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Understanding amapiano and the South African city through the music videos of *Big Flexa* and *Bhebha*

Albert Olatunde Oloruntoba

Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This article explores the impact of the new South African music and dance sub-genre, amapiano, on contemporary South African youth culture, and how this contributes to the ways in which youth practice (re)define the understandings of youth and urbanities in parts of South Africa over the past decade. I analyse two selected amapiano music videos, *Big Flexa* (2021) by Costa Titch and *Bhebha* (2023) by Myztro, Mellow & Sleazy, QuayR Musiq, Matuteboy, ShaunMusiQ & Ftears and Xduppy posted on YouTube, exploring their representations of urbanities, South African youth and amapiano culture, and what I conceptualise as cyber-hinterlands in this article. By analysing these themes, the article addresses a range of key cultural and socio-political concerns that represent predominant interests of amapiano makers, consumers, fans and remixers. Recent scholarship on African urbanities has highlighted the porousness of neat rural-urban divides and brought the study of the rural "hinterland" more closely into considerations of African citiness. This article argues for recognising the digital media landscape, largely non-existent during the eras of earlier genres like jazz, kwaito and others, as a cyber-hinterland, akin to the supposed rural "other," where amapiano youth culture flourishes and profoundly shapes youths' understanding and experience of urban spaces in South Africa.

KEYWORDS

Amapiano; youth and ama2000; South African urbanity; cyber-hinterland; popular culture

Introduction

Many scholars have explored the various significant ways in which South African youths, through music sub-genres such as kwaito, gqom and hip-hop, have influenced popular culture and urban, peri-urban and rural spaces in South Africa (Coplan 2010; Eaby 2023; Hansen 2006; Hlasane and Peterson 2022; Livermon 2014; Pietilä 2012). These scholars posit that various musical sounds, sub-genres and artists have played an integral part in shaping the nation's multiple political and social transitions. Kwaito of the early 1990s and gqom of the early 2000s are among the recent sounds that have shaped South Africa's contemporary social and political landscape. These two recent genres have also been studied for the ways in which they capture the excitement and hope for a better future that the new democratic dispensation promised (Eaby-Lomas 2021; Peterson 2003; Steingo 2005). The most recent South African music and dance subgenre, amapiano, arguably the most impactful on contemporary South

CONTACT Albert Olatunde Oloruntoba albert.oloruntoba@up.ac.za

African youth, has not yet received extensive critical attention. Existing work on the genre by Dion Eaby-Lomas explores the phrase "amapiano to the world," underlining how the sound travels in different ways, especially through digital networks of social media, from one locale within Africa to the world. This article extends the study of the phenomenon of amapiano by exploring the genre through the multiple spatial dimensions represented in two recent amapiano music videos.

Costa Titch's *Big Flexa* (Costa Titch feat. C'buda M, Alfa Kat, Banaba Des, Sdida & Man T 2021) is arguably the biggest amapiano track produced by a South African maker. It became the fastest amapiano track to reach ten million views on YouTube, in less than three weeks of its release on YouTube. The track was also remixed with American artist Akon shortly before Titch's passing in 2023. Titch, who had become relatively famous for his public dance performances, decided to combine his multiple skills as a dancer, choreographer, rapper and kwaito singer to create *Big Flexa*. The virality of this music can be attributed to many factors, including some of the artistic qualities mentioned earlier; however, his racial background certainly plays a part in his fame. Born to a Greek father and a white South African mother, Titch explores a cultural product that ultimately represents black South African townships. The audio version of *Bhebha* (2023), the second amapiano piece I examine in this article, was released earlier but only went viral when the video came out in 2023. Made by several artists, Myztro, Mellow & Sleazy, QuayR Musiq, Matuteboy, ShaunMusiQ and Ftears and Xduppy, the song particularly appeals to youths – a demography often referred to as the ama2000s in the South African context – especially because of the social connotation of the term *Bhebha*, which means "to have sex" in isiZulu. Both *Big Flexa* and *Bhebha* also attract a social media audience, a space which this article refers to as the cyber-hinterland, as it coexists alongside the concrete spaces of both the city and the township. My discussion of the videos of the two amapiano tracks below underscores how they encapsulate and refract the experiences, problems and pleasures of the post-2010 South African youth and how the city, the township and digital media as spaces represented in the videos but also as spaces of reception, circulation and digital remaking contribute to the meanings of the videos.

South Africa's political history has strongly influenced its complex and diverse musical heritage (Mhlambi 2004). The multiplicity of cultural practices in the country, along with transnational musical influences brought about by colonialism, apartheid and migration, has shaped the South African popular music culture we know today (Boloka 2003; Künzler 2011; Mhlambi 2004). Especially urban centres like Johannesburg have become hubs of musical linkages and exchanges with various indigenous, intra- and intercontinental musical styles and sensibilities. This article examines the interplay between globalised images and traditional forms through the lens of amapiano, youth culture and the representation of South African citiness in selected music videos. It particularly foregrounds the connection between this musical genre, the youth and their idea of the city. I show that amapiano, as a genre, is becoming established as an important soundmark and landmark in contemporary South African urbanities. This article therefore follows Connie Rapoo's assertion in *Urbanised Soundtracks: Youth Popular Culture in the African City* (2013) that "youth[s] in the African city use popular culture to 'work out' the experiences, problems, contradictions, and hopes for Africa" (377). African "popular music [therefore] gets woven into the soundtrack of events, moments and experiences" (Nyairo and Ogude 2005, 226) of its people. Focusing on the popular cultural product of

amapiano, this article explores how South African youths use the genre to navigate their identities and experiences within their cities and township spaces. Analysing the lyrics and video images of the two songs, the article argues that this new musical sound, mainly produced and consumed by black youths, contributes towards redefining contemporary South African urbanism and popular culture as characterised by unbridled creativity, confidence, a quest for pleasure, different forms of political participation and wasting or what *Bhebha* terms "one-upmanship."

I analyse the two selected amapiano tracks through Virginia Braun, Victoria Clarke and Paul Weate's (2016) method of thematic analysis (TA). According to Clarke and Braun, TA is an effective research and "analytical method that allows for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data" (2017, 297). In the two music videos, the subjects of urbanity, social media, ama2000, one-upmanship and mobility emerge as consistent patterns/themes, which largely guided the selection of these tracks. Other factors include the relative newness of these tracks (*Big Flexa* 2021, *Bhebha* 2023); their ideological elements such as ama2000ism and DIY (Do It Yourself) culture; and the videography of the songs. As a music and dance sub-genre that has seen little critical attention, the analysis of these two influential tracks not only contributes to bringing amapiano into academic discussion but also explores the different ways in which young people experience and engage with this genre that so prominently shapes the identities of post-2010 South African black youth.

The nature of amapiano and its common features

Amapiano is a dance and music sub-genre that originated in South Africa. It is characterised by electronic dance music and distinguished by its use of piano melodies, smooth jazz elements and various components from other musical genres such as Kwaito, House and Bacardi. Eaby-Lomas describes it as "an electronically produced dance music which emerged from South African townships around 2012 and has since grown to become the most consumed music in the country at present" (2024, 3). Because of its electronic nature, it blends and experiments with multiple local and global genres and sounds, creating a distinctly refined signature. Produced through the collaboration of multiple stakeholders – the DJ, producer and vocalist(s) – fulfilling different roles necessary for the optimal production of the music, it is primarily celebrated for its unique pollyannaish sound. Lyrics are mostly repetitive across a track, and the amapiano songs tend to romanticise ideas that could be perceived as hedonistic. Therefore, amapiano is not typically associated with intricate lyricism, although some songs have been praised for their engagement with social and political issues. The genre has faced criticism for its tendency to sound the same. This is partly because it is composed for dancing, evident in the development of accompanying dance moves variously referred to as "pouncing cat," "the Zekethe," "Dakiwe challenge," etc.

The first set of amapiano sounds, which hit the airwaves around 2014, began with instrumentation that can last for up to 2–3 minutes before words are spoken. Eaby-Lomas (2021) refers to this prolonged music and subsequent gradual addition of other elements as "slow-burn" in his work on gqom (111). When words are spoken, they are often short and repetitive. Fallo's (2015) and Kabza De Small feat. AraSoul Sax's *Hate* (2016) are typical examples. Unlike genres such as jazz, hip-hop, gqom and others that

demand audiences to listen to the lyrics of their songs, many consumers of amapiano care more about the feeling of the vibe and the pleasure the sound evokes within them, although they do not completely disregard lyrics, no matter how short or repetitive. Blogger Memuna Konteh observes that "though not expressly political, the optimistic, anticipatory feel of the music, with its lengthy instrumental intros and dreamlike vocals, speak to a need for escapism and hendoism [sic] fuelled by turbulent politics" (2021). The yearning for vibe and pleasure displayed by amapiano lovers can be regarded as unique among consumers of some of the post-apartheid music sub-genres like bubblegum and electronic dance music (EDM). However, when the sound is followed by matching insightful lyrics, it heightens the demand for and consumption of that particular track.

Another common feature of this music, especially produced by South African makers, is the language of transmission and dissemination. Amapiano, like other South African music genres, incorporates local South African languages like isiZulu, isiXhosa, Xitsonga and others to convey its lyrics. The earlier versions of this sound were mainly in these local languages. These languages deepen the genre's rootedness in the culture of black South Africans, and therefore further soundmark the genre as typically South African. However, in recent times, transnational collaborations with artists around the globe have led to a greater use of English and other transnational colloquial languages like the popular Nigerian "pidgin English," Kiswahili and others, to further embrace the rapid growth the sound is enjoying. Interestingly, most songs with the highest views and streams on YouTube and other music listening platforms feature foreign artists or incorporate English and other non-South African languages. In fact, of the five African songs nominated for the Grammy Award for Best African Music Performance 2024, three of them, including Olamide and Aseke's *Amapiano*, Davido and Musa Keys' *Unavailable*, and the eventual winner, Tyla's *Water*, are based on the amapiano sound. Although Tyla's *Water* technically falls into the popiano sub-genre, a blend of pop and amapiano, it brought amapiano music to the biggest music stage, becoming the first winner of this award category.

In their study of kwaito, Hlasane and Peterson (2022) affirm that kwaito is "a dust that cannot settle" (358). This lingering kwaito dust has been one of the key inspirations for the birth and sustenance of amapiano. It has not only impacted the emergence of amapiano, but amapiano has decided to take this dust to "new levels" (Eaby-Lomas 2024, 8). Similarly, amapiano has also undergone transformations, showcasing its flexibility and adaptability as Afrobeats and RnB makers weave elements of Afrobeats and RnB into their amapiano songs. The task of promoting and circulating the genre is largely left in the hands of youths, often referred to in South Africa as ama2000s.

Amapiano and ama2000s

If the culture of the Y generation in the South African context is a "socioeconomically hybrid culture of the kwaito/hip-hop generation" (Pietilä 2012, 145), Gen Alpha or, preferably, ama2000 (isiZulu for "those of the 2000s") is the socioeconomically hybrid culture of the house/kwaito/amapiano generation. Among this group are debates about the exact nature of its members' demography. Some argue that they are strictly people born in the earlier years of the millennium; others broaden the scope to accommodate those born a few years before then, say 1995. It is safe to say, though, that ama2000s are

post-apartheid "children," born in the freest era of the nation's socio-political history, thereby owning and freely executing their artistic and cultural creativities. According to Tom Head of *The South African*, the following characteristics are common among the ama2000s:

> **Digitally active**: Lives aren't just lived vicariously through social media – your online activity is part of your personality.
> **Make bold fashion statements**: We've all seen the "ripped jeans girl" from Durban July – and these guys aren't scared to ignore the norms.
> **Have political awareness**: It's not just a case of being "woke," these youngsters are VOCAL on societal issues that impact them the most.
> **Encourage opulence**: In the Ama2000 community, there's nothing wrong with flaunting what you've got – no matter the expense.
> **Dance like everyone's watching**: An important part of the culture is having the moves. If a dance goes viral, these kids will be on top of it.
> **Possess confidence and social skills**: Gone are the days of our youth "being seen, not heard." This lot are usually the life and soul of the party.
> **Speak in memes**: A generation bought-up on load shedding has a suitably dark and ironic sense of humour, setting them apart from others. (Head 2022)

Head's observations are reflected in the images of the two selected videos I analyse below; they constitute the features of an important generation in the socio-political and cultural landscape of post-apartheid South Africa.

Amapiano has faced criticisms similar to those directed at previous South African music genres and their artists, particularly kwaito and its creators. For instance, in his work, *"Kwaito"* (2000), Simon Stephens addresses what he describes as the "misogynist dimensions of kwaito" where he explores the role of kwaito in the "objectification of women," "sexual metaphors" and many more (265–267), including rape. Maud Blose also postulates that recent (as at the time the paper was being written) kwaito songs have transformed this genre from its ability to "shap[e] South African politics to diverting to a path where women are used in parallel, often represented in derogatory words and pasted as pornographic objects" (2012). Scholars like Stephens and Blose have been criticised for their narrow views of the genres and their makers (see Peterson 2003; Steingo 2005); however, one tends to observe a similar narrative of consumerism, nudity and hedonism with amapiano. Amapiano does not display or exhibit violence as kwaito did before it, but it does encourage a culture of consumerism, the flaunting of wealth, sexualisation of women's bodies and escapism from the present reality of economic problems, especially in black townships. However, I argue that Konteh's observation of the genre and its consumers being "not expressly political" (2021) suggests that the features of amapiano, often deemed unpolitical, are indeed inherently political. I suggest that amapiano exhibits a different kind of politics, a bottom-up politics in which youths participate in everyday political practices that are non-traditional but rooted in freedom and leisure. The unique manner in which young people express their freedom in post-apartheid South Africa is in itself political. We must acknowledge that these youthful characteristics of amapiano reflect sentiments tied

to the era of freedom, especially as black youths grapple with issues of identity and belonging (see Sibanda and Batisai 2021). These sentiments are not only limited to black South African youths in the city and townships but also extend into the digital space, which the youths have appropriated as theirs. In this article, I theorise this digital space as a "cyber-hinterland" because it encompasses other virtual and non-concrete spaces where human activities, especially those of the youth, take place, while also linking it with other concrete city and rural settings that these music videos address.

The idea of the hinterland is woven around the notion that it is the area adjacent to a trade centre (extending to and including its satellites) which allows for more economic and cultural activities to be focused on the areas termed as the centre. Although urban scholars do not agree on the meaning or definition of "hinterland," most consider it to refer to the "other" space adjacent to the centre that largely supplies the city with raw materials needed to run the city/centre. Thus, for a hinterland to exist, there must be a centre with which the hinterland can be compared and *vice versa*. For Amos Hawley, a twentieth-century urban scholar, "the two develop together, each presupposing the other. But while the centre is compact and readily visible, the second component, the outlying area, is diffuse and difficult of precise observation" (Hawley 1950, 245). In various scholarship on African urbanities, the so-called hinterland is studied alongside the centre, where the hinterland is the coastal area while the centre is the urban area (Fraser and Notteboom 2012; Guyer and Lambin 1993; Sperling and Kagabo 2000). The idea of the cyber-hinterland builds on these earlier urban and ecological engagements with the centre and the hinterland. Although they date back to the mid-twentieth century, my application of the concepts of the hinterland and the city proposed by these scholars is important because their views on the centre, interdependence, hinterland and supply of raw materials are relatable to the concept of the cyber-hinterland proposed in this article.

The cyber-hinterland is thus a space outside the concrete physical mainland of the urban, peri-urban, sub-urban and rural. In line with the idea of the hinterland as a supplier of raw material to the city, the cyber-hinterland supplies some form of raw materials in the shape of online trends or hashtags, memes, dance moves, political rallies, languages and slangs of amapiano that become daily usable cultural products in physical spaces. Although these raw materials arguably have their roots in concrete spaces, they only become popular when influenced by the activities in the cyber-hinterland. Because of the cyclical nature of the mobility of raw materials between the concrete and the cyber-hinterland, the boundaries between these two sets of spaces become blurred. The cyber-hinterland is also an outlying area, diffuse and difficult to study because of its intangibility. It serves as a melting pot and the "town centre" for both urban and non-urban residents, breaking geographical boundaries, and simultaneously creating a third space in relation to physical urban and non-urban spaces. The exploration of the cyber-hinterland is important in the context of this study because it represents the interactive social space available to and accessible by a large majority of the ama2000s, irrespective of physical spatiality and social status. Without this space, the city and township consumers of amapiano may never meet. It also serves as the new custodian of cultural content, allowing these cultures to thrive. When we study contemporary African urbanity, therefore, especially paying close attention to African youths, it is vital that we accentuate the role of the cyber-hinterland and the way it impacts the creation and circulation of popular culture.

Furthermore, the article is interested in how the engagements of youths in the cyber-hinterland further youth participation in the (re)production and circulation of the genre. The article therefore follows a similar method adopted in the works of Yékú (2016) and Femi Eromosele (2021), as it explores how the remediation of meanings reflected in these media "catalyse new directions for the understanding of popular culture" (Yékú 2016). Eromosele and Yeku especially look at the remediation of meaning recreated by consumers of original music videos, concluding that consumers' recreative qualities tend to further the meanings of original music videos published on YouTube. Writing about artists and their invocation of the city of Lagos in their music videos, Eromosele proffers that "stars do not merely use the city as conduit for social criticism … but place themselves in contiguity with the city in a way that ensures the sliding of meaning and affect from one to the other" (2023, 133). This also applies to the selected videos, especially *Big Flexa*, which was shot in Soweto and features a white artist. The selected videos are significant for this study because social media metrics like number of views, likes, shares and trends have foregrounded how popular they are among the youth. The remediation of concepts such as Bhebha and izikhothane is evident in these songs, as I will highlight below.

The youth, reading the city through Titch's *Big Flexa*

Big Flexa's original music video was released to critical acclaim on YouTube in December 2021 by owner, Costa Titch (Costantinos Tsobanoglou), featuring other amapiano artists like C'buda M, Alfa Kat, Banaba Des, Sdida & Man T. As soon as it was released, it became a national soundtrack among youths who began performing to it and making short videos of their performances, which they shared on other media platforms, especially TikTok. In its first week of publication, the music video received 1.4 million views on TikTok, over 100,000 views on YouTube, and thousands of other views on other social media platforms. By month seven, it had amassed over 30 million views on YouTube, becoming the first amapiano track to achieve this milestone. Although Titch suddenly sadly passed away during a stage performance in 2022, the views on this track have continued to soar, reaching 136 million views at the time of writing this paper in June 2025. It currently ranks as the most-viewed amapiano track of all time. The dynamic and complex nature of this track makes its selection significant, in addition to other elements such as the positionality of the singer, the song, the setting of the video and the lyrics. Costa Titch, who was a white South African, become a success through his use of kasi-inspired sounds, initially kwaito, and then amapiano, resulting in his celebrity status in the country.

The music, consisting of beats, dance and dancers, lyrics and rendition, ama2000s and other artistic collaborators such as singers, producers, etc., is a typical representation of what amapiano is all about. *Big Flexa* incorporates the stylistic rap of kwaito, showcasing Titch's beginnings in kwaito music. The introduction of the music follows the "slow burn" structure by starting with simple percussion, followed by a distinct piano-like melody that ushers in the dance nature of the music. It then layers in instruments, before introducing a scintillating jazz sound through the guitar and, later on, the whistle, an instrument that is an important element of amapiano. This lasts for almost two minutes

before the singer comes in with a rap style similar to that of the kwaito legend, Mdu Maselela. Other featured artists in this track, like Alfa Kat, then sing amapiano style.

Lyrically, *Big Flexa* explores self-conceit, and, like many other amapiano songs, is escapist and engages with what I have earlier described as everyday politics or bottom-up politics, which diverges from what is traditionally seen as political to a politics associated with freedom and leisure. The images in the video suggest that the video was shot in Soweto. In the opening scene, a young woman walks towards a tuck shop/spaza shop (see Figure 1) in a dance-like manner, joining fellow dancers all dressed in uniforms identical to hers. Throughout the 5:27 long music video, only Soweto is depicted (also see Figure 2 showing image of the popular Soweto Orlando Towers), underscoring the role of the township in the origin and production of the amapiano genre. For more than three

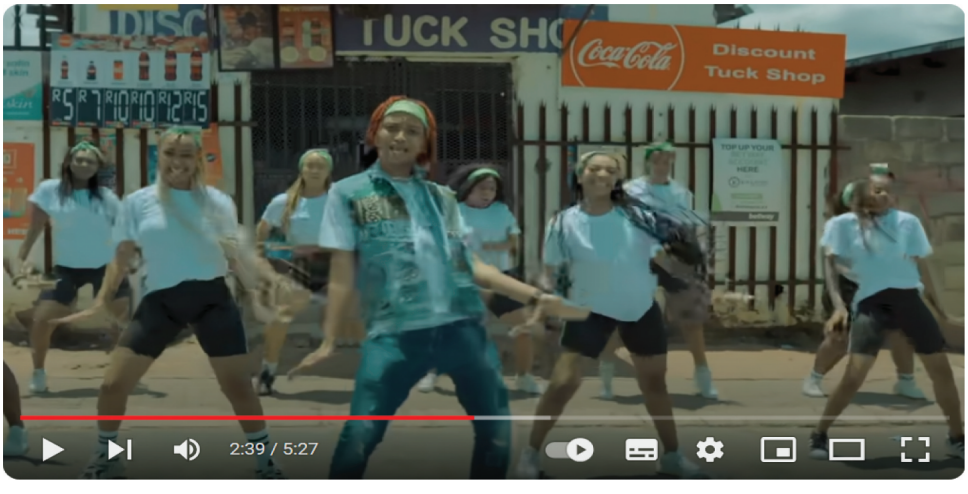

Figure 1. Dancers in front of a tuck shop in the South African township of Soweto. Source: *Big Flexa* (2021) *YouTube* music video.

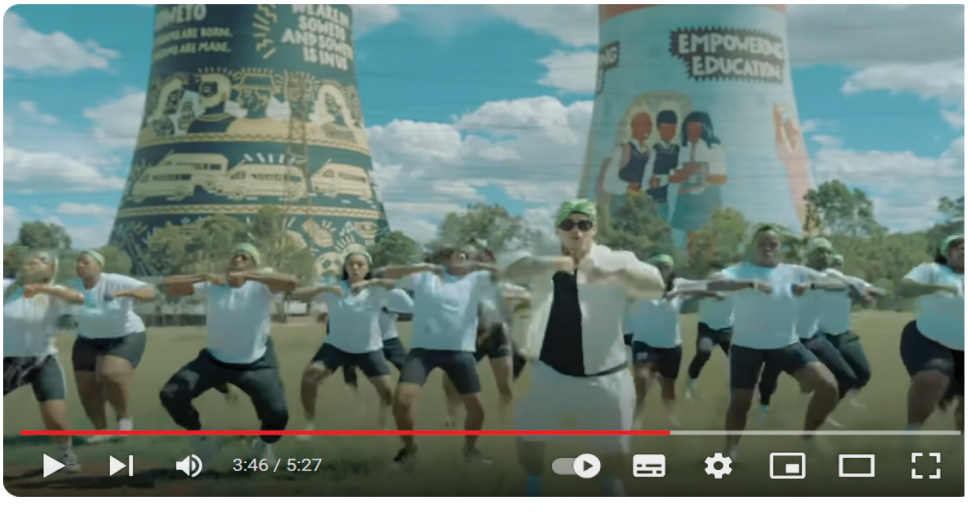

Figure 2. Costa Titch and his dancers perform *Big Flexa* at the Orlando Towers. Source: *Big Flexa* (2021) *YouTube* music video.

minutes of the song, singing and dancing take place in front of the spaza shop, an informal economic system particular to the township developed by black people during apartheid to creatively meet the demands for daily groceries in the townships (Charman and Piper 2011; Terblanche 1991).

Shooting more than half of the music video in this setting firmly foregrounds the relationship between amapiano and township youthfulness, thereby embodying the creativity and DIY (Do It Yourself) ethos of the township. This further affirms Eaby-Lomas's position that "amapiano is proud of its relationship with underserved township locales while simultaneously celebrating new forms of black consumptive freedom, and wider forms of Afrodiasporic connections" (2024, 3).

The second part of the video was shot at the famous Orlando Towers, one of Soweto's most iconic landmarks.

Although this sound has become a popular form of urban music straddling different urban areas, its connection to the township remains a reference point for makers of the sub-genre, either in the lyrics and slang associated with the townships or in the settings of music videos in the township. By shooting the music video in this part of the country, Titch, a non-resident of the township, pays homage to the township as a source of inspiration for South African youth, declaring his allegiance to the space from which amapiano originates. As Eromosele observes in his study of music videos filmed in Lagos, when music makers depict these city scenes, they employ what he terms "affective capital" (2023, 127), which allows stars to position themselves "in a way that ensures the sliding of meaning and affect from one to the other" (Eromosele 2023, 133). Due to the association of amapiano with the township, Titch places himself within the meaning and the affective expression of the township. Although some have criticised Titch for cultural appropriation, what he has achieved regardless of his racial background remains significant. In a column for *Times Live* (2020), senior editor and columnist Chrizelda Kekana took on this debate about cultural appropriation, concluding that Titch "must just be left alone" (2020).

Like many popular amapiano tracks, *Big Flexa* thematically amplifies the desire for youthful pleasure, both in its lyrics and video content. Lyrics such as "ke star like Foca [I am a star like Foca], yeah/Pull up in a Beamer/Too much, Too clean yang'thola? [you get what I am saying?]/A big time player/Crib too big, Nkandla" (Costa Titch feat. C'buda M, Alfa Kat, Banaba Des, Sdida & Man T 2021 in Afrikalyrics) suggest this youthful preoccupation with flaunting expensive cars and showing off expensive-looking "cribs." Going further, Titch adopts literary allusion and intertextuality, a style similar to kwaito artist Mdu Maselela, alluding to South African rapper Focalistic's 2021 song *Ke Star*. Titch compares the size of his "crib" to that of former president Jacob Zuma's infamous "Nkandla" house, suggesting that the target is to look flashy and expensive. The setting of the *Big Flexa* video not only depicts urbanity in its "townshipness," but the lyrics also showcase the quest for leisure that reflects the desires of amapiano youths in the township and other urban areas. As a genre that relies heavily on urban cultural dynamics, as seen in Titch's music video, its commercial success is largely dependent on the youth, who are a group of "online beings." Also referred to as the ama2000s as noted earlier, they spend considerable time in the social media space, enjoying social media content, creating and uploading it, striving for likes and popularity, and ultimately

considering the possibility of monetising these pages. The online space inhabited by this group of people, therefore, allows them to be co-creators through remixing cultural content alongside amapiano makers in how they remediate the song and circulate it.

As soon as *Big Flexa*'s music video was released in 2022, the singer invited fans to the #BigFlexa dance challenge, encouraging young people to record themselves performing the choreographed dance steps from the music video and then post them online. This challenge contributed significantly to the circulation of the song. Youths and adults around the world made hundreds of these short videos and posted them online. The videos have amassed millions of shares, views, likes and comments, further promoting the song, with some of these co-creators becoming social media breakout sensations in their own right. Without the support of this social media space, it is safe to assume that *Big Flexa* would not have achieved the level of popularity it has gathered in the short time since the official release of the music video. Titch's #BigFlexa dance challenge across all major social media platforms further highlights the irreplaceable role of the cyber-hinterland in the consumption and circulation of amapiano songs. By producing a music genre typically associated with youths of different race and class, Titch demonstrates that his creativity is rooted in Ekasi culture, and that he is putting in "effort in learning and understanding the people with whom [he] share[s] home, ... and he therefore, must just be left alone" (Kekana 2020) instead of being criticised by a section of black South Africans who accuse him of cultural appropriation. Whereas the *Big Flexa* video is set in Soweto, its impact on young people of all backgrounds across the globe, who shot and uploaded short video clips of their dances to the song, demonstrates that it has been able to stimulate transnational and cross-cultural engagement, disregarding questions around cultural appropriation.

Different forms of mobilities, from makers to consumers and fans, allow for the circulation of the song and its accompanying nuances, some of which became popular among youths. Mobility as a "concept-metaphor [that] captures the common impression that our lifeworlds are in constant flux, with not only people, but also cultures, objects, capital, businesses, services, diseases, media, images, information, and ideas circulating across the planet" (Salazar and Smart 2011, 1) is a significant feature of urbanities exemplified in Titch's song. Writing about the mobile nature of popular music, Nyairo and Ogude (2005) affirm that "popular music is a travelling text whose multiple meanings are contingent upon the politics of its production and consumption" (226). I find these views on the theme of mobility and popular music useful for the engagement with amapiano and urbanity in this article. Although the genre is originally associated with the space of the township and black makers and listeners, it has transcended its origins, reaching into other urban spaces and embracing multiraciality. It remains closely connected to the township but continually interacts with other South African lifeworlds and extends even further beyond. It has also been able to transcend from the concrete spaces of the city and rural areas to the soft city/space of the cyber-hinterland, a space that has become an embodiment of multiculturality and transnationality. As co-creators or prosumers gain visibility through the dance challenges, the original makers of the song reach a wider audience and, consequently, enjoy the economic benefits of this. The oscillation of the song across multiple media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, X and others is significant for both makers and consumers of amapiano, who can effortlessly switch between being producers and consumers and *vice versa*. The

"travelling" of the song from its source in the township to diverse spaces worldwide is significant in highlighting its mobility, a process which has led to a successful collaboration on a remix of the song between Titch and American singer, songwriter and producer, Akon. A similar influence of social media is seen in the second amapiano track, *Bhebha*, that I analyse in the next section.

Bhebha: *youth's "display of one-upmanship"*

Bhebha's music video was released on YouTube in 2023 by ShaunMusiQ & Ftears. As mentioned earlier, because of the collaborative requirements of making songs in this genre, many artists often come together to create them. Like many amapiano songs, *Bhebha* was collaboratively produced and performed by multiple artists including Myztro, Mellow & Sleazy, QuayR Musiq, Matuteboy, ShaunMusiQ and Ftears and Xduppy. A little over a year since it was uploaded on YouTube, the song has had over 22 million views, over 1,700 comments, tens of thousands of shares, and hundreds of short fan remakes. *Bhebha* has therefore made a significant impact among its fans, particularly the youth.

My analysis of the music video and its depiction of South African youth, urbanities and the online space begins with its Intro: "It is a disturbing new phenomenon that is taking hold among young people. They are spending a fortune on flashy designer gear, and then in a display of one-upmanship, are trashing the clothes and blazingly burning money simply to gain social status" (Bhebha lyrics on *YouTube*)(Myztro, Mellow & Sleazy, QuayR Musiq, Matuteboy, ShaunMusiQ & Ftears and Xduppy 2023). This initial commentary at the beginning of this song evokes the themes of youthful desire for pleasure, flashy appearance and competition among black youths. Like kwaito, the picture of amapiano as a black product that reflects a taste of consumerism (Blose 2012; Mhlambi 2004; Stephens 2000) is invoked in the video as youths are seen wastefully littering the street of the township with Ultramel custard drink (see Figure 3), portraying the idea of waste in the "display of one-upmanship."

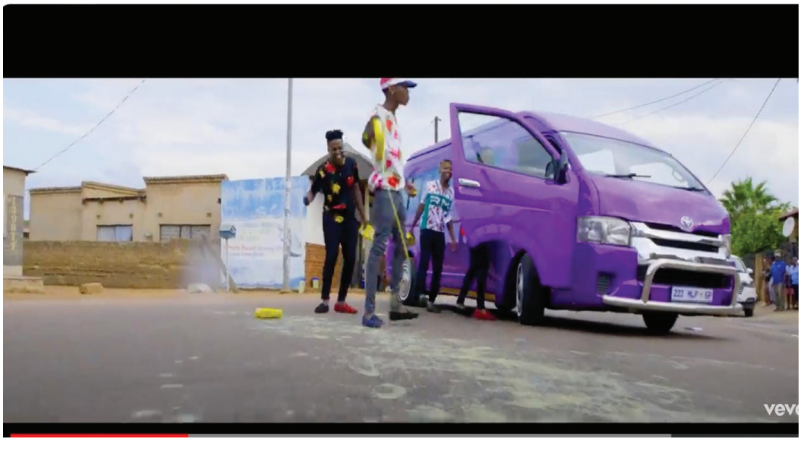

Figure 3. Youths spilling custard drink as a show of one-upmanship. Source: *Bhebha* (2023) *YouTube* music video.

The idea of one-upmanship perhaps finds its roots in Izikhothane culture. This South African battle of showmanship involves dance and performance in which individuals or groups destroy items such as electronics, food, drinks and many more in front of a watching crowd to determine which person or group is wealthier (see Mchunu 2017; Richards and Langa 2018). One-upmanship is a phenomenon among South African youths that entails seeking to outspend, outdo and, as in the case of *Bhebha*'s music video, out-lavish resources, against fellow competitors. The Intro to the song is taken from a 2012 report on eNCA (2012), a national television channel that documented Izikhothane in the township of Katlehong. In the report, the white reporter Debora Patta claimed that the practice is "bling gone obscenely mad" and that residents of Katlehong are battling to make ends meet. As a reaction to and mockery of such reporting concerning a black sub-culture, *Bhebha*'s video transposes Patta's exact words, and then proceeds to show that, in post-apartheid South Africa, the practice does not just suggest wasting of money simply to show status as Patta has reported. Instead, as Mthobeli Ngcongo and Sifiso Mnisi suggest, this practice "challenge[s] social norms and resist[s] structural injustices . . . asserting identity and demanding recognition in a society that has historically treated those who look like them [black young South Africans] as invisible and less than human" (2023). This relates to young black people's reformulation of political participation that is non-traditional but rooted in freedom and leisure. It is therefore a "form of self-expression that has the potential to reclaim a sense of selfhood and pride in the remnants of oppression in post-apartheid South Africa" (Ngcongo and Mnisi 2023).

As shown in the eNCA documentary, Ultramel custard is also seen being littered on the ground in the music video. Ultramel custard, among other drinks, was carefully selected as a product to be wasted in this music video because it symbolised ideas of good living among black impoverished families, especially during apartheid. It was a special treat on Sundays, Easter, Christmas, etc. While the wastage of expensive cognacs like Hennessy or Courvoisier was popularised in Western hip hop music videos (Balaji 2009; Samuel and Lyons 2018; Watts 1997), black youths in the music video for *Bhebha* use Ultramel custard drink instead, referencing narratives that speak to the history of black South African communities. Izikhothane/one-upmanship is a similar practice to *le sape* and the *sapeur* in Congo because of its emphasis on showing off wealth as a performance of masculinity. As mentioned in the Intro to the track, "in a display of one-upmanship, [youths] are trashing the clothes and blazingly burning money simply to gain social status," destruction therefore is a significant part of one-upmanship and Izikhothane. However, in many of these cases, in South Africa, Congo, and elsewhere in the world, it is a common practice that ultimately fosters the desire to perform some form of hyper-masculinity (Bailey 2013; De Jong 2018; Richards and Langa 2018).

Aside from waste and one-upmanship, explicit sexual innuendoes are even more pronounced for those who understand the Tsonga language of the song and for those familiar with the "street meaning" of the word "Bhebha." As such, it is a song that encourages lewdness among youths.

An interesting feature of *Bhebha*'s music video in relation to urbanity is, again, the function of the theme of mobility. Unlike *Big Flexa*, *Bhebha* was shot in Pretoria by musicians who originate from and make music in Pretoria. Images of famous suburban leisure sites, such as the Zanzou Lounge and Bar, and the mention of the 012 club in the

lyrics, suggest that the video depicts Pretoria. The practice of youth and amapiano culture in post-2010 South African cities would have been impossible without the diverse forms of mobilities that characterise youth and pleasure. This mobility is made possible due to young people's "pursuit of sonic pleasure as township tastes, styles, and bodies seeped into formerly white areas" (Livermon 2014, 79). *Bhebha*'s music video is set in two different locations, and the commentaries on the song also attest to this. The images in the first part of the video depict a township area, most likely not far from the suburban city space of Pretoria, where the other part of the video was shot. It is in this township space, with a focus on the scene of the spaza shop, that waste and one-upmanship is displayed. However, in the second part of the video, the scene shifts to the suburb of Hatfield. This is made possible through a process of mobility that is depicted both in the video and through the voice of a male character asking the ama2000 girls to enter the purple mini-bus taxi that will take them to 012 Central, a well-known club in Pretoria's CBD. While this may appear insignificant in the video, it suggests that leisure spaces in the township are perceived as somewhat inadequate for township youth, who yearn for city pleasures in spaces and clubs not found in township areas, where the first part of the video is set.

To enjoy the freedom that post-apartheid South Africa offers in contrast to the "mobility of the Black body [which was] precisely what apartheid attempted to curb" (Livermon 2014, 79), the now freed black body needs to reach the city to complete a full circle of pleasure of sound and space. Peterson describes the experience of moving from the township to the city and vice versa as "the challenges of existing between entrapment and flight" (2003, 207). Peterson's position on the black body's entrapment in the township's ways of life and the desire to experience the post-apartheid city presents a conundrum. It explains why this desired mobility away from township spaces remains part of black people's post-apartheid experience. The breaking away, therefore, of the young black body from the township to the post-apartheid city for sonic pleasure is also an expression of freedom and belonging. Through the movement of young black bodies and their ideas, amapiano becomes a highly mobile genre, spanning South African townships, suburban and inner-city neighbourhoods and extending beyond the country's borders. *Bhebha's* video shows young people enjoying the township space with all its peculiarities and "entrapments" during the day. However, as night falls, the "flight" Peterson speaks of occurs, as leisure activities shift to the city, suggesting that different kinds of pleasure are attained in different geographies and times of the day. The youths, therefore, attempt to "swa[p] ghetto invisibility for the chance of being bonafide public celebrities" (200) in the city, a movement process and spatial engagement that expresses their longing for freedom and belongingness. Using a similar lens to Xavier Livermon, who argues that "kwaito is not simply of the townships or the suburbs, it is both and neither" (Livermon 2014, 90), this article also places amapiano in this space or non-space. However, it takes the idea of the spatiality of amapiano beyond Livermon's conceptualisation of space in relation to kwaito by considering the cyber-hinterland as a space adjacent to the city and the township. While I agree that amapiano, like kwaito, is not simply of the township, the suburbs or the inner-city – it is of all and neither – I suggest that the digital space where amapiano

trends the most can also be considered a valid terrain, a kind of hinterland to the city, the suburbs and the townships that constitutes the most critical space for amapiano makers and the ama2000s. This is because a successful usage and circulation of amapiano song on the cyber-hinterland directly correlates with monetary outcome.

Among other things, the analysis of the selected videos used in this article reflects the interconnectedness between amapiano and the ama2000s. Amapiano fashion is ama2000 fashion; thus, ama2000 fashion reflects amapiano aesthetics. This group of youth conveys a reconfigured bottom-up politics, a lifestyle of fluidity and mobility expressed not only through their fashion as they "make bold fashion statements" (Head 2022), but also through the images and lyrics of *Big Flexa* and *Bhebha*. If they are unable to make authoritative political statements in the concrete traditional urban, suburban and township spaces, the alternative space of digital media affords them this freedom of political participation. Amapiano, therefore, affords people the privilege of experiencing both suburban life and township culture. It enables the ama2000 to engage with digital media activities, allowing them to participate in the production of cultural content while simultaneously consuming and (re)producing it. Through their competitive participation in the dance challenges created for the songs studied in this article, young people engage in co-producing (Bolin 2016) the meaning of the city and township.

Conclusion

The article has observed that urbanity is not only a product of material infrastructures. Creative cultural products emanating from the city's peripheries not only give their makers an avenue to escape precarious socio-economic situations associated with the margins, but they and their products also play a significant role in shaping and remaking urban lifeworlds. Using the amapiano sub-genre as a point of reference, I have shown the close cultural interconnection between amapiano and the ama2000s, which is responsible for the creation of a distinct culture specific to the genre and its community, as expressed in the slogan *amapiano is a lifestyle*. The lifestyle of fashion, one-upmanship, embrace of township culture and citiness, ama2000 and the cyber-space depicted in the analysed videos collectively capture the essence of the amapiano lifestyle. This new musical sound, mostly produced and consumed by youths, plays a prominent role in redefining contemporary South African urbanism and popular culture as one of creativity, confidence, pleasure, everyday politics and waste or what they term one-upmanship. Furthermore, this article concludes that while amapiano relies on South African youths for its global success, these youths require the cyber-hinterland as a means to promote their culture. These agents – amapiano and the media – work together to shape the experiences, challenges and mood of contemporary South African youth residing in townships, suburbs, cities and cyberspace, organically defining their own criteria for stardom and urban identity. In this sense, the digital space represents a workable space that is neither the city, the suburb nor the township, and yet is all. It embodies both rural and city spaces, yet offers something completely different to all.

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Notes on contributor

Albert Olatunde Oloruntoba, is an interdisciplinary scholar who has published in research areas including African Cultural Studies, Comparative Literature, Theatre Arts, Human Rights, Popular Culture, Urban Studies, and Gender Studies. He also possesses a wealth of practical experience working as a radio and TV presenter, news reporter and stage actor. He currently lectures in the Department of English at the University of Pretoria, South Africa.

ORCID

Albert Olatunde Oloruntoba http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6173-1761

Videography

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