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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Performative elements in Tiktok poetry performances

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of social media platforms has resulted to multimodal performance of poetry, in which verbal, visual and technological tools are combined. Among these multimedia platforms, TikTok has become a significant platform for poets to harness a range of digital affordances to aid in their poetic expression and engagement with audiences. Although some poetry has become popular on TikTok, there has been little scholarly research on the performative aspects that inform these digital productions. This paper explores the performative components used in TikTok poetry productions and how it aids in the creation of meaning in digital contexts. Digital Performance Theory and the principle of multimodality is used to guide the analysis. The research method used in the study was qualitative with descriptive research type. For the analysis, four poets were purposively selected from a population of ten popular poets on TikTok to give a sample of sixteen poems. Content analysis was used to gather data and thematic analysis was conducted. The results indicate that TikTok poets use a variety of performative techniques, including visual techniques (such as visual cues, projection aesthetics and kinesthetic typography), digital techniques (such as pacing and digitally augmented sound), and interactive techniques (such as liveability). By integrating these multimodal elements, the work enriches the expression and adds to the thematic messages, while attracting the attention of the audience and turning poetry into a digital performance. The study concludes that TikTok has extended the expressive potential of oral poetry by making use of the technological affordances within the process of poetic performance, thus establishing multimodality as being a defining feature of present-day digital poetry.

KEYWORDS: digitality, interaction, multimodality, performance, poetry, TikTok

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1. Introduction

Poems have always been a way to convey social, political, economic and cultural experiences in communities. Within oral societies, performances were important functions, used to transfer knowledge, values and history from one generation to the next. Carefully arranged performances, poetry preserved collective memory, strengthened social cohesion across generations. Thus, performance has been a part of the poetic expression and not an add-on. The versatility of poetry in various historical periods and media further illustrates the enduring function of poetry as a means of communicating. Poems, as Chasar notes, “travels more easily than any other art” (14), and ever reinvents itself for new communication platforms.

Traditional poetic forms have historically been based upon established conventions of performance that dictate interpretation by the audience. Traditional poetry has consistent metrical patterns, rhyme patterns, and structures that give it a structure for the oral performance, according to Smith. These formal features help to maintain linguistic and cultural heritage and to perform well before audiences. Likewise, in the oral traditions of Africa, forms of poetry have continually developed to reflect the changing social context. For Mwangi, Erithi is an ethnopoetic oral expression that reflects the traditional knowledge and use of language in the Gikuyu community, and how the art of poetry has been continuously negotiated as it comes face-to-face with new cultural settings.

In spoken word poetry, meaning is not just conveyed by the words themselves, but also by the performer’s delivery, and this is an even more central role in spoken word poetry. Ekesa believes that spoken word creates meaning by means of intertextuality and that performance helps to enhance the interpretation by using the voice, body language and stage presence. These extra elements are used to help the audience connect to a performer’s message in both emotional and interpretive ways, and to help them internalize that message. In addition to oral language, Njogu and Oluoch go on to identify artistic performances as tools that give voice to people’s identities, communicate cultural experiences, and actively engage audiences, making performance a cultural experience, not a passive, receiving one.

Digital technologies have dramatically reimaged poetic performance by opening up new contexts for the production, performance and consumption of poetry. Poets have been able to use digital platforms to connect with an audience across a distance and to include multimedia elements that enrich the artistry of their work. Belk posits that digital spaces level the playing field for creative production, making it more accessible and engaging to audiences and making the boundaries between creators and consumers of artistic content more porous (477–478). Similarly, Bhatti (337) notes that digital platforms have changed the nature of the relationship between the author and audience because it has allowed for instant feedback and ongoing interaction with creative products.

TikTok is one of the most important platforms today for performing poetry. According to Mutie, TikTok is a contemporary medium for indigenous knowledge communication using popular reflections on literary works in Africa (46). The platform’s short-form video format provides poets with suitable opportunities to distil ideas into short, emotionally powerful performances that are ideally suited to audiences that change so quickly in the digital age (49). Poets can use text overlays, visual effects, images and sound to support their poetic message, in addition to the spoken word. Literat, Boxman-Shabtai and Kligler-Vilenchik suggest that these multimedia capabilities not only enrich the visual and auditory aspects of poetry, but also empower artists to adopt the most popular sounds, themes and collaborative techniques, as TikTok’s culture is in the business of trends. Overall, TikTok poetry is a growing phenomenon of the digital world that brings together verbal, visual and technological aspects to form the poetic meaning and involvement of its audiences.

2. Review of Related Literature

Bal makes a distinction between performance and performativity. Performance refers to the unique execution of a work, while performativity is the distinct occurrence of an act (110). In simple terms, performance is not the same as performativity in the way that matter is different from materiality or the concrete is different from the abstract. In speech-act theory, performativity is when familiar words move beyond their definitions and linguistic rules, becoming powerful tools or expressions. They carry weight, force and charm in the present moment, happening between specific individuals. In this context, memory might hinder the success of the performance, as it’s best when the words are fresh and impactful. However, performativity might not be effective if the act is not embedded in a cultural context that remembers the potential impact of that act. Understanding the distinction between performance and performativity is crucial for the current study as it navigates the dynamics of poetry within the TikTok context. This review therefore provides valuable insights into the conceptual framework of performative aspects in poetry.

Barber explores the connection between written text and live performance in Africa, highlighting that in literary traditions, the distinction between the two seems clear. The text, whether handwritten or printed, is a lasting artifact, while the performance is a unique and unrepeatable realization of the text, a momentary bringing to life destined to fade with the spoken words. However, even in written traditions, the relationship between a “text” and a “performance” can take different forms. Written texts may serve as cues, scripts, or triggers for oral performances and they can also document, result from, or be secondary to these performances. Even texts typically seen as belonging solely to the written realm can possess a performative aspect. If, as is often the case in many traditions, text relies on performance and performance on text, comparative literary studies can aid in understanding the various nature and degrees of these interdependent relationships.

According to Boletsi, the theory of the performative, as initially formulated by J.L. Austin and later revised by poststructuralist thinkers, provides a framework to examine speech acts within C.P. Cavafy’s poems (67). It also allows us to understand how Cavafy’s poems themselves can act as performances. Performativity in these poems operates on four interconnected levels: the erotic, the theatrical or public, the historical and the linguistic. Instances of “infelicitous” performatives, particularly unfulfilled promises, occur repeatedly in Cavafy’s poems, revealing the critical and creative potential of these imperfections (70). Despite the recurrence of failures and gaps in communication within the poems, they contribute to the concept of a successful poetic event. In this context, failure transforms into a critical act, serving as a motivating force for continuous re-evaluation in Cavafy’s poetic practices. While Boletsi looks into performative as a theory, the current study will go beyond understanding the theory and explore the digital space is the performative aspect of poetry in TikTok.

Performative aspects of poetry encompass dynamic and expressive elements embedded in the delivery and presentation of poetic content. According to Darah unlike traditional written forms, performance poetry involves the oral, visual and sometimes physical aspects of communication (45). The performer’s voice modulation, intonation, rhythm and body language play pivotal roles in conveying not only the semantic content but also the emotional nuances of the poem. These aspects enhance the overall impact of the poem, creating a multisensory experience for the audience.

Additionally, performative poetry often incorporates theatrical elements, where poets may use gestures, movements and spatial dynamics to complement the verbal expression (3). This genre of poetry thrives on the synergy between language and performance, as poets strategically utilize various elements to engage and captivate the audience, fostering a unique and immersive connection between the creator and the spectator. Exploring performative aspects opens a rich avenue for understanding the artistry, versatility and communicative power inherent in the performance of poetry across different platforms and mediums.

John and Visser define poetry within an African context, emphasizing its reliance on performative enactment for meaningful expression. The article illustrates this perspective using poetic verses from Nigeria (Ham and Hausa), Ghana (Ewe and Akan) and Uganda (Ocoli) (28). The scholars assert that the essence of orally-recited poetry is unveiled through enactment, highlighting its central role in the communicative act. The scholars specifically emphasize that much of what is commonly labelled as “poetry” in African oral literature is designed to be performed in a musical context. In this setting, melodic and vocal elements work in tandem, each dependent on the other for effective representation.

The primary concern addressed is the recognition that poetry in traditional African societies is categorized based on the perception of the community in which it is performed (30). This classification, the scholars argue, need not adhere strictly to Western interpretations but should be appreciated within the cultural context where it originates. The review provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the performative aspect of poetry, particularly within the context of African oral literature. It outlines the reliance on performative enactment for meaningful expression, offering a conceptual framework that the current study can build upon and apply to the analysis of poetry on TikTok.

Leeker and Schipper suggest that our usual ideas about performance, which distinguish between human and technological actions, are changing. Human performance involves things like intentionality, thinking about things, using our bodies, repeating actions and breaking norms. “Performing the Digital” aims to explore how people act and perform in today’s digital world (9). The main idea is that digital media and networks are changing how performance happens. They bring together what we usually think of as human or machine actions, following a perspective that sees technology and people as interconnected. In simple terms, digital cultures are seen as always involving performance—they are shaped by and shape how we use technology, creating new ways for people to perform and make an impact. The review provides an understanding of the historical and theoretical context of digital poetic practices, relevant to the current study.

Maranga investigates the influence of digital platforms on artistic expression in Kenya, particularly focusing on the power of performance in the local context (178). The widespread use of social media globally has profoundly affected various aspects of life, including artistic creativity. Digitization has not only transformed how artistic content is produced, performed and circulated but has also created opportunities for young individuals to express their creativity in ways that were previously limited (179). In Kenya and other countries, there is a noticeable trend where young people are now building careers by showcasing short performances on platforms like YouTube, TikTok and Instagram. This shift highlights the impact of digital tools on the performative aspects of artistic endeavours. The review provides a contextual understanding of how social media platforms, including YouTube, TikTok and Instagram, have influenced artistic creativity. This broader context can help situate the current study within the larger landscape of digital platforms and artistic expression.

Sacks argues that in the last twenty years, a growing number of African writers have turned to digital platforms, especially social media, to share, discuss and create their literary work, forming new aesthetic connections (3). This essay focuses on two performance poems from Cape Town: “Rondeau in Four Parts” by Antjie Krog and Peter Odendaal and “State of the Nation’s Undress” by Lwanda Sindaphi. Originally performed in theatres, these poems are now globally accessible on YouTube, serving as both a public space and a record of the original performance (4).

By examining how the reception changes from local to digital settings, Sacks highlights the impact of broader digital aesthetics, specifically the emphasis on popularity and spontaneity, on contemporary poetry styles in Cape Town. Introducing a sound studies perspective to the critique of digital media in South African poetry, the scholar argues that in digital spaces, where the richness of sound can be diminished, the voice gains significant influence as both a physical and symbolic representation of the self. The review sheds light on how African poets navigate the digital landscape, emphasizing the use of social media platforms. This understanding is crucial for contextualizing the current study within the broader digital aesthetics and dynamics that influence contemporary poetry.

3. Methodology

In this study, a qualitative approach with descriptive research design was chosen to analyse the elements of the performative that are used in TikTok poetry performances. The study selected creators of digital poetry on TikTok, and a population of ten poets of the most popular was found, consisting of fifty-five publicly available poems. The four poets were selected through purposive sampling based on their works which best met the purposes of the study. Popularity, audience response, thematic relevance, poetic output and recognition within the digital poetry community (Douglas 415) were used as criteria to help guide the selection. Four poems were then chosen from each of the four poets producing a sample of sixteen poems. Those who have significant original poetry performances, regular appearance for the audience, and proven creativity among a wide range of cultural and language backgrounds were included.

The data collection technique used was content analysis, which was the main tool for data collection. The selected TikTok poetry performances were systematically analysed to determine the elements of performance used by poets in the digital performances. The analysis was centred on verbal, visual and auditory elements that were included in the performances, as well as capturing the audience engagement via publicly available performance metrics like comments, heart likes, reposts, and shares. The selected TikTok accounts were used to collect publicly available poetry videos and a content analysis coding sheet was used to code each poetry video to capture the performative elements of the poem. The data collected were preserved by screenshots, downloading videos, and recording audio so as not to alter the integrity of the digital content during the study. The analysis of data was themed to investigate and discuss common performative patterns in the sampled poetry performances. Through initial open coding, emerging categories were identified, and these were grouped and formed into larger themes describing the performative techniques used by poets on TikTok. The findings were interpreted in line with Digital Performance Theory, more so the principle of multimodality.

4. Findings and Discussion

The analysis focused on poems from four poets: Kapedo (*Girlchild, Drugs, Bittersweet, Kazi, Dunia Iko So Unfair, Mr. Politician, Tuko Same*), Teardrops (*Hope, Generation, Cheza Tuk Ama Wewe*), Somali Iron Lady (*First Time I Saw You, Fake Friends*) and Willie Oeba (*Dear God, Dear Mr. President, Dear Mr. President 2, Uhuru Maliza Uende*). Each poem demonstrates different performative techniques that shape its impact. The discussion integrates both analysis and interpretation, highlighting how these elements contribute to the transformation of poetry in digital spaces. These include interactive techniques such as liveness and interactivity

media, digital techniques such as pacing and digitally augmented sound, and visual techniques. These digital tools do not merely support the performance; they are central to its structure, emotional intensity and audience engagement. Across the 16 selected poems, digital strategies were seen to enhance thematic delivery, reshape poetic aesthetics and amplify the multimodal impact of each performance.

4.1 Interactive Techniques

TikTok poetry interactive methods reorganize the space of performance as human expression is combined with digital affordances. Contrary to the classic oral poetry, where a speaker needs only his/her voice and presence, Tik Tok performances incorporate gestures, bodily motions, and oral performance with digital overlays, captions, and interactive effects. Such hybrid approaches enable the performance to be more interactive and immersive because, in this way, the poets can interact with audiences not only with their words but also with visual and auditory components that react to their performance. In this regard, the screen acts like the stage of interaction where physical performing and digital design works together to form even a richer poetic experience.

Using these interactive methods, the Tik Tok poetry breaks down the performance procedures by imitating interactivity between the performer, the poem and the audience. The features of duets, filters in response to body movements, or texts changing with changes in vocal accents enable viewers to experience that they are actively participating in the performance, even when they are consuming asynchronously. This interactivity makes poetry a multimodal art form, the meaning of which is created in a combination of live performative actions and digital interventions.

a) Liveness

Liveness is the integration of live performance with digital effects in order to increase immediacy and dynamism. This can be seen in Tik Tok performances in which poets perform live with spoken word and digital effects set to replicate background settings or enhance specific movements. As an illustration, in the poem *Dear Mr. President 2* by Willie Oeba, the poet acts as though speaking to the president, with the use of forceful gestures and harsh tonality. Captures that are digitally superimposed are used to highlight words such as *uhuru* (freedom), and *ushuru* (taxes) and background scenery of parliament offices is used to support the political critique. In this case, digital augmentation of the live bodily energy of Oeba is created and this creates a performance that is immediate and mediated.

On the same note, liveness in the *Kapedo Kazi* is also made through the combination of his sorrowful, pessimistic movements and the effects of digital lighting that makes the screen darker than normal; a representation of hopelessness and anger. The action records his physical injury and lowered eye-level, and filters obscure the visual plane, reinforcing this feeling of restraint. The live-digital fusion alters the way the audience receives the poem: they are not just listening to the poem, but rather encounter the performance by means of immersion with the live gestures and digital atmospherics used to co-construct the meaning. Both of them make the smartphone screen an interactive stage in which oral performance acquires new dimensions due to digital layering.

b) Interactive Installations/Interactive Media

Digital poetry interactive installations involve creative activities in which poems are meant to be experienced in more than one form, both as visual objects and as a performance spoken-word poem. The body of the poet is not only the delivery vessel in such settings, but it is also the means of manipulation of both digital text and imagery. Moving, both the visual elements are frequently followed or reflected by physical gestures, voice accent, and movements, hence, the sense is created by the interaction of the text and voice, image and body space. This renders poetry an open, dynamic artifact.

On TikTok this idea of interactive installations is translated to interactive media practices in which filters, split screens, captions, duets, and comment overlays perform alongside performance to give the poem a longer life and a deeper resonance. One poem can be seen as having lived as a piece of text being shared as a post, a performance with digital overlays and overlay side by side as well as a duet or remix performed by audience members. In both variations the audience is a participant, not only as consumer but as a participant whose participation affects the direction in which the poem moves. The outcome is a multi-format, participatory installation in which the delineations between poet, performance and platform are diffused.

In *Girlchild*, the performance exists simultaneously as a spoken-word delivery and as a visual-textual installation. The poet's raised hand gestures are mirrored by bold captions such as "*education is power*" appearing on screen, transforming his bodily movements into triggers for shifting digital text. The visual-text

elements, far from being decorative, anchor the thematic message of empowerment, while the comments and shares re-circulate the poem as a gallery-like text in multiple spaces beyond the original video. In this way, the poem performs in two modes: the live delivery of voice and gesture, and the digital re-installation of text and imagery shaped by audience interactivity.

The same logic of the installation can be seen in *Drugs*. When Kapedo is singing with a hunched posture and voice strains, the TikTok filter put the frame in black and white, which evokes a changing digital text-image space that reflects his physical condition. The poem represents “*Kazi ni ngumu, mwili umechoka*” not only as something said but as something physically acted out in terms of light fading out and movement slowing down. The interaction with the audience then pushes the piece out into a second form: in the comments, the audience recounts its own drug-related stories, building a textual gallery of social testimonies. Therefore, the poem is a performative performance and an act of participatory digital installation in which voice, body and text converge.

The poem *Drugs* can be seen to have the same logic of installation. When Kapedo plays with a bent posture and a hoarse voice, the Tik Tok filter darkens the frame forming a changing digital text-image space that reflects his physical condition. The *phrase kazi ni ngumu, mwili umechoka* is not merely verbal--it is somehow performed in the shutting down of light, in the depression of movement. The interaction with the audience then stretches the work into a second format, in comments, people share their stories of drug-related experiences, building a textual collection of social testimonies. In this way, the poem will live as performative act as well as as participatory digital installation of voice, body, and text coming together.

Oeba’s *Dear Mr. President 2* epitomizes the fusion of physical gesture and digital text in interactive installations. His emphatic pointing gestures are visually reinforced by on-screen captions such as “*Uhuru imekuwa ushuru*”, which shift in synchrony with his delivery. The audience’s subsequent use of hashtags (#leadership, #Kenya) transforms the poem into a mobile text circulating independently of the spoken performance, almost like a gallery piece that can be re-encountered in different contexts. This illustrates the dual existence of TikTok poetry: as a bodily performance interacting with digital text in real time, and as a dispersed, text-driven installation co-authored by audience interaction.

4.2 Digital Techniques

Digital techniques Tik Tok poetry Digital techniques refer to the approaches that are applied by poets to design delivery and sound in a manner that amplifies the effect of their performance on screen. Such techniques include close attention to rhythm, timing and voice so that meaning and emotion can be achieved in the limited scope of the short video. Pacing enables poets to either slow the speed or accelerate to create emphasis on certain feelings or create a sense of urgency. These strategic pauses generate suspense and allow the audience time to internalize the important lines, as the performance proceeds.

Other methods are digitally augmented sound, in which poets add echoes, filters or musical overlays to their voices to augment the effects in layers and reinforce the poem. The place of tonality also plays a key role in it because the poets change their voice to capture the change of mood, whether calm and reflective or intense and offensive. Combined, these methods demonstrate the way poets transform voice and sound into performative aspects through digital tools in order to have much more impact on audiences. Pacing, pauses, digitally enhanced sound, and tonal variation were some of the evidences of pacing in the poems under this study.

a) Pacing

In *Drugs*, pacing is carefully manipulated to dramatize the theme of misguidance and addiction. When Kapedo recites the lines:

Mamangu alipikia jikoni mahali kuna moshi /

Lakini hakuna siku aliniambia nikule mosh

The poet deliberately slows his tempo, drawing out the rhythm of the words. This slow pacing mirrors the contemplative, almost mournful tone of recalling maternal guidance. The effect is twofold: first, it allows the audience to absorb the metaphor of “moshi” (smoke) as a symbol of drug abuse; second, the lingering delivery creates space for reflection, inviting viewers to weigh the gravity of the cautionary message.

On TikTok, the slowed vocal pacing is reinforced by the visual text appearing line by line in sync with his speech. The screen's gradual reveal of words mirrors the hesitancy in his voice, effectively transforming pacing into a multimodal performance strategy. This illustrates how TikTok poetry turns rhythm into both an auditory and visual technique for emotional engagement.

Similarly, in *Hope*, pacing operates as a powerful performative device that transforms the narrative of despair into one of resilience. Teardrops begins with a relatively fast-paced delivery in the opening lines:

*"How comes unaeza hata classes due to lack of school fees na babako huko nje is looking for carol (karo) /
Na si nyi wote mnajua mwanamke ni kama class /
Hata ukuwe an A student, ukihata period unapata D (you get pregnant)"*

Here, the rapid tempo mirrors the breathless frustration of systemic injustice—lack of school fees, absentee fathers, and the societal pressures on women. The speed mirrors the piling weight of challenges, creating a sense of urgency and emotional overload that reflects the lived reality he critiques.

The most striking pacing shift comes when the poet introduces the line:

"So alikuwa, huyu dem alikuwa failure all her life until ile time alikam akapass... (pregnant pause) a pregnancy test"

Here, Teardrops deliberately slows down and inserts a long, dramatic silence between "akapass..." and "a pregnancy test." This pregnant pause functions performatively: it mimics suspense, allows the audience to anticipate multiple possible outcomes, and then subverts expectation with the devastating twist of teenage pregnancy. The pause not only dramatizes the irony but also forces the audience to sit with the emotional weight of the revelation before he proceeds.

After this heavy pause, the pacing quickens again as he narrates the boyfriend's abandonment and the birth of the child named *Hope*:

"One year later, akazaa mtoi- dem, na akamuita Hope..."

The delivery flows faster here, carrying the momentum of the story toward resolution. By the time he repeats the name *Hope* in subsequent lines, the pacing has slowed into a steady, rhythmic cadence, almost like a chant. This closing rhythm produces a sense of stability and reassurance, mirroring the emotional anchor that the child provides for her mother.

On TikTok, the pacing is further reinforced by the synchronized captions and the subtle background beats that drop out during the dramatic pause, leaving silence to amplify its emotional resonance. This multimodal coordination demonstrates how digital techniques elevate traditional spoken word, using pacing not just as rhythm but as a visual-auditory cue that guides interpretation.

b) Digitally Augmented Sound

Digitally augmented sound is a use of digital audio technologies to add voice-related instrumental background, ambient sound, or altered tonal effects to a spoken word construct. These sonic elements are designed to influence the audience perception, rather than to serve as decoration, to provide stronger emotions and to match meaning with delivery. Higgins (2012) notes that in digital performance, sound augmentation takes a voice and stretches its expressive capacity through being incorporated in immersive sonic spaces. That way, digital poetry, such as on Tik Tok, can go beyond the delivery of textual content and become an audio-visual presentation, which combines rhythm, tone, and emotion.

Digitally augmented sound functions as a performative approach to redefine the expression of poetry on Tik Tok, where brevity and increased engagement are the most significant factors. Combining human voice with multiple layers of digital sound, performers can form highly immersive ambiances, reflective of the themes of their compositions. This does not only make sound not only a background element but an important performative instrument that expresses intensity, mood and thematic emphasis. Digitally augmented sound, therefore, is important

as a digital method in changing poetry into a multimedia art process adapted into modern digital environments. In *Girlchild*, the soft background music accompanying Kapedo's spoken word functions as a carefully crafted performative layer rather than a decorative addition. The music generates a reflective atmosphere that complements the poet's central theme of girlchild empowerment. As Kapedo asserts that "*education is the key*," the gentle rhythm sustains a meditative mood, prompting the audience to pause and consider the transformative potential of education. The sonic environment, therefore, shapes how the words are received, encouraging deeper engagement with the message.

This instance demonstrates how digitally augmented sound serves as an integral tool in TikTok poetry, shaping tone and amplifying meaning. By synchronizing the vocal delivery with soft instrumentals, Kapedo ensures that the performance resonates not only intellectually but also emotionally with the audience. The soundscape directs interpretation, allowing the audience to experience empowerment not just as an abstract idea but as a felt reality. In this way, the digital layering of sound becomes part of the poem's performative power, reinforcing the social message through a multimodal aesthetic.

Similar to storytelling performances in *Kazi* by Kapedo, the effect of the ambient instrumental sound, which can be compared to the quiet sound of a saxophone or a violin) adds a melancholy to the performance, which is powerful to support the performance. The soundscape enhances the tired movements and the low-pitched voice of the poet and supports the main idea of exhaustion and suffering. Sound, body and language interact to make the performance more of an affective experience than a mere recitation. It is not that the audience does not merely comprehend what Kapedo is saying, but rather one is pulled into the emotional gravity of the poem, and digital sound is presented as a co-narrator of struggle.

On the same note, Kapedo uses background instrumentals that change the pace according to his delivery in *Drugs*. The frenetic lines are matched by an increase in intensity of the instrumental, making the urgency and chaos dramatization, and more placid parts are toned down by the more constant rhythms. Such synchronization helps to blur the boundaries between the verbal and sonic rhythm of the piece of work, and this music tells the story alongside the spoken word. This augmented overlaying makes the performance both reflective of the instability of addiction and demonstrates how sound can dynamically construct not only time but perception on the part of the audience.

These examples reveal the ways in which digitally enhanced sound reinvents poetic performance on Tik Tok by implicating voice into the expressive sonic spaces. The screen, especially the concept of screen dramaturgy, is a performative interface according to digital performance theory, as voice, body, and sound meet to create multimodal meaning. Digital augmentation in both *Kazi* and *Drugs* makes the poems go beyond conventional oral reading, to the extent that they are the combination of auditory, visual and performance methods that define digital poetry today.

In *Dear God*, Willie Oeba shows that digital augmented sound could be used to create a divine and meditative feeling. Slow and emotional music is his musical companion to his serious voice and contributes to the prayer-like atmosphere of the poem. As his voice drops to sing the lines of confession, the instrumental adds a further level of intimacy to the performance, as the listener can also feel the vulnerability of the speaker. Sound, according to the arguments of theorists of sound studies like Feld (1996), is not merely an aesthetic supplement, but a medium of experience that is overwhelmingly social, and therefore influences the manner in which the audience experiences and understands meaning. The example of Oeba using soft and heartfelt music can be seen as an illustration of this principle since it ensures that the performance would be received as an individual lament of grief and a group of people engaging in a spiritual experience.

In comparison, Uhuru prefigures a more insistent, confrontational instrumental which matches the political criticism tone. What adds to the urgency of his accusations of the failures of the governance and the corruption are the background audio and the dramaticism of his speech. An example here is when he says, *Uhuru imekuwa ushuru*, the tension of the music accompanying this phrase highlights the accusatory nature of the sentence and makes it a verbal and sound indictment. As Auslander (2008) suggests in his book on digital performance, music and sound can be used as mere affective amplifiers, entrenching the political discourse in emotional regimes that are highly effective with audiences. The layering of sound that Oeba executes, strategically, in his critique makes sure that it is not just heard but also experienced.

Collectively, *Dear God* and *Uhuru* underscore the importance of digital augmentation to encourage poets to transcend the oral performance by integrating their voices into expressive sonic space. Digital performance theory, specifically, the concept of screen dramaturgy can be used to understand why the smartphone screen serves as a performative interface in which voice, sound and visual effects come together to produce multimodal

meaning. In the works of Oeba, augmented sound is the main object of audience involvement: it makes lament a primary feature in *Dear God* and even more political in *Uhuru*. This proves the way Tik Tok poetry is becoming a performative art that is simultaneously personal, affective and socially resonant.

4.3 Visual Techniques

Visual and digital enhancements have significantly transformed poetry performances on TikTok, making them more engaging and immersive. Modern poets use digital tools such as filters, lighting effects and text overlays to emphasize themes and emotions (Alghadeer, 87). Background music, slow motion and transitions help create mood shifts, while split screens and augmented reality effects add layers of meaning. These enhancements ensure that poetry is not just heard but also visually experienced, capturing audience attention in a fast-paced digital space. By integrating these elements, TikTok poets make their performances more dynamic, expressive and relatable, appealing to a wider and more diverse audience than ever before.

a) Visual Cues

Visual enhancements in TikTok poetry, particularly filters, effects and camera movements, have revolutionized the way poets engage their audiences. Filters alter the mood and tone of a performance by adjusting colours, contrasts, or adding cinematic textures, making the delivery more visually striking. For instance, in *Uhuru Maliza Uende*, visual enhancements play a crucial role in intensifying the poem's message and mood. The lighting is dim and shadowy, creating a sombre and oppressive atmosphere that aligns with the poet's critique of governance and corruption. Occasional flashes of red light symbolize danger and urgency, reinforcing the poem's theme of political unrest. Camera movements are dynamic, with slow zoom-ins on the poet's face during emotionally charged lines, emphasizing his frustration and determination. Quick cuts and abrupt transitions mirror the instability and unpredictability of the political landscape being discussed. These visual elements blend seamlessly with the performance, heightening its impact and ensuring that the poem's message resonates strongly with the audience.

Likewise, in *Drugs* by Kapedo, visual enhancements such as black-and-white colouring, setting and camera framing intensify the poem's cautionary tone. The choice of monochrome strips away distractions, creating a raw and sombre mood that aligns with the poem's message about drug abuse and its consequences. The abandoned vehicle in the garage serves as a powerful metaphor for stagnation and wasted potential, reinforcing the idea that drug use leads to a dead-end. As the poet turns the static steering wheel, the lack of movement visually symbolizes the illusion of control that drugs create. The middle-class residential background subtly contrasts with the abandoned car, hinting at how drug addiction can disconnect individuals from society and opportunities. In yet another poem, *Tuko same*, by the same poet, the video is shot in black and white, to vividly depict the dilapidated state of the slums and the unemployment that has befallen the youth, hence poverty.

The poem *Dear Girlchild* by Kapedo communicates empowerment through its bright overlays as well as its smooth transitions, which support the message of ambition and progress. The elevators alongside staircases serve as visual elements representing achievement and growth, while the camera angle, filming from below, captures the towering skyscrapers and implies limitless potential. These visuals contrast sharply with the despairing mood of *Drugs* and *Tuko Same*, demonstrating how visual tone can shape thematic delivery. TikTok poetry enables poets to fully control their presentation through detailed planning of lighting effects and camera angles as well as effects and backgrounds to guide instant audience perception. According to Attridge, effects such as slow motion, glitch transitions and motion blur emphasize specific words or emotions, adding depth to the performance. Camera movements, including zoom-ins, pans and dynamic framing, create an intimate or dramatic feel, drawing viewers deeper into the poet's expression. These digital tools work together to make poetry more interactive, emotionally engaging and visually captivating, enhancing both the performance and its impact on the audience.

The poem *Dear Girlchild* by Kapedo communicates empowerment through its bright overlays as well as its smooth transitions which support the message of ambition and progress. The optimistic and powerful theme of the poem becomes more evident through its vibrant effects and fluid animations which strengthen its message about advancement and goals. The elevators alongside staircases serve as visual elements that represent achievement in life while repeating the poet's message about education being more important than early marriage for young females. The camera filming from below the poet's feet simultaneously displays the skyscrapers while hinting at both ambition and endless prospects. Unlike the poems *Drugs* and *Tuko Same* by the same poet, which use black-and-white visuals to convey despair and struggle, *Dear Girlchild* employs vibrant visuals to

create an uplifting and inspiring atmosphere. These visual elements transform the performance into a dynamic experience, allowing the audience to engage with the poem beyond its words.

Through the use of digital effects, poets can evoke specific emotions that align with their message. Poets use strategic lighting shifts to emphasize key moments, enhancing the impact of their performance. A poet addressing social struggles may wear plain or worn-out clothing to reflect hardship, while one discussing empowerment might choose bold, structured outfits to convey confidence. Additionally, the background remains significant in conveying the deeper message of the poet. For instance, in *Dear Mr. President, 2* Willie Oeba strengthens the political themes of power along with inequality and hypocrisy in his poem through digital visual enhancements of costumes and background elements. The president stands out in his formal suit to show power and privilege alongside his two bodyguards who embody different leadership characteristics. The costumes maintain a distinction between the leaders presented image of authority and lawfulness while revealing his hidden roles of criminal conduct. The opposing appearance of the president and his bodyguards visually strengthens the poet's arguments about corrupt leadership with legal and illegal elements.

The background further strengthens the poem's message. The red curtains evoke a sense of political dominance and secrecy, hinting at power being exercised behind closed doors. The president's relaxed posture, swinging in a comfortable seat, contrasts sharply with the poet's frustrated, urgent gestures, deepening the visual narrative of disconnect between the ruling class and the suffering population. Through costume and background, the performance creates a striking, immersive depiction of societal inequalities, making the poem's message more impactful.

The skilful use of background is also evident in his poem, *Dear God*. Here, the poet shows out a vast wilderness during performance, with its rocky valleys and stretching forest, symbolizing isolation and human vulnerability, reinforcing the poet's deep plea to a higher power. His black clothing signifies mourning, struggle, or a sense of despair, aligning with the melancholic mood set by the slow-motion transitions and haunting background vocals. The imagery of him standing atop a hill, hands clasped together, visually expresses a desperate cry for divine intervention. Sitting at the cliff's edge further emphasizes a feeling of hopelessness and contemplation, as if caught between endurance and surrender. These visual elements work together to heighten the poem's emotional weight, drawing the audience into the poet's state of anguish and longing.

b) Projection Aesthetics

The aesthetics of projection is introduced in Tik Tok poetry and takes centre stage in making the digital screen a place of performance. Layering of the visuals, filters, light effects, and background projections are not purely decorative but are tools of interpretation which prolong poetic semantics. They direct the attention of the viewer, create mood, and support thematic issues, and, in this way, enable the poem to exist as a text, image, and as an atmosphere at the same time. In terms of digital performance, projection aesthetics is an example of how the screen is transformed into a dramaturgical zone where visual design plays a direct role in storytelling and emotional appeal to the performance, and makes it more affordable and emotive.

Projection aesthetics involve the deliberate use of overlaid text, digitally inserted phrases, or highlighted keywords that are visually rendered during a performance. These projections, whether static or animated, serve both as semiotic cues and emphatic devices, drawing attention to emotionally or ideologically loaded lines. This is evident in *Dear Mr. President 2* by Willie Oeba, where words like *uhuru* (freedom), *ushuru* (tax) and *sitting allowance* appear in bold typographic bursts timed with the poet's delivery. Their onscreen presence mirrors theatrical projections used in stage performance to anchor key moments, but here, they also leverage TikTok's short-form visual logic, where emphasis must be immediate, eye-catching and emotionally charged. These projections function as digital annotations, reinforcing irony and enhancing interpretability for a wide audience that may scroll past without sound.

Against this backdrop, in Kapedo's *Drugs*, the phrase *kula moshi* "eat smoke" appears prominently on screen at each repetition, mimicking a chant-like refrain while deepening the metaphor of internalized harm. The stark white font contrasts against the grayscale background, creating a visual echo of the poet's verbal warning. This projection is not merely ornamental, it is rhetorical, performative and mnemonic. It transforms the act of smoking into a visual paradox, compelling viewers to reflect not only on the language but on the *social critique* embedded in its repetition.

c) Kinesthetics in TikTok Poetry

Kinesthetic techniques, or what is commonly known in digital literature as kinetic typography, animate words in tandem with vocal intonation, rhythm and camera movement. These techniques treat language as a living

entity, capable of moving alongside the poet. In *Dear Girlchild*, Kapedo uses ascending motion effects on key phrases like “*education itakupea keys*”, symbolically illustrating the notion of elevation and empowerment. As the words rise onscreen, they visually enact the metaphor of progress, reinforcing the poem’s didactic tone and its appeal to young girls to pursue education over romantic entrapment. The motion is rhythmically synced with the poet’s voice, creating a visual-vocal synchrony that amplifies the poetic message.

In *Hope* by Teardrops, kinesthetic design is employed more emotionally. Words ripple and pulse on screen, especially during moments of personal revelation, such as “she passed... a pregnancy test,” with visual trembling that mimics a heartbeat. This typographic effect materializes the emotional undercurrent of the moment, allowing the viewer not only to hear but also to feel the hesitation, shock and transformation the poem articulates. These moving captions become emotionally charged, almost bodily, signifying internal tension through visual rhythm.

Together, projection aesthetics and kinesthetic techniques extend the range of poetic expression in TikTok performances. They allow poets to visually manipulate meaning in real-time, creating an audiovisual experience that appeals to both the cognitive and affective registers of the audience. TikTok poets choreograph visual language that interacts with touchscreen spectatorship, an audience that scrolls, taps, pauses and replays. These techniques transform the poem from a static text or linear recitation into an orchestrated digital event, where every visual shift contributes to the layered unfolding of meaning.

By utilizing this digital aesthetics, TikTok poets expand the expressive boundaries of oral poetry, especially within African sociopolitical discourse. They harness the smartphone screen as a site of protest, healing, empowerment and storytelling where projection and movement become as meaningful as the words themselves.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that TikTok poetry performances extend beyond conventional spoken word by integrating multiple performative techniques that enhance meaning-making and audience engagement. The findings reveal that interactive techniques, including liveness and interactive media, transform the digital screen into an active performance space where spoken language, bodily movement and platform affordances function simultaneously. Likewise, digital techniques such as pacing and digitally augmented sound enable poets to regulate emotional intensity, emphasize thematic concerns and sustain audience attention. Visual techniques, including visual cues, projection aesthetics and kinesthetic typography, further enrich performances by combining imagery, text, movement and lighting to reinforce poetic messages. Collectively, these performative elements illustrate that TikTok poetry is inherently multimodal, relying on the coordinated interaction of verbal, visual and auditory resources to produce layered meanings.

The study concludes that TikTok has redefined contemporary poetic performance by providing poets with digital affordances that expand the expressive possibilities of oral poetry. Rather than replacing traditional performance practices, the platform extends them through multimedia integration, enabling poets to communicate sociocultural issues in ways that are immersive, participatory and accessible to diverse audiences. Guided by the principle of multimodality within Digital Performance Theory, the study establishes that meaning in TikTok poetry emerges from the interaction of speech, gesture, sound, visual design and digital technologies. Consequently, TikTok poetry represents an evolving form of digital performance in which technological affordances have become central to poetic expression, audience participation and the transformation of performance aesthetics.

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