

From Soweto Protest Chants to Setswana Motswako Hip-Hop: Youth Agency, Language Reclamation and Cultural Resistance

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Abstract

The 1976 Soweto Uprising marked a defining moment in South Africa's struggle for educational, linguistic, and cultural liberation. In resisting the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, young people employed protest chants, struggle songs, slogans, and *toi-toi* (high-kneed, foot stomping protest dance) performances as powerful forms of collective expression and resistance. Nearly five decades later, the legacy of this youth activism continues to resonate in contemporary Setswana cultural production. This article examines how Setswana-dominant genres such as *Motswako* hip-hop, *Amapiano*, and spoken-word poetry function as sites of language reclamation, cultural affirmation, and youth agency. Using a qualitative interpretive approach that combines historical analysis, textual analysis, and cultural interpretation, the study compares selected protest traditions of the Soweto Uprising with contemporary musical and poetic texts by artists including Hip Hop Pantsula (HHP), Tuks Senganga, Khuli Chana, Focalistic, and Bothale Boikanyo. Guided by decolonial and sociolinguistic perspectives, the analysis explores how contemporary youth employ Setswana not merely as a medium of communication, but as a form of cultural capital, identity construction, and resistance to linguistic marginalisation.

The findings reveal significant continuities between the protest traditions of 1976 and contemporary youth expression. Repetition, rhythmic delivery, collective participation, audience engagement, and performative practices evident in protest chants and *toi-toi* performances reappear in contemporary music, spoken-word poetry, and dance cultures. While resistance has shifted from direct opposition to state-imposed language policies towards cultural and symbolic forms of assertion, contemporary artists continue to advance linguistic pride, social recognition, and African-centred identities. The article argues that music, dance, and musical, spoken-word, and embodied performance practices remain important vehicles through which young people negotiate belonging, preserve cultural memory, and sustain the ongoing project of linguistic justice and cultural resistance.

Keywords: Soweto Uprising; Setswana music; *Motswako* hip-hop; Youth agency; Language reclamation; Cultural resistance; Dance and performance; Decoloniality

Introduction

Language, music, and dance are powerful vehicles through which communities' express identity, preserve memory, and challenge systems of domination. Beyond their communicative and artistic functions, they serve as important resources for collective mobilisation, cultural affirmation, and social resistance. Throughout African history, songs, chants, oral performance traditions, and embodied forms of expression have played significant roles in articulating political grievances, strengthening communal solidarity, and transmitting cultural knowledge across generations (Coplan, 2007; Finnegan, 2012). In South Africa, these forms of expression became particularly significant during the struggle against apartheid, where music, movement, and language functioned as interconnected tools of resistance.

The 1976 Soweto Uprising remains one of the most significant moments in South Africa's history of educational and linguistic liberation. Triggered by the apartheid government's decision to impose Afrikaans as a compulsory medium of instruction, the uprising reflected broader struggles over language, identity, power, and access to education (Lodge, 2011; Witz, 2022). While the protests are often remembered for their political significance, they were equally important as cultural and collective acts performances. Protest chants, struggle songs, slogans, and *toi-toi* performances enabled learners to transform public spaces into arenas of collective resistance and political education. Through rhythmic chanting, singing, movement, and call-and-response participation, young people articulated opposition to linguistic oppression while simultaneously constructing solidarity, courage, and collective identity (Coplan, 2007; Schumann, 2008).

Nearly five decades later, the legacy of these forms of youth expression continues to resonate within contemporary South African popular culture. Across genres such as *Motswako* hip-hop, *Amapiano*, and spoken-word poetry, young artists employ African languages, particularly Setswana and Setswana-dominant varieties such as *Sepitori*, to articulate identity, negotiate belonging, and assert cultural pride. These artistic forms frequently draw upon performative features of musical and spoken-word performances associated with protest traditions, including repetition, rhythmic delivery, audience participation, collective address, and embodied performance. While contemporary youth operate within a different social and political context, their cultural productions continue to reflect concerns with visibility, recognition, linguistic justice, and self-definition.

This article examines the relationship between the protest chants, struggle songs, and performative traditions of the 1976 Soweto Uprising and contemporary Setswana youth cultural expression. Rather than suggesting a direct causal link, the study explores historical resonances and continuities between these moments of youth agency. Particular attention is given to how contemporary artists employ language, music, spoken word, and dance as resources for cultural resistance and identity formation. Drawing on decolonial and sociolinguistic perspectives, the article argues that contemporary Setswana music, and musical and spoken-word performance constitute important sites of language reclamation and cultural affirmation, extending the legacy of the Soweto Uprising into the everyday cultural practices of post-apartheid youth. The social and psychological legacy of apartheid continues to shape contemporary understandings of identity, language, and belonging among South African youth (Manganyi, 2016).

By placing contemporary musical and performative texts in dialogue with the historical traditions of 1976, the study contributes to broader discussions on language activism, youth agency, cultural memory, and decolonisation. It further demonstrates that the legacy of the Soweto Uprising extends beyond political history and educational discourse into contemporary spaces of music, dance, performance, and popular culture, where new generations continue to negotiate questions of identity, belonging, and cultural visibility.

Literature review

The Soweto Uprising of 1976 occupies a significant place in scholarship on youth resistance, language politics, and educational transformation in South Africa. Existing studies emphasise that the uprising was not merely a reaction to the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, but a broader challenge to systems of racial domination and

cultural oppression embedded within apartheid education (Ndlovu, 2006; Kallaway & Hyslop, 1999). Scholars have demonstrated that language functioned as both a symbol and instrument of power, making resistance to Afrikaans simultaneously an educational, political, and cultural struggle (Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986; Alexander, 2003). The uprising further highlighted the capacity of young people to act as agents of social change, mobilising around issues of linguistic identity, educational access, and cultural self-determination. This understanding of youth agency provides an important historical foundation for examining contemporary forms of linguistic and cultural expression among South African youth.

Research on music and resistance has similarly demonstrated the important role of musical and protest performance in anti-apartheid struggles. Music scholars argue that protest songs, chants, slogans, and the *toi-toi* served not only as tools of political mobilisation, but also as mechanisms for constructing collective identity and sustaining resistance movements (Coplan, 2007; Schumann, 2008). Through repetition, rhythm, call-and-response structures, and collective participation, struggle songs transformed political messages into shared social experiences. These performative traditions enabled ordinary people to participate actively in political struggles and created alternative spaces for communication and solidarity. Studies of African oral performance traditions further highlight the interconnectedness of song, speech, movement, and audience participation within African expressive traditions, suggesting that resistance was often embodied as much as it was verbal (Gunner, 2004; Finnegan, 2012). Such scholarship provides a useful framework for understanding continuities between historical protest traditions and contemporary youth cultural practices.

A growing body of literature has examined the emergence of South African hip-hop as an important site of youth identity formation, political expression, and linguistic creativity in post-apartheid South Africa (Haupt, 2008; Satyo, 2014; Motsapi, 2015). More recent scholarship has similarly examined the rise of *Motswako* hip-hop and *Amapiano* as genres through which young people negotiate language, identity, locality, and cultural belonging (Storey, 2018; Mhlongo, 2021). Such multilingual practices support the view that languages are fluid social resources rather than fixed linguistic systems (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007). This reflects broader patterns in which South African youth employ language as a resource for negotiating identity and belonging (Lekalake, 2016).

The relationship between language, cultural memory, and decolonisation has also attracted considerable scholarly attention. Decolonial scholars argue that the revitalisation of African languages constitutes an important aspect of challenging colonial

epistemologies and restoring indigenous forms of knowledge and identity (Fanon, 1967; Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986; Nyamnjoh, 2020). Cultural memory theorists further contend that societies preserve and reinterpret historical experiences through symbolic practices such as music, storytelling, performance, and collective remembrance (Assmann, 2011). Within this context, contemporary Setswana music, spoken-word poetry, and dance may be understood as cultural spaces through which historical memories of linguistic struggle are reimagined and transmitted to new generations. While existing scholarship has explored the Soweto Uprising, protest music, and contemporary African-language cultural production separately, limited attention has been given to the historical connections between the performative traditions of 1976 and contemporary Setswana youth expression. This study contributes to addressing this gap by examining how language, music, dance, and performance continue to function as vehicles of youth agency, cultural resistance, and linguistic reclamation across generations.

Research design and methodology

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design situated within a cultural-historical framework. The design is informed by the understanding that music, language, dance, and musical and spoken-word performances function as cultural texts through which social meanings, identities, and forms of resistance are produced and communicated (Burke, 2005; Storey, 2018). The study seeks to explore how contemporary Setswana youth musical and performative practices reflect, reinterpret, and transform elements of the linguistic and cultural resistance associated with the 1976 Soweto Uprising. Rather than establishing direct causal relationships between historical and contemporary phenomena, the study investigates historical continuities, cultural resonances, and shifts in forms of youth agency across different socio-political contexts.

The research is grounded in interpretivism, which assumes that cultural products such as songs, spoken-word performances, protest chants, and dance practices carry meanings that must be understood within their historical and social contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach is appropriate, because the study examines how young people employ language, music, and musical and spoken word performance to construct identity, negotiate belonging, and articulate forms of cultural resistance. The focus is, therefore, not on measuring behaviour or establishing generalisable patterns, but on interpreting symbolic meanings embedded within cultural expression.

Data sources

The study utilised two complementary categories of data. The first category consists of historical materials relating to the 1976 Soweto Uprising, including published historical accounts, scholarly literature, archival records, documented protest chants, struggle songs, slogans, and descriptions of *toi-toi* performances (South African History Online, n.d.; Bonner & Segal, 1998; Hyslop, 1999; Ndlovu, 2006). These sources provided insight into the linguistic, musical, and performative characteristics of youth resistance during the uprising.

The second category consisted of contemporary Setswana youth cultural texts drawn from *Motswako* hip-hop, *Amapiano*, and spoken-word poetry. Purposively selected texts included musical works by Hip Hop Pantsula (HHP), Tuks Senganga, Khuli Chana, and Focalistic, as well as spoken-word performances by Bothale Boikanyo. These texts were selected because they foreground Setswana or Setswana-dominant linguistic varieties, enjoy significant circulation among youth audiences, and contain themes related to identity, language, belonging, cultural pride, and social commentary. Audio and video performances available through publicly accessible platforms were used as primary sources for analysis.

Sampling strategy

Purposive sampling was employed to select both historical and contemporary texts that were relevant to the objectives of the study (Patton, 2015). Historical materials were selected based on their documented association with the Soweto Uprising and their relevance to language activism, protest performance, and youth mobilisation. Contemporary texts were selected according to three criteria: the prominence of Setswana as a linguistic resource; the visibility of the artist or performance within youth cultural spaces; and the presence of themes relating to identity, language reclamation, cultural expression, or resistance.

The sample was intentionally drawn from multiple expressive forms, including protest chants, struggle songs, hip-hop, *Amapiano*, spoken-word poetry, and dance-based performance cultures. This enabled the study to explore similarities and differences across historical periods and performance genres while avoiding an overly narrow focus on lyrics alone.

Trustworthiness and ethical considerations

Trustworthiness was enhanced through the triangulation of multiple data sources, including historical records, scholarly literature, musical texts, and spoken-word performances. The use of established historical sources and publicly accessible cultural artefacts enabled the verification of interpretations and contextual claims. Furthermore, the analysis maintained transparency by distinguishing between textual evidence and researcher interpretation throughout the study.

Because the research relied exclusively on publicly available historical documents, published literature, musical recordings, and publicly performed artistic works, no human participants were directly involved. Consequently, no ethical risks associated with interviews, surveys, or participant observation arose. Nevertheless, all artists, performers, and scholarly sources were appropriately acknowledged and cited in accordance with academic conventions.

Sample composition and justification

The protest chants and struggle songs of the 1976 Soweto Uprising served as powerful instruments of mobilisation, solidarity, and resistance. Chants such as “*Amandla!*” (Power!) and the collective response “*Awethu!*”, (Ours!/ To the People!) together with freedom songs and *toi-toi* performances, transformed language into a participatory form of political expression. Through repetition, rhythm, call-and-response structures, and collective vocalisation, these chants unified learners around a common cause and enabled them to communicate resistance in ways that transcended individual voices (Coplan, 2007; Schumann, 2008). The integration of song, movement, and spoken slogans created a shared political identity and sustained the momentum of collective action.

Beyond their mobilising function, these chants constituted acts of linguistic defiance and informal political education. By foregrounding African languages in public spaces, protesting learners challenged the symbolic authority of apartheid language policies and asserted the legitimacy of indigenous linguistic identities (Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o, 1986; Alexander, 2003). The repeated performance of chants and songs also created alternative spaces of learning where ideas of justice, solidarity, and self-determination were collectively constructed and shared (Freire, 1970; Hyslop, 1999). These linguistic and performative features provide an important foundation for understanding how contemporary Setswana youth artists continue to employ language, repetition, and collective expression as resources for cultural agency and identity formation.

The selection of contemporary texts was informed by the study's objective of examining how youth agency, linguistic identity, and cultural expression are articulated through Setswana-dominant musical and poetic forms.

To facilitate a historically grounded comparison, the sample was constructed around genres and artists whose work foregrounds Setswana as a significant linguistic resource and whose performances enjoy broad circulation among youth audiences. The selection was further informed by the linguistic and performative characteristics of the protest chants and struggle songs associated with the 1976 Soweto Uprising. Beyond their political significance, these chants relied on repetition, short memorable phrases, call-and-response structures, rhythmic delivery, and collective participation, enabling large groups of learners to engage actively in acts of resistance and solidarity (Coplan, 2007; Schumann, 2008). The repetitive nature of slogans such as "*Amandla! Awethu!*", together with the integration of chanting, singing, and *toi-toi* movement, transformed protest into a collective performative act in which language, music, and bodily expression reinforced political consciousness and group identity.

The sample spans three expressive domains: *Motswako* hip-hop, Amapiano popular culture, and spoken-word poetry. Within the *Motswako* hip-hop tradition, artists such as HHP, Tuks Senganga, and Khuli Chana were selected, because their work foregrounds Setswana and employs musical and linguistic strategies that lend themselves to comparison with the participatory forms evident in protest chants. HHP's *Tswaka*, Tuks Senganga's *Bona Fela* and *Monate Thwaa*, and Focalistic's "*16 Days No Sleep*" incorporate repetitive refrains, memorable hooks, and forms of collective address that encourage audience participation, while Botlhale Boikanyo's spoken-word performances draw on direct audience engagement, rhythmic delivery, and oral performance traditions (Finnegan, 2012). Collectively, these texts provide a suitable corpus for examining how linguistic affirmation, performance, and youth expression are articulated across different genres, while also enabling comparison with the musical and performative features associated with the protest traditions of 1976 (Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986; Jamison & Eyerman, 1998).

Analysis and discussion

This study analyses contemporary Setswana-dominant youth musical and poetic texts as historically situated expressions of youth agency, language reclamation, and cultural resistance, placing them in dialogue with the linguistic, educational, and cultural struggles associated with the 1976 Soweto Uprising. Rather than assuming a direct historical lineage,

the analysis adopts a continuity-through-transformation perspective, examining how the logics of resistance, justice, identity, and solidarity that characterised the protest culture of 1976 continue to resonate within contemporary youth cultural production. Contemporary musical and poetic texts are, therefore, treated as cultural artefacts that both preserve and reinterpret earlier traditions of youth expression, enabling a comparative analysis without collapsing the distinct historical contexts within which they emerged.

The study focuses on Setswana-dominant musical and spoken-word texts, because Setswana occupies a distinctive position within South African youth culture through genres such as *Motswako* hip-hop, where language itself becomes a symbolic resource for identity formation, cultural affirmation, and resistance to linguistic marginalisation. Songs and performances by HHP, Tuks Senganga, Khuli Chana, Focalistic, and Bothale Boikanyo were selected because they foreground Setswana or Setswana-dominant linguistic varieties, enjoy significant circulation among youth audiences, and engage themes of identity, belonging, language, and social commentary. Through thematic, discourse, and comparative historical analysis, the study explores how contemporary youth artists employ language, music, dance, and performance to negotiate visibility and agency in post-apartheid South Africa.

A useful starting point for this discussion is the protest culture of the 1976 Soweto Uprising itself. The uprising was not only a political response to the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, but also a cultural and linguistic struggle in which learners challenged apartheid authority through collective forms of expression (Hyslop, 1999; Ndlovu, 2006). Protest chants, slogans, struggle songs, and *toi-toi* performances functioned as powerful tools of mobilisation, solidarity, and resistance. Central to these practices were repetition, call-and-response structures, rhythmic delivery, audience participation, and embodied dance performance. Slogans such as “*Amandla!*” followed by the collective response “*Awethu!*” relied on repetitive and memorable structures that transformed individual voices into expressions of collective political identity (Coplan, 2007; Schumann, 2008). Similarly, struggle songs and *toi-toi* performances integrated singing, chanting, movement, and communal participation, creating visible and audible demonstrations of unity, resistance, and determination. Through these practices, language became more than a medium of communication; it became a performative resource through which learners articulated demands for justice, dignity, and educational freedom.

In this way, Setswana functions as a form of symbolic and cultural capital through which artists negotiate recognition, legitimacy, and identity (Bourdieu, 1991). In HHP’s, the

repeated refrain “*Tswaka, tswaka, tswaka*” (Mix, mix, mix) performs a function comparable to that of protest chants by creating a memorable linguistic hook that invites audience participation and collective identification (HHP, 2004). Similarly, Tuks Senganga’s *Monate Thwaa* (Real enjoyment) and *Bona Fela* (Just look) employ repetition, rhythmic delivery, and recurring phrases that encourage communal engagement while simultaneously affirming the legitimacy of Setswana within cultural spaces often dominated by English (Tuks Senganga, 2005). Although these contemporary texts are not directed at a specific political authority in the manner of 1976 protest chants, they continue to challenge linguistic hierarchies by positioning African languages as legitimate vehicles of creativity, authority, and public expression.

A further point of continuity is evident in oral performance and audience engagement. During the Soweto Uprising, slogans, speeches, and chants depended upon collective participation and direct forms of address that transformed listeners into active participants. Similar communicative strategies are visible in Botlhale Boikanyo’s spoken-word performances, where expressions such as “*Hee theetsang! Nkuthwelleng!*” (Hey listen! Listen to me!) directly engage audiences and position the performer as both narrator and social commentator. Through rhythm, oral delivery, and audience interaction, contemporary spoken-word poetry continues traditions of public expression that characterised earlier forms of youth activism. In both historical and contemporary contexts, language functions not merely as communication but as a means of constructing moral authority, collective consciousness, and cultural identity (Mogote wa Poko, 2018 -2022).

The relationship between *toi-toi* (Chants) and contemporary youth dance cultures further demonstrates how forms of resistance and collective expression evolve across generations. During the Soweto Uprising, synchronised movement and rhythmic chanting transformed protest into an embodied act of solidarity and political commitment. Contemporary genres such as *Motswako* hip-hop and *Amapiano* similarly integrate music, movement, and audience participation through dance routines, performance challenges, and communal engagement. While these practices are often associated with entertainment, they continue to create spaces through which young people negotiate belonging, visibility, and cultural pride. In both contexts, dance functions alongside language and music as a powerful medium of collective expression and identity formation.

The comparison between the protest traditions of 1976 and contemporary Setswana youth cultural production reveals both continuity and transformation. Resistance during the Soweto Uprising was overtly political and directed towards state-imposed linguistic and

educational policies. In contemporary cultural texts, resistance is often symbolic, linguistic, and cultural. Artists such as HHP, Tuks Senganga, Khuli Chana, and Focalistic advance linguistic pride and cultural visibility through the strategic use of Setswana and Setswana-dominant varieties, while spoken-word performers such as Bothale Boikanyo employ oral performance to engage contemporary social concerns. Although the contexts differ, the recurring use of repetition, audience participation, collective performance, rhythmic delivery, and embodied expression demonstrates that contemporary youth continue to draw upon broader African traditions of language-based and performative resistance. These practices illustrate how the ideals of identity, solidarity, justice, and agency that animated the Soweto Uprising continue to be negotiated and reimagined through music, dance, and spoken-word performance in post-apartheid South Africa.

Findings

1. Language remains the primary site of youth agency across generations

A central finding is that language continues to function as the core resource through which youth assert agency, just as it did in 1976. While the uprising rejected Afrikaans as a tool of domination, contemporary youth reclaim Setswana and Sepitori as tools of dignity and authority. In *“Ke ba hupetsa ka Setswana, leleme la Mme”* (I am choking them with Setswana, my mother tongue). (Tuks Senganga, 2005), language becomes both a weapon and inheritance, echoing the 1976 insistence that meaningful education and expression must occur in the learners’ own languages. Contemporary artists do not necessarily reject English as the youth of 1976 rejected Afrikaans. Rather, they challenge the symbolic dominance of English by elevating Setswana to equal status within popular culture. Through code-switching and linguistic hybridity, artists reposition African languages from the margins to the centre of cultural production.

2. Protest chant logic persists in musical and poetic form

A notable continuity between the protest traditions of 1976 and contemporary Setswana youth music is the use of hooks and refrains. During the Soweto Uprising, slogans functioned as collective refrains that reinforced solidarity, participation, and resistance through repetition. Similar strategies are evident in contemporary music, where repeated hooks create memorable and participatory performances. HHP’s *Tswaka* (Mix), Tuks Senganga’s *Bona Fela* and *Monate Thwaa*, and Focalistic’s *“16 Days No Sleep”* all employ recurring phrases that encourage audience engagement and collective identification. While

these songs emerge from different historical contexts, their use of repetitive refrains mirrors the communicative and unifying functions of protest chants (Focalistic, 2020). In both cases, repetition serves to strengthen collective identity, sustain participation, and affirm the visibility of African languages in public cultural spaces.

3. Resistance has shifted from confrontation to cultural and moral assertion

Another key finding is that youth resistance has transformed in form, however, not in intent. HHP's "*Bosso*" redefines authority from hierarchical to communal ("*Bosso ke wena le wena*"), (Boss is you and you) echoing the 1976 rejection of illegitimate power structures in schools. Khuli Chana's "*Kasi Yami*" (My Neighborhood) demonstrates resistance through ethical self-positioning, refusing imposed criminal identities (Khuli Chana, 2012). This indicates a historical shift from resistance against overt state oppression to resistance against symbolic, social, and discursive marginalisation.

4. Justice is framed as dignity, recognition, and fair participation

Justice in the analysed texts is not primarily legalistic; it is experiential and moral. In "*See*", social injustice is exposed through testimony of poverty, addiction, and broken educational hopes ("*She thinks o kwa sekolong* (she is at school)..."), paralleling 1976's link between schooling and life chances. In Amapiano texts like "*16 Days No Sleep*", justice appears as survival amid scarcity, highlighting enduring inequalities despite political transition

5. Youth identity is constructed as African, ethical, and linguistically confident

The findings indicate that contemporary Setswana music and spoken-word poetry reflect key principles associated with Black Consciousness, particularly the affirmation of African languages as resources for identity, self-representation, and cultural pride. The selected texts demonstrate a deliberate foregrounding of Setswana within artistic spaces that have historically been dominated by colonial languages. This linguistic choice resonates with the ideals of Black Consciousness, which emphasise the reclamation of African languages and cultures as part of broader processes of empowerment and self-definition (Biko, 1978). Similar to the learners of 1976 who resisted linguistic domination through the assertion of African identities, contemporary artists employ Setswana to express local experiences, challenge linguistic marginalisation, and promote cultural visibility.

Through their artistic practices, HHP, Tuks Senganga, Focalistic, and Bothale Boikanyo position Setswana as a legitimate medium for creativity, social commentary, and youth expression. In doing so, the artists contribute to the continued valorisation of African languages within contemporary cultural spaces, reflecting the enduring influence of Black Consciousness ideals in post-apartheid South Africa.

6. Solidarity is reimagined from mass mobilisation to everyday collectivity

While 1976 solidarity manifested through mass protest, contemporary solidarity often takes the form of shared recognition and collective endurance. Songs like “16 Days No Sleep” and “Bona Fela” construct solidarity through shared hustle, gossip, exhaustion, and perseverance. Youth poetry extends solidarity across linguistic and racial boundaries, as seen in “*madi bhambhaneni sibe monye* (let’s unite and be one)”, reaffirming unity as a core liberation value.

7. Multilingualism functions as a historical argument

The findings indicate that contemporary Setswana youth music shares several musical and performative characteristics with the protest chants and struggle songs of the 1976 Soweto Uprising. One of the most prominent features is repetition, which reinforces key messages and encourages collective participation. During the uprising, repetitive slogans and call-and-response structures enabled large groups of learners to engage actively in protest performances and sustain a sense of solidarity (Coplan, 2007; Schumann, 2008). Similar patterns are evident in the selected musical texts, where recurring hooks, refrains, and rhythmic phrases create memorable performances that invite audience participation and strengthen communal identification. These features demonstrate how repetition continues to serve both aesthetic and social functions within youth cultural expression.

The findings further highlight the importance of spoken word performance, rhythm, and audience engagement as shared characteristics across historical and contemporary contexts. The integration of chanting, singing, and *toi-toi* movement during the 1976 protests transformed resistance into a collective performative act, while contemporary artists employ rhythmic delivery, vocal emphasis, and interactive performance techniques to engage listeners and communicate cultural meanings. Similarly, Bothale Boikanyo’s spoken-word performances draw on oral traditions through direct address to the audience, expressive delivery, and rhythmic narration. These musical and performative practices suggest that contemporary Setswana youth expression extends beyond linguistic

affirmation to incorporate modes of participation and performance that echo the collective spirit of protest traditions, thereby reinforcing youth agency and cultural identity (Jamison & Eyerman, 1998; Finnegan, 2012).

8. Dance and Embodied Forms of Youth Expression

The findings indicate that dance constitutes an important dimension of youth agency and collective expression in both the 1976 Soweto Uprising and contemporary youth culture. During the uprising, the *toi-toi* functioned as more than a physical accompaniment to protest chants and struggle songs; it served as a symbolic expression of unity, resistance, and collective determination. The synchronisation of movement, rhythm, and vocal performance transformed protest into an embodied act through which participants communicated solidarity and political commitment (Coplan, 2007; Schumann, 2008). In this context, resistance was expressed not only through words and songs, but also through coordinated bodily movement that reinforced collective identity.

A similar emphasis on movement and participation is evident in contemporary Setswana youth music, particularly within genres such as Amapiano and *Motswako* hip-hop, where dance forms an integral part of musical performance and audience engagement. Dance challenges, choreographed routines, and participatory performance practices enable young people to actively engage with music and express shared cultural identities. Although these forms of expression operate within different social and historical contexts, they retain the collective and participatory qualities associated with the *toi-toi* tradition. The continued integration of music, movement, and communal performance suggests that dance remains an important medium through which youth negotiate identity, visibility, and belonging within contemporary cultural spaces (Jamison & Eyerman, 1998; Finnegan, 2012).

Limitations of the study

As a historically oriented analysis of contemporary cultural texts, this study operates within several methodological constraints. First, the study does not claim a direct causal relationship between the protest chants of the 1976 Soweto Uprising and contemporary Setswana youth music. Rather, the identified similarities are interpreted as historical resonances, shared performative practices, and recurring forms of linguistic and cultural expression. This approach aligns with cultural-historical methodologies that emphasise contextual interpretation and continuity over linear models of influence or causation (Burke, 2005; Tosh, 2015).

The current study primarily relies on publicly available musical and spoken-word texts. As a result, the analysis is confined to the linguistic, thematic, and performative features visible within the selected artefacts. It does not directly explore the intentions of the artists, the reception by audiences, or the interpretations of listeners. The absence of interviews, oral histories, and audience-based data restricts the extent to which broader meanings and social impacts can be assessed. Nevertheless, the texts are treated as cultural documents situated within specific historical and social contexts, an established approach in cultural and oral history scholarship (Portelli, 1991; Trouillot, 1995).

Third, although the study engages with musical and performative dimensions such as repetition, rhythm, audience participation, and oral delivery, it does not undertake a formal musicological analysis of melody, harmony, tempo, instrumentation, or compositional structure. The emphasis remains on the cultural, linguistic, and performative significance of the selected texts rather than on their technical musical properties. Future studies may benefit from incorporating ethnomusicological approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between protest traditions and contemporary music practices.

Finally, the purposive selection of a small corpus of highly visible artists and texts limits the generalisability of the findings. The selected examples are intended as illustrative case studies rather than representative samples of all Setswana youth musical productions. Furthermore, while Setswana was selected because of its prominence within genres such as *Motswako* hip-hop and its relevance to the current study's focus on linguistic identity and youth agency, South Africa is a multilingual society with numerous African languages that have similarly contributed to cultural expression, resistance, and identity formation. The exclusive focus on Setswana, therefore, does not capture the full diversity of linguistic practices evident in contemporary South African youth culture. Future studies may extend this line of inquiry by examining comparable themes in other African languages, such as isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sesotho, Sepedi, Xitsonga, Tshivenda, isiNdebele, and Siswati, to provide a broader understanding of the relationship between language, music, and youth agency in South Africa.

In addition, the current study remains attentive to the risk of presentism when relating contemporary cultural forms to the Soweto Uprising. To mitigate this, the uprising is treated as a historically situated moment of linguistic and educational resistance, while contemporary texts are analysed as distinct cultural productions that may reflect continuity, adaptation, or transformation rather than direct equivalence (Bonner & Segal, 1998).

The findings should therefore be understood as a historically grounded interpretation of selected texts, rather than a comprehensive account of all contemporary South African youth cultural expression.

Conclusion

The current study has examined contemporary Setswana youth music and spoken-word performance as cultural texts that preserve, reinterpret, and extend elements of the protest traditions associated with the 1976 Soweto Uprising. The study explores the connections between the chants, struggle songs, and *toi-toi* performances from 1976 and contemporary expressions found in *Motswako* hip-hop, *Amapiano*, and spoken-word poetry. It demonstrates that music, together with musical, spoken-word, and embodied performances remain vital platforms for young people to express their identity, agency, and sense of belonging. The analysis shows that musical features such as repetition, hooks, refrains, rhythmic delivery, audience participation, and collective performance remain significant communicative strategies in the works of artists such as HHP, Tuks Senganga, Focalistic, and Bothale Boikanyo, echoing the participatory qualities of protest chants and struggle songs.

The study further highlights the importance of dance and embodied performance in sustaining traditions of collective expression across generations. Just as the *toi-toi* combined movement, rhythm, and vocal performance to communicate solidarity and resistance during the Soweto Uprising, contemporary music genres such as *Motswako* hip-hop and *Amapiano* continue to integrate dance, audience engagement, and communal participation as central components of youth cultural expression. These performative practices demonstrate that resistance and identity formation are communicated not only through language, but also through music, movement, and shared performance experiences. Contemporary Setswana music and spoken-word poetry serve as platforms where historical memory, cultural pride, and youth voices are continuously negotiated and reaffirmed.

The current study emphasises the importance of music, dance, and performance in understanding the historical significance of the Soweto Uprising. It shows how the legacy of the uprising continues to influence contemporary cultural practices. The findings reveal that the impact of the 1976 uprising extends beyond political memory and educational discussions; it also permeates the everyday musical and performative experiences of young people today.

By incorporating Setswana, participatory musical structures, and collective forms of expression, contemporary artists play a crucial role in affirming African languages and identities. Therefore, this article argues that music and dance should not be viewed merely as forms of entertainment, but rather as historically significant practices that enable youth to engage with issues of identity, cultural visibility, and social meaning in post-apartheid South Africa.

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