





## Social media for public participation in Mossel Bay municipality: Opportunities and challenges

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the role of social media in enhancing public participation within the Mossel Bay Municipality, focusing on both opportunities and challenges. While social media platforms have become important channels for communication, participation, and accountability between citizens and local government, their integration into governance processes in South Africa remains underexplored. Existing literature primarily focuses on national-level initiatives or metropolitan municipalities, leaving a gap in understanding the dynamics of social media use in smaller municipal contexts. This research addresses this gap by investigating how social media platforms can strengthen citizen engagement, participation, and accountability in a local municipality. Employing a qualitative approach, the study involved semi-structured interviews with 20 participants, including municipal officials, councillors, and ward committee members. The findings reveal that social media offers significant opportunities to engage diverse audiences, particularly youth, working adults, and urban populations often excluded from traditional participation channels. However, challenges such as digital inequality, limited interaction, and insufficient strategic planning constrain its effectiveness. The study underscores the need for Mossel Bay Municipality to move beyond one-way communication and develop a comprehensive social media strategy with clear goals, interactive mechanisms, and inclusive engagement practices. By focusing on a local municipal context, this research advances e-governance scholarship in South Africa, highlighting practical strategies for leveraging social media to enhance participatory governance and promote social inclusion.*

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## Introduction

The digital revolution has fundamentally transformed the relationship between citizens and government, creating unprecedented opportunities for civic engagement and participatory democracy. In South Africa, where local government serves as the primary interface between citizens and the state, social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools for enhancing public participation and fostering more inclusive governance processes. With over 26 million social media users in the country and citizens spending an average of 3 hours and 36 minutes daily on social platforms, the potential for leveraging these digital spaces to strengthen democratic participation has never been greater (Meltwater, 2024).

The post-apartheid South African Constitution mandates public participation in local government decision-making, particularly through mechanisms such as Integrated Development Planning (IDP) (Matlala, 2024). Despite these provisions, traditional forms of citizen engagement have frequently fallen short of achieving meaningful participation, with many communities remaining excluded from critical governance processes (Mawela et al., 2017; Ntika & Chigona, 2024, July). These challenges are compounded in a context marked by persistent socio-economic inequalities, diverse linguistic communities, and varying levels of digital literacy. In this regard, social media platforms have emerged as a promising avenue to bridge participation gaps by offering accessible, interactive, and real-time communication channels between citizens and local government officials (Okocha & Akpe, 2024).

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Empirical studies demonstrate that social media can serve multiple functions in enhancing citizen participation, including information dissemination, promoting transparency, facilitating dialogue, and enabling collaborative decision-making (Mawela et al., 2017; Matlala, 2024). However, the adoption of digital platforms by South African municipalities has yielded mixed results, influenced by factors such as infrastructure limitations, institutional capacity, and political will (Ntika & Chigona, 2024, July). While some municipalities have successfully leveraged social media to improve service delivery, communication and crisis management, others continue to struggle with foundational digital governance infrastructure.

The opportunities presented by social media for public participation are substantial. These platforms can democratize access to information, enable real-time feedback, facilitate community mobilization around local issues, and provide alternative channels for citizen complaints and service requests (Okocha & Akpe, 2024). Moreover, the interactive nature of social media allows for more dynamic and responsive governance, enabling citizens to engage directly with municipal officials and participate in policy discussions beyond conventional council meetings and public hearings.

Nonetheless, significant challenges persist. Digital divides remain entrenched, particularly in rural and low-income areas, where limited internet access and inadequate digital literacy hinder meaningful online participation (Ntika & Chigona, 2024, July). Existing literature primarily focuses on national-level initiatives or metropolitan municipalities, leaving a gap in understanding the dynamics of social media use in smaller municipal contexts. This research addresses this gap by investigating how social media platforms can strengthen citizen engagement, participation, and accountability in a local municipality. Therefore, this paper explores the role of social media as a tool for enhancing public participation in the Mossel Bay municipality, with a focus on the opportunities it presents and the challenges it entails. By analysing current practices, identifying best practices, and exploring innovative approaches to digital citizen engagement, this research aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on e-governance and participatory democracy in the Global South context.

## **Literature Review**

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Background**

#### **Contextualisation of Social Media**

According to Aichner et al (2021), the term “social media” (SM) was first used in 1994 on a Tokyo online media environment called Matisse. It was in these early days of the commercial Internet that the first SM platforms were developed and launched. As the number of social media platforms and active users has grown over time, social media has emerged as one of the most prominent Internet applications. By enabling individuals, groups, and organizations to communicate and share knowledge seamlessly, social media fosters relational networks that transcend traditional geographical and institutional boundaries (Zumofen et al., 2025).

Social media technologies have fundamentally shifted how information and power circulate within societies. Individuals increasingly rely on peer-generated information rather than institutional sources, marking a transition from organizational control to community-driven influence (Bene & Dobos, 2025). In professional and organizational settings, this transformation has encouraged innovation through bottom-up collaboration, as workers are empowered to exchange ideas and co-create knowledge outside hierarchical constraints (Du & Ibrahim, 2025). Consequently, communication, information, and innovation now converge in online spaces, breaking down conventional barriers and expanding opportunities for engagement and co-production.

Recent scholarship underscores that social media is no longer confined to personal or entertainment use but has become an essential tool in both corporate and public governance contexts (Nasir et al., 2025; Landi, Costantini, Fasan, & Bonazzi, 2022). Organizations and public institutions alike leverage these platforms to enhance transparency, stakeholder engagement, knowledge management, and collaborative problem-solving (Okocha & Akpe, 2024). Empirical evidence suggests that social media use has become standard practice across sectors, with widespread adoption transforming both internal communication systems and external stakeholder relations (Landi et al., 2022).

Bene and Dobos (2025) note that growing expectations from residents and businesses are compelling government entities to embrace social media as a means of improving communication and service delivery. This perceived pressure has contributed to the widespread adoption of social media by governments globally; by 2016, 152 countries had integrated social media platforms into their national portals (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2016). While some government organizations acknowledge using social media primarily to enhance their public image, others emphasize its potential to foster collaboration, enable real-time information sharing, and support the creation of online communities (Lin & Kant, 2021).

However, despite their benefits, social media platforms raise critical concerns regarding information overload, misinformation, and the erosion of interpersonal relationships in digital spaces (Bene & Dobos, 2025; Zumofen et al., 2025). The growing ubiquity of platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, X (formerly known as Twitter), YouTube, Instagram, and LinkedIn reports millions of users. Globally, Facebook reports an estimated 1.45 billion users daily, X reports 336 million users monthly, YouTube reports over a billion users, and LinkedIn reports over 562 million users. Grawe (2022) reveals that the use of social media applications has significantly increased in South African municipalities. However, platforms such as X, Instagram, and YouTube remain the least utilized for internal communication. This indicates a pressing need for municipalities to adapt more effectively to digital transformation.

## **The Role of Social Media in Strengthening Effective Public Participation**

In the context of enhancing public participation, social media is observed as an online platform that seeks to support social interaction between the government and the citizens for the benefit of decision-making and service delivery (Darmastuti, Inayah, Simbolon, and Nizar 2021). This can be informed by the observation that, arguably, we are living in the digital age of the fourth and fifth industrial revolutions, and most government institutions are directing all resources into the digital platforms (Davies, 2020: Online). Authors such as Darmastuti, Inayah, Simbolon, and Nizar (2021) discuss that social media may have the potential to improve government performance through digital diplomacy. Darmastuti, Inayah, Simbolon, and Nizar (2021) describe digital diplomacy being applied through the usage of “Facebook, X, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, Websites, and Applications made by the Government. In addition, Osawa (2024) asserts that platforms assist with facilitating direct access to information and allowing two-way engagement between the government and citizens, and help to increase the openness and accountability of public institutions. Furthermore, social media can also be defined as a virtual space where people can easily interact, create, and share content (Dwikardana, Valerisha, & Yazid, 2018).

According to Lin and Kant (2021), social media has become more widely used by the public and government for collaborative and participatory planning practices. Enwereji (2020) asserts that effective social media public engagement thrives in a country where the participatory approach is used, necessitating the best and most efficient policies. Advancing a similar perspective, social media gives people a forum to voice their thoughts and communicate with decision-makers directly, fostering a more democratic and inclusive kind of involvement (Noviani, Amin, and Jbour 2024:24). This suggests that through social media, citizens can participate in public discussions and influence the decision-making processes of local governments. However, Sinha (2024) argued that social media has the potential to disseminate misinformation, which may disrupt the decision-making processes of the government. For example, Keith (2023) argued that the dissemination of information, especially that is intended to mislead, citizen social media activities to encourage protests, raise awareness, and mobilize support on service delivery issues through social media networks.

Syarifuddin et al. (2024) think that it is simpler for people to support and follow policies when they feel like they have a say in how they are made. To influence government decision-making, social media activists typically use hashtags to increase awareness and steer policy conversations to gauge their effects (Keith, 2023:24). Chandralekha (2023) points out that the introduction of social media in the context of public participation is about the disruption of the old and traditional ways of interacting with the public. Therefore, this suggests that social media platforms nowadays play a crucial role in enhancing public participation in the local government space. As such, there seems to be widespread consensus amongst public administration scholars and practitioners that the role of social media in public participation has created a “forum for dialogue and has generated informed citizenry (Chandralekha 2023:1).” Even though social media has made great efforts to increase public participation in local government, it is evident that they are hesitant to interact with and use these platforms for their public policy (Falco and Kleinhans, 2018). On one hand, “Almost everyone is on X or Instagram or Facebook. So why would any entity use some other means of disseminating information, of connecting its people, maybe even gathering information” (Bietsch 2022).

Suciu (2019) believes access to current events and impending community happenings is just one of the numerous advantages that residents can experience when their local government uses social media. The author further argues that when constituents are informed of breaking events like these, emergency responders can work more uninterrupted, traffic issues can be minimised, and emergency management can become more fluid overall. However, Hsiung (2020) cautions that social media in the current context can only accommodate certain age groups and certain groups. This is precisely that public participation methods and mechanisms depend on the audience that is being served by the municipality. For example, it won't be effective to apply social media strategies in a rural community simply because of a lack of interest and accessibility to social media platforms.

Furthermore, Fashoro (2018) identifies that the major risk with using social media as a tool for community involvement is that the platforms are accessible to everyone and there are “minimal security measures in place”. Similarly, when government institutions approve social media as a tool to enhance public participation, it is critical to ensure that sensitive information is not revealed (Grawe, 2022). Falco and Kleinhans (2018) point out that government institutions lack the capacity of officials who are fully responsible for ensuring that the social media platforms are effectively functioning. Through the various perspectives given by public participation scholars, it can be observed that the intention of using social media as a form of enhancing public participation in local government is to provide members of the public with a sense of inclusion.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In examining the potential benefits and challenges of incorporating social media platforms to strengthen public participation in local government, the Digital Civic Engagement Theory provides a robust theoretical framework. This theory, which focuses on understanding how citizens participate in democratic processes through digital technologies and platforms, is highly relevant to the intricacies of local government digitalisation. More importantly, the theoretical framework encompasses how digital tools, social media platforms, online forums, and various technological innovations facilitate, transform, or potentially hinder traditional forms of civic participation (Loader & Mercea, 2022). The theory emerges from the intersection of political science, communication studies, and digital sociology, attempting to explain how the digital revolution has fundamentally altered the landscape of civic participation and democratic engagement.

At its core, digital civic engagement theory posits that technology serves as both a mediator and a catalyst for civic participation, creating new pathways for citizen involvement while simultaneously transforming existing democratic practices. The theory recognises that digital platforms enable citizens to engage with political processes, community issues, and social causes in ways that were previously impossible or highly constrained by geographical, temporal, or resource limitations (Boulianne, 2020). This theoretical framework acknowledges that digital technologies have democratized access to information, lowered barriers to political participation, and created new forms of collective action that transcend traditional organizational structures.

Similarly, the theoretical foundation builds upon several key premises, including the notion that digital technologies expand the repertoire of civic actions available to citizens, from online petitioning and digital activism to virtual town halls and e-governance initiatives. The theory also incorporates concepts from network society theory, suggesting that digital civic engagement operates within interconnected networks that facilitate rapid information dissemination, collaborative problem-solving, and collective mobilization (Castells, 2019). Furthermore, the theory recognizes the importance of digital literacy and access as fundamental prerequisites for meaningful participation in digital civic spaces.

In addition, digital civic engagement also offers enhanced opportunities for direct democracy and participatory governance through tools such as online deliberation platforms, digital town halls, and e-participation initiatives in government decision-making processes. These platforms can facilitate more nuanced and ongoing dialogue between citizens and elected officials, moving beyond the periodic engagement characteristic of traditional electoral cycles (Fung, 2022). Citizens can provide input on policy proposals, participate in budget allocation decisions, and engage in collaborative problem-solving processes that inform government action.

Notably, the theory also recognizes significant advantages in terms of information access and transparency. Digital platforms can provide citizens with unprecedented access to government data, policy documents, and decision-making processes, potentially enhancing government accountability and informed civic participation (Janssen et al., 2020). Open data initiatives, government transparency portals, and digital freedom of information processes can empower citizens with the information necessary to engage meaningfully in civic life and hold public officials accountable for their actions.

However, digital civic engagement theory acknowledges substantial challenges and limitations that complicate its democratic potential. One of the most significant concerns is the digital divide, which creates differential access to digital civic engagement opportunities based on factors such as socioeconomic status, age, education level, and geographic location (Robinson et al., 2023). This divide can exacerbate existing inequalities in civic participation, potentially amplifying the voices of already privileged groups while further marginalizing those who lack digital access or literacy. The theory recognises that without deliberate efforts to address these disparities, digital civic engagement might reproduce or even intensify traditional patterns of civic inequality.

Moreover, the theory also grapples with questions of representation and voice within digital civic spaces. While digital platforms can amplify marginalized voices, they can also be dominated by vocal minorities or manipulated by organized interests that do not represent broader public opinion (Howard & Kreiss, 2018). The lack of gatekeeping mechanisms that characterize traditional media and political institutions can result in digital civic spaces that are susceptible to manipulation, astroturfing, and coordinated inauthentic behaviour that undermines genuine civic engagement.

Furthermore, digital civic engagement theory recognises the challenge of translating digital participation into real-world policy outcomes and social change. The disconnect between online activism and offline political impact raises questions about the effectiveness of digital civic engagement in achieving substantive democratic goals (Bonsón et al., 2015). Equally important, the theory underscores that without integration between digital participation and established political structures, civic engagement risks remaining symbolic rather than transformative, highlighting the need for sustained, hybrid strategies that bridge online activism with tangible policy outcomes. In light of the above, the theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how digital innovations intersect with governance, participation, and power, providing valuable insights for examining how local governments can harness technology to foster more inclusive and responsive civic engagement.

## **Research and Methodology**

The study employed a qualitative research methodology to collect both primary and secondary data. This approach enabled the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the benefits of using social media platforms to enhance public participation in Mossel Bay municipality (Toews et al., 2017). Purposive sampling was used to identify participants, selected specifically for their knowledge and experience in municipal public participation processes. A total of 20 participants were included in the study. Structured and semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Municipal Manager, the Speaker, the IDP Manager, Public Participation Municipal Officials, seven Ward Councillors, seven Ward Committee members representing different wards, and Community Development Workers. This sample was considered appropriate and relevant, as all participants possessed extensive knowledge and diverse perspectives, offering valuable insights into the role of social media in strengthening public participation within the municipality.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2013) thematic analysis framework, data were coded iteratively to identify recurring patterns, which were subsequently organized into key themes such as effectiveness, cost-efficiency, immediate, and wide audience reach. Conversely, several themes relating to challenges also emerged, including resistance from leadership and politicians, lack of dedicated officials, insufficient budget allocation, training and cost and training, and lack of skills. The thematic analysis followed two main stages. The

first involved engaging with the descriptive data to develop a comprehensive understanding of emerging insights, while the second focused on generating initial codes. Manual coding enabled the researchers to condense the data, identify relationships, and inductively construct coherent and meaningful interpretations. Consistent with Clarke and Braun (2013), the final themes were refined and consolidated through a systematic review of the coded data.

In terms of ethical consideration, the study was approved by the University of the Western Cape Research Ethics Committee (Ref. No. HS21/7/63). The researchers ensured that all research activities complied with the university's standards for integrity, confidentiality, and respect for human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after they were provided with detailed information regarding the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, and all data were securely stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researchers. No identifying information was included in the final report to protect participants' privacy and uphold ethical research standards.

## Results and Discussions

The primary aim of this study was to examine the role of social media as a tool for enhancing public participation in the Mossel Bay Municipality, with particular attention to the opportunities it offers and the challenges it poses. Understanding the potential benefits and limitations of incorporating social media platforms is essential for enhancing service delivery. Several key themes that emerged included effectiveness, cost-efficiency, immediacy, and the ability to reach a wider audience. The benefits identified by interviewees are presented along with direct quotes from interviews that highlight each benefit.

### Effectiveness

Research has highlighted that social media works better than radio, posters, and flyers at spreading information to the general public. The information is easily accessible to citizens whenever and wherever they need it; they do not need to be in the neighborhood of poster distributions or be aware of the precise time of radio broadcasts. Social media gives the communications team control over the dissemination of information; they are not reliant on third parties for information dissemination.

*"What I've discovered about social media is that posting on it works better than distributing flyers and posters. It works well. Naturally, not by itself, but it works incredibly well." - (Respondent 1)*

*"Providing status regarding the interruption of electricity, you cannot go to the radio because that area already does not have electricity, so they cannot hear your notice. At least with social media, everyone has got a phone, they can share their status." - (Respondent 2)*

### Cost-effective

Similar to findings from the literature (Jardim, 2025), the cost-effectiveness of social media was highlighted by a member of the communications team. The amount of money that would have been spent reaching out to citizens through other forms of engagement has been reduced. Citizens are also saved the expense of calling municipality call centres or visiting the municipal offices.

*"Previously, we focused a lot on posters, printing, and it was costly, and we had to rely on somebody to deliver those posters and stick them" - (Respondent 3)*

### Immediate

Social media platforms are live, and therefore, information posted gets delivered to the public immediately. Several interviewees noted this as a benefit of using social media. The municipality can disseminate information and also get responses quickly

*"It's instant and the messaging, it's correct and it's now." - (Respondent 4)*

*"It will definitely make it much easier... but I think social media, because it's immediate." - (Respondent 3) "It's immediate" - (Respondent 5)*

### Wider audience reach

The ability of social media to reach a larger population group than other engagement mechanisms was noted as a benefit by some interviewees. Social media enables information to be rebroadcast by users through shares and retweets, ensuring that even citizens who are not directly connected to the municipality will receive information from friends and family. Social media transcends physical locations, meaning that individuals who are not currently located in the municipality can also receive information posted on these platforms.

*"It helps to increase the reach, and it's more of a now kind of impact" - (Respondent 6)*

*"It reaches more audience than you would have reached through radio, through newspapers" - (Respondent 7)*

## Challenges of Social Media

Conversely, the challenges identified related to resistance from leadership and politicians, the absence of dedicated officials, budgetary constraints, associated costs and training requirements, as well as a general lack of skills, are highlighted below:

### Resistance from leadership and politicians

Social media adoption is met with resistance within the municipality; politicians and senior government officials are hesitant to try unfamiliar technologies.

*"We're not there yet, it's very difficult to sit with a politician and explain to him or her that you need to be creative." - (Responded 1)*

*"I think it's simply a stranger-danger type of attitude, where it's a different thing- don't know it, don't go there, and because I don't know it, I can't make an informed decision about it." - (Responded 3)*

These platforms expose government agencies to criticism and unpredictable behaviour of citizens, and therefore make senior government officials wary. Grawe (2022) advocates that senior government officials get behind social media initiatives to facilitate a change process within their agencies. If these officials are seen to support social media, there will be less resistance from their employees, and a higher tendency for successful adoption (Aichner et al, 2021).

### Lack of dedicated officials

The lack of dedicated officials or a team of individuals came across as the biggest challenge facing the municipality. All interviewees referenced this as an important issue and a hindrance to their successful use of social media. At the Mossel Bay Municipality, officials currently dedicated to social media are also responsible for every other media communication, such as radio, newspaper, meetings, and newsletters. This means their time is split across numerous tasks, which detracts from their interaction on social media. In many situations, these officials are out of the office and have no access to the Internet, so they can only check on social media updates when they return to the office, which may be hours later.

*"We are trying our best, as I said before, we need to get a dedicated person because communication is evolving." - (Respondent 1)*

*"Sometimes I'm in meetings, sometimes I'm at an event, ...and so the turnaround time to answer some queries can take days or it can be immediate" - (Responded 4)*

*"Because we don't have dedicated officials, but it is still done. You know, it's not left by the way side." - (Responded 5)*

*"...a lot of companies, private companies would have a designated person or a social media specialist of whatever. We don't have that, so sometimes people have queries, we can't respond immediately" - (Responded 6)*

With the fast pace of social media, it becomes necessary to have someone working full-time on monitoring posts. However, there is still a lack of trust in these platforms on the part of leadership, so they are hesitant to create a permanent social media management role within the municipality. Many government agencies assign this role to current staff because they are not willing to fund the human capital needed for effective social media adoption (Alotaibi et al., 2016).

### Insufficient budget allocation

One of the Mossel Bay Municipality's biggest problems was identified as a shortage of funding. The municipality's embrace of social media is impacted by the financial concerns around it. It becomes challenging to recruit committed officials, promote social media use inside the municipality, and provide social media staff with training in the absence of a budget. Interviewees emphasised these ensuing problems.

*"My personal view is budget must be made available specifically for marketing social media in the institution. There is no budget, never been any budget, I've been pleading for one for years; it doesn't come." - (Responded 7)*

A lack of funding is not unique to social media, but is a common problem with the adoption of ICTs in government. ICT managers are plagued with the burden of working around limited budgets by turning to open source software or using general administrative budgets (Mawela, Ochara, & Twinomurizi, 2016). Prioritising social media in the municipality's ICT agenda might highlight the need to provide a budget for social media adoption.

### Costs and training

The interview process revealed that the Mossel Bay Municipality has never provided social media training for its staff. The social media team has learned on the job or made personal efforts to learn how to interact on these platforms by purchasing relevant books with their resources. The only member of the team who received official training did so from a previous employer. The municipality receives invitations from organisations for training, but is hesitant to spend on social media training.

*"I still feel that we still need to have more capacity in terms of training in this area, on how more we can capitalise or how more we can take advantage of social media platforms that are there." - (Responded 2)*

*“Like for instance, social media, you will get many invitations coming in but you know the expenditure will be quite big because you go to Joburg, you’ll be there for two days you have to pay up to 25, 000 for those two days and then accommodation and then travel costs and expenditure so it’s a lot of cost that the municipality is very hesitant to incur.” - (Responded 3)*

*“No, learning on the job, but it’s only fair to be trained. Then everyone is clear on the dos and don’ts” - (Responded 4)*

*“On the job learning, I guess, still learning. But we can’t not do the work because you haven’t been trained.” – (Responded 5)*

Professional training on how to grow followers, how to respond in times of emergencies, and language styles are among the skills that are necessary for effective and efficient use of social media by government employees.

However, many government institutions take up social media because it is trendy and expect employees to figure out its use on their own (Bene & Dobos, 2025). In the case of the Mossel Bay Municipality, respondents are committed to using social media and learning on their own. Even though social media has been used by these employees for several years, they still desire formal training to enhance their knowledge and skills.

### **Lack of skills**

The Mossel Bay Municipality social media team is mostly experienced in terms of communicating with the public, they are nevertheless concerned about posting on social media because these platforms require a different skillset.

*“The other thing is, you would have people not skilled enough, they will make spelling errors, it’s not good for your brand.” - (Responded 4)*

*“Social media brought challenges to communications in the sense that yes, it’s now two-way communication, and then secondly, when you write, for instance, on X, you have 140 characters, you cannot write in the business-like way you normally do.” - (Responded 5).*

This challenge is closely linked with the issue of training; social media platforms have unique characteristics that make it difficult to transfer skills built in other areas of communication. Communication on these platforms needs to be concise while providing important information. The need for speed in responding to citizens also hampers rigorous information vetting processes, thereby requiring highly skilled communicators.

The findings reveal both significant opportunities and substantial challenges, emphasising the need for local governments to move beyond broadcasting to create genuine interactive engagement while addressing equity and access issues. Social media platforms were found to be effective tools for promoting engagement between citizens in local government. Participants reviewed sources that indicated that platforms such as Facebook, X, and WhatsApp enable direct communication, allowing citizens to raise concerns, report service delivery issues, and participate in policy discussions. At Mossel Bay municipality, social media is used strategically; it has contributed to greater responsiveness, improved service delivery communication, and enhanced transparency. The findings also revealed that social media has the potential to reach a broader and more diverse audience, including youth, working adults, and urban populations who may not engage through traditional platforms. This finding is similar to the findings of Zumafon (2025), who argues that social media is crucial for governments, as they increasingly prioritize interactions that enhance public service delivery to strengthen civic participation and build citizen trust.

However, the effectiveness is often dependent on how well local governments respond to citizen input, with delayed or no responses eroding public trust and interest. The findings further revealed a shortage of officials designated to manage social media platforms. It is therefore essential to provide these officials with adequate training to equip them with the necessary digital competencies for effective communication. At Mossel Bay Municipality, social media responsibilities are often added to the workload of communications or administrative staff, many of whom lack the time or expertise to manage these platforms effectively. Consequently, this leads to inconsistent posting, delayed responses, and ultimately diminished citizen engagement. Although social media is relatively low-cost, its effective utilization requires financial investment. The study revealed that the municipality does not allocate a dedicated budget for social media engagement, which constrains its ability to procure essential tools, employ qualified personnel, or develop comprehensive content strategies. This absence of budget prioritization reflects a broader undervaluing of digital engagement as a core component of local governance. Another key finding related to cost and training highlighted insufficient investment in capacitating officials to manage social media platforms professionally. Many officials lack familiarity with best practices in digital communication, content creation, and online citizen engagement. Without adequate training, the quality of communication is compromised, resulting in poor messaging, inadequate responsiveness, and, in some cases, reputational risks for the municipality. These findings are consistent with existing literature. This is particularly significant in the South African context, where digital inclusion intermediaries often fail to create sufficient awareness of interventions or to promote the value of information and communication technologies among targeted community members (Katunga et al., 2024).

### **Conclusions**

This paper has explored the potential of social media as a tool to enhance public participation in Mossel Bay Municipality, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges inherent in its adoption. The findings suggest that social media platforms can serve

as powerful enablers of participatory governance by facilitating real-time communication, increasing transparency, and expanding avenues for civic engagement. However, challenges such as digital exclusion, misinformation, limited institutional capacity, and inadequate regulatory frameworks may hinder the effectiveness of these platforms in fostering meaningful participation.

To fully leverage the benefits of social media, local governments must adopt inclusive digital strategies that address access and equity while building the technical and human capacity required to manage these platforms effectively. Furthermore, fostering a culture of open governance and trust between citizens and public officials is essential for sustained engagement. The insights from Mossel Bay municipality offer valuable lessons for other South African municipalities, underscoring the need for coherent policy frameworks that institutionalize social media as a core component of public communication and citizen engagement. Strengthening digital governance policies at the municipal level can also enhance service delivery responsiveness and rebuild public trust. Therefore, by translating these findings into practice, municipalities across South Africa can move closer to achieving a more participatory, transparent, and digitally inclusive form of local governance.

Ultimately, while social media is not a panacea, it offers a valuable complement to traditional participatory mechanisms, with the potential to strengthen democratic governance and promote a more engaged, informed, and empowered citizenry at the local level.

### *Recommendations*

Based on the findings of this study, it is strongly recommended that the Municipality adopt a more strategic approach to social media management by prioritizing three key areas: budget allocation, staff training, and the development of a comprehensive social media strategy.

The Municipality should consider reallocating part of its existing communication or public relations budget to create a dedicated social media budget. This allocation will signify the Municipality's commitment to digital transformation and enhance its capacity to engage effectively with citizens. A dedicated budget will support content creation, social media management tools, paid promotional campaigns, and data analytics software. Such financial commitment will not only improve visibility and transparency but also strengthen the Municipality's responsiveness to citizens' needs in real time.

Given the identified lack of expertise among staff members in managing social media platforms, regular and structured training sessions are essential. These sessions should focus on best practices for digital communication, content development, community management, and online crisis response. Additionally, staff members should be trained on ethical guidelines, privacy issues, and strategies for promoting constructive online engagement. Continuous professional development in this area will enhance institutional capacity and ensure that social media platforms are used effectively as tools for participatory governance.

The Municipality should develop a detailed and integrated social media strategy that defines clear objectives, target audiences, performance indicators, and protocols for engagement. This strategy should emphasize two-way communication, enabling citizens to share feedback, raise concerns, and contribute to local governance discussions. Furthermore, the strategy should outline processes for monitoring and evaluating social media performance to ensure accountability and continuous improvement.

By implementing these recommendations, the Municipality will not only modernize its communication practices but also strengthen democratic participation, transparency, and trust between government and citizens.

### *Limitations of the Study*

Certain limitations were associated with the successful implementation of this research project. The researcher conducted fieldwork during a period when municipal officials were heavily engaged in community meetings related to the development of the 2022–2027 Municipal Integrated Development Plan (IDP). As a result, there was limited availability of officials to participate in the study, which affected the depth and comprehensiveness of the data collected. This time constraint may have influenced the findings by narrowing the perspectives captured, particularly those of key decision-makers who play a crucial role in implementing digital communication strategies.

Additionally, the Municipality's limited adoption of social media as a tool for public participation, despite its prominence in policy documentation, posed another challenge. The gap between policy and practice meant that respondents could not fully engage with questions related to the research objective on social media-based public participation. Consequently, this affected the ability to draw strong empirical conclusions about the practical use and effectiveness of social media platforms within the Municipality's public engagement processes.

To mitigate these limitations, the researchers strengthened their study by incorporating extensive secondary data analysis, which provided valuable contextual insights and helped substantiate the primary findings. However, future research could address these challenges by strategically scheduling interviews and data collection during less busy municipal periods to ensure greater participation from officials. Moreover, complementing interviews with digital ethnography or longitudinal case studies could enhance the understanding of how social media practices evolve over time and how they align with policy commitments. Such approaches would enable a more balanced and comprehensive analysis of digital civic engagement within municipal governance contexts.

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