International Journal of African Society, Cultures and Traditions, 13 (1), 108-132, 2025
Print ISSN: ISSN 2056-5771(Print)
Online ISSN: ISSN 2056-578X (Online)
Website: https://www.eajournals.org/
Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

Negotiating Gender-Based Intersecting Cultural Dynamics in Africa: How Young Girls in Eswatini Navigate Tradition and Modernity

Théophile Munyangeyo and Zinhle Precious Simelane
School of Languages, Literatures and Cultural Studies; Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin, Republic of Ireland
Email: munyangt@tcd.ie; simelanz@tcd.ie

doi: https://doi.org/10.37745/ijasct.2014/vol13n1108132 Published October 13, 2025

Citation : Munyangeyo T. and Simelane Z.P. (2025) Negotiating Gender-Based Intersecting Cultural Dynamics in Africa: How Young Girls in Eswatini Navigate Tradition and Modernity, *International Journal of African Society, Cultures and Traditions*, 13 (1), 108-132

Abstract : *African societies present complex cultural mosaics in which knowledge, values and social norms are often channelled through female cultural interactions. In Eswatini, the last absolute monarchy in Africa, younger generations of girls confront a living cultural architecture that includes Umhlanga/Reed Dance, kinship obligations, systemic conformity. At the same time, they experience rapid modernising influences through education, urbanisation, religion, globalisation, and digital cultures. This paper examines how young Swazi girls negotiate intersecting gendered cultural pressures, and how they embody, adapt, resist, or integrate elements of tradition and modernity when constructing identity and aspirations. Using a qualitative, secondary-data case-study approach, this study examines scholarly literature, policy documents and reports, historical analyses, media reportage, and cultural critiques to trace continuities and ruptures shaping girls' lived realities. The analysis draws on intersectionality (Crenshaw), Edward T. Hall's high-/low-context framing, feminist critiques of ritual and patriarchy, and contemporary literature on digital youth cultures. Findings indicate that young Swazi girls inhabit hybrid cultural spaces: while traditional rituals and kinship structures continue to shape normative expectations and public performances of femininity, digital technologies and educational expansion enable alternative narratives, forms of agency, and new repertoires for self-fashioning. The results highlight tensions, particularly around bodily autonomy, sexual norms, and political visibility, while also underscoring resilience strategies that rework traditions from within. The paper contributes to African feminist scholarship by centring youth agency in cultural negotiation and by showing how digital modernity complicates Hall's communicative binaries in contexts of strong customary continuity. The paper articulates policy implications that include culturally informed gender-sensitive education, youth digital literacy, and rights-based engagement with traditional institutions.*

Keywords: Gender and culture, tradition and modernity, Eswatini Umhlanga, digital cultures, intersectionality, identity negotiation.

International Journal of African Society, Cultures and Traditions, 13 (1), 108-132, 2025
Print ISSN: ISSN 2056-5771(Print)
Online ISSN: ISSN 2056-578X (Online)
Website: https://www.eajournals.org/
Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

INTRODUCTION

Across the African continent, cultural life is unevenly layered: centuries of customary practices and cosmologic moral coexist. That coexistence has experienced rapid transformations introduced through colonial histories, formal education, urban migration, transnational religion, and digital communication (Masango, 2010; United Nations, 2022). In many African societies, women play a central role in the intergenerational transmission of culture, through ritual practices, domestic pedagogy, and community memory, so that gendered norms become not only the medium but also and mainly the message of cultural continuity. Yet the emergence of a digitally connected youth generation presents new pathways for identity formation and cultural contestation, which produces hybrid subjectivities that straddle local tradition and global modernity.

Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) provides a particularly instructive case. As Africa's only contemporary absolute monarchy that still exists, Eswatini's political and cultural life is closely intertwined with royal institutions, ritual performance, and formalised systems of respect, conformity, and kinship. Events such as the Umhlanga (Reed Dance) enact public conventions around femininity, chastity and national belonging while circulations of media, education and migration expose girls to divergent normative repertoires (Sone, 2010; Sone, 2010). The tension between the conservation of gendered customs and the appeal of new aspirational models is not simplistically descriptive; it is inherently political, and encompasses bodily autonomy, labour and schooling opportunities, marriage and family-life expectations, and participation in civic life.

In this regard, this paper seeks to understand how young girls in Eswatini do negotiate intersecting cultural dynamics that pit tradition against modernity. Specifically, it examines the ways girls embody, adapt, resist, or integrate traditional practices and modern impulses in their quest of shaping identities and futures. To enhance that understanding, this paper uses a qualitative case-study lens to examine secondary sources, such as academic research, policy reports, media reportage and cultural critiques. This approach aims to produce a contextualised, theoretically informed account that foregrounds youth agency while attending to structural constraints.

Rationale, aims, and scholarly positioning of the study

The study on *"Negotiating gender-based intersecting cultural dynamics in Africa: How young girls in Eswatini navigate tradition and modernity"* is driven by the recognition that African societies embody complex cultural configurations in which gender, age, and tradition intersect with rapidly transforming modern influences. In Eswatini, the coexistence of the last absolute monarchy in Africa with increasing exposure to education, urbanisation, religious pluralism, and digital modernity presents a particularly compelling platform for understanding how young women experience and interpret these competing cultural forces. The rationale for this research thus arises from a critical gap in African feminist and cultural scholarship, where the voices and experiences of adolescent girls, especially within highly customary societies, remain underexplored or oversimplified.

Much of the existing literature on African gender dynamics tends to oscillate between two interpretive extremes. On one hand, traditional institutions and rituals are portrayed as patriarchal structures that suppress women's autonomy and reinforce gendered subordination. On the other, cultural practices are romanticised as markers of collective identity and continuity, detached from their power

implications. Neither perspective fully captures how young African women inhabit and navigate these systems. As Crenshaw (1989) and Collins (2000) argue, gender cannot be understood in isolation from other intersecting structures of power such as class, geography, and age. This study is therefore motivated by the need to extend intersectional analysis to the experiences of young girls in Eswatini, showing how their identities and actions are shaped by the overlapping forces of tradition, religion, and modernity.

From a theoretical perspective, the research is underpinned by three interrelated intellectual motivations. The first involves the necessity of contextualising African girlhood within traditional feminist thought rather than through imported categories of resistance and submission. African feminist theorists, such as Nnaemeka (2004) and Tamale (2020), have emphasised that African women often engage patriarchy through negotiation, dialogue, and incremental transformation, and these are processes captured by the concept of *nego-feminism*. However, the application of nego-feminist theory to the lived realities of adolescent girls remains limited. The present study responds to this gap by exploring how young Swazi girls enact negotiation in their everyday lives: through participation in cultural rituals such as Umhlanga (the Reed Dance), educational pursuits, and online engagement. Rather than framing these practices as contradictory, the research conceptualises them as complementary strategies through which girls manage social expectations and assert emerging forms of agency.

A second theoretical impetus stems from the need to reassess established communication frameworks within African contexts of digital transformation. Edward T. Hall's (1976) distinction between high-context and low-context communication cultures has long been used to characterise African societies as relying on implicit codes, collective meanings, and relational communication. However, the increasing use of digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and TikTok among young Swazi girls challenges this binary. As Machirori (2023) and Tshabangu et al. (2024) demonstrate, digital youth cultures in Africa represent hybrid communicative environments in which traditional indirectness and metaphor coexist with the explicitness of global online expression. By analysing how Swazi girls use digital platforms to rearticulate identity, share experiences, and contest gender norms, this study extends Hall's framework to account for communicative hybridity in digital spaces. In so doing, it situates Eswatini's youth within a broader transformation of communicative practices across the continent, where technology mediates both continuity and change.

The third scholarly motivation derives from the recognition that intersectionality has not been sufficiently applied to youth studies in the African context. Intersectionality, as articulated by Crenshaw (1989), provides a critical tool for examining how gendered experiences are structured by multiple, overlapping systems of inequality. While intersectional approaches have been extensively employed in feminist legal and sociological research, their application to the lives of African girls, particularly those in rural or customary settings, remains underdeveloped. This study therefore contributes to an emerging body of scholarship that links intersectionality with youth, digitality, and cultural negotiation. By differentiating between rural and urban girls, and by recognising variations in access to education, technology, and social capital, the research underscores that girlhood in Eswatini is a stratified experience rather than a homogeneous condition.

The study also carries a significant socio-political and developmental rationale. Eswatini continues to face acute gender disparities, including limited access to education and hence economic opportunities

for young women (UNICEF, 2025a). These structural constraints operate alongside powerful cultural traditions that prescribe female modesty, sexual restraint, and loyalty to kinship authority. However, younger generations increasingly encounter globalised ideas of gender equality, self-expression, and modern womanhood through schooling and digital media. This juxtaposition of continuity and rupture produces new forms of tension but also new opportunities for agency. Investigating how girls negotiate these pressures is therefore vital not only for advancing academic knowledge but also for informing policy frameworks that address gender equality and youth empowerment within culturally grounded paradigms.

The overarching aim of the study is to examine how young Swazi girls navigate intersecting gendered, cultural, and modernising forces in the construction of their identities and aspirations. It seeks to illuminate the ways in which girls embody, resist, adapt to, and integrate elements of both tradition and modernity, thereby producing hybrid forms of agency. This aim is guided by an effort to move beyond the dualisms of oppression versus liberation and to reveal the complex, negotiated processes that constitute everyday girlhood in Eswatini. By focusing on how girls use cultural rituals, schooling, and digital communication as interrelated arenas of self-fashioning, the study aspires to demonstrate that agency is not a singular act of defiance but an ongoing negotiation embedded in social structures. Within this framework, the study addresses several interrelated scholarly gaps. Empirically, it brings visibility to the lived experiences of Swazi girls, a demographic often overlooked in both feminist and anthropological research. The study's use of secondary qualitative data, drawn from scholarly works, media sources, policy documents, and cultural critiques, offers a composite picture of how young women's practices are simultaneously constrained and enabled by cultural institutions. Conceptually, it bridges African feminist thought, intersectional analysis, and communication theory, offering a multidimensional model of cultural negotiation. Methodologically, it exemplifies the potential of interpretive synthesis for analysing youth cultures in settings where direct ethnographic research may be restricted due to political or ethical considerations.

The scholarly positioning of this study lies at the intersection of African feminist theory, youth studies, and communication research. It contributes to African feminist discourse by demonstrating that agency can be relational, situational, and culturally embedded rather than oppositional or individualistic. In doing so, it affirms the theoretical lineage of nego-feminism (Nnaemeka, 2004), whose argument is that transformation in African societies often occurs through dialogue and gradual reconfiguration rather than open confrontation. The study also extends communication scholarship by showing how digital modernity destabilises established dichotomies such as oral versus literate or high- versus low-context communication, revealing instead a continuum of communicative pluralisms that is shaped by youth digital cultures. Furthermore, it contributes to intersectional research by providing a grounded example of how structural inequalities interact with cultural expectations to produce differentiated experiences of girlhood.

Ultimately, the rationale for conducting this research lies in its potential to reframe the understanding of African girlhood as a dynamic site of cultural negotiation. Eswatini's unique sociopolitical setting provides an empirical lens through which to theorise how tradition and modernity are co-produced in the lives of young women. The study thus challenges reductionist portrayals of African culture as static or uniformly patriarchal. It demonstrates instead that young Swazi girls operate within fluid and evolving cultural spaces where structure and creativity coexist. In line with Ortner's (2006) conception of social life as a "serious game," the research examines the extent to which these girls are active

participants who, while constrained by structural power, employ tactical agency to navigate and reshape their social worlds.

Hence, this study is guided by the dual imperative of scholarly innovation and social relevance. It seeks to advance theoretical understanding of gendered agency in African contexts while simultaneously generating insights for culturally responsive policy design. By situating Swazi girls at the centre of analysis, the research aims to highlight how tradition, education, and digitality converge to redefine the boundaries of traditional and modern African femininity. The rationale, therefore, is not only to fill existing gaps in feminist and communication theory but also to contribute to a broader rethinking of gendered empowerment and cultural continuity in a rapidly changing African society.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

African gender, tradition, and modernity: foundational debates

Gender in African societies has long been framed through the dynamic interplay between continuity and change. In *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses*, Oyěwùmí (1997) challenges Western feminist assumptions regarding "woman" as a universal category, arguing that gender identities in Yoruba contexts were historically organised differently, through democratic seniority and relationality. Although Eswatini offers a different cultural environment, Oyěwùmí's intervention highlights the importance of situating African women's experiences within traditional epistemologies rather than external feminist universals. Similarly, Amadiume (1987) illustrated how Igbo women in Nigeria held strategic social roles that were traditionally under masculine responsibility categories. This suggests that African gender systems are diverse and have historically been very fluid.

While they are more rigidly gendered than in many other African countries, Eswatini's ritual and kinship systems also reveal this fluidity: young girls participate in the Umhlanga (Reed Dance), yet women simultaneously act as custodians of culture and transmitters of social norms (Masango, 2010). This ambivalence by which women are both subjects and agents of patriarchal reproduction echoes Mahmood's (2011) call to consider "agency within tradition," where compliance may also involve strategic adaptation or cultural creativity.

For some critics (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991), the introduction of modernity through colonialism, missionary Christianity, and formal education further complicated gendered identities. Colonial administrations codified "customary law" that often strengthened patriarchal norms for administrative convenience (Chanock, 1985). In Eswatini, the British indirect rule of its colonial policy institutionalised patriarchal kinship norms that protected monarchical rituals, and hence intertwined culture, law, and political economy (Berger, 1992). These historical sedimentations explain why young Swazi girls today navigate both long-standing ritual expectations and modern aspirations in education, careers, and autonomy.

Understanding rituals and their symbolic values within gendered power structures in Eswatini

The Umhlanga has been the most studied Swazi ritual, often analysed through the lenses of cultural nationalism, gender politics, and global media representation (Sone, 2010; Masango, 2010). Sone (2010) interprets the reed dance as both a celebration of national identity and a site where women's bodies become symbolic capital for the monarchy. Masango (2010) reads it as a sociocultural text, an

arena where oral traditions, performance, and collective identity intersect. Meanwhile, critiques from media see the reed dance as the commodification of women's bodies and the reinforcement of patriarchal sexual ethics (*The Guardian*, 2016, 2024).

Furthermore, anthropological debates insist on the rituals being multivocal: Turner (1969) described rituals as "social dramas" where multiple meanings and contestations coexist. For some girls, Umhlanga participation may therefore embody joy, cultural belonging, and intergenerational mentorship. For others, it represents coercion, public display, or gender subjugation. This duality is very significant as it shows that rituals cannot be categorically celebrated or condemned. They are lived differently depending on positionality, aspiration, and historical conjuncture.

Finally, the kinship, respect, and conformity systems that structure Swazi social life reinforce patriarchal authority. However, they also provide frameworks for solidarity and obligation (Kuper, 1986). Respect entails obedience to elders, age hierarchies, and male authority, but it also confers protection and social recognition. Young girls therefore negotiate a delicate balance between conforming to respect norms and pursuing aspirations that may be perceived as disruptive to traditional order.

Education, urbanisation, and religion as mediators of change

Education as a driver of gender transformation

Education has long been recognised as a critical arena where gender relations are renegotiated. Stromquist (1995) argued that education is not only instrumental in promoting women's economic empowerment, but it is also foundational in raising consciousness about gender inequities. In the African context, education has historically been tied to colonial and missionary interventions, where Western curricula introduced formal schooling that often disrupted, indigenous systems of knowledge transmission (Chanock, 1985; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991). In Eswatini, formal education has increasingly been expanded since independence, with notable gains for girls and women. UNICEF (2025a) and UN Women (2024) highlight significant increases in female enrolment at both secondary and tertiary levels, suggesting progress toward gender parity. However, these same reports emphasise dropout rates that remain disproportionately high among rural girls due to poverty and the persistent weight of cultural obligations such as gendered caregiving responsibilities.

Education thus operates as both a space of empowerment and a site of tension. On the one hand, studies across southern Africa confirm that education delays early marriage, fosters professional ambitions, and reconfigures family expectations around daughters' roles (Schwidrowski et al., 2021). For illustration, Eswatini's education reforms have been correlated with improved literacy rates among women and increased participation in the labour force, albeit concentrated in lower-wage sectors (UNICEF, 2025a). On the other hand, curricula remain dominated by Eurocentric epistemologies that marginalise African histories, languages, and knowledge systems. Educational critics such as Oyěwùmí (1997) and Tamale (2020) caution that schooling often reproduces colonial hierarchies by privileging Western paradigms of gender and society, leaving little room for local epistemologies that could provide culturally relevant empowerment.

African feminist educators have thus called for the integration of local knowledge and cultural traditions into schooling. Tamale (2020) argues that decolonised education should foster critical consciousness, enabling students not merely to access opportunities within existing structures but to

challenge systemic inequities embedded in both global and local patriarchies. In Eswatini, this means rethinking the role of schooling beyond economic participation, positioning it as a platform where young women learn to navigate the competing demands of kinship obligations and aspirations for autonomy. For Swazi girls, classrooms often provide the first experiences of independence, peer solidarity, and exposure to global ideas about gender equality. Yet these liberating possibilities are continuously negotiated against the demands of family honour, cultural conformity, and kinship expectations, where parents may still see marriage and caregiving as a daughter's highest duty (Kuper, 1986).

This duality makes education a deeply ambivalent force. It is simultaneously a vehicle for empowerment, which equips girls with the skills and ambitions to pursue independent futures. Education is also a site where they confront tensions between modern ideals of individualism, and traditional imperatives of communal belonging. The experiences of Swazi girls thus illustrate the need to view education not as a linear path toward emancipation but as a contested field where gendered subjectivities are actively shaped and reshaped (Stromquist, 1995; Tamale, 2020).

Urbanisation and shifting gender dynamics

Parallel to education, urbanisation has emerged as a transformative process reshaping gender dynamics across the African continent. Urbanisation entails not only demographic shifts but a fundamental reconfiguration of social and cultural life. Migration to urban centres often loosens the grip of kinship surveillance and exposes young people, especially women, to alternative lifestyles and possibilities for self-fashioning. Machirori (2023) observes that African urban youth are increasingly shaped by global cultural flows, digital platforms, and consumerist practices that create new avenues for identity construction beyond traditional expectations.

In Eswatini, the growth of urban hubs such as Mbabane and Manzini has facilitated access to diverse employment opportunities, educational institutions, and cultural exchanges. These spaces offer young women new forms of mobility, including physical, social, and economic, that are less constrained by the tight kinship structures, which are characteristic of traditionalist rural life. Urban life exposes Swazi girls to a plurality of gender performances: women in leadership roles, peers pursuing professional careers, and media-driven narratives of empowerment. These encounters challenge the monolithic constructions of femininity tied to rural kinship obligations.

However, urbanisation is far from an unequivocal force of liberation. It often introduces new precarities that disproportionately affect women. Employment opportunities in urban centres are frequently gendered, with women concentrated in informal economies, domestic work, or low-wage service sectors vulnerable to exploitation (Schwidrowski, et al. 2021)). Furthermore, rapid urbanisation has been associated with heightened risks of sexual harassment, gender-based violence, and unstable housing, particularly for young women migrating alone (UN Women, 2024).

Urbanisation also generates cultural tensions within families. While urban exposure expands young women's horizons, families often continue to invoke traditional obligations, producing a sense of dissonance. Young Swazi women must navigate urban ideals of autonomy and consumption while maintaining ties to rural kin, who expect financial remittances, deference to elders, and conformity to cultural values. This negotiation reflects what Mbembe (2001) calls the "entanglement of modernity

and tradition," where the present cannot be understood without recognising how these seemingly contradictory logics coexist and shape African life.

The digital culture embedded within urbanisation further complicates gender negotiations. Social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram allow Swazi girls to craft identities that transcend national and cultural borders, engaging with global feminist discourses while still rooted in local realities (Machirori, 2023). Digital platforms become both spaces of liberation, enabling transnational solidarities, and sites of surveillance, where kin and community members monitor girls' online expressions for conformity with traditional respectability norms. Urbanisation thus produces contradictory pressures: it loosens traditional surveillance while at the same time intensifies new forms of visibility and control.

Religion as an ambivalent mediator

Like education and urbanisation, religion plays a dual role as both a force of constraint and empowerment in shaping gender dynamics in Eswatini. Christianity is the dominant faith, through which both mission-founded churches and African Independent Churches exert significant influence on social norms. Across Sub-Saharan Africa, churches have historically reinforced conservative gender roles by emphasising female modesty, obedience, and domesticity (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991). In Eswatini, religious leaders often align with cultural practices such as the Reed Dance, valorising chastity and respect for patriarchal authority as expressions of religious morality (Masango, 2010).

At the same time, religion provides important spaces for women's mobilisation and empowerment. Churches frequently sponsor educational initiatives, health projects, and leadership training that disproportionately benefit women (UNICEF, 2025a). For young women, participation in church groups can offer opportunities to cultivate public speaking, leadership, and community organising skills otherwise inaccessible in traditional spaces. Gondwe (2024) highlights how youth in southern Africa use religious spaces as platforms for civic engagement, blending moral critique with social action.

African feminist theologians have further reinterpreted religion as a resource for challenging patriarchal norms. Some critics argue that women within African Christianity actively renegotiate doctrines to highlight biblical themes of justice, equality, and compassion. This aligns with Mahmood's (2011) insights from Islamic contexts: religious practices can be understood not only as forms of subordination but also as modes through which women cultivate agency, albeit within frameworks that may appear conservative from a Western feminist perspective.

For Swazi girls, religion thus constitutes a complex mediator. On one hand, churches may limit their freedoms by upholding patriarchal ideals that reinforce women's subordinate position within families and communities. On the other hand, churches can empower them by offering organisational skills, community recognition, and moral legitimacy to critique injustices. This ambivalence illustrates the broader paradox of African modernities: institutions that appear to constrain may simultaneously furnish resources for resistance and transformation (Tamale, 2020).

Intersections and integrative analysis

Although education, urbanisation, and religion can each be considered individually, their significance lies in their intersection. For Swazi girls, these three domains are rarely experienced in isolation. A young woman may, for instance, attend university in Mbabane (education), live in an urban environment with limited kinship surveillance (urbanisation), and participate in a youth fellowship group (religion). Each space presents both opportunities and constraints, and her identity is forged at the crossroads of these cultural confluences.

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) offers a valuable framework for understanding these dynamics. Gender in Eswatini cannot be analysed apart from the entangled effects of education, urban migration, and religious affiliation, all mediated by class, location, and cultural background. Nnaemeka's (2004) concept of "nego-feminism" is also instructive: Swazi girls often do not reject traditions outright but negotiate them, strategically accepting certain obligations while pushing boundaries in other areas. For instance, a young woman may attend the Reed Dance to honour her family while simultaneously pursuing a professional career that challenges patriarchal expectations.

The hybridity of these experiences echoes Bhabha's (1994) notion of the "third space," where new identities emerge not by abandoning tradition or embracing modernity wholesale, but by creating syncretic forms that combine elements of both. In Eswatini, this means that education, urbanisation, and religion are not simply linear forces of modernisation but fields where traditional and modern values collide, overlap, and reconfigure.

Digital cultures and youth identity

The rapid diffusion of mobile phones and social media across Africa has reconfigured how young people imagine and perform identity. Recent continent-wide surveys and reviews characterise today's youth as a "digital generation" whose aspirations, aesthetics and civic imaginaries are shaped as much by transnational feeds and algorithmic publics as by local kinship and cultural scripts (Ichikowitz Family Foundation, 2024; Boshoff, 2024). This transformation is not simply technological; it is sociocultural: mobile connectivity compresses distance, accelerates cultural exchange, and creates new temporalities of desire and possibility for young people who spend large parts of their social lives online (Honwana, 2012; Ichikowitz Family Foundation, 2024).

Digital platforms offer multiple affordances that are especially salient for young women. Instagram, TikTok and WhatsApp serve as spaces for aesthetic experimentation, including fashion, hair, and make-up; and vernacular performance through language mixing, or local humour. Additionally, these platforms are popular spaces for political expression through hashtag campaigns, and vlogs. Social media platform experts like Machirori (2023), show how TikTok trends have become vehicles for positive cultural (re)framing, which allows African youth to contest negative global narratives by crafting aspirational selves that move between local norms and global styles. At the same time, scholarship on "digital heritage" emphasises that online archives and visual practices enable young people to re-present cultural practices on their own terms. Such practices curate memory, resist exoticisation, and create new publics of belonging. These affordances are central to how Swazi girls use social media both to signal cultural pride and to experiment with identities that depart from strict local prescriptions.

The communicative logics of social media complicate classic cultural models. Edward T. Hall's distinction between high-context and low-context communication (implicit, relation-based meaning versus explicit verbalisation) can be referred to in clarifying tensions: Swazi rituals such as the Umhlanga (Reed Dance) are dense with embodied, high-context cues, such as dress, proximity, and local narratives, whereas social media encourages de-contextualised images and explicit self-branding suited for broad, often transnational, audiences (Hall, 1976). The result is a double consciousness: young women learn to perform in high-context, embodied ways at home and in ritual spaces, while simultaneously curating low-context, shareable personae for followers online. Scholars argue that this communicative hybridity produces new semiotic repertoires rather than a simple replacement of one mode by another (Machirori, 2023; Mbembe, 2001).

Digital cultures also rework economic possibilities and everyday livelihoods. Social media platforms have become marketplaces: micro-entrepreneurship via Instagram storefronts, WhatsApp-based trade networks, and influencer economies offer income streams, which is critical in contexts of high youth underemployment (Ichikowitz Family Foundation, 2024). For many young women, online economic activity is both pragmatic (supplementary income, flexible hours) and symbolic (aspiration, self-made success). However, scholars caution that platform economies reproduce precarity: algorithmic gatekeeping, opaque monetisation rules, and gendered labour, including free labour in content creation, and unpaid visibility work, mean that digital entrepreneurship can both empower and exploit (Boshoff, 2024).

Crucially, digital publicness is ambivalent: it creates spaces for solidarity and activism but also reproduces vulnerabilities. African youth movements have used social media to mobilise around political and social causes, demonstrating how digital networks can amplify marginal voices (Honwana, 2012; Machirori, 2023). Conversely, evidence shows a rising tide of technology-facilitated harms, including online gender-based violence, image-based abuse, and coordinated harassment, that disproportionately target young women and LGBTQ+ youth (UN Women, 2024). These harms have concrete chilling effects on expression: women may self-censor, withdraw from public life, or face reputational and economic consequences when intimate images or accusations circulate online. For the UN Women (n.d), "The Action Coalition on Technology and Innovation for Gender Equality focuses on preventing and eliminating online and tech-facilitated gender-based violence and discrimination as part of its roadmap."

Surveillance and platform governance add further complexity. The spread of state and private surveillance technologies through phone interception, spyware, biometric projects, creates environments where digital expression can be monitored, criminalised or leveraged for social control (Roberts and Mare, 2025). At the same time, platform design choices (moderation practices, recommendation algorithms) shape who is visible and who is amplified; these algorithmic choices interact with local norms, sometimes magnifying conservative moral policing or commercialising youth creativity in ways that strip context (Ngassam, 2024; Roberts and Mare, 2025). For Swazi girls, the implication is that digital mobility is never purely liberatory: it occurs within a topology of power where privacy, visibility and reputation are contested and risky.

Policy and practice responses are emerging but uneven. Research and advocacy call for comprehensive digital media literacy that is locally grounded, not simply transplanted from Global North models, combining technical skills with critical reflection on gender, privacy, and civic rights (Boshoff, 2024).

UN agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) recommend multi-stakeholder approaches, including platform accountability, state regulation that respects rights, community-led safety networks, and gender-sensitive reporting mechanisms, to reduce harms while protecting young people's civic spaces (UN Women, n.d; Boshoff, 2024). At the grassroots, young African digital feminisms often blend online campaigning with offline organising, which creates hybrid tactics that reflect the same negotiation logic that Swazi girls use between tradition and modernity (Ichikowitz, 2024; Gondwe, 2024).

In conclusion, digital cultures have become central to youth identity formation in Africa, producing hybrid, translocal subjectivities that rework both cultural continuity and modern aspirations. For Swazi girls, social media is a resource for aesthetic experimentation, livelihood diversification and political expression. However, it is also a field of contested visibility marked by gendered risks, surveillance, and commercial precarity. Policies that foster localised digital literacy, gender-aware platform governance and safe reporting mechanisms, which are developed in dialogue with young users, could be crucial to ensure that digital spaces expand real opportunities for agency rather than reproduce old inequalities in new technical forms (Boshoff, 2024; Roberts and Mare, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

The study's reliance on secondary data reflects both practical constraints and analytical opportunities. Secondary case-study methodology allows to synthesise diverse evidence into a coherent narrative (Yin, 2014). In Eswatini, ethnographic fieldwork has been limited due to political sensitivities, making secondary synthesis especially valuable.

Following Thomas and Harden's (2008) approach to thematic synthesis, the study integrates diverse materials, such as peer-reviewed scholarship, policy documents, global institutions, NGO reports, and media accounts, into thematic categories (rituals, kinship, education, digital cultures). This approach has enabled triangulation: ritual significance is read across anthropological analyses, policy concerns, and various critiques, thereby producing a multidimensional view.

Secondary analysis also aligned with feminist methodologies that emphasise reflexivity and critical engagement with knowledge production (Mohanty, 2003). By interrogating existing texts, the study uncovered not only empirical data but also the epistemological assumptions embedded in portrayals of African girlhood. For instance, Western media often sensationalises the Reed Dance as exotic spectacle, while local scholars situate it in cultural continuity. Methodological reflexivity required acknowledging these discursive politics and resisting uncritical reproduction.

Limitations remain since secondary data cannot fully capture the lived experiences, emotions, and agency of girls themselves. However, by foregrounding gaps, the study identifies directions for future primary research, including participatory ethnography with Swazi girls, digital ethnography of online youth cultures, and comparative studies across southern Africa.

Cultural heritage and gendered practices in Eswatini

Eswatini's cultural landscape is deeply informed by continuities of kingship, kinship, and ritual practice, and each carries gendered implications that shape the lives of young women. Cultural practices are not simply "survivals" of tradition, they are active sites of negotiation and reproduction

of power. The interplay between monarchy, ritual, and kinship generates a framework in which female identity is both celebrated and circumscribed.

Umhlanga (Reed Dance): Gendered symbol and contested practice

The Umhlanga, or Reed Dance, is perhaps the most internationally visible of Eswatini's rituals. Taking place annually, it gathers tens of thousands of young women who cut reeds, present them to the Queen Mother, and perform collective dances before the king. Historically, Umhlanga consolidated community solidarity, marked seasonal cycles, and affirmed purity through virginity ideals that tied female sexuality to national morality (Kuper, 1986).

In contemporary Eswatini, the ceremony serves multiple, and often contested, functions. On one hand, it is celebrated as a site of cultural pride and intergenerational bonding. Many participants describe it as empowering, providing spaces of solidarity among women and reinforcing collective identity (Masango, 2010). UNESCO's (2017) recognition of Umhlanga as intangible cultural heritage reflects international valorisation of its cultural significance.

On the other hand, critiques highlight its gendered dimensions. Public semi-nudity, though culturally situated, has been framed by global media as voyeuristic and patriarchal (The Guardian, 2016). Feminist scholars highlight issues of bodily autonomy: young women are expected to embody ideals of virginity and chastity, subjecting them to public moral scrutiny (Sone, 2010; Tamale, 2020). The practice of royal bride selection during Umhlanga, though less overt in recent years, has also drawn criticism for reinforcing asymmetrical gender power (Sone, 2010).

The ambivalence of Umhlanga illustrates what Nnaemeka (2004) calls *nego-feminism*, meaning African women's negotiation of cultural obligations with agency. For some Swazi girls, participation is voluntary and a source of cultural pride; for others, it is an obligation tied to kinship expectations or nationalistic pressure. In this way, Umhlanga exemplifies the broader tension between tradition and modernity: simultaneously a cherished emblem of heritage and a contested site of gender politics.
Scholars such as Sone (2010) argue that Umhlanga is not reducible to either empowerment or oppression but must be understood in its cultural ambivalence. Its continued prominence reflects both the monarchy's need for symbolic legitimacy and women's ongoing navigation of cultural pride and gender constraint.

Kinship, respect, conformity systems, and social reproduction

Kinship structures remain fundamental to Eswatini's social organisation, shaping how girls and women navigate cultural expectations. Swazi kinship is patrilineal, with lobola (dowry) structuring marriage alliances and reinforcing male authority (Kuper, 1986). Girls' life trajectories underpinned by education, marriage, and labour, are mediated through kinship negotiations, with family elders exercising significant influence over decision-making.

Central to these kinship dynamics is the cultural lexicon of *kuhlonipha* (respect in siSwati), which regulates deference toward elders, men, and authority figures (VNR, 2022). Respect systems are gendered: girls are expected to exhibit modesty, obedience, and domestic competence, embodying cultural ideals of womanhood (Amadiume, 1987). These norms are reinforced through ritual instruction and daily practices, shaping social reproduction.

At the same time, respect systems carry ambivalence. They provide a moral framework that affirms belonging and solidarity but also constrain young women's autonomy. Anthropologists have shown that kinship obligations often override individual aspirations: daughters may be withdrawn from school to support household labour or pressured into early marriage to strengthen kinship alliances (Schwidrowski, et al. 2021); UNICEF, 2025a).

Respect norms also shape reputational economies. Girls who deviate from expected behaviours, by rejecting marriage, pursuing careers, or adopting globalised lifestyles, risk stigma and loss of familial support (Tamale, 2020). Yet, as Oyěwùmí (1997) reminds us, African gender systems cannot be reduced to Western binaries: respect systems may simultaneously affirm women's authority within certain spheres while constraining them in others.

Contemporary transformations have begun to reshape kinship practices. Urbanisation and education loosen surveillance, creating spaces for girls to renegotiate respect norms (Machirori, 2023). Still, kinship obligations remain powerful: urban women are often expected to remit resources to rural families, and deviations from cultural respect logics may carry social penalties (Mbembe, 2001).
One can conclude that Eswatini's cultural heritage is deeply gendered, embedded in monarchy, ritual, and kinship systems. These dimensions illustrate how cultural heritage in Eswatini is dynamic, ambivalent, and continually negotiated by young women who embody pride, resistance, and adaptation. Understanding these cultural practices requires moving beyond dichotomies of "tradition versus modernity" and appreciating the complex intersections where heritage and gendered agency converge.

Negotiating identities: embodying, adapting, resisting, integrating
The lived realities of young Swazi girls navigating tradition and modernity can be analysed through four overlapping strategies: embodying, adapting, resisting, and integrating. These are not rigid categories but fluid modes of negotiation that highlight the agency of young women within complex socio-cultural and political terrains. Each strategy involves a negotiation between collective expectations and individual aspirations, mediated by institutions such as kinship, schools, religion, and digital cultures.

Embodying tradition through performance, belonging, and social capital
Embodiment of tradition refers to practices in which girls internalise and perform cultural scripts as a means of affirming belonging and gaining social legitimacy. In Eswatini, participation in the Umhlanga (Reed Dance) and other rituals offers both symbolic and material rewards. As Masango (2010) argues, ritual performance accrues social capital, especially in rural communities where family honour and kinship reputation depend on daughters' visible participation. Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital is particularly relevant here: participation in tradition is a form of investment that yields reputational returns, strengthening networks and family standing. Girls may thus participate in the Umhlanga embody tradition not as passive submission but as cultural performance.

Adapting: selective appropriation and hybrid repertoires
Adaptation involves selective appropriation of traditions while simultaneously embracing aspects of modernity to expand life choices. Many Swazi girls participate in cultural rituals while pursuing education, careers, or global cultural practices. Adaptation thus creates hybrid repertoires that combine local and global registers.

In this regard, girls may attend the Umhlanga but reinterpret its meaning as empowerment rather than chastity, reframing virginity as a marker of autonomy and choice (Masango, 2010; Tamale, 2020). Others may delay marriage, using education as both a protective strategy and a springboard for professional aspirations (UNICEF, 2025a; Schwidrowski et al., 2021). Such pragmatic negotiation reflects what Honwana (2012) calls "waithood": a liminal period where youth delay traditional markers of adulthood in pursuit of alternative futures.

Furthermore, fashion and digital self-presentation are central to adaptation. Studies on African creative industries show how young women blend traditional motifs with global aesthetics, creating hybrid styles that circulate on platforms like Instagram and TikTok (Boshoff, 2024). This "selective cosmopolitanism" allows girls to signal both cultural pride and modern sophistication, thereby broadening their identity repertoires (Mbembe, 2001).

Finally, adaptation is also temporal: girls may perform tradition during youth, then pivot toward modern careers or lifestyles later in life. This sequencing allows them to satisfy kinship expectations while retaining long-term autonomy. More importantly, adaptation is not simplistically pragmatic; it is creative and strategic, generating new forms of cultural hybridity that reconfigure gender roles.

Resisting: contestation, critique, and alternative cultural imaginaries

Resistance entails contesting, critiquing, or rejecting aspects of tradition perceived as oppressive. In Eswatini, gendered resistance often centres on rituals such as Umhlanga. Public critiques in international media portray the Reed Dance as voyeuristic and patriarchal, raising concerns over women's exploitation for cultural display (The Guardian, 2016).

Resistance also emerges within Eswatini's digital public sphere. Young women use hashtags, vlogs, and campaign videos to critique gender norms and advocate for rights-based reforms (Machirori, 2023; Ichikowitz Family Foundation, 2024). Digital platforms allow critiques that would be risky in face-to-face settings, given the monarchy's sensitivity to dissent. Online activism is often calibrated: critiques are framed in cultural pride language while advocating reforms, avoiding direct confrontation with royal authority.

The risks of resistance are real. As Mbembe (2001) emphasises, postcolonial African states often merge cultural and political authority, making dissent both a cultural and political offence. Despite constraints, resistance has transformative potential. By questioning dominant norms, young women generate "alternative imaginaries" (Appadurai, 1996), envisioning futures where gender roles are reconfigured. These imaginaries often intersect with global feminist discourses, expanding possibilities for gender justice.

Integrating: syncretic identities and new subjectivities

Integration refers to the creation of syncretic identities in which tradition and modernity are not seen as opposites but as overlapping registers. Many Swazi girls construct narratives that situate educational ambition within frameworks of respect for elders, thereby reconciling autonomy with cultural obligations (Oyěwùmí, 1997; Tamale, 2020).

Mediating institutions are at the forefront in facilitating integration. Educational institutions, for example, encourage critical consciousness while affirming cultural pride, producing what Stromquist (1995) terms "gender-transformative education." Women's groups and NGOs provide platforms for reinterpreting rituals in empowering terms, while churches offer spaces for moral re-articulation (Gondwe, 2024). Through these institutions, girls embody hybrid subjectivities that fuse cultural continuity with modern aspiration.

Online platforms further enable integration. Girls may curate personas that highlight cultural dress while showcasing entrepreneurial ventures or academic achievements. Such syncretic performances exemplify Mbembe's (2001) concept of *afropolitanism,* which relates to identities that are locally rooted yet globally connected. In these hybrid identities, tradition and modernity are not binaries but interconnected resources for self-fashioning.

Integration also allows intergenerational negotiation. By framing educational or professional ambitions as consistent with cultural respect, girls reduce conflict with elders and gain support for non-traditional pathways (VNR, 2022; UNICEF, 2025a). This strategy highlights the flexibility of cultural values and their capacity for reinterpretation.

To conclude, it seems right to say that the negotiation of identities among young Swazi girls unfolds through four interconnected strategies: embodiment, adaptation, resistance, and integration. While embodiment situates girls within moral economies of respect and belonging; adaptation allows selective appropriation and hybridity; resistance generates critique and alternative imaginaries; and integration reconciles Swazi tradition with modern aspirations in global contexts.

These strategies underline the agency of young Swazi women in navigating cultural terrains marked by both constraint and possibility. They also reveal the ambivalence of tradition: simultaneously a resource for belonging and a locus of contestation. Understanding these negotiations requires moving beyond binary frameworks of "tradition versus modernity" toward an appreciation of the fluid, creative ways African youth construct identities in a globalised and globalising world.

Discussion: tensions, agency and implications

The literature review and theoretical frameworks reveal that the navigation of tradition and modernity by young Swazi girls is neither linear nor uniform. It rather unfolds in ways that are ambivalent, contested, and embedded in specific socio-political contexts. Four interrelated thematic dimensions illustrate these tensions and possibilities: traditions as both constraints and resources; digital modernity as a disruption of communicative binaries; youth agency as relational and intersectional; and the political economy of monarchy as a structuring condition.

Tradition as constraint and resource

Tradition in Eswatini is a deeply ambivalent phenomenon. From the perspective of constraint, traditions often impose normative surveillance over girls' bodies and sexualities. The Umhlanga, by foregrounding chastity and virginity, locates young women's value within patriarchal moral economies (Tamale, 2020; Sone, 2010). Respect norms, such as *kuhlonipha*, regulate behaviour, which produces what Foucault (1977) describes as "docile bodies": disciplined, observed, and controlled. Such practices may limit girls' autonomy in choosing educational or career paths, as family honour and kinship obligations often override personal aspirations (UNICEF, 2025a; Schwidrowski et al. 2021).

Traditions also function as resources. For many young women, participation in rituals fosters cultural pride, intergenerational solidarity, and mentorship. Masango (2010) documents how Umhlanga is experienced by some participants as a celebration of womanhood, offering spaces for bonding and cultural instruction. These forms of embodiment generate social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), which can enhance marriage prospects, strengthen kinship networks, and provide reputational legitimacy.

This duality highlights the need for nuanced feminist interventions. As Nnaemeka (2004) argues in her theory of *nego-feminism* as "feminism of negotiation", effective transformation in African contexts often requires respectful engagement with tradition rather than outright rejection. Efforts to abolish rituals without recognising their community functions risk alienating stakeholders and undermining reform. Instead, co-produced reforms, such as modifying rituals to safeguard bodily autonomy while retaining cultural symbolism, may prove more sustainable (Tamale, 2020; UN Women, 2024). To this end, tradition in Eswatini should not simply be seen as an oppressive relic nor a sacred continuity; it reflects a contested field where cultural pride and patriarchal discipline intersect harmoniously. Recognising this ambivalence allows for interventions that protect rights without erasing cultural identity.

Digital modernity complicates communicative binaries

Hall's (1976) classic distinction between high-context and low-context cultures provides an illuminating but increasingly inadequate lens for understanding Swazi communicative dynamics. High-context cultures rely heavily on shared meanings, implicit communication, and ritualised practices, whereas low-context cultures privilege explicitness and individual expression. Eswatini's embodied rituals such as Umhlanga exemplify high-context communication: symbolism, choreography, and collective meaning predominate.

However, the diffusion of digital technologies has introduced communicative pluralism. Platforms like TikTok, WhatsApp, and Instagram circulate explicit, low-context artefacts, such as videos, captions, hashtags, that are designed for transnational audiences unfamiliar with local symbolism (Boshoff, 2024). Swazi girls who share Umhlanga performances online often supplement them with textual explanations, hashtags such as #SwaziCulture, #UmhlangaPride, or aesthetic reinterpretations, thereby reframing high-context rituals into hybrid communicative forms.

This hybridity complicates binary models. Digital spaces become arenas where meaning is negotiated across media, audiences, and cultural logics. For instance, Machirori (2023) documents how young African women use vlogs to critique traditions while simultaneously affirming cultural pride, thus performing both cultural rootedness and global feminist solidarity. In this sense, digital platforms generate what Spivak (1988) might describe as "strategic essentialisms": selective cultural framings mobilised for specific audiences and purposes.

The implications for policy and pedagogy are significant. Communication interventions in Eswatini must be multimodal by combining traditional community dialogues with digital literacy programs that equip youth to navigate online risks (cyberbullying, surveillance, misinformation) while harnessing opportunities for learning, networking, and activism (Ichikowitz Family Foundation, 2024). Schools can integrate critical media literacy into curricula, which can enable girls to interpret and reframe cultural content circulating online. Civil-society organisations can use participatory digital storytelling to bridge generational divides. This approach can produce dialogic engagements that respect high-

context traditions while embracing low-context digital forms. In this regard, digital modernity does not erase cultural logics but reconfigures them into plural communicative repertoires where girls negotiate meaning across embodied and mediated domains.

Strategic, relational, and uneven agency: rethinking girls' negotiation of power in Eswatini

Contemporary debates on agency often rely on dichotomous framings: subjects are either constrained by structures or emancipated through autonomy. This binary framing, however, obscures the complex, negotiated realities through which individuals, particularly young women and girls, exercise power within socio-cultural and institutional hierarchies. Empirical evidence from Eswatini challenges this dichotomy, revealing that girls' agency is neither wholly emancipated nor entirely constrained but rather strategic, relational, and uneven. Within familial, educational, and religious contexts, Swazi girls navigate power by deploying conformity when it yields social legitimacy and dissent when opportunities arise. Their practices of agency thus unfold within shifting social fields that demand both tactical compliance and subtle resistance.

Participation in traditional rituals such as *Umhlanga* provides a very relevant illustration. While outwardly framed as adherence to cultural norms and a celebration of chastity, participation may also function as a strategic performance through which girls preserve familial honour, maintain community ties, and secure access to parental or institutional support, all while privately pursuing individual ambitions such as education or urban employment (Masango, 2010). The performance of cultural conformity, therefore, cannot be read as passive acquiescence. Rather, it may serve as an instrument for negotiating the constraints imposed by patriarchal expectations. Conversely, digital spaces are increasingly used by Swazi girls as domains for discreet resistance. Online platforms, particularly those accessed via mobile phones, allow young women to explore feminist ideas, express dissenting identities, and participate in networks of solidarity that remain largely invisible in their offline social worlds (Machirori, 2023). These dual modalities of performance, including public compliance and private contestation, align closely with Ortner's (2006) notion of "serious games," where actors manoeuvre tactically within structured social fields to achieve desired outcomes without necessarily overturning those structures.

Agency in this context must therefore be understood not as a binary between freedom and constraint but as a dynamic interplay of strategic negotiation. Girls weigh the costs and benefits of their actions, recognising that overt resistance can invite severe social or even physical sanction. As Nnaemeka (2004) and Tamale (2020) have shown within the corpus of African feminist thought, agency in patriarchal contexts often manifests through pragmatism, relational negotiation, and incremental change rather than open confrontation. This conceptual lens captures how Swazi girls navigate intergenerational authority, social surveillance, and cultural expectation in pursuit of education, mobility, and self-definition.

Recent empirical studies in Eswatini further substantiate this conceptualization. The *Girl Champ* campaign in Manzini, for instance, framed access to sexual and reproductive health services in positive, aspirational terms rather than through deficit-based messaging centred on risk. The campaign demonstrated that when health initiatives acknowledge the affective and social dimensions of young women's lives, girls can engage actively without jeopardising their reputational standing in conservative communities (Brault et al., 2022). Participants reported that such framing enabled them

to pursue reproductive autonomy under the guise of socially acceptable self-care, illustrating a tactical form of agency grounded in subtle negotiation rather than overt resistance.

The unevenness of agency across social locations becomes even more apparent when examined through the lens of intersectionality. Crenshaw's (1989) foundational articulation of intersectionality and later elaborations by Carbado et al. (2013) illuminate how class, geography, and education shape the scope of girls' choices. In Eswatini, urban, educated girls tend to possess broader repertoires of agency: they can delay marriage, access digital spaces for activism, and blend local and global cultural aesthetics in self-expression. By contrast, rural girls may face more rigid kinship surveillance, and poverty. They may face restricted schooling opportunities that significantly narrow their capacity to manoeuvre. Structural inequalities, such as limited access to transportation, uneven school quality, and the burden of agricultural labour impose material constraints that render agency a fragile, unevenly distributed resource. UNICEF's (2025b) adolescent health data highlight these disparities, showing that while urban girls have increased access to contraceptive services and educational continuity, rural girls remain more vulnerable to early pregnancy, school dropout, and gender-based violence.

Religious affiliation and sexual orientation further differentiate girls' experiences of agency. The moral authority of Christian churches in Eswatini shapes public expectations of feminine virtue and obedience, while also providing institutional spaces for limited expression and social belonging. For some young women, church youth groups and faith-based NGOs serve as forums for empowerment, leadership training, and information exchange about reproductive health. For others, however, these same institutions operate as mechanisms of discipline, reinforcing conservative gender norms that curtail autonomy. In a context where non-heteronormative identities are socially marginalised and legally unprotected, expressions of sexual autonomy are frequently displaced into digital or clandestine spaces. These dynamics underscore the risk of homogenising "the African girl-child" as a singular, coherent subject; rather, agency is stratified, contingent, and mediated through multiple intersecting dimensions of identity.

Agency in Eswatini must also be understood as profoundly relational. It is not exercised in isolation but within networks of kinship, peers, and institutional actors. Families, for instance, remain central sites of negotiation. Girls frequently engage in what can be termed "strategic filiality": they enact gestures of respect and obedience toward elders in order to preserve the relational capital necessary to pursue other aims, such as continuing education or delaying marriage. Equally, schools function as ambivalent spaces of power. While they can be sites of surveillance and gendered discipline, they also offer possibilities for mentorship and intellectual growth. Teachers, particularly women educators, may act as intermediaries who legitimise girls' aspirations to higher education. At the same time, instances of harassment and moral policing persist, which confirms that agency is always enacted within asymmetrical relations of authority. Peer groups provide yet another domain for relational agency. Through shared experiences of constraint, girls construct solidarities that enable them to collectively reinterpret cultural norms and exchange strategies for navigating familial expectations. The relational nature of agency thus complicates liberal notions of individual autonomy; rather than a solitary assertion of will, agency emerges as an ongoing negotiation within social interdependence.
Digital technologies further expand the field of relational negotiation. As recent ethnographic reporting shows, initiatives such as Techno Friends Eswatini, which introduces coding and digital storytelling to rural girls, create alternative pedagogical spaces where girls can experiment with self-representation and innovation (Musi, 2023). Such programmes demonstrate how digital literacy facilitates symbolic

resistance, by enabling girls to imagine and narrate futures beyond traditional gender expectations, without necessarily provoking direct confrontation. However, digital participation is also stratified by socioeconomic status, geography, and access to devices, underscoring the material underpinnings of agency. In this regard, Swazi girls' digital practices echo what Ortner (2006) describes as "tactical improvisations" within constrained fields: acts of creativity and navigation that neither wholly reproduce nor decisively overthrow structural power.

Empirical evidence from these domains, such as education, ritual, digital participation, and health, reveals a pattern of what can be called *contingent agency*. This form of agency operates through relational pragmatism and risk assessment. Girls assess the social costs of their actions and often choose incremental change over radical rupture. This strategic restraint should not be mistaken for passivity; it represents an adaptive logic within settings where defiance can result in expulsion from family networks or economic support systems. Nnaemeka's (2004) concept of *nego-feminism* captures this ethos precisely. Swazi girls' everyday negotiations exemplify *nego-feminist* strategies: they seek to "win without fighting," to transform norms subtly while maintaining relational ties. Similarly, Tamale's (2020) theorisation of African sexual politics underscores how women and girls deploy cultural scripts tactically, drawing on communal values to justify choices that might otherwise appear transgressive. Within these frameworks, agency is recognised as both constrained and productive, as a situated practice of navigation within multilayered power structures.

This reconceptualisation of agency has significant implications for feminist theory and development practice. Theoretically, it challenges the liberal assumption that agency must entail visible resistance or autonomy from social structures. Instead, it affirms that within patriarchal and kin-based systems, agency can manifest through strategies of alignment, concealment, or compromise. These acts, despite being relatively minor or ambivalent, can cumulatively reshape gender relations by expanding the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable. Practically, acknowledging the strategic and relational nature of girls' agency calls for development interventions that prioritise flexibility, dialogue, and relational engagement. Programmes that dichotomise "tradition" and "modernity," demanding that girls choose between cultural belonging and personal aspiration, risk alienating those who depend on family approval for survival. Instead, initiatives that involve parents, religious leaders, and community elders in supporting girls' education or health can facilitate change that is both sustainable and culturally grounded.

Furthermore, the uneven distribution of agency underscores the importance of intersectional policy design. Rural girls, for instance, require not only educational support but also infrastructural interventions, such as transportation, ICT access, safety measures, that address the structural conditions limiting their capacity to act. Urban girls, conversely, may benefit more from digital safety programmes and mentorship in navigating online and professional spaces. In both contexts, attention to relational dynamics remains crucial. Empowerment that isolates girls from their social ecosystems risks exposing them to backlash or ostracism; empowerment that engages these ecosystems can foster incremental yet enduring transformation.

Ultimately, the study of girls' agency in Eswatini calls for a paradigm shift in how scholars and policymakers conceptualise empowerment. Rather than viewing agency as a fixed possession or a heroic act of resistance, it should be understood as an ongoing, situated practice of negotiation. Girls in Eswatini operate within dense webs of kinship, religion, education, and digital culture. Their choices

are shaped by material constraints and moral economies but are also animated by aspirations for education, respect, and self-realisation. They navigate these terrains through pragmatic strategies that blur the line between compliance and resistance, revealing agency as both constrained and creative, both relational and transformative.

In conclusion, Eswatini offers a microcosm through which to rethink the broader theoretical and empirical meanings of agency. The dichotomous framing of structure versus autonomy collapses under the weight of lived realities. What emerges instead is a vision of agency as relational practice, such as a repertoire of tactics, performances, and negotiations embedded within layered power structures. Swazi girls' lives demonstrate that even within restrictive conditions, the human capacity for creativity, adaptation, and hope persists. Their everyday manoeuvres, whether in classrooms, rituals, churches, or digital spaces, constitute forms of situated resistance that reconfigure the boundaries of the possible. Recognising and valuing these nuanced forms of agency not only enriches feminist theory but also offers more culturally attuned pathways for social and educational policy.

CONCLUSION AND CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper has explored how young Swazi girls navigate the intersecting cultural terrains of gender, tradition, and modernity, demonstrating that their agency is embedded within complex, negotiated social processes. Drawing on feminist, anthropological, and communication theory alongside recent empirical evidence from Eswatini, the analysis shows that girlhood in this context is neither a simple story of oppression nor liberation but one of creative negotiation, hybrid cultural positioning, and adaptive resilience. Girls inhabit worlds in which ancestral traditions, Christian moral codes, and digital modernity intersect, demanding fluid strategies for self-expression and survival. Their practices of agency, whether through ritual participation, schooling, or online expression, illustrate the ways in which structure and creativity coexist within the same social spaces.

A central contribution of this study lies in revealing how Swazi girls inhabit hybrid cultural spaces. Rather than choosing between "tradition" and "modernity," they synthesise elements from both spheres to construct meaningful identities. Participation in rituals, such as *Umhlanga* (the Reed Dance), is often interpreted by outsiders as simply a submission to patriarchal customs, even though ethnographic research suggests more ambivalent meanings. For many participants, ritual involvement provides access to mentorship networks, cultural pride, and a sense of belonging, even as it reinforces gender hierarchies (Masango, 2010; Shabangu and Madiba, 2019). Girls exhibit cultural performance as social currency, which honours family and community expectations while simultaneously they pursue education, entrepreneurship, and digital self-representation. In this sense, tradition becomes a medium through which young women exercise strategic belonging, sustaining ties to community while leveraging cultural legitimacy for modern aspirations.

At the same time, the analysis demonstrates that traditions are both constraining and enabling. Cultural rituals in Eswatini continue to reproduce gendered hierarchies, restricting young women's mobility and sexual autonomy. However, these very practices can also generate forms of empowerment. The *Umhlanga*, for instance, while enforcing ideals of chastity, provides opportunities for girls to travel, interact with peers, and build networks that may later support educational or professional goals. As Laterza and Golomski (2023) argue, Swazi rituals embody "ambivalent modernities" that both

discipline and empower female participants. This duality reflects what Ortner (2006) terms the "serious games" of social life: individuals act within structured fields of power but do so strategically, seeking incremental gains rather than outright rupture.

Digital cultures have further complicated these dynamics, reconfiguring communicative practices and challenging traditional binaries of public and private, oral and written, or high- and low-context communication. The rise of mobile technology and social media has afforded young Swazi women new platforms for self-articulation and activism. Machirori (2023) reveals that girls use WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, and TikTok videos not simply for entertainment but as spaces of discursive experimentation, which means as spaces where they contest gender stereotypes, share educational resources, and participate in transnational feminist conversations. The digital sphere thus becomes an extension of cultural negotiation: girls display high-context communicative codes, such as metaphor and indirectness, within low-context digital platforms, producing hybrid forms of digital expression that complicate Hall's (1976) binary model of communication. By situating Swazi girls within these hybrid communicative ecologies, the study contributes to the growing field of African digital feminisms, illustrating how digital modernity unsettles established paradigms of communication and socialisation (Tshabangu, T. et al., 2024).

Moreover, this research confirms that agency is both contextual and stratified. Girlhood in Eswatini is lived differently across axes of geography, class, education, and religion. Urban and educated girls generally possess wider repertoires of choice: they can delay marriage, access digital activism, and blend global aesthetics with local cultural expression. By contrast, rural girls face intensified kinship surveillance, limited schooling, and restricted access to digital infrastructure, all of which circumscribe the range of possible agency (UNICEF, 2025a). These disparities affirm Crenshaw's (1989) foundational insight that gender cannot be disentangled from other intersecting structures of power. Intersectional analysis, therefore, is crucial to understanding how structural inequality mediates the experience of being a "girl" in Eswatini. Religion and sexual orientation further differentiate these experiences, as conservative moral regimes often impose additional layers of constraint on female autonomy and bodily expression (Tamale, 2020). Recognising these differentiated realities prevents the homogenisation of "the African girl-child" and situates agency within its material and cultural specificities.

Collectively, these findings make several contributions to African feminist scholarship. They advance the argument that youth agency in contexts of enduring customary authority must be understood through relational and pragmatic lenses rather than through Western binaries of resistance versus submission. Swazi girls' negotiations reflect *nego-feminist* principles (Nnaemeka, 2004), where transformation emerges through dialogue, compromise, and incremental shifts rather than confrontation. This theoretical framing deepens our understanding of African feminisms (Collins, 2000) as inherently adaptive and context-sensitive, acknowledging that cultural continuity and feminist aspiration can coexist within the same lived experience.

The paper also extends communication theory by demonstrating how digital modernity destabilises conventional dichotomies, such as oral versus literate or traditional versus modern, which reveals a spectrum of communicative pluralisms shaped by social media, youth culture, and transnational connectivity.

The study presents policy implications that derive directly from these insights. Digital literacy and safety programmes should be provided to empower girls to harness digital tools for learning and entrepreneurship while mitigating exposure to online harm. Sustainable change also requires community-led dialogues that bridge generations and include traditional authorities, ensuring that reforms protecting girls' rights are co-designed rather than imposed.

Addressing geographic and economic disparities remains critical, as girls from marginalised rural areas face systemic barriers to education and digital participation. Interventions must therefore be intersectionally targeted, providing tailored support that recognises differential constraints and opportunities.

Furthermore, future research should build upon these insights through ethnographic and longitudinal methodologies. Long-term studies would capture how girls' strategies evolve over time as digital infrastructure expands and as Eswatini's socio-political landscape changes. Comparative analyses across Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in culturally customary systems, could illuminate regional patterns of negotiation while highlighting Eswatini's distinctive context of monarchy-embedded patriarchy. Such studies would enrich the comparative sociology of gender and youth in Africa, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how cultural continuity and modernity are co-produced in everyday life.

To conclude, the study confirms that the experiences of Swazi girls reveal that agency, culture, and communication are not opposing forces but interwoven processes of negotiation. By inhabiting hybrid cultural spaces, transforming the meanings of tradition, and reconfiguring digital expression, young women in Eswatini exemplify how African girlhood continually redefines the boundaries of gendered modernity. Their strategies, which are simultaneously cautious and creative, invite scholars and policymakers alike to reconsider the meaning of empowerment in contexts where tradition remains a living, evolving force.

REFERENCES

Amadiume, I. (1987). *Male daughters, female husbands: Gender and sex in an African society*. Zed Books.

Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. University of Minnesota Press.

Berger, I. (1992). *Threads of solidarity: Women in South African industry, 1900–1980*. Indiana University Press

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.

Boshoff, P. (2025). Digital media literacy in Africa: Towards a research agenda. *Digital Journalism Studies*, 45(2):1-11. https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2025.2478460

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241-258). Greenwood Press.

Brault, M. A., Christie, S., Manchia, A., et al. (2022). Girl Champ in eSwatini: A Strategic Marketing Campaign to Promote Demand for Sexual and Reproductive Health Services Among Young Women. *AIDS and Behavior, 26*(3), 853–863.

Carbado, D., Crenshaw, K., Mays, V., & Tomlinson, B. (2013). Intersectionality: Mapping the movements of a theory. *Du Bois Review, 10*(2), 303–312. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X13000349

Chanock, M. (1985). *Law, custom and social order: The colonial experience in Malawi and Zambia*. Cambridge University Press.

Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Comaroff, J., & Comaroff, J. L. (1991). *Of revelation and revolution: Christianity, colonialism, and consciousness in South Africa* (Vol. 1). University of Chicago Press.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167. https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8

Gondwe, G. (2024). How youth in Zambia use mundane technology to navigate civic spaces. *Telecommunications Policy*, 48(5). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.telpol.2024.102443

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*. Pantheon.

Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond culture*. Anchor Books.

Honwana, A. (2012). *Time of Youth: Work, Social Change and Politics in Africa*. Lynne Rienner Publishers

Ichikowitz Family Foundation (2024). *A turning point for African youth: African Youth Survey 2024*. https://ichikowitzfoundation.com/storage/reports/September2024/GSLcmLTnruHzhTrIuDOV.pdf

Kuper, A. (1982). *Wives for cattle: Bridewealth and marriage in southern Africa*. Routledge & Kegan Paul Books

Kuper, H. (1985). *The Swazi: A South African kingdom* (1st ed.). Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Laterza, V., & Golomski, C. (2023). Customary nationalism in crisis: protest, identity and politics in eSwatini. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 41(2), 119–140. https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2023.2234103

Machirori, F. (2023). This is Africa: How young African TikTok trends challenged boundaries. *Journal of African Media Studies*, 15(1), 45–62. https://doi.org/10.1386/jams_00098_1

Mahmood, S. (2011). *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton University Press.

Masango, L. P. (2010). Reading the Swazi reed dance (Umhlanga) as a literary and sociocultural text [Unpublished master's thesis]. University of the Witwatersrand. https://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/items/91a77255-773d-4b77-b4d1-e8514167ee5a

Mbembe, A. (2001). *On the postcolony*. University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520917538

Mohanty, C. T. (2003). *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Duke University Press.

Musi, N. (2023). Where Cattle Herders' Daughters Learn Computer Coding. *Christian Science Monitor*, August 2023. Available at https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2023/0823/Where-cattle-herders-daughters-learn-computer-coding (Accessed 07/10/2025).

Ngassam, S. B. (2024). Social media and the fragility of Africa. *Information Economics and Policy*. 9(2):101104. DOI:10.1016/j.infoecopol.2024.101104

Nnaemeka, O. (2004). Nego-feminism: Theorizing, practicing and pruning Africa's way. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 29(2), 357–385. https://doi.org/10.1086/378553

Ortner, S. B. (2006). *Anthropology and social theory: Culture, power, and the acting subject.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Oyěwùmí, O. (1997). *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses*. University of Minnesota Press.

Roberts, T. and Mare, A. (2025). *Digital surveillance in Africa: Power, Agency and Rights*. Bloomsbury Publishing

Schwidrowski, Z.B. et al. (2021). Assessing gender gaps in employment and earnings in Africa: The case of Eswatini. *Development Southern Africa*, 38(4), 643–663. https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835X.2021.1913996

Shabangu, Z. and Madiba, S. (2019). The Role of Culture in Maintaining Post-Partum Sexual Abstinence of Swazi Women. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(14), 2590; https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16142590

Sone, E. M. (2010). Aesthetics from the Swazi perspective: The case of the Swazi umhlanga/reed dance. *Muziki*, 7(1), 130–139. https://doi.org/10.1080/18125980.2010.484586

Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.

Stromquist, N. P. (1995). *Romancing the state: Schooling, schooling reform and gender equality in the developing world*. University of Chicago Press

Tamale, S. (2020). *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism*. Daraja Press.

The Guardian (2016, September 22). Swaziland's reed dance: Cultural celebration or sleazy royal ritual? Available at https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/sep/22/swaziland-reed-dance-cultural-celebration-or-sleazy-royal-ritual-umhlanga (Accessed 55/09/2025).

The Guardian (2024, September 3). Daughter of South Africa's ex-president Zuma to be Eswatini king's 16th wife. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/sep/03/daughter-of-south-africas-ex-president-zuma-to-be-eswatini-kings-16th-wife (Accessed 55/09/2025).

Thomas, J., & Harden, A. (2008). Methods for the thematic synthesis of qualitative research in systematic reviews. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 8, 45. https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-8-45

Tshabangu, T. et al. (2024). Digital journalism practices at indigenous African language newspapers in Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe: A cultural discourse studies, in A. Gladkova, et al., (eds), *Digital Inequality Studies in Cultural Communication* (pp.184-2023). Routledge. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/oa-edit/10.4324/9781032672250-11

Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Aldine Transaction / Routledge.

UNESCO (2017). *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage: Umhlanga Reed Dance*. UNESCO.

UNICEF Eswatini. (2025a). *A gender assessment of social assistance in Eswatini*. UNICEF Eswatini. Available at https://www.unicef.org/eswatini/documents/assessing-gender-and-age-sensitivity-eswatinis-social-assistance-system (Accessed 01/10/2025).

UNICEF (2025b). *Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Eswatini: National Review Report.* Mbabane: UNICEF Eswatini.

UN Women. (2024). *The Kingdom of Eswatini: Country progress report*. UN Women. Available at https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/b30_report_eswatini_en.pdf (Accessed 01/10/2025).

UN Women (n.d.). Accelerating efforts to tackle online and technology facilitated violence against women and girls (VAWG). https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/Accelerating-efforts-to-tackle-online-and-technology-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-en_0.pdf

United Nations (2022). *Eswatini Voluntary National Review (VNR) — Main Report*. Available at https://eswatini.un.org/en/download/126923/219477 (Accessed 08/10/2025).

Voluntary National Review (VNR). (2022). *Voluntary National Review: Eswatini 2022*. Available at https://eswatini.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/Eswatini%20VNR%20Main%20Report%2008072022%20Final%20and%20submitted%20to%20UNDESA.pdf (Accessed 01/10/2025).

Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.