



Recreational space and identities of young people in Dobsonville, Soweto

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Abstract

This study explores how recreational spaces shape the identities of adolescents in Dobsonville, Soweto, a historically marginalised township in South Africa. Drawing on narrative psychology and theories of space and identity, the research situates adolescence as a critical period of self-construction, where identity emerges through interactions with physical, social, and imagined environments. Despite the enduring legacy of apartheid spatial planning and the persistent underinvestment in township infrastructure, young people actively navigate, repurpose, and reimagine recreational spaces to build meaning, belonging, and aspiration. Using a qualitative narrative approach, data was generated with members of the Youth of the South (YOTS) programme through storytelling, drawing activities, and narrative focus group discussions. Narrative portraits of seven participants reveal both the structural barriers and the creative strategies through which adolescents negotiate their identities. Thematic analysis highlights six key dynamics: gendered spaces; space denied and space reimagined; memory, nostalgia, and the shrinking childhood; aspiration as resistance; digital space, imagination, and unequal access; and moral navigation and everyday ethics of place. Findings suggest that recreational spaces are not merely sites of leisure but are foundational to psychological well-being, social connection, and future-making. When such spaces are absent, unsafe, or exclusionary, young people's opportunities for identity formation are constrained, often forcing them to seek belonging in unsafe or commercialised environments. Conversely, even minimal or improvised recreational opportunities become powerful arenas of resilience and agency. This study contributes to scholarship on youth, space, and identity by foregrounding the voices of adolescents in Dobsonville and emphasising their agency in reshaping spatial narratives. Policy implications include the urgent need to invest in inclusive, youth-friendly recreational infrastructure that addresses gendered and socio-economic inequalities. By recognising young

people as co-creators of space, communities and policymakers can foster environments that nurture resilience, belonging, and hope.

Keywords: *adolescence, youth identity, recreational spaces, Soweto, Dobsonville, spatial inequality, intersectionality, gender, class, race, narrative inquiry, identity formation, belonging, agency, resilience, aspiration, digital spaces, moral navigation, social capital, spatial justice, post-apartheid South Africa*

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This dissertation is a reflection of God's grace and of all your contributions, and I dedicate it to you with love and gratitude.

Declaration

I, Anoshamisa Clive Benhura, declare that this research report, titled "*Recreational space and identities of young people in Dobsonville, Soweto*", is my own work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Community-based Counselling Psychology (MACC) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted for any other degree or examination at any other university. All sources cited have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references according to APA 7th edition.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Benhura', with a stylized initial 'A' or 'B' on the left.

Signed:

Date: 02 September 2025

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Adolescence is a pivotal period of identity exploration, shaped by the environments and spaces that young people inhabit. In South Africa, where the lingering effects of apartheid spatial planning continue to limit safe, accessible areas for recreation and social interaction, the spaces available to youth profoundly influence their trajectories of development, belonging, and expression. Without access to structured and affirming environments, such as libraries, parks, and community centres, many adolescents seek connection and excitement in informal and unsafe settings, including street corners, bars, and shebeens. As Chao et al. (2015) observe, the pursuit of pleasure often outweighs perceived risks, a universal psychological tendency that cuts across class and background. This dynamic was tragically illustrated in June 2022 when twenty-one adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17 died in an East London tavern, reportedly from methanol poisoning while celebrating the end of exams (The Associated Press, 2022). While alternative recreational spaces cannot wholly prevent such incidents, Feldman et al. (2014) remind us that free will is exercised only within the bounds of available options. Thus, creating safe and affirming recreational environments is not merely a protective measure, it is a vital expansion of adolescent agency and an investment in their psychosocial development.

1.1 Setting of the Study

To better understand how young people experience and negotiate space, it is important to locate the study within its geographical and social setting. This research is situated in Dobsonville, Soweto, a historically marginalised township where spatial inequalities remain deeply entrenched. Developed during apartheid as a dormitory area for Black labourers, Dobsonville continues to experience infrastructural neglect, limited recreational amenities, and socioeconomic challenges that shape young people's daily lives and opportunities for self-expression. The research focuses on adolescents who participate in the Youth of the South

(YOTS) programme, a youth-led initiative grounded in participatory action research that foregrounds youth voices and promotes co-production of knowledge. YOTS members, known as “YOTSies,” meet weekly in a space called the ¹*Imbizo* to share experiences, debate social issues, and challenge dominant narratives about township life. Beyond its research orientation, YOTS fosters community engagement through activism, storytelling, and collaboration with local organisations. The programme aligns closely with narrative inquiry principles, providing both the methodological and ethical foundation for this study, which seeks to understand how adolescents in Dobsonville construct their identities through their engagement with, or exclusion from, public and recreational spaces (Kim, 2016; Youth of the South, 2021).

1.2 Aims

This research aimed to explore how recreational spaces, such as libraries, parks, sports fields, and community centres, contribute to the creation, reinforcement, and re-creation of identity among adolescents. Following Erikson (1977), adolescence is widely viewed as a critical stage of development, during which young people begin to form a stable sense of self through interactions with their environments, social groups, and individual experiences. This study focuses specifically on recreational spaces in shaping identity by collecting narratives from adolescents participating in the YOTS programme in Dobsonville, Soweto, as discussed above.

In addition to understanding how these spaces contribute to identity formation, the study examined the barriers that limit youth access to them, such as gendered exclusion, socio-economic constraints, and spatial inequalities. The research further explored the agency of young people in navigating and transforming these spaces in articulating their identities. Given the complex socio-political history of South African townships like Dobsonville,

¹ A Zulu word for a traditional community gathering called by the chief to solve pertinent community issues.

understanding how young people engage with recreational spaces provides crucial insights into how they construct their sense of self and community in the face of systemic challenges. By examining these narratives, the study aimed to illuminate the vital role of recreational spaces in shaping the personal and collective identities of adolescents in under-resourced contexts.

1.3 Rationale

Recreational spaces play an essential role in adolescent identity formation by providing environments where young people can explore, connect, and grow. These spaces are particularly critical in areas like Dobsonville, Soweto, where historical and contemporary structural inequalities have created an environment of deprivation. As previously mentioned, Dobsonville, like many parts of Soweto, was designed during apartheid as a dormitory township for Black labourers, deliberately constructed with limited access to essential services, including water, sanitation, education and health facilities (SAHO, 2019). The prioritisation of labour and the housing of labourers over community development and the failure to provide even essential services, meant that recreational spaces were either non-existent or inadequately developed, leaving a legacy of spatial neglect that continues to impact the youth today. Despite the formal end of apartheid three decades ago, spatial inequalities persist, reinforcing disparities in race, class, and gender (Phadi & Ceruti, 2011). Applying an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1989), this study acknowledges that these categories are deeply interrelated and shape how space is negotiated and experienced. Rather than focusing on gender in isolation, the analysis considers how intersecting social identities, particularly race, class, and gender, collectively inform adolescents' access to and experiences of recreational spaces. This context underscores the urgency of studying the role of recreational spaces in fostering identity and well-being among adolescents, while also highlighting the importance of recognising young people's agency in

how they actively create or repurpose spaces in the absence of formal infrastructure to support their development, expression, and sense of belonging.

The lack of access to recreational spaces has far-reaching consequences for adolescents in historically marginalised urban areas like Soweto, Johannesburg. In a context where schools are under-resourced, mental health support is sparse, and public infrastructure suffers from decades of neglect, it might seem counterintuitive to prioritise sports, arts, and play. Yet it is precisely these spaces that act as psychosocial buffers against structural challenges. Recreational environments provide young people with frameworks for social belonging, identity formation, and emotional regulation, reducing risks associated with substance abuse, gang recruitment, violence, and poor mental health (Seedat et al., 2012; Steyn et al., 2010). In Soweto, where apartheid spatial planning deliberately deprived schools and community centres of resources, the effects of this inequality remain evident in overcrowded classrooms and limited extracurricular opportunities (Dlamini et al., 2020). For many Black working-class adolescents, recreational spaces thus serve as crucial alternative sites of learning, mentoring, and aspiration, filling developmental gaps that schools alone cannot consistently meet (Lundgren & Scheckle, 2019).

Without structured recreational options, many adolescents turn to informal and sometimes unsafe environments for social engagement. These patterns of risk highlight how limited access to safe spaces constrains youth agency and increases vulnerability (Chao et al., 2015; Feldman et al., 2014). Ensuring that safe, community-based spaces exist is therefore not only preventative but central to enabling young people to make healthier, empowered choices in their daily lives.

Recreational spaces are therefore not a luxury but a developmental necessity, especially in South African townships where systemic inequalities continue to shape the trajectories of

Black youth. As Bourdieu (1986) reminds us, aspirations are shaped by access to capital, social, cultural, and economic, and these forms of capital are frequently fostered in communal and recreational settings. Investing in youth-friendly spaces is an investment in long-term resilience, collective identity, and the creation of opportunities that neither the classroom nor the street can fully provide. In a context where race and class continue to mediate access to safe, affirming environments, the politics of play, arts, and sport cannot be separated from the politics of justice.

Beyond safety concerns, the absence of recreational spaces negatively affects adolescents' ability to form meaningful peer connections and develop positive life narratives. Social isolation, which results from a lack of shared activities and communal spaces, can lead to feelings of alienation and disconnection. Adolescents rely on interactions with peers and structured activities, such as sport, group-based recreation, digital engagement, and reading, to create experiences that contribute to their sense of identity. While reading and digital activities can be pursued individually, their developmental value is enhanced when they occur in safe, accessible spaces that support focus, creativity, and social connection (Mütterlein & Fuchs, 2019; Richardson & Eccles, 2007). Libraries, for instance, offer quiet, structured environments for reading and reflection, while also serving as communal hubs where ideas can be shared and discussed. Similarly, digital engagement, from gaming to content creation, is often more meaningful when adolescents have opportunities to collaborate, compete, or debrief with peers, either in person or online (Mütterlein & Fuchs, 2019). These interactions allow young people to test ideas, explore values, and receive feedback, essential components of identity construction. Without access to such environments, adolescents may struggle to construct positive self-narratives, stories of resilience, hope, and agency, that are crucial for their mental well-being (Dunlop et al., 2020). Instead, they may internalise narratives of exclusion and despair, increasing their risk of depression, substance abuse, and unsafe behaviours due to the

lack of other avenues through which to exercise their freedom of choice (Feldman et al., 2014). This underscores the importance of recreational spaces, not merely as sites of leisure, but as foundational to the psychological, emotional, and social development of young people.

The benefits of recreational spaces extend beyond social connection to include significant physical and mental health advantages. Participation in sports and physical activities enhances physical well-being, builds teamwork skills, and contributes to mental health by reducing stress and improving self-esteem (Moljord et al., 2014). According to Moljord et al. (2014), engaging in physical activities stimulates the release of oxytocin, a hormone that fosters social bonding and trust. This biochemical process strengthens peer relationships and fosters a sense of belonging, counteracting feelings of loneliness and isolation. Additionally, physical activity may be linked to cognitive growth, as it enhances memory, concentration, and problem-solving abilities (Moljord et al., 2014). However, these benefits can only be realised if safe and accessible spaces exist for adolescents to participate in these activities. When recreational spaces are absent, deteriorated, or unsafe, young people are denied these crucial developmental opportunities, impacting their identity formation and overall well-being.

The need for structured recreational spaces is becoming increasingly urgent, particularly given the rising health concerns among South African youth. UNICEF (2022) reported that 31.3% of South African females aged 15–19 are obese, a statistic that highlights the growing public health crisis associated with sedentary lifestyles. This health concern underscores the necessity of creating environments that encourage physical activity and promote well-being among young people. However, physical activity alone is not enough. These interventions must go hand in hand with access to good nutrition, as healthy development relies on a combination of movement, nourishment, and rest. Structured recreational spaces can play a vital role in this regard, not only by promoting sport and play, but also by serving as platforms for nutritional

education, community feeding programmes, or partnerships with local food initiatives (Mukoma et al., 2023). By creating safe, accessible environments that support both physical activity and nutritional awareness, communities can foster healthier lifestyles and reduce the long-term health risks associated with inactivity and poor diet.

In addition to physical activities, educational spaces serve as vital recreational and developmental environments for adolescents. While South Africa has made important strides in expanding access to education, stark inequalities persist between affluent and non-affluent schools, often along racial and spatial lines inherited from apartheid (Dlamini et al., 2020). Adebayo et al. (2020), drawing on data from the TIMSS 2015 study, found that learners in well-resourced schools, typically located in suburban or historically white areas, performed significantly better in mathematics and science than those in under-resourced schools, which are more commonly situated in formerly Black townships like Dobsonville, Soweto (Munongi, 2024). Their study found that access to resources such as textbooks, libraries, adequate infrastructure, and digital tools substantially increased the likelihood of students achieving international benchmark scores. However, they also noted that resources alone were insufficient, factors like school management, teacher support, and student motivation were equally critical to educational outcomes (Munongi, 2024).

Beyond their functional utility, recreational spaces also serve as narrative spaces where adolescents construct and articulate their identities. According to McAdams and McLean (2013), identity formation is a process of storytelling, in which young people make sense of their past, present, and future through narratives that give their lives coherence and meaning. These narratives are shaped by the experiences they accumulate in their social and physical environments. When adolescents have access to safe, engaging spaces, they can develop stories of exploration, belonging, and personal growth, reinforcing their sense of self-worth.

However, when these spaces are absent or inaccessible, their ability to construct these narratives is severely limited. Instead of stories of resilience and agency, they may internalise narratives of exclusion and stagnation. This highlights the urgent need for policies and interventions that ensure all young people, particularly those in marginalised communities, have access to recreational spaces that support their identity development.

Given the significant role of recreational spaces in adolescent identity formation, this study is both timely and essential. Understanding how young people in Dobsonville navigate, utilise, and reimagine these spaces provides valuable insights into the intersection of urban planning, social development, and youth well-being.

Recreational spaces are more than just places for leisure, they are critical sites of identity formation, self-expression, and future-making. For young people in marginalised communities like Dobsonville, these spaces represent opportunities for transformation, social belonging, and the construction of meaningful life narratives. By prioritising the creation and maintenance of inclusive, youth-friendly recreational environments, society can support the development of resilient, empowered, and hopeful adolescents, ensuring that they have the foundation needed to thrive.

1.4 Research Questions

What do the narratives of Dobsonville youth reveal about their experience of recreational spaces?

Secondary research question:

How do Dobsonville adolescents use different recreational spaces, with whom, and how often, and in what ways are these experiences shaped by intersecting identities such as gender and class?

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured into six chapters, each contributing to the overarching aim of understanding how adolescents in Dobsonville, Soweto, construct their identities through their engagement with recreational spaces.

- Chapter 1: Introduction outlines the study's aims, rationale, research questions, and background context. It positions the research within the broader South African socio-political landscape, highlighting the significance of youth development and spatial access in post-apartheid townships.
- Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review combines theoretical underpinnings with a critical review of relevant literature. The chapter draws on narrative psychology, identity theory, and spatial theory to conceptualise the relationship between place and self-construction. It also critically examines existing research on youth, public and recreational space, spatial belonging, and the socio-political factors influencing access to safe and inclusive environments, particularly within marginalised communities in South Africa.
- Chapter 3: Methods details the research design, including the study's qualitative approach, participant recruitment, data collection techniques, and analytical strategies. It also outlines ethical considerations, self-reflexivity, and the evolution of the research process. The chapter explains the rationale for using narrative methods and thematic analysis to interpret adolescent experiences of space.
- Chapter 4: Discussion of Results presents the findings of the study through two interconnected levels of analysis. It begins with narrative portraits of seven participants, Sipho, Thato, Zinhle, Thandi, Lerato, Kabelo, and Bongani, each offering a unique account of how young people in Dobsonville experience and interpret recreational

spaces in relation to their identities. These individual stories are then followed by a thematic analysis organised around six core themes: Gendered Spaces; Space Denied and Space Reimagined; Memory, Nostalgia, and the Shrinking Childhood; Aspiration as Resistance; Digital Space, Imagination, and Unequal Access; and Moral Navigation and Everyday Ethics of Place. Together, these narratives and themes highlight both the structural constraints and the creative strategies through which adolescents make meaning of space, belonging, and aspiration.

- Chapter 5: Conclusions synthesises the insights of the study by reflecting on what the research revealed that was not previously known, what proved surprising, and what new nuances were uncovered. It then considers the broader implications for youth development and spatial justice, offering policy recommendations for inclusive recreational design, as well as directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

2.1 Adolescent Identity development

Erikson explained that for adolescents (usually understood as those between the ages of 12 and 18), the most important developmental task is identity formation through solving the crises of identity versus role confusion (Ragelienė, 2016). This entails successfully developing a stable sense of identity by integrating various aspects, such as an individual's beliefs, social roles, interests and values (Erikson, 1977; Knight, 2017). If unsuccessful, one's identity becomes unclear and uncertain about their future (Erikson, 1977; Knight, 2017). It is possible to develop maladaptive traits or behaviours, such as the use of drugs, to cope with identity instability after failing to resolve the developmental crisis (Ragelienė, 2016). de Moor et al. (2022) linked adolescent drug use and the prevalence of mental health disorders to a distorted sense of identity.

Erikson (1977) argued that adolescence is a critical period for identity formation, characterised by exploration, experimentation, and the development of a coherent sense of self. For this process to unfold, adolescents require not only internal cognitive capacities but also external conditions, time, space, and social roles through which to experiment and express who they are. Identity development does not occur in a vacuum; it is deeply embedded within the social structures and power dynamics of society. Yuval-Davis (2006a) introduces the concept of social location to describe how individuals are situated within broader socio-political structures shaped by race, gender, class, ethnicity, and other intersecting axes of identity. These factors determine how individuals experience inclusion or exclusion within social spaces and ultimately influence the stories they tell about themselves. Social location is thus not only a descriptor of identity but also a determinant of access, to safety, opportunity, leisure, and social recognition. In South Africa, these factors are particularly pronounced due to the lingering legacies of

apartheid spatial planning, which continue to shape access to public resources and freedom of movement.

Therefore, the actions of adolescents trying to strengthen their identity take place in a particular place, at a certain time, using specific objects, involving different social roles and locations and regularly with other people. In the context of this research, the time is one which is marked by the digitalisation of social spaces as well as the persistent contemporary effects of post-apartheid socio-economic disparities. South African youth, particularly in townships like Dobsonville, navigate a landscape shaped by historical spatial inequalities, economic marginalisation, and limited access to public resources (Denoon-Stevens & Ramaila, 2018; SAHO, 2019). Although the digital shift offers new ways for identity exploration and formation, it also exacerbates socio-spatial divides, as digital access remains uneven and public recreational spaces continue to decline (McShane & Middha, 2021).

The place is Dobsonville, which as previously explained is a historically under-resourced township in South Africa, where structural inequalities continue to restrict access to safe, inclusive spaces for youth development (Dlamini et al., 2020). The township's legacy as a dormitory, which is inherently riddled with limited economic opportunities, fosters a sense of stagnation and exclusion (SAHO, 2019). Gender and class dynamics further shape young people's experiences, with safety concerns and social norms restricting movement and participation, particularly for young women (Mdunge, 2023). The lack of well-maintained public spaces could force youth to seek alternatives which may often be informal or digital spaces for recreation and socialisation and this would impact their sense of belonging and opportunities for self-exploration.

According to Branje et al. (2021), identity does not start when one becomes an adolescent, nor does it end when one becomes an adult. Branje et al. (2021) explains that the beginnings of identity are made as children differentiate themselves from their parents and

develop increasing autonomy. McAdams (2001) similarly extends Erikson's theory, but argues that while identity development begins earlier with language development, it is only in adolescence, when cognitive capacities such as autobiographical reasoning and temporal understanding mature, that individuals can begin to construct a coherent life story or narrative identity. This is when a person begins to reconstruct their history and envision their future as one cohesive story of themselves. In other words, as children grow and develop, they become more conscious of their distinguishing qualities and abilities, allowing them to distinguish themselves from others and create a sense of self (McAdams, 2001). Thus narrative theories of identity recognise Erikson's identity crisis as significant for adolescence, identity construction is an evolving aspect of adulthood (Maree, 2021; Mitchell et al., 2021; Orenstein & Lewis, 2025).

Narrative identity theories promote the notion that people construct a personal story that links their past, present, and future to comprehend who they are and where their embodied selves fit into the world. Thus, it provides a framework for reconsidering the human subject as an embodied, relational, and temporal being (Bradbury, 2020). As Bradbury (2020, p. 135) explains, "All people narrate the events and experiences of their lives in a perpetual flow of life in which action and meaning-making are intertwined rather than sequential processes." This insight is particularly relevant to this study, which explores how adolescents in Dobsonville make sense of themselves and their environments through storytelling. Their identities are not fixed outcomes of developmental milestones but are dynamically constructed through the way they narrate everyday encounters with public spaces, safety, aspiration, and exclusion. The drawings, narrative group discussions, and shared reflections captured in this study demonstrate how meaning and action unfold simultaneously, revealing how identity emerges through lived experiences and the ongoing interpretation of those experiences within the spatial and social fabric of their township.

Narrative psychology emphasises the importance of stories or narratives in comprehending human identity and life (Bradbury, 2020). According to the narrative approach, language is not merely a means of communication but shapes consciousness and identity formation (Hammack, 2008; McAdams & McLean, 2013; Waters & Fivush, 2015). The narrative approach recognises the value and meaning of human life, recognising that life has a phenomenological status that is unique from other objects of study. Life is believed to be inherently storied or narrative-like, and each person's identity is the result of the story thus far. Bradbury (2020) discusses the role of story structure in forming an identity during the adolescent identity crisis. According to Bradbury (2020), history involves an effort to impose "patterns" or justifications after events have transpired, and comprehension can only be gained in retrospect through narrative work.

Similarly, in individual lives, people make sense of their past and shape their hopes for their futures through the use of personal stories (Bradbury, 2020). She explains that while the biological process of growing up obviously plays a role in adolescence, so do intergenerational family histories which are conveyed through stories, values and collective memories that are passed down. These inherited narratives passed down through families, schools, the media, cultural practices and other active community forums, provide young people with important resources for meaning-making and identity construction. However, the past may also have traumatic afterlives, infusing the present with violent material and psychosocial effects (Bradbury, 2020). An example being how a traumatic history is not simply what happened but rather something which continues to shape someone's present. Through this lens, Bradbury (2020) explains hope not as expecting things to get better but rather using an awareness of the past to create change in the present for the future. This means that storytelling isn't just about remembering but is rather a way of making meaning in the present, constantly working through the tension between past struggles and future possibilities (Bradbury, 2020).

According to Moran et al. (2021), storytelling is found universally as a genre in all cultures and is an essential part of everyday life. No matter one's gender, age, or social class, people may create and modify themselves and their worlds through narration. While the content of stories varies, the capacity for storytelling is a fundamental part of human life through which people make sense of their experiences, connecting the past, present, and future to create meaning (Bradbury, 2020; Schachtner, 2020). It is both personal and social and it shapes individual identity while also forming shared cultural narratives that are passed down through generations. Psychologically, storytelling helps people construct a sense of self by organising personal histories, balancing change and continuity (Bradbury, 2020; McAdams, 2001; Moran et al., 2021; Schachtner, 2020). Vygotsky's theory highlights how human consciousness is shaped by social and historical contexts, making storytelling essential for both identity and emotional processing. It allows individuals to navigate challenges, process emotions, and imagine new possibilities for the future (Schachtner, 2020).

Still, the cultural stock of stories varies across time and place, and each story is distinct and shaped by the storyteller's psychosocial context which includes factors such as race, gender, class and history (McAdams, 2001). McAdams (2001) also explains that the cultural stock of stories is not static as it shifts across generations and contexts, reflecting societal values, historical events, and changing ideologies. This means that while individuals construct their own life narratives, they do so using the broader cultural scripts available to them. With the implication being that stories are not only shaped by personal experiences but also by what is emphasised or silenced in collective memory. As explained by Moran et al. (2021), some aspects of a story may remain unspoken or suppressed due to social taboos, power dynamics, or personal trauma. Thus, the omission of certain details or perspectives can change how a narrative is understood, both by the storyteller and their audience. In this way, storytelling is an active and evolving process, where meaning is continually negotiated based on which voices

are heard and which remain in the background and narrative research allows for such story telling.

2.2 Space and identity

In the context of this study, narrative psychology offers a powerful lens for understanding how adolescents use recreational spaces to construct their identities. These spaces are not merely physical locations but narrative spaces where young people can explore their roles, express themselves, and create meaningful connections with others. By examining the stories adolescents tell about their interactions with one another in these spaces, this research seeks to uncover how identity is shaped through the interplay of personal, social, and environmental factors. Ultimately, the study highlights the importance of providing safe and inclusive spaces where adolescents can engage in the narrative work of identity formation, contributing to their overall well-being and development.

The relationship between space and identity has long been a central theme in social science research, particularly in how young people develop a sense of self through their interactions with physical and social environments (Casakin & Bernardo, 2012; Germinaro, 2025; Gray & Manning, 2022; Wee, 2019). Public and recreational spaces, such as parks, libraries, sports fields, and community centres, serve as more than just locations for leisure; they are sites where adolescents perform, negotiate, and solidify their identities (Gray & Manning, 2022, Pratt & Wood, 2014). The literature on place identity, social belonging, and narrative identity formation suggests that space is deeply intertwined with how young people construct their self-concepts and position themselves within broader social structures (Dunlop et al., 2020; Gray & Manning, 2022; Van den Houten, 2013).

However, access to public and recreational spaces is not equitably distributed, particularly in unequal societies such as South Africa, where historical inequalities,

socio-economic barriers, and spatial exclusions continue to shape youth experiences (Dlamini et al., 2020). Race, gender, and class-based inequalities, exacerbated by post-apartheid urban planning policies, have contributed to the deterioration of public recreational spaces, limiting safe and accessible options for adolescents (Denoon-Stevens & Ramaila, 2018). As a result, young people often resort to reappropriating urban spaces in ways that challenge dominant narratives of public order, reinforcing their agency while also exposing them to increased policing and marginalisation (Van den Houten, 2013).

The increasing commercialisation of public spaces, alongside a shift toward private, consumption-based recreational models, further restricts youth agency in spatial negotiation, particularly for those in under-resourced communities (Wiegratz & Rofe, 2023). This trend not only limits physical access to leisure spaces but also shapes how adolescents view themselves in relation to their environments. When access to recreational space is determined by one's ability to pay or conform to consumer norms, it reinforces existing class divisions and constrains identity development for youth who are economically excluded. These dynamics are particularly relevant in contexts like Dobsonville, where free, accessible, and youth-friendly spaces are limited, and young people must navigate their identities within a spatial landscape increasingly defined by exclusion.

2.4 Space and Identity: Theoretical Foundations

Identity is not constructed in isolation but is shaped by the broader social, cultural, and spatial contexts in which individuals find themselves and their relationality to these contexts. Theories of place identity, spatial belonging, and socio-political structures all contribute to our understanding of how young people, particularly those in marginalised communities like Dobsonville, Soweto, negotiate their identities within the spaces they inhabit. This section explores how social location, race, gender, and urban planning intersect to shape identity

development, access to recreational spaces, and the narratives that young people construct about themselves.

Building on the understanding that identity is co-constructed through engagement with spatial, cultural, and social contexts, Dunlop et al. (2020) argue that the stories young people tell about themselves, narrative identities, are deeply shaped by the constraints and possibilities of their environments. For adolescents in under-resourced areas, spatial limitations often translate into recurring narrative themes of struggle, exclusion, or deferred aspirations. In contrast, young people who grow up with access to well-maintained recreational spaces often craft self-narratives centred on self-expression, play, and possibility. This underscores the bidirectional relationship between space and identity: space shapes who one can become, while identity, in turn, influences how space is navigated and valued.

Wee (2019), in a study of Singaporean female undergraduates in the UK, further demonstrated how identity is not merely located in space, but spatially performed. Across three spatial scales, public, institutional, and private rooms, she found that identity was continuously shaped and negotiated in relation to spatial norms and affordances. For example, public spaces often amplified participants' sense of racial hypervisibility and vulnerability, while room spaces allowed for greater agentic expression of self through objects and layout. This spatially situated and performed identity framework is particularly relevant to the context of this study, where adolescents in Dobsonville must negotiate who they are in the context of decaying, absent, or exclusive spaces. As this research will show, the capacity of young people to articulate coherent and empowered self-narratives is closely linked to whether their environments allow for agency, safety, and meaningful interaction.

Van den Houten (2013) extends this discussion by examining how youth in South Africa navigate urban spaces through practices such as graffiti, skateboarding, and breakdancing,

activities that serve as forms of identity expression. He describes these young people as “Space Invaders”, arguing that their appropriation of public spaces reflects a desire for self-expression and belonging in environments that exclude them. While these activities allow young people to assert their presence and agency, they are often perceived as deviant or disruptive, reinforcing societal stigmatisation and exclusion.

This struggle over space as explained by Van den Houten (2013) is not unique to South Africa but reflects broader global patterns where young people in marginalised communities reclaim urban environments to carve out spaces for identity formation and social interaction (Proctor et al., 2009). These findings align with Dunlop et al.'s (2020) argument that the narrative identities young people construct are influenced by the roles, such as leader, outsider, protector, or challenger, they assume within these contested spaces. When formal recreational spaces are absent, inaccessible, or unsafe, young people often reimagine and repurpose available environments, such as streets, parking lots, or abandoned areas, as sites of recreation and identity expression. While this demonstrates creativity and resilience, it can also subject them to increased surveillance, stigmatisation, and even criminalisation, as their presence in these spaces is often perceived as disruptive or deviant (Dunlop et al., 2020).

The relationship between race, space, and identity is particularly significant in post-apartheid South Africa, where historical spatial planning continues to shape contemporary social realities (Sundstrom, 2003). Sundstrom (2003) argues that race is not only a social construct but also a spatial one, as it dictates who has access to certain environments, resources, and opportunities. The lingering effects of apartheid-era racial segregation have ensured that racial identity remains tightly linked to geography, influencing access to education, healthcare, and recreational facilities.

This dynamic, where racialised identity is closely linked to geography, is illustrated by how two Black males may be perceived differently based on the areas they inhabit. For instance, a Black male in Sandton, a wealthy and predominantly white suburb, may be viewed by the broader public, including authorities, employers, and even other community members, as educated, successful, or socially mobile. In contrast, a Black male in Alexandra Township may be stereotyped as poor, uneducated, or even criminally inclined, despite sharing the same racial identity. These differing perceptions, as discussed by Nattrass and Seekings (2001), reveal how spatial location interacts with race and class to reinforce social hierarchies and unequal access to resources, including public and recreational spaces.

Bourdieu (1986) argues that aspirations are not innate or individually generated but are deeply influenced by access to various forms of capital: economic (money and material resources), cultural (education, language, and skills), and social (networks and affiliations). In under-resourced contexts, such as South African townships, young people's aspirations are often shaped by what is materially and symbolically available to them. This underscores the importance of spatial access and quality: when youth are excluded from recreational spaces that foster creativity and development, their ability to imagine and work toward alternative futures is constrained.

Sundstrom (2003) argues that any meaningful transformation of racial identity categories must involve transforming racialised spaces. This is especially relevant in Dobsonville, Soweto, where limited investment in public infrastructure, recreational spaces, and community resources has reinforced social marginalisation. Without interventions to reimagine urban spaces as inclusive and accessible, young people in these communities will continue to experience constrained identity formation and limited social mobility due to the racialised residential zones.

Massey's (2013) theory of space and gender further deepens our understanding of identity formation by demonstrating how spatial environments reinforce or challenge gender roles. She argues that space actively constructs gender identities, just as gender identities shape how space is used and perceived. In urban environments, gendered mobility, or restrictions on movement due to gender-based expectations and safety concerns, has a profound impact on how young people navigate and experience space. For young women in marginalised communities, issues such as gender-based violence, inadequate lighting in public areas, and social policing of women's behaviour limit their access to public and recreational spaces (Massey, 2013). This creates gendered exclusions, where spaces that should be inclusive and open to all become dominated by male presence, forcing women and gender-nonconforming individuals to modify their behaviour or avoid certain areas altogether.

Massey's (2013) argument aligns with Bauer et al. (2008) and Bradbury (2020), who emphasise that identity is narratively constructed through social interactions, roles, and relationships. If young women are denied access to public and recreational spaces, they lose opportunities to participate in activities that contribute to identity formation, social bonding, and personal development. This spatial exclusion contributes to differentiated experiences of adolescence, where young men might have freedom to explore their environment, while young women remain confined to restricted, often domestic spaces.

In response to this, Checkoway and Gutierrez (2006) offer a feminist, community-based model of youth participation that challenges dominant narratives portraying young people, especially those from marginalised racial and economic backgrounds, as passive recipients of aid or as societal problems. Instead, they position youth as active agents capable of transforming their communities through participatory engagement. Their framework emphasises the need for young people to have real influence over institutional decisions and spatial planning

processes, not merely symbolic inclusion. This model is particularly relevant in Dobsonville, where the historical exclusion of youth, especially young women, from public and recreational space has narrowed pathways for identity development. Feminist principles of empowerment, voice, and relational collaboration are embedded in this approach, which calls for intergenerational partnerships and community-led transformation. Quality participation, they argue, involves youth co-planning and co-leading initiatives that strengthen social connectedness, civic competence, and collective efficacy. This aligns with the call to reimagine urban space not only as inclusive but as co-produced by those most affected by exclusion: young people themselves.

The intersectionality of race, gender, class, and spatial planning is particularly relevant in Dobsonville, where high-density housing, inadequate public infrastructure, and limited recreational facilities contribute to a sense of exclusion and restricted identity development. Drawing on Yuval-Davis (2006b), intersectionality highlights how these social divisions are not merely additive but mutually constitutive axes of power that shape experiences of belonging, marginalisation, and access to resources within specific historical and spatial contexts. In Dobsonville, the legacies of apartheid spatial planning intersect with persistent gendered and classed inequalities, reinforcing differentiated access to safe and affirming public spaces. The absence of well-maintained recreational environments therefore not only restricts adolescents' physical mobility but also reproduces the social boundaries through which identity, agency, and self-expression are negotiated and constrained.

However, as Van den Houten (2013) and Proctor et al. (2009) highlight, when young people lack designated recreational spaces, they will claim and repurpose urban environments in ways that challenge existing spatial hierarchies. In Dobsonville, this can be seen in the appropriation of abandoned lots, school playgrounds, or even taxi ranks as social gathering

points. These informal recreational practices, while fostering youth agency and creativity, also expose young people to risks such as policing, gang violence, and social stigmatisation.

Furthermore, as Dlamini et al. (2020) note, the continued exclusion of marginalised communities from urban planning discussions means that young people in townships are rarely consulted on how public spaces should be designed or maintained. This lack of inclusion leads to recreational spaces that fail to meet the needs of adolescents, further alienating them from their environments and reinforcing a sense of dispossession. Importantly, this issue is not confined to youth alone. Adults too are affected by the broader societal erosion of public space, a trend marked by the privatisation and commodification of formerly communal environments. As Low and Smith (2006) argue, the rise of market-driven urban development has transformed public spaces into sites of consumption rather than collective use, contributing to the disappearance of the commons and diminishing opportunities for genuine civic engagement and community building.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

3.1 Public Spaces and Youth Identity in South Africa

Public space is integral to youth identity formation, providing a setting where young people negotiate belonging, social interaction, and self-expression. The quality, accessibility, and inclusivity of these spaces significantly impact adolescent well-being, autonomy, and sense of social integration (Gray & Manning, 2022). In a qualitative study conducted in southern England, Gray and Manning (2022) explored the spatial experiences of 51 youth aged 11–16 through focus groups and collaborative spatial mapping. Their findings highlighted how young people develop a sense of “autobiographical insideness” and spatial ownership through routine use of micro-geographies, such as street corners or benches, spaces that simultaneously foster belonging and expose youth to surveillance and exclusion. Similarly, Jurkevičienė and Budrytė (2025) conducted a photovoice study with 208 university students (mostly male, aged 18–25) in Kaunas, Lithuania, and found that youth valued multifunctional, well-maintained urban public spaces for socialising. However, their preferences were rarely reflected in actual urban design, as youth were largely excluded from participatory planning processes. This lack of inclusion, especially in middle-sized cities, reinforces a sense of marginalisation. Taken together, these studies emphasise the dynamic relationship between youth identity and public space, the barriers to spatial belonging, and the need for participatory urban planning to foster more inclusive, responsive environments. While these studies establish the importance of public spaces in shaping young people’s social and emotional development, they also reveal how such spaces become sites of regulation and exclusion. To fully grasp how this dynamic influences selfhood and belonging, it is essential to consider how youth experience and negotiate their presence within these environments.

The relationship between space and identity is reciprocal, while public spaces serve as important venues for youth self-expression, they also reflect and reinforce broader social norms, hierarchies, and exclusions (Gray & Manning, 2022). Young people shape their environments through place appropriation and social interactions, but they also experience stereotyping, surveillance, and displacement, all of which affect their sense of spatial belonging. In their study of teenagers in Edinburgh, Travlou (2003) highlighted how youth were often excluded from public spaces such as parks and commercial zones due to adult anxieties, surveillance, and criminalisation, especially when engaging in non-commercial activities like skateboarding or socialising in groups. Similarly, Gray and Manning's (2022) research with 51 adolescents in the South of England demonstrated how young people use micro-geographies like street corners or benches to construct a sense of identity, yet are frequently policed or moved along, reflecting tensions between autonomy and control. Extending this understanding to a global context, Wee (2019) explained that students reported feeling hypervisible and racially "Othered" in British public spaces, compared to the freedom and comfort they felt in Singapore. These studies underscore how spatial identity is constructed differently depending on intersecting factors like race, age, gender, and geographic location, and how public spaces often become contested terrains where belonging must be continuously negotiated.

Exclusionary policies, such as anti-loitering laws, youth curfews, and increased spatial surveillance, reinforce negative perceptions of young people in public spaces, often resulting in their policing, displacement, or restricted access (Travlou, 2003). In her study of youth in Edinburgh, Travlou found that local authorities and adult residents frequently viewed groups of teenagers in parks or shopping areas as disruptive, prompting surveillance and design changes that discouraged their presence. These structural barriers significantly limit young people's opportunities for identity exploration and social interaction, forcing them to navigate environments designed around adult-centric priorities. For instance, research from Iowa State

University (2020) shows that urban planning practices often prioritise commercial interests over youth-friendly communal spaces. The study highlights how decisions to privatise or regulate open spaces frequently result in the marginalisation of youth voices in planning processes, ultimately alienating them from environments that should support their development and belonging.

This dynamic is particularly evident in South African townships such as Dobsonville, where historical spatial inequalities persist. The lack of inclusive public spaces forces youth to appropriate alternative spaces for social engagement, often leading to conflict with authorities and negative societal perceptions (Denoon-Stevens & Ramaila, 2018). The literature suggests that place attachment and spatial belonging are essential for youth well-being, and when young people lack access to such spaces, their social interactions, autonomy, and identity development are significantly constrained.

The availability and quality of recreational spaces, including parks, libraries, sports facilities, and cultural centres, play a crucial role in youth identity development, social capital formation, and community cohesion (Pratt & Wood, 2014). These spaces provide structured opportunities for self-expression, skill-building, and peer interaction, which are particularly vital in marginalised communities with limited resources (Denoon-Stevens & Ramaila, 2018).

Denoon-Stevens and Ramaila (2018) illustrate how well-designed, accessible recreational spaces can foster youth resilience and future aspirations. Their study on the Mahwelereng Sports Node & Library in Limpopo highlights how community-driven recreational spaces contribute to both individual empowerment and social cohesion. The findings emphasise that youth in disadvantaged areas benefit significantly from safe, well-maintained public spaces, which serve as anchors for identity exploration and social engagement. However, neglect and underfunding of public recreational spaces can reinforce cycles of exclusion and poverty

(Denoon-Stevens & Ramaila, 2018). In communities like Dobsonville, where high-density housing and inadequate infrastructure shape daily experiences, the absence of quality recreational facilities limits young people's ability to cultivate a sense of belonging and agency. This aligns with Gray and Manning's (2022) argument that youth who lack access to safe spaces experience greater social isolation, decreased opportunities for identity negotiation, and heightened vulnerability to external stressors.

The decline of public recreational spaces in urban settings has led to the rise of privatised leisure activities, where access to safe, structured environments requires financial resources (Iowa State University, 2020). In South Africa, this contrast is evident between gated estates with private parks and sports facilities and township areas where public recreational spaces are neglected or unsafe (van den Houten, 2013). This shift exacerbates socio-economic divides, as young people from wealthier backgrounds can access exclusive recreational spaces, while those in low-income communities face barriers to participation. This dynamic mirrors Wee's (2019) findings on how spatial inequalities reinforce social hierarchies, where those with economic privilege can navigate multiple spatial scales, while marginalised groups remain confined to restrictive environments.

These patterns of spatial exclusion are not isolated but symptomatic of a broader structural neglect that continues to shape the urban landscape. As public recreational spaces decline and access becomes increasingly tied to economic privilege, inequalities are reproduced across generations. In South Africa, this neglect is especially visible in township contexts, where infrastructural decay and limited investment exacerbate social divides. Understanding the effects of this spatial neglect is therefore critical to analysing how young people's identities are shaped by both their material environments and the systemic inequalities that determine who benefits from urban development.

The continued underinvestment in public spaces in South African townships has long-term implications for youth well-being and identity development. Dlamini et al. (2020) argue that historical spatial segregation continues to influence youth experiences, as townships remain under-resourced compared to wealthier urban centres. This means that young people in townships face limited recreational opportunities, which would further reinforce their exclusion from broader social networks and opportunities for self-development.

Without intentional urban planning that prioritises youth needs, public spaces in townships risk continued deterioration into becoming more unsafe, underutilised environments. The study by Denoon-Stevens and Ramaila (2018) illustrates that when recreational spaces are poorly maintained or inaccessible, youth engagement declines, leading to missed opportunities for identity formation, skill-building, and social integration. In Dobsonville, where many young people navigate daily experiences of economic hardship and limited mobility, the lack of communal, safe spaces further amplifies feelings of exclusion and stagnation.

The global literature supports the need for intentional investment in youth-friendly spaces, as demonstrated by community-driven interventions in other marginalised settings (Iowa State University, 2020). Research highlights that when young people are actively involved in shaping and maintaining recreational spaces, they develop a stronger sense of place attachment, civic responsibility, and personal agency (Travlou, 2003). However, in the absence of participatory urban planning, public spaces will continue to reflect and reproduce social hierarchies, limiting young people's ability to construct empowered identities.

Public spaces play a vital role in shaping youth identity, social belonging, and overall well-being, yet the unequal distribution of these spaces, restrictive policies, and socio-economic barriers continue to hinder their accessibility. As explored in the previous sections, youth actively engage with public spaces as arenas of self-expression and social negotiation, yet structural

forces, ranging from urban planning decisions to economic disparities, often determine who has access to these spaces and under what conditions (Gray & Manning, 2022; Travlou, 2003).

The quality and availability of recreational spaces significantly influence young people's ability to develop autonomy, build social connections, and navigate identity formation in safe and structured ways (Denoon-Stevens & Ramaila, 2018). However, when public spaces are neglected or privatised, they become exclusionary landscapes that reinforce social inequalities, restricting youth from participating in identity-affirming activities. The literature illustrates that marginalised youth, particularly those in townships like Dobsonville, face heightened barriers to accessing safe and well-maintained communal spaces, which in turn limits their opportunities for social mobility and personal growth (Dlamini et al., 2020).

This exclusion is not accidental; it is the product of historical spatial inequalities that continue to shape contemporary urban environments. The legacy of apartheid spatial planning is deeply embedded in current township structures, where poverty, underdevelopment, and restricted mobility intersect to create barriers to youth identity formation (Lundgren & Scheckle, 2019). The next section expands on these challenges by examining how structural inequalities in post-apartheid South Africa continue to shape youth identities, particularly through spatial exclusion, economic disparities, and social marginalisation.

These patterns of exclusion and neglect cannot be understood in isolation from South Africa's broader socio-political history. The unequal distribution of space and resources in township settings such as Dobsonville is a direct inheritance of apartheid spatial planning, where segregationist policies determined who could access safe, resourced environments and who remained confined to peripheral, underdeveloped areas. Despite democratic reform, these spatial hierarchies persist in contemporary urban development, perpetuating cycles of poverty

and exclusion. To unpack how these entrenched inequalities continue to shape youth identity formation, it is necessary to consider the historical and structural forces that underpin them.

The structural barriers that limit youth access to public spaces are deeply rooted in South Africa's historical and socio-political landscape. Although the country has undergone significant political transformations since the end of apartheid, many of its spatial inequalities persist, particularly in townships where economic disparities remain entrenched (Lundgren & Scheckle, 2019). These structural inequalities manifest in restricted access to resources, educational limitations, and constrained recreational opportunities, all of which influence how young people in these communities construct their identities.

Lundgren and Scheckle (2019) illustrate how township youth navigate identity formation within these constraints, emphasising that spatial barriers reinforce social exclusion, limiting opportunities for self-exploration and community participation. Their research, employing participatory photography and reflective writing, captures the lived experiences of youth as they grapple with the challenges of limited access to structured recreational spaces and public infrastructure. The findings suggest that despite personal ambition and resilience, many young people feel a deep sense of exclusion, reinforcing the notion that identity formation is not solely an individual process but one that is deeply embedded in socio-spatial structures.

This aligns with Yuval-Davis's (2006) conceptualisation of social location, which asserts that race, class, and geography shape identity formation through both inclusionary and exclusionary processes. The inability to access safe and structured recreational spaces means that youth in townships like Dobsonville experience fragmented and constrained identity development, reinforcing patterns of marginalisation and limited future aspirations (Lundgren & Scheckle, 2019; Dlamini et al., 2020).

These enduring inequalities are not only structural but also deeply spatial and psychological. The environments in which young people grow up do more than shape their access to resources, they influence how they see themselves, their communities, and their place in society. In contexts marked by exclusion, space itself becomes a site of identity struggle, where belonging must be continuously negotiated amid feelings of marginalisation and constraint. Understanding this link between physical environment and self-concept requires closer attention to the idea of place identity, which captures how individuals internalise and make meaning of their surroundings as part of their sense of self.

Place identity is a crucial yet often overlooked factor in youth identity formation. Dlamini et al. (2020) argue that spatial segregation continues to shape the lived experiences of marginalised youth, highlighting how the legacy of apartheid planning still determines who has access to well-maintained public spaces and who remains spatially isolated. The stark contrast between well-resourced urban centres and underdeveloped township environments reinforces a sense of disconnection and limited mobility among youth, exacerbating their feelings of exclusion from broader societal opportunities.

In spaces where youth lack structured, inclusive recreational environments, their ability to develop a positive sense of self is hindered. This phenomenon is mirrored in other post-colonial urban settings, where exclusionary public policies prioritise economic interests over social inclusivity (Smaniotto Costa et al., 2021). In Lisbon, for example, restrictive policies and urban surveillance limit youth engagement with public spaces, pushing them to the margins of city life (Smaniotto Costa et al., 2021). Similarly, South African townships function as exclusionary landscapes, where youth are often policed and surveilled rather than supported through inclusive urban planning (Dlamini et al., 2020).

3.2 Youth Safety, Conflict, and the Reclaiming of Space

Youth experiences of public space are often defined by a tension between safety and exclusion. While young people seek belonging, connection, and freedom in these environments, the spaces available to them are frequently sites of surveillance, regulation, and social anxiety. As explored in the previous sections, spatial inequality limits access to inclusive recreational environments, forcing youth to navigate unsafe or hostile urban terrains that shape how they construct identity and community (Travlou, 2003; Dlamini et al., 2020). As explored in the previous sections, young people are often excluded from public spaces through implicit and explicit means. These exclusions arise from urban planning decisions that favour adult-centric and commercial interests, alongside socio-political structures that limit youth agency in public space design (Smaniotto Costa et al., 2021).

Research by Jurkevičienė and Budrytė (2025) highlights that despite these barriers, youth continue to appropriate urban spaces to meet their social needs, transforming neglected environments into informal recreational zones. This mirrors the findings of Van den Houten (2013), as discussed above. This form of spatial resistance demonstrates that even when public spaces exclude youth, they find ways to reclaim them, challenging dominant narratives about who belongs where.

Similarly, Park (2020) explores how negative public perceptions of teenagers shape their exclusion, illustrating that societal anxieties around youth presence in public spaces often lead to restrictive policies and surveillance. This creates a paradox where young people are expected to be socially engaged yet are systematically denied access to public environments that facilitate such engagement.

These patterns of exclusion are particularly relevant in South African townships, where youth are often forced to navigate spaces that are unsafe, underdeveloped, or highly surveilled. Mafadza (2024) expands on this dynamic, demonstrating how some youth seek alternative spaces beyond national borders, migrating to cities like Tel Aviv to redefine their aspirations and identities. She explains how she draws on her Sowetean roots by using her resilience, sense of community and creativity in order to make artistic expressions in Tel Aviv which for her became an urban place for story telling, cultural and self expression Mafadza (2024). This highlights that when local environments fail to provide opportunities for self-exploration, young people seek mobility elsewhere, reinforcing the idea that spatial exclusion shapes not only local identity formation but also transnational mobility patterns.

The role of public space in youth identity formation is intricately linked to historical inequalities, socio-economic barriers, and exclusionary urban planning. As demonstrated in the previous sections, marginalised youth, particularly in South African townships, face systematic restrictions that limit their ability to access safe and affirming recreational spaces (Dlamini et al., 2020; Lundgren & Scheckle, 2019). The spatial structures of townships, rooted in apartheid-era segregation and perpetuated by contemporary urban policies, continue to isolate young people from spaces that could foster social integration, self-expression, and personal development (Sundstrom, 2003). In response to these exclusions, some youth appropriate alternative spaces, while others seek opportunities beyond their immediate environments or experience a growing disconnection from communal life (Van den Houten, 2013; Mafadza, 2024).

However, structural exclusion is not inevitable, and various interventions have sought to reclaim and reimagine public spaces as inclusive and youth-friendly environments. A growing body of literature highlights the importance of creating safe, accessible, and purposefully designed spaces that support youth development and well-being. This is particularly relevant in

township contexts, where public investment in recreational infrastructure can play a crucial role in counteracting systemic marginalisation (Denoon-Stevens & Ramaila, 2018). The next section explores initiatives aimed at designing and maintaining safe spaces for youth, participatory urban planning, and the role of alternative spaces, such as third places and digital environments, in shaping youth identity.

Despite these exclusions, young people continue to exercise agency through acts of spatial resistance and reimagination. Whether through reclaiming neglected parks, gathering informally in unsafe zones, or expressing themselves through art and performance, youth actively transform marginalised environments into spaces of meaning and belonging. These acts of reclamation not only challenge restrictive urban norms but also underscore the psychological importance of having safe, affirming spaces. Consequently, the question shifts from how youth are excluded to how safe, inclusive environments can be intentionally created to support their development and identity formation.

Addressing youth exclusion from public spaces requires intentional urban planning and policy interventions that prioritise safe, inclusive, and youth-centred recreational environments. Several initiatives have demonstrated the positive impact of structured spaces on youth identity, mental health, and community cohesion.

One such initiative is UNICEF South Africa's Safe Parks programme, which provides secure recreational environments for marginalised youth (UNICEF South Africa, 2024). These parks are designed to promote well-being, social development, and educational opportunities, highlighting the necessity of integrating child-friendly spaces into broader urban planning strategies. The success of this programme underscores a broader argument in the literature: youth-friendly infrastructure is not merely a luxury but a fundamental necessity for fostering identity development and social inclusion (Denoon-Stevens & Ramaila, 2018).

This approach aligns with Meyer's (2024) argument that addressing youth exclusion requires more than just economic interventions. Meyer emphasises that joblessness and social isolation cannot be tackled without considering spatial access, suggesting that well-designed urban spaces can serve as platforms for skills development, networking, and empowerment. This perspective reframes public space not just as a site of leisure but as an essential component of youth mobility, economic participation, and agency.

Building on these insights, it becomes clear that the sustainability of youth-friendly spaces depends not only on their design but also on the extent to which young people are included in shaping them. While structural interventions and safe-space initiatives address immediate exclusion, lasting transformation requires participatory processes that value youth perspectives as central to urban development. Engaging adolescents as co-designers of their environments transforms them from passive recipients of policy into active agents of change, fostering both civic responsibility and deeper attachment to place.

3.4 Participatory Design and Youth Agency

The exclusion of youth from public spaces is often a consequence of urban planning processes that fail to consider their needs and perspectives. Scholars argue that a participatory approach to urban development is essential in ensuring that public spaces reflect the lived realities of young people (Jurkevičienė & Budrytė, 2025; Smaniotto Costa et al., 2021).

One of the foundational studies in this field is Lynch's (1977) *Growing Up in Cities* Project, which demonstrated how involving young people in urban planning processes leads to the development of more functional and engaging public spaces. This was done through research in Melbourne, Salta, Warsaw, and Mexico City from 1991 to 1997 where teenagers were asked to map their everyday spatial environments. This early research laid the groundwork

for modern participatory design initiatives, which argue that youth who are actively involved in shaping their environments are more likely to develop a sense of place attachment and civic responsibility (Travlou, 2003).

The Edinburgh College of Art's (2003) research on teenagers and public space highlights numerous examples of participatory urban planning, where youth input has directly influenced the design of safer, more engaging, and more inclusive public environments (Travlou, 2003). These findings emphasise that when urban planners work with youth rather than impose restrictions on their movement, the result is more sustainable and functional public spaces that foster belonging and identity development.

While participatory design highlights the importance of youth involvement in shaping formal urban environments, it also draws attention to the informal and improvised spaces where young people exercise agency beyond structured planning processes. In many contexts, adolescents carve out their own gathering sites, parks, pavements, sports grounds, and digital corners of the city, that function as vital extensions of community life. These spaces, often overlooked by planners and policymakers, offer young people opportunities for belonging, expression, and creativity in the absence of institutional support. Oldenburg's (1998) concept of third places provides a useful framework for understanding how such informal environments nurture social connection and identity formation outside the boundaries of home, school, or work.

3.5 Third Places: Youth Agency Beyond Formal Space

The concept of "third places", informal public spaces that facilitate social interaction, community cohesion, and individual well-being outside of home and work or school, has been widely recognised as essential for youth identity formation and social belonging (Oldenburg, 1998).

These spaces, which include parks, plazas, skateparks, and communal gathering areas, offer youth the opportunity to engage with peers in environments that are not strictly regulated by economic constraints or institutional authority.

One such example is Nairobi's skateboarding community, which has transformed Uhuru Park into an inclusive third place where social class, economic barriers, and consumer culture are secondary to self-expression and social engagement (Yawe, 2023). By reclaiming and repurposing urban spaces, youth establish alternative, non-commercialised arenas for identity formation and collective interaction. This form of place appropriation aligns with Van den Houten's (2013) theory, which describes how marginalised youth in South Africa, lacking designated recreational areas, engage in "spatial insurgency", asserting their right to space through activities like graffiti, skateboarding, and breakdancing.

However, while third places offer vital alternatives to structured recreational spaces, they remain highly vulnerable to social, economic, and policy-driven constraints. The decline of public recreational spaces, driven by neglect, privatisation, and urban restructuring, increasingly limits youth access to these crucial social environments (Smaniotto Costa et al., 2021). For example, a public park in Yeoville, Johannesburg, which was refurbished five years ago, has since fallen into disrepair due to poor maintenance and safety concerns, leading to a decline in community trust and engagement (Makhubu, 2023). This illustrates the fragility of third places in urban landscapes, where public investment often prioritises commercial projects over sustaining open, accessible, and youth-friendly environments.

These same dynamics are acutely visible in township contexts such as Dobsonville, Soweto, where structural neglect converges with social risk factors to further limit young people's ability to access safe recreational spaces. Here, the interplay between violence, crime, and recreation further complicates youth engagement in public spaces (News24, 2024).

Concerns over safety, gang activity, and gender-based violence make certain areas inaccessible or unwelcoming, restricting adolescents' ability to form positive social networks (Dlamini et al., 2020). As Sundstrom (2003) and Yuval-Davis (2006a) argue, social location and race intersect with spatial exclusion, meaning that youth from marginalised communities are disproportionately impacted by urban policies and social dynamics that limit their right to public space.

The challenges of exclusion, safety, and surveillance in township contexts such as Dobsonville reveal that the issue is not simply one of access, but also of design and intentionality. When public spaces fail to account for the lived realities of young people, particularly those shaped by violence, gendered risk, and historical marginalisation, they cease to function as safe or empowering environments. Addressing these spatial injustices therefore requires reimagining how public and recreational areas are conceptualised, built, and maintained. Emerging research highlights that when design processes are participatory and community-driven, public spaces become not only safer but also more meaningful for those who use them.

To mitigate these barriers to youth participation in public spaces, urban planners and policymakers must adopt inclusive, community-driven approaches to space design. Research suggests that youth-centric urban planning, where young people actively participate in designing and maintaining third places, leads to higher levels of civic engagement and social cohesion (Travlou, 2003; Jurkevičienė & Budrytė, 2025).

One such model is the participatory redesign of homeless shelters in the United States, where urban planners incorporated principles of dignity, well-being, and agency into architectural design, leading to more humane and engaging public environments (The Guardian, 2023). This approach was shown in Portland, Oregon. The Path Home Family Village was redesigned through a process that focused on the input of unhoused families. This helped

create a more dignified and empowering shelter environment (The Guardian, 2023). Applying these principles to recreational spaces in South African townships could help enhance the usability and safety of third places, encouraging greater youth involvement.

Similarly, the rapid commercialisation of sports in Africa has introduced new recreational spaces, yet these developments also raise concerns about accessibility and exclusion (Wiegratz & Rofo, 2023). While corporate-sponsored sports initiatives may provide infrastructure and economic investment, they often favor elite participation, sidelining marginalised youth who lack financial resources to access these facilities. This highlights the need for balanced policies that integrate commercial investment with community-centred recreational planning.

While the reimagining of physical public spaces offers valuable models for inclusion and empowerment, it is equally important to recognise that the landscape of youth interaction is rapidly evolving beyond the material environment. As economic constraints, safety concerns, and urban neglect continue to limit access to traditional recreational areas, many young people are turning to digital platforms to recreate the social, expressive, and communal functions once provided by physical third places. These online environments, though virtual, have become critical extensions of everyday life, reshaping how adolescents experience belonging, visibility, and participation in contemporary society.

As physical third places become increasingly contested, young people are turning to digital spaces as alternative environments for socialisation, identity formation, and self-expression. Online communities, gaming platforms, and virtual reality spaces are reshaping traditional concepts of third places, offering new opportunities for youth to connect beyond geographic and socio-economic limitations (McShane & Middha, 2021). However, this transition also raises critical questions about digital exclusion, social isolation, and the commodification of virtual interactions.

The next section will explore the role of digital third places in youth identity construction, analysing their potential to either reinforce or challenge the barriers faced in physical spaces. By examining the emergence of digital recreation, online communities, and the metaverse, the discussion will assess whether virtual environments can serve as meaningful alternatives to physical third places, or whether they further entrench socio-spatial inequalities. As young people increasingly navigate hybrid realities shaped by both physical and virtual worlds, the boundary between online and offline spaces has become blurred. This digital turn has redefined how adolescents interact, build relationships, and express identity, offering new forms of agency while also producing fresh inequalities. Understanding these dynamics requires examining how the rise of digitalisation reshapes traditional youth spaces, creating both opportunities for connection and risks of exclusion.

3.6 Digitalisation and Youth Identity

The transformation of social spaces is increasingly shaped by digitalisation, altering how young people interact with their environments. As technology conglomerates invest heavily in digital spaces, the risk of losing physical public spaces grows (Mütterlein & Fuchs, 2019). In South Africa, the decline of skateparks, libraries, and public parks has become evident, with some spaces being repurposed, falling into neglect, or becoming sites of gang activity and criminal occupation (Ndhlovu, 2022). This shift highlights a growing disparity between those who can access and benefit from digital spaces and those who remain excluded due to economic and infrastructural limitations.

Libraries have historically served as crucial hubs for knowledge-sharing, social engagement, and community-building. However, the proliferation of e-books, online reading platforms, and digital archives has significantly diminished their role as physical gathering spaces. The convenience of digital access, while increasing opportunities for self-directed

learning, has also weakened communal engagement, leading to a decline in book clubs, public reading groups, and shared literary experiences. Whether this is true for Dobsonville will be looked at through the narratives of the participants.

Richardson and Eccles (2007) highlight the role of reading in adolescent identity formation, emphasising how structured engagement with literature enables self-exploration, fosters resilience, and nurtures future aspirations. They argue that voluntary reading allows youth to imagine alternative life paths and challenge societal narratives, supporting the cognitive and emotional growth necessary for identity development (Proctor et al., 2009). However, the transition from physical reading spaces to online platforms removes the relational aspect of literary engagement, diminishing the collective storytelling processes that contribute to youth identity formation (James, 2014).

The loss of communal spaces extends beyond libraries to other recreational areas such as parks and playgrounds, where youth once gathered to engage in peer interactions, physical activity, and cultural exchange. In Dobsonville and other South African townships, high crime rates and poor maintenance of public spaces further restrict access to safe recreational areas, exacerbating youth disengagement from communal life (Ndhlovu, 2022).

While digitalisation has expanded access to virtual communities, it has simultaneously increased physical isolation. The ability to interact with others online does not necessarily translate into meaningful social connections in the real world. Research by Pietrabissa and Simpson (2020) links the rise of digital dependence to social withdrawal, with increased screen time correlating with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness among adolescents.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these patterns, forcing many young people into prolonged isolation, where social interactions were limited to digital platforms. Almeida et al.

(2022) emphasise that prolonged detachment from real-world social structures contributes to psychological distress, decreased productivity, and weakened interpersonal skills. South African adolescents, particularly those in economically disadvantaged areas, experience additional layers of exclusion due to limited digital infrastructure and unaffordable internet access, further entrenching socio-spatial inequalities (Ndhlovu, 2022).

Despite concerns about disconnection and social fragmentation, digital platforms offer alternative spaces for youth to construct identity and belonging. Anderson's (2006, as cited in Calhoun, 2016) concept of "imagined communities" suggests that social groups can be formed through shared values, interests, and digital interactions, rather than through physical proximity. In this way, marginalised youth who lack access to physical spaces may find solidarity through online networks, forging social identities based on common experiences rather than geographic boundaries.

Online communities allow for new forms of cultural production and creative expression, enabling youth to participate in virtual activism, artistic collaborations, and identity-affirming conversations. This aligns with Van den Houten's (2013) discussion of youth-driven place appropriation, where adolescents, when excluded from traditional spaces, redefine and reclaim new environments, whether urban or digital, to assert their agency and self-expression.

However, while online communities provide important avenues for engagement, they cannot fully replicate the depth of real-world interactions. McShane and Middha (2021) argue that digital spaces lack the spontaneity, physical engagement, and multisensory experiences of traditional public spaces. Similarly, Oldenburg (1998) emphasises that "third places", social environments outside of home and work, play a unique role in building interpersonal relationships, fostering communal cohesion, and providing essential support systems, however the digital space is separate from "third places" in this research.

3.7 Recreational Spaces: A Necessary Counterbalance to Digitalisation

The continued presence of physical spaces remains critical in ensuring holistic youth development, particularly for those at risk of social alienation. Research by Piyapong et al. (2019) underscores the symbolic and psychological importance of recreational environments, which range from community centres and public parks to structured programmes such as scouting groups and youth workshops. These spaces foster creativity, cultural expression, and collective storytelling, which are integral to developing a cohesive sense of self.

In Spain, Asensio-Ramón et al. (2020) conducted a comparative study involving 430 adolescents aged 14 to 16 from the region of Andalusia. Of these, 215 were active participants in the ASDE Scouts. The study found that those involved in scouting had significantly higher academic performance and better conflict resolution skills than their non-scouting peers. Programs like these provide structured yet flexible environments where young people build stories of resilience, growth, and belonging. While the global scouting movement began in the early 1900s under Robert Baden-Powell and has been shaped by militaristic and patriarchal values, modern versions focus more on inclusivity, co-education, and personal development. Still, critical scholars believe that gendered experiences within scouting need closer examination to ensure fairness in leadership and participation (Mislija et al., 2016; Ryan, 2019).

However, many of these spaces face financial constraints, poor maintenance, or a lack of public investment. The collapse of Scout Hall in Berario, Johannesburg, due to neglect, exemplifies how inadequate infrastructure management leads to the erosion of safe communal spaces (Bain, 2022). This aligns with broader concerns about public space deterioration across South Africa, where urban policies often fail to prioritise youth-friendly infrastructure (Ndhlovu, 2022).

Figure 1

Camp Delta Scout Grounds, Delta Park, Johannesburg.



A scout campsite in Delta Park, a nature reserve in Victory Park, Randburg. Established in the early 1960s, Camp Delta offers basic tent-only accommodation and is run by Gauteng Scouts. It hosts scout patrols, troop camps, and service projects led by youth. The campsite includes a Cub meeting hall and shared camping areas.

While the presence of recreational spaces is fundamental to youth identity development and well-being, neglect and disrepair can render these spaces unusable. Many public spaces in South Africa suffer from infrastructural decline, poor maintenance, and security concerns, limiting their accessibility and functionality. This neglect can stem from a lack of funding, community disengagement, or safety concerns due to crime and vandalism. For instance, the collapse of the roof at the Scout Hall in Berario, Johannesburg, exemplifies the deterioration of once-active community spaces due to mismanagement and neglect (Bain, 2022). Such deterioration raises pressing questions about whether these spaces should receive sustained

governmental funding, given their role in preventing youth from engaging in detrimental activities such as substance abuse (Proctor et al., 2009). A similar example can be found at Camp Delta, the longtime Scout campsite in Delta Park, Johannesburg. Once a lively centre for youth camps, leadership training, and community service, Camp Delta now shows clear signs of neglect. The grounds are overgrown, the facilities are worn, and programming has decreased. This situation reflects the wider disregard for recreational infrastructure. Despite its historical importance and its spot in one of the city's largest urban nature reserves, the site deals with limited funding and inconsistent maintenance. This highlights how even valuable youth spaces can become obsolete without steady investment and attention. The lack of maintenance and staffing in these already scarce spaces signals a broader societal failure to recognise their importance in fostering youth development, social cohesion, and mental well-being.

Figure 2

Berario Scout Hall



The significance of well-maintained and accessible recreational spaces is further emphasised by Gehl's (1987) categorisation of public activities into three types: necessary, optional, and social (Piyapong et al., 2019). According to this framework, necessary activities, such as work or medical visits, can occur in lower-quality environments. However, optional and social activities, such as play, leisure, and communal gatherings, thrive only in high-quality, inviting spaces. This distinction is particularly relevant when considering the role of recreational spaces in adolescent identity formation. High-quality pedestrian environments, for example, have been found to encourage social interactions, facilitate community-building, and enhance individuals' sense of place and belonging (Piyapong et al., 2019). These findings suggest that without safe and well-designed spaces, opportunities for positive youth engagement diminish, leaving many adolescents without adequate environments for social interaction and identity exploration.

Although studies such as Piyapong et al. (2019) highlight the importance of high-quality physical spaces, their research is based on coastal areas in Thailand, which differ vastly from the socio-political landscape of South African townships. Nonetheless, their findings align with global discussions on the necessity of investing in community-driven spaces. In marginalised urban areas like Dobsonville, discussed in Chapter 1, spatial inequalities and infrastructural neglect heighten the importance of accessible, well-maintained recreational spaces. These environments are critical for youth identity development and social engagement, particularly where structural barriers limit access to safe and affirming public areas.

While studies on urban youth experiences have been conducted in other South African towns and coastal regions, there remains a gap in literature focusing on how young people in Dobsonville experience and navigate these spatial constraints. Dobsonville, like many other

townships, is home to a diverse demographic, with varying cultural backgrounds and socio-economic statuses shaping young people's interactions with their environment.

The challenges faced by youth in Soweto are multidimensional, encompassing issues such as poverty, inadequate education, unemployment, domestic violence, and gender-based violence (Oluwayemisi, 2019). These socio-economic stressors have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to rising unemployment and increased disparities in access to essential resources (Mulaudzi et al., 2022). The South African lockdown measures disproportionately impacted adolescents in townships like Dobsonville, further restricting access to already limited public spaces and intensifying the competition for safe recreational areas (Mulaudzi et al., 2022).

In response to the increasing scarcity of public spaces, young people have begun to appropriate alternative locations for social interaction and self-expression. The Luh Twizzys movement, a recent social phenomenon among South African youth, exemplifies this trend (Phiri, 2023). This movement sees adolescents gathering in shopping centres, one of the few remaining spaces where they can freely assemble for recreation and community-building. Shopping malls, however, are inherently exclusionary, as they are designed for consumerism and require financial means for participation. Those without disposable income or access to transportation are left further marginalised from these semi-public spaces.

This shift reflects a broader reality: in the absence of dedicated recreational spaces, youth will find ways to claim and repurpose the spaces available to them. Historically, spaces like Brightwater Commons and Cresta Shopping Centre in Randburg once provided recreational zones specifically designed for young people, featuring skate parks, seating areas, and cultural hubs. Over time, these spaces have been replaced by commercial ventures such as casinos and food courts, limiting their accessibility to those who can afford to engage in consumer-driven

activities. By contrast, parking lots and other open spaces, initially appropriated by youth as informal gathering spots, have been swiftly reclaimed through heavy policing, reinforcing the exclusion of youth from public life.

Figure 3

Old Brightwater Commons Skate Park



Figure 4

New Brightwater Commons Sitting Area



The matters discussed above raise fundamental questions about the relationship between youth identity and spatial accessibility. One of the most pressing concerns is where young people are allowed to go and where they are excluded from. In many urban and township settings, youth face significant restrictions when it comes to occupying public spaces. Some of these restrictions are implicit, such as the lack of infrastructure supporting youth-friendly recreational spaces, while others are explicit, including curfews, surveillance, and policing that actively discourage youth from gathering in certain areas. The absence of designated safe spaces for young people forces them to appropriate alternative environments, which often results in conflict with authorities and older generations. Thus, it is essential to critically examine how spatial policies and urban planning decisions influence young people's mobility, autonomy, and sense of belonging.

Equally important is the question of which narratives young people are permitted to share and which ones are silenced. Public space is not just a site for physical movement but also a platform for self-expression and storytelling. Spaces that are welcoming to youth allow them to share their experiences, perspectives, and creative expressions, fostering a sense of agency. However, when youth are denied access to communal spaces, their stories often go unheard, leading to a sense of alienation. For example, marginalised youth who seek to express themselves through street art, skateboarding, or dance may be stigmatised as disruptive rather than recognised as contributors to urban culture. Understanding the constraints on youth storytelling in different spatial contexts can provide insight into the broader dynamics of social exclusion and belonging.

Furthermore, this research considers which identities are constrained or deprived due to spatial limitations and which are reinforced by the spaces young people are able to access. Space plays a fundamental role in shaping identity, whether through cultural associations, social

interactions, or personal experiences tied to a particular location. If youth are excluded from parks, libraries, or community centres, they may lose opportunities for self-development, socialisation, and creative expression. Conversely, the spaces that are available to them, such as commercialised environments like shopping malls, may reinforce consumer-driven identities that limit their ability to engage in non-commercialised social interactions. Additionally, the absence of inclusive and diverse spaces means that specific identity groups, such as LGBTQ+ youth or those from marginalised racial and socio-economic backgrounds, may feel even more excluded from mainstream public life.

Taken together, the reviewed literature demonstrates that while significant scholarship exists on youth identity development, spatial inequality, and the psychosocial importance of recreation, there remains limited empirical attention to how adolescents in South African townships actively negotiate, reimagine, and reclaim space within contexts of exclusion. Much of the existing work examines either urban design or developmental outcomes in isolation, with few studies integrating spatial theory, narrative inquiry, and intersectionality to understand identity formation holistically. This study therefore seeks to bridge this gap by exploring how adolescents in Dobsonville experience and narrate their identities within and beyond recreational spaces. By foregrounding young people's lived experiences, it contributes to emerging conversations on spatial justice, belonging, and youth agency in post-apartheid South Africa.

Building on this foundation, the present research investigates how spatial inclusion and exclusion shape adolescent identity in Dobsonville. Through an analysis of youth narratives, it aims to understand how young people navigate, contest, or accept the spatial constraints placed upon them and how they reclaim or reimagine space, whether through physical appropriation of urban environments or the creation of alternative digital third places. Ultimately,

this research contributes to a broader dialogue on the right to space, the role of public environments in youth identity formation, and the pursuit of spatial justice in marginalised communities. about the right to space, the role of public environments in youth identity formation, and the potential for spatial justice in marginalised communities. Having established the theoretical and contextual foundations for understanding how youth navigate spatial inclusion and exclusion in Dobsonville, the next chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted to explore these lived experiences.

Chapter 4: Methods

I chose a qualitative approach for this research project which is suitable for exploring a complex phenomenon in detail (Yilmaz, 2013). A qualitative approach allowed for in-depth understanding of the experiences of adolescents regarding their relationship with space through a combination of visual, participatory and narrative methods. By focusing on their narratives, this research provided insights into the subjective experiences of the youth, something qualitative research is uniquely positioned to do (Yilmaz, 2013). Although one of the study's broader goals was to advocate for the proliferation of high-quality physical spaces, this was not approached through gathering large quantities of generalisable data. Instead, the study focused on illuminating the intricacies of identity and its spatial relationships in the experiences of a small specific group.

Several challenges were anticipated and addressed during this process. These included biases inherent in qualitative data collection and analysis methods, ethical concerns, and the potential for lengthy processes. Efforts were made to mitigate these issues by maintaining reflexivity throughout the research and adhering to ethical guidelines prioritising participants' well-being and autonomy (Yilmaz, 2013).

4.1 Research paradigm

This research was grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, a framework rooted in phenomenology and hermeneutics. Phenomenology focuses on studying individual experiences and understanding how people interpret their surroundings through lived realities. Hermeneutics complements this by emphasising how humans interpret texts, language, and symbols, assigning meaning to them in ways that reflect their personal and cultural contexts (Spector-Mersel, 2010). Together, these traditions provided a foundation for exploring participants' meaning-making processes, emphasising the uniqueness and value of their subjective experiences. This paradigm was essential for recognising that individuals'

perceptions and interpretations of their realities are shaped by their social and cultural contexts, making their experiences as valid and valuable as objective measurements (Thanh & Thanh, 2015).

The interpretivist paradigm may be aligned with social constructionist understandings of how language shapes reality and knowledge. Social constructionism posits that reality is not fixed but is constructed through experiences, interactions, and how individuals interpret and understand the world (Spector-Mersel, 2010). This view was particularly relevant to this research, as it sought to understand how adolescents construct their identities and make sense of their environments through narratives. By focusing on the subjective and socially situated nature of these experiences, the research explores the complex interplay between personal stories and broader socio-cultural dynamics.

The constructivist paradigm complements the interpretivist focus on subjective experiences but emphasises questions of sociopolitical power. This recognition of psychosocial subjectivity allowed the research to delve deeply into participants' individual and collective narratives, capturing the richness and complexity of their lived experiences. The constructivist paradigm enabled the exploration of how social locations, such as race, class, and gender, and power dynamics influenced the narratives participants shared about their lives and identities (Spector-Mersel, 2010).

This paradigmatic frame also facilitated an investigation of the diverse viewpoints and voices contributing to creating a shared narrative reality. This approach was essential for capturing the multifaceted nature of participants' experiences, as it included multiple perspectives and interpretations. By focusing on the stories participants told, the research illuminated how they navigated and understood their identities within the broader social, cultural, and historical frameworks that shaped their lives.

This paradigm is also particularly well-suited to narrative research, as it acknowledges the importance of individual stories in understanding identity, relationships, and cultural knowledge.

Narrative research is a qualitative research method with the goal of understanding people's experiences and the stories they construct by analysing how they construct and present their unique identities and it brings voices into the foreground (Moran et al., 2021). When studying the youth, narrative research enables researchers to learn more about how children and teenagers interpret their experiences, create identities, and deal with difficulties (Moran et al., 2021). For several reasons, the study of adolescents and their identities can benefit from narrative research. Researchers can capture the complexity and variety of the stories that young people tell, as well as their emotions, viewpoints, and values, through the use of narrative research (Moran et al., 2021). By giving young people a voice and the chance to create their narratives, narrative research can aid in empowering them.

According to McAdams and McLean (2013), adolescents tell stories about their personal lives to construct a coherent and meaningful narrative identity. This means that they make sense of their past experiences regarding their relations to space, objects, roles, and other people, their present actions, and their future goals to develop a clear sense of who they are (Bradbury, 2020) This provides adolescents with a sense of unity and life purpose, which can help them navigate their developmental identity crisis by answering "Erikson's key identity questions: Who am I? How did I come to be? Where is my life going?" (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 235). However, those internalised life stories are constantly evolving, which shows that identity formation does not stop after the crisis has been resolved; instead, it is an ever-present phenomenon. McAdams and McLean (2013) explain that higher levels of mental health, well-being, and maturity are enjoyed by those who constructed life stories that featured the redemptive themes of personal agency and exploration in times of suffering and adversity.

McAdams and McLean (2013) shared that results from Adler (2012) and Tavernier and Willoughby (2012) were consistent with the possibility of the construction of redemptive narratives leading to an increase in well-being. In this context, play provides adolescents with a creative and experiential way to explore different roles, spaces, and social interactions, helping them construct and refine their narrative identity (Layland et al., 2018). Through play, they can experiment with agency, process past experiences, and imagine future possibilities, reinforcing a sense of purpose and well-being (Layland et al., 2018).

One of the significant strengths of the constructivist paradigm in narrative research is its emphasis on subjectivity, meaning-making, and context. This focus enabled a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives, capturing the depth and complexity of their narratives (Spector-Mersel, 2010). This balance was critical for ensuring that the research did not overly emphasise individual experiences at the expense of recognising the larger social, cultural, and political frameworks that shaped participants' lives (Alanazi, 2016).

By grounding the study in the interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, the research explored the dynamic interplay between personal narratives and socio-cultural realities. Ultimately, this approach provided a rich and meaningful understanding of the participants' experiences, emphasising the value of their voices and perspectives in addressing broader questions about identity, space, and social justice.

4.2 Participants

The participants in this study were members of YOTS, a youth group based in Dobsonville, as explained in the literature review. These adolescents shared valuable stories about spatial belonging, identity, and community life in Soweto. Their active involvement in YOTS's participatory and reflective practices made them well-suited to contribute to a study on the link between recreational spaces and the development of youth identity.

The YOTSies narratives about recreational spaces and identity development served as the central aspect of the research. Their reflections on these spaces, ranging from parks and libraries to soccer fields and community centres, were crucial in understanding how young people in Soweto interact with their environment and construct their identities. These recreational spaces provided opportunities for socialisation, creative expression, and personal development. The study did not require frequent use of these spaces; rather, it sought meaningful insights, regardless of how often participants engaged with these environments.

Initially, the study aimed to recruit 10 participants to ensure an in-depth exploration of each participant's narrative. Qualitative research prioritises depth over breadth, as it seeks to understand complex experiences and perspectives rather than produce generalisable findings (Creswell, 2009). The proposed number of participants was intended to facilitate a detailed investigation into each individual's experiences while still allowing for the identification of recurring themes across multiple narratives. A smaller, carefully selected group ensures that each participant's voice is heard and analysed with the attention and rigour required for a meaningful qualitative study.

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants, as this method allows for the deliberate selection of individuals with relevant experiences and insights (Palinkas et al., 2015). By targeting specific traits and attributes, purposive sampling ensured that participants were well-positioned to contribute valuable perspectives. In this study, the selection criteria included Black adolescents aged 14–19, of any gender, who were members of YOTS. This demographic criterion reflected the socio-cultural context of the study and ensured the inclusion of young people who had first-hand experience with recreational spaces in Soweto.

Purposive sampling was particularly appropriate for this research because it ensured that the findings were rooted in the lived experiences of those directly affected by spatial

accessibility and youth identity formation. Unlike random sampling, which might have resulted in less relevant or representative data, purposive sampling enabled the intentional selection of participants who could offer deep insights into the study's research questions (Palinkas et al., 2015).

During recruitment, 14 individuals who received the Participant Information Sheet (refer to Appendix A) expressed interest in participating. However, due to logistical constraints, the study proceeded with 7 participants who were available on the scheduled day of the participatory workshop. While this was a small group, the richness of the data was maintained through the structure of the method, which enabled each participant to be engaged twice over two periods. First, participants shared narratives while illustrating the recreational spaces they interact with, and then later revisited and discussed these drawings during the group sessions. These layered interactions allowed for deeper reflection, clarification of earlier insights, and opportunities for co-constructed meaning through peer engagement. As a result, despite the smaller sample size, the method facilitated the collection of detailed, nuanced narratives that captured the complexity of youth identity formation in Dobsonville.

By treating each participant as a unique narrator of their lived spatial experience, this approach allowed for a more intense focus on the complexities of their identity formation, emotional landscapes, and relationships with recreational spaces. This level of depth would have been hard to achieve with a larger sample. The repeat group interactions built a stronger rapport and trust, encouraging participants to share more reflective and personal accounts. In this way, the reduced sample size enhanced the study's ability to uncover rich, nuanced understandings of how youth in Soweto navigate space, exclusion, and self-identity.

All participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. The stories are presented using the participants' own words, with direct quotes italicised and

indented to distinguish their voices clearly. These narrative portraits were constructed through close and iterative reading of the transcripts, with careful attention paid to tone, emotional cadence, silences, and the embodied ways in which participants navigated their environments.

Table 1

Participant Information

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Age	Grade
Sipho	Female	Black	16	Grade 10
Thato	Male	Black	17	Grade 11
Zinhle	Female	Black	16	Grade 10
Thandi	Female	Black	17	Grade 11
Kabelo	Male	Black	17	Grade 11
Bongani	Male	Black	18	Grade 12
Lerato	Female	Black	18	Grade 12

4.3 Data Collection

I conducted data collection over two sessions, both held at Forte Secondary School's repurposed library, a space creatively transformed by YOTS members. The library's aesthetic, featuring graffiti and vibrant artwork, provided an informal and comfortable setting conducive to creative engagement and storytelling.

The first data collection session took place on November 10, 2023, beginning at 1:00 PM and concluding at 4:00 PM. The seven participants engaged in an art-based exercise, where they were given A2 paper, pencils, crayons, markers, and other art supplies and instructed to draw a space in their community where they engage in recreational activities. I encouraged them to interpret the prompt freely, choosing to work individually or collaboratively.

Initially, this study aimed to use a photovoice method to let participants visually document their interactions with recreational spaces. However, after considering participants' safety, the availability of devices like smartphones or cameras, and concerns about mobility within the township, the approach was changed. Instead, drawing was introduced as an accessible, low-risk way to improve participants' narratives. Drawing not only fit the diverse contexts of the youth but also served as an engaging way to start storytelling. It worked as an ice-breaker, reduced pressure, and helped build connections during group discussions. As Quinn (2021) points out, drawing can enhance narrative inquiry by grounding both the researcher and participants in shared reflection. The use of drawing created opportunities for thoughtful, expressive storytelling and helped reveal small events and emotional experiences often overlooked in verbal accounts.

As participants worked on their drawings, I moved around the room, engaging them in informal discussions about their artwork while asking them questions based on the interview schedule (See Appendix B). These conversations elicited descriptions of their chosen spaces, the significance of these locations, and the personal experiences tied to them. These discussions helped establish an initial narrative framework for later group narrative discussions.

Once all participants had completed their drawings, we reconvened to discuss their representations. Each participant presented their artwork, providing narrative insights into the spaces they had depicted, their interactions within those spaces, and their reflections on

accessibility, safety, and social significance. I audio-recorded these discussions for subsequent transcription and analysis.

During this first session, participants expressed frustration at being asked to depict recreational spaces within their communities, as many of them felt there were no spaces they could positively represent. They suggested an alternative approach: rather than drawing real spaces, they wished to depict spaces where they would like to be, ideal recreational environments, whether local or international, real or imagined. This shift introduced a new layer of insight into how youth conceptualise space beyond physical constraints, reflecting both their aspirations and limitations.

Originally, I had planned for the second session to include the remaining seven participants from the initial pool of 14. However, as the narrative co-creation process evolved, I realised that the first group had more to contribute and wished to continue their engagement. This change aligned with the principles of narrative inquiry, where the research adapts to participant experiences and emergent themes (Kim, 2016).

The second session took place on November 24, 2023, once again starting at 1:00 PM and concluding at 4:00 PM. Instead of including the originally planned second group of participants, I decided to continue working with the same seven individuals from the first session, allowing them to expand on the narratives developed in the initial discussion. Regrettably I had to ask the other participants if they were agreeable to this being the new format and not being part of the research and the majority agreed to proceed with this format.

For this session, the revised prompt was:

"Draw a space where you wish to be, a place where you feel you belong or imagine yourself thriving."

Unlike the previous session, all participants opted to work individually, reflecting the personal nature of the new prompt. I maintained the same approach, engaging with participants as they worked, recording their insights, and facilitating a post-activity group discussion. This continuation of engagement resulted in a richer, more nuanced dataset, capturing both current realities and aspirational identities linked to space.

To ensure the accuracy and integrity of the data collected during the narrative focus group discussions, I employed audio recording as my primary method of documentation. I used two separate recording devices, strategically placed in different areas of the room to capture participant voices from multiple angles. This approach was necessary to minimise the risk of losing valuable dialogue due to low volume, background noise, or overlapping speech. Given the dynamic nature of group discussions, participants often spoke simultaneously, reacted to each other's statements, or switched between languages, making it imperative to record from multiple sources to capture the full depth of their interactions.

4.4 Data Analysis

Once the sessions were completed, I transcribed the recordings verbatim, a process that proved to be both time-intensive and methodologically significant. The transcription process presented several challenges, including overlapping speech, variations in volume, and instances where participants' voices dipped too low to be easily discernible. Additionally, some participants alternated between English and vernacular languages. While the use of vernacular was limited, when it did occur, I drew on Google Voice Translation, DeepL Translate, and Reverso to ensure accuracy. This required careful attention to context and nuance to preserve participants' intended meanings and represent their stories respectfully.

To address transcription challenges, I replayed recordings multiple times to decipher low-volume speech and overlapping dialogue. I also used audio editing software to amplify sections where participants spoke too softly. Importantly, I cross-referenced participant narratives with their artwork, aligning verbal descriptions with visual representations to preserve contextual integrity. This ensured that meaning was not only preserved but deepened by combining spoken and visual accounts. Beyond documentation, transcription captured emotional tone, hesitation, and emphasis, revealing deeper meanings about how participants experienced, navigated, and conceptualised space in relation to their identities. In this sense, the process was not simply technical but interpretive, preserving the richness and depth of participants' voices.

The analysis unfolded in two interrelated stages. First, I constructed narrative portraits of each participant. These were context-rich accounts developed from transcripts, drawings, and discussions, with the aim of foregrounding participants' lived experiences and privileging their own words, movements, and memories. Narrative portraiture, as articulated by Rodríguez-Dorans and Jacobs (2020), emphasises staying close to the raw data and presenting participants' voices with minimal abstraction, thereby resisting the reduction of stories into decontextualised categories. Instead, it allows participants to emerge as experts of their own lives while situating their accounts within broader social and cultural narratives. Similarly, Ryan (2025) highlights the affirmative potential of narrative portraits, showing how the method can generate counter-narratives that challenge dominant deficit framings by centring participants' words in extended, nuanced extracts. In this study, the use of narrative portraits made it possible to capture how each young person actively constructed meaning in relation to public and recreational space, while also creating space for joy, agency, and subjectivity to emerge in ways that resist deficit-driven interpretations.

Second, I conducted a thematic analysis across all narratives to identify broader patterns of meaning. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis (as elaborated by Nowell et al., 2017), I first familiarised myself with the data through immersive reading and reflection. I then generated initial codes guided by the study's research questions and theoretical framework on narrative identity. This top-down, deductive approach was complemented by attention to unexpected insights that emerged inductively from the data.

The interpretation of narratives followed a thematic narrative approach, attentive to both the content of participants' stories and the ways these stories connected to broader social and spatial contexts (McAdams, 2001; Bradbury, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach allowed for a focus on how meaning was constructed around spaces in Dobsonville, particularly through stories of decline, exclusion, and aspiration. Rather than relying on pre-set coding frames, the analysis emphasised emergent themes while remaining grounded in theoretical perspectives on identity and space (Hammack, 2008; Massey, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2006a). This interpretive process supported a reading of youth narratives not only in terms of identity but also in relation to well-being, resilience, and social belonging.

Once initial codes were established, I clustered them into themes, refined these through review, and defined them in relation to participants' lived experiences. Themes were named to reflect their narrative essence and to capture how adolescents articulated belonging, exclusion, aspiration, and ethical self-positioning through space.

To ensure that the thematic structure did not overshadow participants' individuality, the chapter first presented narrative portraits of each participant before moving to the cross-cutting thematic analysis. The detailed discussion showed how these patterns emerged organically from the narratives. In this way, the analysis combined depth and breadth: the portraits offered insight into individual lives, while the themes illuminated broader social and spatial dynamics.

Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and suitability for narrative inquiry (Ibrahim, 2012). It allowed recurring topics to be identified while remaining open to new insights as they emerged. Codes and themes were organised around central concepts such as spatial belonging, exclusion, memory, aspiration, and moral navigation. Taken together, this layered approach provided a holistic account of how young people in Dobsonville make sense of, resist, and reimagine their environments through narrative identity work.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct the study was acquired from the University of the Witwatersrand Ethics Committee before beginning the data collection process. Additionally, permission was obtained from the Gauteng Department of Education (Appendix C), the YOTS programme (Appendix D), and Forte Secondary School (See Appendix E). The participant information sheet (Appendix A), consent letter for parents (Appendix F), assent letter for participants (Appendix G), and interview schedule (Appendix B) were provided as appendices.

The YOTS programme had previously received parental consent for participants to engage in research as part of their membership clause, providing a strong foundation for obtaining research permissions. Consent forms (See Appendix F) were drafted and sent to the parents of those who wished to participate in the research. Participants also completed assent forms (See Appendix G) before data collection commenced.

Confidentiality was limited in instances where focus groups were used as a method of data collection (Guest, 2017). Only minimal demographic data, including gender, age, and race, were collected. Participants were instructed not to sign their names physically or electronically on any images or capture themselves in any of the images. A private room at Forte Secondary School was secured to ensure a controlled and confidential environment for conducting interviews.

During audio-recorded interviews, any confidential information disclosed was redacted during transcription. Participants were reminded that their anonymity would be preserved in the final research report through the use of pseudonyms, although complete anonymity could not be maintained during the data collection process. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from participation at any point (See to Appendices A and F).

In recognising potential biases, my own experiences and interactions with recreational spaces and their benefits may have influenced the data analysis process. However, these biases were explicitly stated and acknowledged to mitigate their impact. The use of literature as a guiding framework was incorporated to ensure that subjective influence on data interpretation was minimised. This approach aligns with efforts to incorporate reflexivity and positionality as tools within the research, thereby enhancing validity and reliability (Darwin Holmes, 2020). Although the study did not address a particularly sensitive topic, counseling services were made available in case participants experienced any distress during or after their participation (See Appendix A).

4.6 Self-Reflexivity and the Evolution of the Research Process

As a qualitative researcher, self-reflexivity was central in recognising how my own experiences, values, and positionality shaped this study. I was conscious throughout of the ways my background influenced both the questions I asked and how I interpreted participants' narratives (Dodgson, 2019).

Growing up in Chitungwiza, Zimbabwe, I was intimately familiar with the scarcity of recreational spaces. The single soccer field in my community functioned as a hub of socialisation, while the streets themselves became places of play and communal belonging. These memories of joy and community left a deep imprint on me. Yet, when I moved to Northcliff, Johannesburg in 2009, the contrast was stark. Space was privatised, children played behind high walls, and

social interaction was limited. Parks and centres were available but came with fees and restrictions, leaving me searching for belonging in unconventional places, such as shopping centre rooftops.

These personal experiences shaped my motivation for this research. I know first-hand the consequences of growing up without accessible public spaces: my own struggles with substance use were tied, in part, to a lack of safe alternatives for socialisation and recreation. This project therefore became more than an academic exercise. It was also an act of advocacy for environments that promote hope, connection, and healthy identity formation rather than pushing young people toward harmful coping mechanisms.

One of the most powerful lessons of the process was learning to let go of rigid expectations. What began as a carefully designed plan shifted in response to participants' needs and ideas. Initially, I experienced anxiety and even a sense of loss when my plans had to change, but I came to embrace these moments as opportunities. Participants challenged my assumptions, reframed activities, and even reimaged the research questions. Their insistence on exploring not only their present realities but also their imagined futures reminded me that identity is shaped both by what is and what one hopes could be.

This taught me humility as a researcher. I realised that my role was not to control the story, but to create conditions in which participants could speak in their own voices. At times, this required me to confront discomfort, whether in the vulnerability of sharing my own background, in adjusting my expectations, or in witnessing participants' frustration with their environment. Yet these moments deepened the authenticity of the narratives and pushed me to reflect on how research can be genuinely co-created.

Looking back, I see the evolution of this project as a mirror of the very theme it explores: spaces, whether physical or methodological, are continuously reshaped by those who inhabit them. Just as my childhood spaces influenced who I became, the spaces of this research were shaped by the participants' agency and creativity. This has left me with a lasting reminder that qualitative research is not simply about data collection, but about honouring stories and recognising the transformative potential of listening.

4.7 Rigour

Guba and Lincoln's criteria for establishing rigour in qualitative research, dependability, transferability, credibility, and confirmability, were central to this study (Dodgson, 2019). Confirmability refers to the extent to which the research findings accurately represent the experiences and viewpoints of the participants (Dodgson, 2019). Credibility reflects how compelling and believable the research is to the target audience and whether the findings resonate as true. Transferability pertains to the applicability of research findings to different situations or populations, while dependability concerns the repeatability and consistency of the study procedure, ensuring that it is auditable by other researchers (Dodgson, 2019).

To ensure confirmability, methods such as supervisor debriefing, detailed descriptions of the research context and participant characteristics, and prolonged engagement with participants were employed. This included conducting 2 narrative focus group interviews lasting between 1 hour 30 minutes and 2 hours, complemented by their drawn pictures of their recreational spaces. These steps ensured that the findings were grounded in the participants' lived experiences.

Credibility was established through strategies like theory triangulation, which involved applying multiple theoretical perspectives from the theoretical framework to analyse the data gathered. Reflexivity, as outlined in the self-reflexivity section, also contributed to credibility by

ensuring that the researcher's perspectives and biases were acknowledged and accounted for (Dodgson, 2019).

To enhance transferability, a purposive sampling strategy was implemented, selecting participants based on specific criteria, traits, or qualities relevant to the research topic and objectives. This approach ensured that the findings could be meaningfully applied to similar contexts.

Finally, dependability was ensured by maintaining thorough documentation of the research process, allowing for transparency and reproducibility. Additionally, peer and supervisor reviews were sought throughout the research process to verify consistency and coherence in data analysis and interpretation. By employing these strategies, this study upheld high standards of integrity, ensuring that the research findings contribute meaningfully to the broader body of knowledge in the field (Dodgson, 2019).

4.8 Methodological Reflections and Limitations

This study generated rich insights into how youth in Dobsonville use, reimagine, and are excluded from recreational spaces. Working with a smaller group of seven participants across multiple sessions allowed for deeper engagement and the development of more trusting, open conversations. Seeing participants more than once created space for rapport to build organically, which was particularly important given the sensitive nature of some of the narratives shared.

The use of group discussions as a primary method of data collection allowed for the co-construction of meaning. The group setting enabled participants to reflect together, build on each other's insights, and challenge dominant narratives in real time. However, the absence of microphones posed challenges during transcription. Overlapping speech, varied speaking volumes, and quiet moments sometimes made it difficult to capture the full nuance of each

voice. Fortunately, vernacular use was minimal, but when used, translation support was accessed through online resources tools to ensure clarity and accuracy.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Results

5.1 Introduction

This chapter begins by presenting narrative portraits of each participant, which provide a window into how adolescents in Dobsonville make sense of their identities, spaces, and futures. Narrative inquiry, as Bradbury (2020) and others argue, allows for an understanding of individuals not simply as research subjects but as storytellers who construct meaning through the accounts they share. By foregrounding these narratives, the chapter recognises participants as active agents in the interpretation of their own lives, rather than reducing their experiences to abstract categories.

The chapter unfolds in two layers. First, each participant's story is described in depth to capture the personal, emotional, and spatial dimensions of their lived realities. Second, these stories are brought into conversation with one another through thematic analysis, identifying recurring patterns, tensions, and aspirations. In this way, the chapter highlights both the unique qualities of each narrative and the collective insights they generate about youth identity formation in a post-apartheid urban context.

5.2 Narrative portraits

5.2.1 Sipho's Narrative: Running as Escape, Identity, and Legacy

Sipho is a quiet but fiercely aspirational young woman. While she speaks softly in group discussions, her story reveals an intense inner life, one rooted in discipline, solitude, and a yearning to run toward something greater than her current reality. Her identity is not forged in noise or attention, but in motion: running becomes her way of becoming. Her emotional life is introduced through a small but powerful confession:

"I'm homesick. I am always homesick. Especially when I'm in school for more hours."

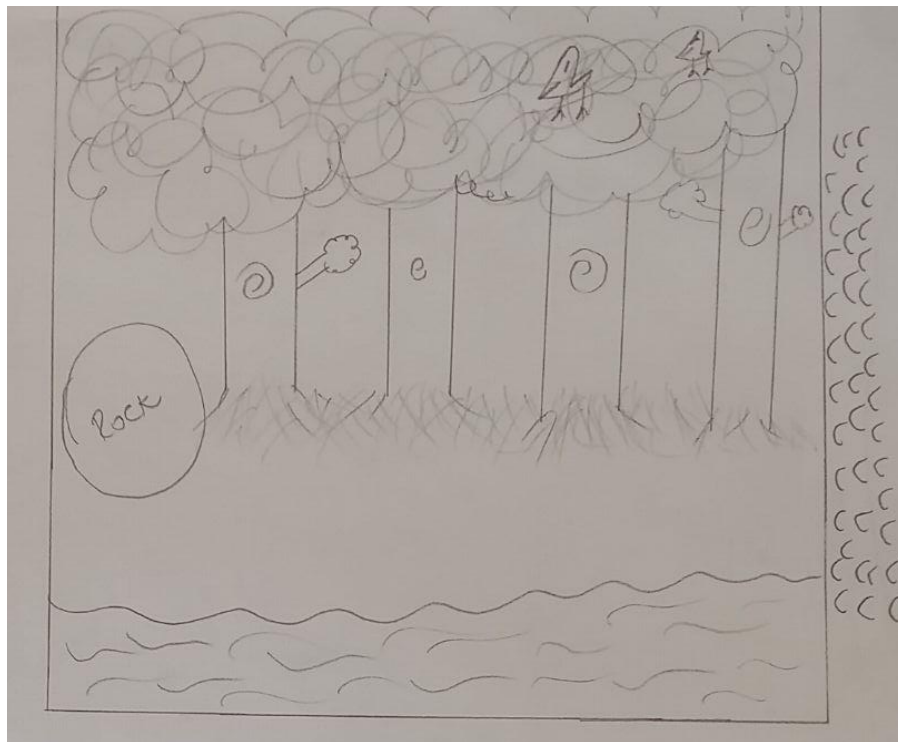
This longing is not for a carefree domestic haven, her home is marked by strict boundaries. Her mother doesn't allow her friends to visit:

"Mina, my friends can't visit me, shame. I have a Xhosa mom that doesn't allow them. My mom is there all the time... she just thinks my friends are a bad influence, shame."

With limited social mobility at home, Sipho turns to places that others fear. One of these is the Roodepoort Cemetery, which she reclaims as a space of peace and bravery:

Figure 5

Roodepoort Cemetery



“This is a very scary place, but it is also peaceful... I go there alone, and I just sit there and listen to the birds chirping, the wind, the tree sounds. It’s so nice.”

“Maybe it’s because I’m just brave.”

But nowhere does Sipho’s identity come through more clearly than in her reflections on running. For her, running is not just a sport, it is a spatial and emotional practice, a form of self-definition, resilience, and future projection. She describes her routine with pride:

“I used to also go to the pitch early in the year because I am also running, I’m an athlete.”

“I used to go there in the morning and do 500 [meters] times 10.”

“My only goal is to win, but not just any medal, I want the gold...it’s about reaching the top...that rush of excitement, knowing I have to push harder, it’s everything to me

These early mornings, alone on the pitch, represent a form of self-care and commitment. While other youth played soccer or hung out in groups, Sipho chased distance and she was aiming to become the very best at what she loves. But she wasn’t supported in this pursuit.

“I needed spikes to run, and they told me I had to buy them myself because it’s my future. I get it, it is my future, but it’s frustrating. Some schools provide everything for their athletes, you know? Tracks, spikes, training gear. My school doesn’t.”

Figure 6*Track Field*

This lack of support is not neutral, it shaped her reality. She paused her training to focus on school, but her dream remains undimmed. In fact, it has expanded:

"I want to represent Gauteng, then South Africa. I want to be on TV, breaking records, and proving to myself that I can do it."

"I think I'd come back. I want to give back to my community. I want to give the next generation what I didn't have, training kits, spikes, proper refreshments. You can't run at your best without the right gear or a healthy diet"

Here, running goes beyond being personal; it becomes political and communal. Sipho dreams not only of escaping Dobsonville but also of returning to transform it. Sipho's wish to build a running facility points to a significant shift in opportunity. It rejects the limitations imposed by geography, class, and gender.

Running also aligns with Bradbury's (2020) conception of narrative identity as both temporal and embodied, where identity is constructed through the dynamic interplay of lived experience, memory, and future imagination. Bradbury emphasises that narrative research is not only about storytelling, but about how individuals make sense of who they are across time, integrating past events, present experiences, and anticipated futures in ways that shape personal identity. In this sense, Sipho's narrative of running becomes a powerful act of self-construction, one that connects her past trauma, present solitude, and future aspirations into a coherent and embodied narrative arc. As she re-narrates her life through the act of running, this becomes not just a physical release but a symbolic journey toward transformation. Her story illustrates what McAdams and McLean (2013) call a redemptive narrative, in which past adversity is reinterpreted as meaningful and generative, offering direction and hope.

Other places she inhabits, like Kopanong Hall,

“you wouldn't even tell there is a library there”,

reflect her connection to the hidden, the overlooked. Her love for swimming is also notable:

“Yoh, I love to swim.”

But again, public space fails her. The Dobsonville pool has become unsafe:

“You go there wearing clothes, and then when you leave, you're not wearing anything but boxer shorts.”

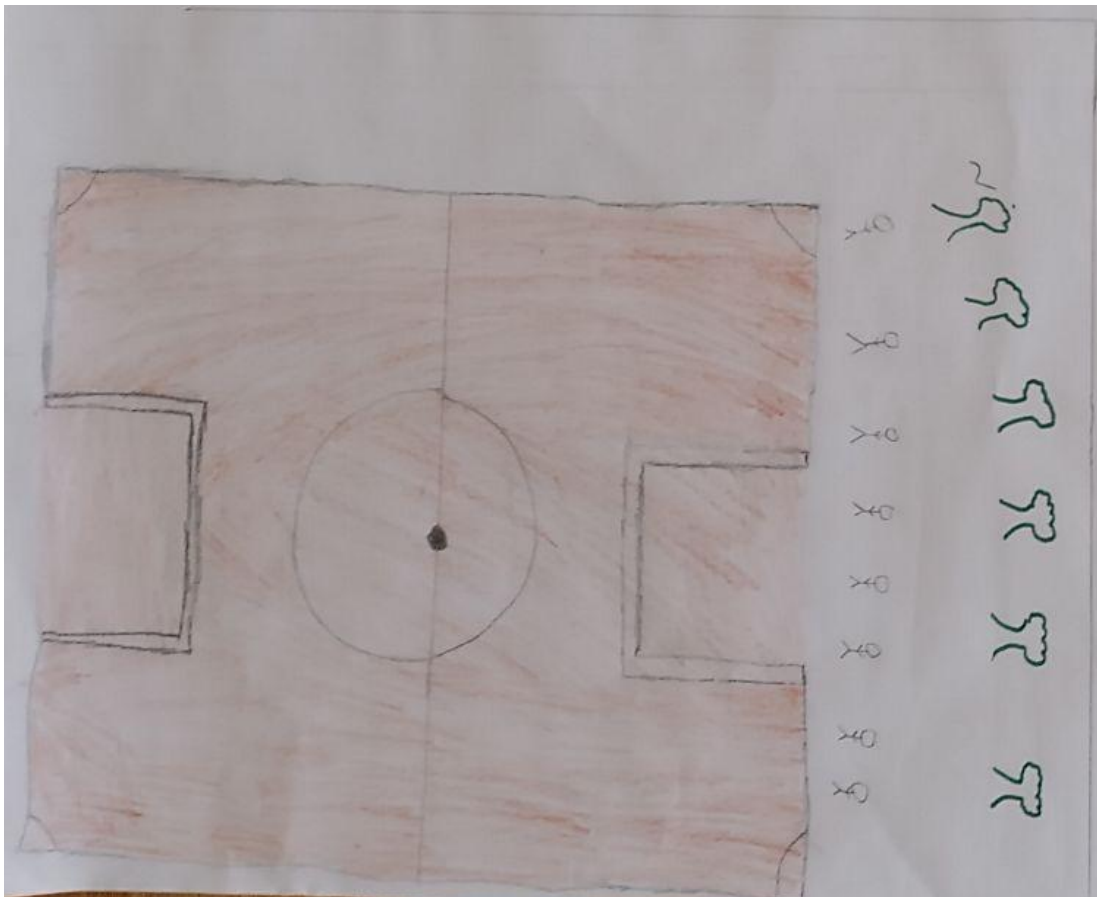
This deterioration of public recreational space reflects structural violence (Dlamini et al., 2020), gendered exclusion (Massey, 2013), and the spatial neglect that shapes township life. Yet she still finds joy in movement.

"I'm doing things slow."

When asked where she wouldn't go, her voice darkens:

Figure 7

Soccer Field



"The soccer field. It's a nice place to go to, but if you go there, you don't come back... even when you're there, it's still dangerous."

The soccer field represents the haunted margins of space, places laced with gendered fear and spatial trauma. For Sipho, choosing not to go there is an act of survival and agency.

Ultimately, Sipho's narrative is about self-belief in the face of silence. Running structures her story, not only as physical movement, but as a metaphor for discipline, escape, and return. She is not just running toward a goal; she is carrying others with her in that imagined future.

5.2.2 Thato's Narrative: Memories of Movement, Friendship, and Fragile Freedom

Thato is a thoughtful and grounded young man whose narrative is shaped by his attachment to spaces of leisure, friendship, and imaginative possibility. His identity, like that of many adolescents navigating township life, is intertwined with places that once brought joy but have since become fraught with risk and constraint. In telling his story, he moves between remembrance and resignation, between what used to be and what no longer is.

The drawing exercise became a site of pleasure and reflection for Thato because of the creative freedom it offered:

"Because we were able to use our minds, just like that, and draw what we were thinking about, that was fun."

This moment reflects how, for Thato, mental stimulation is liberating. It aligns with McAdams and McLean's (2013) insight that meaning-making and action are intertwined processes in narrative identity development. Drawing was not just expression, it was a form of imaginative authorship, a place to reconstruct agency and possibility.

He elaborated on what he chose to draw:

“You see here, I drew the mall because I like shopping. And here, I drew the swimming pool because I like going to the swimming pool with my friends, having fun.”

These images represent more than physical locations, they are memory-scapes, sites of autonomy, joy, and social bonding. The mall in particular functions as a “third place” (Oldenburg, 1998), a semi-public zone of youth belonging beyond the binaries of school and home. His tone when naming these spaces is marked by ease and affection:

“That’s the place I like going to.”

However, this sense of enjoyment is fractured by his present-day relationship to those spaces. When asked about the swimming pool, his voice shifts. The joy remains in memory, but the present is marked by caution:

“Oh, eish. I no longer go to the pool because of what happens there now.”

“They take your money, clothes.”

What was once a site of fun is now experienced as a site of threat. This transformation reflects what Dlamini et al. (2020) describes as the spatial exclusion of youth in under-resourced environments. Thato’s nostalgia is a coping mechanism, a way of holding onto identity through remembering rather than re-inhabiting.

Yet Thato’s story extends beyond loss. His sense of curiosity and intellectual engagement re-emerges when he speaks about his interest in *MetaTrader*, a digital platform for learning financial trading:

“I started learning about MetaTrader, trading and stuff... I’m still learning, but yeah, I’m interested.”

This represents a crucial shift in Thato's narrative, from physical space to digital space. His engagement with MetaTrader aligns directly with the literature on digitalisation and youth identity, illustrating how adolescents are increasingly navigating alternative "virtual third places" (Mütterlein & Fuchs, 2019). In the absence of safe physical infrastructure, digital platforms like MetaTrader offer a new form of symbolic space where agency, learning, and imagined futures can take root.

Thato's story resonates with Anderson's (2006, as cited in Calhoun, 2016) idea of imagined communities, as he begins to see himself as part of a broader digital culture of economic literacy, despite his local constraints. He is quietly acquiring cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that could potentially reshape his future position in the social field.

Importantly, Thato's interest in digital self-learning pushes against the concern raised by Pietrabissa and Simpson (2020) that digital spaces lead primarily to isolation. In his case, MetaTrader does not reflect escapism, but strategy, a tool for financial agency in an environment where economic opportunity is limited. However, his access to such platforms is still precarious, reflecting the disparities in digital infrastructure and affordability noted by Ndhlovu (2022). His ability to learn online is not guaranteed, but it shows how township youth are carving futures in constrained digital environments.

Although Thato says little about formal career aspirations, his story speaks volumes. His love of using his mind, his quiet curiosity, his nostalgia for joy and movement, and his retreat from unsafe spaces reflect a complex navigation of freedom and risk. He is building a narrative identity on the tension between safety and aspiration, between stillness and strategy, between memory and imagination.

Thato's narrative reminds us that agency does not always announce itself loudly. Sometimes it appears in drawings, in quiet withdrawals, or in the steady clicking of a trading app, subtle, deliberate acts of hope in the face of fragile freedom.

5.2.3 Zinhle's Narrative: Longing for Safety and the Weight of Cynicism

Zinhle's story is sparse in words but powerful in emotion. Her few statements reveal the stark emotional and spatial terrain she navigates, a world marked by broken dreams, longing for safety, and the quiet resignation that comes with growing up in a landscape of persistent instability. While her peers may voice aspirations or dwell in memory, Zinhle offers a narrative that is emotionally concise and existentially heavy. Her identity emerges not through elaboration but through sharp, revealing fragments.

One of her most evocative statements comes as a reflection on the changing meaning of space and expectation:

"Imagine going there with a bag and coming back with no bag."

This line encapsulates a larger story: one of disillusionment, betrayal by space, and the collapse of trust in the environments meant to provide freedom, leisure, or even safety. The unspoken implication is that theft, vulnerability, and loss are commonplace experiences. Her words echo Dlamini et al. (2020), who argue that township youth are often forced to navigate urban spaces defined more by risk than by recreation.

In another moment, when discussing the current state of the township, she simply says:

"Ey, here it's not nice."

This short line, emotionally flat yet charged, speaks volumes. It lacks detail but carries a deep affective truth: Zinhle does not feel good where she is. Massey (2013) and Yuval-Davis

(2006a) would describe this not only as a reaction to personal conditions but as an expression of social location, a spatial embodiment of class, gender, race, and vulnerability. Zinhle's lament reflects a life where belonging is constrained, and spaces once considered safe or hopeful no longer offer comfort.

And yet, her drawings show that she is not without refuge or imagination. She sketched Kopanong Hall, a library she explained she loved because it allowed her to read, be alone, and "clear my mind." In her account, this hall was more than a study space, it was chosen as a sanctuary from the dangers and decay elsewhere in Dobsonville. Within it, Zinhle carved out solitude and safety, a counterpoint to her otherwise guarded relationship with space. What is striking is that in the same drawing, she depicted glamorous dresses, suggesting a wish that extended beyond study. In subsequent sessions, she drew Paris Fashion Week, explaining that she hoped to travel overseas to represent South Africa. The juxtaposition between Kopanong Hall and Paris speaks to the dual layers of her identity work: the pragmatic need for refuge and safety, and the aspirational desire to belong in global stages of recognition and creativity.

Figure 8

Kopanong Hall



Her longing for safety is also rooted in memory. Reflecting on her earlier childhood, she explained:

“Yeah, it was a safe space... before Dobsonville Stadium, actually.”

Here, Zinhle identifies a time before things deteriorated, before the erosion of safety and order. The phrase *“before Dobsonville Stadium”* hints at a shift in community space, when once-trusted areas became marked by risk, crime, or exclusion. Her memory of a “safe space” underscores how fleeting such environments are for township youth and how deeply their loss shapes identity (Gray & Manning, 2022).

Perhaps the most startling moment came in a rhetorical and sarcastic reflection on growing up in this environment:

“So you must steal when you grow up?”

Whether said in jest, anger, or disbelief, it captures the creeping cynicism that can define township adolescence. When space offers only insecurity, when dreams are stolen both literally and symbolically, then survival strategies become normalised. Bourdieu’s (1986) framework reminds us that aspirations are formed within access, or lack, of capital, whether economic, cultural, or symbolic. Zinhle’s quote reveals the absence of those supports. When identity formation is squeezed by deprivation and systemic exclusion, resignation can masquerade as pragmatism.

Zinhle does not offer an elaborate, verbalised future vision like Siphso, nor the nostalgic or quietly hopeful agency of Thato. Her narrative is rooted in the present tense, and that present is one of loss, fragmentation, and guarded awareness. And yet, through her drawings and reflections, she reveals a layered identity: a young woman seeking solitude in Kopanong Hall,

dreaming of Paris runways, and telling blunt truths about the cynicism of her environment. In naming both loss and aspiration, she participates in the work of narrative identity (McAdams & McLean, 2013), making meaning from adversity, shaping the self through fragmentary yet potent acts of truth-telling and imagination.

5.2.4 Thandi's Narrative: Outspokenness, Danger, and the Persistence of Joy

Thandi is a bold, expressive, and humorous young woman who narrates her world with vivid clarity and unmistakable energy. Her identity is animated by her sharp observations, her ability to poke fun at dangerous realities, and her refusal to be silenced or subdued by the constraints of her environment. While other participants speak softly of memory or longing, Thandi laughs in the face of fear, but her laughter is also a form of survival.

From the start, Thandi positions herself as a truth-teller. Her tone is playful, but her insights cut deep. Reflecting on what it means to grow up in her current spatial context, she jokes:

“You can’t expect to go there with a Nike bag and come back with it. You can’t be flashy.”

Here, humor becomes a coping mechanism for danger, a way of expressing hard truths without being weighed down by them. Thandi names a reality many participants hinted at: that public space in Dobsonville is not neutral. What you wear, how you look, and how you move through it all carry risk. Her sarcasm is protective, revealing an adolescent who is deeply aware of spatial hierarchies and codes of survival.

Thandi shares her own experience:

“Yeah, they stole from me, and I had to walk home with only my costume on.”

She tells this with a mix of honesty and cheek, turning humiliation into a story of resilience. Her voice is not defeated, it's defiant. This aligns with Bradbury's (2020) framing of narrative identity: storytelling is not merely about memory, but about actively constructing meaning in the present. For Thandi, this means finding humour in hardship, and insisting on her right to be in public spaces, even when they turn against her.

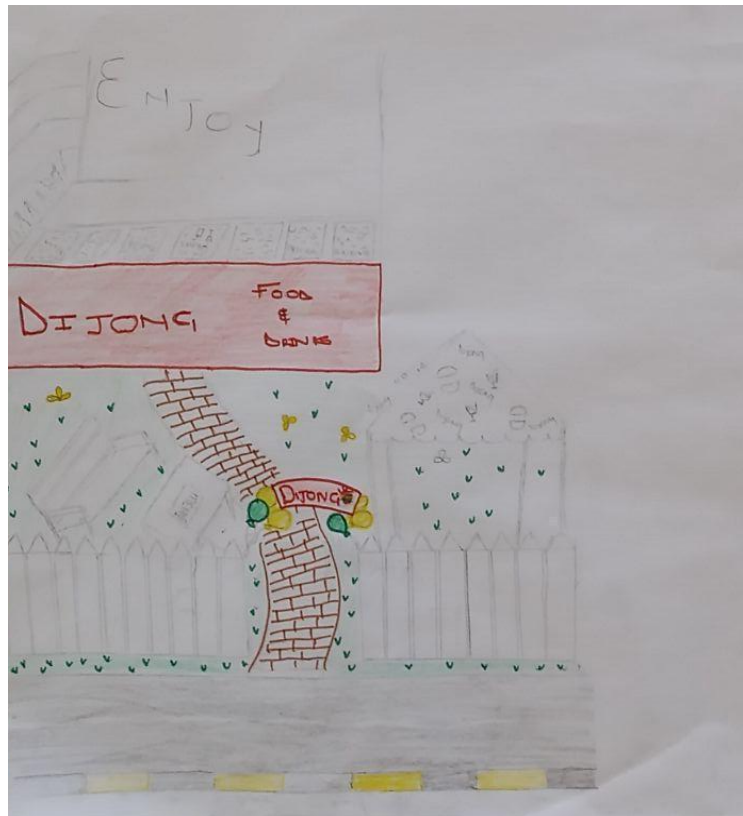
Unlike some peers who have withdrawn from unsafe spaces, Thandi still asserts her presence:

“Yeah, we still go there. We need to swim.”

This sentence is quietly radical. It reflects what Van den Houten (2013) called spatial insurgency, the refusal of marginalised youth to cede public spaces, even when they become dangerous. For Thandi, swimming is more than a hobby, it is a reclaiming of space, a declaration that joy and fear can coexist, and that danger will not erase her right to leisure and fun.

She makes distinctions between areas too:

“Hai, there's Ma 29 here. And on your way to Dijong, you get robbed.”

Figure 9*Dijong*

Thandi's narrative offers a vivid demonstration of embodied spatial literacy. She spoke about Dijong with affection, describing it as a space of fun, joy, and social gathering, a place she enjoys frequenting. Yet even this space, while emotionally affirming, is not without danger. Thandi notes that one can get robbed at Dijong too. Her comparison between Dijong and Ma 29, the latter likely referencing a well-known local gang, reveals a sharp and practical spatial awareness. These are not abstract locations, but lived, navigated, and emotionally charged geographies. Ma 29 represents a different order of threat, one associated with organised violence and intimidation, while Dijong, although joyous, carries the everyday risk of petty crime. This contrast reflects what Massey (2013) and Yuval-Davis (2006a) describe as the political and

gendered nature of space. Thandi's navigation of these zones demonstrates a context-sensitive spatial intelligence: she knows where to go, what to wear, how to behave, and whom to avoid, skills necessary for survival, identity performance, and freedom within constrained urban geographies.

Still, her reflection ends on a wistful note:

"It was safe until 2015."

In this one line, we glimpse the temporal rupture in Thandi's experience. Something shifted around 2015. Her statement doesn't explain why or how, but it situates her identity in time, echoing McAdams' (2001) theory of narrative identity: adolescents begin to reconstruct their past and understand their present as part of a longer life story. For Thandi, 2015 became a marker of spatial and emotional loss, a turning point where public space became contested, and innocence was perhaps replaced by vigilance.

Yet through all of this, Thandi remains vivid, animated by humour, clarity, and an unfiltered voice. She proudly identifies as a *bari*, a label she reclaims with playful defiance.

When asked to define it, she laughs:

"A bari is, like, some stupid thing."

"Yeah, that's a bari. I have to be a bari."

Pressed further, she explains:

"I have to be a bari so I can be myself. I don't want to do things like everyone else."

Figure 10

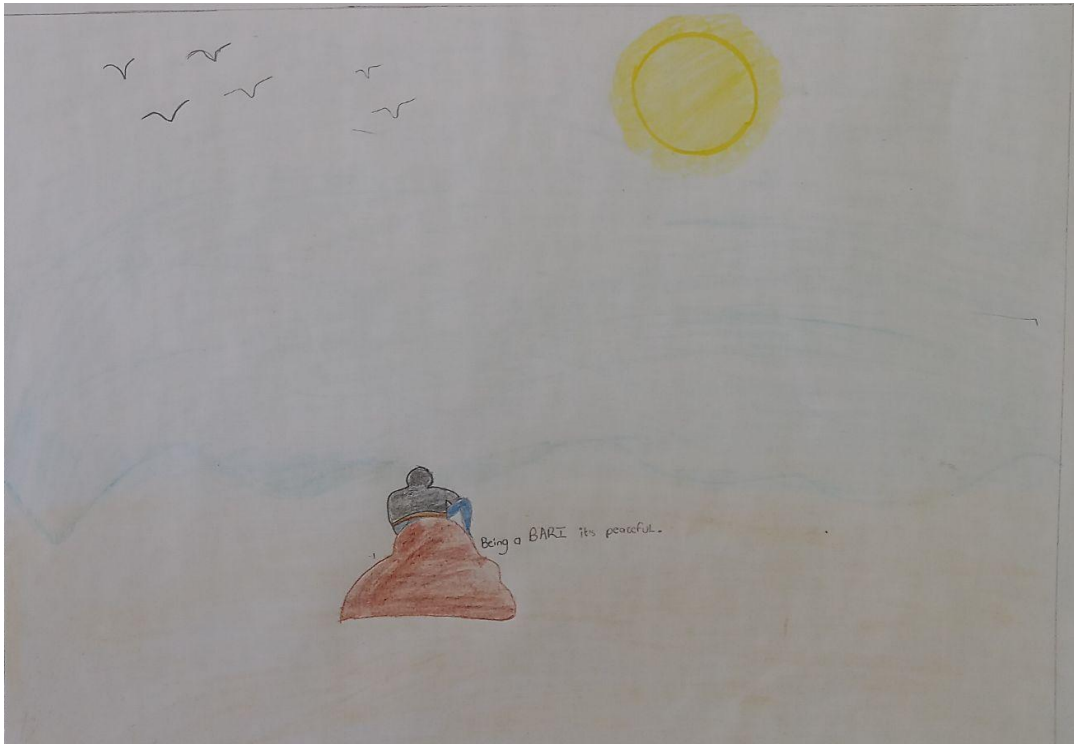
The Bari

Figure Ten: The Bari

To be a *bari*, in Thandi's world, is to reject conformity, to embrace difference, and to perform a kind of everyday rebellion against expectations. Her identity is not shaped in silence or submission, it is sharpened through banter, storytelling, and presence. She is a sharp-tongued girl whose humour resists victimhood, whose laughter unsettles constraint, and whose continued swimming, despite the risks, is an act of joy and reclamation. For Thandi, being a *bari* is not stupidity; it is strategy, a way of being fully herself in a world that often tries to contain her.

In her narrative, we see not just a chronicle of danger, but a living testament to joy, autonomy, and refusal. Thandi does not simply describe space, she performs herself within it, crafting a story of survival that is as honest as it is animated.

5.2.5 Lerato's Narrative: From Studio Dreams to Community Calling

Lerato's story unfolds through a unique blend of creativity, introspection, and visionary leadership. She presents herself as both self-possessed and community-minded, a young woman in pursuit of peace and purpose, not only for herself but for those around her. Unlike some of her peers, who centred their drawings and reflections on parks, pools, and public corners, Lerato's narrative is anchored in a space of artistic expression and symbolic emergence: a modeling studio. Her dream space signals not only personal aspiration, but the pursuit of visibility, elegance, and self-authorship.

"This is a modeling agency by UJ... This is my happy place, my safe space, and I want to be a professional model."

Her articulation of the studio goes beyond surface imagery. She paints the scene with deliberate precision, "umbrellas for shade," "white background," "lighting," and "curtains", offering a richly sensory portrait. This reflects what Richardson and Eccles (2007) describe as the importance of aesthetic environments in identity construction: spaces that allow youth to imagine alternate self-narratives beyond their immediate social realities. Lerato's modelling studio turns into a place for expressing identity. It is an emotionally charged space where she practices being her ideal self.

"Well, it's because I'm different, you know. I like having my own things, and usually, people don't come here. I am inspired when I'm there."

Her self-identification as “different” functions not as separation from others, but as a creative assertion of uniqueness within her community. This aligns with McAdams’ (2001) theory of narrative identity, which emphasises that adolescents craft life stories that reflect both personal agency and communal embeddedness. Lerato’s resistance to sameness is a resistance to erasure, an effort to be seen and defined on her own terms.

What deepens Lerato’s narrative is the shift she makes in her second drawing, from the studio to a pastoral dreamscape, where she herds sheep:

Figure 11

The Shepherd



*“It’s just me and the sheep, you know. I’m taking them to the river to drink water...
It’s calming, almost like meditating.”*

At first glance, this may seem like an aesthetic contrast, but it becomes clear that the image is metaphorical. The sheep are not passive symbols, they represent a collective in need of care, direction, and guidance. Lerato envisions herself as a shepherd not of animals, but of people:

“These days, people are leaderless... I think it’s important to step up and say, ‘Let me lead my people toward a better future.’”

Her reflection here echoes the ethics of care and relational leadership seen in feminist and community-based models of youth leadership (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006). Drawing inspiration from her grandmother, a respected community figure, she frames leadership not as domination or control, but as moral responsibility and gentle example:

“In a truthful and mannered way. I want to guide people toward a better life in the community, one that’s united and peaceful.”

This vision of leadership through presence, values, and modeling aligns with McAdams and McLean’s (2013) concept of redemptive identity, where personal growth is transformed into a commitment to generativity, leaving behind something of value for others.

“It starts with me, how I carry myself, how I represent myself to others. Kids in the community need to see that and think, ‘Okay, that’s where we can be. That’s the standard.’”

For Lerato, the modeling studio becomes both literal and symbolic. It represents not escape, but aspiration, a way of visualising what dignified, safe, creative youth spaces could look like in Soweto. This vision reflects Van den Houten’s (2013) notion of “place appropriation”,

where youth reclaim or imagine spaces that are otherwise inaccessible, and imbue them with meaning, agency, and hope.

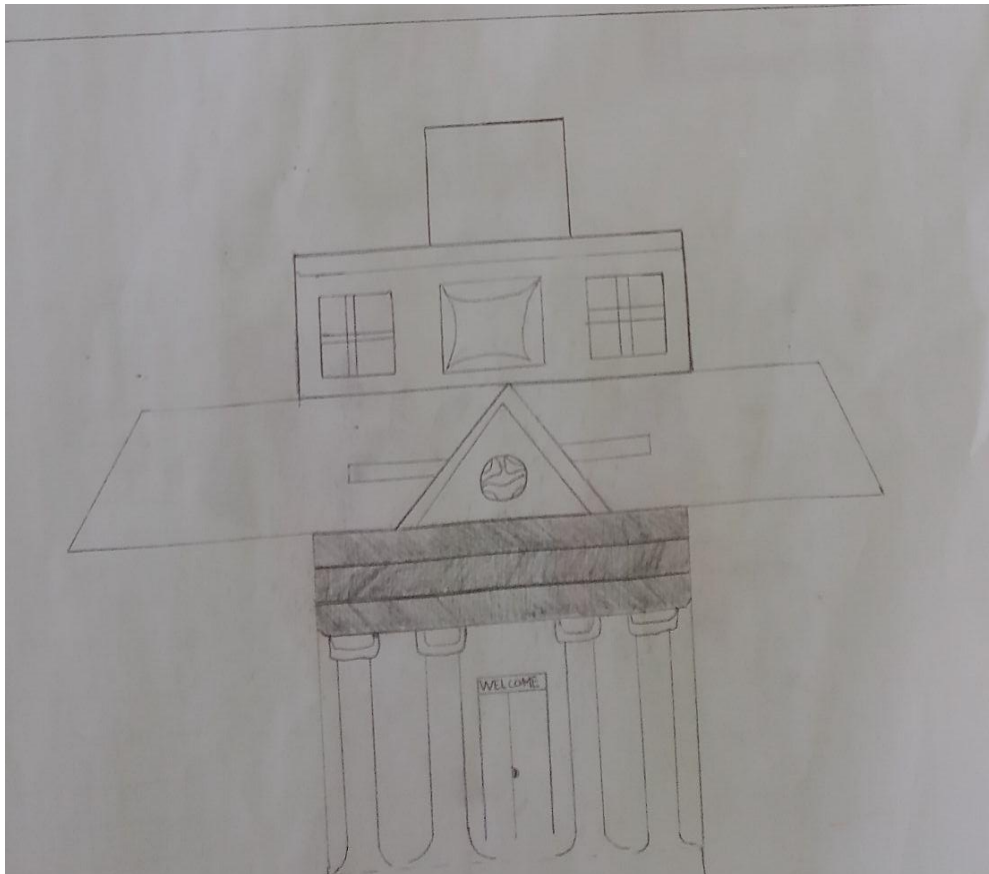
Her narrative also bridges urban modernity and rural calm. The modeling agency near the University of Johannesburg speaks to urban aspiration, while the pastoral scene gestures to ancestral rhythms and cultural continuity. This interplay speaks to what Yuval-Davis (2006a) terms multi-layered belonging, where identity is not fixed to one space but moves fluidly between roots and futures, between the self and the collective.

Ultimately, Lerato's story is one of purposeful imagination. She does not dream of abandoning her community. Instead, she imagines returning to it with more: more dignity, more beauty, more structure. The modeling studio is not just her dream job, it is her blueprint for transformation. In her words and drawings, we glimpse a Dobsonville in which youth spaces are not sites of threat or decay, but of elegance, confidence, and possibility. Through her eyes, the studio becomes not just a backdrop, but a beacon.

5.2.6 Kabelo's Narrative: Between Studio Dreams, Holy House, and Sunday Faith

Kabelo's story unfolds along a quiet but deliberate arc, one that balances creative ambition with moral boundaries, imagination with strategic withdrawal. His contributions in the group are concise, but his words carry weight. When asked about where he loves to be, he identifies two main spaces: the church and the recording studio.

The Church



"I go to church. I started going to church now since I don't go partying, and I don't go drink. Like every weekend, I go to church."

His words are matter-of-fact. The shift is not dramatic, but intentional. Kabelo narrates this as a self-initiated transition, a conscious choice to move away from habits that no longer serve him. He explains:

"Before, I spent all my time partying before going to church. So, like, I started going to church to limit myself from doing those wrong things."

He offers no spectacle, no need for applause, just a grounded commitment to a different path. Meaning that church, for Kabelo, is a spatial and moral anchor. It gives structure to his weekends and frames his values. He has a growing awareness of his own environment and the power to choose within it. Kabelo is not simply escaping danger; he is defining himself through what he allows and refuses.

This boundary-making becomes even clearer when the group discusses Holy House, a space widely understood among participants as a dangerous site of drugs, peer pressure, and absence of adult supervision. Kabelo is firm:

“First of all, I’m not smoking, so why must I go there? Even if you are my friend and you want to take me there, then you’re not my friend.”

He names “Holy House” not with panic, but with precision. His response suggests a code: your character is revealed by where you go and who you go with. Holy House represents what Massey (2013) describes as a “politicised space”, one where gender, power, and risk intersect. It is not just unsafe, it is misaligned with who Kabelo is becoming, with who he sees himself to be. His spatial choices reflect what Yuval-Davis (2006a, 2006b) calls situated intersectionality: his identity is shaped through class, peer dynamics, moral reasoning, and a deep understanding of context.

And yet, Kabelo’s story is not only about constraint. He also names the recording studio as a space of freedom and belonging. He says simply:

“For me, it’s also the studio.”

Though understated, this declaration signals a dream space, one where Kabelo can shape sound, construct meaning, and author his identity. McAdams (2001) would describe this

as part of the narrative identity project: the act of constructing a coherent self-story that connects past, present, and imagined future.

Kabelo's imagination does not stop at the studio. He draws Las Vegas, an unusual and bold spatial symbol in the midst of Dobsonville's decay:

Figure 13

Las Vegas



"When I think of Vegas, I feel like I'd belong there, it'd feel like my own country in a way."

This vision of Vegas, not as a distant fantasy but as “*my own country*,” reveals a longing for autonomy, brightness, and symbolic escape. In McAdams and McLean (2013) terms, Kabelo is constructing a redemptive narrative, transforming present limitations into imagined futures where dignity and creativity are possible. Vegas represents not just lights or luxury, but what space could be if it were designed for his joy.

His language about “belonging” aligns with Anderson’s (2006, as cited in Calhoun, 2016) concept of imagined communities. For Kabelo, Vegas is not about location, it is about alignment, identity, and ease. He longs for a place where he does not have to explain or defend himself, where he can exist without threat, guilt, or compromise.

Kabelo is also pragmatic about technology. In a discussion about content creation and photography, he remarks:

“Now, sir, I feel like there’s no space, and people have iPhones. So maybe, like, if I have an iPhone, I shoot for free.”

This reflects a layered understanding of both the limitations and potential of digital space. While the urban environment restricts physical access and opportunity, digital tools offer a way to reach audiences, practice skills, and find relevance. His comment resonates with Mütterlein and Fuchs (2019), who argue that digitalisation reshapes access to visibility and meaning-making, especially for youth who are spatially and economically excluded.

Still, Kabelo is acutely aware of the unevenness of digital access, his reference to iPhones as gatekeepers hints at the digital divide (Ndhlovu, 2022). Even within imagined liberation, access is mediated by infrastructure, class, and availability.

Throughout his narrative, Kabelo positions himself as someone who navigates the world intentionally. He doesn't romanticise his past, nor dramatise his decisions. Instead, he speaks from a place of emerging self-trust. Whether it's choosing the studio over the street, church over parties, or rejecting friends who lead him to risk, Kabelo is, in his own quiet way, mapping a future. He is walking the line between aspiration and restraint, performance and principle.

His story is one of self-curation, a young man remixing space, sound, and spirit to create a version of himself that both belongs and transcends. Between Holy House and Vegas, Kabelo chooses something else entirely: presence, intention, and the long beat of becoming.

5.2.7 Bongani's Narrative: From Cake and Cousins to Community Care

Bongani's story moves between play, loss, reflection, and purpose. His tone is laid-back, but beneath it lies a profound awareness of what has changed, and what still needs changing. Unlike some of the others who drew malls, fashion studios, or abstract dreams, Bongani's reflections return often to home, familiar spaces, and a deep concern for the emotional lives of young people around him.

"When I was young, my cousins and friends would come to play at my house. My mom would make cake, and we would chow it."

This memory is warm and tactile, steeped in routine and comfort. It represents a time of security, togetherness, and care. The house was a home, a site of shared joy. Yet, like the muddy playtime that turned into solo clean-up for others, Bongani's memories are also layered with change. As he puts it:

"Yeah, now, even if you're on the road, it's not for fun. There's not enough space to play on the road."

This subtle shift from presence to absence, from play to avoidance, speaks volumes. It aligns with what Dlamini et al. (2020, p. x) call the “shrinking childhoods” of township youth, where spatial injustice, crime, and poverty diminish the capacity to play freely and safely. Bongani’s earlier joy is now shadowed by limits, dangers, and the loss of innocence.

Yet Bongani is not cynical. He still finds pride and comfort in some spaces. At the barbershop:

“When I do my hair, I do it with two gents, the one who’s doing the fresh cut and the one who’s washing the hair. They’re friendly. I enjoy speaking to them. Besides, when people walk into the shop, there’s much respect, like greetings. And they play music, house on Sunday, hip-hop on Saturday.”

This is more than grooming. It’s a ritual of affirmation, a place where music, respect, and conversation still offer belonging. It mirrors Dunlop et al.’s (2020) claim that identity is shaped in everyday routines and relational spaces, not only dramatic events. The salon, for Bongani, is as much about emotional recharge as appearance.

Still, he does not avoid the more painful shifts in the community.

“We used to go to the swimming pool when we were kids... but now, even if you’re not wearing a label, as long as they know you’re not from there, they’ll take your stuff.”

“You see this place? We want to bomb it.”

These expressions are laced with frustration and humour, but also anger. The swimming pool once held joy. Now, it’s a space of threat, of stolen items and stolen innocence. His

sardonic humour, "We want to bomb it", underscores a common township sentiment: things are broken, and no one is fixing them.

And yet, Bongani's voice returns again to hope and vision.

"I want to study psychology... and then go back to the community to help teenagers deal with mental health challenges."

"Mental health issues really hit hard at 14 or 15. I've been there. I had to fight my battles alone."

Bongani doesn't just want to escape; he also wants to return. His dream isn't to disappear from the township but to transform it. Like McAdams' (2001) concept of generativity, Bongani is already imagining how to use his story to shape those of others. He sees his past not as something to run from, but as preparation for purpose.

"Everything starts with the mind, imagination, dreams, everything."

He remembers pain, failure, and repeating grades not as shame but as fuel. He was once a child who played in the sand and ate cake with cousins. Now, he is a young man envisioning a way forward for himself and others, not through wealth or escape, but through healing and mental health care.

Bongani's narrative stands out because it is *grounded*. He doesn't romanticise township life, nor does he reject it outright. He names its beauty and its brutality. He claims his past and his future. And in doing so, he speaks for many young people whose dreams are forged not in distant skylines, but in conversations at the salon, stolen afternoons on the pitch, and the quiet decision to care for others where no one cared for them.

5.3 Thematic analysis

5.3.1 Theme 1: Gendered Spaces

Participants' narratives revealed that public space in Dobsonville is heavily structured by gendered expectations, surveillance, and fear. For adolescent girls, public environments often represent zones of threat rather than opportunity, as they must continuously assess danger and modify their presence accordingly. Spatial freedom is thus distributed unequally: boys are permitted exploratory movement, while girls remain tethered to concerns about safety, visibility, and respectability.

"You can't expect to go there with a Nike bag and come back with it." – Thandi

"You go there wearing clothes, and then when you leave, you're not wearing anything but boxer shorts." – Siphso

"Imagine going there with a bag and coming back with no bag." – Zinhle

These statements reflect how space is encoded with implicit threat, especially for girls. Although both male and female participants referred to certain areas as unsafe, it was only the female participants who consistently framed their spatial experiences through the lens of bodily threat, personal safety, and vulnerability. Their language marked a distinct gendered awareness of space, where they could and could not go, what time of day was acceptable, how they should dress, and who might pose a danger. In contrast, male participants rarely mentioned safety, and their engagement with public space was generally marked by freedom, movement, and a taken-for-granted right to occupy space. This contrast shows the deeply gendered nature of spatial experience in Dobsonville.

As Massey (2013) argues, space is not an empty container but a product of power relations, relations that are always gendered. Girls in Dobsonville are not only navigating space but navigating themselves through the lens of perceived risk. Yuval-Davis (2006a) reinforces this, stating that spatial access and visibility are shaped by intersecting identities, where gender and class determine mobility, legitimacy, and exposure to harm. The girls' narratives reflect this convergence: their class location in an under-resourced township, coupled with their gender, intensifies the social policing of their movement.

This gendered geography is lived through daily negotiation. Van den Houten (2013) and Dlamini et al. (2020) describe how young women engage in protective spatial practices, changing routes, avoiding parks, limiting time outside, or dressing defensively. These behaviours are not merely reactive; they are forms of internalised spatial regulation that reflect what Germinaro (2025) calls affective spatiality, where space becomes emotionally loaded with fear and self-surveillance.

The spatiality of fear has psychological consequences. Exclusion from communal space is shown to reduce adolescents' opportunities for identity rehearsal, peer interaction, and social growth (Casakin & Bernardo, 2012; Germinaro, 2025; Gray & Manning, 2022; Wee, 2019). In a setting where public parks and recreational spaces are limited or dominated by boys, girls are left with restricted geographies that shrink their social and narrative worlds. As McAdams and McLean (2013) suggest, personal identity develops through storied experiences, ones that allow exploration, risk-taking, and the building of narrative coherence. For girls, restricted access to space limits their ability to construct expansive life stories that include freedom, pleasure, and autonomy. Such gendered exclusions are also sustained by cultural scripts that discipline female presence. Wee (2019) argues that girls are often hyper-visible in public, seen as transgressive if they occupy male-dominated or unsupervised spaces. This aligns with the moral

surveillance present in the girls' accounts: being seen in certain places, or with certain people, invites judgment, even violence. This visibility is both dangerous and disciplinary.

The male participants' silence on safety reveals another layer. Their spatial entitlement reflects what Bourdieu (1986) would identify as unspoken spatial capital, a kind of privilege that allows one to move freely without risk or scrutiny. In this context, not thinking about safety is itself a gendered privilege.

To address this disparity, scholars such as Checkoway and Gutierrez (2006) advocate for youth-led spatial transformation. This involves more than building infrastructure; it demands a redistribution of power and voice, where girls are recognised as co-designers of public life. Initiatives that include girls in safety audits, urban planning, and recreational programming not only counter their exclusion but validate their experiences and restore narrative agency.

Dobsonville's spatial landscape, then, is more than geography, it is a site of gendered storytelling. By listening closely to how girls speak about space, fear, and mobility, we uncover deeper truths about power, identity, and the right to occupy one's environment with confidence and joy.

5.3.2 Theme 2: Space Denied and Space Reimagined

While formal recreational spaces in Dobsonville were frequently described as inaccessible, unsafe, or in disrepair, participants demonstrated a striking capacity to reclaim or reimagine territory through narrative, imagination, and symbolic acts. Their spatial strategies reflected more than passive adaptation, they revealed active resistance and identity-making within contexts of exclusion.

“Yeah, we still go there. We need to swim.” – Thandi

“When I think of Vegas, I feel like I’d belong there.” – Kabelo

“This is a modeling agency by UJ... my happy place, my safe space.” – Lerato

These quotes reflect what Van den Houten (2013) terms spatial insurgency, the assertion of presence and meaning in spaces that systematically exclude. Thandi’s act of swimming in a location known to be dangerous is not simply recreational but symbolically resists the degradation of her environment. This echoes Dlamini et al. (2020) and Denoon-Stevens & Ramaila (2018), who document how township youth navigate neglect through creative reappropriation of space.

Moreover, these narratives align with Bradbury’s (2020) view of storytelling as both embodied and intergenerational, linking the act of “being” in space to inherited trauma and historical marginalisation. For instance, Lerato’s naming of a place near the university as a “happy place” constructs emotional sanctuary amidst spatial constraint, what Gray & Manning (2022) refer to as micro-geographies of belonging.

From a developmental standpoint, such spatial reimaginations align with McAdams & McLean’s (2013) concept of narrative identity, where youth assemble coherence and agency by linking their spatial past and imagined futures. Kabelo’s imagined belonging in Las Vegas reflects what Hammack (2008) frames as aspirational geographies, youth using space to dream alternative selves.

Importantly, the act of returning to contested spaces, “we still go there”, highlights Layland et al.’s (2018) insight that play is not only a leisure act but also a form of narrative construction. Here, resistance is not just physical, but symbolic, what McShane & Middha (2021)

term narrative reclamation, especially in contexts where digital and physical exclusions converge.

Lerato's phrase "safe space" also echoes Yuval-Davis (2006a) and Wee (2019), who argue that inclusion and exclusion are experienced through intersectional identities, particularly race, gender, and class. Her selection of a modeling agency near the university as a sanctuary also suggests an aspirational class-coded affiliation with institutions of mobility and visibility.

These accounts reflect a broader pattern of imaginative occupation, described by Bourdieu (1986) as a form of symbolic capital, where aspirations, dreams, and even memories allow youth to resist material marginality. As Sokol (2009) and Orenstein & Lewis (2025) argue, identity is not a static developmental stage, but a process, one negotiated in and through contested terrain.

Finally, these youths' resistance to spatial abandonment through narrative reflects Dunlop et al.'s (2020) view that marginalised youth develop identity through counter-stories of place, particularly in contexts of exclusion. Whether through swimming, dreaming, or claiming "happy places," these participants actively rework exclusion into belonging.

5.3.3 Theme 3: Memory, Nostalgia, and the Shrinking Childhood

For many participants, memories of early childhood functioned as a powerful narrative resource, a means of anchoring identity in contrast to the present-day fragmentation of space, safety, and belonging. These recollections of play, food, and familial intimacy, "*my mom would make cake,*" "*the pool,*" "*it was safe*", are more than wistful nostalgia; they are emotionally embedded spatial references that offer coherence and continuity in the face of marginalisation and exclusion.

“My cousins and friends would come to play... my mom would make cake.” –

Bongani

“I like going to the pool with my friends... having fun.” – Thato

“It was safe until 2015.” – Thandi

These autobiographical reflections reflect what McAdams & McLean (2013) describe as narrative identity: a life story that connects the past to the present and projects meaning into the future. In these stories, the past is not neutral; it becomes a moral geography, a benchmark for judging decline (Massey, 2013). The once-safe spaces of childhood, gardens, pools, parks, homes, become symbolic of a lost sense of belonging and agency.

The capacity to recall and articulate these memories is vital for identity formation, particularly during adolescence, a time when young people must reconcile their past with an emerging adult self (Erikson, 1977; Sokol, 2009). According to Schachtner, (2020), storytelling enables this reconciliation by offering an embodied and relational mode of meaning-making. Youth in Dobsonville actively use narrative to resist the spatial and emotional deterioration of their surroundings, converting memory into a critique of current exclusions and a longing for what Knight (2017) describes as the developmentally necessary spaces for exploration.

Importantly, these childhood memories are not just individual; they are deeply social and culturally situated. Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, echoed by Schachtner (2020) and Moran et al. (2021), affirms that human consciousness and identity are shaped through interactions within specific social and historical contexts. Thus, the memories of “cake” or “swimming” are not trivial, they reflect embedded routines, family rituals, and communal belonging that once defined the psychosocial ecology of these youth.

The notion of the “shrinking childhood,” as articulated by Dlamini et al. (2020), is critical here. They argue that township youth experience a truncated adolescence, where exposure to violence, poverty, and neglect accelerates maturity and robs children of safe spaces to play, explore, and develop. The contrast between “then” and “now” in participants’ stories marks not only temporal change but spatial trauma. Thandi’s declaration, “It was safe until 2015”, captures the rupture of a once-trusted geography. The theoretical lens of Layland et al. (2018) further positions childhood play as a core site of identity experimentation. The absence of accessible, secure spaces for play disrupts not only physical activity but the developmental processes of creativity, resilience, and socialisation.

Participants’ evocations of lost space mirror the “autobiographical insideness” described by Gray & Manning (2022), a concept referring to the deep emotional attachment to micro-geographies of childhood. As those spaces decay or become unsafe, identity is forced into a defensive posture, relying on memory as a coping resource. Waters & Fivush (2015) and Hammack (2008) underscore that these memories are culturally and contextually constructed; they are shaped by what is narratable within a given social structure.

Moreover, the Dobsonville context exemplifies the layered impact of spatial and economic marginalisation. According to Denoon-Stevens & Ramaila (2018) and Mdunge (2023), township youth contend with infrastructural neglect, insecure public space, and the commodification of leisure, which disproportionately affect young people's ability to access places where identity can safely unfold. Ultimately, these nostalgic stories serve as a redemptive narrative tool (Adler, 2012; McAdams, 2001), offering youth a way to reframe loss, assert coherence, and envision alternative futures. This is echoed by Bradbury (2020), who argues that hope emerges not from naïve optimism but from critical remembrance, “rooted in awareness of the past to transform the present.”

Thus, memory and nostalgia are not simply backward-looking sentiments. They are resistance narratives, shaped by personal, spatial, and structural histories. They allow youth to negotiate shrinking spaces, truncated childhoods, and dislocated identities, by insisting on the value of what once was, and by holding a mirror to what should be.

5.3.4 Theme 4: Aspiration as Resistance

While dominant narratives often frame success for township youth as synonymous with departure, escaping marginalised environments for the promise of mobility, participants in this study expressed a different vision. Their aspirations were not about severing ties with Dobsonville, but about returning with purpose. They imagined a future in which their personal growth, through education, sport, or leadership, could be reinvested into their community.

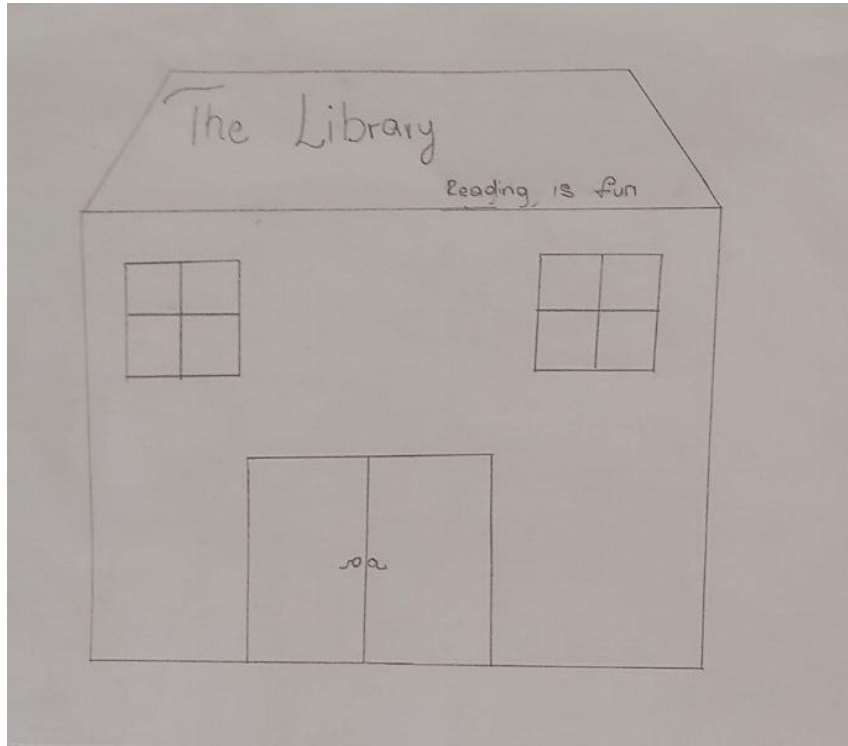
“I want to represent Gauteng... and come back to give others what I didn’t have.” –

Sipho

“I want to study psychology... and go back to the community to help teenagers.” –

Bongani

“Let me lead my people toward a better future.” – Lerato

Figure 14*The Library*

For Thandi, aspiration took the shape of artistic self-expression. In her drawing of Kopanong Hall, she filled the windows with glamorous dresses, transforming the local library into a symbolic site of fashion, creativity, and possibility. She explained that Kopanong was a place where she could “be alone and clear my mind,” describing how solitude there gave her space to imagine herself designing clothing and dreaming of representing South Africa on a grander stage, even evoking Paris Fashion Week in her narrative. In this sense, aspiration is not only tied to professional or educational advancement, but also to creative re-visioning of space and selfhood. Even in the most ordinary of local places, she found room to dream expansively, showing how imagination itself can function as a resource of resistance.

These narratives reflect what McAdams and McLean (2013) define as redemptive identity stories, where hardship is not only acknowledged but becomes the foundation for transformation and contribution. Aspirations here are rooted in collective wellbeing rather than individual mobility, underscoring an ethical commitment to community that pushes back against the logic of spatial abandonment.

This form of aspiration is shaped by both structural conditions and socio-cultural belonging. Yuval-Davis (2006a) highlights how social location, race, class, gender, affects the stories people can tell about themselves and the futures they can imagine. Within the township context, where spatial marginalisation persists (Dlamini et al., 2020; Denoon-Stevens & Ramaila, 2018), youth aspirations are necessarily crafted in dialogue with these exclusions. Yet rather than internalising narratives of deficit, participants reimagine themselves as agents of change within their own geographies.

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital offers a useful analytic here. Participants seek to accumulate educational and social capital, through university study, sports achievement, or leadership experience, not as a means of personal escape, but with the intention of returning and redistributing that capital within Dobsonville. The idea of return is not nostalgic; it is strategic, reflecting what Germinaro (2025) describes as the spatial reattachment of identity, where adolescents ground their futures in specific places imbued with memory, responsibility, and struggle.

These aspirations also reflect a subtle resistance to neoliberal framings of youth development, which often position young people as individual entrepreneurs of the self. Instead, the participants here articulate aspirations embedded in relational ties and communal obligations, echoing the emphasis by Sokol (2009) and Maree (2021) on identity as an ongoing, socially embedded process rather than a singular developmental stage. Moreover, the moral

orientation of these dreams resonates with Hammack (2008) and Waters & Fivush (2015), who argue that narrative identity is shaped not only by personal goals, but by cultural scripts, collective memory, and the resources available for storytelling. The stories told here are shaped by a history of exclusion, but they are also acts of cultural resistance, resistance to being forgotten, displaced, or erased.

The choice to ‘come back’ becomes a narrative strategy to reclaim agency and place. This echoes Van den Houten’s (2013) study of youth in post-apartheid South Africa who used spatial performance (e.g., graffiti, dance) to reassert presence and belonging in marginalised spaces. While the current participants may not engage in physical reclamation in the same form, their aspirations reflect a symbolic return that carries similar intent: to make visible, to restore, and to rebuild. Aspiration in this context operates not as an individualistic escape but as a counter-narrative to spatial and historical exclusion. It is a form of hope tied to transformation rather than departure, what Massey (2013) might describe as spatial responsibility, where space is not a backdrop but a co-producer of identity and moral agency. These narratives of return reflect a commitment to reshaping Dobsonville not only as a remembered place, but as a future site of dignity, justice, and belonging.

5.3.5 Theme 5: Digital Space, Imagination, and Unequal Access

Amid the decay of township infrastructure and the erosion of safe recreational environments, youth in Dobsonville are increasingly turning to digital platforms and imagined futures as alternative identity spaces. However, these symbolic and technological arenas mirror the very inequalities of the physical world, marked by uneven access, material limitations, and unequal visibility.

“I started learning about MetaTrader... I’m still learning, but I’m interested.” – Thato

“If I have an iPhone, I shoot for free.” – Kabelo

Digital space has become a surrogate for public space, a virtual arena where identity is constructed, creativity is performed, and belonging is negotiated. McShane and Middha (2021) describe these platforms as emerging digital third places, echoing Oldenburg's (1998) original concept of informal communal spaces where youth form relationships and perform identity. However, unlike their physical counterparts, digital third places are not equitably accessible. As Ndhlovu (2022) and Smaniotto Costa et al. (2021) argue, digital access in South Africa is stratified by race, class, geography, and infrastructure, with township youth often excluded from full participation due to data costs, unstable connectivity, and limited access to devices.

Mütterlein and Fuchs (2019) support this view, noting that while online environments offer space for identity experimentation, they also serve as gatekeepers of inclusion. Kabelo's comment about needing an iPhone to produce creative content illustrates the symbolic capital embedded in digital access, only certain devices grant the legitimacy to "shoot," be seen, and be heard. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural and symbolic capital is particularly salient here: digital tools are not just functional, they confer access to participation, recognition, and aspirational futures. This aligns with Massey's (2013) power-geometry, which highlights how mobility and spatial participation, even in virtual environments, are unevenly distributed. In Dobsonville, where youth are structurally excluded from both physical and digital spaces, the digital becomes not just a substitute but a contested space of hope, longing, and creative struggle.

Participants like Thato engage with digital learning platforms (e.g., MetaTrader) in a self-directed quest for economic agency. Yet this learning remains precarious, shaped by intermittent access, informal mentorship, and technological inequality. This reflects what Checkoway and Gutierrez (2006) describe as the failure of urban systems to incorporate youth into participatory design processes, whether in built or digital environments.

Schachtner, (2020) emphasises that storytelling and imagination are embodied, relational acts that carry the potential to transform structural exclusion. For youth in Dobsonville, imagination becomes an identity resource, a way to narrate themselves into possibility despite material constraints. Here, the digital is not merely a tool but a terrain of hope, one that echoes McAdams and McLean's (2013) theory of narrative identity in linking past limitation, present struggle, and future aspiration.

From a spatial lens, the post-apartheid exclusionary logics described by Denoon-Stevens & Ramaila (2018) and Dlamini et al. (2020) remain entrenched, reproducing themselves digitally through what Wiegratz & Rofe (2023) refer to as the commercialisation of access. Youth are made hypervisible as consumers but invisible as creators unless they can afford the tools of participation. This fractured access to digital belonging reinforces Yuval-Davis's (2006) insight that social location, gender, class, race, structures both the narratives we are able to tell and the platforms from which we tell them. The symbolic economy of social media rewards a particular kind of presence, curated, consumable, often tied to material signifiers like phones or cameras, which many township youth cannot afford.

The narrative consequences are profound. As Hammack (2008) and Waters and Fivush (2015) argue, the stories youth tell about themselves are shaped by the resources, languages, and cultural scripts available to them. In Dobsonville, limited access to digital tools truncates the available storytelling repertoire, reinforcing marginality not only in economic terms but also in representational ones.

Thus, digital imagination emerges as a survival mechanism, a way to resist erasure and reassert agency. But it is also a site of deep frustration, a dreamscape with a password. The digital is always present, always visible, but often unreachable.

5.3.6 Theme 6: Moral Navigation and Everyday Ethics of Place

Beyond avoiding physical danger, many participants in this study articulated a set of spatial decisions grounded in ethical reasoning and personal values. Their choices were not merely protective; they reflected acts of self-authorship and moral orientation in a context where space, identity, and safety are deeply intertwined.

“I don’t go there... even if you’re my friend and you take me there, then you’re not my friend.” – Kabelo

“I have to be a bari so I can be myself.” – Thandi

These declarations reveal that for youth in Dobsonville, identity is not only shaped by where they go, but also by where they refuse to go. In this sense, space is not only geographic, it is moral terrain, a landscape over which the adolescent self is negotiated and defined.

This aligns with McAdams’ (2001) model of narrative identity, which emphasises how young people construct internalised life stories composed of themes such as agency, communion, redemption, and particularly moral clarity. These life stories do not emerge in a vacuum, they are shaped by the social, spatial, and historical contexts in which youth live (McAdams & McLean, 2013). As youth in Dobsonville draw moral boundaries through spatial refusal, they are actively shaping life narratives that reflect ethical aspirations and identity commitments.

Dlamini et al. (2020) support this view in the South African context, showing that township youth develop what they call embodied geographies of caution, internalised mental maps that not only reflect risk but also encode moral choices. Avoiding a space associated with drugs or violence is not just self-preservation; it's a rejection of an identity that does not align with their values. Similarly, Van den Houten (2013), through his study of youth spatial reclamation in South Africa, shows how informal spatial codes emerge among youth, guiding both inclusion and exclusion, and becoming mechanisms of moral alignment and social identity.

Bradbury (2020) argues that identity is not merely internal but relational and socially performed. Here, young people's spatial decisions are forms of embodied storytelling, narrating who they are and who they are not through the ethics of place. In saying "no," as Kabelo and Thandi do, they assert moral agency and protect the coherence of their narrative identity.

These narratives must also be situated within the broader inequitable spatial conditions of post-apartheid South Africa. Massey's (2013) concept of power-geometry illustrates how spatial mobility is shaped by access, class, and historical inequality. Choosing to avoid certain places is not only about risk but also about navigating a landscape structured by power and inequality. In this context, moral decisions become acts of resistance against spaces that reproduce exclusion or harm.

Yuval-Davis (2006a) emphasises the intersectionality of social location, race, gender, class, as critical to understanding access, movement, and identity. For female participants in particular, moral navigation often intersected with gendered expectations of safety and propriety, reinforcing the findings of Wee (2019), who documents how gendered spatial exclusions shape identity performance.

The ethical dimensions of spatial navigation reflect how adolescents develop a socially shaped sense of self. Through social interaction, storytelling, and their daily experiences of inclusion and exclusion, youth internalise values and ways of understanding the world. In their narratives, they engage in a creative reconstruction of identity, one that is influenced by histories of trauma while also driven by a desire for transformation and possibility.

Moreover, this moral navigation speaks to what Orenstein and Lewis (2025) describe as the ongoing process of identity development, beyond fixed stages. Youth are not passively shaped by their environments; they engage in deliberate, value-laden decisions that contribute to evolving self-concepts. As they draw spatial boundaries, they also construct ethical boundaries around who they are becoming. In this way, narrative identity is not only about memory or aspiration, it is about moral authorship. The participants' spatial decisions, though rooted in everyday life, are acts of self-definition. By choosing where not to go, they are declaring who they refuse to be. These choices reflect a profound engagement with the moral landscape of adolescence, one that is both spatial and deeply personal.

5.4 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has explored how adolescents in Dobsonville actively narrate who they are, and who they are becoming, through the spatial, social, digital, and moral geographies they inhabit. Moving from textured individual accounts to shared themes, the chapter illuminated the complex ways young people locate themselves in constrained urban environments marked by post-apartheid legacies, safety risks, social expectations, and limited opportunity.

Across six interlinked themes, ranging from gendered spatial codes, aspirational mobility, and social surveillance, to resilience, ethical navigation, and digital exclusion, participants revealed that identity is not merely something possessed but something continually authored.

Drawing on narrative theory (McAdams, 2001; Bradbury, 2020; Hammack, 2008) and contextualised within South African spatial studies (Dlamini et al., 2020; Denoon-Stevens & Ramaila, 2018), the chapter highlighted how identity emerges through the interplay of personal memory, embodied practice, socio-political context, and imagined futures.

Participants' stories reflect agency within constraint. Girls navigated gendered exclusions through strategic avoidance or imagined reprieve. Boys wrestled with visibility, reputation, and the performance of safety and power. Some youth reinhabited memory spaces, others sought digital or aspirational escape. But all were engaged in a form of moral authorship, making choices about who to be and how to move, often in environments marked by threat and surveillance.

This identity work was evident not only in what participants remembered or hoped for, but in what they refused. Spatial refusals, of certain parks, peers, or reputational paths, were not just survival tactics but ethical declarations. These everyday decisions reveal a narrative construction of the self that is moral, political, and deeply spatial. Recreational spaces, whether physical (parks, gyms, street corners), symbolic (dreams of elsewhere), or digital (social media and phones), functioned as identity arenas. Within them, youth experimented with roles, protected their dignity, and enacted resistance. Even when such spaces were absent, unsafe, or surveilled, young people carved out moments of play, connection, and authorship, an act of resilience that affirms Massey's (2013) insight that space is never neutral but always produced.

This chapter therefore argues that identity in Dobsonville is not formed in isolation but forged through relational geographies: interactions with people, institutions, histories, and material conditions that shape, and are shaped by, youth. In narrating their spatial lives, these adolescents are also narrating who they are. They do so with complexity, with tension, and above all, with intention.

The next chapter will discuss how these insights contribute to broader understandings of adolescent development, urban spatial justice, and narrative identity, and will propose implications for policy, recreation design, and youth support in South Africa and beyond.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

This study set out to explore how adolescents in Dobsonville engage with recreational spaces and how these engagements shape and reflect their processes of identity formation. The analysis was informed by a layered theoretical framework that combined Erikson's (1977) psychosocial theory of adolescent development, McAdams and McLean's (2013) framework of narrative identity, and Bradbury's (2020) contributions to narrative theory, together with Massey's (2013) spatial theory, Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital, Yuval-Davis's (2006) intersectionality, and scholarship on the digitalisation of space (Mütterlein & Fuchs, 2019; Ndhlovu, 2022), among other theories. Narrative inquiry was employed not only as a method but also as an interpretive lens, foregrounding how young people use storytelling to make meaning of their spatial encounters, negotiate belonging and exclusion, and articulate aspirations for the future. In doing so, the study demonstrates that identity formation is inseparable from both the physical and symbolic geographies of Dobsonville, shaped by legacies of spatial inequality, gendered dynamics, and the expansion of digital social worlds.

6.1 What We Know Now

One of the most important insights gained through this research is that space is not a neutral backdrop, rather it is actively implicated in the shaping of identity. We now know that even in conditions of infrastructural neglect, decay, and exclusion, young people carve out symbolic and physical sites for self-expression. The study demonstrates that identity work in Dobsonville is not only about presence in space but also about memory, imagination, and refusal. Participants showed that spaces like cemeteries, tracks, libraries, and digital platforms carry layered meanings as sites of danger, aspiration, solitude, and even moral authorship.

Another key finding is that aspirations were not framed primarily as escape from Dobsonville, but as return. Participants consistently imagined futures in which their growth, whether in sport, fashion, education, or leadership, was reinvested back into their community. This emphasis on ethical return challenges dominant narratives that equate success with departure, highlighting instead an ethic of place-based responsibility and collective uplift.

6.2 What Was Surprising

Several aspects of the data proved unexpected. First, the centrality of refusal emerged strongly. Participants defined themselves not only by what they hoped for or remembered, but by what they *declined to do*, what spaces they avoided, what influences they resisted, and what peer expectations they rejected. These refusals carried moral weight, illustrating that selfhood was being actively authored through boundary-making and ethical positioning.

Second, the depth of digital aspiration was striking. Participants not only used online platforms as substitutes for decaying physical spaces, but also framed them as imagined stages of recognition and belonging. Yet digital spaces were revealed to be profoundly unequal. Devices like iPhones became markers of inclusion, and forex trading, gaming, or online content creation were described with both hope and exclusion. The digital thus mirrored and magnified inequalities already experienced offline.

Third, the use of libraries and community halls as sites of refuge and imagination added nuance to understandings of space. For example, Zinhle's depiction of Kopanong Hall was especially illuminating. She described it as a safe place to be alone and clear her mind, yet she also drew fashionable dresses inside its windows and later envisioned herself at Paris Fashion Week. This layering of solitude, safety, and global aspiration illustrates how ordinary community spaces can double as symbolic gateways to larger worlds of possibility. Such findings

complicate simple binaries of inclusion/exclusion by showing how the same space can hold both protection and projection.

6.3 What is Now More Nuanced

This study has provided a deeper and more textured understanding of several dynamics that previous research had only partially addressed. One of the clearest insights relates to gendered spatiality. The narratives of young women revealed that their experience of public space was shaped not simply by exclusion but by constant negotiation. Girls described moving through the township with an acute sense of vulnerability, often guided by moral codes and practices of strategic withdrawal. Their accounts demonstrated that identity is not only formed in spaces of aspiration but also in the ethics of careful self-protection, showing how everyday navigation becomes a form of identity work.

A second important dimension that emerged is what can be described as moral navigation. The young people in this study constructed embodied geographies of caution, mapping out not only the places they hoped to reach but also the areas they deliberately avoided. These maps of avoidance became as significant to their sense of self as their dreams of achievement. In refusing to enter unsafe or morally compromised environments, participants expressed who they were and who they did not want to become, highlighting how ethical refusals were as central to identity as future-oriented aspirations.

The study also highlighted the importance of hybrid spaces in the lives of youth. Identity-making did not occur solely in formal arenas such as schools, stadiums, or libraries, but also in informal, symbolic, and improvised spaces. Cemeteries, athletics tracks, and digital “third places” emerged as unexpected sites of belonging, while imagined spaces such as beaches or fashion studios were drawn and narrated as meaningful stages for self-expression. These

accounts challenge urban policy frameworks that value only brick-and-mortar recreational facilities, overlooking the symbolic and improvisational environments where young people actively construct identity.

Finally, the research underscored the role of narrative as resistance. The stories told by participants consistently pushed back against deficit-based framings of township youth. Instead of internalising narratives of decay and exclusion, they reinterpreted these conditions as contexts for resilience, repair, and communal responsibility. By telling their own stories, young people asserted agency, reframed hardship, and opened up new possibilities for identity and community building.

6.4 Policy Implications: Toward Inclusive Recreational Spaces

The findings of this study underscore the urgency of treating recreational space not as a luxury but as a foundation for youth well-being, development, and social connection. Several priorities stand out in this regard. First, participatory urban planning is essential. Young people must be directly involved in the design and governance of the spaces they use. Evidence shows that when youth are engaged in planning processes, the resulting environments are more relevant, inclusive, and sustainable (Smaniotto Costa et al., 2021; Ndhlovu, 2022).

Second, the study points to the critical need for sustained infrastructure investment. The collapse of halls, parks, and sports fields in Dobsonville illustrates the consequences of long-term neglect. Municipalities must commit resources not only to building but also to maintaining spaces, ensuring that they remain safe and accessible. This includes routine upkeep, safety upgrades, and staffing support (Bain, 2022; Makhubu, 2023).

Third, policy must adapt to the growing importance of digital space in young people's lives. Hybrid models that combine physical and digital opportunities can extend access and

relevance. Recreational hubs equipped with digital literacy labs, creative studios, and virtual reality zones could complement traditional physical spaces, reflecting the realities of a generation for whom identity work increasingly spans both online and offline arenas (McShane & Middha, 2021).

Fourth, inclusive design principles must be embedded in every policy intervention. The data showed that girls, and economically disadvantaged young people often experienced alienation in existing public spaces. Designing for intersectionality requires practical measures such as improved lighting, safe transport links, accessible toilets, and non-gendered environments, alongside broader cultural shifts that recognise the layered barriers to participation (Yuval-Davis, 2006a, 2006b; Crenshaw, 1989).

Finally, policy must be informed by narrative approaches. The stories young people told about tracks, libraries, cemeteries, and imagined fashion studios revealed that recreational space carries symbolic as well as practical value. A policy framework that takes seriously the symbolic attachments and narrative meanings of space will be better equipped to create environments that foster dignity, belonging, and aspiration.

6.5 Future Research Directions

Building on these findings, several directions for future research are apparent. Longitudinal narrative studies would be particularly valuable, tracing how young people's stories and spatial relationships evolve over time. Such research could capture the impact of infrastructural change, life transitions, and shifting social conditions on identity development.

Further research should also adopt a gender-inclusive lens, with specific attention to the experiences of girls and gender-diverse youth. Their heightened vulnerability and strategies of

withdrawal in public space demand more targeted exploration, including evaluations of safety-oriented and gender-sensitive urban planning interventions.

Comparative work across communities would also strengthen the field. Studies that contrast Dobsonville with other townships, informal settlements, or rural areas could reveal both shared challenges and context-specific innovations, offering policy makers a more nuanced understanding of youth spatial engagement across South Africa's diverse geographies. Another vital area of research lies with young people who do not participate in recreational spaces at all. By intentionally recruiting excluded youth, future studies could shed light on the factors, whether crime, stigma, gender norms, or alienation, that prevent engagement, providing insights essential for inclusive design.

Finally, as digital platforms increasingly function as alternative recreational and identity spaces, digital ethnographies should explore how young people use online environments such as trading platforms, gaming communities, and content creation sites as substitutes or complements to physical space. This would provide a more holistic understanding of youth identity work in an era where the boundaries between physical and digital geographies are increasingly porous.

6.6 Final Reflections

This study reveals that for young people in Dobsonville, recreational space is not a luxury, it is a lifeline. It is memory, aspiration, critique, and resistance. It is where they carve out dignity, reimagine futures, and resist being written out of the city. The narratives collected here show that identity is not only made in moments of success or recognition, but in quiet refusals, imaginative leaps, and the ability to claim even fragile or decaying spaces as their own.

What we now know is that youth in Dobsonville are not simply victims of exclusion; they are active narrators of space, self, and possibility. What was surprising was the degree to which moral agency and digital aspiration featured as central strategies of self-making. And what is now more textured is our understanding of space itself, not just as physical infrastructure, but as a moral, imaginative, and narrative landscape through which identity is continually authored.

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Appendices

Appendix A - Participation Information Sheet



Participant Information Sheet

Dear Sir / Madam

My name is Anoshamisa Benhura. I am a master's student in Community-Based Counselling Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. My supervisor is Prof. Jill Bradbury. I am conducting a research study about how recreational spaces (spaces where individuals perform activities during their free time, for the purpose of enjoyment, relaxation, and personal growth, and can include a wide range of physical, social, and cultural pursuits such as sports, hobbies, creative arts, and travel) contribute to identity creation, reinforcement, and re-creation among adolescents. The research will entail collecting data to obtain insight into the experience of young people regarding their experience of recreational spaces. The research aims to gather narratives from young people who take part in the Youth of the South (YOTS) programme in Dobsonville, Soweto. The study title is "Recreational space and identities of young people in Dobsonville, Soweto".

I am inviting you to take part in a Photovoice process. This means that first you will be asked to take a photo of recreational spaces you engage with currently, have engaged with previously or wish to engage with in the future. Then a focus group interview will be used where the participants will be asked to tell stories about their experiences in the places they photographed. A focus group will be impactful for the participants because of the nature of the YOTS programme and how they meet as a group weekly to discuss sensitive topics. A focus group enables the exploration of shared experiences, viewpoints, and attitudes about a certain issue. The pictures will be shared with the other participants and those with a story about the place photographed will share their narratives of being in these spaces. 2 focus groups will be run on different days and these groups will either be separated randomly into 5 and 5. The focus will be held at Forte Secondary School, in Dobsonville Soweto and they will be anywhere from 1 hour 30 minutes to 2 hours for the focus group.

With your permission, I would like to record the interview's audio and keep a record of your images. This data will be stored on a password protected laptop for the duration of the research study and the NEST data archive after.

During the research activity, I will need to ask for some personal information about you, including your age, gender, and education level.

The interview and pictures will be confidential, but anonymity cannot be kept in focus group settings. When I share the results of the research study, I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you. With your permission, other researchers may use the data collected from this research study, but your name and any personal information will not be used or passed on.

If you decide to take part in the research study, it should be because you want to volunteer. You do not have to take part. You can stop being in the study at any time. You do not have to answer any questions if you do not want to. You will not get any direct benefits if you choose to join the research study. You will not lose any services, benefits, or rights you would normally have if you decided not to join. Taking part in the research study will not cost you anything. You will not be paid for being in this research study. Your travel/data costs to attend the interview will be reimbursed to a maximum of R150.

The risks for this research study are no more than what happens in everyday life but some of the memories remembered may make you feel sad or upset. If you experience any distress or discomfort at any point in this process, we can stop and talk about it. There are also counsellors or therapists, whose contact details are listed below, who are willing and able to talk with and/or assist you.

This research study will be written up as a research report. The report will be available on the university library website. If you would like to receive a summary of this report, I will be happy to send it to you.

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research study, feel free to contact me or my supervisor on the details listed below. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely,

Anoshamisa Benhura

Researcher:

Anoshamisa Clive Benhura, [REDACTED]

Supervisor:

Jill Bradbury, [REDACTED]

Debriefing Services (available at the school)

Hayley Haynes-Rolando

[REDACTED]

Appendix B - Interview Schedule

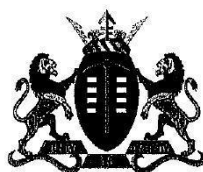
Interview Questions

This is a list of example questions which can be posed at any time during the interviews which can further the focus group discussions or the individual story being told by the participants.

- Can you tell me about a time when you were in one of these spaces and what you were doing?
- How does being in these spaces make you feel and why?
- Are there any specific memories or experiences you associate with these spaces?
- Can you talk about the people you typically interact with when you're in these spaces and how they influence your experience?
- How often do you visit these spaces and is there a specific time of day or week when you're most likely to be there?
- In your experience, are there any differences in how boys and girls use these spaces?
- How important are these spaces in shaping your identity and sense of belonging in Dobsonville?
- Can you describe a specific memory or experience you had in a recreational space and how it made you feel?
- How do you usually choose which recreational spaces to visit and with whom do you typically go there?
- Can you tell me about a time when you were not able to access a recreational space you wanted to use and how it affected you?
- In what ways do the recreational spaces you use shape or reflect your identity?
- Can you think of a time when you used a recreational space to connect with others or to escape from something and what that experience was like?

- Have you ever encountered any challenges or barriers when using recreational spaces, and if so, how did you overcome them or cope with them?
- How do you think recreational spaces could be improved or better utilised in your community?

Appendix C - GED Research Approval Letter



GAUTENG PROVINCE

Department: Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

8/4/4/1/2

GDE RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER

Date:	20 October 2023
Validity of Research Approval:	08 February 2024– 30 September 2024 2023/254A
Name of Researcher:	Benhura AC
Address of Researcher:	
Telephone Number:	
Email address:	
Research Topic:	Recreational space and identities of young people in Dobsonville, Soweto
Name of University:	Wits
Type of qualification	Masters
Number and type of schools:	1 Secondary School
District/s/HO	Johannesburg South

Re: Approval in Respect of Request to Conduct Research

This letter serves to indicate that approval is hereby granted to the above-mentioned researcher to proceed with research in respect of the study indicated above. The onus rests with the researcher to negotiate appropriate and relevant time schedules with the school/s and/or offices involved to conduct the research. A separate copy of this letter must be presented to both the School (both Principal and SGB) and the District/Head Office Senior Manager confirming that permission has been granted for the research to be conducted.

The following conditions apply to GDE research. The researcher may proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met. Approval may be withdrawn should any of the conditions listed below be flouted:

 20/10/2023

1

Making education a societal priority

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management

7th Floor, 17 Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, 2001

Tel: (011) 355 0488

Email: Faith.Tshabalala@gauteng.gov.za

Website: www.education.gpg.gov.za

1. Letter that would indicate that the said researcher/s has/have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.
2. The District/Head Office Senior Manager/s must be approached separately, and in writing, for permission to involve District/Head Office Officials in the project.
3. **Because of the relaxation of COVID 19 regulations researchers can collect data online, telephonically, physically access schools or may make arrangements for Zoom with the school Principal. Requests for such arrangements should be submitted to the GDE Education Research and Knowledge Management directorate.**
4. **The Researchers are advised to wear a mask at all times, Social distance at all times, Provide a vaccination certificate or negative COVID-19 test, not older than 72 hours, and Sanitise frequently.**
5. A copy of this letter must be forwarded to the school principal and the chairperson of the School Governing Body (SGB) that would indicate that the researcher/s have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.
6. A letter / document that outline the purpose of the research and the anticipated outcomes of such research must be made available to the principals, SGBs and District/Head Office Senior Managers of the schools and districts/offices concerned, respectively.
7. The Researcher will make every effort obtain the goodwill and co-operation of all the GDE officials, principals, and chairpersons of the SGBs, teachers and learners involved. Persons who offer their co-operation will not receive additional remuneration from the Department while those that opt not to participate will not be penalised in any way.
8. Research may only be conducted after school hours so that the normal school programme is not interrupted. The Principal (if at a school) and/or Director (if at a district/head office) must be consulted about an appropriate time when the researcher/s may carry out their research at the sites that they manage.
9. Research may only commence from the second week of February and must be concluded before the beginning of the last quarter of the academic year. If incomplete, an amended Research Approval letter may be requested to conduct research in the following year.
10. Items 6 and 7 will not apply to any research effort being undertaken on behalf of the GDE. Such research will have been commissioned and be paid for by the Gauteng Department of Education.
11. It is the researcher's responsibility to obtain written parental consent of all learners that are expected to participate in the study.
12. The researcher is responsible for supplying and utilising his/her own research resources, such as stationery, photocopies, transport, faxes and telephones and should not depend on the goodwill of the institutions and/or the offices visited for supplying such resources.
13. The names of the GDE officials, schools, principals, parents, teachers and learners that participate in the study may not appear in the research report without the written consent of each of these individuals and/or organisations.
14. On completion of the study the researcher/s must supply the Director: Knowledge Management & Research with one Hard Cover bound and an electronic copy of the research.
15. The researcher may be expected to provide short presentations on the purpose, findings and recommendations of his/her research to both GDE officials and the schools concerned.
16. Should the researcher have been involved with research at a school and/or a district/head office level, the Director concerned must also be supplied with a brief summary of the purpose, findings and recommendations of the research study.

The Gauteng Department of Education wishes you well in this important undertaking and looks forward to examining the findings of your research study.

Kind regards



Dr. Bimani Mukatuni
Acting CES: Education Research and Knowledge Management

DATE: 20/10/2023

2

Making education a societal priority

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management

7th Floor, 17 Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, 2001

Tel: (011) 355 0488

Email: Faith.Tshabalala@gauteng.gov.za

Website: www.education.gpg.gov.za

Appendix D - YOTS Permission Request Letter.



University of the Witwatersrand,
School of Human and Community Development (+27 (0)11 717 1000)

Phethile Zitha [REDACTED]

Hayley Haynes Ronaldo [REDACTED]

YOTS
[REDACTED]

9 May 2023

Dear Madams,

Re: Permission to conduct research at YOTS programme.

My name is Anoshamisa Benhura.

I am studying for a Masters in Community-Based Counseling Psychology Degree in the School of Human and Community Development at the University of the Witwatersrand. I am seeking permission to do research with the YOTS members in Forte Secondary School.

I am conducting research on how recreational spaces such as libraries, parks, sports fields, and community centres contribute to identity creation, reinforcement, and re-creation among adolescents. The research will entail collecting data to obtain insight into the experience of young people regarding their experience of recreational spaces.

I will invite individuals from your organisation to participate in this study. Any of the members can join if they have interacted with recreational spaces such as parks, libraries, community centres, public swimming pools, skate parks, soccer fields, basketball courts and the like. If they agree, they will first be asked to take photos (using their phones) of their communities in relation to and focus on recreational spaces. Then a focus group interview will be used where the participants will be asked to tell stories about their experiences in the places they photographed. The interview will be unstructured as that will allow for an uninterrupted story and the interview audio will be recorded. When the participant is unable to continue telling their stories, questions might be posed, or comments might be made to promote continuation, but these will follow from the natural flow of conversation. The interviews will be held at Forte Secondary School, in Dobsonville Soweto and they will be anywhere from 1 hour 30 minutes to 2 hours considering the depth of the narratives told by the participants.

Participants will be asked to give their written consent before the research begins. Their responses will be treated confidentially, and identities (their names and the name of the organisation) will be anonymous unless otherwise expressly indicated. Individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

The results will be communicated through a dissertation.

The research participants will not be advantaged or disadvantaged in any way. They will be reassured that they can withdraw their permission at any time during this project without any penalty. Risks might emerge from having to recall past experiences which might trigger trauma. Please may you assist and inform me on how this would be handled. The participants will not be paid for this study.

All research data will be preserved anonymously or destroyed if requested.

I therefore request permission in writing to conduct my research at your organisation. The permission letter should be on your organisation's headed paper, signed and dated, and specifically referring to myself by name and the title of my study.

Please let me know if you require any further information. I look forward to your response as soon as it is convenient.

Yours sincerely,

Anoshamisa Benhura

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Jill Bradbury

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Appendix E - Forte Secondary School Permission Request Letter

Department of Psychology

School of Human & Community Development

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

University of the Witwatersrand

Private Bag 3, WITS, 2050

Tel: (011) 717 4500

Fax: (011) 717 4559



Request for Permission from Forte Secondary School

My name is Anoshamisa Benhura and I am studying for a Masters in Community-Based Counseling Psychology Degree in the School of Human and Community Development at the University of the Witwatersrand. I am seeking permission to do research with the scholars who are part of the YOTS programme in Forte Secondary School situated in Dobsonville, Soweto.

I am conducting research on how recreational spaces such as libraries, parks, sports fields, and community centres contribute to identity creation, reinforcement, and re-creation among adolescents. The research will entail collecting data to obtain insight into the experience of young people regarding their experience of recreational spaces

I would like to request permission to access Forte Secondary School, and conduct focus interviews with learners. Participation, will include:

1. Learners taking photographs of different places that represent their experiences with recreation in their communities These will form part of the focus group discussions.

The focus group sessions will be audio recorded. The recordings will be kept securely locked up and will not be shared with anyone outside of the project. Furthermore, participation is voluntary, and participants may withdraw at any time. The interviews will be completely confidential and anonymous, and the information given to me will be held securely and not disclosed to anyone, but my supervisor. I will be using pseudonyms (false name) to represent participants' participation in my final research report.

Many thanks,

Anoshamisa Benhura (Researcher)

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Prof. Jill Bradbury (Supervisor)

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Appendix F - Consent Letter for Parents



Recreational space and identities of young people in Dobsonville, Soweto

Anoshamisa Benhura

I,, agree that my child/ward
....., can participate in this research project.

I agree to the following:

(Please circle the relevant options below)

The research study was explained to me. I understand what this study is about. YES NO

I understand that my child/ward can volunteer to take part in the study. YES NO

I agree that the interview may be audio recorded. YES NO

I agree that direct quotations from the interview may be used by the researcher in their research report. YES NO

I agree that my child/ward's participation will remain anonymous (their name or other identifying data will not be used by the researcher in their research) YES NO

I agree that other researchers may use the information provided in the interview (depending on their own ethics clearance being obtained) but my child/ward's name and any personal information will not be used or passed on. YES NO

..... (signature)

..... (Parent/Guardian)

..... (date)

..... (signature)

..... (name of researcher)

..... (date)

Appendix G - Assent Letter for Participant



Recreational space and identities of young people in Dobsonville, Soweto

Anoshamisa Benhura

I,, agree to participate in this research project.

I agree to the following:

(Please circle the relevant options below)

The research study was explained to me. I understand what this study is about.	YES NO
--	--------

I understand that I can volunteer to take part in the study.	YES NO
--	--------

I agree that the interview may be audio recorded.	YES
	NO

I agree that direct quotations from the interview may be used by the researcher in their research report. YES NO

I agree that my participation will remain anonymous (my name or other identifying data will not be used by the researcher in their research) YES NO

I agree that other researchers may use the information I provide in my interview (depending on their own ethics clearance being obtained) but my name and any personal information will not be used or passed on. YES NO

..... (signature)

..... (name of participant)

..... (date)

..... (signature)

..... (name of researcher/person seeking consent)

.....