

RESEARCH ARTICLE

New currents, old boundaries: exploring the relationship between streaming platforms and Afrikaans music

Schalk D. Van der Merwe

Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa
Email: deltablu@sun.ac.za

Abstract

This article explores the impact of music streaming platforms on popular Afrikaans music. It sets recent technological developments in digital music distribution against the complex historical backdrop of the Afrikaans language and the histories of social marginalization affecting large parts of its linguistic communities. These patterns have shaped Afrikaans music production, consumption and gatekeeping since the first recorded Afrikaans music in the early twentieth century. A key question arises: how has the fundamental shift in the music economy ushered in by streaming platforms enabled previously marginalized Afrikaans artists – particularly from the Coloured community and speakers of vernacular forms such as *Kaaps* – to reach wider audiences, thereby breaking with historical patterns? This article draws on interviews with music artists, scholars, producers, mixing engineers, platform founders and executives, as well as analyses of publicly available data from platforms such as Spotify, YouTube and TikTok. The evidence suggests continuity at the centre: white Afrikaans pop still dominates discovery playlists and editorial spaces – whether curated by human editors, algorithms, or both. Yet the peripheries are stirring. The rise of Afrikaans *gqom* on the Cape Flats and the growing visibility of *Koortjies* within Coloured Pentecostal circuits show how streaming can surface alternative publics, vernacular aesthetics and new circuits of value.

Résumé

Cet article explore l'impact des plateformes de streaming musical sur la musique afrikaans populaire. Il situe les récentes avancées technologiques en matière de distribution de musique numérique dans le contexte historique complexe de la langue afrikaans et des histoires de marginalisation sociale qui touchent une grande partie de ses communautés linguistiques. Ces schémas ont façonné la production, la consommation et la diffusion de la musique afrikaans depuis les premiers enregistrements au début du XXe siècle. Une question essentielle se pose : comment le changement fondamental qu'ont induit les plateformes de streaming dans l'économie musicale a-t-il permis à des artistes afrikaans auparavant marginalisés (notamment issus de la communauté métisse et locuteurs de formes

vernaculaires comme le *kaaps*) de toucher un public plus large, rompant ainsi avec les schémas historiques ? Cet article s'appuie sur des entretiens avec des artistes, des universitaires, des producteurs, des ingénieurs du son, des fondateurs et dirigeants de plateformes, ainsi que sur l'analyse de données accessibles au public provenant de plateformes telles que Spotify, YouTube et TikTok. Ces éléments suggèrent une continuité au centre : la pop afrikaans blanche domine toujours les playlists et les espaces éditoriaux, qu'ils soient gérés par des éditeurs humains, des algorithmes ou les deux. Mais à la marge, les choses bougent. L'essor du *gqom* afrikaans dans la région du Cap et la visibilité croissante des *koortjies* au sein des circuits pentecôtistes métis montrent comment le streaming peut faire émerger des publics alternatifs, des esthétiques vernaculaires et de nouveaux circuits de valeur.

Resumo

Este artigo explora o impacto das plataformas de streaming de música na música popular africâner. Ele compara os recentes desenvolvimentos tecnológicos na distribuição de música digital com o complexo contexto histórico da língua africâner e as histórias de marginalização social que afetam grande parte das suas comunidades linguísticas. Esses padrões moldaram a produção, o consumo e a seleção da música africâner desde a primeira gravação de música africâner no início do século XX. Surge uma questão fundamental: de que forma a mudança fundamental na economia da música, introduzida pelas plataformas de streaming, permitiu que artistas afrikaans anteriormente marginalizados – particularmente da comunidade Coloured e falantes de formas vernáculas como o *kaaps* – alcançassem públicos mais amplos, rompendo assim com os padrões históricos? Este artigo baseia-se em entrevistas com artistas musicais, acadêmicos, produtores, engenheiros de mistura, fundadores e executivos de plataformas, bem como em análises de dados disponíveis publicamente em plataformas como Spotify, YouTube e TikTok. A evidência sugere continuidade no centro: o pop africâner branco ainda domina as playlists de descobertas e os espaços editoriais – sejam eles curados por editores humanos, algoritmos ou ambos. No entanto, as periferias estão em ebulição. A ascensão do *gqom* afrikaans em Cape Flats e a crescente visibilidade dos *Koortjies* nos circuitos pentecostais dos Coloured mostram como o streaming pode revelar públicos alternativos, estéticas vernáculas e novos circuitos de valor.

Introduction

The relationship between music streaming platforms and music is neither linear nor unilateral. Streaming has not simply transformed how music circulates; it has also been reshaped by the creative practices, linguistic nuances and audience behaviours that define musical cultures. These transformations have raised many important questions. As a result, the existing literature is remarkably broad – ranging from highly technical analyses of platform algorithms (Bolin and Schwarz 2015; Roth *et al.* 2020), often referred to as the 'black box' (see Pasquale 2015), to more socially focused studies on how this technological wave is shaping people's lives (Beer 2017; Hesmondhalgh and Meier 2018; Jansson 2021), as well as works that bridge both domains (Bucher 2018; Bonini and Gandini 2019). This article situates itself within the middle category and observes that, just as in the global North – as Hesmondhalgh and Meier have argued (2018: 1556) – we are witnessing a fundamental shift in how music is produced and consumed, driven by the rise of music streaming platforms across Africa. As internet penetration on the continent has steadily increased, genres such as

Afrobeats from Nigeria and, more recently, Amapiano from South Africa have transcended regional and linguistic boundaries, aided by the accessibility platforms provide (Corrine 2023). This study, however, adopts a more localized lens, focusing on Afrikaans music in South Africa. It asks how platformed listening intersects with the complex social history of Afrikaans – its creolized origins, its politicization under apartheid, and the durable inequalities that shape who gets heard.

Drawing from interviews with music artists, scholars, producers, mixing engineers, platform founders and executives – along with my own industry insider experience as a session musician since the mid-1990s (having played on more than sixty albums, contributed to forty number one hits on South African streaming charts, and witnessed first-hand the industry shifts brought about by the streaming era) – this article presents an exploratory study of the social dynamics of Afrikaans music streaming. The analysis also incorporates publicly available data from three streaming platforms (Spotify, YouTube and TikTok). Although music streaming has been widely researched in other linguistic and cultural contexts, the Afrikaans music ecosystem remains largely unexamined. This study offers one of the first focused investigations into how Afrikaans music circulates, gains visibility and acquires value within digital streaming environments. It frames recent developments against a macro-historical backdrop of technological changes in the consumption and production of Afrikaans music since the early twentieth century. These changes have been closely tied to power hierarchies rooted in the colonial and apartheid eras, which prioritized the promotion and protection of white Afrikaans culture, resulting in the near total domination of the Afrikaans music market by white artists and audiences (Van der Merwe 2017). Given that music streaming platforms have so fundamentally transformed the music industry, the central question arises: to what extent have they reshaped Afrikaans music performance and consumption in ways that reflect, reproduce or even change broader ideas around race, culture and language?

There are significant methodological obstacles to answering this. Beer (2017: 2) highlights the challenges of studying algorithms on streaming platforms, noting that the highly technical nature of the subject can lead to misconceptions, misjudgements and skewed perceptions of how algorithmic influence is deployed in such cases. Furthermore, platforms are very secretive about their data.¹ Access to it would no doubt give scholars very valuable insights into the minutiae of music consumption. One alternative is to have individual artists share their streaming data (as part of the streaming service, platforms give artists access to their own listener data), although this makes for a very limited dataset. Another challenge is navigating the differences between platforms themselves. Platforms typically build up large catalogues of music containing millions of songs that can be accessed directly by listeners who either opt to pay for the service through a monthly subscription (known as a ‘premium’ package) or choose a ‘freemium’ option where access is free but the experience comes

¹ The author has been corresponding with numerous different platform executives across Africa for five years now, and the responses, when there are any, are initially positive but then fall silent. This is similar to Bonini and Gandini’s experiences with platforms in Europe and the USA (2019). The anonymous platform executives who did agree to be interviewed for this article did so because of personal connections with the author.

with advertisements. Different platforms also use different algorithms and types of media. TikTok is a free-to-use platform that uses short format video and is more about social engagement with an artist's music and profile. YouTube can accommodate longer-form video content, music videos and music streaming. It has a freemium offer with ads and a premium offer without. Artists use YouTube as a primary platform for their music videos. Spotify also has a two-tier offering, with a freemium level with ads and a premium package without ads. More recently, it has expanded its services to include audiovisual content, podcasts and other non-musical content, such as audiobooks, and even AI-generated music (Kiberg and Spilker 2023: 151–2).

I searched these platforms for 'Afrikaans music' and curated Afrikaans playlists. The most popular Afrikaans music artists were identified by comparing, where possible, the number of monthly listeners, the number of followers and engagements, and the number of views music videos have garnered. Artists were also interviewed for insight into their perspectives on streaming platforms and their strategies for how to maximize audience engagement through these new media and in this changing music landscape. Ultimately, this article highlights how deeply rooted ethnic identities are perpetuated through both algorithmic and human-curated processes, how artists respond to these dynamics, and how platforms simultaneously create new spaces and opportunities that shape evolving patterns of cultural consumption among Afrikaans speakers from historically marginalized backgrounds.

Popular music and identity in South Africa

The relationship between popular music and identity in Africa has been widely explored. Much of this scholarship – particularly in the South African context – highlights the urban–rural, and by extension modern–traditional, dynamics of musical performance and the role of Black musicians as cultural brokers within the shifting socio-political contexts of colonial and apartheid South Africa.² As Coplan (1985: 246) notes, understanding cultural transformation requires a social history that connects changing forms of association with evolving modes of expression.

Research on Afrikaans popular music, however, has followed a different trajectory, focusing largely on race and Afrikaner identity.³ White Afrikaner cultural formation developed under conditions markedly different from those of Black South Africans and its institutional and social contexts cannot be mapped directly onto Black musical histories.

The picture becomes more complex with the literature on Coloured Afrikaans musicians. While they, of course, also act as cultural brokers – performing identities and mediating social change – the migration narrative that has often been central to analyses of Black South African music is less prominent. Instead, Coloured cultural life emerged from the creolized, urban encounters of Cape Town and its surroundings (see Martin 2013).

These differences point to distinct historical trajectories and cultural logics across racialized communities. As such, Afrikaans popular music requires analytical

² The work of Allen (1993), Ballantine (1993), Coplan (1985), Erlmann (1991) and Meintjies (2003) remains highly authoritative.

³ See, for instance, Ballantine (2004), Grundlingh (2004), Suriano and Lewis (2015) and Van der Merwe (2017).

approaches attentive to these divergences rather than assumptions drawn from broader African popular music literature. Fiske's observation that 'it is in the production of audiences that the political and social reality of art can be found' (quoted in Coplan 2001: 107) remains highly relevant – arguably even more so in the streaming era. Streaming platforms, through granular data, algorithmic curation, human editorial decisions and broad accessibility, do not simply reflect cultural audiences; they actively produce them. To understand this evolving relationship, it is necessary to situate the South African case within the broader political economy of global streaming, where patterns of access, representation and algorithmic visibility shape how cultural forms travel and gain value.

The relevance of music streaming in the global and local context

The legal streaming of music on digital platforms has become the most popular way to consume music globally. Maasø and Spilker have divided the development of music streaming into three historical phases: the Unlimited-Access Phase, 2008–11, that promised users unlimited access to vast catalogues of music; the Social-Streaming Phase, 2011–14, that added extra social features where users could interact with each other; and lastly the Algorithmic-Streaming Phase, 2014–present, where services have become hyper-personalized through algorithmic processing of user data (Maasø and Spilker 2022: 302–3). How applicable these stages are to the African context is uncertain. In 2025, streaming accounted for 69 per cent of the total global income of the music industry (IFPI 2025: 4), with sub-Saharan Africa reporting the second-fastest growing sector at 22.6 per cent (IFPI 2025: 11). South Africa represented 74.6 per cent of the sub-Saharan market and reported an annual growth rate of 14.4 per cent (IFPI 2025: 11). Yende, Hlatshwayo and Koliti (2025) point out that the digital revolution has transformed how music is created, shared and consumed, allowing artists to reach global audiences through platforms such as Spotify, YouTube and Apple Music. While this shift has raised new legal and financial challenges around copyright and revenue sharing, it has also democratized music distribution by enabling independent artists to bypass traditional industry gatekeepers. They also argue that, in South Africa, these developments have opened up unprecedented opportunities for emerging musicians to publish and promote their work directly and affordably (Yende *et al.* 2025: 2).

Several factors have fuelled this growth. First, online access on the continent has recently passed the 50 per cent mark. Although this is still the lowest for any continent, it means that more than 700 million Africans are now connected to the internet (Degenhard 2024). In South Africa, the connectivity percentage currently stands at 78.9 per cent,⁴ and although this translates to a relatively low streaming service adoption rate compared with the global North, it is still an undeniable shift (Van der Merwe and Van Schalkwyk 2020: 498). De Beukelaar and Eisenberg have also pointed out that, in many parts of Africa, mobile telecom and technology companies play a primary role in the digital distribution of music (2020: 196). This can at least partially be linked to the fact that data costs have steadily decreased, making it more affordable for a traditionally poorer population to stream music. Platforms also use music compression technologies to lower the data usage of streaming, thus making it

⁴ See <<https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-south-africa>>, accessed 10 June 2025.

less expensive.⁵ Technological advances have also democratized the recording, filming and uploading of African music performances to such an extent that music platform catalogues are growing by thousands of songs per week.⁶ The digital divide between rich and poor communities remains high, however, and still affects streaming (Ansell 2022). Lower socio-economic status affects listeners' ability to afford premium streaming services (which in turn affects streaming income) and their overall ability to stream even on free platforms due to data shortages, lack of access to the internet and lack of access to a streaming device.

From a data perspective, streaming platforms have access to detailed user information, including age, gender and location, but also listening patterns, like when someone streams music, for how long, which songs are skipped, etc. They can also see the ratios between certain genres and premium subscribers who listen to them, which, in the South African case – where there is a significant wealth gap between different population groups – 'can also be an indication of socio-economic class'.⁷ Listener data is processed using machine learning to increase the effectiveness of the platform's unique algorithm that makes suggestions to listeners based on their musical tastes (Dinnissen and Bauer 2022: 2). The curation of playlists is another important strategy aimed at growing the number of monthly active users on a platform. To maximize the popularity of playlists, curators use artificial intelligence (AI) to analyse listener data from previous playlists (for example, which songs were repeated or skipped). In this way, different themes or styles are identified that are most likely to boost the popularity (effectiveness) of new playlists. In theory, as this process is repeated, the effectiveness of a platform's proprietary algorithm, or 'black box', increases and the platform becomes more competitive.⁸ The act of curation has come under much scrutiny as it is a form of gatekeeping that concentrates power in the hands of an individual human, an algorithm, or a combination of the two (see Prey 2018; Bonini and Gandini 2019; Maasø and Spilker 2022). When considering this against the fact that, historically (and to a great extent still today), the gatekeepers in the Afrikaans music industry were exclusively white (reflecting the wider social hierarchies in apartheid South Africa) and catered for a white audience, what is 'popular' from an algorithmic perspective has a high likelihood of repeating this predominance.

The repetition of this process of curation and analysis results in a cyclical system where the very act of streaming (consuming) a song leaves a footprint that contributes to the data that is, in turn, used to curate new music content for a listener to consume. Andy Bennett has pointed out that more recent sociological work on the relationship between the consumption of music and constructions of identity has reframed music as a 'resource through which individuals negotiate ... structural forces and engage in the co-production of their socio-cultural identities' (Bennett 2015: 143–4). Applying this logic to the context of a streaming platform, it becomes

⁵ Interview with Pierre Greeff, lead singer of Die Heuwels Fantasties, Stellenbosch, 4 April 2024.

⁶ This information was obtained from an interview in 2023 with a streaming platform executive who wished to remain anonymous.

⁷ Telephone interview with anonymous platform executive, 6 January 2023.

⁸ Telephone interview with Catherine Luckhoff, founder of Nichestream music streaming platform, 14 January 2023.

not just a matter of consuming music as a way to negotiate ‘structural forces’ and ‘social relationships’, but also a scenario where consumption itself affects the trajectory towards new resources that are used in the ‘co-production of socio-cultural identities’. This relationship is also contingent on how ‘personalized media “see” the individual; how this in turn leads them to enact the “data subject”; and what this might imply for the relationship between the data subject and the subject it refers to’ (Prey 2018: 1097). This brings us to a fundamental question on the nature of Afrikaans music on streaming platforms: to what extent is platform content (for instance, playlists and suggested songs) influenced by Afrikaans socio-cultural identities, and to what extent are these socio-cultural identities influenced by platform content?

Afrikaans language and identity in context

Afrikaans has its roots in the slave society of the Cape Colony. While Dutch was the original language of officialdom from the middle of the seventeenth century, the vernacular communication between slave owners (mostly from Europe), enslaved people (from various Indian Ocean origins, from Mozambique to Indonesia) and the indigenous Khoi and San people resulted in the emergence of a new language (Alim *et al.* 2021: 196). Its development ran parallel to the colonial racialization that constructed social hierarchies that privileged whites, or Europeans, while designating all those who were not of European descent to a subaltern position. Thus the Afrikaans linguistic community, from its inception, was multicultural and, owing to the race consciousness of settler colonists (who saw and projected clear racial distinctions between different speakers), socially divided. The fact that Coloured people have historically represented a significant percentage of Afrikaans speakers was mainly ignored as the language became an important badge of social identity that differentiated the two white populations of South Africa (Van der Waal 2012). These two populations were split between those who were descended from the Dutch colonists who settled the Cape in 1652 and whose first language had become Afrikaans by the nineteenth century, and English speakers who came to the colony after Britain occupied it in 1806. At times, tensions between the two groups were high, especially after the South African War (1899–1902), in which the Boers (who were white Afrikaans speakers) were defeated by the British.

The first two decades after the South African War saw a rapid rise in Afrikaans cultural ephemera such as poetry, literary novels, newspapers, advertisements, magazines and gramophone records, which, combined, helped to homogenize Afrikaner⁹ identity and to establish Afrikaans as a ‘white man’s language’ (Hofmeyr 1987; Van der Merwe 2017). Afrikaans also became a vital node for political mobilization in that it provided the cornerstone for the development of Afrikaner nationalism (Van Wyk 1991: 87; Witz 2003: 13). The link between language and politics was further solidified when Afrikaans replaced Dutch as one of the two official languages of the Union of South Africa in 1925. By this time, the standardization of Afrikaans – a project driven by Afrikaner nationalists that allowed for the development of standardized Afrikaans grammar rules and spelling and the

⁹ ‘Afrikaners’ here is defined as ‘white Afrikaans speakers’, although not all white Afrikaans speakers would self-identify as such.

establishment of Afrikaans as an academic language – was well under way (Van Wyk 1991: 87). Standardized Afrikaans was thus an ethnicized, white version of the language that reflected ideas of ‘purity’, power and political control (especially so during the apartheid era) and that excluded the vernacular (and what Van der Waal (2012) calls ‘non-ethnicized’) Afrikaans, or *Kaaps*, spoken by Coloured people. As a result, the histories of Afrikaans language practices among white and Coloured people have mainly followed different trajectories. Yet to view them as completely distinct monolithic identities is problematic, as is viewing the silencing of *Kaaps* as total.

The term ‘Coloured’ in the South African sense does not describe some cultural monolith or racial and ethnic truism. Under the apartheid-era Population Registration Act of 1950, any person who was not white, Black or Indian was assigned to the last available category: Coloured. This negative categorization (if you’re not one of the other groups, you are automatically ‘Coloured’) belied the historical realities of a diverse group of people forging their identities over centuries under an oppressive settler colonial system in the Cape Colony (Martin 2001). Several scholars have argued that the cultural practices of Coloured people from the Cape should be viewed as the result of ongoing creolizing forces (Nuttall and Michael 2000; Alim *et al.* 2021; Van der Waal 2012) that generated – and still generate – ‘histories not only of loss, rupture, transportation, dislocation and discontinuity, but also of cultural creation and contestation in contexts of forced human and cultural heterogeneity and colonial dominance’ (Erasmus 2011: 639). From a linguistic perspective, some have argued for Afrikaans to be classified as a creole language, while Coloured activist artists who collectively form the *Afrikaaps* movement – for greater acknowledgement of *Kaaps* – reject such a linguistic categorization as a ‘product of colonial ideologies at work in these Eurocentric processes of classification’ (Alim *et al.* 2021: 196). Coloured culture is not a monolith and ‘Colouredness’ is not total. Rather, Coloured identity reflects the interwoven lived experiences of multiple communities on macro and micro levels, with various dynamic intersections and disjunctions, all set against the historical specifics of colonial and apartheid South Africa. This brings to mind Homi Bhabha’s suggestion that it is ‘in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest or cultural value are negotiated’ (1994: 2).

It is against this complex linguistic background that the history of recorded Afrikaans music unfolded. From the first gramophone records at the start of the twentieth century to the golden age of CDs in the early 2000s, popular Afrikaans music was almost exclusively recorded by, and for, white Afrikaans speakers (Van der Merwe 2017). It played a central role in their cultural practices and leisure activities and, in some ways, formed part of the politicization of white Afrikaans culture and identity in service of Afrikaner nationalism during the twentieth century. Coloured Afrikaans music artists, on the other hand, despite having a deeply rooted tradition of music performance,¹⁰ rarely got to record Afrikaans music. Thus, from a music perspective, Coloured Afrikaans music artists remained as marginalized in the Afrikaans music industry as they were in wider society. As a result, throughout the twentieth century, when new technologies were introduced that influenced music production and

¹⁰ For example, the minstrel carnival of Cape Town (celebrated every year on 2 January to mark the emancipation of slaves in 1834), which dates back to the 1870s (Martin 2013: xvii).

consumption, these artists – unlike their white Afrikaans contemporaries – were not in a position to seize the opportunities. To better understand the impact of streaming platforms on these patterns of exclusion, it should be contextualized against the historical introduction of these earlier music technologies.

Historicizing music technology and opportunities

Technological advancements in the recording and distribution of sound, including popular music, started with the invention of gramophone records at the end of the nineteenth century. Hesmondhalgh and Meier have identified a series of key technological advancements in the twentieth-century music industry that resulted in dynamic changes in consumption patterns: phonography, radio, vinyl records, audio cassettes and compact discs (2018: 1559). These technologies also had an impact on African societies over time. Barber points out that media technologies on the continent are far from recent or foreign intrusions; successive generations of media have been locally adapted and integrated into cultural life for more than a century (2017: 130). More locally, in South Africa, a number of Afrikaans artists, throughout the twentieth century, capitalized when new technologies were introduced to the local music industry. Some of the first local gramophone records were in Afrikaans (dating to 1910), and a dedicated Afrikaans radio service was established in 1937 by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), which was itself established the year before.¹¹ Whether it was on commercial radio (and later television), or on vinyl, cassettes or CDs, white Afrikaans music artists had an almost total monopoly over the Afrikaans music industry (Van der Merwe 2017). This should, of course, be considered against the wider socio-political developments of the period, which saw Afrikaners dominate the political sphere on the one hand, and the state support Afrikaans arts on the other.

The end of apartheid in the early 1990s also marked the end of state support for Afrikaans arts and a shift to the privatization of the Afrikaans culture industry (Steyn 2016). The proliferation of new Afrikaans arts festivals, Afrikaans television channels, Afrikaans pop concerts and the like created new spaces in which commercial Afrikaans pop thrived. As a result, the early 2000s saw an Afrikaans pop music explosion, with numerous artists selling hundreds of thousands of CDs (Van der Merwe 2017). This golden era of CD sales was not to last. First, through music downloads, and more recently through music streaming in what tech analysts call a ‘post-download era’, streaming platforms have had a negative impact on the popularity of CDs, and consequently a negative effect on the income of most artists (Ansell 2022).

The traditional reach of radio, so influential in creating soundscapes in South Africa since the 1920s, has also been steadily decreasing since the early 2000s. In fact, the number of households in South Africa that own a radio was down from 73 per cent in 2001 to 50.3 per cent in 2022.¹² To further explain this point, being put on A rotation

¹¹ In contrast, the first fully fledged African-language radio service of the SABC, Radio Bantu, was launched in 1960 and acted as a propaganda machine for the apartheid regime (Lekgoathi 2011: 117).

¹² ‘92.1% of SA population owns a cellphone’, South African Government News Agency, 12 October 2023 <<https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/921-sa-population-owns-cellphone#:~:text=>>, accessed 8 April 2024.

(the highest level of playlisting – the number of times your song will be played on the radio) on one of the most popular radio stations in South Africa ‘means that your song will be played four times in a week’, as reported by a platform executive who wished to remain anonymous.¹³ This may or may not indirectly increase a song’s audience on streaming platforms. Radio stations, however, have responded to the rise of streaming in pragmatic ways – for example through the live streaming of programmes – although it is clear that traditional radio is increasingly being affected by new technology that is not just a form of transmission but a ‘key metaphor for the flow of information in the digital age’ (Morris and Powers 2015: 107). In fact, music streaming platforms differ substantially from older technologies and have the power both to amplify traditional patterns of music consumption and to create new ones.

Historically, the mediation of popular Afrikaans music was managed by white gatekeepers in an industry aimed at white audiences. This had been a constant feature since the first album releases in Afrikaans dating to the first decade of the twentieth century. The social background of this mediation is closely linked to the wider power dynamics within the Afrikaans linguistic community. While Bonini and Gandini (2019: 2) posit that the first decade of the twenty-first century, thanks to the impact of illegal file sharing and the introduction of the internet, constituted a period when traditional mediators were less influential (while they do not explicitly mention it, their study focuses on Europe and the USA), this did not necessarily apply to the Afrikaans context. Here, other factors, like the privatization of the Afrikaans cultural space through Afrikaans arts festivals and privatized television channels, ensured that the (white) Afrikaans music industry boomed. Coloured artists continued to face the same obstacles as in the past: despite a strong music culture, access to proper studios remained limited; artists who did find an audience were limited in terms of infrastructure, which made surviving solely from music almost impossible; they had an audience with limited buying power, which potentially impacted sales of CDs and show tickets; and even in cases where artists did have successes, it was more difficult to establish longevity.¹⁴

The Afrikaans mainstream

Mainstream Afrikaans music is not a single genre but a collection of interrelated styles – ranging from country pop and gospel to dance pop and pop rock – grouped together under the broad label of ‘Afrikaans hits’ on platforms such as Spotify. This form of categorization is unusual in the South African context: while most musical taxonomies across the continent are organized by *genre* (for instance, gospel or Afrobeats), Afrikaans music is typically classified by *language*. This linguistic framing implies that many listeners search for ‘Afrikaans’ before specifying a genre, reflecting the deep intertwining of language, identity and cultural belonging in Afrikaans-speaking communities. Because the majority of these listeners are white Afrikaans speakers,¹⁵ the prominence of language as a marketing and curatorial tool also

¹³ Telephone interview with anonymous platform executive, 8 April 2025.

¹⁴ Telephone interviews with Fraser Barry, artist and cultural activist, 3 June 2025; Jurgen von Wechmar, producer and studio engineer, 3 June 2025.

¹⁵ Although streaming data does not indicate race, various other factors do, like location, the artists themselves (out of the seventy-five artists on Spotify’s Afrikaans hits playlist, only two are Black; see

mirrors the longer history of linguistic hegemony and racialized cultural gatekeeping within Afrikaans music.

However, this hegemony is showing signs of unravelling. Henco Harmse, the head of Afrikaans music at Spotify South Africa, recently commented: '[I]n addition to traditional genres [of the CD era and prior] such as pop, praise and worship, and country, there are Afrikaans-speaking women doing really interesting things in genres such as *gqom*, hip-hop, and dance.'¹⁶ This diversity of styles that collectively fall under the banner of 'Afrikaans' creates the impression, on the surface, that the digital sphere is a space where musical diversity thrives and where new music economies are formed. Studies have shown, however, that more content does not necessarily mean more variety in listening patterns. Beer (2017: 7) states that algorithms are likely to place a limitation on cultural experiences and wider, external social connections and influences, resulting in users being confined to the same cultural experiences. Maasø and Spilker call this the 'streaming paradox', 'the way in which plenitude at the outset produces narrowness as the outcome' (2022: 300). This happens because the algorithmic processes involved in curating and suggesting new music content (from thousands of songs) in fact lead to directing listeners towards already popular artists and genres. In the case of Afrikaans music, such processes have the potential to inadvertently continue trends linked to the complex history of the language itself.

An analysis of four songs on Spotify's biggest Afrikaans hits of 2023 playlist points to some of the most popular themes in mainstream Afrikaans music. The music videos on YouTube were also analysed. The most popular Afrikaans artist is Riaan Benadé, and his song 'Vat 'n bietjie' ('Drink a little') has been streamed 7,381,573 times¹⁷ on Spotify. The music video has been viewed 11 million times on YouTube.¹⁸ Stylistically, it is a rhythmic acoustic guitar-driven sing-along song. The video shows a group of white men dressed in khaki clothes playfully abducting their friend to take him to his bachelor's party. Scenes show them drinking and having a good time, going on safari and *braaing*.¹⁹

Another example is the song 'Tekkies brand' ('Burning sneakers') by female artist Irene-Louise van Wyk.²⁰ This is a dance pop song about *sokkie* – a popular dance style among Afrikaners.²¹ The video shows a group of young white people *sokkie* dancing in a venue in Pretoria. Another very popular artist is Brendan Peyper. His dance pop hit 'Toer om die vloer' ('Tour the dance floor') has had 4,548,588 streams on Spotify and 5.9 million views on YouTube.²² The video and the lyrics contain a number of popular themes: a reference to the term *boeremeisie* ('farmer girl'), khaki clothes, a farm

<<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/37i9dQZF1DX7bangZ8fzV0>>), and the lyrical and visual content of their music and videos (where whiteness is performed).

¹⁶ 'From *gqom* to gospel: female Afrikaans singers are embracing change', Bizcommunity, 30 August 2023 <<https://www.bizcommunity.com/Article/196/810/241444.html>>, accessed 20 April 2024.

¹⁷ All streaming numbers date from the time of writing (mid-2024).

¹⁸ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Tt3Ot_RPwM>.

¹⁹ *Braai* is the Afrikaans word for barbecue.

²⁰ It has 5,859,027 streams on Spotify and 5 million views on YouTube: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4Gz4PWYEO>>.

²¹ *Sokkie* is typically danced in pairs, rotating in a circular movement around the dance floor. It shares similarities with two-step dancing.

²² See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=frTqPM_lu_U>.

setting, and they also dance *sokkie*. A rising star on the most popular list is Dodo Nyoka, who is originally from the Congo but grew up in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. While his mother tongues are Xhosa and French, he is also fluent in Afrikaans.²³ The video of his hit song 'Foto's' ('Photos')²⁴ shows him riding a horse on a farm, then cuts to a scene where he, as the only Black person, is partying with a group of other young, exclusively white people. The lyrics make references to the famous white artist Appel (Apple), getting 'a little drunk', 'lighting the fires' for a *braai*, and 'hooking up' with a girl. Dodo Nyoka is a Black artist, but he sings and speaks with an Afrikaans accent (including a pronounced 'r') that is indistinguishable from a white speaker's. The fact that he is the only Black person in the music video and that he uses themes (the farm, partying, *braaiing*) that are strongly linked to contemporary white Afrikaans identity creates the impression that he is not only performing for a white audience but is also performing aspects of whiteness.

Judging from the above, the most recurring themes (implied either lyrically and/or visually) on the Afrikaans hits list are dancing (*sokkie*), partying/drinking, the outdoors (mostly the farm), heteronormative romance, khaki clothes and *braaiing*. These themes represent a continuation of a music tradition of upbeat major chord structures and lyrics that emphasize leisure activities (fun, uncritical and light-hearted as opposed to socially critical and introspective) that white Afrikaans speakers have long had a taste for, and which has ensured a type of predictability that artists have capitalized on. Although commenting on a different music landscape, Arvidsson and Bonini (2015: 159) have argued exactly this: that audiences become commodities when they can be relied upon to 'reproduce a particular consumption norm with calculable predictability'. Traditionally, these types of songs were called *lekkerliedjies* ('nice songs') (Van der Merwe 2014). This is not necessarily unique in the world of music, but *lekkerliedjies* have at times been criticized for being 'trite and banal' (Jury 1996: 99), especially during times of increased political tension during the late apartheid years. In the post-apartheid era, the leisurely nature of these popular visual and lyrical themes obscures deeper elements of Afrikaner identity constructions. Three decades after apartheid, Afrikaners find themselves in a liminal space where they lack political power (in stark contrast to the apartheid era) yet hold on to material wealth, but they also acutely feel that their language and way of life are under threat in a multicultural democracy (Van der Merwe 2017; Sonnekus 2020; Steyn 2012; Korf and Malan 2002; Grundlingh 2004; Vestergaard 2001). Faced with the 'immeasurable debt' (Sonnekus 2020: 94) incurred by their forefathers' complicity with apartheid, many Afrikaners tend to reconstruct new relationships with this troubled past (by ignoring problematic areas and focusing only on 'the pretty things'),²⁵ in what Melissa Steyn has called the 'ignorance contract' (2012: 8), to make it easier for them to live untroubled lives in the present.

Given the dynamics of streaming popularity, it is conceivable that the consumption of mainstream Afrikaans music plays a part in the construction and continuation of a particular brand of whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa that

²³ See <<https://www.coleskeartistmanagement.com/dodo-nyoka>>, accessed 25 April 2024.

²⁴ See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7QczS53b-m0>>. It has been streamed 3,547,259 times on Spotify and has 4.2 million views on YouTube.

²⁵ As famous Afrikaans crooner, Bles Bridges, once said during a TV interview in 1988 (Ross 2006).

stands in stark contrast to the rest of the Afrikaans linguistic communities. While the mainstream caters for and is dominated by white Afrikaans speakers, listener data also points to the rising popularity of other Afrikaans music genres on streaming platforms that are far removed from the mainstream and in which different aspects of Coloured culture are performed. By opening up new spaces where Coloured artists can find an audience, streaming platforms act as catalysts for the consumption of Afrikaans music by and for the Coloured community that breaks with this history of exclusion. The following sections explore two genres that have come to represent such a break: Afrikaans *gqom* and *Koortjies*.

Afrikaans *gqom*

Over the past four years, Afrikaans *gqom* has surged across streaming platforms, signalling not only the growing visibility of Coloured artists but also a renewed presence of *Kaaps* – the vernacular form of Afrikaans spoken predominantly in Cape Town. Although its linguistic and stylistic roots lie far from the Cape, the genre's transplantation from Durban to the Western Cape marks a striking instance of musical and cultural translation. '*Gqom*' derives from Zulu, the dominant language in Durban townships and their surroundings where the genre originated. It is an onomatopoeic expression with a deep click sound that mimics the sound of a beat on a drum. Zungu (2020) places the origins of *gqom* in the evolution from localized performance traditions and recontextualized communal rhythmic patterns into an urban, electronically mediated sound that bridges heritage and innovation. *Gqom* emerged in this setting around 2008 (Lobley 2018: 63) and is a genre of electronic music with synthesizers and samples over a distinctive repetitive beat.²⁶ It is often described as 'raw' and 'dark' and marks a departure from *kwaito*, the popular South African electronic dance music genre that emerged at the end of the apartheid era (Eaby-Lomas 2021: 101). Eaby-Lomas (*ibid.*: 101) further suggests that *gqom* can be understood as a post-*kwaito* phenomenon: it inherits *kwaito*'s rhythmic pulse and youth culture ethos but departs from its optimism to reflect the disillusionment of a generation confronting persistent inequality in post-apartheid South Africa.²⁷ Furthermore, the introduction of the internet and new digital forms of distribution have helped *gqom* 'gain autonomy from its predecessor' (*ibid.*: 102).

Gqom's transplantation to the Cape Flats and its translation into Afrikaans (more specifically, *Kaaps*)²⁸ more than a decade after it initially emerged add to its post-*kwaito* autonomy. Whether consciously or not, the marriage of *gqom* beats and *Kaaps* delivers a powerful result. An initial comparison will find superficial similarities between the violent surroundings of the original *gqom* artists in Durban and the environment on the Cape Flats. As a space, the Cape Flats, on the outskirts of Cape Town, marks the intersection of colonial and apartheid-era racial segregation, forced removals and oppression, as well as acute gang violence and widespread drug use.

²⁶ Some of the most prominent artists include DJ Lag, Distruction Boys and Babes Wodumo.

²⁷ In contrast, *kwaito* has been described as a genre that celebrated political freedom after apartheid, while others have pointed out that it was more focused on turning away from politics and focusing on materialism and having fun (Eaby-Lomas 2021: 103).

²⁸ Although the lyrics are in *Kaaps*, all of the artists interviewed described it as 'Afrikaans *gqom*', not *Kaapse gqom*. It is also called 'Afrikaans *gqom*' on playlists.

However, while Durban *gqom* can be associated with a sense of disillusionment, as Eaby-Lomas suggests, Afrikaans *gqom* lyrics and accompanying videos generally follow a different, more playful theme. This indicates that it is the *sound* of *gqom*, rather than its lyrical content, that most strongly appeals to Afrikaans performers.

Among the earliest and most influential Afrikaans *gqom* artists is Tashreeq de Villiers, known as Ricky Vani Frontline, whose 2021 release ‘*Ricky Opi Beat*’ became a viral success, garnering over 2 million views on YouTube.²⁹ De Villiers was drawn to *gqom*, he explains, when he recognized that its characteristic tempo of around 128 beats per minute (bpm) closely matched that of *Klopse* marching bands that parade through Cape Town’s streets during the annual *Tweede Nuwejaar*³⁰ (Second New Year) celebrations.³¹ This rhythmic parallel reveals an unexpected continuity between *gqom*’s percussive drive and the *ghoema* tradition – a rhythm historically rooted in the musical practices of enslaved people at the Cape and today an emblem of Coloured identity (Martin 2013). Indeed, Eaby-Lomas has identified 128 bpm as the standard tempo used in Durban *gqom* (2021: 110), exactly the same tempo as ‘*Ricky Opi Beat*’. It is, however, not only the tempo that is familiar but also the beat, which is similar to the traditional *ghoema* rhythm of Coloured Afrikaans music from Cape Town. The *ghoema* drum was originally played by enslaved people and the beat is a distinctive Capetonian cultural feature (Martin 2013: 113). Even linguistically, de Villiers adapts *gqom*’s pronunciation: replacing the isiZulu click with a guttural *gh*, transforming *gqom* into *ghom* – a phonetic echo of *ghoema* itself.

De Villiers has been singing in *Klopse* groups since a young age and is well embedded in the music scene of Cape Town (his cousin is Youngsta CPT – perhaps the most successful rapper of the new generation of hip-hop artists of the Cape Flats, and his uncle is Zayn Adams, also a well-known singer). According to de Villiers, it seemed a natural thing to add Afrikaans (or specifically *Kaaps*) lyrics, instead of the normal Zulu, to an already familiar beat and tempo. This might explain why *gqom* resonates so strongly among a Coloured Afrikaans audience. In terms of production, de Villiers records in a professional studio and most of his live shows are confined to the Western Cape province.³² His choice to combine *gqom* beats with *Kaaps* lyrics underscores a broader trend of reterritorializing a genre born in Durban into a distinctly Capetonian expression.

Another act at the forefront of Afrikaans *gqom* is the Temple Boys CPT, a group of young artists from Ravensmead on the Cape Flats that rose to prominence with their unique blend of *gqom* beats and *Kaapse* lyrics. The Temple Boys follow a ‘do it yourself’ (DIY) ethos. In contrast to Ricky Vani Frontline, they record only on a computer and a microphone, without expensive studio or recording equipment, which reflects both the accessibility of digital production tools and the democratizing reach of streaming platforms. Central to their message (and DIY ethos) is that you don’t need much to ‘follow your dream’.³³ They have garnered a significant following on TikTok, with more

²⁹ See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qw9qGyiwy94>>.

³⁰ The *Tweede Nuwejaar* celebration dates back to the 1870s and celebrates the emancipation of slaves in 1834.

³¹ Indeed, Eaby-Lomas has identified 128 bpm as the standard tempo used in Durban *gqom* (2021: 110), which is exactly the same tempo as ‘*Ricky Opi Beat*’.

³² Telephone interview with Tashreeq de Villiers, Afrikaans *gqom* artist, 8 June 2025.

³³ Written correspondence with Temple Boys CPT, Stellenbosch, 30 April 2024.

than 200,000 followers, and their hit ‘*Saggies*’ (‘Softly’)³⁴ has had 3 million YouTube views in two years. Perhaps not coincidentally, the tempo is also exactly 128 bpm.

There are a number of other Coloured artists who also produce Afrikaans *gqom*. A survey of Spotify and YouTube shows that the genre is gaining popularity. The song ‘*Wikkel Wikkell*’ (‘Shake shake’) by RJay & LK featuring AG-B and Early-B has been viewed 2.3 million times on YouTube.³⁵ Another notable song is ‘*Coloured Goose*’ (‘Coloured girl’) by Atie-G featuring Paula Kammies. Kammies stands out as she is one of very few female Afrikaans *gqom* artists. One of Ricky Vani Frontline’s other hits is ‘*Anni brand*’ (‘On fire’), featuring Weh Sliiso, with 1.7 million YouTube views.³⁶ Only two of these songs, ‘*Coloured Goose*’ and ‘*Wikkel Wikkell*’, have accompanying videos, while the others are music only. Both videos show people dancing in the *bhenga* style, the dance associated with *gqom* (Oliver 2016). References are made to the Western Cape and Cape Town, overtly situating the music within a specific cultural space. In both videos, people are partying at someone’s house (urban setting), with fancy cars in the background. Together with Ricky Vani Frontline and Temple Boys CPT, these artists illustrate how Afrikaans *gqom* bridges linguistic, cultural and technological spaces. It thus stands as both a local adaptation and a broader metaphor for how digital and cultural flows continually reshape the meanings of music in post-apartheid South Africa.

In stark thematic contrast to Afrikaans *gqom*, which is closely linked to leisure activities and partying, another Afrikaans music genre – the type of Pentecostal church music known as *Koortjies* – has also experienced a rapid increase in its online audience in recent years. Despite their differences, the growing popularity of both Afrikaans *gqom* and *Koortjies* on streaming platforms shows how these platforms can help generate new alternative publics, vernacular aesthetics and new circuits of value that break with the historical marginalization of Coloured Afrikaans music.

Koortjies

Koortjies is an Afrikaans gospel genre directly linked to the *Pinkster* (the Coloured Pentecostal) church. Wider Pentecostalism in South Africa dates back to the launch of the Apostolic Faith Mission in 1908, and over time African gospel musicians in the church have fused American gospel music with a variety of local genres, including *kwela* and *mbaqanga* (Martin 2013: 303). *Koortjies* musicians in turn have added their own unique elements, such as *ghoema* and other local Capetonian rhythms and melodic traditions (*ibid.*: 303–4). It also has a strong link to indigenous Khoi and San cultural practices in which people danced in a circle to repetitive music to induce a state of trance or heightened spiritual awareness.³⁷ As a result, *Koortjies* has come to represent a clear sonic identifier of the Coloured community (Engelbrecht 2023).³⁸

³⁴ See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zISpS91lFXM>>.

³⁵ See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKHAKURqWPU>>.

³⁶ See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QkOF1vcX1V4>>.

³⁷ Interview with Inge Engelbrecht, expert on *Koortjies*, Stellenbosch, 30 April 2024; telephone interview with Fraser Barry, 3 June 2025; interview with Daniel Titus, musical director of *Koortjies* television show, 10 June 2025.

³⁸ According to Daniel Titus, it apparently also played a role in the anti-apartheid struggle when it was a source of hope for Coloured people during a politically volatile period. Interview with Daniel Titus, 10 June 2025.

Pentecostalism experienced a new wave of popularity from the 1990s onwards across South Africa with the increased globalization of Christian media (Thompson 2015: 14; see also Meyer 2004; Comaroff and Comaroff 2008), which also affected the popularity of *Koortjies*. It is, however, in the last five years especially that the online streaming of *Koortjies* (mostly on YouTube) has soared, mostly due to the popularity of a television show with the same name.³⁹ *Koortjies* (the show) is broadcast on the KykNet channel, which forms part of the DSTV paid subscription television service. There are many music videos from *Koortjies* on YouTube that have between 1.5 and 2.7 million views, suggesting that the show, and by extension the genre, has a large audience. Given that the television show is behind a paywall, it is likely that many people of lower socio-economic status watch *Koortjies* only on YouTube.⁴⁰

Other popular *Koortjies* artists include Neville D, whose video of a 'music battle' with Jonathan Rubain (in which they try to out-perform each other with a *Koortjie* performance) has had 2.4 million views on YouTube.⁴¹ Another star is Kunjalo, a female artist whose song 'Hy maak 'n weg' ('He makes a way') has had an impressive 5.7 million streams on YouTube, despite showing just an album cover, not a video.⁴² Singer Alton Zakay's song 'Sterk Toring' ('Strong tower') has had 2.6 million views on YouTube.⁴³ While there are many other *Koortjie* artists and groups, these represent at least some of the most popular ones in the digital space. These artists have Spotify profiles but relatively small audiences on that platform (Neville D has 19,166, Kunjalo 17,398, Alton Zakay 14,893, and Jonathan Rubain 16,280), which suggests that *Koortjies* is more established on YouTube at the moment. Music videos invariably have either a TV studio setting (for the programme *Koortjies*) or a church setting, with high-energy performances and enthusiastic congregations. From a production perspective, the music is recorded professionally and mixed in first-class studios. The in-house *Koortjies* band consists of eight musicians (excluding the main vocalist), playing various instruments. Notably, the music is mixed specifically for smaller speakers common in television sets or small sound systems as those are the main channels through which the music will be heard.⁴⁴ This reminds us of Louise Meintjies' observations on the way in which Zulu musicians' recordings in the 1980s and 1990s were mixed specifically for the cheap sound systems that would be listened to in the townships (Meintjies 2003).

In terms of language, *Koortjies* lyrics tend to be in standard Afrikaans and not *Kaaps*, possibly due to their liturgical status. However, the call-and-response dialogues between pastor and congregation – which do not form part of the main lyrics of the songs – are often in *Kaaps*.⁴⁵ This view of standard Afrikaans as the proper medium when performing church music in this context reveals a complex fault line in the language politics surrounding Afrikaans, intricately interwoven with colonial-era constructions of race, language and social power. As mentioned earlier, the standardization of Afrikaans was closely linked to the ideology of white Afrikaner

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVIE8wv-B6A>>.

⁴² See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s51URsGalls>>.

⁴³ See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydvHOF4nDwo>>.

⁴⁴ Telephone interview with Tim Rankin, mixing engineer, *Koortjies* television programme, 3 May 2024.

⁴⁵ Interview with Inge Engelbrecht, 30 April 2024.

nationalism that claimed ownership over the language and, in the process, silenced more vernacular versions such as *Kaaps*. In recent years, several Afrikaans hip-hop artists from the Cape Flats have been instrumental in advocating for the recognition of *Kaaps* and, as prominent performers in *Kaaps*, they have also assisted with the writing of the first dictionary of *Kaaps* (Haupt 2021). Although their work is very important socially, most of these *Kaapse* hip-hop artists have relatively small digital profiles. Furthermore, geographically, *Koortjies* has a larger footprint than just Cape Town, and, in linguistic terms, it is also more diverse than the Afrikaans/*Kaaps* dichotomy.

According to Daniel Titus, the musical director of the television show, *Koortjies* has a national (and even cross-border) popularity. They have toured South Africa and Namibia and have played sold-out shows in churches, town halls, theatres and stadiums, in rural areas and cities. Everywhere they encounter local *Koortjies* singers (and sometimes singers from other regions appear on the show) who sing in vernacular forms of Afrikaans other than *Kaaps*, with different accents and subtly different playing styles.⁴⁶ This broadens the linguistic – and artistic – scope of *Koortjies* beyond *Kaaps* to include other vernacular forms of Afrikaans from more rural areas of South Africa, many of which have been historically even more marginalized. The fact that *Koortjies* singers from these Coloured communities can now be easily accessed on streaming platforms marks a significant step in the increased visibility and consumption of their cultural practices.

Artists' responses to music streaming

Technological shifts in how music is consumed do not affect listeners alone; artists, too, must continually adapt to navigate and succeed within newly emerging digital environments. All of the artists interviewed here have their music digitally distributed across all major music streaming platforms by aggregators such as DistroKid. Artists can then access their listener data either through their aggregator, or directly on their individual platform accounts.⁴⁷ The data gives artists unprecedented insight into the consumption of their music, including the locations from where their music is streamed,⁴⁸ exactly how many streams each song has on each platform, and in some cases even how long certain songs are played before they are skipped. Artists use this data in different ways. For instance, the popular Afrikaans rock band Spoegwolf uses streaming data to mitigate risk when organizing international tours. As a result, they regularly book successful tours to the UK, the Netherlands, Australia and New Zealand, where they know there are large concentrations of people streaming their music.⁴⁹ Others, like the Temple Boys, look at listener data to see what works compositionally and to 'push harder for success and to make better music for our listeners'.⁵⁰ Pierre Greeff, vocalist of the popular Afrikaans electro pop band Die Heuwels Fantasties and founder of the

⁴⁶ Interview with Daniel Titus, 10 June 2025.

⁴⁷ Telephone interview with Tashreeq de Villiers, 8 June 2025.

⁴⁸ For instance, data has shown that Die Heuwels Fantasties are most popular in Pretoria and Johannesburg, even though they are based in Cape Town. Interview with Pierre Greeff, 4 April 2024.

⁴⁹ Interview with Danie du Toit, lead singer and songwriter, Spoegwolf, Stellenbosch, 12 January 2023.

⁵⁰ Interview with Temple Boys CPT, 30 April 2024.

independent record company Supra Familias, also emphasizes the importance of finding the optimal ‘sweet spot’ in song length, particularly concerning the timing of the first chorus, as well as determining the ideal number of songs for each album.⁵¹ Ricky Vani Frontline does not use the data for touring or compositional choices, but does focus on audience engagement to boost his traction on platforms. He singles out TikTok as the platform with the algorithm that responds the quickest to content posts, which is then enhanced if the artist actively responds to fans’ reactions by re-posting.⁵² The Temple Boys prefer to use Facebook as their main channel to communicate with their 175,000 followers on the platform. On the other hand, *Koortjies* is less affected by platform data. The musicians from the television show, for instance, do not own the rights to the music (the television channel does) and do not upload music onto platforms themselves.⁵³

While the continued popularity of mainstream Afrikaans pop is unsurprising – given its longstanding dominance in the local music economy – the rise of alternative genres owes much to the democratization of access between artist and audience through free streaming services. However, this shift has not necessarily translated into economic success. Streaming still constitutes a relatively small portion of most artists’ income, particularly in South Africa, where even top-streamed Afrikaans artists often derive only a third of their earnings from streaming (Ansell 2022).⁵⁴ Due to the relatively small size of the Afrikaans-speaking population, streaming is unlikely to surpass live performances as the primary income source in the near future.

Has the scene changed?

Although listeners now have access to millions of songs – often for free – research shows that algorithmic recommendations tend to steer audiences towards what is already popular. This phenomenon, sometimes referred to as the ‘streaming paradox’, also affects the streaming of Afrikaans music. Data from Spotify, YouTube and TikTok indicates that music reflecting longstanding lyrical and visual themes associated with whiteness continues to dominate. These themes are closely tied to white Afrikaner leisure and worldviews, which, while seemingly innocuous, reflect complex socio-cultural identity formations rooted in South Africa’s colonial and apartheid history. As a result, streaming platforms – despite their promise of openness – do not represent a complete break from the historical marginalization of the broader Afrikaans-speaking community and its artists.

However, this exclusion is not absolute. The growing popularity of Afrikaans *gqom* and *Koortjies* illustrates emerging cultural shifts. The rise of Afrikaans *gqom* can be attributed to several factors: its pre-existing audience on the Cape Flats, its rhythmic similarity to the local *ghoema* beat (despite no direct historical link), and the affordability and accessibility of digital distribution. While *Koortjies* gained visibility through the television programme of the same name, its sustained success lies in its free and unlimited availability on YouTube.⁵⁵ Its appeal must also be understood in

⁵¹ Interview with Pierre Greeff, 4 April 2024.

⁵² Telephone interview with Tashreeq de Villiers, 8 June 2025.

⁵³ Interview with Daniel Titus, 10 June 2025.

⁵⁴ Interview with Pierre Greeff, 4 April 2024.

⁵⁵ Interview with Daniel Titus, 10 June 2025.

relation to the genre's deep cultural roots in the Coloured community and the broader growth of Pentecostalism in South Africa. Together, these two genres reflect complex intersectional identities within the Afrikaans linguistic community. Although they may not influence algorithmic curation in the same way as mainstream Afrikaans pop, they are part of new cultural networks shaping the identities of Coloured South Africans.

Ultimately, the interplay between content and socio-cultural identity in streaming environments is both reciprocal and problematic. Streaming platforms often reinforce existing structures of exclusion because the content that circulates most widely is embedded within those very structures. At the same time, they enable alternative narratives – allowing Afrikaans *gqom* to emerge from a bedroom studio in Ravensmead or *Koortjies* from a Pentecostal church to reach broader audiences and gain cultural relevance in ways previously unimaginable. This shows that platforms can also be paradoxical. Although the scope of this study is highly localized, it demonstrates that streaming platforms are reshaping how music is accessed and consumed – even in areas with lower internet penetration than the global North. It also reveals how artists are adapting to this changing landscape by engaging with the granular data provided by these platforms. While human and algorithmic gatekeeping can reinforce historical patterns of exclusion, these same platforms also offer pathways for decentralization and cultural visibility, enabling historically marginalized music genres to find new prominence online.

References

- Alim, S. A., A. Haupt, E. Jansen and Q. Williams (2021) “‘Kom Khoi San, kry trug jou land’: disrupting white settler colonial logics of language, race, and land with Afrikaaps”, *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 31 (2): 194–217.
- Allen, L. V. (1993) ‘Pennywhistle kwela: a musical, historical and socio-political analysis’. MMus thesis, University of Natal.
- Ansell, G. (2022) ‘Music streaming in South Africa – new survey reveals musicians get a raw deal’, *The Conversation*, 6 December <<https://theconversation.com/music-streaming-in-south-africa-new-survey-reveals-musicians-get-a-raw-deal-194087utm>>, accessed 28 May 2025.
- Arvidsson, A. and T. Bonini (2015) ‘Valuing audience passions: from Smythe to Tarde’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (18) 2: 158–73.
- Ballantine, C. (1993) *Marabi Nights: early South African jazz and vaudeville*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Ballantine, C. (2004) ‘Re-thinking “whiteness”? Identity, change and “white” popular music in post-apartheid South Africa’, *Popular Music* (23) 2: 105–31.
- Barber, K. (2017) *A History of African Popular Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Beer, D. (2017) ‘The social power of algorithms’, *Information, Communication and Society* 20 (1): 1–13.
- Bennett, A. (2015) ‘Identity: music, community, and self’ in J. Shepherd and K. Devine (eds), *The Routledge Reader on the Sociology of Music*. New York NY: Routledge.
- Bhabha, H. (1994) *Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Bolin, G. and J. A. Schwarz (2015) ‘Heuristics of the algorithm: Big Data, user interpretation and institutional translation’, *Big Data and Society*, July–December: 1–12.
- Bonini, T. and A. Gandini (2019) “‘First week is editorial, second week is algorithmic’: platform gatekeepers and the platformization of music curation”, *Social Media + Society* 5 (4): 1–11.
- Bucher, T. (2018) *If ... Then: algorithmic power and politics*. New York NY: Oxford University Press.
- Comaroff, J. L. and J. Comaroff (2008) ‘Faith’ in N. Shepherd and S. Robins (eds), *New SA Keywords*. Johannesburg: Jacana.
- Coplan, D. (1985) *In Township Tonight! South Africa’s Black city music and theatre*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.

- Coplan, D. (2001) 'Sounds of the "third way": identity and the African renaissance in contemporary South African popular traditional music', *Black Music Research Journal* 21 (1): 107–24.
- Corrine, A. (2023) 'Amapiano to the world: the next cultural shift in mainstream music', *Vibe*, 1 June <<https://www.vibe.com/features/editorial/amapiano-musics-next-cultural-shift-recap-1234760585/>>, accessed 30 April 2024.
- De Beukelaar, C. and J. A. Eisenberg (2020) 'Mobilising African music: how mobile telecommunications and technology firms are transforming African music sectors', *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 32 (2): 195–211.
- Degenhard, J. (2024) 'Internet users in Africa 2014–2029', Statista <<https://www.statista.com/forecasts/1146636/internet-users-in-africa>>, accessed 10 April 2024.
- Dinnissen, K. and C. Bauer (2022) 'Fairness in music recommender systems: a stakeholder-centered mini review', *Frontiers in Big Data* 5: 1–9.
- Eaby-Lomas, D. M. (2021) 'Historicising *gqom* as a post-kwaito phenomenon', *Journal of the Musical Arts in Africa* 18 (1): 101–16.
- Engelbrecht, I. A. (2023) 'Die Koortjie undercommons'. PhD thesis, Stellenbosch University.
- Erasmus, Z. (2011) 'Creolization, colonial citizenship(s) and degeneracy: a critique of selected histories of Sierra Leone and South Africa', *Current Sociology* 59 (5): 636–54.
- Erlmann, V. (1991) *African Stars: studies in Black South African performance*. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Grundlingh, A. (2004) "'Rocking the boat"? The "Voelvry" music movement in South Africa: anatomy of Afrikaans anti-apartheid social protest in the eighties', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 37 (3): 483–514.
- Haupt, A. (2021) 'The first-ever dictionary of South Africa's *Kaaps* language has launched – why it matters', *The Conversation*, 29 August <<https://theconversation.com/the-first-ever-dictionary-of-south-africas-kaaps-language-has-launched-why-it-matters-165485>>, accessed 5 May 2024.
- Hesmondhalgh, D. and L. M. Meier (2018) 'What the digitalisation of music tells us about capitalism, culture and the power of the information technology sector', *Information, Communication and Society* 21 (11): 1555–70.
- Hofmeyr, I. (1987) 'Building a nation from words: Afrikaans language, literature and ethnic identity, 1902–1924' in S. Marks and S. Trapido (eds), *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism*. Harlow: Longman.
- IFPI (2025) *IFPI Digital Music Report*. London: International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI).
- Jansson, A. (2021) 'Beyond the platform: music streaming as a site of logistical and symbolic struggle', *New Media and Society* 25 (12): 1–19.
- Jury, B. (1996) 'Boys to men: Afrikaans alternative popular music, 1986–1990', *African Languages and Cultures* 9 (2): 99–109.
- Kiberg, H. and H. Spilker (2023) 'One more turn after the algorithmic turn? Spotify's colonization of the online audio space', *Popular Music and Society* 46 (2): 151–71.
- Korf, L. and J. Malan (2002) 'Threat to ethnic identity: the experience of white Afrikaans-speaking participants in postapartheid South Africa', *Journal of Social Psychology* 142 (2): 149–70.
- Lekgoathi, P. L. (2011) 'Bantustan identity, censorship and subversion on northern Sotho radio under apartheid, 1960s–1980s' in L. Gunner, D. Ligaga and D. Moyo (eds), *Radio in Africa: publics, cultures, communities*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Lobley, N. (2018) 'Hyperactive musical communities on- and offline: dancing and producing Chicago footwork, Shangaan electro, and *gqom*' in S. A. Reily and K. Brucher (eds), *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Local Musicking*. New York NY: Routledge.
- Maasø, A. and H. S. Spilker (2022) 'The streaming paradox: untangling the hybrid gatekeeping mechanisms of music streaming', *Popular Music and Society* 45 (3): 300–16.
- Martin, D. (2001) 'What's in the name "Coloured"?', in A. Zegeye (ed.), *Social Identities in the New South Africa*. Cape Town: African Minds.
- Martin, D. (2013) *Sounding the Cape: music, identity and politics in South Africa*. Cape Town: African Minds.
- Meintjies, L. (2003) *Sound of Africa! Making music Zulu in a South African studio*. London: Duke University Press.
- Meyer, B. (2004) "'Praise the Lord": popular cinema and Pentecostalist style in Ghana's new public sphere', *American Ethnologist* 31 (1): 92–110.

- Morris, J. W. and D. Powers (2015) 'Control, curation and musical experience in streaming music services', *Creative Industries Journal* 8 (2): 106–22.
- Nutall, S. and C. Michael (2000) *Senses of Culture: South African culture studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Oliver, H. (2016) 'Gqom, the foot-stomping new sound of South Africa's townships', *The Guardian*, 22 January <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/jan/22/gqom-house-dance-bhenga-julz-da-deejay>>, accessed 15 April 2024.
- Pasquale, F. (2015) *The Black Box Society: the secret algorithms that control money and information*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Prey, R. (2018) 'Nothing personal: algorithmic individuation on music streaming platforms', *Media, Culture and Society* 40 (7): 1086–100.
- Ross, L. (2006) *Voëlvry: the movie*. Johannesburg: Shifty Studios.
- Roth, C., A. Mazières and T. Menezes (2020) 'Tubes and bubbles topological confinement of YouTube recommendations', *PLoS ONE* 15 (4): e0231703.
- Sonnekus, T. (2020) 'Afrikaner identity in contemporary visual art: a study in hauntology' in F. Frechsi, B. Schmähmann and L. Van Robbroeck (eds), *Troubling Images: visual culture and the politics of Afrikaner nationalism*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Steyn, A. S. (2016) 'Afrikaans, Inc.: the Afrikaans culture industry after apartheid', *Social Dynamics* 42 (3): 481–503.
- Steyn, M. (2012) 'The ignorance contract: recollections of apartheid childhoods and the construction of epistemologies of ignorance', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 19 (1): 8–25.
- Suriano, M. and C. Lewis (2015) 'Afrikaners is Plesierig! Voëlvry, music, anti-apartheid identities and Rockey Street nightclubs in Yeoville (Johannesburg), 1980s–90s', *African Studies* 74 (3): 404–28.
- Thompson, R. L. (2015) 'The production of gospel music: an ethnographic study of studio-recorded music in Bellville, Cape Town'. MA thesis, University of the Western Cape.
- Van der Merwe, M. and H. Van Schalkwyk (2020) 'Perceived usefulness of video and music streaming services among generation Y students', *International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanity Studies* 12 (2): 498–512.
- Van der Merwe, S. D. (2014) 'Radio apartheid: investigating a history of compliance and resistance in popular Afrikaans music, 1956–1979', *South African Historical Journal* 66 (2): 349–70.
- Van der Merwe, S. D. (2017) *On Record: popular Afrikaans music and society, 1900–2017*. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media.
- Van der Waal, C. S. (2012) 'Creolisation and purity: Afrikaans language politics in post-apartheid times', *African Studies* 71 (3): 446–63.
- Van Wyk, J. (1991) 'Afrikaans language, literature and identity', *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory* 77: 79–89.
- Vestergaard, M. (2001) 'Who's got the map? The negotiation of Afrikaner identities in post-apartheid South Africa', *Daedalus* 130 (1): 19–44.
- Witz, L. (2003) *Apartheid's Festivals: contesting South Africa's national pasts*. Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press.
- Yende, S. J., L. P. Hlatshwayo and T. Koliti (2025) 'Understanding the digital transformation of the South African music industry: a multidisciplinary approach', *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies* 7 (2): 1–11.
- Zungu, E. B. (2020) 'Modernizing traditional game songs through gqom music: a case study of Babes Wodumo', *Mankind Quarterly* 60 (1): 90–110.

Schalk Van der Merwe teaches history and intercultural studies at Stellenbosch University and is affiliated with the Africa Open Institute for Music, Research and Innovation. His research focuses on South African social and cultural history, popular music, and the political economy of culture in colonial and postcolonial contexts.

Cite this article: Van der Merwe, S. D. (2026). 'New currents, old boundaries: exploring the relationship between streaming platforms and Afrikaans music'. *Africa* 96, 14–34. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972026101764>