SUMMARY

This ethnography drew on qualitative data that were collected over three years in a northern suburb in Johannesburg, South Africa. The aim of the study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of how middle-class men and women of 18 to 28 years of age shape, experience, and make sense of their (hetero)sexual identities. The focus on middle-class young people permitted for a nuanced understanding of heterosexual identities in current society. It did so by using an intersectional approach to illustrate how a number of identity markers (such as race, class, age, gender, and culture) intersect to shape heterosexual beings and experiences. The study placed heteronormativity and intersecting identity markers at the centre of its analysis to show how these pervasive drivers not only shape young people’s heterosexual identities, but also how heterosexuality, for a large part, is institutionalised, taken for granted and naturalised among these participants.

In the context of this study, it became imperative to view these constructions in line with the history of South Africa and how heteronormative messages were used with the intention of policing heterosexual bodies. These normative principles of the past still came into play in the ways in which the young people in the study made sense of their straight identities.

Chapter One thus considered how South Africa’s constrained past laws and dominant discourses of the times informed its citizens’ views regarding sexual identities. Heterosexual identities were considered ‘appropriate’ and the only ‘correct’ way of being sexual. This, of course, played out differently among the different racial groups. Due to South Africa’s racist colonial and apartheid past, restrictions were placed on the bodies of black men and women in particular. Apart from the government of the time, Christianity was one of the leading forces which directed people’s views and shaped their sexual identities. These dominant discourses were largely driven by white heterosexual men who, along with the church’s dogmas, constructed a division between what is expected of individuals based on their gender. Men fell into the traditional role of being the providers of their families, while women were placed in caregiving roles. During this time, challenging any of these views was a taboo and could even result in convictions. After the fall of apartheid, new ways of being opened up – both legally and socially. In light of these new opportunities that young people experience, it then becomes possible to study how heterosexual identities have started and continue to shift. Much of the scholarly work from the advent of democracy focused on heterosexuality and young people from the vantage point of the pressing social problems of the times. Shifting the focus to middle-class young people tells a different story, as this thesis illustrates. Middle-class young
people have a degree of power and privilege in society that impacts on their identity trajectories and show a different side to how heterosexual identities are lived in this context. In the end, the construction of their heterosexual identities cannot be seen in isolation. Different identity markers constantly intersect and shape their experiences. The series of narratives presented in this thesis shows the constant interplay and tensions with the legacies of the past in conjunction with the newfound opportunities and freedoms that contemporary democratic South Africa has to offer.

It is for this reason that this study employed an intersectional analytical approach, which is discussed in Chapter Two. Scholars have pointed out how intersectionality does not necessarily need to be employed in studying marginalised identities. Instead, some authors argue that mainstreaming this approach is useful in studying identities that are considered privileged. For this study, the ways in which power operates within a relatively privileged group of individuals, based on their class identities, were considered. In line with the problem statement of this study, the theories reflected upon in this chapter highlighted that heterosexual identities entail more than just a label. It brings with it certain norms, expectations, and responsibilities. Drawing on the concept of heteronormativity further allowed for an in-depth exploration into how straight identities are shaped within larger social discourses surrounding ‘acceptable’ sexual identities. As this chapter illustrated, the link between sexuality and gender is undeniable. Contemporary femininities and masculinities are informed by (hetero)sexuality and vice versa. The narratives that followed in the findings chapters made this link abundantly clear through the lived experiences of the young people who participated in this study.

A feminist epistemological framework guided the research design of the study. The following chapter gave a detailed overview of how this ethnography transpired. Starting from the notion that heterosexuality is often a taken-for-granted and normalised concept, the research choices made in this study aimed to uncover and problematise this identity. The data-collection methods, together with the time spent in the field, then made it possible to collect a variety of narratives from young straight men and women living in a northern suburb in Johannesburg and highlighted the ambiguous nature of heterosexual identities within this space.

Chapter Four used sex-toy parties as a point of departure to show how straight white women experience and express their heterosexual identities. Sex-toy parties allowed for a space whereby these women felt safe to openly converse about (hetero)sexuality and (hetero)sex. At the same time, however, it highlighted the boundaries that limited their sexuality. These boundaries – what is acceptable, expected, and what is not – reflects societal discourses on sexuality and gender. During the parties, constant processes of negotiations where taking place.
which delineated to the permissible limits of transgression while never losing sight of the ways to act. The chapter illustrates the shifts that are taking place regarding white women’s sexual agency, giving them more freedom to experience sexual pleasure, however, still keeping in step with the gender and sexual discourse and social expectations.

Placing men and women’s experiences in particularly sexualised spaces such as nightclubs allowed for an interrogation into how young people express their (hetero)sexual, gender, and class identities through their physical appearance and flirtations with one another. Chapter Five showed the different ways in which heterosexual identities are represented and experienced as gendered. This chapter also gave insight into the ways young people define once-off sexual encounters and casual dating. It became evident that the meanings they attached to one-night-stands and casual dating was age dependent as well as what they thought was expected of them as heterosexual men and women. Similar to Chapter Four, the narratives in Chapter Five illustrate the permissible limitations of transgression but go into further detail. It portrays women’s sexual agency as proactive, particularly the moments that some straight women initiate sex and seek sexual pleasures for themselves. Yet, here too, heteronormative expectations related to the ways women’s sexuality is meant to please their male sexual partners – not losing sight of the ‘male gaze’. As such, despite the fact that the night club is a sexual space which gives women more room to sexually transgress, men are still socially ‘allowed’ more freedom to engage in one-night stands, for instance. Ultimately, the chapter demonstrates that despite the room for transgression, the night club reinforces gendered divisions according to the ways in which men and women express and experience their (hetero)sexualities.

Chapter Six provides an example of a braai (barbeque) to illustrate how traditional notions of gender are conceived and performed by the participants of this study. While braais are enjoyed by people of all colours, the braais discussed in this chapter were predominantly frequented by white, Afrikaans-speaking participants. The narratives presented in this chapter showed how these participants maintained unequal and hegemonic gender roles. At the same time, they expressed instances in which the prevailing gender order was challenged, still against the backdrop of the status quo. Here it became clear how gender and more specifically, its manifestation in the division of labour informs heterosexual identities. Moreover, heterosexual identities were often shaped in continual reference to the opposite sex, thus, binary constructions of gender was omnipresent.

In Chapter Seven the intersections of race, gender, and class came to the forefront in the way they contributed to black middle-class men’s construction of heterosexual identities.
Space – being an urban setting like Johannesburg, and living and socialising in affluent neighbourhoods – was also of great significance to the meanings that they attached to their overall identity constructions. The narratives presented here highlighted a shift in how contemporary straight black men view themselves in relation to black men from the past, as well as poor black men in contemporary South Africa. These middle class young men actively want to create an identity that separates them from black men living in townships. They did this through consumption or performing a type of middle-class swag in the city. Not only does this illustrate how living in contemporary South Africa allows them these opportunities in identity construction, but it also shows how their middle-class positioning provides them with a degree of agency which is not a possibility for black men of lower classes. Simultaneously, their notions of their heterosexual identities were still in line with the straight expectations of eventually getting married and taking care of a family.

Throughout all the narratives, it became clear that there are different sources in contemporary South African society that create and maintain sexual values within this context. Past conceptions of gender and sexuality, traditional cultural scripts, and religious notions of morality and decency drive heteronormative discourses in this country. In as much as the participants grew up in a fairly more progressive time in South African history, messages received from schools, churches, and their families often still assume that all people are heterosexual. Treating heterosexuality as the norm therefore shaped how these young people made sense of their sexual selves.

In conclusion, this study questioned what (hetero)sexual agency entails, showing the constant tension between what is considered appropriate hetero-behaviour and discourses surrounding gender empowerment and transgressions. What it means to be heterosexual in this context is then, in fact, not a simplistic taken-for-granted issue, but rather built on different moments and experiences which do not lead to homogenous ways of defining, enacting and embodying heterosexuality. The thesis shows that within the contemporary situation for young people, there is more room for them to stretch the boundaries of what it means to do heterosexuality acceptably. With that said, the thesis also makes evident, that even though the boundaries have been stretched, they have not been able to reconsider the taken for granted way that heterosexuality is embedded in society. The transgressions that occur do not always contest heteronormativity and the binary gendered and sexual order remains intact, with very few signs that it will disappear in the near or future. This contestation should not only be acknowledged by scholars in the field, but also by the straight individuals themselves. In this
way, it becomes possible to see the different meanings attached to heterosexual identities in this context.