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COLLABORATING FOR AFRICA'S DEVELOPMENT: THE ROLE OF BRETTON WOODS INSTITUTIONS AND THE NEW DEVELOPMENT BANK

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Abstract. Africa's development financing has been shaped by traditional international institutions such as the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWIs) and newer entities, such as the New Development Bank (NDB), established by the BRICS countries. The BWIs, particularly the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, have provided critical financial support. Still, they are often criticised for their rigid conditionalities, which limit African countries' autonomy in development planning. In contrast, the NDB offers a more flexible, partnership-driven approach despite facing governance and institutional capacity challenges. The study explores the feasibility and challenges of collaboration between BWIs and the NDB to fund development projects in Africa. Addressing a gap in the literature, the research investigates how these institutions can work together to create a more balanced and effective development model that prioritises both economic growth and social development. The problem lies in the stark differences between the BWIs' conditionality-driven model and the NDB's evolving governance structures, which present challenges to achieving sustainable development in Africa. Utilising a qualitative research design, the study gathered data through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including policymakers and development experts, and document analysis of institutional reports. Findings indicate that while BWIs' strict conditionalities promote fiscal discipline, they often undermine social development by prioritising short-term economic goals. Conversely, the NDB's flexibility supports greater local ownership but struggles with governance and accountability issues. Both institutions are influenced by the geopolitical interests of their dominant member states, complicating their effectiveness in promoting Africa's long-term development. Recommendations include creating a hybrid financing model that combines the financial discipline of BWIs with the flexibility of the NDB, strengthening governance through joint capacity-building initiatives to address institutional capacity gaps, and ensuring that development projects align with Africa's long-term strategic goals. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to assess the lasting impacts of these institutions on sustainable development outcomes in Africa.

Keywords: Bretton Woods Institutions; New Development Bank; Africa; development financing; governance; sustainable development

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JEL Classifications: O1, O11, 022

Additional disciplines: public administration; political sciences

1. Introduction and Background

Africa's development trajectory has been shaped by a complex set of internal and external forces, particularly the influence of international financial institutions. Despite abundant natural resources, the continent has faced longstanding developmental challenges, such as entrenched poverty, inequality, infrastructure deficits, and political instability. These issues have been exacerbated by global economic trends, regional conflicts, and governance challenges, all of which have hindered Africa's ability to achieve sustainable development. International organisations like the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWIs), namely the International Monetary Fund

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(IMF) and the World Bank, have been central to attempts to address these issues by providing financial assistance and policy advice to African nations, especially during periods of economic crisis. However, the effectiveness of these interventions has been a subject of debate, as the conditionalities attached to BWI funding often require recipient countries to implement stringent economic reforms that may conflict with local priorities and social needs (NDB, 2021; World Bank, 2023). These reforms, typically centred around macroeconomic stability and liberalisation, have been criticised for exacerbating inequality and stifling long-term, inclusive development in Africa (Alao, 2007).

Since the mid-20th century, the role of BWIs in African development has grown significantly, particularly during economic crises, when African countries have turned to these institutions for financial bailouts and policy guidance. For example, many African nations sought assistance from the IMF and the World Bank to stabilise their economies during the global oil crises of the 1970s and the debt crises of the 1980s. However, these interventions were often accompanied by Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), which required countries to adopt austerity measures, privatise state-owned enterprises, and liberalise their markets. While these reforms were intended to restore fiscal balance and promote growth, they frequently increased unemployment, reduced public spending on essential services, and deepened poverty, particularly in rural areas (Bannon & Collier, 2003). These outcomes highlight a fundamental tension between the goals of short-term macroeconomic stabilisation and the need for long-term, sustainable development that addresses the social and economic needs of Africa's most vulnerable populations (Nyadera et al., 2022).

In contrast to the BWIs, new institutional frameworks such as the New Development Bank (NDB), established by BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), offer alternative mechanisms for financing development in Africa. The NDB was founded to support infrastructure and sustainable development projects in emerging economies, including Africa (NDB, 2021). Unlike the BWIs, criticised for their top-down, conditionality-based approach, the NDB promotes a more flexible, partnership-oriented development financing model. This model emphasises mutual benefit and respect for national sovereignty, allowing African countries more significant control over the design and implementation of development projects. By focusing on infrastructure development—such as transportation, energy, and telecommunications—the NDB seeks to address some structural impediments to African growth while fostering regional integration and economic diversification (Hofman & Srinivas, 2024).

The divergence in approach between the BWIs and the NDB has led to ongoing debates about which institution is better suited to address Africa's development needs. On the one hand, the BWIs have a more extended history of engagement in Africa and possess the financial resources and institutional capacity to support large-scale projects. Their expertise in managing complex macroeconomic stabilisation programs and overseeing significant infrastructure investments is unmatched. However, the rigid conditionalities imposed by these institutions have often undermined their effectiveness, leading to a backlash from African governments and civil society groups who argue that the BWIs' policies are out of touch with the realities on the ground (Alesina et al., 2006). On the other hand, the NDB's more flexible approach, which allows for greater local ownership and customisation of projects, has been praised for aligning more closely with African countries' sovereignty and developmental priorities. Nevertheless, the NDB remains a relatively new institution and faces challenges related to capacity building, governance, and trust-building with African governments (NDB, 2021).

The potential for collaboration between these institutions is an area of growing interest, particularly as Africa's development challenges become increasingly complex and multidimensional. Recent studies have suggested that a hybrid model of collaboration between BWIs and the NDB could offer significant benefits by combining the financial discipline and technical expertise of the former with the flexibility and local responsiveness of the latter (Khuzwayo, 2023). Collaboration could help address both institutions' trust deficits and capacity limitations. For example, the IMF and the World Bank's extensive experience in managing large-scale infrastructure projects could complement the NDB's more flexible financing model, enabling greater project customisation to meet

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African countries' specific needs (World Bank, 2023, 2026). However, significant obstacles remain, including differing governance structures, institutional mandates, and priorities between the BWIs and the NDB (Khuzwayo, 2023).

This study investigates the feasibility and challenges of collaboration between BWIs and the NDB to fund development projects in Africa. While both institutions play significant roles in Africa's economic development, a notable gap in the literature concerns how their respective strengths—BWIs' extensive experience and financial capacity and the NDB's flexibility and partnership-driven approach—can be synergised to address Africa's unique development needs better. Existing research has focused mainly on these institutions in isolation, often critiquing BWIs' conditionalities or highlighting the NDB's emerging role. Still, few studies have examined the potential benefits and obstacles of collaboration between these major financial players. This study addresses this gap by exploring how such collaboration could better support Africa's long-term development objectives, providing new insights into how financial institutions can foster more inclusive, context-sensitive, and sustainable growth.

In analysing the synergies and challenges within these institutional frameworks, the study will also delve into broader implications for Africa's development trajectory. Particular attention will be given to critical themes such as enhancing transparency, strengthening institutional capacity, and promoting inclusive development approaches that are responsive to the needs of African countries. By critically assessing the roles, challenges, and potential collaborations between BWIs and the NDB, this research contributes to ongoing debates about the most effective strategies for tackling Africa's complex development challenges. Ultimately, this study aims to provide actionable recommendations to foster a more effective partnership between these institutions, helping bridge the gap between Africa's economic aspirations and the financial mechanisms needed to achieve them.

2. Literature Review

Theoretical framework

Development financing in Africa has been a focal point of significant academic discourse, with various theoretical frameworks shedding light on the roles and impacts of international financial institutions. A critical perspective in this debate is World-Systems Theory, which argues that global economic structures are designed to perpetuate the dominance of wealthy, industrialised nations (core nations) over less-developed, resource-rich countries (peripheral nations) (Wallerstein, 2004). In this context, BWIs (like the IMF and the World Bank) are often seen as tools that reinforce these global hierarchies by imposing economic reforms that benefit core nations at the expense of peripheral countries. These reforms usually involve neoliberal policies in Africa, such as market liberalisation and privatisation, increased dependence on foreign aid and external markets, and a limitation on the continent's ability to pursue independent development strategies (Alao, 2007). Moreover, these reforms have typically failed to consider Africa's unique socio-political contexts, leading to unsustainable economic models that exacerbate poverty and inequality (Bannon & Collier, 2003; World Bank, 2026).

In contrast, Political Realism offers another critical theoretical lens for understanding the motivations behind international financial institutions' interventions. This theory, rooted in the belief that states act primarily in their self-interest, posits that the financial assistance provided by BWIs and the NDB is driven not by altruism but by geopolitical and economic interests (Morgenthau, 2005). Regarding BWIs, critics argue that their policies are often influenced by the strategic interests of powerful donor nations, particularly the United States and European countries, which use these institutions to extend their influence in Africa (Hofman & Srinivas, 2024). Similarly, the NDB, while promoting a more flexible and partnership-oriented approach, can also be viewed through a realist lens. BRICS nations, particularly China and Russia, are seen as using the NDB to expand their geopolitical influence in Africa, with development finance serving as a means to secure access to the continent's vast natural resources (Chagas de Assis 2024).

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Participatory Development Theory, on the other hand, presents a more optimistic framework for understanding the NDB's role in Africa. This theory emphasises the importance of local ownership and decision-making in development processes. It argues that development projects are more likely to succeed when driven by the needs and priorities of the communities they aim to serve (Twinamasiko & Turyamureeba, 2025). The NDB's approach aligns closely with this theory, as it promotes collaboration between African governments and BRICS nations in the design and implementation of infrastructure projects, allowing for greater local input and control (NDB, 2021). Unlike the top-down, prescriptive approaches of BWIs, which have often been criticised for imposing external solutions on African countries, the NDB's model is seen as more responsive to the specific developmental needs of African nations, particularly in infrastructure development and sustainable growth (BRICS Policy Centre, 2021). This alignment with participatory development principles has led to increased support for the NDB in Africa, with many viewing it as a more viable alternative to the traditional dominance of BWIs (World Bank, 2023; Hofman & Srinivas, 2024).

However, despite the theoretical appeal of the NDB's model, its effectiveness in practice remains a subject of debate. Critics argue that while the NDB's emphasis on infrastructure development is essential for Africa's long-term growth, its focus on large-scale projects may overlook more immediate social development needs, such as healthcare, education, and poverty reduction (Bannon & Collier, 2003; World Bank, 2026). Furthermore, there are concerns that the NDB, like the BWIs, may prioritise the interests of its most influential members—China and Russia—over the needs of African nations. This raises questions about whether the NDB can genuinely serve as a counterbalance to BWIs or perpetuate similar power dynamics in global development finance. Thus, while Participatory Development Theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the NDB's potential, it must be critically assessed alongside other theoretical perspectives that highlight the geopolitical and economic realities of international development finance.

The theoretical frameworks outlined above—World Systems Theory, Political Realism, and Participatory Development Theory—will shape this study's analysis by providing distinct lenses for assessing the roles and impacts of BWIs and the NDB in Africa's development. World-Systems Theory will be used to evaluate how the policies of these institutions reinforce or challenge global economic hierarchies, particularly regarding Africa's dependence on external financial assistance (Wallerstein, 2004). This framework will be critical in analysing the structural conditions that limit Africa's ability to pursue autonomous development strategies despite the presence of both BWIs and the NDB (Alao, 2007). Political Realism will provide insights into the motivations behind these institutions' financial interventions, enabling the study to critically assess the geopolitical and economic interests that shape development finance in Africa (Morgenthau, 2005). Finally, the Participatory Development Theory will guide the evaluation of the NDB's partnership-oriented model, focusing on the extent to which it promotes local ownership and decision-making in African development projects (Twinamasiko & Turyamureeba, 2025). Together, these frameworks will enable a comprehensive analysis of the synergies and challenges associated with BWI and NDB collaboration in funding developmental projects in Africa.

Empirical studies on institutional effectiveness

Empirical studies assessing the effectiveness of BWIs and the NDB in Africa present a complex and often contested picture, shaped by differing institutional mandates, governance structures, and development philosophies. BWIs, particularly the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, have historically played a central role in stabilising African economies during periods of fiscal distress by providing liquidity support and policy guidance. For example, IMF interventions during global economic shocks have been credited with preventing macroeconomic collapse in several African economies (IMF, 2020a,b, 2023). However, a growing body of recent empirical literature highlights that these interventions remain deeply embedded in conditionality frameworks that prioritise fiscal consolidation over inclusive development outcomes (Olaoye, 2022; Momoh, 2023).

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Contemporary studies further demonstrate that austerity-linked reforms—such as wage bill containment and public expenditure cuts—continue to exacerbate inequality and weaken already fragile public service systems across Sub-Saharan Africa (Kentikelenis & Stubbs, 2023; Green, 2025). These findings reinforce longstanding critiques that BWIs tend to favour short-term macroeconomic stability at the expense of long-term developmental transformation (Harvey, 2005; World Bank, 2023). Moreover, recent analyses of IMF programme design indicate that while conditionalities have evolved rhetorically toward "social protection," their implementation often remains constrained by technocratic priorities and external policy prescriptions (Sahasrabuddhe & Seddon, 2025).

In contrast, the NDB represents an emerging paradigm in development finance, characterised by greater flexibility, borrower ownership, and alignment with national development priorities. Empirical evidence from infrastructure financing initiatives—such as Nigeria's Lekki Deep Sea Port—suggests that NDB-funded projects are less encumbered by stringent policy conditionalities, thereby enabling greater policy autonomy for recipient states (NDB, 2021). This model resonates with broader shifts toward South–South cooperation and alternative development financing architectures. However, recent scholarship cautions that the NDB's institutional novelty presents significant governance and accountability challenges. Studies indicate that while the NDB promotes a partnership-oriented approach, it is still consolidating its internal oversight, environmental safeguards, and evaluation systems (Wang, 2019; Kellerman, 2021).

More recent comparative analyses highlight that new multilateral development banks—including the NDB—face a "legitimacy–capacity paradox," where increased flexibility and responsiveness may come at the cost of weaker institutional controls and transparency mechanisms. This suggests that while the NDB offers an important alternative to BWIs, its long-term effectiveness will depend on strengthening governance frameworks without replicating the rigidities associated with traditional institutions.

A comparative examination of BWIs and the NDB reveals a fundamental divergence in development approaches. BWIs continue to prioritise macroeconomic stability through structural reforms, often leading to reduced public investment in critical social sectors (Olaoye, 2022). Empirical evidence shows that such reforms have, in some cases, contributed to persistent development inequalities and limited state capacity in African contexts (Kentikelenis & Stubbs, 2023). Conversely, the NDB's focus on infrastructure development and long-term growth aligns more closely with structural transformation agendas in Africa. Its financing model, which emphasises national ownership and contextual responsiveness, has been identified as a key strength in recent development finance literature.

At the same time, emerging research on global financial governance suggests that institutions such as the NDB and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) are not entirely detached from geopolitical dynamics but rather represent a reconfiguration of global power relations in development finance (King, 2022). This reinforces the argument that institutional effectiveness must be understood not only in technical terms but also within broader political economy contexts.

Despite the relative advantages associated with the NDB's model, empirical studies consistently identify institutional capacity constraints as a critical bottleneck affecting development outcomes across Africa. Projects financed by both BWIs and the NDB frequently encounter delays, cost overruns, and implementation inefficiencies due to weak administrative systems, procurement challenges, and limited technical expertise at the national level (Khuzwayo, 2023; Etikan & Bala, 2017). Recent global infrastructure research further confirms that project underperformance is strongly correlated with governance deficits and inadequate planning capacity in developing economies (World Bank, 2023). These findings underscore the importance of embedding capacity-building and institutional strengthening within development financing frameworks, rather than treating them as peripheral components.

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The theoretical frameworks underpinning these empirical insights remain essential for interpreting institutional effectiveness. World Systems Theory continues to provide a critical lens for understanding how BWIs may reproduce structural dependency within the global economic system (Wallerstein, 2004). Recent scholarship extends this argument by demonstrating how historical financial architectures—rooted in the Bretton Woods system—continue to shape contemporary inequalities in global monetary governance (Green, 2025; King, 2022). In parallel, Political Realism offers a useful framework for analysing how both BWIs and the NDB are influenced by the strategic interests of dominant member states, with development outcomes often reflecting broader geopolitical priorities (Morgenthau, 2005; Sahasrabuddhe & Seddon, 2025).

Overall, while both BWIs and the NDB remain central actors in Africa's development financing landscape, their effectiveness is mediated by competing priorities, governance constraints, and political dynamics. BWIs' emphasis on macroeconomic discipline often constrains social development, whereas the NDB's flexible, partnership-driven approach enhances local ownership but raises concerns regarding institutional robustness. Consequently, recent empirical and policy-oriented literature increasingly advocates for a hybrid or complementary model—one that integrates the financial discipline and technical expertise of BWIs with the contextual responsiveness and flexibility of the NDB—to address better Africa's complex and evolving development challenges (Khuzwayo, 2023).

3. Methodological Framework

This study adopts a qualitative research paradigm rooted in interpretivism, focusing on the subjective meanings individuals and groups attach to their experiences and interactions. Interpretivism is particularly suitable for this study as it explores African stakeholders' nuanced and multifaceted perceptions regarding the influence of the NDB and BRICS-Africa Forums on Africa's sustainable development. By emphasising the subjective meanings individuals attribute to these institutional partnerships, the interpretive approach enables the generation of in-depth, context-sensitive insights through direct engagement with participants in their natural settings (Berg, 2004; Bryman, 2016). This approach is ideal for investigating how the dynamics of international cooperation, mainly through the NDB and BRICS, shape African economic development trajectories.

Furthermore, interpretivism allows the researcher to delve into the complexity of institutional interactions and the perceptions of critical actors involved in Africa's development. This paradigm is integral to the study's objectives, which focus on understanding how African nations can strategically leverage support from the NDB and BRICS-Africa Forums to address their development challenges. Through this qualitative lens, the research examines how institutional actors from different backgrounds—from policymakers to development professionals—interpret their roles within these frameworks.

The study employs a qualitative research design to explore the intricacies of international cooperation within the context of African development. A qualitative design allows for flexibility in exploring emerging themes during the research process while centring on participants' lived experiences and perceptions (Berg, 2004). This design is particularly effective in investigating complex social phenomena, such as the strategic role of BRICS-Africa Forums and the NDB in addressing Africa's development priorities (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Qualitative research is well-suited to understanding how these institutions influence Africa's development landscape, including the varying dynamics across infrastructure, education, and sustainable development (Bryman, 2016).

A case study approach is integrated into the research design to provide a detailed exploration of specific projects and initiatives within the NDB and BRICS-Africa collaborations. Case studies, including projects in South Africa, Mozambique, and Ghana, will illustrate the practical outcomes of these institutional partnerships. By focusing on real-world examples, the case study method provides empirical grounding for the research while allowing for a deeper exploration of how these partnerships affect Africa's development trajectory. Additionally, case studies provide insight into the local and regional variations in the execution of development projects.

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Data collection and sampling methods

Semi-structured interviews are the primary data collection tool employed in this study, chosen for their flexibility and ability to capture in-depth insights into key stakeholders' perspectives. These interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 15 participants, all of whom had a deep understanding of BRICS, the NDB, and their impact on Africa's development. The sample includes professionals from institutions directly engaged with African development, particularly those involved in BRICS-related activities. This purposive sampling ensures that the study targets individuals with relevant experience, thereby enabling a detailed exploration of the research questions. The diverse backgrounds of the participants, ranging from policymakers to academics, help provide multiple perspectives on the dynamics of BRICS-NDB collaboration.

Participants were drawn from six key institutions, including the NDB African Regional Centre, BRICS Think Tanks, African embassies, and policymakers from the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO). These participants were selected for their direct involvement in BRICS-Africa and NDB initiatives, making their insights particularly valuable for understanding the institutional dynamics shaping Africa's development. Table 1 summarises the key participants, their roles, and the justification for their inclusion.

Table 1. Interview Participants

Department/Organisation	**Number of Participants**	**Position**	**Justification for Selection**
New Development Bank Institution (African Region)	5	Senior Professionals and Officers	Responsible for project origination, implementation monitoring, and client relations
African Embassy Officials (Ghana, Mozambique, Angola, etc.)	2	Ambassadors	Selected based on their relations with BRICS countries
BRICS Think Tanks	5	Policy Analysts	Provide independent and scientific foreign policy advice to government and parliament
BRICS Academic Forums	5	Professors and Senior Lecturers in Public Administration and International Relations	Bring extensive academic and professional experience in the field of BRICS and African development
DIRCO	5	Public Diplomacy and Director General's Office	Key implementers of South African foreign policy
Academies of Social Sciences	5	Senior Managers and Researchers in International Relations	Experts in social sciences with a focus on BRICS and global development issues

Document analysis is used to complement the interview data. This involves reviewing policy documents, reports, and academic papers on the NDB, BRICS-Africa Forums, and Africa's economic development. Document analysis helps triangulate the interview data, adding depth to the study by providing broader contextual information (Bowen, 2009). Sources include official NDB reports, BRICS policy papers, and development evaluations published by African governments and international organisations. They review these documents to understand how policy decisions and institutional practices translate into on-the-ground development outcomes (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

Data analysis methods

Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with policymakers, NDB representatives, and development experts. This approach involves systematically identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns or themes within the dataset (Krippendorff, 2004). Initially, data-driven codes were generated from the participants' responses, capturing their varied perspectives on the operations

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and collaborations between the BWIs and the NDB. For example, codes such as "rigid conditionalities" and "governance challenges" were identified during the analysis. A continual comparison process was applied, allowing the researcher to compare and contrast codes across interviews, which helped refine and consolidate them into broader themes.

As part of the thematic analysis, codes were grouped into broader categories that reflected the study's central issues. These included institutional governance, conditionalities, and collaboration dynamics between BWIs and the NDB. For instance, codes such as "geopolitical influence" and "collaborative potential" emerged as key indicators of the differing motivations and potential for cooperation among these institutions. The process of continual comparison facilitated the identification of recurring themes, such as governance structures and the impact of conditionalities on African autonomy in development planning, which were consistently highlighted across the participants' responses. To ensure consistency and coherence in theme development, the study applied an explicit theoretical framework that grounded the analysis within established governance and development financing concepts. This approach helped mitigate potential inconsistencies in the thematic analysis, ensuring that the identified themes aligned with the research's theoretical underpinnings. The codes and their corresponding broader themes identified through the thematic analysis are below.

Table 2. Codes and themes

Participants Code	Interview Question	Codes	Description	Theme
AFR1	How do BWIs' conditionalities affect your country's development?	Rigid conditionalities	Discusses how BWIs' stringent conditions limit national autonomy and development priorities.	Conditionalities and Autonomy
NDBR2	What challenges does the NDB face in project implementation?	Governance challenges	Highlights weak governance structures in the NDB that hinder project execution and monitoring.	Governance Structures and Capacity
EMB3	How do you perceive the role of BRICS in African development?	Geopolitical influence	Explores how BRICS nations use the NDB to expand geopolitical influence in Africa.	Geopolitical Motivations
POL4	How do you assess collaboration between BWIs and the NDB?	Collaborative potential	Discusses opportunities for hybrid financing models that combine flexibility and financial discipline.	Collaboration Dynamics and Outcomes

Trustworthiness and credibility

Several strategies are employed to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings. Triangulation of data sources (interviews and document reviews) is used to cross-verify findings, ensuring the results are consistent and well-supported (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Additionally, member checking is conducted by sharing interview transcripts with participants for validation, ensuring their views are accurately captured. This process enhances the reliability of the findings, aligning with Creswell and Poth's (2024) recommendations for maintaining qualitative rigour. Reflexivity, where the researcher actively reflects on potential biases, is also incorporated into the research process to ensure objectivity in data interpretation.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the key findings of the study, based on stakeholder interviews and document analysis. These findings are framed within the study's theoretical perspectives. Each finding addresses critical aspects of how the NDB and BWIs operate in Africa, particularly regarding development financing, governance, geopolitical motivations, and the impact on sustainable development.

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Conditionalities and autonomy in development financing

One of the most significant findings relates to the conditionalities attached to development financing by BWIs, particularly the IMF and the World Bank. The interviews revealed a clear consensus among African policymakers and development experts that the rigid conditionalities imposed by BWI often limit African countries' ability to shape their development agendas. This was particularly evident in the analysis of SAPs, designed to ensure fiscal stability but often at the cost of social development (IMF, 2020). Many interview participants highlighted the IMF's insistence on austerity measures, which reduced social spending, including healthcare and education, thus exacerbating poverty and inequality (Khuzwayo, 2023). This reflects the central argument of World Systems Theory, which posits that global financial systems are structured to maintain the dominance of core nations over peripheral ones by restricting the latter's development options (Wallerstein, 2004).

The document analysis showed that these conditionalities have long-term implications for the autonomy of African states. BWI reports frequently emphasise the importance of macroeconomic stability but rarely acknowledge the social costs associated with these reforms (World Bank, 2023). This finding was supported by interviewees at African embassies, who noted that while BWI funding provided short-term financial relief, it often imposed conditions that undermined local ownership of development projects. One policymaker from Ghana noted that "*the strings attached to World Bank loans sometimes force us to prioritise short-term fiscal discipline over long-term developmental goals, making it difficult to invest in key sectors like education and healthcare*" (Interview Participant 5, 2023).

In contrast, the NDB's more flexible financing model, which does not impose the same level of stringent conditionalities, was consistently praised by African stakeholders. Several interviewees highlighted that the NDB gives African governments greater control over the design and implementation of development projects, particularly in infrastructure (NDB, 2021). This approach is more in line with Participatory Development Theory, which emphasises local ownership and decision-making as essential components of successful development interventions. Document analysis of NDB reports confirmed that the institution aims to align its projects with the national development strategies of member countries, reinforcing the idea that development should be driven by local priorities rather than external mandates (NDB, 2020, 2021).

Governance structures and institutional capacity

The findings also highlighted significant differences in governance structures between BWIs and the NDB, and how these differences affect the success and sustainability of African development projects. BWIs, particularly the IMF and the World Bank, have well-established governance frameworks that include rigorous oversight mechanisms to ensure loans are used efficiently and in accordance with their terms (World Bank, 2021). Interviews with African stakeholders revealed a mixed perception of these governance frameworks. While some appreciated the transparency and accountability that BWIs bring to development financing, others criticised them for being too prescriptive and overly bureaucratic. One senior official from the New Development Bank stated, "*The IMF's stringent governance and oversight mechanisms often slow down project implementation, and sometimes the processes become more important than the outcomes*" (Interview Participant 3, 2023). From the document review, it became clear that BWIs' governance frameworks are deeply embedded in global financial structures dominated by Western countries. This finding supports political Realism, which argues that international institutions are often instruments of dominant global powers that serve their geopolitical interests (Morgenthau, 2005). For instance, the IMF's governance structures allow disproportionate influence to the United States and European countries, which means that the policies imposed on African countries are often aligned with the strategic interests of these global powers. Several interviewees pointed out that these governance frameworks frequently prioritise donor countries' interests over recipient nations' developmental needs, thereby reinforcing the global economic hierarchy described by World-Systems Theory (Wallerstein, 2004).

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In contrast, the NDB's governance structures are still evolving. Many participants emphasised that the NDB, as a relatively new institution, has greater governance flexibility but lacks the robust oversight mechanisms of the BWIs (NDB, 2021). A senior policy analyst from a BRICS Think Tank observed, "*The NDB's governance is still in its infancy, and while this allows for more local input, it also creates risks related to project oversight and accountability*" (Interview Participant 7, 2023). This was echoed in the document analysis, which revealed that the NDB is still working to develop its internal oversight frameworks, especially in monitoring and evaluating projects (NDB, 2020). This governance gap was highlighted as a potential weakness in the NDB model, particularly in countries with weak institutional capacities.

Geopolitical motivations behind development finance

The geopolitical motivations behind development financing emerged as a critical theme in interviews and document analysis. Participants consistently noted that the NDB, despite its emphasis on partnership and development, is viewed by many African stakeholders as a tool for BRICS nations, particularly China and Russia, to expand their geopolitical influence in Africa. This perception was supported by document analysis, which showed that many NDB-funded projects are strategically located in areas of geopolitical interest to BRICS countries (Khuzwayo, 2023). For instance, infrastructure projects such as the Lekki Deep Sea Port in Nigeria, while undoubtedly beneficial for regional integration, are also critical to China's broader Belt and Road Initiative (NDB, 2021).

Several interview participants from African embassies and BRICS Think Tanks expressed concerns that the NDB may prioritise projects that serve the geopolitical interests of BRICS nations over the development needs of African countries. One academic from the BRICS Academic Forum noted, "*While the NDB offers an alternative to the IMF and World Bank, it is not free from geopolitical motivations. The challenge is ensuring that Africa's interests remain at the forefront of these collaborations*" (Interview Participant 9, 2023). This finding aligns with Political Realism, which posits that international institutions are driven by the self-interest of powerful states (Morgenthau, 2005). Similarly, several reviewed documents highlighted the strategic interests of BRICS nations in expanding their influence in Africa through the NDB, particularly to secure access to natural resources and strategic infrastructure (Hofman & Srinivas, 2024).

However, the geopolitical motivations behind BWI interventions were also emphasised. Several participants argued that while the IMF and World Bank often present themselves as neutral development partners, their policies are deeply influenced by the strategic interests of Western nations, particularly the United States and the European Union (Harvey, 2005). This is evident in the types of reforms BWIs demand in exchange for financing, often aligning with neoliberal economic policies favoured by Western powers (World Bank, 2021). These findings reinforce the argument of World-Systems Theory that international financial institutions are instruments of global hegemony, designed to perpetuate the economic dominance of the Global North over the Global South (Wallerstein, 2004).

Impact on sustainable development and regional integration

The final key finding of the study pertains to the impact of NDB and BWI interventions on sustainable development and regional integration. Both institutions were found to play significant roles in advancing infrastructure development in Africa, but their approaches and impacts differ. The NDB's focus on large-scale infrastructure projects, such as transportation and energy, was praised by many participants as critical for fostering economic growth and regional integration (NDB, 2021). One senior official from the African Embassy in South Africa noted, "*The NDB's investments in cross-border infrastructure are essential for boosting intra-African trade and regional cooperation, which are key to sustainable development*" (Interview Participant 6, 2023).

However, several interviewees expressed concern that the NDB's emphasis on infrastructure sometimes comes at the expense of social development. While infrastructure is vital for economic growth, it must be complemented by

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investments in social sectors such as education, healthcare, and poverty reduction to ensure that the benefits of growth are equitably distributed (Khuzwayo, 2023). This critique is supported by Participatory Development Theory, which argues that development interventions must be holistic, addressing both economic and social dimensions to achieve long-term sustainability (Twinamasiko & Turyamureeba, 2025). The document analysis revealed that while the NDB has significantly addressed Africa's infrastructure needs, its focus on large-scale projects may overlook the more immediate social challenges facing African countries (NDB, 2021).

In contrast, BWIs have historically placed greater emphasis on poverty alleviation and social development, though their interventions have often been critiqued for failing to address the root causes of inequality (Harvey, 2005). Several participants highlighted the World Bank's support for education and healthcare programs as examples of the institution's broader focus on social development (World Bank, 2021). However, these efforts are often undermined by the macroeconomic conditionalities attached to BWI loans, which prioritise fiscal austerity over social investment. As one senior lecturer from the BRICS Academic Forum noted, "*The World Bank's social development projects are essential, but they are often hampered by the broader macroeconomic policies imposed by the IMF, which limit the government's ability to invest in these sectors*" (Interview Participant 8, 2023). This finding underscores the tension between the economic and social dimensions of sustainable development, a theme central to theoretical discussions of World Systems Theory and Participatory Development Theory.

The analysis of these findings reveals that while the NDB and BWI play critical roles in Africa's development, their differing approaches to governance, conditionalities, and geopolitical motivations have significant implications for the success of development projects on the continent. These findings highlight the need for a more integrated approach that balances development's economic and social dimensions, ensuring that Africa's growth is inclusive and sustainable.

5. Conclusions

This study explored the feasibility and challenges of collaboration between BWIs and the NDB financing developmental projects in Africa. The interviews and document analysis findings reveal significant differences in how these institutions operate, particularly regarding conditionalities, governance structures, geopolitical motivations, and their impact on sustainable development. BWIs, particularly the IMF and World Bank, have historically imposed stringent conditionalities that have constrained African autonomy in development planning. These conditionalities have often been viewed as reinforcing global economic hierarchies, as posited by World Systems Theory. In contrast, the NDB's partnership-oriented model offers greater flexibility and local ownership despite facing governance and institutional capacity challenges.

Geopolitical motivations also played a significant role in shaping the development agendas of both the BWIs and the NDB. Political Realism suggests that these institutions act in the interests of their dominant member states, a view supported by the findings that the NDB's projects often align with the strategic interests of BRICS nations, particularly China. At the same time, BWIs are seen as promoting Western powers' geopolitical and economic interests through neoliberal reforms. Finally, the study found that while both institutions contribute to sustainable development, the NDB's focus on infrastructure and the BWIs' emphasis on social development often create a gap between economic growth and social equity.

6. Recommendations

Based on the key findings of this study, the following strengthened recommendations aim to enhance the effectiveness of development financing in Africa through a more collaborative and context-sensitive approach between the BWIs and the NDB. These recommendations align with the findings on conditionalities, governance structures, geopolitical motivations, and sustainable development impacts.

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Develop a flexible conditionality framework tailored to local needs

The study highlights the restrictive conditionalities imposed by BWIs as a significant barrier to African countries' autonomy in development planning, whereas the NDB offers more flexibility. It is recommended that both institutions work towards creating a joint conditionality framework that allows for greater flexibility and local ownership of projects. This framework should be tailored to the socio-economic contexts of African nations, allowing governments to prioritise long-term development objectives over short-term fiscal adjustments. The NDB's partnership model, which minimises conditionalities, can be a guiding example for BWIs adopting more context-sensitive approaches. Participatory Development Theory supports this recommendation, emphasising that locally driven development interventions are more sustainable and effective. African countries, in turn, must work to articulate clear national development priorities, such as those laid out in Agenda 2063, that can serve as the basis for negotiating terms with BWIs and the NDB. The flexibility of the NDB combined with the financial discipline of BWIs can create a hybrid financing model that ensures fiscal stability while empowering African nations to shape their development pathways.

Strengthen governance and accountability mechanisms through joint capacity-building initiatives

The findings reveal that, although BWIs have well-established governance and oversight mechanisms, these often stifle local ownership due to excessive bureaucracy, and the NDB's governance frameworks are still evolving. To bridge this gap, both institutions should invest in joint capacity-building initiatives to strengthen governance structures in African countries. These initiatives should focus on strengthening local institutional capacity in project management, financial oversight, and governance, thereby enabling African governments to manage large-scale projects more effectively. BWIs and the NDB should collaborate to develop tailored capacity-building programs that equip African governments with the skills and resources to oversee complex development projects. These programs should include knowledge-sharing platforms for BWIs and the NDB to exchange best practices in transparency, accountability, and financial management. This recommendation is supported by Political Realism, which highlights the need for robust institutional frameworks to prevent external powers from exploiting governance gaps.

Promote a balanced approach between economic growth and social development

While crucial for fostering economic growth, the NDB's focus on large-scale infrastructure projects often overlooks social development sectors such as healthcare, education, and poverty reduction. On the other hand, BWIs, while focusing on poverty alleviation, have frequently undermined these efforts with stringent macroeconomic reforms. To address this imbalance, it is recommended that both institutions adopt a more integrated approach that combines infrastructure investments with targeted social development programs.

The NDB, in particular, should broaden its portfolio to include projects that directly address the social dimensions of sustainable development, such as education and healthcare systems, in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2023). BWIs should align their macroeconomic reforms with social development objectives to ensure that fiscal policies do not undermine investments in human capital. Both institutions should balance infrastructure development with social equity to create inclusive growth models that benefit all population segments.

Institutionalise geopolitical neutrality and focus on African development priorities

The study found that BWIs and the NDB are often perceived as instruments of geopolitical influence—BWIs serve Western interests, and the NDB reflects the strategic interests of BRICS nations, particularly China and Russia. To address these concerns, both institutions must institutionalise geopolitical neutrality and refocus their efforts on supporting Africa's long-term development priorities. This could be achieved by enhancing transparency in project selection processes, ensuring that projects are aligned with the national development goals of African states rather than the strategic interests of external powers.

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The NDB, in particular, should establish a clear governance framework that prioritises African-led development agendas, as outlined in Agenda 2063, while BWI should reevaluate its policy conditions to ensure they support, rather than hinder, the socio-economic growth of African countries. This would require a shift in how both institutions engage with African governments, promoting a more consultative approach that involves African stakeholders at every stage of project development and implementation. Political Realism underscores the importance of transparency and neutrality in preventing the exploitation of development financing for geopolitical gain (Morgenthau, 2005).

Enhance regional integration through cross-border collaboration on infrastructure projects

The NDB's role in financing large-scale infrastructure projects, such as the Lekki Deep Sea Port, has been praised for its potential to enhance regional integration and intra-African trade. However, regional integration requires more than physical infrastructure—it demands collaboration across policy, governance, and trade mechanisms. To maximise the impact of NDB and BWI investments, both institutions should prioritise cross-border infrastructure projects that facilitate regional integration. Still, these projects should be complemented by harmonised trade policies and regulatory frameworks that allow for the seamless movement of goods and services across African borders. The NDB should collaborate with BWIs to support regional economic communities (RECs), such as the African Union and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), to ensure that infrastructure investments are aligned with broader regional goals. This recommendation aligns with findings that infrastructure-led growth must be coupled with trade facilitation and social development to achieve sustainable economic outcomes (NDB, 2021). The continent can achieve more integrated and sustainable development outcomes beyond national borders by fostering greater collaboration between African governments, BWIs, and the NDB.

Facilitate joint monitoring and evaluation to enhance project success and sustainability

Given the challenges related to project governance and accountability, it is recommended that BWIs and the NDB establish joint M&E frameworks for all significant development projects. These frameworks should be designed to assess the economic outcomes of projects, as well as their social and environmental impacts. World Systems Theory emphasises the importance of scrutinising the operations of global institutions to ensure they do not perpetuate existing inequalities. It makes joint M&E essential for ensuring that projects serve African development needs rather than external interests.

This recommendation aligns with the need for stronger institutional capacity-building discussed earlier, as it would require training and resources to enable local governments to effectively participate in monitoring and evaluation of projects financed by both institutions. Joint M&E efforts would promote transparency, improve accountability, and ensure that development outcomes are aligned with national and regional priorities. This approach would allow BWIs and the NDB to learn from each other's best practices, improving project implementation and sustainability.

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PERCEIVED BEHAVIOURAL CONTROL AND ENTREPRENEURIAL INTENTION AMONG UNEMPLOYED YOUTH IN THE EASTERN CAPE: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF SUBJECTIVE NORMS

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Abstract. This study examines the mediating role of subjective norms in the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention among unemployed youth in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, an area marked by persistent unemployment and socioeconomic constraints. Grounded in the Theory of Planned Behaviour, the study employed a quantitative research approach using a cross-sectional survey and purposive sampling to collect data from 248 participants. Structural equation modelling was applied to test the proposed relationships among constructs. The findings indicate that perceived behavioural control has a positive, statistically significant direct effect on subjective norms ($\beta = 0.748$; $p = 0.001$). Subjective norms, in turn, positively and significantly influence entrepreneurial intention ($\beta = 0.449$; $p = 0.002$). Additionally, perceived behavioural control has a significant direct effect on entrepreneurial intention ($\beta = 0.546$; $p = 0.002$). Mediation analysis further demonstrates that subjective norms partially mediate the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention, reflecting a complementary indirect effect ($\beta = 0.374$; SE = 0.116; 95% CI [0.182, 0.640]; $p = 0.001$). These results highlight the combined importance of individual control beliefs and social influence in shaping entrepreneurial intention. The study offers practical implications for educators, policymakers, and community programmes by emphasising interventions that strengthen youth agency (skills, self-efficacy, access to resources) and cultivate supportive social norms that legitimise entrepreneurship as a viable pathway to livelihoods and inclusive development.

Keywords: unemployed youth; Eastern Cape; Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB); entrepreneurship; youth empowerment

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1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship is widely recognised as a key mechanism for addressing socioeconomic challenges in developing contexts, particularly where formal labour markets cannot absorb growing youth populations (Neneh, 2024). In South Africa, the Eastern Cape remains one of the provinces most affected by unemployment, poverty, and economic exclusion, leaving many young people with limited prospects for stable wage employment (Stats SA, 2024; Stats SA, 2025). Recent studies continue to demonstrate that entrepreneurial intention among youth is shaped by entrepreneurial education, access to finance, innovation ecosystems, and psychological capital, particularly within developing economies (Shahriar et al., 2024; Haddoud et al., 2024; Popoola, 2025).

Structural constraints such as limited access to quality education, weak industrial diversification, and inadequate infrastructure continue to restrict broad-based job creation, while sectoral contractions and uneven development further reduce entry-level opportunities for young work seekers (Eastern Cape Socioeconomic Consultative

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Council, 2024). As these constraints persist, entrepreneurship is increasingly framed not only as an economic strategy but also as a pathway toward social resilience and inclusive development in resource-constrained communities (GEM, 2024; Bowmaker-Falconer et al., 2023).

However, entrepreneurship does not begin with business registration; it begins with intention. Entrepreneurial intention refers to an individual's commitment and willingness to start a business and is frequently treated as an immediate antecedent of entrepreneurial behaviour; nonetheless, the "intention–behaviour gap" remains a key concern, especially in contexts where structural barriers prevent intentions from translating into action (Neneh, 2024). In high-unemployment contexts, young people may express interest in self-employment. Yet, their movement from aspiration to action is shaped by psychological readiness, perceived feasibility, and the social environments in which they are embedded (Zwane, 2024). Even when entrepreneurial opportunities exist, many prospective entrepreneurs face barriers such as limited access to finance, insufficient mentorship, weak market linkages, and minimal exposure to constraints on entrepreneurial learning, as repeatedly documented in South African youth entrepreneurship studies (Mhlongo et al., 2025; Zwane, 2024). These realities make it essential to understand the drivers of intention formation among unemployed youth in provinces such as the Eastern Cape. Recent studies on entrepreneurship intention in South Africa and other African contexts further suggest that entrepreneurial intention among youth is significantly influenced by entrepreneurial education, self-efficacy, social support structures, and exposure to entrepreneurship programmes (Mhlongo et al., 2025; Gathitu & Muiru, 2026).

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) remains one of the most influential frameworks for explaining the formation of intentions, including entrepreneurial intention. TPB proposes that intention is shaped by (1) attitudes toward the behaviour, (2) subjective norms, and (3) perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). While many entrepreneurship studies apply TPB in full, there is growing value in testing focused pathways to understand better mechanisms most relevant in specific populations and environments, particularly where culture and social context shape the strength of TPB relationships (Mfazi & Elliott, 2022). In socially embedded contexts where family networks, community expectations, and collective livelihood strategies are pronounced, subjective norms may play a stronger role than is sometimes observed in more individualistic settings (Pham et. al., 2023). In parallel, in settings marked by poverty and constrained opportunity, perceived behavioural control can be decisive: young people who believe they have the capability and resources (or can access them) may be more likely to develop stronger entrepreneurial intention (Villanueva-Flores et al., 2023).

Recent South African entrepreneurship intention studies grounded in the Theory of Planned Behaviour continue to demonstrate the importance of personal attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control in shaping entrepreneurial intention among unemployed youth (Murire et al., 2026). However, while prior studies have largely focused on the direct effects of TPB constructs, limited attention has been given to the mediating mechanisms through which subjective norms strengthen the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention in resource-constrained township settings.

Against this background, the present study focuses on a specific pathway within the TPB logic, how perceived behavioural control (PBC) shapes entrepreneurial intention (EI) directly and indirectly through subjective norms (SN). This emphasis is particularly relevant in the Eastern Cape, where social approval and community validation can influence whether entrepreneurship is seen as legitimate, realistic, and worth pursuing (Stats SA, 2025). Prior evidence suggests that in community-oriented environments, social influences can reinforce or constrain individual motivation, meaning intention is not only an individual psychological state but also a socially negotiated outcome (Mfazi & Elliott, 2022; Pham et al., 2023).

Therefore, the study examines whether subjective norms mediate the relationship between personal agency (PBC) and entrepreneurial intentions. In other words, beyond believing "I can do this," do young people also need to perceive "people important to me approve and support this" for entrepreneurial intention to strengthen?

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Empirically, Study 3 uses a quantitative cross-sectional survey with purposive sampling of 248 unemployed youth participants and applies structural equation modelling with bootstrapping to test the hypothesised relationships.

The results provide evidence that PBC significantly predicts SN and EI, SN significantly predicts EI, and SN partially mediates the PBC–EI relationship through a complementary indirect pathway. The contribution of this study is threefold. First, unlike many previous entrepreneurship intention studies that primarily focus on university students, this study focuses specifically on unemployed youth in a resource-constrained township context in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Second, the study extends entrepreneurship intention literature by examining the mediating role of subjective norms in the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention. Third, the findings demonstrate that entrepreneurial intention formation among unemployed youth is not only agency-driven but also socially negotiated through community support, social validation, and normative approval processes. This contribution complements recent studies on entrepreneurial intention in developing economies (Shahriar et al., 2024; Haddoud et al., 2024; Popoola, 2025).

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

Theoretical framework

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) explains how individuals form intentions that precede planned behaviours (Ajzen, 1991). The theory argues that intention is influenced by three determinants: *attitude toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control.* Attitude reflects the individual's evaluation of entrepreneurship (favourable or unfavourable), subjective norms reflect perceived social pressure or approval, and perceived behavioural control reflects perceived capability and access to resources required to perform the behaviour (Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). In entrepreneurship research, TPB is widely adopted because business creation is typically intentional and involves planning, effort and commitment over time (Krueger et al., 2000; Liñán & Chen, 2009).

A core strength of TPB is its ability to incorporate both *internal* and *external* drivers of intention. While attitudes and control beliefs are often treated as personal psychological factors, subjective norms capture how social environments shape decision-making through perceived expectations from important referent groups, such as family, peers, and community leaders (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Cialdini et al., 1990). This makes TPB particularly useful for analysing entrepreneurial intention in community-based environments where collective expectations may strongly influence what individuals perceive as acceptable and feasible (Triandis, 1995).

In this study, TPB is applied to examine (1) whether perceived behavioural control influences entrepreneurial intention directly, (2) whether subjective norms influence entrepreneurial intention, and (3) whether subjective norms mediate the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention. This mediation logic aligns with the view that individual agency (control beliefs) and perceived social approval can jointly shape entrepreneurial intention, particularly among unemployed youth operating within tight social networks and resource constraints (Schlaegel & Koenig, 2014; Liñán & Fayolle, 2015).

Recent studies on entrepreneurial intention have increasingly focused on entrepreneurial education, access to finance, psychological capital, and innovation ecosystems as predictors of entrepreneurial intention among university students and youth populations in developing countries (Shahriar et al., 2024; Haddoud et al., 2024; Popoola, 2025). However, few studies have examined how subjective norms mediate the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention among unemployed township youth operating in socioeconomically constrained environments. This study, therefore, contributes to the Theory of Planned Behaviour literature by empirically demonstrating that entrepreneurial intention among unemployed youth is simultaneously influenced by perceived capability and socially reinforced approval structures.

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Perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention

Perceived behavioural control refers to an individual's perception of their ability to control the performance of a behaviour, including the perceived availability of skills, resources, and opportunities to act (Ajzen, 1991). In entrepreneurship, PBC is conceptually close to entrepreneurial self-efficacy because both reflect confidence in one's capability to execute entrepreneurial tasks and manage uncertainty (Zhao et al., 2005). Where youth face structural barriers such as limited financial access, weak market linkages, and scarce mentorship, perceived control becomes a critical factor in seeing entrepreneurship as feasible rather than merely desirable (Szirmai et al., 2011; World Bank, 2020).

Empirical scholarship consistently supports PBC as a strong predictor of entrepreneurial intention across diverse contexts (Krueger et al., 2000; Schlaegel & Koenig, 2014). Individuals who believe they can mobilise resources, cope with business risk, and handle start-up demands are more likely to develop stronger entrepreneurial intentions (Liñán & Chen, 2009; Kautonen et al., 2015). For unemployed youth, this relationship is particularly important: intention is less likely to be driven by "interest" alone and more likely to depend on perceived feasibility under constrained conditions (ILO, 2020). In this study, perceived behavioural control had a statistically significant direct effect on entrepreneurial intention, indicating that greater control beliefs are associated with stronger intentions to pursue entrepreneurship. This supports the TPB position that perceived behavioural control functions as an intention driver, especially for behaviours that require substantial planning and resource mobilisation (Ajzen, 1991; Armitage & Conner, 2001).

Subjective norms and their mediating role

Subjective norms refer to the perceived social expectations, approval, or pressure from significant others regarding whether an individual should engage in a particular behaviour (Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). In entrepreneurship, subjective norms reflect whether family members, peers, mentors and community leaders are supportive of business start-up decisions, and whether the individual values those opinions (Liñán & Chen, 2009). Norms can encourage entrepreneurial intention by legitimising entrepreneurship as a socially acceptable and desirable pathway, particularly when social networks provide emotional support, advice, and access to resources (Cialdini et al., 1990; Kautonen et al., 2015).

While some studies have found subjective norms to be weaker than attitudes or PBC in predicting entrepreneurial intention, this often varies by context and population. In collectivist or community-oriented settings, normative pressures may be stronger because individuals rely more on family and peer networks for support and validation (Triandis, 1995). In such environments, subjective norms can operate not only as direct predictors but also as mechanisms through which personal beliefs translate into stronger intentions (Liñán & Fayolle, 2015).

From a mediation perspective, a key argument is that individuals with higher perceived behavioural control may be more likely to seek encouragement, communicate their plans confidently, and interpret feedback as supportive, thereby strengthening perceived subjective norms, which, in turn, elevate entrepreneurial intention (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). Mediation analysis in behavioural research is commonly assessed using bootstrapping because it provides more robust confidence intervals for indirect effects (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). In addition, "complementary partial mediation" occurs when both the direct and indirect effects are significant and point in the same direction (Zhao et al., 2010).

The study provides evidence for this mechanism: subjective norms significantly predicted entrepreneurial intention and significantly mediated the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention via a positive indirect effect, consistent with complementary partial mediation.

Contextualising subjective norms

Subjective norms must be interpreted within a socio-cultural context. In communities where unemployment is widespread and households depend on shared survival strategies, social approval and family influence can

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meaningfully shape entrepreneurial decision-making (Triandis, 1995; Williams & Williams, 2014). For unemployed youth, entrepreneurship can be seen either as a respected pathway to independence or as an uncertain option compared to secure employment, meaning that encouragement (or discouragement) from key referent groups can materially affect intention formation (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).

In settings like the Eastern Cape, subjective norms may be particularly salient because social networks often function as primary sources of emotional support and informal resources. Where formal institutions are limited, family members and peers can influence not only confidence but also access to information, start-up resources and market opportunities (World Bank, 2020). Therefore, understanding whether subjective norms strengthen the effect of control beliefs is important for designing interventions that are socially grounded rather than individually focused (Liñán & Fayolle, 2015).

The study's descriptive results also suggest strong relationships among the three constructs (PBC, SN and EI), which supports the view that intention formation among unemployed youth is embedded in both perceived agency and perceived social approval processes.

Hypotheses
H1: Perceived behavioural control has a statistically significant positive and direct effect on subjective norm.
H2: Subjective norm has a statistically significant positive and direct effect on entrepreneurial intention.
H3: Perceived behavioural control has a statistically significant positive and direct effect on entrepreneurial intention.
H4: Subjective norm has a significant mediating effect on the relationship between perceived behavioural control and subjective norm.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative research approach to examine the relationships among perceived behavioural control (PBC), subjective norms (SN), and entrepreneurial intention (EI) among unemployed youth in a South African township. A cross-sectional survey design was utilised to collect data at a single point in time.

A non-probability purposive sampling technique was applied to recruit participants who met the study's specific inclusion criteria, unemployed youth (18–35 years) with potential interest in entrepreneurship. This approach was appropriate because the target population was clearly defined and required deliberate selection. Data were collected from 248 participants using a self-administered questionnaire. The sample size was considered adequate for structural equation modelling (SEM), meeting recommended minimum thresholds (Wolf et al., 2013).

To enhance instrument quality, the questionnaire was reviewed for face validity by three local entrepreneurship educators and two community development practitioners, and minor revisions were made based on their feedback. A pilot study (n = 20) involving unemployed youth with similar characteristics was conducted to assess comprehension, wording clarity, and cultural appropriateness, which led to further small refinements.

The instrument was adapted from the Entrepreneurial Intention Questionnaire (EIQ) developed by Liñán and Chen (2009). All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The constructs were operationalised using established measures: subjective norms were captured using three items reflecting perceived social approval/pressure to start a business; perceived behavioural control was measured using six items assessing perceived ease/difficulty and capability to start a business; and entrepreneurial intention was assessed using six items designed to measure an individual's intention to start an enterprise (Liñán & Chen, 2009).

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Data analysis involved both descriptive and inferential procedures. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise participant demographics and the main study variables. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted in AMOS 22 to assess the measurement model's validity and reliability. Thereafter, SEM was used to test the hypothesised structural relationships among PBC, SN, and EI. A bootstrapped maximum likelihood estimation procedure was applied, and the significance of direct and indirect effects was evaluated using bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals based on 10,000 bootstrap samples. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, McDonald's omega, and Jöreskog's rho coefficients.

4. Results and Interpretation of Obtained Results

Demographic information

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarise the demographic characteristics of the respondents and the main study variables (personal attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioural control, and entrepreneurial intention). Table 1 presents the demographics of the study sample.

Table 1. Respondent demographic information

Variable	Levels	df	f	Valid %
Gender	Male	1	101	40.7
	Female		147	58.9
Age	18-21	2	63	25.4
	22-25		49	19.8
	26-29		43	17.3
	30-33		53	21.4
	34-35		39	15.7
Highest Qualification	Grade 11	3	102	41.1
	National Senior Certificate/ Matric		119	48.0
	National Certificate Vocational		9	3.6
	Diploma		14	5.6
	Degree		3	1.2
Marital Status	Single	4	239	96.4
	Married		9	3.6
Dependents	None	5	114	46.0
	1-2		100	40.3
	3-4		23	9.3
	5-more		11	4.43
Impairment/ Disability	No	6	240	96.77
	Yes		8	3.22

N= 248

The demographic profile shows that 58.9% of respondents were female and 40.7% were male, suggesting gender-related differences in entrepreneurial intention. In many developing contexts, women often engage more actively in entrepreneurship due to structural constraints such as limited access to formal employment. For this group, entrepreneurship often serves as a practical route to financial independence and autonomy (Neneh, 2020; Giwu et al., 2024).

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Almost half of the participants were aged 18–25, indicating a youth-dominated sample. This age cohort is often more willing to explore entrepreneurial opportunities and take risks, partly because they typically have fewer long-term personal obligations and may be more adaptable. These characteristics can contribute to stronger entrepreneurial intentions.

Most respondents reported secondary-level education, with 48.0% holding a National Senior Certificate and 41.1% having Grade 11. This reflects constrained access to tertiary education. In such circumstances, entrepreneurship can emerge as a more realistic and accessible pathway for income generation and self-employment (Makhetha, 2020).

In terms of socioeconomic characteristics, the majority of respondents (96.4%) were single, which may allow greater flexibility and lower risk aversion when considering entrepreneurial ventures (Libera, 2024). However, 54% reported having dependents. This suggests a complex dynamic: some unemployed youth may be driven toward entrepreneurship to meet household needs, while others may become more cautious due to financial responsibilities and the risk of unstable income (Kautonen et al., 2015; Petersen, 2021).

Only 3.22% of participants reported having a disability or impairment. While this means the findings largely reflect the perceptions of able-bodied youth, it remains important to acknowledge that youth with disabilities often face distinct barriers to entrepreneurship in township settings. These may include accessibility limitations, social stigma, and restricted support networks, which can constrain entrepreneurial participation (Giwu et al., 2024).

Validity and reliability assessment

The measurement tool was first subjected to validity and reliability assessment. The validity of the tools was examined using CFA to establish the measurement model. Reliability analysis was conducted to examine the reliability of the established factors. Since the measurement tool was adopted from other authors, literature on the instrument was used to guide the empirical factors to be loaded in the CFA. To examine the model fitness, we utilised some goodness-of-fit indices coupled with their respective criteria (see Table 2).

Table 2. Goodness of fit indices summary and their accepted values according to literature

Name of index	Cut-off points	Comment	Reference
CMIN/DF	< 3	Good fit	Hu & Bentler (1999)
	< 5	Acceptable fit	Hu & Bentler (1999)
RMSEA	≤ 0.05	Good fit	Hu & Bentler (1999)
	0.05 < RMSEA ≤ 0.10	Acceptable fit	Hu & Bentler (1999)
SRMR	≤ 0.05	Good fit	Diamantopoulos & Siguaw (2000)
	0.05 < SRMR ≤ 0.09	Acceptable fit	Hu & Bentler (1999)
CFI	1	Perfect fit	Hu & Bentler (1999)
	≥ 0.95	Good fit	Hu & Bentler (1999)
	0.90 ≤ CFI < 0.95	Acceptable fit	Hu & Bentler (1999)
NFI	1	Perfect fit	Daire Hooper, et al. (2008)
	≥ 0.95	Good fit	Daire Hooper, et al. (2008)
	0.90 ≤ NFI < 0.95	Acceptable fit	Daire Hooper, et al. (2008)

CMIN/DF = Chi-square divided by degree of freedom. **SRM*R*** **=** The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual. **RMSEA = The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation. CFI** = The Comparative Fit Index. **NFI** = The Normed Fit Index.

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In general, the results for the validity and reliability assessment of the measurement instrument, estimated from the CFA and reliability coefficients, are highly satisfactory. The most parsimonious model was achieved after eliminating items with poor factor loadings. Results from Table 3 show that all factor loadings were above 0.60, indicating satisfactory significance of the retained items. The average variance extracted (AVE) values are all greater than the required minimum of 0.50. Thus, the convergent validity is deemed adequate for the established factors. Regarding reliability, all the factors exhibited Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega values greater than 0.80. Thus, the internal consistency of the factors is highly satisfactory. Further, assessing the Jöreskog rho, the values are more than 0.80 for all the major variables; thus, composite reliability is also highly satisfactory for the established measurement model. The resulting measurement model (see Figure 1) shows high factor loadings, indicating a satisfactory fit between the items and factors. Examining the overall assessment criteria for model fitness, the measurement model showed generally an acceptable fit.

Table 3. Confirmatory factor analysis and reliability output for the measurement model

Variables	Items Before CFA	Items After CFA	CFA Factor Loadings Range	AVE	CR	Alpha	ω
Perceived behavioural control	6	4	[0.659 – 0.823]	0.565	0.838	0.835	0.840
Subjective norm	3	3	[0.803 – 0.821]	0.658	0.852	0.853	0.855
Entrepreneurial intention	6	4	[0.767 – 0.859]	0.685	0.897	0.897	0.899

CFA = Confirmatory factor analysis. **AVE** = The average variance extracted. **C*R* =** Composite reliability as measured by the Jöreskog rho coefficient. **Alpha** = The Cronbach's alpha coefficients. **ω =** McDonalds' omega coefficient.

The results in Table 4 showed that the value of CMIN/DF = 3.916 is between three (3) and five (5), suggesting an acceptable model fit. Further, SRM*R* = 0.040 is below 0.05, which suggests a good model fit. The RMSEA is 0.104 with 90% CI [0.097, 0.127], indicating an acceptable model fit. For incremental fitness, CFI is 0.933 > 0.90, and TLI is 0.909, which is also greater than > 0.90, both suggesting an acceptable model fit.

Table 4. Goodness-of-fit indices for the established measurement model

Measurement model	CMIN/DF	CFI	TLI	SRMR	RMSEA [90% CI]
Measurement Model	3.916	0.933	0.909	0.040	0.104 [0.097 – 0.127]

CMIN/DF = Discrepancy/Chi-square divided by degree of freedom. **CFI** = The Comparative Fit Index. **TLI** = The Tucker-Lewis index. **SRM*R* =** The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual. **RMSEA** = The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation.

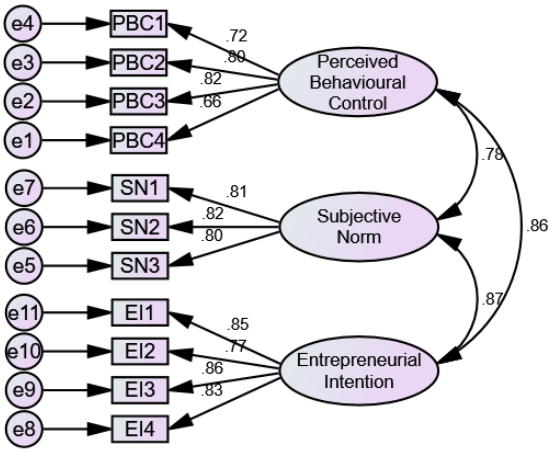


Figure 1. Measurement model

Descriptive summary of main theoretical variables

Table 5 presents the descriptive summary and correlations of the main theoretical variables. The results show moderate mean levels (on a 5-point Likert scale) for the study's major theoretical variables. The results of assessing the linear relationship between perceived behavioural control and subjective norm indicate that perceived behavioural control is strongly, positively, and statistically significantly associated with subjective norm (r = 0.673). Thus, as perceived behavioural control increases, the subjective norm also increases. For the linear relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention, the results show that perceived behavioural control has a strong and positive significant linear relationship with entrepreneurial intention (r = 0.753). Thus, as perceived behavioural control increases, entrepreneurial intention also increases. It is also important to note that entrepreneurial intention has a strong, positive, and statistically significant correlation with subjective norm (r = 0.755).

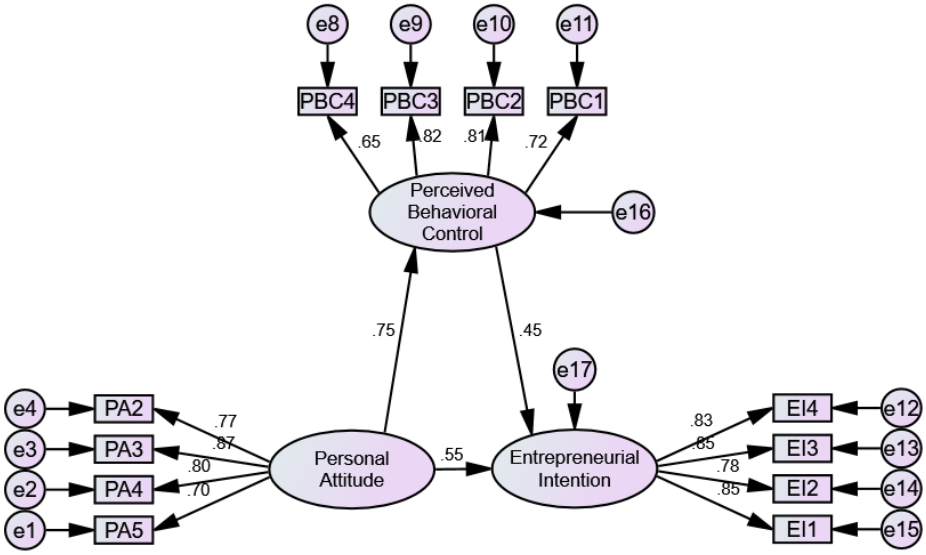
Table 5. Descriptive summary of main theoretical variables

Variables	Mean (SD)	PBC	SN	EI
Perceived behavioural control	4.016 (0.856)	1		
Subjective norm	4.097 (0.999)	0.673**	1	
Entrepreneurial intention	4.339 (0.871)	0.753**	0.755**	1

PBC = Perceived Behavioural Control; **SN** = Subjective Norm; **EI** = Entrepreneurial Intention; **SD** = Standard Deviation

Hypotheses testing

Figure 2 shows the structural model established to test the hypothesised frameworks presented earlier. The goodness of fit indices of the established structural model indicate that the model has a satisfactory fit for the data. The structural regression path coefficients were used to test for the direct effects between the variables, whilst the mediation effect was assessed using the significance of the indirect effect by utilising the maximum likelihood-based bootstrap procedure.



CMIN/DF = 2.974; **CFI** = 0.948; **TLI** = 0.933; **SRM*R*** = 0.042; **RMSEA** = 0.090 with 90% CI [0.074; 0.107].

Figure 2. Structural model

Hypotheses H1: Table 6 shows the maximum likelihood-based beta estimates with their respective bootstrapped 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals for the regression path coefficients. The results show that the path for the direct effect of perceived behavioural control on subjective norm is positive and statistically significant (β = 0.748; SE = 0.074; 95% CI = [0.576, 0.865]; p = 0.001). Since the beta parameter is positive and statistically

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significant, the result supports *H1*; perceived behavioural control has a positive and statistically significant direct effect on subjective norm.

Hypotheses H2: Examining the direct effect of subjective norm on entrepreneurial intention, the regression path coefficient shows a positive and statistically significant estimate (β = 0.449; SE = 0.131; 95% CI = [0.200, 0.711]; p = 0.002). This finding supports *H2*, that is, subjective norm has a positive and statistically significant direct effect on entrepreneurial intention.

Hypotheses H3: The regression path coefficient for the direct effect of perceived behavioural control on entrepreneurial intention is also positive and statistically significant (β = 0.546; SE = 0.127; 95% CI = [0.296, 0.794]; p = 0.002). This result supports *H3*, hence we can conclude that perceived behavioural control has a positive and statistically significant direct effect on entrepreneurial intention.

Hypothesis H4: Lastly, it was imperative to establish whether subjective norm significantly mediates the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention. The indirect effect was examined, and the results indicated a positive and statistically significant effect (β = 0.374; SE = 0.116; 95% CI [0.182, 0.640]; p = 0.001). This is a case of complementary partial mediation since the direct effect of perceived behavioural control on entrepreneurial intention is positive and statistically significant, whilst the indirect effect is also positive and statistically significant. From these findings, there is sufficient statistical evidence to support *H4* and conclude that subjective norm significantly partially mediates the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention.

Table 6. Structural model path beta estimates to establish the mediating effect of subjective norm on the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention

Effects	Beta estimates		95% Bias-Corrected CI		Significance of beta estimates
	Beta	SE	LLCI	ULCI	*p*-value
Direct effect(s)					
Path a: PBC (X) → SN (M)	0.748	0.074	0.576	0.865	0.001*
Path b: SN (M) → EI (Y)	0.449	0.131	0.200	0.711	0.002*
Path c: PBC (X) → EI (Y)	0.546	0.127	0.296	0.794	0.002*
Total effect of X on Y	0.982	0.111	0.746	1.182	0.001*
Indirect effect of X on Y	0.374	0.116	0.182	0.640	0.001*

*Significant effect at Alpha = 0.05. Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals: 10000
Note: SE – Standard Error, LLCI - Lower limit confidence interval and ULCI - Upper limit confidence interval.
Independent variable (X): Perceived behavioural control (PBC)
Dependent variable (Y): Entrepreneurial intention (EI)
Mediator variable (M): Subjective norm (SN)

Interpretation of findings

The findings provide important insights into the relationships between perceived behavioural control (PBC), subjective norms (SN), and entrepreneurial intention (EI), grounded in a partial application of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991). Overall, the results support the hypothesised direct relationships and confirm the mediating role of subjective norms in explaining how perceived capability and control translate into stronger entrepreneurial intention among unemployed youth. The findings contribute to the growing body of literature on entrepreneurship intention by highlighting the combined influence of personal agency and social validation in resource-constrained contexts.

Firstly, the results reveal that perceived behavioural control has a strong, positive, and statistically significant direct effect on subjective norms (β = 0.748; p = 0.001). This suggests that unemployed youth who perceive

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themselves as capable of starting and managing a business are also more likely to perceive encouragement and approval from significant others. These findings are consistent with the theoretical assumptions of the TPB, which propose that perceptions of capability influence behavioural intentions through both individual and social mechanisms (Ajzen, 1991). The findings also support those reported by Villanueva-Flores et al. (2023), who found that perceived behavioural control can indirectly influence entrepreneurial intention through socially embedded pathways. Similarly, Murire et al. (2026) reported that higher levels of perceived behavioural control significantly strengthen entrepreneurial intention among unemployed youth in South Africa. The present study extends this body of knowledge by demonstrating that perceived behavioural control not only directly influences entrepreneurial intention but also enhances perceptions of social approval, thereby strengthening subjective norms.

Secondly, subjective norms were found to positively and significantly predict entrepreneurial intention ($\beta = 0.449$; $p = 0.002$). This finding supports the view that entrepreneurial intention is not solely an individual psychological state but is also shaped by social expectations, family support, peer influence, and community validation. These findings are consistent with those of Pham et al. (2023), who found that subjective norms play a significant role in shaping entrepreneurial intention through complex social influence processes. Likewise, Mhlongo et al. (2025) reported that entrepreneurial passion and entrepreneurship education contribute significantly to entrepreneurial intention among South African youth, partly through creating supportive social environments. Similar findings were reported by Haddoud et al. (2024), who highlighted the role of psychological capital and entrepreneurship education in strengthening entrepreneurial implementation intentions. The current study extends these findings by demonstrating that subjective norms function not only as direct predictors of entrepreneurial intention but also as mediating mechanisms through which perceived behavioural control influences entrepreneurial intention.

Thirdly, the results indicate that perceived behavioural control has a positive and statistically significant direct effect on entrepreneurial intention ($\beta = 0.546$; $p = 0.002$). This finding reinforces one of the central propositions of the Theory of Planned Behaviour, namely that individuals are more likely to engage in entrepreneurial activities when they believe they possess the skills, resources, and capabilities necessary to succeed (Ajzen, 1991). These findings are consistent with those reported by Kautonen et al. (2015), who found that perceived behavioural control was among the strongest predictors of entrepreneurial intentions across contexts. Similarly, Gathitu and Muiru (2026) found that self-efficacy significantly influences entrepreneurial intention among university students in Kenya, while Murire et al. (2026) reported a positive relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention among unemployed youth in South Africa. The present findings therefore provide further empirical support for the importance of perceived capability in fostering entrepreneurial aspirations, particularly in environments characterised by unemployment, limited economic opportunities, and resource constraints.

Finally, the mediation analysis demonstrates that subjective norms partially mediate the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention through a statistically significant indirect effect ($\beta = 0.374$; SE = 0.116; 95% CI [0.182, 0.640]; $p = 0.001$). Since both the direct effect (PBC → EI) and indirect effect (PBC → SN → EI) were positive and significant, the mediation pattern reflects complementary partial mediation (Zhao et al., 2010). These findings are consistent with those of Villanueva-Flores et al. (2023), who similarly found that subjective norms and perceived behavioural control interact to influence entrepreneurial intention. However, the current study contributes additional insight by demonstrating this mediating mechanism among unemployed youth in a township setting within the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Unlike many previous studies that focused primarily on university students, the present research highlights how social approval and community support reinforce entrepreneurial intentions among economically marginalised youth populations.

Taken together, these findings suggest that entrepreneurship development initiatives should not focus exclusively on enhancing individual capabilities such as entrepreneurial skills, self-efficacy, and access to resources. Rather,

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interventions should simultaneously cultivate supportive social ecosystems that legitimise entrepreneurship as a viable career pathway. Family-inclusive entrepreneurship programmes, community mentorship initiatives, peer-support networks, and exposure to successful entrepreneurial role models may strengthen both perceived behavioural control and subjective norms. The findings therefore support recent calls for entrepreneurship interventions that recognise entrepreneurial intention as both an agency-driven and socially negotiated process within resource-constrained environments (Shahriar et al., 2024; Mhlongo et al., 2026; Popoola, 2025).

Theoretical implications

Theoretically, Study 3 strengthens entrepreneurship-intention scholarship by showing that PBC may operate through both an "agency pathway" (direct PBC→EI) and a "social validation pathway" (PBC→SN→EI) in a youth unemployment setting. This finding aligns with recent work arguing that subjective norms remain under-specified in many TPB applications and require deeper contextual interpretation, particularly regarding how social approval processes interact with other TPB predictors (Ahmed, 2025).

The results also complement more recent syntheses suggesting that TPB remains robust across entrepreneurship contexts, while the relative importance of TPB constructs (especially SN) varies by setting, population, and socio-cultural embeddedness (Mfazi & Elliott, 2022; Andrade & Carvalho, 2023). In the Eastern Cape context, where youth often rely on social networks for emotional and material support, the significant SN pathway provides empirical evidence that the formation of entrepreneurial intention is partly socially negotiated rather than purely individualistic.

The findings also extend recent entrepreneurship intention scholarship emerging from developing economies. Shahriar et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of entrepreneurship programmes and access to finance in shaping entrepreneurial intention, while Popoola (2025) demonstrated that innovation environments and entrepreneurship education significantly influence entrepreneurial intention among youth. The present study contributes differently by focusing on unemployed youth within township settings where entrepreneurial intention formation is socially negotiated through collective approval structures, family support systems, and community validation processes.

Practical and policy implications

At a practical level, the findings imply that interventions aimed at increasing youth entrepreneurship should build both (i) individual capability and feasibility (PBC) and (ii) supportive social norms (SN). This is especially important in South Africa's youth labour market, where a large share of unemployed youth report no prior work experience, reinforcing cycles of exclusion and limited pathways to opportunity (Statistics South Africa, 2025). In such circumstances, strengthening PBC through applied skills development, mentorship, and access to resources can directly enhance intention while also improving how young people perceive social approval of entrepreneurship.

For policymakers and local economic development stakeholders, the complementary mediation pattern suggests that entrepreneurship programmes should not focus only on the "individual entrepreneur," but also intentionally engage the surrounding social system, families, peers, community leaders, and local role models. Community-facing strategies (e.g., showcasing credible local entrepreneurs, family-inclusive entrepreneurship training, peer entrepreneurship clubs, and community mentorship networks) can help convert capability gains into socially reinforced intentions. This aligns with broader international concerns about youth employment prospects and the need for multi-actor support ecosystems (ILO, 2024).

For entrepreneurship educators and training providers, the results support strengthening practical, experience-based entrepreneurship education and mentorship, given continued concerns that entrepreneurship education in many contexts is often assessed as weak and insufficiently practice-oriented (GEM, 2024). In line with Study 3, educational interventions should be designed to increase perceived controllability (e.g., opportunity recognition,

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feasibility planning, micro-venture experimentation) while also building social legitimacy (e.g., family/community pitch days, peer support structures, and locally relevant success narratives).

Study limitations

Notwithstanding the analytical value of the findings, the research design necessarily operates within specific constraints. First, the study used a cross-sectional survey design, which limits causal interpretations of the observed relationships (Ajzen, 1991). Second, non-probability purposive sampling was applied to target unemployed youth with entrepreneurial potential, which may constrain the generalisability of the results beyond the immediate population studied (Wolf et al., 2013). Relatedly, the study relied on self-reported measures adapted from prior scales, which can introduce common-method effects and social desirability bias (Liñán & Chen, 2009).

Future research should therefore consider longitudinal designs (e.g., time-lagged measurement of PBC, SN, and EI) to strengthen causal inference and better capture the development of intention over time (Ajzen, 1991). Comparative studies across multiple districts/provinces, and between rural–urban settings, would also be valuable for testing the contextual stability of the PBC→SN→EI pathway in South Africa (Neneh, 2020; Urban, 2020). Finally, mixed-method approaches could deepen interpretation by exploring *why* and *how* social approval processes amplify agency into intention in resource-constrained communities (Liñán & Fayolle, 2015).

5. Conclusions

This study set out to investigate how perceived behavioural control and subjective norms interact to influence entrepreneurial intention among unemployed youth in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, an environment marked by persistent unemployment and socioeconomic constraints. Grounded in the Theory of Planned Behaviour, the study specifically examined whether subjective norms mediate the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention.

The empirical findings confirm that perceived behavioural control exerts a statistically significant positive effect on subjective norms and entrepreneurial intention, and that subjective norms significantly predict entrepreneurial intention. Furthermore, subjective norms partially mediate the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention, indicating a complementary mediation effect.

This pattern highlights that stronger capability beliefs can translate into stronger entrepreneurial intention both directly and through enhanced perceived social support. Overall, the study contributes to entrepreneurship-intention scholarship by showing that perceived behavioural control is not only an internal judgement of feasibility but can also operate through a social mechanism (subjective norms), thereby further strengthening entrepreneurial intention.

The study also contributes to emerging entrepreneurship scholarship in developing economies by highlighting that entrepreneurial intention among unemployed youth is shaped not only by perceived capability but also by socially embedded support systems and normative approval processes.

The novelty of this study lies in its examination of the mediating role of subjective norms in the relationship between perceived behavioural control and entrepreneurial intention among unemployed youth in a resource-constrained South African township. Unlike many previous entrepreneurship intention studies that primarily focused on university students and direct TPB relationships, the present study demonstrates that entrepreneurial intention formation among unemployed youth is both agency-driven and socially negotiated through community validation and social approval structures. The findings, therefore, extend the Theory of Planned Behaviour literature within developing economy contexts.

For educators, policymakers, and community leaders, the results underscore the need for youth entrepreneurship strategies that simultaneously build competence and access to enabling resources, while cultivating supportive social norms that validate entrepreneurship as a viable pathway to livelihoods and inclusive development.

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Sustainability for Regions

THE ROLE OF INTERNAL CONTROLS IN PROMOTING GROWTH AND SUSTAINABILITY OF SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES IN SOUTH AFRICA*

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Abstract. Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) play a crucial role in South Africa (SA) in creating employment, driving economic development, and alleviating poverty. Even though their importance is acknowledged, high failure rates among SMEs persist; weak governance structures, improper financial management, exposure to fraud, and inadequate risk assessment practices sometimes cause them. This study assesses the role of internal controls in promoting the growth and sustainability of SMEs within the Free State province. The study employed structured interviews as a data-collection instrument and a thematic approach to analyse the data. The results of this study demonstrate a clear maturity gradient of internal controls. Micro-SMEs rely on owner-driven, informal controls, whereas medium-sized enterprises use structured governance and risk management systems. Control activities such as the approval process and cash reconciliations are mostly implemented, while proper risk management, monitoring mechanisms, and internal audit functions are absent due to limited resources. This study suggests that internal controls not only serve as compliance mechanisms but also play a vital role in enhancing the sustainability and growth of SMEs. The study recommends establishing a policy to support SME growth and providing training in internal controls and digitalisation to strengthen the sustainability of SMEs in South Africa.

Keywords: SMEs; internal controls; sustainability; growth; risk management; South Africa

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JEL Classifications: M10, M13, M40

1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that SMEs are a vehicle for realising economic development in South Africa (Shava, 2024). The literature also affirms the role played by SMEs in job creation and economic growth (Aziz et al., 2024; Okoye et al., 2024). There is, however, a high failure rate among SMEs, which is associated with the absence of a proper governance structure, poor financial management, heightened exposure to fraud, and inherent risks that affect SME sustainability (Shipanga et al., 2022; Su et al., 2022). To curb these challenges, there is a need for implementing proper internal controls (tto, 2024). Historically, internal controls have been associated with established corporations because of resource considerations; however, they are increasingly recognised for the sustainability of SMEs as well (Tam & Le-Anh, 2021).

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The Committee of Sponsoring Organisations (COSO) framework provides a solid foundation for establishing effective internal control components. These are control environment, risk assessment, control activities, information and communication, and monitoring activities (Purba et al., 2022). Collectively, these components are fundamental for designing and evaluating the functioning of internal controls in both established organisations and SME settings (Tam & Le-Anh, 2021). Yet SMEs continue to suggest that resource constraints are among the reasons they can only implement informal controls, even though some are fully aware of formal frameworks. This has the potential to limit their growth and sustainability (Musikavanhu & Nqala, 2024). Against this backdrop, this study sought to understand how implementing internal controls enhances SME growth and sustainability. The study draws on empirical data indicating a high failure rate among SMEs operating in the Free State province. The study sought to answer the following questions: (1) How do SMEs conceptualise internal controls? (2) What types of internal control systems are implemented? (3) How do internal controls influence business growth and sustainability? (4) What challenges hinder effective implementation? The purpose of this study is to contribute to a better understanding of how adopting formal controls can enhance SME growth and sustainability, and to demonstrate practical implications for good governance, risk management, and policy support.

The core internal control components are rooted in the COSO framework and in the literature underpinning research on SMEs in emerging markets (Tam & Le-Anh, 2021). The implementation of internal controls associated with SME performance and growth is further informed by empirical studies conducted across Africa and other regions. The literature revealed consistent patterns that demonstrate a positive correlation between internal controls and better performance, highlighting a contextual understanding that formal internal controls provide greater protection than informal controls (Ajala et al., 2023; Mukarromah et al., 2020). The absence of internal controls allows operational risks, fraud, and governance issues to thrive, which negatively affects the sustainability of SMEs, necessitating the implementation of practical and relevant internal controls even for emerging SMEs (Ololade, 2024; Hatab et al., 2020). Various South African studies demonstrate that cash flow management and good governance practices are fundamental to the growth and sustainability of SMEs, with adherence to internal control processes, even though this is not regular, an enabler in metropolitan contexts such as Cape Metropole and Pretoria (Musikavanhu & Nqala, 2024). Collectively, these elements call for an exploration of the implementation of internal controls by SMEs in the Free State province.

2. Literature Review

Internal Control Framework

The COSO framework underpins the implementation of sound internal controls. COSO is a framework established in 1992 and last revised in 2013; it provides a comprehensive approach to integrating internal controls and organisational risk management (Makaš, 2023; Pelei & Benedek, 2024). Despite the acknowledged importance of the COSO framework in the implementation of internal controls, SMEs are still not exploring this advantage (Igbojioyibo, 2024; Ngan, 2024). Instead, SMEs are mostly implementing informal controls, even though some are aware of the COSO framework, due to limited resources and a perceived burden associated with compliance with the formal framework (Tam & Le-Anh, 2021). Various research studies have demonstrated how the components of internal control apply to SME performance.

The study conducted by Ajala et al. (2023) in Nigeria demonstrates a positive association between an improved organisational performance and compliance with adopted internal control systems. Including sustainability, growth, and operational efficiency, illustrating that SME's broader performance is supported by proper implementation of internal controls. In agreement, the study by Oyelakin & Abdullahi (2022) found that various components of internal controls are positively associated with sound financial management in SMEs, while control activities significantly enhance SME growth and sustainability.

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Relevant internal controls reinforce SME performance, while sales and profitability growth are often associated with how internal controls monitor differences between targets and prompt timely remedial actions (Appah, 2025). However, the extent and trodden path of the effects can differ; control activities dimensions in certain sectors or countries may have a stronger relative impact (Appah, 2025).

Operational efficiency, growth, and sustainability are enhanced by a properly functioning system of internal controls across various business settings (Ololade, 2024). The strength and relevance of the components of the COSO framework vary by size and sector; for instance, reactive or semi-formal internal control practices are frequently implemented by SMEs, which sometimes limit operational effectiveness (Ololade, 2024).

In the South African context, various scholars have conducted numerous studies on the relationship between internal control and SMEs' outcomes. The studies revealed that SMEs are experiencing challenges in designing, implementing, and maintaining internal control systems (Musikavanhu & Nqala, 2024). This is more prevalent among SMEs operating in semi-urban settings in the Free State province; these SMEs emphasise practical challenges related to resource constraints, government alignment compliance, and expertise (Baloyi & Khanyile, 2022; Magodi et al., 2023). These SMEs have limited knowledge of the potential of internal controls to ensure effective financial management and sustainability when embedded in governance and sound financial management procedures (Musikavanhu & Nqala, 2024).

SMEs and Sustainability in South Africa

The SMEs are considered economic growth drivers in SA; however, their sustainability is impacted by challenges associated with risk exposure as a result of inadequate formal controls, which also lead to weak governance and regulatory non-compliance, complicating survival and scaling for many SMEs (Maela et al., 2024; Efile & Neethling, 2025). Other factors that impede the sustainability of SMEs include operational risks, which encompass processes, employees, systems, and external events, especially in manufacturing SMEs (Shipanga et al., 2022). These highlight the need for systematic risk assessment and adherence to implemented internal controls to mitigate adverse outcomes. Scholars highlight that the absence of internal controls allows fraud risk to thrive; this can be mitigated through proactive internal controls and good governance mechanisms, thereby reducing fraudulent activities and financial losses (Efile & Neethling, 2025). The scholars further revealed a relationship between sound cash flow management and the sustainability of SMEs (Efile & Neethling, 2025).

SME sustainability and growth are linked to governance-related dynamics and sound cash flow management; good governance and vigorous cash flow management practices enhance the sustainability prospects of retail sector SMMEs (Zeng et al., 2020; Iwara, 2024; Molope et al., 2024). This is a practical process for implementing relevant internal control systems for business continuity, safeguarding assets, and improving the performance of SMEs in SA (Rahayu et al., 2024). The majority of recent SA studies focused on metropolitan municipalities (e.g., large urban municipalities). It revealed capacity constraints and the need for governance processes designed and aligned with the size of SMEs and the sector. These studies further suggested a potential gap between SME realities and the adoption of the formal components of the COSO framework. Ethical culture and governance, as well as internal controls, were identified as fundamental mechanisms that enhance the reliability of financial reporting, operational efficiency, and trust in studies conducted in SA and other regions, emphasising their links to the sustainability of SMEs (Aray & Alcívar, 2025). The view that proper functioning internal controls influence SME sustainability and growth is widely supported by the literature. However, the type and strength of the influence vary by sector, business size, governance procedures, context, and the extent to which components of COSO are implemented and monitored (Oyelakin & Abdullahi, 2022).

Synthesis of Literature

The components of the COSO framework do not automatically translate to an improved SME performance; the significance of each component can differ in context, for instance, numerous studies widely regard the control

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environment as a foundational component, whereas other scholars find the effects of risk assessment, information and communication and monitoring weaker or inconsistent (Oyelakin & Abdullahi, 2022; Klein et al., 2024). This suggests that there must be controls specifically designed for SMEs, rather than requiring SMEs to adopt formal frameworks wholesale. Empirical studies from emerging economies and Africa generally support a significant relationship between SME performance and growth and the role of well-functioning internal controls. However, the relationship does not exist without differences in size effects and meaningful individual dimensions of COSO (Ololade, 2024). This demonstrates that the implementation of internal controls is uniform across various environments but must be aligned with the operations of specific SMEs and relevant to their risk profiles (Ololade, 2024). Governance and proper cash flow management are closely linked to the sustainability and growth of SMEs in SA (Şenvar & Hamal, 2022). The relationship between financial awareness, budgeting, accounting skills, and the financial sustainability of SMEs in South Africa demonstrates that the effectiveness of internal control depends on complementary capacity building in financial management (Olarewaju & Msomi, 2021). The implementation of a proper system of internal controls remains a general concern for SA SMEs, even though scholars consistently demonstrate that implementing rigorous internal controls and integrating compliance with a control culture mitigate exposure to fraud and enhance the reliability of financial reporting and operational efficacy (Aray & Alcívar, 2025).

In conclusion, the core proposition that SME sustainability and growth are enhanced by implementing internal controls is widely supported in the literature. The literature also acknowledges that their effectiveness depends on the type of business environment. The COSO framework provides a structured lens for evaluating internal controls; successful SMEs have adopted controls that align with their size, the sector in which they operate, governance maturity, and resource constraints. This study contributes to the literature by assessing the implementation of internal controls by SMEs operating within the Free State province and exploring how SMEs can benefit from the system of internal controls within the SA context.

3. Research Methodology

Research Design

To evaluate how internal control can enhance SME sustainability and growth, this study employed a qualitative research design. This design approach was adopted because it is appropriate for the study, which seeks to gather extensive insight into the perceptions, practices, and experiences of SME founders and their managers regarding the implementation of internal control systems. The interpretivist paradigm underpins this study, which holds that institutional realities, such as internal control practices, are context-dependent and socially constructed. This design provides an in-depth understanding of how SMEs implement and conceptualise internal control systems while facing resource constraints.

Research Setting and Context

This research study was carried out with SMEs operating in the Free State province in South Africa. This province was selected because it has a notably high failure rate among SMEs across various sectors, including retail, transport, construction, professional services, and manufacturing. These SMEs sometimes operated under resource constraints, caused by limited access to financial assistance and inadequate professional management expertise. Therefore, it was necessary to conduct a study to evaluate how implementing an internal control system can improve the sustainability and growth of SMEs in this province, while noting the conditions.

Target Population and Sampling Strategy

The 50 SME founders and managers from various sectors were selected as the study's target population. Of the 30 respondents in this study, only 20 showed up for structured interviews. These respondents exhibit the following characteristics: SME owner or founder and SME manager. The chosen sampling technique was used to a greater extent to select respondents with relevant knowledge of implementing internal control practices within their

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business. The selected respondents had to meet the following criteria: being an SME founder or holding a managerial role within the SME; being actively involved in financial or operational decision-making; owning or managing an SME with at least 1 year of operations; and operating as a micro, small, or medium enterprise. Once the selection processes were concluded, a sample comprising SMEs with varying numbers of employees emerged, enabling assessment of the internal control maturity gradient, ranging from informal to formal control activities.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews were used as a data-collection instrument in this study. It provided flexibility for evaluating respondents' perceptions while ensuring consistency across themes. The interview guide was developed to gather data on the following themes: understanding of internal controls; types of control systems implemented; risk management practices; monitoring and reporting mechanisms; perceived impact on business performance and sustainability; and challenges in implementing internal controls. As such the following questions were asked: what is your conceptual understanding of internal controls, what is the nature of internal controls implemented by your business (guidance are they formal or informal), have you heard about COSO framework, if yes what component of COSO is implemented in your business, what is your understanding of internal controls and business sustainability, in a case where internal controls are implemented, what are the challenges in maintaining internal controls.

During the interviews, the respondents were allowed to elaborate on their internal control practices, demonstrating both formal and informal control mechanisms. Where answers were unclear, probing questions were asked to clarify and gain deeper insights. Data collection continued until the thematic goal was met, as no new significant themes emerged.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected for this study were analysed using a thematic process. The thematic analysis approach was used to identify patterns and themes within the data, specifically with regard to internal control practices in line with the COSO framework. The thematic analysis followed the steps below:

- Familiarisation of data – transcripts and recordings were listened to and reviewed several times to get a full picture.
- Initial coding – the relevant segments of the data were coded by the researcher based on recurring concepts.
- Construction of themes – the broader themes and subthemes were constructed by grouping codes.
- Review of themes and modification – to maintain consistency and alignment of themes with research objectives, the themes were modified.
- Interpretation –the internal control theoretical framework and SME sustainability were used to interpret the themes.

Thematic analysis revealed numerous key themes as follows: internal controls as financial safeguards; formal vs informal control systems; COSO components in practice; internal controls and sustainability outcomes; and challenges in implementation.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Characteristics of the Respondents

The SMEs in various sectors constituted the sample frame for this study. The characteristics of the respondents included owners and managers from various sectors such as retail, construction, agriculture, IT Services, transport, manufacturing, tourism, pharmacy, hospitality, security services, online Retail, and the Informal sector (spaza shops). These sectors are categorised as small, medium, or micro, with different numbers of employees and years of operation. This diversity provided a broad perspective on internal control practices across different industries. Further information is provided in Table 1 below.

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Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Respondent	Position/Role	Sector	Years in Operation	Number of Employees	SME Category
R1	Owner-Manager	Retail (Clothing)	6	8	Small
R2	Financial Manager	Construction	12	35	Medium
R3	Owner	Catering	3	5	Micro
R4	Operations Manager	Agriculture	15	20	Small
R5	Owner	IT Services	4	6	Small
R6	Owner	Transport	10	18	Small
R7	Managing Director	Manufacturing	20	50	Medium
R8	Owner	Hair & Beauty	5	7	Small
R9	Partner	Accounting Practice	8	12	Small
R10	Owner	Spaza Shop	2	3	Micro
R11	Owner	Cleaning Services	7	14	Small
R12	Owner	Tourism	9	10	Small
R13	Owner	Pharmacy	11	9	Small
R14	Owner	Auto Repairs	6	6	Small
R15	Owner	Printing & Branding	4	8	Small
R16	Owner	Daycare Centre	5	5	Micro
R17	Manager	Wholesale	13	25	Medium
R18	Owner	Restaurant	7	15	Small
R19	Managing Director	Security Services	14	40	Medium
R20	Owner	Online Retail	3	4	Micro

4.2 Understanding of Internal Controls

Internal Controls as Financial Safeguards

The majority of the respondents understood internal controls to mean processes used to manage cash flow properly, procedures followed to prevent fraud, processes to safeguard their stock, and approval procedures. To the greatest extent, the system of internal controls is associated with procedures to ensure the accuracy of financial reporting and processes to safeguard assets, not necessarily mechanisms that enhance broader governance structures *("I think controls help to report correct information about how much money the business has made in a given time. In my business, the controls assisted me in preventing theft and loss of money and stock, and, in some instances, helped identify stale or expired products. For example, we now do a stock take, which is part of applying internal control activities).*

Limited Strategic Interpretation

The system of internal control was described only by well-established, professionally managed SMEs in terms of risk management, compliance, governance, and control activities that align with the COSO framework. Whereas within smaller SMEs, internal controls are equated with daily cash checks and the owner's approval. It is therefore concluded that there is an existing maturity gap between micro-SMEs and medium-sized businesses in conceptual understanding.

4.3 Nature of Internal Control Systems

Predominance of Informal Controls

The empirical results revealed that businesses with three to ten employees mostly rely on owner supervision, daily cash counts, trust-based systems, and manual bookkeeping. These, however, were undocumented and experience-based controls. *("Look, we are not like those big businesses, we cannot afford some of the things, we rely on cash up daily, the employees here have worked quite some time, and we have developed some level of trust, we like family now").*

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Formalisation in Growing SMEs

The interviews revealed that the medium-sized business documented its control procedures; approval processes require at least two signatures; in some instances, a cloud accounting system is used; and risk assessments are conducted quarterly. There was an observed pattern: as the formalisation of internal controls increases, SME size also grows.

4.4 COSO Components in Practice

Control Environment

The SME founders spoke strongly against theft, emphasising zero tolerance for employee and customer theft and a clear leadership authority. The owners, however, stressed the hindrances posed by the separation of duties and the duplication of roles in small enterprises. Structural limitations also weaken the effectiveness of the existing ethical culture. *("We have installed cameras in strategic areas. When the new staff assume their duties, they are shown around, cautioned about stilling, and informed about the consequences of being found stilling. Due to the limited number of staff, it is not always easy to assign them to different roles. At times, you will find one employee having to perform three duties that are supposed to be done by two different employees").*

Risk Assessment

Informal, reactive, and experience-based risk assessment approaches are predominantly used in the operations of SMEs. Fewer SMEs document proper risk assessments and formal financial risk analyses. It was also identified that there is a gap in the structured risk assessment process.

Control Activities

It was revealed that SMEs perform daily cash reconciliation (an example of reconciliation and verification control activity); all payments are approved by the owner (authorisation and approval control activity); and the stock count is performed by a staff member and reported to the owner on what is out of stock. The control activities found in the business operations of SMEs were operational and transactional. *("Before we knock off at work, we do a recalculation of the amount of money in the cash register or till and confirm it on the till slips on the manual sale order. The stock shortages are brought to the attention of the manager and the owner for authorisation to request stock delivery from the suppliers. This is normally done every Monday morning for a delivery on the next Monday").*

Information and Communication

The SMEs are relying only on manual bookkeeping, verbal and telephonic communication, and assistance from accountants to communicate their financials for funding purposes. Their information is typically communicated verbally to those who need to perform their daily duties. *("Duties of the staff are normally circulated on WhatsApp; say we notify them about the changes on their shift or the duties that they need to perform on a given day. We sometimes from time to time require accountants' services to assist in compiling financial statements to apply for government funding").*

Monitoring Activities

The empirical results revealed that, due to resource constraints, the SMEs are unable to conduct monthly financial reviews, quarterly reviews, and external audits as a means of oversight. They also cannot afford to employ an internal auditor or outsource internal auditing services, except for two medium-sized enterprises, which indicated that they outsource internal auditing services once a year. The observation made was that the SMEs focus more on financial reporting than on the evaluation of internal control effectiveness. *("We know the value injected by the role of internal auditors, see or rather, we hear about it from the well-established business, not to brag, but my daughter is an internal auditor to those big companies. You know, the issue is that we cannot afford to pay them").*

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4.5 Internal Controls and Business Sustainability

Loss Prevention

The participants' understanding was that the system of internal controls assists in preventing the procurement of unneeded stock, the theft of stock and cash, payments to fictitious suppliers, and the misuse of business cars and petrol. The majority of respondents consider preventing losses to be the most important role of internal controls. *("Even though we don't have intense or formal controls, the informal ones that we have assist us a lot in preventing losses in our business. We haven't experienced loss of either money or stock, as we don't bother that much about implementing formal controls; the controls are meant to prevent losses, that's my understanding. I would like to formalise internal controls to prevent losses from occurring, it is better to safeguard than to be sorry").*

Improved Financial Stability

The results revealed that it is within medium-sized enterprises that the value of internal controls is realised through better profitability tracking, enhanced supplier trust, and increased client credibility. This medium-sized enterprise aligns its structure controls with the long-term growth.

Operational Efficiency

The results revealed monitoring of equipment, management of the booking system, improvement in job costing and data security controls as the operational activities prevalent within the SMEs—the system of internal controls we found to be improving both operational and financial performance.

4.6 Challenges in Maintaining Internal Controls

Resource Constraints

The respondents revealed that they can only employ a limited staff, face exorbitant compliance costs they cannot afford, and incur automation expenses. *("It is expensive to implement compliance structures, policies, procedures. As we speak, we are struggling with tax compliance requirements. There is a lot of cost one must incur to be compliant, ranging from audit professional fees, its infrastructure and equipment, all of which require a lot of money, which my business does not have. The government also requires many documents; some of you must pay to obtain them. For example, one of the requirements for government funding is a proposal that must meet certain standards, with a financial statement, and the costs to employ someone who would assist with that).*

Skills and Knowledge Gaps

The results identified an inadequate accounting background and knowledge, insufficient risk management training, and limited knowledge of internal control frameworks, revealing a major gap in knowledge and skills.

Monitoring Difficulties

The SMEs are grappling with resource constraints, such as an inability to employ sufficient staff to implement internal control activities effectively. This was identified as the fundamental barrier to effective implementation of internal controls.

5. Cross-Cutting Analytical Observations

Internal Control Maturity Gradient

The above results revealed that the respondents understand the conceptualisation of internal control systems in the context of SMEs as a continuum that progresses from informal financial controls to formal, governance-influenced controls. The respondents understand that the effectiveness of internal controls depends on the size of the SME, resources and managerial capacity. The study provides a suitable graphical model illustrating an internal control conceptual maturity model for SMEs. A Conceptual Model of Internal Controls and SME Sustainability is provided in Figure 1 below.

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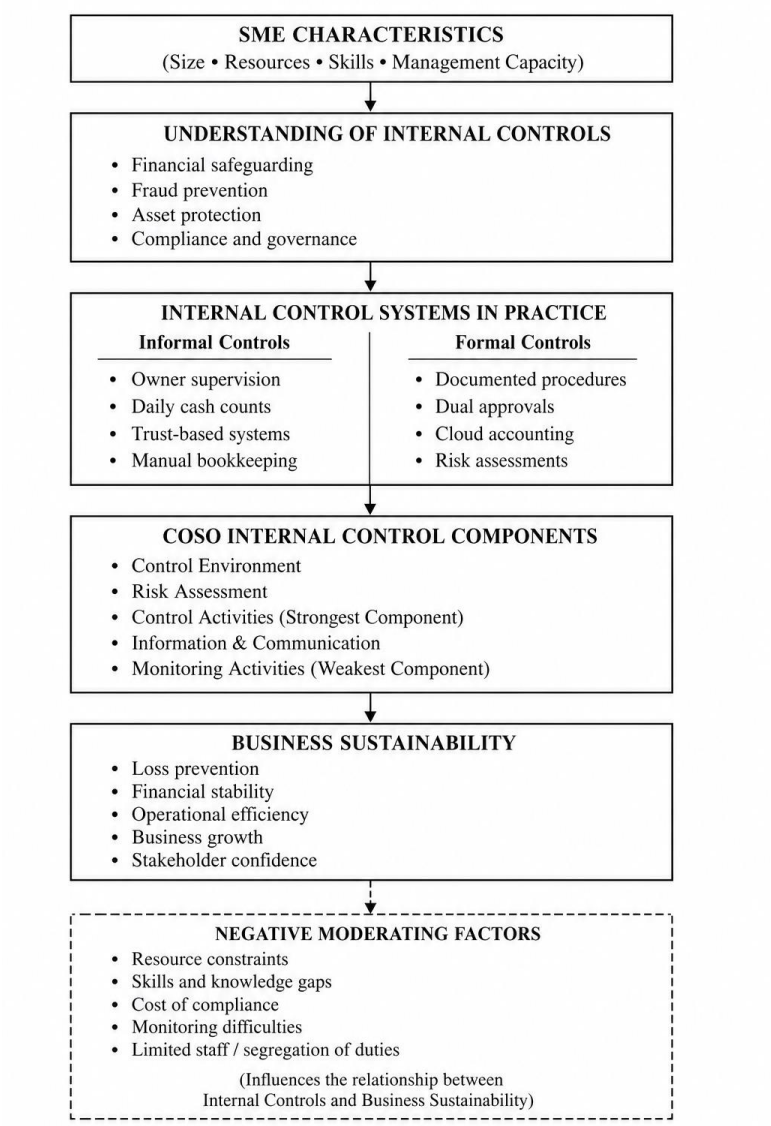


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Internal Controls and SME Sustainability

The data analysis revealed the following internal control maturity gradient:

- Micro SMEs → Informal, owner-driven controls
- Growing SMEs → Semi-formal financial systems
- Medium SMEs → Structured governance and risk systems

This maturity gradient of internal controls reveals that effective implementation depends on the SME's growth and size.

Weak Risk Assessment and Monitoring

The respondents of this study revealed that control activities are the best-applied component of the COSO framework; risk assessment and monitoring are the least applied; and the services of the internal audit function are not used at all due to financial constraints. This demonstrates an imbalance that limits long-term sustainability.

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Internal Controls as Growth Enablers. The respondents acknowledged that internal controls play a role that is more than just a compliance tool, serving as mechanisms for SME sustainability, growth, and risk mitigation. Investor confidence is enhanced by compliance with internal controls, improving resilience during economic recessions.

6. Policy and Practical Recommendations

The results of this study demonstrated that the importance of internal controls is recognised by SMEs; however, they face various constraints that prevent their implementation. The constraints include limited resources, inadequate formalisation of internal controls and skills gaps. A multi-stakeholder approach is required to improve the sustainability and growth of SMEs; it should include government funding support, financial institutions, SMEs, and various industry bodies. This collaboration will equip SMEs with all the necessary skills, knowledge and resources. The policy and practical implications that are underpinned by empirical findings are expanded in this section.

The government should increase funding for SMEs, simplify the application process, and digitise the required information. The government may consider subsidising compliance programmes, simplifying internal control frameworks to align with SMEs' operations and needs, and financial literacy campaigns. The maturity gap could be bridged by a simplified COSO framework tailored for SMEs. The findings of the study revealed that the SMEs require financial support through government funding to purchase affordable accounting software; government-led ME indaba workshops focusing on bookkeeping training; internal control toolkits; digitalisation of grants; cybersecurity training; mentorship programmes designed to enhance their managerial skills; and sector-specific guidelines.

Limitations of this study. This study evaluated the role of internal controls in promoting the sustainability and growth of SMEs operating in the Free State province in South Africa. The study demonstrated that the implementation and effectiveness of internal controls vary with SME size and resilience. The data was collected from one province, which limits the generalisation beyond the scope of this study. The study employed a qualitative research approach; future studies may consider using a quantitative approach to statistically confirm whether a relationship exists between internal control maturity and the sustainability of SMEs across SA provinces.

7. Conclusion

This study argued that the sustainability and growth of SMEs are enhanced by the critical role of the implementation of internal control systems in SA. The implementation of internal controls by SMEs depends on the entity's size and resource capacity, even though the importance of internal control is acknowledged. The SMEs are primarily implemented to prevent misuse and losses, protect assets, improve operational efficiency, and ensure reliable financial reporting. There is, however, a need for structured and risk assessment, monitoring in activities and the aof user-level audit usage. The study suggested that the system of internal controls applied by SMEs should be strengthened by targeted policy support, digitalisation initiatives and training to significantly improve sustainability and decrease SME failure rates. The study suggests repositioning internal controls from a bureaucratic burden to a strategic tool for the long-term sustainability and growth of SMEs in SA.

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THE ESSENCE OF TEACHER TRAINING QUALITY IN IMPLEMENTING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AT A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract. This study sought to examine the essence of quality teacher training in implementing inclusive education at a higher education institution in South Africa. Inclusive education in the South African education context is a reformatory tool to welcome diversity amongst learners in one classroom. Drawing on a multi-method South African policy discourse and teacher education for inclusion, the study interrogates how pre-service and in-service training prepare teachers to teach diverse students in higher education contexts. Inclusive education policy, as stated in Education White Paper 6, establishes teachers as the primary implementers of inclusion. Yet, systematic evidence points to gaps between policy ideals and actual teacher preparation, practice, and support within higher education settings. Qualitative data for this study was drawn from student teachers and lecturers from a selected university. All participants in the study were members of the faculty of education. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. In this study, semi-structured interviews served as a well-established qualitative data collection method suited to exploring complex stakeholder perspectives. Semi-structured interviews offered the flexibility to elicit in-depth insights from diverse participants while preserving comparability across interviews. The purposive sampling technique was selected because it enables the identification and selection of participants who are particularly knowledgeable and experienced with the phenomenon of interest. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data. The findings of this study revealed that student teachers are not being prepared to meet the needs of diverse learners that they will teach at school. Respondents frequently reported gaps in knowledge, practical competencies, and confidence to implement inclusive strategies in diverse classrooms. The study concludes that both the theory and the practical implementation of inclusive education for student teachers are paramount to transforming the educational landscape in South Africa. This points to the need for strengthened teacher education for inclusion within South Africa's higher education programs.

Keywords: quality teacher training; inclusive education; higher education; policy

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1. Introduction

The quality of teacher training is crucial for the effective implementation of inclusive education, especially in higher education contexts, where the need for qualified teachers capable of addressing diverse learner needs is paramount. In South Africa, the post-apartheid educational landscape necessitates a profound reconsideration of teacher preparation programs to ensure they are equipped to foster inclusion and meet the multifaceted needs of all students, particularly those with disabilities and other special educational needs (Mlambo, Hlongwa & Mubecua, 2018; Bozalek & Boughey, 2020). The significance of this subject is underscored by the legislative frameworks and policies established to promote inclusivity within educational institutions; these policies

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emphasiseemphasise the importance of equitable access to education for all individuals, irrespective of their background or learning challenges (Bozalek & Boughey, 2020). Numerous studies emphasise the relationship between teacher training and attitudes toward inclusive education. This notion relates to teachers who participate in specialised training programs and show higher levels of efficacy and more positive attitudes toward inclusive practices, which translate into better educational outcomes for students with diverse needs (Rasmitadila, 2023). Notably, long-term engagement in training enhances teachers' readiness and willingness to embrace inclusion in their classrooms. Similarly, the experiences of teachers in various contexts, such as the Maldives and Japan, indicate that a substantial proportion lack formal training, which affects their confidence and readiness to implement inclusive educational practices effectively (Yada & Savolainen, 2017; Naseer & Hameed, 2024). Moreover, existing literature highlights systemic challenges in implementing inclusive education, including inadequate resources, insufficient training, and the necessity for collaborative efforts among educational stakeholders (Monteiro & Ikegami, 2023). These barriers hinder effective educational practices and underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions in teacher preparation.

Considering the articulation above, the study advocates integrating inclusive education principles into teacher education curricula, emphasising the role of effective pedagogies and approaches tailored to diverse learning environments (Kumari, Bika & Bhesera, 2024). This framework is especially relevant to South Africa, where the historical context of educational oppression requires a nuanced approach to redressing inequities in access and quality of education (Osman & Maringe, 2019; Koch, Pool & Heymans, 2023).

This study, therefore, aims to illuminate the dynamics within a South African higher education institution, focusing on how teacher training can transform pedagogical approaches towards inclusivity. The significance of this study lies not only in exploring the current state of teacher education but also in proposing actionable strategies to enhance the quality of teacher training, which is vital for fostering inclusive educational environments.

2. Literature review

The implementation of inclusive education is a pressing challenge worldwide, particularly in South Africa, where socio-political factors compound the needs of diverse learners. A substantial body of literature underscores the critical importance of teacher training in effectively fostering inclusive education practices. This review explores key themes in the literature on the relationship between teacher training and inclusive education, drawing on experiences from various educational contexts and drawing implications for South African higher education.

Importance of teacher attitudes and beliefs towards inclusion

A foundational aspect of teacher training for inclusive education is the development of positive attitudes and beliefs among teachers. Research indicates that teachers' attitudes significantly influence the success of inclusive practices in classrooms. For instance, Krischler and Cate (2019) emphasised that pre- and in-service training programs should be designed to enhance teachers' competencies while also cultivating positive attitudes towards students with learning difficulties and challenging behaviours. In this vein, prospective teachers trained in special education had higher efficacy beliefs regarding inclusion than their counterparts in general education, underscoring the impact of educational specialisation on teacher attitudes. Moreover, studies in various international contexts, such as Japan, corroborate these findings, noting that teachers' experience can shape attitudes toward inclusive practices, with younger teachers generally having greater exposure to inclusive education training (Yada & Savolainen, 2017).

Effectiveness of professional development programs

Professional development is critical to ensuring that teachers are equipped with the skills and knowledge needed to implement inclusive education effectively. Several researchers have highlighted that targeted training programs

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lead to measurable improvements in teachers' competencies in inclusive settings. For example, Strakšienė and Musneckienė (2024) reported that involvement in professional development training enhances pedagogical skills and fosters personal and interpersonal competencies essential for inclusive teaching. Furthermore, Ahmad and May (2018) highlighted ongoing challenges in teacher preparation for inclusive education, noting that inadequate training could hinder the education of students with learning disabilities.

Training and collaboration between teachers

Collaboration between general and special education teachers is vital for successful inclusive practices. Salim (2019) articulates the importance of pedagogical competence gained through collaborative training between special and regular teachers, which fosters effective teaching strategies for learners with special educational needs. This collaborative model resonates with findings from various studies indicating that a systemic approach, one that integrates support from all educational stakeholders, can significantly enhance the quality of inclusive practices in classrooms.

Impact of teacher experience and ongoing training

Literature reflects a consensus on the role of both initial teacher training and ongoing professional development in preparing educators for inclusive education. In this instance, Masongsong et al. (2023) argued that enhanced teacher training correlates directly with improved efficacy in inclusive classrooms, suggesting that ongoing professional development is essential for success. This viewpoint is echoed by Moon (2023), who stressed the need for targeted interventions to promote teacher readiness and performance in inclusive settings. The variability in experiences, as noted in Yada and Savolainen's (2017) work, highlights the complexity of teacher readiness and points to a significant yet nuanced relationship between years of teaching experience and attitudes towards inclusive education.

Holistic training incorporating diverse educational needs

A holistic approach to inclusive education training that accounts for various learner needs is necessary for successful implementation. Research conducted by Rabi, Ghazali, Rohaizad and Zulkefli (2028) indicated that pre-service teacher courses focusing on inclusive education significantly transform attitudes and self-efficacy regarding teaching diverse student populations. Similarly, Coelho, Blázquez and Cubo (2017) emphasised the diverse factors, such as qualifications, training type, and personal experiences, that shape teachers' attitudes towards inclusion, advocating for comprehensive teacher training that addresses these dimensions.

In synthesising the literature, the corpus reveals a persistent gap related to the insufficient integration of policy intent with the lived realities of teacher training in South Africa's HEIs. This indicates a gap in understanding the specifics of translating policy into effective, inclusive practice within HEI contexts. The gap in understanding encompasses the design, delivery, and assessment of teacher education that produce the competencies, dispositions, and collaborative capacities required for inclusive learning environments. Beyond this gap, there is an incomplete understanding of how the quality of pre-service and in-service training differentially shapes inclusivity outcomes in South African HEIs, particularly those that most effectively produce inclusive teaching practices. Lastly, there is limited attention to the holistic training of teachers to address diverse educational needs within South African HEIs, including broader inclusion dimensions beyond disability.

Theoretical framework

The study was guided by Engelbrecht's (2006) Inclusive Education Theoretical Framework. Engelbrecht (2006) explored the significance of inclusive education in the South African context, asserting that it is not merely an additional educational option but a vital strategy for promoting social justice and transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. It is within this vein that Bipath, Tebekana and Venketsamy (2021) posit that all learners, regardless of their background or abilities, have the right to access quality education in shared environments. This notion emphasises that teacher training must equip teachers with the necessary skills,

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knowledge, and dispositions to cater to diverse learning needs. Within this scope, Vergunst, McKenzie and Hansen (2021) additionally emphasised the importance of capacity building among teachers, which is vital for instilling the confidence and competence necessary for effectively implementing inclusive education. This assertion indicates that training and collaboration can foster positive changes in teachers' attitudes towards inclusive practices, reinforcing Engelbrecht's (2006) assertion regarding the essential nature of educator training and policy reform.

Moreover, research demonstrates that effective inclusive education requires intentional curriculum design that fosters adaptability in teaching methodologies and embraces diversity as a strength rather than a barrier. To advance this notion, Bipath et al. (2021) assert that in the South African context, inclusive education aligns with the Education White Paper 6 (WP6), which articulates the nation's commitment to developing inclusive education systems. Thus, this framework emphasises that inclusive education is fundamentally intertwined with larger democratic ideals and is supported by key policy documents, such as the White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education, which advocates for systemic change to foster an inclusive educational environment (Engelbrecht, 2006). In other words, Engelbrecht's (2006) theoretical framework provides a foundational understanding of inclusive education in South Africa, linking educational practices to broader democratic and human rights principles.

3. Research methodology

Research approach

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore teacher trainees' experiences and perceptions of the effectiveness of teacher training programs in implementing inclusive education. The researcher employed this approach to delve into the lived experiences of pre-service and in-service teachers regarding inclusive education (Cresswell, 2017). This methodology is particularly well-suited, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of how these teachers perceive their training and the implementation of inclusive practices, aligning with insights into bridging research gaps in teacher training and inclusion. Further, the phenomenological approach facilitates understanding issues surrounding teacher self-efficacy and attitudes throughout the educational spectrum, supporting the notion that these factors profoundly impact the effectiveness of inclusive education (Yada & Savolainen, 2017). Employing this qualitative approach was intended to align with the study objectives, focusing on understanding the subjective experiences of teacher trainees and potentially illuminating the need for improved training methodologies and support systems within higher education institutions in South Africa.

Sampling strategy

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who are directly involved with inclusive education training processes. This ensures that the data collected is relevant and specific to the research questions outlined. Fundamentally, purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants had relevant experience and knowledge of the specific themes under investigation. The logic behind purposive sampling was to select information-rich cases that could provide an in-depth understanding and meaningful insights into the research focus. In this study, participants were teachers with substantial engagement in inclusive education practices, ensuring that their perspectives were well-informed. This targeted selection is fundamental, as qualitative research aims to explore specific phenomena in depth rather than generalise across a broad population (Herchline, 2024).

With purposive sampling, the researcher focused on specific groups that offer the clearest insights into the issues surrounding quality teacher training and inclusive education. This aligns with the assertion that qualitative research concentrates on themes that emerge from the experiences of those most relevant to the topic (Herchline,

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2024). In this instance, the inclusion of diverse stakeholders, such as student teachers, in-service teachers, and lecturers, provided a comprehensive understanding of the training landscape.

The researcher selected a small sample size of 12 participants to reflect the depth of data desired rather than the breadth. The purpose of selecting such a small number of participants was to facilitate profound insights while remaining manageable within qualitative frameworks. For the study on teacher training for inclusive education, the researcher targeted this number (12) of participants who are actively engaged in inclusive education, maintaining a balance between richness of data and minimising repetitive responses. Participant selection, therefore, took the stance intended to reach data saturation, as Kodagoda and Deheragoda (2021) posit that saturation may be achieved with a few participants in certain situations, depending on the research context. This notion holds that data saturation is a pivotal concept in qualitative research, denoting the point at which no new information or themes emerge from the collected data. This principle helps determine when sufficient data have been gathered, allowing the researcher to cease further participant recruitment (Glick et al., 2024).

Participants selected were comprised of a diverse sample of stakeholders from the educational landscape, including pre-service teachers currently enrolled in teacher training programs and in-service teachers working in various educational contexts. The sample population ensured representation across diverse demographics and teaching backgrounds, providing a nuanced view of the varied experiences and challenges teachers face in implementing inclusive education (Strakšienė & Musneckienė, 2024).

Data collection

This study used qualitative data collection, a method utilised in qualitative research, to gather non-numeric insights through various techniques that provide a deeper understanding of social phenomena. Unlike quantitative research, which often relies on numerical data and statistical methods, qualitative research emphasises the collection of rich, descriptive data that elucidates participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviours in their natural contexts. This approach is critical for exploring complex topics where understanding the how and & why is vital (Yesseikyzy et al., 2022; Magta et al., 2024). This involves employing techniques that facilitate an open-ended, exploratory investigation of human experiences. The primary goal is to obtain information that reflects the nuances of these experiences rather than to quantify them. Common methods used in qualitative data collection include interviews (structured, semi-structured, or unstructured), focus group discussions, ethnography, and participant observation (McGrath et al., 2018; Magta et al., 2024; Imran et al., 2024). The nature of qualitative data collection allows researchers to develop a comprehensive understanding of participants' perspectives, fostering a holistic view of the issues under study (Anugrah, Ibrahim & Sukardjo, 2021; Depari, Sihombing & Siahaan, 2024). For this study**,** multiple qualitative data collection methods were employed. These include the following.

Semi-structured interviews: These explored teachers' perceptions of their training, skills, and the effectiveness of their preparation for inclusive education. The interviews were guided by semi-structured questions to allow flexibility, adaptability, and depth in participants' responses (McGrath, Palmgren & Liljedahl, 2018). This method enabled the researcher to probe deeper into participants' thoughts and feelings, thereby enriching the data collected. By utilising semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, this research aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors influencing teachers' preparedness to teach in inclusive settings and to identify potential barriers encountered during the training process. Studies indicate that incorporating personal narratives and experiences can significantly highlight the barriers and facilitators encountered in implementing inclusive practices (Obah, 2024). Insights gathered from participants provided rich, context-specific data that allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of current teacher education strategies related to inclusive practices (Raith, 2021).

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Document analysis: Training materials, program curricula, and policy documents related to inclusive education at the institution were reviewed to triangulate data collected from interviews and focus groups, and to substantiate the analysis with existing educational frameworks and instructional methodologies (Masongsong et al., 2023). Researchers had also analysed existing documents, such as reports, meeting minutes, and other relevant materials, which provided additional context and insights related to the study topic (Cleland, 2017; Anugrah, Ibrahim & Sukardjo, 2021).

Interviews were conducted during a general qualitative fieldwork window from March to June 2025. These interviews were conducted in person without any pandemic-related constraints. An appropriate time to conduct interviews was arranged with the participants, as they were all engaged in their study and work-related programs. Participants were reached through purposive sampling. The sampling strategy was chosen because the study aimed to include participants with substantial engagement in inclusive education practices, ensuring that their perspectives reflect practical experience with training and implementation, as outlined in the sampling section. There was, therefore, a purposive consultation of individuals known to be engaged in inclusive education activities.

Data Analysis

For qualitative data, thematic analysis was employed to identify key themes and insights that emerged from the interviews and focus group discussions (Susilawati et al., 2023; Naseer & Hameed, 2024). Thematic analysis was also utilised to identify recurring themes and patterns within the qualitative data. This method enabled the interpretation of the participants' narratives within the broader context of inclusive education policies and their practical implementation. The themes were contextualised within existing literature on attitudes towards inclusive practices and teachers' perceived competencies (Nkomo, 2022; Gorani & Mahmood, 2024). This method allowed for the interpretation of data within the cultural and contextual realities of South African higher education institutions.

For data analysis, the researcher followed a step-by-step process, with the initial step being familiarisation with the data. In this instance, the researcher was deeply involved with the raw data or transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content. This step was essential for recognising initial thoughts and patterns regarding the participants' perceptions and experiences of inclusive education. According to Filia et al. (2018), multiple readings of the data can help distil significant insights and prepare the researcher for subsequent coding. Following familiarisation, the generation of initial codes began, where data segments of relevance were identified and labelled systematically. This is the stage where data is translated into a coded format, allowing for efficient organisation and retrieval later on. The researcher then searched for themes, organising the codes into potential themes that represent broader patterns observed across the datasets. Themes were constructed by examining the interplay between codes, thereby guiding the overarching narrative regarding the essence of quality teacher training in the context of inclusive education. It was therefore crucial at this stage to consider the relationships among various codes and sub-codes to uncover the latent messages in the data (Lenvik et al., 2021).

After themes were formulated, the researcher reviewed them by evaluating identified themes against the dataset for consistency and internal validity. This was done to ensure that the final themes adequately reflect the diversity of participants' viewpoints (Filia et al., 2018; Avci & Omar, 2023). Once reviewed, the researcher defined and named the themes. Each theme's essence was clarified, facilitating a coherent narrative in the qualitative report that encapsulates participants' insights into teacher training and inclusive education. Naming themes effectively helped present the findings in an accessible and comprehensible manner for the intended audiences, including scholars and teachers.

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Finally, the report was produced, culminating the thematic analysis process. This involved presenting the findings in a structured manner, including narrative descriptions supported by direct participant quotes to illustrate the themes robustly.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review committee. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, and informed consent was secured before data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process, with participants granted the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty (Frey, 2021).

4. Results of the Study

The essence of quality teacher training in implementing inclusive education within higher education institutions in South Africa is a vital topic that reflects a growing need for teachers to be adequately prepared to address diverse learning requirements. The participants' verbal insights, comprising student teachers, in-service teachers and lecturers, provided critical perspectives on this matter. Student teachers frequently articulated the importance of inclusive education training as foundational to their preparedness. One participant noted: *"Having courses specifically focused on inclusion will not only change my attitude but prepare me better for real-life classroom scenarios I will face".*

This sentiment emphasised the role of targeted training, which is inclusive education in this case, in shaping future teachers. Such a sentiment is echoed by findings suggesting that student teachers' attitudes can be significantly enhanced through direct experience and practical engagement with the principles of inclusion (Qandhi & Kurniawati, 2019). Participants articulated a need for comprehensive training in inclusive pedagogies, which aligns with findings that show self-efficacy significantly predicts positive attitudes towards inclusion (Kazanopoulos et al., 2022). Thus, training programs that incorporate inclusive education strategies can build teachers' self-efficacy and reduce their apprehensions about implementing inclusive practices. In-service teachers also provided valuable reflections on the challenges they face in an inclusive educational landscape. One teacher candidly expressed: *"I often feel overwhelmed by the diverse needs of my students, but realise that my training didn't fully prepare me for this reality ".*

This response highlighted a critical gap in pre-service education that ought to be undertaken by the higher education institution (Costello & Boyle, 2013). Furthermore, studies demonstrate that when teachers perceive themselves as inadequately equipped for inclusive education, it hampers their ability to create effective learning environments (Hellmich & Görel, 2017). This inconsistency between training outcomes and classroom reality calls for a reassessment of current educational programs.

Lecturers, as facilitators of teacher education, underscore the necessity of integrating inclusive education into mainstream training curricula to ensure future teachers are well-equipped. For instance, lecturers noted the importance of effectively integrating inclusive education into teacher training, suggesting that without proper training, both student and in-service teachers may struggle to implement inclusive practices confidently (Avramidis et al., 2019). From this understanding, a lecturer articulated: *"We need to not only teach the ideals of inclusivity but also how to implement these principles in diverse classrooms practically".*

The notion emphasises the dual focus on theory and practical application in the teaching-learning situation (Nel et al., 2023). This approach aligns with the understanding that inclusive education must be viewed holistically, where both theoretical frameworks and experiential learning coexist (Koliqi, Koliqi & Zabeli, 2023). Moreover, with South Africa's commitment to inclusive education post-1994, teachers need consistent support to implement policies effectively, moving beyond mere compliance to actively foster inclusive cultures (Ndebele et al., 2024).

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Finally, the insights from student teachers, in-service teachers, and lecturers underscore a pressing need for comprehensive training that not only promotes the ideals of inclusive education but also equips teachers with the practical skills needed for classroom implementation. As articulated by various participants, successful inclusion depends significantly on enhanced training efforts that reflect the complexities inherent in diverse educational contexts.

4. Interpretation of results

The results indicate a robust, evidence-based interpretation: high-quality teacher training for inclusive education in South Africa requires deliberate, targeted training in inclusive education (IE) for student teachers. This must be strengthened by practical engagement and self-efficacy-building experiences, as well as ongoing support and professional development for in-service teachers. There should be a deliberate integration of IE into mainstream teacher education curricula facilitated by lecturers and aligned with broader policy and curricular reform. The convergence of student, teacher, and lecturer perspectives with global IE literature supports a coherent strategy: implement holistic, practice-oriented IE training within South Africa's higher education system, underpinned by policy support and sustained institutional investment.

5. Discussion

The results underscore that student teachers view IE-focused coursework as essential for shaping attitudes and preparing them for real classroom scenarios. This aligns with the broader literature showing that targeted IE training fosters both attitudes and practical competencies necessary for inclusive practice (Martin & Bertram, 2024; Ndebele et al., 2024). Online and face-to-face IE modules are increasingly used in South Africa to build knowledge about barriers to learning and responsive pedagogy, though evidence suggests translation into sustained practice remains variable (Nel et al., 2023; Martin & Bertram, 2024; Malahlela & Johnson, 2024). The literature also notes that pre-service training should not be limited to ideals; it must integrate practical experiences that build self-efficacy in IE strategies to mitigate apprehensions about implementation (Ledger et al., 2021; Nel et al., 2023; Martin & Bertram, 2024). The MRTEQ framework positions inclusive education as central to teacher preparation, yet empirical work suggests the need for explicit guidance on translating policy into classroom practice (Ledger et al., 2021; Nel et al., 2023; Martin & Bertram, 2024).

The in-service teachers' sentiments about feeling overwhelmed by diverse learner needs point to a gap between university preparation and the realities of contemporary South African classrooms. The literature documents similar concerns, highlighting a misalignment between theory and practice, insufficient practical experience, and a lack of concrete competencies for inclusive teaching in diverse contexts (Mosito et al., 2020; Nel et al., 2023; Ndebele et al., 2024; Malahlela & Johnson, 2024). When teachers perceive themselves as inadequately equipped for IE, their ability to establish inclusive environments is constrained, which can perpetuate exclusionary practices or superficial compliance rather than transformative inclusion (Mosito et al., 2020; Nel et al., 2023; Malahlela & Johnson, 2024). This underscores the need for ongoing, praxis-oriented professional development (PD) that is linked to classroom realities and supported by schools and universities (Nel et al., 2023; Ndebele et al., 2024; Malahlela & Johnson, 2024). This calls for the design of an ongoing, context-responsive IE PD that directly addresses student diversity.

Lecturers also advocate for infusing inclusive education throughout initial teacher education, rather than treating IE as a stand-alone add-on. This perspective echoes findings that the infusion of IE into foundational and advanced teacher education is essential to ensuring that future teachers can implement IE confidently in diverse classrooms (Nel et al., 2023; Mabasa-Manganyi, 2023).

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A holistic approach integrating IE theory, pedagogy, practice, and policy is advocated as conducive to sustainable inclusion. This aligns with the South African policy milieu where IE is anchored in constitutional rights, White Paper 6, SIAS, SASA, and related reforms, but where implementation gaps persist due to resource constraints, capacity limits, and variable school contexts (Ndebele et al., 2022; Stemela-Zali et al., 2022; Nel et al., 2023; Mabasa-Manganyi, 2023; Malahlela & Johnson, 2024).

Notably, the study's findings show similarities and differences with other research studies. For instance, the findings described in the discussion are largely consistent with existing research on the need for practicum and PD, the centrality of policy-to-practice translation, and the reported gaps between university preparation and classroom realities in South Africa and comparable contexts. The discussion does not present claims that starkly contradict the literature, where differences arise. The literature mainly reflects the ongoing, nuanced debates about the relative weight of pre-service versus in-service training and the variability of translation into sustained practice. The cited set of references includes several positions that are broadly consonant with the findings, as well as minor deviations that likely reflect specific South African institutional contexts.

6. Conclusion

The research unveiled critical insights into how teacher training shapes teachers' competencies and attitudes toward inclusive education in the South African higher education context. By exploring essential components of effective teacher training programs, such as collaborative practices and reflection on personal biases, this study aims to contribute valuable recommendations for program design and policy formation (Kurniawati et al., 2016; Juhairiah, Yuwono, & Sabela, 2024). Moreover, the findings will enhance understanding of the support mechanisms required to empower teachers in their inclusive educational endeavours and highlight potential areas for improvement in teacher preparation programs to better align with inclusive educational mandates (Ahmad & May 2018).

This qualitative study is poised to significantly enrich the discourse on inclusive education by examining the quality and effectiveness of teacher training in the South African context and providing evidence-based recommendations to enhance educational practices that cater to diverse learning needs. In this qualitative research study, the researcher served as the primary instrument of data collection. This means that the researcher was actively engaged with participants and adapted their approach based on ongoing interactions. The researcher's perspectives and interpretations inherently shaped the data collection process, underscoring the importance of reflexivity throughout the study (Tarin, 2017). This dynamic relationship not only enriches the data but also enables researchers to respond to unfolding insights and emerging themes throughout the study.

Lastly, this paper will contribute to the ongoing discourse on inclusive education in South Africa, drawing on extensive evidence illustrating the pressing need for comprehensive teacher training initiatives to address the unique challenges educators face in promoting inclusive practices. Inclusive education is no longer a new phenomenon in the education system; it only needs a revisit in implementation practices. Nonetheless, high-quality teacher training is integral to the successful implementation of inclusive education, particularly in the South African context, where historical disparities persist. This notion underscores the necessity of fostering positive attitudes, enhancing pedagogical competencies, promoting collaborative practices, and offering holistic training programs tailored to meet the needs of diverse learners. Such multifaceted training initiatives could provide teachers within South Africa, and more broadly, a robust framework for achieving truly inclusive educational environments.

The novelty of the results is that the study contributes contemporary, South Africa-specific insights into how IE-focused coursework shapes the attitudes and perceived readiness of students and in-service teachers within higher education contexts. While prior work documents general links between IE training and attitudes, this study

reinforces the applicability of these dynamics to South African higher education settings, highlighting the lived variability across pre-service, in-service, and lecturer perspectives in South African HEIs. Once more, by incorporating student teachers, in-service teachers, and lecturers, the study offers a more holistic portrait of IE training effectiveness than studies focusing on a single stakeholder group. This triangulation extends the literature, which often emphasises one group by showing how each group perceives the same training ecosystem and its translation into practice, thereby clarifying where gaps are shared or diverge across roles.

Regarding limitations, the findings are drawn from one South African higher education institution, which may limit their transferability to other South African HEIs with different resource levels, student demographics, and policy implementation support. This aligns with methodological cautions in qualitative studies that emphasise context-specific insights rather than broad generalisation. Also, while triangulating three groups is a strength, the sample size and composition do not capture the full heterogeneity of South African HEIs. This is aligned with the understanding that while three stakeholder groups offer depth, there are subgroups, such as students with disabilities, subject-specific lecturers, or senior administrators, whose experiences are not captured in the study.

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FACTORS INFLUENCING CONSUMER REPURCHASE INTENTION OF RED MEAT IN CHAIN SUPERMARKETS IN MTHATHA

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Abstract. In today's knowledge society, the reputation of any brand is becoming increasingly important, whether it's a consumer good or a service provided by an organisation. Customers assess a brand's reputation before deciding whether to accept or reject it. This study is one of the few in the South African context to examine the factors influencing consumers' repurchase intentions for supermarkets in Mthatha. A set of postulated hypotheses was tested, and a sample consisting of 150 permanent and contingent workers from a supermarket in M was used in this study. A Structural Equation Modelling approach using Smart PLS was employed to test all the postulated hypotheses empirically. The findings suggest that repurchase intention in this context is significantly influenced by store service quality, store brand image, store brand loyalty, store brand trust, and red meat repurchase intention. Based on the current study results, insights for academia, practice, and management were provided. Furthermore, recommendations on possible strategies and policies that management or government can adopt, particularly regarding store service quality and red meat repurchase intention, were provided based on the current study's findings.

Keywords: red meat; store service quality; store brand image; store brand loyalty; store brand trust; red meat repurchase intention

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JEL Classifications: Q01, D90

1. Introduction

Consumers have become aware of the negative aspects of conventional meat, including environmental impacts, animal welfare concerns, and consumer health (Coucke et al., 2022). Alternative meats (i.e., cultured meat and plant-based meat alternatives) have been introduced recently to address these problems, and the rapid growth of the alternative meat market could pose a threat to the conventional meat market. It is necessary to identify the features of alternative meat that affect consumers' purchase intentions (Treiblmaier & Garaus, 2022).

According to Mazhar et al. (2022), repurchase intention is very important for profitability and is an objective discussed in company evaluations. In addition, repurchase intention also refers to the extent to which consumers are willing to buy a product or service again and is a simple, objective, and observable purchase behaviour expected (Istanbulluoglu & Sakman, 2022; Wang et al., 2023).

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Previous studies by other researchers mostly focused on the relationships among brand image, service quality, and price for consumers in large retail stores, and they didn't focus on price because consumers consider the store to charge reasonable prices. Some studies (not all) focused on consumers' consideration of reasonable prices.

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The purpose of the study is to investigate the factors influencing consumer repurchase intention for red meat in chain supermarkets in Mthatha. The authors will examine the influence of all variables on repurchase intention rather than as separate predictors. Store service quality, store brand image, store brand trust, and store brand loyalty may all influence red meat repurchase intention at South African supermarkets, particularly in Mthatha. One can hardly find a study with these four important variables in the Eastern Cape context, particularly in Mthatha. This study will examine factors influencing consumers' repurchase intention for red meat in chain supermarkets in Mthatha.

2. Problem statement

Despite the growing presence of chain supermarkets in Mthatha and the continued importance of red meat in consumers' diets, there is limited understanding of the factors influencing consumers' intentions to repurchase red meat from these outlets. Consumers are increasingly concerned about meat quality, freshness, price fluctuations, food safety, product availability, animal welfare, and health-related issues, all of which may affect their purchasing decisions (Buys et al., 2020; Fetscherin et al., 2024). For chain supermarkets, repeat purchases are essential for maintaining customer loyalty, profitability, and competitive advantage. However, variations in consumer preferences and perceptions may lead to inconsistent purchasing behaviour and reduced customer retention (Ip & Liang, 2024). The lack of empirical evidence on the determinants of red meat repurchase intention in the Mthatha context creates a knowledge gap that may hinder supermarkets from developing effective marketing and customer retention strategies (Chauhan, 2023). Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the key factors influencing consumers' repurchase intentions for red meat in chain supermarkets in Mthatha, providing insights that can support both retail management and consumer satisfaction.

3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical model or framework explains previously proven theories and how they may apply to the new study (Bouncken et al., 2021).

Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)
This theory served as the basis for the study, as established by Icek Ajzen in 1991 (Hagger et al., 2022). The theory of Planned Behaviour started as the Theory of Reasoned Action in 1980 to predict an individual's intention to engage in behaviour at a specific time and place (Soomro et al., 2022). The theory of planned behaviour is effectively adapted to ground this study, as customers' intentions regarding products such as red meat are based on their behavioural decisions, their awareness of the supermarket brand, and the communication (Hill-Sullins et al., 2025).

4. Review of literature

Attitudes towards Red Meat
Purchasing intentions for red meat are influenced by a combination of economic, social, cultural, and product-related factors (Fetscherin et al., 2024). Price and household income may play a major role, as consumers often balance affordability with perceived quality. Product attributes such as freshness, taste, tenderness, nutritional value, safety, origin, and production methods also affect buying decisions Samarakoon (Mudiyanselage et al., 2025). Health concerns about fat content and cholesterol, as well as links between excessive red meat consumption and certain diseases, can reduce demand among some consumers. Meat consumption itself has several peculiarities compared with other foods: it is often associated with status, tradition, celebrations, and social identity; consumption patterns vary significantly across regions, age groups, and income levels; and demand is highly sensitive to health information, food safety incidents, and ethical concerns (Singh et al., 2025). Furthermore, while many consumers value meat for its flavour and protein content, growing interest in

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sustainability and alternative protein sources is influencing consumption habits and shifting purchasing behaviour (Nguyen et al., 2022; Kantono et al., 2021).

Store Service Quality

According to Tran (2022), service quality is a measurement of how well a company meets the expectations of the clients who hire it to provide services in response to their demands. Service quality measures how closely a service given meets the client's expectations (Karunaratna, 2022). It encompasses aspects such as the friendliness and professionalism of staff, prompt customer assistance, store cleanliness, efficient checkout services, proper handling and display of meat products, and the availability of knowledgeable employees who can provide information on meat quality and freshness (Junior et al., 2022). When consumers experience high service quality, they are more likely to develop trust and satisfaction with the supermarket, which, in turn, increases their willingness to buy red meat from the same store again (Morales, Ehmke & Sheridan, 2024).

Store Brand Image

The way a customer perceives a brand is known as its "brand image." It is the culmination of customers' perceptions, thoughts, and impressions of the brand. Brand image is the customers' current perception of a company. It can be characterised as a particular collection of associations held by the target audience. It denotes what the brand currently represents. It is a group of beliefs people hold about a particular brand. Brand image is how consumers see your business and how it communicates emotional value (Liu et al., 2025; Fatma & Khan, 2025).

Store Brand Trust

Customer trust in your brand's capacity to deliver on its promises is known as brand trust. The branding effect known as "brand trust" describes the connection between a brand and its customers (Febrian & Fadly, 2021). Brand trust develops from a variety of factors, such as prestige and service quality, but the manner of communication also plays a crucial role (Zhang, Xu & Ye, 2022).

Store Brand Loyalty

According to Julian and Ferdinan (2022), brand loyalty occurs when a customer repeatedly purchases a product from a competitor. For example, some people will always buy Coke at the grocery store, while others will always buy Pepsi. Brand Loyalty is the faithfulness a customer develops toward a brand. Brand loyalty develops in a consumer's mind after the consumer finds the product or service useful (Vikaliana et al., 2021).

Red Meat Repurchase Intention

According to Miao et al. (2021), repurchase intention is the process by which an individual purchases goods or services from the same firm, and the reason for repurchasing is primarily based on past purchase experience. Repurchase Intention is very important for profitability and is a factor discussed in company evaluations (Anshu, Gaur & Singh, 2022).

6. Research Methodology

According to Schwendicke et al. (2021), research methodology is an outline of how a given piece of research is carried out. It defines the techniques or procedures used to identify and analyse information on a specific research topic. This study is quantitative research; it is a major category in the research sphere, alongside qualitative research (Hafner et al., 2022; Sun & Moon, 2025). Quantitative data were collected from 150 customers who bought red meat online, using a questionnaire, as part of the target population. Random probability sampling was utilised because it involves selecting numbers from a list assigned to the sample in a fully randomised process.

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7. Presentation and analysis of research findings

Accordingly, quantitative data was collected from 300 customers who purchased goods and services online using a questionnaire. Composite Reliability was employed to evaluate the measurement scale and confirm the instrument's internal consistency. According to Baharum et al. (2023), if the composite reliability is greater than 0.6, the instruments are reliable. In this study, Smart PLS was used to compute the composite reliability, and the results depict that all variables meet the acceptable threshold of 0.6. Hence, all the measurement instruments used in this study are deemed reliable.

According to Cheung et al. (2024), convergent validity is evaluated using factor loadings and average variance extracted. According to Santos and Cirillo (2023), factor loadings should be above 0.5, but 0.4 is marginally acceptable, while average variance extracted should be 0.7 and above, but 0.4 is marginally acceptable.

Cronbach Alpha

Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was employed to evaluate the measurement scale's internal consistency and reliability, according to Bujang et al. (2024). Cronbach's Alpha value should be greater than 0.7 to be reliable. Cronbach's Alpha was used to assess the instruments' reliability. All Cronbach's Alpha values are greater than 0.7, confirming that the measurement instruments used in this study are reliable.

Composite Reliability

According to Baharum et al. (2023), if the composite reliability is greater than 0.6, the instruments are reliable. In this study, Smart PLS was used to compute the composite reliability, and the results depict that all variables meet the acceptable threshold of 0.6. Hence, all the measurement instruments used in this study are deemed reliable. Based on these two indicators meeting the recommended threshold, the study is reliable, as the researcher aimed to assess its reliability and validity (see Table 1).

Table 1. Reliability test results: Cronbach Alpha and Composite reliability

Research constructs	**Cronbach's Alpha**	**Composite reliability (rho_a)**	**Composite reliability (rho_c)**
Red meat repurchase intention	0.944	0.944	0.960
Store brand image	0.903	0.904	0.932
Store brand loyalty	0.920	0.920	0.949
Store brand trust	0.952	0.953	0.963
Store service quality	0.888	0.896	0.930

Average variance extracted

Average Variance Extracted (AVE). AVE is expected to be > 0.5, the acceptable threshold. However, an AVE that is above 0.4 is regarded as marginally acceptable, while 0.5 is regarded as excellent. Therefore, the AVEs in this study range from marginally acceptable to acceptable. In the current study, the lowest AVE is 0.774, while the highest AVE is 0.862 (see Table 2).

Table 2. Validity test results: Average variance extracted

Research constructs	**Average variance extracted (AVE)**
Red meat repurchase intention	0.856
Store brand image	0.774
Store brand loyalty	0.862
Store brand trust	0.839
Store service quality	0.817

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Based on this indicator, the data collected from the respondents converged well in this study, as all AVEs met the recommended threshold. The aim of using this indicator was to check convergent validity.

Four hypotheses were tested, and the path coefficients are provided in Figure 1 below. The significant levels were assessed using p-values and t-statistics. Respectively using the p-values. Hypotheses are viewed as significant at a 95% or higher level of significance (≥ 95%), where the p-value is ≤ 0.05 (Selvaraj et al., 2022). The t-statistics are expected to exceed 1.96 for the proposed relationship to be deemed acceptable. The proposed hypotheses and path coefficients are presented first, followed by t-statistics and p-values indicating the significance level of the proposed relationships. Finally, the last column provides the researcher's decision on whether to accept or reject the proposed hypotheses based on the research findings. The path coefficients demonstrate the strength of the relationships between the dependent and the independent variables (Sarstedt & Danks, 2022). Upon assessing the probability value, also referred to as the p-value, it was demonstrated that four hypotheses postulated were significant at $p<0.05$.

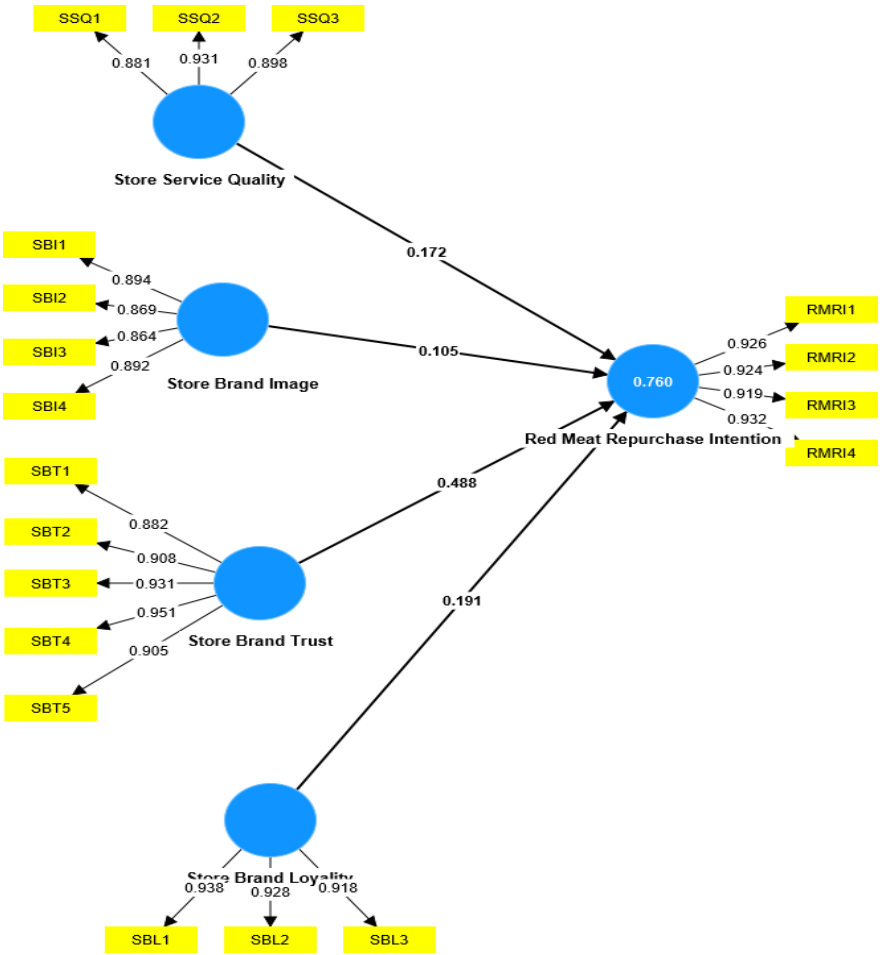


Figure 1. Structural equation modelling

Note*: SSQ=Store Service Quality; SBI= Store Brand Image; SBT=Store Brand Trust; SBL= Store Brand Loyalty; RMRI= Red Meat Repurchase Intention.*

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Path Analysis Results

Similarly, to obtain and validate the directed dependencies among the variables, a Path Analysis was conducted, as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Path analysis

Hypothesised relationship	Hypotheses	Path coefficient	T-statistics	P-value	Outcome
SSQ>RMRI	H_1	0.105	2.990	0.003	Significant & supported
SBI>RMRI	H_2	1.928	1.093	0.274	Insignificant & unsupported
SBT>RMRI	H_3	0.488	5.105	0.000	Significant & supported
SBL>RMRI	H_4	0.172	1.928	0.054	Insignificant & unsupported

Note*: SSQ = store brand image; SBI = store brand image; SBT = store brand trust; SBL = store brand loyalty; RMRI = red meat repurchase intention.*

Four hypotheses were proposed in the study. All hypotheses except H_2 and H_4 are statistically significant. The strongest relationship was between SSQ and RMRI, with β=0.105, t=2.990, and p=0.000. This was followed by the relationships between SBI and RMRI (β=0.191; t=1.093; p=0.274), SBT and RMRI (β=0.488; t=5.105; p=0.000), and SBL and RMRI (β=0.172; t=1.928; p=0.054), respectively.

(a) Results after testing Hypothesis 1

The results of the H1 test confirmed that there is an association between store service quality (SSQ) and red meat repurchase intention (RMRI). A path coefficient of 0.105 was realised after testing H_1. This means that store service quality (SSQ) positively influences red meat repurchase intention (RMRI). Furthermore, the results indicate that the relationship between store service quality (SSQ) and red meat repurchase intention (RMRI) is positively significant (t=2.391, p=0.003).

(b) Results after testing Hypothesis 2

The results of the H2 test confirmed that there is an association between store brand image (SBI) and red meat repurchase intention (RMRI). A path coefficient of 0.191 was realised after testing H_2. This means that store brand image (SBI) has a positive relationship with red meat repurchase intention (RMRI). Furthermore, the results indicate that the relationship between store brand image (SBI) and red meat repurchase intention (RMRI) is positive but insignificant (t=1.928, p=0.274).

(c) Results after testing Hypothesis 3

The results of the H3 test confirmed that there is an association between store brand trust and red meat repurchase intention (RMRI). A path coefficient of 0.488 was realised after testing H_3. This means that store brand trust (SBT) positively influences red meat repurchase intention (RMRI). Furthermore, the results indicate that the relationship between store brand trust (SBT) and red meat repurchase intention (RMRI) is positively significant (t=5,105, p=0.00).

(d) Results after testing Hypothesis 4

The results of the H4 test confirmed that there is an association between store brand loyalty and red meat repurchase intention (RMRI). A path coefficient of 0.172 was realised after testing H_4. This means that store brand loyalty (STL) positively influences red meat repurchase intention (RMRI). Furthermore, the results indicate that the relationship between store brand loyalty (STL) and red meat repurchase intention (RMRI) is positively significant (t=1.928, p=0.054).

Limitations of the study

Research limitations are potential weaknesses or constraints within a study's design, methodology, or scope that can influence its outcomes and the extent to which the results can be applied. Acknowledging them demonstrates academic integrity and helps readers properly interpret the study's findings (Balta-Salvador et al., 2025). For this

study, the following research limitations may be acknowledged. The study may be limited by its geographical scope, as it focuses only on consumers purchasing red meat from chain supermarkets in Mthatha. Consequently, the findings may not be generalisable to consumers in other towns, rural areas, or different retail formats such as butcheries and informal markets (Makusha et al., 2023). Another limitation is the reliance on self-reported data, which may be subject to response and social desirability biases, as well as to inaccurate recall of purchasing behaviour. The study may also be constrained by time and financial resources, limiting sample size and the ability to collect data from a broader population (Zhu, Greene, & Dolnicar, 2024). Furthermore, consumer repurchase intention may be influenced by external factors such as economic conditions, inflation, seasonal changes, meat shortages, food safety incidents, and cultural preferences, which may not be fully captured by the study (Zurek & Rudy, 2024).

8. Conclusions

The major objective of this study was to investigate the impact of store service quality, store brand image, store brand trust, and store brand loyalty on supermarkets in Mthatha. To accomplish this purpose, a conceptual model was developed, and hypotheses were postulated. Moreover, a research questionnaire was used to collect data, and Smart PLS software was used for structural modelling and data analysis. Overall, the findings confirmed that all the proposed hypotheses were positive, although only two were significant. The following section will discuss the findings for each of the three tested relationships in light of the prior empirical literature.

The literature review revealed a lack of evidence on the use of a mixed-methods approach in red meat repurchase intention. The use of a structural modelling approach for a quantitative research study and a qualitative study (mixed-methods approach) contributed new insights. It provided in-depth knowledge of store service quality, store brand image, store brand trust, and store brand loyalty as predictors, and red meat repurchase intention as the outcome variable. This study paves the way for other researchers to conduct follow-up studies using a mixed-methods approach. The following suggestions for future studies have been picked up:

- future studies should evaluate the factors that limit the current study, such as expanding the conceptual model;
- the results should be checked in other populations, in other provinces, across the country, and beyond;
- the population size should be increased to achieve better, more robust results.

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HATE CRIME VICTIMISATION IN SOUTH AFRICA: EMPIRICAL PATTERNS, INTERSECTIONAL VULNERABILITIES AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES (2013-2026)

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Abstract. Hate-motivated crimes continue to undermine South Africa's constitutional commitments to equality and human dignity. Hate crimes and violence remain a challenge despite the enactment of the Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Act (Act 16 of 2023). Using the Hate Crimes Working Group (HCWG) Monitoring Form Project (2013-2017) as its primary empirical source for assessment, this study examines victimisation patterns and incident typologies documented in the HCWG dataset (2013–2017) and assess whether these patterns persist after that period; analyse victim and offender characteristics associated with hate-motivated incidents; and evaluate institutional responses to hate crime and identify the implementation gap between legislative enactment and enforcement. Using descriptive statistics from the HCGW dataset, triangulating with post-2017 civil society publications (including Xenowatch, 2025). The data reveal a high incidence of recurrent victimisation and underreporting of hate crimes. The study confirms the persistence and intensification of xenophobic and anti-LGBTQ+ violence, institutionalised through groups such as Operation Dudula, notwithstanding new legislation in the post-2017 period. The study recommends a national hate crime database, strengthening of institutional accountability, and dedicated victim support services, particularly for intersectionally vulnerable groups.

Keywords: hate crime; vulnerability, victimisation; intersectionality; institutional response; South Africa

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1. Introduction

Hate crimes are a problem confronting many societies worldwide. Hate crimes instil fear among entire targeted groups, as supported by substantial empirical evidence (Hardy & Chakraborti, 2020; Díaz-Faes & Pereda, 2022; Mas Grau et al., 2025). Hate crimes manifest across nations and regions with diverse cultural traditions, colonial and post-colonial histories, religious traditions, political systems, and economies. This crime results in violence in which the denigration of a person's perceived identity, such as their 'race,' their ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, disability status, or sexual identity, plays some role. Although hate crimes may differ from country to country and even within individual countries (Iganski & Levin, 2015), their effects on individuals and society are disastrous. For instance, hate crime resulting in violence led to the September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda terror attacks on the World Trade Centre, in rural Pennsylvania, and against the Pentagon in the United States were evidence of hate crime and political, economic, and military might. The casualties were the nearly 3,000 people, mostly civilians, who lost their lives in a horrible conflagration. The acts combined religious conviction, loathing of

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secular society, and hatred of the United States (Iganski & Levin, 2015). Hate speech, disseminated in print and by radio, led to genocidal crimes in Rwanda with disastrous consequences for the country.

The threat Index ranking of countries compiled by The Minority Rights Group International, a campaigning non-governmental organisation founded in the 1970s to defend the rights of disadvantaged minorities and indigenous people, has been recording annually the risk of genocide, mass killing or other systematic violent repression like hate crimes across the globe. According to the rights watch, the threat of hate crimes manifests in the form of religious, sectarian, or ethnic conflict and persecution. Hate crimes in the guise of religious hatred are prevalent in the Middle East and African states, with people most at risk of mass killings. Eight countries, including Somalia, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Myanmar (formerly Burma), and Ethiopia, have consistently ranked in the top ten each year as the most at risk. Each year, Somalia has been ranked at the highest risk, and since 2010, Sudan has been ranked second, having risen from third in 2008 and 2009. A few other countries have featured intermittently in the top ten at greatest risk: Chad (2010), Côte d'Ivoire (2011), Iran (2012), Israel/Palestine (2009), Nigeria (2013), South Sudan (2012), Syria (2013 & 2014) and Yemen (2014) where hate crimes in the modes of religious and sectarian conflicts feature prominently in a number of these countries (Iganski & Levin, 2015).

Statement of the problem

South Africa remains one of the countries battling with hate crimes. Recent media reports from March and April 2026 document fresh xenophobic attacks and rising tensions against foreign nationals in areas such as Durban, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, and the Western Cape (Ngcobo & Naadi, 2026). Constitutional efforts have been made to tackle hate crimes in South Africa. Despite this, cases of hate crimes have continued to be evidenced in violent attacks, violence against LGBTQ+ persons, racial intolerance, and xenophobia, underscoring a troubling gap between the law and reality (Human Rights Watch, 2024). According to Mlambo et al. (2023), hate-motivated violence includes corrective rape of lesbian women, violent intimidation of religious and ethnic minorities, and xenophobic attacks on African migrants. The empirical research on hate crime in South Africa, however, is still sparse. Other examples of hate crimes include violent intimidation of religious groups, corrective rape of lesbian women, xenophobic attacks on African migrants, and ethnic minorities, all of which are hate-motivated violence (Dahlberg & Thapar-Björkert, 2023). In a study by Mitchell and Nel (2017), it is reported that the Hate Crimes Working Group (HCWG) Monitoring Form Project has documented 945 incidents between 2013 and 2017 across five provinces, revealing systematic victimisation of migrants, LGBTQ+ persons, and other marginalised groups, alongside high levels of underreporting and weak institutional response. The poor documentation of hate crime reports by the government or relevant authorities since 2017 has created a critical empirical gap (Nel & van Wyk, 2024).

Act 16 of 2023, which explicitly criminalises hate-motivated offences and adds hate motive as an aggravating sentence factor, was passed in South Africa in response to civil society advocacy against hate crimes in 2003. Several studies have highlighted serious concerns about poor implementation and delays, insufficient operational reporting mechanisms, and a continued lack of credible data (PPM Attorneys, 2026; Mamba Online, 2026)

Despite legislative enactment of Act 16 of 2023, disability-based hate crimes have receive nearly no dedicated empirical attention; post-Act evaluation is still lacking, with literature ending at draft regulations (November 2025); intersectionality applications are limited, concentrating primarily on single biases; a systematic review of the provided reference corpus (2018–2026) reveals several critical gaps, offender motivations lack integrated causal models beyond economic scapegoating; and (5) data remain fragmented and geographically limited. This study seeks to bridge the gap by triangulating the HCWG baseline with post-2017 sources (including Xenowatch, 2025, and the 2025 Johannesburg High Court judgment against Operation Dudula), analysing disability as an understudied bias, and proposing suggestions.

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This study addresses the identified gap by analysing patterns of hate crime victimisation using the HCWG dataset and situating these findings within post-2017 institutional and legislative developments. The study set to investigate these specific objectives: (1) to examine victimisation patterns and incident typologies documented in the HCWG dataset (2013–2017) and assess whether these patterns persist after that period; (2) to analyse victim and offender characteristics associated with hate-motivated incidents; and (3) to evaluate institutional responses to hate crime and identify the implementation gap between legislative enactment and enforcement.

2. Literature Review

Conceptualisation of hate crime

Conceptualising hate crime is quite problematic in terms of one's interpretation. In the academic and grey literature, a recent Campbell Systematic Review identified 423 definitions, 168 measurement instruments, and 83 legislative definitions, highlighting the lack of global agreement (Vergani et al., 2024). For operational purposes, the broad definition advanced by Act 16 of 2023 defines hate crime as an offence committed where the perpetrator is motivated by prejudice or intolerance based on the victim's race, nationality, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, disability, or albinism, among other characteristics (Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Act, 2023).

Hate victimisation patterns and incident typologies documented 2018-2026 after the HCWG dataset (2013–2017) period

South Africa faces the challenge of hate and discriminatory crimes to date. Available data and literature indicate that the problem exists in different patterns and at varying incidences. For example, a xenophobic movement founded in Soweto on June 16, 2021, Operation *Dudula* spread across the country. It was characterised by UN human rights experts as a catalyst for murder, arson, and vigilantism (Al Jazeera, 2023). In the wake of the 2024 general elections in South Africa, Global Witness and the Legal Resource Centre (2024) documented the influence of social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok on the promotion of xenophobic advertisements in South African languages. It recorded xenophobic attacks in South Africa between 2022 and 2024, including 255 incidents, 57 fatalities, 6,134 displaced persons, and 810 looted stores, and is also detailed in the Xenowatch report (2025). 83 incidents (2024 resurgence), 62 incidents (2023 decline), and 110 incidents (2022 peak) annually. The most frequent category (109 occurrences) was violence, which was followed by threats (22), health xenophobia (21), harassment (32), extortion (26), evictions (16), and refused services (7).

Anti-LGBTQ+ violence continued as a pattern of hate crimes was also recorded. The U.S. Department of State (2021) records that more than 22 LGBTQ+ persons were killed in South Africa in 2021 alone, with nine further deaths recorded in 2022 (U.S. Department of State, 2024), while Human Rights Watch confirmed that Black lesbians and transgender women in townships face killings, sexual assault, and harassment (HRW, 2022, 2023, 2024). The study by Ngidi, Ntinga, Osward and Fredriksen-Goldsen (2025) highlights the South African early-access version of a comprehensive empirical study of the incidents of violence and discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people from 2013 onwards, which is central to any study of intersectional hate crime vulnerability in South Africa. The authors vividly capture the disconnect between South Africa's progressive constitution and laws, which are among the earliest in the world to explicitly guarantee equal rights to women, men, transgender and gender non-conforming people, to which LGBTIQ+ people are entitled and the high rates of physical assault, sexual violence, harassment and social exclusion that they experience in their daily lives. The study also focuses on the intersection of race, gender identity, and geographical location to adjust risk. Black LGBTIQ+ people living in township neighbourhoods are seen as having far higher risks than those living in urban, predominantly white or middle-class neighbourhoods, thus substantiating the intersectional hypothesis that guides the analytical approach adopted in the present article.

Furthermore, Ngidi et al. (2025) name institutional failure as systemic police officers are reported to be indifferent, sceptical and hostile towards LGBTIQ+ persons when they file complaints for hate-motivated crimes

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and conviction rates in such cases are reported to be negligible. In a desk review study, Van Der Schyff (2025) discovered that gay males and social dynamics, such as gender-based violence, abduction, victimisation, and queercide, were increasing in certain South African areas. The research analysed online reports, between 2022 and 2024, by a community organisation on cases of violence against gay men. Derogatory language and discrimination were also reported to be on the rise, as a prelude to actual hate crimes (Kteily & Landry, 2022). Strong empirical evidence supports Iganski's (2001) fundamental theory of the "in terrorem" effect, which holds that hate crimes cause dread throughout entire targeted communities (Díaz-Faes & Pereda, 2022; Hardy & Act 16) of 2023's portrayal of verbal and physical hate as points on a continuum.

Onwukwe's (2024) study focuses on the survivors rather than the perpetrators and the structures of the analysis. The article does fieldwork with Nigerian immigrants in Cape Town and Johannesburg and describes how xenophobic violence forces migrants to constantly negotiate their identities, including when they consciously adapt their communication to avoid being stigmatised. The Nigerian respondents mention code-switching, accent suppression and selective disclosure of nationalities as common adaptations that are protective strategies to everyday life as a hate crime target that is significant. It is important to note that Onwukwe's results align with the present article's intersectional perspective, which offered an insight into the complex interplay between ethnicity, nationality and language and how these factors place certain groups of migrants at greater risk, as well as the fact that victimisation is not a one-off experience, but an ongoing process influencing self-presentation and community belonging.

Victim and offender characteristics associated with hate-motivated incidents

Important trends from the HCWG project (2013–2017) include demographics and socio-economic profile: Most victims are between the ages of 21 and 40; 41% were between 21 and 30, and 35% were between 31 and 40. The average age of victims was around 31 years, and most of them were Black/Africans (59%) of instances where race was established, with a notable percentage of foreign nationalities (particularly East African [28%] and Central African (18%); Ethiopian 8%, Somali 6%). Gender identity revealed that 64% of victims were men, 28% were women, and 8% were transgender women; 68% of victims were men. Employment varied but included significant percentages of shop clerks, sex workers, and self-employed/informal traders (especially among foreign-national and LGBTI victims); in summary, 14% were specifically jobless. Most of these people resided in townships or urban/informal settlements (48% of informal urban residences), and while secondary education was prevalent, many lacked postsecondary education. According to HCWG researchers (Nel & van Wyk, 2024) victims were singled out for perceived or unchangeable traits, resulting in "message crimes" that terrorise the entire communities. + Ableism is emphasised as a motivation that is different from general vulnerability in disability-specific work (Holness, 2021). Offender data gaps persist, while economic scapegoating dominates explanations, integrated causal models remain underdeveloped in the literature.

Institutional Responses and the Legitimacy Crisis

Arising from the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC, 2022 and 2025) and the South African Social Attitudes Survey, there was an erosion of public confidence in the South African Police Service (SAPS). The police in South Africa have witnessed a decline in public trust. The driving factors for the distrust include inadequate oversight, financial pressures on officers, and political interference (Molokomme & Motebe, 2025). Nel and van Wyk (2024) note that institutional failure has produced a critical dependence on civil society organisations as primary service providers for hate crime victims. An eighteen-month gap between Act 16 of 2023's assent in May 2024 and the publication of draft Regulations in November 2025, during which SAPS officers had no prescribed forms, standard operating procedures, or formal training mandate to tackle hate crime. Sibanda, Muringi, Masinga and Lelope's (2025) research examines a facet of xenophobic victimisation in the South African literature with respect to the particular vulnerabilities of migrant and refugee entrepreneurs whose economic livelihoods are attacked in addition to their persons during outbreak events. The study is multi-sectoral in nature to determine the level of socio-economic services available to business owners impacted by a xenophobic attack, and it examines Government departments, civil society organisations, and informal support

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networks as potential response mechanisms. The results show high vulnerability to segregation in services and that, while some victims of entrepreneurship receive short-term humanitarian assistance, there is little systematic support to help businesses recover, resulting in long-term precarity and a heightened risk of re-victimisation. This evidence directly feeds into the present study's findings on the capacity of the state in South Africa to respond to immediate violence, rather than to address the structural conditions, such as economic exclusion, that give rise to it. With its attention to questions of pedagogy and moral formation, John's (2025) is a unique departure from the purely structural accounts. He explores the role that poverty and political opportunism play in sustaining violence against migrants in South Africa, but looks more closely at the entrenched epistemic frameworks, learned dispositions of dehumanisation that circulate in and are generated by public discourse, media representation, and everyday social interaction. The study draws on humanisation theory and critical pedagogy to suggest that it is essential to "unlearn" the ongoing practices of intentional racialisation of migrants as threatening and/or sub-human for enduring prevention and prevention of xenophobic hate crime. This analysis adds to the institutional responses dimension of the current article, as it suggests that policing, prosecution, and policy reform are necessary but not sufficient in the absence of parallel investments in transformative civic education.

The study by Chekenya (2024) offers a valuable theoretical synthesis to explain the perpetuation of anti-migrant violence in South Africa despite its constitution's promise of human dignity. Based on theoretical orientations and empirical findings, Chekenya makes the case that xenophobia in South Africa is not a byproduct of the South African society, but rather a social product of economic marginalisation, competition for resources and scapegoating of foreign nationals in South Africa. The study further shows that “state complicity” in township economies through the use of selective law enforcement and the inaction of state officials in bringing prosecution against repeat victimisation acts as a structural enabler of repeat victimisation, while migrants from sub-Saharan Africa are overrepresented in those same economies. In particular, migrants in Chekenya are found to be relying on community-based protection forms, often the only ones available to them, which are also precarious and context-specific, particularly at the point of implementation, where formal legal protection mechanisms are often absent or ineffective. The institutional divide between legislative promises and their actual implementation is a cross-cutting theme in the post-2013 literature examined in this paper. Yingi, Ncube and Benyera (2024) build on Chekenya's structural reading by strategically situating South African xenophobia within a longer post-colonial and pan-African story of thwarted liberation. The authors develop the notion of 'dashed prospects of independence' to describe the disillusionment of former colonies that had hoped that democratic freedom would lead to material improvement. This frustration is transferred onto migrants from other African countries, where they are seen as taking up the few jobs and the limited housing and social services, in the South African context. From a theoretical perspective, Yingi et al. suggest that xenophobic violence is, in part, a racialised and nativist reaction to the failure of the post-1994 democratic settlement, which highlights the need to tackle economic inequality not only as a development goal, but as a hate crime prevention strategy. The most important finding of the study for the present article is that hate crime victimisation is not a problem that can be separated from the macrostructural conditions of its production: analysis of the problem and effective institutional responses must take account of socio-economic conditions rather than focusing only on individual incidents and the law enforcement response to these incidents.

The systemic needs for effective hate victimisation prevention and monitoring, as presented by Nel and Venter (2024), provide a South African and African perspective. Nel and Venter evaluate the current state of hate crime legislative, institutional and civil society responses in terms of international expectations and best practices in the collection of hate crime data, supporting victims, and holding perpetrators accountable. One of their key conclusions is that South Africa is experiencing an urgent need for dependable hate crime statistics, namely, statistics that are disaggregated and that provide information on the bias-motivation of an offence. Nel and Venter call for the formalisation of hate crime monitoring procedures that align with international best practice, such as dedicated hate crime units within the prosecution services and the mandatory recording of bias indicators by the police. The recommendations in this article align with the empirical patterns dimension of the present article,

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which also addresses the challenge of obtaining reliable incidence data in the absence of formally adopted legislation on hate crimes and hate speech.

In a philosophically driven study by Sesanti (2025), the question is posed: what values should guide South Africa's response to hate-crime victimisation, and how has the post-apartheid constitutional settlement failed to capture these values adequately? Sesanti claims that the absence of Ubuntu, the African philosophy that emphasises personhood in relation to others, communal solidarity and interdependence from the South African Constitution, has left a normative void that can make xenophobic violence more understandable and harder to address. Any approach to Ubuntu's ethic of mutual obligation, however, is missing from the dominant liberal understanding and discourse, which limits responses to rights talk and the enforcement of the law, and ignores the relationship reconstruction needed to restore social trust between migrants and host communities. Sesanti locates this argument in the pan-African critique. Xenophobia towards other Africans is a crime and a failure of civilisational values that drove the fight against colonisation and apartheid. The study has implications for the present study's assessment of institutional responses, in that efforts to be truly transformative in institutional responses to hate crime cannot simply be based on Euro-American value systems but must instead be grounded in indigenous African value systems. The pedagogy of Sesanti, so to speak, of humanisation thus complements John's (2025) pedagogy of humanisation and underscores the importance of culturally grounded prevention strategies in addition to institutional reform.

All the literature reviewed in the study found that there is a structural disconnect between South Africa's legal landscape and the lived experience of hate crime victims, whether migrants or LGBTIQ+, which is reinforced by the institutional inability, gaps in enforcement, and cultural resistance of law enforcement agencies. Second, the literature clearly shows how unable single-axis analyses are: the experience of hate crime victimisation in South Africa is a product of the intersectional nature of nationality, race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, language and geography, and responses to it need to be attuned to this intersectional complexity. In addition, the literature as a whole draws attention to macrostructural conditions, the post-apartheid inequality and labour market exclusion and how these contribute to the social resentments that hate crime perpetrators draw on.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on four theoretical frameworks. First, is the Message crime theory by Iganski (2001), which holds that hate crimes communicate to the victim's entire community that they are unsafe and unwelcome, producing secondary victimisation far beyond the individual victim. Second, is Intersectionality theory by Crenshaw (1991), which holds that overlapping disadvantages generate unique vulnerabilities for those with marginalised identities. Individuals who are simultaneously foreign-born, Black, and LGBTQ+ face compounded exposure to multiple hate vectors. Third is the Critical Hate Studies framework by James and McBride (2022), which holds hate as a structural phenomenon produced by power, inequality, and the social organisation of difference conditions deeply embedded in South Africa's apartheid legacy. This theory explains that, despite legislation, structural conditions persist. Fourth, procedural justice theory, as formulated by Tyler (2006), holds that institutional legitimacy depends on the perceived fairness and respect with which authorities treat people. This explains why communities disengage from formal reporting of hate crimes because of the procedural challenge, characterised by underreporting. These theories are relevant to understanding why hate crimes, vulnerability and victimisation persist in nations like South Africa.

4. Methodology

Research Design
This study employs an ex post facto, secondary data analysis design appropriate for investigating phenomena that have already occurred and cannot be manipulated experimentally. The study design enables the analysis of already collected empirical data.

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Primary Dataset

The primary data source is the HCWG Hate and Bias Crimes Monitoring Form Project (January 2013–September 2017), see Appendix 1 in the reference section, the most comprehensive dataset currently available on hate crime victimisation in South Africa. In five provinces, the Eastern Cape, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, and Western Cape, more than 150 trained monitors from 85 partner groups gathered 945 documented cases. In-person interviews (44%) and case file review (46%) were used to collect data. This dataset provides a unique empirical baseline because there is no official police classification of hate crimes in South Africa (Nel & van Wyk, 2024).

Study Setting

South Africa has diverse races, ethnicities, languages, and cultural identities, and is a constitutional democracy. Despite a legal framework guaranteeing equality, the nation has had high rates of hate-based violence that continue to pose serious tensions and development challenges to the nation.

Unit of Analysis and Sampling

The HCWG selected occurrences reported by partner organisations and trained monitors working within designated provinces to use purposeful case documenting. Although this method allows for depth of information, it does not produce a nationally representative probability sample.

Data Analysis

The HCWG dataset was subjected to descriptive statistical analysis, frequency distributions, and percentage computations to identify victimisation patterns, event typology, and the institution's response.

Ethical Considerations

Sensitive personal data and victim names are anonymised in the HCWG dataset. The study complies with accepted ethical standards for secondary data research, ensuring that data are used exclusively for academic purposes and that results are presented in a manner that prevents the disclosure of individual identity.

5. Findings

Victim Demographics

Victim ages spanned from infancy to 81 years. The dominant age cohorts were 21–30 years (41%) and 31–40 years (35%), indicating that economically active adults bear the greatest burden of victimisation; 22 victims were identified as children or adolescents under 18. As shown in Figure 1, Black/African individuals comprised 62% of victims. Among foreign nationals, those from East Africa accounted for 28%, those from Central Africa for 18%, and those from Asian countries for 8%. LGBTQ+ persons constituted 43% of all victims (35% lesbian or gay; 8% transgender). Thirty-six per cent of victims had not completed Grade 12, and 4% had no formal education. It is worth noting that, according to the findings, victims were frequently identified as foreign by language: offenders selected targets upon hearing non-South African accents or home languages, consistent with scholarship on the embodied performance of belonging and exclusion (Dahlberg & Thapar-Björkert, 2023).

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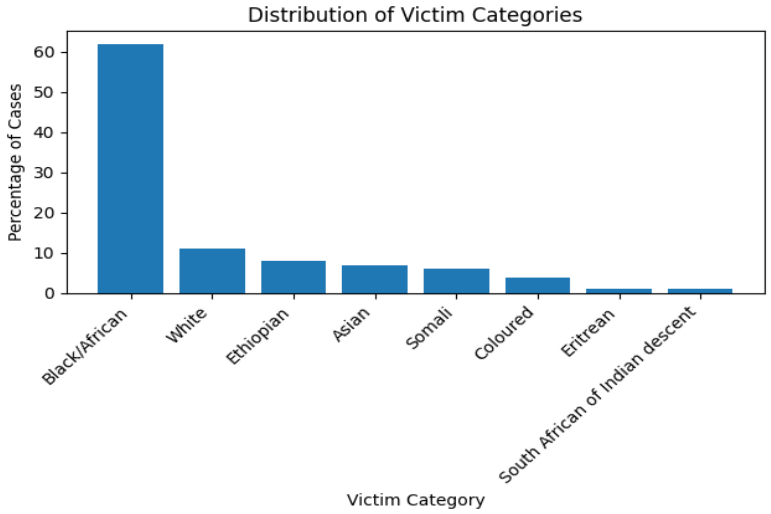


Figure 1. Bar chart presenting Victim Racial Categories (HCWG Dataset, 2013–2017)
Source: The author used the HCWG Dataset (2013-2017), as cited in Mitchell & Nel (2017), to generate the bar chart

Incident Scale, Offenders, and Typology

Of 669 personal attack cases, at least 1,113 individuals were directly affected (approximately 1.7 victims per incident). Offender profile data reveal a critical governance dimension as SAPS officers accounted for 7% of identified offenders, public officials for 4%, school or college staff for 2%, and medical professionals for 1%. 34% of offenders were known to victims, and another 34% were members of the victim's own community. The leading crime categories were robbery/theft (30%), property damage (27%), and illegal eviction (17%), as shown in Figure 2. Electronic hate crime accounted for 6% of cases, a proportion that has grown substantially in the post-2018 digital environment. Among hate speech and discrimination incidents, intimidation was most prevalent (34%), followed by hate speech (24%), harassment (22%), intentional unfair discrimination (19%), and defamation or harm to dignity (11%).

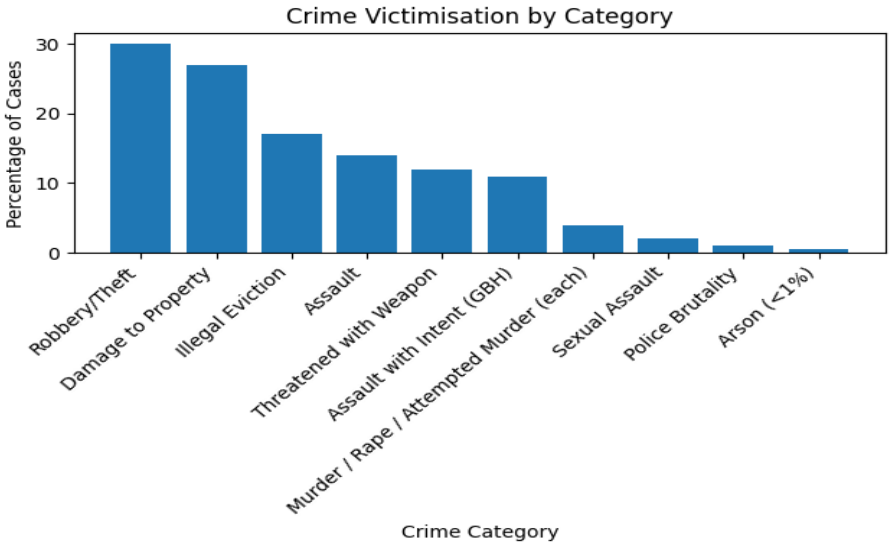


Figure 2. Hate Crime Typology (N = 945)
Source: The author used the HCWG Dataset (2013–2017), as cited in Mitchell & Nel (2017), to generate the bar chart

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Language, Repeat Victimisation, and Geographic Distribution

Perpetrators audibly used derogatory or dehumanising language in 68% of cases characterised by the HCWG as "unmistakable indicators of the reasons for the attack" (Mitchell & Nel, 2017). Half of all victims reported at least one prior prejudice-based incident; 15% had been explicitly threatened before the incident. In many instances, organised defamatory campaigns preceded physical attacks by months, consistent with escalation dynamics in Critical Hate Studies (James & McBride, 2022). Geographic concentration was highest in the Eastern Cape (27%), Western Cape (26%), Gauteng (20%), KwaZulu-Natal (14%), and Limpopo (7%).

Reporting, Impact, and Institutional Response

Nearly two in three victims (67%) did not report their experiences to SAPS, consistent with procedural justice predictions of institutional disengagement (Tyler, 2006). Of the reported cases, only 36% of victims found the police helpful. Police officers were identified as accomplices or perpetrators in 66 recorded cases. Among cases that reached the court, hate motivation was formally recognised in only 16 of 89 cases (18%). The psychological and economic toll was substantial: 50% of victims experienced emotional harm, 7% reported combined mental health effects, and 35% suffered economic harm. Civil society organisations (CSOs, NGOs, CBOs) provided the primary source of support in 43% of cases, compared with 26% for SAPS, underscoring the state's failure as the primary service provider.

Disability-Based Victimisation: An Understudied Gap

The HCWG dataset and post-2017 sources provide disaggregated data on disability-based hate crimes despite albinism and disability being listed in Act 16 of 2023. Victims with disabilities, according to findings, face unique vulnerabilities (e.g., mockery of mobility aids, financial exploitation, institutional abuse). However, empirical patterns remain underdocumented, mirroring the broader gap in the literature and underscoring the need for targeted future monitoring.

6. Discussion

The findings show concentration of victimisation among Black/African individuals, foreign nationals, LGBTQ+ persons, and the educationally marginalised, which reflects the systematic production of vulnerability through intersecting structural inequalities. Critical Hate Studies frames this not as individual prejudice but as structural practice: hate crime enforces social hierarchies and punishes difference (James & McBride, 2022). The post-2017 evidence confirms that these structural conditions have not diminished. Operation Dudula's institutionalisation of vigilante xenophobia organised digital hate mobilisation (Global Witness & Legal Resource Centre, 2024), and the ongoing corrective rape of LGBTQ+ individuals in townships collectively demonstrate that hate crime in South Africa is a durable structural feature, not a residual historical phenomenon. The multideterminant model illustrates how macro-economic grievances are reframed through digital platforms into meso-level vigilantism and micro-level impulses, with the 2025 Johannesburg High Court interdict against Operation Dudula providing judicial confirmation of this pathway (International Commission of Jurists, 2025).

The HCWG finding that 66 SAPS officers were implicated as perpetrators, combined with the fact that two in three victims never reported to police, must be read alongside the HSRC's post-2017 trajectory of declining police legitimacy. Procedural justice theory directly predicts the outcome: institutions experienced as complicit or indifferent are progressively abandoned by the communities they are meant to serve, entrenching underreporting and eroding governance effectiveness (Tyler, 2006).

Act 16 of 2023 closes the legislative gap that civil society spent a decade advocating to address. Its provisions include a statutory hate crime definition, mandatory sentencing aggravation, and electronic hate speech criminalisation. However, the eighteen-month implementation gap between the Act's assent in May 2024 and the publication of draft Regulations in November 2025 confirms that legislative enactment has not yet translated into

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operational effectiveness. The near-complete failure of courts to recognise hate motivation in sentencing in 16 of 89 cases between 2013 and 2017 was primarily a failure of prosecutorial practice and judicial culture, which Act 16 of 2023 addresses in principle but has not yet resolved.

Novelty and contribution of the findings

To sum up, the following five unique and interrelated contributions to knowledge have been made in this study. First, it presents the first systematic empirical use of the structural framework of Critical Hate Studies in an analysis of hate crime data in South Africa over a period of thirteen years, demonstrating that incidents of victimisation follow axes of intersecting structural inequality rather than individual prejudice. Second, it builds and tests a multi-determinant pathway model that incorporates macroeconomic, digital mobilisation, and micro-level variables, providing an explanatory framework that surpasses that of most previous South African studies, which focus on a single level of the incident. Third, it brings a more stringent standard of institutional change to the specific context of police complicity and chronic underreporting than the literature to date has produced by employing procedural justice theory. Fourth, it offers a real-time baseline assessment of the trajectory of implementation of Act 16 of 2023, so that the evidence of successes and challenges before and after the Act has been enacted provides a before/after evidentiary baseline, and shows that the enactment of the Act is not enough to achieve effectiveness without the right trajectory. Fifth, it sets the evidential and infrastructural basis for nationally representative monitoring of hate crimes and outlines a clear research agenda for the future. Taken together, these contributions establish the study as a key reference for scholarship, policy, and advocacy on hate crime in South Africa, and, more generally, in post-colonial African democracies amid tensions between progressive constitutional provisions and structural forms of social violence.

Limitation of the study

A key limitation of this study is the reliance on the HCWG dataset, which, while the best available source, is based on purposive rather than probability sampling and covers only five provinces. Findings should therefore be read as indicative rather than nationally representative. The triangulation with post-2017 secondary sources (including Xenowatch, 2025) partially mitigates this limitation but cannot fully substitute for official statistics. Future research should prioritise the development of a nationally representative, longitudinal hate crime monitoring.

7. Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has documented a convergence of three interrelated failures in South Africa's response to hate crime: the empirical void left by the absence of official national hate crime statistics since 2017; the continuation and in some respects intensification of hate-motivated violence confirmed by Xenowatch data, human rights reporting, and academic research; and the implementation gap between Act 16 of 2023's enactment in May 2024 and the publication of operational Regulations in November 2025. The HCWG dataset remains the most rigorous empirical baseline available. The patterns it documents, systematic targeting of vulnerable groups, dehumanising language as a prelude to violence, institutional complicity and neglect, and civil society as the primary safeguard, are not historical artefacts. As Nel and van Wyk (2024) observe, significant progress remains elusive despite nearly three decades of advocacy. Based on these findings, the following recommendations are advanced:

1. The November 2025 draft Regulations must be finalised without further delay. Forms 1-5 should be rolled out across all SAPS stations, and the implementation gap should be treated as a governance emergency.
2. A hybrid national hate crime monitoring system should incorporate civil society data from Xenowatch (2025), HCWG, MambaOnline (2026), and Lawyers for Human Rights (2024) into a national database, immediately addressing the data void that has persisted since 2017.
3. Mandatory hate crime training for all SAPS officers should be introduced, with specific modules on LGBTQ+ rights, the constitutional rights of migrants regardless of documentation status, and hate crime recognition.

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4. The National Prosecuting Authority's Rapid Response Team model should be extended beyond LGBTQ+ cases to cover all protected characteristics under Act 16 of 2023, with training to ensure hate motivation is systematically adduced as a sentencing aggravator.
5. Political leadership at all levels should work to address unambiguous national and provincial rejection of anti-immigrant rhetoric, alongside meaningful implementation of the National Action Plan to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance.
6. Act 16 of 2023's electronic communications provisions must be actively enforced, with formal engagement of social media platforms on content moderation obligations in South African languages.
7. Intersectionally sensitive support services should be developed for groups including undocumented migrants, persons with disabilities, and Black LGBTQ+ individuals, in partnership with civil society and grounded in an intersectional approach.

Appendix 1.

HCWG Dataset Summary Statistics (2013–2017)

Domain	**Key Statistic**
Total cases/threshold	945 / 900
Trained monitors/organisations	>150 / 85
Data sources	46% case files; 44% face-to-face interviews
Persons directly affected	≥1,113 across 669 personal attack cases
Majority victim age	21–40 years (76% combined); 22 victims under 18
Race majority	Black/African 62%
LGBTQ+ victims	35% lesbian/gay; 8% transgender (43% combined)
Education	36% < Grade 12; 4% no formal education
Derogatory language used	68% of cases
Prior victimisation	50% reported prior prejudice-based incidents; 15% explicitly threatened
Unreported to the police	~67% (2 in 3)
Police as accomplices	66 cases
Police perceived helpful	36% of reported cases
Convictions with a hate element	16 of 89 cases (18%)
Emotional/psychological impact	50% emotional; 7% combined mental health effects
Economic harm	35% of cases
Primary support source	CSO/NGO/CBO 43%; SAPS 26%

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STRATEGIC MARKETING COMMUNICATION AS A DRIVER OF PUBLIC TRUST AND SUPPORT FOR NON-PROFIT ORGANISATIONS IN SLOVAKIA

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Abstract. The article examines the role of marketing management in the non-profit sector in the Slovak Republic, with particular attention to public trust, transparency, perceived social impact and willingness to support non-profit organisations. The topic is relevant because non-profit organisations increasingly operate in an environment where their social mission alone is insufficient to secure public support. They must also communicate their activities, results and use of resources in a clear, credible and strategically managed manner. The study is based on theoretical knowledge from non-profit marketing, relationship marketing, accountability, and digital communication, as well as empirical findings from a quantitative survey of the Slovak public. The research focuses on how the public perceives the social importance of non-profit organisations, how trust is formed, which communication deficits are most visible and which factors motivate support. The results show that non-profit organisations are generally perceived as socially important, but this positive perception is not automatically translated into high levels of trust. A significant part of the public remains uncertain or sceptical, especially when financial transparency and evidence of real social impact are not communicated sufficiently. The findings indicate that communication quality, transparent reporting and visible outcomes are among the key determinants of public trust and donor behaviour. The study also confirms that support for non-profit organisations is strongly connected with reputational factors. Trust, transparency, personal experience and convincing evidence of social impact are more influential than general awareness alone. Digital communication has become an important channel for visibility and stakeholder engagement. Still, it requires systematic planning, ethical use of data and consistency between messaging, mission, and real organisational performance. The article concludes that marketing management in the non-profit sector should not be reduced to promotion or occasional campaigns. It should be understood as a strategic system that connects mission, stakeholder relationships, accountability, communication planning and evaluation. Such an approach can strengthen public trust, improve fundraising potential and contribute to the long-term sustainability of non-profit organisations in the Slovak Republic.

Keywords: marketing management; digital communication; non-profit organizations; Slovak Republic; transparency; donor behaviour; public trust

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JEL Classifications: M37, M21

1. Introduction

The non-profit sector is an important component of modern democratic societies because it complements the public and private sectors in areas where social needs cannot be fully satisfied by market mechanisms or by public administration alone. In the Slovak Republic, non-profit organisations operate in the fields of social assistance, education, culture, health, environmental protection, community development, human rights, and humanitarian aid. Their primary purpose is not the distribution of profit, but the creation of public or mutual benefit. This specific mission gives non-profit organisations an important social role, but it also exposes them to high expectations regarding trust, transparency and accountability (Wymer, Becker & Boenigk, 2020).

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The development of non-profit organisations in Slovakia after 1989 was closely connected with the transformation of civil society and the gradual creation of a legal and institutional framework for the third sector. The sector has become more differentiated and more professional, but it also faces stronger competition for financial resources, volunteers, media attention and public legitimacy. In this environment, marketing management can no longer be considered a secondary activity limited to promotion. It becomes a necessary part of organisational governance, relationship management and strategic communication.

The central problem addressed in this article is the gap between the generally recognised social importance of non-profit organisations and the lower level of concrete public trust. The public may accept the sector as socially useful, but remain uncertain about the transparency, credibility and effectiveness of individual organisations. For this reason, the quality of communication, the clarity of reporting and the ability to present concrete social impact become decisive factors of public support.

The article aims to analyse how marketing management and marketing communication influence public trust and willingness to support non-profit organisations in the Slovak Republic. The article first summarises theoretical approaches to non-profit marketing, transparency and digital communication. It then presents the research material and methods, interprets selected empirical findings and formulates managerial implications for non-profit organisations.

2. Theoretical Background

The application of marketing principles outside the commercial sector has been discussed since the expansion of the marketing concept proposed by Kotler and Levy (1969). Their argument that marketing is relevant for all organisations seeking to influence the attitudes and behaviour of target groups remains important for the non-profit sector. Non-profit organisations do not primarily aim to maximise profit; they aim to create social value, mobilise support and deliver services aligned with their mission. Nevertheless, they must identify stakeholders, understand their expectations, design value propositions, communicate effectively and evaluate results.

A specific feature of non-profit marketing is the dual character of its markets. The recipient of a service is often not identical with the person or institution that finances the activity. Donors, sponsors, public institutions, volunteers, beneficiaries, and the wider public may all be relevant stakeholders, but each expects different information and forms of value (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011; Bhati & McDonnell, 2020). This makes marketing management more complex than in many commercial contexts (Yoon, 2024; Rundle-Thiele et al., 2024). The organisation has to communicate social mission and compassion to one group, efficiency and accountability to another group, and accessibility or service quality to beneficiaries (Perica & Sodan, 2025; Hersberger-Langloh, 2025).

Strategic marketing in the non-profit sector, therefore, requires more than occasional campaigns (Gartner et al., 2021; Elvira-Lorilla et al., 2024). It includes analysis of the internal and external environments, segmentation of stakeholders, selection of communication channels, formulation of messages, and evaluation of outcomes (Csapi & Sárics, 2025). Andreasen and Kotler (2014), Werke and Bogale (2024). emphasise stakeholder-oriented thinking and systematic planning as conditions for achieving social goals. The same logic applies in the Slovak context, where many organisations operate with limited resources and must use communication carefully and efficiently.

Trust is one of the most important intangible assets of a non-profit organisation. Donors and volunteers usually have incomplete information about internal processes, financial decisions and the real impact of activities. For this reason, they rely on reputation, transparent reporting and communicative signals. Sargeant and Lee (2004) show that donor trust is closely related to relationship commitment and supportive behaviour. Later studies similarly

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confirm that transparency and accountability influence willingness to give and the overall evaluation of charities (Hyndman & McConville, 2018; Becker, Boenigk & Willems, 2020; Dethier et al., 2024).

Transparency has both a formal and a communicative dimension. The formal dimension concerns annual reports, financial statements and project outputs. The communicative dimension concerns the ability to explain these data in a way that is understandable to the public. A formally available annual report may not build trust if stakeholders cannot easily interpret what the organisation achieved, how resources were used and why the activity mattered. Saxton and Guo (2011) and Tao et al. (2021), therefore, interpret online accountability as a communication practice rather than merely an administrative obligation.

Digital communication has changed the way non-profit organisations interact with stakeholders. Websites, social media, e-mail newsletters, online fundraising platforms and audiovisual content allow organisations to reach audiences at relatively low cost. Lovejoy and Saxton (2012), Krishen et al. (2021). Cipriano and Za (2024) show that social media enable non-profit organisations not only to inform, but also to build communities and stimulate action. Digital tools can strengthen transparency by enabling regular updates and easier report publication, but they can also create reputational risks when communication is inconsistent, unclear, or perceived as manipulative.

3. Research Aim

The main aim of the research is to analyse the relationship between marketing communication, transparency, public trust, and willingness to support non-profit organisations in the Slovak Republic. The article focuses on public perception because the reputation of non-profit organisations is shaped not only by their actual activities but also by how these activities are communicated, interpreted, and evaluated by stakeholders.

The research problem is based on the assumption that a socially beneficial mission does not automatically create trust. Trust must be continuously developed through credible communication, transparent reporting and visible evidence of impact. The research, therefore, connects the managerial perspective of non-profit organisations with the behavioural perspective of donors and the wider public.

Research question 1: How does the Slovak public perceive the social significance and trustworthiness of non-profit organisations?
Research question 2: How does the quality of marketing communication influence public trust and willingness to support non-profit organisations?
Research question 3: Which socio-demographic differences are relevant for communication strategy in the non-profit sector?

4. Materials and Methods

The empirical material of the study consists of a quantitative survey of the Slovak public's perceptions of non-profit organisations. The survey was conducted using the CAWI method. The analysed sample comprised 2,380 respondents aged 18 years or older. The sample was designed to reflect the basic socio-demographic characteristics of the population of the Slovak Republic, with a maximum modelled deviation of ±1.5 percentage points.

The questionnaire included closed- and scale-based questions, particularly five-point Likert-type items measuring perceived social significance, trust, transparency, communication quality, and willingness to support non-profit organisations. The structure of the questionnaire enabled the linking of general attitudes toward the sector with more specific perceptions of marketing communication, social impact, financial transparency, and support behaviour.

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The research material is interpreted as a framework for public perception, not as an audit of individual organisations. This distinction is important because the study captures respondents' stated attitudes and evaluations. However, these perceptions are directly relevant for marketing management because support decisions are influenced by perceived credibility, perceived impact and confidence in the responsible use of resources.

The analytical approach is primarily descriptive and interpretative. Percentages are used to identify dominant tendencies in respondents' attitudes, while interpretation links empirical findings to theoretical concepts of non-profit marketing, trust, transparency, accountability, and digital communication. The purpose is not only to describe individual values, but also to explain what the results mean for strategic marketing management in the non-profit sector.

5. Results

The results show that the non-profit sector has relatively strong social legitimacy in the Slovak Republic. A total of 62.9% of respondents consider non-profit organisations rather or very important for society, while 16.3% evaluate them as not important. This finding indicates that the public does not reject the existence of the third sector. On the contrary, many respondents recognise that non-profit organisations perform functions relevant to society and complement public institutions and commercial actors.

For marketing management, this is an important starting point. If the public already recognises the sector's general value, communication does not have to begin by proving that non-profit organisations are necessary. Instead, organisations need to demonstrate that a concrete organisation is credible, competent and effective. The perceived importance of the sector, therefore, represents potential rather than an automatic guarantee of support.

The level of trust is more problematic than the evaluation of social significance. Only 27.9% of respondents report that they either somewhat or fully trust non-profit organisations. By contrast, 39.7% state that they do not trust them at all, and 32.4% hold a neutral position. This creates a perception gap between the acknowledged social usefulness of non-profit organisations and the degree to which the public trusts their operation.

The neutral group is especially important from a managerial perspective. Respondents who neither trust nor distrust the sector may be open to persuasion if organisations provide better evidence of impact and clearer communication about finances. Strategic communication should therefore not focus only on convinced supporters, but also on undecided stakeholders who may become supporters if uncertainty is reduced.

Financial transparency was identified as one of the most visible communication deficits. At the same time, 59.6% of respondents stated that the quality of communication influences their trust in non-profit organisations. These findings are closely related. The public expects organisations not only to do socially beneficial work, but also to explain how money is used, what results are achieved and why support is meaningful.

More than half of respondents (54.9%) stated that they had supported a non-profit organisation in the past. The most common form was financial support, declared by 36.8% of respondents. This confirms that the relationship between the public and the non-profit sector is not only symbolic. A substantial part of the population has translated attitudes into behaviour.

The most important motivational factors for support were trust, declared by 60.7% of respondents, and transparency, declared by 55.8%. This result directly connects the communication and accountability dimensions of marketing management with support behaviour. Respondents do not support organisations only because the topic is emotionally attractive. They need to believe that the organisation is reliable and that resources will be used responsibly.

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The research also shows that digital channels are highly visible. Social networks were identified as the most frequently perceived communication channel of non-profit organisations, followed by online media, television and radio, events and personal campaigns, and print. This confirms the importance of digital communication, but it also shows that the non-profit sector operates in a mixed communication environment in which online and offline tools should be combined strategically.

Respondents also identified what they most often miss in the communication of non-profit organisations. The most visible deficits were transparency of finances, real results, professionalism and human stories. These findings show that the public expects a combination of rational and emotional communication. Financial transparency and concrete outcomes are necessary for credibility, while human stories can help communicate the meaning and social value of activities.

The analysis indicates meaningful socio-demographic differences. With increasing age, scepticism toward non-profit organisations becomes stronger. Respondents aged 55 and older express negative attitudes more frequently than younger groups. Education is an important differentiating factor: respondents with higher education are more likely to evaluate the social impact of non-profit organisations positively and show lower levels of distrust. Gender differences are also relevant, as women more frequently evaluate the sector positively and are more likely to express financial support.

6. Discussion

The results are consistent with international literature on non-profit marketing and donor behaviour. The study confirms that public trust is a central condition for support and that it is formed through communication, transparency, and perceived social impact. The empirical findings also confirm the argument that non-profit marketing cannot be reduced to promotion. Promotion may increase visibility, but visibility alone does not solve the trust problem. An organisation may be visible and still not be trusted if its communication lacks clarity, evidence and accountability.

The perception gap identified in the Slovak data is especially important. The public recognises the social importance of non-profit organisations, but this recognition does not automatically lead to trust. This finding corresponds with research showing that accountability and transparency are decisive for the evaluation of charities (Ortega-Rodríguez et al., 2020; Rossi et al., 2024). It also suggests that non-profit organisations should not rely exclusively on moral appeals. They need to provide credible information about their work, finances and outcomes.

The results support the relevance of relationship marketing. Donors and volunteers are not anonymous sources of resources; they are stakeholders who need feedback, recognition and evidence that their participation has value. If communication is one-way and campaign-based, the relationship may remain weak. If communication is continuous, transparent and adapted to stakeholder expectations, it can build commitment. In this sense, marketing management contributes to the long-term stability of non-profit organisations.

The digital environment makes this relationship both easier and more demanding. Social media and websites allow fast communication, but they also increase expectations of immediacy and transparency. Organisations can no longer communicate only through annual reports or occasional press releases. The public expects updates, accessible explanations, authentic stories and simple ways to verify claims. Digital communication, therefore, needs governance, not improvisation. A professional digital strategy should define target groups, frequency, content types, publication responsibilities, and evaluation methods.

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Another important implication concerns segmentation. The findings on age, education and gender show that the public is not homogeneous. Older respondents may require more formal credibility signals, clearer financial reporting and communication through channels they trust. Younger respondents may be more responsive to digital engagement, social media content and participatory formats. Donors may prioritise accountability and impact, while beneficiaries may need accessible, empathetic information. Effective marketing management should recognise these differences and adapt messages without compromising consistency of mission.

7. Managerial Implications

The first practical implication is the need to place trust at the centre of marketing strategy. Non-profit organisations should define how their communication builds trust before they design specific campaigns. This includes deciding which evidence of impact will be communicated, how financial transparency will be presented and how feedback will be provided to supporters. Trust should be managed as a long-term asset that can be strengthened or weakened by every communication decision.

The second implication is the need for transparent and understandable reporting. Annual reports, financial statements and project outputs should not be published only as formal documents. They should be translated into clear public communications, such as short summaries, infographics, donor letters, website updates, and social media posts, explaining what was achieved and how resources were used. Transparency becomes effective only when it is accessible and meaningful for the intended audience.

The third implication concerns communication planning. Organisations should prepare annual or semi-annual communication plans that align with their mission, fundraising cycles, project milestones, needs, and stakeholder expectations. Such plans should specify target groups, key messages, channels, timing and evaluation indicators. Even small organisations with limited resources can benefit from a simple but consistent plan, because it prevents communication from becoming random and reactive.

The fourth implication is the integration of digital tools. Websites should be treated as central credibility platforms where the public can find mission statements, projects, team information, reports, contact details and support options. Social media should be used not only for visibility, but also for community building and feedback. E-mail communication can support long-term donor relationships by providing regular and personalised information. Artificial intelligence and automation may support content organisation and the segmentation of feedback analysis, but their use must remain transparent, ethical, and under human control.

The fifth implication is evaluation. Non-profit organisations should measure not only the number of posts, followers, or website visits, but also indicators of trust and engagement. Useful measures may include donor retention, response rates, repeated support, feedback quality, perceived clarity of reports and stakeholder satisfaction. Evaluation should connect communication activities with organisational goals and should help managers decide which activities to strengthen, change or discontinue.

8. Conclusions

The article has shown that marketing management is a strategic necessity for non-profit organisations in the Slovak Republic. The empirical findings confirm that the public generally recognises the social importance of the non-profit sector, but trust remains more fragile. This creates a perception gap between the acknowledged usefulness of non-profit organisations and the degree to which the public trusts their operation. The gap is mainly connected with transparency, communication quality and the visibility of concrete social impact. The strongest conclusion is that trust does not arise automatically from a socially beneficial mission. It is built through long-term, transparent, consistent and credible communication. Organisations that communicate how they use resources, what results they achieve, eve and why their work matters are better positioned to secure support from

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donors, volunteers, and the wider public. Marketing communication, therefore, has both reputational and economic significance because it influences willingness to support the organisation.

The results also indicate that non-profit organisations should work with segmented communication strategies. Different age, education and stakeholder groups have different expectations and different levels of trust. Effective marketing management should therefore combine a consistent mission with differentiated communication formats. Digital tools can support this process, but only if they are embedded in a clear strategy and used ethically.

In summary, the future development of the non-profit sector in Slovakia will depend not only on the quality of services and activities provided, but also on the ability of organisations to communicate their value transparently and professionally. Marketing management should be understood as an integrated system that connects mission, stakeholder relationships, accountability, digital communication, and evaluation. Such an approach can strengthen public trust, improve fundraising potential and contribute to the long-term sustainability of non-profit organisations.

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PUBLIC GOVERNANCE, TRANSPORT SAFETY AND REGIONAL SUSTAINABILITY: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF URBAN FREIGHT SYSTEMS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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Abstract. Urban freight systems are increasingly recognised as critical drivers of regional economic development, yet their rapid expansion in developing countries has exposed significant governance and transport safety challenges. This study evaluates the role of public governance in shaping transport safety within sustainable supply chains, with a focus on urban freight systems in developing regions, drawing implications for regional sustainability. Drawing on a qualitative multiple case study approach, the research examines institutional structures, regulatory effectiveness, and safety challenges in cities such as Harare, Nairobi, and Lagos. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with transport regulators, logistics managers, and urban planners, complemented by document analysis of policy frameworks and regulatory instruments. The findings reveal that fragmented governance structures, weak enforcement mechanisms, and constraints on institutional capacity significantly undermine transport safety outcomes. Furthermore, safety risks such as vehicle overloading, driver fatigue, and inadequate infrastructure contribute to supply chain inefficiencies and limit regional competitiveness. The study demonstrates that governance plays a central role in aligning transport safety with sustainable supply chain objectives, highlighting the need for integrated policy frameworks and institutional coordination. The paper contributes to the regional development literature by linking governance, safety, and supply chain sustainability and offers policy recommendations to improve regulatory effectiveness and enhance regional economic performance.

Keywords: urban freight transport; transport governance; sustainable supply chains; road safety; regulatory institutions; regional development

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1. Introduction

Urban freight transport has become a central cog of regional economic systems, facilitating the movement of goods across cities and supporting industrial and commercial activities. The expansion of supply chains in developing countries has intensified reliance on road-based freight systems, particularly in rapidly urbanising cities such as Harare, Nairobi, and Lagos. Scholars such as Holguín-Veras et al. (2023) and Maxner & Giuliano (2025) argue that urban freight systems are essential for ensuring regional connectivity and economic integration. Efficient freight systems enhance regional productivity by reducing transaction costs and improving market accessibility, thus acting as a catalyst for economic development (Barrera-Jiménez & Pineda-Jaramillo, 2024). The World Bank (2024) estimates that logistics costs account for up to 30% of GDP in some developing African countries, compared to around 10% in high-income economies, highlighting the significant drag that inefficient freight systems place on regional development. However, this expansion has also introduced complex challenges related to congestion, infrastructure strain, and safety risks. Adu & Dorasamy (2024) highlight that inadequate

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road infrastructure in developing economies significantly increases supply chain costs and compromises safety outcomes, thereby affecting regional productivity and exacerbating spatial inequalities. The inefficiencies within these systems can hinder regional competitiveness and create barriers to inclusive growth, with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA, 2025) reporting that poor road infrastructure and regulatory fragmentation cost the African continent an estimated 2% of GDP annually in lost trade opportunities.

Regional development from the freight transport perspective is increasingly mediated through governance structures, ensuring that the transport systems are efficient and safe, the latter necessary conditions for sustainable regional development, as well as the need for good public governance, are all in place. In many developing countries, by contrast, governance models remain fragmented and poorly coordinated. Lindholm & Behrends (2012) acknowledge that urban freight planning is generally neglected in broader transport policies, leading to regulatory gaps that impede effective system performance. In contrast, Cowie and Fisken (2023) emphasise that policy maturity in urban freight systems remains low, particularly in regions with limited institutional capacity. Transport safety is one of the most vital but least investigated aspects of sustainable supply chains, where the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2024) and Muzondo et al. (2026) pontificate that road traffic crashes lead to approximately 1.35 million deaths each year, with more than 90% of these deaths being recorded in low- and middle-income countries. The death rate is 27 per 100,000 people in sub-Saharan Africa, which is the most alarming record compared with any region across the globe. Freight vehicle road accidents are known contributors to deaths and economic losses; they also affect supply chain operations and generate significant externalities for regional economies. According to Tiwari et al. (2018) and Dangisso et al. (2025), governance failures, including weak enforcement and inadequate regulatory oversight, are closely related to transport system safety challenges. Particularly in developing countries, such problems are exacerbated by rapid urbanisation and growing interest in freight services, resulting in greater risks for urban logistics systems. This points to a growing concern about how the governance failures affect transport safety and, equally important, the sustainability and regional development potential of urban freight systems.

Against this background, the current research aims to assess *how public governance affects transport safety and environmentally friendly supply chains in the sub-Saharan region*. Particular attention is paid to regional development, analysing governance structures related to urban freight transport, examining safety challenges that affect the operation of freight facilities, evaluating effective governing bodies within regulatory institutions, and finally suggesting alternative strategies that may enhance safety and regional sustainability.

Anchored on these four objectives, the research aims to address the following fundamental questions:

- How do regulatory institutions govern urban freight systems in developing countries? What safety problems affect freight transport?
- What is the impact of governance on safety?
- What policy changes can help to promote safety and regional development in Sub-Saharan Africa?

Apart from contributing to the extant literature on public governance, transport safety, and sustainability in the supply chain as vital components of regional development, this study provides a multipronged analysis of the interdependencies among these variables, especially in relation to regional development in developing countries.

This study seeks to close the knowledge gap in the existing literature on public governance and urban freight systems, demonstrating how they contribute to regional economic performance. This study provides deep insights into how institutional changes could not only contribute to transport safety and regional economies, but also promote overall sustainability, along with a reassertion of knowledge about the impact of governance and infrastructure on emerging economies.

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2. Literature Review and Conceptual Background

Urban Freight Systems and Regional Economies

Urban freight systems are critical to regional economic development. They serve as the backbone of distribution networks and trade across urban and rural areas. Holguín-Veras et al. (2023) argue that efficient freight systems improve productivity through lowering transaction costs and increasing accessibility to the marketplace. On the other hand, Barrera-Jiménez & Pineda-Jaramillo (2024) highlight the collaborative contribution of integrated freight and land-use planning to enhance regional competitiveness and offer evidence that strategic infrastructure management can generate considerable economic gains. The performance of these systems is crucial, particularly with respect to regional connectivity, which drives choices regarding industrial placement and the labour market. According to Rodrigue (2020), in the Geography of Transport Systems, freight distribution networks are a key driver for regional economic integration. Therefore, if these networks are inefficient, logistics deserts will ensue, exacerbating the marginalisation of certain regions.

However, there is disagreement among scholars over whether modern urban freight systems promote sustainable development. Lindholm & Behrends (2012) highlight some structural inefficiencies in urban freight planning (e.g., congestion, lack of infrastructure), that are often the result of policy neglect. However, Russo & Comi (2016) argue that policies, including incentivisation of green logistics practices and off-peak deliveries, can mitigate these issues. This view of divergence reflects contrasting perspectives on the efficacy (and ease of implementation) of policy frameworks in promoting freight systems. The former is more pessimistic about political will to change, while the latter is more optimistic about targeted intervention. Some recent studies have introduced the technological dimension to express the potential of smart cities to improve the efficiency of freight transport. Klar et al. (2023) highlight the potential role of digital technologies such as the Internet of Things and digital twin technologies in improving logistics operations and route planning capabilities. Li et al. (2024) expand on the implications of cognitive digital twins in developing low-carbon freight systems. However, these approaches often overlook the institutional constraints in developing countries, where technological adoption is limited by weak, fragmented governance and resource constraints (Farquharson et al., 2021). Muzondo et al. (2025), in their systematic review of IoT in public transport logistics in Zimbabwe, established that while the potential is recognised, implementation is hampered by a lack of infrastructure and skilled personnel, among other factors.

Furthermore, existing literature points to a growing critical need to integrate technology, planning, and/or policy as a prerequisite for improving system performance. Using economic modelling, Tundulyasaree et al. (2025) observed that coordinated tax and subsidy policies are more effective than fragmented measures in incentivising modal shifts for sustainable urban freight. This study builds on these observations by exploring governance as a mediating factor that either enables or constrains these integration efforts.

Sustainable Supply Chains and Regional Development

Long-term sustainability of supply chain performance entails balancing economic, environmental, and social goals in regional development. Dwivedi et al. (2023) claim that sustainability in freight transportation plays a vital role in minimising environmental impacts whilst respecting operational efficiency, a position that Singh et al. (2026) emphasise by integrating efficiency, resilience, and environmental sustainability approaches to sustainable regional development. Similarly, Fan et al. (2023) highlight that government policies and stakeholder engagement drive sustainable logistics and that sustainability should be viewed as a public policy issue in both the private and public sectors. Jelti et al. (2023), in their review paper, projected the transition towards sustainable transport systems. Technological innovation, policy support and behavioural change were identified as the cornerstones in the framework.

However, the lack of integration of sustainability across regions into supply chains has so far been unevenly experienced. Muzondo & Pashapa (2025) denote that developing countries struggle to implement sustainable

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practices due to limited resources and institutional capacity. This leads to a disconnect between the normative targets in the sustainability literature and the concrete realities of developing environments. In contrast, Prause & Hunke (2014) posit the use of ICT systems to facilitate the realisation of green transport corridors, in which technological innovation could overcome structural constraints. Similarly, this notion is supported by Fatorachian & Pawar (2025), who emphasise the correlation between Industry 4.0 technologies and sustainable freight transport.

Previous studies have examined the safety-fitness in the sustainability framework. Wang et al. (2022) underlined the importance of safety for transport sustainability, while Shankar et al. (2018) focus more on treating safety as a risk reduction issue rather than a core sustainability objective. These divergent perspectives signal the need for a more comprehensive and integrated approach to safety recognition, one that considers safety a central component of a sustainable supply chain, where accidents can jeopardise both the social and economic pillars of sustainability. According to a systematic review conducted by Nkesah (2023), making road freight transport more sustainable requires treating safety as a core performance indicator rather than an external factor.

Public Governance and Transport Regulation

The concept of public governance in the transport sector provides a foundation for developing transport systems, designing regulatory frameworks, ensuring compliance, and shaping public participation in these systems. Rosales (2024) recognises different governance models in urban logistics, ranging from marketised mechanisms to state-led solutions, noting that the mode of governance may substantially influence outcomes. Similarly, Kervall et al. (2025) focus on the significance of governance in making transitions to sustainable freight systems feasible, particularly for small and medium-sized cities, whose capacity constraints can limit effective transition. Looking at the public authority sector as a whole, Tronca and Rotaris (2024) highlight that urban freight innovation ecosystems need to be designed through collaborative governance models.

However, governance is a patchwork of interventions that are unevenly effective across contexts. Cowie & Fisken (2023) assert that policy maturity is a critical factor in determining transport system performance, with more advanced systems demonstrating higher levels of coordination and integration. In contrast, Ma et al. (2025) raise concerns regarding access restrictions as a policy framework, given their limited effectiveness in practice when enforcement capacity and stakeholder compliance are low. This indicates concurrence with the idea that effective policy design requires effective implementation and enforcement mechanisms. Fransen et al. (2023) establish a taxonomy of urban vehicle access regulations that indicates that the burden of policy instruments is sometimes greater in complexity than in administrative capacity to control them.

A longstanding tension between regulatory ambition and implementation capacity is evident across the literature. Although many policies seek to encourage sustainability and safety, weak institutional frameworks and compliance mechanisms undermine their effectiveness. Research in this area aims to fill this gap by focusing on the impact of governance structures (not just policies) on transport safety performance in developing countries. In their multimodal transport study, Makarova et al. (2023) emphasise that sustainable territorial development should be underpinned by strong governance to mitigate risks and facilitate coordination among these various modes of transport and regions.

Transport Safety and Economic Externalities

Transport safety is a significant concern with far-reaching economic and social consequences. Tiwari et al. (2018) state that traffic accidents impose costs on the economy in many ways, including healthcare costs, loss of productivity, and damage to infrastructure. Negative externalities, often unmentioned in transport planning, lead to market failures due to these costs. Similarly, Wang et al. (2025) detail spatial inequalities in crash severity, revealing heterogeneity in safety risk across regions and an ongoing exacerbation of regional disparities. The cost of road traffic crashes in developing countries ranges from 1% to 3% of GDP annually, according to the World Bank (2023).

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Several researchers also underline the cruciality of the regulatory framework in enhancing safety outcomes. McLeod & Curtis (2022) suggest adding safety to transport policy through hazard control frameworks, while Anastasiadou and Kehagia (2025) present decision-support systems as an approach to improving road safety. Almashhour et al. (2023) take a Delphi-ANP perspective to reconcile highway transportation, health, and social equity, positing that sustainable transport planning should place safety at the heart of social justice. These interventions often require robust institutional resources that are sometimes absent in emerging contexts.

The literature broadly agrees on the necessity of safety but disagrees on how to achieve it, with some prioritising top-down regulatory responses and others encouraging bottom-up, technology-based solutions. Comi et al. (2024) present a comprehensive review of tools and policies relating to urban freight transport, reporting that safety is generally a secondary consideration to efficiency and environmental objectives in policy frameworks. This research contributes its own nuance to the nexus of this issue by linking concerns about safety with governance, regional progress, and supply chain performance within a much broader, more integrated framework that is essential in emerging economies.

Research Gap

The literature review established that, within a region's overall development framework, there are still knowledge gaps regarding the linkages among governance, transport safety, and sustainable supply chains. Existing studies tend to look at these dimensions individually, but few examine their interconnections, particularly in developing countries. Additionally, the literature treats safety as a separate issue, rather than as part of supply chain sustainability and regional competitiveness. This study, therefore, aims to address this gap by offering a qualitative analysis of governance structures and their impact on transport safety and regional sustainability. By so doing, the study contributes to the emerging discourse on regional safety and sustainable development.

3. Theoretical Framework

Institutional Theory

Institutional theory helps to explain how formal and informal rules of conduct inform organisational behaviour. According to this standpoint, regulatory institutions shape compliance and performance by defining norms and enforcement mechanisms. In urban freight systems, institutions set the stage for policy implementation and facilitate stakeholder interaction. Li & Abiad (2009) state that institutions are the rules of the game that govern incentives and economic performance. Rosales (2024) and Kervall et al. (2025) highlight the roles of institutions in shaping governance outcomes as well as the need for coordination and legitimacy. However, institutional theory holds that there is nonetheless room for inefficiencies, especially in contexts with poor governance, where institutions may have little impact on real governance (Li & Abiad, 2009). This study examines the effects of various regulations on transport safety outcomes through the lens of institutional theory, examining whether safety relates to the strength and integrity of these institutional formations. Given the limitations of institutional theory highlighted above, the current study utilises the Sustainable Supply Chain theory to strengthen its theoretical framework.

Sustainable Supply Chain Theory

An integral part of sustainable supply chain theory is the integration of economic, environmental, and social goals (Dwivedi et al., 2023). This is true in urban freight systems, where safety, emissions minimisation and the effective use of resources should be ensured. The study's contribution to theory is a regional development perspective that situates governance of sustainable outcomes within this framework. By fusing safety and sustainability, the study presents a more comprehensive picture of supply chain performance, suggesting that safety is not merely a service cost in doing business but a crucial component of long-term regional sustainability. El Amrani et al. (2024) also found that freight can be embedded in existing public transport, which may lead to sustainable development, but where safety remains a challenge.

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4. Methodology

This study adopted an interpretivist research philosophy, which is appropriate for understanding more complex social phenomena such as governance and institutional behaviour. This interpretive framework provides rich insight into how stakeholders think about or view the transport system in context (Paddeu et al., 2024). A qualitative multiple-case study design was employed to examine urban freight systems, focusing on capital cities such as Harare, Nairobi, and Lagos. Correspondingly, these cities were chosen better to understand their importance to regional development and rapid urbanisation, and to identify issues in transport governance (Dangisso et al., 2025). Additionally, cross-case comparison and pattern identification across contexts enabled the generalisation of research findings through a multiple-case approach, allowing study findings to be compared across cases. Harare serves as the capital city of Zimbabwe, a landlocked country in the Southern African region characterised by a harsh economic environment; Nairobi is the regional hub of East Africa with a flourishing technology-driven economy, and Lagos is a megacity in West Africa with intense congestion and informality. This diversity enhances the external validity of the study. Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews with 20 respondents (specialising in logistics and transport regulations, urban development and governance, see Table 1). Respondents were purposively sampled based on their lived experiences of the study subject. This is consistent with qualitative research methodologies intended to acquire deep insights into the study from knowledgeable and well-experienced people (Hauge et al., 2021).

Table 1. Interview Participant Breakdown

Participant Category	Number of Participants	Location (City)
Transport Regulators	6	Harare, Nairobi, Lagos
Logistics Managers	8	Harare, Nairobi, Lagos
Urban Planners	6	Harare, Nairobi, Lagos

Source: the authors

In addition to interviews, the study utilised document analysis to review policy documents, regulatory systems, and government reports from the three countries. Data were collected from published academic papers and policy documents available online. Document analysis is a technique used to enhance the trustworthiness and validity of the findings by using multiple sources and verifying them. Thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews, while secondary data were analysed using a content analysis approach. These qualitative analysis methods included familiarisation with data, coding, theme development, and interpretation. NVivo software was used to facilitate the organisation and analysis of data, providing a systematic and transparent coding process. Ethical concerns were addressed regarding informed consent, confidentiality, and compliance with research ethics guidelines.

5. Research Findings

This section presents and analyses the research findings in line with the study objectives and research questions. The findings are organised according to four major research questions: (1) how regulatory institutions govern urban freight systems in developing countries; (2) what transport safety challenges affect freight systems; (3) how governance structures influence transport safety outcomes; and (4) what policy interventions may strengthen safety and regional sustainability. The themes presented below emerged from semi-structured interviews conducted with transport regulators, logistics managers, and urban planners across Harare, Nairobi, and Lagos. Interview data provided experiential insights into institutional practices, enforcement realities, and operational challenges affecting urban freight systems.

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5.1 Research Question 1: Governance of Urban Freight Systems in Developing Countries

This section addresses Research Question 1: How do regulatory institutions govern urban freight systems in developing countries? Findings from the interviews revealed that governance arrangements across Harare, Nairobi, and Lagos are highly fragmented and characterised by overlapping institutional mandates, weak inter-agency coordination, and inconsistent regulatory enforcement. Participants consistently emphasised that fragmented governance structures undermine operational efficiency, weaken transport safety oversight, and constrain integrated regional logistics planning.

Interview participants explained that multiple institutions are involved in freight governance, yet there is limited coordination among them. A transport regulator from Harare observed*: "Coordination is weak, and fragmentation is leading to gaps where unsafe behaviour can thrive. Road maintenance is the responsibility of the local municipality, the national police enforce traffic laws, and the city council issues trade permits. None of them speaks to each other."*

The interviews were particularly valuable in revealing operational realities that are often overlooked in formal policy frameworks. Regulators and logistics managers described how fragmented institutional arrangements create inconsistencies in enforcement, delays in freight movement, and weaknesses in transport safety management. Participants further noted that the absence of a central coordinating authority contributes to inefficiencies throughout urban freight systems.

Respondents also linked institutional fragmentation to broader regional economic consequences. Participants argued that weak coordination among regulatory bodies limits the development of integrated regional logistics strategies and undermines the efficiency of freight corridors. A logistics manager from Lagos explained: *"The port authority, the state government, and the federal ministry all have a say in how goods move from the port into the city. What you get is gridlock and a system in which all sides are battling instead of working together. Multiple checkpoints run by different agencies can make it take three to four days for a truck to move out of the port area."*

These findings are consistent with Lindholm and Behrends (2012), who identify institutional fragmentation as a major barrier to effective urban freight planning. Similarly, Cowie and Fisken (2023) argue that low policy maturity and weak coordination mechanisms significantly undermine sustainable freight governance systems. The current study extends this literature by demonstrating how fragmented governance structures directly contribute to regional economic inefficiencies, transport delays, and increased logistics costs.

Interview participants further explained that inconsistent permit systems, duplicated inspections, and overlapping enforcement responsibilities create unnecessary delays and operational uncertainty. A Lagos-based logistics manager remarked that the absence of coordinated governance structures prevents cities from functioning effectively as regional trade hubs, as freight operations become costly, unpredictable, and inefficient. These findings also support Castrellon and Sánchez-Díaz (2024), who found that fragmented city-level freight management systems generate significant operational inefficiencies and weaken urban logistics performance globally.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that governance fragmentation is not simply an administrative issue, but a structural challenge that undermines transport safety, freight efficiency, and regional economic integration within developing-country urban freight systems.

5.2 Research Question 2: Transport Safety Challenges Affecting Urban Freight Systems

This section addresses Research Question 2: What transport safety challenges affect urban freight systems in developing countries? Findings from interviews identified overloading, driver fatigue, weak vehicle maintenance systems, corruption, and reactive safety management practices as the most significant threats affecting freight

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transport safety. Respondents further explained how operational pressures and weak enforcement structures contribute to unsafe freight practices across the three cities. A logistics manager at Nairobi said: *"Drivers are under pressure to meet deadlines and to maximise the load, which results in unsafe behaviours such as overloading and driving without sufficient rest. Last year, a truck driver who had been driving for 18 hours in a row fell asleep and crashed, killing two people. There is great pressure from the company to deliver; anything late can have penalties."*

A transport regulator based in Harare also mentioned that, *"We'll run roadblocks, but it's a game of cat-and-mouse. Drivers, knowing the routes and when to take them, will overload at night or pay off officials to be waved through. There isn't the capacity for consistent, 24/7 enforcement."*

The interview findings strongly support Tiwari et al. (2018), who argue that freight transport safety risks often stem from broader systemic and operational failures. Similarly, McLeod and Curtis (2022) advocate proactive hazard-control frameworks, yet the present findings demonstrate that many developing-country freight systems remain largely reactive and crisis-driven. A traffic officer in Harare has to pontificate this*: "We deal with accidents only after they occur," said a city planner in Harare. "We have no proactive safety management system. There is no data collection on near-misses or any systemic analysis of the causes of accident incidents. It's just crisis management."* It is a reactionary response that fails to address the deeper determinants of safety failures, thereby perpetuating vulnerabilities and their negative economic impacts in the area.

5.3 Research Question 3: Influence of Governance on Transport Safety Outcomes

This section addresses Research Question 3: What is the impact of governance on transport safety outcomes? Findings from the interviews consistently revealed that weak enforcement systems, institutional fragmentation, corruption, and inadequate political commitment significantly undermine transport safety management and regional freight efficiency across Harare, Nairobi, and Lagos. Participants further explained that governance failures are not merely administrative weaknesses, but structural barriers that directly contribute to unsafe freight practices, infrastructure deterioration, increased logistics costs, and weakened regional competitiveness.

The interview findings revealed that transport regulations are often poorly enforced and inconsistently implemented across the three case study cities. Participants emphasised that although formal regulatory frameworks exist, enforcement agencies frequently lack the institutional capacity, coordination mechanisms, and political support necessary to ensure compliance. A city planner in Lagos explained: *"There are policies to follow, but the enforcement is lax, and frequently influenced. They're rules on paper, but they're rarely enforced in practice. Axle load limits, for example, are ignored since the officials at the weighbridges are easily bribed. That causes the roads to crumble faster, and that comes at a high cost to the state."*

The interviews were particularly important in exposing the disconnect between formal institutional frameworks and operational realities within freight systems. Respondents described how weak governance structures allow informal practices such as bribery, regulatory evasion, and overloading to become normalised within freight operations. This reflects what Institutional Theory describes as the gap between institutional design and institutional practice, in which formal rules exist symbolically but are weakly implemented (Li & Abiad, 2009). The findings further support Cowie and Fisken's (2023) argument that low policy maturity and weak coordination mechanisms reduce the effectiveness of urban freight governance systems in developing countries.

Interview participants further argued that institutional barriers such as corruption, resource shortages, limited technological capacity, and weak political commitment intensify governance failures and compromise regional development outcomes. Across all three cities, respondents consistently linked governance weaknesses to delays, increased transport costs, inefficient freight movement, and declining regional competitiveness. A transportation regulator in Lagos expressed concern that *"The inefficiencies in our freight system, whether at checkpoints, delays, or poor road conditions, mean that goods are more expensive and less competitive in the marketplace*

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compared to other regional markets. A container sent from the port to a warehouse 20 kilometres away can be more expensive than shipping it from Europe to Lagos. This leaves our local industries uncompetitive and drives up prices for all." Similarly, a logistics manager in Nairobi remarked: *"We lose almost 20% of our transport capacity to idle time at weighbridges and police roadblocks. This constitutes almost 20% of our fleet that could be moving, but instead they are sitting and waiting to be cleared. That increases the cost of every consumer good in the region."*

The findings also revealed that weak governance structures undermine compliance behaviour in the freight industry. A logistics manager from Harare explained that: *"Companies seeking to implement the rules in places where enforcement is weak are at a competitive disadvantage. This undermines safety standards throughout the industry. It turns into a race to the bottom."*

This finding demonstrates how inconsistent enforcement environments create incentives for non-compliance and weaken industry-wide safety standards. The results corroborate Adu and Dorasamy (2024), who argue that governance inefficiencies significantly increase logistics costs and reduce regional economic productivity. The findings are also consistent with those of Dangisso et al. (2025), who identified institutional weaknesses and enforcement deficiencies as major barriers to sustainable transport systems in developing countries. However, unlike previous studies that primarily describe governance barriers, the current study demonstrates the mechanisms through which governance failures systematically undermine transport safety, supply chain efficiency, and regional competitiveness simultaneously. Consequently, fragmented governance systems generate an inefficient, unsafe, and economically unsustainable urban freight environment that constrains broader regional development objectives.

5.4 Research Question 4: Policy and Sustainability Implications for Regional Development

This section addresses Research Question 4: What policy interventions may strengthen transport safety and regional sustainability? Interview findings demonstrated that transport safety is fundamentally linked to sustainable supply chain performance. Respondents argued that governance weaknesses increase operational uncertainty, insurance costs, delays, and reputational risks, thereby undermining regional competitiveness and long-term sustainability objectives. A logistics manager in Nairobi summed this up: *"Safety incidents result in delays, add price to the insured sector, and tarnish our good name. This is a great obstacle to developing a sustainable and dependable supply chain. Our clients, from abroad, require high standards for safety and sustainability. If we are unable to do that, we lose our contracts."*

A regulator in Harare said, too: *"So many people in our industry still find sustainability to be very abstract. They are focused on survival. But safety is a specific beginning point. You can't talk about environmental sustainability or social responsibility when the very simple system on the ground is unsafe and unpredictable."*

This supports Dwivedi et al. (2023) in demonstrating that sustainability cannot be secured without a safety base. It also builds on the argument by showing how governance failures result in a system in which safety and sustainability are simultaneously compromised. The key themes and implications are summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Summary of Thematic Findings and Implications

Research Question	Key Interview Findings	Regional Implications	Supporting Literature
How do regulatory institutions govern urban freight systems?	Fragmented authority, overlapping mandates, weak coordination	Delays, weak logistics integration, increased transport costs	Lindholm & Behrends (2012); Cowie & Fisken (2023)
What transport safety challenges affect freight systems?	Overloading, fatigue, poor maintenance, reactive safety management	Accidents, supply chain disruptions, economic losses	Tiwari et al. (2018); WHO (2024)

What is the impact of governance on safety outcomes?	Weak enforcement, corruption, inconsistent implementation	Unsafe practices, infrastructure deterioration, reduced competitiveness	Li & Abiad (2009); Ma et al. (2025)
What policy interventions may improve safety and sustainability?	Institutional coordination, proactive safety systems, technology adoption	Improved sustainability, lower logistics costs, regional integration	Dwivedi et al. (2023); Tundulyasaree et al. (2026)

Source: the author

6. Analysis and Interpretation of Research Findings

The findings presented in Chapter 5 are interpreted in this section through the lenses of Institutional Theory and Sustainable Supply Chain Theory. The analysis connects empirical interview evidence with broader scholarly debates on governance, transport safety, and regional sustainability. The analysis of findings points out that the efficiency and effectiveness of urban freight systems in developing countries are essentially informed by the nexus between sound institutional governance and changes in supply chain sustainability. Informed by the Institutional Theory and Sustainable Supply Chain Theory, this paper establishes that governance challenges are not merely administrative inadequacies but structural issues that consistently compromise transport safety and regional development outcomes in cities, including but not limited to Harare, Nairobi, and Lagos.

Drawing on Institutional Theory, the research findings revealed a mismatch between formal regulatory frameworks and informal practices (actual enforcement and behaviour). Whilst regulatory frameworks governing freight transport are present in all three cities, their weak and fragmented character, underpinned by overlapping roles among municipalities, police, port management offices, and government ministries, generates what institutional scholars have termed institutional voids. These gaps compromise regulatory coherence efforts and enable the prevalence of opportunistic behaviour (such as overloading, bribery, and regulatory evasion). Lack of a centralised coordination office again compounds this fragmentation, culminating in uneven enforcement and inadequate accountability.

Fundamentally, the study confirmed the applicability of the Institutional Theory by showing that disintegration not only leads to governance failures but also creates systemic safety risks. Weak enforcement capabilities, together with rife corruption and resource gaps, standardise unsafe behaviours within freight services. For example, the recurrence of overloading and driver fatigue cases demonstrates a regulatory system that treats compliance as debatable rather than mandatory. This supports the idea of institutional isomorphism in weak and fragmented governance environments, where companies normalise unsafe yet economically convenient behaviours to sustain their competitive edge amid uneven regulation. Consequently, safety standards deteriorate across the entire system, generating a 'race to the bottom' that compromises both regulatory acceptability and market stability.

Additionally, the study found that institutional limitations are deeply entrenched within broader political and economic systems. Endemic corrupt tendencies, lack of political will, and weak commitment to enforcement technologies (e.g., weighbridge systems) compromise efforts to capacitate regulatory structures to fulfil their mandates productively. This is indicative of a classic institutional deficiency in which rules are symbolically designed with no practical relevance, thus widening the gap between policymaking and operationalisation. Eventually, governance frameworks do not guarantee the predictability and coordination needed to ensure a sound urban freight system, resulting in congestion, delays, and heightened logistics costs. If assessed through the lens of the Sustainable Supply Chain Theory, these governance deficiencies generate ripple effects on regional sustainability. The study findings categorically confirm that transport safety is not merely an isolated operational issue but a foundational cog in sustainable supply chains. Unsafe practices, such as overloading, poor vehicle maintenance, and driver fatigue, not only compound accident-related uncertainties and risks but also further affect supply chain dependability, increase insurance costs, and minimise overall system productivity. This resonates

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with the theoretical assumption that sustainability in supply chains depends on the combination of economic efficiency, social responsibility (e.g., safety), and environmental considerations.

Notwithstanding this, the study adopts the Sustainable Supply Chain Theory by demonstrating the relationship among governance, safety, and sustainability in a developing-country-specific environment. Weak and fragmented governance systems concurrently compromise all three dimensions of sustainability. On the economic front, issues such as unnecessary delays at checkpoints and port congestion compound transaction costs and minimise regional competitiveness. From a social perspective, high accident rates usually call for people's deaths and public health challenges. The environmental consequences stem from a poor freight system, which increases emissions due to congestion and prolonged vehicle idling. Therefore, governance limitations generate serious negative effects that undermine the overall sustainability of urban freight movement.

A key insight derived from the study findings is that retrospective safety management practices are characterised in the case study cities discussed above. A lack of proactive practices such as data-driven risk evaluation tools, monitoring of near-misses, and consolidated safety planning points to serious institutional capacity challenges for sound anticipatory governance systems. Theoretically, this indicates an inability to migrate from compliance-based regulation to performance-based and preventive governance systems, which are key to effective, sustainable supply chain management. In the absence of such a governance shift, safety commitments serve no purpose at all, particularly in addressing the structural causes of safety risk. Additionally, the study found that governance deficiencies at the urban level have serious effects on regional development. Ineffective and unsafe freight movement increases business costs, reduces trade competitiveness, and limits cities' capacity to operate as regional logistics hubs. For instance, sustained cargo clearance delays and extreme checkpoint disruptions in Lagos and Nairobi demonstrate how local institutional inadequacies disrupt broader regional supply chains. This advances the proposition that regional sustainability depends on the effectiveness of local governance systems, particularly in the transport sector.

Moreover, the study findings demonstrate the fundamental role of the private sector in addressing governance limitations discussed in this paper. Even though companies are often pressured to rely on unsafe behaviours, evidence shows that proactive measures in safety management, driver training, and technology utilisation are key to promoting both efficiency and sustainability. This underlines the imperative of hybrid governance systems, characterised by public regulation that complements private-sector self-regulation and industry standards. Such integrated governance systems align with Sustainable Supply Chain Theory, which emphasises synergies among all stakeholders to realise system-wide sustainability outcomes.

Overall, the analysis shows that the governance issues confronting urban freight movement in the developing world are not merely technical but essentially institutional and systemic. Institutional fragmentation, weak enforcement, and governance loopholes create a non-conducive environment in which safety risks are normalised, compromising sustainability imperatives. Dealing with issues requires not only upgrading the infrastructure but also significant institutional reforms that promote proper coordination, strengthen enforcement, and align incentives among stakeholders. Through the integration of the Institutional Theory and Sustainable Supply Chain Theory, this study provides deep insights into how governance inefficiencies translate into safety risks and, consequently, undermine concerted efforts aimed at regional development.

7. Policy Implications for Regional Development

The policy implications for regional development through the enhancement of local urban freight systems are substantial. These are taken in different action layers presented below.

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Government Level

Strengthening institutional coordination, especially at the national and regional government levels, is crucial. This entails the development of a specialised freight transport agency to alleviate existing fragmentation (UNECA, 2025). Policies must be more realistic in their implementation capability and move from aspirational ambitions to the enforcement of standards. This means investing in equipment and services sufficient for regulators to carry out inspections and enforce safety requirements, including weigh-in-motion technologies to reduce human interaction and corruption. Governments need to tackle the source of corruption and informal malpractices that compromise the rule of law. Tundulyasaree et al. (2026) argue that well-designed tax and subsidy policies can provide positive safety- and sustainability-facilitated incentives that do not rely on a purely punitive approach to implementation.

Urban/Regional Planning

In long-term development plans, freight transport must be taken into account at both the urban and regional planning phases. That includes land-use planning, infrastructure planning, and spatial development that consider freight and transport needs. The establishment of dedicated freight routes, the development of off-peak delivery programs, and the upgrading of essential infrastructure, such as roads, border posts, and other physical requirements of the area, would greatly enhance the efficiency and safety of freight. The African Development Bank (2024) introduced corridor management interventions designed to overcome non-tariff barriers and enhance cross-border cooperation, highlighting a model that could play a role in urban freight. This is to ensure that the systems that transport goods serve the region's interests, leading to more networked and competitive markets among regional economies.

Private Sector

The private sector, including logistics firms and shippers, must play a vital role. This study's analysis shows that safety management should take a proactive approach rather than remain reactive. Companies need to invest in areas such as safety compliance systems, driver training programs, and vehicle maintenance. Technology adoption in fleet management and route optimisation is integral to increasing transport safety and efficiency. Industry associations have to promote best practices and self-regulation and alleviate the load on public agencies. While Industry 4.0 technologies can be the key enabler for firms willing to invest (Fatorachian & Pawar, 2025), it requires a paradigm shift to view safety from cost to competitive advantage.

Regional Impact

These policies are designed to maximise regional productivity, reduce regional inequality, and promote sustainable growth. Regions can improve their competitiveness by building a better, less risky, more efficient, and more predictable freight system. Logistics costs can be lowered, and supply chain reliability improved, which will eventually lower market entry barriers for businesses, create jobs, and promote economic diversification. Safety risks also bring some direct social benefits as they tend to lead to fewer deaths and injuries. Together, these actions ensure a more sustainable and inclusive regional development path and contribute to the Insights into Regional Development theme, which focuses on emerging and less developed economies.

7. Conclusions

This study reveals the potential impact of public governance on transport safety and sustainable supply chains in developing countries. This study has developed a framework that integrates governance, safety, and regional development to provide a broad view of urban freight systems. Fragmented governance structures and a lack of institutional capacity have been identified as major barriers to achieving urban freight safety and sustainability.

The findings of this study largely corroborate existing literature on governance fragmentation and transport safety challenges in developing countries. Similar to Lindholm and Behrends (2012) and Cowie and Fisken (2023), the study confirms that fragmented institutional structures weaken urban freight coordination and regulatory effectiveness. The findings also support Tiwari et al. (2018) and McLeod and Curtis (2022), who argue that weak

enforcement systems and reactive safety management practices contribute significantly to freight transport risks. However, unlike many previous studies that examine governance, safety, or sustainability in isolation, the current study demonstrates how these dimensions interact to influence regional economic performance and sustainable supply chain development.

This study makes the following critical contributions. First, in theory, it applies institutional theory to provide a solid foundation for exploring urban freight systems, focusing on the poor safety performance of institutions, including supply chain inefficiency. Empirically, the study provided considerable qualitative evidence from multiple case references derived from three developing countries in the sub-Saharan region, which is a considerable gap in the study. From a practical and policy perspective, it suggests actionable recommendations for governments, planners, and industry.

The findings underscore the imperative for institutional reforms to improve regulatory effectiveness and sustainable regional development by raising standards and improving regulatory efficiency. The fragmentation of governance and enforcement, and the embedding of freight in regional development agendas, are two issues informing future studies. From the practitioner's perspective, the review highlights the critical need to move from a responsive approach to safety management to one which is more proactive and systemic.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrated examination of public governance, transport safety, and sustainable supply chain performance within the context of regional development in Sub-Saharan Africa. While previous studies have often examined these variables separately, this study demonstrates their interconnectedness through qualitative evidence drawn from multiple developing-country case studies. The study further contributes by positioning transport safety not merely as a technical or operational concern, but as a central determinant of regional competitiveness and sustainable development.

Lastly, this study has a specific impact on the regional development literature by demonstrating that transport regulation and governance are not local or technical issues but are fundamental to regional economic performance and sustainability. Poor and hazardous freight is a major threat towards regional productivity and competitiveness. Subsequent studies should focus on quantitative investigations to measure the economic effects of these governance failures and examine institutions and case studies with successful reforms that can serve as models for other developing countries. Comparative research across governance models and regions may also help enhance the evidence base for such policy measures.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. The research relied on qualitative data collected from a relatively small sample of participants across three cities, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other developing-country contexts. Additionally, the study focused primarily on governance and institutional perspectives and did not quantitatively measure economic losses associated with freight inefficiencies and safety failures. Future research should therefore employ mixed-methods or quantitative approaches to evaluate the economic costs of governance fragmentation and transport safety failures. Comparative studies examining successful governance reforms across different regional transport systems would also strengthen policy understanding in this field.

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THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM OF ASSESSMENT: HOW TESTING SYSTEMS REPRODUCE INEQUALITY IN AFRICAN EDUCATION

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Abstract. This paper interrogates the often-overlooked hidden curriculum embedded within assessment systems and examines how testing practices reproduce and legitimise inequality in African education contexts. Moving beyond conventional concerns with reliability and validity, the study advances a critical theoretical framework that conceptualises assessment as a socially situated practice shaped by language, culture, and power relations. Drawing on insights from critical theory and sociological perspectives on cultural capital, the paper argues that dominant assessment regimes privilege learners whose linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds align with institutional norms, while systematically disadvantaging those from marginalised communities. Synthesising existing literature on educational assessment, inequality, and development in Sub-Saharan Africa, the study demonstrates how high-stakes testing, language-of-instruction policies, and standardised measurement practices function as mechanisms of exclusion. It further illuminates how these dynamics contribute to uneven educational outcomes, constrain human capital development, and reinforce broader patterns of social and regional inequality. By situating assessment within the wider discourse of regional development, the paper establishes a conceptual link between inequitable testing systems and constrained socio-economic progress. In response, it proposes a reorientation of assessment theory and practice towards equity-sensitive frameworks that recognise contextual diversity and promote inclusive measurement, calling for culturally responsive assessment designs, multilingual approaches, and policy reforms that place fairness at the centre of educational governance. The study contributes to ongoing debates on educational transformation in Africa by foregrounding assessment as a critical yet under-theorised site of the reproduction of inequality and systemic change.

Keywords: hidden curriculum; educational assessment; inequality; African education; cultural capital; equity; high-stakes testing; regional development; culturally responsive assessment; Sub-Saharan Africa

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1. Introduction

Assessment is rarely understood as a neutral act. Yet the dominant discourse surrounding educational testing in Africa has persistently privileged technical questions of reliability and validity over the political and sociological dimensions of who benefits, who is measured, and whose knowledge counts. This preoccupation with psychometric soundness has rendered invisible a deeper set of concerns: that testing systems carry within them a *hidden curriculum*, an implicit set of values, assumptions, and epistemological commitments that quietly sorts learners, rewards conformity to institutional norms, and replicates the very inequalities that education is ostensibly designed to redress (Ullah et al., 2025; Villacañas-de-Castro, 2025; Wolford et al., 2025).

The concept of the hidden curriculum, first elaborated in the sociology of education by Philip Jackson (1968) and subsequently developed by scholars such as Bowles and Gintis (1976), highlights the unstated lessons that schooling transmits beyond its official content. Applied to assessment, the concept illuminates how testing

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practices communicate, through their language, format, cultural referents, and institutional embeddedness, which forms of knowledge are legitimate and which are not. For learners whose home languages, cultural practices, and socio-economic circumstances diverge from those encoded in dominant assessment frameworks, these unstated lessons are often ones of deficit and exclusion.

In the African context, this dynamic assumes particular urgency. The continent hosts some of the world's most linguistically diverse societies. Yet, the majority of high-stakes examinations are conducted in former colonial languages, English, French, or Portuguese, which many learners encounter only as foreign languages within school walls (Beckmann, 2025). Socio-economic stratification, entrenched urban–rural divides, gender disparities, and the residual architecture of colonial schooling further compound the conditions under which assessment operates (Fobosi et al., 2026). Against this backdrop, the persistence of imported testing models - standardised, norm-referenced, and language-homogeneous raises serious questions about their fitness for purpose in contexts of structural diversity and inequality.

This paper advances a critical theoretical interrogation of assessment in African education, arguing that dominant testing regimes function as mechanisms of social reproduction. The study draws on Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital, critical race theory's insights on epistemic justice, and postcolonial scholarship on education and development to construct a framework that positions assessment as a site of power, one that requires not merely technical reform but fundamental conceptual reorientation. The paper synthesises peer-reviewed scholarship, institutional reports, and empirical studies from across Sub-Saharan Africa to support its central arguments. It proposes a set of equity-sensitive alternatives grounded in the principle of culturally responsive assessment.

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond the classroom. Educational assessment outcomes determine access to higher education, credential attainment, and labour market trajectories. In contexts where these outcomes are systematically skewed along lines of language, class, gender, and geography, assessment becomes an instrument of social stratification with far-reaching implications for regional human capital development and socio-economic progress. The paper contributes to the journal's concern with regional development by demonstrating how educational inequity, mediated through assessment, constitutes a structural constraint on sustainable development across Africa.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews theoretical frameworks relevant to the study. Section 3 examines the historical and structural context of assessment in Africa. Section 4 analyses the mechanisms through which testing systems reproduce inequality. Section 5 discusses the implications for regional development. Section 6 proposes equity-sensitive assessment frameworks. Section 7 concludes with recommendations for policy and practice.

2. Theoretical Framework: Assessment, Power, and Social Reproduction

Cultural Capital and the Hidden Curriculum of Testing

Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital provides an indispensable lens for understanding how assessment systems reproduce inequality. Bourdieu distinguished between economic, social, and cultural capital, arguing that educational institutions valorise and reward particular forms of cultural capital, those associated with the dominant class, while systematically devaluing others. In assessment terms, this means that learners who arrive at school already endowed with the linguistic registers, dispositions, and cultural knowledge that examinations privilege enter the testing arena with a structural advantage that has nothing to do with innate ability or effort.

The hidden curriculum of assessment operates precisely through this valorisation. When a national examination in Nigeria, Uganda, or Mozambique is written in English or Portuguese, draws analogies from Western cultural

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contexts, and uses response formats that presuppose familiarity with abstract academic discourse, it encodes a specific cultural capital as the universal standard. Learners from urban, middle-class, English-medium households accumulate this capital with comparative ease. Those from rural, multilingual, low-income households are effectively required to translate not only linguistically but culturally and epistemologically before they can demonstrate competence. The selection reflects and reproduces the interests of dominant groups. Official knowledge is ideologically saturated. Applied to assessment in Africa, this insight highlights how examination syllabi, item construction, and scoring rubrics privilege particular epistemic traditions while marginalising indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, and non-Western modes of reasoning (Dei, 2014; wa Thiong'o, 1986).

Critical Theory and Epistemic Justice

Miranda Fricker's (2007) theory of epistemic injustice offers a complementary analytical resource. Fricker identified two forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice, which occurs when a speaker receives less credibility than they deserve due to identity prejudice, and hermeneutical injustice, which occurs when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage in making sense of their social experience. Both forms are operative in African assessment contexts.

Testimonial injustice manifests when the knowledge and reasoning capacities of learners from marginalised communities are systematically underestimated, and when their performance in a foreign language examination is read as evidence of limited intellectual capacity rather than of an inequitable testing environment. Hermeneutical injustice manifests when the frameworks available for conceptualising assessment quality, reliability, validity, and standardisation lack the resources to capture the lived reality of a learner who is simultaneously navigating linguistic alienation, resource poverty, and cultural dislocation within a single examination sitting.

Postcolonial education scholars have reinforced these insights by drawing attention to the epistemic violence embedded in the uncritical adoption of Western assessment models across Africa (Dei, 2014; Ndlovu-Gatsheni et al, 2022). Wa Thiong'o's (1986) seminal argument that the colonisation of the mind operates most powerfully through language finds a concrete institutional expression in assessment systems that evaluate African learners' intelligence primarily through their command of ex-colonial languages. The decolonisation of assessment, on this reading, is not merely a matter of adding indigenous content to existing frameworks but of fundamentally reconceiving what counts as evidence of learning and who is authorised to produce and evaluate it.

Social Reproduction Theory and Regional Development

Bowles and Gintis (1976), writing from a structuralist perspective, argued that schooling functions as a mechanism for the social reproduction of economic relations, that the school system produces not merely educated individuals but compliant workers stratified by class. While their analysis has been critiqued for its functionalist determinism, the core insight that educational structures tend to reproduce the inequalities of the societies in which they are embedded retains considerable explanatory power.

Applied to the regional development literature, this framework establishes a causal pathway between inequitable assessment systems and uneven human capital development. When high-stakes examinations systematically produce lower attainment rates in rural, low-income, and linguistically marginalised communities, they generate unequal distributions of credentials. Unequal credentials translate into unequal access to tertiary education, formal employment, and participation in knowledge economies. At the aggregate level, this produces regional human capital deficits that constrain economic productivity, innovation, and sustainable development, a dynamic that is particularly pronounced in Sub-Saharan Africa, where educational attainment is strongly associated with economic growth trajectories (World Bank, 2022; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2015).

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The theoretical synthesis offered in this paper thus links the micro-level dynamics of assessment practice, item language, cultural referents, and scoring rubrics to macro-level outcomes of regional inequality. This linkage, largely absent from existing assessment scholarship, constitutes the study's conceptual contribution.

3. Methodology

This study employs a systematic integrative literature review as its primary methodological approach. Integrative reviews are appropriate when the goal is to synthesise a broad body of existing knowledge across multiple disciplinary traditions, assess the state of understanding on a topic, and generate conceptual frameworks that extend beyond what any single study can offer (Torraco, 2005; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). Given the interdisciplinary nature of the inquiry, spanning educational assessment, sociology of education, postcolonial studies, and regional development economics, an integrative review provides the methodological flexibility necessary to engage with diverse theoretical and empirical traditions.

The literature search was conducted across multiple academic databases, including Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, JSTOR, and ERIC, as well as the repositories of key regional and international development organisations, including UNESCO, the World Bank, and the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ). Search terms were constructed to cover three interconnected domains: (1) educational assessment and testing, combined with inequality, equity, and fairness; (2) African education, Sub-Saharan Africa, and postcolonial education; and (3) hidden curriculum, cultural capital, and social reproduction. Boolean operators were used to combine and refine searches, and reference list tracing was employed to identify seminal works not captured by database searches.

Inclusion criteria required that sources: (a) addressed assessment practices, outcomes, or policies in African educational contexts or offered theoretical frameworks directly applicable to such contexts; (b) were published in peer-reviewed journals, scholarly books, or authoritative institutional reports; and (c) were available in English. While this language restriction represents a limitation (discussed in Section 8), it reflects the current distribution of accessible scholarship in this field. No strict date restriction was imposed, given the historical analysis required in Section 4; however, deliberate effort was made to ensure that sources published within the last five years constitute approximately thirty per cent of the cited literature, in line with best practice in scholarly synthesis, thereby ensuring that the review reflects the current state of the field.

The analytical framework applied to the synthesised literature draws on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) and the sociology of knowledge. Rather than treating reviewed texts as transparent data sources, the study examines how they construct, contest, and reproduce particular understandings of assessment quality, educational achievement, and learner competence. This reflexive approach to synthesis is consistent with the epistemological commitments of the theoretical framework outlined in Section 2, which positions knowledge production as always embedded in relations of power.

The study is explicitly theoretical and conceptual rather than empirical. It does not generate new primary data but constructs a novel analytical framework by bringing existing theoretical resources, Bourdieusian cultural capital theory, Fricker's epistemic injustice framework, social reproduction theory, and postcolonial education scholarship into productive dialogue with empirical studies conducted across Sub-Saharan Africa. The conceptual contribution lies in the systematic articulation of linkages among assessment practice, inequality mechanisms, and regional development outcomes, a set of linkages that, while implicit in the existing literature, has not previously been theorised within a coherent framework.

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4. Historical and Structural Context of Assessment in Africa

Colonial Origins and Institutional Persistence

The architecture of educational assessment in most African countries was constructed during the colonial period and has, in significant respects, been preserved since independence. Examinations functioned as gatekeeping mechanisms within this hierarchy, selecting the few who would ascend to positions of relative privilege while excluding the majority from further educational and economic opportunity.

The continuity of these systems after independence has been widely documented. Many African countries retained not merely the structural features of colonial examinations, their language medium, format, and curriculum orientation, but also their institutional relationships with metropolitan examining bodies. The Cambridge International Examinations (now Cambridge Assessment International Education) and the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), for instance, continued to exercise significant influence over secondary school certification in Anglophone Africa well into the post-independence era (Harber, 2014). The content and cultural referents of these examinations reflected assumptions about knowledge, competence, and academic achievement that were deeply rooted in British educational traditions.

Decades of curriculum reform have partially Africanised examination content, yet the fundamental structure, high-stakes, norm-referenced, externally administered, conducted in ex-colonial languages, has proven remarkably resistant to change. This institutional inertia reflects not only the path-dependent dynamics of bureaucratic systems but also the active interests of elites whose privileged access to ex-colonial language education gives them and their children a comparative advantage within existing assessment regimes (Du Plessis, 2025).

Language of Instruction and Assessment: The Linguistic Fault Line

The relationship between language of instruction and educational achievement is one of the most extensively researched and consistently demonstrated findings in comparative education. A substantial body of evidence, synthesised by UNESCO (2016) global education monitoring framework, establishes that learners acquire literacy, numeracy, and higher-order cognitive skills most effectively when instruction is provided in their strongest language. This principle, though widely acknowledged in policy discourse, is systematically violated in the assessment practices of most African countries.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the majority of children begin school speaking a home language different from the official language of instruction. Yet national examinations are almost universally conducted in official, that is, ex-colonial languages. The consequence is that performance in these examinations reflects, to a significant degree, the level of acquired proficiency in a second or third language rather than mastery of the subject matter being assessed.

This evidence has profound implications for the interpretation of national examination results. When grade repetition, dropout, and attainment gaps are mapped across linguistic communities in countries such as Tanzania, Zambia, or Cameroon, the patterns closely follow the fault lines of language policy. Communities whose home languages are absent from both instruction and assessment face a compounded disadvantage: they must learn through a language they do not yet command and be evaluated in that language against peers who have far greater exposure to it (Alidou et al., 2006).

Socio-economic Stratification and the Unequal Assessment Environment

The assumption of equivalent assessment conditions, that all learners in a given examination cohort compete from a comparable starting position, is a fiction that standardised testing requires but reality rarely provides. In Africa, the material conditions of schooling vary enormously across socio-economic strata and between urban and rural settings. Research by the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality

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(SACMEQ) consistently documents stark differentials in school infrastructure, teacher qualifications, textbook availability, and class sizes across countries and between population subgroups within countries. The assessment system, by treating these learners as comparable, by reporting a single pass-fail threshold or percentile ranking across a heterogeneously resourced school system, renders invisible the structural determinants of differential performance and naturalises them as individual achievement or failure. This is the hidden curriculum of standardisation: it presents a structured outcome as a meritocratic one.

5. Mechanisms Through Which Assessment Systems Reproduce Inequality

High-Stakes Testing as a Gatekeeping Mechanism

High-stakes examinations, those whose results determine access to educational advancement, credential attainment, or employment, concentrate enormous consequences into a single measurement event. In many African countries, secondary school-leaving certificates and university entrance examinations operate as definitive gatekeepers: passing determines access to the formal economy; failing consigns a learner to restricted socio-economic trajectories regardless of the competencies they have developed or the obstacles they have navigated. The stakes are heightened because these examinations often serve as the terminal educational credential for most learners who do not pursue tertiary education.

The high-stakes nature of these examinations distorts pedagogy and learning. When teachers and schools are evaluated based on examination pass rates, instruction narrows to examination preparation, a phenomenon extensively documented in the literature as 'teaching to the test' (Au, 2007). In resource-constrained African classrooms, this narrowing is often extreme: curriculum breadth is sacrificed for examination rehearsal, and the development of critical thinking, creativity, and contextually relevant competencies is subordinated to the memorisation of examinable content. The learner who excels in this regime is the one who has mastered the particular discourse conventions, genre expectations, and cultural referents of the examination, advantages that are far more accessible to learners from privileged backgrounds.

Critically, failure in high-stakes examinations in Africa carries no systematic provision for remediation or alternative credentialling. Unlike educational systems in some Nordic countries, where multiple pathways to certification exist, and failure in any single assessment does not permanently foreclose opportunity, most African assessment systems are strongly sequential and terminal. The student who fails the West African Examinations Council Senior School Certificate Examination or the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education often faces restricted access to further educational opportunities and formal employment, particularly within contexts where secondary school certification functions as a key gatekeeping mechanism for social mobility and labour market participation (Minnis, 2006). High-stakes assessment is thus not merely a measurement system; it is a distributive mechanism.

Standardised Measurement and the Erasure of Contextual Diversity

Standardisation in assessment is premised on the principle that a common measurement instrument, applied consistently, produces comparable data for evaluating learner attainment and system performance. This principle has legitimate applications in the monitoring of educational quality at scale. However, when standardised instruments are applied across contexts characterised by radical diversity in language, culture, resource provision, and socio-economic circumstance, as is inevitably the case in national examinations across African countries, the comparability that standardisation is designed to produce becomes analytically incoherent and ethically problematic.

The problem is not merely technical. It is not resolved by improving item reliability or expanding normative samples. It is conceptual: the assumption that a single instrument can produce valid evidence of learning across learners who have been educated under radically different conditions, in different languages, and with access to

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radically different material resources is not a technical assumption but an ideological one. It conceals the role of structural advantage in producing differential performance and presents what are, in effect, socially produced outcomes as individually determined ones.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), while not originally designed for African contexts, has increasingly influenced assessment policy discourse on the continent through its adoption by the World Bank and bilateral donors as a quality benchmark. Scholars such as Dohn (2007) have argued that the PISA framework embodies particular epistemological assumptions about the nature of mathematical reasoning, scientific literacy, and reading comprehension that are not culturally universal and that systematically disadvantage learners educated outside the Western European contexts in which the framework was developed. The uncritical importation of this and similar frameworks into African educational assessment risks compounding existing inequalities rather than addressing them.

Gender, Disability, and the Compound Disadvantage of Marginalised Groups

While the foregoing analysis has concentrated on the intersecting inequalities of language, class, and geography, any comprehensive account of assessment-driven inequality in Africa must attend to the compounding disadvantages faced by girls, learners with disabilities, and other marginalised groups. Gender gaps in educational attainment persist across Sub-Saharan Africa, driven by a complex interaction of economic, social, cultural, and institutional factors. Assessment systems contribute to these gaps in specific, addressable ways.

Item formats that privilege abstract, decontextualised reasoning, typical of conventional multiple-choice and analytical essay formats, tend to produce larger gender gaps than formats that contextualise problems within social and relational scenarios. Item language and cultural referents frequently reflect masculine-coded domains of knowledge and experience. Assessment conditions, large halls, time pressure, and invigilated silence can be particularly alienating for learners from social backgrounds where collaborative and dialogic modes of knowledge production are normative. For learners with physical, sensory, or cognitive disabilities, the standard assessment environment is often simply inaccessible. Yet universal design principles and reasonable accommodation provisions are rarely institutionalised in African examination systems, which typically lack the resources, administrative infrastructure, and regulatory frameworks to guarantee equitable access. The result is that learners with disabilities face a systematic barrier to credential attainment that is legally and ethically unjustifiable (Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht, 2018).

Structural Driver	Assessment Mechanism	Outcome	Equity Intervention
Colonial legacy/language policy	High-stakes exams in ex-colonial languages	Systematic exclusion of mother-tongue speakers	Multilingual assessment; mother-tongue instruction
Socio-economic stratification	Standardised testing assumes equal resource access	Reproduction of class-based attainment gaps	Context-sensitive performance tasks; resource audits
Cultural capital differentials	Curricula privileging dominant cultural norms	Misrecognition of indigenous knowledge	Culturally responsive rubrics; local knowledge integration
Urban–rural infrastructure divide	ICT-dependent or resource-intensive assessments	Widened regional development disparities	Low-tech portfolio; community-based assessment
Gender and disability marginalisation	Uniform time-bound written tests	Disproportionate exclusion of vulnerable groups	Universal design for assessment; flexible modes

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Structural Drivers, Assessment Mechanisms, Outcomes, and Equity Interventions
Source: Authors' own construction based on a synthesised literature review

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Figure 1 above maps the relationship among the structural drivers of inequality in African contexts, the specific assessment mechanisms through which these drivers are operationalised, the educational and developmental outcomes they produce, and the equity-sensitive interventions recommended in the literature. This framework is intended as both an analytical and a prescriptive tool, demonstrating that each dimension of assessment-driven inequality admits a corresponding, evidence-based corrective.

6. Assessment Inequality and Regional Development: Tracing the Causal Pathway

The foregoing analysis of assessment-driven inequality is not merely a matter of educational philosophy. It has concrete, measurable implications for regional human capital development and socio-economic progress across Africa. The pathway from inequitable assessment to constrained development operates through several interconnected mechanisms.

First, inequitable assessment outcomes produce skewed distributions of educational credentials. When high-stakes examination pass rates are systematically lower in rural, low-income, and linguistically marginalised communities, as the evidence reviewed above consistently demonstrates, the distribution of credentials replicates and entrenches the geographical and socio-economic inequalities of broader society. Regions with lower examination attainment rates face lower rates of tertiary education participation, which in turn produces regional deficits in the professional and technical skills that drive economic diversification and productivity growth. World Bank (2022) analysis of African labour market data confirms that the returns to education, measured in terms of earnings, formal employment probability, and entrepreneurial capacity, are strongly associated with credential attainment, making the examination system a central mediating institution in the reproduction of regional economic inequality.

Second, the human capital constraints produced by inequitable assessment systems disproportionately affect the regions of Africa that are already most economically marginalised. The Sahel, the Horn of Africa, the Great Lakes region, and rural southern Africa, areas characterised by linguistic diversity, inadequate school infrastructure, and high rates of poverty, are precisely the areas where the disadvantaging effects of dominant assessment systems are most pronounced. The compound effect is a self-reinforcing dynamic: low examination attainment reduces tertiary participation, the regional supply of qualified professionals and teachers, and educational quality in subsequent generations, thereby perpetuating low attainment rates. Breaking this cycle requires interventions at the level of the assessment system itself, not merely at the level of school resources or curriculum content.

Third, the global discourse on sustainable development increasingly recognises that investment in human capital is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 4, which commits signatory states to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and to promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, explicitly includes reducing educational outcome disparities by socio-economic status, gender, disability, and geographic location among its targets. The assessment systems currently operative in most African countries are in systematic tension with these commitments. Achieving SDG 4 in Africa requires, inter alia, reforming assessment practices to measure educational quality in ways that are equitable, contextually appropriate, and conducive to the development of the full range of human capacities envisioned by the SDGs (Unterhalter, 2019).

Fourth, there is a well-established relationship between educational inequality and social cohesion. Societies characterised by large educational attainment gaps between social groups tend to experience higher levels of social grievance, political instability, and inter-group conflict, dynamics that impose severe costs on economic development and regional integration. In the African context, where ethnic, linguistic, and regional identities are frequently mapped onto educational disadvantage, assessment systems that are perceived as culturally biased or structurally unfair can become sources of social tension and delegitimise educational institutions more broadly.

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Equitable assessment, in this sense, is not merely an educational good but a governance and development imperative.

7. Towards Equity-Sensitive Assessment: A Framework for Reform

Culturally Responsive Assessment

Culturally responsive assessment, as theorised by Villegas and Lucas (2002) and subsequently applied to African educational contexts by scholars including Dei (2014) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986), influenced curriculum theorists, begins from the recognition that learner knowledge and competence are always culturally situated. Assessment instruments, if they are to generate valid evidence of learning, must engage learners within frameworks of meaning that are accessible and relevant to their cultural experience, rather than requiring them to perform competence within an alien cultural register.

In practice, culturally responsive assessment implies several specific design principles. Item content should draw on scenarios, contexts, and referents that are familiar and meaningful to the populations being assessed. Assessment tasks should create space for multiple modes of demonstrating competence, oral, practical, and performative, as well as written, so that learners whose strengths do not lie in academic written discourse are not systematically disadvantaged. Rubrics and scoring criteria should be developed with attention to the cultural diversity of expected responses, and assessors should receive training to recognise and credit culturally diverse expressions of competence (Hassani & Schwab, 2025).

Several African countries have experimented with elements of culturally responsive assessment, with promising though uneven results. Ethiopia's ongoing curriculum reform has sought to integrate indigenous knowledge systems into the formal curriculum and its associated assessments (Teklu, 2020). South Africa's National Senior Certificate includes provisions for mother-tongue assessment in a range of African languages, though implementation has been constrained by teacher capacity and resource limitations. Rwanda's recent shift towards competence-based education has opened space for more contextualised assessment approaches, though the influence of international benchmarking frameworks continues to pull in the direction of standardisation (Nsengimana, 2022). These experiments, taken together, suggest both the feasibility and the complexity of culturally responsive reform.

Multilingual Assessment Approaches

The evidence reviewed in Section 3 makes a compelling case for adopting multilingual assessment approaches as a central element of any equity-sensitive reform agenda. Multilingual assessment does not require abandoning shared assessment standards or producing entirely separate examinations for each linguistic community. Rather, it encompasses a range of practical interventions: providing examination papers in multiple languages; allowing learners to read questions in one language and respond in another; permitting the use of bilingual glossaries during examinations; conducting oral examinations in learners' strongest language; and using mother-tongue assessment during the early years of schooling while developing proficiency in the language of wider communication.

The technical challenges of multilingual assessment, ensuring conceptual equivalence across languages, managing the logistics of multiple-language examination administration, and training markers in multiple languages are rare but tractable (Madonsela, 2023). Benson (2014) documents multilingual assessment initiatives in Mozambique, Ethiopia, and Papua New Guinea that have achieved both operational viability and measurable gains in equity. The Mozambican PEBIMO project, which assessed literacy in both Portuguese and local languages in the early grades, found that children assessed in their home languages demonstrated higher measured competence than those assessed only in Portuguese, a finding with significant implications for how early-grade learning trajectories are interpreted and responded to.

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The political economy of multilingual assessment reform is, however, more challenging than its technical dimensions. The language of assessment is a domain in which competing social interests, linguistic communities, academic traditions, labour market gatekeepers, and political elites stake significant claims. Reform in this domain requires not merely technical expertise but political will, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and institutional investment in teacher training and materials development in multiple languages.

Portfolio and Competence-Based Assessment

Portfolio and competence-based assessment approaches offer a promising alternative to the high-stakes, single-occasion, written examination as the primary instrument of educational credentialling. Portfolio assessment involves the systematic collection of learners' work over time, curated to demonstrate the development of specified competencies and to reflect the learner's best performance across a range of tasks and contexts. It is inherently more longitudinal, contextualised, and learner-centred than examination-based assessment, and creates space for learners to demonstrate competence in modes that are authentic to their learning experiences.

Competence-based assessment frameworks, which specify learning outcomes in terms of observable competencies rather than content coverage, similarly create space for greater contextual flexibility. They permit assessment in locally relevant contexts, through tasks that have genuine significance for the learner's community, and across multiple occasions rather than in a single high-stakes event. Several African countries have adopted competence-based curriculum frameworks in recent years, including Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Ghana, and South Africa. However, the translation of these frameworks into genuinely competence-based assessment practice has been partial and uneven.

Portfolio assessment is resource-intensive and requires teacher capacity and time that are frequently unavailable in large, under-resourced African classrooms. Competence-based assessment demands ongoing professional development and clear assessment criteria that can be consistently applied across diverse contexts, capacities that require sustained investment in teacher education and support. Equitable implementation of these approaches at scale is achievable. Still, it presupposes system capacity levels that many African educational systems have not yet attained, making the reform agenda inseparable from broader investments in teacher development and school resourcing.

Policy Architecture for Equitable Assessment

The technical and pedagogical reforms outlined above require an enabling policy architecture to achieve systemic impact. Several specific policy commitments are identified in the literature as foundational to equitable assessment reform in Africa. First, national assessment policies must explicitly commit to the principle of fairness, not merely as a procedural concern about test administration conditions but as a substantive commitment to ensuring that assessment systems do not systematically disadvantage learners based on socio-economic background, language, gender, disability, or geographic location.

Second, assessment reform must be embedded within broader educational governance processes that include linguistically and culturally diverse communities as active participants, not as consultation beneficiaries but as co-designers of the frameworks within which their children's learning is evaluated. This requires a deliberate challenge to the technocratic gatekeeping that has historically insulated assessment policy from democratic accountability. Third, assessment quality assurance frameworks must extend beyond psychometric criteria to encompass equity audits — systematic analyses of whether assessment instruments and practices produce disparate impacts across population subgroups, and if so, why and how such disparities can be addressed.

Fourth, the international development community, including the World Bank, UNESCO, bilateral donors, and multilateral development banks, must align its support for African educational assessment with equity-sensitive principles, rather than continuing to promote standardised international benchmarking as the primary metric of

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educational quality. The Global Partnership for Education and the Education Commission's International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity have made commitments in this direction; translating these commitments into concrete support for multilingual, culturally responsive, and portfolio-based assessment reform represents a significant outstanding challenge (Unterhalter, 2019; World Bank, 2022).

8. Insights based on Results

The evidence and arguments assembled in this paper converge on a diagnosis that is at once analytically precise and practically consequential. Assessment systems in Africa are not failing learners from marginalised communities inadvertently, through poor design or insufficient resources. They are, in significant measure, producing exactly the outcomes that their structural logic predicts: the sorting of learners along pre-existing lines of social advantage and disadvantage, the credentialing of the already privileged, and the systematic exclusion of those whose linguistic, cultural, and economic circumstances diverge from institutional norms. The hidden curriculum of assessment is not hidden in the sense of being arcane or inaccessible; it is hidden in the sense of being naturalised, presented as the inevitable result of differential merit rather than as a socially produced outcome of structural inequality.

This diagnosis does not imply fatalism. The scholarship reviewed in this paper demonstrates that equity-sensitive assessment is not a utopian aspiration but a practical, achievable reform agenda, implemented with varying degrees of success in multiple African and global contexts. Culturally responsive assessment designs, multilingual approaches, portfolio-based credentialing, and participatory assessment governance have been developed, tested, and refined. What is lacking is not knowledge of what to do, but the political will, institutional capacity, and resource investment to do so at scale.

The regional development implications of this analysis are significant. If the argument advanced in this paper is correct, that inequitable assessment systems are a structural determinant of skewed human capital distributions and constrained regional development in Africa, then assessment reform must be recognised as a development intervention of the first order, not merely an educational technicality. International development actors who invest in school construction, teacher training, and curriculum development while leaving assessment systems unreformed are investing in a pipeline with a broken distribution mechanism.

The study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. The synthesis draws primarily on Anglophone scholarship and may not fully represent assessment dynamics in Francophone, Lusophone, or Arabic-medium African educational systems, which have their own distinct colonial legacies, language policies, and reform trajectories. The heterogeneity of African educational contexts is such that generalisations, even carefully qualified ones, risk homogenising genuinely diverse situations. Future research should engage more systematically with non-Anglophone African assessment scholarship and with subnational and community-level data that can capture the fine-grained dynamics through which assessment interacts with local inequalities.

9. Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper has advanced a critical interrogation of assessment systems in African education, arguing that dominant testing practices function as a hidden curriculum that reproduces and legitimises inequality. Drawing on cultural capital theory, epistemic justice frameworks, social reproduction theory, and postcolonial scholarship, the study has demonstrated that high-stakes examinations, language-exclusive assessment policies, and standardised measurement practices systematically disadvantage learners from linguistically, culturally, and socio-economically marginalised communities, not because of the inherent limitations of those learners but because of the structural mismatch between the assumptions encoded in assessment frameworks and the realities of those communities' educational experience.

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The implications for regional development are substantial and largely unacknowledged in existing policy discourse. Assessment-driven credential disparities produce regional human capital deficits that constrain economic productivity, limit social mobility, and reinforce patterns of spatial inequality that are already among the most pronounced in the world. Addressing these dynamics requires that assessment reform be recognised as a development intervention, not merely an educational administrative matter.

Novelty of Results

The principal novelty of this study lies in three interconnected contributions. First, it is the first synthesis to construct an explicit and theoretically grounded causal framework linking micro-level assessment mechanisms, item language, cultural referents, scoring rubrics, and high-stakes gatekeeping, to macro-level regional development outcomes in Sub-Saharan Africa. While the component arguments exist in dispersed literatures, their systematic integration into a single analytical framework is original. Second, the study introduces the concept of the 'hidden curriculum of assessment' as a distinct analytical category applicable to postcolonial African education systems, extending the classical hidden curriculum concept beyond its origins in curriculum sociology to the domain of measurement and evaluation. Third, the paper proposes a multi-level policy architecture for equity-sensitive assessment reform that operationalises theoretical commitments at the levels of instrument design, governance, and international development financing, moving beyond the level of aspiration at which most equity-in-assessment arguments remain.

Directions for Future Research

Several directions for future research emerge from the analysis. First, empirical studies are needed that directly measure the differential impact of assessment language medium on content-knowledge attainment across linguistic communities in African countries, employing matched-language and non-matched-language assessment designs to isolate the language effect from other variables. Second, research should investigate the political economy of assessment reform in greater depth, examining how elite interests, donor conditionalities, and institutional path dependencies interact to sustain inequitable assessment architectures in specific national contexts. Third, the literature on assessment equity in Francophone, Lusophone, and Arabic-medium African educational systems is severely underrepresented in international scholarship; concerted research investment in these contexts is needed to develop contextually grounded reform frameworks. Fourth, longitudinal studies tracking the educational and labour market trajectories of learners who have experienced different assessment regimes, including multilingual, portfolio-based, and competence-based approaches, would provide the causal evidence needed to make the regional development case for assessment reform to governments and development partners. Finally, participatory action research that co-designs assessment instruments with marginalised communities offers a methodologically innovative approach to both advancing equity and generating contextually grounded knowledge that is currently absent from the field.

Recommendations

1. African governments and their educational governance bodies should commission equity audits of existing national assessment systems, with the explicit mandate to identify and address disparate impacts on learners categorised by language, socio-economic status, gender, disability, and geographic location.
2. Language-of-assessment policies should be reviewed with a view to expanding multilingual assessment provision, at a minimum in the early grades, and to ensuring that learners have access to examination materials in their strongest language wherever administratively feasible.
3. Assessment reform processes should be participatory, including linguistically and culturally diverse communities, particularly those most systematically disadvantaged by existing assessment frameworks, as active co-designers rather than passive consultation beneficiaries.

4. Curriculum reform initiatives that have moved towards competence-based frameworks should be accompanied by corresponding assessment reform, ensuring that the assessment system is aligned with, rather than contradicting, the stated goals of competence-based education.
5. International development partners and multilateral institutions should align their support for African educational assessment with equity-sensitive principles by providing technical assistance and financing for multilingual assessment development, culturally responsive item design, and portfolio-based credentialing systems.
6. Research agendas in African educational assessment should be expanded to encompass not only technical questions of psychometric quality but sociological and political questions about the equity effects of assessment systems, with particular attention to non-Anglophone contexts and subnational dynamics that are currently underrepresented in the literature.

Assessment is, ultimately, a political act, a claim about what matters, whose knowledge counts, and who deserves to advance. In Africa, as elsewhere, the politics of assessment have historically been structured by colonial legacies, class interests, and epistemic hierarchies that serve the few at the expense of the many. Transforming these politics requires not merely better tests but a fundamental reimagining of what assessment is for, and for whom. The conceptual and empirical resources for that reimagining exist; what is needed is the collective will to apply them.

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REIMAGINING ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION IN THE AI ERA WITHIN RESOURCE-CONSTRAINED SETTINGS: A PEDAGOGICAL RENAISSANCE

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Abstract. How can artificial intelligence (AI) technologies transform entrepreneurship education (EE) in resource-constrained settings? This study explores this question through an investigation of technology adoption at a South African university. Our findings reveal three key phenomena that challenge conventional views on digital transformation in higher education. First, students often lead technological innovation informing faculty in using AI agents and platforms. Second, resource limitations drive what we term "adaptive digital bricolage," where basic AI technologies are combined in creative ways to achieve advanced EE outcomes. Third, rather than eroding traditional practices, AI platforms can preserve and enhance indigenous entrepreneurial knowledge. Using an integrated theoretical framework by drawing from the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) and Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK), we show that successful digital transformation depends more on leveraging local innovation than on significant resource investment. These findings offer new insights for institutions operating in resource-constrained environments, suggesting pathways to achieve technological advancement while preserving local knowledge systems.

Keywords: entrepreneurship pedagogy; Artificial Intelligence technologies; entrepreneurship education; indigenous knowledge integration; adaptive digital bricolage

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JEL Classifications: L26, I20, I25

1. Introduction

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into entrepreneurship education (EE) heralds a transformative shift in pedagogical practices, offering unprecedented opportunities to democratise access, personalise learning and bridge skill gaps in rapidly evolving economies (Chen et al., 2024). While the potential of AI to reshape higher education is widely acknowledged, its application in resource-constrained environments where technological infrastructure limitations, cultural contexts and institutional capacities differ markedly from well-resourced settings remains underexplored. Moreover, while existing scholarship predominantly examines digital transformation through a Western-centric lens, emphasising technological infrastructure and financial investment as prerequisites for success (Berglund et al., 2020). We find this narrative overlooking the unique dynamics of institutions in the Global South, where constraints may catalyse unconventional innovation and where cultural preservation intersects with technological adoption in ways that challenge dominant patterns.

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Three critical gaps persist in current literature. First, studies on AI in EE disproportionately focus on technologically advanced environments, neglecting how resource limitations in developing economies shape adaptive strategies. Second, while innovation under constraints is recognised in entrepreneurship theory, its pedagogical implications particularly how students and faculty collaboratively navigate technological adoption are rarely examined. Third, the interplay between AI agents and indigenous knowledge systems remains poorly understood with discussions often framing technology as a threat to cultural preservation rather than a potential enabler. These gaps limit our understanding of how resource-constrained institutions can leverage local strengths to achieve sustainable digital transformation.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating AI integration in EE at a South African university where resource scarcity and cultural diversity create fertile ground for reimagining entrepreneurial pedagogy. We query: *How do resource constraints and cultural contexts shape AI adoption in EE and what innovative practices emerge from these dynamics?* Through this lens, we uncover three findings that redefine conventional narratives of technological change: (1) reverse technology adoption, where students inform faculty in AI tool usage (2) adaptive digital bricolage, the creative recombination of basic technologies to achieve advanced outcomes and (3) the role of AI in preserving and enhancing indigenous entrepreneurial knowledge. By synthesising the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) and Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework, we propose a context-sensitive model of digital transformation that prioritises local innovation over resource abundance.

2. Literature Review

The integration of AI into EE has sparked significant scholarly debate (Chen et al., 2024), yet critical gaps persist in understanding how resource constraints and cultural contexts shape this transformation. This review synthesises four interrelated themes, that is, AI's role in EE pedagogy, digital transformation tensions, innovation under constraints and cultural preservation to expose limitations in current frameworks and justify the necessity of this study.

The Evolving Role of AI in EE Pedagogy: Overlooking Contextual Realities

Existing scholarship highlights AI's potential to personalise learning and enhance experiential training through virtual simulations. Although these contributions offer valuable insights, a notable gap emerges in their predominant focus on technologically privileged institutions such as in the global North. Such studies often assume universal availability of high-speed connectivity, advanced digital infrastructure and pre-existing technological competencies. These are conditions that remain aspirational rather than operational in many under-resourced Global South educational contexts. For instance, AI-powered adaptive learning platforms applauded in Global North contexts for personalising instruction may struggle to function in regions such as Zimbabwe where mobile data costs consume a significant portion of household incomes and where devices frequently malfunction due to dust, heat or inadequate maintenance. This disparity invites critical reflection on how assumptions about technological parity may inadvertently marginalise institutions and students navigating infrastructural or socio-economic constraints. Hence, addressing this oversight is vital to fostering inclusive, equitable applications of AI in EE that transcend resource disparities.

By foregrounding this limitation, we aim to broaden the dialogue around AI-driven pedagogical innovation urging scholars to consider contextual realities that shape educational access (Chari, 2024). Doing so not only strengthens academic rigour but also advances the pursuit of pedagogical equity in an increasingly digitised learning landscape.

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Digital Transformation in Higher Education: A False Binary

In our examination of digital transformation discussions, we find ourselves grappling with a persistent dialectic, that is, techno-optimists champion digital tools as emancipatory instruments capable of democratising opportunity, while techno-skeptics foreground their role in entrenching systemic inequities (Martinez-Rodriguez et al., 2023). Though this binary is widely acknowledged, our research reveals a troubling gap in scholarly dialogue specifically in how institutions operating within resource-scarce environments reconcile these competing visions. We argue that dominant analytical models such as the TAM fall short in explaining the adaptive strategies institutions employ to mediate between aspirational technological ideals and the material realities of infrastructural precarity. This gap not only obscures the lived complexities of technological adoption but risks perpetuating theoretical frameworks detached from the improvisational pragmatism we observe in under-resourced contexts. For example, Ifraheem et al., (2024) demonstrate AI's efficacy in boosting student engagement but their model presupposes institutional support for training and infrastructure which is a luxury unavailable to educators relying on "bricolaged" tools. Conversely, Heeks, (2007) analysis of failed digital initiatives highlights the dangers of what we may deem as "transplanting" Western models without contextual adaptation, yet their work falls short of identifying strategies for leveraging constraints as catalysts for innovation. This gap reveals a critical need for frameworks that recognise resource limitations not as deficits but as drivers of context-specific solutions.

Resource Constraints and Innovation: Beyond Deficit Narratives

Emerging scholarship from the Global South challenges the assumption that technological advancement requires substantial investment. This has led to scholars such as Ng'ambi et al., (2016) to document how South African educators repurpose basic mobile technologies for collaborative learning while Vishwanath et al., (2017) illustrate how Indian institutions use low-cost virtual reality (VR) tools to simulate business environments. These studies seem to align with Winter, (2013) concept of "constraint-driven innovation," which posits that scarcity fosters creativity. This has recently been exemplified by DeepSeek AI, a start-up firm from China which outperformed most well-resourced US-based AI firms, including OpenAI, Gemini and Llama in benchmark evaluations despite operating on a fraction of their budgets/resources proving that innovation and global competitiveness need not correlate with financial scale (Gao, et al., 2025; Normile, 2025). Back to our study's context, from our observation, we have come to note that existing literature largely examines technological adaptation in isolation neglecting its pedagogical implications. For instance, how do student-faculty dynamics shift when students become technology mentors? How might improvised tools reshape curricular design? By focusing on technical outcomes rather than pedagogical processes, current literature fails to capture the transformative potential of constraints in EE, a gap this study addresses through its exploration of reverse adoption and adaptive bricolage.

Cultural Preservation and Digital Integration: Reconciling Competing Narratives

The interplay between technological advancement and cultural preservation continues to provoke scholarly debate (Siliutina et al., 2024) leading to some scholars examining asymmetrical power dynamics in technological diffusion. Scholars such as Roturier & Beau, (2022) contend that insufficiently examined adoption of Western digital infrastructures risks destabilising indigenous epistemologies through imperceptible epistemological displacement. Conversely, emerging research guided by African relational philosophies offers counter-narratives as Abubakre's et al., (2023) posit compelling evidence in what they term "Digital Ubuntu" which puts an emphasis on communal reciprocity and context-aware innovation. Hence, the concept of digital ubuntu can transform technology integration into an act of cultural reaffirmation rather than erosion. In so doing, this dialectic underscores the necessity of examining not merely AI technological tools but the philosophical frameworks through which societies negotiate their adoption. Be that as it may, what unsettles us, is that emerging scholarship critique both positions for neglecting a critical third axis: the pedagogical agency of digital tools in actively preserving cultural knowledge through participatory archiving, intergenerational storytelling platforms and decolonial AI-driven language revitalisation (George et al., 2024). This tripartite tension between epistemic erosion, relational reclamation and agentive cultural transmission demands rigorous interrogation. For this reason,

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the urgent question, then is not whether technology preserves culture, but may be how we ethically amplify the marginalised voices redefining preservation itself.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 The Inadequacy of Existing Theoretical Models in Resource-Constrained Contexts

The integration of AI into EE within resource-constrained environments presents unique challenges that existing theoretical frameworks inadequately address. While established models such as the TAM, UTAUT and TPACK have proven valuable in explaining technology adoption in well-resourced contexts, they exhibit critical limitations when applied to the complex realities of developing economies.

TAM as a foundational model in understanding individual technology adoption conceptualises acceptance through perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use (Davis, 1989). However, we concur with Abubakre et al., (2021) arguments that TAM's individual-centric perspective fails to account for the collective, community-oriented decision-making processes prevalent in African educational contexts Moreover, TAM's assumption of voluntary adoption becomes problematic in resource-constrained settings where technology choices are often dictated by availability rather than preference and where users must creatively repurpose available tools regardless of their intended design (Rattanasampan & Kim, 2002).

Similarly, while UTAUT (Venkatesh et al., 2003) extends TAM by incorporating social influence and facilitating conditions, we argue that it maintains a top-down perspective that assumes institutional or peer-driven adoption. Hence, this model inadequately explains scenarios where students, as digital natives, become primary change agents who mentor faculty in technology use, a phenomenon increasingly observed in developing world contexts (Ng'ambi et al., 2016). Furthermore, UTAUT's "facilitating conditions" construct assumes the presence of adequate infrastructure and support systems, conditions often absent in resource-constrained environments where users must create their own facilitating conditions through improvisation and creativity.

Lastly, the TPACK framework (Mishra & Koehler, 2006), while valuable for understanding the intersection of technology, pedagogy and content knowledge, presupposes access to formal educational technologies and structured institutional support. We must acknowledge that TPACK's conceptualisation of technological knowledge assumes familiarity with purpose-built educational technologies rather than the creative repurposing of consumer applications for educational purposes, a common practice in resource-limited settings.

3.2 Theoretical Gaps in Understanding Digital Transformation in the Global South

Three critical gaps emerge from the existing theoretical landscape that necessitate a more nuanced framework for understanding AI adoption in resource-constrained EE contexts.

Gap 1: Unidirectional Technology Transfer Assumptions

Our discussion so far highlights that existing models assume hierarchical technology diffusion patterns where adoption flows from institutional authorities to end-users. This assumption becomes problematic in contexts where students possess superior digital literacy compared to faculty, creating reverse knowledge flows that challenge traditional power dynamics in educational settings (Prensky, 2001). Given this, current theories lack constructs to explain how digital natives can serve as change agents who drive institutional transformation from the bottom up.

Gap 2: Resource Abundance Bias

We should stress that traditional TAMs implicitly assume access to appropriate technologies and supporting infrastructure (Venkatesh et al., 2012). This "resource abundance bias" renders these models inadequate for explaining how educational institutions creatively combine available tools to achieve desired outcomes despite

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limitations. The concept of "making do" with available resources, what Lévi-Strauss (1966) termed bricolage, requires theoretical frameworks that can account for constraint-driven innovation rather than treating resource limitations as mere barriers to adoption.

Gap 3: Cultural Homogenisation Assumptions

Western-developed theoretical models often assume cultural contexts where individual autonomy, technological determinism and linear progress are valued (Hofstede, 2001). These assumptions fail to capture how collectivist cultures, indigenous knowledge systems and non-linear approaches to problem-solving influence technology integration patterns in African educational contexts (Seleke et al., 2025). Therefore, the absence of cultural sensitivity in existing models limits their explanatory power in contexts where technology adoption must align with local values and knowledge systems.

3.3 An Integrated Resource-Constrained Technology Adoption (RCTA) Framework

To address these theoretical gaps, we propose an integrated Resource-Constrained Technology Adoption (RCTA) framework that synthesises insights from TAM, UTAUT and TPACK while incorporating three novel theoretical constructs that emerge from resource-constrained contexts: reverse adoption dynamics, adaptive digital bricolage and indigenous knowledge integration. An Integrated Resource-Constrained Technology Adoption (RCTA) Framework is presented below in Figure 1.

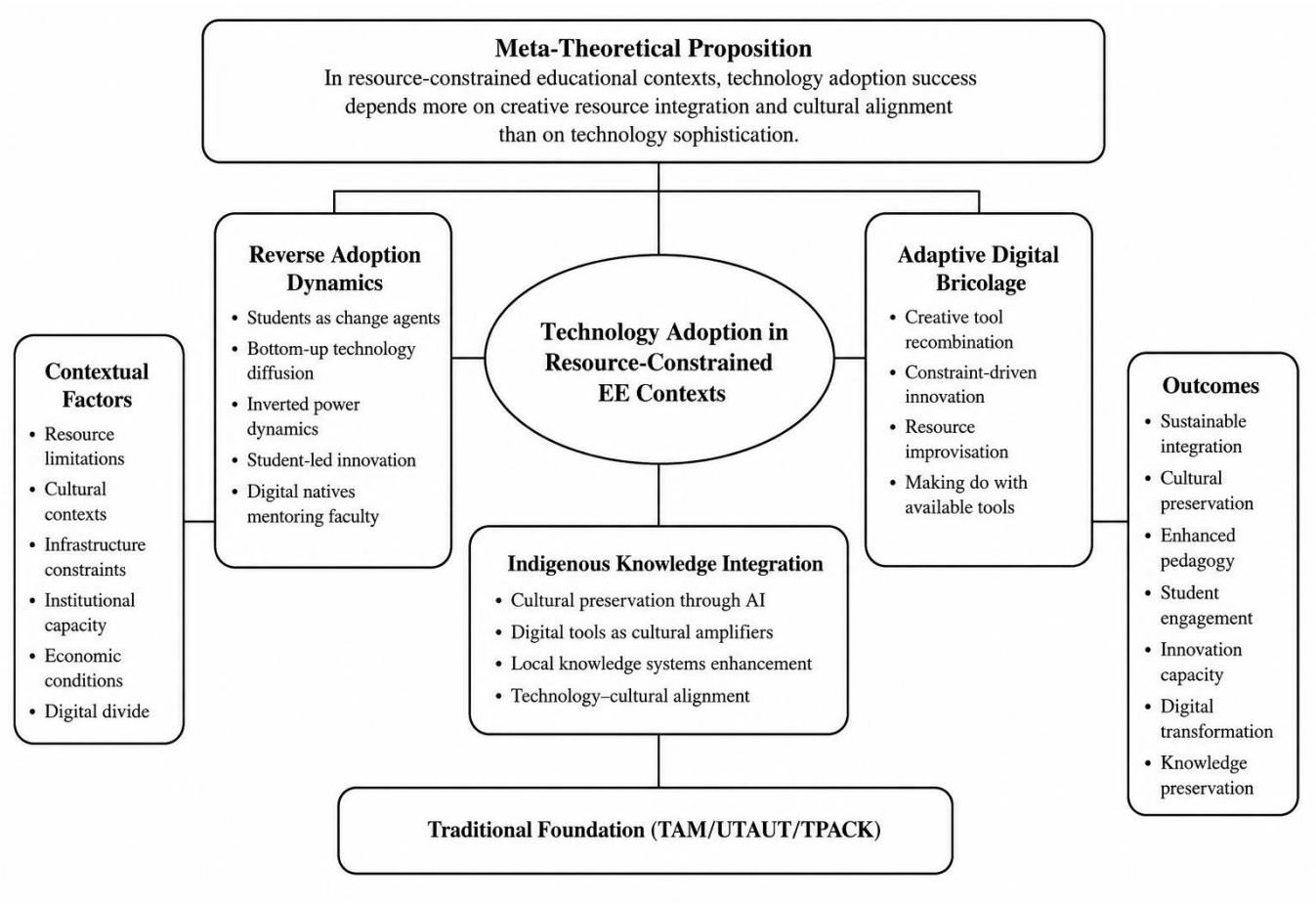


Figure 1. An Integrated Resource-Constrained Technology Adoption (RCTA) Framework

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Traditional foundation (bottom layer) - shows the established TAM, UTAUT and TPACK elements that form the base of the framework.

Three Novel Constructs (main focus areas)

- Reverse adoption dynamics (top left) - Students as change agents leading technology adoption.
- Adaptive digital bricolage (top right) - Creative use of basic tools to achieve advanced outcomes.
- Indigenous knowledge integration (bottom centre) - Using AI to preserve and enhance cultural knowledge.
- Central processing core - Where technology adoption occurs in resource-constrained EE contexts.
- Context factors (left) - Environmental influences like resource limitations, cultural contexts and infrastructure constraints.
- Outcomes (right) - Results including sustainable integration, cultural preservation and enhanced pedagogy.

Design Features

- Color-coded sections for easy identification.
- Directional arrows showing relationships and flow.
- The meta-theoretical proposition highlighted at the top.
- Interactive elements showing how all components work together.

Novel Theoretical Constructs

Construct 1: Reverse Adoption Dynamics

We introduce "reverse adoption dynamics" as a theoretical construct that explains how digital natives (typically students) can serve as primary change agents who drive technology adoption among digital immigrants (typically faculty) within educational institutions. This construct extends traditional diffusion theory by recognising that expertise and influence can flow upward through organisational hierarchies, particularly in rapidly evolving technological contexts (Attewell, 1992).

Construct 2: Adaptive Digital Bricolage

Building on Lévi-Strauss's (1966) concept of bricolage and its application to organisational contexts (Baker & Nelson, 2005), we propose "adaptive digital bricolage" as the creative recombination of available digital tools and platforms to achieve educational objectives that would typically require more sophisticated or expensive technologies. This construct explains how resource constraints can catalyse innovation rather than merely inhibit technological progress.

Construct 3: Indigenous Knowledge Integration

We conceptualise "indigenous knowledge integration" as the process by which digital technologies are leveraged to preserve, enhance and transmit local cultural knowledge and practices within formal educational settings. This construct challenges the false dichotomy between technological advancement and cultural preservation, proposing instead that digital tools can serve as vehicles for cultural continuity (Oladokun et al, 2024).

Framework Dynamics and Interactions

Our RCTA framework posits that technology adoption in resource-constrained educational contexts results from the dynamic interaction between traditional adoption factors (usefulness, ease of use, social influence) and context-specific factors (reverse adoption dynamics, adaptive bricolage capabilities and indigenous knowledge integration needs).

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The framework suggests that successful technology integration depends on achieving congruence between available resources, cultural values, pedagogical objectives and community needs. Unlike traditional models that treat resource constraints as barriers, our framework positions them as potential catalysts for innovative practices that may offer advantages over resource-abundant approaches.
Meta-Theoretical Proposition - In resource-constrained educational contexts, technology adoption success will be determined more by the creative integration of available resources and cultural alignment than by the sophistication or expense of the technologies employed.

3.4 Theoretical Contributions and Implications

This integrated framework makes several key theoretical contributions to the technology adoption literature:

1) extends technology acceptance theory - by incorporating cultural relevance and resource accessibility as additional determinants of perceived usefulness, we expand TAM's applicability to non-Western contexts;
2) reconceptualises social influence - our framework challenges UTAUT's assumption of top-down social influence by demonstrating how reverse mentoring can drive institutional change;
3) introduces constraint-based innovation theory - our concept of adaptive digital bricolage contributes to understanding how limitations can foster creativity and innovation in educational technology use;
4) bridges technology and culture - the indigenous knowledge integration construct offers a theoretical foundation for understanding how technologies can support rather than threaten cultural preservation efforts.

These theoretical contributions provide a foundation for understanding technology adoption patterns in resource-constrained contexts while offering insights that may be applicable to well-resourced environments seeking to foster innovation and cultural sensitivity in their technology integration efforts. The RCTA framework thus serves not merely as a descriptive tool but as a prescriptive guide for educational institutions operating in resource-constrained environments, suggesting pathways for leveraging local strengths and constraints to achieve meaningful technological transformation while preserving cultural values and knowledge systems.

4. Research Methodology

Research Design and Philosophical Underpinnings
To produce valuable insights and make a relevant input to the debate surrounding technology integration in EE, we employed a qualitative exploratory design grounded in the interpretive paradigm. By so doing, we acknowledged the socially constructed nature of technology adoption in educational settings. Therefore, the choice of interpretivism aligned with our research objectives to understand how primary stakeholders navigate technology integration within resource-constrained environments while preserving indigenous knowledge systems in EE. Our epistemological stance recognises knowledge as co-constructed through interaction between researchers and participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This approach was particularly relevant given the emergence of unexpected patterns such as reverse technology adoption and adaptive digital bricolage which required deep engagement with participants' lived experiences.

Sampling
The study was conducted at the University of South Africa (UNISA), focusing on the Department of Applied Management (Entrepreneurship). UNISA's position as a major African university operating in a resource-constrained environment while pursuing digital transformation made it an ideal setting for examining our research questions. Data collection was conducted in two distinct phases as part of an iterative qualitative research approach. The first phase, conducted from October 2022 to January 2023, involved 17 participants and formed the foundation of the doctoral research. Following initial analysis and the emergence of key theoretical constructs, a second phase was conducted from May to August 2024, adding 8 additional participants to deepen our

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understanding of the phenomena and achieve comprehensive theoretical saturation. This two-phase approach reflects the iterative nature of qualitative inquiry where initial findings inform subsequent data collection to ensure robust theoretical development (Charmaz, 2014). Purposive sampling was employed to recruit 25 participants: 14 final-year entrepreneurship students and. 11 faculty members. This sample size aligns with Saunders and Townsend's (2016) recommendations for qualitative research involving semi-structured interviews (5-25 participants) and proved sufficient to reach theoretical saturation. Saturation was achieved by the 22nd interview, with three additional interviews conducted to ensure completeness.

Ethical Considerations and Informed Consent

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of South Africa's College of Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee (Ref # 2022_CRERC_007 (FA) and permission from the Research Permission Subcommittee of the UNISA Senate, Research, Innovation, Postgraduate Degrees and Commercialisation Committee (Ref # 2022_RPC_023). Hence, written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. The informed consent process included providing participants with a detailed information sheet outlining the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures and their rights as participants. All participants signed consent forms, indicating their voluntary participation and understanding that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

All data collection procedures adhered to the principles outlined in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics and particular attention was given to ensuring participant privacy and confidentiality. Therefore, to protect participant identities, pseudonyms were assigned during data analysis and reporting as reflected in the participant demographics table 2. All interview recordings and transcripts were securely stored with password protection and only the research team had access to the raw data.

Sample Size

This sample size of 25 participants aligns with established qualitative research principles, which prioritise depth over breadth to achieve theoretical saturation. Data saturation is the point at which new data ceases to yield novel insights (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink et al., 2019). The heterogeneous nature of the participant pool encompassing diverse academic roles (students, lecturers, professors) and experience levels necessitated a moderately larger sample than typical homogeneous qualitative studies. While Guest et al. (2006) suggests 12 interviews often suffice for saturation in homogeneous groups, Hennink et al. (2019) recommend 16–24 participants for heterogeneous contexts to ensure both code saturation (exhaustion of thematic categories) and meaning saturation (depth of understanding). Hence, our final sample of 25 participants balanced these guidelines while remaining manageable for in-depth analysis. Theoretical saturation was systematically assessed using an iterative approach. Preliminary coding of the first 18 interviews established core themes, with subsequent interviews analysed for emergent patterns. By the 22nd interview, code frequency stabilised and no significant new themes emerged in the four interviews, confirming saturation. This process ensured robustness without unnecessary expansion of the sample. The participant demographics (Table 1) reflect deliberate diversity in age, educational attainment and geographic distribution, capturing a range of perspectives on technology adoption in EE. This strategic composition, rather than sheer quantity, underpins the study's analytical rigour and contextual relevance.

Distribution of Participants

We interviewed 25 participants across both phases, comprising fourteen final-year entrepreneurship students and eleven faculty members. As shown in Figure 2, the faculty members constituted 44%, while the student sample constituted 56% of the total participants. Participants worked within the Entrepreneurship department, specifically. Pseudonyms were given to each participant at sample selection. The participant number was attached to the department, such as ES1 denoting Entrepreneurship Student Participant 1, FM1 denoting Faculty Member Participant 1 and so on.

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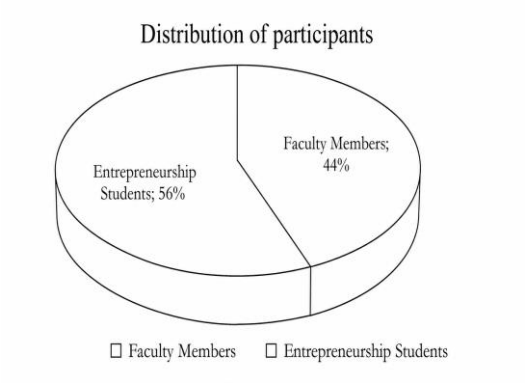


Figure 2. Distribution of participants
Source: Illustrated by the authors

Table 1 below provides a summarised description of the participants in the study. The participants are divided into two groups: faculty members identified as FM1- FM11 and entrepreneurship student participants identified as ES1-ES14. Regarding educational level, the study includes undergraduate, honours, masters and doctorate level participants with most participants being at the undergraduate level. The faculty members encompass professionals at various levels, including lecturers, senior lecturers, associate professors and full professors.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant	Location	Education Level	Age Bracket	Department	Experience/Level
FM1	Pretoria	Masters	35-45	Entrepreneurship	5 Years
FM2	Pretoria	Doctorate	45-55	Entrepreneurship	7 Years
FM3	Pretoria	Honours	25-35	Entrepreneurship	3 Years
FM4	Pretoria	Doctorate	35-45	Entrepreneurship	5 Years
FM5	Pretoria	Masters	35-45	Entrepreneurship	4 Years
FM6	Pretoria	Masters	25-35	Entrepreneurship	3 Years
FM7	Pretoria	Doctorate	45-55	Entrepreneurship	5 Years
FM8	Pretoria	Masters	25-35	Entrepreneurship	4 Years
FM9	Pretoria	Doctorate	35-45	Entrepreneurship	7 Years
FM10	Pretoria	Masters	35-45	Entrepreneurship	6 Years
FM11	Pretoria	Doctorate	55-65	Entrepreneurship	10+ years
ES1	Johannesburg	Undergraduate	25-35	Entrepreneurship	Year 3
ES2	Midrand	Undergraduate	21-25	Entrepreneurship	Year 3
ES3	Polokwane	Undergraduate	25-35	Entrepreneurship	Year 3
ES4	Durban	Undergraduate	21-25	Entrepreneurship	Year 3
ES5	Pretoria	Undergraduate	25-35	Entrepreneurship	Year 3
ES6	Pretoria	Undergraduate	21-25	Entrepreneurship	Year 3
ES7	Nelspruit	Undergraduate	25-35	Entrepreneurship	Year 3
ES8	Johannesburg	Undergraduate	21-25	Entrepreneurship	Year 3
ES9	Johannesburg	Undergraduate	35-45	Entrepreneurship	Year 3
ES10	Cape Town	Undergraduate	21-25	Entrepreneurship	Year 3
ES11	Johannesburg	Undergraduate	25-35	Entrepreneurship	Year 3
ES12	Kimberly	Undergraduate	45-55	Entrepreneurship	Year 3
ES13	Bloemfontein	Undergraduate	25-35	Entrepreneurship	Year 3
ES14	East London	Undergraduate	25-35	Entrepreneurship	Year 3

Source: Illustrated by the authors

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Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using video conferencing platforms (MS Teams and Zoom) across both data collection phases. Phase one interviews were conducted from October 2022 to January 2023, while phase two interviews took place from May to August 2024. The interview protocol was refined between phases based on initial findings, allowing for deeper exploration of emergent themes while maintaining consistency in core research questions.

Initial Interview Guide Construction

The development of our interview guide followed a systematic three-stage process informed by our integrated theoretical framework and preliminary literature review. Drawing from established protocols in technology acceptance research (Venkatesh et al., 2003) and EE studies (Chen et al., 2024), we constructed an initial semi-structured interview guide containing 24 open-ended questions organised around four thematic areas (see Appendix):

1. **Technology Integration Experiences** (6 questions)
    - Current use of digital tools in EE
    - Challenges and facilitators in technology adoption
    - Perceptions of technology's role in learning/teaching
2. **Resource Context and Adaptation** (7 questions)
    - Institutional resources and constraints
    - Creative responses to resource limitations
    - Collaborative practices in technology use
3. **Cultural and Knowledge Dynamics** (6 questions)
    - Integration of local entrepreneurial knowledge
    - Cultural considerations in technology adoption
    - Preservation and transmission of indigenous practices
4. **Learning and Teaching Relationships** (5 questions)
    - Faculty-student interactions around technology
    - Knowledge sharing patterns
    - Changes in traditional educational hierarchies

Pilot Testing and Refinement

Prior to data collection, we conducted pilot interviews with three participants (two students & one faculty member) not included in the main study. These pilot sessions revealed several critical issues:

Language and Cultural Sensitivity Concerns:

- Initial questions contained Western-centric assumptions about individual technology ownership.
- Technical terminology required clarification in multilingual contexts.
- Questions about "innovation" needed reframing to include indigenous knowledge systems.

Question Refinement Examples:

- Original: "How do you personally use AI tools in your studies?"
- Revised: "Can you describe any AI tools or technologies you've used or seen used in entrepreneurship learning, whether individually or in groups?"
- Original: "What barriers prevent AI technology adoption?"
- Revised: "What challenges have you or your colleagues faced when trying to use AI tools and how have you worked around these challenges?"

Following pilot testing, the interview guide was reduced to 18 questions with enhanced probes and culturally appropriate language. A multilingual glossary of technical terms was developed to ensure consistent understanding across participants.

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Data Analysis Framework

Data analysis followed a rigorous three-phase process using ATLAS.ti software. The final phase as shown in table 3 below involved integrating categories into overarching themes that aligned with our theoretical framework while remaining grounded in the data. This process revealed how reverse adoption patterns, adaptive bricolage and indigenous knowledge integration interact within resource-constrained educational environments.

Emergent Concept Development: From Data to Theory

A critical methodological transparency issue involves clarifying how our key theoretical concepts emerged from data versus being imposed through our theoretical framework. We employed a systematic inductive process that we document below.

Initial Open Coding (Grounded Approach): In the first phase of analysis, we deliberately bracketed our theoretical assumptions and engaged in open coding using participants' own language and concepts. This revealed several unexpected patterns:

- Students frequently described "teaching" or "showing" faculty members how to use technologies.
- Participants used terms like "making a plan" to describe creative technology use.
- Cultural preservation emerged as a spontaneous theme when participants discussed technology benefits.

Pattern Recognition and Concept Formation: Three patterns emerged consistently across interviews that had not been anticipated in our initial theoretical framework:

1. Bottom-up Technology Leadership:
    - 12 of 14 students described instances of informing faculty about digital tools.
    - 8 of 11 faculty acknowledged learning from students.
    - This pattern emerged independently of our questions about hierarchies or power dynamics.
2. Creative Resource Recombination:
    - Participants consistently described combining multiple basic tools to achieve complex objectives.
    - This pattern appeared in 23 of 25 interviews without direct prompting about constraints or innovation.
    - The concept of "making a plan" appeared 27 times across transcripts.
3. Technology as Cultural Bridge:
    - 18 participants spontaneously discussed using AI digital tools to preserve or share cultural knowledge.
    - This emerged from questions about learning benefits, not from questions about culture.
    - Participants framed technology as helping rather than threatening cultural continuity.

Concept Naming and Theoretical Integration: Only after identifying these empirical patterns, we began connecting them to existing theory and developing our conceptual labels:

- Reverse adoption emerged from the bottom-up technology leadership pattern, informed by but extending diffusion of innovations theory.
- Adaptive digital bricolage was derived from the creative recombination pattern, drawing on Lévi-Strauss's bricolage concept.
- Indigenous knowledge integration reflected participants' own framing of technology as culturally supportive.

Theoretical Validation Process

To ensure our theoretical concepts remained grounded in data rather than imposed, we employed several validation strategies:

Participant Verification:

- In second-phase interviews, we presented our emerging concepts to participants using their own language.

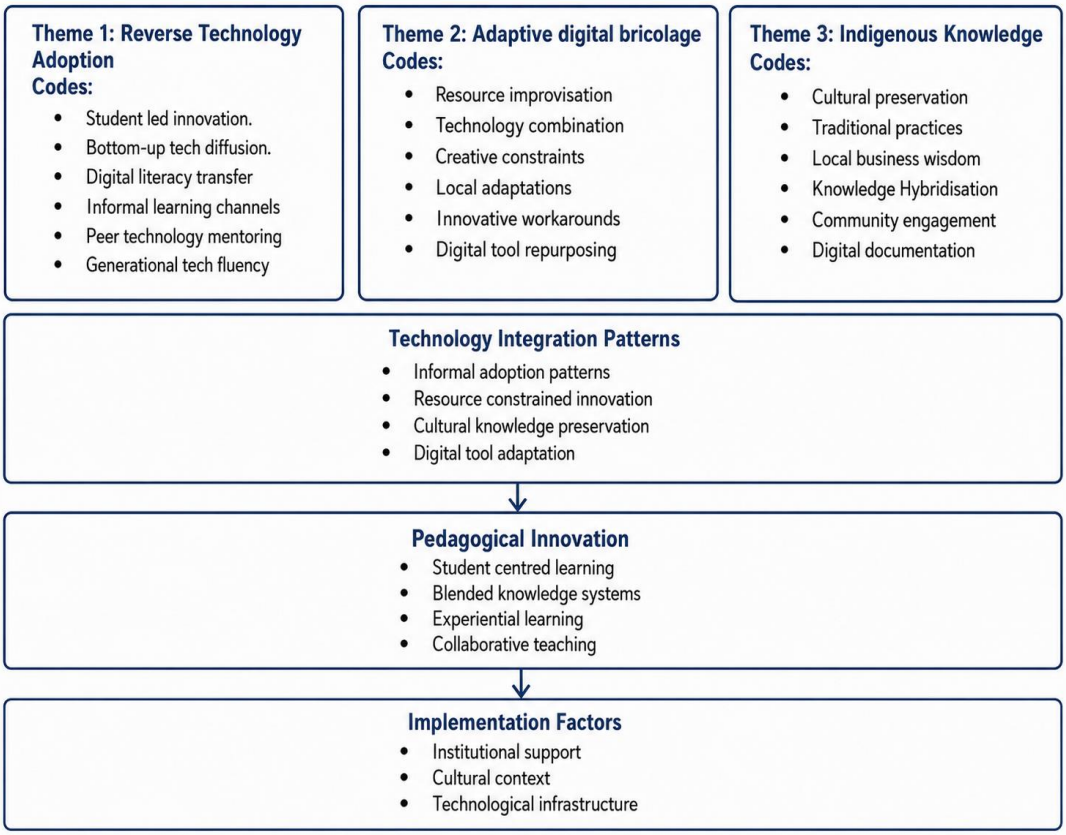
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- We asked: "We've noticed that students sometimes teach faculty about technology tools. Does this match your experience?"
- 22 of 25 participants confirmed these patterns aligned with their experiences.

This methodology enabled systematic exploration of technology integration in EE while remaining sensitive to cultural contexts and resource constraints. The two-phase approach allowed for both depth and temporal insight, revealing how resource-constrained institutions adapt and evolve their technology integration practices over time. The emergent themes challenge existing theoretical frameworks while suggesting new directions for understanding technology adoption in developing world contexts.

After generating the codes from both phases, a comprehensive code framework was developed as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Code framework derived from data collection.



Source: Illustrated by the authors

5. Findings

Our analysis of semi-structured interviews revealed a transformative narrative of how resource constraints and cultural contexts are reshaping technology integration in EE. As previously indicated, our analysis of participant narratives identified three interconnected themes that challenge conventional wisdom: reverse technology adoption, adaptive digital bricolage and indigenous knowledge integration. These findings not only extend existing theoretical frameworks but also highlight the unique innovative potential of resource-constrained environments.

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5.1 Theme 1: Reverse technology adoption – Inverting hierarchies of knowledge transfer

Our analysis revealed three interconnected themes that redefine technology adoption in resource-constrained EE contexts. Below, we present these findings alongside participant perspectives and critically examine their implications for existing theoretical frameworks. Contrary to traditional models of top-down technology diffusion, students emerged as key drivers of innovation, mentoring faculty in digital tool adoption. For instance, ES3 described informing faculty on AI tools: *"I showed my lecturer the art of prompt engineering to generate culturally relevant business scenarios. Now, she uses these in class discussions."* Furthermore, faculty acknowledged this dynamic, with FM2 noting:*"Students introduced me to apps like Elicit, Canva and Notion among others, tools I now use daily. Their fluency with technology is reshaping how I prepare my lectures."*

Theoretical Implications

While UTAUT emphasises "social influence" as a determinant of technology adoption (Venkatesh et al., 2003), our findings invert its traditional application. Thus, UTAUT typically frames social influence as peer-to-peer or institutional pressure (e.g., faculty mandating tools). In our case, "reverse adoption" introduces a bottom-up model where students' digital literacy redefines power dynamics. This challenges UTAUT's assumption that adoption is driven by superiors or peers of equal status suggesting the need to incorporate "intergenerational influence" as a distinct construct. Therefore, future iterations of UTAUT must account for contexts were students, not educators, act as change agents.

5.2 Theme 2: Adaptive digital bricolage – Innovation born from constraints

Participants consistently repurposed basic tools to overcome resource limitations. FM5 detailed a low-cost simulation: "*We combined WhatsApp groups, Google Docs and free AI analytics to mimic a startup ecosystem. Students role-played as CEOs and investors and it cost nothing but sparked deep learning.*" Similarly, ES7 highlighted improvisation: "*We used TikTok to pitch ideas and Instagram polls for market research. Our lecturers never taught this, but it worked!"*

Theoretical Implications

TPACK emphasises the interplay of technological, pedagogical and content knowledge (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). However, TPACK assumes access to formal technologies, neglecting contexts where educators combine informal tools to achieve pedagogical goals. Our concept of "adaptive bricolage" extends TPACK by demonstrating how resource constraints force educators to prioritise creativity over technological sophistication. This challenges TPACK's implicit bias toward well-resourced environments and introduces "constraint-driven TPACK" as a framework for low-infrastructure settings.

5.3 Theme 3: Indigenous knowledge integration – Digital tools as cultural amplifiers

Our findings revealed that digital tools were leveraged to preserve, rather than erode, local entrepreneurial traditions. FM7 explained: "*There are some trained AI models that can document elders' trading practices in isiZulu and Sesotho. Now, students access this wisdom digitally as it bridges generations*."
Students like ES9 blended tradition with technology: *"Using VR, we recreated a traditional spaza shop negotiation. It taught us modern marketing without losing our cultural roots.*"

Theoretical Implications

This theme disrupts the "digital colonialism" narrative (Kwet, 2019) by positioning technology as a vehicle for cultural preservation. While TAM focuses on perceived usefulness of tools (Davis, 1989), our findings revealed a dimension absent in traditional models, that is "cultural relevance" as a driver of adoption. When tools align with indigenous values (e.g., communal knowledge sharing), they gain legitimacy beyond mere functionality. This necessitates revising TAM to include cultural alignment as a core determinant of perceived usefulness in non-Western contexts.

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These insights demand a paradigm shift in how we conceptualise digital transformation. Rather than viewing resource constraints as barriers, our study positions them as catalysts for context-driven innovation, a framework where local knowledge, student agency and improvisation redefine technological "best practices.

5. Limitations of the Study

This study's findings must be interpreted within the context of several key methodological and conceptual limitations that shape both their applicability and generalisability.

Methodological Constraints. Our single institution focusses at UNISA allowed for deep contextual insights although it presents significant limitations for generalisability. Despite UNISA's prominence in South African higher education, the unique characteristics of its entrepreneurship program and institutional culture may not reflect the broader landscape of EE in other developing economies or institutions. This limitation is particularly salient given the heterogeneous nature of African HEIs and entrepreneurial ecosystems. The sample size of 25 participants, though reaching theoretical saturation within our specific context, limits the breadth of perspectives captured. While this aligns with qualitative research principles, it may not fully represent the diversity of experiences within EE, particularly regarding technology integration. The exclusive focus on the entrepreneurship department provides disciplinary depth while potentially overlooking valuable interdisciplinary insights that could have enriched our understanding of technology integration across different academic contexts.

Temporal and Technological Limitations. The cross-sectional nature of our data collection presents a significant limitation in understanding the dynamic process of technology adoption and integration. As Børte et al. (2023), and Børte and Lillejord (2024) argue, technology acceptance and integration in higher education are evolutionary processes that unfold over time. Our snapshot approach, while providing valuable insights into current practices cannot capture the longitudinal developments in how faculty and students adapt to and integrate new technologies over time. Additionally, our focus on specific AI may have inadvertently overlooked other emerging technologies that could significantly impact EE. We note that the rapid pace of technological advancement means that any study of current technologies risks becoming quickly outdated. This limitation is particularly relevant given the emergence of new technologies like quantum computing and latest artificial generative intelligence models that could reshape EE in ways not captured by our study.

Methodological Self-reflection. The reliance on self-reported data through interviews introduced potential social desirability bias, as identified by Fisher (1993). Participants may have overstated their technology proficiency or understated their resistance to technology adoption. The absence of observational data or direct assessment of technology use in classroom settings limits our ability to verify reported behaviours against actual practices.

Stakeholder Representation. The exclusion of industry partners and entrepreneurs from our sample represents a missed opportunity to triangulate academic perspectives with real-world practitioners. It is important to align educational practices with industry needs, a dimension our study could not fully address. This limitation is particularly relevant given the applied nature of EE and its goal of preparing students for real-world business challenges.

6. Implications for Future Research

These limitations suggest several directions for future research:

i. Multi-institutional studies spanning different African countries to capture broader patterns of technology integration in EE.
ii. Longitudinal investigations tracking the evolution of technology adoption and its impact on learning outcomes.

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iii. Mixed - methods approaches incorporating classroom observations and quantitative metrics of technology use.
iv. Comparative studies evaluating the effectiveness of different pedagogical approaches, both traditional and technology enhanced.
v. Research incorporating industry perspectives and measuring the alignment between educational practices and market needs.

Understanding these limitations not only contextualises our findings but also provides a roadmap for future research that can address these gaps and advance our understanding of technology integration in EE within developing economies.

Theoretical Synthesis and Contributions. Our research makes three significant theoretical contributions that extend current understanding of technology integration in EE.

Reverse Technology Adoption Theory in Educational Settings. The discovery of bottom-up technology adoption pattern challenges traditional technology acceptance models. While existing frameworks like TAM and UTAUT assume a top-down diffusion of technology (Venkatesh et al., 2003), our findings suggest a need to reconceptualise these models to account for student-led technology adoption in educational settings. This extends Killen and Knight's, (2020) work on the role student partners play as digital change agents by identifying a novel mechanism where students become primary agents of technological change.

Resource-constrained Innovation Framework. Our identification of "adaptive digital bricolage" contributes a new theoretical construct to understanding technology integration in resource-limited EE contexts. This framework extends beyond simple adaptation to demonstrate how resource constraints can catalyse innovative pedagogical approaches. This challenges the dominant narrative in digital transformation literature that positions resource limitations as purely inhibitory factors (Hanelt et al., 2021).

Indigenous Digital Pedagogy Model. The study's findings on the integration of indigenous knowledge through digital means contributes to decolonial theory in education technology. This extends Kadhila and Nyambe's (2022) work by demonstrating how AI technologies can serve as tools for legitimising and preserving indigenous knowledge in formal educational settings rather than merely replacing it.

7. Conclusion

This study offers novel insights into how AI technologies can transform EE in resource-constrained settings. By examining the dynamics of technology adoption at a South African university, we identified three critical phenomena: reverse technology adoption, adaptive digital bricolage and indigenous knowledge integration. These findings challenge traditional assumptions about top-down technology diffusion and demonstrate the creative potential of resource-constrained environments. Theoretically, this study contributes to existing literature by extending the applicability of TAM, UTAUT and TPACK in developing world contexts. Specifically, it highlights the role of students as digital change agents, the innovative potential of constraints through bricolage, and the capacity of digital tools to preserve and enhance cultural knowledge. These insights expand the scope of technology acceptance and pedagogical frameworks, offering a more context-sensitive understanding of digital transformation in EE. Practically, this research underscores actionable strategies for HEIs operating in resource-constrained environments. Therefore, HEIs should formalise reverse mentoring programs enabling students to support faculty in adopting emerging technologies. Institutions can also establish innovation.

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Appendix

A.1 Initial Interview Guide (24 Questions)

Section 1: Technology Integration Experiences (6 questions)

1. What AI technologies are you currently using in your entrepreneurship education (learning/teaching)?
2. How did you first learn about or become aware of these AI tools?
3. Can you describe a specific instance where you successfully used AI technology in your entrepreneurship studies/teaching?
4. What challenges have you encountered when trying to use AI tools in entrepreneurship education?
5. What factors have made it easier for you to adopt and use these technologies?
6. How do you perceive the role of AI technology in entrepreneurship learning/teaching?

Section 2: Resource Context and Adaptation (7 questions)

7. What technological resources does your institution provide for entrepreneurship education?
8. What technological resources or infrastructure do you feel are lacking?
9. How do you work around or compensate for limited technological resources?
10. Can you describe any creative approaches you have used to achieve educational goals despite resource limitations?
11. Do you collaborate with others (students/colleagues) when using AI technology? If so, how?
12. How do cost considerations influence your choice of AI tools?
13. What role does internet connectivity and device availability play in your AI technology use?

Section 3: Cultural and Knowledge Dynamics (6 questions)

14. How do you integrate local or indigenous entrepreneurial knowledge into your studies/teaching?
15. Do you see any conflicts between using AI technology and preserving cultural knowledge? Please explain.
16. Can you describe ways in which technology has helped (or could help) preserve or share indigenous business practices?
17. How important is cultural relevance when selecting or using educational technologies?
18. Do the AI tools you use reflect or accommodate South African/African entrepreneurial contexts?
19. How do you balance modern technological approaches with traditional entrepreneurial wisdom?

Section 4: Learning and Teaching Relationships (5 questions)

20. How would you describe the typical pattern of AI technology adoption in your department (who leads, who follows)?
21. Have you ever taught or learned about AI technology from a student/lecturer? Please describe.
22. How have AI technology tools changed the way you interact with faculty/students?
23. What role do students play in introducing new AI technologies to the learning environment?
24. How has the use of AI technology affected traditional teacher-student relationships or hierarchies?

A.2 Refined Interview Guide Post-Pilot Testing (18 Questions)

Section 1: Technology Integration Experiences (5 questions)

1. Can you describe any AI tools or technologies you have used or seen used in entrepreneurship learning, whether individually or in groups?
2. How did you first discover or learn about these AI tools? Who introduced them to you?
3. Could you share a specific example of when using AI technology helped you achieve a learning or teaching goal?
4. What challenges have you or your colleagues faced when trying to use AI tools and how have you worked around these challenges?
5. What do you think makes it easier or harder to start using new AI technologies in entrepreneurship education?

Section 2: Resource Context and Adaptation (5 questions)

6. What AI technological resources are available to you for entrepreneurship education at this institution?
7. When you need a AI technology tool that is not available or is too expensive, what do you do?
8. Can you describe a time when you combined different AI basic tools to create something more advanced for your learning/teaching?
9. How do you and your classmates/colleagues work together when using AI technology?
10. How do factors like data costs, device access and internet connectivity affect your use of AI tools?

Section 3: Cultural and Knowledge Dynamics (4 questions)

11. How do you bring local entrepreneurial knowledge, stories or practices from your community into your entrepreneurship studies/teaching?
12. Have you used any AI or digital tools to preserve, document or share indigenous or local business practices? Please describe.
13. When choosing AI technology tools, how important is it that they reflect African or South African business contexts?
14. Do you think AI technology supports or threatens the preservation of local entrepreneurial knowledge? Why?

Section 4: Learning and Teaching Relationships (4 questions)

15. In your experience, who typically introduces new AI technologies first, students, lecturers or the institution?
16. Have you ever shown a lecturer/student how to use an AI technology tool? What was that experience like?
17. How has the use of AI tools changed the way you communicate or collaborate with your lecturers/students?
18. Has AI technology use affected the traditional roles of teacher and student in any way? Please explain.

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Data availability statement. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, F.I Mugunzva, upon reasonable request.

Author contributions. Fidel I Mugunzva led the conceptualisation and design, analysis, interpretation of findings and drafting of the manu¬script. Evelyn. G. Chiloane-Tsoka and Ntise H. Manchidi were engaged in reviewing the manuscript and approving the submission to the journal. All authors have approved the manuscript.

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GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT NEXUS THROUGH THE LENSES OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND SEN'S CAPACITY THEORIES

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Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to examine the nexus between gender discrimination and women's empowerment by focusing on Social Constructionism and Sen's Capability theories, and to develop a framework that illustrates their relationship. Gender is a social construct that distinguishes the functions and roles of men and women. The positions, functions, and roles of men and women determine the distinction. However, the conventional concept of gender roles has resulted in unequal status and decision-making power between men and women. The increasing discrepancies in defining gender roles have intensified women's discrimination. Thus, leading to women's underdevelopment, further exacerbated by traditional beliefs, cultural norms and customary practices which underlie the social construction of discriminatory gender roles. Discrimination against women in various forms has continued to exist in African societies, despite global and regional efforts of the United Nations declaration of 1975–85 as Women's Development Decade and the adoption of the 1979 Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) aimed at ensuring gender equality between men and women. The paper argues that challenging and restructuring social norms by deconstructing gender roles can create more inclusive systems. The paper concludes that although Social Constructionist Theory highlights and shapes societal inequality and advocates for normative change, and Sen's Capacity Theory focuses on the real-world effects of discrimination and stresses the practical expansion of women's freedom and opportunities, both are crucial for addressing social norms and thus targeting capability deprivation.

Keywords: gender; women empowerment; Social Constructionism Theory; Sen's Capacity Theory; policies; development

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JEL Classifications: I31, I38

1. Introduction

Gender perceptions of women are naturally unequal to those of men, which consequently gave rise to the arbitrary social construction of gender roles between men and women, in which men come first in the scheme of things (Masenya, 2023). Like any other social reality, gender is a culturally constructed phenomenon, relative to the larger context and hence may have varied connotations across societies. While in some cultures gender equality may mean something as basic as equal access to formal education for both sexes, in others it may encompass issues such as equal participation in child-rearing responsibilities and household chores. It is because some societies have reached a point where men are expected to give up their socially sanctioned gender privileges to promote equality, while others are still struggling to ensure women have equal opportunities to men (Dyantyi & Mbatha, 2025; Govender & Muringa, 2025). Hence, what people seek when they ask for gender equality is contingent upon the socio-cultural standing of a given society.

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In general, the conventional concept of gender roles has resulted in unequal status and decision-making power between men and women. Women are considered inferior to men in the aspects of marriage, property and inheritance rights. Men have greater entitlements in the household and society, and more rights to ownership and control of land, which is a major source and means of economic empowerment (Mudau & Kona, 2025). Subsequently, men dominate the economic sphere and positions of political decision-making. At the same time, women's roles are considered to be on the domestic front, consisting mainly of menial endeavours that do not yield political and economic empowerment. These inequitable gender roles have thus placed men far ahead of women in positions of economic and political power where vital decisions are made and the allocation of resources, material and non-material, is determined.

The increasing discrepancies in gender roles have intensified women's discrimination in many developing countries (Zhang, 2022; Huysamen, 2025). Women's underdevelopment is instigated by traditional beliefs, cultural norms and customary practices which underlie the social construction of discriminatory gender roles. Discrimination against women in various forms persists in African societies (Ebute, 2026).

2. Review of literature

Social Constructionism Theory

According to various scholars, social constructionism has numerous definitions and meanings (Nyarko, 2022). Social constructionism is a framework that proposes that certain ideas about physical reality arise from collaborative consensus rather than from pure observation of that reality. The theory of social constructionism proposes that people collectively develop the meanings, denotations, and connotations of social constructs. Social constructionism has been characterised as a neo-Marxian and a neo-Kantian theory, proposing that it replaces the transcendental subject with a societal concept that is both descriptive and normative. A social construct or construction is the meaning, notion, or connotation placed on an object or event by a society and adopted by that society with respect to how they view or deal with the object or event. The preceding explanations emphasise that social constructionism assumes that reality is constructed by collaborative consensus and is dependent on communal interpretation, as well as how society connects meaning and interpretation based on context.

One of the most well-known theories on why there is discrimination against women is the social constructionist. This theory emphasises that gender is not a biological product, but rather a social construct that society has created and perpetuated, and gender roles, expectations, and standards are shaped by social interactions and cultural practices. This theory contends that gender discrimination occurs when individuals are subjected to unfair or disparate treatment based on their gender, hence limiting their opportunities and access to resources. It emphasises how gender stereotypes and societal norms impact how men and women are treated and given chances in different ways. Generally, the social constructionist provides a framework for understanding and addressing the systemic basis of gender discrimination and emphasises how society affects gender roles and inequities.

The theory of Social Constructionism guides this study. Constructionism is a theory that considers knowledge to be constructed through social interaction and context sensitivity. Constructionism is defined, at a general level, as an approach that holds that reality is socially constructed and reproduced through human interactions. Constructionism connects international theory to long-standing sociological concerns about the social construction of reality. There are different varieties of social constructivism as an epistemological approach. The main divide is between a rationalist, actor-centred approach, which takes a more positivist stance. A reflectivist approach, which takes a more interpretative position, is interested in the role language and discourses play in the construction of reality. Social constructionism places great emphasis on the fact that society constructs its reality; it also accepts that there is an objective reality and is concerned with how knowledge is constructed and understood. Hence, gender is a socially constructed component that reflects a society's views on the appropriate roles of men and women and is shaped by traditional beliefs, cultural norms, and customary practices. Put

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differently, these perspectives construct societal rights and entitlements in a form that denies women access to economic and political empowerment, hence women's poverty.

Gender Discrimination and Constructionism

When people are treated unfairly because of their gender, it frequently leads to unequal opportunities, rights, and social standing (Larson, 2019; Khoza, 2021; Donkor, 2022; Biryuk, 2026). This is known as gender discrimination. For example, previously, women in rural areas had limited access to education and health care services.

Gender should be contextualised within social constructivism. According to Nyarko (2020), "the term gender became known in early 1977, when a London feminist group no longer used old issues such as patriarchal or sexist but replaced them with the term gender discourse". Gender is a social construct that distinguishes the functions and roles of men and women. The positions, functions, and roles of men and women determine the distinction. Many people have the perception that gender is always related to women. Gender is an attribute inherent in men and women that is culturally shaped. Gender also shapes the structure of every aspect of human social life. As a concept in social analysis, gender refers to a set of traits, roles, responsibilities, functions, rights, and behaviours inherent in men and women as cultural forms (Nyarko, 2020). Society creates attitudes and behaviours based on gender, including those that determine what should distinguish women and men. This belief is also passed down from generation to generation through the process of socialisation, both within the family, community, educational institutions, and religion. Gender can also be understood as a consequence of differences in biological anatomy that encourage the emergence of cultural aspects.

Gender is socially and culturally constructed to distinguish the varied roles of men and women. There are biological differences between women and men, but culture interprets these biological differences as a set of social demands regarding appropriate behaviour, and, in turn, rights, resources and power (Akinola, 2018). While these demands vary widely by society, there are some striking similarities. For example, gender parity refers to an equal situation between men and women, especially in terms of fulfilling rights and obligations. Nonetheless, women often experience discrimination; for example, there are still many cases of violence against women. With the passage of time, the community began to work together to fight for gender equality. Women have dared to enter the realm of tasks or jobs that men mostly do. As a process, gender creates the social differences that define women and men. In social interaction throughout their lives, individuals learn what is expected, see what is expected, act and react in expected ways, and thus simultaneously construct and maintain the gender order. The very injunction to be given gender takes place through discursive routes: to be a good mother, to be a heterosexually desirable object, to be a fit worker, in sum, to signify a multiplicity of guarantees in response to a variety of different demands all at once.

Traditional Approaches to Gender Roles and Relations

The traditional approaches to gender emphasise men's dominance over their female counterparts. The traditional constructions of gender roles and gendered heterosexual practices are still dominant in many communities (Nyarko, 2020). There is clear recognition of the pervasiveness of traditional gender roles, which involve women being focused on the family and domestic reproduction and men fulfilling the traditional role of breadwinner (Akinola, 2018). In addition, women are still expected to be submissive to their husbands, and men are still constructed as the primary decision makers. Churches are seen as supportive of these traditional roles, as was traditional culture, so that women were expected to obtain permission from their husbands for their actions, and men were to be obeyed (Zhang et al., 2021). Such discourses of culture and tradition have been illustrated in other studies to be significant in the rationalisation and naturalisation of gender roles and power relations.

The dominant construction of men as leaders and authorities in the public realm is still strong in many communities. The traditional approach emphasises the fact that, in community organisations and civil society

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structures, men assumed leadership positions, although it was often women who did the hands-on work. Society often expects women to take care of the home while men go to work. Many men see themselves as the dominant figures, believing that women should always agree with them, even when they are wrong. In terms of gender roles, the chairman is a man; even though the committee combines both sexes, there is still a notion that men must lead. Nonetheless, it is like that because it has been happening over the years. Males' dominance is still there, although women are very much active.

Culture, Tradition and Gender Discrimination

Women and men have distinct gender roles across different societies and cultures. Men dominate the economic sphere and decision-making positions. At the same time, women are believed to be on the domestic front, engaged mainly in menial endeavours that do not yield economic and political empowerment. The result of gender discrimination is therefore the unequal distribution of wealth in favour of men, hence the prevalence of women's poverty.

The ongoing cultural and traditional debate regarding gender focus on culture/tradition as key issues in relation to the continued reproduction of gender difference and power inequality. Some communities reject traditional gender discourses, arguing that, ideally, partners should share household and workplace roles and make decisions jointly; therefore, it is evident that most communities do not view this as a normative practice. The distancing of some communities from dominant gender-relations practices reflects processes of change and the imperative to subscribe, at least discursively, to the now politically correct language of gender equality.

Traditional notions of male dominance and female subservience are still intact, along with traditional gender roles that mandated a division of labour between the household women's domain and the paid workforce men's domain. Moreover, although violence against women is deplored, others saw it as a normal and expected part of heterosexual relationships (Bayeh, 2016). Family structures reinforce women's dependence on male partners, as women are sometimes told to stay in abusive situations for the sake of the family.

Furthermore, a discourse of culture and tradition, as well as biological determinist notions, is echoed in the male sexual drive discourse, where deliberations serve to rationalise and reproduce traditional gender roles, relations and practices (Gupta, 2020). On the other hand, it was constantly noted how particular discourses used to describe, explain and rationalise gender inequalities and gender-based violence are reflected across cultures in this country and globally, and how frequently culture is used in multiple contexts as a discursive tool in the naturalisation and legitimisation of gender inequalities. In terms of gendered power in general, it is perceived that material and economic sources of power for women are growing, particularly the increasing number of employed women and the high level of unemployment among men.

Gender norms also negatively affect people with diverse gender identities, who often face violence, stigma and discrimination as a result, including in healthcare settings (Jeske, 2022). Women and girls also face unacceptably high levels of violence rooted in gender inequality. They are at grave risk of harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and early forced marriage. Therefore, understanding gender roles and gendered power relations is necessary to address persistent gender inequality and related social problems, such as the continued high rates of gender-based violence. Social constructions assume that the meanings people make of their lives, the discourses they draw on through language or language-like systems, reflect broader social discourses and serve to legitimise, bolster, and reproduce such discourses, as well as, in some cases, resist and challenge them. The various social aspects that relate to social constructionism. These social aspects include family, societal structures and religion.

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Family Socialisation and Gender Roles

The concept of family has been evolving. In the past, a family was identified as a heteronormative system (Breuer & Asiedu, 2017). This means that it was understood to be made up of a heterosexual couple and children. Family is a group of people related to one another by blood, sexual, and/or legal ties (Larson, 2019). This definition does not view the family in terms of biological sex characteristics. The expansion of the definition of the family is related to the fact that there is a rise in same-sex relationships both in South Africa and internationally.

The family is the first setting into which people are socialised. Therefore, it is in this system that they learn values, principles and socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Consequently, the family is a system that can predict the likelihood of people adopting traditional or non-traditional ways of expressing their gender identity. One of the first things children learn is whether they are male or female. This has several implications. For instance, in most traditional families, children are often dressed in gender-specific colours. For instance, girls are often dressed in pink, whereas boys are dressed in blue. This influences gender socialisation. This also illustrates the principles of the Social Learning Theory (Bandura et al., 1963). Other ways in which children are made aware of their gender differences are in the toys they play with. It is common for female children to be given dolls and kitchen sets, while male children are likely to receive gifts such as cars, guns, or tools that suggest the importance of manual labour.

At an early age, women and men are made aware of gender differences and the gender-stereotypical messages they receive (Khoza, 2021). Family instils the belief that women are responsible for household duties, whereas men are responsible for providing for the household or being productive in the workplace. Parents' approach towards gender roles has been linked to gender-typed attitudes and behaviours that emerging adults adopt. The quality of the relationship between children and their parents may contribute to adults adopting their parents' proposed expression of gender identity.

It is crucial to take into account the country's political history. For instance, in prior-apartheid South Africa, there was a deliberate emphasis that feminine identity was inferior to masculine identity. However, this perception appears to have transformed with the rise of democracy. Men in contemporary society have embraced a modern viewpoint on masculinity. For instance, it has been reported that African men have learned to be less controlling towards women, which did not exist in the apartheid era (Lecoutere, 2017). This perception is embraced in different families. The realisation that men and women should be treated as equals has resulted in men being less dominating. The literature reveals that the structure of the home can demonstrate this. For instance, in some households, men and women divide the household responsibilities evenly.

Social Structures and Gender Discrimination

Social structures are defined as specific institutions in which interactions between people occur. For instance, social structures include schools, sports groups, economic status groups, education, the law and social classes. Therefore, they desire a sense of belonging. In this regard, societies know themselves in relation to others and the social structures in which they function. In an attempt to belong, the society might adhere to societal standards for what it means to be male, female, feminine, masculine or even androgynous. They might do so without questioning or considering what their personal stance is on issues of gender identity.

There is a historical explanation for the existence of occupational segregation both in South Africa and globally. Women are often required to assume the majority of unpaid childcare and domestic work. Thus, limiting their time for education, training and paid employment. Women's ability to bear children is one of the characteristics that have traditionally put them at a disadvantage when it comes to the job market. This means that during pregnancy and after delivery, they are more likely to require time off from work. This can negatively impact

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production in the workplace. The ability to bear children has hence been identified as an interruption to the continuity of employment.

Women were identified as domestic and maternal beings, and women who entered the labour market were regarded as inferior to men. The salary gap between men and women demonstrated this. Therefore, masculine and feminine identities were subject to inequality. In the South African culture, masculinity is closely related to concepts such as aggression, competition, power and a violent nature. Masculinity is also understood to be superior to femininity. Young women are less likely than young men to obtain a degree or qualification in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields, despite doing slightly better in science than their male peers (Saifuddin et al., 2022). Young men are also more likely than young women to gain the digital skills needed in today's economy.

Religion and Gender Discrimination

Gender identity develops across different domains, including religion. The domain of religion can be used to foster attachment and to improve levels of emotional involvement (Ashdown et al., 2014). Religion can also be utilised as a tool to assist in developing a self-concept. An example of this self-concept is gender identity. Ultimately, religion has a large influence on the understanding of gender identity and the process of gender identity development. Religion influences how people understand their position in society (Parveen, 2022). Christian women are believed to be religious, dependable, righteous, trustworthy, noble, diligent, loving, sympathetic, pure, meek, submissive and passive (Parwez & Patel, 2022). It is further indicated in the scripture that women of Christ are homemakers, mothers, and ultimately devoted to God. In addition, they are inspirational and a source of strength to their husbands. Christian women are expected to have high moral standards and bring joy to those around them.

Sen's Capability Theory

Sen notes that his approach has strong conceptual connections to Aristotle's understanding of human flourishing, Adam Smith, and Karl Marx (Sen, 1979). Marx discussed the importance of functioning and capability for human well-being. For example, Sen cites Smith's analysis of relative poverty in The Wealth of Nations, noting how a country's wealth and cultural norms shaped which material goods were understood to be necessities (Sen, 1979). Sen also cites Marx's foundational concern with "replacing the domination of circumstances and chance over individuals by the domination of individuals over chance and circumstances".

Sen's capability framework proposes that social arrangements should be evaluated primarily according to the extent of the freedom people have to promote and achieve the functions they value (Sen, 1979). Amartya Sen's capability theory approach is a theoretical framework that involves two core normative claims. Firstly, the assumption that freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance (Breuer & Asiedu, 2017). Secondly, that freedom to achieve well-being must be understood in terms of people with capabilities (Sen, 1979). Therefore, the real opportunities to do and be what they value. The theory has been developed into a variety of more specific normative theories, such as those of social justice or the narratives of development ethics. It has also given rise to a new, highly interdisciplinary literature in the social sciences, resulting in new social statistics and indicators. The new policy paradigm used mainly in developing studies is the so-called human development approach or human well-being.

The capability approach focuses directly on the quality of life that individuals are actually able to achieve. Sen (1979) referred to empowerment as principles, such as the ability of individuals and groups to act to ensure their own well-being or their right to participate in decision-making that concerns them, that have guided research on and social intervention among poor and marginalised populations. This quality of life is analysed in terms of the core concepts of functionings and capabilities. Functionings are states of being and doing, such as being well-

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nourished and having shelter. They should be distinguished from the commodities employed to achieve them. Capability refers to the set of valuable functionings that a person has effective access to (Breuer & Asiedu, 2017). Thus, a person's capability represents an individual's effective freedom to choose among different functioning combinations and kinds of life that they have reason to value.

In relation to women's empowerment, the capabilities approach addresses the quality of life that women can achieve. This quality of life is analysed in terms of the central concepts of functioning and capability. Sen argues that the correct approach to assessing how well people are doing is to evaluate their ability to live a life that has reason to value it, rather than their wealth of resources or subjective well-being. However, to begin to assess how women perform in terms of capacity, first there must be a determination of which functions are important to the good life and how much or at least specify an assessment procedure to determine this.

Assessing capability is more information-demanding than other accounts of advantage because it not only has a much broader view of what constitutes the achievement of well-being but also attempts to assess the freedom women actually have to make high-quality choices. However, the value of a set of capabilities represents an individual's effective freedom to live a life that is valuable in terms of the value of the functionings available to that individual, when available functionings are enhanced, so is the individual's effective freedom. The capability approach allows a very wide range of dimensions of advantage to be positively evaluated. This allows for an open diagnostic approach to what is going well or badly in women's lives, revealing unexpected shortfalls or successes across different dimensions without aggregating them into a single number (Mamun, 2022). The focus can be tightened depending on the purpose of the evaluation exercise and relevant evaluative and informational constraints.

The capability approach claims that freedom to achieve well-being is a matter of what women can do and be (Mamun, 2022). Therefore, the kind of life they can effectively lead. As Sen argues, women's commodities, wealth, or mental reactions are an inappropriate angle because they provide limited or indirect information about how life is going (Ruffle, 2022).

A review of recent literature indicates that prior studies on gender discrimination and women's empowerment have predominantly focused on workplace dynamics in public and private institutions, typically situated in urban contexts (Kim & Oh, 2022; Zhang, 2022; Gupta, 2023). In contrast, there remains a notable paucity of research that critically examines the nature and underlying factors contributing to gender discrimination from the perspective of women’s empowerment in rural communities, particularly within the Limpopo Province of South Africa.

3. Methodology

The research methodology adopted in this paper is primarily qualitative and interpretative, guided by philosophical assumptions that enable a critical analysis of the implications of social constructionism and Sen's capability approach for understanding gender discrimination and women's empowerment. A qualitative literature review was conducted, involving the systematic analysis and synthesis of recent scholarly works in English published in peer-reviewed journals, with Google Scholar as the primary search engine. As Mwita (2022) explains, a literature review entails the systematic collection and examination of existing written materials to generate insights relevant to a study's research questions. Accordingly, the materials selected for this study were evaluated for their merit in offering valuable perspectives on gender discrimination and women's empowerment in rural communities in developing countries.

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4. Results

In conclusion, the capabilities approach is defined by its choice of focus on the moral significance of individuals' ability to achieve the kind of life they have reason to value. This distinguishes it from more established approaches to ethical evaluation. They focus exclusively on subjective well-being or the availability of means for good living, respectively. The set of valuable beings and actions defines a person's ability to live a good life. Like having good health or having loving relationships with other people to whom they have real accessibility. From the theories, the following conceptual framework has been formulated (see Figure 1 below).

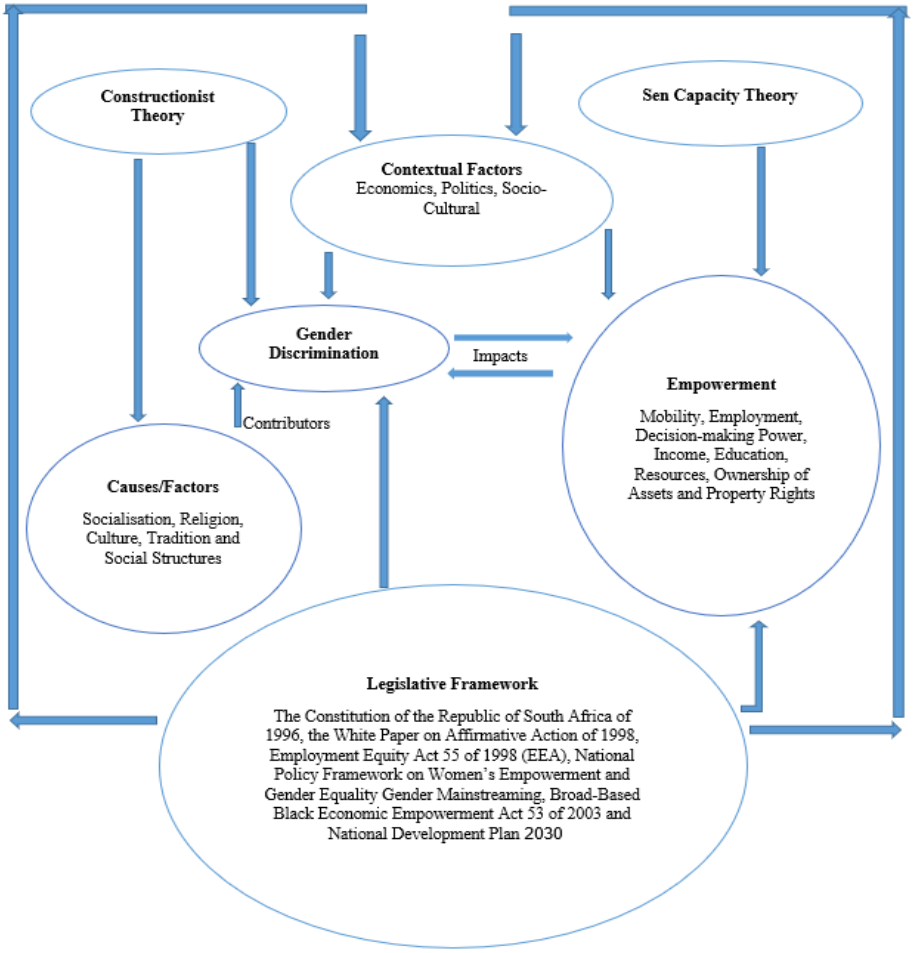


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework
Source: the authors

The framework explains the relationship between gender discrimination and women's empowerment in the study, drawing on Social Constructionist and Sen's Capability Theory. According to the theory, gender is not a biological product but a social construct created and perpetuated by society, and gender roles, expectations, and standards are shaped by social interactions and cultural practices. This theory contends that gender discrimination occurs when individuals are subjected to unfair or disparate treatment based on their gender, hence limiting their opportunities and access to resources. It emphasises how gender stereotypes and societal norms impact how men and women are treated and given chances in different ways. Generally, the social constructionist provides a framework for understanding and addressing the systemic basis of gender discrimination and emphasises how society affects gender roles and inequities.

Constructionists argue that gender discrimination manifests through religion, socialisation, culture, tradition and social structures. All the aspects have either direct or indirect negative impact on what Sen believes are the indicators of empowerment (mobility, employment, decision-making power, income, education, resources, ownership of assets and property rights). Although there is a legislative framework and policies that seek to eliminate all forms of discrimination, gender discrimination persists. However, it is worth noting that the context in which it manifests varies from place to place.

Conclusion

Gender discrimination occurs on a continuum and is influenced by various societal factors. These factors included family, social structures and religion. The expression of femininity and masculinity has racial implications. The places occupied by men and women in history were different. Historically, men had more privileges than women and consequently more opportunities, especially in the labour market. This is because society operated as a binary, unequal system. It is also important to note that white men had more privileges than men belonging to other racial groups. The social construction of gender has been shown to affect empowerment and disparities in the economic, cultural, social, and political standing of women worldwide.

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IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE ON DIGITAL INEQUALITY AMONG STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract. This study investigates how bridging social capital shapes digital inequality among undergraduate students at the University of Professional Studies, Accra (UPSA), Ghana. It examines whether diverse inter-group networks predict digital access, skills, and purposive digital use. A quantitative cross-sectional survey of 412 stratified, randomly sampled UPSA undergraduates was conducted. Bridging social capital was measured using Williams's (2006) Internet Social Capital Scale and an adapted resource generator. Digital inequality was operationalised across three dimensions. Structural equation modelling with SmartPLS 4.0 and bootstrapped mediation analysis were applied. Bridging social capital significantly predicted digital skills ($\beta = 0.341$, $p < 0.001$) and purposive digital use ($\beta = 0.297$, $p < 0.001$), but not physical access. Digital skills mediated 63.7% of the total effect on purposive use. Income remained the dominant predictor of access-level inequality. The cross-sectional, single-institution design limits causal inference. Institutions should invest in peer mentoring and cross-departmental communities as cost-effective mechanisms for bridging digital skill gaps. This study provides original empirical evidence from sub-Saharan Africa, extending digital capital theory by positioning bridging social capital as an antecedent to digital capital accumulation in resource-constrained higher education settings.

Keywords: social capital; social media; Accra; University of Professional Studies; digital inequality; digital capital; higher education; Ghana, sub-Saharan Africa; digital skills; students; social media

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JEL Classifications: O33, R58

1. Introduction

The proliferation of digital technologies has fundamentally reconfigured how knowledge is produced, transmitted, and consumed within contemporary higher education sector. Across the Global South, tertiary institutions increasingly rely on digital platforms to facilitate activities such as course delivery, assessment, research collaboration, and administrative communication. However, this shift towards digitally mediated learning has not occurred on a level playing field. There are still many students who lack adequate devices, reliable internet access, and sufficient digital competencies who are systematically disadvantaged in their academic pursuits. For example, within Ghana's rapidly expanding higher education sector, these disparities are acutely shaped by uneven infrastructure development, pronounced socioeconomic stratification, and persistent urban disparities in ICT penetration. The University of Professional Studies, Accra (UPSA), as one of Ghana's leading public universities with a professionally oriented student body, presents a compelling and underexplored context for examining digital inequality. Unlike elite research universities with well-endowed ICT infrastructure, UPSA caters predominantly to students from lower and middle-income backgrounds who navigate digital learning environments under significant resource constraints. Understanding the mechanisms through which some students overcome these constraints while others remain digitally disadvantaged is therefore both theoretically significant and practically urgent.

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Existing studies on digital inequality have largely focused on material factors such as household income, geographic location, and institutional resources as primary determinants of differential digital access and competence (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019; Ragnedda & Ruiu, 2020). However, a growing body of work suggests that social network characteristics, specifically the nature of interpersonal connections beyond one's immediate social group, play a critical though underappreciated role in shaping individuals' digital trajectories (Kozová et. Al., 2025; Bačík et al., 2025; Nyusani & Mabungela, 2025).

Bridging social capital, conceptualised by Putnam (2000) as the resources embedded in weak, cross-cutting ties that connect socially heterogeneous groups, has been theorised as a mechanism through which individuals can access information, skills, and opportunities otherwise unavailable within their own networks. Yet empirical examinations of how bridging social capital specifically shapes digital inequality in university settings, particularly in African higher education contexts, remain sparse.

This study addresses that gap by asking: to what extent does bridging social capital reduce digital inequality among undergraduate students at UPSA? Drawing on Bourdieu (1986) capital theory, Putnam (2000) bonding-bridging distinction as well as Ragnedda and Ruiu (2020) digital capital framework, this paper develops and tests a structural model in which bridging social capital is hypothesised to positively influence digital access, digital skills, and purposive digital use. The analysis further investigates whether digital skills mediate the effect of bridging networks on higher-order digital outcomes, thereby clarifying the precise pathways through which social connectivity converts into digital capital.

Beyond its empirical contributions, this study advances the theoretical conversation on digital capital by contextualising Lybeck et al. (2024) bridge capital argument within a sub-Saharan African higher education setting. The study also responds to calls by Clamor and Saloma (2023) for more empirically grounded accounts of how structural social inequalities are mediated by digital capital in Global South university settings.

The remaining sections of this paper are structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical underpinnings and relevant empirical literature on digital inequality and social capital in higher education. Section 3 details the research methodology, including sampling procedures, measurement instruments, and analytical approach. Section 4 presents and discusses the findings. Section 5 concludes with policy recommendations and directions for future inquiry.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical architecture of this study draws on three interrelated conceptual traditions: Bourdieu's general theory of capital, Putnam (2000) social capital typology, and Ragnedda (2018) digital capital framework. Together, these traditions offer a layered explanation for how structural social positions, network configurations, and digital resource accumulation interact to produce and sustain digital inequalities in university settings.

Bourdieu (1986) conceived capital as accumulated labour, whether in material or incorporated form, that agents deploy within social fields to maintain or improve their positions. Social capital, in Bourdieu's formulation, refers to the aggregate of actual or potential resources accessible through durable networks of mutual acquaintance and recognition. What matters is not merely the possession of social ties but the quality and composition of those ties, and crucially, the capital, whether economic, cultural, or symbolic, that can be accessed through them. This formulation implies that social networks are not uniformly beneficial; their value depends on who is in the network and what resources those members possess and are willing to share. Coleman (1988) further developed this understanding by emphasising the role of closure, trustworthiness, and information channels within networks

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as facilitators of human capital formation, a perspective directly relevant to educational contexts where peers transmit knowledge and competencies through informal interaction.

Putnam (2000) refines the understanding of social capital by distinguishing between bonding social capital, which resides in dense, homogeneous, and emotionally close networks, and bridging social capital, which emerges from looser, more heterogeneous connections that span social cleavages. Bonding ties reinforce group solidarity and provide reliable emotional support, but they tend to circulate redundant information within closed groups. Bridging ties, by contrast, serve as conduits for novel information, diverse perspectives, and resources that are unavailable within one's primary network. In the context of digital inequality, this distinction is consequential: students embedded in socially heterogeneous networks are more likely to encounter peers with greater digital competence, access to devices, and experience with productive digital practices. These encounters can trigger informal learning processes and facilitate access to resources that directly reduce digital disadvantage.

Ragnedda (2018) as well as Ragnedda and Ruiu (2020) built on Bourdieu (1986) framework to theorise digital capital as a distinct form of capital comprising of both material resources, such as digital devices and connectivity, and embodied competencies, including digital skills and digital literacy. Their formulation situates digital capital at the intersection of the digital divide literature and Bourdieusian capital theory, framing digital inequality not as a binary of access versus non-access but as a multidimensional stratification across levels of access, skill, and use. Lybeck et al. (2024) extends this argument by demonstrating empirically that digital capital functions as a bridge capital between cultural capital and political engagement, and that education as a source of cultural capital is transformed into digital capital primarily through the mediating role of operational digital skills. This paper extends this logic by proposing that bridging social capital itself serves as an antecedent condition for digital capital accumulation, particularly in settings where formal educational resources are insufficient to independently generate digital competence.

The integrative framework guiding this study, therefore, posits a multilevel model of digital inequality in which students' structural positions, specifically income and institutional affiliation, determine baseline access to digital resources; bridging social capital moderates' inequalities at the skill and use levels; and digital skills mediate the relationship between bridging networks and purposive digital engagement. This model addresses a gap identified by Gentry et al. (2025), who observes that social capital research in higher education has inadequately been engaged with digital dimensions of students' capital endowments. In addition, Clamor and Saloma (2023) calls for further studies that can empirically model the indirect pathways through which capital accumulation influences academic belonging and engagement.

2.2 Empirical Studies

Research on digital inequality in higher education has evolved considerably from early binary framings of the digital divide toward more nuanced, multi-level analyses. The earliest contributions to this literature, typified by Attewell (2001) and Katz and Aspden (1997), conceptualised the digital divide primarily as a gap in physical access to computing devices and internet connectivity, driven by socioeconomic disparities. While this first-level divide retains explanatory relevance, scholars including van Deursen and van Dijk (2014, 2019); Makhoba et al. (2026) have progressively demonstrated that even among those with physical access, significant variation in digital proficiency and purposive use persists, necessitating analysis at second and third levels of the divide.

Van Deursen and van Dijk (2014) establishes that differences in digital skills, rather than access alone, are the primary driver of unequal digital outcomes in contemporary societies. Their longitudinal work distinguishes between operational, information navigation, social, creative, and mobile skills, each with distinct sociodemographic predictors. Extending this framework, van Deursen and van Dijk (2019) further demonstrates that the first-level divide has shifted from inequalities in physical access to inequalities in material access,

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encompassing the quality of devices and connectivity, with income and education as the strongest predictors. This multi-level understanding directly informs the operationalisation of digital inequality in the present study.

Clamor and Saloma (2023) conducted a landmark quantitative study across Philippine universities during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating that family income ($\beta = 0.220$, $p < 0.001$), type of residence, and academic excellence criterion were the primary determinants of digital capital accumulation. Their structural equation model revealed that digital capital significantly predicted students' sense of belonging ($\beta = 0.576$, $p < 0.001$) and that digital capital mediated the effects of residence type and family income on belonging. By contrast, gender did not emerge as a significant predictor in the SEM results despite bivariate differences, a pattern replicated in the present study. Where Clamor and Saloma (2023) focused on belonging as the outcome, the present study extends their model by examining purposive digital use as an academic performance-related outcome and by introducing bridging social capital as a structural predictor alongside income and residence type.

Lybeck et al. (2024), drawing on a large representative Finnish survey of 3,724 adults, demonstrates that digital skills mediated over 80% of educational differences in online political participation. Their decomposition analysis identifies operational skills as the most powerful mediator, accounting for more of the indirect effect of education than informational, creative, or mobile skill dimensions. This finding contrasts somewhat with Park's (2017) argument that higher-order creative and strategic skills are the most consequential for deriving social benefits from digital engagement. The discrepancy is likely explained by the level of analysis for example, at the population level, basic operational competencies represent the binding constraint, whereas among those with already adequate operational skills, higher-order skills become differentiating. In a developing country context such as Ghana, where foundational digital access remains uneven, operational skills are plausibly the binding constraint which is consistent with Lybeck et al. (2024) population-level conclusion.

Ragnedda et al. (2020) empirically measures digital capital using a multi-dimensional instrument by combining the Digital Access and Digital Competence Index and finds that digital capital accumulation is significantly shaped by socioeconomic background, age, and educational attainment. Their findings from a multi-country study replicate and extend the earlier work by Ragnedda (2018), who theorises digital capital within a Weberian framework of life chances that position digital competencies within a new axis of social stratification. Crucially, they found that urban residence strongly predicted higher digital capital accumulation compared to rural residence, a pattern replicated in the present study's access-level findings. Where Ragnedda (2018) and colleagues measured digital capital as a composite of access and competence, the present study disaggregates these dimensions to enable more precise identification of where social capital effects operate most strongly.

Gentry et al. (2025) provides a systematic review of 93 quantitative social capital assessment studies in higher education, revealing that most instruments lack alignment with social capital theory and rely on indirect proxy measures or generic Likert scales that inadequately capture the resources embedded in social ties. Their review advocates for resource generators and position generators as more theoretically valid assessment methods, specifically because these instruments measure what one can access through networks rather than simply who one knows or how often one interacts. This methodological critique directly informed the measurement design of the present study, which combined Williams's (2006) Internet Social Capital Scale with an adapted resource generator.

Williams (2006) develops and validates the Internet Social Capital Scale to capture both bridging and bonding capital in online contexts to distinguish between the two forms through items that reflect openness to diverse perspectives, exposure to new ideas, and interaction with people different from oneself. Several subsequent studies have employed what Williams (2006) refers to as a scale in educational settings. For instance, Trieu et al. (2019) finds that bridging capital scores positively predict individuals' willingness to form and maintain weak ties that provide novel information. Cheung and Liu (2017) similarly find that higher bridging capital among

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university students is associated with greater volunteer participation and diverse social interactions. These findings collectively suggest that the scale by Williams (2006), though developed in a Western internet context, is responsive to a theoretical and meaningful variation in network heterogeneity which can be adapted for use in African university settings through appropriate recontextualisation.

Empirical studies which specifically examined social capital and digital outcomes in African higher education remain limited, but a small body of work has begun to emerge. Research by Mishra (2020) which draws on a systematic review of social capital studies that focuses on underrepresented students, finds that network diversity, especially access to cross-group institutional ties, consistently predict better information outcomes and access to academic resources.

The relationship between formal education and digital skill development has been examined in multiple national contexts. Blank and Groselj (2014) analyses data from Great Britain, finding that educational attainment is the most consistent predictor of both the breadth and quality of internet use, even after controlling for income, age, and employment status. Büchi et al. (2016) replicates this finding across five European countries, confirming that education predicts internet use variety and benefits at the third-level divide.

Clamor and Saloma (2023) finds that non-binary students at Philippine universities reported higher digital capital than binary-gendered students, a finding attributed to increased Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) community engagement with digital tools and online civic spaces during the pandemic. The current study, conducted in a different cultural context and with a binary gender variable due to the institutional survey framework, finds no significant gender difference in digital skills at UPSA, broadly consistent with the trend toward gender convergence in foundational digital access identified in recent global evidence.

The mediating role of digital skills in converting social and educational resources into digital outcomes has been theorised and empirically tested across several studies. Scheerder et al. (2017) conducted a systematic review of second and third-level digital divide determinants, confirming that digital skills consistently mediate the relationship between socioeconomic variables and beneficial digital outcomes, including online civic participation, economic activity, and educational engagement. Their finding that information navigation and creative skills are particularly consequential for third-level outcomes is consistent with the present study's emphasis on purposive digital use as the key outcome variable.

Lin (2001), whose network theory of social capital provides the most precisely operationalised framework for empirical measurement, argued that the value of social capital lies not in the sheer size of one's network but in the diversity of resources accessible through network ties and the structural positions of those who provide them. This argument directly supports the present study's hypothesis that bridging, rather than bonding, capital is the form of social capital most likely to generate digital skill acquisition. Students with access to network members who occupy different structural positions, including senior students, faculty, and peers from technology-oriented disciplines, are better positioned to access diverse digital knowledge and resources than students confined to homogeneous peer clusters.

Timmis and Munoz-Chereau (2022) examined digital capital accumulation among underrepresented university students in the United Kingdom, finding that students from disadvantaged backgrounds developed digital improvisations, creative and adaptive uses of available technologies that partially compensated for structural disadvantages. Crucially, these digital improvisations emerged through social interactions with more digitally competent peers rather than through formal digital skills instruction, reinforcing the argument that bridging network access is a critical determinant of skill development in resource-constrained settings. Buzard et al. (2011) similarly finds that the pedagogical use of digital technologies in higher education classrooms increased student engagement and competence, but that these benefits were unevenly distributed, with more socially connected

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students deriving greater gains from digital instruction. The empirical literature identifies a clear and consistent pattern that views digital inequality as a multi-level phenomenon shaped by structural socioeconomic factors at the access level and by skills, network, and motivational factors at higher levels. While prior studies have examined income, education, and geographic residence as the primary predictors of digital capital, this study introduces bridging social capital as a theoretically distinct and potentially more actionable predictor of second and third-level digital inequalities. The study builds on the methodological rigour advocated by Gentry et al. (2025), the multilevel operationalisation developed by van Deursen and van Dijk (2014, 2019), the digital capital framework of Ragnedda and Ruiu (2020), and the SEM approach employed by Clamor and Saloma (2023), while addressing the specific contextual conditions of Ghanaian public higher education.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data, Population, Sampling, and Sample Size

The study population comprised all full-time undergraduate students enrolled at the University of Professional Studies, Accra, during the 2023/2024 academic year. According to institutional enrolment records, UPSA had approximately 9,800 undergraduate students across five schools: Business, Finance and Management Studies; Applied Arts and Technology; Graduate Studies and Professional Development; Research and Innovation; and Continuing Education. The sampling frame in this study was restricted to full-time undergraduate students to ensure comparability across degree programmes and to exclude part-time and postgraduate students whose digital engagement contexts differ substantially.

A stratified random sampling approach was adopted, with the academic school as the stratification variable. This approach was selected to ensure proportional representation of students from each school and to allow sub-group analyses by discipline. Within each stratum, students were randomly selected from departmental enrolment lists provided by the Office of the Registrar. The minimum sample size was determined using Cochran's (1977) formula for proportions, assuming a population proportion of 0.50, a 95% confidence level, and a 5% margin of error, yielding a minimum of 370 respondents. Accounting for an anticipated non-response rate of approximately 12%, a target sample of 420 questionnaires was distributed. Of these, 412 were returned with sufficient data for analysis, representing a response rate of 98.1%. The demographic profile of respondents is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents (n = 412)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	215	52.2
	Female	197	47.8
Age (Mean = 22.4 yrs, SD = 2.81)	18 to 24 years	287	69.7
	25 years and above	125	30.3
Residence	Urban	253	61.4
	Peri-urban or Semi-rural	159	38.6
Household Income	Below GHS 1,500	141	34.2
	GHS 1,500 to 3,000	118	28.6
	GHS 3,001 to 5,000	88	21.4
	Above GHS 5,000	65	15.8
Departments of Enrolment	Business, Finance and Management	168	40.8
	Communication and Technology	124	30.1
	Other Schools	120	29.1
Year of Study	Year 1	89	21.6
	Year 2	143	34.7
	Year 3	112	27.2
	Year 4	68	16.5
Total		412	100.0

Note. *Source: Field Survey Data, 2024.*

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3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected via a structured, self-administered questionnaire over four weeks in May and June 2024. The questionnaire was developed in three stages: item generation grounded in the theoretical framework and prior validated instruments; expert validation through review by three academics with expertise in ICT education and social capital research; and pilot testing with 40 students drawn from the same population but excluded from the final sample. Minor revisions were made following the pilot to improve item clarity and reduce response time to an average of 18 minutes.

Bridging social capital was measured using an adapted version of Williams (2006) Internet Social Capital Scale, specifically the bridging subscale, supplemented by items from a resource generator adapted from van der Gaag and Snijder (2005) Survey on Social Networks of the Dutch, recontextualised for the Ghanaian university setting. The resource generator component asked respondents whether they had someone in their social network, outside their immediate family and closest friends, who could provide specific digital and educational resources. These included lending a laptop or tablet, assisting with installing or troubleshooting software, explaining how to find credible academic sources online, sharing mobile internet data, and advising on how to use digital platforms for academic tasks. Each resource generator item was coded dichotomously (0 = no, 1 = yes), consistent with the resource generator protocols recommended by Gentry et al. (2025) and van der Gaag and Snijders (2005). The William (2000) scale items used a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The combined bridging social capital scale achieved satisfactory internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.79).

Digital inequality was operationalised across three sequential dimensions following van Deursen and van Dijk (2019) multi-level framework. First-level digital access was measured through seven items capturing device ownership, including smartphone, laptop, and tablet, home internet access, mobile data availability, and perceived reliability of connectivity, scored as a composite index from 0 to 7. Second-level digital skills were assessed through eighteen items drawn from van Deursen et al. (2016) Internet Skills Scale, covering operational, information navigation, social, and creative skill dimensions on a five-point Likert scale. Third-level purposive digital use captured the frequency and diversity of academic and civic digital activities, including use of learning management systems, academic database searches, online collaboration, and digital content creation, measured on a frequency scale. All dimensions demonstrated acceptable reliability: access index alpha = 0.71; digital skills alpha = 0.84; purposive use alpha = 0.82.

Structural equation modelling (SEM) was employed as the primary analytical technique, implemented using SmartPLS version 4.0 following the two-step approach recommended by Hair et al. (2010). The measurement model was first evaluated for reliability and validity before proceeding to structural estimation. Composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio were used to assess convergent and discriminant validity, respectively. Model fit was assessed using the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR), the normed fit index (NFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The Stone-Geisser Q2 statistic was computed through blindfolding to assess predictive relevance. Mediation analysis was conducted using bootstrapped confidence intervals based on 5,000 resamples. Variance accounted for (VAF) was calculated to quantify the proportion of total effects mediated by digital skills. Control variables included gender, age, income, school of enrolment, and year of study.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Measurement Model Assessment

Before structural analysis, the measurement model was evaluated to confirm the reliability and validity of all constructs. Standardised factor loadings for all reflective indicators exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.60, with the majority surpassing 0.70, indicating strong item-construct convergence (Hair et al., 2017).

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Table 2. Measurement Model: Factor Loadings, Reliability, and Validity

Construct / Indicator	Loading	CR	AVE	Alpha	VIF
Bridging Social Capital (BSC)		0.847	0.524	0.793	
BSC1: Peer assists with software	0.741				1.82
BSC2: Peer shares mobile data	0.714				1.74
BSC3: Peer lends device	0.698				1.68
BSC4: Peer advises on digital platforms	0.761				1.93
BSC5 to BSC9 (Williams items)	0.63-0.79				1.55-2.10
Digital Access Index (DA)		0.784	0.521	0.712	
DA1 to DA7 (device and connectivity items)	0.61-0.76				1.44-2.03
Digital Skills (DS)		0.882	0.584	0.843	
Operational skills (4 items)	0.71-0.81				1.77-2.31
Info-navigation skills (4 items)	0.72-0.83				1.81-2.44
Social skills (5 items)	0.64-0.77				1.58-2.12
Creative skills (5 items)	0.63-0.79				1.50-2.18
Purposive Digital Use (PDU)		0.869	0.565	0.821	
PDU1 to PDU8 (LMS, databases, collaboration)	0.66-0.82				1.61-2.28

Note. *CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted; VIF = Variance Inflation Factor. All loadings significant at $p < 0.001$. Items abbreviated for space.*

As presented in Table 2, composite reliability values ranged from 0.784 for the digital access index to 0.882 for digital skills, all exceeding the acceptable minimum of 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). AVE values ranged from 0.521 to 0.584, comfortably above the 0.50 threshold required for convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Variance inflation factor (VIF) values across all indicators were below 3.3, confirming the absence of problematic collinearity within constructs (Hair et al., 2017).

Table 3. Discriminant Validity: HTMT Ratios and Square Root of AVE (diagonal)

Construct	BSC	DA	DS	PDU
Bridging Social Capital (BSC)	0.724			
Digital Access (DA)	0.312	0.722		
Digital Skills (DS)	0.483	0.391	0.764	
Purposive Digital Use (PDU)	0.451	0.367	0.601	0.752

Note. *Diagonal elements = square root of AVE. Off-diagonal elements = HTMT ratios. All HTMT values < 0.85 threshold (Henseler et al., 2015). BSC = Bridging Social Capital; DA = Digital Access; DS = Digital Skills; PDU = Purposive Digital Use.*

Discriminant validity was assessed using the HTMT ratio, as reported in Table 3. All HTMT values were below the conservative threshold of 0.85 recommended by Henseler et al. (2015), and the diagonal elements, representing the square root of AVE, exceeded all off-diagonal inter-construct correlations, confirming adequate discriminant validity.

Table 4. Model Fit Statistics and Predictive Relevance

Fit Index	Obtained Value	Recommended Threshold	Assessment
SRMR	0.051	< 0.08 (Henseler et al., 2015)	Acceptable
NFI	0.847	> 0.80 (Hair et al., 2010)	Acceptable
RMSEA	0.055	< 0.08 (Browne and Cudeck, 1993)	Acceptable
R2 (Digital Access)	0.184	> 0.10 (Cohen, 1988)	Moderate
R2 (Digital Skills)	0.397	> 0.10 (Cohen, 1988)	Substantial
R2 (Purposive Digital Use)	0.412	> 0.10 (Cohen, 1988)	Substantial
Q2 (Digital Skills)	0.218	> 0 (Hair et al., 2017)	Predictive relevance confirmed
Q2 (Purposive Digital Use)	0.229	> 0 (Hair et al., 2017)	Predictive relevance confirmed

Note. *SRMR = Standardised Root Mean Square Residual; NFI = Normed Fit Index; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; R2 = coefficient of determination; Q2 = Stone-Geisser predictive relevance statistic.*

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Model fit indices for the structural model are reported in Table 4. These values indicate an acceptable to good model fit, consistent with standards in the PLS-SEM literature (Hair et al., 2017). The positive Q2 values for both endogenous constructs confirm the predictive relevance of the structural model.

4.2 Direct Effects of Bridging Social Capital on Digital Inequality

The structural model results are presented in Table 5. Bridging social capital did not exert a statistically significant direct effect on first-level digital access ($\beta = 0.089$, $p = 0.214$), but produced significant positive effects on both digital skills ($\beta = 0.341$, $p < 0.001$) and purposive digital use ($\beta = 0.297$, $p < 0.001$). Income was the strongest predictor of digital access ($\beta = 0.312$, $p < 0.001$), while year of study and school of enrolment both produced modest but significant positive effects on digital skills. Gender produced no significant effect on any dimension once other variables were controlled.

Table 5. Direct Path Coefficients and Significance (Bootstrapped, n = 5,000)

Path	Beta	SE	t-value	p-value	Decision
BSC -> Digital Access	0.089	0.071	1.254	0.214	Not supported
BSC -> Digital Skills	0.341	0.058	5.879	0.000***	Supported
BSC -> Purposive Digital Use	0.297	0.061	4.869	0.000***	Supported
Digital Skills -> Purposive Digital Use	0.554	0.052	10.654	0.000***	Supported
Income -> Digital Access	0.312	0.063	4.952	0.000***	Supported
Income -> Digital Skills	0.168	0.059	2.847	0.005**	Supported
Year of Study -> Digital Skills	0.127	0.055	2.309	0.022*	Supported
School (Tech) -> Digital Skills	0.143	0.057	2.509	0.013*	Supported
Gender -> Digital Skills	0.041	0.054	0.759	0.449	Not supported

Note. *SE = standard error; BSC = Bridging Social Capital; DS = Digital Skills; PDU = Purposive Digital Use. School (Tech) = Applied Arts and Technology school, reference category: other schools. *** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.*

The non-significant effect of bridging social capital on digital access is consistent with theoretical expectations and aligns with prior empirical findings. Access to digital devices and reliable internet connectivity is primarily determined by material conditions, specifically income, household infrastructure, and institutional provision, which are not easily altered by network connections alone. A student from a low-income household embedded in a wide bridging network may be better informed about available devices but still lacks the financial resources to acquire them. These finding parallels that of Clamor and Saloma (2023), who found that family income and type of residence were the primary determinants of digital capital at the resource level. In the UPSA context, income remained the strongest predictor of access-level digital inequality, underscoring that first-level divides are structural phenomena that social network interventions alone cannot resolve.

The significant positive effect of bridging social capital on digital skills ($\beta = 0.341$) is a substantively important finding. It suggests that students who maintain broader, more heterogeneous social ties are considerably more likely to develop stronger digital competencies, even after controlling for income, gender, year of study, and school of enrolment. This finding supports Putnam (2000) argument that bridging networks serve as conduits for novel information and practices and extends it to the domain of digital skill acquisition. In the university context, this likely reflects the role of informal peer mentoring in facilitating digital learning. Students who interact regularly with peers from different departments, year levels, and socioeconomic backgrounds encounter a wider diversity of digital practices, problem-solving strategies, and platform-specific knowledge. These encounters can substitute, at least partially, for formal digital skills instruction, consistent with Lybeck et al. (2024) observation that digital skills are primarily learned by doing rather than through formal education.

The significant effect of bridging social capital on purposive digital use ($\beta = 0.297$) indicates that well-networked students engage more frequently and diversely with digital platforms for academic and civic purposes. This encompasses activities such as using learning management systems, accessing academic databases, creating digital content for coursework, and participating in online academic discussions. In the UPSA context, students

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embedded in heterogeneous networks appear to have greater awareness of the range of digital tools available for academic engagement, and greater motivation to use them productively, because they have encountered models of effective digital academic practice through their diverse network ties.

Regarding control variables, income remained the most powerful predictor of first-level digital access ($\beta = 0.312$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that material constraints are the primary driver of access-level inequalities at UPSA. Year of study positively predicted digital skills ($\beta = 0.127$, $p < 0.05$), consistent with the expectation that extended exposure to digital learning environments yields incremental skill gains. School of enrolment predicted variation in digital skills, with students in Applied Arts and Technology reporting higher digital proficiency than those in Business and Finance, plausibly attributable to the greater digital skills content of technology-oriented curricula. Gender did not significantly predict any of the three digital inequality dimensions once other controls were included, a finding consistent with Clamor and Saloma (2023) and with the growing body of evidence suggesting that gender gaps in foundational digital access have narrowed considerably among younger university cohorts.

4.3 Mediation Analysis

The mediation analysis results are summarised in Table 6. Digital skills significantly mediated the relationship between bridging social capital and purposive digital use (indirect $\beta = 0.189$, 95% CI [0.134, 0.249], $p < 0.001$). The VAF of 63.7% indicates partial mediation with digital skills as the dominant pathway, since the direct effect of bridging social capital on purposive digital use remained significant after digital skills were included in the model.

Table 6. Mediation Analysis: Indirect Effects through Digital Skills (Bootstrap n = 5,000)

Indirect Path	Beta	SE	t-value	95% CI	p-value	VAF%
BSC -> DS -> PDU	0.189	0.029	6.517	[0.134, 0.249]	0.000***	63.7%
Income -> DS -> PDU	0.093	0.031	3.000	[0.034, 0.155]	0.003**	

Note. *SE = standard error; CI = bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence interval; VAF = variance accounted for (indirect/total effect); BSC = Bridging Social Capital; DS = Digital Skills; PDU = Purposive Digital Use. *** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01. Total effect of BSC on PDU = 0.297 + 0.189 = 0.486 before decomposition. VAF = 0.189/0.297 = 63.7%.*

The mediation result aligns strongly with Lybeck et al. (2024) decomposition analysis, which showed that digital skills mediated over 80% of educational differences in online political participation. In both studies, the structural mechanism is similar: social position or social connectivity shapes skill development, and skills in turn enable more purposeful digital engagement. The slightly lower proportion of mediation in the present study compared to Lybeck et al.'s finding is likely explained by the distinct nature of the treatment variable: where Lybeck and colleagues examined formal education as the independent variable, a more distal structural factor, the present study examines bridging social capital, which already carries some direct motivational and informational pathway to digital use beyond its skill-development effect. This interpretation is consistent with Lin (2001) framework, in which social capital provides both information benefits and direct resource benefits to network members.

The mediation finding has a practical implication of considerable importance. If the pathway from bridging social capital to purposive digital use is substantially mediated by skills, then interventions designed to foster bridging networks among students should be expected to improve digital use outcomes primarily through their upstream effect on skill development rather than through direct exposure to digital platforms. This suggests that peer-learning communities, cross-departmental study groups, and structured mentoring programmes that bring together students with different digital competence levels may be among the most cost-effective approaches to reducing second and third-level digital inequalities in resource-constrained university settings.

4.4 Theoretical and Contextual Implications

Taken together, the findings advance the theoretical understanding of digital inequality in several respects. First, they confirm the multilevel structure of digital inequality, with material factors dominating at the access level and

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social capital factors becoming increasingly explanatory at higher levels. This layered pattern supports van Deursen and van Dijk (2019) sequential divide model and applies it to a sub-Saharan African university context, filling an important empirical gap in the geographic coverage of this literature.

Second, the findings establish bridging social capital as a theoretically distinct and empirically validated mechanism for reducing second and third-level digital inequalities in higher education. This extends both Putnam (2000) bridging-bonding framework and the digital capital literature by identifying a specific social mechanism through which digital skill inequalities can be moderated without requiring direct material investment. In resource-constrained university environments where institutional ICT budgets are limited, this finding points to a potentially underutilised lever for equity-oriented intervention.

Third, the study's findings speak to Gentry et al. (2025) recommendation that higher education social capital research adopt more direct measures aligned with social capital theory. The use of a resource generator in this study, rather than a generic Likert scale of social interaction frequency, allowed for a theoretically precise operationalisation of bridging capital as the accessibility of diverse, cross-cutting social resources, and produced findings with clearer theoretical interpretability than studies using less aligned measures.

Finally, the mediation of digital skills positions informal peer learning as a key mechanism through which bridging social capital translates into digital outcomes. This resonates with Ragnedda and Ruiu (2020) conceptualisation of digital capital as a practice-based form of capital, one that is acquired not primarily through formal instruction but through habitual and socially situated engagement with digital tools. For students at UPSA, exposure to digitally competent peers through heterogeneous networks appears to create learning opportunities that formal curricula do not consistently provide.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the role of bridging social capital in shaping digital inequality among undergraduate students at the University of Professional Studies, Accra. The findings demonstrate that bridging social capital exerts significant positive effects on digital skills and purposive digital use, though it does not overcome the material determinants of first-level digital access. Digital skills emerge as the primary mediating mechanism through which bridging networks translate into higher-order digital engagement, accounting for nearly two-thirds of the total effect. These findings are theoretically significant and practically consequential for policy and institutional practice in Ghana and the broader sub-Saharan African higher education.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study extends the digital capital framework by empirically demonstrating that bridging social capital functions as an antecedent condition for digital capital accumulation in a resource-constrained setting, a role analogous to but distinct from the bridge capital function attributed to digital capital itself in prior work (Lybeck et al., 2024). The study affirms the relevance of Putnam's (2000) bonding-bridging distinction for understanding educational inequalities in the digital age, a connection that has been theorised but rarely empirically tested in Global South higher education contexts.

This study makes a meaningful contribution to digital inequality and social capital in higher education by providing empirically grounded evidence from an underrepresented institutional and national context. The findings affirm that reducing digital inequality is not solely a technological or resource allocation challenge but is also a social one. How students are connected, and to whom, shapes their capacity to develop and exercise digital competencies in consequential ways. Addressing these social dimensions of digital inequality must be a core component of any serious institutional strategy to promote digital equity in African higher education.

6. Limitations

Various limitations are identified and acknowledged in this study. For example, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference about the direction of relationships, and reverse causality remains possible since more digitally skilled students may easily form bridging networks. The restriction to a single institution limits the generalisability of findings to other Ghanaian or African universities with different institutional profiles. The resource generator relied on self-reported network access and may be subject to social desirability bias. As well, negative impact of social media on users is not being taken into account (Ivančík et al., 2024). Students must be alive to the negative impact of addiction to social media and improve their academic performance by managing the time when using these social media (Salari et al., 2025)

Future research should employ longitudinal designs tracking students across academic years and incorporate qualitative components to illuminate the specific social mechanisms through which bridging ties facilitate digital skill acquisition. Comparative studies across multiple Ghanaian universities, and within West Africa more broadly, would substantially advance the contextual generalisability of these findings.

7. Recommendations

The policy and practice implications of these findings are significant. Universities operating under constrained ICT infrastructure budgets should consider structured social interventions as complementary mechanisms for reducing digital skill inequalities. Specifically, institutions such as UPSA are encouraged to: establish formalised peer digital mentoring programmes pairing digitally proficient students with those reporting lower digital skills; design cross-departmental academic communities and study groups that cut across socioeconomic and disciplinary boundaries to maximise exposure to heterogeneous digital practices; integrate social capital development into student induction programmes, with explicit attention to bridging network formation; and develop targeted ICT access support for low-income students, including subsidised device schemes and campus Wi-Fi expansion, to address first-level access inequalities that social network interventions alone cannot resolve.

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PATHWAYS TO A MERIT-BASED RECRUITMENT SYSTEM FOR SUSTAINABLE SERVICE DELIVERY: A SOUTH AFRICAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. Section 152(1)(b) of the South African Constitution mandates local government to "ensure the provision of services to communities in a sustainable manner." This constitutional responsibility is hindered by political interference, cadre deployment, nepotism, and severe capacity shortages, resulting in persistent service delivery protests and poor municipal performance. This paper examines how adopting a merit-based recruitment system and professionalising the public service can enhance sustainable service delivery in South African local government. The study employs the Person–Job Fit Theory as a theoretical lens, utilising secondary data analysis and a narrative literature review. Empirical evidence from 2020–2025 is drawn from Statistics South Africa, the Auditor-General, the Department of Cooperative Governance, and peer-reviewed research to evaluate service delivery performance and human resource practices. Findings reveal significant capacity deficits: many municipal officials lack required competencies; municipalities rely heavily on consultants for financial management; and governance failures manifest in widespread protests and adverse audit outcomes. The adoption of the 2022 National Framework towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector indicates a policy shift towards meritocracy. Transparent, competitive hiring and promotion based on qualifications and performance can strengthen accountability, efficiency, and service quality. Prioritising merit over political affiliation is essential to building institutional capacity and restoring public trust in local government. The paper positions meritocracy as a structural reform imperative for achieving South Africa's developmental goals. It recommends strict enforcement of merit-based appointments, continuous skills development, and adherence to governance standards to foster a capable, ethical, and service-oriented municipal sector.

Keywords: Local government; service delivery; meritocracy; professionalisation; capacity; South Africa

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1. Introduction

The pursuit of sustainable service delivery within South African local government remains one of the most complex challenges of the post-apartheid era. While the constitutional mandate provided by Section 152(1)(b) establishes a clear obligation for municipalities to ensure the provision of services in a sustainable manner, the practical realisation of this goal is frequently undermined by deep-seated structural and administrative pathologies. Central to this crisis is the tension between merit-based recruitment and the entrenched practice of political patronage, often manifesting as cadre deployment. This report provides an exhaustive examination of these dynamics, integrating critical reviewer feedback to address the one-sided nature of previous meritocracy debates and exploring the emerging phenomenon of the qualifications-experience gap within the public sector. By synthesising empirical data from 2020 to 2025, the analysis demonstrates that while meritocracy is a necessary

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objective, its implementation must be contextually grounded in the unique socio-political realities of a developing state. Local government is the sphere of administration closest to communities and is often the first point of contact between citizens and the state. It is tasked with providing urgent and essential services that improve residents' quality of life (Jili & Masuku, 2019). In the context of local government, service delivery refers to the provision of public goods and basic services, such as water, sanitation, electricity, waste management, roads, and housing, by municipalities to meet the needs of communities (Reddy, 2016). South Africa, like many countries, faces serious challenges in delivering these services effectively (Sibiya & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023).

Section 152(1)(b) of the Constitution explicitly requires local government to *"ensure the provision of services to communities in a sustainable manner."* Governments must therefore prioritise responsive and efficient delivery of fundamental services to their residents. Despite this mandate, service delivery in the South African local government sphere has not improved in recent years; on the contrary, many indicators suggest deteriorating performance. While there have been some gains in expanding access to basic services over the past decade, for example, between 2011 and 2022 access to clean water increased from 85.1% to 88.5% of households, and access to electricity rose to 94.3%, the *quality* and *reliability* of these services remain in question. Progress has been uneven across municipalities, and infrastructure maintenance has often been neglected. As a result, communities frequently experience water outages, electricity load shedding, sewerage spills, and other failures that undermine gains in nominal access. Public frustration with poor local services has led to a high number of service-delivery protests. In 2022, for instance, 193 service delivery protests were recorded nationwide, reflecting a return to pre-COVID levels of unrest (Masson, 2023). Such protests – which averaged around 200 per year in the late 2010s – have become a "firmly entrenched social phenomenon," indicating deep-seated dissatisfaction with municipal performance (Masson, 2023). The prevalence of these demonstrations underscores the urgent need for local governments to restore public confidence by delivering basic services effectively and sustainably.

A central barrier to effective service delivery in South African municipalities is institutional capacity. Many local governments suffer from acute shortages of skilled and qualified personnel, undermining their ability to plan, budget, and implement service delivery programs. A significant proportion of municipal staff lack the formal qualifications or technical competencies required for their positions. For example, a 2020 report found that only about 53% of municipal officials met the minimum competency requirements for their jobs, and just 54% of chief financial officers in municipalities were suitably qualified (National Treasury, 2020; NewsWire, 2021; Enterprises University of Pretoria, 2024). This skills deficit is compounded by high vacancy rates in critical posts and frequent turnover of key officials. The Auditor-General's assessments have repeatedly highlighted these capacity challenges: many municipalities have vacant senior positions or employ key officials without appropriate competencies, and there has been a decline in consequence management for poor performance (Davids et al., 2022). According to a Human Sciences Research Council comprehensive skills assessment report, "most municipalities are mired by capacity issues" that prevent them from performing their functions optimally (Davids et al., 2022). In essence, a municipality's effectiveness is heavily reliant on its human capital – the skills, experience, and integrity of its public servants. When this capacity is lacking, service delivery suffers.

One of the root causes of capacity constraints in local government has been the practice of cadre deployment and other forms of patronage-based appointments. Over the past decades, there has been a tendency to fill municipal positions based on political loyalty or personal connections rather than merit (Jili & Masuku, 2019). Scholars note that the politicisation of local government hiring, often through ruling party cadre deployment, has led to the placement of individuals without the necessary skills or experience in strategic roles (Reddy, 2016). Shava and Chamisa (2018) observe that political interference in municipal human resource practices has negatively impacted recruitment, promotion, and staff development. The entrenched patronage network has resulted in nepotism, in which unqualified friends or relatives are hired or promoted, while competent professionals are sidelined. Nepotism not only creates skills gaps in the administration but also demoralises diligent employees who see opportunities blocked by favouritism (Bless, 2023). Over time, these practices have eroded the professional ethos

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of the local public service and undermined the constitutional mandate of municipalities. Instead of a professional bureaucracy staffed by experts, many municipalities have become sites of political contestation over jobs and resources.

The consequences of these governance failures are evident in the outcomes: poor service delivery, financial mismanagement, and corruption. Scores of municipalities struggle to spend their budgets effectively or to collect revenue, leading to deteriorating infrastructure and unsustainable finances. The Auditor-General of South Africa's reports on local government reveal persistent breakdowns in governance and accountability. For the 2021–22 financial year, audit outcomes showed *little overall improvement*; in fact, the number of municipalities with clean audits decreased, remaining a small fraction of the 257 municipalities (Auditor-General of South Africa, 2022). Clean audits are typically achieved by fewer than 20% of municipalities, primarily in the Western Cape, indicating that most councils fail to meet basic financial management and performance standards. Meanwhile, irregular and wasteful expenditures remain rampant, and there were fewer than hoped improvements in the many municipalities that previously had disclaimers or adverse opinions (Auditor-General of South Africa, 2022). These audit results mirror the lack of skills and controls in local government – problems often rooted in poor appointment practices and weak institutional capacity.

In this context, there is a growing recognition that merit-based recruitment and professionalisation of the public sector are necessary to turn around local government performance. The National Development Plan (NDP), South Africa's long-term vision, explicitly calls for building a *capable and developmental state* staffed by professionals chosen on merit. After nearly 30 years of democracy, the imperative of shifting from patronage-driven systems to meritocracy has never been clearer. A merit-based public sector system prioritises the appointment and promotion of individuals based on their qualifications, competence, and performance, rather than political affiliations or personal relationships. By hiring the *right people with the right skills* for the job, municipalities can enhance their capacity to deliver services and fulfil their constitutional obligations. Indeed, countries that have progressed towards developmental goals have generally established meritocratic civil services, underpinned by competitive selection and performance-based career development (Mulaphong, 2022; Oliveira et al., 2023).

By strengthening the case for meritocracy and providing up-to-date evidence and policy developments, this paper contributes to the public administration discourse on improving governance and service delivery at the local level in South Africa. It aligns with disciplinary standards by rooting the analysis in established theory, empirical findings, and the normative frameworks of good governance. Ultimately, the goal is to inform and persuade stakeholders – policymakers, scholars, and practitioners that a merit-based public sector is not only a theoretical ideal but a practical necessity for the developmental state that South Africa aspires to build.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The Person–Job (PJ) Fit Theory posits that organisational performance is primarily driven by the alignment between an individual's knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) and the specific requirements of a role (Wong & Tetrick, 2017). In the context of South African local government, this theory serves as a critical lens to explain systemic service delivery failures: the appointment of officials whose competencies do not match the technical and managerial demands of their roles leads to financial mismanagement, infrastructure collapse, and overall organisational dysfunction. Furthermore, the theory must be balanced with Person–Organisation (PO) fit, which considers how well an individual's values align with the organisational culture. In the South African public sector, a high PO fit might ironically lead to the retention of individuals who are "aligned" with a culture of patronage, even if their PJ fit is low. Table 1 outlines the study's theoretical framing and its alignment with the argument under investigation.

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Table 1. Theoretical framing

Dimension of Fit	Definition in Public Sector Context	Impact on Municipal Performance
Demand-Abilities Fit	Match between technical qualifications and job requirements (e.g., an engineer managing water infrastructure).	Direct influence on service quality and technical reliability.
Needs-Supplies Fit	Match between what the employee seeks (growth, ethics) and what the municipality provides.	Influences long-term retention and resistance to corruption.
Self-Concept Fit	The degree to which the job aligns with the individual's professional identity.	Drives innovative behaviour and public service motivation.
Complementary Fit	Adding a skill or perspective missing from the existing team environment.	Essential for breaking "echo chambers" in local councils.

Source: Researchers' own compilation

Research indicates that PJ fit operates across two primary dimensions: demand-abilities fit (whether the employee possesses the necessary skills) and needs-supplies fit (whether the job satisfies the employee's needs). While South African municipalities have historically focused on the former, the latter is increasingly significant. When highly qualified individuals are placed in dysfunctional environments, where their expertise is underutilised or thwarted by political interference, the resulting "misfit" leads to burnout and high turnover.

Furthermore, PJ fit must be balanced with Person–Organisation (PO) fit, which assesses the alignment between individual values and organisational culture. In the South African public sector, a high PO fit can paradoxically be detrimental; it may lead to the retention of individuals who are "aligned" with a culture of patronage, even if their technical PJ fit is low.

Merit-based recruitment maximises PJ fit by prioritising relevant skills and proven performance. Conversely, politically motivated or nepotistic appointments often produce mismatches that undermine community well-being and democratic participation (Reddy, 2016). Empirical evidence highlights the extent of this challenge: as of 2020, only 57% of senior municipal officials, 53% of chief financial officers, and 54% of senior managers met minimum competency requirements (BusinessTech, 2020). While PJ fit is a dominant paradigm, it is not without detractors. Critics argue that an overemphasis on "fit" can lead to:

- Organisational stagnation: hiring managers may select candidates who mirror existing staff, stifling diversity and innovative perspectives.
- Exclusionary practices: rigid adherence to fit can be weaponised to exclude "outsiders" who might challenge unethical but culturally embedded practices.

However, advocates argue that without a foundational match between skills and demands, the "square peg in a round hole" syndrome is inevitable. This results in the high vacancy rates and performance failures currently seen across South African municipalities. Ultimately, the theory assumes that individual performance is a product of the interaction between personal attributes and the work environment, in which compatibility is a prerequisite for positive outcomes (Kristof, 1996).

Recruitment and promotion should therefore rigorously match candidates' qualifications and skills to job demands, for instance, ensuring that engineering posts are filled by engineers and finance positions by qualified accountants. Merit-based HR systems institutionalise this fit, aligning with Weberian bureaucracy principles that meritocratic, professional civil services improve governance (Evans & Rauch, 1999). In South Africa, both the National Development Plan and the 2022 National Framework towards Professionalisation endorse meritocratic appointments to build a capable state. Ultimately, improving person–job fit through professionalised, merit-based recruitment is key to strengthening municipal performance and delivering sustainable, high-quality public services.

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2.1. Meritocracy in the Public Sector

Meritocracy in public sector employment has received considerable attention in governance and public administration literature. A merit-based system bases hiring, promotion, and other HR decisions on qualifications and demonstrated ability rather than political connections, nepotism, or favouritism. Its goal is to build a competent, professional public service that operates effectively and fairly. Scholars such as Anniza (2023) note that meritocratic systems emphasise open competition and rigorous evaluation through transparent job postings, standardised exams, competency assessments, and structured interviews to identify the most capable applicants. Poocharoen and Brillantes (2013) emphasise the need for qualifying standards and formal recruitment processes that minimise arbitrary appointments, weighing education, experience, skills, and past performance. Meritocracy contrasts with patronage systems, where jobs are rewards for loyalty rather than merit (Nielsen, 2016). Such practices often foster incompetence and corruption. By prioritising talent, effort, and achievement, meritocracy enhances perceptions of fairness (Suzuki & Hur, 2022). Empirical studies, notably Evans and Rauch (1999), link meritocratic bureaucracies with better governance and economic growth, aligning with Weber's model of a technically qualified, professional civil service.

Key features of a merit system include both practical skills and theoretical knowledge relevant to the job (Anniza, 2023). Civil service exams often assess analytical and subject-specific expertise, with higher scores correlating to better job performance. Educational qualifications serve as a baseline for competence (Evans & Rauch, 1999). Meritocracy also entails continuous performance evaluation and promotions based on achievement, ensuring that hard work is rewarded while underperformance is not shielded by seniority or political ties (Suzuki & Hur, 2022). This fosters a professional ethos in which impartiality, integrity, and public service take precedence over partisan interests. Bellows (2009) highlights Singapore's meritocratic public service as a driver of efficient governance and low corruption.

Meritocracy extends beyond efficiency to social justice and equal opportunity. According to the National School of Government (2022), merit-based public service aligns with constitutional principles of fairness and impartiality in appointments, as articulated in Section 195 of the Constitution. Section 197(3) further prohibits political discrimination in public employment (Newswire, 2022). Ideally, meritocratic processes allow all qualified individuals an equal chance to serve while preventing political affiliation from influencing hiring decisions. Challenges to pure meritocracy include balancing it with representativeness and political oversight. Nonetheless, recent policy shifts, notably the National Framework towards Professionalisation of the Public Sector (2022), advocate merit-based recruitment at all levels of government and call for the abandonment of cadre deployment. This marks a significant normative shift, signalling that building a capable state depends on ensuring that the right people are appointed to the right positions on the basis of merit.

The literature on public-sector meritocracy suggests that professional, rule-bound, and merit-based civil services are more likely to deliver high-quality services and uphold good governance. Such systems cultivate expertise, continuity, and accountability (*see* Mlambo, Thusi & Mkhize, 2022; Suzuki & Hur, 2022; Poocharoen & Brillantes, 2013; Bellows, 2009; Singo & Mafunisa, 2023; Nkgapele & Mofokeng, 2024). In the South African local government context, where capacity and governance problems are acute, the literature would predict significant improvements if hiring and promotion were strongly meritocratic. The next sections of this paper examine the legislative framework for local government employment and present findings on how the lack of meritocracy has affected service delivery, thereby reinforcing arguments in the literature.

2.1.1. International Benchmarks in Meritocratic Systems

To move beyond the rhetoric, South Africa can draw lessons from countries that have successfully institutionalised merit-based recruitment. Countries such as Singapore, South Korea, Canada, and Australia provide useful models for integrating technical expertise into state machinery.

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2.1.2. Singapore and the" Scholar" System

Singapore is often cited as the archetype of a meritocratic state, with its meritocratic practices intrinsically tied to the government's nation-building project (Chua et al., 2024). Its civil service is characterised by high-stakes competitive examinations and a system that identifies top-tier talent early in their careers. This process spans almost the entire lifetime of citizens from primary school through adulthood (Chua et al., 2020). This ensures a bureaucracy staffed by elite professionals, rooted in the "Weberian" ideal of a rules-based civil service that provides efficient public sector administration (Chua et al., 2020). However, this model is often critiqued for its potential to create a social divide between the "meritocratic elite" and the general populace. Critics argue that the system can foster elitism and social stratification, as the heavy reliance on standardised test scores may fail to account for systemic inequalities or the advantages provided by intergenerational transfers of status and resources (Chua et al., 2020; Chua et al., 2024).

2.1.3. Canada and Australia: Balance and Inclusivity

Canada excels in HR management and inclusivity, demonstrating that merit-based recruitment can coexist with representational diversity, particularly through its Employment Equity Act, which seeks to remove systemic barriers for underrepresented groups (Agocs, 2020). Australia also scores above average in policymaking and regulation, driven by a civil service that prioritises continuous learning and objective performance evaluations, as evidenced by the APS (Australian Public Service) Reform initiatives focused on data-driven decision-making and professional development (Halligan, 2020).

These examples suggest that a "pure" meritocracy is not only about intelligence but also about creating a culture of public service and ethical accountability. By integrating broader socio-ethical goals into hiring and promotion, these states move toward a "representative bureaucracy" that balances technical competence with the diverse values of the public they serve (Peters & Pierre, 2023).

Table 2 provides a summary of international benchmarks of merit-based public service systems.

Table 2. Summary of international benchmarks

Country	Primary Merit Mechanism	Performance Metric
Singapore	High-level entrance exams and elite scholarships.	Top rank in low corruption and efficiency.
South Korea	Transparency in budget practices and merit recruitment.	Leader in spending transparency.
Canada	Integrated inclusivity in recruitment and talent management.	High scores in HR management and diversity.
Finland	Strong emphasis on readiness to learn and job-related training.	Excellence in crisis and risk management.
Botswana	Independent anti-corruption agencies and merit hiring.	Relative regional stability and resource management.

Source: compiled by the authors

While meritocracy and professionalisation provide the technical framework for improvement, the "missing factor" in many failed municipalities is political will. Political will is defined as the commitment of political leaders to undertake actions to achieve a set of objectives and to sustain the costs of those actions over time.

The Auditor-General of South Africa (AGSA) has consistently noted that the primary obstacle to improvement is not a deficit of legislation but a pervasive lack of administrative and political will to execute mandates effectively. For example, in 2021-22, municipalities incurred billions in irregular expenditure. Despite identifying these failures, there has been a notable decline in the adequacy of consequence management. Scores of municipalities struggle to spend their budgets effectively or to collect revenue, leading to deteriorating infrastructure and unsustainable financial positions.

The shift from a dominant-party structure toward complex multiparty coalition systems has introduced new challenges for local governance. Political polarisation often results in "administrative paralysis", where party competition overrides the need for stable municipal management. In divided councils, coordination between the

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political executive and the administrative leadership often fails, leading to disruptions in public services and a breakdown in community trust.

2.2. The Duality of Political Appointments and Cadre Deployment

A comprehensive analysis of South African governance must move beyond a binary view of cadre deployment as inherently detrimental. While the literature frequently links cadre deployment to administrative inefficiency and state capture, there are theoretical arguments in favour of certain forms of political appointment, particularly in post-liberation contexts.

In some developmental contexts, political appointments provide what is known as “upward embeddedness”, social and political connections between bureaucrats and politicians that can facilitate accountability and resource flow. From this perspective, a politically aligned official may be more motivated to implement the ruling party's manifesto, ensuring that policy goals are not lost in bureaucratic inertia. The original intent of the African National Congress (ANC) regarding cadre deployment was to ensure that the state machinery was transformed to serve the majority and to prevent sabotage by a recalcitrant old-guard bureaucracy.

Conversely, the practical implementation of cadre deployment in South Africa has often diverged from this strategic ideal. Instead of placing "the most capable people into key positions", the system has frequently devolved into a mechanism for political cronyism. This has resulted in the "blurring of the lines" between the state and the party, leading to a situation where accountability is owed first to the party hierarchy and second to the public interest. This dynamic creates a "shadow state" in which formal administrative rules are bypassed in favour of informal patronage networks, directly undermining municipalities' ability to manage budgets and deliver services.

2.3. The Expertise Paradox: Qualifications vs Practical Mastery

A critical shortcoming in contemporary public sector discourse is the failure to distinguish between formal qualifications and functional expertise. In the South African context, an emerging phenomenon involves individuals who possess the requisite academic credentials yet lack the practical experience and “on-the-job” knowledge necessary to manage complex municipal operations.

The South African labour market is currently characterised by a paradox: high unemployment among graduates coexisting with acute skills shortages in technical municipal roles. Many new entrants into the public service possess National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Level 6 or 7 degrees but have minimal practical exposure to local government financial management or civil engineering. Employers in the municipal sector increasingly value "practical relevance" over academic achievement alone, yet recruitment processes often rely on degree-based screening as a shortcut for assessing competence. This leads to the appointment of "qualified but inept" officials who struggle to navigate the complexities of the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA) or integrated development planning (IDP).

The impact of this expertise gap is most visible in the Auditor-General's reporting on municipal reliance on consultants. In the 2021-22 financial year, municipalities spent R1.61 billion on financial reporting consultants, largely because internal staff, despite holding relevant degrees, lacked the experience to produce credible financial statements. This "outsourcing of core functions" indicates that formal qualifications are being treated as a proxy for competence, which they are not. The lack of an experiential bridge between university and senior management creates a “missing middle” in the administrative hierarchy, where technical leadership is absent.

2.4. Legislative Frameworks Governing Local Government Employment

South Africa's legal and policy framework provides the principles and rules that should guide public-sector employment, including at the local government level. These frameworks, if properly implemented, support the

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shift towards merit-based and professional administration. Table 3 provides a summary of important legislation that governs local government employment.

Table 3. Important legislation governing local government employment

	Description(s)
Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996)	Section 195 of the Constitution outlines the core principles for public administration across all spheres of government, including professionalism, efficient use of resources, development orientation, impartiality, and fair, merit-based employment practices. It balances merit (ability, objectivity, fairness) with equity (redressing historical imbalances for representation). Section 197(3) prohibits discrimination or favouritism based on political affiliation, thereby rejecting partisan hiring. For local government, Section 152 mandates sustainable service delivery, which relies on skilled personnel. These constitutional provisions create both an ethical mandate and a practical imperative to professionalise municipal administrations, ensuring that appointments are based on competence while promoting inclusivity and equity.
Local Government: Municipal Systems Act 2000	The Municipal Systems Act promotes accountable, professional local government. The 2022 Amendment bans senior managers from political office, curbing cadre deployment, and empowers the Minister to set uniform HR standards. New regulations mandate merit-based recruitment, minimum qualifications, competency testing, and national advertising, ensuring only qualified candidates are appointed and preventing nepotism or unqualified hires.
Municipal Finance Management Act, 2003 (Act 56 of 2003)	The Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA) promotes professionalisation in local government by setting minimum competency standards for financial officials, requiring specific qualifications, experience, and training in financial and supply chain management. Key sections emphasise the need to appoint qualified personnel to prevent unfit appointments, yet compliance remains low, with only 53% of CFOs meeting requirements by 2022. In October 2022, the Cabinet adopted the National Framework towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector, advocating merit-based recruitment, reduced political interference, and the rejection of cadre deployment. While not legally binding, it informs legislative reforms and supports the State Capture Commission's recommendations to curb politically motivated appointments.

Source: compiled by the authors

2.5. Meritocracy: Rhetoric versus Reality in South Africa

Despite these legislative gains, a critical assessment suggests that meritocracy remains largely a rhetoric in the South African public sector. The gap between policy intent and operational reality is vast, with many municipalities continuing to function as sites of patronage.

Section 152(1)(b) of the Constitution explicitly requires local government to ensure the provision of services to communities in a sustainable manner. Governments must therefore prioritise responsive and efficient delivery of fundamental services to their residents. However, service delivery in the South African local government sphere has not improved in recent years. In stark contrast to the initial promises of democratic governance, many indicators suggest a significant deterioration in performance. Access to clean water increased slightly from 85.1% to 88.5% between 2011 and 2022, and access to electricity rose to 94.3% (Stats SA, 2024). Nevertheless, the quality and reliability of these services remain in question. Frequent water outages, electricity load-shedding, and sewerage spills continue to undermine the gains in nominal access.

A municipality, like any other organisation, requires a stable administrative core to function effectively. Progress has been uneven across municipalities, and infrastructure maintenance has often been neglected. The significance of brackets in contemporary reports, such as those by Davids et al. (2022), highlights the multidisciplinary nature of recent assessments, which combine demographic analysis with technical skills audits to provide a clearer picture of municipal dysfunction.

3. Research Methodology

The researchers employed a qualitative, secondary data analysis approach combined with a narrative literature review. The research did not involve primary data collection (such as interviews or surveys); instead, it systematically gathered and synthesised information from existing sources that are pertinent to the research

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objectives. The research question of this study is: What are the key factors influencing the implementation of a merit-based recruitment system in South African local government, and how do they affect sustainable service delivery?

The study focused on collecting data and literature from the period 2020–2025 to ensure up-to-date insights. The study specifically utilised peer-reviewed articles on public administration, local government, and human resource management to understand theoretical perspectives and prior research findings on merit-based systems, professionalisation, and service delivery. This included works by both local and international scholars (for example, studies on cadre deployment, meritocracy outcomes, and capacity building in municipalities). Furthermore, recent reports from oversight bodies and institutions provided empirical evidence. Critical among these were the Auditor-General's Consolidated Reports on Local Government Audit Outcomes for financial years 2020-21 and 2021-22, which contain data on municipal performance, compliance, and capacity issues. Publications by Statistics South Africa (such as Census 2022 service delivery analysis) gave quantitative indicators of service delivery reach and quality (Stats SA, 2024). Reports and press releases from the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA), including media statements by the Minister and the content of the Professionalisation Framework, were used to gauge policy shifts. The National School of Government's 2022 Professionalisation Framework document was a key policy source.

The text of relevant legislation (Municipal Systems Act and its amendments, MFMA, and constitutional provisions) was examined, primarily through government gazettes and legal databases (Municipal Systems Act 2000). This ensured an accurate understanding of the legal requirements for municipal HR practices. Since the research covers contemporary developments, reputable news outlets were considered for reporting on issues like service delivery protests and notable events. For example, an article in the *Mail & Guardian* (Masson, 2023) was used for data on the number of protests and to contextualise public sentiment. However, care was taken to use media sources primarily to illustrate or supplement findings from official reports and research, rather than as primary evidence.

The data search keywords included combinations of terms such as "merit-based system South Africa," "local government skills shortage," "service delivery protests South Africa," "municipal audit outcomes," "professionalisation public service," and "cadre deployment local government." Searches were conducted via academic databases (e.g., Sabinet, JSTOR, Google Scholar), official websites (for AGSA, Stats SA, NSG, etc.), and general search engines for news and grey literature. The search was iterative, with initial broad searches leading to the identification of key sources, which were then snowballed to find additional relevant data (for instance, finding a statistic in a news article, then tracing it to the original report). The gathered data were analysed using a narrative and thematic approach. Being an exploratory, descriptive study, the analysis sought to piece together a coherent narrative of the current state of local government capacity and how a merit-based approach could address its challenges. Key themes that emerged and were systematically examined included:

- The impact of non-merit appointments on service delivery (e.g., through themes of *skills mismatches*, *corruption/nepotism*, *accountability deficits*).
- Evidence of capacity constraints (such as use of consultants, vacancy rates, audit findings).
- The benefits of meritocratic practices, drawing from theory, other countries' experiences, and any examples within South Africa.
- Recent reforms and their intended effects (theme of *professionalisation efforts*).
- The relationship between meritocracy and sustainable service delivery (bringing together earlier themes to address the core research question).

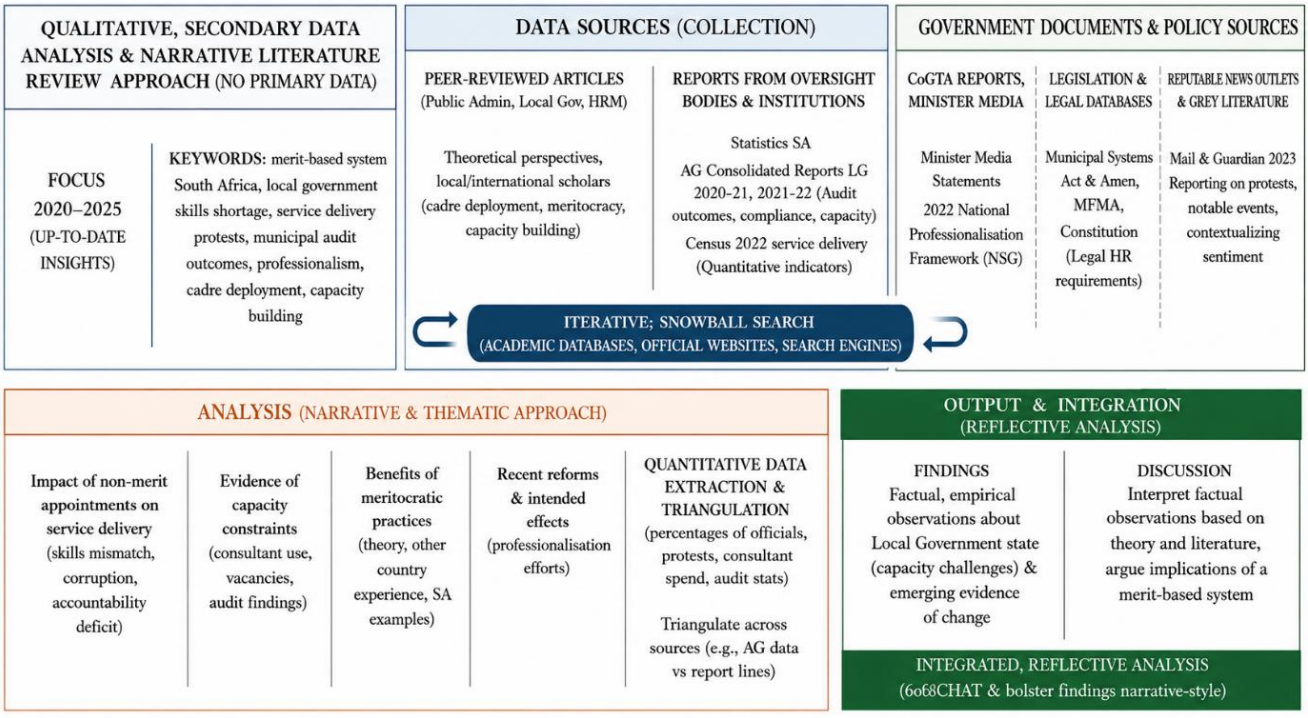
Where possible, quantitative data, such as percentages of qualified officials, numbers of protests, consultant expenditures, and audit statistics, were extracted to provide concrete evidence within the narrative. These data points were triangulated across sources to ensure reliability; for example, a figure reported by the Auditor-General was cross-checked against the AG's official report lines or an official press release (Auditor-General of South

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Africa, 2022). The literature review was integrated with the data findings to allow for a reflective analysis, meaning this paper does not rigidly separate findings and discussion but rather uses the literature to explain and bolster the findings narratively. However, for clarity and to meet academic structure requirements, distinct sections for "Findings" and "Discussion" are presented. The paper presents factual, empirical observations on the state of local government (capacity challenges) and notes emerging evidence of change. These findings are interpreted in light of theoretical expectations and the literature, and arguments are made about the implications of adopting a merit-based system.

By using this qualitative synthesis approach, the paper ensures a comprehensive view that is grounded in evidence yet able to engage with abstract concepts (like meritocracy and good governance). The approach is appropriate for the topic because it addresses complex social and administrative phenomena that require an understanding of context and causality, which pure quantitative analysis might not fully capture. The narrative style also makes the content accessible by linking cause and effect (how cadre deployment leads to poor outcomes and how merit appointments could alter that). As a secondary analysis, the study is limited by the quality and scope of available data. Some desired data (for example, a precise number of municipal staff vacancies nationwide or qualitative insights from municipal officials) were not readily available or up to date. There is also an inherent challenge in directly attributing improvements to merit-based practices, since multiple factors affect service delivery. However, by drawing on authoritative and recent sources and triangulating multiple forms of evidence, the study mitigates these limitations. The focus on the 2020–2025 period means that very recent developments are considered, but long-term historical trends are touched on only briefly (for context). Overall, the methodology provides a balanced and scholarly underpinning for the paper's analysis, ensuring that conclusions and recommendations are supported by documented evidence and established theory. Figure 1 illustrates the schematic representation of the research methodology adopted in this study.

Figure 1. Schematic representation of research methodology for this study



Source: compiled by the authors

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4. Findings

Capacity Challenges in South African Local Government

The research finds that South African local governments face severe capacity and governance challenges, many of which can be linked to the absence of a strong meritocratic system in public sector employment. These challenges directly impair the municipalities' ability to deliver services sustainably. A consistent theme in the data is that many municipalities lack personnel with the necessary skills in critical areas. As noted earlier, by 2020, only about half of senior municipal officials nationwide met the minimum competency criteria for their jobs. Fields like financial management, engineering, and project management are particularly affected by shortages of qualified staff. For instance, *municipal engineering departments* often struggle to retain professionally registered engineers, affecting infrastructure maintenance and expansion. In 2020, a study highlighted that only 53% of senior managers in municipalities were appropriately qualified. This skills deficit has real consequences: complex tasks like compiling annual financial statements, planning water and sanitation systems, or managing procurement processes are not executed properly, leading to service delivery failures and audit findings.

High Reliance on Consultants due to Skills Gaps

Because of internal capacity limitations, municipalities have increasingly turned to consultants to perform essential functions, especially in financial reporting and technical projects. The Auditor-General reported that in the 2020-21 financial year, 62% of municipalities hired consultants to supplement the expertise of their finance units, and another 7% did so to fill vacant positions. In 2021-22, municipalities collectively spent R1.61 billion on financial reporting consultants, a 19% increase from R1.36 billion the previous year (Auditor-General of South Africa, 2022). These consultants are often used to prepare financial statements and asset registers, tasks that regular municipal staff should ideally handle (Auditor-General of South Africa, 2022). While consultants can provide short-term relief, the Auditor-General has warned that this practice is not sustainable – it does not build internal capacity. It often indicates that municipalities lack the necessary skills or fail to train and retain their own employees (Auditor-General of South Africa, 2022). Indeed, some municipalities repeatedly use consultants year after year, effectively outsourcing core responsibilities. This is costly and sometimes ineffective; in a few cases, consultants failed to deliver the desired outcomes, resulting in wasteful expenditure (Auditor-General of South Africa, 2022). The underlying cause is that municipalities cannot find or attract skilled professionals to work in the public sector, or that hiring processes have resulted in less competent individuals who then require external help to do the job.

Vacancies and Turnover in Key Positions

Many municipalities experience instability in leadership positions. It is not uncommon for posts such as Municipal Manager or Chief Financial Officer to remain vacant or be filled in an acting capacity for extended periods. The HSRC's Municipal Capacity Assessment (2022) noted "high vacancy rates for key positions" as a recurring problem. Such instability disrupts strategic planning and weakens oversight of municipal operations. Frequent turnover – often due to political changes or dismissals tied to patronage shifts – results in the loss of institutional memory and momentum. Some municipalities have had multiple municipal managers within a single five-year term, each with possibly different priorities and varying levels of competence. This churn is exacerbated by the practice of cadre deployment, in which changes in political leadership can lead to the wholesale replacement of senior staff to align with new political patrons, rather than continuity based on merit.

Cadre Deployment and Non-Merit Appointments

The evidence strongly indicates that political appointments have undermined capacity. The ruling party (ANC) 's cadre deployment policy, which aimed to place loyalists in strategic positions, has often resulted in appointments made without due regard to merit or competence (Shava & Chamisa, 2018). A critical finding of the State Capture Commission (2022) was that such deployment was abused to facilitate patronage networks and was *"a key driver of state capture"*, even deemed unconstitutional in effect (Newswire, 2022; Mkhize, Thusi and Kayembe, 2025).

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In local government, cadre deployment has manifested in municipal councils, influencing who gets appointed as managers or section heads, sometimes overruling recommendations of hiring panels. Makole (2022) finds that cadre deployment in the public service "denies qualified graduates' opportunities" and skews hiring in favour of *"unqualified political appointees,"* thereby severely undermining state capacity. The consequence is that many municipalities have managers who are politically connected but inept, leading to poor decision-making, mismanagement, and in some cases, corruption. The morale among competent staff is also eroded in such environments, because merit and performance are not rewarded, reducing incentives for excellence or innovation.

Poor Governance and Accountability Practices

A lack of skilled, merit-appointed officials has a knock-on effect on governance. Internal controls in many municipalities are weak – evidenced by the prevalence of unauthorised, irregular, and fruitless expenditure reported by the Auditor-General each year. For example, in 2021-22, municipalities incurred billions of rands in irregular expenditures (often due to bypassing procurement rules), which suggests that officials either do not know the rules or willingly break them. The Auditor-General noted a "decline in adequate consequence management" for such transgressions (Auditor-General of South Africa, 2022). This means that even when wrongdoing or incompetence is identified, municipalities often fail to act (like disciplining or firing the responsible officials), which perpetuates a culture of impunity. The Public Service Commission has flagged that political interference in disciplinary processes often lets officials with serious misconduct off the hook. All of this is intertwined with non-merit appointments. When officials are in their posts due to connections, they might be protected by the same connections even if they underperform or engage in malpractice. Moreover, councillors and mayors may be reluctant to act against allies. The net effect is poor governance – financial mismanagement (wasting or misappropriating service delivery funds) and the erosion of public trust.

Service Delivery Outcomes and Protests

The ultimate test of capacity and governance is whether services are delivered. Unfortunately, the research confirms that in many municipalities, service delivery outcomes have been suboptimal or outright failing. There are municipalities where tap water is unsafe or does not flow regularly, where refuse is not collected, where electricity outages are common (aside from loadshedding), and where roads and sewer systems are crumbling. These failures have been a catalyst for community protests. As noted, 2022 saw 193 major service delivery protests across the country (Masson, 2023). Many of these protests specifically cite local issues: lack of water, persistent power failures, potholed roads, or incomplete housing projects. Analysis by Municipal IQ shows that the most protest-prone provinces (Gauteng, Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal) are often those with municipalities in financial or administrative distress (Masson, 2023). The protests themselves sometimes turn violent, destroying municipal property – ironically worsening service delivery further. This level of public unrest signals that communities are not experiencing the promised improvements in services and correlates with dysfunction attributable to capacity deficits and mismanagement within local authorities.

To summarise the capacity challenges: South African local government is in many cases caught in a vicious cycle where lack of skilled staff leads to poor performance and governance, which in turn leads to service failures and public discontent, which then sometimes prompts short-term political fixes (like replacing people for political appeasement rather than fixing structural issues), further destabilising administrations. The data strongly suggests that breaking this cycle requires addressing the root problem of human resource capacity. A municipality can only be as good as the people who run it – this aligns with the earlier theoretical emphasis on person-job fit. The findings clearly show that current practices have often resulted in *misfits*: people in roles without the needed competence.

However, there are also signs of progress and recognition of these issues in recent years: Firstly, the national government's approval of a Professionalisation Framework in 2022 and the Cabinet's explicit call to "ditch" cadre deployment indicate a high-level acknowledgement of the problem (National School of Government, 2022). This

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is a positive development; acknowledging the problem is the first step to solving it. As of mid-2023, municipalities are legally prohibited from appointing senior managers without proper qualifications and must vet candidates through competency assessments. Some provinces have started nullifying dubious appointments. For example, in 2023, the Eastern Cape provincial government invalidated the appointment of a municipal manager who didn't meet the requirements for a certain municipality. These enforcement actions set precedents and send a message that qualifications and merit matter. Even under current pressures, a few municipalities have maintained good performance, often credited to strong, qualified management teams. The Midvaal Local Municipality in Gauteng is frequently cited for consistently achieving clean audits and meeting most of its service delivery targets, thanks in part to a stable administration with skilled officials (Auditor-General of South Africa, 2022). Such cases demonstrate what is possible when capacity is in place. They also show that having merit-based hiring (whether by policy or by coincidence of good leadership) correlates with better outcomes, reinforcing the argument for wider application of those principles.

Overall, the *Findings* highlight a clear gap between the current state of many municipalities and the *desired state* of a professional, high-performing local government sphere. This gap is largely a function of human resource failings – a gap that a merit-based system aims to fill. The next subsection of findings will directly address how a merit-based approach is beneficial and what evidence exists for those benefits, setting the stage for a more analytical discussion of how to transition to such a system.

5. Benefits of a Merit-Based System for Local Governance

The literature and empirical evidence highlight multiple benefits of adopting a merit-based public sector system, particularly at the local government level, where capacity and governance challenges are acute. Such a system can improve service delivery, strengthen governance, and ensure the sustainability of interventions by ensuring that capable and qualified individuals fill positions. Merit-based recruitment improves internal functioning by placing skilled people in roles where their expertise enables efficient processes, accurate service delivery, and timely task completion. In municipal contexts, this translates into better billing and revenue collection, improved infrastructure maintenance schedules, and more rigorous project management, all of which contribute to consistent service provision.

Transparency in appointments also weakens corrupt patronage networks. Open and competitive selection processes empower citizens to hold government accountable by exposing hiring practices to scrutiny, thereby deterring appointments based on loyalty or personal connections. In South Africa, where public accountability has often been compromised, requiring positions to be earned on merit diminishes the perception and reality of a "spoils system." Career bureaucrats selected on merit are more likely to adhere to professional ethics and less beholden to political patrons, increasing their willingness to enforce rules and resist malpractice. International evidence further shows that meritocratic civil services correlate with lower corruption levels, partly because staff have more to lose when performance, rather than political favour, determines career progression.

Merit-based systems also attract top talent. Talented graduates and experienced professionals are more inclined to join public service if career advancement is based on competence rather than favouritism (Sudrajat, 2023). Such systems expand the recruitment pool, ensure equal opportunity, and help retain high performers. Conversely, in politicised environments, skilled staff often leave or disengage when advancement is blocked by nepotism. Public trust in local government can be restored when communities see that officials are appointed fairly and deliver results. The National Framework towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector identifies merit-based recruitment as central to reversing negative perceptions of public service hiring (Newswire, 2022). Examples such as competent engineers repairing infrastructure or skilled CFOs restoring municipal finances demonstrate visible improvements that bolster legitimacy, encourage resident cooperation, and support social stability.

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Qualified professionals in a meritocratic environment are better positioned to implement policy effectively and innovate solutions to local challenges. Such systems integrate training and development, as seen in initiatives by the National School of Government, which enhance adaptability to technological and environmental changes. Without qualified staff, even well-designed policies, like smart metering, can fail. With competent teams, resources are used more efficiently, and service delivery supports the broader developmental agenda. The National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 goals, including universal access to basic services, depend on municipalities staffed by skilled administrators.

Experience from certain municipalities shows the value of professionalisation. The Western Cape, for example, recorded the highest proportion of clean audits and better service delivery in 2021–22, partly due to stricter merit-based hiring and less political interference. The Auditor-General has praised municipalities with strong audit outcomes for having stable, qualified leadership and effective financial and performance management systems. Recent policy reforms are promising. The 2022 legislative amendments prohibiting senior officials from holding political office and requiring specific qualifications have begun to improve the quality of recruitment. Some municipal manager posts now attract candidates from beyond traditional political networks, including private sector professionals and officials from other provinces, broadening the talent base. While the full impact will take time to materialise, these developments suggest a shift toward openness and competitiveness.

Makole (2022) reinforces the argument that abandoning cadre deployment in favour of performance-based meritocracy is essential for fulfilling democratic promises. By appointing the most competent individuals, municipalities can better utilise scarce financial and human resources, reduce waste, and improve delivery in critical areas such as water, electricity, waste management, and local economic development. Ultimately, moving to a merit-based system in local government is not a superficial HR reform but a foundational transformation. It directly addresses root causes of municipal underperformance, skills deficits and weak accountability, leading to more effective daily operations and better outcomes for citizens. This shift promises to replace cycles of dysfunction with systems that reward competence, professionalism, and service to the public, thereby building the institutional capacity needed for sustainable service delivery.

6. Discussion

The findings above paint a clear picture of why a merit-based public sector system is desirable for South African local government: it would directly counteract the capacity shortfalls and governance failures that hinder service delivery. In this discussion, we delve deeper into the implications of these findings, connect them with the theoretical framework and literature, and consider the pathways and challenges to realising a meritocratic local government. The central argument remains that *adopting merit-based recruitment and professionalisation is pivotal for sustainable service delivery improvement*. Here, we discuss *how and why* that is the case, as well as acknowledge the complexities involved in the transition. The Person-Job Fit Theory highlighted earlier is strongly corroborated by the evidence. Where there is misalignment (unqualified individuals in roles), performance suffers; where alignment is present (qualified, competent officials), performance improves. This seems intuitive, but is worth stressing – *getting the right people in the right jobs is a prerequisite for everything else*. Sustainable service delivery (which means consistent, ongoing delivery that meets current needs without compromising the ability to meet future needs) relies on systems and processes. Still, those, in turn, rely on people to design, operate, and maintain them. For example, a water treatment plant's sustainability depends on skilled engineers and managers overseeing it. No amount of funding or political will can compensate for a lack of necessary skills; eventually, the plant will fall into disrepair or operate below capacity. Conversely, a team of competent, motivated individuals can often do more with less – stretching limited resources, innovating to solve problems, and pre-emptively addressing maintenance issues. The findings about consultant reliance and financial mismanagement underscore that South Africa has been paying a price for poor person-job fit. This, in turn, strengthens the case that a merit-based approach (which maximises person-job fit) would yield better outcomes.

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The discussion of benefits highlighted improved accountability and reduced corruption as expected outcomes of meritocracy. This deserves further exploration. *How exactly does merit-based hiring improve accountability?* The answer lies in both the type of individuals hired and the system around them. First, individuals selected on merit are likely to have stronger professional ethics (though this is not guaranteed; the recruitment process can include vetting of integrity and references). They also do not owe their position to a political patron, so they may feel freer to enforce rules even if it displeases politicians. Second, the act of hiring transparently sets a tone of the rule of law in the organisation. If a municipal council conspicuously follows proper procedure to hire a new manager (open advert, competitive interview, etc.), it signals to everyone in the administration that rules matter – which can translate to better enforcement of procurement rules, financial controls, etc., by that manager. This helps break the culture of impunity. Empirically, as mentioned, municipalities with clean audits tend to have had merit-based appointments, at least at the technical level; they often also have political leadership that respects administrative autonomy. The New South Institute's (2024) policy brief suggests strategies for reforming the senior civil service on the basis of merit to ensure sound governance. It argues that "political ties often take precedence over aptitude and skill" in the current system, and that reversing this will lead to more effective government. Our findings echo this: political appointments bred the dysfunction; hence, merit appointments can remedy it by placing skill and aptitude at the forefront.

The October 2022 Cabinet approval of the Professionalisation Framework marked a decisive moment in South Africa's governance reform agenda. The framework's language was unusually candid for a government policy document, explicitly criticising "deployment practices" and calling for a shift back to merit-based appointments. This change in tone was prompted by the damning findings of the Zondo Commission, combined with years of pressure from civil society and political opposition, including legal challenges to cadre deployment. The framework proposes a range of concrete measures: public service entry exams, compulsory integrity tests, and the creation of a Head of the Public Service to oversee the career progression of senior officials in a non-partisan way. For local government, recommendations include strengthening recruitment processes and engaging professional bodies, such as the Institute of Municipal Finance Officers, to vet key appointments, such as Chief Financial Officers. If fully implemented, these proposals could entrench meritocratic systems and make regression to politically driven appointments more difficult. However, policy adoption does not guarantee implementation. Resistance is likely, especially from individuals and networks benefiting from the current system. Even within the ANC, some members rejected Zondo's stance on cadre deployment as overreach. At the municipal level, councillors accustomed to influencing recruitment may resist losing that power. Overcoming this will require rigorous oversight, supported by legislative tools allowing provinces to nullify improperly made senior appointments. The Public Service Commission, civil society organisations, the media, and public opinion will be vital watchdogs in ensuring compliance and deterring cronyism.

Meritocracy must also coexist with South Africa's transformation objectives. Critics sometimes argue that strict merit-based systems disadvantage historically disadvantaged groups who, because of past inequalities, may lack the qualifications demanded. The framework addresses this by advocating universal merit standards while expanding training, mentorship, and professional development to increase the pool of qualified candidates from all backgrounds. Historical context reveals that pre-1994 nepotism often advantaged unqualified white individuals; today, nepotism can cross racial lines. The Constitution's principles of "ability, objectivity, fairness, and the need to redress past imbalances" support an approach that does not lower standards but instead helps more candidates reach them. Researchers such as Makole (2022) reinforce this balanced view: uphold merit while accelerating skills development for disadvantaged groups. The shift to merit-based appointments will not deliver instant results. Some municipalities are so institutionally damaged that even highly competent new managers may take years to reverse entrenched problems like debt, failing infrastructure, and unskilled staff. Nonetheless, improvements such as better financial discipline or customer service could be realised within a year, with more substantial outcomes, including reliable service delivery and cleaner audits, achievable over a 3–5-year horizon.

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Professionalisation must be seen as a long-term process. The “professionalisation value chain" outlined by the National School of Government covers the full cycle of human resource development: pre-service training, recruitment, onboarding, performance management, and career progression. Mandatory training tied to promotion, partnerships with universities to build graduate pipelines, and mentorship from ethical professionals can strengthen this chain. Beyond internal operations, professionalisation can improve public engagement. Competent, confident officials are better positioned to engage communities transparently, encouraging citizen cooperation rather than protest. These dynamic supports enable the co-production of services, where residents actively contribute, such as by reporting infrastructure issues or paying for services. Municipalities that demonstrate responsive, reliable service provision can foster public trust, creating a positive feedback loop that supports sustained performance improvements.

The framework's emphasis on meritocracy resonates with foundational public administration theories: Weber's bureaucratic model, which stresses neutral competence; the Wilsonian separation of politics from administration; and New Public Management's focus on measurable performance. In South Africa, blurred lines between politics and administration have compromised service delivery; the merit-based approach seeks to restore professional neutrality as a cornerstone of governance. Ethics are integral to this reform. Technical qualifications alone are insufficient; an ethical public service ethos must be cultivated. If recruitment is based on loyalty rather than competence, it signals tolerance for bending the rules. Merit-based hiring allows for ethical vetting, such as checking for past misconduct or conflicts of interest. Over time, this can build a professional cadre of career civil servants who identify primarily as public servants rather than political operatives. This cultural shift valuing rule-based integrity over patronage can be as impactful as structural changes.

With professionalisation now a formal government policy, there is an opportunity for scholars and practitioners to contribute to its practical implementation. Research could focus on municipalities piloting these reforms or evaluating the effects of new training programs. This process represents a live experiment in state reform, offering valuable lessons for governance in South Africa and beyond. A merit-based public sector offers a coherent response to multiple interlinked challenges facing local government. If recruitment and promotion are based on ability, municipalities can rebuild capacity, improve services, and restore public trust. The rationale is well-supported by both theory and comparative evidence. While resistance and implementation challenges remain, these can be overcome through political leadership, institutional oversight, and active civic engagement. As the 2026 local government elections approach, municipalities will increasingly be judged on their operational competence, creating both a principled and pragmatic reason to embrace meritocracy: it is ethically sound and politically strategic for councils aiming to demonstrate tangible progress to voters.

7. Recommendations

A schematic framework (Figure 2) is further provided to distil the study’s argument by showing the logical flow from the constitutional mandate for sustainable service delivery to the systemic capacity deficits caused by political interference, cadre deployment, and skills mismatches. The Person–Job Fit Theory provides the conceptual link between merit-based recruitment and improved municipal performance. At the core is the argument that professionalisation through qualified appointments, targeted skills development, and reduced political interference can strengthen capacity, accountability, and service quality while reducing corruption. The framework also highlights the study’s contribution as both an empirical case for meritocracy in South African local government and a policy guide aligned with the National Framework towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector.

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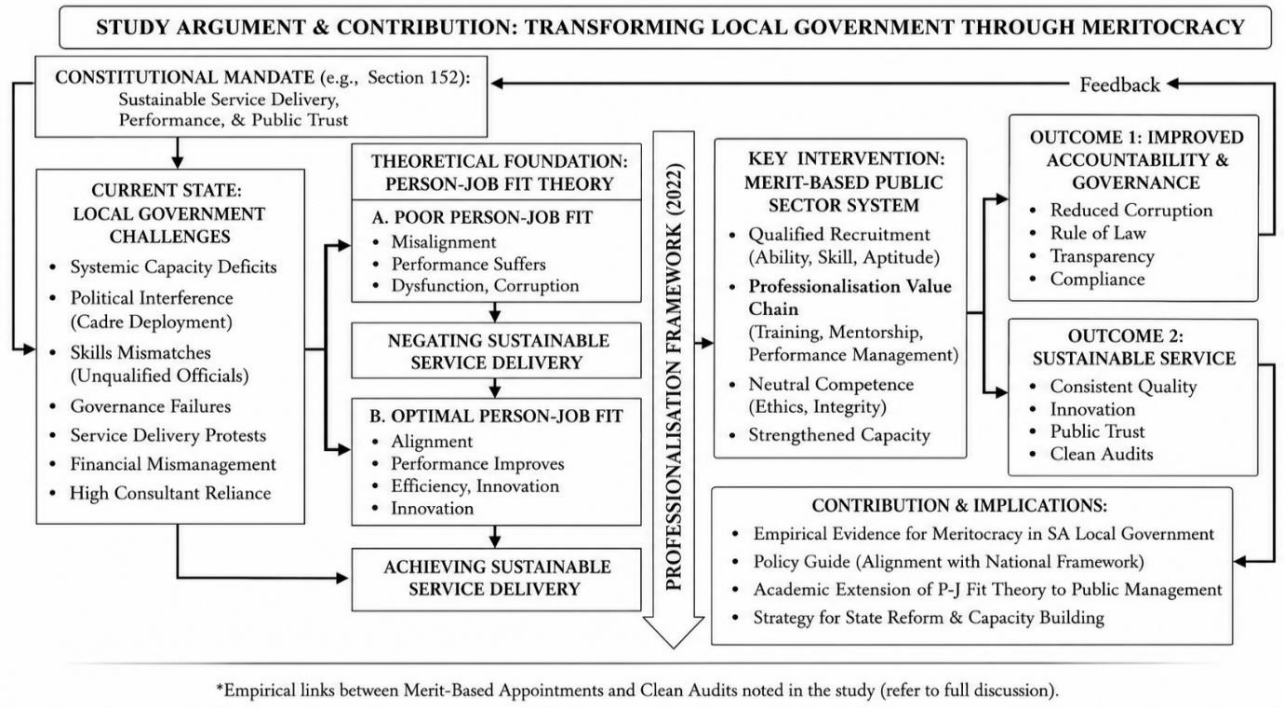


Figure 2. Conceptual framework for merit-based recruitment and professionalisation in South African local government
Source: compiled by the authors

Based on the conceptual framework developed above, the authors recommend the following measures:

- Political leadership should refrain from interfering in municipalities' nationwide recruitment processes; instead, administrative leadership should assume responsibility for these systems. Ensuring a clear line of authority will foster transparency and accountability in the recruitment process.
- The Human Resources Management Unit within municipalities must ensure that individuals appointed to positions meet the necessary qualifications. To achieve this goal, it is essential to involve experts from the respective fields in the recruitment process. These experts can provide insights into the specific skills and competencies required for each role, enhancing the overall quality of the hiring process.
- Administrative leadership in municipalities across South Africa should advocate for the professionalisation of the public service, ensuring that appointees are well suited to their roles. This professionalisation can include ongoing training and development programs that keep employees up to date on best practices and emerging trends in public administration. Additionally, administrative leadership should establish strong control systems to prevent any political interference in the recruitment process. This could involve implementing standardised procedures and transparent criteria for evaluating candidates, allowing for fair assessments based solely on merit.
- Furthermore, municipalities should consider adopting technology-driven solutions, such as applicant tracking systems, to streamline the recruitment process and maintain an organised record of applicants. By leveraging technology, the recruitment process can be made more efficient and reduce the potential for bias. Lastly, ongoing evaluations of the recruitment processes should be conducted to ensure they remain effective and aligned with the evolving needs of the municipalities. Regular feedback from employees and community stakeholders can help identify areas for improvement and reinforce the commitment to a fair and professional public service.

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8. Conclusion

Over three decades into democracy, South Africa's local government system continues to struggle to meet its constitutional mandate of delivering sustainable services to all. This paper identifies a chronic skills and capacity deficit in municipalities as a central cause, rooted in persistent non-meritocratic hiring practices, including cadre deployment, nepotism, and politically motivated appointments. These approaches have repeatedly placed unqualified or unsuitable individuals in critical posts, undermining efficiency, accountability, and the effectiveness of governance. The consequences are most severe for the country's poorest citizens, who often face inconsistent or inadequate access to water, sanitation, electricity, refuse removal, and road maintenance.

Public dissatisfaction is reflected in hundreds of service delivery protests since the inception of democratic local government, with a sharp increase in recent years. These protests are grassroots expressions of frustration, signalling that in many communities, living conditions have stagnated or worsened. Each reported case of municipal corruption, infrastructure collapse, or governance failure reinforces the urgency for reform. A decisive shift toward merit-based systems is essential. Under meritocracy, recruitment and promotion prioritise qualifications, competence, experience, and ethical conduct over political loyalty or personal connections. Evidence shows that such systems, coupled with professionalisation, align staff capabilities with job demands, leading to better planning, resource management, infrastructure maintenance, and problem-solving. While implementation will face resistance from entrenched political interests and require substantial training, these are challenges of execution rather than of principle.

To operationalise this shift, strict enforcement of the 2022 legislative amendments and related regulations is needed, with oversight by bodies such as the Auditor-General and the Public Service Commission. Capacity-building initiatives should train HR personnel in competency-based recruitment, supported by toolkits from the DPSA, DCoG, and SALGA. Political leaders must respect the separation of political and administrative roles, reinforced through orientation and best-practice examples. Finally, recruitment processes should be transparent and participatory, with wide advertising, published criteria, and community observer involvement to build public trust. Embedding meritocracy in local government is both a reaffirmation of core principles of public administration and a strategic reform aligned with developmental goals. Professionalisation is not optional; it is vital. Failure to act will perpetuate service delivery breakdowns, public unrest, and declining trust in local democracy. At the same time, a merit-based approach offers the promise of capable, ethical, and citizen-centred municipalities that deliver consistently and sustainably.

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DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY ADOPTION IN SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES: EMPLOYEE READINESS AND ORGANISATIONAL CAPABILITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract. Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in South Africa face increasing pressure to adapt to technological changes as digital transformation becomes essential for corporate resilience, competitiveness, and long-term sustainability. However, a significant gap remains in the literature on how these enterprises are prepared to implement and sustain digital transformation, particularly regarding organisational capabilities and digital skills. Government interventions and public policy support SMEs' digitalisation; however, their effectiveness is limited due to a lack of contextual relevance, accessibility, and low awareness. Therefore, this study examines the anticipated readiness and utilisation of digital technology among South African SMEs, focusing on the structural, strategic, and human capital capabilities required for successful transformation. A systematic desktop analysis was utilised using 86 peer-reviewed academic articles, policy documents, and institutional reports published over the past decade. The findings of the study reveal that although government intervention and digital support initiatives exist, they often fail to reach their intended beneficiaries due to misalignment with SME-specific challenges. Findings indicate notable disparities in SMEs' strategic alignment with digital goals, technology investment behaviours, employee digital literacy, and leadership preparedness. Moreover, the findings inform policy development and capacity-building efforts among policymakers, enterprise development agencies, and SME owners by contributing to the discourse on digital transformation in developing economies. Drawing on the Technology Organisation Environment (TOE) framework and the Resource-Based View (RBV), the study analyses the readiness of South African SMEs for digital transformation, identifying strategic, capability, skills, and policy gaps that constrain digital resilience and competitiveness.

Keywords: digital technology; SME's, employee readiness; organisational capability; Resource-Based View

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JEL Classifications: M21, O32

1. Introduction

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2025), Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SME) in South Africa play an imperative role in alleviating poverty and inequality and improving livelihoods. South Africa's SMEs contribute over 34% of the country's GDP and account for approximately 60% of employment (The Department of Trade, Industry, and Competition, 2019). The competitiveness and long-term sustainability of SMEs in the digital era increasingly rely on their ability to adopt and effectively utilise digital technologies (Vrontis et al. 2022; Parra-Sánchez & Talero-Sarmiento, 2023).

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Evidence suggests that digital tools such as cloud computing, enterprise resource planning (ERP), e-commerce platforms, artificial intelligence (AI), and data analytics can significantly transform SME operations, lower costs, expand market reach, and improve decision-making (World Bank, 2025). Despite the transformative potential of digital innovations, South African SMEs continue to exhibit slow to adoption, attributing this delay to various organisational, structural, and human capital hurdles (GCIS, 2021; Mashavira et al., 2022). Employee readiness remains a critical constraint to digital transformation in South African SMEs, encompassing factors such as digital literacy, willingness to adapt, training availability, and perceptions of job security (Ben Arfi & Hikkerova, 2021). Many employees in SMEs exhibit insufficient digital competencies. In contrast, others resist technological change, often due to fears of redundancy or a lack of adequate support structures. Furthermore, organisational capability, which encompasses leadership commitment, technological infrastructure, change management processes, and an innovation culture, is often weak or underdeveloped in many local SMEs (Saah & Mbohwa, 2025; Mkansi & Nsakanda, 2025; Siljeur et al., 2026; Belete & Murthy, 2026).

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the digital divide, showing that SMEs with greater digital maturity exhibited enhanced resilience and adaptability throughout the crisis (UNCTAD, 2021). The acceleration of digitalisation during the pandemic revealed existing structural weaknesses in organisational agility and workforce preparedness among many South African SMEs (Stats SA, 2021). The National Digital and Future Skills Strategy of South Africa (2020–2030) identifies the critical need to cultivate a digitally proficient workforce and to enhance institutional support for digital adoption within small and medium enterprises (Department of Communications and Digital Technologies, 2020). This study examines the dual aspects of employee readiness and organisational capability in facilitating the adoption of digital technology within South African SMEs. This study seeks to offer empirical insights into the interaction between these two factors and identify necessary interventions to promote successful digital transformation in this critical economic sector.

2. Problem Statement

In 1995, the South African government adopted the White Paper on National Strategy for the Development and Promotion of Small Business in SA (DTI, 1995). At the time, just a year into the new democratic dispensation, the government faced multiple challenges, including high unemployment rates, high levels of inequality as reflected in the Gini Coefficient, and the urgent need to facilitate and champion economic transformation in the country. The government's promise of a better life for all had to be taken seriously. Central to the government's approach to employment creation, poverty alleviation, and transformation were SMEs. The national government identified the SMEs as key drivers of job creation, economic growth, and inequality reduction in South Africa. The government recognised the SME sector as an unexplored, strategically significant mechanism for creating employment opportunities and addressing the unemployment crisis. While the government and prominent scholars held this perception at the time, there was also an acknowledgement of underlying constraints limiting the growth and sustainability of SMEs in SA. These constraints included an unfavourable legal and regulatory environment confronting SMEs, limited access to markets, finance, and affordable business premises, inadequate managerial and technical skills and a lack of access to appropriate technology, poor business infrastructure in poverty areas, and, in some cases, the tax burden.

However, empirical evidence suggests that despite the implementation of numerous support initiatives, the majority of SMEs, especially those in rural areas, still lack information on how to obtain support from government institutions and their stakeholders. Jili, Masuku, and Selepe (2017) assert that 90% of surveyed SMEs had never received support from the government institutions. This study will investigate South African SMEs' anticipated readiness for and utilisation of digital technology, with a focus on the structural, strategic, and human capital capabilities required for successful transformation. A systematic desktop analysis was conducted, using 100 peer-reviewed academic articles, policy documents, and institutional reports published over the last decade.

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3. Methodology

As with any other research paper, for a literature review to be considered a proper research methodology, the necessary steps and actions must be taken to ensure the review is accurate, precise, and reliable. Given the research question for this paper, a semi-systematic literature review was conducted to examine the relationships among digital technology adoption, employee readiness, and organisational capability in South African SMEs. A semi-systematic literature review, also known as the narrative review approach, is a type of review that follows partial as opposed to full guidelines of a systematic review in terms of a literature survey and selection, but also includes steps of framing a written discourse about literature that can be used as part of the research process (Zunder, 2021; Al Hadwer et al., 2021). This type of review is designed for topics conceptualised differently and studied by various groups of researchers within diverse disciplines (Snyder, 2019; Schreiber & Cramer, 2022).

Information sources and data collection process

A search strategy for identifying relevant literature was developed and conducted between Jan 2024 and September 2025 under five electronic databases: Google Scholar, Sabinet, Social Science Citation Index (Web of Science), and EBSCOhost. Table 1 below presents the total results for each database during the preliminary literature search. The selected search terms included were "Digital technology", "SME's", "Employee Readiness", "Organisational Capability" AND **"**Resource-Based View". These terms are directly related to the research question of this review. The paper searched for literature within the past 20 years, as we needed older literature to better understand trends in digital transformation in SMEs in the South African context, with an emphasis on human and organisational factors.

Table 1. Results of the preliminary literature search using databases

Databases	Total number of results	Peer-reviewed papers	Included for review
Google Scholar	250	150	30
Sabinet	100	40	15
Social Science Citation Index (Web of Science)	65	40	29
EBSCOhost	50	30	12

Source: Authors' own compilation

Article selection

As shown in Table 1, our search yielded 465 articles; then duplicates and studies irrelevant to Digital Technology Adoption in Small and Medium-sized Enterprises: Employee Readiness and Organisational Capability in South Africa were removed, leaving a total of 260 articles. After a further rigorous review process and consideration of all the inclusion criteria (discussed in detail below), only 86 articles were selected for analysis. Data extraction involved first reading abstracts to make selections, followed by reading full-text articles before making the final selection. Once this step was completed and the initial articles (or other relevant literature) had been collected, the texts were screened in full to ensure they met the inclusion criteria. As an additional strategy, references in the selected articles were scanned to identify other potentially relevant articles. Findings were synthesised through thematic analysis, a method commonly used to identify, analyse and report patterns as themes within a text (Snyder, 2019). The abstracted data were based on findings and conceptualisation of digital technology adoption in small and medium-sized enterprises, focusing on employee readiness and organisational capability in South Africa.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Regarding research quality, deciding on inclusion and exclusion criteria is one of the most critical steps when conducting a review (Snyder, 2019). The inclusion criteria were the year of publication (between 2015 and 2024), the language of the article (strictly English), the types of articles (conceptual and empirical papers), and media

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sources, as well as reports from institutional organisations. The studies considered were qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods.

3. Literature Review

Entrepreneurship and Economic Growth

Over the past few decades, there has been a growing interest among scholars and policymakers worldwide in SMMEs and employment, particularly given high unemployment rates. Interest in SMMEs stems from several studies that have posited a link between entrepreneurial activity and economic growth, indicating that SMMEs are crucial and serve as the engine of economic growth (Carree, 2007; Wong et al., 2005; Bassanini et al., 2001). According to Baumol (1990), even if economies had an unlimited supply of entrepreneurs, economic growth would not occur without a supportive institutional environment. In other words, a supportive institutional environment favours the mobilisation of labour, capital and technology for productive endeavours, resulting in the accumulation of wealth (Acs et al., 2017). However, the Solow model allows no role for entrepreneurship, with appropriate institutional support, either as the basis for knowledge Spillovers or innovation and economic growth. Entrepreneurship, therefore, has considerably more importance to economic growth than is often given credit for by models such as the Solow model (Ramesh, 2020). Therefore, the study examines the relationship between the dependent variable and the independent variables using the three theories: the evolution theory of organisation, the resource-based theory, and the technology-organisation-environment theory, respectively.

Digital Transformation as a Strategic Imperative for SME Resilience and Growth

Research on the adoption of digital transformation by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) has garnered considerable attention, particularly amid recent economic changes and technological advances spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic. This literature consolidates extensive research clarifying the factors influencing digital transformation in SMEs, the obstacles encountered, and the potential benefits of its implementation. A crucial element of the discussion on digital transformation is technology's role as a catalyst for change. Teng et al. (2022) contend that integrating diverse digital technologies, such as artificial intelligence, IoT, and cloud computing, is essential for SMEs seeking to improve performance and gain competitive advantages in dynamic, contemporary contexts. Research indicates that the implementation of customised digital strategies is associated with efficient resource allocation, hence positively influencing total transformation (Zhang et al., 2022). Furthermore, the use of digital technologies may enhance resilience, enabling SMEs to adapt to complex environments and thereby redefining stability from mere survival to a state of antifragility that allows them to prosper during crises (Corvello et al., 2022).

Barriers to Digital Transformation Adoption in SMEs

Nonetheless, the adoption process is not without challenges. Pelletier and Cloutier (2019) emphasise the awareness and understanding of technical obstacles in SMEs, which frequently lack the necessary infrastructure and strategic frameworks to implement extensive digital changes. Lei et al. (2022) corroborate this view, indicating that the daunting aspects of digital transformation frequently induce reluctance among SMEs, especially in countries such as China, where economic sustainability depends on their ability to adapt quickly. These problems underscore the need for systematic strategies in digital transformation, advocating that SMEs implement gradual modifications rather than drastic reforms, as demonstrated by Priyono et al. (2020). Moreover, gender dynamics and leadership abilities are recognised as crucial elements in addressing the challenges of digital transformation. Alam et al. (2022) assert that leadership competencies and proficiency levels profoundly influence the effectiveness of digital efforts, especially during periods of disruption, such as the pandemic. This notion aligns with research findings that highlight the need for enhanced training and knowledge development among personnel to meet the technological requirements of digital transformation (Yen et al., 2024).

Strategic Approaches to Digital Transformation in SMEs

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The significance of strategic frameworks is evident, as highlighted by Sánchez et al. (2023) and Wang (2024), who promote the incorporation of digital strategies into organisational practices to enhance transformation outcomes. The identification of specific drivers, such as market competitiveness, knowledge management, and business model innovation, further exemplifies the intricate and context-dependent nature of digital transformation in SMEs (Ragazou et al., 2022). Given these foundations, SMEs are encouraged to develop customised strategies that account for their unique circumstances and market dynamics. In conclusion, the literature offers a comprehensive understanding of the digital transformation process for SMEs, emphasising the strategic necessity of technology adoption and the complex issues that arise from these projects. By employing strong leadership, customised strategies, and gradual execution, SMEs can enhance their ability to leverage the benefits of digital transformation in an evolving economic environment.

Evolutionary Theory of Organisations

The Evolutionary Theory of Organisations posits that firms operate in dynamic and continuously changing environments, requiring constant adaptation to survive and remain competitive (Ferreira da Silva et al., 2016). Market systems are inherently unstable and evolve in response to shifts in consumer needs, technological advancements, and competitive pressures, leading to ongoing disequilibrium (Kiveu & Ofafa, 2013). As a result, firms must continuously innovate, improve product and service quality, and identify new market opportunities to sustain a competitive advantage. Failure to adapt may result in declining performance and eventual market exit. In the context of this study, the theory explains the necessity for South African SMEs to adopt digital technologies as part of their adaptive response to a rapidly evolving digital economy. It highlights that employee readiness and organisational capability are critical enablers of this adaptation, as firms require skilled employees and agile structures to respond to technological change and shifting market demands effectively.

The Resource-Based View

Subsequently, the Resource-Based View (RBV) conceptualises the firm as a bundle of resources and capabilities that can generate sustained competitive advantage when they are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Barney, 1991; Mata, Fuerst & Barney, 1995). Originating in Penrose's (1959) work, the theory emphasises that firm growth depends on how effectively management utilises available resources. These resources include not only physical assets but also intangible elements such as knowledge, skills, organisational processes, and technological capabilities.

Empirical studies have demonstrated that firms with strong information systems (IS) capabilities tend to outperform their competitors (Bharadwaj, 2000; Santhanam & Hartono, 2003), while IS resources such as infrastructure, technical skills, and change management capabilities are critical for organisational performance (Wade & Hulland, 2024; Melville et al., 2024). In relation to this study, the RBV provides a lens for understanding how employees' digital literacy and organisational capability function as strategic resources within South African SMEs. Firms that possess strong digital skills, effective leadership, and robust technological infrastructure are better positioned to adopt and leverage digital technologies successfully. In contrast, resource-constrained SMEs face significant barriers to digital transformation.

The Technology-Organisation-Environment (TOE)

In line with the other theories mentioned, the Technology-Organisation-Environment (TOE) framework, developed by Tornatzky and Fleischer (1990), provides a comprehensive approach to understanding the factors influencing organisational adoption of technological innovations. The framework categorises these factors into three contexts: technological, organisational, and environmental. The technological context refers to the characteristics of the technology itself, such as complexity, compatibility, and security; the organisational context includes factors such as firm size, managerial support, and internal capabilities; and the environmental context encompasses external influences such as market competition, regulatory pressures, and government support. Compared with other models that focus on individual behaviour, such as the Technology Acceptance Model

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(Davis et al., 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003, 2008) and the Diffusion of Innovations theory (Rogers, 2003), the TOE framework is particularly well-suited to firm-level analysis. In this study, the TOE framework is applied to examine how technological readiness, organisational capability, and environmental factors collectively influence digital adoption among South African SMEs. Specifically, employee readiness aligns with the organisational context, while policy support and market pressures reflect the environmental dimension, enabling a holistic understanding of the enablers and barriers to digital transformation.

In conclusion, the Evolutionary Theory of Organisations, the RBV, and the TOE framework collectively offer a coherent and complementary foundation for understanding digital technology adoption among South African SMEs. The Evolutionary Theory highlights the imperative of continuous adaptation to rapidly changing technological and market conditions. At the same time, the RBV emphasises the strategic importance of internal resources, particularly employee skills and organisational capabilities, in achieving sustained competitive advantage. The TOE framework extends this understanding by integrating technological, organisational, and environmental dimensions that shape adoption decisions. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that successful digital transformation is not solely driven by access to technology, but by the alignment between internal capabilities and external pressures, thereby reinforcing the central role of employee readiness and organisational capability in this study.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that digital readiness among South African SMEs remains highly uneven. While some enterprises have effectively integrated digital technologies into their operations, many continue to rely on outdated systems and manual processes. Employee readiness emerged as a critical factor influencing the pace and success of digital adoption. Organisations with a digitally literate workforce tend to adapt more successfully and reap greater benefits due to enhanced organisational performance. Similarly, leadership commitment, as evidenced by clear digital strategies and technology investments, was found to influence transformation outcomes significantly. However, despite numerous government programmes supporting SME digitalisation, issues of awareness, accessibility, and contextual relevance persist. The findings suggest that both human and organisational capabilities must be strengthened for meaningful progress to occur.

5. Policy Implications

The results carry significant implications for policymakers, enterprise development agencies and institutional stakeholders. There is a clear need for inclusive digital literacy programmes that empower not only business owners but also employees. Government support must be context-sensitive, ensuring that rural and township-based SMEs can access and benefit from available resources. Collaboration among government, academic institutions, and the private sector is crucial for building integrated support systems. Furthermore, digital policies should align with the realities of SMEs, focusing on the practical barriers that hinder their digital transformation rather than adopting one-size-fits-all approaches.

6. Recommendations

Based on these insights, this research proposes several recommendations. Firstly, there is a need to invest in continuous digital training for employees to foster adaptability and confidence in new technologies. Secondly, SMEs should cultivate a culture of innovation that encourages digital experimentation. Thirdly, access to government digitalisation programmes should be simplified and decentralised to reach marginalised business communities. Lastly, public–private partnerships should be promoted to expand digital infrastructure, particularly in rural regions. These measures would collectively enhance SME resilience, productivity, and competitiveness in an increasingly digital economy.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study finds that digital transformation is not merely a technological challenge but fundamentally a human and organisational one. Employee readiness and organisational capability form the foundation upon which successful digital transformation is built. Without adequate skills, leadership commitment, and supportive structures, SMEs will struggle to leverage digital technologies effectively. For South Africa to achieve inclusive economic growth, we must prioritise building digital competencies and organisational resilience among our SMEs. Strengthening these areas will not only enhance business performance but also significantly contribute to national development goals, such as job creation, innovation, and competitiveness.

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HOUSING SATISFACTION AS A MEDIATING FACTOR BETWEEN HOUSING PROVISION AND QUALITY OF LIFE: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract. Adequate housing is a fundamental human right, yet the quality and satisfaction levels associated with Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) housing in South Africa remain a subject of ongoing concern. Despite government efforts to address housing backlogs, many beneficiaries continue to experience substandard living conditions that compromise their quality of life. This study investigated housing satisfaction as a mediating factor between housing provision and quality of life. A qualitative research approach, underpinned by a case study design, was employed. A purposive sample of six municipal officials from Mnquma Local Municipality participated in the study. Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, were strictly observed throughout the research process. Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability measures. Six themes emerged from the findings: housing quality and structural deficiencies; infrastructure and service delivery challenges; safety and social environment concerns; governance and institutional constraints; community participation and beneficiary involvement; and the broader relationship between housing and quality of life. The findings revealed persistent structural defects, inconsistent service delivery, safety concerns, weak institutional capacity, and limited community participation as key factors undermining housing satisfaction and quality of life among beneficiaries. Integrated, community-centred approaches that encompass construction quality enforcement, strengthened governance, reliable infrastructure, and meaningful participation are essential to improving RDP housing outcomes. Housing provision must be complemented by broader socioeconomic interventions to achieve sustainable human development.

Keywords: RDP housing; housing satisfaction; quality of life; service delivery; Mnquma Local Municipality

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1. Introduction

Everyone agrees that housing is an essential human right and a key component of socioeconomic growth. The state's commitment to addressing the injustices of apartheid is reflected in South Africa's constitution, which guarantees access to decent housing (Republic of South Africa, 1996). The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) was implemented as a comprehensive policy framework to address housing backlogs and improve living conditions in previously underprivileged areas following the democratic transition in 1994 (Amoah et al., 2022). Under the RDP, the South African government has provided millions of subsidised housing units over the past thirty years (Mosala, 2022). Even as this accomplishment is a significant step toward social and spatial change, there are still concerns about how effectively these housing measures would improve beneficiaries' quality of life. Research indicates issues with housing quality, location, and sustainability are often overlooked by the emphasis on quantitative delivery (Huchzermeyer, 2021; Moamba & Mamokhere, 2025).

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Beneficiaries have often gained access to formal housing, but they still face obstacles such as poor construction, inadequate infrastructure, and limited job opportunities (Zondi & Haruna, 2025). In rural and semi-rural communities, where structural differences and service delivery limitations persist, these problems are most noticeable (Sekoboto & Landman, 2019). Such a context is evident in Mnquma Local Municipality in the Eastern Cape, which is marked by high unemployment, poverty, and inadequate infrastructure. The relationship between housing availability and quality of life is complicated (Palimaru et al., 2021) and cannot be fully represented by quantitative statistics alone. Although the quantity of housing provided is a crucial indicator of development, it does not accurately reflect beneficiaries' actual experiences (Mnguni, 2020). The extent to which residents believe their housing conditions meet their requirements and expectations is known as housing satisfaction (Mekebo & Dong, 2021), and it is increasingly recognised as a crucial factor in determining well-being.

The main aim of the study was to explore housing satisfaction as a mediating factor between housing provision and quality of life. This was a case study based in Mnquma Local Municipality, in the New Rest township in Butterworth. The study aimed to answer the following research question: What are the housing conditions and service delivery factors that influence housing satisfaction among RDP beneficiaries in Mnquma Local Municipality? How do RDP houses satisfy beneficiaries' physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualisation needs as explained by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs? How do beneficiaries perceive the adequacy of housing quality, infrastructure, neighbourhood environment, and municipal services in their RDP settlements? How can the principles of Residential Satisfaction Theory and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs be integrated to explain the relationship between housing provision, housing satisfaction, and quality of life? And, what conceptual model can be developed to enhance housing satisfaction and improve the quality of life of RDP beneficiaries in Mnquma Local Municipality?

2. Theoretical framework

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Residential Satisfaction Theory was used in the study to explain how housing satisfaction affects the quality of life among recipients of Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses in Mnquma Local Municipality. Maslow's theory was reinforced by Residential Satisfaction Theory; both theories played a significant role in the understanding of how beneficiaries assess their housing circumstances and how these circumstances affect their well-being.

According to Mohit and Raja (2014), the Residential Satisfaction Theory describes how people evaluate their living conditions based on their wants, expectations, and personal experiences. According to the hypothesis, when beneficiaries' expectations align with their actual housing conditions, they are satisfied; when they do not, they become dissatisfied. The Residential Satisfaction Theory acknowledges both empirical and subjective aspects of housing pleasure (Mohit & Raja, 2014). Housing quality, infrastructure, service accessibility and location are objective aspects; comfort, safety, dignity, and emotional attachment to the home are subjective qualities (Das, 2026).

Structural challenges, inadequate infrastructure, subpar service delivery, and constrained living space may lead recipients of RDP housing to feel unhappy even when they are obtaining formal housing. Recent research indicates that residential happiness is also influenced by municipal accountability and responsiveness to governance (Emami & Sadeghlou, 2021; Ibem & Aduwo, 2023). It explains how beneficiaries' beliefs and experiences affect their overall satisfaction with RDP housing. The theory is relevant to our study.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs explains how housing affects human well-being and offers a more comprehensive developmental perspective (Trivedi & Mehta, 2019). Maslow argues that human needs are organised in a hierarchy, starting with physiological needs and progressing to safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation (Ghaleb, 2024). Secure, stable housing promotes safety and mental well-being, while also satisfying physiological

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needs by providing shelter and protection. Through home ownership and community integration, housing also fosters a sense of social belonging, dignity, and self-worth. However, these demands are undermined, and quality of life is adversely affected by poor housing, dangerous areas, and inadequate infrastructure. According to recent research, poor living conditions hinder social and psychological growth (Kurniawati et al., 2025; Palimaru et al., 2023).

The study conceptualises housing satisfaction as a mediating factor between housing provision and quality of life through the integration of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Residential Satisfaction Theory. Maslow's theory describes how housing conditions affect broader developmental outcomes, whereas Residential Satisfaction Theory explains how beneficiaries assess those conditions. When combined, these theories offer a useful conceptual framework for comprehending the connection between RDP beneficiaries' quality of life and housing satisfaction in Mnquma Local Municipality.

3. Literature review

Physical, social and institutional factors all affect the multifaceted concept of housing satisfaction (Moolla et al., 2011). Satisfaction in low-cost housing environments can be affected by the development's location, service accessibility, and building quality. Poor construction quality has repeatedly been found to be a key cause of dissatisfaction in empirical studies. The durability and usefulness of houses are compromised by faults such as cracked walls, leaking roofs, and poor finishes (Nyakala et al., 2021). In addition to impairing physical comfort, these problems impose an additional financial burden on beneficiaries who must make repairs.

Another important factor influencing housing satisfaction is access to basic services. Although access to electricity, water, and sanitary facilities is supposed to be provided by RDP housing, the reliability and quality of these services often vary. Inadequate sanitation systems, poorly maintained infrastructure, and disruptions in the water supply all considerably lower satisfaction ratings (Moolla et al., 2011). Another important factor is location. Many RDP housing estates are situated on the outskirts of cities, far from social services and employment opportunities. This geographical inequality restricts economic mobility and fosters dissatisfaction (Visagie et al., 2024).

Physical, psychological, social and environmental well-being are all included in the complex concept of quality of life (Palimaru et al., 2023). Housing affects social relationships, safety, and health; it is a major factor in determining the quality of life. By lowering exposure to environmental risks and providing a stable living environment, adequate housing can enhance health outcomes. Creating a feeling of safety and community can also improve psychological well-being. Poor housing conditions, however, can have the opposite effect, increasing social exclusion, tension, and anxiety (Sakariyau et al., 2023).

Although the RDP housing program has played a significant role in reducing housing backlogs, its effectiveness remains debatable. Although the program has made formal housing more accessible, it has drawn criticism for problems with sustainability, location, and quality. According to studies, many RDP homes have poor infrastructure and structural flaws that compromise their long-term viability (Amoah et al., 2022). Furthermore, the remote locations of many housing developments limit access to economic opportunities, which reduces the program's ability to reduce poverty. These challenges are exacerbated in the Eastern Cape by institutional problems and resource limitations, resulting in unequal housing outcomes. There is limited qualitative research on beneficiaries' lived experiences in rural municipalities, despite a large body of research on RDP housing. As a result, by offering a thorough qualitative examination of housing satisfaction and quality of life in Mnquma Local Municipality, this study fills this gap.

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4. Research methodology

The qualitative research methodology was used in this study and was well-suited to examining complex social phenomena and understanding participants' viewpoints. To gather detailed information about housing satisfaction and quality of life, a case study design was used. The study focused on an in-depth investigation of housing satisfaction and quality of life within a specific context, namely RDP housing beneficiaries in MLM. Data were collected from municipal officials directly involved in housing delivery, allowing for a detailed exploration of implementation processes, governance practices, and perceived outcomes. The case study design was therefore suitable because it enabled a comprehensive examination of a contemporary social phenomenon within its real-life setting, while capturing the complexity of housing-related experiences and service delivery dynamics. Semi-structured interviews with local governments involved in housing delivery were used to gather data. These interviews provided insights into perceived results, implementation difficulties, and governance procedures. Thematic analysis was used to examine the data, identifying, categorising, and interpreting common themes. The study ensured credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability through rigorous methodological procedures.

5. Findings and Discussion

Theme 1: Housing quality and structural deficiencies

Participants frequently brought up concerns about the physical condition of RDP homes. Problems, including poor materials, structural cracks, and insufficient space, were often raised. One participant noted: *"Many of the houses that were built initially had defects. You find cracks in the walls, leaking roofs, and sometimes doors that don't close properly. These issues affect how people feel about their homes."* Another participant emphasised: *"The size of the houses is also a concern. Families are growing, but the houses remain small. People end up extending them informally, which creates other problems."*

These findings highlight how a key factor in determining satisfaction is the quality of living conditions. The durability and functionality of standard homes are compromised by poor construction, which makes recipients unhappy. This result is consistent with Nyakala et al. (2021), who contend that subpar materials and shoddy construction are significant causes of dissatisfaction in RDP homes. In a similar vein, Amoah et al. (2022) note that structural flaws make affordable housing less sustainable in the long run. According to the Residential Satisfaction Theory (Mohit & Raja, 2014), an inconsistency between expectations and actual living circumstances can lead to discontent. In this instance, recipients' expectations for secure, long-term housing are not fully met, resulting in unfavourable evaluations. Poor housing quality is increasingly associated with social instability and psychological stress, according to recent research. Recurrent structural defects are linked to worry, instability, and a decline in public trust in institutions (Moamba et al., 2025). Ibem and Aduwo (2023) contend that the level of trust by the people in government service delivery is weakened when they are unhappy with the quality of their dwelling.

Theme 2: Infrastructure and service delivery challenges

Participants noted that access to essential services has improved, but they also highlighted that quality and reliability remain major issues. One participant stated, *"Yes, people now have access to water and electricity, but the problem is consistency. Water is not always available, and sometimes the infrastructure is not maintained properly."*Another added: *"Roads are another issue. In some areas, they are not properly developed, and this affects access to services like clinics and schools."*

These quotes demonstrate that service dependability is just as crucial as access alone in determining housing satisfaction. These findings support Moolla et al. (2011), who contend that service dependability is a major factor influencing home satisfaction. In a similar vein, Mutyambizi et al. (2020) stress that the advantages of housing provision are compromised by poor infrastructure. According to Maslow, the extent to which housing contributes

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to well-being is limited, as inconsistent services affect both physiological and safety needs (Ghaleb, 2024). Integrated human settlements are more important than isolated housing delivery, according to recent research. Visagie et al. (2024) assert that even when housing is provided, socioeconomic marginalisation persists in underdeveloped municipalities. Similarly, Kurniawati et al. (2022) discovered that emotional health and community trust are adversely affected by infrastructure instability. Maslow's thesis goes on to explain that poor infrastructure limits the quality of life by compromising safety and the ability to meet physiological needs.

Theme 3: Safety, security, and social environment

Housing satisfaction and quality of life are significantly impacted by safety. A participant explained: *"Some of these areas are not very safe. Crime is a problem, and the houses themselves are not always secure. This makes people feel uncomfortable in their own homes."* Another participant noted, *"Even though people have houses, if they do not feel safe, it affects their overall well-being. Safety is very important."*

These answers show that home satisfaction encompasses the broader social environment as well as physical structures. These findings align with Aigbavboa and Thwala (2012) claim that safety is a major factor in home satisfaction. According to Wood et al. (2021), psychological well-being is adversely affected by insecurity. Theoretically, safety is emphasised as a basic human need in Maslow's Hierarchy. Higher-order needs such as esteem and belonging cannot be met when safety is jeopardised. The relationship between home conditions and mental health is being highlighted more and more in recent research. Unsafe living settings are linked to long-term stress and social disengagement, according to Palimaru et al. (2023). It indicates that community safety conditions and quality of life are inextricably linked. This perspective is supported by Maslow's paradigm, which views safety as a fundamental human need.

Theme 4: Governance, monitoring, and institutional constraints

Participants raised concerns about governance, including poor institutional responsiveness and insufficient oversight. One participant stated: *"Monitoring and evaluation are not always effective. Sometimes issues are reported, but they take a long time to be addressed. "*Another added: *"There are capacity challenges within the municipality. We do not always have enough resources to respond to all the issues."*

These quotes highlight structural issues that affect the execution and long-term viability of housing initiatives. These findings are consistent with Nyakala et al. (2021), who state that a significant barrier to housing supply is inadequate municipal capacity. In a similar vein, Mhlongo et al. (2022) emphasise how institutional inefficiencies compromise the efficacy of programs. This view holds that governance problems create a gap between policy goals and actual circumstances, leading to dissatisfaction.

Theme 5: Community participation and beneficiary involvement

One common concern was the lack of community involvement. A participant noted: *"Community involvement is not always strong. People are informed about projects, but they are not always involved in decision-making."* Another participant explained: *"When communities are involved, they take ownership of the projects. But when they are excluded, dissatisfaction increases."*

These findings imply that involvement is a key factor in determining housing satisfaction. Zonke and Matsiliza (2015), who contend that participatory approaches improve satisfaction and sustainability, support this result. In a similar vein, Aigbavboa and Thwala (2013) highlight that community involvement enhances alignment between housing provision and local requirements.

Theme 6: Housing and quality of life

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While acknowledging that RDP housing has improved living conditions, participants highlighted that difficulties persist. One participant stated*, "People's lives have improved because they now have shelter, but there are still challenges. Housing alone cannot solve all problems."* Another added: *"Quality of life depends on many things: employment, services, and safety. Housing is just one part of it."*

These quotes underscore the multifaceted nature of quality of life. Palimaru et al. (2023), who define quality of life as embracing numerous characteristics beyond housing, concur with this finding. The necessity of integrated approaches to human settlements is also emphasised by Visagie et al. (2024).

6. Recommendations

The Department of Human Settlements should enforce stricter quality control measures during RDP house construction, including independent post-construction inspections to identify and rectify structural defects before handover to beneficiaries. Mnquma Local Municipality should establish dedicated infrastructure maintenance teams to ensure reliable water, electricity, and road services, recognising that consistent service delivery is fundamental to housing satisfaction and overall well-being. Collaborative partnerships among the municipality, the South African Police Service, and community structures should be prioritised to address crime and improve the social environment in RDP settlements. Municipal capacity should be strengthened through targeted training, adequate resourcing, and effective monitoring and evaluation systems to improve responsiveness to reported housing defects. Structured participatory frameworks should be institutionalised to ensure beneficiaries are actively involved in housing planning and decision-making, thereby fostering ownership and long-term satisfaction. Housing delivery should be complemented by employment creation, social services, and community development initiatives, acknowledging that quality of life extends beyond physical shelter.

7. Conclusion

The main aim of the study was to explore housing satisfaction as a mediating factor between housing provision and quality of life. This was a case study based in Mnquma Local Municipality, in the New Rest township in Butterworth. To achieve this aim, the study sought to determine the factors influencing housing satisfaction, examine residents' perceptions of housing infrastructure and services, assess the relationship between housing satisfaction and quality of life, and identify measures for improvement. The findings revealed that a combination of housing quality, access to basic services, neighbourhood safety, governance practices, and community participation influences housing satisfaction. Participants perceived infrastructure and service delivery as inconsistent, with structural defects, inadequate maintenance, and limited economic opportunities negatively affecting satisfaction levels and quality of life. The study further established that housing satisfaction is an important mechanism by which housing provision contributes to broader well-being outcomes. The novelty of the study lies in its integration of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Residential Satisfaction Theory to provide a comprehensive understanding of how housing conditions influence both satisfaction and quality of life within a rural municipal context, while also proposing an integrated conceptual model linking housing provision, housing satisfaction, and quality of life. The study was limited by its focus on a single municipality, the relatively small qualitative sample, and the reliance on participants' perceptions, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. Future research should test the proposed model quantitatively across different municipalities, conduct comparative studies between rural and urban RDP settlements, and employ longitudinal designs to examine how housing satisfaction and quality of life evolve.

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Data Availability Statement: The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical and confidentiality considerations. The raw data are securely held by Mr Maxhobandile Ndamase, Head of Department, School of Management and Public Administration, Walter Sisulu University, Butterworth Campus. Researchers interested in accessing the data may contact Mr Ndamase at nndamase@wsu.ac.za or by telephone at +27 47 401 6396. Access to the data will be considered upon reasonable request and subject to applicable ethical requirements.

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EXPERIENCES FACED BY FEMALE STUDENT LEADERS IN TRADITIONALLY MALE-DOMINATED LEADERSHIP ROLES AT A SELECTED SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract. This paper explores the experiences of female student leaders in traditionally male-dominated leadership roles at a selected South African University. Given the gender differences often present in leadership positions in higher education, this paper aims to examine the challenges these student leaders face, the strategies they employ to overcome obstacles, and the impact of their leadership on the university community. The paper used a qualitative research methodology. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, as the researchers deemed them knowledgeable about the problem under study. The researchers utilised 5 female student leaders who hold prominent leadership positions in various student organisations, including student government, academic societies, and cultural groups. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to probe participants' responses and gather data. Thematic analysis was utilised to analyse data. Findings of the paper show that although female student leaders encounter many difficulties, such as stereotyping, discrimination based on gender, and a lack of institutional support, they also show resiliency and flexibility in overcoming these barriers. This paper highlights the need for inclusive policies and support systems at a selected university and advances our understanding of leadership dynamics in a gendered setting. The paper concludes that targeted mentorship, gender-specific training, and inclusive policies are crucial for empowering female student leaders and fostering an equitable leadership environment. Recommendations include establishing mentorship programs, facilitating networking opportunities, and reviewing organisationalorganisational policies to address gender biases. This research offers valuable insights into gendered leadership dynamics in South African higher education, underscoring the need for institutional reforms to promote diversity and gender equality in student governance. It underscores the importance of supportive environments in enabling women to realise their leadership potential and advance social justice in academic settings.

Keywords: male-dominated spaces; gender-diverse leaders; leadership positions; higher education

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JEL Classifications: I2, I3

1. Introduction

A traditionally male-dominated leadership refers to positions of authority and influence that have historically been occupied predominantly by men (Geffner, 2023). In higher education, a relevant example is the role of Student Union President or Student Government Leader. Historically, these roles have been primarily held by men across many universities worldwide. Matthews and Dollinger (2023) added that Individuals in these positions are responsible for organising student activities, representing student interests, advocating for student rights, and influencing university policies affecting the student body. Despite ongoing efforts to promote gender diversity, these leadership roles continue to exhibit a higher representation of men, reflecting longstanding gender disparities in university leadership.

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Higher education leadership has traditionally mirrored larger gender inequalities in society, with males typically holding most leadership positions, even at the student leadership level (Moodly, 2024). Globally, women's access to education has increased, but structural, cultural, and societal issues that impede equal representation continue to produce gender inequalities in leadership roles (Risman, 2018). Muthuswamy and Savithri (2025) argued that historical injustices, cultural norms, and institutional factors that interact with gender to affect leadership opportunities and experiences further exacerbate existing discrepancies.

A robust understanding is that, at universities, student leadership is essential for influencing policies, representing a range of student interests, and forming campus culture. In traditionally male-dominated entities such as student government, academic societies, and cultural clubs, female student leaders frequently face significant obstacles. Stereotyping, gender-based discrimination, and occasionally insufficient institutional support systems are among the barriers that prevent female students from fully participating and exerting influence (Muthuswamy & Savithri, 2025; Smith & Sinkford, 2022). In this instance, fostering inclusive leadership environments that represent a range of views and experiences requires an understanding of these obstacles and how female student leaders overcome them.

This paper, therefore, explored the experiences of female student leaders in leadership roles at a selected South African university. The focus is on investigating the specific challenges these women face, the strategies they deploy to overcome these barriers, and the influence of their leadership on the broader university community. Employing a qualitative methodology allowed for in-depth insight into the lived experiences of these student leaders, shedding light on the complexities of leadership within a gendered context. The paper contributed to the expanding corpus of research on leadership and gender in higher education, particularly in light of the distinct sociopolitical context of South African universities. The results influenced institutional policy by emphasising the need for inclusive, empowering policies that empower female student leaders and advance gender parity in leadership positions. From these results, the researchers found that many studies worldwide have examined the experiences of female student leaders in traditionally male-dominated leadership roles. Still, no study has been conducted at a selected South African university. As such, a research question arose: What are the experiences and challenges faced by female student leaders in traditionally male-dominated leadership roles at a selected South African university?

Background

The ideal situation for higher education is gender equality, with varied and inclusive campus leadership, reflected in the full participation and success of female student leaders in roles that have historically been held by men (Tshipani, 2021). The reality at the chosen South African university, however, shows enduring gender inequality, with female student leaders encountering major obstacles like gender-based discrimination, stereotyping, and a lack of institutional support that restricts their efficacy and career prospects (Smith & Sinkford, 2022). In addition to jeopardising the growth and empowerment of female student leaders, this disparity between the ideal and the actual limits the wider university community's ability to gain from equal representation and a diversity of viewpoints.

Among the repercussions of this discrepancy are persistent gender biases and unequal power dynamics within university leadership structures, which limit women's leadership development and career options (Brabazon & Schulz, 2020). Additionally, the marginalisation of female leaders harms the university's culture and its compliance with national gender equality goals, undermining efforts towards social justice and inclusivity. These issues risk escalating structural injustices and reducing the possibility of revolutionary leadership in student government if left unchecked.

Therefore, the suggested remedy is a thorough investigation into the real-life experiences of female student leaders, with an emphasis on identifying the difficulties they face and the coping mechanisms they use, and

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evaluating the effectiveness of current support networks. The paper's conclusions are to guide the creation of targeted interventions, such as mentorship programs, gender-responsive leadership training, and inclusive institutional policies, to empower female student leaders and foster a welcoming atmosphere that defies longstanding gender stereotypes (Akinola & Naidoo, 2024). By encouraging fair participation and strengthening women's leadership abilities in higher education, these initiatives seek to close the gap between the ideal and reality.

An important consideration of this paper is its capacity to enhance understanding of the distinct experiences and obstacles faced by female student leaders in roles that have historically been dominated by men at a particular South African university (Mkhize, 2022). The paper provides important insights into how gender dynamics influence leadership experiences in higher education by emphasising obstacles such as discrimination, gender stereotyping, and a lack of institutional support. This knowledge is essential for guiding university policies and procedures aimed at fostering more welcoming and encouraging environments for women in leadership roles (Shubhanshi, 2026).

Additionally, there is a broader conversation on gender equality and leadership in higher education, particularly in the South African context, where historical and societal factors strongly shape gender roles. The paper provides useful advice for creating mentorship programs, leadership development courses, and support networks tailored to women's needs by describing the tenacity and tactics used by female student leaders to overcome challenges (Geffner, 2023). To create a leadership culture that celebrates diversity and advances social justice in educational institutions, the paper ultimately aims to empower female student leaders and advance gender equity in student governance.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Literature Review

Gender and Leadership in Higher Education

Historically, men have held most leadership positions in higher education institutions, reflecting broader societal norms and power dynamics (Moodly, 2024). In addition to senior academic roles held by men, there is a noticeable gap at the student leadership level, where men predominate, particularly in student government and several academic societies perceived as typically masculine (Bush et al., 2022). Systemic obstacles such as gender stereotyping, corporate cultures that value male values, and restricted access to professional networks and mentorship have resulted in women's under-representation in leadership positions worldwide (Zahoor et al., 2025). Correa, Glas, and Opara (2025) added that females remain underrepresented in academic roles, particularly in leadership positions that shape the future direction of higher education and impact society at large.

In South Africa, gender inequalities in leadership are further nuanced by the country's socio-political history and ongoing efforts to redress past injustices. Universities have made strides toward gender transformation; however, women often remain marginalised in leadership, both formally and informally (Bosch, 2019). The intersection of gender with race, class, and culture complicates women's leadership experiences, especially within student leadership structures, where societal expectations shape both self-perceptions and external perceptions of female leaders (Dlamini & Mnguni, 2025).

Challenges Faced by Women in Leadership

Gender-based barriers that prevent women from assuming leadership positions are regularly identified by research. One major barrier is stereotyping, in which women are frequently viewed as less capable or as authoritative leaders, especially in settings that have historically been controlled by men (Barkhuizen, Masakane & van der Sluis, 2022). Discrimination, marginalisation, and heightened scrutiny of women's choices and leadership philosophies can result from these misconceptions (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Social constraints

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associated with traditional gender roles, which require women to prioritise family obligations over leadership commitments, exacerbate these obstacles for student leaders (Sokani, 2025). Boerner, Schwarzmaier and Tagos (2025) found that women tend to be less motivated to take on leadership positions than men.

Furthermore, organisational cultures within universities often reflect and reinforce male-dominated leadership paradigms, creating environments that are less welcoming or supportive of women leaders (Brabazon & Schulz, 2020). A lack of institutional support structures, such as mentoring programs, leadership development tailored to women, and networking opportunities, exacerbates these challenges, leading to feelings of isolation and restricted professional growth (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024).

Resilience and Strategies for Overcoming Barriers

Despite the difficulties women face in leadership roles, studies highlight the resilience and adaptability of women leaders, who actively employ a range of strategies to navigate and overcome barriers. These strategies include building informal support networks among peers, leveraging role models, and engaging in continuous self-improvement and leadership development (Akinola & Naidoo, 2024). Female student leaders often demonstrate flexibility, balancing academic, social, and leadership responsibilities while challenging gender norms through advocacy and visible leadership (Smith & Sinkford, 2022).

Empowering women leaders through targeted interventions such as mentorship, leadership training, and inclusive policies has been shown to enhance women's leadership effectiveness and satisfaction. Transformational leadership theory, which emphasises inspiration, individualised support, and empowerment, offers a useful lens for understanding how women leaders motivate others and drive change in challenging environments (Adeoye, Baharun, and Munawwaroh, 2025).

Support Systems for Women Leaders in Higher Education

Support systems are crucial to fostering gender equity in leadership. Effective mentorship programs, leadership development workshops, peer networks, and institutional policies designed to address gender biases have proven essential in advancing women's leadership (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). In South African universities, some institutions have introduced gender equity frameworks and leadership initiatives; however, disparities in implementation and cultural resistance remain challenges (Akala, 2018). Understanding how female student leaders experience and access support systems in their unique contexts will inform practical recommendations to enhance institutional support and foster a more inclusive leadership culture.

2.2 Theoretical framework

The Transformational Leadership Theory of Bass and Riggio (2006) and the Social Role Theory of Eagly and Kite (1987) serve as the foundation for this paper on the experiences of female student leaders in traditionally male-dominated leadership positions at a particular South African university. Bass and Riggio (2006) argued that Transformational Leadership Theory, effective leaders inspire and motivate followers to go above and beyond expectations by cultivating an inclusive vision, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration. This notion is especially pertinent to understanding how female leaders fulfil their duties in male-dominated environments by motivating change, questioning accepted wisdom, and empowering others despite structural obstacles. Examining how female student leaders exercise influence and promote favourable organisational outcomes is made possible by its emphasis on leadership as a dynamic and relational process.

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Figure 1. The Transformational leadership Theory Bass & Riggo (2006)

The image in Figure 1 shows a leader guiding and inspiring a team through communication, innovation, and personal support, as seen in activities such as presenting ideas, mentoring, and encouraging collaboration. The picture demonstrates how effective leaders motivate and empower individuals to achieve shared goals and drive positive change.

Social Role Theory (Eagly & Kite, 1987) explains that gender roles and stereotypes in society shape individuals' behaviour and expectations (see Figure 2 below). It suggests that women often face prejudice in leadership roles due to traditional norms that associate leadership with masculine traits. This theory helps to contextualise the challenges female student leaders encounter, such as stereotyping and discrimination, and explains societal resistance to women in leadership positions.

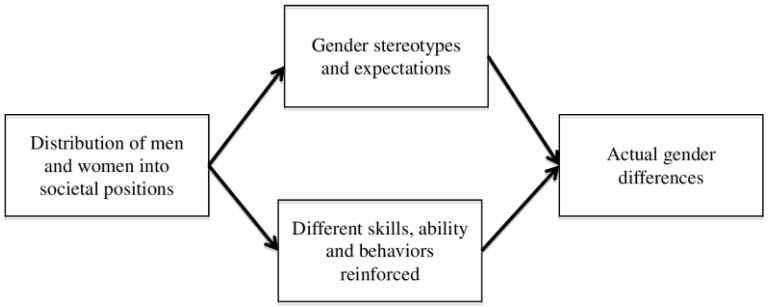


Figure 2. Social Role Theory (Eagly & Kite, 1987)

Both theories provide a lens for examining how female student leaders inspire and lead within contexts that often marginalise them, emphasising their resilience, empowerment, and strategies for effective leadership. Social Role Theory enhances this by highlighting the social norms and gender-based obstacles that shape their experiences. These theories work together to provide a thorough understanding of the challenges and leadership styles faced by female student leaders in predominantly male environments. This understanding informs prospective interventions and support networks aimed at advancing gender parity in student leadership in higher education.

3. Research methodology

Research Approach

This paper employed a qualitative research methodology to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and support systems of female student leaders in traditionally male-dominated leadership roles at a selected South African University. Qualitative research enables rich, detailed exploration of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings, which are essential to uncovering the complexities of gendered leadership dynamics (Lim, 2025). The qualitative approach was relevant to the paper because it enabled a thorough examination of participants' viewpoints, experiences, and perspectives.

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Research Design

A case paper design was selected to focus on a specific university context, enabling a comprehensive and contextualised examination of the issues faced by female student leaders. The researchers used a case paper research design, which they considered suitable for this paper. In this paper, the researcher employed a case paper research design because, in qualitative research, case studies are frequently driven by the goal of obtaining a comprehensive, in-depth understanding of a particular instance, event, individual, or group in its actual setting.

Population and Sampling

The population of interest comprised female student leaders holding prominent leadership positions within various student organisations, including student government, academic societies, and cultural groups. The researcher identified female student leaders as the primary source of information because the researcher wants to understand the support needed to improve the academic performance of first-year students at a selected university.

Purposive sampling was utilised to select participants who were deemed knowledgeable and experienced regarding the research problem (Palinkas et al., 2015). This approach ensured that the sample included women with firsthand experience navigating leadership roles traditionally dominated by men. A total of 5 female student leaders were recruited for the paper. Participants represented a cross-section of leadership roles across student government bodies, academic and disciplinary societies, and cultural organisations, providing diverse perspectives on leadership experiences within the university.

Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed flexibility to probe and clarify participants' responses while maintaining a focus on key research themes. The researcher used semi-structured interviews, recorded and transcribed for analysis, to gather data. The researchers chose semi-structured interviews as a relevant tool for data collection in this paper because Akyıldız and Ahmed (2021) argue that semi-structured interviews allow researchers to explore topics in depth while following a set of guiding questions. Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey (2020) also noted that semi-structured interviews provide participants with greater freedom to share their ideas and experiences. The interviews explored the challenges participants faced in leadership roles, the strategies they employed to overcome barriers, and their perceptions of institutional support systems.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the interview data systematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data were analysed to comprehend and explain the rich experiences, viewpoints, and significance within the data. In addition, thematic analysis was useful for locating recurrent themes and subthemes in the data. This involved several stages: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, and defining and naming final themes. Thematic analysis facilitated the identification of recurrent patterns across participants' narratives related to gender-based challenges, coping strategies, and support mechanisms. The analysis was iterative, with ongoing reflection and coding adjustments to ensure trustworthiness and depth of interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Faculty Research and Higher Degree Committee of Walter Sisulu University (Protocol Number: FEDSHREC1130-10-23). The paper adhered to ethical standards for research involving human participants, and the study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after explaining the purpose of the paper, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. To maintain confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms, and any identifying information was excluded from reports. Data were securely stored, accessible only to the research team. Sensitivity to the potential emotional impact of discussing experiences of discrimination and stereotyping was maintained throughout the interview process.

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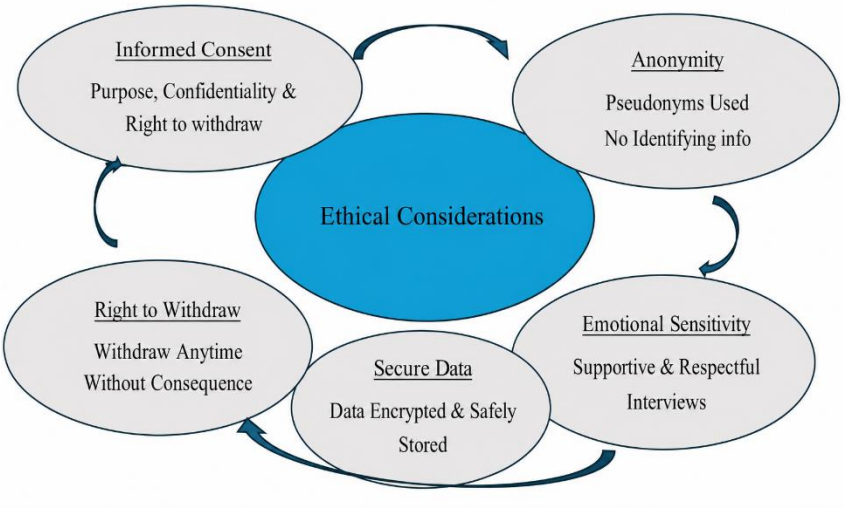


Figure 3. Ethical Considerations (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023)

The diagram (see Figure 3) illustrates the key ethical principles guiding research with human participants, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time. It shows how participants' identities are protected through anonymity and secure data storage, ensuring that sensitive information is not disclosed.

4. Findings

The thematic analysis of the interviews with 5 female student leaders revealed several key themes related to their experiences in leadership roles traditionally dominated by men. These themes reflect the challenges they face, the coping strategies they employ, and their perceptions of institutional support.

Theme 1: Gender-Based Stereotyping and Discrimination

Participants consistently reported encountering gender-based stereotypes that questioned their competence and suitability for leadership roles. Many expressed experiences where their authority was undermined or overlooked by peers and other leaders, reflecting persistent patriarchal attitudes within the university setting. For example, P1 commented: *"Sometimes I feel like my ideas are not taken seriously because I am a woman leading in a space mostly occupied by men. There is always a question of whether I am capable enough. "*Of a similar opinion, P2 highlighted*: "I have often felt that my ideas are dismissed just because I'm a woman. Whenever I suggest something in meetings, I notice that my peers tend to overlook or undermine my suggestions, assuming I lack the authority or competence to lead."* In line with the claims above, P4 opined: *"Despite having the skills and experience, I still encounter stereotypes that question whether a woman can handle leadership responsibilities. My authority is often challenged or ignored, especially when I attempt to make tough decisions."* With a slightly different opinion, P3 argued: *"I often notice that I am not taken as seriously as my male counterparts. There seems to be an unspoken expectation that women should be more collaborative and nurturing, which makes it harder for me to be recognised as a strong, confident leader."*The last participant (P5) supported this view by saying that: *"I have noticed that female colleagues often have to work twice as hard to earn the same respect as male leaders. There is a persistent male-dominated attitude that leadership is primarily male, which affects how our contributions are valued and recognised."*

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Theme 2: Navigating the Dual Burden of Leadership and Social Expectations

Balancing leadership responsibilities with societal and familial expectations emerged as a significant source of stress. Participants described feeling pressure to conform to traditional gender roles outside the university, which sometimes conflicted with their leadership commitments. This dual burden often limited their availability and energy for leadership activities, resulting in heightened stress and, at times, burnout. For instance, P3 said that: *"There are expectations from family and community that I should prioritise certain roles as a woman, which makes balancing everything very challenging."* With the same opinion, P2 mentioned that: *"There is this constant pressure to fulfil traditional gender roles at home, which conflicts with my leadership duties. It's exhausting trying to meet everyone's expectations while also trying to make a difference on campus."* In line with the above claims, P1 stated that: *"Balancing leadership responsibilities with societal expectations often leaves me drained. I find myself sacrificing sleep or free time to keep up with everything, and it's taking a toll on my mental health."* With a slightly different opinion, P5 argued: *"Juggling my role as a student leader and the expectations my family has for me outside of university can be really overwhelming. Sometimes I feel like I'm pulled in different directions, and it's hard to give my best to both." P4 agrees with P5 by saying that: "Sometimes I feel like I have to choose between being a good leader and fulfilling my family's traditional role. The dual burden makes it hard to focus fully on my commitments, and I worry about burnout."*

The participants' experiences of balancing leadership responsibilities with societal and familial expectations reflect the pervasive influence of traditional gender roles and stereotypes, as outlined in the literature, which often place women in subordinate or supportive positions, both socially and within organisational cultures (Moodly, 2024; Sokani, 2025).

Theme 3: Limited Institutional Support and Visibility of Policies

Many participants highlighted a lack of accessible and effective institutional support mechanisms tailored to the needs of female student leaders. While some mentioned the existence of general leadership programs, few found these resources adequately addressed gender-specific challenges. Awareness of such programs was also limited. Participants expressed a desire for mentorship, leadership development workshops, and networking opportunities that support women leaders.

P1 commented: *"There are some leadership programs at the university, but most of them are not specifically tailored to address the challenges women face. I wish there were more targeted support for female leaders."* Of a similar opinion, P2 highlighted: *"I wasn't even aware of some of the existing mentorship opportunities until recently. It feels like these resources are not well-advertised or accessible to us."* In line with the claims above, P3 opined: *"Leadership workshops are available, but they often don't focus on gender-specific issues or how to overcome barriers faced by women in leadership roles. More specialised training would be helpful."* With a slightly different opinion, P4 argued: *"I think we need more networking events that connect women leaders across different faculties. Building a community and sharing experiences could really strengthen our confidence and visibility."* The last participant (P5) supported this view by saying that: *"Mentorship programs specifically for women would make a big difference. It's hard to find role models or guidance without targeted support, and I believe that could really empower more women to step into leadership roles."*

Theme 4: Resilience and Adaptive Strategies

Despite the barriers, female student leaders demonstrated notable resilience and resourcefulness. They employed various strategies to cope with challenges, including building informal peer support networks, seeking guidance from role models, and continuously developing personal skills independently. These strategies enabled them to maintain confidence and effectiveness in their roles.

P1 commented that: *"Whenever I face challenges, I turn to my peers for advice and support. Having a strong network of friends who understand what I'm going through really helps me stay motivated."* Of a similar opinion,

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P2 highlighted: *"I've sought out role models within the university who inspire me. Their guidance has been invaluable in helping me develop my leadership skills and stay confident."* In line with the claims above, P4 opined: *"I've been focusing on improving myself by taking online courses and workshops. Continuously developing my personal skills keeps me effective and energised in my leadership role."* With a slightly different opinion, P3 argued: *"Sometimes, I rely on my own resilience and problem-solving abilities. I've learned to adapt quickly and stay focused on my goals, even when faced with setbacks."* The last participant (P5) supported this view by saying that: *"Building informal support groups with fellow female leaders has been crucial. Sharing our experiences helps us navigate challenges and stay resilient."*

Theme 5: Impacts of Leadership on Self-Identity and Empowerment

Participants reported that their leadership roles were transformative experiences that contributed to their personal growth and empowerment. Holding leadership positions allowed them to challenge prevailing gender norms and inspire other women within the university community. However, they also experienced increased scrutiny and pressure to prove their capabilities.

P1 said that: *"Taking on a leadership role has really boosted my confidence. It made me see that I can break stereotypes and prove that women are just as capable as anyone else."* With the same view, P2 highlighted that: *"Being a leader has transformed how I see myself. It's empowering to challenge gender norms and show others that women can lead effectively."* In line with the claims above, P4 opined: *"While leadership has helped me grow personally, it also comes with a lot of pressure and scrutiny. Sometimes I feel like I constantly have to prove myself to others."* With a slightly different opinion, P3 argued: *"Leadership has definitely inspired me to empower other women in my community. I want to be a role model and encourage more women to step into leadership roles."* The last participant (P5) supported this view by saying that: *"It's been a transformative experience, but the increased attention and expectations can be overwhelming. Still, I believe it's worth it for the growth and impact I've gained."*

5. Discussion of Findings

This paper explored the experiences of female student leaders occupying traditionally male-dominated leadership roles at a selected South African university.

Gender-Based Stereotyping and Discrimination

Findings revealed that female student leaders commonly encounter gender-based stereotyping and discrimination that undermines their authority and leadership capability. These accounts align with broader research showing that women in leadership often face doubt rooted in gender biases (Barkhuizen, Masakane & van der Sluis, 2022). These accounts collectively illustrate how gender-based stereotypes and male-controlled attitudes continue to undermine women's leadership roles within university settings, reflecting persistent biases that question their competence and authority.

Navigating the Dual Burden of Leadership and Social Expectations

Their feelings of exhaustion, stress, and potential burnout are consistent with research on the structural obstacles women face, including societal pressure to prioritise family obligations over leadership roles, which are reinforced by gendered norms and organisational environments that lack adequate support (Brabazon & Schulz, 2020; Thelma, & Ngulube, 2024). These challenges highlight the importance of resilience strategies and institutional support mechanisms, such as mentorship and leadership development, emphasised in the literature, which are essential for empowering women to navigate the dual burden and foster more inclusive leadership cultures in higher education settings (Akinola & Naidoo, 2024; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Addressing these dual burdens requires targeted support systems and cultural shifts to empower women leaders to balance societal expectations with their leadership roles effectively.

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Limited Institutional Support and Visibility of Policies

The participants' calls for more targeted institutional support, such as mentorship and networking opportunities focused on women's leadership challenges, reflect the broader systemic barriers identified in the literature, including gender stereotyping, limited access to support structures, and organisational cultures that reinforce male-dominated paradigms (Brabazon & Schulz, 2020; Moodly, 2024). Their experiences underscore the need for enhanced visibility and accessibility of gender-responsive programs, which are critical for empowering women leaders to overcome societal and institutional obstacles and to foster a more inclusive leadership environment in higher education (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024; Akinola & Naidoo, 2024). Addressing these gaps aligns with the theoretical frameworks of Transformational Leadership and Social Role Theory, emphasising the importance of supportive networks and challenging societal norms to promote gender equity in leadership roles.

Resilience and Adaptive Strategies

The resilience and adaptive strategies demonstrated by female student leaders, such as building peer support networks, seeking role models, and engaging in continuous self-improvement, align with the literature's emphasis on women's resourcefulness in overcoming systemic barriers rooted in gender stereotyping and organisational cultures that reinforce male dominance (Ngwira, 2021; Moodly, 2024). These strategies demonstrate how women navigate and challenge societal and institutional constraints, supporting the application of Transformational Leadership and Social Role Theories by highlighting the importance of empowerment, mentorship, and resilience in fostering effective female leadership within male-dominated environments (Eagly & Kite, 1987; Bass & Riggio, 2006). Ultimately, such adaptive approaches are crucial for promoting gender equity and strengthening women's leadership efficacy in higher education contexts.

Impacts of Leadership on Self-Identity and Empowerment

The participants' experiences of leadership as a transformative and empowering journey highlight how, despite facing societal scrutiny and gendered expectations, women leverage personal growth, role modelling, and resilience strategies to challenge norms and inspire others, aligning with the literature's emphasis on women's capacity for empowerment and adaptive leadership within male-dominated contexts (Ngwira, 2021; Moodly, 2024). These narratives underscore the importance of fostering environments that support women's leadership development, as emphasised by Transformational Leadership and Social Role Theories, by recognising women's agency in overcoming systemic barriers and promoting gender equity in higher education leadership (Eagly & Kite, 1987; Bass & Riggio, 2006). Ultimately, such experiences demonstrate that resilience and empowerment are central to transforming individual identities and advancing women's leadership trajectories in challenging socio-cultural landscapes.

The paper underscores the importance of implementing inclusive policies and targeted support mechanisms within higher education institutions to promote gender equity in student leadership. Key recommendations include developing mentorship programs, gender-specific leadership training, formal networking platforms, strengthening institutional policies, and fostering an inclusive organisational culture. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of gendered leadership dynamics in South African higher education. It offers practical insights to enhance support for female student leaders, thereby advancing gender diversity in campus leadership structures.

6. Conclusion

This paper concluded that gender-based stereotyping and discrimination remain significant obstacles, undermining female students' authority and confidence in leadership roles. Additionally, the paper underlines the ongoing impact of masculine attitudes and societal norms that limit women's opportunities and recognition in higher education leadership. Furthermore, the paper presumed that female student leaders face a dual burden, balancing their leadership responsibilities with societal and familial expectations. This often results in increased

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stress, exhaustion, and a risk of burnout, emphasising the need for support systems that help women manage these competing demands. The participants' resilience and adaptive strategies, such as building peer networks and seeking mentorship, demonstrate their resourcefulness in overcoming these challenges. Fostering an inclusive and supportive organisational culture is vital for advancing women's leadership in universities. Implementing targeted policies and programs can help overcome systemic barriers, inspire confidence, and encourage more women to pursue leadership positions. Ultimately, these efforts will contribute to a more equitable, diverse, and dynamic leadership landscape in higher education, benefiting institutions and communities alike.

Limitations

The sample size was small, which limits the generalisability of the findings. The qualitative nature of the study provides in-depth insights but does not allow for statistical validation or broader applicability across diverse contexts. Additionally, the study is confined to a single university, and cultural or institutional variations may influence the experiences of female leaders differently elsewhere.

7. Recommendations

Based on the paper findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the experiences and support systems for female student leaders:

- Develop Targeted Mentorship Programs: Establish structured mentorship initiatives pairing experienced female leaders with emerging student leaders to provide guidance, role modelling, and support.
- Implement Gender-Specific Leadership Training: Design leadership development workshops and training sessions that address gender-related challenges, build confidence, and develop negotiation skills.
- Create Formal Networking Platforms: Facilitate regular forums, peer groups, and networking events focused on women's leadership to foster community and collective advocacy.
- Review and Strengthen Institutional Policies: Ensure policies explicitly promote gender equity, transparency in leadership appointments, and provide mechanisms to address discrimination and bias.
- Promote Awareness and Accessibility: Increase outreach about available support programs to women student leaders to enhance participation and impact.
- Encourage an Inclusive Organisational Culture: Sensitise the broader university community to gender biases and promote male allyship to support women leaders.

Recommendations for further research

For future research purposes, the researcher wishes to promote the following:

- The current researcher conducted the research at one selected higher education institution in the Eastern Cape and therefore recommends that further studies be conducted across higher education institutions in the Eastern Cape Province.
- The researcher has employed a qualitative research approach in this paper and recommends that more studies use a mixed-methods approach in the future.

By implementing these recommendations, the university can build an enabling environment that supports and sustains female student leaders, contributing to a more equitable and diverse leadership landscape.

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Sustainability for Regions

CHALLENGES OF MOVING TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN ZIMBABWE*

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Abstract. The goal of policy implementation is to translate policy intentions into desired outcomes. However, Zimbabwe has adopted elaborate policies over the years aimed at achieving sustainable development, yet persistent socio-economic challenges of poverty, unemployment and inequality persist. Therefore, the novelty of this paper lies in its approach to addressing policy implementation gaps in Zimbabwe's sustainable development trajectory. The paper examines why socio-economic challenges persist despite Zimbabwe's adoption of the Sustainable Development Agenda and national development policies. Hence, qualitative methods were used to examine gaps in policy implementation. Accordingly, government policy documents were analysed, complemented by key informant interviews to gather insights. Findings establish that Zimbabwe's implementation architecture for the Sustainable Development Agenda, including national development policies, is characterised by fragmented governance and a weak alignment with the social and economic indicators of sustainable development. Moreover, policy implementation is fraught with challenges, including limited fiscal space, exclusionary governance, reliance on primary commodities, fiscal indiscipline, corruption and an informal economy. Therefore, the paper formulates recommendations to build a model for transitioning towards sustainable socio-economic development, including governance reforms, enhanced public participation in policymaking, formalisation of the economy and targeting social indicators in policy implementation.

Keywords: policy implementation; social sustainability; sustainable economic growth; sustainable development; Zimbabwe

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JEL Classifications: O1, O55

1. Introduction

Poverty, inequality, and unemployment are complex challenges in Zimbabwe's development trajectory. However, improving the welfare of the majority has been the government's policy thrust since independence. One of the earliest policies implemented was Growth with Equity in 1981, aimed at promoting equitable growth through socialist ideology and democratic principles (Zhou & Zvoushe, 2012). Despite achieving a 10% economic growth rate between 1981 and 1982, social spending triggered inflation (Mutenga & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2022). Economic performance was affected by increased social spending at the expense of production. However, the inception of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programmes (ESAPs) in the 1990s led to significant shifts in policymaking. ESAPs encapsulated neo-liberal policy prescriptions aimed at cutting government spending and promoting economic growth. However, the anticipated economic growth was not realised. The cuts in social spending, such as health and education, exacerbated social suffering. ESAPs were later abandoned, and a

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successor programme, the Zimbabwe Program for Economic and Social Transformation (ZIMPREST), was launched in 1998. However, it was partially implemented.

The turn of the new Millennium witnessed a heightening of social and economic suffering in Zimbabwe. The economy faced an unprecedented downturn marked by reactive policy measures. In 2007, annual inflation skyrocketed to 7 983% (National Budget Statement, 2008). Moreover, 52% of the country's GDP was lost between 1999 and 2008 (Kanyenze et al., 2017). Thus, policy implementation was fraught with challenges emanating from economic depreciation, including inflation. Apart from that, state control over markets aggravated the crisis. A National Incomes and Pricing Commission was established in 2007 to control income and prices. Consequently, price controls led to shortages of basic commodities, and most industries shut down. However, notable macroeconomic stability was achieved in the aftermath of an inclusive government (2009 to 2013), comprising the main political parties: Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the two Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) formations. However, the intense ideological rivalry among political parties hindered effective policy implementation (Zvoushe, 2023). Hence, the best course of action to achieve the common public good was not undertaken. However, the government reaffirmed its commitment to a sustainable development trajectory by adopting the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (ZIMASSET) in 2013. Despite this, ZIMASSET was largely perceived as a political manifesto rather than a genuine national development policy (Chilunjika & Muzvidziwa-Chilunjika, 2020). The policy thrust was to consolidate power in the ruling party ahead of the general elections. Consequently, implementation faced challenges, including insufficient funding and a lack of stakeholders' buy-in.

In 2018, the government reaffirmed its commitment to the Sustainable Development Agenda by adopting an ambitious blueprint, Vision 2030. The policy thrust aims to transform Zimbabwe into a prosperous upper-middle-income economy by 2030 (GoZ, 2020). This is achieved through medium-term plans: the Transitional Stabilisation Plan (TSP), the National Development Strategy 1 (NDS 1) and the National Development Strategy 2 (NDS 2). The macroeconomic framework focuses on macroeconomic stability, containing inflation and achieving economic growth. However, socio-economic challenges, including poverty and unemployment, remain elevated despite economic growth. Extreme poverty affects 42% of the population (WFP, 2026). Moreover, the economy is extremely informalised, hindering the creation of decent work opportunities and broad-based economic growth. Therefore, this paper examines why socio-economic challenges persist despite Zimbabwe's policy commitments towards promoting sustainable development.

Accordingly, the paper aims to: (1) analyse the implementation architecture of the Sustainable Development Agenda, (2) examine the alignment of Zimbabwe's national development policies with sustainable economic growth, (3) evaluate the integration of social sustainability, and (4) formulate actionable recommendations for enhancing policy implementation to achieve sustainable socio-economic development. Concomitantly, the paper builds a model for transitioning towards sustainable socio-economic development, using formulated recommendations.

2. Review of Literature

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a complex phenomenon (Sachs et al, 2025). Therefore, this section delineates a framework for analysing the complex trajectory of sustainable socio-economic development in Zimbabwe. It illustrates the theoretical relationship among key concepts under study, including policy implementation, sustainable economic growth, and social sustainability. Policy implementation translates policy intentions into desired outcomes. However, effective policy implementation relies on good governance mechanisms that foster a collaborative, iterative policy process. Hence, effective policy implementation is a panacea for achieving complex, sustainable socio-economic development outcomes, including employment

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creation and the eradication of poverty and inequality. On the contrary, poor policy implementation hinders progress toward sustainable development outcomes.

Impact of Policy Implementation on Desired Policy Outcomes

Policy implementation is a political process of achieving policy goals (Sager et al., 2024). This involves translating policy intentions into desired outcomes to address public problems. Therefore, effective policy implementation must tackle the complex challenges of development. Poverty and inequality are complex challenges that prompt governments to craft elaborate policies aimed at eradicating them. Hence, policy implementation must translate policy objectives into sustainable development outcomes. Effective policy implementation largely depends on a government's ability to transform policy objectives into desired outcomes (Uwizeyimana, 2024). Therefore, policy implementation is fundamentally a political process that influences development outcomes. The political will of governments to act or refrain from action is crucial for effective policy implementation. This makes policy implementation a complex issue. Most developing countries struggle to translate their policy intentions into desired outcomes. While policy design is important, effective implementation is crucial for realising policy goals. In fact, policy implementation can sometimes become a graveyard for even the most well-conceived policies. This exhorts governments to invest more in knowledge and other resources to ensure policy success. Moreover, policy design and implementation are intertwined. Policy design flaws affect the success of policy implementation. Therefore, policies must have clearly defined goals and objectives. Policies must be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) to promote successful implementation. Furthermore, policy goals are crucial for translating intentions into desired outcomes (Glass & Newig, 2019). Policy implementation must also prioritise human well-being as the primary objective of development because true development is people-centred and must transform people's livelihoods. As such, policy implementation must be bottom-up and inclusive rather than purely technical. The lack of public input in policy implementation often leads to misaligned priorities, which hinder sustainable development outcomes. Exclusionary governance is detrimental to development (Masunungure & Zvoushe, 2023). However, good governance is crucial for translating policy intentions into desired outcomes.

Interplay of Good Governance and Policy Implementation

Simply put, governance denotes a comprehensive system of rules, institutions, practices, and processes by which a society manages and allocates its resources. This involves various actors, processes, structures and agencies engaged in crafting and executing political decisions. Notably, public institutions are key actors in governance, conducting public affairs, managing public resources, and setting policy priorities to address public problems. Thus, a government's ability to establish norms, institutions, and a legal and policy framework that empowers individuals to participate in policy decisions and hold leaders accountable is crucial for addressing public problems. However, governance institutions don't operate in a vacuum; they need supporting principles to foster their effectiveness in responding to public problems. Accordingly, good governance provides a framework for promoting the efficiency of public institutions to address public problems. Good governance constitutes the principles, tactics and standards adopted by a government to build political will to address societal problems (Olowu, 2025). The core principles of good governance include accountability, transparency, responsiveness, participation, inclusiveness and equity (Omri & Ben Mabrouk, 2020). These principles foster inclusiveness in policy implementation to ensure that it is inherently consultative, which is pivotal for achieving sustainable development. The practice of good governance fosters an environment conducive to effective policy implementation, whereas poor governance leads to implementation gaps. Moreover, strong institutions are built on good governance, contributing to enhanced human well-being (DCAF, 2021). Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 aims to create effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions that foster sustainable development. Hence, good governance, policy implementation and sustainable development are interwoven.

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Sustainable Development

Sustainable development aims to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Therefore, the goal of sustainable development is to achieve human development while also nurturing the planet's capacity to support life. This approach integrates the principles of environmental protection and economic development. However, the adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Agenda reflects a collective call to action to build a resilient, just, and prosperous world for all (Sachs, 2015). Accordingly, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. Therefore, addressing the world's complex problems, including poverty, must integrate strategies that balance economic growth and social sustainability while safeguarding the environment. Economic sustainability is rooted in economic growth; however, economic growth does not guarantee improvement in people's well-being. Therefore, sustainable economic growth goes beyond traditional measures of development to emphasise the advancement of human capacities and capabilities for well-being. This includes poverty eradication, job creation, and the provision of health and education. Apart from that, social sustainability aims to enhance people's capacities to realise their full potential. The elements of social sustainability include inclusion, equity, cohesion, resilience, empowerment and participation, which create an enabling environment for people to meet their needs. Meanwhile, environmental sustainability aims to conserve the environment while also advancing economic and social objectives. Accordingly, sustainable development is a complex phenomenon that relies on effective policy implementation to balance the social, economic and environmental objectives of human well-being.

Social Sustainability

Social sustainability refers to a development process that enables people in a given community or society to be part of it and benefit from it (Barron et al., 2025). The main elements of social sustainability include social cohesion, inclusion, equality, resilience, quality of life, community resilience and process legitimacy. Thus, social sustainability serves as an endpoint of exclusion, ensuring that those at risk of poverty and other disadvantages can access the opportunities and resources necessary to realise their full potential (Paraschiv et al., 2021). This promotes productive, cohesive societies, allowing people to cooperate and establish the basic social functions that underpin prosperity. However, exclusion is detrimental to social cohesion and inclusive development. Inclusive societies are built on promoting people's access to basic services and meaningful participation in development. Therefore, encouraging people's participation in policy implementation empowers them to influence decisions on issues that affect their daily lives, fostering inclusive development. People's participation builds social capital and a sense of local ownership, which drives sustainable development (Nwachi, 2021). Sustainable development is an inclusive process that aims to leave no one behind. Hence, resilient societies enhance people's ability, particularly the poor and marginalised, to withstand shocks and protect cultural integrity.

Furthermore, social inclusion promotes equal opportunities for all to participate in development fully. Accordingly, social inclusion is categorised into socio-cultural, political, and economic. Socio-cultural inclusion enables groups in society to participate in decision-making, thereby fostering social trust in the implementation of policies. The political aspects of social inclusion focus on bridging the gap between national agendas and local needs. When institutions and political powers hold authority over decision-making, it can lead to misaligned priorities in policy implementation. However, public participation in decision-making enhances policy legitimacy and builds public trust in government, both of which are essential for achieving sustainable development.

In contrast, exclusionary governance does not empower marginalised individuals to make decisions on issues that impact their daily lives. As such, the goal of social inclusion is to reduce inequalities, eliminate any forms of exclusion and discrimination and achieve social justice and cohesion (Dugarova, 2015). Government policies must embrace meaningful participation, universal social protection, and the social and solidarity economy to enhance sustainable socio-economic development.

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Sustainable Economic Growth

Traditional economics utilised productivity and factor endowments in determining the growth and development of economies. However, productivity alone does not capture income distribution and how people meet basic needs (Kreinin & Aigner, 2022). People are the real wealth of nations, and the goal of development is to improve human well-being through enabling people to realise their full potential and live productive lives (UNDP, 1990). Utilising real per capita GDP as an absolute measure of development omits the indicator of living standards. Economic metrics are a means to an end, not an end in themselves, for improving human well-being. Sustainable development integrates the dimensions of economic growth and human well-being. The Human Development Index (HDI) is a composite statistic used to measure quality of life and human well-being. HDI focuses on life expectancy, educational attainment, and GDP per capita. This integrates non-economic metrics into the human development framework. HDI informs the achievement of human development goals and the design and implementation of economic development policies. The intersection of economic growth, health, education, and the environment is vital for achieving sustainable development (Kamran et al., 2022). Therefore, sustainable economic growth aims to deal with the complex challenges of inequality and poverty in human development. Governments are exhorted to develop appropriate policies to create equal opportunities for all and ensure that all can contribute to and benefit from economic growth (Widianingsih et al., 2024).

Furthermore, employment quality is another key dimension of sustainable economic growth. Accordingly, SDG 8 aims to promote inclusive growth, decent work and productive employment for all. The quality of employment affects the progress of human well-being. The deficit in decent work opportunities increases workers' vulnerability and perpetuates poverty. Figure 1 illustrates the four pillars of sustainable economic growth.

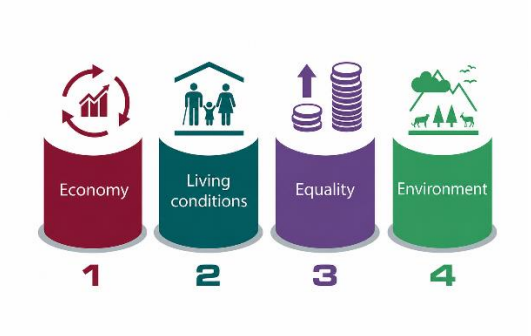


Figure 1. Four pillars of sustainable economic growth.
Source: UNCTAD (2022)

The four pillars of sustainable economic growth include the economy, living conditions, equality and the environment. Economic indicators include Gross Domestic Product (GDP), national income, purchasing power, employment, and trade. Social and economic standards, including health and education, measure indicators of living conditions. Moreover, equality is assessed through labour participation, income inequality, school enrollment, political participation, and gender equality. The environmental dimension of sustainable economic growth encompasses the protection of natural capital. Accordingly, developed countries generally achieve higher levels of sustainable economic growth than developing countries. Luxembourg, Iceland and Norway are amongst the top-ranked countries in sustainable economic growth, whilst Ethiopia is ranked the lowest (UNCTAD, 2022). High levels of inequality are the major impediments to sustainable economic growth and the eradication of poverty.

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3. Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded in two interconnected theoretical perspectives that inform the analysis of policy implementation and the achievement of sustainable socio-economic development. These include the governance theory and the human development approach.

Good Governance Theory

Good governance refers to public administration processes that maximise public interest (Kotnik et al, 2020). Therefore, this paper employs good governance theory to examine the importance of effective institutions in policy implementation. The concept of good governance originated from the World Bank's policies, which were tailored for developing countries in the 1980s (World Bank, 1992, 2000, 2024). It was believed that significant economic failures in these countries stemmed from poor governance. Thus, governance refers to the exercise of power by a government in managing a country's social and economic resources. Good governance promotes sound development, while poor governance hinders it. Accordingly, good governance comprises a set of principles including responsiveness, consensus, accountability, transparency, participation, and equity. Embracing these principles is the core of governance, supporting a well-functioning government in achieving sustainable development outcomes. Hence, sustainable development is facilitated by effective institutional and procedural mechanisms that represent the public interest. However, weak governance affects a government's macroeconomic performance and its ability to pursue sustainable growth (Newiak, 2022) credibly. Niger is a typical country in Sub-Saharan Africa, where weak governance has hindered the achievement of sustainable development outcomes (Sun et al, 2025). Hence, good governance theory establishes fundamental principles that inform an efficient and effective public sector in development management.

Human Development Approach (HDA)

According to the UNDP (1990), the focus of human development is to enlarge people's choices for a decent standard of living. The objective of human development is to create an enabling environment that enhances people's capacity to live productive lives. This includes a long and healthy life, education, a decent standard of living, political freedom, guaranteed human rights and self-respect. Income and wealth are only means to an end, not ends in themselves. Therefore, policymaking must not focus solely on economic growth. Economic growth does not always trickle down to promote inclusive growth. The eradication of socio-economic challenges, including poverty and unemployment, relies on deliberate policies rather than trickle-down effects. Employment creation and poverty eradication are means to productive lives, not a result of economic growth. Sustainable development integrates the social, economic and environmental dimensions. Paradoxically, Zimbabwe's macroeconomic policy framework is focused on stabilisation without integration of social indicators.

The above theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for analysing why elaborate policy designs fail to transform human well-being in Zimbabwe. Poverty, unemployment and inequality remain elevated despite the adoption of comprehensive socio-economic policies. The theoretical foundations of good governance and the human development approach illuminate pathways to strengthen policy implementation and achieve sustainable socio-economic development in Zimbabwe.

4. Study Design and Methodology

The nature of the research problem under investigation determines the selection of a research approach. Therefore, this study employs a qualitative research approach to examine why socio-economic challenges persist despite the adoption of elaborate policies in Zimbabwe. Qualitative research helps explore and understand the meanings that individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). This offers in-depth insight into the complexity of sustainable development and facilitates a nuanced understanding of policy implementation dynamics. Documentary analysis of key government policy documents and key informant

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interviews were utilised to gather insights. The key government policy documents reviewed include Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), the Transitional Stabilisation Program (TSP), the National Development Strategy 1 (NDS 1), the National Development Strategy 2 (NDS 2) and Budget statements. However, reliance on government policy documents is a limitation for the study as they are prone to bias, tending to portray successes while downplaying failures.

To counter the limitations of documentary analysis, key informant interviews were conducted with policy analysts to generate insights into the dynamics of policy implementation and the achievement of sustainable development outcomes in Zimbabwe. Moreover, the paper adheres to ethical standards, providing an impartial synthesis of available information and maintaining academic integrity. Ethical approval was granted by the School of Public Management, Governance and Public Policy- Research Ethics Committee at the University of Johannesburg.

5. Implementation of the Sustainable Development Agenda and National Development Policies in Zimbabwe

Institutional architecture for implementing the Sustainable Development Agenda in Zimbabwe
The SDGs secretariat under the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare coordinates the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in Zimbabwe. Implementation of the SDGs takes a holistic, multi-sectoral approach as illustrated in Figure 2.

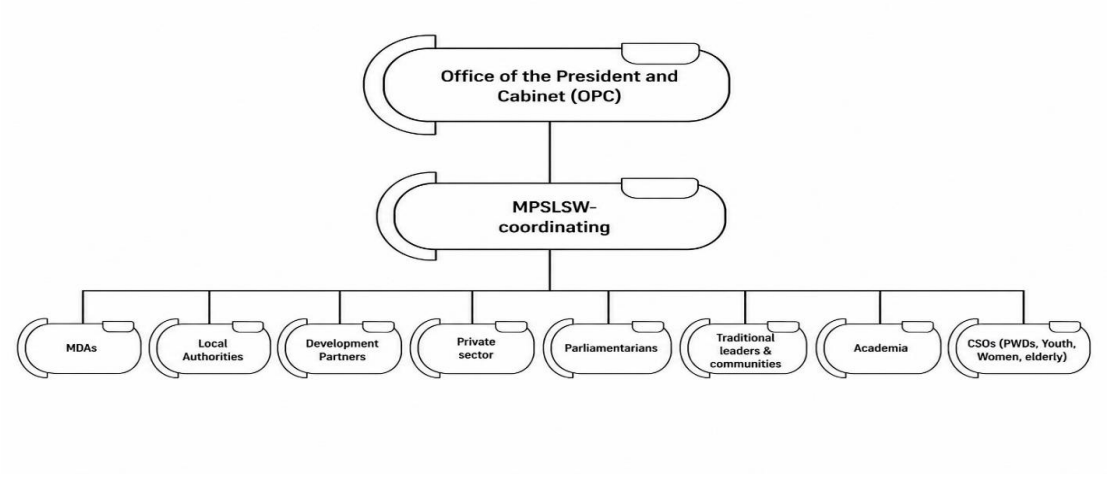


Figure 2. SDGs Implementation Structure in Zimbabwe
Source: Government of Zimbabwe, Voluntary National Review (2024)

The comprehensive approach to implementing SDGs in Zimbabwe aims to promote both vertical integration and horizontal coordination across different sectors and levels of governance. However, the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare (MPSLSW), coordinating the SDGs, does not play a leading role in formulating national development policies. The Ministry of Finance, Economic Development and Investment Promotions plays a leading role in formulating national development policies, particularly the National Development Strategy 2 (NDS 2). This limits the SDGs secretariat's role in effectively coordinating and mainstreaming SDGs in government policies. Consequently, the weak alignment of domestic policies with the Sustainable Development Agenda impedes the achievement of sustainable development outcomes. Apart from that, stakeholders, including development partners, are limited to consultation and technical support, without a stake in higher-level decision-making.

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The Alignment of National Development Policies with Sustainable Economic Growth

Zimbabwe's macro-economic policies are aimed at stabilisation, containing inflation and promoting economic growth. However, the economy has been in flux, with elevated poverty and unemployment rates. The government adopted Vision 2030, a framework aimed at achieving a prosperous upper-middle-income economy through medium-term plans, including the Transitional Development Plan (TSP), the National Development Strategy 1 (NDS 1) and the National Development Strategy 2 (NDS 2). The Transitional Stabilisation Plan was a short-term policy intervention aimed at addressing pressing economic challenges. The primary focus of TSP was to stabilise the macroeconomic environment, promote a private sector-led economy, address infrastructure gaps, and achieve quick wins to stimulate growth (GoZ, 2018). However, the adoption of TSP was not participatory; key stakeholders were not consulted (LEDRIZ, 2020). The lack of stakeholder participation hindered the success of implementation. Although the TSP was focused on addressing macroeconomic challenges, it overlooked the equally important social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. Sustainable development is a holistic process which integrates economic, social and environmental dimensions. Moreover, stipulated mechanisms for fiscal and monetary discipline were not enforced. In 2020, the Treasury made various direct payments totalling US$22,024,406 on behalf of Ministries without supporting evidence (OAG, 2020). This reveals weak governance practices that undermine the efficiency of service delivery and national economic performance. The lack of fiscal prudence impedes efficient resource allocation, hindering prospects for improving people's well-being.

However, the adoption of NDS1 and NDS2 in 2020 and 2025, respectively, represents the government's commitment towards a middle-income economy by 2030. Despite this, the government's primary focus is on economic stabilisation without deliberately integrating social indicators. Thereby limiting the achievement of sustainable development outcomes. Consequently, Zimbabwe has achieved a single-digit inflation since 1997, but poverty and unemployment remain elevated. Moreover, the economy relies on primary products, limiting manufacturing growth. Manufacturing growth is crucial to promote structural change and broad-based economic growth (Baymul & Sen, 2020). However, agriculture and mining are considered the primary drivers of socio-economic transformation in Zimbabwe. Agriculture receives more budgetary allocations than industrial growth and manufacturing. The 2026 National Budget allocated ZiG26.8 billion to agriculture, compared with ZiG459.8 million to industry (National Budget Statement, 2025). 70% of agricultural produce is exported in raw form. This limits beneficiation and broad-based economic growth. There is a need to promote value addition and shift from primary agriculture to promote structural change. Despite government efforts to modernise agriculture and boost production, including the Pfumvudza/Intwasa initiative, productivity is largely subsistence and less diversified. Apart from that, agriculture contributes a significant share of employment. According to the 2025 Second Quarter Labour Force Survey Report, agriculture accounts for 24.8% of national employment, whilst manufacturing accounts for 7% (ZIMSTAT, 2025a,b). This constrains the creation of decent work opportunities; agriculture does not provide decent employment compared to manufacturing. This precipitates poverty and hinders inclusive growth. Moreover, economic informalisation is a challenge limiting the creation of decent work opportunities in Zimbabwe.

Integration of Social Sustainability

The principle of "leaving no one behind" is an integral part of Zimbabwe's national development policy framework, including NDS 1 and NDS 2. However, Zimbabwe has a long-standing history of exclusionary politics, in which public consultations often serve as mere formalities to validate decisions rather than genuinely engage key stakeholders (Masungure & Zvoushe, 2023). The national budget remains a technical exercise which often fails to align with people's actual needs. There is inadequate dissemination of information about budget consultations, and most people, particularly those in rural areas, remain sidelined in national budgeting.

Furthermore, the scale of Zimbabwe's informal economy presents a significant challenge to macroeconomic gains. 76.1% of establishments in Zimbabwe are informal (Zimbabwe Economic Census, 2025). Therefore, the

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prevalence of the informal sector leaves many workers in vulnerable employment, which exacerbates poverty. The informal sector is neither registered nor does it pay taxes, undermining the government's tax revenue base and leading to fiscal deficits. Fiscal deficits shrink the resources available for social sectors. Moreover, efforts toward gender equality in Zimbabwe's political economy remain more symbolic than genuinely empowering. Despite the government enacting legislation to improve women's participation in politics, such as a constitutional quota system, these measures are largely symbolic and fail to achieve genuine representation. Women remain underrepresented on key decision-making platforms, despite making up 52% of the national population. The 2013 constitution established a gender quota, reserving 60 parliamentary seats for women through proportional representation to address the historical underrepresentation of women. However, the gender quota has only increased women's numerical presence in politics, but they remain underrepresented in political leadership positions. Hence, the continued underrepresentation of women hinders their active participation in development. Women must have a voice in political leadership to represent their interests. Therefore, the traditional barriers to women's representation should be dismantled to promote genuine empowerment.

6. Policy Implementation Challenges

Exclusionary Governance

Despite government commitments to social equality, significant barriers persist, limiting the participation of marginalised groups in development. Youths, women, and people with disabilities continue to face structural barriers that limit their participation in national development processes. While gender has been mainstreamed in legislative frameworks, including gender quotas, implementation gaps remain in translating these formal commitments into tangible outcomes. Moreover, poverty and inequality further constrain women's participation in development processes. Women constitute a significant portion of Youth Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET). In 2025, females accounted for 57.4% of Youth Not in Employment, Education or Training compared to 40.4% among their male counterparts (Zimbabwe Second Labour Force Survey, 2025). Hence, marginalised groups, particularly women, often lack the resources and agency necessary to advocate for their interests and needs effectively.

Fiscal Indiscipline and Corruption

Corruption is a structural barrier to development which undermines the functionality and legitimacy of institutions, affecting the quality and availability of public services (GoZ, 2021). Moreover, fiscal indiscipline undermines the efficiency of government policies and programmes, due to weak governance and inadequate enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance. The Office of the Auditor General's (OAG) yearly reports show a grim picture of fiscal indiscipline. However, there are no effective enforcement mechanisms in place to ensure compliance or to prosecute offenders. Despite the establishment of the Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission (ZACC) to prevent and combat corruption. The ZACC has been criticised for a 'catch-and-release' approach. High-profile offenders are often not effectively prosecuted as much as low-profile offenders. Zimbabwe remains ranked as a highly corrupt country on the Corruption Perceptions Index, with a score of 22 for perceived levels of public sector corruption (Transparency International, 2026:5).

Limited Fiscal Space

Limited fiscal space is a significant challenge to achieving the UN 2030 Agenda in Zimbabwe (GoZ, 2017). Zimbabwe's economic challenges are significantly constraining policy implementation. The country has experienced persistent hyperinflation, currency instability, and limited fiscal space, reducing the resources available for development programs. Macroeconomic challenges lead to fiscal pressures, limit funding for programs, and reduce the purchasing power of the resources allocated to them. In 2024, the national budget projected revenue of Z$53.9 trillion against expenditure of Z$58.2 trillion, resulting in a budget deficit of Z$4.3 trillion (Budget Statement, 2025). Moreover, the country is in debt distress, limiting fiscal space for social spending. At the end of September 2025, Zimbabwe's public and publicly guaranteed debt stood at USD 23.4

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billion (GoZ, 2025). The debt service payments made by the Government of Zimbabwe in the 2025 fiscal year exceed the budgetary allocations for industry, tourism and mining. With limited fiscal space, the government relies on external support from development partners to bridge the development finance gap. However, the decline in global Official Development Assistance (ODA) presents challenges for Zimbabwe's development finance. In 2023, development assistance to Zimbabwe declined to USD 549.8 million, down from USD 638.8 million in 2022 (GoZ, 2024). Between January and September 2025, Zimbabwe received USD 386.1 million in development assistance against a target of USD 500 million (Budget Statement, 2025). Hence, reliance on development partner support has become unsustainable for bridging Zimbabwe's development financing gap.

Reliance on Primary Commodities

Zimbabwe's economic growth relies on primary factors, which are problematic for sustainable socio-economic development. Agriculture remains the mainstay of Zimbabwe's economy, and it is primarily subsistence, and productivity is significantly affected by climatic shocks. In 2019 and 2020, the GDP contracted by 6% and 4%, respectively, due to an El Niño-induced drought that severely impacted agricultural production and manufacturing (GoZ, 2020). Therefore, the government must modernise agriculture and transition from primary production to manufacturing to promote growth. Apart from that, critical minerals, including gold and lithium, are largely exported in raw form, limiting beneficiation and broad-based economic growth. Value addition promotes manufacturing growth and broad-based economic growth. Moreover, most mining ventures are informal, small-scale operations that engage in environmentally harmful practices, thereby undermining the sustainability of the mining sector and its contribution to broad-based economic growth. The natural environment is finite, and the exploitation of natural resources must balance the objectives of social, economic and environmental sustainability. However, the prevalence of poverty forces people to depend on their immediate environment for survival. This has led to the proliferation of informal small-scale mining in Zimbabwe.

Informalised Economy

The informal sector is a livelihood strategy for a significant portion of Zimbabwe's population. However, it presents a significant challenge to achieving sustainable socio-economic development. The informal sector does not pay tax, which constrains the government's tax revenue base. Moreover, informal employment is precarious; it lacks job security and social security, which constrain the creation of decent work opportunities. Although the informal sector serves as a coping mechanism against economic challenges, working conditions fall short of decent standards. Hence, the prevalence of the informal economy in Zimbabwe indicates structural challenges in generating decent work opportunities. The deficit of decent work perpetuates poverty and constrains the achievement of broad-based economic growth. Consequently, Zimbabwe experienced a 6% annual growth rate in 2025, but a significant portion of the population remains in poverty.

7. Policy Recommendations

Governance Reforms

There is a need to prioritise governance reforms that strengthen institutional capacity and accountability to promote effective policy implementation in Zimbabwe. This includes investing in the technical and managerial capabilities of public institutions at both national and sub-national levels, with a particular focus on implementation agencies. The establishment of the dedicated SDGs Secretariat represents a positive step which should be adequately resourced to coordinate SDG implementation. The SDGs secretariat must be empowered to participate effectively in implementing national development policies. Furthermore, the government must enhance transparency and accountability by regularly reporting to the public on the progress of national development plans. Moreover, the Whole-of-Government Performance Management System for NDS1 and NDS2 monitoring represents a good practice that should be strengthened. Furthermore, anti-corruption efforts should be strengthened through continued capacity-building for institutions such as the Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission (ZACC), the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA), and the Office of the Auditor General (OAG).

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Stakeholders Buy-In in Policymaking

The government must enhance public participation in policymaking to promote social cohesion and policy legitimacy. The lack of public participation leads to misaligned and misplaced priorities, hindering inclusive development. Technical policymaking often serves the interests of a few while excluding the majority from decisions that affect their daily lives. Therefore, the national budget must evolve from a technical process to one that captures public interest. This enhances the effectiveness of government policy interventions in addressing public problems in Zimbabwe.

Formalisation of the Economy

The informalisation of the economy is a significant challenge limiting broad-based economic growth in Zimbabwe. The informal sector fails to create decent work opportunities and support sustainable economic growth, thereby perpetuating poverty. Furthermore, the informal economy undermines the government's tax base, leading to fiscal deficits that constrain resource allocation to critical social and economic sectors. Therefore, the informal economy must transition into the formal economy to enhance its contribution to sustainable socio-economic development, including decent work and contribution to the national fiscus. However, the informal sector should not be treated as a threat to the formal sector but must be productively integrated into the formal economy. This goes beyond taxation by addressing barriers to its growth and providing incentives to attract formalisation.

Targeting Social Indicators in Policy Implementation

Zimbabwe's macroeconomic framework is focused on stabilisation, containing inflation and promoting economic growth. This is envisioned to trickle down and transform socio-economic development. However, eradicating social challenges, including poverty and unemployment, requires deliberate policies that promote people's well-being. Despite achieving positive economic growth, poverty and unemployment remain elevated. Therefore, Zimbabwe's macroeconomic framework, including national development policies and national budgets, must integrate social indicators in policy implementation to achieve sustainable socio-economic development outcomes.

Conclusion

The paper examined why socio-economic challenges, including poverty, unemployment and inequality, persist in Zimbabwe despite the implementation of the Sustainable Development Agenda and successive national development policies. Accordingly, the aim was to explore Zimbabwe's implementation architecture for the Sustainable Development Agenda, examine the alignment of national development policies with sustainable economic growth and social sustainability outcomes, and provide actionable recommendations for enhancing policy implementation to achieve sustainable socio-economic development. The paper developed a model for transitioning to sustainable socio-economic development and accompanied it with recommendations. Therefore, the novelty of this paper lies in addressing the implementation gap of sustainable socio-economic development in Zimbabwe. Documentary analysis of government policy documents and key informant interviews were used to gather insights. However, government policy documents are prone to bias as they can portray successes while downplaying failures. Findings established that implementation of the Sustainable Development Agenda is characterised by fragmented governance, which affects desired policy outcomes. Moreover, Zimbabwe's national development policies fail to integrate social indicators and focus solely on economic stabilisation, thereby hindering sustainable socio-economic development. Consequently, the economy has experienced flux amid persistent socio-economic challenges such as poverty, unemployment and inequality. Moreover, policy implementation is fraught with challenges, including exclusionary governance, fiscal indiscipline and corruption, limited fiscal space, reliance on primary commodities, and an informalised economy. Accordingly, the paper builds a model for transitioning to sustainable development by formulating recommendations, including

governance reforms, stakeholder buy-in to policymaking, formalising the economy, and targeting social indicators in policy implementation.

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DECENTRALISATION OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AND PRINCIPAL AUTONOMY IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Abstract. In the context of increasing decentralisation of educational management, principals are expected to navigate complex governance structures that often limit their decision-making power; however, the extent of their autonomy varies significantly across different governance systems. This qualitative conceptual discourse analyses the policy implications of granting school principals' autonomy in school leadership and governance. The findings highlight the need for balanced policies that empower principals while maintaining rigorous accountability measures to ensure equitable and high-quality education. Policy recommendations are provided to enhance governance frameworks, support leadership training for principals to foster effective school leadership, and foster environments conducive to educational excellence. This paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on optimising school governance structures to support principal autonomy and improve educational outcomes. Through addressing these issues, this paper aims to offer practical insights for policymakers seeking to design governance systems that both empower school leaders and uphold the standards necessary for consistent and fair educational practices.

Keywords: school leadership; governance; policy; principal autonomy

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1. Introduction

School leadership and governance play pivotal roles in shaping the quality and direction of contemporary educational systems (McKay, 2018). At the heart of effective schools are leaders who not only manage the day-to-day operations but also inspire their staff and students. They are tasked with setting strategic visions, nurturing a positive school culture, and ensuring that teaching and learning outcomes meet high standards (Wermke et al., 2022). Governance structures, typically comprising school boards or committees, work alongside these leaders. They provide oversight, set policies, and ensure accountability, bridging the gap between educational objectives and community expectations (Du Plessis, 2019). In recent years, the complexity of school leadership and governance has increased, reflecting broader societal changes and the growing demands for schools to cater to diverse student needs (Gu & Colman, 2023). Leaders must now be adept at navigating technological advancements, integrating digital learning tools, and promoting inclusivity and equity within their institutions. This shift has necessitated a move away from traditional, hierarchical models of leadership towards more collaborative approaches. Limon and Aydın (2020) state that leaders are now seen as facilitators who empower teachers and students, fostering innovation and creativity. The relationship between leadership and governance in schools is also evolving. Keddie, Blackmore and MacDonald (2024) aver that effective governance bodies

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recognise the importance of supporting school leaders in their quest for educational excellence. This includes providing resources, facilitating professional development, and engaging with the wider community. Moreover, governance bodies are increasingly held accountable for their schools' performance, prompting a more data-driven approach to decision-making (Blackmore et al., 2023). This symbiotic relationship ensures that schools can adapt to changing educational landscapes while maintaining high standards of accountability and transparency. Looking ahead, the future of school leadership and governance will likely be shaped by ongoing debates around decentralisation, autonomy, and the role of technology in education (Myende, Blose & Adebiyi, 2024). As schools become more autonomous, leaders will have more flexibility to innovate but will also face greater scrutiny regarding their performance. Technology will continue to be a double-edged sword, offering new opportunities for learning while presenting challenges related to the digital divide and cybersecurity (Mugwaze & Smith, 2024). To navigate these challenges successfully, leaders and governance bodies will need to remain adaptable and foster a culture of continuous improvement and stakeholder engagement.

2. Definition of Principal Autonomy

Keddie and Holloway (2020) define autonomy in school leadership as a pivotal concept, referring to the degree of independence and self-governance that school leaders, such as principals and administrative staff, have in making decisions that affect their schools. This autonomy can cover various areas, including curriculum choices, staff recruitment and development, resource allocation, and the implementation of innovative teaching methods. The significance of autonomy in this context lies in its potential to foster environments that are adaptable, personalised, and optimally conducive to student learning (Woods et al., 2021). By empowering leaders to make decisions based on their professional judgment and intimate knowledge of their school's unique needs and challenges, autonomy can lead to more effective and responsive educational practices (Niesche, 2018). The impact of autonomy in school leadership extends beyond administrative freedom; it fundamentally alters the dynamics of accountability and responsibility within the educational system. Autonomy shifts the focus from compliance with centralised policies to outcomes and performance, encouraging leaders to innovate and pursue excellence in education. This transition demands a high level of trust in school leaders' capabilities and requires robust support systems to ensure that autonomy leads to positive educational outcomes (Limon & Aydın, 2020). It also requires a balance to ensure that autonomy does not lead to disparities in educational quality across regions or demographics. Furthermore, the significance of autonomy in school leadership is evident in its potential to boost morale and job satisfaction among school staff (Blackmore & MacDonald, 2024). When leaders have the authority to make decisions that directly affect their work environment and students' success, it fosters a sense of ownership and commitment to the school's vision. This can lead to a more motivated and cohesive team, which is crucial for implementing effective teaching and learning strategies. Gu and Colman (2023) assert that autonomy also allows leaders to tailor professional development opportunities to their staff's specific needs, further enhancing the school's educational capacity. However, the successful implementation of autonomy in school leadership is not without its challenges. It requires a delicate balance between granting freedom and ensuring accountability, necessitating clear frameworks and guidelines to prevent misuse of autonomy. Moreover, it demands a change in mindset among all stakeholders in the education system, from policymakers to the community, to understand and support the notion that autonomy can lead to better educational outcomes (Wermke et al., 2022). Despite these challenges, the move towards greater autonomy in school leadership holds the promise of creating more dynamic, responsive, and effective educational environments that can meet the diverse needs of students in the 21st century.

Research objective: to investigate the decentralisation of school leadership and principal autonomy within the South African education system.

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3. Theoretical Framework

This paper adopted Transformational Leadership Theory as its theoretical foundation, initially introduced by Burns in 1978 and later expanded by Bass in 1985. This leadership style is characterised by its ability to inspire and motivate followers to embrace new ideas and perspectives, thereby guiding the organisation towards growth and success. Mirkamali (2021) underscores the significance of transformational leadership in fostering an environment where innovation and progressive thoughts thrive, positioning it as a crucial factor in the successful management and evolution of organisations.

Transformational Leadership Theory closely aligns with the principle of autonomy in educational leadership, particularly for school principals. It posits that this form of leadership empowers school leaders to implement meaningful changes, promote equity, and adeptly navigate policy frameworks in ways that resonate with the specific needs of their school communities. By embracing principal autonomy, transformative leadership paves the way for innovation, shared governance, and the restructuring of educational frameworks. These changes aim to enhance the educational experience for diverse student populations, demonstrating the theory's profound impact in creating more inclusive and adaptable educational environments.

4. Methodological Outline

The methodology adopted in this study is an integrative literature review, a systematic approach that constructs a comprehensive understanding by amalgamating knowledge categorised into distinct themes (Pálsdóttir & Jóhannsdóttir, 2021). These themes elucidate the paper's objectives and offer a deep dive into the prevailing scholarly discourse on the policy implications of principal autonomy in school leadership and governance. To achieve this, thematic and narrative analyses were employed to synthesise literature retrieved from relevant academic databases using specific search terms. The integrative literature review methodology offers a systematic approach to exploring the policy implications of principal autonomy on school leadership and governance. By employing both thematic and narrative analyses, this method synthesises knowledge from a broad range of academic sources, identifying key themes related to policy implications of principal autonomy on school leadership and governance. The review gathers literature on principal autonomy and school governance using targeted search terms, thereby constructing a comprehensive understanding of the policy implications of principal autonomy for school leadership and governance. Dyantyi, Ncanywa and Nguza-Mduba (2024) state that thematic analysis categorises insights into distinct themes, offering a structured reflection on the prevailing scholarly discourse, while narrative analysis allows for a deeper exploration of how these themes collectively contribute to reimagining higher education for a more just and inclusive future.

5. School Leadership and Autonomy

The role of school principals has historically been centred on administrative leadership, focusing on managing staff, ensuring compliance with district policies, and overseeing day-to-day school operations (Pont, 2020). However, in recent years, the evolving educational landscape has necessitated a shift in this role. Principals are now finding themselves at the helm of not only administrative duties but also a broader educational leadership role (Ndwandwe, 2024). This includes fostering a positive school culture, driving instructional improvement, and leading the implementation of innovative educational strategies. The dual focus on administrative efficiency and educational efficacy underscores the increasingly complex nature of the principalship in modern education (Gibson & Bailey, 2024). As educational leaders, principals are now expected to be deeply involved in curriculum design and implementation, teacher professional development, and the analysis of student performance data to inform instructional strategies. This shift reflects the growing recognition of the importance of school leadership for student outcomes. Limon and Aydın (2020) affirm that principals are tasked with creating a learning-conducive environment, which involves supporting teachers in adopting best instructional practices and actively

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engaging with students and parents to enhance educational experiences. This multifaceted role requires principals to be visionary leaders who can inspire their staff and students towards achieving excellence. Moreover, the integration of technology in education has added another layer to the principal's role (Ganon-Shilon & Chen, 2019). Principals must now oversee the integration of digital tools and resources in teaching and learning processes, ensuring that the school remains at the forefront of educational innovation. This means staying up to date on the latest educational technologies, guiding the adoption of digital learning platforms, and promoting digital literacy among both teachers and students. The challenge lies in balancing the traditional administrative responsibilities with the need to be a proactive advocate for technological advancement within the school (Pont, 2020). The evolving role of principals, therefore, reflects broader shifts in the education sector, underscoring the need for dynamic leadership that can adapt to changing educational landscapes. Principals are increasingly recognised as pivotal to school success, requiring a blend of administrative acumen and educational insight (Gibson & Bailey, 2024). As they navigate these complex responsibilities, principals play a crucial role in shaping the future of education, ensuring that schools not only run efficiently but also provide a rich and engaging learning environment for all students.

Autonomy in Decision-Making: Curriculum Implementation

Autonomy in decision-making significantly affects various aspects of educational institutions, particularly curriculum implementation. Shabangu (2025) aver that when schools have the freedom to tailor their curricula, they can better meet the specific needs and interests of their student populations. This autonomy allows educators to design and modify courses that not only align with state or national standards but also incorporate local culture, address current events, and cater to the evolving requirements of the job market (Skerritt, 2023). As a result, students receive a more relevant and engaging education, preparing them for real-world challenges.

Budgeting and Resource Allocation

In budgeting and resource allocation, autonomy plays a critical role in ensuring funds are used effectively and efficiently. Schools with decision-making power in this area can prioritise expenditures based on direct knowledge of their unique needs and objectives (Niesche et al., 2023). This could mean allocating more resources to areas with the greatest impact on student learning, such as technology upgrades, library resources, or extracurricular programs. By managing their budgets, schools can better support their educational goals and enhance the overall learning environment.

Staff Recruitment and Development

Staff recruitment and development are other areas where autonomy significantly benefits educational institutions. With the freedom to hire and develop staff, schools can focus on attracting individuals who not only possess the necessary qualifications but also share the institution's vision and values (McKay, 2018). This autonomy enables schools to implement targeted professional development programs that address specific needs, promote innovative teaching practices, and foster a supportive and collaborative school culture. Consequently, this leads to a more motivated, effective, and cohesive staff, ultimately benefiting student learning and achievement.

Community Engagement

Autonomy in community engagement allows schools to forge stronger connections with their local communities (Heystek, 2022). By having the freedom to initiate and cultivate partnerships with local businesses, organisations, and parents, schools can build a supportive network that enhances students' educational opportunities and resources. These collaborations can lead to internship opportunities, community service projects, and the integration of community resources into the curriculum, providing students with hands-on learning experiences and a deeper understanding of their community's challenges and assets. Engaging with the community also helps in building a sense of belonging and pride among students, further motivating them to succeed (Shabangu, 2025).

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Balance of Autonomy and Accountability

Navigating the tension between autonomy and accountability is a complex challenge that principals face in the educational landscape (Limon & Aydın, 2020). Autonomy empowers principals to make decisions that best suit their school's unique needs, allowing for innovative approaches to teaching, learning, and management (Niesche, 2018). However, with this autonomy comes heightened accountability, requiring principals to meet or exceed specific performance standards. Balancing these two aspects requires a keen understanding of when to leverage freedom to experiment and when to adhere strictly to guidelines and expectations. This balance is crucial to fostering an environment in which schools can thrive, innovate, and consistently deliver high-quality education to students. The balance between autonomy and accountability affects not only the principals but also the entire school culture. When principals manage this balance effectively, it sets a precedent for how teachers and staff approach their roles within the school. A principal's ability to navigate this tension can inspire teachers to take initiative and be creative in their teaching methods, while also understanding the importance of meeting educational standards and goals (Keddie, Blackmore & MacDonald, 2024). This dual focus can lead to a more engaged and motivated staff and a more dynamic and responsive learning environment for students. Mthembu and Bhengu (2025) state that it encourages a culture of trust, in which autonomy is seen as an opportunity for professional growth and accountability as a framework for achieving excellence. However, finding the right balance is an ongoing process that requires principals to be adaptable, reflective, and strategic. They must continuously assess the changing needs of their students, the evolving dynamics of their staff, and the shifting expectations of their educational community (Woods et al., 2021). By doing so, principals can make informed decisions that align with both their autonomous goals and accountability measures. Effective communication, collaborative leadership, and continuous professional development play key roles in maintaining this balance (Chibaya & Gcelu, 2026). Ultimately, the successful navigation of autonomy and accountability by principals can lead to more innovative, effective, and equitable educational outcomes for all students.

6. Policy Landscape

Employment Equity Act (EEA 55 of 1998)

The relationship between the Employment Equity Act (55 of 1998) and principal autonomy is a complex interplay that balances the legal obligations of educational institutions to foster an equitable work environment with the autonomy of school principals in making personnel decisions. Niesche et al. (2023) state that the Employment Equity Act mandates eliminating employment barriers for four designated groups: women, Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, and members of visible minorities, aiming to ensure fair treatment and equal employment opportunities for all. Limon and Heystek (2022) argue that principals, in their roles as leaders and managers of schools, must navigate these requirements while exercising their autonomy in hiring, promoting, and managing staff. This necessitates careful alignment of institutional policies with the principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion, ensuring that principals' decisions not only comply with the law but also help create a more inclusive educational environment. Altrichter (2019) contended that this dynamic underscores the importance of principal training and support in equity and diversity issues, equipping them to make informed decisions that uphold both the spirit and the letter of the Employment Equity Act.

South African Schools Act (SASA 84 of 1996)

The relationship between the South African Schools Act (SASA) and principal autonomy is nuanced and pivotal for the administration of education in South Africa. Keddie and Holloway (2020) state that SASA (84 of 1996), enacted to provide a uniform system for the organisation, governance, and funding of schools, outlines the roles and responsibilities of principals, thereby shaping the extent of their autonomy. While it grants principals significant authority in managing the day-to-day operations of their schools, including financial management, resource allocation, and staffing, it also places them within a framework of accountability to school governing bodies and the Department of Education (Keddie, Blackmore & MacDonald, 2024). This ensures that while principals can exercise autonomy in decision-making to adapt to their school's unique needs, they must also align

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with national and provincial educational guidelines and policies, balancing independence with adherence to standardised educational objectives.

Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC) agreements

Altrichter (2019) states that the relationship between the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC) agreements and principal autonomy is intrinsically linked to the governance and operational structures within educational institutions. The ELRC, a bargaining council operating in the education sector, plays a pivotal role in shaping policies and agreements that affect educators, including principals (Gu & Colman, 2023). These agreements often encompass a wide range of issues, from employment terms to working conditions, and can significantly influence the decision-making freedom principals have within their schools. While these agreements are designed to create a standardised framework for operations across schools, they can sometimes limit principals' autonomy by prescribing specific guidelines and protocols that must be followed, potentially restricting innovative approaches to school management and leadership. On the other hand, Du Plessis (2019) asserts that principal autonomy is essential for fostering an environment that encourages innovation, adaptability, and personalised approaches to meeting students' educational needs. Autonomy allows principals to exercise discretion in making decisions that directly impact the quality of education, such as curriculum choices, teaching methodologies, and resource allocation (Wermke et al., 2022). However, the extent of this autonomy can be significantly affected by the stipulations outlined in ELRC agreements. While these agreements aim to ensure fairness and equity across the educational sector, they must also provide sufficient flexibility for principals to adapt to the unique challenges and opportunities of their respective schools (Gu & Colman, 2023). Balancing the need for standardisation through ELRC agreements with the need for autonomy among principals is crucial to developing a dynamic and responsive education system.

7. Impact of These Policies on Autonomy

Constraints on Hiring Practices and Staffing

Constraints on hiring practices and staffing are a significant area of impact. These policies aim to ensure fairness and equality in employment within educational institutions (Hashim, Torres & Kumar, 2023). However, they can also impose certain restrictions on how schools manage their hiring processes. For example, the Employment Equity Act requires that hiring practices promote equitable representation of designated groups (Limon & Aydın, 2020). This can limit a school's autonomy to select staff solely on merit or in line with its specific needs, as it must also consider equity targets.

Curriculum Compliance and Flexibility

Regarding curriculum compliance and flexibility, the South African Schools Act sets out the basic framework for what schools must teach, aiming to standardise education across the country (Caldwell, 2018). While this ensures a minimum standard of education for all students, it can also reduce a school's ability to adapt or expand its curriculum to better suit students' needs or to specialise in certain areas. Schools must navigate these regulations carefully to maintain compliance while also striving to offer innovative and relevant education (Moloto, Ndwandwe & Adewale, 2026).

Accountability Frameworks Affecting Autonomy

Accountability frameworks outlined in these policies and agreements have a profound impact on autonomy. Schools are required to adhere to various standards and reporting requirements, which can affect their operational autonomy (Gu & Colman, 2023). While accountability is crucial for maintaining education standards and ensuring resources are used effectively, overly stringent frameworks can limit a school’s ability to make autonomous decisions regarding its administration, teaching methods, and resource allocation. Balancing accountability with autonomy remains a challenge within the educational landscape.

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Challenges to Principal Autonomy

Policy restrictions significantly impact principal autonomy by imposing bureaucratic policies that often limit principals' ability to make autonomous decisions about their schools (Grant, 2022). These policies can range from district-wide curriculum mandates to standardised testing requirements, often leaving little room for principals to tailor educational approaches to their students' specific needs or to innovate in response to unique challenges. The rigidity of such policies can stifle creativity and initiative, forcing principals to operate within a tightly constrained framework rather than exercising professional judgment and leadership (Chibaya & Gcelu, 2026). Consequently, the potential for school leaders to implement changes that could directly benefit their students and staff is significantly diminished, undermining the efficacy of school-level educational leadership.

External interference further complicates the landscape of principal autonomy. The involvement of external stakeholders, including district officials, school boards, and unions, can sometimes overshadow the principal's authority, making it challenging to navigate between adhering to external directives and focusing on the school's immediate needs (Caldwell, 2018; Hashim, Torres & Kumar, 2023). Such stakeholders often have their own agendas or priorities that may not always align with the school's goals or the principal's vision. This dynamic can lead to a tug-of-war, in which principals find themselves balancing the need to satisfy external demands with the need to advocate for their school's interests. Du Plessis (2019) contends that this delicate balancing act can dilute a principal's authority and hinder their ability to make decisive, autonomous decisions in the best interests of their students and teachers.

Capacity and training are significant barriers to effective principal autonomy. Many principals may not be fully prepared or equipped to exercise the level of autonomy expected of them, due to gaps in their training or a lack of resources. According to Gu and Colman (2023), effective leadership requires a diverse skill set encompassing not only educational expertise but also managerial acumen, strategic thinking, and the ability to navigate complex political landscapes. Without adequate preparation and ongoing support, principals may struggle to genuinely leverage their autonomy to enhance school performance and student outcomes. This underlines the importance of comprehensive professional development and support systems that equip school leaders with the tools and knowledge they need to exercise their autonomy effectively and confidently.

Opportunities for Enhancing Autonomy

Policy reform

Myende, Blose and Adebiyi (2024) state that policy reform plays a crucial role in enhancing principals' autonomy, enabling them to make more informed decisions that directly benefit their schools. By revising existing policies, educational authorities can empower principals by giving them greater flexibility and discretion in operational matters. Chibaya and Gcelu (2026) aver that this autonomy can lead to more responsive, tailored educational experiences for students, as principals can implement strategies that best meet their communities' needs. Moreover, policy reform can also involve streamlining bureaucratic processes, thus allowing principals to focus more on leadership and less on red tape, ultimately leading to a more efficient and effective educational environment.

Capacity building

Capacity building for principals is another vital area for enhancing autonomy. This involves providing principals with training and support mechanisms that equip them with the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively manage their schools (Singh & Mukeredzi, 2024). By investing in professional development programs, educational systems can ensure that principals are well-versed in instructional leadership, financial management, and other critical areas. Such empowerment enables principals to make better decisions, innovate, and lead their schools more effectively (Moloto, Ndwandwe & Adewale, 2026). Additionally, support mechanisms, such as mentorship programs and peer networks, can provide principals with the resources and community they need to navigate challenges and share best practices.

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Collaborative leadership

Shabangu (2025) states that collaborative leadership is essential for expanding schools' decision-making capacity and enhancing principal autonomy. By fostering partnerships within governance structures, principals can engage with a broader array of stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and community leaders, in the decision-making process (Mugwaze & Smith, 2024). This collaborative approach not only democratises school governance but also leverages the diverse perspectives and expertise of the school community. As a result, decisions are more informed, inclusive, and likely to generate positive outcomes. Furthermore, collaborative leadership strengthens the support system around principals, making it easier for them to implement innovative solutions and achieve their school's objectives.

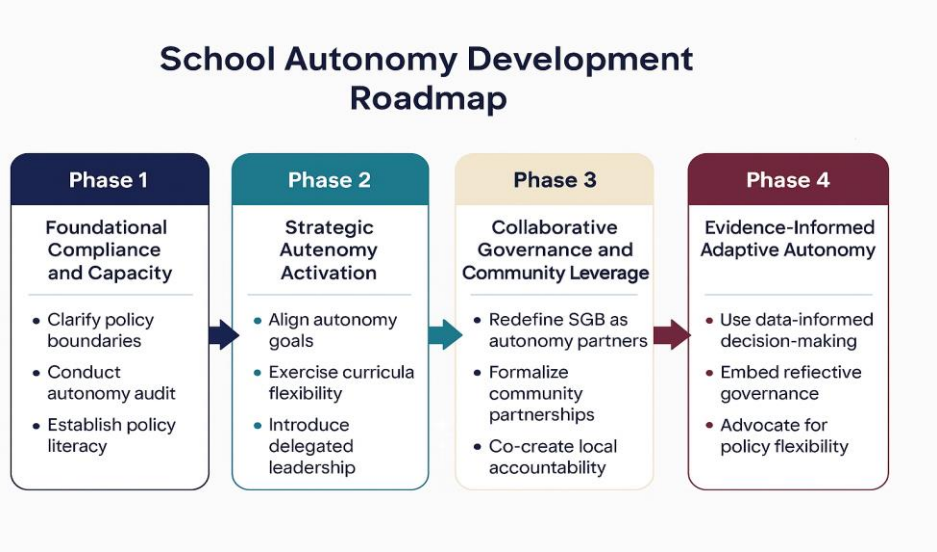


Figure 1. The School Autonomy Development Roadmap (SADR)
Source: Own elaboration

The *School Autonomy Development Roadmap (SADR)* provides a structured, phased approach for schools to progressively strengthen principal and institutional autonomy while remaining compliant with policy and accountability requirements. Rather than conceptualising autonomy as a fixed condition or policy end-state, the model frames autonomy as a *developmental process*, achieved through deliberate leadership actions, capacity building, and collaborative governance. This approach is particularly valuable in highly regulated education systems, such as South Africa's, where school autonomy must be exercised within legal and accountability frameworks.

The model introduces a developmental logic that recognises varying levels of readiness and capacity among schools. It allows schools to assess their current level of autonomy, identify realistic next steps, and make incremental progress. This phased approach mitigates risks associated with premature decision-making, such as policy non-compliance and mismanagement, while also supporting capacity building. Ultimately, it ensures that as schools gain autonomy, they also develop competence and accountability. The model is discussed in four phases:

Phase 1: Foundational Compliance and Capacity

The model encourages schools to first build a strong foundation in compliance and capacity by focusing on policy literacy and clarifying roles. This phase aims to help schools identify which decisions can be negotiated and which cannot, promote shared understanding among leadership, and recognise any skills gaps that might hinder effective autonomy. By reinforcing foundational compliance, the model positions policy as an enabling

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framework for responsible decision-making, especially in environments where fear of sanctions may stifle innovation among principals.

Phase 2: Strategic Autonomy Activation
The model encourages schools to implement autonomy once foundational capacities are strategically in place. This involves aligning the school's vision, improvement planning, and leadership practices. Key strategies include creatively utilising curriculum flexibility to meet national standards, delegating leadership responsibilities to prevent centralisation, and directly linking autonomy to school improvement priorities. This approach aims to foster meaningful autonomy that positively influences teaching and learning, rather than superficial autonomy limited to administrative decisions.

Phase 3: Collaborative Governance and Community Leverage
In the third phase of autonomy development, leadership shifts from individuals to collective governance, emphasising collaboration with school governing bodies (SGBs), parents, and community partners. Schools are encouraged to redefine governance as strategic partnerships, mobilise community resources for expanded opportunities, and create local accountability mechanisms that align with national standards. This phase highlights that sustainable autonomy relies on legitimacy and trust rather than on authority alone, leading to reduced resistance, increased transparency, and shared responsibility in decision-making.

Phase 4: Evidence-Informed Adaptive Autonomy
The final phase emphasises schools achieving mature, adaptive autonomy based on evidence and ongoing reflection. In this stage, accountability is rooted in credibility rather than external control, enabling schools to use data to support their decisions, demonstrate their impact on learner outcomes, and engage with education authorities to secure policy flexibility. This phase transforms schools into knowledge-producing institutions that contribute to system-level improvements, enabling them to adapt dynamically to shifting learner needs and contextual challenges.

8. Conclusion

The findings highlight the evolving role of school principals, emphasising the increasing complexity of their responsibilities due to the growing focus on educational leadership and technology integration. While autonomy empowers principals to make significant decisions in curriculum implementation, budgeting, staffing, and community engagement, it also introduces challenges, such as balancing autonomy with accountability. Policy frameworks such as the Employment Equity Act and the South African Schools Act influence how principals exercise their autonomy, ensuring equity and compliance while sometimes constraining decision-making freedom. Additionally, external interference and inadequate training can hinder principals from fully exercising their leadership potential. Ultimately, the ability of principals to strike a balance between autonomy and accountability while adapting to the demands of policy, school governance, and their communities' needs is critical to fostering innovation and ensuring positive educational outcomes. Schools can thrive when principals are equipped with the necessary skills and resources, have sufficient support, and are empowered to exercise their autonomy effectively. However, the success of autonomy in school leadership is contingent on providing adequate professional development, fostering collaboration, and promoting equity and inclusivity within governance frameworks.

9. Policy Recommendations

To foster greater autonomy for principals while ensuring accountability, educational policies should strike a balance between granting school leaders decision-making power and maintaining oversight through clear, flexible accountability frameworks. Policies should allow principals to tailor curricula, allocate resources, and manage staffing based on the unique needs of their schools, while still aligning with national education standards. Regular

training and professional development in leadership, financial management, and educational innovation are essential to equip principals with the skills to exercise their autonomy effectively. Additionally, collaborative governance involving school governing bodies, district officials, and community stakeholders can provide a support system that ensures accountability while empowering principals to drive meaningful improvements in school performance.

Future research on the evolving role of autonomy in school leadership should explore the dynamic interplay between autonomy and accountability, particularly in diverse educational contexts. Studies could examine how varying levels of autonomy influence school performance, leadership effectiveness, teacher morale, and student outcomes. Additionally, research should consider how principals balance external pressures, such as policy restrictions and community expectations, with the need for innovation and responsive leadership. A focus on identifying best practices for professional development, support systems, and capacity building to enhance principal autonomy would also be critical, ensuring that school leaders are well-equipped to navigate the complexities of modern education.

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CLIMATE–MIGRATION–MENTAL HEALTH NEXUS IN AFRICA: INSIGHTS FROM DIGITAL NARRATIVES AND POLICY ANALYSIS

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Abstract. This paper explores the interlinkages among climate change, migration, and mental health in Africa through the lens of environmental justice. Whilst there has been increased recognition of the critical role of all three dimensions, they are often addressed separately in policy, and thus the complex interrelations between them remain underexplored. In an endeavour to fill this research gap, the current study utilises a discourse analysis framework to analyse narratives of environmental change in the African digital space and regional policy texts. The study reveals three core findings inter alia: that environmental anxiety, loss, uncertainty, and psychological distress are common elements of public discourses on the discussed issue; the mental dimension of environmental changes in Africa remains unconsidered in regional policies on climate and migration; and community-level approaches to psychosocial adaptation are not prioritised in current policies. This study contributes to existing multidisciplinary research efforts related to environmental justice, migration, and global mental health, with a dire need to realise regional and global Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDGs 3, 10, and 13, and Africa's Agenda 2063.

Keywords: climate change; critical discourse analysis; digital narratives; migration; mental health

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JEL Classifications: Q54; F22

1. Introduction

African societies experience severe impacts of climate change, environmental problems, socioeconomic vulnerability, and human migration on sustainability and public health (McDonough & Colucci, 2021). McMichael, 2023; Adebayo, 2025). The phenomenon of climate change is no longer remote in its environmental ramifications; its impact is becoming more manifest in African daily life by way of increased temperature, altered rainfall regimes, persistent drought, floods, cyclones, and other forms of natural disasters (Dow & Downing, 2016; Opoku et al., 2021). Such environmental challenges lead to human displacement and migration in search of survival.

Climate change-induced migration does not only imply human movement from one location to another. In addition to such physical consequences of the phenomenon, climate change-induced migration disrupts the social fabric, means of livelihood, cultural identity and economic well-being of the displaced, thereby putting them at increased risks of poverty, marginalisation, exploitation and social exclusion (Torres & Casey, 2017; Bhat & Wani, 2025). There is now enough evidence showing that the effects of climate displacement on people's mental well-being are significant but not adequately addressed in research and policies. People who undergo climate-induced migration can feel anxiety, depression, trauma, long-term psychological stress, grief for the lost

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properties and means of livelihood, and fears for their future due to uncertain climatic conditions, also referred to as climate anxiety (Charlson et al., 2021; Atwoli, Muhia & Merali, 2022; Lawrance et al., 2022; Clayton & Brown, 2024; Clayton & Crandon, 2024). Despite increasing awareness of the problem, its mental aspects are only partially addressed in climate adaptation, disaster risk reduction, and migration policies across various African countries.

Although there are already studies on the connections among climate change, migration, and mental well-being considered separately, few studies address them as a systemic problem in Africa. Additionally, little consideration is given to the correlation between the life stories people publicly share in the digital sphere and the main themes of regional policies. In looking at these two sources in relation to each other, there emerges the possibility of comparing community and institutional responses and of uncovering policy gaps regarding the psychosocial aspects of climate-induced migration.

There are three core concepts involved in this study. Firstly, climate change involves changes in the climate that persist over time as a result of anthropogenic activities, particularly greenhouse gases that affect temperatures, precipitation, drought, flooding, and other extreme weather patterns. Secondly, climate-induced migration involves the movement of individuals, either totally or partially, resulting from the effects of climate change on their livelihoods, ecosystems, and living conditions. Thirdly, mental health involves psychological, emotional and social aspects, particularly cases of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorders and other forms of psychological problems resulting from environmental and social issues (Olvera Alvarez et al., 2018).

In view of the above, this study examines the nexus among climate change, migration, and mental health in Africa through qualitative analysis of digital narratives and select policy documents from across the continent. Additionally, the study provides an integrated approach to examining the nexus utilising the proposed Climate-Migration-Mental Health Nexus Model. This model recognises the three fields as interlinked and mutually reinforcing across the micro (the experience of the individual and his/her family), meso (networks and coping strategies at the community level), and macro (policies and institutional frameworks) dimensions.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical basis for this research is an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates theories of intersectionality, environmental justice, migration, and digital discourse. All these perspectives offer useful approaches to comprehending how climate change, migration, and mental well-being are interconnected in Africa. Rather than viewing these aspects as separate entities, they are understood as interlinked phenomena shaped by environmental factors, social disparities, institutional action, and human experiences. Notably, this theoretical perspective served as the guiding lens throughout the data-gathering and analysis process. The Climate-Migration-Mental Health Nexus Model, which will be discussed further in the paper, was developed through an iterative process informed by findings from the literature review and qualitative analyses of digital discourses and regional policies.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality can be considered a helpful approach for analysing the effect of multiple and interlocking aspects of social stratification on people's vulnerability and resilience (Crenshaw, 1991; Davis, 2014). First introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe the combined impact of racial and sexual discrimination on Black women, this term has found wide application in many fields, from environmental studies to public health and development sciences (Azmitia, Garcia Peraza & Casanova, 2023; Crenshaw, 2019). Intersectionality recognises that, rather than being considered in isolation, social identities such as gender, age, socioeconomic class, ethnicity, disability, or geographical location intersect and affect one another. From an African standpoint, intersectionality means that people's vulnerability to the effects of climate change is socially mediated rather than solely environmental.

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Droughts, floods, and other climatic threats have consequences that are influenced by aspects of life such as access to land, money, education, health care, governmental institutions, and social networks (Williams et al., 2023; Putsoane, Bhanye & Matamanda, 2024). Women practising subsistence agriculture, for example, may suffer disproportionately from the impacts of limited access to productive resources and caretaking roles. As a result, it becomes clear that intersectionality is an essential approach to understanding the differential effects of climate migration and psychological issues arising in connection with it.

Environmental Justice

The concept of environmental justice complements intersectionality by situating climate vulnerability within historical, political, and socioeconomic frameworks (Trummer et al., 2023). Having emerged from the advocacy work of grassroots movements for the fair distribution of environmental costs and benefits, environmental justice has become a multidisciplinary approach concerned with fairness in environmental governance, participation, and resource allocation (Putsoane, Bhanye & Matamanda, 2024). Such a perspective seems especially relevant to Africa, where many nations emit small amounts of greenhouse gases yet suffer disproportionately from the consequences of climate change (Adzawla, Sawaneh & Yusuf, 2019). The concept of environmental justice raises concerns about procedural injustices, including the lack of involvement of vulnerable groups in decision-making concerning climate adaptation and migration policies (Atedhor, 2023; Adebayo, 2025). Within the framework of this research, environmental justice reveals the structural factors that affect climate displacement and the availability of psychosocial services.

Migration Studies and Mental Health

Migration theories provide the basis for analysing human mobility in response to environmental changes, whereas mental health research examines the psychological effects that may result from displacement (Castles, 2006; McMichael, 2023; Severoni, Hiam & Garry, 2024). Although conventional theories of migration tend to emphasise economic and demographic factors as primary, modern studies increasingly consider the impact of climate change (Leal Filho, Olaniyan & Alverio, 2022; Sanni et al., 2022). In cases of climate-induced migration, phenomena such as the disruption of people's means of earning a living, the loss of social connections and networks, culture, and a sense of connection to one's community occur. The above-mentioned processes can result in anxiety, depression, psychological distress, trauma, as well as uncertainty regarding future livelihoods (Charlson et al., 2021; Schwerdtle, Bowen & McMichael, 2018). On the other hand, people's mental state may have a direct effect on their ability to adapt, deal with stressful situations, and take advantage of available services.

Digital Discourse and Informality

The discourse of the digital world offers another way to consider how individuals convey their lived experiences outside institutions. Using the concept of informality (Roy & AlSayyad, 2003), one can understand digital platforms as places where people construct meaning, share information, express emotions, and collectively develop responses to environmental changes. Narratives in the digital realm, published on publicly available sites such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and discussion forums, offer another way to consider lived experiences that may not be captured by official documentation (Happer, 2024). The narratives can illustrate vulnerabilities, coping mechanisms, and resilience of communities, as well as point out what communities consider to be the gaps between their experiences and institutional responses. Moreover, digital discourse can be seen as a form of public participation through which communities raise their voices and influence policy discussions (Crilley, Manor & Bjola, 2020; Denisova, 2025).

Integrating the Theoretical Perspectives

Together, all four theoretical perspectives form a consistent framework for studying the climate-migration-mental health connection. Intersectionality reveals why some people are more vulnerable than others depending on their social group membership, while environmental justice helps us understand these vulnerabilities in the context of

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broader structural inequalities. Migration and mental health research help us understand the mutual effects of migration and mental well-being, while digital discourse provides an opportunity to examine personal stories alongside official policies. All four perspectives were applied when interpreting digital narratives and policies in this study, helping form the Conceptual Framework of the Climate-Migration-Mental Health Nexus model.

3. The Climate–Migration–Mental Health Nexus Model

Applying the interdisciplinary perspectives outlined above, this research proposes the Climate-Migration-Mental Health Nexus model as a conceptual framework for examining the interconnections among the environment, human mobility, and psychological well-being in Africa. Instead of treating climate change, migration, and mental well-being as discrete processes or components of a linear sequence, the model presents them as interrelated processes occurring at various social levels. Of particular significance is that the model emerged from an iterative analysis that involved not only synthesising literature findings but also identifying trends through content analysis of narratives and policy documents from the region. Theoretical perspectives were used to construct the basic analytical framework, while the analysis's findings were used to further develop the model's relationships.

Micro-Level: Individual and Household Experiences

At the micro level, the model takes into account the individual experiences of people directly affected by environmental changes due to climate change (Palinkas & Wong, 2020). Factors such as droughts, floods, reduced agricultural production, and loss of income determine whether individuals will migrate or stay put. Such experiences can bring certain emotional responses of individuals, such as anxiety, sadness, uncertainty, trauma, and others (Clayton & Crandon, 2024). However, in contrast to other theories, which presuppose that such experiences are general for all people, the model holds that they are specific to each person, shaped by individual circumstances and predispositions as determined by the literature and empirical research.

Meso-Level: Community Networks and Social Support Systems

The meso-level includes the influence of institutions and informal systems of social solidarity in the community, governance arrangements, and community resilience as determinants of the response to climate-induced displacement (Rwigema, 2022). Community organisations, kinship networks, faith-based organisations, and local leadership can have a mitigating effect on vulnerability through facilitating or hindering access to information, resources, psychosocial support, and adaptation capabilities (Sanni et al., 2022). The analysis also shows that community resilience activities are often not guided by formal policies but occur outside them, meaning that locally initiated coping mechanisms are an important yet underestimated aspect of adaptation and psychological well-being.

Macro-Level: Governance and Policy Systems

At the macro level, the model accounts for the impact of regional and national policy-making contexts related to climate change, migration, and mental well-being. Policies made by regional and national policymakers influence the institutional response to climate-induced displacement and dictate the extent to which psychosocial support is incorporated into adaptation strategies and migration policies. The policy analysis carried out in this research has revealed that these policy sectors tend to operate separately, with climate adaptation, migration, and mental well-being policies managed by different institutions. This fragmentation may limit the potential for a comprehensive response to the multifaceted issues of climate-induced migration. Digital narratives interact with all three levels of the model by serving as a channel for sharing and making experiences visible. Digital narratives allow sharing experiences that may not be covered in policy papers and, hence, serve as a valuable source of supplementary data on the climate-migration-mental well-being relationship.

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Interconnected Dynamics within the Climate–Migration–Mental Health Nexus

The suggested framework, as highlighted in Figure 1 below, reflects the connections among climate change, migration, and mental health as dynamic and reciprocal rather than linear. Climate-driven environmental changes might affect migration choices, but migration could also affect people's mental well-being. In turn, mental well-being might influence people's adaptive capacity, migration choice, and resilience. Both of those connections are influenced by two cross-cutting axes that are apparent throughout the whole study. On the one hand, intersectional inequalities play an important role in how various social groups face environmental risks and in the resources they have for adaptation and recovery (Crenshaw, 1991; Schuster et al., 2024). On the other hand, institutional fragmentation in climate governance, migration, and health policy could impede the creation of policies that address these interconnected issues.

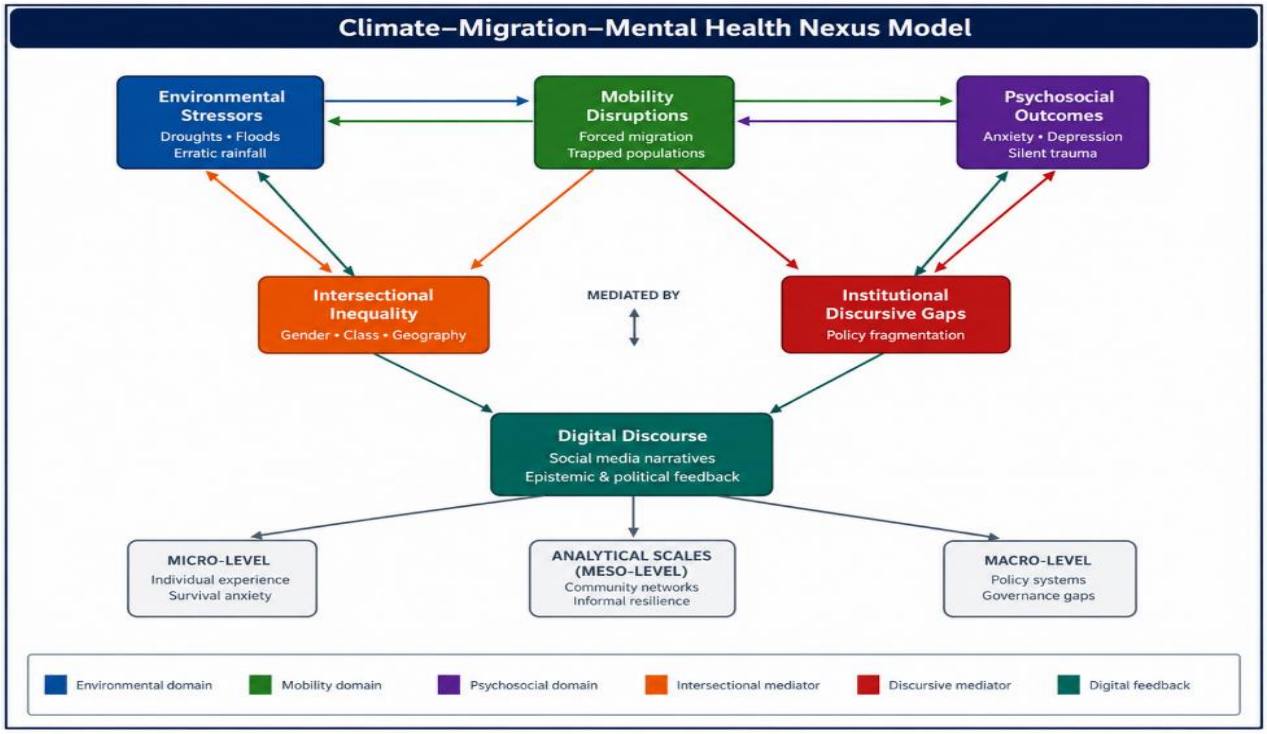


Figure 1. Climate–Migration–Mental Health Nexus Model. Conceptual flow depicting environmental stressors, mobility disruptions, psychosocial outcomes, mediating inequalities, and digital discourse feedback
Source: the authors

The model in Figure 1 above is significant theoretically for three reasons. First, it bridges micro-level experiences and macro-level policy institutions by developing a multiscale approach that links personal experience to the institutionalisation process. Second, it introduces the notion of digital discourse as an epistemic intervention by recognising the power of informal epistemologies as a source of knowledge about crisis management (Jacobsen & Majidi, 2023). Third, it questions the dominant technocratic paradigm by positioning mental well-being as the focal point of climate governance (Nori-Sarma & Galea, 2024). All of these theoretical points lay a solid foundation for the research on the climate–migration–mental health nexus in Africa.

4. Literature Review

This section provides a critical review of the academic literature on climate change, migration, mental well-being, and digital storytelling to contextualise the research within the existing body of literature. Unlike the separation of

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topics, this section will discuss the growing interrelation between the issues and identify some theoretical and practical gaps in the literature, thereby motivating the current research.

Climate Change as a Driver of Socio-Environmental Disruption

Climate change is increasingly seen as a threat multiplier, exacerbating vulnerabilities that already exist socially, economically, and environmentally (McMichael, 2023; Upadhyay, 2020). In Sub-Saharan Africa, in which people still depend on climate-dependent industries like rain-fed agriculture, pastoralism, and fishing, changes in the rainfall pattern, droughts, floods, and other extreme weather conditions have heightened food insecurity, water scarcity, displacement, and disruptions of livelihood (Opoku et al., 2021; Leal Filho, Olaniyan & Alverio, 2022). The idea of climate change as a "threat multiplier" has gained significant traction in explaining how environmental stresses are connected to the problems of governance and development (Leichenko & O'Brien, 2024). Although it helps to understand the cascading effects of climate threats, it has been criticised for focusing more on environmental stress than on the social, institutional, and psychological aspects through which such effects are felt. Therefore, the need for studies on environmental stress, as well as the experience of such stress, remains (Niedzwiedz et al., 2024; Lugo-Candelas, 2023).

Climate-Induced Migration: Beyond Physical Mobility

Migration researchers now acknowledge that climate mobility cannot be understood exclusively within an environmental perspective. Migration processes generally result from intricate interconnections between environmental drivers, economic motives, governance conditions, conflicts, household assets, and social ties (Castles, 2006; Leal Filho, Olaniyan & Alverio, 2022). It is not surprising that the definition of the "climate migrant" is rather controversial due to ongoing debates over causality, labelling, and legal protection. In addition, modern research has pointed to the notion of a "trapped population," which refers to people facing significant environmental threats but lacking the resources to move away from danger zones (Teye, 2022). In the African context, climate mobility usually occurs gradually through several steps, starting with local or rural-to-urban movements and, in some cases, continuing with cross-border migrations (Leal Filho, Olaniyan & Alverio, 2022). While multidimensional migration pathways have recently attracted increasing scholarly interest, the psychological impact of displacement on people, including its effects on social connections, community bonds, and culture, has not been investigated as thoroughly (Schwerdtle, Bowen & McMichael, 2018).

Mental Health in the Context of Climate Change

Increasingly, there is recognition that climate change has major consequences for mental health and is linked to anxiety disorders, depression, psychological distress, PTSD, ecological grief, and climate-induced anxiety (Charlson et al., 2021; Lawrance et al., 2022; Clayton & Brown, 2024). The constructs of eco-anxiety, ecological grief, and solastalgia have further contributed to the growing knowledge base about the varied psychological consequences of environmental change (Niedzwiedz et al., 2024). Nonetheless, the majority of empirical literature comes from high-income countries, thus calling into question its applicability in Africa due to differences in environmental settings, mental illness-related cultures, health care systems, and adaptive strategies (Atwoli, Muhia & Merali, 2022).

Integrating Climate Change, Migration, and Mental Health

While there is a significant body of literature on climate change, migration, and mental well-being individually, there remains a relative lack of research that examines these three elements together (Charlson et al., 2021; Severoni, Hiam & Garry, 2024). Much of the existing research on these interlinked elements tends to be either concerned with a single element of the connection or is conducted at a broader scale of national or international politics, paying little attention to the way in which lived experiences relate to governmental policies (Palinkas & Wong, 2020; McMichael, 2023). Recent multidisciplinary literature has sought to conceptualise climate change, migration, and mental well-being as a connected nexus rather than as a set of distinct policy areas (Lugo-Candelas, 2023). Still, there is a gap in the literature on the situation in Africa regarding the nexus between the lived experience of mobility driven by climate change and regional governance.

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Digital Narratives as Sources of Knowledge

The rapid development of digital communication has changed how people report, disseminate, and perceive experiences of environmental change and displacement (Crilley, Manor & Bjola, 2020; Happer, 2024). Digital narratives that can be accessed freely online include viewpoints which may not be reported in any official documents or reports about fear, uncertainty, grief, resilience, and community adaptation (Jacobsen & Majidi, 2023; Lee et al., 2024). On the other hand, the use of digital narratives has some methodological and ethical challenges. Online participation remains uneven in many African countries owing to existing inequalities in internet access, digital literacy, language, and economic circumstances; thus, online narratives should not be taken to reflect the experiences of all those who have been displaced or experienced environmental changes (Nguyen, 2023). There are certain ethical concerns regarding privacy, anonymity, and the use of the material posted on the web. Nevertheless, digital narratives can be seen as a source of valuable qualitative data which reflects the experiences of people affected by environmental changes and displacement. The analysis of digital narratives, along with policies, allows for comparison of people's experiences with institutional responses to such events.

Research Gap

After analysing the literature, one may point out that more and more attention is drawn to the relationships between the factors mentioned above of climate change, migration and mental health. However, few studies have examined the interrelationships among those issues through the analysis of open digital narratives and regional policies in Africa. Moreover, there is little research on the connection between narratives and regional policies on climate, migration, and mental health.

Summary of Key Studies and Identified Gaps

Table 1 synthesises key studies across the three focal domains, identifying their focus and the gaps they leave unaddressed.

Table 1. Synthesis of key studies and identification of gaps in the literature

Author(s), Year	Domain	Focus	Gap / Limitation
Charlson et al. (2021)	Mental health	Scoping review of climate–mental health linkages globally	Limited African context; mental health as outcome, not process
Clayton & Brown (2024)	Mental health	Climate anxiety and psychological impacts	Global North focus; no policy analysis
Castles (2006)	Migration	Conceptual frameworks for forced migration	Pre-digital; minimal psychosocial dimension
Trummer et al. (2023)	Climate–migration	Climate change, migration, and health in Africa	No digital narrative analysis; limited mental health integration
Severoni et al. (2024)	Migration–health	Health of displaced and migrant populations	Policy-level only; no lived-experience data
Niedzwiedz et al. (2024)	Mental health	Glossary of climate–mental health impacts	Definitional focus; no African empirical data
Present study	All three domains	Digital narratives + policy analysis, Africa-specific, nexus model	N/A — addresses all identified gaps

Source: the authors.

Research Questions

Using the Climate-Migration-Mental Health Nexus Model as well as an interdisciplinary approach as discussed above, this research seeks to explore the following research questions:

RQ1: How is the issue of climate distress, displacement, and migration depicted in the digitally available narratives from African countries?

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RQ2: What does the chosen policy framework from Africa state about climate change, migration, and mental health?
RQ3: How does the digital narrative differ or converge with the selected policy framework with regard to climate-migration and psychosocial issues?

5. Methodology

Research Design

For this research on climate change, migration, and mental health in Africa, the researchers will use an interpretive qualitative methodology. This study involves the analysis of open-source digital stories and regional policy documents through qualitative methodology. These methods were adopted for this research since the study aims to analyse not only the material aspects of climate-induced migration and its impacts on people's psychological well-being but also the discourse it creates (Bowen, 2009). The analysis of digital stories was based on critical discourse analysis (CDA) theory. According to van Dijk (1993) and Fairclough (2013), critical discourse analysis involves examining how language creates social realities, represents certain experiences, and reflects the power relations. It was deemed appropriate because the subject matter of this research is socially and politically constructed. The policy component of the research employed qualitative document analysis to explore the connections among climate change, migration, and mental health within specific regional policy frameworks. This mix allowed for comparison of the experiences of grassroots organisations and their digital stories with the policies in policy documents.

Data Sources and Sampling Strategy

The analysis was conducted on approximately 350 publicly accessible digital narratives collected from X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook between January 2022 and December 2025. Purposive sampling was employed to determine digital content regarding the nexus between climate change, migration, and mental health. Digital searches were conducted using the following keywords: "climate anxiety Africa", "climate migration", "flood displacement Africa", "mental health climate Africa". Digital content was selected if it satisfied the following conditions: it mentioned climatic or environmental events or effects; migration or displacement was mentioned; psychological, emotional, or sociological well-being was mentioned; and the content referenced Africa, whether explicitly or implicitly. Content was excluded if it involved: duplicate content; commercial content; automated content; content not addressing the experience of Africans; or content that discussed climate change but not migration or psychosocial issues. The data set comprised stories collected in Africa, with the Southern, Eastern, and Western African regions represented. The predominant language in the analysed narratives is English. Translation was performed as needed, preserving the meaning and context of the narratives. Data collection was terminated when thematic saturation was reached, meaning that further data added no new themes or discourse patterns.

Policy Documents

Policy documents were selected purposively based on three criteria: relevance to climate change, migration, displacement, or human security; regional significance and policy influence; and availability of official documentation. The analysis focused on selected frameworks developed by African regional institutions, including the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), and the African Union (AU).

Analytical Procedures

Analysis of digital narratives was conducted using a combination of critical discourse and thematic analyses. The analysis process followed three interrelated steps. Initially, coding of recurring themes, concepts, and narratives identified in the dataset was conducted. These include narratives about livelihood disruption, displacement,

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psychosocial stress, climate uncertainty, adaptation measures, and policy gaps. The second step involved grouping similar codes into larger themes on: climatic vulnerabilities, migration experiences, mental health consequences, community coping mechanisms, and institutional responses. Finally, critical discourse analysis was conducted on these narratives to analyse how they constructed meaning about climate change, migration, vulnerability, resilience and responsibility. In particular, emphasis was placed on: linguistic representations of affected communities; representations of vulnerability and agency; representations of uncertainty and loss; narratives of resilience and adaptation; and the contrast between lived experience and institutional responses.

Policy documents were analysed using qualitative document analysis. The analysis focused on how climate change was framed; whether migration and displacement were recognised; whether mental health or psychosocial support was addressed; the levels of coordination among the climate, migration, and health sectors; and the gaps between policy priorities and lived experiences. The alignment of data analysis with research questions is highlighted in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Summary of data sources and analytical procedure

Data Source	Volume / Scope	Analytical Strategy	Research Question
Social media posts	~350 posts (2022–2024)	Critical discourse analysis (CDA)	RQ1, RQ3
Policy documents	5 regional frameworks (SADC, ECOWAS, COMESA, MENA, AU)	Qualitative content analysis	RQ2, RQ3
Comparative analysis	Cross-dataset	Convergence/divergence mapping	RQ2, RQ3

Trustworthiness and Research Quality

As the interpretive nature of the research dictates, quality was assessed using qualitative criteria, including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was ensured through the triangulation of digital stories and policy papers to compare the two. Dependability was ensured by documenting the analysis process, including coding and theme development. Confirmability was achieved through reflection on the researcher's interpretation and potential biases during the analysis. Transferability was ensured by describing the research context and the analysis process in detail.

This study adhered to the ethical guidelines associated with research involving publicly available digital content. Only publicly available posts were examined; no private profiles, restricted posts, or other private data were accessed. To preserve users' privacy, their usernames and all identifiable data were deleted. Direct quotes were selected carefully and anonymised, and whenever possible, paraphrasing was used.

This research project is subject to various methodological limitations. Firstly, digital narratives are far from statistically representative of all African populations due to unequal access to digital media across socioeconomic groups and geographical regions. Therefore, the results can be viewed as representing the experiences covered by the dataset, but not all experiences affected by climate change. Secondly, digital narratives might be biased by the viewpoints of those with greater access to digital technologies and who are willing to discuss their experiences online. Rural and marginalised communities might be poorly represented. Thirdly, the analysis of policy documents represents a formal commitment to action rather than its results.

6. Findings

Qualitative analysis of 350 digital narratives, accessible from January 2022 to December 2025, revealed various themes at the intersection of climate change, migration, and mental health in African settings. These results are reported using the categories of the analytical framework of the Climate-Migration-Mental Health Nexus Model. These themes represent the recurrent themes in the analysed dataset. They should be seen as representations of the

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experiences conveyed by these digital narratives, not as statistically representative of all climate-affected populations in Africa.

Climate-Related Distress and Livelihood Insecurity

A recurring theme among the examined digital stories was the articulation of anxiety stemming from livelihood insecurity, environmental uncertainty, and concerns about future survival. Instead of expressing abstract fears about environmental changes, climate anxiety was usually related to direct experiences of crop losses, unreliable rainfall, food insecurity, and diminishing economic prospects. One respondent shared: "*The rains won't come anymore. We hope for rain, plants, and everything goes lost. How can we think about the future in this way*?" This example shows how climate-related psychological distress is linked to material insecurity. In the examined data set, the anxiety seems to be caused not only by concerns about future threats to the environment but also by concrete problems of disrupted livelihoods and difficulties of planning for the future. This finding helps develop the micro-level component of the Climate-Migration-Mental Health Nexus Model by illustrating the process by which environmental stresses are converted into emotions and psychological experiences. The results also support the model's intersectional view, as climate-based anxiety is influenced by resource availability and livelihood vulnerabilities.

Temporal Uncertainty and Disrupted Future Planning

Yet another theme was uncertainty about the future. Many of the narratives expressed challenges in forecasting seasonal patterns and livelihoods, and in making plans for the future. As one respondent put it:*"We don't know if next year will be worse or better. There is no normal anymore."* It implies that, beyond affecting current reality, climate change can also affect people's capacity to imagine and plan the future. This pattern is interpreted in the current study as temporal uncertainty, meaning the psychological effects resulting from the disruption of usual predictable rhythms of nature and society. Rather than depicting temporal uncertainty as a universal state of mind, the current analysis shows that climate variability was often linked to feelings of uncertainty and an inability to plan the future. In the context of the Nexus Model, the impact of climate change on psychosocial outcomes can extend beyond physical displacement.

Migration, Belonging, and Identity Disruption

The findings showed that migration was typically depicted not merely as a physical act but as a disturbance of social belongingness, identity, and community ties. Multiple narratives suggested that migration entailed emotional conflicts related to the departure from known environments and the establishment of new ones. As one respondent noted: *"We are strangers in the city. We do not belong there anymore, but we can never return*." Climate-induced migration entails psychosocial dimensions that extend beyond mere movement. These aspects include the loss of familiar environment, community connections, culture, and livelihood identity. The finding confirms the mobility aspect of the Nexus Model, as it shows how migration has psychological effects that can interact with social inequalities and access to resources.

Normalised Psychological Distress and Silent Experiences of Trauma

Another theme found among the digital narratives was the normalisation of distressing situations. Instead of portraying their experiences of climate change as sudden and acute crises, some participants described distress as an ongoing and normal part of life. Example: *"We are used to this now. Every year, something happens."* From this, some climate-affected persons may suffer from continuous psychological strain that may get normalised over time. In this research, the term 'silent trauma' has been used with caution to refer to recurrent cases of distress that may not be easily detected using a crisis-oriented approach to assess mental well-being. This finding should not be taken as a clinical diagnosis. This theme in the Nexus Model illustrates the interaction between personal experiences and institutional recognition. The normalisation of distress means less attention in policy-making processes, which usually address sudden emergencies rather than ongoing psychological challenges.

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Policy Framings and the Climate–Migration–Mental Health Disconnect

The comparison of regional policies revealed a persistent discrepancy between the institutional portrayal of climate-related problems and the personal experiences presented in digital narratives. The majority of the policy documents considered topics such as climate change adaptation, environmental management, resilience building, migration, and development, as shown in Table 3 below. Mental health and psychosocial well-being were not directly addressed in these policy documents.

Table 3. Paradigm divergence between policy logic and lived experience

Domain	Policy Logic	Lived Experience
Climate	Environmental risk management and adaptation	Daily insecurity, livelihood disruption and emotional distress
Migration	Mobility governance and displacement adaptation	Loss of belonging, uncertainty, and social disruption
Mental Health	Limited or indirect consideration	Immediate concern expressed through lived experiences

Source: the authors

The implication is that even when climate change, migration, and mental well-being are linked, policy-making is often done in isolation for each aspect. This finding in the Nexus Model shows the effect of fragmentation on institutional processes.

Digital Narratives, Community Agency, and Resilience Practices

Adaptation, assistance, and resilience strategies were also present within the narratives of vulnerability. Among those were examples of assistance from family members, community solidarity, knowledge sharing within the community, and the community's responses to environmental issues. The resilience strategies mentioned were characteristic at the community level and demonstrated the relevance of the informal system of relations in helping people affected by climate change. The findings revealed that, apart from institutional strategies, there are resilience strategies formed within communities in everyday life. Nevertheless, the former might sometimes be overlooked in formal policies. In the Nexus Model, this result is associated with the meso-level dimension of the framework.

7. Conclusions

The results indicate that the climate–migration–mental health nexus operates through a complex, dynamic interaction, rather than as independent environmental, migratory, and health issues. The digital stories discussed in this study show that climate change is experienced through livelihood insecurity, uncertainty, displacement, identity change, and mental well-being. One of the key contributions of this study is the understanding of the significance of examining climatic changes from material and psychological perspectives. Despite ample studies on climate vulnerability and migration, the results make it clear that individuals perceive environmental changes emotionally, through uncertainties and feelings of loss and of belonging. The results further underscore the role that intersectionality plays in addressing climate vulnerability. The effects of climate do not affect everybody equally. There is an uneven impact due to differences in livelihood dependency, socioeconomic standing, geographic positioning, and support structures. Policy responses that consider only climate risk and relocation issues tend to overlook the social and psychological aspects of climate-induced movement.

In light of the contrast drawn above between digital narratives and policy approaches, institutional approaches to addressing climate-induced issues may pay little regard to the real-world experiences of climate-affected people. Whereas the policies generally highlight adaptation, resilience, and governance, the narrated experiences point to uncertainties, psychological distress, and disruptions to social order. The results also indicate the relevance of

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digital stories as another source of knowledge. Although they cannot substitute for surveys or studies of the whole population, digital stories can reveal knowledge about experiences that might not be captured through usual policy and research processes. In general, the results confirm the Climate-Migration-Mental Health Nexus Model by depicting a recursive relationship among climate change, mobility, and mental well-being.

8. Recommendations

In light of the study's findings, it is evident that climate change, migration, and mental health are interrelated issues that require more than a sector-based approach to address. Below are the recommendations drawn from the findings and gaps noted in the existing policy framework:

1) to integrate mental health issues into climate and migration policy frameworks. The regional and national policies on climate change and migration should include mental well-being as an integral aspect of resilience. The study's findings show that the effects of climate change extend beyond material displacement, financial loss, and physical displacement, encompassing feelings of uncertainty, stress, loss of identity, and psychological strain, among other things. Integration of mental health concerns in the adaptation plans for climate change and migration will assist policymakers in addressing the wide scope of impact of the issues;

2) establish mechanisms for incorporating community and digital narratives into policy processes. The results indicate that open-source digital stories can be used to access information about experiences that regular policy-monitoring systems cannot easily capture. As such, regional organisations and policymakers must develop systematic ways to engage with community experiences, including the use of ethically sourced digital stories, consultations, and other forms of community-based knowledge. This will contribute to minimising the gap that exists between organisational agendas and the lived experiences of people who are experiencing disruption as a result of climate change;

3) strengthen community-based psychosocial support within climate adaptation programs. The results make it clear that informal community networks play a vital role in responding to climate-related distress and displacement. For this reason, climate adaptation programs need to recognise and strengthen community support networks and connect them to relevant professional psychosocial interventions.

4) foster cross-sectoral collaboration among institutions dealing with climate, migration, and health. Fragmentation of institutional responses results from the division among climate, migration, and health policies. The regional organisations should develop coordination mechanisms involving environmental organisations, migration agencies, health services, and community organisations. A coordinated response would better recognise the interrelated aspects of climate-induced mobility and related psychological outcomes;

5) build monitoring mechanisms for climate-induced mental health outcomes. The study recommends developing more advanced mechanisms to generate data on the mental health consequences of climate change in Africa. Future monitoring mechanisms must combine quantitative measures with qualitative methods to capture subjective experiences and community-level responses.

Suggested Areas for Further Study

Future studies could build on this exploratory investigation by conducting empirical analyses of the relationships among climate, migration, and mental health using diverse research methods. Although digital narratives offer important information about people's experiences, additional research using other methods, such as interviews, household-level surveys, ethnography, and community research, can be used to obtain perspectives that may be missing from the digital space, especially for rural populations that may lack the skills to contribute online. Comparative research across various regions in Africa also helps clarify how experiences with climate-change-related stress and resilience differ across social and environmental settings. Multilingual digital narratives can also be studied in the future to ensure participant diversity.

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FINANCIAL GOVERNANCE TRANSFORMATION STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH AFRICAN MUNICIPALITIES

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Abstract. Challenges such as poor internal control, lack of transparency, poor service delivery and high crime rate due to poor financial governance practices suggest the need for digital and innovative strategies for sustainable development. Municipalities' financial distress has intensified to the point that local government is experiencing unsustainable development. The annual general report highlighted that 28% of municipalities misreported their revenue due to incorrect billing or a lack of proper audit evidence. Considering these challenges, the study seeks to identify and explore possible solutions to address financial governance practices. The main focus of this study is on local municipalities, and qualitative research methods were used. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 15 participants who serve on the Municipal Public Accounts Committee and Audit Finance Committees at local municipalities. The data collected indicate the need for proper monitoring of municipalities' financial governance practices, as participants showed that municipalities face many problems due to financial mismanagement. The municipalities are failing to eliminate the challenges they face due to poor financial practices, as most participants could not provide a clear view of strategies for addressing these challenges. Therefore, the study has the potential to explore the transformation of financial governance through digital and innovative strategies that could help eliminate financial mismanagement and poor service delivery, and ensure that financial governance practices promote sustainable development.

Keywords: digital; governance; financial, innovation; internal controls; sustainable development

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Additional disciplines: public administration

1. Introduction

Financial governance transformation encompasses a range of legislative reforms, institutional frameworks, and management strategies aimed at improving financial accountability, transparency, and performance within the public sector. In South Africa, these initiatives aim to ensure that public funds are managed efficiently and ethically to support sustainable development, improve service delivery outcomes, and strengthen public-sector governance (Gumbi, 2025). However, local municipalities often lack sound financial governance as many fail to provide reliable financial reports, maintain adequate internal control, or effectively mitigate potential risks. These shortcomings exacerbate existing challenges in financial governance practices. To address these issues, strengthening organisational capacity and leadership, and implementing policy reforms are required to effectively embed digital transformation within sustainable financial governance systems (Suljic, 2025). Hendriks (2018) revealed that most South African municipalities face challenges in ensuring sound financial practices, highlighting the need to mitigate poor financial practices to maintain sustainable development. This revelation demonstrates that integrating digital transformation into sustainable financial governance systems is crucial to

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reducing corruption, ensuring equitable resource distribution, and promoting transparency, accountability, and sustainable development in municipalities. Interventions such as the Electronic Government policy have become central to efforts to increase transparency and accountability in public services through digital transformation (Wijaya et al., 2024). However, the utilisation of digital transformation remains limited, and South African local municipalities continue to face challenges related to poor financial governance practices, despite the introduction of electronic tools.

The purpose of the study is to explore innovative strategies and digital transformation, such as digitalisation of financial governance, performance-based budgeting, digital financial systems, revenue enhancement, and financial sustainability. The study found that poor digital transformation and a lack of innovative ideas in financial governance have left local municipalities in distress and have hampered their financial progress, as funds are misused (Brackley, 2025). The local municipality's Annual Report 2023/2024 illustrates that financial governance and human capital are the municipality's biggest challenges (King Sabatha Dalindlebo Municipality, 2025). For many years, the municipality has been striving to eliminate the financial challenge that has hindered its growth and development. Even with new developments in digital transformation, local municipalities still struggle to ensure implementation is fully utilised due to a lack of capacity, limited resources, lack of training, resistance to change, and poor integrated development plans, proving that financial practices in local municipalities remain a challenge that impacts good financial governance. Therefore, to investigate the transformation of financial governance through innovative strategies and digital transformation for the sustainable development of local municipalities, the study used a local municipality as the study area. Subsequently, this study aims to explore innovative strategies and digital transformation to enhance financial governance within South African municipalities, thereby improving financial accountability, transparency, and service delivery. The study seeks to answer the following research question: How do digital transformation and innovative financial strategies contribute to enhancing financial governance in South African municipalities?

2. Conceptual and theoretical framework

Mitigating challenges that could lead to financial governance failure is important for municipalities' growth (Chiwawa & Uwizeyimana, 2025). Municipalities' history of financial mismanagement has led to poor development, raising doubts on the nation's capacity and commitment to effectively tackle corruption (Mishi, Mbaleki & Mushonga, 2022). Digital systems can help maintain stability and ensure supervision, forcing institutions to comply; however, the government is mostly focused on transparency and accountability, not on what can be implemented to eliminate poor financial governance. Sinervo (2020) states that financial governance practices are essential for the long-term sustainability of local municipalities. Municipalities are unable to ensure sound financial practices, as citizens continue to suffer from poor service delivery, infrastructure damage, and unemployment (Stephens, 2025). According to Akinsola (2025), adopting effective financial practices can help eliminate some of the challenges of poor financial governance, as it is essential for ensuring transparency, accountability, internal control, and compliance within an organisation. Regrettably, the government is failing to strengthen digital systems and implement a new approach for financial practice to maintain sustainability.

Therefore, the study relies on internal control theory, which can assist in ensuring the use of digital systems, promoting good financial performance, and ensuring ethical standards, thereby reducing the negative impact on financial governance growth. Effective internal controls are instrumental in preventing and detecting fraud, minimising the risk of financial mismanagement and unauthorised transactions (Musyoki, 2023). This clearly indicates that internal control can help promote transparency, accountability, and efficiency, and mitigate challenges caused by corruption. Internal controls are designed to provide managers with greater accountability for their plans and to reasonably ensure that the plans they guide achieve the set goals. However, poor controls have led to a lack of accountability and significant challenges within the public sector, including financial mismanagement and the failure to provide essential services to citizens effectively and efficiently (Mofokeng &

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Nkgapele, 2025). Adopting internal control theory can ensure that digital systems are implemented and risks are identified, thereby enhancing stability and improving financial governance in local municipalities.

Mitigating challenges faced by municipalities through digital and innovative strategies

Poor financial governance poses a great challenge to local municipal citizens and may lead to the community's vulnerability to climate disasters. According to Darwish, Paridon & Wali (2023), poor financial governance has contributed to inadequate financial development and a high crime rate due to a lack of adherence to laws and transparency. Again, fiscal crisis has constrained the quality of basic service delivery to local communities (McKenzie & Marx, 2025). This proves that poor financial governance has hindered municipal development, and there have been few plans to improve the situation. Digital transformation can help municipalities present a viable, data-backed approach to mitigating these challenges and ensuring long-term stability. By embracing technology-driven governance, municipalities can enhance service delivery, improve financial transparency and achieve sustainable financial health (Tariq, 2025).

McKenzie (2025) asserts that municipalities are financially distressed because there has been insufficient investment in building robust digital technology, and basic service delivery is crumbling. Local communities are often plagued by water and electricity interruptions, dilapidated roads, and faltering emergency services. This implies that local municipalities need to adopt new technologies and strategies that will foster transparency, improve service delivery, and enhance accountability. The Auditor-General clearly shows that ineffective governance lies at the heart of municipal dysfunction, as poor governance leads to defective financial reporting and, in turn, a lack of accountability. So, local government will need to employ leaders with strong leadership skills, implement effective strategies, provide training, and foster collaboration with various stakeholders to maintain sustainable development.

With only 41 municipalities achieving clean audits and over 100 operating with unfunded budgets, the Auditor-General of South Africa's report revealed a persistent trend of accountability and financial management challenges faced by municipalities, resulting in service delivery failures and institutional collapse (Auditor-General of South Africa 2023-2024). This conclusion highlights the need for proper implementation of financial practices, which can be achieved through effective internal control and the adoption of modern IT systems. South African newspaper reports are proof that local municipalities face challenges due to poor financial practices, as they confirm in each report that extensive corruption is the order of the day at the local government level in South Africa. So, it's important for the government to adopt digital transformation tools and strategies used by Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, and Uganda, as they have been using a financial governance matrix that involves four financial arenas: budget governance, public procurement, internal controls, and external audit. These countries use a broader approach to financial governance, while the South African government focuses on effective, efficient, and proper financial reporting and compliance with policies. This could lead to several consequences, such as corruption, loss of investor confidence, and financial instability.

The biggest challenge to eliminating corruption is the lack of government input in enforcing regulations and laws. Although various programs were initiated to strengthen operational capacity and enhance financial management capabilities, public-sector municipalities still fail to adopt digital transformation as a tool to fight corruption and deliver the services required to improve development, reduce poverty and inequality, and improve the lives of all South Africans. This indicates incompetence, highlighting the need for the government to address matters that affect citizens. According to Obicci (2025), despite ongoing reforms, governance weaknesses continue to undermine service delivery and public trust. Lack of transparency, accountability, and fairness in the conduct of public duties is the main factor that led to inappropriate financial governance. Through analysis of budgetary allocations, the development of IT systems, audit outcomes, and the implementation of financial controls, this research identifies significant governance challenges that impede the municipality's progress toward sustainable development goals.

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Innovative strategies to address financial governance challenges

The South African government has been attempting to implement innovative ideas. Still, it lacks in digital transformation, which may be part of the strategies that need to be adopted to fight financial mismanagement. It is evident that corruption has led to high levels of poverty, unemployment, and inequality, and has weakened the development and sound financial governance of local municipalities. Building a new digital culture, upskilling and reskilling the workforce, deploying a mix of intelligent automation and hybrid augmented workflows and deploying frontier technologies responsibly are now on the agenda for forward-thinking boards to maintain sustainability (Vasiliu-Feltes, 2024).

Poor financial governance has contributed to inadequate financial development and a high crime rate, caused by noncompliance with laws and a lack of transparency (Wali, van Paridon & Darwish 2023). So, it is important to consider the Municipal Fiscal Power and Functions Act (12 of 2007), Subsection 229, for innovative financial governance to ensure that municipal management is exercised in a manner that will not materially and unreasonably prejudice, nationally, the mobility of goods, services and capital; this Act, in theory, provides for an appropriate division of fiscal powers. Secondly, municipalities must use innovations such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, and real-time data analytics to transform financial reporting, fraud prevention, and decision-making processes (Tran & Le, 2024; Tariq, 2025). The authors further highlighted that digital tools enable governments to develop data-driven policies, optimise resource allocation, and deliver inclusive and accessible services to citizens.

A significant role in ensuring good financial governance is to reduce elevated levels of unethical behaviour, such as corruption, fraud, and bribery. Tinuoye (2023) argues that, no matter how tough anti-corruption measures are in the public and private sectors, establishing digital systems to monitor and hold governments accountable for the delivery of public services and eliminating corrupt practices remain challenges. This suggests that poor financial governance has become a critical challenge in almost all municipalities, and the adoption of digital transformation remains limited in local municipalities due to a lack of capacity, resistance to change, limited resources, poor data management, and cybersecurity concerns. Municipalities need to implement financial systems, develop and enforce financial policies, strengthen internal controls, and promote financial transparency and accountability, as these will help monitor progress and mitigate potential risks to the municipality. According to Finkler, Calabrese & Smith (2025), establishing innovative strategies and a digital governance system that will shape how financial matters are managed within the organisation can address poor financial management. So, internal control systems positively influence financial management (Aziz & Cek, 2025).

Section 165 of the Municipal Financial Management Act (Act 56 of 2003) states that it is important for municipalities to have an internal audit, as this will help them prepare for financial management risks and provide clear guidelines for plans. The Act further illustrates that the main objectives of the internal audit unit are to validate internal audit, internal control, risk and risk management, accounting procedures and practices and performance management. Developing financial strategies and digital transformation to mitigate corruption can help local municipalities boost their confidence in fighting corruption and enhance good financial governance. This study aims to ensure that the fight against corruption in local municipalities is successful and that development is enhanced. However, the ongoing failure of officials to understand financial governance practices is the main cause of challenges in financial practices.

3. Methodology

The King Sabatha Dalindyebo Municipality (KSD) was used as a case study to investigate the transformation of financial governance through innovative strategies and digital transformation to sustain development. The methodological approach adopted in this study was informed by its aim: to explore the role of digital

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transformation and innovative financial strategies in enhancing financial governance within South African municipalities, thereby improving financial accountability, transparency, and service delivery. Furthermore, the study was guided by the following central research question: How do digital transformation and innovative financial strategies contribute to enhancing financial governance in South African municipalities? The study adopted a qualitative research approach to ensure the trustworthiness of the collected data. Adopting a qualitative approach was important for this study as it prioritises depth over breadth and aims to explore the "why" and "how" behind human behaviours and social phenomena (Lim, 2025). To address the research objectives, the study used purposive sampling, as it allows researchers to select participants based on their knowledge, relevance, or expertise regarding the challenges of financial governance (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). The study employed semi-structured interviews because they facilitated the collection of rich, thick descriptions, enabling an in-depth exploration of the research topic from participants' perspectives. This approach allowed the researcher to probe emerging issues, seek clarification, and follow up on participants' verbal responses to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The data collection method included in-depth interviews with 15 officials from MPAC and the Audit Finance Committee in the Finance Department to provide insight into the use of the digital system and innovative ideas to address challenges the municipality faces due to unethical financial practices. The study used thematic analysis to interpret the findings, as it is a method for analysing qualitative data gathered from the interview schedules to identify themes and patterns of meaning across the dataset concerning the research question.

Ethical Guidelines

Before commencing the study, the researchers were granted ethical clearance from the research committee. Before data collection, the study adhered to clear research guidelines; the purpose of the study was explained to participants, and they were given the right to participate (Maingehama, 2024). The study adhered to the Protection of Personal Information Act 41, 2013 (POPIA, No. 41 of 2013) to maintain confidentiality and establish trust with participants during data collection.

4. Findings

A theme addressing challenges faced by municipalities due to poor financial governance surfaced as a major problem in ensuring good financial governance. The study clearly viewed that poor financial mismanagement has negatively impacted the financial governance practices of the KSD municipality, as this was confirmed during the interview by a Risk Management Committee member who responded to that: *"There are many challenges, non-payment of services such as electricity negatively impacts our municipality and frustrates the municipality as well. Vandalising infrastructure during strikes is also a challenge because, after the strike, we always have to replace what was damaged, and the municipality has limited resources. We have been fighting it as a municipality, and we have created a learner guide that will teach citizens about the impact of this negligence".* (p1)

The participant's failure to mention digital tools such as automated payment reminders, real-time monitoring, and predictive analytics to address challenges that could negatively impact financial governance is concerning. Again, the participant does not clearly outline the actions taken to address vandalism challenges, indicating a lack of understanding of financial governance and compromising financial sustainability. This provides clear evidence that the KSD Municipality needs to be transparent and adopt digital tools, as they might improve communication between communities and businesses on how the funds are used. Research by Moolman & Van Der Waldt (2022) argues that a good financial governance framework must promote the transparent, fair, and efficient allocation of resources and be consistent with the rule of law, thereby supporting effective supervision and enforcement of good financial governance. Budget transparency and accountability are good elements of good public financial governance (Bakhtiar, 2021). It is important to promote the use of digital transformation tools and innovative strategies to foster partnerships with citizens and businesses, thereby positively influencing trust. A participant

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from the Audit and Performance Audit Committee responded to the same question: *"I will not mention the challenges, but the municipality has so many challenges, and auditors usually mention some of them".* (p4)

The participants affirm a lack of knowledge, indicating poor use of digital transformation tools and limited adoption of innovative strategies to maintain stability. They could not necessarily disclose the challenges the municipality is dealing with, which suggests that the participants may not know exactly what challenges there are. Analysis made by Visser et al. (2022) suggests that it is essential that all role players in the strategic plan of financial control play their part; they need to be committed and sufficiently competent to ensure sustainable development in financial governance. This shows that even though the participants are well informed, they rely on auditors' reports. This was verified by a participant from the Audit and Performance Audit Committee in the finance department at KSD municipality: *"Yes, the municipality has been facing so many challenges, and corruption is one of the challenges. Even with auditors and the risk management team, we are still fighting to ensure such problems are tackled."* (p5)

The participants' confirmation of the challenges has shown that the municipality faces many challenges. The participant's statement clearly indicated that corruption in the municipality is still an issue they are dealing with. Proving that the municipality is incompetent, implementing new ideas such as data-driven decision-making, risk management, and transparency and accountability could help fight corruption. Corruption impacts the effectiveness of the country's resources (Mateus, Allen-Ile & Iwu, 2014). By facilitating the flow of information among government institutions, between government and citizens, and among citizens, new technologies can promote transparency, accountability, and civic participation (Bhanye & Shayamunda, 2025). Even with non-response from a participant, it shows that many issues regarding financial governance among municipal participants are hidden or that they are not well-informed. This view is that the municipality has several incompetent staff members and lacks transparency, as participants in the finance department should be better informed about financial decisions. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development promotes transparency, which enables local governments to strengthen governance and build trust among individuals (Gorus, 2024). This suggests that the participants and MPAC committee members at KSD municipality lack critical thinking, digital, and problem-solving skills that affect public funds. Response from the MPAC member to the same question expressed: *"In most instances, the challenges that we have been facing as a municipality include inadequate funding, non-payment of services from citizens, and vandalism caused by citizens during strikes. The municipality also faces challenges in terms of limited capacity and poor financial management practices".* (p9)

The results are concerning, as the participants report no improvement in financial challenges. The municipality seems to be relying on manual processes, which indicates its failure to adapt to change, as technology can help reduce human error, track cash flow, and detect fraud. Again, this proves that the KSD municipality faces challenges such as inadequate funding, poor utilisation of digital tools, and improper implementation of innovative financial strategies, resulting in poor service delivery. The municipality is failing to ensure that it distributes limited resources fairly and equally among citizens, as the national government is focusing primarily on Metro municipalities. With the increasing complexity of financial markets and the growing demand for transparency and efficiency in public finance management, traditional methods of risk identification and mitigation are proving to be inadequate (Bouchetara, Zerouti & Zouambi, 2024). So, implementing strong corporate and technology governance, such as board oversight, clear policies, accountability, Information technology strategies, Artificial intelligence, and proper training, is important for preventing financial misconduct and enhancing operational efficiency, access to capital, risk reduction, and the protection of stakeholders' interests. Thus, municipalities need to put more pressure on the national government to support local municipalities and to review funding models to accommodate current conditions.

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Strategies for addressing challenges

A subtheme emerged regarding strategies developed to address challenges municipalities face in ensuring good financial governance. The participant from MPAC at KSD municipality responded: *"I would not say we have strategies, but budgeting has been assisting us in checking all the financial practices. Secondly, we must employ new interns who are qualified in finance."* (p2)

This resonates with the research aim as budgeting is essential, especially when it is needed to track all expenditure and income, as it promotes transparency. However, with local municipalities such as the KSD municipality facing a lack of funds, incompetent staff, and limited resources, the budget may be ineffective in addressing the challenges of poor financial governance. The municipality must include digital and innovative financial governance strategies, as these may improve efficiency and transparency, reduce overspending of the available budget, and ensure officials' compliance with financial governance. Again, budgeting does not necessarily ensure data security or improve financial governance; therefore, participants' statements highlight the need to adopt digital and innovative ideas. Countries such as Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda have been using the financial governance matrix, which involves four financial arenas of budget governance: public procurement, internal controls, and external audit. SA local municipalities need to adopt the digital tools and strategies used by some African countries in maintaining their finances.

When the same question was posed to a participant from the Audit and Performance Audit Committee in KSD at the finance department regarding strategies for addressing challenges, shockingly, he had no response. This suggests that the municipal participant lacks the capacity to identify problems related to poor financial governance. As the participant from the Audit and Performance Audit Committee in KSD municipality, in the finance department, explained: *"The municipality has been receiving National treasury intervention through funding, and we train new interns for 3 years to equip them with needed skills, which the treasury and state organisations facilitate."* (p5)

These measures taken by the National Treasury to provide training for new interns are good; however, if the leaders who are decision-makers lack the necessary skills to manage finances well, the likelihood of failure to provide strategies may be high. In the same vein, the employment of newly qualified staff does not clearly demonstrate that corruption will be eliminated, as older staff seem to be excluded from the training process, even though the majority of participants proved incompetent. So, the municipality needs to adopt measures such as digital transformation, data-driven decision-making, innovative revenue streams, effectiveness, transparency, and accountability. By creating systems that combine innovation with robust regulatory oversight, the global financial system can leverage digital assets to unlock new opportunities for financial growth and inclusion. KSD municipal managers need to boost financial inclusion through digital channels and promote citizens' freedom to participate in financial decisions, rather than relying on new interns.

The same question was posed to a participant from the Risk Management Committee. A participant explained: *"I would say the implementation of internal controls to ensure we prevent financial misconduct has served as an intervention strategy for financial governance of the municipality."* (p6)

This affirms that the municipality is moving in the right direction, as measures to manage risk are a good start, especially when public funds are involved, but compliance with them has been a challenge. Tougher anti-corruption measures in the public and private sectors would include establishing systems to monitor and hold local governments accountable for the delivery of public services and eliminating corrupt practices (Tinuoye, 2023). This does not necessarily prove that the controls are effective in mitigating the municipality's financial struggles. When there is a lack of internal control, organisations tend to experience fraud and debt (Saluja et al., 2024). It is also significant for municipalities to consider changes in their management, collaborate with

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technologically developed countries such as China, monitor municipal progress, and invest in digital infrastructure, as inadequate financial controls could lead to errors, fraud, and increased risk.

5. Conclusion

The study sought to explore how digital transformation and innovative financial strategies contribute to enhancing financial governance within South African municipalities, with specific reference to KSD Municipality. The findings revealed that although the municipality has implemented traditional financial governance mechanisms such as budgeting, internal controls, external audits, and National Treasury interventions, these measures have not adequately addressed persistent challenges such as corruption, inadequate funding, non-payment of municipal services, infrastructure vandalism, limited staff capacity, and poor financial management practices. The study found that digital transformation initiatives and innovative financial strategies remain underutilised despite their potential to improve transparency, accountability, efficiency, and financial sustainability. Participants demonstrated limited awareness of digital governance tools, including data analytics, automated financial monitoring systems, artificial intelligence, electronic procurement systems, and digital citizen engagement platforms. Consequently, the study concludes that the successful enhancement of financial governance requires integrating digital technologies, data-driven decision-making, innovative revenue-generation strategies, effective risk management systems, and stronger stakeholder participation. The findings further indicate that improved financial governance can only be achieved when technological innovation is accompanied by competent leadership, skilled personnel, effective oversight structures, and a culture of accountability and transparency.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was confined to the KSD municipality, which limits the generalisability of the findings to other municipalities operating under different socio-economic and administrative conditions. The findings were based largely on participants' perceptions and experiences, which may be subject to personal bias or incomplete knowledge of municipal financial management practices. Given the rapidly evolving nature of digital technologies and financial governance practices, future developments may introduce new opportunities and challenges that were not captured within the scope of this study. Therefore, future research should consider comparative studies across multiple municipalities and adopt mixed-methods approaches to provide a broader understanding of digital transformation and innovative financial strategies for enhancing financial governance.

The novelty of this study lies in its contribution to the emerging discourse on the transformation of financial governance within South African local government. Unlike many previous studies that focused primarily on traditional public financial management systems, this study examined financial governance through the lens of innovative strategies and digital transformation. The study provides empirical evidence from a local municipal context, highlighting how limited digital adoption and capacity constraints undermine the effectiveness of financial governance. Furthermore, the study identifies a significant knowledge gap among municipal governance structures, including MPAC, Audit and Performance Audit Committees, and Risk Management Committees, regarding the strategic use of digital technologies to address financial governance challenges. Therefore, by proposing innovative strategies and integrating digital transformation, transparency, accountability, and citizen participation into a comprehensive financial governance framework, the study offers a new perspective on strengthening municipal financial governance in resource-constrained environments.

6. Recommendations

The findings revealed that municipal officials largely rely on traditional budgeting processes and have limited awareness of digital transformation initiatives that could strengthen financial governance. Therefore, the KSD municipality should develop a comprehensive digital financial governance strategy that integrates digital budgeting systems, financial management information systems, electronic procurement platforms, data analytics,

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and real-time financial monitoring tools. Such a strategy would improve transparency, accountability, efficiency, and compliance while reducing the risks associated with manual financial processes. The study found that some participants were unable to articulate strategies for addressing financial governance challenges, suggesting capacity gaps among key officials and oversight structures. KSD municipality should therefore implement continuous professional development programmes for councillors, MPAC members, Audit and Performance Audit Committee members, finance officials, and senior managers. Training should focus on digital financial governance, risk management, data-driven decision-making, anti-corruption measures, and emerging financial technologies. Capacity building initiatives should target both newly recruited interns and existing employees to ensure organisational-wide competence. The municipality should institutionalise the use of data analytics and digital dashboards to support financial planning, expenditure monitoring, revenue forecasting, and risk identification. Data-driven decision-making would enable management to identify inefficiencies, detect financial irregularities early, and make informed strategic decisions. Furthermore, predictive analytics could assist the municipality in anticipating financial risks, managing debt collection, and improving resource allocation. Although internal controls were identified as an existing strategy, concerns remain regarding their effectiveness. KSD Municipality should strengthen internal controls by adopting automated compliance monitoring systems, electronic audit trails, artificial intelligence-assisted fraud detection tools, and digital risk management platforms. These technologies would improve monitoring capabilities, reduce opportunities for financial misconduct, and enhance accountability throughout the municipality.

The findings suggest a need for greater transparency and stakeholder involvement in financial governance processes. KSD municipality should establish digital platforms that enable citizens to access municipal budget information, track expenditure, monitor service delivery projects, and participate in financial decision-making processes. Increased transparency can improve public trust, encourage accountability, and enhance citizen oversight of municipal finances. KSD Municipality should benchmark its financial governance systems against best practices adopted by high-performing municipalities in South Africa and internationally. Particular attention should be given to countries that have successfully integrated digital technologies into financial governance, such as Rwanda, Kenya, and Ghana. Lessons learned from these jurisdictions can assist the municipality in modernising its financial governance framework and improving operational efficiency. While the National Treasury's support through funding and training programmes was acknowledged, the study indicates that these interventions have not fully translated into improved financial governance outcomes. Therefore, stronger collaboration among the National Treasury, provincial government, and municipal leadership is required to ensure that training initiatives align with municipal needs and that digital transformation objectives are effectively implemented and monitored.

Given concerns about corruption and financial misconduct, the KSD municipality should implement technology-enabled anti-corruption measures, including electronic procurement systems, digital whistleblowing platforms, fraud-detection software, and automated transaction-monitoring systems. These measures can reduce opportunities for corruption while improving transparency and accountability in financial operations. The successful implementation of digital transformation initiatives requires adequate technological infrastructure. KSD municipality should invest in modern information technology systems, cloud-based financial management platforms, cybersecurity mechanisms, and reliable digital infrastructure to support financial governance processes. Such investments would enhance data security, operational efficiency, and service continuity. The municipality should develop a Financial Governance Innovation Framework that combines digital transformation, innovative financial strategies, risk management, accountability mechanisms, and performance monitoring. This framework should provide clear guidelines for integrating technology into financial governance practices while ensuring alignment with legislative requirements and good governance principles.

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DIGITAL LEARNING AS A TRANSFORMATIVE FORCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN EASTERN CAPE, SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract. This paper examined the transformative role of digital learning in the Eastern Cape. The advent of digital learning has emerged as a transformative force in higher education institutions, reshaping pedagogical approaches and enhancing student engagement. The paper adopted a qualitative, interpretive stance to capture lived experiences, meanings, and context-specific understandings of digital learning as a transformative force in Eastern Cape higher education institutions. A qualitative stance was aligned with the emphasis on depth of understanding, pedagogical change, and student and staff experiences rather than purely measurable outcomes. A multisite instrumental case study design was appropriate for illuminating how digital learning functions as a transformative force across diverse Eastern Cape higher education institutions. The population for this paper included students, academics, and administrative staff involved with digital learning across selected Eastern Cape higher education institutions. Purposive sampling was used to select participants to capture diverse perspectives on transformation. The sampling strategy was guided by data saturation, with a focus on in-depth semi-structured interviews for students and staff, complemented by document analysis and observations. Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse, and report patterns across datasets. Findings suggest that while digital learning can enhance accessibility and flexibility, significant disparities in access to technology and digital literacy persist, exacerbating existing inequalities. The findings of the paper were context-specific to Eastern Cape higher education institutions and may not generalise beyond similar settings. The paper concludes with recommendations for improving digital learning infrastructure and strategies for future research.

Keywords: Digital learning; Transformation; Changing education system; Higher education; Pedagogy

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JEL Classifications: I23, O33

1. Introduction

The rapid and pervasive integration of digital technologies into higher education is redefining how universities teach, learn, research, and engage with broader social objectives. In the context of South Africa, digital learning is increasingly seen as a transformative force capable of altering the structure, governance, and outcomes of the higher education system. The paper positions digital learning as central to ongoing reform, performance, and equity in South African higher education. This paper situates digital learning within the broader pressures of post-apartheid transformation. In essence, digital learning is understood as more than the deployment of online platforms; it is a driver of organisational and pedagogical change that reconfigures learning spaces, assessment practices, faculty development, and student support (Jakoet-Salie & Ramalobe, 2022). However, as a fulcrum of transformation in a constrained but evolving system, digital learning is meant to achieve academic and administrative objectives through effective leadership, a culture of innovation, and the strategic deployment of digital tools. The convergence across these accounts reinforces the view that digital learning is inseparable from

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the quality and equity of the educational experience in the South African milieu (Mhlanga et al., 2022; Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020; Shava, 2022).

A central strand in the discourse on digital transformation is the role of policy frameworks and governance mechanisms in guiding it. In South Africa, policy instruments and national strategies shape how institutions negotiate resource allocation, cybersecurity, and the design of digital learning ecosystems. Adeyemo (2023) and Mhlanga et al. (2022) highlight the need for collaborative, bottom-up policy development and stronger alignment between policy and local practice to reduce inequalities and improve outcomes in higher education. Where governance remains top-down or unevenly funded, implementation gaps emerge, undermining the transformative potential of digital learning (Adeyemo, 2023; Mhlanga et al., 2022).

Although pandemic-driven disruption exposed capacity gaps in infrastructure, digital literacy, and support systems, it catalysed experimentation with online and blended modalities. It also spurred investment in digital infrastructure and prompted rethinking of assessment, student engagement, and flexible learning spaces (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020; Shava, 2022). This also resulted in a robust body of literature documenting the scale of online migration, the challenges for rural and disadvantaged students, and the necessity of sustainable strategies to close the digital divide post-pandemic (Mhlanga et al., 2022; Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020; Shava, 2022; Moonsamy et al., 2022). These studies collectively argue that the long-term value of digital learning rests on deliberate investments in broadband access, device availability, training for faculty and students, and policy measures that foreground equity. With all these considerations, digital transformation needs to be accompanied by deliberate attention to equity, access, and inclusion. The persistence of inequalities in connectivity, digital literacy, and device access shapes learning experiences and outcomes, requiring targeted policy and resource allocation to prevent widening gaps Mhlanga et al., 2022; Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020; Shava, 2022; Moonsamy et al., 2022). These arguments led Maimela & Mbonde (2025), Becker (2020), and Jowi (2024) to centre the ethical and epistemic dimensions of digital learning, including debates around the decolonisation of curricula, data governance, and epistemic justice in knowledge production within digital platforms.

Despite substantial scholarship on digital transformation and COVID-era online learning in South Africa, there remains a need to articulate how digital learning constitutes a transformative force within the changing higher education system. This includes how policy, leadership, and infrastructure interact to enable or constrain this transformation. Notably, digital learning can be deliberately designed to advance equity, decolonisation, and sustainable development within South Africa's higher education landscape, thereby fostering 4IR readiness (Oke & Fernandes, 2020; Masinde & Soux, 2020). In other words, studies situate digital learning within broader, forward-looking discourses such as 4IR, illustrating both potential and risk. Analyses of 4IR readiness in Africa and debates about decolonising curricula that consider artificial intelligence (AI) and digital technologies inform the conceptual framework and policy recommendations for the South African context (Oke & Fernandes, 2020; Masinde & Soux, 2020; Mangosuthu & Bayaga, 2025).

This paper, therefore, advances a nuanced account of how digital learning can reshape higher education in South Africa when pursued with deliberate policy design, inclusive infrastructure investment, and a commitment to decolonised, contextually relevant pedagogy. By foregrounding the collapse of old hierarchies through digitally mediated access, the paper contributes to the ongoing policy discourse and empirical inquiry into how South African HEIs can leverage digital learning to achieve equitable, high-quality education in a rapidly transforming global knowledge economy.

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2. Literature Review

Introduction

Digital learning has become a central vector of transformation in higher education globally. In South Africa, digital learning is frequently framed as a catalyst for expanding access, improving teaching quality, and reconfiguring governance, structure, and outcomes within the sector. Below is a synthesis of recent empirical and conceptual work on how digital technologies are reshaping teaching, learning, research, and social objectives in South African higher education (HEI).

Digital Learning as a Transformative Force in South Africa

Transformation through digital technologies is visible in shifts toward blended and hybrid modes of instruction within South African HEIs, motivated by aims to broaden access and enhance quality. Watson & Struwig (2024) document a clear move toward blended and hybrid delivery in SA public universities. This provides evidence-based recommendations for designing assessments that preserve accessibility, equity, and academic integrity in digital contexts. Building on this notion, complementary analyses emphasise that the adoption of digital platforms and learner management systems (LMSs) has become integral to curricula, with ongoing recalibration of teaching practice at the institutional level (Shava, 2022; Moonsamy et al., 2022). These studies collectively position digital learning as a central reform lever in SA higher education, rather than a peripheral adjunct (Majanja, 2020; Watson & Struwig, 2024).

In this instance, COVID-19 acted as a stress test and accelerator for digital transformation, highlighting both opportunities and persistent constraints. Out of this context, studies identify tenets of digital transformation lessons from the pandemic, notably the imperative to build digital capabilities, address the digital divide, and scale online learning infrastructure and skills development (Mhlanga et al., 2022; Moonsamy et al., 2022; Moyo et al., 2022; Adeyemo, 2023). Across these works, online platforms such as Zoom, Teams, MOODLE, Blackboard, and LMSs became defining features of emergency remote teaching. Authors also consistently call for policy alignment, sustained investment, and continuous pedagogy development to prevent relapse into inequitable access patterns (Majanja, 2020; Mhlanga et al., 2022; Moonsamy et al., 2022; Moyo et al., 2022. Digital inequality and access to infrastructure remain central constraints shaping the transformative potential of digital learning. Woldegiorgis, 2022) argued that the digital divide exacerbates inequities in access to higher education during crises like COVID-19, underscoring the need for inclusive digital pedagogy and coordinated national strategies to ensure continuity and fairness in learning opportunities. Several studies directly link infrastructure, affordability, and digital literacy to student outcomes, urging targeted investments and policies to close gaps between urban and rural, and between advantaged and disadvantaged cohorts (Bere et al., 2018; Majanja, 2020; Woldegiorgis, 2022; Moonsamy et al., 2022). This evidence base cautions against overclaiming transformation without systemic support and policy coherence.

In addition, the role of leadership, policy, and strategic alignment in enabling digital learning as a transformation emerges in SA HEIs. There is an understanding that leadership must navigate the complexities of implementing digital pedagogy at scale, reconciling 4IR aspirations with real-world resource constraints, governance, and inclusivity. To this view, Singaram et al. (2023) articulate the need for strategic vision, organisational readiness, and policy alignment to guide the integration of 4IR-driven technologies into teaching, learning, and curricula. Studies contend that successful digital transformation hinges on coherent policy ecosystems, investment in digital infrastructure, and ongoing professional development for staff and students (Saib et al., 2022; Oke & Fernandes, 2020; Ajani, 2023; Adeyemo, 2023; Mashau & Nyawo, 2021).

Digital Learning and Governance, Structure, and Institutional Outcomes

The evolving digital landscape has reframed librarians' teaching and learning role, with librarians increasingly participating as pedagogical partners in online environments. Saib et al. (2022) and Omarsaib (2024) highlighted

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the need for librarians to possess pedagogical and digital skills, and for higher education libraries to cultivate teaching identities and collaborate on policy and practice to support digital learning. This cross-unit collaboration engages with the broader 4IR discourse and the implications for curriculum design, leadership, and skills development in HEIs. Leadership must therefore anticipate the implications of 4IR for learning spaces, workforce readiness, and curricula, while also acknowledging risks of digital inequality and epistemic biases in AI-enabled learning (Singaram et al., 2023). Adequate governance and policy frameworks are consistently identified as prerequisites for responsibly harnessing 4IR advances in SA higher education.

Complexities, Tensions, and Gaps

Across sources, digital learning is described as transformative in principle, with substantial potential to expand access and improve outcomes. Yet, persistent constraints such as the digital divide, inconsistent electricity supply, data costs, inadequate digital literacy, and uneven institutional readiness temper transformative claims and necessitate policy and resource commitments to realise benefits (Moonsamy et al., 2022; Woldegiorgis, 2022; Majanja, 2020; Mashau & Nyawo, 2021). To be transformative, digital transformation requires rethinking pedagogy and assessment to preserve quality and integrity. Re-imagining assessments in digital landscapes, ensuring accessibility and equity, and developing context-sensitive pedagogies are recurrent themes in SA research (Watson & Struwig, 2024). According to Saib et al. (2022) and Omarsaib (2024), librarian-facilitated digital literacies and the evolving role of information professionals in teaching contexts also surface as critical governance considerations.

Implications of Digital Learning for SA Higher Education

A transformed SA higher education system will likely feature blended and hybrid pedagogies as standard practice with governance mechanisms that coordinate digital strategy across teaching, learning, libraries, and ICT support. This calls for a redesigned curriculum and assessment practices aligned with digital literacies and 4IR capabilities (Moonsamy et al., 2022; Moyo et al., 2022; Watson & Struwig, 2024). The transformation also demands targeted investments to close the digital divide, including rural and under-resourced institutions. Ongoing leadership and professional development to sustain digital pedagogy and data-informed decision-making are a vital need as well (Woldegiorgis, 2022; Adeyemo, 2023; Singaram et al., 2023).

Future directions should therefore deepen longitudinal assessments of digital learning outcomes and investigate the efficacy of governance models for digital strategy in SA HEIs. This relates to examining AI and ethics in 4IR-enabled higher education, with explicit attention to equity across contexts, be it urban or rural (Woldegiorgis, 2022; Adeyemo, 2023; Singaram et al., 2023). Within this understanding, digital learning, as a transformative force in South African higher education, can reconfigure teaching, learning, research, and social objectives when supported by coherent governance, infrastructure investment, and capacity building. However, the transformative promise is constrained by persistent inequities in access to technology, digital literacy gaps, and variable institutional readiness. A holistic approach that integrates policy alignment, leadership, librarianship, curriculum redesign, and equitable resource distribution is required to realise the emancipatory potential of digital learning in South Africa's higher education system.

3. Research Methods

Introduction

This paper aimed to understand how digital learning functions as a transformative force within higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, against a backdrop of ongoing educational transformation. The paper sought to capture stakeholders' lived experiences, meanings, and interpretations of digital learning and to elucidate how ICT-enabled pedagogy, governance, and student engagement contribute to or hinder transformative change in the local context (Garton et al., 2022; Nqabeni et al., 2024; Chirowamhangu, 2024). The research adopted an interpretivist stance to foreground participants' perceptions and meanings and uses a

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qualitative, case-study approach to illuminate how digital learning acts as a mechanism for transformation across multiple HEIs in the Eastern Cape (Matabane & Matabane, 2021; Ugwuanyi et al., 2023; Mdodana-Zide, 2023; Nqabeni et al., 2024). Given inequities in ICT access, infrastructure, and digital literacies, the paper explicitly addressed issues of digital poverty, digital readiness, and digital citizenship as they pertain to transformative educational outcomes in Eastern Cape HEIs (Birdthistle et al., 2022; Seleke, 2024).

Research Paradigm

The paper adopted an interpretivist stance that is linked with exploring meanings, perceptions, and lived experiences of stakeholders in complex social contexts, such as digital learning in South African HEIs in the Eastern Cape (Fataar & Norodien-Fataar, 2021; Turner, 2023; Ngqulu & Nomnga, 2023; Nqabeni et al., 2024). Applying an interpretive paradigm for this paper enabled interpretation through stakeholders' meanings, experiences, and sense-making within the Eastern Cape HEI context. The great benefit of espousing this research paradigm is that knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and participants, emphasising participants' perspectives and local discourses surrounding digital learning, technology readiness, pedagogy, and equity. This aligns with an interpretive stance that prioritises participants' voices to understand transformation processes (Fataar & Norodien-Fataar, 2021; Nqabeni et al., 2024). The paradigm situated qualitative methods, such as interviews, document analysis, and observations, as appropriate for accessing nuanced meanings, rather than solely measuring outcomes. In essence, the interpretive paradigm foregrounds the ways in which local histories, socio-economic conditions, language and decolonisation discourses, and infrastructural realities shape the enactment and perception of digital learning. This resonates with literature that situates digital transformation within South Africa's post-apartheid socio-political and educational landscape, where context is essential to interpretation (Fataar & Norodien-Fataar, 2021; Turner, 2023; Ngqulu & Nomnga, 2023).

Research Design

An interpretive paradigm informed the choice to employ a multisite case study design that aligns with interpretive aims to illuminate how digital learning is understood and experienced across different HEIs (Ugwuanyi et al., 2023). It takes this position while enabling deep comparisons of meanings across sites rather than testing universal hypotheses (Ngqulu & Nomnga, 2023; Nqabeni et al., 2024). The rationale for using a case study design in this paper was to enable an in-depth exploration of phenomena within their real-world contexts, using multiple data sources to enhance the credibility and transferability of the findings (Mpongwana & Cishe, 2024).

Population and Sampling Strategy

The population for this paper included active course students, academics delivering online and hybrid modules, IT staff, and policy-makers within the selected institutions. This multi-stakeholder frame supports a rich, interpretive understanding of digital learning as a transformative phenomenon from multiple vantage points. The rationale for including students is that students are central to any evaluation of digital learning's transformative potential, as they are the primary agents of engagement with digital pedagogy, platforms, and resources. Their experiences reveal how digital learning reshapes access, participation, identity, and belonging within Eastern Cape HEIs (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020; Fataar & Norodien-Fataar, 2021; Nqabeni et al., 2024). Contextual factors such as digital readiness, connectivity, device access, and language of instruction influence students' experiences and perceptions of transformation, making students a critical population for capturing lived realities under resource constraints common in the Eastern Cape (Turner, 2023; Nqoma et al., 2024).

The inclusion of academics relates to their pivotal role in translating digital learning policy into classroom practice. Their pedagogical beliefs, digital literacies, and perceived institutional support directly shape student experiences and transformation outcomes (Fataar & Norodien-Fataar, 2021; Ntlabathi & Mashiyi, 2022; Badaru & Adu, 2022). The literature on academics' preparedness, capacity-building needs, and adaptation during COVID-19 highlights the importance of including teaching staff who are actively implementing online and hybrid modalities in Eastern Cape contexts (Ugwuanyi et al., 2023; Mudau et al., 2022; Ntlabathi & Mashiyi, 2022). On

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the one hand, ICT staff are the infrastructural and technical backbone enabling digital learning. Their perspectives illuminate the feasibility of transformative aims, capacity limitations, maintenance challenges, and strategic priorities for digital infrastructure and support services (Fataar & Norodien-Fataar, 2021; Nqoma et al., 2024). They provide institutional insights into readiness, system interoperability, and the alignment between policy intentions and technical realities (Fataar & Norodien-Fataar, 2021; Ntlabathi & Mashiyi, 2022). Lastly, policy-makers and leaders shape the strategic direction of digital learning, resource allocation, and overarching transformation agendas. Their views reveal governance, prioritisation, and framing of transformation at the macro level, including decolonisation and inclusion discourses pertinent to the Eastern Cape context (Fataar & Norodien-Fataar, 2021; Turner, 2023; Nqabeni et al., 2024). Their involvement helps connect classroom-level experiences with policy intent, enabling examination of alignment, tensions, and enactment gaps between policy and practice (Fataar & Norodien-Fataar, 2021; Nqabeni et al., 2024).

The paper espoused a purposive sampling strategy to illuminate the study's interpretive aims by capturing diverse, information-rich perspectives across stakeholder groups and HEIs. Purposeful sampling was intended to select participants who could lay bare the meanings, practices, and transformation processes surrounding digital learning, rather than to seek statistical representativeness. It allowed for the chosen participants, students, academics, IT staff, and policy-makers to provide complementary viewpoints on transformation, policy enactment, infrastructure, and everyday teaching and learning practices in the Eastern Cape context (Fataar & Norodien-Fataar, 2021; Ngqulu & Nomnga, 2023; Nqabeni et al., 2024). Moreover, a purposive, criterion-based selection ensured participants have substantial engagement with digital learning) (Mdodana-Zide, 2023; Chirowamhangu, 2024).

The sample size for this paper was guided by a prioritisation of depth, with sample sizes typically varying based on data saturation and resource constraints (Ntlabathi & Mashiyi, 2022; Ugwuanyi et al., 2023). Two higher education institutions were selected in the Eastern Cape. For each site, a target of three (3) active students was maintained, giving a total of six (6) students, three (3) academics from each site with a total of six (6) academics, two (2) ICT staff from each site with a total of four (4) and two (2) policy-makers from each site with a total of four (4). The total number of participants was twenty (20).

Data Collection

Data collection is the systematic process of gathering information from sources or participants to answer research questions, test ideas, or build theory. In qualitative research, data collection emphasises depth, context, and meaning, using methods such as interviews, observations, and document review to reveal how people experience and interpret phenomena (Nqabeni et al., 2024). For this paper, data collection aimed to elicit rich, descriptive accounts that illuminate how participants understand and enact social processes, rather than produce numerical generalisations (Nqabeni et al., 2024). Data was collected using triangulation and multiple data sources, such as interviews, observations, and documents, to strengthen credibility and cross-verify findings across sources (Elly et al., 2024).

Data Collection Procedures

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The researcher developed an interview guide with a core set of open-ended questions applicable to all groups, along with flexible probes tailored to participant groups. The sections on interviews included context and background, daily practices, perceived transformation, equity and inclusion, supports and barriers, and future directions. This section also incorporates probes around power relations, language and decolonisation considerations, and local contextual factors unique to the Eastern Cape, such as connectivity, device access, and infrastructural variability. Interviews were conducted face-to-face where feasible; otherwise, via secure Microsoft Teams or phone calls to accommodate connectivity constraints. These interviews were also audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim, with anonymisation and participant

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codes applied. Interviews were conducted at the participants' convenience to avoid disruptions to their schedules. In other words, these interviews were conducted during and after working hours.

Observations, as an instrument, allowed the researcher to document actual digital teaching and learning practices, platform use, interactions, and infrastructural affordances in real time, grounding interpretations in observable phenomena (Sinnige et al., 2023; Fourar et al., 2024). Selected classes observed included online, hybrid, and face-to-face classes with digital components, computer labs, learning management system (LMS) use, and library and ICT-enabled events or workshops. The researcher took field notes detailing the environment, technology affordances, pedagogy shifts, student engagement, and academic teaching strategies. Throughout this due process, the researcher obtained consent for observations, maintained a non-intrusive presence, and anonymised any identifiable information from participants.

Document Analysis was used by the researcher to identify relevant documents from current and archival sources within each institution and to ensure access permissions to collect multiple documents per site, enabling cross-checking. A data extraction sheet was developed to capture key themes, including transformation aims, equity commitments, allocated resources, implementation timelines, measurement indicators, and governance structures. The focus was on comparing policy-intended goals with classroom and student experiences, as evidenced by interviews and observations, to identify consistencies and gaps.

Data was analysed through *thematic analysis*. Thematic analysis was well-suited to explore how participants interpret digital learning as a transformative force within Eastern Cape HEIs, capturing meanings, patterns, and variations across institutions, staff, and students (Rof et al., 2020; Patil & Patil, 2022; Gkrimpizi et al., 2023). Data sources analysed through thematic analysis included semi-structured interviews with academics, ICT staff, students, and policy-makers; policy documents; and observation notes from digital learning environments. Interviews were transcribed, with repeated reading and annotation to capture first impressions about how digital learning is described as transformative (Morales et al., 2021; Gkrimpizi et al., 2023; Polin et al., 2023). Potential themes were then generated and checked against data to ensure internal coherence and distinctiveness, and to ensure that they capture both convergence and divergence across participants and institutions

4. Results of the Study

The results of the study were presented as emerging from the participants' responses, with data collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. The following results were presented and organised by stakeholder group and by key themes:

Academics: Pedagogical Transformation and Practice
Shifts toward blended and hybrid modalities are prominent, with academics reporting incremental integration of digital tools into teaching and assessment, consistent with SA-wide digital learning reform trends. The results indicate academics increasingly design learning activities that leverage learner management system (LMS) platforms, digital resources, and online collaboration to complement face-to-face instruction. This indication emphasises digital platforms as central levers for reform in SA higher education. The results also revealed pedagogical reconfiguration, accompanied by concerns about quality and equity, including how digital formats affect assessment integrity and student engagement. This resonates with the call for policy alignment, investment, and ongoing pedagogy development to sustain equitable digital teaching practices post-pandemic. In this instance, institutional readiness and leadership emerge as critical enablers. This is where academics linked successful digital transformation to coherent policy ecosystems, infrastructure investment, and professional development. Such sentiments echoed broader SA findings about governance and capacity-building as prerequisites for 4IR-aligned curricula.

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ICT Staff: Infrastructure, Support, and Governance

Infrastructure readiness and reliability were central concerns. ICT staff reported ongoing needs to strengthen bandwidth, LMS reliability, and hardware provisioning to support scalable digital learning. This revelation mirrors the emphasis on broadband access, device availability, and resilient ICT ecosystems as foundational for transformation. Support ecosystems and interoperability were highlighted as key determinants of user adoption. ICT staff emphasised the importance of training for academics and students, responsive helpdesk support, and system interoperability. This aligns with calls for capacity building and governance that enable 4IR-enabled learning environments. ICT staff also pointed to gaps between policy intentions and on-the-ground technical realities, underscoring the need for governance structures that integrate digital strategy with ICT operations and data security.

Students: Access, Literacy, and Learning Experiences

Access and connectivity disparities are evident, with students' experiences reflecting rural-urban and resource-related inequities. Issues raised included device ownership, internet reliability, and language and contextual barriers that influence participation and engagement in digital environments. Aligned with this view is evidence that the digital divide is a persistent constraint on transformation. Students revealed that digital literacy and user experience shape learning outcomes. The understanding is that students' engagement with online platforms and digital tools is mediated by their technological literacy and their ability to navigate digital learning spaces. This view supported the emphasis on capacity-building for students as part of equitable digital learning strategies.

Policy-makers: Alignment, Funding, and Decolonisation Discourses

The results indicated tensions between macro-level policy design and classroom enactment. From this viewpoint, policy-makers emphasised the need for collaborative, bottom-up policy development and strong alignment with local practice to reduce inequalities in the digital transformation of higher education. Policy-makers also highlighted resource allocation, long-term funding commitments, and governance mechanisms as determinants of the scalability and continuity of digital learning. This revelation stresses the calls for sustained investment and coherent digital strategy across teaching, learning, libraries, and ICT support. The results reflected on decolonisation and inclusion discourse to shape strategic direction. Policy discussions reflected epistemic justice, curriculum relevance, and decolonisation considerations as central to the transformation agenda, consistent with decolonising curricula and data governance in digital platforms.

Across academics, ICT staff, students, and policy-makers, there was consensus that digital learning is a core driver of transformation when accompanied by coherent governance, infrastructure investment, and capacity building. This convergence framed digital learning as a central reform lever requiring policy coherence and infrastructure investment.

While there was agreement on the transformative potential, tensions arose around equity of access (digital divide), the urgency of policy-practice alignment, and the pace of implementation given resource constraints. These tensions reflected ongoing debates about how to balance innovation with inclusivity and sustainability in SA higher education.

Lastly, the results suggested that successful digital transformation in the Eastern Cape requires integrated policy design, targeted investment in broadband and devices, ongoing professional development for staff and students, and governance mechanisms that coordinate digital strategies across all sectors. These implications advocate for strategic alignment, persistent investment, and combined top-down or bottom-up governance approaches to realise 4IR-ready, equitable higher education in SA.

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4. Summary and Interpretation of the Results

The paper presented results that emerged from interviews, observations, and document analysis, organised by stakeholder groups such as academics, ICT staff, students, and policy-makers. The results were anchored in four cross-cutting themes: pedagogical transformation and practice; infrastructure, support, and governance; access, literacy, and learning experiences; and alignment, funding, and decolonisation discourses. Across stakeholder groups, a consensus is evident: digital learning is a core reform lever for higher education transformation in the Eastern Cape and in South Africa as a whole. This is particularly relevant when it is undergirded by coherent governance, sustained infrastructure investment, and capacity-building. However, tensions remain regarding equity of access, policy-practice alignment, and the pace of implementation under resource constraints.

Around pedagogical transformation and practice, academics viewed the emergence of blended and hybrid modalities as a central reform trajectory. These participants described shifts toward blended learning, with incremental integration of digital tools into teaching and assessment. Academics increasingly designed activities that leveraged LMS platforms, digital resources, and online collaboration to supplement face-to-face instruction. This aligns with SA-wide reform trends that position digital platforms as levers for reform in higher education. These views highlighted that learning design is increasingly mediated by digital infrastructures, with LMSs and online resources becoming foundational for modern curricula.

With pedagogical reconfiguration and quality- or equity-related concerns, the results highlighted concerns about assessment integrity, student engagement, and overall quality in digital formats. These concerns reference ongoing policy alignment, infrastructure investment, and professional development to sustain equitable digital teaching post-pandemic. They also implicate governance and capacity-building as prerequisites for 4IR-aligned curricula. It then becomes clear that rapid digitalisation without robust pedagogical design exacerbates inequalities. When looking at enablers, readiness, coherent policy ecosystems, and investment, academics explicitly connected successful digital transformation to coherent policy ecosystems, infrastructure investment, and ongoing professional development. This mirrors the broader SA context where governance, strategic planning, and investment in ICT are prerequisites for scalable digital learning and 4IR-ready curricula. The stakeholder consensus across academics reflected the discourse that policy coherence and strong leadership are central enabling conditions for durable reform.

ICT staff identified infrastructure readiness and reliability as central concerns, citing the need to strengthen bandwidth, LMS reliability, and hardware provisioning to support scalable digital learning. This reflects SA-wide emphasis on broadband access, device availability, and resilient ICT ecosystems as foundational for transformation. In other words, without reliable infrastructure, digital learning cannot scale or sustain quality. Support ecosystems, interoperability, and capacity-building staff also stressed the importance of training for academics and students, responsive helpdesk support, and system interoperability. These elements are critical determinants of user adoption and sustained use of digital platforms. This suggests that capacity-building and governance mechanisms that integrate digital strategy with ICT operations are essential for 4IR-enabled teaching environments. ICT staff also highlighted gaps between policy aims and technical realities, calling for governance structures that bridge digital strategy and ICT operations, as well as data security considerations. This tension is noted in issues of policy design versus practical implementation, policy ownership, resource allocation, and infrastructural realities in HEIS.

Students reported device ownership, internet reliability, and language and contextual barriers affecting participation. This situation is caused by the digital divide that intensifies inequalities in South African higher education, particularly in open and remote contexts and rural settings. The emphasis is that access disparities mediate engagement and outcomes in digital learning environments. Student experiences also indicated that digital literacy and user experience moderate learning outcomes, with engagement shaped by students' capacity to

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navigate online spaces. These experiences highlighted digital literacy as a key lever for equitable uptake of e-learning and for mitigating access barriers.

Lastly, policy-makers reported tensions between macro-level policy design and classroom enactment, advocating for collaborative, bottom-up policy development and alignment with local practice to reduce inequalities. This identifies policy coherence across teaching, libraries, and ICT support, as well as the need for governance mechanisms to ensure scalability and continuity. The results also focused on resource allocation, long-term funding, and governance as determinants of scalability. The results foreground sustained investment and governance as critical determinants of digital learning scalability and continuity. Policy-makers also highlighted decolonisation and inclusion discourse as central to strategic direction, aligning with epistemic justice, curriculum relevance, decolonising curricula, and data governance in digital platforms.

6. Conclusions

The convergence of stakeholder voices in the Eastern Cape study indicates that digital learning is a central transformative lever for higher education reform in South Africa. This is so when embedded within coherent governance, sustained infrastructure investment, and capacity-building across all levels. Academics described a visible move toward blended and hybrid modalities underpinned by LMS use and online collaboration. ICT staff identified the indispensability of reliable bandwidth, interoperable systems, and robust training to sustain quality and scale. Students' experiences foreground the digital divide and digital literacy as pivotal determinants of access and learning outcomes, reinforcing the need for targeted student support and inclusive design. Policy-makers' emphasis on bottom-up policy alignment, long-term funding, and decolonisation discourses further underscores that technological adoption alone is insufficient without epistemically just and contextually relevant curricula supported by durable funding and governance structures. Taken together with SA-wide scholarship on 4IR-ready curricula and infrastructure, the study suggested that the pathway to equitable, transformative higher education in South Africa rests on integrated policy design, multi-stakeholder governance, and persistent investment in broadband, devices, and human capacity. This must be complemented by deliberate attention to pedagogy, assessment integrity, and inclusive student support. While consensus exists on digital learning as a driver of reform, tensions around equity of access, policy-practice alignment, and implementation pace remain, signalling the necessity for context-sensitive, multi-level strategies that couple top-down direction with local practice innovation.

The novelty of the research results lay in positioning digital platforms as central, evidence-based levers for reform within the SA higher education reform landscape. The results provided an integrated, region-specific diagnosis of governance, infrastructure, and capacity-building needs, thereby delivering a nuanced and contextualised account of the digital divide that links access, literacy, and learning experiences. Digital learning, as a transformative force, perceived decolonisation and epistemic justice as strategic axes shaping policy design and resource allocation, and presented a holistic, multi-stakeholder consensus on the conditions necessary for scalable, equitable, 4IR-aligned transformation in the Eastern Cape. The results were supported by cross-cutting evidence from academics, ICT staff, students, and policy-makers, and were consistent with broader SA reform trajectories while offering detailed, location-specific insights that refine policy and practice recommendations. These novel contributions extend existing SA higher education literature by combining a granular regional analysis with a theory-informed, governance-centred interpretation of 4IR-enabled digital learning transformations.

The limitations of the study are reflected in its geographic and institutional confinement to two Eastern Cape HEIs, which impedes generalizability to the broader SA context or to other provinces and types of institutions.

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CONCEPTUALISING HEI-BASED ENTREPRENEURSHIP DEVELOPMENT CENTRES AS TOOLS FOR FOSTERING LOCAL ECONOMIES

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Abstract. Several African institutions of higher learning possess extensive research capacity, infrastructure, and human capital; however, these assets are often underutilised in addressing the continent's regional and local economic challenges. Empirical evidence suggests a lack of direction in deploying these vital resources for the economic good. Drawing on best practices from nine leading global universities, this conceptual paper examines critical constructs of entrepreneurship development centres with potential for local economic development, aiming to distil strategies for development actors. Publications (39) retrieved from scientific databases and subjected to qualitative thematic analysis suggest that achieving sustainable impact in local economies requires a systemic and integrated approach that connects venture creation, skills development, and research commercialisation into a cohesive innovation pipeline. It highlights the importance of embedding experiential learning, supporting startup incubation, and translating academic research into market-oriented enterprises, particularly in sectors aligned with national priorities. Strengthening university–industry linkages and equipping graduates with both entrepreneurial competencies and practical experience are identified as critical drivers of job creation, innovation, and talent retention. The paper further emphasises the need to build inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems underpinned by strong networks, accessible finance, and supportive policy frameworks. While the findings offer a blueprint for development actors to strategise and channel targeted support, the identified factors should be subjected to further empirical validation to support generalisation.

Keywords: entrepreneurship centres; local economic sustainability; regional development; higher education institutions

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JEL Classifications: J64, I23, I26

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship development centres within higher learning institutions are increasingly recognised as strategic platforms and mechanisms for promoting innovation, enterprise development, and socio-economic transformation (Ijiola & Nwogwugwu, 2023; Leal, Leal & Silva, 2023; Mohamed et al., 2024). In the global space, especially in developed economies, such as the United Kingdom, Sweden, United States of America, among a myriad of others countries, these centres are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and real-world economic needs (Owen, Vedanthachari & Hussain, 2024; Godley et al., 2025; Gonzalez-Urango & Mu, 2025; Rámháp, Kezai & Skala-Gosk, 2026), for instance, venture creation and incubation, impactful skills development and entrepreneurial mindset, research commercialisation, ecosystem building and networking, SME and community support, sector-specific development, policy influence and regional strategy, and access to finance and investment.

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In Africa, there is discernible evidence of intentional and strategic investment aimed at advancing this development agenda; however, such efforts remain markedly marginal and inadequate in scale and scope to achieve expected transformative and sustainable outcomes. This undermines the essential role of the entrepreneurial development centres in fostering local economic prosperity. Africa continues to face persistent socio-economic challenges, including surging youth unemployment exceeding 40% in some countries (Baah-Boateng, 2015; Arizie & Abonongo, 2026), high poverty levels (Narayan et al., 2024; Umoh, 2024), limited access to capital for small enterprises (Brixiová, Kangoye & Yogo, 2020; Nyika et al., 2024), and weak integration between higher learning institutions and local economies (Iwara & Kilonzo, 2022; Oukouomi Noutchie, 2025). Arguably, the continent's institutions of higher learning possess extensive research capacity, infrastructure, and human capital that can help address these local economic challenges; these assets are often underutilised. Drawing on best global practices, this study aims to outline how entrepreneurship development centres within higher learning institutions can deploy their institutional, intellectual, and network resources to stimulate local economic development. While the focus is on Africa, the methodology has global imperatives; hence, it can be harnessed within and beyond the continent.

Because Africa is characterised by high unemployment, rising poverty levels, inequality, and spatial economic disparities, it is imperative to interrogate mitigative strategies. This study positions entrepreneurship development centres as strategic development mechanisms, capable of aligning academic innovation with societal needs to drive economic change and sustainability in Africa. Such centres represent untapped engines of local and regional economic development, particularly in developing contexts such as South Africa. By integrating their resources, including human capital, knowledge, infrastructure, and networks, into structured, community-oriented interventions, they can play a transformative role in fostering inclusive growth, reducing unemployment, especially graduate and youth unemployment and strengthening local economies. This study aligns with the African Union Agenda 2063 to foster economic freedom, inclusivity, and sustainable development, and with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically goals 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), and 10 (Reduced Inequalities). In addition, HEIs' sovereignty and economic stability are critical to enhancing inclusive development. Therefore, this study's findings and recommendations will present a strategic blueprint for intervention.

The subsequent sections illustrate the methodology, explaining the materials, methods and techniques followed to conduct the narrative review. In addition, the sections explain data collection, analysis and charting modalities. The results, along with a discussion of the findings, were presented before the conclusion and key recommendations.

2. Research Methodology

This scoping narrative follows an exploratory systematic mapping research design, aiming to survey the breadth and scope of the existing literature on the entrepreneurship-university concept. It identifies key strategies and theoretical perspectives in the extant literature, particularly within HEI-based entrepreneurship development centres globally, and highlights leading best practices. Because it is a conceptual study, it will rely solely on the literature, including publications such as articles, book chapters, theses, and verifiable reports on the subject matter. The metrics for enrolment were determined by enormous presence, evidence of recognition, and external validation of crucial entrepreneurial university strategies, stemming from curriculum entrepreneurship, commercialisation, and entrepreneurship-related stakeholder engagements (see Table 1).

The selected universities represent the best global practices because each demonstrates a distinct yet complementary strength in leveraging entrepreneurship centres for economic development and integrating these strengths into broader innovation ecosystems. Institutions like MIT and Stanford exemplify large-scale venture creation and ecosystem leadership, while Oxford and Cambridge show how structured incubation and research

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commercialisation can drive regional innovation clusters. Universities such as Waterloo and Wageningen illustrate the importance of aligning skills development and sector-specific research with industry needs to ensure direct economic relevance. Meanwhile, Aalto University and land-grant institutions in the United States emphasise the value of ecosystem coordination, policy engagement, and inclusive entrepreneurship. Collectively, these cases show that global best practice arises not from a single model, but from the strategic alignment of entrepreneurship, research, education, and partnerships to generate sustained, inclusive, and locally embedded economic impact.

Table 1. Sampled Institutions of Higher Learning

Institution	Area of Strength	Best Practice Approach	Global Benchmark
Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), USA.	Venture creation & research commercialisation.	Integrated entrepreneurship ecosystem (Martin Trust Centre), strong spin-off culture, deep industry ties.	Demonstrates how universities can systematically produce high-impact startups and global companies on a scale.
Stanford University, USA.	Ecosystem building & entrepreneurial culture.	Close ties with Silicon Valley, strong alumni and venture capital networks, interdisciplinary entrepreneurship.	Represents the gold standard for university-led innovation ecosystems and regional economic transformation.
University of Oxford, UK.	Incubation & venture support.	Oxford Foundry supports early-stage ventures through mentoring, incubation, and networks.	Illustrates how structured support systems within universities can rapidly grow startup ecosystems.
University of Cambridge, UK	Research commercialisation.	Cambridge Enterprise enables spin-offs, IP licensing, and strong academia–industry integration.	A leading model of how research commercialisation drives regional clusters (Silicon Fen).
University of Waterloo, Canada.	Skills development & talent pipeline.	Co-operative education model combining study with industry placements.	Shows how aligning education with industry needs produces highly employable and entrepreneurial graduates.
Wageningen University, Netherlands.	Sector-specific innovation (agriculture).	Focused agri-food ecosystem linking research, farmers, and agribusiness.	A global leader in place-based, sector-driven innovation with strong local and global impact.
Aalto University, Finland.	Ecosystem orchestration & policy influence.	Triple Helix collaboration, startup platforms like Slush, strong government–industry links.	Exemplifies how universities can shape national innovation systems and entrepreneurial ecosystems.
Land-Grant Universities, USA.	Community engagement & SME support.	Extension services delivering practical knowledge to farmers and local businesses.	A benchmark for inclusive innovation and direct community-level economic impact
Fraunhofer-linked Universities, Germany.	Industry collaboration & applied research.	Close collaboration between universities and applied research institutes for industrial innovation.	A leading example of how applied research can strengthen manufacturing and regional competitiveness.

Source: Authors' illustration

In total, 72 publications were retrieved for the synthesis, out of which only 39 of the sourced material met the inclusion criteria for analysis. The exclusion of 33 was based on context, geographical scope, unscientific nature, incompleteness, language and relevance to the research focus. Consequently, the qualified publications were consolidated into a file format modelled using Atlas-ti software to facilitate systematic thematic analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

Across these global examples, entrepreneurship development centres are most effective at fostering local economic development when they operate as integrated ecosystem hubs that combine venture support, skills development, research commercialisation, and strategic partnerships. This integrated approach ensures sustained, innovation-led, and inclusive local economic growth, with universities acting as central orchestrators of regional development (see Table 2).

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Table 2. Entrepreneurship Centres as Drivers of Local Economic Development (Global Best Practices)

Theme	Explanation	Approach (Global Examples)	Benefits to Local Economy
Venture Creation & Incubation	Centres actively support the formation and scaling of startups	MIT – structured accelerators and venture mentoring through the Martin Trust Center; Oxford University – Oxford Foundry provides incubation and founder support.	High startup formation rates, job creation, development of innovation clusters
Skills Development & Entrepreneurial Mindset	Builds entrepreneurial skills across disciplines and communities	Stanford University – embeds entrepreneurship across faculties; University of Waterloo – co-op education integrates study and work experience.	Graduates become entrepreneurs, improved employability, strong talent retention
Research Commercialisation	Translates academic research into market-ready innovations	University of Cambridge – Cambridge Enterprise supports spin-offs and IP commercialisation; Wageningen University – commercialises agri-food research.	Growth of high-value industries, increased innovation output, attraction of global investment
Ecosystem Building & Networking	Connects startups to investors, industry, and global networks	Stanford University – deep links with Silicon Valley venture capital networks; Aalto University – builds ecosystems through partnerships and initiatives like Slush.	Access to finance, faster innovation cycles, strong regional entrepreneurial ecosystems
SME & Community Support	Extends entrepreneurship support to local businesses and underserved communities	US Land-Grant Universities – extension services support farmers and SMEs.	Inclusive growth, strengthened SMEs, rural and community development
Sector-Specific Development	Focuses on priority industries aligned with regional strengths	Wageningen University – global leader in agri-food innovation; Fraunhofer-linked universities – support advanced manufacturing and Industry 4.0.	Sector productivity growth, enhanced competitiveness, innovation in key industries
Policy Influence & Regional Strategy	Contributes to shaping innovation and economic development policy	MIT & Harvard – influence Boston's innovation policies; Aalto University – contributes to national innovation strategy.	Better policy alignment, coordinated economic development, stronger innovation systems
Access to Finance & Investment	Facilitates startup funding and investor connections	Stanford University – strong alumni-driven venture capital networks; Cambridge University – angel and VC networks linked to the Silicon Fen cluster.	Increased startup survival, scaling of businesses, attraction of global capital

Source: Authors' illustration based on literature review

The results demonstrate that entrepreneurship development centres are critical enablers, ensuring institutions move beyond traditional teaching roles and function as active engines of venture creation and local industrial development. Evidence from global players such as MIT and the University of Oxford illustrates how structured incubation and acceleration programmes can systematically convert ideas into viable enterprises. MIT's Martin Trust Center, for instance, provides mentoring, funding pathways, and entrepreneurial training that have contributed to a high volume of globally competitive startups (Roberts, Murray & Kim, 2019; Degroof, 2021), while Oxford's Foundry focuses on nurturing early-stage ventures through incubation and founder support (Reilly, Sokol & Toniatti, 2023; Chisty, 2025). These approaches show that when institutions of higher learning deliberately build platforms for venture formation, they stimulate firm creation, job generation, and cluster development, effectively anchoring local innovation ecosystems.

Human capital development through entrepreneurship education is central to this discourse as it equips individuals with the skills to drive economic activity. Stanford and the University of Waterloo present an essential model in this context, demonstrating how embedding entrepreneurship across disciplines and integrating experiential learning into curricula produces graduates who are not only employable but also capable of launching and sustaining businesses (Valentine, 2000; Lynas, 2013). While Stanford's ecosystem encourages interdisciplinary innovation (Engel, 2015; Etzkowitz, 2022), Waterloo's co-operative education model ensures

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students gain real industry experience during their studies (Bramwell & Wolfe, 2008; Truax, Orchard & Love, 2021). This alignment between education and practice enhances talent retention, strengthens the local skills base, and increases the likelihood that graduates will contribute to regional economic growth either by starting businesses or by driving innovation within existing firms.

The findings further highlight the critical role of research commercialisation and ecosystem connectivity in translating university knowledge into economic value. University of Cambridge and Wageningen University exemplify this imperative, substantiating how entrepreneurship development centres, working alongside technology transfer structures, can turn research outputs into high-impact ventures. Cambridge Enterprise supports spin-offs and intellectual property commercialisation, contributing to the success of the "Silicon Fen" cluster (Viitanen, 2016; Rezaei & Kamali, 2022). In parallel, Wageningen has built a globally recognised agri-food innovation ecosystem by linking research directly to industry and market applications (Annosi & Gilissen, 2020; Van Thinh, 2026). These examples demonstrate that the value of university research is maximised when it is embedded within strong networks that include industry partners, investors, and policymakers, enabling faster innovation cycles and greater economic impact.

Further, empirical evidence demonstrates that entrepreneurship development centres are most impactful when they adopt a broad, inclusive, and ecosystem-oriented approach that extends beyond startups to incorporate SMEs, communities, and policy influence. Aalto University in Finland, for instance, plays a central role in national innovation strategy and ecosystem development, linking startups, government, and global investors through platforms like Slush (Raevaara, Laukkanen, Markkula & Ahonen, 2016; Saini, 2020). Similarly, land-grant universities in the United States provide extension services that support small businesses and rural entrepreneurs, ensuring that the benefits of innovation are widely distributed (Etzkowitz, 2001; Mars, 2014; Lyons, Miller & Mann, 2018). These approaches demonstrate that entrepreneurship centres can drive not only high-growth innovation but also broad-based economic development, positioning universities as key orchestrators of resilient, inclusive, and regionally embedded economic systems.

The experience, informed by leading global practices, suggests that establishing an entrepreneurship development centre with a local economic multiplier requires a systemic, integrated approach rather than isolated interventions. A central imperative is the deliberate coupling of venture creation, skills development, and research commercialisation into a cohesive pipeline (Huang-Saad, Fay & Sheridan, 2017; Yang, Kher & Lyons, 2018). This means the centre's innovation hubs must not only teach entrepreneurship but also actively incubate ventures, embed experiential learning, and translate research into viable enterprises, particularly in priority sectors such as agribusiness and sustainable development. The success of institutions like MIT, Stanford, and Wageningen demonstrates that entrepreneurship flourishes where there is a continuous flow from knowledge creation to market application, supported by mentoring, structured accelerators, and intellectual property frameworks. For economies such as South Africa that are striving to position entrepreneurship at the centre of education and development, this implies investing in university-based incubation centres, strengthening industry–academic linkages, and ensuring that graduates leave with both entrepreneurial competencies and market-relevant experience, thereby enhancing job creation, innovation output, and retention of local talent.

Equally critical is the need to build inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems supported by finance, partnerships, and enabling policy frameworks. Evidence from global players also shows that high-impact entrepreneurship does not emerge in isolation but rather through dense networks that connect startups to investors, government, industry, and communities (Ford, O'Neal & Sullivan, 2010; Malecki, 2018). Institutions such as Stanford and Aalto highlight the importance of strong ecosystem orchestration. At the same time, examples from land-grant models demonstrate the value of extending support to SMEs and rural communities to ensure broad-based, inclusive growth. For South Africa and other African economies, this translates into fostering regional innovation clusters aligned with local strengths, for instance, agriculture, manufacturing, digital services, improving access to early-

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stage finance (angel, venture capital, blended finance), and positioning universities as active contributors to policy design and regional development strategies. Ultimately, the multiplier effect will depend on how well entrepreneurship initiatives are embedded within local economic structures, enabling not only startup formation but also value chain development, productivity gains, and sustained community transformation. Figure 1 further illustrates these imperatives.

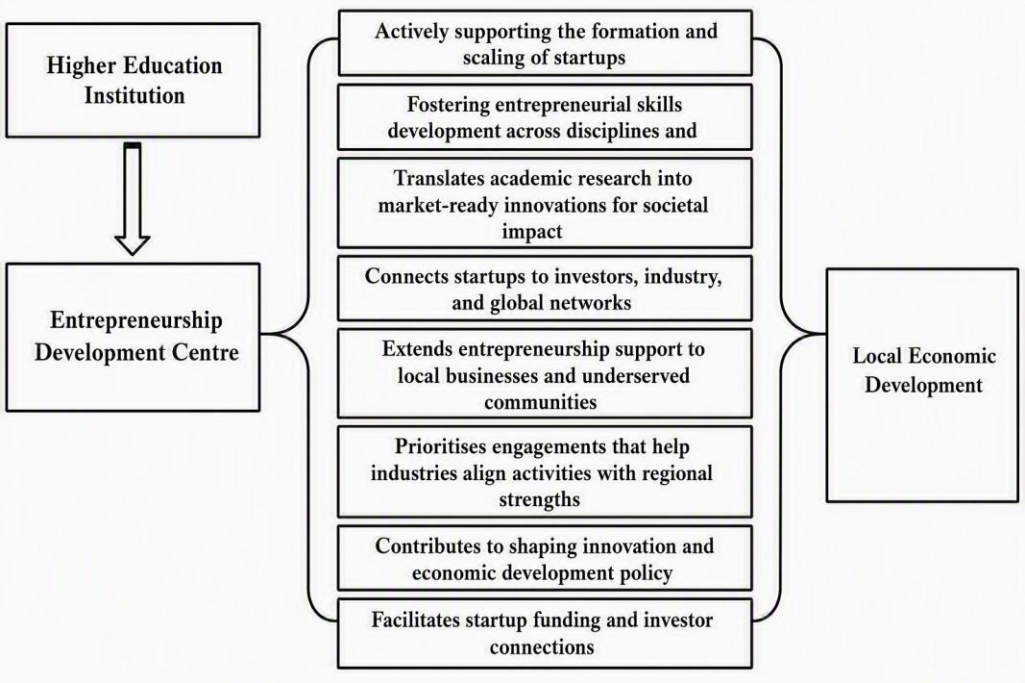


Figure 1. A Blueprint Fostering Local Economies through HEI Entrepreneurship Development Systems

In a nutshell, educational institutions, through their entrepreneurship development systems, can play a significant role in fostering local economic development. This can be achieved through diverse and intentional strategies, including entrepreneurial skills development among students and community members; venture formation and scaling support; connections with startups, investors, industry, and global networks; extending entrepreneurship support to local businesses and underserved communities; and contributing to the shaping of innovation and economic development policy, among other imperatives. Consequently, South African and African HEIs aiming to foster holistic entrepreneurship development trajectories may draw on and adapt these strategies to their institutional contexts to achieve comparable outcomes.

4. Conclusion

Drawing on perspectives from nine higher learning institutions and 39 publications, and focusing specifically on entrepreneurial university imperatives and local economic development, entrepreneurship development centres are critical resources for fostering local economic multipliers. The evidence demonstrates that universities can become highly effective agents of local economic development when their entrepreneurship development centres are strategically positioned as integrative hubs of innovation, talent, and collaboration. The most successful global examples show that impact is maximised when venture creation, skills development, research commercialisation, and ecosystem partnerships are not treated as isolated functions, but as interconnected components of a broader development system. Importantly, these institutions also illustrate that relevance to local context, whether through sector focus, community engagement, or policy alignment, is critical for sustained impact. Moving forward, higher education systems seeking to replicate these successes should adopt a deliberate, long-term, and place-

based approach, investing in both high-growth entrepreneurship and inclusive development initiatives. In this direction, they can play a transformative role in building resilient, innovation-driven economies that generate opportunities not only for firms and graduates, but for society at large.

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EXTERNALISED CONSTRAINTS ENCOUNTERED BY THE PUBLIC PROTECTOR'S OFFICE IN ENFORCING ETHICAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract. This study examines the external challenges hindering ethical accountability within the Public Protector's Office in Polokwane, South Africa. The responsibility of public institutions is to ensure honesty, transparency, and accountability that goes beyond just following the law, which is called ethical accountability. Even though the Public Protector is tasked with investigating maladministration and taking the necessary steps to address these challenges, the Office still faces many external hindrances. The study used qualitative research methodology and conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 officials from the Office of the Public Protector in Polokwane. Purposive sampling was used to select the officials. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. The results show that political interference, poor cooperation from government institutions, limited financial resources, legal limitations, and slow administrative processes are making the Office less effective and less efficient. Respondents also alluded that bypassing internal complaint steps and resistance to implementing remedial actions were major reasons for delays and slow resolution in cases. The study pronounces that ethical accountability is undermined by linked challenges in political, financial, legal, and systemic environments that the Public Protector does not control. These challenges reduce the ability to investigate, slow the process of securing justice, and erode confidence in institutions that are supposed to be watchdogs. The study recommends strengthening institutional independence, improving enforcement of remedial actions, fostering collaboration among governmental institutions, and raising public awareness of the Public Protector's mandate. The findings reveal a need for structural reforms to strengthen ethical accountability and make public sector management better in South Africa.

Keywords: Ethical Accountability; Institutional Theory; Public Protector; Political Interference; Resource Constraints

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1. Introduction

Ethical accountability is the obligation of individuals, leaders, and organisations to uphold high ethical standards in their decisions, actions, and practices, particularly those that influence others. This concept involves being answerable not only for the results but also for the moral and just processes that led to them. It extends beyond mere legal compliance by mandating that entities accept full responsibility for their effects on stakeholders and acknowledge the implications of their choices. This accountability is vital for ensuring integrity, fairness, and transparency in interactions, thus fostering trust among groups that have historically faced discrimination or marginalisation. In the context of the Office of the Public Protector, ethical accountability requires a genuine commitment to doing what is right, even in uncomfortable or complex situations, rather than superficial compliance. True accountability integrates inclusive values into the organisational culture, beyond mere policy documentation, promoting a holistic approach to ethical conduct that positively impacts the community. Such an

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approach is essential in the pursuit of equitable and just practice, reinforcing the moral fabric of organisations and society at large (Onyango, 2021; Goldstein, 2025; Moamba & Mamokhere, 2026). Ethical accountability is one of the basic values and principles governing public administration (RSA, 1996). Mabusela-Munyai (2025) posit that South Africa's constitutional framework includes formal accountability systems, yet public officials and institutions continue to face difficulties being held accountable for their actions or inaction. Such accountability systems include institutions such as the Public Protector (PP), which is charged with investigating any conduct in state affairs, or in the public administration in any sphere of government, reporting on that conduct and, where appropriate, taking the necessary remedial action (Pieters, 2026). The PP is an independent Chapter 9 institution in South Africa, mandated to strengthen constitutional democracy by acting as an intermediary between the state and citizens. However, the current Public Protector Act also regulates the appointment of the PP. It protects the PP against arbitrary removal from Office by requiring the support of a 'super-majority' in Parliament before the incumbent can be removed". The Public Protector Act, 1994, states that the PP shall be competent to investigate, on their own initiative or on receipt of a complaint, any alleged attempt to do anything which they may investigate under section 112 of the Constitution (Public Protector, 1994). This means that the PP must be accessible to all persons and communities. Bazana and Reddy (2021) allude that institutions such as the PP enhance ethical accountability and responsibility, thus safeguarding the public's interest. According to Gcaleka (2025), in her lecture titled "*Transparency, Fairness and Accountability: The Mandate of the Ombudsman - A South African Perspective"*, the PP plays a crucial role in checks and balances against corruption and maladministration. The potential failure of the PP in executing its mandate would risk unchecked abuse of power, impunity for officials, and the marginalisation of vulnerable citizens who rely on this free, impartial recourse to hold state organs accountable. Gcaleka (2025) further argues that "effective accountability requires a systemic analysis of administrative failures and advocacy for structural reforms that prevent recurring problems. Thus, the PP's annual reporting requirements provide crucial opportunities to highlight systemic accountability failures and advocate for legislative and policy reforms, despite the constitutional mandate of the PP to be independent, impartial, and to exercise its powers and perform its functions without fear, favour or prejudice as prescribed in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. Moamba and Mamokhere (2026) add that the PP continues to face operational and contextual challenges that hinder its effectiveness in achieving ethical accountability. Although the challenges (used interchangeably with roadblocks) facing the PP have been widely discussed in governance and public administration discourse, limited research has focused specifically on the external roadblocks experienced by the Polokwane Office and the root causes underlying these roadblocks. Equally, there is insufficient empirical understanding of how these factors affect the institution's ability to achieve ethical accountability at a regional level, especially in remote areas. Thus, this article is underpinned by the objectives below:

- To examine the root causes and external barriers confronting the Public Protector in achieving ethical accountability in the Polokwane Office.
- To propose viable solutions to mitigate the challenges and improve ethical accountability.

2. Problem Statement

Widespread corruption and a lack of ethical accountability are the main causes of the significant problems facing South Africa's public service sector (Nyane, 2021). These problems significantly hinder the effective functioning of services and undermine people's confidence in government institutions. Even though legislative frameworks such as the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA) and the Prevention and Combating of Corrupt Activities Act (PRECCA) have been enacted to promote transparency and ethical behaviour, corruption remains widespread in many public institutions. Recent studies have shown that corruption causes serious problems, leading to lower-quality and slower service delivery in the public sector (Anders, Kanyongolo & Seim, 2020; Modise, 2025). Promoting ethical accountability in the South African public sector is crucial, especially in light of persistent claims of maladministration, corruption, abuse of power, and poor leadership within government institutions. The PP was established as an independent constitutional institution mandated to investigate

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improper conduct in state affairs and to strengthen accountability, transparency and good governance (Public Protector, 1994). Despite this constitutional mandate, the PP continues to face significant challenges that undermine its effectiveness in ensuring ethical accountability in the public sector (Moamba et al., 2026).

The Polokwane Office of the PP is facing several external challenges that make it harder to execute its duties effectively. These challenges involve government officials and state institutions' lack of cooperation during investigations, resistance in sharing crucial information, and unwillingness to implement the remedial actions given by the PP. In many cases, state institutions use judicial review processes to delay compliance with corrective measures, adding more stress to the PP's already limited financial and human resources. Furthermore, many members of the public and some state employees sometimes bypass internal grievance procedures and go straight to the PP, even though the PP is meant to be the final option for resolving issues. This practice leads to administrative overload and reduces the operational efficiency of the PP (Moamba et al., 2026). Modise (2025) agrees that there are external hurdles to public accountability, including political and institutional factors that make it hard for public officials and institutions to be held accountable for their actions and performance. These hurdles include political interference and a lack of strong political will, which make it hard to carry out accountability and anti-corruption efforts; weak oversight systems with limited enforcement powers; bureaucratic inefficiencies such as red tape and complicated government processes; and inadequate financial and human resources that constrain institutional effectiveness. In the different context of South Africa, especially local government, these challenges are further exacerbated by political instability, inadequate stakeholder consultation, and the frequent turnover of accounting officers and oversight committee members, all of which weaken accountability processes and governance outcomes. In addition, Xali (2024) indicate that "poor visibility, accessibility and funding continue to limit the capacity of the Polokwane Office to reach communities and fulfil its constitutional obligations effectively. These challenges are further compounded by political interference, poor management practices within state institutions, and a lack of political will to promote ethical governance and accountability. Such conditions not only weaken the effectiveness of the PP but also erode public trust and confidence in constitutional oversight institutions". Thus, this study aims to investigate the root causes and external roadblocks faced by the Polokwane Office of the Public Protector in upholding ethical accountability. It further intends to propose feasible recommendations to overcome these roadblocks and strengthen ethical accountability.

Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory provides a suitable framework for examining the external roadblocks faced by the Polokwane Office of the Public Protector in promoting ethical accountability. The Theory explains that organisations do not operate in isolation; rather, they are influenced by the broader political, social, legal, and cultural environments in which they function (Alziady & Enayah, 2019; Xali, 2024). These external environments influence how organisations act, make decisions, and perform by setting rules, standards, and expectations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Because of this, how an organisation performs is often influenced by factors that leaders and workers cannot directly control. Institutional Theory also holds that organisations face pressure from external groups, including government departments, regulators, politicians, the media, professional organisations, and the public (Munir, 2019; Moamba & Mamokhere, 2026). These pressures can affect how institutions carry out their duties and may cause problems that make it harder for them to function effectively. In the case of the Polokwane Office of the Public Protector, external barriers such as political interference, inadequate institutional support, limited resources, red tape, and public scrutiny could make it harder for the Office to uphold ethical accountability and carry out its oversight function. The Theory also suggests that organisations usually adjust their strategies and actions to fit what others expect and stay seen as acceptable in their surroundings. Not following these expectations could lead to reputational harm, loss of public trust, reduced institutional credibility, or other negative consequences (Aharonson & Bort, 2015; Mlambo, Zubane & Mlambo, 2020). Therefore, Institutional Theory is relevant to this study because it enables an examination of how external political, institutional, and societal pressures influence the operations of the Office of the Public Protector and contribute to the challenges it faces in achieving ethical accountability in South

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Africa.

3. Literature Review

The Institution of the Public Protector in South Africa

The institution of the Public Protector in South Africa may be new. However, it has long existed under different names in different parts of the world, such as Ombudsman. The Ombudsman system is used throughout the world in countries like Britain, Canada, the USA, Western Europe, India, Malaysia, Mauritius, Singapore, Guyana, and South Africa. Cheng (1968) argued that the introduction of the Ombudsman system in New Zealand and Norway in 1962 significantly advanced the concept of the Ombudsman. The successful application of this institution in New Zealand generated extreme interest in both developed and developing countries. Before Denmark adopted the system, there were concerns that it would affect the accountability of ministries, and administrative secrecy was often cited in many countries as a reason not to adopt the system. The flexibility of the ombudsman system made it easy to adapt to different countries with varying political and administrative environments. Cheng (1968) posits that countries such as Sweden and Finland have Ombudsmen with jurisdiction over the judiciary. In addition, the latter not only has jurisdiction over Cabinet ministers but also has the authority to prosecute them. This shows the system's versatility, as other countries' ombudspersons lack authority and jurisdiction over the judiciary or the power to prosecute ministers. This is also applicable to the South African PP; it does not have authority or jurisdiction over the judiciary or the power to prosecute ministers. Hatchard (1986) posits that over the years, Africa has seen a significant increase in the number of countries establishing ombudsperson offices.

Tanzania became the first African country to establish the Permanent Commission of Enquiry (PCE). This followed the report of the 1965 Presidential Commission on the Establishment of a One-Party State (the Presidential Commission), which recommended establishing a Permanent Commission of Enquiry as a safeguard against the abuse of power. The next African country to establish the Office was Zambia. Zambia's 1973 Constitution made provision for a Commission for Investigations (CFI), which began operating in 1974. During the early stages of the Office, it faced budgetary and staffing problems that led to challenges in providing adequate service to the public outside the main urban areas (Hatchard, 1986). In the following years, other African countries such as Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Uganda and Namibia followed in the footsteps of Tanzania and Zambia by establishing their own ombudsperson offices. Unlike Scandinavian countries, ombudspersons in Africa have no enforcement powers; they can only make recommendations to rectify injustices. Hatchard (1986) describes that in the early years, both the Tanzanian and Zambian ombudspersons sent their reports directly to the President, who may personally determine the action to be taken. In practice, the President was only involved in difficult or important cases. This was evident in 1975, when a gross abuse of authority by a junior minister led the Commission for Investigations in Zambia to recommend his dismissal. The President, without giving reasons, refused to endorse the recommendation and instead decided on a reprimand. However, this has changed over the years and is provided for under section 34(1) of the Public Protector Act No. 15 of 2016 of Zambia, where the public protector reports directly to Parliament, similar to the South African reporting structure.

The South African Public Protector has its origins in the pre-democratic Advocate-General established under the Advocate-General Act of 1979, which was later renamed the Ombudsman in 1983 to promote efficient public administration by investigating maladministration and recommending corrective action (Mbiada, 2017). With the advent of democracy, the institution was transformed into the Public Protector, a Chapter Nine (9) institution under Section 181 of the Constitution, mandated to operate independently, impartially, and free from interference, while remaining accountable to the National Assembly through annual reporting. The Public Protector is endowed with extensive constitutional and statutory powers, including the authority to investigate alleged improper conduct in state affairs or public administration, report findings, and take appropriate remedial action, with broader investigative powers outlined in the Public Protector Act 23 of 1994" (Constitution of the

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Republic of South Africa, 1996). These include investigating maladministration, abuse of power, corruption, improper enrichment, and any conduct causing unjust prejudice, as well as resolving disputes through mediation, conciliation, or negotiation. The Office also has discretion over its investigative methods and may enter premises when necessary to fulfil its mandates (Public Protector Act, 1994).

Root Causes of Roadblocks Faced by the Regional Office of the Public Protector in Enforcing Ethical Accountability in South Africa

The Public Protector of South Africa faces intricate, interconnected challenges that significantly weaken its ability to ensure ethical accountability. These challenges stem from legal constraints, political influence, institutional shortcomings, and wider issues within the governance system (Moamba et al., 2026). "One of the most noticeable and ongoing difficulties is political interference, as the Office, although constitutionally independent, functions in a deeply politicised setting. Powerful political figures frequently employ litigation as a tactic to slow down investigations, extend legal procedures, and consume institutional resources, which in turn reduces the effectiveness of oversight mechanisms" (Gcaleka, 2025). In addition, the PPSA relies on Parliament to implement its remedial measures; however, when Parliament is split along political lines or fails to take decisive action, the enforcement of decisions is slowed or weakened, thereby reducing the institution's effectiveness. This is further illustrated by the Nkandla investigation, in which the mixing of political and administrative responsibilities reduced accountability because those holding political positions were directly involved in administrative decision-making. Institutionally, the PPSA faces major financial and human resource constraints that limit its ability to operate efficiently and conduct thorough investigations. Budget reductions limit the Office's capacity to hire experienced investigators to conduct intricate, large-scale investigations that demand specialised technical expertise and ongoing support. As a result, the institution is frequently compelled to focus on individual complaints rather than conduct broader systemic investigations, even though significant governance issues affect more than 1,000 state institutions. These capacity limitations were evident in major cases such as State Capture and Phala Phala, where a lack of resources led to delays, backlogs, and difficulties in gathering and examining critical evidence (Xali, 2024). In some situations, investigations face additional challenges when evidence is destroyed or withheld, which reduces the chances of holding people accountable and delays case resolution.

Legally and in terms of structure, "the Public Protector has broad investigative and remedial powers as outlined in the Constitution and the Public Protector Act 23 of 1994. However, the Public Protector does not have prosecutorial authority. This indicates that even when there is evidence of criminal behaviour, cases should be forwarded to the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) for legal action. Delays or inefficiencies in the NPA system can therefore reduce the effectiveness of the PPSA's findings and lower public trust in accountability mechanisms" (Munzhedzi, 2016). Furthermore, even though the Constitutional Court has confirmed that the Public Protector's remedial actions are enforceable unless a court decides otherwise, public officials often contest these decisions through judicial review. These are often used to delay implementation and frustrate enforcement. Beyond the limitations imposed by institutions and laws, the PPSA is also affected by broader governance issues in the South African public sector. These issues include a lack of strong ethical leadership, failure to comply with regulations such as the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA), weak procurement processes, and deep-rooted bureaucratic problems that enable poor governance and corruption to persist (Brierley & Hendrickse, 2025). A lack of willingness to be held accountable and to reform within government departments also reduces the effectiveness of investigations, as officials often ignore findings from oversight bodies and fail to take action to fix the problems. Additionally, recurring issues such as outdated administrative systems, poor human resource management, and limited consequence management contribute to an environment where unethical conduct is not effectively deterred (Moamba et al., 2026). Equally, these issues, such as political, institutional, legal, and systemic factors, interact in ways that significantly weaken the PPSA's ability to enforce accountability, protect public resources, and ensure ethical governance. As a result, the effectiveness of the Office is frequently compromised, leading to delayed investigations, weakened enforcement of remedial

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actions, and reduced public trust in state accountability institutions.

Externalised Constraints Hindering PP in Effectively Facilitating Ethical Accountability

The Public Protector faces numerous external roadblocks that hinder its ability to fulfil its constitutional mandate to promote ethical accountability effectively and hold public officials accountable for maladministration, corruption, and abuse of power. One of the most prominent challenges is political interference and politicisation of investigations, particularly in high-profile cases involving senior government officials and political leaders. Research suggests that cases like the State Capture investigation faced significant political debate, opposition from political groups, and public backlash against the institution. This created significant pressure on the institution's operations and cast doubt on the validity of its results (Munir, 2019; Aharonson & Bort, 2015). Externally, the Public Protector also faces pressure from the public and media. There is a lot of media attention and high public expectations, which often put the institution's decisions under close examination. This can influence how the public views the institution's fairness and trustworthiness, as noted by Hosoi (2023).

Furthermore, limited enforcement powers remain a significant challenge, as the Public Protector depends on other state institutions to implement remedial actions and recommendations, which may be overlooked, postponed, or disputed. Another major issue is the lack of resources, such as insufficient funding, not enough personnel, and increasing case volumes, which hinder the institution's ability to effectively and efficiently handle complex investigations. Bureaucratic inefficiencies and poor coordination between government departments lead to delays in investigations by limiting access to information and creating excessive administrative hurdles. Concerns have also been expressed regarding the processes by which the Public Protector is appointed and removed, as these involve political figures and may lead to perceptions of institutional weakness and potential external interference (Soobaran & Van Niekerk, 2017; Moamba et al., 2026). Collectively, these external roadblocks undermine the independence, effectiveness, and credibility of the OPP, making it more difficult for the institution to achieve ethical accountability and strengthen democratic governance in South Africa (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Alziady & Enayah, 2019; Xali, 2024).

4. Research Methodology

This study adopted the qualitative case study design. According to Rashid et al. (2019), a qualitative case study is a research method that explores a phenomenon in a specific context using a variety of data sources and examines it through multiple lenses to reveal its multiple dimensions. The core purpose of this study was to investigate the external challenges faced by the Polokwane Office of the PP in achieving ethical accountability. Using a qualitative design for this study encouraged open discussions between the researcher and participants, rather than strictly following a fixed set of closed-ended questions. Such openness provided the researcher with the opportunity to get the most relevant data on the challenges faced by the employees in their quest to achieve ethical accountability and enabled further probing as required. This methodological design was appropriate for this study because it allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the subject through the natural, unrestrictive, and open-ended scope of the investigation.

Study Area

Limpopo is the fifth-largest province in South Africa. It is divided into five (5) district municipalities and further subdivided into twenty-two (22) local municipalities. The Polokwane Municipality covers an area of 3775 km2, accounting for 3% of the province's total area of +-125 754 km2. The municipality has a predominantly rural character, including substantial areas of land under traditional authority. The city of Polokwane is 23% urbanised and 71% rural (Limpopo Development Plan 2025-2030, 2025). Figure 1 below illustrates the Polokwane area, the study context of this research.

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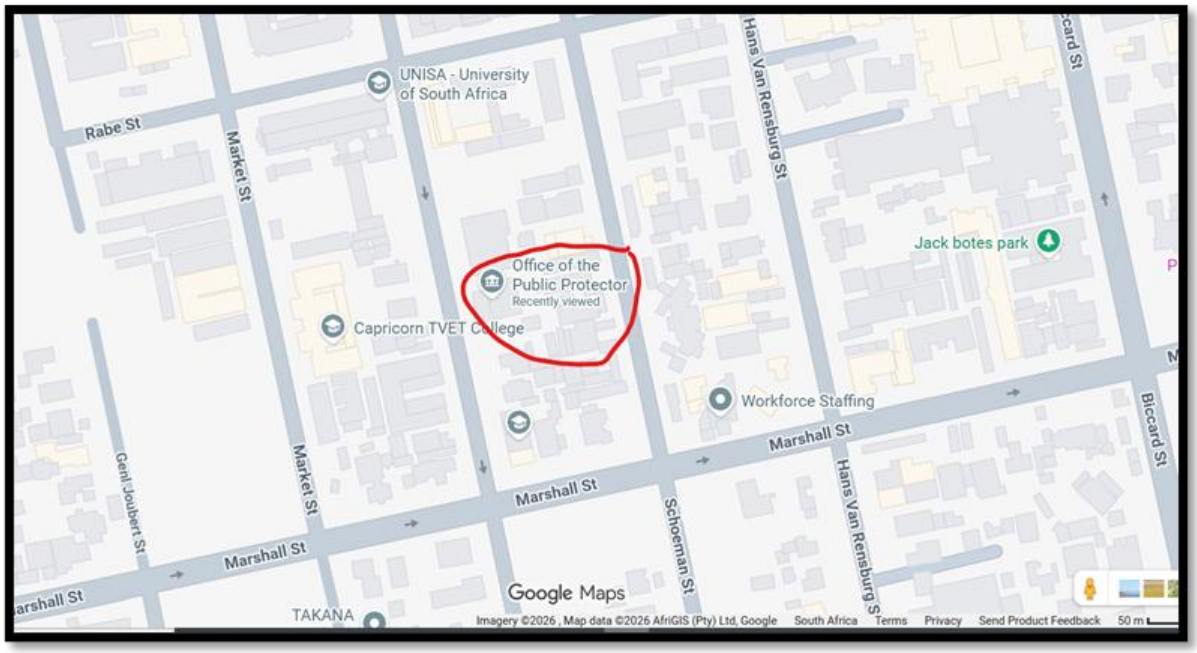


Figure 1. Map of the study area
Source: Google Maps (2026)

Target Population

A Population is defined as the total number of people living in a country, city, district, or region. It can also be defined as the number or proportion of residents in a place who belong to a particular social, cultural, socioeconomic, ethnic, or racial group. The target group or population for this study were employees of the Office of the Public Protector in Polokwane.

Sampling Technique and Size

The study adopted a purposive sampling technique. According to Campbell, Greenwood, Prior, Shearer, Walkem, Young, Bywaters, and Walker (2020), purposive sampling is used to select respondents most likely to provide relevant and useful information. The technique also enables researchers to identify and strategically select cases, thereby ensuring the effective use of limited research resources (Campbell et al., 2020). The study purposively sampled thirteen (13) officials from the Polokwane Office of the PP, which was made up of investigators, management, and analysts. These individuals were purposively selected because they are the primary stakeholders responsible for ensuring that investigations and critical information are collected ethically and accurately, thereby promoting and guaranteeing accountability. Moreover, these officials were purposively selected for their experience and expertise in investigating and promoting ethical accountability within the Polokwane Office, in accordance with the mandates set out in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996 and the Public Protector Act of 1994.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection instruments are essential tools for gathering data to address research questions. In this study, interviews and document reviews were utilised as data collection methods. An interview is a two-way conversation in which the interviewer asks participants questions to collect data and learn about their ideas, beliefs, views, opinions, and behaviours. There are generally three main forms of interviews: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. This study used semi-structured interview questions to collect detailed information and build rapport with the participants. The data were gathered between December 2022 and May 2023. According to George (2023), semi-structured interviews include features of both structured and unstructured types

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of interview questions. They typically include open-ended questions that allow flexibility while maintaining a structured order, making it easier to compare responses across participants. This format permits detailed conversations on important subjects, giving the interviewer the flexibility to move away from the planned script when needed (George, 2023). In addition, the study used a document analysis method, which means carefully examining both printed and digital documents to understand the information and build practical knowledge based on real evidence (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). It used journal articles, conference papers, books, legislation, official reports from the public protector's website, court documents, newspaper articles, and internet sources.

Data Analysis and Ethical Implications

The study used thematic data analysis to examine the narratives provided by the respondents. Caulfield (2019) indicates that a thematic content analysis is a method of analysing qualitative data. This usually applies to various texts, such as interviews and transcripts, where researchers scrutinise the data to identify common themes. The study adhered to ethical considerations. The goal of research ethics is to prevent harm to participants. This is a low-risk study. Before the study, the researcher obtained ethics clearance from the Turfloop Research and Ethics Committee (TREC) at the University of Limpopo and approval from the Polokwane Public Protector's Office. The ethical clearance project number is TREC/609/2022: PG. Written informed consent forms were secured and signed by participants, who were assured of no harm, anonymity, confidentiality and the purpose of the study. To ensure participants' privacy, no official names are mentioned in the study; instead, pseudonyms are utilised. The findings from this analysis are presented below.

5. Results and Discussion

This section focuses on analysing, interpreting, and presenting research findings from a study conducted at the Polokwane Office of the Public Protector in Limpopo Province. The study aimed to identify external challenges (used interchangeably with roadblocks) faced by the PP in achieving ethical accountability and explore the root cause of these challenges. The next section presents the study's findings.

Biographical information of participants

The biographical information of the respondents plays an important role in the study. It gives a clear picture of the type of people participating in the study. This helps determine the reasons for the diversity of responses, which are influenced by biographical factors. The study considers the following biographical information: gender, age group, marital status, education level, employment type and occupation. The biographical information is presented below.

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Participants

Category		Subgroup	Percentage
Gender		Male	85%
		Female	15%
Age Group		26–30	0%
		31–35	0%
		36–50	85%
		51–65	15%
Race Group		African	100%
		Coloured	0%
		White	0%
Education Level		Degree	85%
		Postgraduate Qualification	15%
		Diploma	0%
		Certificate	0%
		No Education	0%
Employment Type		Part-time	0%
		Contract	0%

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		Permanent	100%
Occupational Status		Investigator	61%
		Management	23%
		Human Resources	8%
		Information Officer	8%

Source: Compiled by the Authors (2025)

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the study participants, which are important for contextualising and interpreting the qualitative findings of this study conducted at the Polokwane Office of the Public Protector of South Africa. The sample is predominantly male (85%) and female (15%), while all participants are African Black (100%), reflecting the regional and institutional demographic profile of the Office in Limpopo Province. The age distribution shows that most respondents are in the 36–50 years category (85%), with a smaller proportion aged 51–65 years (15%), indicating that the study largely captures the perspectives of experienced and mid-to-senior-level employees. In terms of education, all participants have completed tertiary-level studies, with (85%) holding degrees and (15%) holding postgraduate qualifications, indicating a group of participants who are well-informed and able to engage with institutional procedures and accountability systems. All the respondents are in permanent positions, which is significant because it suggests they have stable employment conditions. This stability may affect their understanding of institutional knowledge, the organisation's ongoing operations, and their views on how the organisation functions. Occupationally, the sample consists of (61%) investigators, (23%) management, and (8%) each from human resources and information-related roles, making sure that input comes from important areas such as investigation, administration, and support services. The significance of this demographic information lies in enhancing the study's credibility and providing a deeper understanding of the findings, rather than in making broad generalisations or drawing normative conclusions. It offers important background on how participants' positions within their institutions, their level of experience, and their specific roles may influence their views on external challenges related to ethical accountability. For example, the significant role of investigators is especially important because they are directly responsible for handling cases, aligning with the study's emphasis on operational challenges such as workload, available resources, and investigative capabilities. The presence of management and support staff enables a more balanced view of how different parts of an organisation function and interact. It is important to note that this demographic information is used to situate the findings within the specific setting of the Polokwane Office, rather than to assess whether staffing levels are sufficient or to judge the institution's overall performance.

Theme 1: The Root Causes of the Challenges

The external challenges that restrict the Polokwane Office of the PP from achieving ethical accountability have been deliberated in detail. Therefore, it is equally important to identify and understand the root cause of these challenges. The following are some of the causes identified by the interviewed participants.

Sub-theme 1.1: Political Interference

Political interference constitutes a significant externalised constraint on the Public Protector's Office in enforcing ethical accountability in South Africa, as it can undermine the institution's constitutional independence and impartiality when investigating alleged misconduct, maladministration, corruption, and violations of the Executive Ethics Code. Although the Public Protector is constitutionally established as an independent institution under Section 181 of the Constitution, political pressure may manifest through public criticism of its leadership, demands for the disclosure of confidential investigative information, attempts to influence high-profile investigations, and indirect control over financial and institutional resources. Such interference can constrain the Office's operational capacity, delay investigations, weaken its ability to exercise oversight over politically influential officials, and divert institutional attention towards defending its independence. More broadly, perceived political interference may erode public confidence in the Public Protector's impartiality and effectiveness, thereby weakening the broader system of ethical accountability and constitutional oversight in South Africa (Modise, 2025). According to Collins (2023), political interference is the

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unwanted or unnecessary involvement of politicians in institutional matters. The participants alluded that: *"our reports contain the names of those who carry considerable public power rather than the names of ordinary citizens. Thus, some politicians and associates often use their positions and powers to interfere with our work and investigations. Certain individuals would physically come to the Office and refuse to leave until their demands are met. Moreover, political interference can be seen as a ploy to collapse the institution due to ongoing funding cuts*".

This interference can range from deliberate refusal to comply with the public protector's guidelines and rules to lack of cooperation, cover-up of wrongdoing, and intimidation of investigators. One of the participants alluded to instances in which some investigators were threatened with investigating certain individuals and departments.

Sub-theme 1.2: External Funding Cut

The participants indicated that: *"From our perspective, one of the most significant challenges we face in holding public officials and politicians accountable is the issue of funding cuts, which directly undermines our Office's independence and operational capacity. Although we are constitutionally mandated to investigate maladministration, corruption, and abuse of power, the reality is that limited, often reduced budgets constrain what we can effectively achieve in practice. These financial constraints make it difficult for my Office to recruit and retain skilled investigators, legal experts, and forensic specialists who are essential to handling complex, high-profile cases involving corruption and senior political figures. In addition, funding cuts affect our ability to conduct timely and thorough investigations. Many cases require extensive fieldwork, expert analysis, and prolonged engagement with evidence, all of which are resource-intensive. When financial resources are insufficient, our Office is often forced to prioritise certain cases over others, which may delay justice for affected citizens and weaken the overall impact of accountability efforts. This is particularly concerning in systemic investigations involving multiple state institutions, where the scale and complexity demand substantial financial and human resources".*

The results indicate that reduced funding negatively affects institutional independence in a subtle yet significant manner. Although the institution is legally independent, its reliance on financial resources determined through executive and parliamentary procedures introduces vulnerabilities that can indirectly impact the extent and pace of the Office's work. This reliance also limits the capacity to expand investigative efforts when confronting new governance issues. Ultimately, reductions in funding do more than affect administrative efficiency; they also limit the capacity to fulfil the constitutional duty to ensure ethical accountability fully and hold individuals in positions of power responsible for their actions.

Sub-theme 1.3: Legal Limitation

The participants stressed the legal limitation of their role. They indicated that: "From our position, we recognise that although we have extensive investigative and remedial powers granted by the Constitution and the Public Protector Act 23 of 1994, we do not have prosecutorial authority. This means that even when my investigations uncover evidence of criminal conduct, I am not empowered to prosecute those responsible. Instead, I must refer such matters to the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) for further legal action".

The findings show that the role of the public protector is limited to only making recommendations; therefore, there is a need for reform to strengthen the Public Protector Act.

Sub-theme 1.4: Poor management and lack of political will

The PP must work hand in hand with other organs of the state to effectively achieve its mandate. However, poor management by senior personnel and heads of departments in State organs in implementing consequence management for staff non-performance and non-compliance has made it challenging for the PP to achieve its

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mandate. Poor management by those in senior positions indicates a lack of accountability, hence the need for the PP to extend its services to such departments. Furthermore, the lack of political will to partake in good governance training organised by the PP continues to perpetuate the unethical behaviour of those in power.

The participants indicated that: *"We conduct workshops for all state officials to promote stakeholder engagement, capacity-building, and training-related programmes for government stakeholders, municipalities, and the provincial legislature in Lebowakgomo. These structured engagements aim to strengthen accountability, good governance, ethics, cooperation, and understanding of the Public Protector's mandate. However, despite these efforts by our Office, there is still a lack of political will to meet the Office halfway in promoting and achieving ethical accountability."*

To resolve public problems, there should be a collaborative effort between state institutions and other agencies. Political will should be at the centre of the state development agenda, including the promotion of good governance.

Theme 2: External Roadblocks Confronted by the Public Protector in Achieving Ethical Accountability

The PP as an institution is confronted with both internal and external challenges (Soni & Hamid, 2022). Similarly, this applies to the Polokwane Office of the PP, which faces both internal and external challenges. Nevertheless, this study focuses on the external challenges that hinder the Limpopo Office of the PP from achieving ethical accountability. To understand these challenges, the following themes were organised, and the challenges are outlined below by the respondents.

Sub-Theme 2.1: Lack of Cooperation from Officials and State Institutions

To ensure ethical accountability in the public sector, those implicated or suspected of wrongdoing while exercising public power or performing a public function must avail themselves to the relevant bodies, such as the PP, to account for their actions and/or inaction. However, in practice, this is not the case. The respondents alluded to this by emphasising that they still encounter situations in which public officials and parties under investigation refuse or are reluctant to cooperate with the PP during investigations. This reluctance manifests in a refusal to participate in investigations, withholding information, and misdirection. This sentiment is not only applicable to the Polokwane PP Office, but it is a national pandemic, which Modidima (2020) described as "*the institution is confined in a vicious cycle where those who exert considerable public power do not want to be held accountable, or they dictate the terms if they are to be held accountable.*" The participants alluded that: *"This resistance has created a troubling precedent that the Office of the PP may be treated with disregard and a lack of respect. The absence of cooperation from state organs under investigation is further compounded by the deliberate failure to respond within the prescribed timelines".* Furthermore, the participants affirmed that *"this failure and reluctance by organs of state to engage with the PP within the specified timeframes contribute negatively to the Office because the limited resources we have are now spent chasing around institutions and departments that are deliberately failing and refusing to comply with the PP. Other institutions do not reply at all".*

While the PP has constitutional and statutory authority to require cooperation from state organs. In practice, it is challenging because the Office cannot itself arrest, prosecute, or directly compel compliance in the same way a court sheriff or law enforcement body can. According to the Public Protector Act (1994), the effectiveness of the PP largely depends on institutional respect for constitutional oversight, political will, and court backing when recommendations or directives are ignored. The PP's lack of teeth to directly compel cooperation has led some stakeholders and departmental heads to undermine the Office. This was evident when the then PP, Thuli Madonsela, endured extreme abuse and public ridicule for seeking accountability from senior politicians. A classic case is the investigation into President Jacob Zuma's security upgrades at his private residence. The

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President challenged and refused to cooperate with the PP's findings to the point that he initiated a parallel investigation led by then Minister of Police Nathi Nhleko, who, in his report, exonerated President Jacob Zuma from paying back any public funds used for upgrades at his private Nkandla homestead, after the Parliament's ad hoc committee directed the police to evaluate the upgrades. "This report served as a direct political counterweight to Public Protector Thuli Madonsela's 2014 *'Secure in Comfort'* report, which had concluded that the President unduly benefited from non-security luxuries" (Public Protector, 2015).

Sub-theme 2.2: Bypassing of Internal Protocols

The Public Protector Vision (2022) clearly states that the Office of the PP is a complaints body of last resort. This means that everyone and anyone who wants to complain to the Public Protector must first try to solve the problem themselves by speaking to the official(s) involved; Writing to the person in charge of the official(s), such as the head of the department, the chief executive officer, or the municipal manager; or may also consider approaching a member of Parliament or provincial legislature. However, the Public Protector has no jurisdiction over individuals, private companies and court decisions. The participants alluded to the fact that "*Some of the complaints that the PP faces relate to systemic issues that the office is neither capacitated nor mandated to deal with, according to the Public Protector Act."*

This argument is supported by the then PP, Adv Busisiwe Mkhwebane, who highlighted that the Office started sending public outreach officials (not as investigators) to take part in public participation processes where they listen and interact with government departments and entities in trying to elevate concerns of communities before they become complaints (Public Protector Report, 2024). Bypassing internal protocols has practical consequences for the PP, such as investigators spending time screening and redirecting complaints; complex corruption investigations receiving less attention; case backlogs increasing; and turnaround times slowing. The Polokwane Office of the PP is often confronted with heavy foot traffic as individuals bypass internal institutional protocols by going straight to the PP to lay complaints without first trying to resolve the problem themselves by following the institution's internal guidelines and procedures that aggrieved them. The public and other state employees bypassing protocols hinders the Office from functioning at full capacity, as they have to attend to people who use the PP as the first recourse rather than the last. Additionally, the Office has to spend time educating these people that certain matters should be referred to other institutions, such as the Public Service Commission, the Labour Bargaining Council and the human resources department instead of the PP.

Sub-theme 2.3: Challenging and a Lack of Compliance with the Public Protector's Remedial Actions

One of the most evident external challenges facing the Office of the PP in achieving ethical accountability is the challenge to its reports, recommendations, and remedial actions. According to Corruption Watch (2014), once a public protector report is published, it can be challenged through judicial review in the High Court. Investigated or affected parties have the right to challenge the PP's report by way of review or appeal. "In review proceedings, the court's function is limited to considering only the method or procedure adopted to reach the decision. If, for example, the decision was taken procedurally unfairly or there was bias, the court may set aside the decision and refer the matter back to the original decision maker. It will substitute its own decisions only in exceptional circumstances" (Corruption Watch, 2014:3). Conversely, on appeal, the court will consider the material findings to determine whether there was an error of law or fact. The court can replace these conclusions with its own. The court will quell a report, if necessary, but does not wish to interfere with the discretion of the public protector (Corruption Watch, 2014). The participants stated that: *"State institutions and departments are often reluctant to apply the recommendations of the PP; they abuse the right to review the findings of the PP as a delay mechanism in complying with the recommendations of the PP. This places a huge burden on the Polokwane Office, as they must spend their limited financial and human resources on court cases due to such behaviour. Consequently, the lack of cooperation from state institutions in implementing the remedial actions and the constant challenge of the PP's reports affect the reputation of the institution, as it does not know what it is doing due to the high number of reports or cases challenged and put on review."*

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According to Gcaleka (2025), the South African PP is often viewed as a classic ombudsman institution that has the power to investigate complaints, make recommendations, and report findings, but does not necessarily possess binding enforcement powers. Their recommendations are not legally binding and rely on persuasion and public pressure to secure compliance rather than on formal authority to enforce decisions. However, South Africa's Supreme Court of Appeal and the Constitutional Court did not only confirmed the binding effect of the remedial actions of the PP, but more importantly, made it clear that if its findings are not challenged in a court of law, any disregard thereof by any party obliged to take action in pursuance of such remedial action, is unlawful and has legal consequences for the party concerned. This declaration answers the long-debated discourse about the binding effect of the PP's remedial action. Of late, compliance with the PP's recommendations has improved from a level as low as 2% to 39%. Before this, the PP went through a taxing cycle of costly litigation against institutions to comply with its remedial actions (Gcaleka, 2025:17).

Sub-theme 2.4: Inadequate Visibility, Accessibility and Funding

For the PP to achieve its mandate as an institution established to support constitutional democracy, it needs to be visible and accessible to anyone who would like to utilise its services. The Polokwane Office of the PP views this inadequacy in visibility and accessibility as an external challenge stemming from the institution's dented reputation, caused by certain people who paint the Office as sub-optimal, leading to a lack of public trust in the institution. The participants alluded to: "*The Polokwane Office of the Public Protector would like to be visible and accessible to many, just as municipalities are found in every town. This visibility will allow us to educate people more about the services of the Office; however, the lack of sufficient funding has made it difficult for us to achieve this because budget cuts are becoming a norm*".

Insufficient funding, visibility, and accessibility for the Office adversely affect not only the Office but also the community. According to Gcaleka (2025), vulnerable members of the community face greater barriers to accessing justice than others. The capacity of an individual to seek justice through any number of forums will vary, for example, according to their literacy, age, education, awareness, and financial means. Therefore, the Office must be visible and accessible to all South Africans; this can only be done if the Office is adequately funded.

3. Discussion

Based on the findings, the study demonstrates that the effectiveness of the Polokwane Office of the Public Protector in promoting ethical accountability is constrained by structural, political, legal, and institutional challenges that undermine its constitutional mandate. Political interference became a major obstacle, as participants noted that individuals in prominent political positions often seek to influence ongoing investigations, pressure investigators, and weaken institutional independence. These results support the idea that political involvement undermines oversight bodies by restricting fair judgment and reducing trust in systems that ensure accountability (Collins, 2023). Equally important were financial limitations, which the participants identified as hindering the Office's capacity to hire specialised investigators, conduct in-depth investigations, and expand its reach into different communities. This finding is consistent with global evidence indicating that oversight bodies require sufficient financial independence to effectively address maladministration and corruption (Moamba et al., 2026). The findings also showed that the Public Protector's lack of prosecutorial authority and reliance on other external organisations, especially the National Prosecuting Authority, led to gaps in how matters are handled and caused delays in achieving justice, thereby making investigations less effective. Although the Constitutional Court has confirmed that the Public Protector's remedial actions are enforceable unless overturned by a court, participants noted ongoing failure to comply, frequent use of judicial reviews as delays, and a lack of willingness from state bodies to follow through on recommendations, which aligns with findings by Kholeka Gcaleka (2025) on the ongoing difficulties in enforcing the institution's decisions. In addition, the lack of cooperation from state departments, complainants' direct approach to bypassing internal

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complaint processes, and the limited political support for training in governance and ethics collectively led to increased case backlogs, the misallocation of limited resources, and a decline in overall institutional efficiency. These findings support institutional Theory, which suggests that the success of accountability institutions depends not only on official legal requirements but also on a supportive institutional context that includes political commitment, organisational credibility, and collaboration across different levels of government (North, 1990; Scott, 2014). The paper advocates that improving ethical accountability requires changes to laws to strengthen enforcement capabilities, ensure long-term funding, promote better cooperation among government institutions, improve adherence to remedial actions, and provide greater political support for monitoring the constitution and maintaining good governance.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

This study explores the external challenges and root causes hindering the Polokwane Office of the Public Protector from promoting ethical accountability in public administration. It reveals that, despite ethical accountability being a constitutional mandate in South Africa, its implementation is obstructed by various political, institutional, legal, and systemic issues. Key findings indicate that political interference, lack of cooperation from state entities, and resistance to remedial actions undermine the Office's effectiveness and credibility. Furthermore, financial resources that the PP receives from the government, known as transfer payments or direct budget vote appropriations, and human resource constraints impede the Office's capacity to conduct thorough investigations, particularly in cases of corruption involving high-level officials. The Public Protector's lack of prosecutorial powers exacerbates these issues, as referrals to the NPA often lead to delays and diminished deterrence. Systemic problems like weak ethical leadership, poor governance compliance, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and insufficient political will perpetuate maladministration and weaken accountability mechanisms. Ultimately, the study affirms that while the Public Protector is mandated as an oversight body, its ability to ensure ethical accountability is significantly obstructed by external factors beyond its control. To enhance its effectiveness, the study puts forth specific recommendations aimed at addressing these challenges and strengthening the role of the Public Protector:

Strengthening Institutional Independence and Funding: The government should ensure stable and sufficient funding for the Office of the Public Protector to enhance operational independence. A more autonomous budgeting mechanism should be considered to reduce executive influence and enable the institution to recruit skilled investigators, legal experts, and forensic specialists. This will improve the capacity to handle complex and high-profile investigations effectively. Enhancing Enforcement of Remedial Actions: Parliament and relevant oversight structures should strengthen mechanisms for enforcing compliance with the Public Protector's remedial actions. Clear consequences should be established for non-compliance or unjustified implementation delays by state institutions to enhance accountability and reduce the tendency to ignore or delay remedial directives. Improving Cooperation between State Institutions: All government departments and public entities should be legally and administratively compelled to cooperate fully with the Public Protector during investigations. This includes timely submission of information, avoidance of obstruction, and adherence to prescribed response timelines. Intergovernmental coordination frameworks should be strengthened to support accountability processes.

Expanding Public Awareness and Accessibility: The Office should intensify public education and outreach programmes to improve awareness of its mandate and encourage proper utilisation as a “last resort” institution. Increased visibility through regional offices, community engagement, and digital platforms will improve accessibility and reduce unnecessary case backlogs caused by misplaced complaints. Resolving Legal and Structural Limitations: Consideration should be given to policy or legislative reforms that strengthen the

enforcement power of the Public Protector, including improved collaboration with the National Prosecuting Authority to reduce delays in prosecuting criminal matters identified during investigations. Promoting Ethical Leadership: Government departments should institutionalise ethics training, strengthen consequence management systems, and enforce compliance with frameworks such as PFMA. Leadership accountability should be prioritised to reduce maladministration and corruption. Regulate Political Interference: Clear safeguards should be reinforced to protect the Public Protector from political pressure, including stricter regulations on interference and litigation abuse intended to delay investigations. This will help preserve institutional credibility and independence.

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TOURISM OPPORTUNITIES CREATED BY COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN VHEMBE DISTRICT MUNICIPALITY, LIMPOPO PROVINCE, SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract. Like all other forms of pervasive disruption, COVID-19 disrupted the world's economic and social systems, while creating opportunities for some and devastating threats for others**.** The South African economy, through the tourism sector, was highly affected. This paper, therefore, investigated the opportunities created by the COVID-19 pandemic in the tourism sector, with a focus on South Africa's Limpopo Province, specifically the Vhembe District Municipality. The study employed quantitative methods supported by a descriptive research design. For this study, a survey questionnaire was distributed to forty-two (42) tourism business owners in four (4) local towns in the Vhembe District, and convenience sampling was utilised to choose participants for the study. The quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). A deductive analysis method was used to analyse data generated by SPSS from tables and figures**.**

Keywords: Business Forums; COVID-19; Local economic development; Opportunities; Tourism sector

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JEL Classifications: Z32, R11

1. Introduction

The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the COVID-19 pandemic due to its impact on economies worldwide. Several enterprises went into lockdown, demand dropped, and supply was briefly halted as a precaution against infection (Korinth & Ramasigher, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted supply chains, national networks, and organisational operations of all sizes, from micro to multinational (Xu et al., 2020). It has had a substantial effect on the global tourism industry, affecting travel agencies, hotels, cruise lines, and tour operators (Gossling, Scott & Hall, 2020). Given the disastrous impact of COVID-19 on the global tourism economy, some argue that the positives lie in market responses that were forced to change. The situation indeed provided an opportunity for 'resetting' the tourism sector, particularly in developing countries. Especially given the greatly reduced visitation numbers and profound changes in the traveller behaviour (Li et al., 2020). It is undisputed that developed countries generate more tourism dollars for developing countries. This paper, therefore, would like to answer the question: Did COVID-19 create new opportunities for tourism businesses in countries such as South Africa? Especially in the Limpopo Province, in the Vhembe District. In answering the research question, this paper will present the theoretical framework, literature review, results, discussion, and conclusion.

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2. Theoretical Framework: Local Economic Development (LED) Theory and the South African Context

Local Economic Development (LED) theories examine the strategies, actors, and institutions that drive economic growth in a specific local area. The study intends to use LED theory, specifically Growth Pole theory, to forecast and explain the opportunities that arose from the COVID-19 pandemic in the tourism sector. Growth pole theory, first proposed by Perroux in 1952, has been adopted across disciplines as a model of industrialisation for developing countries (Lee, 2015). The approach gained favour in the 1960s and 1970s, and it is not surprising that tourism has been exploited as a key business for district development in several nations (Rogerson, 2015).

LEDs have been used in many places in the world, particularly in the Growth Pole theory. It was most effectively used in the coastal development of Languedoc-Roussillon in France, as well as the proposed tourism resort in Cancun, Mexico. In these cases, the state's strategy included investing in tourism to promote area development and/or identifying economically disadvantaged regions with adequate fundamental tourism resources before extending tourism infrastructure to promote regional uplift (Clarke, 1981). Among the best examples of Growth Pole theory implementation were the Languedoc-Roussillon coastal development in France and the proposed tourism resort in Cancun, Mexico. In these situations, the state's approach included investing in tourism to promote area development and/or identifying economically disadvantaged regions with suitable fundamental tourism resources before using tourism infrastructure expansion to promote regional uplift (Clarke, 1981). In Indonesia, the growth pole has also been widely used. The tourism sector has emerged as one of Indonesia's primary drivers of economic growth (Haryana, 2020). Madagascar also adopted the Growth Pole Theory. The Madagascar Integrated Growth Poles Project aimed to accelerate development in three distinct regions of Madagascar, focusing on the Antananarivo-Antsirabe, Fort Dauphin, and Nosy Be development poles. The poles identified institutional capacity, skills, the business environment, infrastructure, and the availability of finance as important impediments to investment. The projects that drive the poles' growth span multiple sectors, with a special emphasis on tourism-driven growth in Nosy Be, export-driven growth in Antananarivo-Antsirabe, and mining and tourism in Fort Dauphin. Australia is a prominent example of a country that has applied the Growth Pole Theory to drive economic transformation and growth (Rodrigue, 2024). This method was developed to discourage individuals from relocating from regional areas to major cities while encouraging employment, growth, and investment in specific locations. LED theories, notably growth pole theory, have been utilised in North America, with the theory's key merits being its ease of use for analysis and forecasting, as well as its broad acceptance as a foundation for understanding North American economic development. The primary issue is its inability to see economic development as a long-term process (Malizia et al., 2020). LED theories, notably growth pole theory, have been utilised in North America, with the theory's key merits being its ease of use as a tool for analysis and forecasting, as well as its general acceptance as a foundation for understanding North American economic development. The primary issue is its inability to see economic development as a long-term process (Malizia et al., 2020). Africa, particularly South Africa, is an excellent example of a country that has adopted the growth pole method to promote national development, progress, and change. The growth pole aims to concentrate development in specific regions, creating centres where economic activity can thrive and benefit the surrounding areas. In the 1960s, the country implemented a regional development policy based mostly on this method. The government made significant investments in infrastructure and established businesses in select locations, hoping that development in those areas would eventually extend to the country's poorest and most remote regions (National Treasury, 2022). The National Department of Tourism has established a National Tourism Strategy to drive tourism growth, development, and transformation through its strategic pillars, which include: (a) effective marketing, (b) facilitating accessibility and visitor experience, (c) destination management, and (d) widespread benefits.

The Limpopo Development Plan 2020-2525 has highlighted Limpopo's growth poles, such as mining, agriculture, tourism, and manufacturing, with a leaning towards supporting SMEs, microenterprises, and cooperatives. The

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Limpopo Development Plan's objectives are to ensure long-term development, generate decent employment through inclusive development and a sustainable way of life that enables people or communities to meet their immediate needs while preserving and enhancing their well-being over time in a way that is resilient, fair, and environmentally sound, enhance quality of life, boost the efficacy and effectiveness of developmental public services, encourage social protection, and investments, and support vibrant and equitable sustainable rural communities. The Limpopo Tourism Growth Strategy seeks to grow the province's tourism industry by leveraging its abundant natural resources and cultural heritage through the promotion of key sites, infrastructure development, community engagement, and sustainable practices. These activities are part of a larger goal to make Limpopo a popular tourist destination for both local and international visitors (LEDET, 2010). The Vhembe Tourism and Promotion Plan is consistent with the Limpopo Growth Strategy by leveraging the district's competitive edge in culture, heritage, and natural resources for tourism development and promotion. South Africa's policies and goals align with the growth pole approach, which promotes development, expansion, and change in the country.

3. Literature Review

Numerous studies on COVID-19 have been reported in various scholarly journals. Most studies about COVID-19 touched on the adverse economic impact on countries, but a larger volume of literature in that regard was published in health science journals. Yao, Xu, Skare & Wang (2024) acknowledged that "numerous published studies on the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 are predominantly written from the biomedical and social science perspectives". One of the few post-COVID-19 studiespost-COVID-19 studies was conducted by Mandlakosi and Nyasha (2023) to assess the effectiveness of the South African government's response to COVID-19COVID-19. Although government publications around the globe reported such impacts, few, if any, studies have targeted tourism opportunities generated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the opportunities some small firms have taken to their advantage (Mandlazi & Nyasha, 2023). The literature in this study, backed by its empirical findings, explored that gap.

Innovation and Creativity in the Tourism Sector

According to Cheshmehzangi, Su & Zou (2023), a notable development was the widespread use of technologies across various work and service environments (Kitkowska, Alaqra & Wästlund, 2024). Along with its wide-ranging negative impacts, COVID-19 problems might be viewed as an opportunity to promote more sustainability in the pre-pandemic travel business (Schmidt, Sieverding, Wallis, and Matthies, 2021). According to Ost and Saleh (2021), the pandemic might be viewed as an opportunity to spur greater innovation and creativity in the tourism sector, thereby contributing to resilience and sustainability. When international borders were closed, domestic travel increased in places like Thailand and South Africa. The shift from "sustainable" tourism, which focuses on minimising harm, to "regenerative" tourism, which actively improves the destination, was cited as a benefit for "economic diversification," which lessens the dependence of local businesses on unstable international markets. This includes "building back better" by emphasising the welfare of local communities rather than just visitor numbers (Sigala, 2020; Gössling et al., 2021; Dube-Xaba, 2023).

The Emergence of New Destinations, Higher Hygiene and Sanitation Standards

Other positive effects of the pandemic on the tourism industry include the promotion of eco-friendly products, an increase in nature-based tourism activities, the emergence of new destinations, higher hygiene and sanitation standards, and a heightened awareness of biodiversity conservation. The COVID-19 pandemic has spurred additional innovation and positive impact by exposing previously unexplored destinations. For example, COVID-19 has prompted passengers to explore new forms of tourism, such as six-foot tourism, staycations, workcations, and so on. (Goel et al., 2022). The creation of new types of tourism that adhere to safety rules is proof of "innovations to lead the way during difficult times". Thus, continuous innovation in new types of tourism, combined with adequate planning and organisation, can help the business endure crises (Seabra & Bhatt, 2022).

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The COVID-19 issue has resulted in increased innovation and a positive impact due to several unexplored potential avenues. COVID-19, for example, has allowed passengers to explore new forms of tourism, such as six-feet tourism, staycations, workcations, and so on (Goel et al., 2022). The emergence of such new kinds of tourism that adhere to safety rules demonstrates "innovations to lead the way during difficult times". Thus, continuous innovation in new types of tourism, together with adequate planning and organisation, can help the business endure during times of crisis (Seabra & Bhatt, 2022).

Hastened Digital Change

According to Nawaz et al. (2024), the COVID-19 pandemic has hastened digital change. The pandemic emphasised the importance of "contactless" interactions, hastening a decade of technological development. The use of AI, IoT, and Big Data for "crowd management" became critical. This enables Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) to monitor tourist movements in real time, hence minimising congestion. The rise of virtual experiences and "untact" (no-contact) tourism has created new revenue streams and increased accessibility for those unable to travel physically (Demir et al., 2021; Busulwa, 2022). Automation in the hospitality business (check-ins, service robots, and digital menus) has enhanced long-term operational efficiency and safety requirements. The pandemic spurred the adoption of technological solutions such as virtual reality, online tours, augmented reality, artificial intelligence, and other state-of-the-art technologies that adhere to COVID-19 protocols, thereby shifting the tourism industry toward more innovative and sustainable practices. In addition to providing visitors with a more complex experience, the use of such human-machine interaction technologies in the tourism sector can lead to more intelligent and sustainable destination planning (Van et al., 2021).

Reassessment of Local Park Management Approaches

The COVID-19 situation presents an unparalleled opportunity to reassess local park management approaches by leveraging a range of direct and indirect techniques to reduce overpopulation. The travel limits provided temporary relief from the environmental impacts of unsustainable tourism practices, such as overuse of nature-based tourism sites and wildlife disturbance (Sumanapala & Wolf, 2021). Swart, Dube and Ezeuduji (2025) found that “under-tourism” can help restore vulnerable ecosystems. Notable examples in the literature include the cleansing of Venice’s canals and the restoration of animals in protected areas that tourists had previously overrun.

3. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative approach within a descriptive research design. The quantitative approach involved distributing a survey questionnaire to forty-two (42) tourism business owners in four (4) local towns in the Vhembe District, and convenience sampling was utilised to choose study participants. The quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The goal of collecting data from tourism businesses via survey questionnaires was to obtain general perspectives on prospects arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and to solicit data that will either confirm or deny the *hypothesis that, behind the disastrous effects of COVID-19, the positives prevail*.

4. Results and Discussion

The study presents results from a survey questionnaire administered to tourism businesses in Vhembe District Municipality. The results are quantitative, and data generated from the survey are presented in tables and figures. Both deductive and inductive analyses will be done to analyse the results. The questionnaire examined the following regarding tourism opportunities created by COVID-19.

4.1 Types of sectors in the tourism business

The type of company determines enterprise resilience, government assistance, regulatory compliance, and employment policies. It also impacts operational flexibility and the ability to respond to disruptions. Furthermore,

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identifying business types helps assess their contribution to the local economy and guides the focus of governmental initiatives. Table 1 below presents the types of businesses in the tourism Sector. The respondents had an option to tick more than one applicable answer.

Table 1. Types of sectors in the tourism business

Business	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
1. Tour operators	5	7%
2. Tourism agency	6	8%
3. Tour guiding	2	3%
4. Tourism experiences or activities (such as fishing, riding horses, safaris, etc.)	2	3%
5. Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibition (MICE)	8	11%
6. Tourism for business, which includes MICE	3	4%
7. Ecotourism (conservancies, reserves, coastal/beach, etc.)	2	3%
8. Sport tourism	1	1%
9. Cultural tourism	6	8%
10. Accommodation	25	34%
11. Transport	2	3%
12. Restaurant	10	14%
13. Retail of goods targeting tourism	1	1%
14. Other (specify)	0	0%
Total	**73**	**100%**

The results show that the dominating business in the study is accommodation services at 34%, followed by restaurants at 14%, and MICE at 11%. Travel agencies, tour operators, and cultural tourism are relatively significant business sectors, whereas others have a limited impact on the tourism industry. Therefore, this result shows that the largest business in the tourism sector is accommodation, and the lowest is retail goods, which target tourism and sports tourism.

4.2 The opportunity for new venture creation for businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic

It is vital to examine the possibilities for economic ventures arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, as it has had unique consequences and created new market demands. The epidemic has caused massive changes in tourist behaviour, supply chains, and the economy, making conventional tourism business models obsolete.

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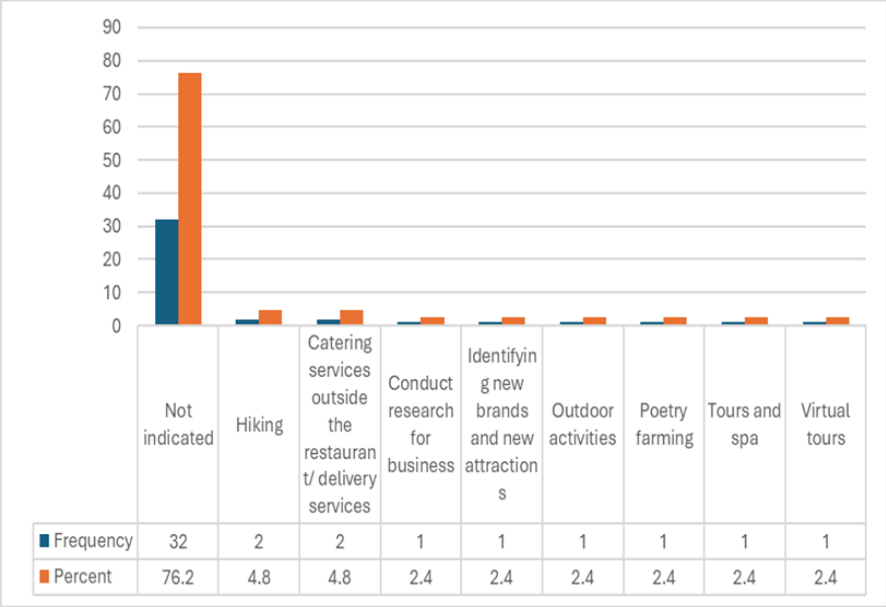


Figure 2. New venture creations

Figure 2 above shows that 4.8% of respondents stated that the new enterprises they ventured into were in hiking; similarly, respondents who ventured into catering services, including food delivery, accounted for 4.8%. A total of 2.4% of the respondents ventured into new businesses in outdoor activities, 2.4% into poetry farming, 2.4% into spas, and 2.4% into virtual tours. Most respondents did not start new businesses. Respondents stated that the COVID-19 pandemic prompted them to consider starting new businesses in hiking, catering services outside of restaurants and delivery services, conducting business research, identifying new brands and tourist attractions, outdoor activities, poultry farming, tour operating, spas, and virtual tours. This pattern suggests that, for some firms, the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for entrepreneurship and innovation, particularly in industries that could implement social distancing, adapt to changing consumer needs, or leverage digital technology.

4. 3 Product diversity

The evaluation of product diversification chances during outbreak events considers both short-term and long-term recovery. It is a strategic authority tasked with building a more resilient, imaginative, and successful organisation for the future. Firms that understand and adapt to major changes in tourist behaviour and market dynamics can turn a crisis into a long-term competitive advantage. Figure 3 below illustrates the products of the tourism sector.

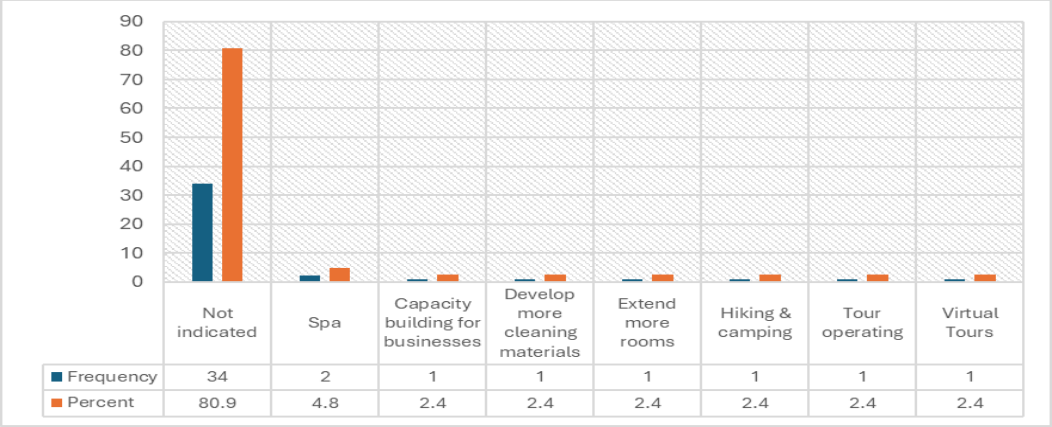


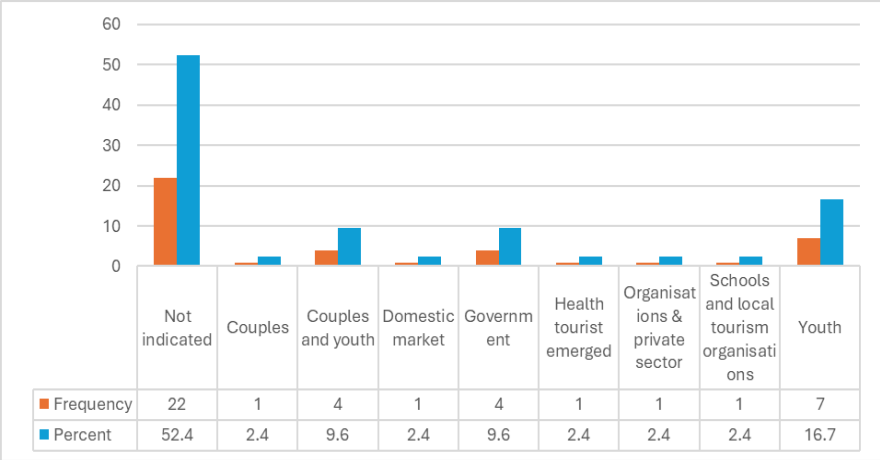
Figure 3. Product diversity

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Figure 3 above illustrates that 80.9% of the respondents did not diversify their businesses. The participants indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic presented an opportunity to diversify their product offerings in spa services, which accounted for 4.8%, capacity building for businesses, which accounted for 2.4%, the development of more cleaning material, which accounted for 2.4%, the extension of rooms, which accounted for 2.4%, hiking and camping, which accounted for 2.4%, tour operation, which accounted for 2.4%, and virtual tours, which accounted for 2.4%. Tourism products include diverse offerings such as spas, capacity building for businesses, the development of additional cleaning materials, expanded room options, hiking and camping, touring, and virtual tours. This trend indicates a clear shift toward comprehensive, personalised, and resilient tourism experiences, driven by the need to address evolving consumer preferences, adapt to new operational challenges, and leverage technological innovations.

4. 4. Discovering a New Target Market

Identifying a new target market is critical to determining how the COVID-19 outbreak has affected travel-related enterprises. Evaluating potential in new target markets is a proactive, data-driven approach that enables the tourism sector to adapt, develop, and prosper in a radically changed world. Figure 4 below illustrates an opportunity for a new target market for the tourism business in Vhembe District Municipality.



	Not indicated	Couples	Couples and youth	Domestic market	Governm ent	Health tourist emerged	Organisat ions & private sector	Schools and local tourism organisati ons	Youth
Frequency	22	1	4	1	4	1	1	1	7
Percent	52.4	2.4	9.6	2.4	9.6	2.4	2.4	2.4	16.7

Figure 4. Discovery of a new target market

Figure 4 above shows that the new target markets identified were youth (16.7%), couples and youth (9.6%), the government (9.6%), couples only (2.4%), the domestic market (2.4%), health tourists (2.4%), the organisationorganisation and private sector (2.4%), and school and local tourism organisationsorganisations (2.4%). The figure depicts how the COVID-19 outbreak created opportunities to identify new target audiences, including couples, youngsters, the home market, the government, health tourists, organisations, the private sector, schools, and local tourism organisations. This shows that the tourism sector is actively working to diversify its client base beyond traditional markets, reduce reliance on a single segment, such as international leisure travel, and strengthen resilience to future disruptions. The inclusion of the home market represents a move toward local and regional tourism, which was widely implemented during the pandemic in response to international travel restrictions and is now recognised as critical to a speedy recovery and long-term growth. The emphasis on government and institutional clientele reflects a desire to revitalise MICE and business travel, as well as encourage corporate, institutional, or health-related tourism ("health tourists").

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4. 5 Discovering New Marketing Tools

Discovering new marketing tools is a significant variable in the study, as they can help the tourism industry adapt to new tourist behaviour, gain a competitive edge, and improve marketing effectiveness and efficiency. Figure 5 below illustrates new marketing tools that were discovered during the COVID-19 pandemic.

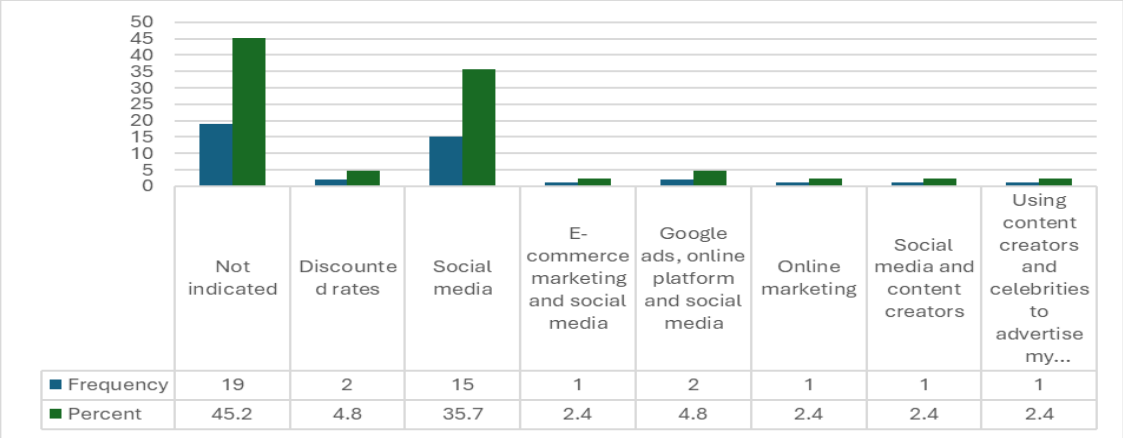


Figure 5. Discovery of new marketing tools

Figure 5 above shows that 35.7% of the new marketing tools identified were social, 4.8% were discounted, 4.8% were Google ads, 2.4% were online platforms and social media, e-commerce marketing and social 2.4% were online marketing, 2.4% were social media and context creators and celebrities to advertise, and 2.4% were content creators and celebrities to advertise. The majority of respondents reported discovering social media as a new marketing tool. Others reported discovering new marketing tactics such as discounted rates, e-commerce marketing, Google AdWords, online marketing, and the usage of content creators and celebrities. This trend implies a significant, rapidly accelerating shift in business marketing strategies toward digital platforms that are measurable and focused on relationship building.

4. 6 Discover new innovative approaches to running the business

Researchers must examine new economic opportunities arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, as the pandemic has caused long-term changes in visitor behaviour, market shifts, and operational needs. Businesses that evaluate these opportunities can adjust and establish long-term resilience. Table 2 below illustrates innovative approaches to running the business identified during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 2. New innovative approaches to running the business

Discovering new ways to operate the business	Frequency	Percent
Not indicated	26	61.9
Change operating times and rotate employees	1	2.4
contactless meeting/online meetings	1	2.4
Develop strategies for disruption due to pandemics	1	2.4
Diversify	1	2.4
Introducing part-time workers	1	2.4
Online marketing	1	2.4
Online operation	1	2.4
operate from home	1	2.4
Safety and health conscious, sanitisers	1	2.4
Social distancing	3	7.2

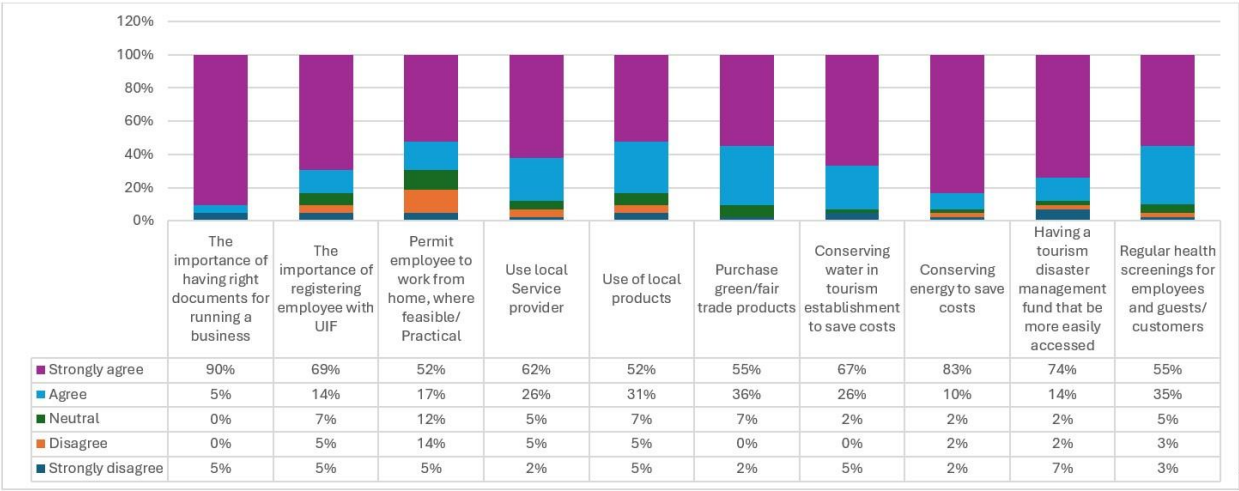
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Virtual tours and using a content creator to advertise my business	1	2.4
Working from home and virtual meetings	3	7.2
Total	**42**	**100**

Table 2 above, shows that the new innovative approaches to run the business that was discovered after the COVID-19 pandemic was to change operating times and rotate employees (2.4%), contactless meetings/online meetings (2.4.), diversify (2.4%), introduce part-time workers (2.4%), online marketing (2.4%), online operations (2.4%), operate from home (2.4%), develop strategies for disruption due to pandemics (2.4%), safety and health consciousness, sanitiserssanitisers (2.4%), social distancing (7.2%), virtual tours and the use of content creators to advertise my business (2.4%), and online/ virtual meetings and working from home (7.2%). Social media, virtual/online meetings, and working from home are emerging as new ways to operate businesses. This trend indicates that businesses have shown considerable flexibility and adaptability during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.7. The degree to which tourism businesses support or oppose the COVID-19 pandemic's statement opportunities

Assessing the opportunities that emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic for the tourism sector is important because it provides essential insights to develop a more flexible and resilient tourism economy in the event of future catastrophes. The epidemic was more than a calamity; it was a "watershed" moment that compelled the industry to innovate and adapt. By analysing these changes, academics might develop new business models and tactics that can help the tourism sector not only survive but also prosper in a post-pandemic world. Figure 6 below illustrates the extent to which tourism businesses support or oppose the statement below regarding the COVID-19 pandemic's opportunities.



	The importance of having right documents for running a business	The importance of registering employee with UIF	Permit employee to work from home, where feasible/ Practical	Use local Service provider	Use of local products	Purchase green/fair trade products	Conserving water in tourism establishment to save costs	Conserving energy to save costs	Having a tourism disaster management fund that be more easily accessed	Regular health screenings for employees and guests/ customers
Strongly agree	90%	69%	52%	62%	52%	55%	67%	83%	74%	55%
Agree	5%	14%	17%	26%	31%	36%	26%	10%	14%	35%
Neutral	0%	7%	12%	5%	7%	7%	2%	2%	2%	5%
Disagree	0%	5%	14%	5%	5%	0%	0%	2%	2%	3%
Strongly disagree	5%	5%	5%	2%	5%	2%	5%	2%	7%	3%

Figure 6. The degree to which travel agencies support or oppose the COVID-19 pandemic's statement opportunities

Figure 6 above presents tourism businesses' agreement and disagreement regarding opportunities related to the COVID-19 pandemic. While they presented immense challenges and hardships globally, they also spurred great innovation and generated new opportunities across a variety of tourism sectors. A much greater percentage strongly agreed or agreed with the variables indicated in Figure 6. Most businesses indicated that it is important to have the correct documents to conduct business. The importance of having the right documents for conducting a business accounted for 90% of the variables. Conserving energy to save costs (for instance, switching to solar power, using energy-efficient appliances and lights, etc.) accounted for 83%, with respondents strongly agreeing, which shows that many businesses surveyed see conserving energy to save costs as important. The other variables that respondents strongly agree with are having funds for tourist disaster management that are easier to access, at 74%, and the importance of registering employees with UIF, at 69%. The businesses also agreed on using local

service providers and conserving water in tourist establishments to save costs (for instance, reusing towels and greywater), as these accounted for between 60% and 67%. The purchase of green/fair trade products and the use of local products allow employees to work from home, if practical, and frequent health tests for employees and customers are reported by 52% to 55% of businesses that value their importance. A very small percentage strongly disagreed with or disagreed with the variables indicated in Figure 6. The highest percentage strongly disagreed that the variable was creating a more accessible tourism disaster management fund, accounting for 7%. The overall results indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic offered opportunities for business owners in tourism, highlighting the importance of all the variables shown in Figure 6 and the need to implement them in their businesses.

6. Conclusion

Tourism destinations in Vhembe District Municipality took advantage of the pandemic to implement good practices aimed at tourism recovery. Despite these negative consequences, it has been argued that the COVID-19 pandemic provided opportunities for transformation and that rural tourism areas could thrive. Because of their area and capacity to enforce health and safety rules, these areas have had the potential to drive the revival of domestic and international tourism. The COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity for rural tourism sites to modify their offerings and plan for long-term growth. The study contributes to both academic knowledge and the practice of tourism economics and is useful to both researchers and practitioners of tourism studies. The study area was confined to one district municipality in the Limpopo Province of South Africa, which is likely to be a biased sample for generalising to the 9 provinces of South Africa, with different tourism potential and challenges. This study is, however, insightful and provides significant data that could be useful for policymaking in South Africa's tourism sector, especially in regions with similar ecotourism characteristics.

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