

Digital Platforms, Youth Representation, and Policy Advocacy in South African Municipal Governance: A Study of Vhembe and Capricorn District Municipalities, Limpopo Province

Paul Mudau

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8696-7495>

University of South Africa

mudaufp@unisa.ac.za

Wonder Juniper

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1668-916X>

University of Limpopo, South Africa

Wonder.juniper@ul.ac.za

Abstract

Digital platforms have become important tools for enhancing youth representation and policy advocacy within South African municipal governance. This study, focusing on Vhembe and Capricorn District Municipalities in Limpopo Province, addresses ongoing challenges such as youth disengagement, low voter turnout, and limited influence in municipal decision-making processes. The research aims to deepen understanding of how digital technologies can amplify youth voices and support more inclusive policy advocacy, thereby strengthening youth democratic participation at the local government level. Using a qualitative research design, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with youth activists, policymakers, and technology experts to explore perceptions and experiences related to digital engagement in local governance. The theoretical framework is grounded in participatory democracy and digital inclusion theories, which guide analysis of the intersections between technology, youth engagement, and policy influence. Findings reveal that digital platforms offer significant opportunities for youth to participate in municipal governance and advocate for policy change. However, challenges such as the digital divide and unequal access to technology constrain these opportunities. The study underscores the need for targeted policies to address these disparities and promote equitable access to digital resources. The implications of this research are relevant to policymakers, civil society, and electoral management bodies, highlighting the importance of integrating technology-driven approaches to foster meaningful youth participation in local governance. By focusing on South Africa, the study contributes to broader discussions on democratic renewal and socio-political inclusion, offering practical recommendations to empower young citizens through technology.

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Introduction

In South Africa, youth participation in local governance remains a pressing issue (Bodede 2021). Youth aged 18 to 34 make up almost one-third of South Africa's adult population, positioning them as a potentially decisive force in shaping the country's electoral outcome (Bekker et al. 2022). Nonetheless, young people remain under-represented in municipal decision-making, with low electoral turnout and persistent disengagement (Vilakazi and Nene 2022). The problem is evident in rural districts such as Vhembe and Capricorn, Limpopo Province, where structural barriers hinder meaningful youth involvement in both formal and informal channels (Univen News 2025). The Vhembe District Municipality comprises four local municipalities: Collins Chabane, Makhado, Musina, and Thulamela, while the Capricorn District Municipality comprises four local municipalities: Blouberg, Molemole, Polokwane, and Lepelle-Nkumpi.

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, in Section 1(d), 19, 152(1)(a), 152(1)(e), and 195(1)(e)), and national legislations: Section 16 of the Local Government: Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000; Section 22 of the Local Government: Municipal Structures Act 117 of 1998; and Local Government: Municipal Electoral Act 27 of 2000; they promote inclusive and participatory governance. Nonetheless, a gap remains between these legal ideals and everyday experience (Hofmeyr 2024). Voter registration statistics of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) show that youth registration and turnout in local elections are the lowest among all age groups, raising concerns for democratic legitimacy (IEC 2026). Youth apathy, or more precisely disenchantment, threatens the credibility of local government (Oyedemi and Mahlatji 2016). There is a definite need for innovative strategies to engage the youth, who bear the brunt of unemployment, inadequate service delivery, and exclusion from local development policies (National Planning Commission 2011).

Consequently, digital platforms, such as social media, messaging apps, and online advocacy tools, offer new spaces for youth to express views, mobilise, and interact directly with officials. Through hashtags, online petitions, and digital forums, young South Africans are beginning to shape civic debates and demand greater accountability from local government. Recent developments, such as #FeesMustFall, the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) digital voter campaigns, and the widespread use of WhatsApp in local politics, highlight how youth activism in South Africa is increasingly shaped by digital technology, making young voices more visible and connected (Buyens 2019). Studies show that when accessible, digital tools can lower barriers to civic engagement and enable new forms of democratic participation, particularly among young people who are dissatisfied with traditional processes (Mudau and 'Nyane 2023; Coleman and Shane 2012). However, major inequalities persist in Vhembe and

Capricorn. Many young people still lack access to devices, affordable data, and digital skills, risking deeper exclusion even as digital platforms promise to include them (Univen News 2025; Netshirando et al. 2024).

Digital tools spanning social media, online petitions, and dedicated civic apps have transformed the channels by which youth express demands, organise, and communicate with decision-makers at the local level (Asimakopoulos 2025). Young people are increasingly using WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, and e-government platforms not only to access local news and updates on service delivery, but also to raise complaints, advocate for policy changes, and launch campaigns (Masiya and Lubinga 2013; Firtin et al. 2025). Digital accountability through e-participation: the moderating role of the digital divide (Public Money and Management 1–13). South Africa’s National Digital and Future Skills Strategy sees such platforms as promising avenues for broader, more participatory democracy, provided persistent digital divides are addressed (Sundani 2019).

Using a qualitative research design, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with youth activists, policymakers, and technology experts to explore perceptions and experiences related to digital engagement in local governance. This study examines the impact of digital platforms on youth representation and policy advocacy in these two predominantly rural districts, drawing on theories of participatory democracy and digital inclusion. The core question is: are digital tools helping youth participate and influence local government, and what factors help or hinder this?

The study pursues the following objectives: to map and analyse how youth in Vhembe and Capricorn use digital platforms for civic participation and policy advocacy; to explore key perceptions and challenges around digital engagement; to identify systemic barriers such as the digital divide or local institutional culture; and to recommend policies for more inclusive, digitally driven participation at the municipal level. By focusing on rural Vhembe and Capricorn, the study contributes to data and theoretical insights into the promise and pitfalls of digital platforms in widening youth voice and agency, and guiding practitioners and policymakers in leveraging technology for inclusive democracy, drawing on local realities and practices from South Africa and beyond.

From this backdrop, the article is structured into eight interconnected sections that together build a coherent analytical narrative. It begins with an Introduction that outlines the study’s focus on youth engagement through digital platforms in local governance. This is followed by the Problem Statement, which frames the core challenges young people in the Vhembe and Capricorn districts face regarding representation and digital participation. The Theoretical Underpinnings section elaborates on the conceptual frameworks guiding the analysis, offering lenses for examining digital governance and youth advocacy. The Research Methodology details the study’s design, including data-gathering techniques and analytical approaches appropriate for understanding

municipal-level digital participation. The Findings and Analysis section presents empirical insights derived from the field, highlighting youths' experiences, barriers, and emerging opportunities within municipal digital ecosystems. These findings are further elaborated in the Discussions, which examine their broader implications for democratic participation and policy processes. The article then moves to the Conclusion, synthesising key arguments and underscoring the significance of strengthening youth digital inclusion in municipal governance. Finally, the Policy Recommendations section provides actionable strategies to enhance youth representation, improve digital infrastructure, and promote meaningful digital engagement within Limpopo's district municipalities.

Problem Statement

Stakeholder Perceptions, Motivations, and Challenges

The ambivalence that youth feel towards formal channels of municipal participation (Allen and Light 2015). They often view digital platforms as “parallel publics” that offer immediacy, lower participation costs, and the opportunity to bypass traditional gatekeepers (Allen and Light 2015). Motivations for digital engagement range from personal empowerment and collective solidarity to practical service delivery needs (Mugobo and Baschiera 2015). Yet, there is caution that enthusiasm is uneven: digital activism may be episodic, superficial, or blunted by “engagement fatigue,” reflecting both resource constraints and institutional inertia (Foyet and Child 2025).

Stakeholder perceptions are often shaped by local organisational cultures: some municipal leaders welcome digital participation as a tool for improved service delivery and communication, while others view online activism as disruptive or difficult to channel into actionable policy input (Netshirando et al. 2024). These findings highlight a fundamental tension between the potential of digital platforms and the realities of legacy structures, echoing a comparative analysis of networked young citizens (Asimakopoulos 2025).

Systemic Factors: Digital Divide, Literacy, and Institutional Culture

Central to the prospects for deepened participation is the “digital divide,” the uneven access to broadband, affordable data, functional devices, and digital literacy that disproportionately affects rural and poorer youth (Coleman and Shane 2012). A significant digital divide, with some studies suggesting that over 50% of rural households in South Africa lack access, highlights the persistent challenges of inadequate infrastructure and socio-economic barriers to digital inclusion (Mwansa et al. 2025; Hernandez and Faith 2023). In South Africa, the digital skills gap maps onto broader patterns of inequality, such that female, disabled, and rural youth are routinely more marginalised in both digital and analogue civic spaces (Statistics South Africa 2021). These exclusionary dynamics are culturally reinforced within municipal institutions, where the adoption of digital feedback mechanisms is often slow or

superficial, thereby reducing the scope of genuine participatory budgeting or policymaking (FoodBev SETA 2022). Local context is thus decisive: the culture of responsiveness, management vision, and resource allocation within a municipality can either enable or foreclose youth digital participation (South African Cities Network 2015).

Policy Advocacy and Sustainability

While digital platforms have amplified youth voices and enabled new forms of advocacy, converting digital participation into policy change requires institutionalisation (Vilakazi and Nene 2021). Policy recommendations foreground targeted investment in digital infrastructure, integration of digital civic education in schools, mechanisms for sustained youth policy input, and a strong push on inclusivity for marginalised groups (Mudau 2022; Simiyu 2022). Van der Merwe and Bohler-Muller (2013) contend that, given the fast-paced changes in today's world, governments should actively stay informed about emerging trends and create modern policies that promote the positive use of information and communication technology (ICT) platforms. These policies must be guided by the needs and priorities of their citizens.

The National Youth Policy (NYP) 2020–2023 (Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities 2021) is South Africa's strategic framework aimed at guiding youth development efforts across all sectors of society. It was developed by the Department in the Presidency for Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities, in collaboration with stakeholders including government departments, civil society, academia, and youth organisations. The NYP recognises the need to equip the youth with digital skills to thrive in a rapidly changing technological landscape. It promotes curriculum reform to include problem-solving, entrepreneurship, and digital literacy. Youth are seen as agents of change who must be involved in shaping their communities. Hence, the NYP accentuates the fostering of leadership and active citizenship among youth, encouraging participation in governance at all levels.

Gaps Addressed By This Study

Although scholarship on digital democracy and youth participation in South Africa is growing, the majority of existing research focuses on national-level trends, broad rural–urban inequalities, or general patterns of digital access, rather than conducting fine-grained district-level analyses. The study by Mwansa et al. (2025) offers detailed insights into digital exclusion in rural areas, documenting the effects of inadequate connectivity, unaffordable data costs, and low digital literacy in South African communities. However, the focus is on generalised rural contexts rather than district-specific municipal governance structures such as those in Vhembe or Capricorn (Molobela 2025). Similarly, broader national assessments highlight systemic digital inequality, particularly the lack of reliable data to distinguish individual from household access and the need for nationally representative ICT usage metrics (Gillwald et al. 2018). Yet these studies provide macro-level critiques and do not disaggregate their

findings to the municipal or district governance level, leaving a gap in understanding how digital participation unfolds within specific district municipalities. In addition, little attention is paid to comparative or longitudinal analysis: most studies remain cross-sectional or anecdotal, leaving open questions on sustainability and adaptation to future demographic and technological shifts (Statistics South Africa 2021).

By mapping and analysing youth digital use in Vhembe and Capricorn, exploring stakeholder experiences, dissecting local systemic barriers, and offering strategic policy/practice guidance, this study responds directly to these gaps and advances both empirical and theoretical understanding of youth, technology, and policy advocacy in South African local governance.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Theoretical Framework

This body of work is undergirded by participatory democracy theory, which asserts that locally anchored, ongoing participation is vital to democratic legitimacy and social justice (Coleman and Shane 2012). Digital inclusion theory draws attention to material, instructional, and institutional conditions for equitable engagement, warning against techno-centric solutions that re-inscribe old inequalities (Gottschalk and Weise 2023). Youth engagement theory contextualises these challenges and opportunities, pointing out that authentic youth participation depends on agency, capacity-building, and institutional openness to change.

This article primarily draws on the theories of participatory democracy and digital inclusion, both of which provide conceptual and analytical lenses for understanding the dynamics, opportunities, and constraints of technology-enabled youth engagement at the local government level.

Participatory Democracy

Participatory democracy theory posits that meaningful democratic governance requires the active, ongoing involvement of citizens in decision-making beyond periodic elections. Unlike representative democracy, which centres on delegation of authority, participatory democracy advocates for deeper and more direct forms of engagement, valuing deliberation, co-governance, and shared responsibility between citizens and officials (Mudau and Nyane 2023).

This tradition has gained resonance in South Africa, where the constitutional and legislative framework expressly foregrounds participation as an essential function of local government. The Constitution in Section 152(1)(e) specifically mandates municipalities to “encourage the involvement of communities and community organisations in the matters of local government.” Participatory democracy is recognised as necessary for social justice, the legitimacy of institutions, and the

development of an active political culture, especially among historically marginalised groups such as youth (Molobela 2025).

In this study, participatory democracy theory positions digital platforms not merely as tools for information exchange but as dynamic arenas for deliberation, collaborative advocacy, and the joint shaping of municipal policy. The emergence of civic portals, interactive applications, and social media forums enables young South Africans to take on more active roles in their local communities, moving beyond passive consumption to direct engagement with decision-makers. Through digital mobilisation such as online petitions, live debates, and interactive consultations, young citizens can influence local agendas, propose actionable solutions, and hold officials accountable, thus deepening the democratic process (Molobela 2025). Unlike traditional participation, which is limited to physical presence or periodic voting, this theoretical lens emphasises the importance of attention to the quality, depth, and regularity of engagement and participation fostered by digital platforms (Allen and Light 2015). On these platforms, meaningful involvement is measured not only by numbers alone, but also by deliberative input, continuity of voice, and shared governance.

Digital Inclusion

Digital inclusion theory critically examines the enabling conditions and persistent barriers to genuine youth participation in the digital age (Pawluczuk 2020). While digital platforms promise to broaden democratic opportunities, digital inclusion insists that mere technology availability is insufficient: genuine access must encompass affordability, digital literacy, relevant skills, and content that reflects diverse cultural backgrounds (Hussain and Phulpoto 2024; Mudau 2022). In South Africa, gaps in digital infrastructure, connectivity, and device ownership persist, particularly in rural areas such as Vhembe and Capricorn. These disparities risk excluding already marginalised groups and perpetuating cycles of disengagement. Digital inclusion, therefore, addresses not only material resources, devices, data, and stable internet, but also social and educational factors such as training, community support, and local language representation (Nirmanani 2025). Failure to address these multidimensional needs can result in technology-driven initiatives that inadvertently widen existing inequalities, rather than empower disadvantaged youth.

Synthesis: Applying the Frameworks to Youth Engagement in Local Governance

This synthesis highlights that genuine digital participation for South African youth requires more than just access to technology; it demands integrated efforts that combine infrastructure investment, affordable connectivity, and targeted capacity-building to address diverse, intersectional needs. When upgrades, skills training, and inclusive design are coordinated across government, education, and community sectors, digital platforms can become transformative spaces for dialogue, civic responsibility, and youth influence in municipal policy (Yang et al. 2024). Embedding digital literacy and civic engagement in education and community programmes further builds long-term

resilience, ensuring digital spaces stay accessible, relevant, and empowering for future generations (Dubow 2017).

Research Methodology

This section details the study's methodological approach, providing a transparent account of the research design, participant selection strategies, data collection procedures, ethical considerations, analytical methods, and the study's principal limitations. The approach was guided by the need to capture multi-faceted perspectives on digital platforms, youth representation, and policy advocacy in South African municipal governance, specifically within the Vhembe and Capricorn district municipalities.

Qualitative Research Design

A qualitative research design was chosen to facilitate a rich, in-depth exploration of the complex experiences, attitudes, and institutional dynamics related to youth engagement and digital participation (Creswell 2014). Qualitative methods are particularly suited to interrogating “how” and “why” questions about social phenomena and are recognised as best practice in studies exploring lived experience, meaning-making, and social context (De Vos et al. 2013).

Given the paucity of detailed empirical work at the district municipal level in South Africa, this design enabled the study to go beyond broad trends and analyse locally situated narratives and strategies. The research was underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm, acknowledging that realities around youth digital engagement and policy advocacy are socially constructed, multi-layered, and best understood through the perspectives of those directly involved (Flick 2008). This paradigm prioritised the collection of first-hand accounts and the co-production of meaning between researcher and participants, grounding the study in an authentic context and voice.

Participant Selection

Rationale and Population

Vhembe District covers 27,969.148 square kilometres and has a total population of 1,653,077 (Vhembe District Municipality 2025). With a total area of 21.705 square kilometres, the Capricorn District has a total population of 1,447,103 (Capricorn District Municipality 2025). The figures are from Statistics South Africa's 2022 Census.

The study deliberately targeted a range of stakeholders relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. The population included youth activists, policymakers (local government officials and elected councillors), and technology experts (including NGO digital specialists, civic tech developers, and academics). This multi-perspective approach was driven by the recognition that effective analysis of youth digital

participation must account for both “user” and “system” experiences (Palinkas et al. 2015).

Sampling Techniques

A purposive sampling strategy was employed, as is common in qualitative inquiry focused on depth rather than representativeness (Noy 2008). Participants were selected based on their direct involvement in youth civic advocacy, their professional roles in shaping local policy, or their expertise in digital governance. In Vhembe and Capricorn, networks of local organisations, municipal offices, and technology innovation hubs were consulted to identify potential informants who could provide diverse, contextually embedded insights. Snowball sampling supplemented this, enabling the researcher to gain access to hard-to-reach or “hidden” actors such as rural grassroots activists whose work is often under-documented (Creswell and Poth 2018).

A total of 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted: eight with youth activists (18–30 years), six with municipal policymakers, and six with technology experts, plus four additional interviews with crosscutting “bridging” participants (e.g., youth digital mobilisers embedded in local government structures).

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected primarily through structured interviews, a method chosen for its balance between focused questioning and space for participant-driven narratives (Tracy 2020). Interview guides were designed around the study’s objectives but also allowed for flexibility in probing emerging issues and local specificities. Questions explored experiences with digital platforms, motivations and barriers to participation, views on institutional openness and responsiveness, and perceptions of the digital divide in Vhembe and Capricorn.

Ethical Considerations

The research design was rooted in ethical best practice as outlined by South African social science and legal research protocols (Israel and Hay 2006). Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review board at the University of Limpopo. Participation was strictly voluntary, with informed consent obtained in writing or via voice recording, as applicable, from all interviewees. Participants were fully informed about the purpose, scope, and intended use of the research and assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Confidentiality was respected through anonymisation: all responses were coded, and no personally identifying information will appear in any publication or report. Data was securely stored on encrypted devices, and access was restricted to the research team. Given the research focus on youth, including some participants under the age of 21, special care was taken to outline terms in plain language, protect vulnerable participants, and provide opportunities to debrief following sensitive topics (such as exclusion or

experiences of institutional marginalisation). Data involving municipal officials was managed with equal sensitivity, explicitly separating professional and personal views in reporting.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis provides the primary tool for evaluating qualitative data (Braun and Clarke 2006). This approach is well regarded for its flexibility and systematic coding of themes across a corpus of texts. Transcriptions were read closely and iteratively coded using a combination of “a priori” codes derived from the literature (such as “digital divide,” “policy impact,” and “institutional openness”) and “open” codes emerging inductively from participant narratives. Coded extracts were clustered into core themes and sub-themes, which were reviewed and refined through peer debriefing to ensure validity and consistency. NVivo software (version 14) was used to manage and retrieve interview data, enabling transparent, auditable analytic procedures. Patterns and contrasts were identified both within and across stakeholder groups and districts, ensuring that the analysis reflected both diversity and shared experiences.

Trustworthiness in this study was upheld through measures designed to ensure that data were gathered from appropriate sources and that the findings were not distorted, aligning with De Vos et al.’s (2013) emphasis on safeguarding data integrity. Credibility was strengthened by sourcing information from participants who were directly relevant to the research focus and by investing time in building rapport before formal data collection, which encouraged openness and facilitated the collection of genuine perspectives. During interviews, the researcher applied member checking through real-time paraphrasing, summarising, and seeking clarification to ensure accurate interpretation, followed by immediate playback of recorded responses so participants could verify their statements. Additional follow-up checks after preliminary analysis further validated the interpretations drawn from the data, ensuring that participants’ intended meanings were faithfully represented. Dependability was maintained through a well-documented, systematic analytical process, in which the research supervisor cross-checked the coding framework to verify consistency and accuracy. This collaborative review ensured that themes were grounded in the data rather than researcher bias, thereby reinforcing the reliability, transparency, and replicability of the study’s findings.

Limitations of the Methodology

To minimise the risk of selection bias inherent in purposive and snowball sampling, the researcher implemented strategies to diversify the sample by deliberately seeking participants from multiple youth networks, including both digitally active groups and community-based organisations representing less-connected young people. Recruitment was extended through schools, ward councillor offices, and local NGOs to ensure that digitally excluded youth had alternative offline entry points into the study. To address infrastructural barriers in remote areas of Vhembe, the researcher used

flexible, mixed-mode data collection, combining in-person interviews where possible with telephone calls and low-bandwidth messaging platforms such as WhatsApp voice notes for participants with unstable connectivity. When travel restrictions limited access to certain locations, the researcher partnered with local facilitators who helped reach hard-to-reach participants while maintaining ethical oversight.

In response to language dynamics, interviews were conducted in participants' preferred languages (Tshivenda, Sepedi, or English), with clarification prompts and translation assistance used where necessary to reduce misunderstandings. The researcher also provided simple, jargon-free explanations of digital governance concepts to accommodate varying levels of digital literacy, ensuring that participants could engage meaningfully regardless of their technical familiarity. To address potential power imbalances between youth participants and policymakers, interviews with youth were conducted separately in safe, youth-friendly spaces where participants could speak freely without intimidation. The researcher also emphasised voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity, reinforcing the idea that young people's perspectives were valued and carried no risk of reprisal.

Finally, as data were self-reported and subjective, accounts are shaped by memory, interpretation, and the research context. Triangulation with documentary analysis and online observation, however, helped mitigate these weaknesses. Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a rigorous, authentic, and nuanced picture of the lived realities of digital youth participation and policy advocacy in South African municipal governance. Collectively, these mitigation strategies enhanced the credibility and inclusiveness of the study while reducing the effects of the identified limitations.

Findings and Analysis

This section presents and analyses key themes emerging from qualitative interviews with youth activists, policymakers, and technology experts across the Vhembe and Capricorn district municipalities. Drawing on the conceptual frameworks of participatory democracy and digital inclusion, the analysis situates empirical findings within the broader discourse on youth civic engagement, digital governance, and policy advocacy in post-apartheid South Africa.

Overview of Participant Demographics and Approach

A total of 24 semi-structured interviews formed the basis for this analysis. Participants included eight youth activists (aged 18–30), six municipal policymakers (officials and elected councillors), six technology experts (including NGO professionals, digital platform developers, and academic researchers), and four bridging figures whose work straddled two or more stakeholder categories. Data was coded thematically using a hybrid approach, allowing for both theory-driven and inductively emergent insights.

Table 1: Summary of Interview Participants

Participant Category	Number of Participants	Age Range / Profile	Description / Role
Youth Activists	8	Ages 18–30	Young civic actors engaged in digital advocacy and community mobilisation.
Municipal Policymakers	6	Officials and elected councillors	Individuals involved in planning, governance, and policy decision-making at the municipal level.
Technology Experts	6	NGO professionals, digital platform developers, and academic researchers	Specialists providing insights on digital tools, platform design, and ICT environments.
Bridging Figures	4	Work spans two or more categories	Intermediaries linking youth, government, and technology sectors.

Theme 1: Digital Platforms as Gateways to Participation and Voice

A central finding was the widespread perception among youth participants that digital platforms serve as accessible, empowering gateways to civic participation in municipal governance. For many, digital channels represent a significant departure from the often intimidating, bureaucratic, or unresponsive structures of government (Mudau and ‘Nyane 2023).

A youth activist from Vhembe shared that “digital platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook have made it easier to voice concerns and report service issues directly, contrasting this with previous experiences of having to visit municipal offices in person, often without being heard” (Vhembe Youth Activist 3 2025). Digital petitions and online campaigns have become effective tools for placing issues on the municipal agenda and accelerating council responses, according to a Capricorn youth activist (Capricorn Youth Activist 5 2025).

Participants described how social media, messaging apps, and targeted civic tech tools (such as the GovChat platform and IEC’s online voter registration) made it easier to access local government information, report service delivery failures, and mobilise peers around policy issues. Policy advocacy was seen as strengthened by the rapid dissemination possible via digital networks, with hashtag activism and digital storytelling frequently cited as amplifiers of youth voice.

Municipal policymakers echoed this perspective, noting that digital feedback has increased responsiveness and transparency. The use of digital platforms, including WhatsApp, has enabled quicker responses to youth concerns and created a sense of direct communication between the public and the council (Capricorn Municipal Official 2 2025). These findings align with the prominence of participatory democracy theory in advocating for accessible, ongoing public engagement, as well as digital inclusion's focus on reducing practical and psychological barriers to participation.

Theme 2: From Expression to Influence – The Limits of Digital Engagement

While digital platforms are widely celebrated as avenues for expression, interviewees were more circumspect about their capacity to deliver genuine influence or policy change. A youth activist from Capricorn expressed concern that while digital platforms make it easy to share issues, such efforts often fail to influence decision-making (Capricorn Youth Activist 6 2025). They noted that municipal councils sometimes appear more responsive to media or political actors than to the voices of young people online. A youth activist from Vhembe remarked that “while digital participation can enhance visibility, it often fails to influence municipal processes when officials perceive it as mere protest or disruptive noise rather than legitimate civic input” (Vhembe Youth Activist 7 2025).

A recurrent pattern was the perception of “digital tokenism”: instances in which youth input was acknowledged but not systematically incorporated into municipal decision-making. Both youth and digital experts cited examples of online consultations or suggestion boxes that led to little action, or in which feedback was “not taken seriously.” This sometimes led to frustration and disengagement, reinforcing scepticism about the authenticity of local government openness.

Theme 3: The Digital Divide as a Persistent Barrier

A key recurring theme was that the digital divide continues to limit youth participation and advocacy: urban and peri-urban youth generally enjoy regular smartphone use and stable connectivity, while rural and low-income youth face significant barriers, including high data costs, limited device access, unreliable electricity, and low digital literacy. A youth activist from rural Vhembe shared that limited access to affordable data often restricts their online engagement to times when free Wi-Fi is available at school, highlighting the economic barriers to consistent digital participation (Vhembe Youth Activist 2 2025). A youth mobiliser and NGO worker from Capricorn highlighted that many young people in rural villages continue to rely on traditional communication channels such as word of mouth and radio, noting that digital campaigns often fail to reach these communities effectively (Capricorn Youth Mobiliser and NGO Worker 2025).

Municipal officials confirmed that, when conducted, online consultations tended to attract more responses from better-connected wards, raising internal concerns about

representativeness and equity. A policymaker from Capricorn noted that digital outreach efforts, such as using Facebook to solicit input, tend to receive more responses from youth in townships and higher-income areas, while those in remote rural villages remain difficult to engage (Capricorn Policymaker 4 2025).

Both technology experts and youth activists stressed the need to prioritise affordable data, improve youth digital literacy, and adopt multi-modal communication strategies that combine traditional and digital media. These recommendations reflect the digital inclusion theory's view that access to and skills in digital technologies are essential for equitable participation, aligning with South African policy concerns about the growing digital divide.

Theme 4: Youth Agency, Mobilisation, and New Civic Identities

Interviews revealed that, where access and skills barriers were overcome, digital platforms enabled new forms of civic identity, peer-to-peer mobilisation, and youth leadership. A youth activist from Capricorn revealed that "WhatsApp group created to share ideas about cleaning a local river evolved into a broader campaign, eventually gaining the ward councillor's attention and participation" (Capricorn Youth Activist 4 2025).

The finding aligns with youth engagement theory, showing that digital tools not only amplify young people's voices but also provide spaces to build networks, develop advocacy skills, and foster collective action. Digital storytelling, including voice notes, videos, and photo essays, was particularly effective in raising awareness of local issues and building solidarity beyond immediate communities.

Theme 5: Institutional Openness and Resistance

A fifth theme was that municipal openness to digital youth participation varied, with some officials actively integrating online feedback through dedicated platforms and consultations. A municipal official from Capricorn reported that public participation meetings have increasingly moved online, with platforms such as WhatsApp used for live feedback during council sittings. This shift has helped improve engagement with younger constituents (Capricorn Municipal Official 1 2025).

In contrast, other youth and technology experts described instances in which municipal actors were resistant or even hostile to technology-driven participation, viewing digital activism as disruptive, unmanageable, or illegitimate. A technology expert noted that some councillors tend to dismiss digital comments, viewing online activism as either hostile or politically motivated rather than as constructive civic input (Capricorn Tech Expert 3 2025). A youth activist from Vhembe observed that some older municipal officials are hesitant to engage with newer digital tools, often ignoring messages or failing to check relevant applications (Vhembe Youth Activist 1 2025).

This tension highlights the importance of institutional culture and capacity in sustaining participatory democracy, underscoring, as noted in digital inclusion literature, the need to integrate digital literacy and openness at both the governmental and citizen levels. Such cases, while not yet the norm, demonstrate that with intentional design, shared learning, and resource allocation, the constraints of the digital divide can be overcome and youth voices mainstreamed into municipal policy processes. These findings are consistent with participatory and digital inclusion theory, which encourages adaptive, context-responsive engagement.

Challenges: Sustainability, Representation, and Accountability

Interviewees also identified several enduring challenges. These included the sustainability of digital enthusiasm (with “activism fatigue” reported after unsuccessful campaigns), concern that more vocal or connected youth may dominate online debates (leaving marginalised voices unheard), and the lack of formal mechanisms to track, audit, and report back on the impact of digital participation. A youth activist from Capricorn explained that “although their online campaign initially gained attention, the council’s delayed response caused public interest to wane” (Capricorn Youth Activist, 7 2025). Although their online campaign initially generated significant attention, the council’s delayed response led to a decline in public interest (Capricorn Youth Activist, 7 2025).

A youth activist from Vhembe highlights the importance of acknowledging and addressing online contributions, warning that “failure to do so can lead young people to feel exploited and disengage from the process” (Vhembe Youth Activist 5 2025). Policymakers acknowledged the difficulty of translating a high volume of digital input into actionable and legitimate policy responses, especially given limited staff capacity. A municipal official from Vhembe observed that while collecting feedback online is relatively simple, the real challenge lies in effectively incorporating that input into the council’s formal workings (Vhembe Municipal Official 3 2025).

Integrating Findings and Theoretical Framework

Synthesising the empirical analysis with the study’s theoretical foundations, two dominant insights emerge. Digital platforms, when accessible and institutionally integrated, can substantially enhance youth participation in democracy, opening new avenues for information exchange, deliberation, and policy advocacy. However, their effectiveness depends critically on digital inclusion: without addressing the material, educational, and institutional preconditions for meaningful access and agency, attempts at digital democracy risk inclusivity failures and reinforce old inequalities (Boulianne 2015).

This section has presented and thematically analysed the study’s key empirical findings, demonstrating strong resonances with participatory democracy and digital inclusion theory. While the opportunities for digitally enabled youth engagement in local

governance are substantial, realising this potential in Vhembe and Capricorn remains contingent on youth agency, political will, and the systematic dismantling of access, skill, and institutional barriers. These findings lay the foundation for the discussion and recommendations that follow.

Discussion

This section analyses the findings on digital platforms, youth representation, and policy advocacy in Vhembe and Capricorn, linking them to participatory democracy and digital inclusion theory. It considers the implications for youth engagement in local governance, evaluates both the potential and limits of digital tools in democratic participation, and offers policy recommendations to promote more inclusive municipal decision-making.

Interpreting the Findings: Expanding and Limiting Factors

Digital platforms are creating new opportunities for youth participation in local governance by reducing barriers to access, enabling direct communication with officials, facilitating mobilisation, and enabling rapid advocacy (Mossberger et al. 2008). Yet, these benefits are unevenly distributed, as persistent digital divides leave many rural and low-income youth in areas like Vhembe and Capricorn with limited access to devices, affordable data, and reliable electricity, reflecting broader national trends.

This digital divide is exacerbated by disparities in digital skills and confidence, further reinforcing exclusion even with adequate technical infrastructure. Thus, while some youth can engage with local government via digital channels, others remain reliant on analogue, word-of-mouth forms of collective action and policy input, confirming the warnings of digital inclusion theorists that participation is not solely a function of platform provision, but of the full spectrum of enabling resources and capabilities (Hodzi 2022).

Digital Platforms as Vehicles for Democratic Transformation

Despite these constraints, the research highlights the transformative potential of digital platforms for revitalising local democracy in South Africa. Innovations such as digital participatory budgeting, online by-law co-design, and WhatsApp-based citizen reporting showcase the value of flexible, user-centred engagement models that meet young people “where they are.” Such models closely align with the promises of both participatory democracy (the ongoing, deliberative shaping of governance) and digital inclusion (the mediated agency of historically excluded groups).

The technology-enabled emergence of new civic identities, in which youth see themselves (and are recognised by others) as advocates, leaders, and partners in governance, offers hope for a deeper, more sustainable form of democracy. Technology-

mediated participation can foster new solidarities, bridge divisions, and expand the public sphere, especially when local political cultures are supportive (Nchaga 2025). However, digital platforms are not a panacea. Without dedicated efforts to support youth digital literacy, bridge infrastructure gaps, and counteract gatekeeping by digital feedback and accountability mechanisms, platforms risk entrenching existing disparities or creating new forms of symbolic, rather than substantive, inclusion.

Conclusion

This article examined how digital platforms influence youth participation and policy advocacy in municipal governance within South Africa's Vhembe and Capricorn districts, finding that tools such as social media, messaging apps, and civic portals can lower access barriers, amplify youth voices, and foster innovative engagement, yet remain constrained by persistent digital divides, variable digital literacy, and uneven institutional responsiveness. While many young people are willing and able to engage, effective participation depends on closing infrastructure gaps, developing practical skills, and fostering an open, responsive governance culture. The research contributes new, rural-focused evidence to debates on participatory democracy and digital inclusion, offering practical recommendations for policymakers and civil society to meaningfully integrate youth voices.

The findings show that while digital tools such as WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, and e-participation portals have the potential to significantly enhance municipal public participation by reducing geographic, social, and bureaucratic barriers for young citizens, their impact remains uneven. These platforms support broader representation and networked governance by enabling youth to voice concerns, propose solutions, and mobilise peers more efficiently. However, entrenched inequalities, particularly high data costs, unreliable connectivity, and limited device access among rural and low-income youth, continue to restrict meaningful participation and risk deepening socio-economic divides. Gaps in digital literacy among both community members and some officials further limit the effective use of these tools, underscoring that simply providing digital channels is not enough without accompanying training and support. Moreover, institutional attitudes play a critical role: while some municipal officials value and incorporate digital feedback, others remain sceptical of online activism or treat it as symbolic rather than substantive. Together, these factors highlight that the transformative potential of digital platforms depends not only on technological availability but also on equitable access, capacity-building efforts, and organisational cultures that genuinely welcome and act upon citizen input.

Policy Recommendations

National and Provincial Policy Alignment for Digital Inclusion

To ensure that digital participation becomes a sustainable and equitable feature of youth engagement, national and provincial policymakers must integrate digital inclusion goals

such as infrastructure development, data affordability, and digital literacy into all youth and municipal governance frameworks. This requires not only policy alignment but also the allocation of dedicated budget lines within relevant departments to support youth digital engagement initiatives. Without financial and institutional commitment at higher levels of government, local efforts risk fragmentation and under-resourcing, particularly in rural districts like Vhembe and Capricorn.

Strengthening Local Governance through Transparent Digital Participation

At the municipal level, local governments must take proactive steps to develop and publicise clear digital participation policies. These policies should be co-designed with youth stakeholders to ensure they are accessible, relevant, and inclusive. Furthermore, municipalities should institutionalise mechanisms to routinely evaluate and publish feedback on digital submissions. This transparency is critical for building trust and legitimacy, especially among young people who may otherwise perceive digital engagement as performative or tokenistic. By embedding accountability into digital governance, municipalities can foster more meaningful and sustained youth participation.

Bridging the Digital Divide through Infrastructure Investment

To enable meaningful youth participation in municipal governance, investment in affordable broadband infrastructure and the rollout of municipal Wi-Fi hotspots, particularly in rural wards, must be prioritised. In both Vhembe and Capricorn districts, limited internet access remains a structural barrier that disproportionately affects young people in under-resourced communities. By expanding digital infrastructure, municipalities can create the foundational conditions for inclusive digital engagement, ensuring that rural youth are not excluded from policy discourse due to geographic or economic constraints.

Empowering Youth through Digital Literacy and Civic Education

Digital access alone is insufficient without the skills to navigate and influence online governance spaces. Municipalities should launch youth-focused digital literacy and civic education programmes that equip young people with the tools to critically engage with policy processes. These programmes should be co-designed with youth-led organisations to ensure relevance and resonance. In both districts, interviewees emphasised the need for training that extends beyond technical skills to encompass knowledge of municipal structures, rights-based advocacy, and online safety.

Institutionalising Digital Participation Mechanisms

For digital engagement to be effective, municipalities must establish formal structures to process, respond to, and integrate online submissions into their decision-making processes. The current ad hoc approach undermines trust and discourages sustained participation. Institutional mechanisms such as digital feedback dashboards, response

timelines, and youth liaison officers can help bridge the gap between online input and offline action. Without such systems, digital platforms risk becoming symbolic rather than substantive tools of governance.

Co-Creation and Collaborative Governance

A recurring theme in the study is the importance of co-creating digital engagement strategies. Municipal officials, youth-led organisations, and technology partners should collaborate to design platforms that are accessible, transparent, and responsive. This participatory approach not only enhances the legitimacy of digital tools but also fosters a sense of ownership among young people. In both Vhembe and Capricorn, co-creation was identified as a pathway to more context-sensitive and sustainable digital governance models.

Directions for Future Research and Policy Innovation

Future research should build on these findings by exploring intersectional access issues, such as those related to gender, disability, and language, and by assessing the longitudinal policy impact of digital advocacy campaigns. Additionally, there is a need to examine how offline and online participation can be integrated into hybrid engagement models that reflect the lived realities of South African youth. By addressing these gaps, municipalities, especially in rural districts, can move toward more inclusive, responsive, and participatory governance that reflects the voices and agency of their youth populations.

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