised for its foundational role in research. Accordingly, it offers a comprehensive overview of the existing knowledge on young Black men’s challenges in South Africa (Dawadi, 2020). The research design is aimed at investigating various scholarly sources in detail to uncover the patterns, trends, and contradictions in these challenges. It synthesises this information systematically to reveal the overarching themes, thereby ensuring rigorous study positioning within the broader academic discourse on the subject.

Additionally, the study employs the social ecology model (SEM) to explore young Black South African men’s holistic journey, considering individual experiences and societal factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It highlights the intricate interplay among determinants at various levels regarding digital contexts and broader environmental factors. This multifaceted

perspective, ranging from individual experiences to societal influences (Navarro and Tudge, 2023), illuminates the complex dynamics of development, offering valuable insights for holistic research and interventions across different domains (Scarneo *et al.*, 2019; Darling, 2007).

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3. Literature review

3.1 Early childhood development

The challenges young Black men face during childhood are closely intertwined with family characteristics; in some cases, the lack of family support exacerbates these difficulties. Statistics South Africa (2022) advances the fact that approximately one-fifth (21.3%) of children aged 17 years and younger in South Africa do not live with their parents, deviating from the international norm where most children under 18 reside with both parents. The non-co-residence with biological parents is primarily attributed to parental labour migration and low marital rates among mothers. As a result, many children are raised by their grandparents or other relatives, particularly in rural areas. Mao *et al.* (2020) indicate “that parental absence is negatively associated with the development” of young children, leading to lower cognitive and academic test scores and a decreased likelihood of attending college.

This finding concurs with the research conducted by Balasundaram and Avulakunta (2023), which indicates that exposure to adverse experiences during early childhood development can potentially impede the overall development of children. Sandstrom and Huerta (2013) support the notion that instability has a negative effect on child development and emphasises that children’s early experiences have a lasting impact on their overall well-being and education.

Mao *et al.* (2020) indicate that when the mother is absent, this can impact children’s mental health and reduce their efforts in class. Positive support can also be derived from the presence of male figures, as observed in a study where young boys who were tracked from an adolescent stage and were now fathers, underscores the importance of promoting and celebrating positive expressions of masculinity (Langa, 2017). Thus, noting the disadvantage of not having a male figure for guidance, young Black men must also care for their children and not become absent fathers. Ulferts (2020) emphasises the importance of nurturing parenting that offers age-appropriate autonomy and structure for the “healthy and prosperous development of children and adolescents across various domains” in the 21st century. This suggests that community support and guidance involvement are crucial, as they can provide additional resources and care for children and adolescents when the mother is absent or unable to provide adequate support. Most importantly, community support could help fill the gap and contribute to young individuals’ healthy development and well-being.

Mogotlane *et al.* (2010) emphasise the devastating impact of the HIV and AIDS pandemic on families and communities regarding the loss of income, the poor quality of life, morbidity, and mortality, resulting in the rapid increase in destitute and orphaned children. Regarding the above matter, Diago (2020) also highlights the prevalence of child-headed households in South Africa, where children are forced to take on adult caregiving roles due to socio-economic challenges, illness, or the death of caregivers. The author mentioned above refers to the Children’s Act 38 of 2005, which acknowledges that children in such households may need care and protection. It recommends that the government should take the necessary measures to promote their rights and prevent discrimination in social roles usually reserved for adults (Diago, 2020). Accordingly, young Black men in South Africa are already facing significant challenges right from the start of their journey to adulthood due to the above societal issues affecting children, such as the non-co-residence with parents, the parental absence, the impact of HIV and AIDS, the prevalence of child-headed households, and the mismanagement of support grants. This highlights the need for immediate action by the government, families,

parents, and the community to address these challenges and provide support to the affected orphans and vulnerable children. Therefore, urgent steps must be taken to alleviate their circumstances and improve their well-being.

The South African government has initiated different programmes to mitigate these challenges; however, [Motsapi \(2021\)](#) reports that despite the continued increased spending by the government on support grants for vulnerable children in South Africa, there has been a rise in the number of vulnerable children on the streets and at shopping centres. As highlighted by the author, a setback contributing to these initiatives is stakeholders' mismanagement and maladministration of the support grants, leading to the misuse of child support grants meant for vulnerable children ([Motsapi, 2021](#)).

Healthy development in the early years can hamper their cognitive and academic development, limit their access to educational opportunities, and potentially impact their mental health, creating additional barriers as they transition into adulthood.

[Balasundaram and Avulakunta \(2023\)](#) state that the early intervention of children with adverse experiences is vital for their healthy development. [Sandstrom and Huerta \(2013\)](#) add that to reach their full potential, children require various essential elements, such as stable housing, nutritious food, access to medical care, supportive relationships with caregivers, responsible parenting, high-quality learning opportunities at home, nurturing childcare, and schools.

Early childhood development is a fundamental foundation for adulthood that should not be ignored, as it "plays a significant role in shaping the overall" development of young Black men. Ultimately, the negative or positive effects will only be fully realised later in life. Therefore, the imperative is to influence children positively during these early years to ensure a positive outcome in the future.

3.2 Education challenges

In examining the landscape of challenges faced by young Black men in South Africa, particular attention is directed towards the realm of education, where multifaceted hurdles spanning from early childhood to tertiary institutions significantly impact their developmental journey.

3.2.1 Primary and high school. From early childhood and throughout the primary education stage, young Black men often experience overcrowded classrooms, limited attention from teachers, and poor infrastructure ([West and Meier, 2020](#); [Nortje, 2017](#)). Furthermore, there is a poor academic performance in the early childhood development phase, with South African learners receiving some of the worst literacy and numeracy scores compared to the international standards ([Venter, 2022](#)). The author mentions a significant disparity in academic performance between learners from the wealthiest and poorest socio-economic quintiles. Learners from the wealthiest quintile achieve good academic results, while those from the poorest quintiles face academic difficulties and failure. The author emphasises that improving the quality of education is crucial for increasing the percentage of school-ready five-year-olds. Additionally, [Venter \(2022\)](#) points out that such circumstances can lead to grade repetitions and hamper the progress of disadvantaged students, revealing disparities within the education system.

Considering the crucial significance of facilitating optimal early childhood development, the government and other stakeholders are responsible for promoting and supporting nurturing care for children. The South African government has initiated programmes that have regularly seen increased budgets; however, efforts are still required with regard to infrastructure, nutrition, teacher training, institutional capacity and funding, as highlighted by [Atmore et al. \(2012\)](#). [Mabunda \(2020\)](#) cites a support initiative provided to Grade 5 boys from ten different primary schools in Soweto and Atteridgeville. It helped them develop a

more equal and respectful view of gender roles, challenging the notion of superiority and power over girls and women. The intervention demonstrated positive effects and has the potential to contribute to reducing gender-based violence (Mabunda, 2020). As mentioned earlier, interventions have shown positive benefits to development. Therefore, effective policies and programmes with well-audited funding are necessary to support these efforts. Additionally, implementing monitoring and evaluation practices can further enhance the effectiveness of these interventions.

The detrimental consequences of grade repetition and difficulties in coping with school become evident during the intermediate phase (Grades 4 to 6) and senior phase (Grades 7 to 9). Hartnack (2017) sheds light on a notable dropout rate among young individuals, commencing at the age of 14, which is frequently obscured by statistics reflecting high school attendance up to Grade 9, the final grade of mandatory schooling in South Africa. In 2021, the dropout rate was approximately 3% among 15-year-olds and 9% among 17-year-olds (Statistics South Africa, 2023b). Maarman and Lamont-Mbawuli (2017) also highlight suboptimal annual pass rates in various Grades (7–12). According to Nortje (2017), at this stage, it becomes evident that certain learners struggle with fundamental reading, writing, and arithmetic skills due to teachers lacking the required competencies and knowledge to teach these skills. Furthermore, constant curriculum changes, inadequate infrastructure, and resource scarcity contribute to the challenges faced by students in public schools, with 27% needing access to running water and 78% needing more libraries or computers (Nortje, 2017, p. 50).

Adolescent Black males in South Africa face a challenging environment, with a myriad of social issues impacting their development. Poverty, teenage pregnancy, bullying, low self-esteem, and parental unemployment are prevalent challenges affecting learners' academic performance in secondary schools. This necessitates comprehensive strategies involving the government, community members, teachers, parents, and students for effective intervention (Whyken *et al.*, 2022). Parental involvement is also emphasised for improved academic achievement (Lara and Saracosti, 2019). Moreover, the prison conditions and high number of juveniles in detention facilities underscore a lack of investment in the formative years of these young men, with adverse effects on their well-being and potential for success. Challenges in their hostile living environments, including negative peer pressure, bullying, and a lack of social support, call for interventions involving positive role models, self-esteem development, and strong family and community support (Phillips *et al.*, 2018). Collectively, these issues emphasise the need for a more supportive and inclusive environment to nurture the potential of young Black men in post-democratic South Africa.

Furthermore, Mathebula (2019) highlights the vulnerability of students from under-resourced rural schools to discrimination and unfair treatment stemming from historic segregation and concentrated poverty in these areas. Negative stereotypes about Black boys and men in the media, as observed by Wood and Harper (2023), further compound these challenges. Studies by Mouton *et al.* (2013) and Strayhorn (2023) emphasise the need for an educational culture transformation and tailored interventions to enhance the academic achievement of Black students. These findings stress the importance of understanding these challenges and initiating informed actions. In Grade 12, the culmination of the South African education system, numerous obstacles, such as poverty, sporadic absenteeism, and overcrowded classes, impacted students' journey. It becomes evident that addressing these challenges must begin earlier in the education process to ensure the success of young Black men. As proposed by Naidoo and Van Schalkwyk (2021), a potential solution involves fostering positive relationships, specific qualities, and motivation to facilitate academic success for students in high-risk communities, ultimately removing obstacles to higher education and success across South Africa.

Overall, it is apparent that obtaining a matric pass for a young Black man is an outstanding achievement considering the vast array of educational challenges observed

throughout the growth stages, which, if left unattended, can have detrimental effects or become compounded until they become more pronounced later. Remedial programmes from early childhood development through the different educational phases and family, community, and government support are critical to addressing these challenges. The government must increase, monitor, and evaluate expenditures to implement these effective programmes and interventions.

3.2.2 Higher education. The first challenges for young Black men in higher education stem from transitioning from high schools to tertiary institutions. [Harry and Chinyamurindi \(2022\)](#) shed light on the struggles of Black graduates to transition from higher education to the labour market, which includes challenges, such as the language of instruction within the higher education system, access to career counselling and guidance services and dealing with a deficient curriculum regarding the experiences of Black people. [Mseleku \(2022\)](#) contributes financial issues, informational barriers and an inability to meet the minimum requirements to the complex underlying barriers preventing young people from accessing higher education. In contrast, the lack of aspiration is mentioned as a soft barrier. In addition, [Maila and Ross \(2018\)](#) add peer pressure to the factors facilitating and constraining the transition to tertiary education. Therefore, the young Black man is denied an opportunity to access education even before enrolling in higher education.

There is also limited access to tertiary institutions in South Africa. [Makwea \(2023\)](#) stresses the scarcity of tertiary institutions available to accommodate the high number of matriculants, particularly young Black men. The author states that in 2022, only about 196,324 seats were available for first-time students in South African tertiary institutions, which is far from enough to accommodate the over 830,000 matriculants who have passed matric ([Motsapi, 2021](#)). It can be deduced that the challenges faced by young Black men in transitioning from high schools to tertiary institutions and subsequently entering the labour market are multifaceted, and the adverse effects of these challenges for the young Black man include obstructed educational and career opportunities, perpetuating social and economic inequalities, and limiting their overall personal and professional development.

Higher education financing for young Black men in South Africa is a formidable challenge. A student protest movement that began in October 2015, initially sparked by proposed fee increases at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), soon spread to all government-funded universities ([Mavunga, 2019](#)). South African universities face high dropout rates, a meagre 15% graduation rate, and substantial disparities between White and Black students in graduation rates, exacerbating educational inequalities and racial disparities ([Letseka and Maile, 2008](#)). [Knox \(2023\)](#) emphasises that the issue of costs and racial discrimination is not unique to South Africa but is also found in the United States, where Black college students have lower six-year completion rates compared to other demographic groups, with just 34% of Black Americans having an associate degree or higher, in contrast to 46% of the general population. Additionally, South Africa exhibits a concerning trend of slow progress through the education system, with students taking six years to complete a three to four-year degree ([Van der Berg and Hofmeyr, 2018](#)).

Additionally, technical and vocational colleges (TVET) need to provide for the skills in demand in the labour market ([Van der Berg and Hofmeyr, 2018](#)). Once more, government efforts to assist students financially through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) are hampered by delayed payments and distribution, which pose additional obstacles for young Black men seeking a tertiary education ([Nzimande, 2022](#)). It has become clear that there is a need for sound and well-managed financial support for young Black men to fund tertiary education. Thus, attaining a post-matric qualification in South Africa is even more remarkable, given the significant challenges highlighted within higher education.

[Reeves et al. \(2020\)](#) reveal disparities in educational attainment between Black men and women, with a lower percentage of Black men achieving bachelor's and master's degrees than

their female counterparts and White peers. These findings emphasise the necessity for programmes and initiatives that specifically address the challenges faced by young Black men to support their academic success. From an American perspective, there is a growing lack of Black men in medicine and science (Laurencin, 2018). The previous statement implies that Black men could be under-represented internationally. Theron (2016) reveals that South African adults' encouragement of academic education to overcome structural disadvantages influences young people's choices, highlighting the importance of career counselling interventions.

Shange (2018) suggests that individuals, families, and society, as a whole, should get together to create support structures that address the social issues and higher education needs of students, including the financial challenges and difficulties in meeting academic standards.

3.2.3 Informal education. Research in the field of informal education has explored multifaceted dimensions. Studies by Gough *et al.* (2019) and Walker and Mkwanzani (2015) challenge the formal-informal education divide, highlighting the blend of these elements, especially for marginalised groups accessing higher education. Pimmer *et al.* (2014) demonstrate the transformative power of mobile technology in remote areas, informing systematic mobile learning approaches, while Matambo (2018) advocates context-sensitive, hybrid educational strategies. In the realm of informal education, Natrass *et al.* (2012) reveal technology's potential to enhance data literacy and understanding, emphasising participatory learning. Robinson's (2022) work explores the influence of digital platforms on literacy practices, showing how platforms like Discord, shape new forms of literacy. Ahmad *et al.* (2023) highlight education's role in fostering entrepreneurship, emphasising the importance of equipping students with skills, creating supportive environments, erasing the stigma of failure, and promoting ethical values and inclusiveness. Collectively, these studies illuminate the transformative capacity of informal education and its implications for learners' future prospects.

3.3 Navigating social realities: unemployment, societal pressures, and cultural dynamics

3.3.1 Unemployment. The persistent youth unemployment rate in South Africa presents significant challenges for graduates seeking suitable employment opportunities. The first quarter of 2023 witnessed a total youth unemployment rate of 46.5%, marking a 1.1% increase from the previous year (Statistics South Africa, 2023c). Mngoma and Ayonrinde (2023) note that the Black youth in rural areas encounter difficulties in transitioning to post-secondary education and finding work due to limited employment prospects. Relocating to urban areas, once seen as a solution, now presents additional challenges, including an unwelcoming environment and feelings of isolation (Puoane and Tsolekile, 2008). Statista (2022) highlights a 27% unemployment rate among individuals aged 35 to 44, indicating that unemployment is much higher than the highly publicised youth unemployment rate. Despite having degrees or post-matric qualifications, employment is not guaranteed (Jones and Schmitt, 2014). This situation has led to declining employment and labour force participation among young Black men aged 16 to 34 with a high school education or less (Holzer *et al.*, 2004). Oluwajodu *et al.* (2015) highlight the growth of South Africa's graduate labour force alongside graduate unemployment, resulting in human capital wastage due to skills disparities and differing employer-graduate expectations, particularly in the banking sector. This confluence of challenges frequently frustrates young people, potentially driving them away from higher education or job-seeking in search of more promising opportunities, possibly contributing to risky behaviour.

The multifaceted impact and far-reaching consequences of unemployment are evident across various studies. Cloete (2015) connects unemployment and poverty, highlighting its

effect on human dignity, especially among vulnerable young job seekers. [Ebrahim et al. \(2013\)](#) emphasise limitations in economic indicators, advocating subjective well-being measures and revealing unemployment's complex effects on life satisfaction across diverse racial groups. [Kingdon and Knight \(2004\)](#) challenge the traditional views, and explore distinct South African unemployment dynamics, including labour market segmentation and entry barriers to the informal sector. [Joseph et al. \(1988\)](#) underscore the evolving focus on societal and mental health repercussions of high unemployment rates among Black individuals.

In turn, [Spaights and Dixon \(1986\)](#) emphasise severe societal implications, notably social alienation and crime that impact the Black youth and warn of the potential erosion of the social fabric. These studies collectively stress the need for comprehensive policies and interventions to counter unemployment's adverse effects. The persistent unemployment in South Africa is noted by [Lam et al. \(2008\)](#) as a forty-year issue with the influence of historical racial disparities, particularly affecting Black job seekers. This emphasises the need for action and intervention to promote economic growth and equity in the country.

3.3.2 Health and wellness. Research has probed into the multifaceted relationship between poverty and health, offering distinct perspectives on their interconnectedness. [Nattrass et al. \(2012\)](#) provide insight into how poverty, sexual behaviour, and circumcision influence HIV infection and emphasise gender-specific variations. [Pienaar's \(2017\)](#) conceptualisation challenges traditional views by highlighting the intrinsic connection between poverty and disease, especially in the context of the South African HIV epidemic. In a different context, [Duminy \(2023\)](#) underscores the importance of demographic factors and their interaction with health risks in urban areas, suggesting that these must be integrated into post-COVID-19 urban health agendas. This comprehensive review underscores the need to consider social and demographic aspects in understanding and addressing health challenges, offering fresh interpretations and advocating for a holistic approach to studying poverty and disease.

Considering the enduring impact of apartheid on health systems in predominantly Black areas, [Schuld's \(2013\)](#) research challenges the notion that post-conflict societies naturally transition into peace, emphasising that violence often persists at levels comparable to those during the conflict. [Garrib et al.'s \(2006\)](#) study in a high HIV-prevalence rural area of South Africa, uncovered alarmingly high infant and child mortality rates, with HIV/AIDS as the leading cause of death in children under five, highlighting the urgent need for interventions to reduce child mortality. [Wong et al.'s \(2021\)](#) cross-sectional study in rural South Africa, revealed a convergence of infectious and non-communicable diseases, emphasising the necessity of a comprehensive public health response to improve the overall health in sub-Saharan Africa. This underscores the significant health challenges young Black men face in South Africa.

Apartheid's lasting impact heightens health challenges for young Black men in South Africa. [Burger and Christian \(2020\)](#) identified issues related to affordability (23%) and availability (27%), especially in underdeveloped rural regions, with fewer concerns about acceptability (10%). [Coovadia et al. \(2009\)](#) linked these health challenges to historical policies, emphasising the need to address discrimination, economic disparities, and HIV. [Katu \(2016\)](#) noted inequities and fragmented health systems, with potential solutions in the eHealth Strategy. [Mhlanga \(2021\)](#) highlighted the reliance on public healthcare, particularly clinics, suggesting an increased investment in this sector and improved nurses' welfare for better healthcare delivery.

3.3.3 Societal expectations. The pressure on young Black men to succeed, combined with limited opportunities, compounds their challenges. [Webb \(2021\)](#) highlights the impact of "Black tax," arising from high inequality and unemployment, which involves providing financial support to families, and affects education choices and family assistance. This phenomenon, however, impedes personal development, savings, and investment opportunities, negatively impacting financial well-being and prospects ([Magubane, 2016](#)).

Xotyeni (2021) raises the issue of the overtaxed middle class and the unaffordable cost of living, affecting young Black people who face significant debt. The burden of “Black tax” imposes substantial challenges on young Black men, affecting their economic prospects and life trajectories.

An 11-year-old study demystifies stereotypes pertaining to Black youth and crime, showing their focus on academic achievement and future careers and challenges notions of risky behaviours like gang involvement. Langa’s (2020) research highlights their challenges and the need for support in transitioning to positive manhood. In turn, Mazur (2023) links reputation-focused communities to heightened aggression and testosterone levels in disadvantaged contexts among Black men. Emezue *et al.* (2023) identify youth violence in resource-limited areas and advocate for technology-based interventions. Supporting these determined young Black men, whether pursuing success or facing challenges, is crucial.

The impact of technology, globalisation, and rising costs complicates the situation for the Black middle class. Zwane (2019) emphasises the need for the government to address challenges promptly instead of letting them escalate. While the digital fourth industrial revolution offers young Black South Africans opportunities, issues like limited Internet access and computer anxiety hamper its potential (Faloye and Ajayi, 2022). Merchant *et al.* (2014) issue a warning about the growing concern regarding job displacement by technology, leading to technological unemployment and significant social and economic consequences. Stöckl *et al.* (2022) emphasise the importance of understanding societal expectations and challenges to create effective youth programmes addressing the opportunities and obstacles of technological growth. Debates on technology’s role in employment persist. Olaitan and Mavuso (2022) call for aligning South African STEM education with disruptive technologies, emphasising soft skills and collaboration between government, industry, and academia. In contrast, Le Ludec *et al.* (2023) reveal AI’s influence on labour distribution, expanding labour outsourcing to low-income countries like Madagascar, highlighting the need to consider technology’s global employment impact.

Extensive research explores diverse challenges facing South African youth. Oosthuizen *et al.* (2020) explore urbanisation, sustainable energy, and poverty, emphasising the vulnerability of female-led households in impoverished urban areas. Gender perspectives in energy technology are crucial. Qhwagi (2021) focuses on young township entrepreneurs, examining economic and social obstacles, supply chains, socio-demographics, and government interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic. These studies offer essential insights for addressing South African youth’s multifaceted challenges.

Based on the above, it is evident that the young Black man faces numerous hurdles on the path to success. These include incurring debt for higher education and the additional responsibility of supporting family members that hamper his progress.

3.3.4 Cultural expectations. Cultural expectations play a pivotal role in shaping the experiences of young Black men. Khumalo *et al.* (2020) emphasise how cultural contexts influence sexual behaviours, alcohol’s impact on condom use, and the normalisation of risky behaviours. Prostate cancer concerns, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and among Black men in the U.K. and USA, are associated with cultural influences, which hamper health service engagement, as highlighted by Machirori *et al.* (2018). In South Africa, Ncayiyane and Nel (2023) shed light on the disempowerment young Black fathers face due to traditional breadwinner roles amidst high unemployment rates, while Khosa-Nkatini *et al.* (2023) advocate embracing evolving gender roles, given women’s empowerment in South African communities.

Challenging narratives that hamper emotional development and well-being are evident in the experiences of Black men. Dennis and Zolnikov (2023) indicate that cultural norms like “boys do not cry” negatively impact Black American males’ emotional growth, potentially leading to health issues and behavioural problems. Wong (2023) discusses colourism’s

influence on young Black males' self-identity within their racial group, emphasising conformity to favoured skin tones. Meanwhile, [Ichou \(2008\)](#) explores how unemployment and patriarchal norms lead to disempowerment and shame, contrasting with men who challenge such norms and reshape masculinity. Additionally, [Sikweyiya et al. \(2022\)](#) stress the importance of gender-transformative interventions for healthier family dynamics and communities. These studies, while conducted in different contexts, resonate with the experiences of young Black men in South Africa, offering insights into shared dynamics and strategies for empowerment.

Also noted by this study are the shifting masculinities and religious influences. [Hadebe \(2010\)](#) highlights how traditionalist masculinity can lead to resistance and disrespect, while women unite against injustices. Conversely, it underscores the vulnerability of changing masculinities and the reinforcement of gender hierarchies within religious contexts. These insights reveal the interplay between cultural expectations, emotional well-being, and evolving masculinities in young Black men's lives, offering guidance for policy-making and empowerment strategies. Another cultural influence is the male-breadwinner norm, shaping the link between men's unemployment and the risk of separation ([Gonalons-Pons and Gangl, 2021](#)). Gender norms have a significant effect on relationship happiness and stability, with women prioritising attributes matched to their own, leading to a preference for delayed marriage ([Maharaj and Shangase, 2020](#)). Amid this culture, young Black men face challenges amplified by high unemployment rates and limited educational access, underlining the need for tailored support strategies.

4. Results, synthesis and discussion

In addressing the objectives of the article, the challenges faced by young Black men in South Africa, viewed through the social ecology model (SEM), reveal the nuanced interplay of individual, family, community, and societal factors across various developmental stages. In alignment with the first objective, to identify and analyse the key challenges young Black men face in South Africa from childhood to adulthood, during early childhood, the absence of family support due to parental labour migration and low marital rates results in approximately 21.3% of children under 17 not residing with their parents, contributing to the formation of child-headed households ([Statistics South Africa, 2023a](#); [Mogotlane et al., 2010](#)). This familial instability has implications for cognitive and academic development, emphasising the importance of a stable family environment, notwithstanding challenges related to the mismanagement of support grants ([Diago, 2020](#)).

During primary school, challenges persist with overcrowded classrooms, limited teacher attention, and inadequate infrastructure ([West and Meier, 2020](#)). Government initiatives to improve educational quality necessitate further investments in infrastructure and teacher training, with dropout rates increasing in intermediate and senior phases due to social challenges like poverty, teenage pregnancy, bullying, and parental unemployment ([Atmore et al., 2012](#); [Hartnack, 2017](#)). Positive role models and parental involvement emerge as crucial factors in mitigating academic challenges, emphasising the role of community support and interventions.

Transitioning from high school to tertiary institutions introduces obstacles, such as financial issues, informational barriers, and limited access ([Harry and Chinyamurindi, 2022](#); [Mseleku, 2022](#)). Initiatives like the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) face distribution challenges, hampering access to higher education ([Nzimande, 2022](#)). The compounding challenges of high education costs, student protests, and declining labour force participation further complicate the journey, coupled with societal expectations around employment, marriage, and gender roles ([Mngoma and Ayonrinde, 2023](#); [Mavunga, 2019](#)). Achieving a balance between these societal expectations and individual goals presents a complex issue for many young Black men.

Moreover, these challenges are intensified by societal and cultural expectations rooted in traditional manhood and masculinity, contributing to emotional stressors and unaddressed mental health challenges (Mabunda, 2020; Langa, 2017; Watkins, 2019). The intersectionality of race, age, and gender results in distinct challenges for young Black men, underscoring the need to consider the complexities of their experiences and disparities. Therefore, addressing these multifaceted challenges demands comprehensive strategies, including targeted support programmes, improvements in education quality, the creation of job opportunities, and challenging societal expectations and cultural norms, all contributing to a more equitable and inclusive society.

Regarding the second objective, which was to explore the societal factors that contribute to the struggles young Black men face, going beyond individual experiences to analyse the broader social context and its impact on this particular group, it becomes evident that these challenges are deeply rooted in historical factors, such as apartheid and colonialism, shaping a complex landscape marked by racial inequalities and diverse ethnicities (Seroto, 2019; Amira, 2023; Chaka and Adanlawo, 2023). The intersectionality of race, age, and gender introduces unique layers of challenges distinct from other groups (Knox, 2023; Reeves *et al.*, 2020). Societal expectations around employment, marriage, and gender roles further complicate their journey, emphasising the need to challenge prevailing norms and expectations (Mngoma and Ayonrinde, 2023; Mavunga, 2019).

Summatively, regarding objective 3, which was to inform interventions and support positively towards young Black men in South Africa, highlights that addressing the need for positive interventions and support, the multifaceted challenges young Black men face demand comprehensive strategies. These strategies encompass targeted support programmes, improvements in education quality, the creation of job opportunities, and challenging societal expectations and cultural norms (Statistics South Africa, 2023b; Mngoma and Ayonrinde, 2023; Gonalons-Pons and Gangl, 2021). Concerning the historical, socio-cultural, and economic factors, a holistic approach is essential for creating a more inclusive and equitable society (Gumede, 2021; Hofman and Katuu, 2022; Madhavan and Crowell, 2014; Ratele *et al.*, 2021).

In the light of other studies in the literature, the challenges faced by young Black men in South Africa are deeply rooted in historical factors, such as apartheid and colonialism, manifesting in a landscape marked by racial inequalities and diverse ethnicities, languages, and traditions (Seroto, 2019; Amira, 2023; Chaka and Adanlawo, 2023). The intersectionality of race, age, and gender adds unique layers of challenges, necessitating a holistic approach and targeted interventions to empower young Black men and create a more inclusive society (Knox, 2023; Reeves *et al.*, 2020; Gumede, 2021; Hofman and Katuu, 2022; Madhavan and Crowell, 2014; Ratele *et al.*, 2021). Addressing the challenges within the SEM framework requires acknowledging the profound impact of historical, socio-cultural, and economic factors and developing a comprehensive approach that considers young Black men's unique experiences and needs.

5. Conclusion

This article employs the social ecology model to reveal the multifaceted challenges young Black men encounter in South Africa. It emphasises the need for a comprehensive, collaborative approach involving government, communities, educators, families, and individuals to create an equitable environment. Informal education is recognised as vital, highlighting formal and informal learning experiences. Furthermore, this study underscores economic and health-related concerns among young Black men, advocating for an integrated approach spanning education, economic empowerment, and healthcare. Collaboration among stakeholders is essential for evidence-based interventions, fostering young Black men's

development and equity. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies, cultural influences on education, and comparative studies to identify effective interventions. These directions expand knowledge and support young Black men's well-being, promoting inclusivity in Society.

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