# Digital construction of SA black identity through Amapiano: Analysis of local newspaper

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## Abstract

Although Amapiano has become a globally celebrated music genre, limited research has focused on its creators, audiences, and cultural significance. Further investigation is needed to understand its impact on South African townships, the construction of Black identity in digital spaces, cultural entrepreneurship, and the ways it continues to evolve within a complex and dynamic cultural environment. This study employs Amapiano as a lens through which to examine the contemporary culture of South African youth residing in townships, commonly referred to as iKasi. It investigates how Black South African youth engage with, shape, and innovate within the genre, while also contributing to its global visibility through the creation and international spread of its distinctive sound. A total of 100 online newspaper articles were collected and analysed using Atlas.ti software. Each article was systematically examined to identify recurring patterns and ideas. Initial codes were developed from the data, organised into categories, and refined into broader themes, enabling a structured thematic analysis aligned with the research objectives. The analysis of local newspaper articles revealed that South African Black identity in the digital space is expressed through platforms that amplify Black voices, support the growth of township-based businesses, and contribute into township economy. The findings also demonstrate how Amapiano has evolved and transformed within a complex cultural environment, reflecting broader social, cultural, and economic changes. This study contributes to digital humanities by using qualitative digital text analysis to online newspaper archives, demonstrating how digitally mediated news narratives can be systematically analysed to show the construction of black South African identity, cultural transformation, and community representation through Amapiano.

## 1 Introduction

Amapiano is a South African house music genre that emerged in the mid-2010s and gained recognition for its distinctive sound, production techniques, and cultural significance. Its development is associated with 2012, when the genre became widely identified by the name Amapiano (Brown, 2022; Naidoo, 2022; Seroto and Ba, 2023; Vollmer, 2025). However, its origins remain contested, with townships in Johannesburg and Pretoria, including Soweto, Katlehong, Alexandra, Soshanguve, Atteridgeville, and Mamelodi, recognised for their contributions to its development (Mohlomi, 2019; Seroto and Ba, 2023). Characterised partly by its signature log-drum sound, Amapiano combines elements of South African musical traditions with contemporary production techniques and international influences. Although DJ Maphorisa is widely associated with popularising the genre, its development reflects the contributions of producers such as DJ Stokie, MFR Souls, Mr JazziQ, Josiah De Disciple, and Kabza De Small (Conteh, 2021; Maneta, 2024; Mkwananzi, 2025c; Saeed, 2020). Beyond its musical characteristics, Amapiano represents a cultural expression through which young Black South Africans negotiate identity, belonging, and social aspirations. Emerging from townships shaped by apartheid-era racial segregation, the genre reflects the historical and contemporary experiences of communities that have faced marginalisation and unequal opportunities. In this context, Amapiano can be understood as a form of creative expression through which young people assert cultural identity and challenge established representations of Black South African life (Eaby, 2023; Eaby-Lomas, 2024; Goldrick, 2024; Matschke, 2022; Seroto and Ba, 2023). As Amapiano expands beyond South Africa, digital media provide spaces through which its cultural meanings and representations circulate. Local newspaper coverage contributes to this pro-

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cess through articles, headlines, interviews, and narratives that frame the genre's origins, creators, audiences, and commercial success. Examining these representations provides an opportunity to understand how digital journalism participates in constructing and communicating contemporary Black identity. To investigate this relationship, the study collected and analysed 100 online newspaper articles using ATLAS.ti software. Initial codes were developed from the data, organised into categories, and refined into broader themes, enabling a structured thematic analysis aligned with the research objectives.

## 2 Problem Statement

Despite its growing popularity, scholarly understanding of its cultural significance, particularly its relationship with Black township life and identity formation, remains limited (Eaby, 2023:14). Although existing scholarship has examined Amapiano as an expression of Black identity and youth culture in South Africa, as well as the role of digital media in shaping its cultural meanings, comparatively less attention appears to have been given to how Black South African identity is digitally constructed and represented through local online newspaper coverage of Amapiano (Mdlalose, 2026; Oloruntoba, 2024).

Amapiano provides a lens through which to examine the contemporary culture of Black South African youth residing in townships, commonly referred to as Kasi. These communities have historically been shaped by apartheid-era racial segregation and continue to navigate social and economic inequalities (Zono, 2025). This limitation presents a particular research problem because digital newspaper narratives do not simply document cultural developments; they also select and frame the meanings through which audiences encounter them (Linström and Marais, 2012).

Newspaper headlines, articles, interviews, and descriptions may emphasise particular aspects of Amapiano while giving less attention to others. Examining these representations is therefore necessary to understand how digital media communicate ideas about Black identity, cultural belonging, and the relationship between local experiences and global recognition. The focus is not to establish how audiences interpret newspaper content, but to investigate how Black South African identity is represented and constructed within the selected media texts.

Accordingly, this study addresses the limited understanding of how local newspapers digitally construct Black South African identity through Amapiano. It examines 100 online newspaper articles to identify recurring representations relating to Black identity in digital spaces, cultural entrepreneurship, the transition from a local sound to a global movement, and the transformation of the genre within a changing cultural environment. By analysing these representations, the study seeks to contribute to scholarship on digital journalism, popular music, and the construction of contemporary Black South African identity, while highlighting the importance of documenting the township contexts and cultural experiences associated with Amapiano.

## 3 Methodology

This study employs computer-assisted qualitative content analysis using ATLAS.ti 26. The software was used to organise and manage the data by coding relevant quotations and grouping related information into themes. This process made it easier to identify patterns and organise the data for analysis (Konopásek, 2007). While Yeku and Junck (2026) examines the evolution of Afrobeats from its origins in Lagos to its current position as a globally recognised pop music genre, with digital platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter contributing to its global reach. This study is different as the approach is to examine 100 online newspaper articles, and investigates how Black South African identity is represented in relation to cultural entrepreneurship within the townships, the role of township experiences in shaping Amapiano, the genre's global expansion, and its continued evolution. This approach is appropriate because the study seeks to interpret how digital newspaper narratives represent Amapiano, its cultural significance, and its relationship with Black identity. Rather than measuring the frequency of representations alone, the study examines the meanings, narratives, and cultural perspectives communicated through newspaper articles.

### 3.1 Role of the Researcher

The researcher is responsible for collecting and organising 100 newspaper articles, develop the coding framework, categorise the code, interpreting the data, and identifying the themes emerging from the analysis. Also examines how language, descrip-

tions, and narratives construct representations of Amapiano and Black South African identity in the digital media.

### 3.2 Data Collection and Data Analysis

The study uses 100 online newspaper articles about Amapiano as its primary dataset. The articles were collected to investigate how local newspaper coverage represents the genre and its relationship with Black South African identity. The articles are treated as media texts through which cultural meanings and social identities are communicated. The specific newspapers' article-selection criteria will be documented to clarify the boundaries of the dataset and support the transparency of the research process. The study employs computer-assisted qualitative content analysis using ATLAS.ti26 to identify and interpret recurring patterns of meaning across the 100 newspaper articles. This approach reflects the evolution of data collection and analysis, which is no longer limited to traditional paper-and-pencil methods but increasingly incorporates digital tools, internet-based platforms, and electronic resources (Cope, 2014).

ATLAS.ti26 is used to support the organisation, coding, categorisation, thematisation, and interpretation of the textual data. Each article was systematically examined to identify relevant ideas, descriptions, and representations. Six themes guided the analysis: Black Identity in Digital Space; Cultural Entrepreneurship; From Local Sound to Global Movement; Music, Society and Social Experience; Unpredictability in the creative Industry; and Genre Transformation in a Complex Cultural Environment.

## 4 Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Black identity in digital space

The demonstration of black identity in digital space has built through the interaction between Black cultural expression, community cultural practices, digital platforms and visibility, digital storytelling and representation, and youth identity and participation. Black identity emerges through the ways cultural practices are expressed, shared, documented and interpreted within digital environments. Amapiano provides a useful lens for understanding these relationships because its influence extends beyond music into social experiences, spirituality, education, family traditions, entrepreneurship and global cultural exchange.

Black cultural expression forms an important part of this process because it communicates the experiences, values and aspirations of black communities. Maliba (2025) reports Kabza De Small describing Amapiano as "a cultural movement" and "a reflection of our everyday stories". This place the genre as a cultural language through which Black South Africans communicate their identities and everyday realities. Its connection to "spirituality" (Nqamanza, 2024), "education" (Tshehle, 2023) and traditional family practices such as "uLobola" and "The artist shared that his latest single Intombi Yam is a heartfelt tribute to love and cultural pride" (Mkwananzi, 2025b) further demonstrates that Black cultural expression is not limited to musical production. Rather, it draws on different aspects of social and cultural life, which contribute to the continuous recreation of Black identity.

### 4.2 Cultural Entrepreneurship

Cultural entrepreneurship positions Amapiano not only as a musical genre but also as an expanding cultural economy in which artistic expression and business development intersect. The commercialisation of Amapiano demonstrates how cultural popularity can be converted into economic value. Sithathu (2025a) describes the genre as "one of the music genres that has taken Mzansi by storm and cemented itself as one of the country's most beloved and versatile sounds." Its commercial growth is evident in music releases, brand partnerships, live performances and international tours. Newspaper article says "LeeMcKrazy and Scotts Maphuma's sold-out UK tour showcase SA's Amapiano talent." (Peshwa, 2025), illustrates the demand for Amapiano beyond South Africa. Similarly, "When tickets sold out within hours of being announced, it was anticipated that the Red Bull Symphonic Kabza De Small with Ofentse Pitse and the Symphonic Orchestra would be one for the books." (Nkonki, 2024), demonstrates how the genre can be presented through premium live experiences. These examples show how Amapiano's cultural appeal creates opportunities for artists and other industry participants to generate revenue. The findings further associate commercialisation with new business opportunities and economic empowerment. Independent Newspapers (2025) reports that a major Amapiano event generated "an estimated R64 million in revenue generated and over 1000 jobs created, many for young South Africans eager to build careers in the entertainment indus-

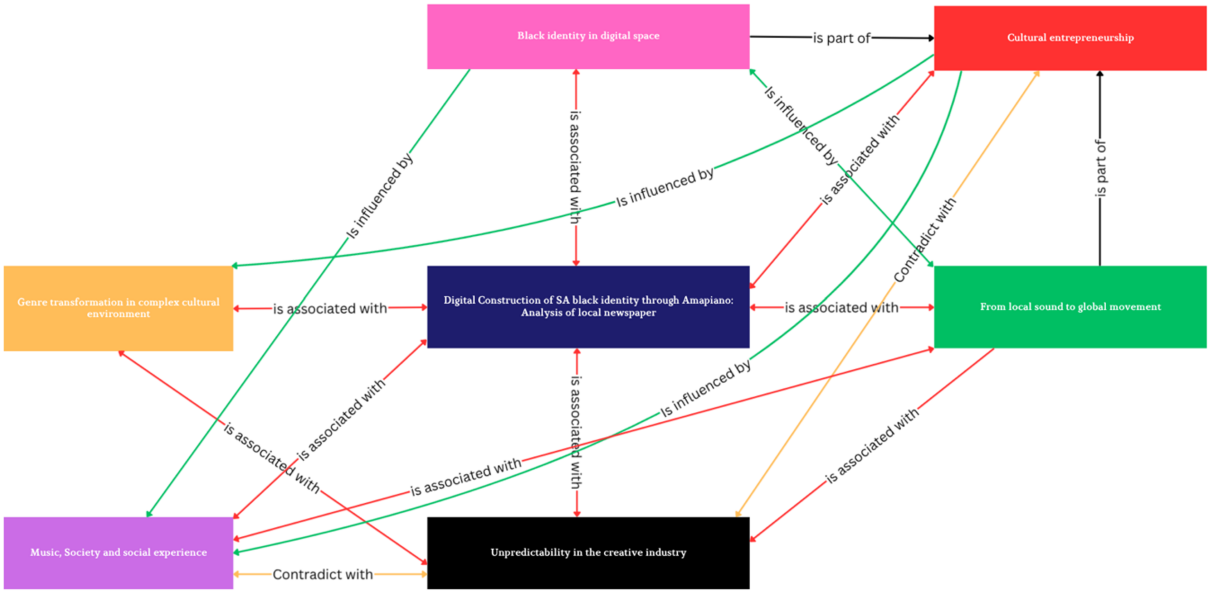


Figure 1: Themes of the digital construction of SA black identity through amapiano: Analysis of local newspaper

try." This shows how the economic benefits of Amapiano can extend beyond performers to include event organisers, musicians, technical crews, marketers and other service providers. Additionally, the genre's growing international presence can support tourism and hospitality, as American female solo traveller, Mimi Pinkjested state "I will say that Amapiano is what really pushed me to visit the country." (Cele, 2025). Cultural entrepreneurship therefore has the potential to contribute to employment creation and broader economic participation.

### 4.3 From Local Sound to Global Movement

The genre's transformation from a local South African sound into a global cultural movement is shaped by the relationship between township origins, global audiences and exchanges, global influence and diplomacy, and international recognition. Rather than representing global success as an isolated achievement, the findings suggest that Amapiano's movement across geographical boundaries is connected to the communities, creative practices and cultural experiences that shaped its development. Township origins and local roots provide the cultural foundation for Amapiano's international growth. Seemela (2025) describes how "the genre grew from local taxis and backyard sessions to global festival stages and streaming charts." Similarly, Arena Holdings (2025b) refers to a period when Amapiano "was still an underground force that echoed at kasi grooves, and thumped through taxi speakers." These articles demonstrate that the genre emerged within everyday social environments where music, dance and community interaction formed part of local cultural life. Its township roots are therefore not merely historical background; they contribute to the identity and distinctiveness of the sound as it reaches international audiences. The diagram further illustrates how these local roots influence African cultural representation. Amapiano provides a platform through which South African artists communicate cultural experiences, languages, dance styles and creative identities to audiences beyond the country. Ngenyane (2023) writes on an interview with US ex-military Big Sbuda, "We all have that connection with the motherland, longing to be here and chase our roots. It is us telling our stories to each other without the lies and misinformation, sibling to sibling." This perspective highlights the significance of Amapiano as a cultural expression through which African creativity becomes visible internationally. Its global circulation allows audiences to encounter cultural expressions rooted in South African experiences rather than relying exclusively on external representations of African societies.

### 4.4 Genre Transformation in a Complex Cultural Environment

Amapiano is a continuously evolving musical genre because of experimentation, technological innovation, creative collaboration and interactions with different musical and cultural traditions. Amapiano's transformation cannot be understood solely

through changes in its sound. Rather, its development involves the interaction between its musical foundations, creative practices and expansion into broader cultural environments.

The evolution of Amapiano is influenced by the musical experimentation and creative contributions of artists and producers. Seemela (2022) reflects on this development, explaining, "I started investing in the amapiano space in 2014 and officially had my music playing on the radio in 2016." This account illustrates the gradual development of the genre and the participation of different individuals in establishing its presence. Arena Holdings (2025a) identifies songs such as Amantombazane, Lotto, eMcimbini and Banyana as "cultural time stamps that marked the genre's breakout moment." These examples demonstrate how particular releases contributed to the genre's development and popularisation.

As shown in Figure 5, evolution is closely associated with musical innovation and creative collaboration, suggesting that Amapiano's development depends on artists continually experimenting with sounds, arrangements and production techniques. Musical innovation also influences the relationship between Amapiano's origins and its changing musical identity. Maphorisa explains that "amapiano didn't have the various styles it has today – that movement only had instrumental. So Kabza de Smal started fiddling with vocals on songs like Umshove and Bamba La, and then De Mthuda changed it by adding some flavor with Shesha, which was the first melodic song that influenced Amantombazane [in 2019] this song become a commercial hit that ticked every box" (Arena Holdings, 2025a).

This demonstrates that the genre did not emerge as a fixed musical form. Instead, its identity developed through the creative decisions of producers and artists who introduced new elements while building on existing foundations. The log drum, rhythmic grooves, melodic piano elements and soulful qualities remain recognisable characteristics, but their application varies across different productions.

The emergence of styles such as "Private School Amapiano" pioneered by Kelvin Momo further illustrates how artists establish distinctive identities within the broader genre (Argus, 2025). Figure 5 therefore highlights an important relationship: the origins of Amapiano provide a foundation for experimentation, while experimentation continually reshapes how its musical identity is expressed.

### 4.5 Music, Society and Social Experience

Amapiano operates beyond entertainment, functioning as a cultural practice through which individuals establish social connections, negotiate identity, communicate social concerns and experience emotional and spiritual meaning. This demonstrate that Amapiano is embedded in everyday social life, connecting individual experiences with broader cultural and societal realities.

Amapiano facilitates community engagement through dance competitions, social- media challenges and collective participation. Mphande (2025) explains, "When you dance in this competition, you need to show versality so we did hip hop, vogue, amapiano, Afro styles and dance hall." This illustrates how Amapiano participates in a broader cultural environment in which people express themselves and engage with different musical and dance traditions.

Furthermore, one account states, "The energy of township dance culture taught me to perform like I already belonged." This suggests that participation in dance can cultivate confidence and belonging. AFP (2025) similarly describes how "At a studio in central Johannesburg, dancers from various countries moved together to the rhythm of South Africa's amapiano sound that is taking social media by storm."

These examples demonstrate how shared musical experiences can connect people across cultural and geographical boundaries. This sense of belonging is closely connected to the influence of artists as cultural role models. Reece Madlisa explains, "I'm still booked in other countries because I'm an artist who is passionate about what he does and my consistency is what will help me sustain longevity in the game" (Seemela, 2024).

His statement highlights persistence and commitment as important aspects of sustaining an artistic career. Similarly, CocoSA states, "There will be challenges along the way, but if you're passionate and persistent, you'll carve out your own space in the industry" (Mkwananzi, 2025d).

Such accounts position musicians as potential sources of inspiration for emerging artists and young audiences. The findings therefore suggest that Amapiano artists influence society not only through their music but also through the experiences and values associated with their careers.

### 4.6 Unpredictability in the creative Industry

In this theme, the findings suggest that success in the creative industry is not determined by musical talent alone but also by artists' ability to navigate changing industry demands, maintain their wellbeing, establish professional relationships and adapt to emerging technologies.

As illustrated in the thematic network (see Figure 1), industry challenges, artist wellbeing and precarity, professionalisation and recognition, structural weaknesses, and technological disruption are interconnected dimensions of this unpredictability. While professionalisation can support career sustainability, it may be undermined by inadequate management, unstable income, and rapidly changing technological environments. Artist wellbeing and precarity emerged as important dimensions of this theme. It indicates that the demands of creative work can affect artists' physical and emotional health, requiring them to balance professional commitments with personal wellbeing (Sithathu, 2025), on an interview with Anathi, "I've been locked in working on myself holistically, and it feels amazing to see the results on my continued health journey."

Similarly, another producer explains, "I also make time to recharge whether it's through travelling, listening to different genres of music, or just taking a step back to reflect. Music is a huge part of my life, but I've learned that maintaining a healthy balance is key to longevity in this industry" (Mkwananzi, 2025a).

These statements demonstrate that sustaining a music career involves more than continuous production and performance; it also requires rest, reflection and deliberate attention to wellbeing. The personal significance of health is further illustrated by Baby Momo's Kufezekile II, which "was created as a tribute to life following serious health challenges he faced in 2023" (Mkwananzi, 2025e). Together, these findings highlight the vulnerability of artists whose creative careers are closely connected to their physical and emotional circumstances.

## 5 Conclusion

The research shows that Amapiano's significance lies in the relationship between cultural identity, economic participation, musical creativity, social experience and the conditions shaping the music industry. The findings therefore suggest that the continued growth of Amapiano depends not only on artistic innovation and global recognition but also on stronger professional practices, effective rights administration and sustainable opportunities for artists and other industry participants. Ultimately, Amapiano reflects both the creative possibilities and the structural complexities of the contemporary South African music industry. Amapiano's expansion from its township origins to international audiences demonstrates the global reach of locally rooted cultural expressions. Its continuous musical transformation, driven by experimentation, collaboration and technological innovation, also shows how artists contribute to the development of a distinctive yet evolving musical identity. However, the findings also reveal tensions between Amapiano's growing cultural and commercial success and the challenges experienced by those working within the industry. These challenges shows that increased visibility and commercial success do not necessarily guarantee sustainable careers. Although Amapiano has transformed the lives of many young people in South African townships, its origins remain insufficiently documented in academic research (Eaby, 2023). Further research should therefore investigate the historical emergence of Amapiano, examining where the genre originated, the communities and musicians who contributed to its development, and the social and cultural conditions that influenced its formation.

## Limitations

This study is limited by its reliance on 100 online newspaper articles, which may not fully represent the diverse perspectives and experiences surrounding Amapiano and the construction of South African Black identity. The focus on newspaper content also excludes other forms of digital expression and perspectives from artists, music producers and audiences. Additionally, the findings reflect the selected media sources and the researcher's interpretation of the identified themes through ATLAS.ti 26. Therefore, the findings should be understood within the scope of the selected dataset rather than as a comprehensive representation of Black identity in South Africa.

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## Appendices

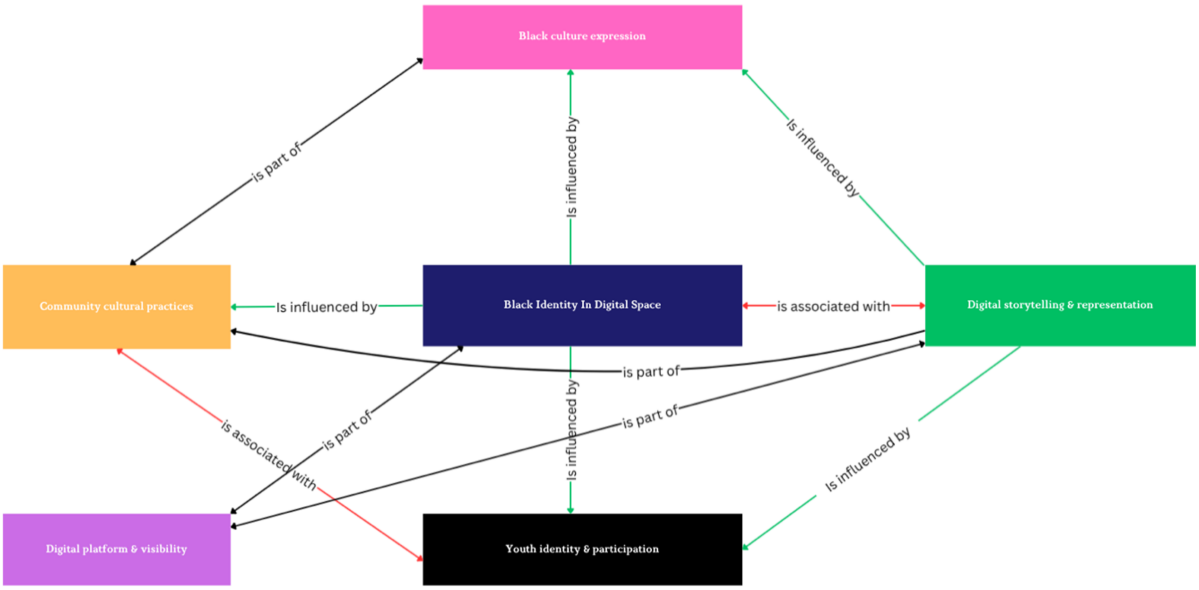


Figure 2: Black Identity in digital space

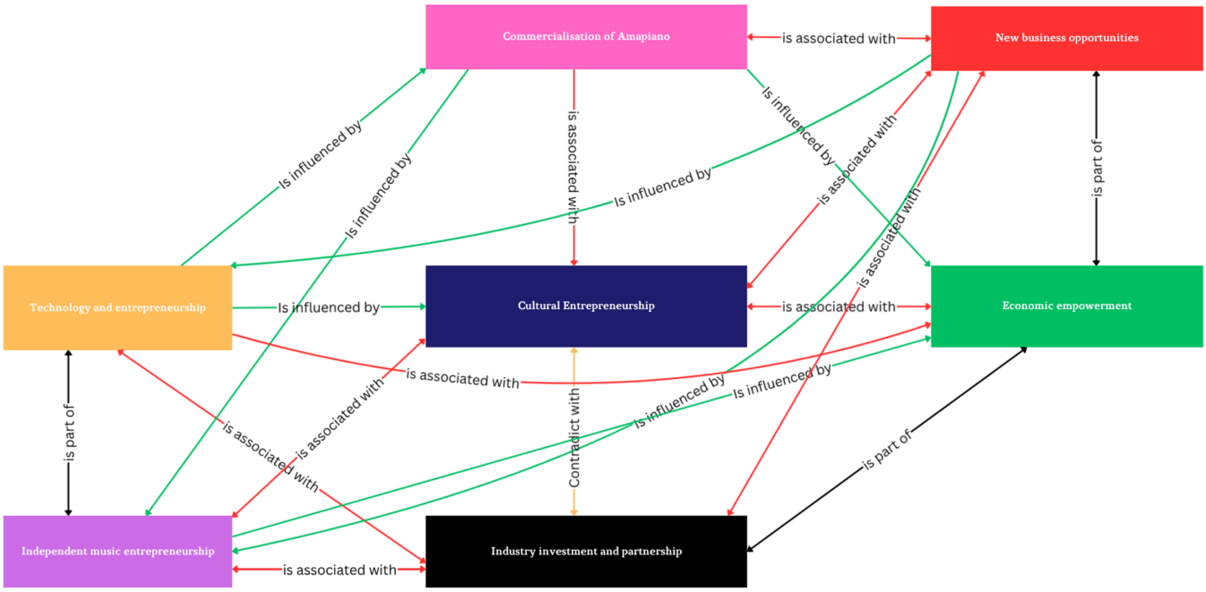


Figure 3: Cultural entrepreneurship

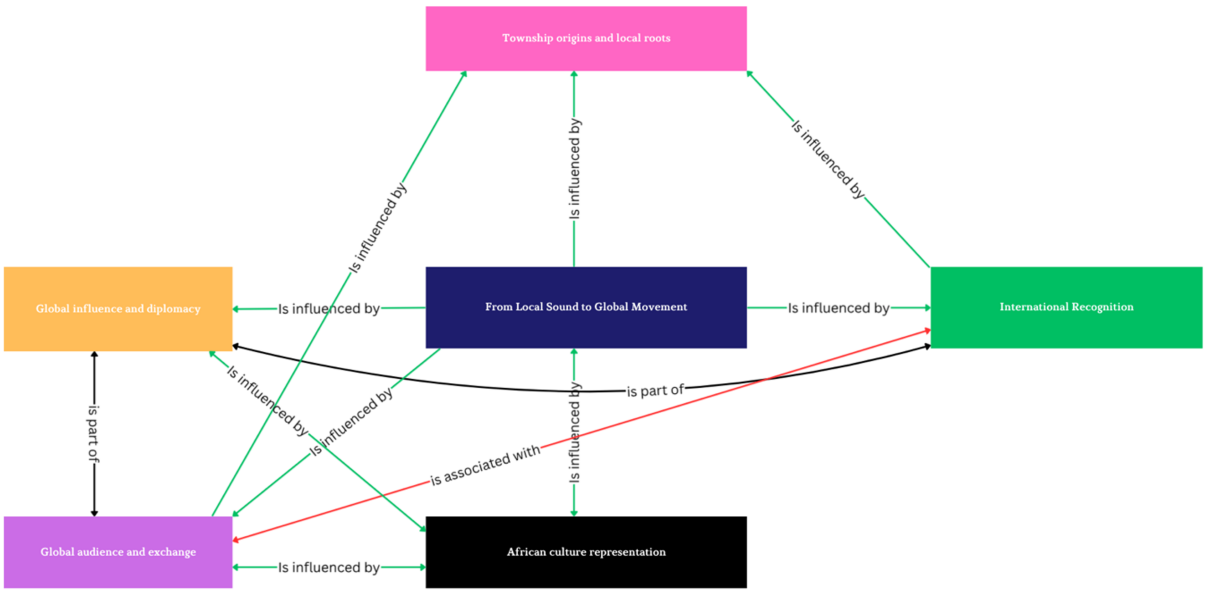


Figure 4: From local sound to global movement

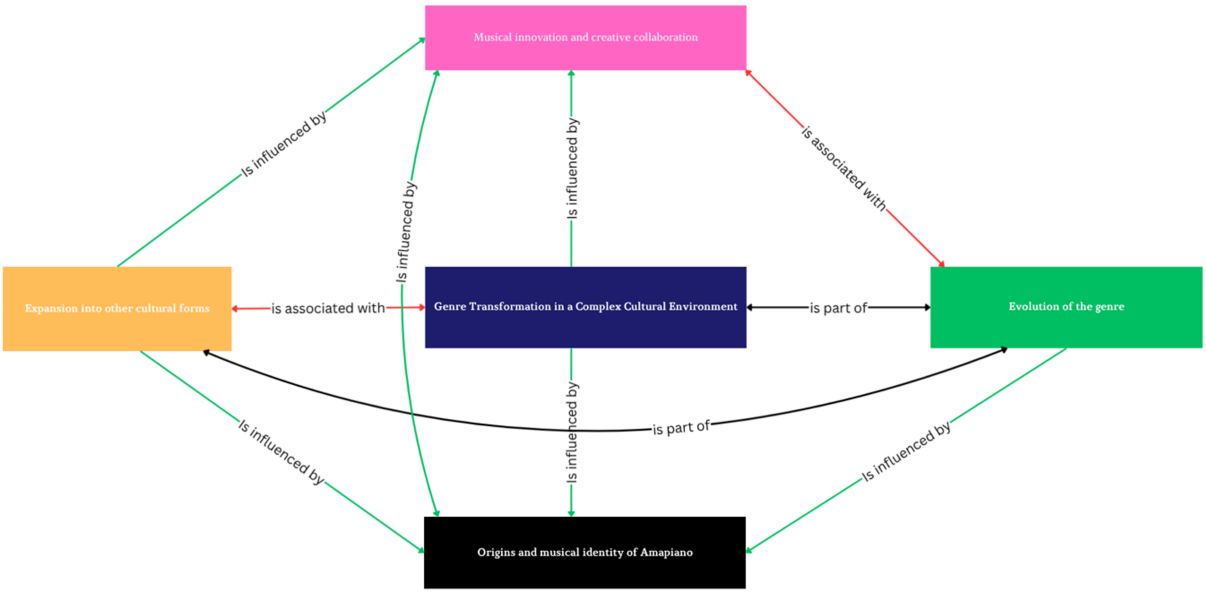


Figure 5: Genre transformation in complex cultural environment

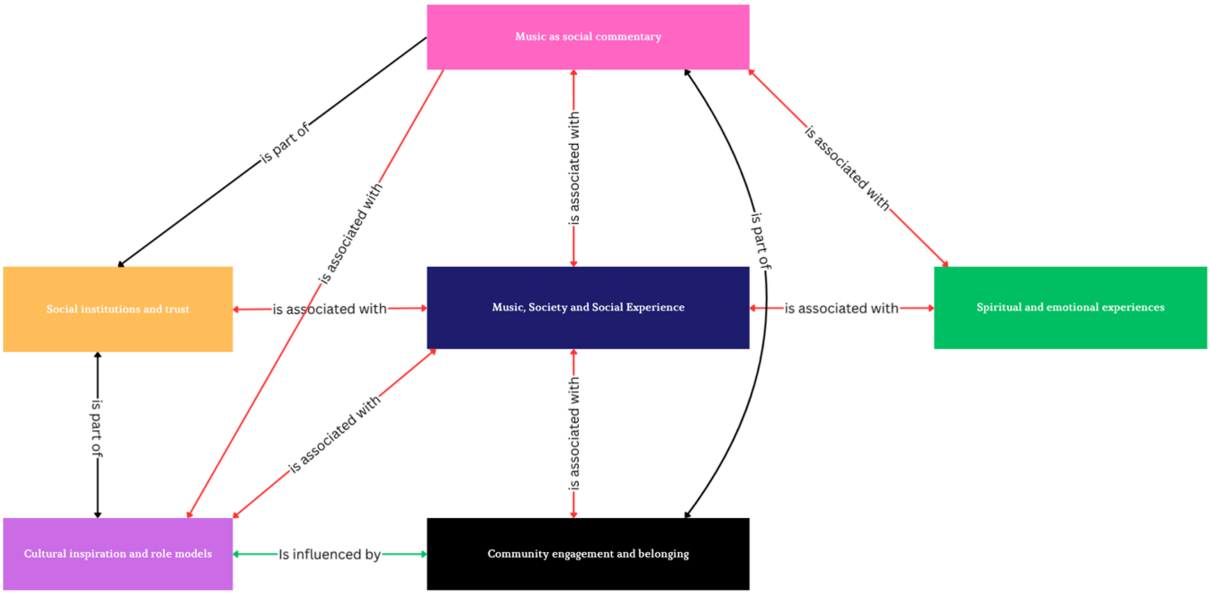


Figure 6: Music, Society and Social Experience

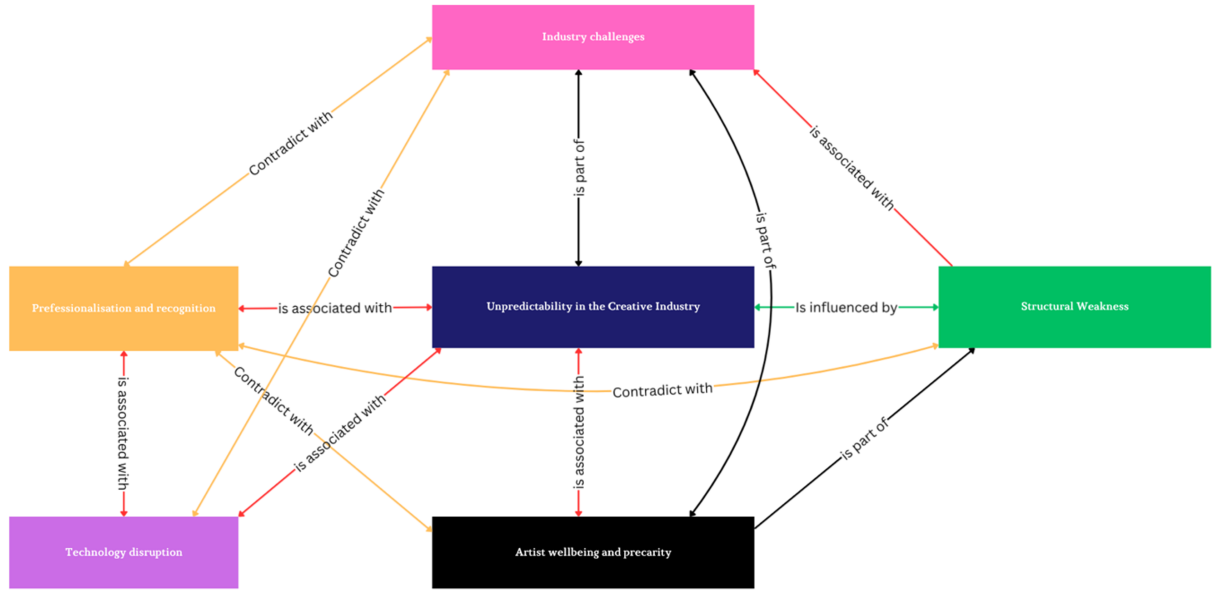


Figure 7: Unpredictability in the creative Industry