



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism*

Performing Symbolic Protest: The Representation of young masculine identities in Kenyan urban music

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how young Kenyan male artists construct and perform masculine identities through urban music in the genres of Genge, Kapuka, Gengetone, and Kenyan Drill. Although existing scholarship has often dismissed these genres as vulgar, hedonistic, and misogynistic, this study argues that they function as significant cultural sites where young masculinities negotiate identity in response to systemic marginalisation. Through the lens of Masculinity Theory as articulated by Raewyn Connell, the article interrogates how Kenyan male urban artists represent young masculine identities through lyrical content and visual performances. The study adopts a qualitative research approach and combines thematic, semiotic, and discourse analyses of purposively selected songs by artists such as Jua Cali, Nonini, Mejja, Ethic Entertainment, Wakadinali, and Buruklyn Boyz. The findings reveal that the artists construct multiple masculine identities including protest masculinity, hustler masculinity, aspirational masculinity, vulnerable masculinity, collective masculinity, and toxic masculinity. These identities emerge as responses to economic precarity, unemployment, police brutality, and systemic neglect. Though these performances reflect genuine assertions of agency, they more often reproduce the patriarchal norms they purport to resist thereby remaining predominantly performative rather than transformative. Therefore, this study treats this contradiction with caution.

KEYWORDS: Kenyan urban music, protest masculinity, identity, agency, popular culture, gender performance.

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1.0 Introduction

Kenyan urban music is an art form appropriated by Kenyan youth to express and negotiate identity and communicate socio-political dissent (Kasyoka, 2022). By Kenyan youth, the study refers to the Gen-Z, born between 1997-2012, and the Millennials, born between 1981-1996 (Dimock, 2019). Through genres such as Genge, Kapuka, Gengetone, and Kenyan Drill, they express their frustrations, struggles, and experiences (Mukasa, 2022). Notably, the older generations view Kenyan urban music as a threat to the moral fibre of society (Muchunku, 2023). This criticism is in view of this music's unapologetic use of vulgar language, lyrically explicit themes and visually sensual content. The youthful artists, however, conceive of Kenyan Urban Music as a cultural critique of oppressive and suppressive acts of dominant groups (Koech, 2021). As a result, a unique tension between the artists and the dominant social-cultural structures over the cultural significance of this music has emerged (Mungai, 2008; Kiio, 2023). It is against this background that this study examines how young male Kenyan artists construct and perform masculine identities in the process of articulating their lived experiences within the Kenyan urban music space.

The study focuses on young male artists because they dominate the Kenyan urban music scene, and it places Kenyan urban music within the broader popular music category to understand the relationship between masculinity and protest. Popular music has no stable definition because of its fluidity, social grounding, and dependence on historical circumstances (Middleton, 1990; Storey, 2018). This study interrogates the following questions: How does Kenyan urban music represent Kenyan urban young masculine identities? What forms of masculinity emerge from the lyrical and visual performances of these artists? How do these representations reflect the socio-economic and political conditions of marginalised urban youth?

This article contends, drawing on Connell's theory of masculinities, that young male artists strategically deploy exaggerated masculine performances-hypersexual imagery, aggressive aesthetics, performative toughness, and linguistic hybridity-to negotiate identity and agency within a morally regulated and commercially driven industry. However, the study acknowledges that this protest masculinity operates within what Connell (2005) terms "marginalised masculinity"-authentic responses to systemic disempowerment that nonetheless frequently reproduce patriarchal norms.

The study is organised into five sections. First, the study reviews literature on masculinity, popular culture, and identity formation in African music. Secondly, it outlines the theoretical framework deployed. Third, it presents case studies of selected male artists across the four genres. Fourth, there is a discussion on how these performances serve as strategies of identity construction. Fifth, a conclusion on whether the performances operate as genuine expressions of identity or merely reproduce the structures they resist.

2.0 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Raewyn Connell's (2005) Masculinity Theory as the primary lens. The theory is necessary to capture the complex interplay between structural constraint, individual agency and cultural expression in the Kenyan urban music context.

Connell's seminal work on masculinities identifies multiple forms: hegemonic, complicit, marginalised, and subordinate (Connell, 2005). He avers that masculinities are not fixed but are socially constructed, performed, and contested within specific historical and cultural contexts (pp. 76-77). Hegemonic masculinity represents the culturally dominant form of masculinity in a particular setting, embodying characteristics such as authority, control and heteronormativity (p. 77). Of central concern to this study is his conceptualisation of marginalised masculinity, which designates a category of men subordinated by hegemonic masculinities and excluded from the centre of power due to intersecting factors like class, ethnicity, economic background or even race (pp. 80-81).

When formerly marginalised masculinities find the agency to perform subversive acts against dominant forces, they are transformed into protest masculinity. As a subset of marginalised masculinity, protest masculinity emerges as a reaction against systemic oppression, effecting the subversive exaggerated performance of masculine traits such as aggression, sexual bravado, and defiance (Connell, 2005, p. 111). It arises in response to social powerlessness and marginalisation and is normally observed in the context of poverty and systemic disadvantage (p. 114). Connell asserts that protest masculinity emerges as a response to childhood experiences of powerlessness, deprivation and instability (pp. 110-111). This response involves overcompensation where violence, sexuality and physical dominance-traditional markers of masculinity-are emphasised to assert a claim to power in situations where material or social resources are lacking. As Connell has argued, "Protest masculinity is a marginalised masculinity, which picks up themes of hegemonic masculinity in the society at large but reworks them in a context of poverty" (p. 114).

The concept of toxic masculinity—a constellation of harmful behaviour which are linked to Connell's hegemonic masculinity (Kimmel, 2021; Harrington, 2021)—is also relevant to this study. Kimmel (2021) argues that toxic masculinity names and analyses specific destructive patterns tied to the dominant masculine ideals, which manifest as violence, aggression, and misogyny. It is viewed as a response to the pressure to conform to the restrictive and unattainable ideals of hegemonic masculinity (Wong et al., 2022). The inability to attain these ideals leads to frustration thereby producing harmful behaviour.

This study provides a fertile ground for identity reconstruction, situating the intersection between masculinity and music. It therefore follows that through music, masculinities are performed and negotiated. Young Kenyan men appropriate genres such as Genge, Kapuka, Gengetone, and Drill to contest hegemonic structures and articulate their lived experiences of poverty, unemployment, and systemic neglect. The lyrical content of these genres often reflects themes of rebellion, hypermasculinity, and defiance against authority. These expressions reimagine Connell's concept of protest masculinity, where marginalised men exaggerate traditional masculine traits as a means of asserting agency.

2.1 Literature Review

Music functions as a cultural space where young men construct, perform and negotiate their masculine identities. Wanjala and Kebaya (2016) in "Popular Music and Identity Formation Among Kenyan Youth" argue that the choice of music by young people is a determinant of the kind of identity under construction and that the influence of this choice as a medium is pervasive and complex (pp. 20-21). Young men in urban centres operate in a space where they are marginalised, and as a result, they appropriate the tools at their disposal (music in this case) to challenge dominant structures. By so doing, they tend to develop multiple identities individually or collectively (Ouzgane & Morrell, 2005). While Wanjala and Kebaya (2016) acknowledge the role of urban music in identity formation, their argument falls short of specifying the identity.

There appears to be a dearth of scholarship with a specific focus on young masculine identities in Kenyan urban music, despite masculinity being central to lyrical content and performance (Mungai, 2008). Instead, scholarship has frequently focused on linguistic and subcultural dimensions (Mukasa, 2022). While Alim (2006) focuses on African American hip hop, his conceptualisation of "linguistic work" on identity aligns with the Kenyan context in the sense that Sheng functions as an in-group code that simultaneously excludes outsiders and signals authenticity. However, Sheng emerged from postcolonial urban migration, inter-ethnic contact, and the particular pressures of Moi-era authoritarianism (Githiora, 2002), unlike African American Vernacular English, which developed from the transatlantic slave trade and segregation. This means that though the mechanism of linguistic identity work is similar, its historical conditions differ—a distinction this study maintains. Peck (2025), in *Nairobi Hip Hop Flow*, affirms Alim's claims by providing a significant contemporary intervention, positioning Kenyan urban music as a site where youth negotiate space, class, and belonging in the city (pp. 16-18). Despite her study focusing more on underground hip hop than Genge, Gengetone, Kapuka or Drill, the scholarship insinuates that Kenyan urban masculinities are constructed through a combination of entrepreneurial selfhood, affective resilience, and aesthetic defiance (Mungai, 2008).

In the context of Kenyan urban music, other than the use of explicit sexual imagery, aggressive tone, and hustle narratives, Genge, Kapuka, Gengetone and Kenyan Drill deploy Sheng as a means of self-fashioning and assertion of identity. This argument aligns with Ngũgĩ's postulation that language is a marker of identity (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, in *Decolonising the Mind*, provides a philosophy of language that is critical in drawing the profound relationship between language and identity. He describes language as culture, as a symbol of identity and community, and as a tool of power. In essence, it reflects how people view the world—the values, aesthetics, humour, and collective identity. In the context of Kenyan urban music, the use of coded language, Sheng in this case, is a means of battling and challenging power structures and fostering cultural hybridity and a unique cultural identity.

According to Izugbara and Egesa (2019), the Kenyan cultural landscape represents a patriarchal system which influences young men in the city (p. 2). This system presents men as superior to women and children, sexually potent and promiscuous, emotionally stoic, financially independent and family breadwinners (Izugbara & Egesa, 2019, p. 2). Young men find it hard to maintain this persistent dominant ideal because of its performative nature. This persistent dominant ideal is explained by the theory of precarious manhood which postulates that masculinity is an unstable social status that requires constant public validation (Bosson et al., 2021). Scholars such as Ouzgane and Morrell (2005) argue that young African men often pursue aspirational masculinities as a result of inability to attain the social status that the patriarchal society demands of them. The structural unemployment and poverty lead to feelings of inadequacy, frustration and emasculation, creating

a marginalised masculine identity. The urban setting severs the young men from the traditional rural settings where masculine roles were clearly defined (Gater, 2021). It is within this landscape of unstable and aspirational manhood that music serves as a critical space for expressing and performing a credible sense of masculine identity, thereby prompting young men to craft alternative masculinities.

This study, while not excusing the accusations of misogyny and explicitness, seeks to understand the conditions that produce the aggressive and hyper-heterosexual performances that claim power in a context of disempowerment or compensatory masculinity. In Ogone's (2014) research *Framing the Urban Hustler: Space and Identity Discourse in Kenyan Popular Music*, urban musicians have appropriated the negative hustler identity to mean being aggressive, resilient, and enterprising, redefining it to reflect their coping mechanisms within a challenging urban context (p. 112). Ogone adds that the artists show how the city is divided along class lines and how the inhabitants negotiate these class boundaries (p. 124). Since most of the artists come from Eastlands, a low-income neighbourhood, ghettoized by the dominant groups, these musicians anchor their identity on them (Nyairo, 2004; Wabende & Were, 2023). They celebrate coming from the margins in the form of storytelling and even tend to own the city by adopting stage names that reflect their neighbourhood (Ogone, 2014). Their songs also proclaim the neighbourhood origins, for instance, "Na wasee tumetoka Githurai", to challenge marginalisation or exclusion.

3.0 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine how young Kenyan urban music artists construct masculine identities. Thematic analysis (used to identify and interpret recurring themes and explore the meaning and significance of those themes), semiotic analysis (decode the symbolism inherent in the linguistic codes and visuals), and critical discourse analysis were employed to provide a nuanced understanding of the interplay between music and identity. The research adopted an interpretive and case-study-oriented research design, treating Kenyan urban music as the case.

The target population for this study comprises all songs produced within the Genge, Kapuka, Gengetone, and Kenyan Drill genres by Kenyan male artists between 1999 and 2025. Since there is no centralised discography for Kenyan urban music and the artists can directly publish their music on various platforms, the exact population size is indeterminate. Based on streaming platform searches (YouTube, Spotify and Mdundo) and media archives, the estimated population exceeds 5000 tracks. Because the study is designed under a qualitative approach, non-probability sampling techniques were adopted. Towards this end, purposive and quota sampling techniques were used.

Purposive sampling was used to select the specific artists to be featured in the study out of the entire pool of male artists identified. To make this selection, the following criteria were used: the artist must be producing music within the Kenyan Urban genres of interest and their music addresses social issues that affect young men such as unemployment, drug and substance abuse, and encounters with authority among others. Also, the music should have a considerable presence and influence among the youth, either through radio, streaming platforms or public discourse. After conducting purposive sampling, the selected songs were subjected to quota sampling to choose a manageable number of songs per category, given that lyrical and semiotic analysis is labour-intensive. The quota categories were defined alongside the selected genres of Kenyan urban music, which are four in total, namely: Genge, Kapuka, Gengetone and Kenyan Drill. Under each category, five songs were purposively selected for analysis, bringing the total number of songs to twenty.

The sample population for this study consisted of 20 song lyrics and videos from various artists. They include: "Kiasi" by Jua Cali, "We Kamu" by Nonini, "Nyundo" by Flexx, "Salary" by Nameless, "Githurai" by Mr Googz, "Hamnitishi" by E-Sir, "Sitoi Kitu Kidogo" by Jimwat, "Landlord" by Mejja, "Niko Thirsty" by Parrot, "Tarimbo" by Ethic, "Njege Sanse" by Wakadinali and "Cold" by Big Yasa, "Wamocho" and "Ngumi Mbwegze" by Mbogi Genje, "Wamlambezi" by Sailors Gang, and "Dream ya Kutoka kwa Block" by Buruklyn Boyz and "Inshallah" by Geri Soweto. Twenty songs were considered sufficient because qualitative thematic saturation was achieved, with recurrent patterns of masculinity emerging across the corpus.

4.0 Findings

This section builds on Masculinity Theory (Connell, 2005) as the primary lens. It answers the research questions through case study analysis of selected male artists across the genres of Genge, Kapuka, Gengetone, and Kenyan Drill. The examination of the lyrics and music videos shows that the artists' performances construct multiple masculine identities as responses to systemic marginalisation and disempowerment.

Protest Masculinity

Protest masculinity is evident in hypersexual lyrics and performances of Flexx, Ethic Entertainment and Sailors Gang. Flexx's "Nyundo" uses phallic symbols like the hammer and the description of a woman's bottom as the cupboard that needs making by nailing and smoothing with sandpaper. The *Nyundo* video is shot in front of a timber yard, depicting the informal jobs that these young men must engage in for survival. Consider the following lines:

Nashindwa jo nizame wapi
I don't know where I should dip it
Nyundo yangu sasa itauwa wapi
Where will my hammer strike now
Usiwache endelea cheza nalo
Don't stop, keep playing with it
Mpaka iseme jina zote unazo
Until it makes you say all the names you have

Sexual conquest functions as symbolic capital that substitutes for economic capital. Unable to achieve hegemonic masculinity through wealth or occupational success, the artists relocate masculine legitimacy into sexual performance. Since young men lack economic power, they resort to the assertion of sexual power. Flexx uses vulgarity and sexual bravado to express agency. The song deliberately objectifies women, utilises explicit metaphors, celebrates promiscuity and glorifies sexual dominance. This directly challenges religious morality, state censorship and the older generation's expectations of respectable masculinity.

Ethic Entertainment, in "Tarimbo", demonstrates nonconsensual sex with women using dense sexual metaphor of the "Tarimbo"-an excavation tool. He uses violent terms such as "stepping on" and "hitting" to describe forceful sex acts with the women.

Bas bas jo kama ana maringo
If a girl has attitude
Mi hupenda chapa na tarimbo
I like hitting it with "tarimbo"
Mi huchapa chapa na nakanyaga
I keep pounding and pressing down
Namwaga bila hata permission (mmmh)
I release without even asking permission

This can be viewed as a construction of toxic masculinity which according to Wong et al. (2022) is a response to the pressure to conform to the restrictive and unattainable ideals of hegemonic masculinity. The extreme vulgarity is a symbolic dissent against society and aligns with Mbembe's concept on vulgarity as a protest strategy. According to Mbembe (2001), obscenity and the grotesque are parodies that undermine officialdom, indicating its vulnerability and arbitrariness, thereby turning it into an object of ridicule. Tarimbo, therefore, ridicules officialdom. It is no wonder the song was singled out for banning by the Kenya Film and Classification Board (KFCB) in November 2019.

Sailors Gang in "Wamlambez" repeatedly chant "*wamlambez wamnyonyez*" (they lick it, they suck it), indicating hypersexual acts towards women. The sexual dominance and vulgarity by these young masculinities become a compensatory power in the context of socio-economic and political powerlessness. This aligns with Connell's assertion that protest masculinity emerges from deprivation and involves overcompensation through traditional masculine markers. The repeated chant reflects the construction of hypersexual masculinity and constructs masculinity through dominance and control over women.

Hustler Masculinity

Young men reframe informal labour, resilience and daily struggle as dignified masculine virtues in songs like "Salari" by Nameless, "Wamocho" and "Ngumi Mbwegze" by Mbogi Genje. In the absence of formal employment, this identity directly challenges the equation of manhood with white-collar employment.

“Salari” by Nameless gives an account of a young man who struggles each day to earn a salary in order to feed his family. He relies on prayer amid uncertainty.

*When you see me pray I am struggling to find my way
I hustle night and day So I can feed my lovely family*

The persona is a musician who uses his talent to look for money. When formal employment has become difficult to come by, the persona resorts to his talent to make ends meet and to survive.

*Ukiniona jukwaani Ninaruka ka mchizi
When you see me on stage, I jump like a madman
Maikrofoni mkononi Natafuta salari
With a microphone in my hand, I am looking for a salary*

He encourages his friends, women, “bodaboda” operators, farmers, touts and fellow musicians to work hard in order to look for salary, so that in the end they can party. He gives a disclaimer that even if he does not wear a tie, he should not be looked down upon, he deserves respect and that he will hustle till he dies. This is a protest against the exclusion of youths from formal employment and directly challenges the equation of dignity with a white-collar job.

“Wamocho” by Mbogi Genje presents a group of young men who have constructed a hustling masculinity. They wake up in the morning every day to work for survival since the streets do not allow laziness.

*Genje streets si mnajua ni kuwamocho
Genje streets - you already know it's about hustling
Nikirao naraukia kuwamocho
When I wake up I rush straight to the hustle*

The young men claim that they are educated, but their certificates or papers have remained to be decorations. They cannot find employment, evidence of government failure.

*Mbuku jo nimekula mbuku jo
I have eaten book
System jo imeninyima kazi jo
The system denied me a job
Digrii yangu ni urembo jo
My degree is just decoration
Mbogi jo inataka dishi jo
The crew needs food
Inabidi tuwateke wamocho
We must hustle hard*

Since they are unable to achieve the hegemonic ideal of the employed breadwinner, they compensate with the hustler identity. They exhibit exaggerated performance of toughness. This is exemplified in the lines *Tukimuok warazi wanabuya* (When we attack, enemies scatter) and *Tunatafash mpaka wanadai ni hush* (We cause chaos until they say keep quiet). These are claims of power amid powerlessness. Big Yasa, in “Cold” ties financial success to a man's worth and authority. He equates true masculinity to being capable of paying bills: *Haupay mabills so hauwezi feel* (You don't pay bills so you can't relate).

Aspirational Masculinity

Young poor men presented in most of the lyrics exhibit the desire to live a better life. Aspirational masculinity is exemplified by Nonini's “We Kamu”, Jua Cali's “Kiasi,” E-Sir's “Hamnitishi,” and Buruklyn Boyz's “Dream ya

Kutoka kwa Block.” While acknowledging their current precariousness, the young men express a desire for upward mobility, material success, and escape from marginalised neighbourhoods.

Nonini in “We Kamu” constructs the identity that a man should not lack. His worth is in his ability to provide, and if rejected, he tries elsewhere without giving up. He admits that their house does not have a bathtub.

*Home hakuna bathtub, si shower afadhali
At home there's no bathtub, shower will do*

This admission is a clear performance of aspirational masculinity. It also indicates that the persona's family struggles economically since they cannot afford a house with a bathtub.

E-Sir, in “Hamnitishi” equates his life to travelling on the road without a spare tyre. This causes uncertainty, which forces him to move slowly to avoid a puncture. He thanks God for helping him understand that doing good breeds good to the doer. He is also reflective of the fact that nobody would have imagined he would be famous from when he sat at the jobless corner, chewing khat, even though he was educated. This shows how the youth use music to navigate the economic hardships and unemployment to attain success.

*Yule kijana aliyekuwa akikaa jobless corner / Akisaga gomba ijapokuwa amesoma
That boy who used to sit at the jobless corner / Grinding despite having education*

This aligns with Connell's concept of marginalised masculinity-young, educated, but unemployed and excluded from hegemonic power. The “jobless corner” is a symbol of the spatial marginalization of the urban youth. Unlike the hypersexual protest masculinity characteristic of Gengetone, E-Sir deploys resilience and gratitude as masculine virtues.

Similarly, “Dream ya Kutoka kwa Block” by Buruklyn Boyz foregrounds ambition and escape amidst disenfranchisement. It frames masculinity as a struggle to transition, constructing young urban masculinity as aspirational, religiously grounded, street-aware, and success-driven.

*We came with a dream of leaving the block
Meaning to get rich, to make it in short*

The reference ‘we’ emphasises a collective male dream of escaping poverty. The block represents the marginalised neighbourhoods, in this case, Buru Buru, an estate in Eastlands. The reference to God, *Nikilala mi huacha maisha yangu, kwa mikono ya God* (When I sleep, I leave my life in the hands of God), portrays a young male subject as vulnerable. The masculinity in this case is precarious and dependent on divine intervention. Expressing “dream ya kutoka kwa block” is not escapism but a protest against present confinement.

Vulnerable Masculinity

Young men, emotionally suppressed by hegemonic masculinity, admit disillusionment, betrayal, fear, and trauma. In some cases, the young men negotiate survival through compromise. This is evident in Jaguar's “Kigeugeu” and Jua Cali's “Kiasi”.

In the second verse of “Kiasi” by Jua Cali, the persona is accosted by a violent gang, who harass him. He gives them something, probably money, so that he is released. His friend, though, does not escape because he had argued with them. Instead, he is hit or silenced with a piece of wood. This reflects Connell's marginalised masculinity shaped by urban precarity where survival is negotiated through compromise. Once attacked, bribe yourself out or get beaten. The persona says that those people (gang) are violent and unsympathetic.

*Eeeh! chali yangu haujawai skia maneno ya hawa watu hawana huruma ata
Eeeh! My friend you have never heard what these people say they don't have mercy at all*

Jaguar's “Kigeugeu”, loosely translated as turncoat or betrayer, is about a young man who is disillusioned by a broken social system that has prevented him from achieving his dreams. The persona pleads with the world to

swallow him or let him leave all alone because whenever he trusts people, they turn against him, especially when he is closer to success.

*Dunia nizamishe
World, swallow me
Ama uniweke niishi pekee yangu, kwani
Or leave me to live all alone, because
Ninapomwamini kila binadamu, mwishowe
Whenever I trust any human being, in the end
Ananigeukia*

The speaker performs masculinity through frustration, distrust of authority, hustling and betrayal. The opening lines position the speaker as a disillusioned young man. He expresses his masculinity through endurance and resilience. Despite the betrayals, he continues to hustle and frames himself as a hardworking person trying to cross the borders. He mentions betrayal from his wife, friend, politicians, pastor, doctor, technician, midwife, driver, and conductor. He exposes a society that is defined by betrayal and opportunism. Since no institution is dependable, the persona resorts to individual survival.

Big Yasa also shows the vulnerability of young men when he claims that the streets are cold and the harshness of the streets coupled with police harassment causes mental breakdown of the youth.

*Hizi sides maboy hugo mental
On these sides, boys go mental
Hatujui manze ni kwa nini
We don't know, man, why*

He further states that he was very close to losing hope, acknowledging that sometimes in the life of a man there are stories that are untold and that friends can run away when one is in trouble. This demonstrates that despite young men acting tough, they can reach their limits.

Collective Masculinity

Collective masculinity is not only manifested in the lyrics but also in the videos. Mbogi Genje, Ethic Entertainment, Buruklyn Boyz, and Mr Googz and Mr Lenny perform in groups that they refer to as crews. Individuals are rarely seen in the dance choreographies and performances. The young men dance, chant, cheer, and mirror bodily gestures, suggesting solidarity and protective brotherhood.

“Ngumi Mbwegze” by Mbogi Genje is an exemplification of collective masculinity. *Mbogi Genje* is a phrase that loosely translates as “two fists,” a greeting signifying unity. The song tells of youth unity in the neighbourhood, fighting against their perceived enemies who could be the police or snitches. The song begins with lines that proclaim their identity and the search for money.

*Mbogi Genje, si ndio Mbogi Genje
Mbogi Genje, yes this is Mbogi Genje
Tunasaka picha ya Kenyatta kwa walenje*

Through the collective first-person focalisation, the speakers construct a collective hyper-localised masculine identity rooted in marginalised and protest masculinity. They assert solidarity and a defiant identity by declaring that they are the Mbogi Genje.

Githurai by Mr Lenny, Mr Googz and Vinnie Banton exemplifies “cultural mapping” and young masculinities identity construction. Githurai becomes the space that the artists assign meaning to. They show territorial pride in their neighbourhood and foreground it despite Githurai being in the periphery of the city. The central assertion is in the chorus:

*Na wasee tumetoka Githurai
And we guys have come from Githurai*

This can be read as youths transforming spatial stigma into symbolic capital and at the same time, presenting a collective masculine identity. Githurai becomes a “marked space” (Nyairo, 2004). It is geographically peripheral but symbolically central to the identity of the artists. Buruklyn Boyz in “Dream ya Kutoka kwa Block” affirm street credibility and violent masculinity: *Huwezi nishow venye we ni mrong* (You can’t tell me how you’re wrong). The crew-based collective masculinity, common in Genge and Gengetone music, demonstrates that masculinity amongst the marginalised is produced within a group, rather than a lone dominant male figure.

Sheng as a Marker of Masculine Identity

The choice of Sheng in the lyrics is significant in constructing protest masculinity. Ngugi wa Thiong’o considers the use of African languages to tell stories as a form of dissent against colonisation. Therefore, the choice of Sheng by young male artists is an expression of dissent against the dominant social structures. Also, the language, Sheng, is a mix of English and Kiswahili or local languages. The speakers, therefore, develop a hybrid identity, aligning with Homi Bhabha’s concept of hybridity. In “Sitoi Kitu Kidogo” by Jimwat, the policeman admits that he does not understand the language. “*Zielewi hio lugha, anza guongea ganji*” (I don’t understand that language, start speaking money). This indicates the youth’s rejection of formal authority and constructs their urban identity.

Visual Reconstruction of Identity

Beyond constructing protest masculinity through lyrics, the young male artists use the camera to construct their identity. Consider the following figure, a snapshot of the introductory scene of Kiasi by Jua Cali:



Figure 1: A screenshot of Jua Cali “Kiasi” showing a drinking den

The video is filmed in medium shots against an impoverished backdrop, synonymous with the Eastlands neighbourhoods. Rustic iron sheets wall the structures (00:04:36). There is a juxtaposition of a church and a drinking den. Young men sprawl outside the drinking den in drunken stupor. Jua Cali, in contrast, wears clean contemporary clothing. The visual juxtaposition of marginality and aspiration mirrors the lyrical tension between “maisha yangu tamu” and “siku inaniraukia mbaya”. Also, the drunken men look disillusioned and vulnerable, constructing vulnerable masculinity. Further, Jua Cali wears a red t-shirt with the word California printed on it (00:3:44) to mark their neighbourhood and show spatial pride.

Parrot perhaps makes the boldest protest video that demonstrates the construction of protest masculinity. He dresses video vixens in the nun’s attire. The vixens are semi-nude and dance suggestively. This signals a hypersexual masculinity constructed through sexual conquest. The religious imagery (nun outfits) is deliberately sexualised, and this turns symbols of purity into objects of desire. This, coupled with the verbal performance of sex acts within the church compound, suggests parody of the religious institution.

The song reinforces this assertion through the lines:

*“Naskia mafather ndio ma-king
of sodomy (I hear the fathers(priests) are the kings of sodomy”
“Ndo mana nimecome manun wako hot (That’s why I have come, the nuns are hot)”*



Figure 2: A screenshot of Parroty’s “Niko Thirsty” vixens dressed in nun attire

By depicting priests as sinful and nuns as objects of desire, the young men, through irony, have subverted religious norms. This can be considered as religious subversion through masculine rebellion. The men, in the next image, hold Bibles while smiling and singing obscenities, undermining religious authority. This constructs masculinity as anti-establishment, irreverent, and resistant to moral policing, thereby aligning with Boehmer and Borzaga’s assertion that artistic forms from postcolonial contexts often destabilise dominant narratives while forging new cultural identities (Boehmer, 1995; Borzaga, 2020).

There is also a construction of collective masculinity when the young men in the video perform together in the church compound, dressed in black. Young men appearing in a tight-knit group is a common motif in urban music, as seen in the following snapshots.



Figure 3: A screenshot of Parroty’s “Niko Thirsty” male dancers holding the Bible

Rather than glamorous elite spaces, Wamlambezi foregrounds ordinary neighbourhood environments: open compounds, shipping-container-like environments, informal urban spaces and crowded communal grounds. This connotes that masculine authenticity or pride emanates from the neighbourhood. The dances are aggressive, showing bodily confidence and portraying energetic, streetwise, and fearless masculinity. The performers appear comfortable in their environment, turning ordinary urban areas into performance spaces, suggesting ownership and pride.

The crew-based collective masculinity, common in Genge and Gengetone music demonstrates that masculinity amongst the marginalised is produced within a group, rather than a lone dominant male figure. For a young man tasked with the responsibility to provide to survive, he must be tough. Nameless’ video depicts a tough image of men who have left their families at home to hustle for their families. They are at a construction site wearing black vests and showing their muscular hands. This constructs tough masculinity as a way of navigating urban precarity.



Figure 4: A screenshot of Sailors Gang’s “Wamlambezi” street dance scene

Big Yassa in “Cold” performs directly toward the camera, creating intimacy with the audience and asserting authority. The group in his video occasionally moves in unison, reinforcing solidarity and brotherhood (collective masculinity). Most movements involve hand gestures, head nodding and synchronised group swaying. This choreography projects calmness, toughness and masculine composure. The indoor scenes show him wearing a black suit, white shirt, spectacles and jewellery, which project aspiration. He also performs hegemonic masculinity through a direct gaze, controlled facial expression and stylish dressing.



Figure 5: A screenshot of Nameless’ “Salari” scene of men queueing for wages

4.1 Discussion

The study examined young male Kenyan artists across the genres of Genge, Kapuka, Gengetone, and Kenyan Drill. The findings from the case studies reveal a complex and often contradictory picture of how Kenyan male urban artists construct masculine identities. This discussion attempts to synthesise the study’s key concerns: whether the performances represent genuine identity construction or merely reproduce the structures they resist.

The findings reveal that the artists deploy urban music as a form of tactical identity construction, aligning with what Connell (2005) terms protest masculinity. This enables individual visibility and survival within the male-dominated and morally regulated industry. However, there is a caveat against celebrating such performances as unambiguously liberating. Three thematic conclusions emerge from the synthesis of the case studies.

First, the performances are compensatory rather than structural. While all the case studies demonstrate deliberate performance of masculine traits; for instance, Flexx’s hypersexual metaphors, Ethic Entertainment’s aggressive sexual posturing, and Nameless’s hustler identity-the performances remain largely compensatory. Although these are significant expressions of agency, the structural inequalities that necessitate such performances are not fundamentally challenged. This aligns with Connell’s (2005) assertion that protest masculinity allows marginalised men to assert agency but does not fundamentally challenge hegemonic masculinity. The artists can temporarily invert power dynamics within individual performances, but the industry structure that requires them to perform exaggerated masculinity for visibility remains unchanged.

Secondly, although the artists demonstrate the freedom of expression in their lyrics and performances, their freedom is constrained. They choose to express their frustrations through hypersexual lyrics, aggressive posturing, and defiance. While these choices are authentic expressions of agency within a constrained field, the available choices are narrowly dictated by the commercial and patriarchal logics. All the artists in this study only achieved visibility through lyrical content centred on sexual bravado, aggression, and vulgarity as opposed to more constructive forms of political critique. The market and regulatory bodies ensure that the only

avenue for visibility by young men remains exaggerated masculinity. Connell (2005) refers to this as protest masculinity-authentic responses to disempowerment that nonetheless occur within a narrow field of available expressions.

Lastly, these performances tend to produce individual survival as opposed to collective transformation. The artists manage to successfully navigate scrutiny, build brands and claim space. For instance, Jua Cali's "Kiasi" and Mejja's "Landlord" have had millions of streams; Ethic Entertainment has achieved commercial success; and Buruklyn Boyz have gained international recognition. These are tangible achievements. However, there is little evidence in the findings that these performances challenge the underlying structures that *require* young men to perform exaggerated masculinity. While an artist from a privileged background can achieve visibility through lyrical skill alone, a marginalised artist cannot. This aligns with Connell's (2005) view that protest masculinity allows critical distance but fails to dismantle the gendered and class-based expectations. The individual success of these artists does not translate into structural change that would make protest masculinity unnecessary for the next generation of male artists.

The findings affirm Connell's (2005) assertions about protest masculinity. The artists frame their exaggerated masculine performances as weapons for empowerment and survival. They also deploy individual structural constraints as personal branding. The paradox cannot be read as the artists' personal failure but rather the result of the contradictory conditions in which they operate. The study, therefore, concludes that protest masculinity is a rational strategy within an irrational structure.

5.0 Conclusion

This study set out to explore how young male artists across the genres of Genge, Kapuka, Gengetone, and Kenyan Drill construct masculine identities in response to systemic marginalisation. The study applied the lens of Masculinity Theory (Connell, 2005) to interrogate how Kenyan male urban artists represent young masculine identities through lyrical and visual performances. This study demonstrates that:

First, Kenyan urban music represents young masculine identities as multiple, fluid, and contested. The study identified protest masculinity, hustler masculinity, aspirational masculinity, vulnerable masculinity, collective masculinity, and toxic masculinity as the dominant forms emerging from the lyrics and videos. These identities are responses to systemic disempowerment, economic precarity, and social marginalisation. Protest masculinity, characterised by hypersexual performance, aggression, and defiance, is the most dominant form, reflecting Connell's assertion that marginalised men exaggerate traditional masculine traits as a means of asserting agency.

Secondly, the artists use Sheng as a marker of masculine identity and a tool of resistance. Sheng functions as an in-group code that excludes outsiders (authority figures, older generations, censors) while signalling authenticity and solidarity among marginalised urban youth. The choice of Sheng reflects a rejection of formal authority and a reclamation of urban identity on the artists' own terms. This aligns with Ngũgĩ's (1986) assertion that language is a carrier of culture and a symbol of identity.

Thirdly, the visual performances complement the lyrical content in constructing masculine identities. The music videos depict crew-based collective masculinity, territorial pride, and aspirational imagery. Religious symbols are parodied to subvert moral authority, while neighbourhood backgrounds assert pride in marginalised spatial identities. These visual elements reinforce the protest masculinity articulated in the lyrics.

In conclusion, existing scholarship has examined Kenyan urban music through language, censorship, youth culture, and identity. However, few studies have systematically examined how masculine identities are constructed across Genge, Kapuka, Gengetone and Drill using Connell's framework. This study addresses that gap. Kenyan male urban artists operate within what this study terms "constrained agency"—a form of identity construction that is authentic and strategic yet shaped by structural forces beyond individual control. Their performances represent neither pure victimhood nor unqualified liberation, but rather tactical negotiations of contradictory demands. The study therefore cautions against both celebratory readings that ignore structural constraints and condemnatory readings that deny the real agency these artists exercise. The goal of cultural criticism, this study suggests, should be to recognise the strategic intelligence of artists operating within oppressive structures while continuing to critique the structures themselves. As Frantz Fanon (1963) observed in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the art of the oppressed is never pure; it bears the wounds of the system it resists.

5.1 Limitations and Future Research

The study has three limitations. First, it relies on textual and visual analysis without examining audience reception. Future research should investigate how Kenyan audiences, particularly young men, interpret these performances of masculinity. Secondly, the study focuses on artists who have achieved commercial success. Future research might examine emerging artists to understand the costs of non-compliance with dominant masculine norms. Such research would illuminate whether the industry permits alternative routes to visibility or whether protest masculinity remains a near-compulsory strategy. Lastly, a comparative study with female artists would clarify whether these masculine performances are gendered or genre-wide phenomena.

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