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RESEARCH ARTICLE (PEER-REVIEWED)

South African Urban Youth Responses to Living in a World With COVID: Lessons from #Slam4urLife

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Abstract

Using poetry, visual art, songs, raps and sketches submitted to #Slam4urLife, a social media competition encouraging young people in South Africa to respond creatively to the COVID-19 pandemic, this article outlines young urban people's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa through four narratives: shock, loss, survival and activism. Resting on practices of engaged scholarship, it draws on knowledge bases and collaborations in and beyond the academy to contribute grounded research on arts-based social media competitions as an effective method for encouraging and amplifying the youth voice. It does this by creating digital public spaces in which young people can practise civic engagement in contexts where this cannot be done in physical public spaces. In doing so, the article contributes to the literature on community-based research and youth in African cities from the perspective of South Africa. It also argues the importance of art-based social media competitions in creating digital public spaces in which the youth voice can be encouraged, legitimised and amplified in so far as these kinds of digital spaces allow for a kind of civic engagement not always seen by young people in the physical public spaces of African cities.

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Keywords

Youth; COVID-19; South Africa; Social Media; Competitions; Civic Engagement

Introduction

This article emerged from #Slam4urLife, a social media competition which encouraged young people in South Africa to respond creatively to the theme ‘Living in a world with COVID-19’. #Slam4urLife was launched by FunDza Literacy Trust in partnership with South Africa’s Western Cape provincial Department of Cultural Affairs and Sport, supported by three local charities (Community Chest, Assitej arts organisation and Harambee youth employment accelerator), and funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund through the University of Bristol. Representing a research and writing collaboration between youth development workers from the Western Cape provincial Department of Cultural Affairs and Sport and the FunDza Literacy Trust, as well as academics from the University of Bristol, this article provides reflections from our experience in launching, running and funding #Slam4urLife and responds to three related questions: ‘How did young people respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in South African cities?’; ‘To what extent might arts-based social media competitions such as #Slam4urLife encourage and amplify youth voice by creating digital public spaces in which young people can practice civic engagement in contexts where this cannot be done in physical public spaces?’; and ‘What can be learnt about the importance of durable institutions and partnerships with community and government organisations for enabling engaged research?’

There are three interconnected layers to the formation of this article, within which these questions are explored. The first and most important lies with the community of young urban people who responded rapidly and creatively to the challenges of COVID-19 in South African cities through their contributions to #Slam4urLife. The bulk of the article is, appropriately, focused on this layer in narrating and locating the story of #Slam4urLife as an example of urban youth innovation and community mobilisation in a time of protracted crisis. It would be disingenuous, however, to present #Slam4urLife as an isolated case of youth innovation and mobilisation in response to crisis in this country. Rather, #Slam4urLife should be seen as a collection of youth voices on COVID-19 connected to a wider urban intellectual tradition in South Africa that has long seen strong partnerships between residents, scholars, activists and professionals.

The second layer is about a cohort of South African urban interlocutors based in a university, a provincial government department, and a durable non-government organisation (NGO) who, having all lived and worked in South Africa, are close enough to communities to read opportunities for innovation and to respond to them. Engaged research is rarely, if ever, undertaken by a lone researcher and is generally characterised by sustained relationships over time. The social, political and intellectual networks around #Slam4urLife reflect new partnerships and also decades of collaboration between international universities (the universities of Bristol and Cape Town), national governments (the United Kingdom and South Africa), and local NGOs (FunDza, Community Chest, Assitej, and Harambee). The details of this epistemic community need not be set out here other than to note that it was in the multidimensional dynamics of trust that engaged scholarship was able to flourish.

#Slam4urLife, a project with a budget of less than £10,000 from the Global Challenges Research Fund, was within months of lockdown able to appoint staff, devise a project and fund project prizes. Both the #Slam4urLife project and this episodic research intervention depended on durable institutions that were committed and able to execute co-production, and to do so quickly. For the project to be run effectively, the University of Bristol, the Western Cape Provincial Department of Cultural Affairs and Sport, FunDza Literacy Trust, Community Chest, Assitej and Harambee had to variously provide fiscal and administrative support to ensure the rapid set up of the project, uphold due process and provide project administration and oversight. The University of Bristol offered fiscal support through administering the Global Challenges

Research Fund, the Western Cape Provincial Department of Cultural Affairs and Sport, Community Chest, Assitej and Harambee provided administrative support, and the FunDza Literacy Trust managed the campaign – ensuring that it was marketed effectively, that the judging was fair and transparent, and that all youth voices were amplified and shared.

In other words, this article reflects on the process of collaboration between the university, government and community partners that enabled the launch of the #Slam4urLife project and the research endeavours of those involved. The ‘institutional’ layer highlights that the preconditions needed for collaborative and engaged community-based research (CBR) to emerge requires an intellectual and moral willingness by scholars to embrace CBR methodologies and practices, but also often on durable academic institutions and NGOs, as well as established community-government-university partnerships.

This article contributes to CBR in two ways. Empirically, it outlines young people’s responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa through four narratives of shock, loss, survival and activism. Methodologically, it draws on knowledge bases and collaborations in and beyond the academy to contribute grounded research on arts-based social media competitions, seen as an effective method for encouraging and amplifying youth voices, and creating digital public spaces in which young people can practise civic engagement in contexts other than physical public spaces.

In reflecting on CBR from our experience of launching the #Slam4urLife project and co-producing the reflections contained in this article, we position ourselves as the objects of our enquiry. In doing so, we invoke the southern tradition of CBR, which suggests that ‘the distinction between the researcher and the participant is irrelevant’ when the ‘researcher’ and the ‘participant’ research and participate together, as was the case both with #Slam4urLife as a project and the research intervention that followed it ([Tandon 1988](#), p. 12).

It is this positionality which allows us to write not ‘on’ or ‘about’ engaged and collaborative research, but instead to write *from* our experience in collaborating on the launch of #Slam4urLife – a project which addressed real need in South Africa during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. That the project came first, and the research followed as a process of reflection to feed back into community practice is what makes this article an exercise in engaged and responsive scholarship and distinguishes it from exercises in social research that are solely university-driven and designed to merely include community groups ([Hacker 2013](#) et al. 2003).

This is a timely article. In Africa, three-quarters of the population are under the age of 35, making it the world’s youngest continent ([Joffe 2021](#)). In many African cities, urban youth live in complex and precarious environments ([Gittings et al. 2021](#), p. 958) where public expression of sentiments, such as shock, loss, survival and activism, can be curtailed by the urgency of everyday life in which vulnerability and speaking out are not supported. The COVID-19 pandemic further constrained young people’s civic engagement by obstructing their access to typical spaces of public gathering and sharing, such as schools, universities, work, mosques, churches and streets. It is from this context that we write this article and consider the ways in which arts-based social media competitions geared towards young people can foster spaces for youth engagement in contexts where social life is curtailed.

This article is comprised of five substantive sections. It begins with a review of recent literature on young people’s responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and their use of social media for digital civic engagement in ways that supplant similar practices in physical public spaces. The subsequent section provides a background to the article, which discusses what the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic meant for young people in South Africa and the impetus for launching the #Slam4urLife competition. This section is followed by a methodological discussion of art-based social media competitions as a method for generating innovative and context-specific evidence of young people’s participation in civic engagement in times of protracted crisis by drawing directly on the youth voice. A substantive part of this article considers

a selection of illustrative submissions entered in the #Slam4urLife competition to present the empirical findings on young people's responses to the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa, and discusses shock, loss, survival and activism as four emerging themes. The article closes with a discussion of the importance of art-based social media competitions in creating digital public spaces in which youth voice can be encouraged, legitimised and amplified, in so far as these kinds of digital spaces allow for a kind of civic engagement not always seen by young people in the physical public spaces of African cities.

Literature Review

A number of recent studies have documented young people's responses to COVID-19 in South Africa and elsewhere (see, for example: [Álvarez-Iglesias, Garman & Lund 2021](#); [Bhandari 2021](#); [Coetzee et al. 2021](#); [Gallagher et al. 2020](#); [Gittings et al. 2021](#); [Govender et al. 2020](#); [Haffejee & Levine 2020](#); [Inyabri, Aboh & Mensah 2021](#); [Kaur et al. 2021](#); [Mohamad 2020](#); [Padmanabhanunni & Pretorius 2021](#); [Pinet, Sanyu & Youn 2021](#)). Three common themes cut across this growing body of literature, namely: the psychological burden of the pandemic on the mental health of young people; the intensified material challenges faced by young people as a result of the pandemic (especially in relation to livelihoods and food security); and the coping mechanisms displayed by young people through creative expression both online and offline.

Drawing on findings from the National Income Dynamics Study: Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey and projects that elicited children's perspectives, [Jamieson & van Blerk \(2021\)](#) caution that, while there might be cross-cutting themes in young people's experiences of the pandemic in South Africa, the severe social and economic inequalities that exist in the country meant that, depending on where they live, young people experienced different levels of insulation from the impacts of the pandemic.

Despite these nuances, the cross-cutting trends in young people's responses to COVID-19 emerging from South Africa chime with research emerging elsewhere, particularly with regard to creativity (and, more specifically, creativity online), as a lens through which to understand young people's responses to the medical, psychological, social and economic impacts of the pandemic. For example, [Inyabri, Aboh & Mensah \(2021\)](#) use creative digital data sourced from Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WhatsApp to demonstrate how young people in Nigeria used humour to come to terms with the novelty of a global pandemic and to communicate their perceptions of COVID-19 in Nigeria. Their 2021 article also explores the extent to which social media provides a platform for young people to practise civic engagement, which [Adler and Goggin \(2005, p. 236\)](#) define as the 'ways in which citizens participate in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future'. [Inyabri, Aboh & Mensah \(2021\)](#) argue that social media provides a space in which young Nigerians can satirically articulate angst about the political system in which they live.

In the Southeast Asian context, [Mohamad \(2020\)](#) used social media content created by young people in Brunei Darussalam to explore how Bruneian youth responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in their country. From this, the author traced five narratives used by Bruneian youth to support social distancing online: a narrative of fear, a narrative of responsibility, a narrative of annoyance, a narrative of fun and a narrative of resistance. Of particular relevance to our article is how [Mohamad \(2020\)](#) explored new youth spatialities, social engagement and participation through young people's activity online.

Our article adds to the growing body of literature and evidence of young people's responses to COVID-19 and the importance of social media in supplanting young people's practices of citizenship in the public space in South Africa. Literature on the use of social media for civic engagement by youth in South Africa has tended to focus on protest and politics (see, for example, [Bosch 2013, 2017](#); [Zeilig 2013](#)), while less of the literature examines young people's use of social media for broader civic practices. Our article attempts to fill this gap by looking at curated social media 'spaces', such as #Slam4urLife, as digital zones in

which young people in South Africa can practise civic engagement by giving voice to the challenges faced by South Africa as a result of COVID-19 from their perspectives and those of the people around them.

In the section that follows, we offer a background to our article by contextualising the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa in terms of what it meant for young people in the country, as well as the origins of the #Slam4urLife competition, first and foremost as a community-based project, and secondly as an exercise in CBR. Here we describe the ‘subject-to-subject’ relationship that defined our working partnership as representatives from an NGO, a provincial government department and a university, and offer an alternative to the binary subject–object relationship between academics and community groups sometimes found in orthodox social research (Sousa 2021, p. 4). This section is followed by a discussion of our approach to CBR and art-based social media competitions as a method for generating innovative and context-specific evidence on young people’s participation in civic engagement in times of protracted crisis by drawing directly on the youth voice.

Background

Following the World Health Organisation’s classification of COVID-19 as a global pandemic, the South African government declared a national state of disaster and introduced a strict lockdown on 26 March 2020 that lasted for 10 weeks. It was within this context that crèches, schools, after-school programs and universities were closed in South Africa. For the 10 weeks of lockdown from the end of March to 8 June, children were not allowed to go to school or see their friends and family outside of their homes. Moreover, during the first five weeks of ‘hard’ lockdown, children were not allowed to leave their homes for any reason other than to seek medical attention (Spaull & Van der Berg 2020, p. 2). Access to services, including safeguarding and healthcare, was also limited (Spaull & Van der Berg 2020, p. 2). It was within this context that children and young people in South Africa experienced the psychological and material challenges documented in the literature described in the previous section.

Recognising the plight of young people during the national lockdown, the [Western Cape provincial Department of Cultural Affairs and Sport \(2020\)](#) released a press statement publicising the #Slam4urLife competition:

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent national lockdown, millions of young South Africans are at home confronting the abrupt changes to their daily routines and wrestling too with the stress of how this crisis impacts their lives, and their future hopes and dreams.

In this press release, the Department also recognised that by May 2020 many young people were already taking to social media to express their feelings about the pandemic and the lockdown in various forms ‘from short poems on Twitter about the uncertain future to TikToks about life in lockdown’ ([Western Cape Cultural Affairs and Sport 2020](#)).

Through #Slam4urLife, FunDza Literacy Trust aimed to catalyse this creative expression of the youth voice online. As a literacy organisation founded in 2011 to promote a culture of reading and writing amongst youth in South Africa, FunDza was acutely aware of the impact of COVID-19 and ensuing lockdowns on young people in South Africa and the need for expression, peer-to-peer connection and engagement in activities arising from the subsequent closure of crèches, schools, after-school programs and universities. With support from the Western Cape provincial Department of Cultural Affairs and Sport, Community Chest, Assitej arts organisation and Harambee youth employment accelerator, and funding from the Global Challenges Research Fund through the University of Bristol, FunDza launched #Slam4urLife on 5 May 2020 to ensure that young people within and beyond its network were able to share their experiences of how the pandemic was impacting their lives.

The competition ran for six weeks until 8 June 2020 and received over 1000 entries. The competition was launched in less than two months of the pandemic's arrival in South Africa precisely because of the decades of collaboration between universities, governments, NGOs and individuals, and the relationships of trust this collaboration had fostered which could quickly be mobilised to appoint staff, devise a project, and fund and deliver prizes.

Young people in South Africa aged 13 to 35 were encouraged to share their experiences of COVID-19 via their preferred language and creative medium. Entries could be submitted through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or TikTok by tagging @Slam4urLife and using the #Slam4urLife hashtag. Participants were also able to submit entries via the FunDza WhatsApp account by texting 'hi' to the account, typing # and following the prompts. This was the most popular method for submitting entries, which was not surprising considering that WhatsApp is the most commonly used social networking platform amongst young people in South Africa ([Burton, Leoschut & Phyfer 2016](#), p. 22).

The only guidelines for submissions were that they had to 'focus, in an original and creative way, on some impact of the pandemic on [young people's] lives, whether on the health aspect or the major societal shifts that the pandemic has sparked' ([Team FunDza 2020](#)). Submissions were judged by a panel of notable influencers, poets, television and radio presenters and artists, in South Africa purely on their merit as authentic responses to the impact of the pandemic on young people's lives. Winners were rewarded with air-time, data and cash on a weekly basis. Grand prizes of cash and laptops were also awarded to finalists during a live Facebook prize-giving event on 16 June 2020, which is 'Youth Day' in South Africa.

The digital format of the #Slam4urLife competition meant that followers of the #Slam4urLife social media pages could see the artworks and hear stories shared by youth across the country. Thus, young people's creative responses to the pandemic were witnessed by others, including their peers and the public figures responsible for judging the entries. By creating a digital space in which young people's experiences and insights could be shared with and witnessed by others on social media, #Slam4urLife fostered a liminal space that was defined by location, but transcended particular places and traditional neighbourhood convenings. And, although the competition concluded in June 2020, the social media pages on Facebook and Instagram, where entries were shared, remain live, allowing #Slam4urLife to continue to serve as a place of youth voice and civic engagement on COVID-19.

It is this archive that constitutes the data underpinning this article. In the section that follows, we discuss the process of analysis and collective meaning-making which spanned the life of the project, from a collaborative youth development initiative to a collaborative research intervention. We also expound on our collaborative methodology by explaining how our joint efforts as partners from an NGO, a university and a provincial government department spanned the processes of project planning, implementation and evaluation, ultimately culminating in this research.

Methodology

The internet and social media have long been described as vehicles for social participation, evidenced by research on major political events, such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, which brought attention to the transformative potential of social media in facilitating 'practical citizenship' ([Bosch 2017](#), p. 224) by increasing opportunities for engagement in collective action ([Castells 2015](#); [Kidd & McIntosh 2016](#); [Tufekci & Wilson 2012](#)). Nevertheless, significantly less attention has been paid to how social media has been used as a vehicle for ordinary civic participation in sub-Saharan African societies beyond the sphere of protest and student politics.

[Bosch 2017](#) (p. 221) argues that South African youth are increasingly using social media for civic engagement and social networking to 'develop a new biography of citizenship which is characterized by more individualized forms of activism'. Where Bosch's work looks specifically at Twitter as a platform through

which the Rhodes Must Fall movement afforded youth the opportunity to participate in social and political discussions, our article considers how other social media platforms (such as WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok and Instagram) enabled young people to do the same within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through its analysis of over 1000 poetry, rap, song, TikTok, sketch, photographic, visual art and meme submissions entered in the #Slam4urLife competition, this article explores young people's responses to the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa and considers social media campaigns as a tool for mobilising youth engagement in civic life in African cities.

Analysis and judging of the entries was undertaken by representatives of our co-authorship team from the FunDza Literacy Trust who were responsible for launching and running the competition and had experience of doing so from past projects, in addition to local influencers, poets, television and radio presenters, and artists in South Africa. During this process, each entry was carefully considered and subjected to two degrees of analysis: understanding (What is the entry about? What is it trying to tell its audience?) and evaluation (Is this entry worthy of a prize and why?).

This round of analysis was performed as a necessary component of the competition and was led by FunDza Literacy Trust, the organisation responsible for administering the project. FunDza has many years of experience in conducting similar competitions and so was best placed to fulfil this task. However, as a project initiated by partners from government, the third sector and universities, there was, from the outset, an openness and eagerness to observe the broader lessons on community practice that could be learnt from the project and fed back into community work focusing on youth. This is a central tenet of CBR and participatory research (Gaventa 1993; [Rahman 1991](#)). The process of learning from doing or creating 'knowledge in action' ([Ledwith 2020](#), p. 136) is central to CBR and participatory research ([Rahman 1991](#); [Tandon 1988](#)) and also to how FunDza operates. Collaborating with academic partners meant that there was the space, time and resources to turn this emergent institutional knowledge into research.

The initial round of meaning-making produced through exercises in understanding and analysis was supplemented with Qualitative Content Analysis by academic members of the co-authorship team from the University of Bristol, who repeated the exercise of reviewing the entries with co-authorship partners from FunDza Literacy Trust. This second round of meaning-making unfolded over the course of two years, during which there were many conversations between representatives of the various project partners in the co-authorship team and time for ideas to percolate and understanding to slowly emerge. While all partners were involved in the evolution of the project through the planning, implementation and reflection stages, they also contributed in different ways at different times depending on their expertise, position and capacity. For example, collaboration between the university and the provincial government was essential to allow the project funds to flow, while FunDza took the lead on delivering the project, and partners from the University of Bristol drove the subsequent processes of reflection and writing.

This slow-baked process of analysis and collective meaning-making led us to four themes which spoke to young people's experience of the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa, namely shock, loss, survival and activism. We selected two visual and two verbal entries which best illustrated each theme. We decided to choose a visual and a verbal entry for each theme in order to showcase the diversity of expression emerging from the entries received.

In the transition from the analysis of entries for the purposes of the competition to analysing entries for the purposes of research, consideration regarding ethics and permission became relevant. To honour the agency of the young people represented in this article, we approached those whose entries we hoped to include and asked for permission to showcase their work and to find out how they wanted to be represented in the article – whether they preferred to appear anonymously, or for us to use their name or a pseudonym. The submissions and identities in the following section, where we discuss our findings, were included with the informed consent of the young people they belonged to, or in instances where the young people were under the age of 16 (the legal age for consent in South Africa), the consent of their parents or guardians.

[Polkinghorne \(2007\)](#) suggests that ‘good’ qualitative research should aim ‘to reduce the distance between the meanings as experienced by participants and the meanings as interpreted in the findings’. This is as much about ensuring the validity of the data as it is about practising ethical research ([Lunn 2014](#); [Twyman, Morrison & Sporton 1999](#); [Van Nes et al. 2010](#); [Wasserfall 1993](#)). To honour this principle, the images and text included in the subsequent section appear as we received them with no alterations made to wording, spelling or punctuation. In the one instance where the entry is in Afrikaans, we include the text in its source language and offer a translation in English with the permission of the author.

Findings

Using illustrative submissions to the #Slam4urLife competition, this section presents empirical evidence of young people’s localised and contextualised creative responses to the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa, including the material and psychosocial impacts of the lockdown on young people in the country, many of whom were already living in contexts of precarity and constraint. The findings document young people’s experiences of shock, loss, survival and activism during the early stages of the pandemic in South Africa. While the narratives of shock and loss speak to the psychological and emotional impacts of the pandemic on young people in South Africa, the narrative of survival speaks to the pandemic’s material impact, and the narrative of activism concerns youth agency in response to the mental and material impacts of the pandemic.

SHOCK



Figure 1. ‘When someone sneezes’ by Kwandile Twala

Were You Prepared?

By Steven Fortuin

(Translated from the original version in Afrikaans below)

Let's see where the virus started
 A small town in China and that's that
 Where you can cook up and swallow animals
 A dog or a cat tastes supposedly like a biscuit
 So wait let me set the pace
 The facts are out
 China was the best ever
 Dammit wait
 Listen I'll say it straight
 Now everyone is in a mask because of a bat
 And me?
 I would have never believed it
 The epidemic has long been predicted
 We were too worried about Facebook and Mxit
 And now you have to go for test when you're sick
 They say you must relax and ...
 While you wait over the next plan
 The virus mutates like an X-man
 What if Ramaphosa extends the lockdown?
 What then?
 What?
 Then what will you do?
 Protest with bombs in the street?
 How many are dead in the Cape?
 How many?
 My only question is
 Were you prepared?
 We don't have enough, if you don't feel it then were you prepared?
 We will be in the house, but give us our wages
 Were you prepared?
 The lockdown is here

Was Jy Bereid?

By Steven Fortuin

*Kom ons kyk waar die virus begin het
 'n klein dorpie in China en dis dit
 Waar jy diere kan op kook en insluk
 'n hond of 'n kat proe kamma like a biscuit
 So wait let me set the pace
 Die fekts is uit
 China was die beste ooit
 Dammit wait
 Luister ek sê dit straight*

*Nou's almal in 'n mask deur 'n vlerremuis
En ek?
Ek sal dit nooit gebelieve het
Die epidemic was lank al predicted
Ons was te worried oor Facebook en Mxit
En nou moet jy gan vir 'n toets as jy siek is
Hulle se jy moet releks en...
Terwyl jy wag oor die next plan
Die virus mutata soos 'n x-man
Wat as Ramaphosa die lockdown extend?
Wat dan?
Wat?
Dan wat gan jy maak?
Protest met bombs in die straat?
Hoeveel is al dood in die kaap?
Hoeveel?
My enigste vraag is...
Was jy bereid?
Ons het nie genoeg nie as jy dit nie voel nie was jy bereid?
Ons sal innie huis is ma oppel die wages
Was jy bereid?
Die lockdown is hier
Nou soek jy 'n bier
Was jy bereid?*

Several studies report the psychological impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing restrictions on young people: [Álvarez-Iglesias, Garman & Lund 2021](#); [Bauer et al. 2021](#); [Coetzee et al. 2021](#); [Gallagher et al. 2020](#); [Gittings et al. 2021](#); [Haffejee & Levine 2020](#); [Mudiriza & De Lannoy 2020](#); [Padmanabhanunni & Pretorius 2021](#); [Saud, Mashud & Ida 2020](#); [Spaull & Van der Berg 2020](#); [Weinstock et al. 2021](#).

These studies tend to focus on anxiety and depression as the primary psychological impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, paying less attention to shock as a basic response to the pandemic. Shock, and what it encapsulates with regard to feelings of surprise and (in some cases) upset and fear, emerged as a salient theme in the creative entries submitted by young people to the #Slam4urLife competition. Steven Fortuin's song, *Was Jy Bereid?* (Were you prepared?), translated above from Afrikaans to English speaks to young people's feelings of shock, disbelief and being caught off-guard by the arrival of the pandemic, as well as the changes it wreaked on people's lives, from mask-wearing to testing, lockdowns and alcohol bans. Kwandile Twala's drawing ([Figure 1](#)) invokes the theme of shock by showing how something previously considered relatively benign (a sneeze) suddenly sends people running in the context of COVID-19. Likening a sneeze to the eruption of a volcano, Kwandile's drawing describes the fear people felt in South Africa during the early stages of the pandemic, both of the virus itself and of one another as potential carriers of the virus.

Both Steven's and Kwandile's entries speak to the narrative of shock (including surprise and fear), which was evident not only in their pieces but also many others. For example, the coronavirus was depicted as a villain, monster or Grim Reaper personifying death (see, for example, [Figure 3](#)), or bemoaned as an 'invisible enemy' or 'unwelcome visitor' which arrived suddenly and disrupted people's lives, as described in a few lines by Orphoneal Shai in their poem 'Visitor'.

Boarded a plane and decided to visit our shore.
But your presence brought sickness and death to our door.

Face masks, sanitisers, and an occasional soldier.
Can't wait for all this madness to be over.

Disruption was often framed in a language of loss, when describing what the virus, pandemic and ensuing lockdowns took away from young people and their communities in the form of opportunities, as well as everyday pleasures such as socialising or hugging. The emerging theme of loss is explored below.

LOSS

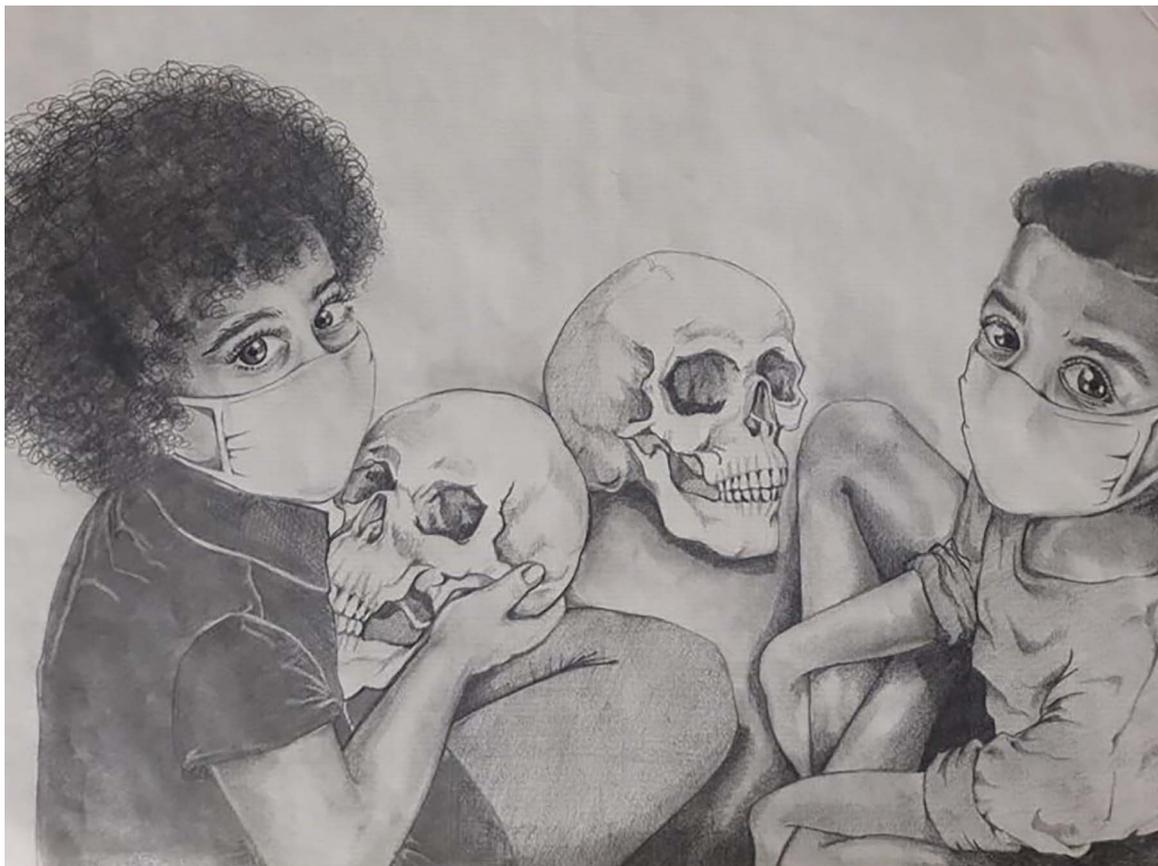


Figure 2. 'Untitled' by Lungile Manyati

What I Miss (Being in Lockdown)

By Yavari Leonie

chirpy voices, loudly music banging
shoulder striking, peaceful hugging
white teeth showing, soft kisses blowing
visits there, having fun here until sun shining
I miss Sunday morning praises
club vibing and beach tribing
night sky eyeing and braaistand fryings
going freely for a gossip and sharing a mutual problem not worrying if I might spit
touching, fitting, and testing at the shop

without it even being bought
 I want to go where I want, when I want and how I want
 Travel around, going on rides above the grounds
 I want KFC and restaurant glee's
 get chased around trees
 and being held for a little short internity
 I miss game nights with my family
 and getting showed off by my partner proudly
 I miss these small things:
 picking my nose
 kicking my partner for snoring
 the aunty selling on the side walk, stopping for a side talk
 I miss the reality shows
 and crave dancing in the snow
 weird kisses being blow
 by strangers I don't know
 I miss walking barefoot to Spar
 or can hardly walk leaving the bar
 I miss not feeling that everything I touch might die
 that I don't have to be alone with my thoughts
 but in the end there are some things happening in isolation that cannot happen in a crowd

In their working paper for the Overseas Development Institute, titled 'Advancing Youth-Centred Digital Ecosystems in Africa in a Post-Covid-19 World', [Pinet, Sanyu and Youn \(2021\)](#), p. 10) explain that 'social distancing measures [...] disrupted existing social practices and considerably altered the social fabric of African youths' communities.' Yavari Leonie's poem above contextualises this disruption to social practices in the language of what is missed, in other words – a language of loss. This loss of social practices is added to the loss of people imposed upon by the pandemic and invoked in Lungile Manyati's chilling drawing ([Figure 2](#)) of two children sitting alongside – and holding – the skulls of unknown people, leaving the viewer to wonder who they belonged to and who was lost.

Several studies describe the causal relationship between disruptive events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and high rates of anxiety and depression amongst all groups, including young people ([Spaull & Van der Berg 2020](#); [Álvarez-Iglesias, Garman & Lund 2021](#); [Pinet, Sanyu & Youn 2021](#); [Brooks, Webster, Smith, Woodland, Wessely, Greenberg & Rubin 2020](#); [Mudiriza & De Lannoy 2020](#)). For example, [Spaull & Van der Berg \(2020\)](#), p. 9) explain that 'large-scale disasters, such as terrorist attacks, mass shootings or natural disasters are almost always accompanied by increases in depression [and] post-traumatic stress disorder', predicting that 'following the pandemic there will be increases in anxiety and depression', among other mental and behavioural impacts. In a review of 3166 articles, [Brooks et al. \(2020\)](#) explain why quarantine measures, in particular, can have negative psychological effects on people's mental health, including depression, post-traumatic stress, anger and emotional exhaustion.

It is perhaps still too early to tell what the psychological impact of the pandemic on young people will be. Nevertheless, in highlighting experiences of shock and loss, the creative entries submitted by young people to the #Slam4urLife competition provide some early insights into the nature of the psychological burden of COVID-19 on young people, directly from the perspective of the young people. Loss was a theme which emerged in many submissions received by #Slam4urLife and it highlights young people's processes of shared grieving for the people, but also the opportunities taken away by the pandemic. For example, in his poem, 'Dear Covid-19' (see excerpt below), Freddy Jay Nyezi describes the loss of lesson time due to the disruption

caused by the pandemic, and explains how COVID-19 robbed them of the ceremony which would have marked their graduation from high school to university:

Today, I collected my degree like it was a
certified copy, you stole my graduation ceremony from me.

I'm in matric and I'll be the first in the family to go to university, but I've lost lesson time
and I don't even know if I'll get
to write my finals, how will I make it to my dreams?

The excerpt from Freddy's poem provides deeper insight into the observation by others, including [Pinet, Sanyu & Youn \(2021\)](#), of constrained access to education as a detrimental impact of the pandemic on young people by detailing just what that loss means to them in terms of opportunities and aspirations, as well as security and sanctuary. What Freddy's expression of loss in relation to education and opportunity shows, along with the other examples of shock and loss described in this article, is that the emotional and psychological impacts of the pandemic are related to its material impacts. In the section that follows we discuss how young people grappled with the material impacts of COVID-19 in South Africa through a narrative of survival.

SURVIVAL

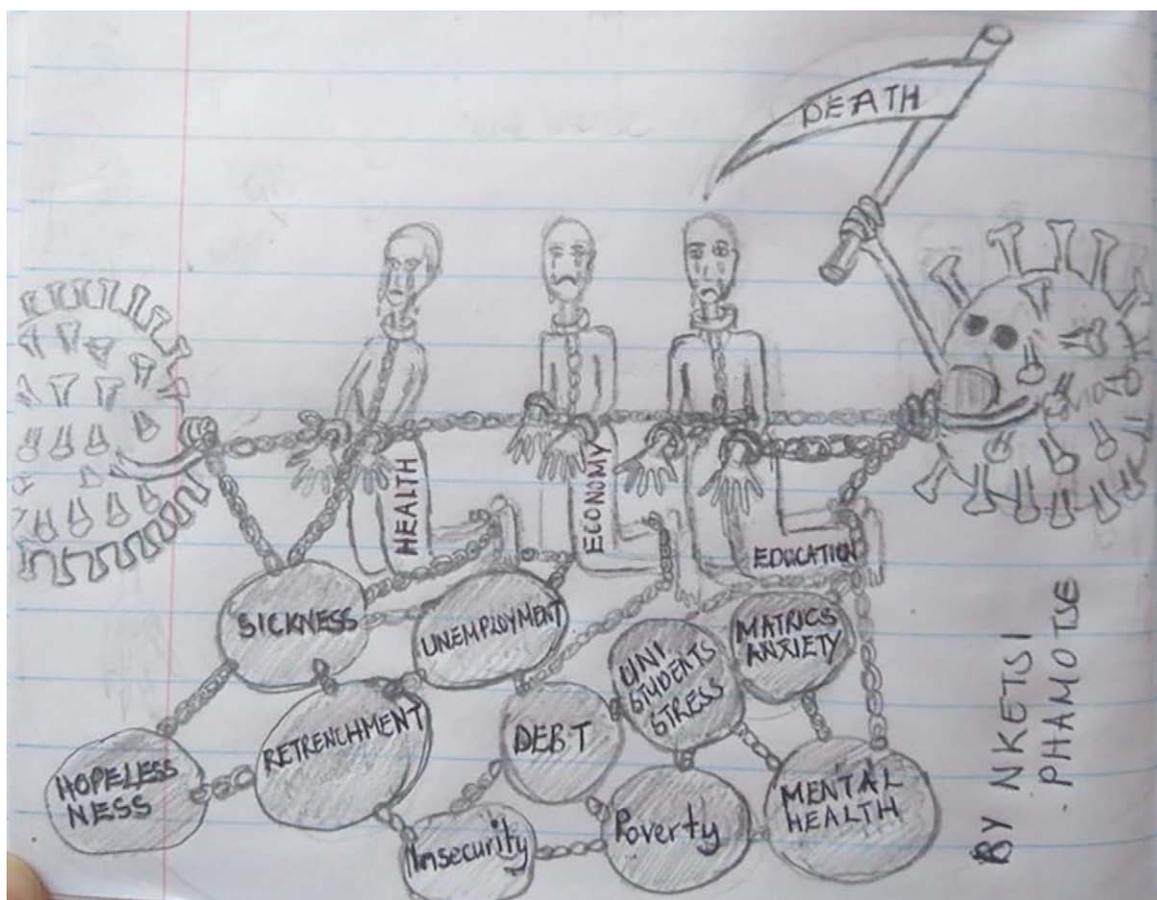


Figure 3. 'Untitled' by Nketsi Phamotse

We Did Not Choose

by Umnikazi Wempilo

We did not choose to quarantine in these overpopulated informal settlements after testing positive for Covid 19.

We had no business in the first place to be at work without any personal protective equipment but we had no choice because we couldn't afford no work no pay.

We did not choose to quarantine in these shacks where social distancing is as impossible like the City of Cape Town respecting the right to human dignity of the residents of these overly populated informal settlements.

We did not choose to quarantine in a community where the water supply is as unpredictable as the consistent electricity supply prior to the lockdown so our situation renders regularly washing our hands null and void.

The face of poverty and hunger did not choose to be accused by her community of contracting Covid 19 at some funeral she attended in Port Elizabeth which has led to her being ostracized and her entire household stigmatized.

[Gittings et al. \(2021\)](#), p. 958) point out that, in South Africa, as in other African countries, the COVID-19 pandemic occurred 'against the backdrop of already full, complex, and often precarious lives'. The majority of people living in cities in South Africa are highly vulnerable. They live in overcrowded conditions in informal settlements without adequate access to formal housing, water, sanitation or electricity, surviving from week to week (and in some instances day to day) off the minimum wages for casual unskilled labour and/or government grants ([Govender et al. 2020](#), p. 6). Unemployment rates in South African cities are high, and many households already making do with low wages had their income disrupted by South Africa's lockdown measures.

Findings from the National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey June ([Spaull et al. 2021](#)) found that almost three million people in South Africa lost their jobs during the most intensive lockdown period, during which the #Slam4urLife competition ran. Moreover, during this time the National School Nutrition Program was halted and one in seven children reported that they had gone hungry in the week before they were interviewed ([Haffejee & Levine 2020](#)).

Acknowledging these challenges, the South African government introduced a number of temporary social and economic relief measures, including food packages, a COVID-19 Social Relief Distress grant of R350 (£16/\$20) per month and increases to existing social welfare grants, such as the basic child support grant, which was increased by an additional R440 per month (£20/\$26) ([Haffejee & Levine 2020](#)). However, these measures were largely insufficient and failed to protect the majority of South Africans from worsening social and economic conditions ([Haffejee & Levine 2020](#)).

This is the context within which young people were responding to the COVID-19 pandemic via #Slam4urLife's platforms. For many young people in South Africa, where one-third of people aged 15 to 24 (approximately 3.3 million) are not in employment, education or training ([StatsSA 2021](#)), the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on everyday life was immense. Speaking to the material impact of COVID-19 on South Africa (personified as a Grim Reaper wielding a scythe in its representation of death), Nketsi's drawing ([Figure 3](#)) illustrates the coupled consequences of COVID-19 for people's survival and wellbeing through the impacts of sickness, retrenchment, unemployment, debt, insecurity, poverty, mental health, stress, anxiety and hopelessness.

Umnikazi's poem, 'We did not choose', focuses in on the impact of COVID-19 on specific communities and describes the experience of urban youth living in 'overpopulated informal settlements' or 'shacks where social distancing is impossible', where 'the water supply is as unpredictable as the [in]consistent electricity supply prior to the lockdown' and where preventative hygiene measures are not easy to implement.

Submissions received by other entrants similarly spoke of food parcels being misdirected due to corruption and nepotism, hunger, unemployment and poverty.

Nketsi's and Umnikazi's submissions illustrate how, through the #Slam4urLife competition, young people in South Africa demonstrated an awareness of the impact of the pandemic not only on themselves, but also on their families and communities, while also giving voice to wider societal challenges facing many people in South Africa as a result of the pandemic.

ACTIVISM



Figure 4. 'Covid-19' by Dineo Dseko

We Will Sing Glory

By Fistos Fifi Da-Poet

Nation is in agony.
 With ease ace the query.
 We will conquer these worry.
 Soon the virus will say sorry.
 Doctors and nurses will sing glory.
 Nation shall celebrate their glory.
 Behind the curtains we hide the hopeless.
 Be careful, the streets are lifeless.
 Isn't it obvious?
 The virus is poisonous.
 Booze banned, sober we are.
 Place your bet right.
 I say police and soldiers defend us right.
 Health workers works over night.
 Wear the mask, support our team right. Wash your hands, isn't that right?
 Stadiums are empty.
 The grass is greener.
 Isn't that a victory?
 Virus became the best player
 but we will get tamed
 and virus will become lame.
 Learners will polish their shoes and shine the future.
 Markets will reopen and rise the economy.
 President will smile and enter the parliament.
 After isolation, we'll gather.
 After social distancing, we'll remain united.
 With hands sanitized, we'll see sunny days.
 Lockdown will be a hero for it saved lives,
 Virus will be mad but we will be merry.

Despite the evident challenges associated with the emotional and material impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people in South Africa, findings also affirm what [Gittings et al. \(2021, p. 958\)](#) describe as the 'creativity, resilience and agency of South African adolescents'. One of the most striking findings that studies into young people's responses to COVID-19 report relate to displays of public health activism by young people, especially online (see, for example, [Mohamad 2020](#); [Pinet, Sanyu & Youn 2021](#)). Similarly, activism emerged as a theme in the creative entries submitted by young people in South Africa to the #Slam4urLife competition.

Like Dineo Dseko's collage ([Figure 4](#)) of different aspects of COVID-19 hygiene, including handwashing, masks, hand sanitiser and disinfecting surfaces, many of the submissions received by #Slam4urLife evidenced familiarity with the South African government's public health response to the pandemic. They also evidenced an eagerness to motivate others to do their bit to reduce transmission of the virus by stressing the unselfish acts of medical health professionals in looking after the public ('Health workers works over night' Fistos Fifi Da-Poet explains in their poem 'We will sing glory'), depicting and describing emergency workers as superheroes, and calling for people to wash their hands and socially

distance, or as Fistos Fifi Da-Poet put it ‘Wear the mask, support our team right. Wash your hands, isn’t that right?’ ([Gittings et al. 2021](#), p. 958).

Through the narrative of activism, as well as those of shock, loss and survival, young people’s engagement with the COVID-19 pandemic in the #Slam4urLife competition went beyond content sharing to ‘transmitting and recreating a discourse’ ([Mohamad 2020](#), p. 354), which contextualised the psychological and material realities of the pandemic for themselves and their communities. In the final section of this article, we discuss how this practice of civic engagement was enabled by the #Slam4urLife competition through the principles of encouragement, legitimacy and amplification, allowing it to constitute a digital public space for youth expression.

Discussion

Representing a research and writing collaboration between youth development workers and academics from the Western Cape provincial Department of Cultural Affairs and Sport, FunDza Literacy Trust and the University of Bristol, this article provides reflections on our experience of launching, running and funding #Slam4urLife across three related questions: ‘How did young people respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in South African cities?’; ‘To what extent might arts-based social media competitions such as #Slam4urLife encourage and amplify youth voice by creating digital public spaces in which young people can practice civic engagement in contexts where this cannot be done in physical public spaces?’; and ‘What can be learnt about the importance of durable institutions and partnerships with community and government organisations in enabling engaged research?’

Young people’s interpretations of the theme ‘Living in a world with Covid-19’ communicated through their entries to #Slam4urLife evidenced four responses to the pandemic in South Africa: shock, loss, survival and activism. These responses spoke to both the material and psychological impacts of the pandemic on young people in the country. That these responses emerged in the digital space created by #Slam4urLife when they appeared absent from traditional physical spaces of youth gathering suggested to us that the competition somehow encouraged, legitimised and amplified youth engagement with the pandemic by creating a digital space in which young people could comment on the challenges faced by South Africa as a result of COVID-19 from their perspectives and those of the people around them. For example, after being featured on the #Slam4UrLife social pages, one participant commented ‘this motivates us as upcoming artist, to keep on doing what we are currently doing and may god bless you guys for recognizing my talent’.

We suggest that the nature of the discursive space created by #Slam4urLife enabled a degree of vulnerability and outspokenness that we have not witnessed from young people in physical spaces in cities and towns to the same extent. By exchanging knowledge about transmission prevention through a demonstration of public health activism and giving voice to their communities’ experiences of shock, loss and survival, young people displayed not only a willingness to speak about their own experiences, but also to speak on behalf of friends, parents, families and neighbours, and in doing so acted as spokespeople of the everyday realities of the pandemic in South Africa.

We identified three qualities which enabled #Slam4urLife to provide a space for youth civic engagement: encouragement, legitimacy and amplification. #Slam4urLife encouraged young people to share their creative responses to the pandemic by coupling a clear directive – ‘focus, in an original and creative way, on some impact of the pandemic on our lives’ ([Team FunDza 2020](#)) – with the possibility of rewards (prizes) and pathways for participation through social media which were easy for young people to access. Young people were already engaging with the pandemic online before the launch of the competition, but #Slam4urLife offered a degree of legitimacy to the youth voice on the pandemic by creating a platform on which young people’s content could be showcased to an audience comprising other young people, as well as respected public figures who considered each entry.

The social network surrounding #Slam4urLife, alongside practices of liking, commenting on, tagging and sharing, contributed to the final defining feature of #Slam4urLife as a digital public space of engagement – namely amplification, the ability to be seen and heard by a larger audience as a result of the infrastructure of social media which enabled access to large numbers of contacts (Bosch 2017, p. 224). For example, the most popular video submission has to date attracted 3086 views on Instagram. Posts on #Slam4urLife’s social media pages garnered likes, views and comments in the form of messages of congratulations, support or empathy like ‘I love it man’ or ‘better days are due soon, you gonna be shining, walking into your sunny days’, as well as in the form of emoticons including hearts, trophies, hands raised in a gesture of praise and flames.

Finally, in response to the question ‘What can be learnt about the importance of durable institutions and partnerships with community and government organisations in enabling engaged research?’ we illustrated how the durability of three institutions (a university, a government department and an NGO), together with the partnerships and interpersonal relationships which connected these institutions, provided the necessary infrastructure, fiscal and administrative support, and relations of trust that enabled us to collaborate first and foremost on delivering a youth-based community project and later to reflect on the lessons learnt through the experiences, which are documented in this research article.

Conclusion

Drawing on knowledge bases and collaborations in and beyond the academy, this article offered preliminary findings on the localised and contextualised responses of young people in South Africa to the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country, and discussed shock, loss, survival and activism as four emergent themes cutting across youth responses to the pandemic. The article also argued that expression of these narratives was enabled through the #Slam4urLife competition, which encouraged, legitimised and amplified engagement by young people in South Africa with the realities of the pandemic, and in doing so constituted a kind of digital public space for civic engagement at a time when physical equivalents were not easily accessible owing to the restrictions placed on physical gathering due to COVID-19. Finally, the article illustrated how reconfiguration of public space in neighbourhoods, towns and cities due to the COVID-19 pandemic opened up new avenues for research into the urban geographies of young people and the geographies of cities beyond physical spaces.

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