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PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT IN THE DIGITAL AGE: A CASE STUDY OF CHUKA YOUTH INFORMATION CENTRE, THARAKA NITHI COUNTY

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ST. PAUL'S UNIVERSITY

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DECLARATION

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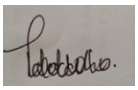
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ABSTRACT

Participatory communication is increasingly recognized as an important approach to community empowerment because it promotes dialogue, inclusive participation, shared decision-making and local ownership of development processes. However, community-based organizations still face challenges related to unequal participation, access to information and the digital divide. This study examined how participatory communication contributes to community empowerment in the digital age with Chuka Youth Information Centre (CYIC) in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya, as a case study. The study explored the participatory communication approaches used at CYIC, their contribution to community empowerment, the role of digital technologies and the challenges affecting participation. The study was guided by Participatory Communication Theory, Paulo Freire's Dialogical Theory and Jan Servaes' Multiplicity Paradigm. A qualitative case study design was adopted with 27 participants purposively selected from CYIC-related programmes and activities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed manually using thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach. Findings show that CYIC facilitates participation through community dialogue, consultation, shared decision-making, collaboration, civic engagement and feedback. Participants linked these practices with improved access to information, having improved self-confidence in expressing views, local ownership and collective action. Digital technologies, especially WhatsApp and mobile communication, enhanced face-to-face interaction by enabling information sharing, mobilization, follow-up and continued interaction. However, unequal access to devices, high data costs, limited digital literacy skills and lack of internet connectivity constrained meaningful participation for some community members. The study concludes that hybrid participatory communication, which integrates face-to-face and digital approaches, provides a more inclusive basis for community engagement. It recommends that, in order to strengthen digital inclusion, the capacity of facilitators and volunteers be built, and that accessible offline participation methods be developed to support equitable community empowerment.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CYIC - Chuka Youth Information Centre

ICTs - Information and Communication Technologies

ISERC - Institutional Scientific and Ethics Review Committee

KNBS - Kenya National Bureau of Statistics

NACOSTI - National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation

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CHAPTER ONE

1.1 Introduction

Community empowerment is essential for inclusive and sustainable development, and for this reason, development outcomes depend not only on the availability of resources and services but also on people's capacity to participate in decision-making that directly affects their livelihoods.

Recent development communication research shows a gradual shift from conventional, top-down approaches that position communities primarily as recipients of information toward participatory approaches that emphasize dialogue, active community involvement, shared decision-making and local ownership of development processes (Servaes, 2008; Gebeyehu & Jira, 2023; Fadipe & Molale, 2024; Odoom et al., 2024).

Participatory communication is therefore not only concerned with communicating information to communities, but also with enabling communication that facilitates open dialogue, empowerment, knowledge sharing and learning together, ensuring that there is accountability within these communities. However, participation does not necessarily result in empowerment unless communities have meaningful opportunities to influence decisions (Odoom et al., 2024; Fadipe & Molale, 2024).

The relationship between communication and empowerment is important in community-based development. Communication provides opportunities for people to voice their opinions, discuss and share knowledge, evaluate existing systems and participate in collective decision-making. However, participation varies; communities may be involved without necessarily having influence over decisions, while more meaningful forms of participation involve collaboration and shared, community-led decision-making. Recent research on participatory communication in devolved development similarly distinguishes between information sharing, community engagement and empowerment. This shows that

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communication activities alone do not establish meaningful participation (Odoom et al., 2024). Community empowerment should therefore be understood not simply from the perspective of the number of people reached, but from whether communication processes facilitate open communication, empowerment, knowledge sharing, and learning together, ensuring there is accountability within these communities.

The communication environment within which participation occurs has also evolved significantly with the digital transformation. Mobile phones, social media, messaging applications and other digital platforms have created additional opportunities for communities to access information, communicate with organizations, unite over shared concerns and maintain connections beyond physical interactions. In Kenya, this transformation is profoundly significant because mobile and internet connectivity have expanded rapidly. The Communications Authority of Kenya reported continued growth in mobile subscriptions and digital connectivity during 2024/2025, while the Kenya Digital Economy Acceleration Project is explicitly investing in broadband infrastructure, digital platforms and digital skills.

Digital transformation, however, should not be equated with universal or equal participation. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU, 2024) reports ongoing inequalities in internet use, affordability, rural connectivity and digital skills. Globally, internet access and use in 2024 were considerably higher in urban areas than in rural areas, with the rural-urban gap particularly conspicuous in Africa. The ITU also identifies affordability and the varying levels of digital literacy as continuing barriers to meaningful connectivity. These inequalities are important for participatory communication because access to a digital platform does not necessarily mean that individuals have the required skills, resources, confidence and opportunities to participate meaningfully.

The gap between access and meaningful participation is therefore central to understanding community empowerment in the digital age. Digital technologies may widen the

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reach of participatory communication, but can also reinforce existing socioeconomic and geographical inequalities where, for instance, some community members do not have appropriate devices, cannot afford internet connectivity or lack the required digital skills in order to access and use digital platforms effectively. Research on rural communities similarly shows that digital participation depends on more than physical access to technology, with confidence, digital literacy and patterns of use affecting people's ability to benefit from digital services (Jongebloed et al., 2024).

These issues are particularly relevant in African development contexts where participatory communication coexists with socioeconomic, infrastructural and institutional disparities. Recent African research demonstrates both the continuing importance and the complexity of participatory communication. Odoom et al. (2024), for instance, highlighted that participatory communication can support development within community-led governance. This study also showed the importance of the different levels of engagement and the extent to which communities influence decision-making. In their study of a rural South African municipality, Fadipe and Molale (2024) show the importance of integrating participatory communication principles within local contexts instead of just treating communication as a simple process of sharing information.

The Kenyan context offers an important framework for examining these issues. The Constitution of Kenya (2010) establishes participation of the people as a national value and prioritizes strengthening public participation in decision-making as one of the key elements for devolution. Article 174 of the Kenya Constitution notably aims to strengthen civic participation in the exercise of state power and in decisions affecting them, while also recognizing communities' rights to manage their own affairs and pursue their development. This constitutional framework creates an important background for examining communication as part of participatory development within the local context.

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At the same time, Kenya's rapid digital transformation has created new opportunities and new inequalities. The Communications Authority of Kenya's recent sector statistics indicate continued growth in mobile and internet connectivity, such as the increased adoption of 4G and 5G technologies. However, national connectivity statistics can overshadow differences in how people actually use communication technologies.

The availability of network infrastructure or mobile connectivity does not necessarily indicate that rural community members have equal access to digital technologies. In Kenya, disparities in device ownership, affordability, digital skills, education, income and rural-urban location continue to shape who can access and meaningfully use digital technologies and online platforms (CA & KNBS, 2025; Okello, 2024)

Community-based organizations (CBOs) play an important role in this context because they operate within the communities they serve. They can provide spaces where local knowledge is shared, community issues are discussed, information is shared, and collaborative initiatives are planned. Their proximity to communities also makes them ideal contexts for examining whether participatory communication is experienced as meaningful two-way communication and shared decision-making, or primarily as just information sharing.

The Chuka Youth Information Centre (CYIC) provides a relevant case for examining these processes in practice. The Centre operates within a local community context in Tharaka Nithi County, and it provides a background in which communication, community participation and development activities connect. Its communication practices include face-to-face interactions and digitally supported communication, providing an opportunity to examine how traditional and digital forms of communication integrate. The study therefore does not assume that digital communication has replaced traditional community engagement, but it examines how different communication modes interact and whether their combination creates more inclusive opportunities for participation and empowerment.

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This study is needed because participatory communication methods can exist without translating into actual participation and empowerment. Existing research establishes the importance of two-way communication, participation and community empowerment, while recent African studies demonstrate the relevance of participatory communication to local development. However, research needs to examine how these processes are experienced within a specific grassroots CBO, particularly in a rural Kenyan context where face-to-face communication, community infrastructure, and digital platforms may operate simultaneously. The study therefore focuses on the Chuka Youth Information Centre to examine the communication channels available, how community members experience participation, how they perceive empowerment, how digital technologies shape participation and what social, institutional and technological barriers affect the process.

This study examines participatory communication and community empowerment at the Chuka Youth Information Centre in Tharaka-Nithi County, Kenya.

1.2 Background of the Study

Development communication has undergone an important conceptual shift from predominantly top-down approaches towards communication processes that emphasize dialogue, participation and community empowerment. Earlier modernization-oriented approaches largely positioned communication as a means of transferring development ideas, knowledge and practices from experts and institutions to less developed populations. Such approaches were later challenged for giving insufficient attention to local knowledge, dialogue and communities' capacity to participate in defining their own development concerns (Freire, 1970; Servaes, 1999, 2008).

Participatory communication emerged partly in response to these limitations. Freire (1970) emphasized dialogue, critical reflection and collective action as central to transformative communication. From this perspective, communication is not simply the

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transmission of information but a process through which people interpret their social realities, exchange knowledge and participate in collective action. Participatory communication therefore places greater emphasis on dialogue, local knowledge, community voice and ownership of development processes (Servaes, 2008, 2020). However, participation does not automatically result in empowerment. People may be informed or consulted without necessarily having meaningful influence over decisions that affect their lives (Arnstein, 1969; Cornwall, 2008).

Community empowerment is consequently an important dimension of participatory communication. Empowerment involves more than access to information and may include the capacity of individuals and groups to express concerns, participate in discussions, influence decisions and engage in collective action (Laverack, 2006; Zimmerman, 2000). The relationship between participation and empowerment therefore depends on how communication creates meaningful opportunities for people to exercise voice and influence. This distinction provides an important basis for examining participatory communication within community-based organizations, where communication practices are closely connected to everyday community concerns and relationships.

The emergence of digital communication has further transformed how communities and organizations communicate. Mobile phones, messaging applications, social media and other digital platforms can facilitate information sharing, feedback, interaction and mobilization beyond physical meetings. At the same time, digital technologies do not automatically produce inclusive participation. Differences in access to devices and connectivity, affordability, digital literacy skills and patterns of use can influence who can participate and how effectively (van Dijk, 2020). The digital environment may therefore expand opportunities for participation while also creating or reproducing forms of exclusion. Global evidence continues to show persistent inequalities in meaningful connectivity, such as

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differences related to location, affordability and digital skills (International Telecommunication Union [ITU], 2024).

Kenya provides a relevant context for examining these dynamics because the country's constitutional and governance framework recognizes participation. The Constitution of Kenya (2010) identifies participation of the people among the national values and principles of governance and provides for public participation within national and county governance. Kenya has also experienced significant digital transformation, increasing opportunities for communication, information access and interaction through mobile and digital services (Communications Authority of Kenya [CAK] & Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2025). These developments create a context in which established community communication practices increasingly interact with digital forms of communication.

Community-based organizations provide an important setting for examining this interaction because of their close engagement with local communities. Their activities may include community meetings, interpersonal communication, information sharing, civic engagement, mobilization and support for local initiatives. Such organizations can therefore provide spaces for participation through both established face-to-face practices and emerging digital channels. Examining these processes is particularly important where access to digital technologies and opportunities for participation may vary across community members.

CYIC is a community-based organization operating in Tharaka-Nithi County and engaging community members through youth and community development activities. Its activities have included information sharing, community meetings, civic and health awareness, training, community mobilization, home visits and support for vulnerable community members. Communication within these activities has involved face-to-face meetings, dialogue, interpersonal communication, volunteers and, increasingly, mobile and digital channels such as WhatsApp. These activities make CYIC a relevant setting for examining how participatory

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communication operates in practice and how established community communication approaches interact with digital technologies.

The study does not treat CYIC as representative of all community-based organizations in Kenya. Instead, it uses CYIC as a single case through which the relationship between participatory communication, digital technologies and community empowerment can be examined in depth. The central concern is how communication is practiced, who is able to participate, the extent to which participants exercise influence and how face-to-face and digital forms of communication operate together within a specific community context.

Although participatory communication, community empowerment and digital inclusion have received increasing scholarly attention, there remains a need to understand how these processes operate together within everyday community-based settings. In particular, it is important to examine how community members experience participation, how participation relates to information access and collective action, how digital and face-to-face communication interact, and what conditions shape opportunities for meaningful participation. This study addresses this through a qualitative case study of CYIC.

The background therefore establishes the central concern of the study: participatory communication may create opportunities for community empowerment, but the nature and extent of that empowerment depend on how communication is practiced, who can participate, how much influence participants exercise, how digital and face-to-face communication interact, and what social, institutional and technological conditions shape participation.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Participatory communication is recognized as an approach that promotes dialogue, community participation, localized governance, and empowerment. However, participation does not necessarily translate into meaningful influence or empowerment. African research shows that participatory processes can remain constrained by structural frameworks, limited

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resources, power dynamics and weak community control (Odoom et al., 2024). This raises an important question about how participation is experienced and operationalized as empowerment within grassroots organizations such as CYIC.

Advances in digital technologies have created opportunities for community participation beyond face-to-face interactions and meetings, enabled by mobile phones, social media, and messaging platforms. In Kenya, recent findings show very significant urban-rural differences in mobile-phone ownership and Internet use, with affordability, infrastructure, education and digital literacy shaping access and participation (Communications Authority of Kenya & Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2025). Therefore, digital technologies can expand communication while also creating new forms of exclusion.

Although existing research has examined participatory communication, digital engagement and community empowerment, comparatively limited attention has been given to how these processes interact within rural Kenyan community-based organizations. Qualitative evidence remains limited on how face-to-face and digital communication operate together, how participants move from information access to participation and influence and how social, technological and institutional conditions shape experiences of empowerment.

This study addresses this gap through a qualitative case study of the Chuka Youth Information Centre (CYIC) in Tharaka-Nithi County. It examines how participatory communication is practiced, how participants experience its contribution to community empowerment, the role of digital technologies in facilitating or constraining participation and the challenges affecting meaningful engagement.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to examine how participatory communication, enabled by digital technologies, promotes community empowerment at the Chuka Youth Information Centre in Tharaka-Nithi County, Kenya.

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1.5 Objectives of the Study

i. To explore how the Chuka Youth Information Centre uses participatory communication methods to support community engagement and dialogue.

ii. To evaluate the extent to which participatory communication methods contribute to community empowerment.

iii. To analyze the influence of digital technologies on the facilitation or limitation of participatory communication at the Chuka Youth Information Centre.

iv. To identify the challenges that impact the effectiveness of participatory communication in promoting community empowerment at the Centre.

1.6 Research Questions

1. What participatory communication approaches does the Chuka Youth Information Center use to engage the community?
2. In what ways do these participatory communication approaches contribute to community empowerment outcomes?
3. What is the role of digital technologies in shaping participatory communication at the Centre?
4. What challenges influence the effectiveness of participatory communication in fostering community empowerment at the Chuka Youth Information Centre?

1.7 Justification of the Study

Participatory communication is important to community empowerment because it gives communities opportunities to contribute their knowledge, express their priorities and participate in development processes. However, recent African research shows that participatory structures do not necessarily lead to meaningful participation or empowerment. Odoom et al. (2024), for instance, found that participatory communication was inadequately

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applied in local development services in Ghana, with institutional, resource and ownership challenges constraining participation.

This study is justified by the limited context-specific evidence on how participatory communication operates within rural Kenyan community-based organizations, particularly where face-to-face and digital communication are used together. CYIC provides a relevant setting for examining this issue because it operates at the community level and uses communication and engagement activities to connect with community members. The study therefore provides an opportunity to examine not simply whether communication channels are available, but how participants experience information access, participation, influence, and empowerment within these processes.

The study is also academically relevant because recent research continues to identify the need to understand how participatory communication contributes to development outcomes in different African contexts. Dikeocha (2024) highlights the importance of effective stakeholder engagement in development interventions, while Letsie and Osunkule (2025) show the value of looking at participatory communication in rural community-development contexts. By focusing on CYIC in Tharaka Nithi County, this study adds localized qualitative evidence to the broader development communication literature.

The findings can assist CYIC, community volunteers, development practitioners and other community-based organizations in strengthening participatory communication by identifying practices that facilitate meaningful engagement and barriers that limit participation. Additionally, the study may offer insights into how digital tools can complement, not replace face-to-face community interaction.

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1.8 Significance of the Study

This study is significant to community-based organizations, development practitioners, policymakers and researchers because it provides qualitative evidence on how participatory communication operates at the grassroots level in the digital age.

For CYIC and other community-based organizations, the findings may provide practical insights into strengthening dialogue, community participation, feedback and the integration of digital and face-to-face communication. The study may also help identify barriers to inclusive participation, particularly those associated with digital access, skills and socioeconomic circumstances.

For development practitioners and policymakers, the study provides context-specific evidence that can inform programmes and policies aimed at strengthening community engagement, digital inclusion, youth participation and local ownership of development initiatives, particularly in rural settings.

For academia and future researchers, the study contributes to development communication scholarship by providing an in-depth qualitative account of the relationship between participatory communication and community empowerment within a Kenyan community-based organization. It also contributes to understanding how traditional and digital communication practices can operate together in grassroots development.

Finally, the study may benefit community members and youth-led initiatives by highlighting communication practices that support information access, participation, collective action, and greater involvement in decisions affecting their communities. The experience of CYIC may therefore provide useful lessons for similar grassroots organizations seeking to strengthen participatory and inclusive development communication.

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1.9 Assumptions of the Study

The study was based on several assumptions. First, it was assumed that the participants had adequate experience with CYIC's activities and communication practices to provide relevant accounts of their experiences and perceptions. Second, it was assumed that the participants would provide honest and reflective responses during the interviews based on their personal experiences and perceptions. Third, based on the preliminary sit-down session with the CYIC programme coordinator/facilitator, the study assumed that CYIC uses both face-to-face and digital communication practices in its community engagement activities. The session provided contextual information on CYIC's activities. This preliminary understanding informed the researcher's examination of how community members experienced communication and participation within the organization. However, the extent to which these communication practices were inclusive, meaningful and empowering was treated as an empirical question to be examined through the study. Finally, it was assumed that the participants' accounts, together with the researcher's field notes and contextual observations, would provide sufficient information to examine how participatory communication was experienced within the CYIC context.

1.10 Scope of the Study

The research scope is intentionally defined. Geographically, the Chuka Youth Information Centre (CYIC) is located in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya. This location supports a detailed contextual analysis of participatory communication practices in a specific community through a qualitative case study. Beyond geographic boundaries, the study is limited to a community-based organization focused on youth development and community empowerment. The participants comprised 27 community members with experience in CYIC's activities and communication practices. This focus allowed the researcher to closely examine grassroots participatory communication practices. Additionally, the study emphasizes themes

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related to participatory communication approaches and the empowerment outcomes community members experienced.

1.11 Limitations of the Study

The study presents several limitations. First, it focused exclusively on a single case, the Chuka Youth Information Centre (CYIC), which restricts the transferability of the findings to other organizations and contexts. This limitation was addressed by deliberately delimiting the study geographically and by case to CYIC in Tharaka-Nithi County, Kenya. This approach enabled the development of an in-depth, context-specific understanding of participatory communication and community empowerment. The study did not aim to make statistical generalizations or systematically compare CYIC with other organizations or programmes.

Second, the study relied primarily on participants' self-reported experiences, which may have been influenced by recall or social desirability bias. Participants varied in both the duration and depth of their involvement with CYIC. To address this limitation, the study included only individuals with direct experience in CYIC programmes, such as current and former participants, community volunteers, and community members. Variations in participants' experiences were considered, rather than assuming uniform levels of involvement or perspectives.

Third, most participants declined audio recording, so the study relied on handwritten interview and field notes. This approach may have reduced the precision of direct quotations. To mitigate this limitation, interview notes were reviewed and expanded immediately after each session to enhance accuracy and preserve the intended meaning of participants' responses. The analysis prioritized participants' expressed experiences and meanings rather than extensive use of verbatim quotations.

Finally, access to organizational records was limited. However, a contextual discussion with a CYIC programme coordinator provided background information regarding the

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organization's previous communication practices and activities. This information was used to establish context and support interpretation of the interview findings, not to replace the primary interview data

1.12 Definition of Terms

Participatory-Communication

Participatory communication is a dialogical process through which community members exchange knowledge, express views, and participate in decisions and collective action (Servaes & Malikhao, 2005). In this study, it refers to CYIC's use of dialogue, consultation, feedback, and shared participation.

Community-Empowerment

Community empowerment is the process through which individuals and communities gain greater capacity and influence over decisions affecting their lives (Zimmerman, 20000. In this study, it includes access to information, participation, decision-making, confidence, leadership and collective action.

Digital-Communication

Digital communication refers to the exchange of information and interaction through digital technologies. In this study, it includes mobile phones, WhatsApp, Facebook, and other digital platforms used by CYIC.

Digital-Inclusion

Digital inclusion refers to the ability to access and meaningfully use digital technologies, such as having appropriate devices, connectivity, affordability, and digital skills (van Dijk & van Deursen, 2014). In this study, it involves participants' ability to engage with CYIC's digital communication.

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Digital Divide

The digital divide refers to inequalities in access to, skills for using, and meaningful use of digital technologies (van Dijk, 2020). In this study, it involves differences in devices, connectivity, data affordability, skills, and digital participation.

Community-Based Organization (CBO)

A community-based organization (CBO) is a locally organized group whose members come together around shared interests, needs or community concerns and participate in activities intended to benefit the community or its members (World Bank, 2005). In this study, the term specifically refers to the Chuka Youth Information Centre (CYIC), which is examined as a community-based organization operating within the local context of Tharaka Nithi County.

Hybrid Participatory Communication

Hybrid participatory communication refers to combining face-to-face and digital communication within participatory processes. In this study, it describes CYIC's integration of community meetings, personal interaction, telephone communication and digital platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook.

1.13 Summary

Chapter One established the study's foundation by outlining the background, problem statement, objectives, research questions, significance, scope, and methodological boundaries. The chapter highlighted participatory communication as part of the shift from top-down approaches to those emphasizing dialogue, inclusion, knowledge sharing, and community participation, particularly in the digital era. The study was situated within the Kenyan context, focusing on the Chuka Youth Information Centre (CYIC) in Tharaka-Nithi County. The chapter reviewed CYIC's communication history and its gradual adoption of digital technologies, emphasizing the coexistence of traditional and digital communication practices. The research gap was identified as the limited understanding of how participatory

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communication fosters community empowerment within localized community-based organizations. Therefore, the study focused on participants' opportunities for dialogue, influence, information access, participation and collective action. Four objectives were introduced, addressing CYIC's participatory communication practices, community empowerment, the role of digital technologies and challenges affecting participation. In summary, Chapter One established the rationale for examining participatory communication as a contextual, evolving process providing the foundation for the theoretical, conceptual and empirical review in Chapter Two.

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CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter analyzes relevant academic work on participatory communication and community empowerment through engagement with community-based organizations in Kenya, within the context of the global, developing field of Development Communication (DC). It also outlines key issues, definitions, and research findings that deepen understanding of how collaborative processes enhance both individual and collective capabilities to shape their own future. This chapter articulates the theoretical and conceptual frameworks used in this research.

2.2 General Literature Review

Participatory communication marks a shift from predominantly linear, expert-driven models of development communication to approaches that emphasize dialogue, inclusion, knowledge sharing and greater recognition of community agency. Instead of conceptualizing communication solely as the transmission of information from experts to recipients, participatory approaches view communication as a social process in which individuals exchange knowledge, identify issues, negotiate meanings and contribute to decisions that affect their lives (Freire, 1970; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009). This shift is significant for this study, as participation may occur through both established interpersonal and community-based channels and emerging digital platforms.

2.2.1 Participatory Communication in Development

Early development communication was strongly influenced by modernization thinking, which associated development with the transfer of knowledge, technologies and practices from more developed societies to those considered less developed. Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovations perspective, for instance, explains how innovations spread through social systems. Although diffusion research contributed to understanding innovation adoption, development

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communication subsequently faced criticism for approaches that positioned communities mainly as recipients of externally defined knowledge and solutions.

Participatory approaches emerged partly in response to these limitations. Freire (1970) challenged the "banking" model of communication and education and emphasized dialogue, reflection and action. From this perspective, people actively interpret their circumstances and contribute to processes of change. Communication is therefore connected to voice, knowledge, agency and power.

Tufte and Mefalopulos (2009) similarly conceptualize participatory communication as a dialogical process through which stakeholders exchange information, perceptions and opinions and participate in social and decision-making processes. Participation consequently involves more than receiving information or attending activities. It concerns whether communication processes enable people to contribute knowledge, articulate concerns, and influence development processes.

Servaes' (1999) multiplicity paradigm further emphasizes that development should be understood within the particular social, cultural, political and economic circumstances of communities. Therefore, no single communication model can be applied uniformly across contexts. Communication practices need to reflect local experiences, knowledge and priorities.

Participatory communication therefore does not require rejecting mediated or institutional communication. Instead, it recognizes the value of interpersonal communication, community forums, local knowledge, media and digital platforms. The critical consideration is whether the communication process creates opportunities for dialogue, knowledge exchange, participation and meaningful influence.

For this study, participatory communication refers to processes through which community members exchange knowledge, discuss issues, express views, provide feedback and participate in decisions or collective activities affecting their community. This definition

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provides the basis for examining communication practices at the Chuka Youth Information Centre (CYIC).

2.2.2 Dialogue, Power and Meaningful Participation

Dialogue is central to participatory communication because it distinguishes meaningful participation from primarily one-way communication. Freire (1970) associates dialogue with mutual learning, reflection and action. In development communication, dialogue therefore creates opportunities for people to contribute their experiences and knowledge and to examine issues collectively.

Participation, however, occurs within power relations. Individuals and groups may differ in authority, knowledge, resources, social position and access to decision-making. Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation illustrates this distinction by differentiating between forms of participation that provide limited influence and those involving partnership, delegated power and citizen control. Although developed in the context of citizen participation in planning, the framework remains useful for considering whether participation involves actual influence or mainly attendance and consultation.

Cornwall (2008) similarly shows that participation means different things depending on who participates, what they participate in and whose interests are represented. Participation may therefore range from receiving information and being consulted to collaborating in decisions and exercising influence.

These perspectives are relevant to community-based organizations. Community members may be invited to meetings or encouraged to express their views while organizational actors retain control over agendas, resources and decisions. Participatory communication therefore requires attention not only to the existence of communication spaces but also to whether participants can influence processes and outcomes.

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In this study, meaningful participation is examined through opportunities for dialogue, expression of views, feedback, influence, decision-making and involvement in collective activities.

2.2.3 Community Empowerment

Participation and empowerment are related but distinct concepts. Participation is about involvement in processes, while empowerment is the capacity and opportunity to exercise influence over matters affecting individuals and communities. Zimmerman (2000) conceptualizes empowerment as a process through which individuals, organizations and communities develop greater control and influence over decisions affecting their lives.

Narayan (2002) identifies access to information, participation in decision-making, accountability and local organizational capacity as important dimensions of empowerment. Access to information can therefore support participation, but information alone does not constitute empowerment unless individuals and communities can use that knowledge and exercise influence.

Empowerment may occur at both individual and collective levels. Individually, it may involve confidence, knowledge, skills and self-efficacy. Collectively, it may involve organizational capacity, collaboration and the ability to influence decisions and conditions affecting the community (Zimmerman, 2000).

Participatory communication can create conditions for empowerment by enabling people to share and exchange information, express concerns, build shared understanding and organize collective responses. However, participation does not automatically result in empowerment. Where decision-making remains concentrated among organizational or institutional actors, individuals may participate without acquiring greater influence.

In this study, community empowerment refers to the development and exercise of knowledge, confidence, self-efficacy, collective capacity and influence over matters affecting

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the community. The study therefore considers empowerment through information access, participation in decision-making, confidence, collaboration, collective action and perceived influence.

2.2.4 Digital Technologies and Participatory Communication

Digital technologies have expanded the communication environments within which participation occurs. Mobile phones, the Internet, social networking platforms and messaging applications allow people to communicate beyond the physical spaces and times associated with conventional community meetings. These technologies can facilitate information sharing, interaction, networking and the circulation of user-generated content (Castells, 2009; Couldry, 2012).

However, the significance of digital technologies for participatory communication depends on how people use them and the conditions under which they access them. Digital platforms may facilitate interaction and self-expression, but they do not automatically redistribute power or create meaningful participation. Access, digital literacy skills, affordability and control over information can influence who participates and how effectively (Couldry, 2012; van Dijk, 2020).

Digital communication can also complement and not replace established communication practices. Face-to-face meetings, community forums and interpersonal communication may continue to provide important spaces for dialogue while digital platforms can extend information sharing and interaction before or after physical activities. Participatory communication can therefore operate across both online and offline spaces.

In this study, digital technologies are understood as tools and platforms that may extend participatory communication through information sharing, interaction, feedback, networking and knowledge exchange. This study examines digital communication alongside established face-to-face practices rather than treating it as a substitute for traditional participation.

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2.2.5 Digital Inclusion and the Digital Divide

The expansion of digital technologies has also highlighted inequalities in access and use. The digital divide extends beyond physical access to devices and Internet connectivity to include affordability, quality of access, digital skills, patterns of use and the benefits derived from technology (van Dijk, 2020; van Dijk & van Deursen, 2014).

This distinction matters for participatory communication because owning a mobile phone or accessing a digital platform does not necessarily mean an individual can participate effectively. Data costs, device availability, network reliability, electricity, digital literacy skills and the ability to produce and evaluate information may influence digital participation.

Digital inclusion should therefore be understood as the ability not only to access digital technologies but also to use them meaningfully and benefit from them. For community-based organizations, this requires attention to affordability, infrastructure, digital skills and the relevance of digital communication to community members' circumstances.

These concerns are particularly important in rural settings, where connectivity and resources may be uneven. Relying on digital communication can unintentionally exclude people who lack devices, connectivity, affordability or digital literacy skills. Digital communication should therefore be considered alongside other communication channels. This perspective is relevant to CYIC because the study examines the coexistence of face-to-face and digital communication.

2.2.6 Participatory Communication in the Kenyan Context

Participatory communication in Kenya occurs within a context that is shaped by devolved governance, community development, established interpersonal communication practices and increasing digitalization. The Constitution of Kenya (2010) provides an institutional foundation for participation. Article 10 identifies participation of the people among the national values and principles of governance, while Article 174 identifies enhancing

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people's participation in the exercise of state power as an objective of devolution. Article 196 further provides for public participation in county assembly processes.

Formal recognition of participation, however, does not necessarily guarantee meaningful influence. The difference between participation as a procedural requirement and participation as meaningful influence is therefore important in the Kenyan context. Communication channels may exist without ensuring that community members can express their views, receive feedback or influence decisions.

Kenya's communication environment also combines established interpersonal and community-based forms with digital communication. Community meetings, public forums and other face-to-face activities continue to provide spaces for engagement, while mobile phones, social media and messaging applications provide additional communication channels. Participation may therefore occur across both physical and digital spaces.

The Kenyan context provides an appropriate setting for examining participatory communication as a social and contextual process. The issue is not simply whether communication channels exist, but how they are used, who can participate, which forms of knowledge are recognized and whether participation creates opportunities for influence and empowerment.

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2.3 Empirical Literature Review

Empirical studies show that participatory communication can create opportunities for engagement, knowledge sharing and empowerment but they also show that power relations, institutional practices, digital inequalities and context shape participation. The literature therefore does not suggest that participation automatically results in empowerment.

2.3.1 Participatory Communication and Community Engagement

Kenyan evidence shows the importance of participation quality and timing. Kamau and Khsiebi (2022), examining participatory communication in the Lamu Port project, found that

project-affected communities' concerns could not be understood simply by counting consultation opportunities. Their study highlighted the importance of meaningful opportunities for affected communities to express their interests and concerns.

Muli et al. (2024), examining communication planning for the diffusion of improved maize varieties in semi-arid Lower Eastern Kenya, also found that effective participatory communication requires stakeholder involvement in assessing communication needs and developing communication strategies. Participation may therefore be weakened when important communication decisions are made without adequate stakeholder involvement.

In Ghana, Odoom et al. (2024) examined participatory communication in delivering development services within a decentralized government system. Their findings show the continued importance of participatory communication while also identifying challenges in translating institutional participation into meaningful engagement.

These studies show that participation depends on how much stakeholders are involved in communication processes. However, the studies focus primarily on infrastructure, agricultural communication and decentralized development services. Less attention has been given to smaller community-based organizations where communication may occur continuously through interpersonal, community and digital channels. This provides a basis for examining CYIC as an organizational setting in which participation is part of everyday community engagement.

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2.3.2 Dialogue, Power and Meaningful Participation

Empirical studies continue to challenge the assumption that participation is automatically empowering. Kamau and Khsiebi (2022) argue that communities that are involved in participatory processes may not have equivalent power to influence decisions. Their findings emphasize the importance of community members' ability to express concerns and influence outcomes.

Research from South Africa provides a related perspective. Molale and Fourie's (2023) study of municipal participation found that institutionalized participation could become passive where communities were primarily informed about decisions without being actively involved in determining them. These findings suggest that institutional arrangements can shape the quality of participation across different development contexts.

Power may nevertheless differ between government projects and community-based organizations. In large infrastructure or government settings, formal institutions may concentrate decision-making authority. Within community-based organizations, power may be more relational and may involve programme coordinators, organizational leaders, community representatives, donors or digitally active members.

Muli and Oloo (2025), looking at communication in county budget-making in Makueni County, found that community engagement was associated with effective budget outcomes while overreliance on existing participation methods was negatively associated with effectiveness. Their findings also indicated continued reliance on public barazas, limited use of digital platforms and a need to strengthen feedback mechanisms.

These studies demonstrate that the existence of participatory structures does not establish meaningful participation. However, much of the existing research examines participation from government, institutional or project perspectives. The present study therefore gives particular attention to community members' experiences of participation at CYIC, including whether they can express views, receive feedback and perceive their contributions as influencing community activities or decisions.

2.3.3 Participatory Communication and Community Empowerment

Empirical studies suggest that communication can contribute to empowerment where communities participate actively in knowledge production, problem-solving and collective action. Anyolitho et al. (2024), for instance, examining a schistosomiasis communication

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campaign in Uganda using citizen science and participatory action research, show how community involvement in identifying problems, producing knowledge and developing responses can strengthen community agency.

Jaya and Sarwoprasodjo (2024), examining a participatory development communication model among farmer groups in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, also link participatory communication to empowerment through processes that involve community members in identifying needs and developing solutions.

Kenyan research also demonstrates the relationship between participation and empowerment. Fidler et al. (2024), examining community-based conservation in Kenya and Tanzania, found relationships between individual and community empowerment and perceptions of conservation effectiveness. Gichuki et al. (2024), studying community-based participatory approaches to improve access to trachoma treatment in a pastoral conflict area of Kenya, highlight the value of community involvement in responding to local social and geographical conditions.

Kehinde and Alabi (2026), looking at participation in community-based organizations and poverty eradication among rural households in Osun State, Nigeria, further demonstrate the relevance of organizational and socio-economic conditions to community participation.

These studies show that participation can contribute to empowerment, but they do not support an assumption that empowerment is automatic. The present CYIC case study therefore examines empowerment through participants' experiences of information access, confidence, skills, collaboration, collective action and influence without treating participation itself as evidence of empowerment.

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2.3.4 Digital Technologies, Participatory Communication and Hybrid Participation

Empirical research increasingly shows that digital technologies can complement established communication channels. Githaiga and Wildermuth (2022), studying young women in Mathare, Nairobi, found that radio and mobile communication supported information access, conversations and livelihood opportunities, while socio-economic and cultural conditions constrained the empowering potential of ICTs.

Maina and Simiyu (2024), examining Mathare FM in Nairobi, also show how digital transformation can extend community media and social inclusion. Their findings are relevant because they highlight the possibility of integrating digital communication with established community communication practices instead of treating digitalization as a complete replacement.

Katunga et al. (2024), examining social media use by development actors in South Africa, found that social media and instant messaging applications created additional opportunities to reach and engage citizens. The study nevertheless emphasizes the importance of integrating digital platforms within broader communication strategies.

Kimotho (2025), looking at a Kenyan agricultural WhatsApp group, found that the platform supported information and resource sharing as well as discussion and collaboration among members. This highlights how everyday digital platforms can support community-based knowledge exchange.

These studies suggest that digital technologies can extend participatory communication beyond physical meetings. However, social and institutional conditions still shape digital participation. This creates a need to examine how digital and face-to-face communication function together and whether digital platforms extend participation or reproduce existing

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inequalities. This study addresses this issue through the concept of hybrid participatory communication at CYIC.

2.3.5 Digital Inclusion, Participation and the Limits of Technological Access

Existing literature also shows that access to technology is uneven. Examining digital divides among informal enterprises across sub-Saharan Africa, Girollet (2024) found that substantial differences in digital technology use were linked to socio-economic and organizational characteristics. The study is important because it shows that physical access alone does not eliminate inequalities in digital use. Gender remains a key aspect of digital inequality. Shiferaw (2024), using municipal-level data in South Africa, found that men tended to use the internet more frequently than women, even though national differences in mobile phone ownership had decreased. The findings show that differences in digital use can persist even where basic access becomes more widespread. Astuti and Ayinde (2025) also show that digital technology adoption across sub-Saharan Africa is uneven, demonstrating differences between countries and populations. Their findings reinforce the need to consider the conditions that shape technology adoption and not assume digital expansion is uniform across the region. The Communications Authority of Kenya and the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2025) reported that mobile phone ownership among people aged three years and older was 53.7% nationwide, compared with 64.6% in urban areas and 48.6% in rural areas. Internet use was also significantly higher in urban than in rural areas. These differences highlight the ongoing relevance of geographic inequalities when digital communication is considered a means of participation. Research on rural South Africa also identifies infrastructural and socio-economic barriers to digital participation (Mwansa et al., 2025). These studies show that digital inclusion is more than just providing access to a platform. Affordability, infrastructure, digital literacy skills, patterns of use, and the capacity to benefit from digital communication also shape participation. These findings are particularly pertinent to the present study, as CYIC operates

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within a community context where participants may possess varying levels of access to devices, connectivity and digital literacy skills. Therefore, the study examines digital communication not only in terms of platform availability, but also in relation to how participants access and utilize these platforms, the opportunities they afford and the barriers that may constrain participation.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Participatory Communication Theory and draws on Paulo Freire's dialogical approach and Jan Servaes' multiplicity paradigm as complementary theoretical perspectives.

Participatory Communication Theory is appropriate because the study examines communication as a process through which community members exchange knowledge, express concerns, participate in decisions and potentially strengthen their capacity to influence issues affecting them. The theory therefore provides the broad framework for examining both communication processes and their potential contribution to community empowerment.

Freire's (1970) dialogical approach provides the principal relational perspective. Freire challenges the "banking" model, in which experts transfer knowledge to passive recipients, and instead emphasizes dialogue, reciprocity, reflection and action. In this study, the approach provides a basis for examining whether CYIC's communication practices enable community members to express their views, contribute their knowledge, participate in discussions and develop confidence and agency. It also highlights power by asking whether opportunities to speak are accompanied by recognition of community knowledge and meaningful influence.

Servaes' (1999, 2008, 2020) multiplicity perspective complements Freire by emphasizing the social, cultural, political and economic contexts in which communication and development occur. The perspective rejects the assumption that a single development model can be applied uniformly and instead emphasizes locally relevant development processes. For

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this study, it provides a basis for examining CYIC's communication practices in relation to local experiences, community relationships, available technologies and established communication practices in Tharaka Nithi County.

The two perspectives therefore serve complementary purposes. Freire emphasizes the relational dimensions of participation, particularly dialogue, reciprocity, voice and agency, while Servaes emphasizes the contextual dimensions of participation. Together, they provide a framework for examining participatory communication across both face-to-face and digital spaces.

The framework also guides interpretation of the four study objectives. For the first objective, Freire's perspective highlights dialogue, reciprocity, voice and mutual learning, while Servaes' perspective focuses on whether communication practices reflect local needs and circumstances. For the second objective, the framework considers whether meaningful participation contributes to knowledge, confidence, skills, collective action and perceived influence. For the third objective, it provides a basis for examining whether digital technologies facilitate participation while also considering accessibility, contextual suitability and their relationship with established communication practices. For the fourth objective, it highlights relational and contextual constraints, including unequal participation, institutional power, limited digital skills, resource constraints and unequal access.

The framework has limitations. Freire's ideas emerged within a particular historical and educational context and therefore require contextual interpretation when applied to contemporary digital communication. Similarly, participatory communication does not automatically eliminate power inequalities or produce empowerment. Participants may engage in dialogue while continuing to experience unequal access to resources, institutional authority or digital technologies. The study therefore uses Participatory Communication Theory as an interpretive framework instead of assuming that participation necessarily results in

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empowerment. Instead, it examines whether and how CYIC's communication practices create opportunities for dialogue, participation and empowerment and the conditions that enable or constrain these processes.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

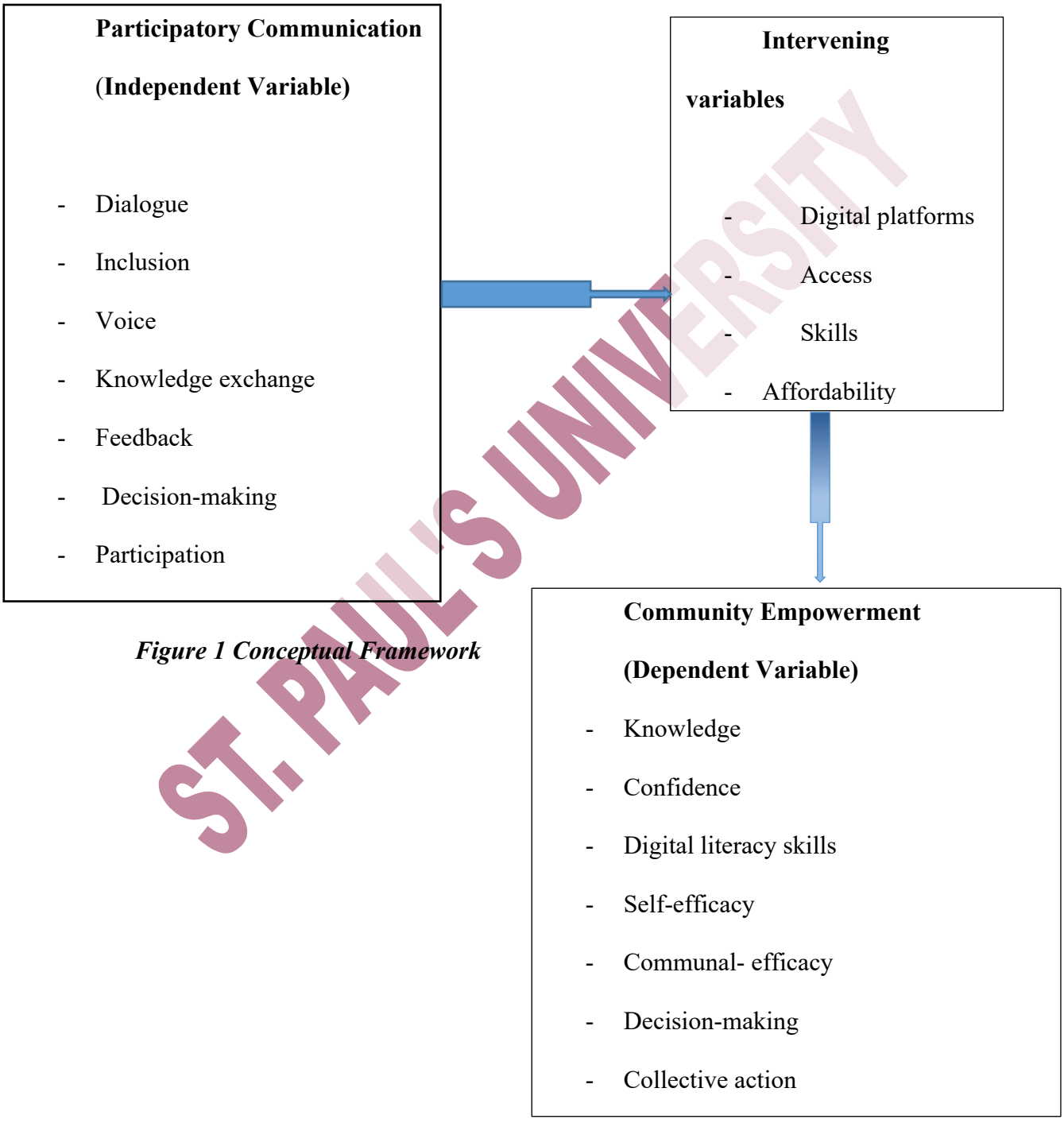


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

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The conceptual framework identifies participatory communication as the independent variable, community empowerment as the dependent variable and digital technologies and contextual conditions as intervening variables. Participatory communication refers to dialogue, inclusion, voice, knowledge exchange, feedback and involvement in decision-making. This aligns with objective one, which investigates the participatory communication approaches implemented by CYIC. Community empowerment encompasses access to knowledge, skills, confidence, self-efficacy, influence, decision-making and collective action, corresponding to objective two, which evaluates the contribution of participatory communication to community empowerment. Digital technologies such as digital platforms, internet connectivity, affordability and digital skills can facilitate information sharing and interaction. However, limited access and skills may constrain participation. This is addressed in objective three, which examines the role of digital technologies in supporting or constraining participatory communication. Contextual factors, such as socio-economic, cultural and institutional conditions, available resources and CYIC's responsiveness, may further enable or restrict participation and empowerment. Objective Four identifies the challenges affecting participatory communication and community empowerment. The framework suggests that participatory communication can foster community empowerment, while digital technologies and contextual conditions may either enhance or limit this relationship.

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2.6 Research Gap Analysis

The reviewed literature demonstrates that participatory communication can create opportunities for dialogue, inclusion, knowledge sharing, participation and community empowerment. However, the literature also shows that participation does not automatically result in meaningful influence or empowerment. The extent to which communication becomes participatory depends on the opportunities available for people to express their views, influence decisions, access information, receive feedback and take part in collective action. These

observations point to four related gaps that this study addresses: a contextual gap concerning rural community-based organizations in Kenya; an empirical gap concerning the relationship between communication participation and empowerment; a technological gap concerning the interaction between digital and face-to-face communication; and a methodological gap concerning the need for in-depth qualitative accounts of participants' experiences.

2.6.1 Contextual Gap

The literature reviewed shows considerable interest in participatory communication within development programmes and specific sectors such as infrastructure, agriculture and community-based initiatives. For instance, studies in Kenya have examined participatory communication in the Lamu Port project and stakeholder involvement in agricultural communication processes (Kamau & Khsiebi, 2022; Muli et al., 2024). Research has also looked at communication within community-based organizations, including the use of digital platforms to communicate development initiatives (Muninzwa, 2023). However, comparatively less attention has been given to how participatory communication operates within community-based organizations as part of everyday community development practice. This is particularly relevant in rural contexts where communication may combine formal meetings with interpersonal and locally established practices.

The Kenyan literature therefore provides useful evidence on participation, communication and development, but much of the research focuses on particular sectors, projects or programmes rather than the everyday communication practices of grassroots community organizations. Research on CBOs also demonstrates that community voice and participation are shaped by relationships between communities and development actors, including how community perspectives are heard and acted upon (Woensdregt, 2023). This suggests the importance of examining participation within the organizational and local contexts in which communication takes place.

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The contextual gap is therefore not simply the absence of research in Kenya or Tharaka-Nithi County. Instead, there is limited context-specific evidence on participatory communication within rural Kenyan community-based organizations and how these practices relate to community empowerment. The Chuka Youth Information Centre provides an opportunity to examine this issue within specific grassroots setting. By focusing on CYIC, the study contributes evidence on how participatory communication is organized and experienced within a rural CBO and how local communication practices relate to community participation and empowerment.

2.6.2 Empirical Gap

The literature establishes a broad connection between participation and empowerment but leaves the process linking the two insufficiently explained. Participation may involve receiving information, attending meetings, expressing opinions or contributing to discussions. These activities, however, do not necessarily mean that participants influence decisions, develop greater confidence or contribute to collective action. Cornwall (2008) emphasizes that the meaning and quality of participation depend on who participates, what they participate in and the extent to which their participation has influence. Similarly, empowerment is more than participation itself. It involves developing the capacity and opportunities to exercise influence and control over matters affecting individuals and communities (Zimmerman, 2000).

This distinction reveals an important empirical gap. Existing research shows that participatory approaches can support development outcomes, but less is known about how participants experience the shift from communication and participation to empowerment. In particular, we need to understand whether access to information leads to greater confidence, whether opportunities to express views lead to decision-making influence, and whether dialogue contributes to collective action and community ownership.

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The gap is consequently not whether participation is beneficial in principle. Rather, it concerns the conditions and communication processes through which participation may become meaningful empowerment. This study addresses that gap by examining participants' experiences at CYIC without assuming that participatory communication automatically produces empowerment. It considers empowerment in relation to information access, participation in decision-making, civic engagement, confidence to express views, collective action and community ownership. This allows the study to distinguish between participation as presence or communication and participation as meaningful influence.

2.6.3 Technological Gap

The literature also indicates that digital technologies have expanded the spaces through which communities can communicate and participate. Mobile phones, messaging applications and social media can facilitate the circulation of information, maintain relationships between physical meetings, support discussion and create additional opportunities for feedback. However, digital communication does not necessarily replace established face-to-face forms of participation. Participatory communication is shaped by the social, cultural and material context in which technologies are used (Servaes, 1999; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009).

A further issue is that technological access does not automatically translate into meaningful digital participation. Differences in connectivity, affordability, ownership, and digital literacy skills can determine who is able to use digital platforms and how effectively they can use them. Recent Kenyan ICT evidence also demonstrates continuing differences between rural and urban access and internet use, reinforcing the importance of examining digital participation in relation to wider conditions of access and inclusion (Communications Authority of Kenya & Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2025).

Despite growing attention to digital participation, empirical understanding remains limited on how digital communication interacts with existing face-to-face communication

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practices within rural community-based organizations. In particular, less is known about whether digital platforms complement traditional participation, extend communication beyond physical meetings, create new opportunities for engagement or introduce additional forms of exclusion.

This study addresses this gap by examining communication across both digital and face-to-face spaces at CYIC. Instead of treating technology as inherently empowering, the study considers how participants experience its use alongside established community communication practices. It therefore examines digital communication as part of a broader participatory communication environment and considers both its enabling and constraining effects.

2.6.4 Methodological Gap

The methodological review indicates that participatory communication and empowerment have been examined through quantitative, mixed-method and qualitative approaches. Quantitative approaches can identify patterns of participation and access while mixed-method studies can provide evidence of relationships between participation and development outcomes. However, such measures may not fully capture how individuals understand participation, experience inclusion or exclusion, interpret empowerment or perceive changes in their ability to influence community affairs.

A qualitative approach is particularly relevant where the concepts under investigation are experiential and context-dependent. Empowerment may be expressed through increased confidence, improved knowledge, greater willingness to speak, stronger relationships, involvement in community decisions or the ability to mobilize others. Similarly, meaningful participation may involve experiences of being heard, receiving feedback or seeing community views reflected in action. These aspects are difficult to understand through participation rates or access indicators alone.

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This creates a methodological gap in in-depth qualitative examination of participatory communication and empowerment within rural Kenyan community-based organizations, especially where communication occurs across both offline and digital spaces. Addressing this gap requires attention to participants' own accounts and to the context in which communication occurs.

This study addresses this methodological gap through a qualitative case study of CYIC. The approach enables the study to examine participants' experiences and perceptions within their specific organizational and community context. Through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the study identifies patterns in how participants describe communication practices, participation, digital engagement, challenges and perceived empowerment. This provides contextual evidence that complements existing research based on surveys, programme assessments and institutional perspectives.

2.6.5 Alignment of the Research Gaps with the Study Objectives

The four identified gaps are directly addressed by the four research objectives of the study.

Table 1 Alignment of the Research Gaps with the Study Objectives

Research gap	What remains insufficiently understood	Study objective addressing the gap	Contribution of the CYIC study
Contextual gap	Limited evidence on participatory communication within rural Kenyan	Objective1 : Explore participatory communication practices at CYIC	Provides a locally grounded account of communication practices within a rural

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	CBOs		Kenyan CBO
Empirical gap	Limited evidence explaining how participation translates into meaningful empowerment	Objective2 : Assess how participatory communication contributes to community empowerment	Examines perceived changes in knowledge, confidence, agency, decision-making and collective action
Technological gap	Limited research examining the interaction between digital and face-to-face participation	Objective3 : Analyse the role of digital technologies in participatory communication and empowerment	Examines whether digital communication complements, extends or constrains existing community participation
Methodological gap	Limited in-depth qualitative evidence capturing participants' experiences and meanings of participation and empowerment	Objectives 1-4: Investigate practices, outcomes, digital participation and challenges through qualitative inquiry	Provides participant-centred, context-sensitive evidence through an in-depth qualitative case study
Cross-cutting gap	Limited understanding of the	Objective 4: Identify	Identifies institutional,

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	conditions that enable or constrain meaningful participation	challenges affecting participatory communication and empowerment	technological, socio-economic and communication barriers affecting participation

Each one of the research objectives addresses a specific gap in the existing literature. The first objective documents participatory communication within CYIC. The second investigates the relationship between participatory communication and empowerment. The third examines both digital and face-to-face communication modalities. The fourth identifies the conditions and experiences that influence participation. This study seeks to provide empirical evidence on participatory communication in a rural Kenyan community-based organization (CBO), participants' experiences, the interaction between digital technologies and communication practices and the extent to which participation contributes to community empowerment.

2.7 Summary

This chapter reviewed general and empirical literature on participatory communication, community empowerment and digital communication. The general literature established that participatory communication emphasizes dialogue, inclusion, knowledge exchange, voice and community agency, while empowerment involves the capacity to exercise influence and collective action. The literature also showed that participation does not automatically lead to empowerment and that digital technologies can both extend participation and reproduce inequalities.

The empirical literature shows that power relations, institutional practices, technological access and local context shape participation quality. Kenyan and African studies

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have provided evidence from infrastructure, agriculture, governance, community development and digital communication settings, but they have paid less attention to everyday participatory communication within rural community-based organizations.

Four gaps were therefore identified: contextual, empirical, technological and methodological. These gaps provide the basis for examining participatory communication, community empowerment and the interaction between digital and face-to-face communication through a qualitative case study of the Chuka Youth Information Centre in Tharaka Nithi County.

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CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodology for examining participatory communication and community empowerment at the Chuka Youth Information Centre (CYIC) in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya. The study adopted a qualitative case study approach to understand participants'

experiences and perspectives within the specific context of a community-based organization (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Yin, 2018).

The primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 27 purposively selected participants who had relevant experience with CYIC's programmes and communication activities. The researcher also held a sit-down discussion with a CYIC programme coordinator to obtain contextual information about the organization's communication history and evolution. The interview data were recorded through detailed handwritten notes and field notes… The data were then analyzed manually using thematic analysis, involving familiarization with the data, coding, identifying patterns and developing themes in relation to the research questions. Thematic analysis provides a systematic approach to identifying and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.2 Research Design

The study used a qualitative case study design to examine participatory communication and community empowerment at CYIC. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study focused on participants' experiences, meanings and perspectives. The case study design enabled an in-depth examination of these processes within their specific organizational and community context (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Yin, 2018).

The primary data was obtained through semi-structured interviews with 27 participants who had direct experience with CYIC programmes and communication activities. The design enabled the study to examine community dialogue, participation, empowerment, digital communication and challenges affecting participation.

3.3 Population

The study population comprised individuals with direct experience of the Chuka Youth Information Centre (CYIC) and its community programmes in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya. This included current and former programme participants, community members and volunteers

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who had interacted with CYIC's community engagement and communication activities. The study also obtained contextual information from one CYIC programme coordinator who knew the Centre's communication practices and their development.

3.4 Target Population

The target population comprised current and former CYIC programme participants, community members and volunteers who had direct experience of the Centre's participatory communication activities. Eligible individuals had participated in activities involving community dialogue, consultation, information sharing, feedback, collaboration or decision-making, including both traditional face-to-face and emerging digital communication practices. From this target population, 27 participants (P01-P27) were purposively selected to provide the study's primary empirical data. The CYIC programme coordinator was consulted separately for contextual information and was not included among the 27 interview participants.

3.5 Sampling Technique

The study used purposive sampling to select participants with direct and relevant experience of CYIC's programmes and participatory communication activities. Purposive sampling is appropriate in qualitative research because it enables researchers to deliberately select information-rich participants whose experiences are relevant to the research questions and objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Campbell et al., 2020). The CYIC programme coordinator assisted the researcher by identifying and introducing potential participants. However, participation remained voluntary, and the researcher applied the study's inclusion criteria. Participants were selected from current and former CYIC programme participants, community members and volunteers who had engaged in activities involving dialogue, consultation, information sharing, feedback, collaboration or decision-making. The approach prioritized the relevance and depth of participants' experiences (Yin, 2018).

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3.6 Sample Size

The study included 27 participants (P01-P27) purposively selected from the target population. These participants provided the primary empirical data on participatory communication, community empowerment, digital communication and challenges affecting participation. In addition, one CYIC programme coordinator provided separate contextual information about the development of the Centre's communication practices. The separate discussion with the CYIC programme coordinator was not included in the sample size because it was conducted solely to obtain contextual information.

The sample of 27 participants was considered appropriate for the qualitative case study because the study prioritized depth and relevance of information (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). The principle of information power was also considered, whereby a focused research question, specific study population and information-rich participants can support an adequate sample size in qualitative interview research (Malterud et al., 2016). The 27 interviews provided sufficient material to identify patterns, differences and variations relevant to the four study objectives.

3.7 Data Collection Instrument

The primary data-collection instrument was a semi-structured interview guide which was designed to explore participants' experiences and perceptions of participatory communication and community empowerment at the Chuka Youth Information Centre (CYIC). This guide included open-ended questions that aligned with the study objectives, addressing participatory communication practices, community empowerment, digital communication and the challenges to participation. This semi-structured format ensured there was consistency across interviews. Kallio et al. (2016) emphasize that systematically developing semi-structured interview guides strengthens the rigor and trustworthiness of qualitative data collection.

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During the interviews, the researcher took detailed handwritten notes because participants did not consent to audio recording. The notes captured participants' responses and key explanations as closely as possible and were reviewed and expanded immediately afterwards, while the discussions remained fresh. The resulting interview notes constituted the primary qualitative dataset and were later subjected to a manual thematic analysis. Therefore, quotations presented in Chapter Four are identified as excerpts from the interview notes. Because the interviews were not audio-recorded, the researchers handled participant quotations cautiously. Where the notes did not preserve participants' exact wording, the participants' accounts were paraphrased.

A separate contextual discussion was held with one CYIC programme coordinator to obtain background information about the development of the Centre's communication practices. The information obtained was used only to provide organizational context and to support understanding of how CYIC's communication practices had evolved; it was not treated as participant interview data or included in the primary dataset.

3.8 Piloting of the study

Prior to collecting the main data, the researcher conducted a pilot study to test the semi-structured interview guide in order to refine data collection procedures. The researcher piloted the semi-structured interview guide with two individuals who met the study's inclusion criteria but were not included in the final sample. The pilot assessed the clarity, relevance and sequencing of the questions and identified areas requiring refinement. It also initially tested a small-group interview format. The pilot showed that some participants contributed more extensively than others, which could limit the opportunity for individual perspectives to emerge. Hence, the main study used individual semi-structured interviews to allow each participant to provide detailed accounts of their experiences. The pilot also identified questions that were too broad or needed clearer wording, leading to refinement. The interview guide was

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therefore refined before the main data collection. This helped researchers identify weaknesses in research instruments (Saunders et al., 2023).

The researcher also held a separate contextual discussion with one CYIC programme coordinator to develop background understanding of the Centre's communication history. This discussion was not part of the pilot, was not one of the 27 participant interviews and was not included in the primary qualitative dataset. It provided contextual background for interpreting participants' accounts of the development of CYIC's communication practices.

3.9 Trustworthiness

In this qualitative study, trustworthiness was considered in terms of credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, the semi-structured interview guide was piloted with two participants who met the study criteria but were excluded from the final sample. The pilot helped identify unclear questions, refine wording and improve the sequencing of questions before the main interviews. Individual interviews were subsequently used because the pilot indicated that a group format could limit participants' opportunities to express their individual experiences.

Second, a separate discussion with a CYIC programme coordinator provided contextual information about the Centre's communication history and practices, including its earlier use of barazas, community meetings, drama and skits and its more recent adoption of digital platforms. This discussion provided context, helping the researcher interpret participants' accounts within the broader development of CYIC's communication practices.

Third, participants were purposively selected because of their direct experience with CYIC's programmes and communication activities. During the interviews, the researcher used the same semi-structured guide and allowed follow-up questions when clarification or further detail was needed. Since participants did not consent to audio recording, the researcher used detailed handwritten interview notes and field notes to document their responses.

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Finally, the researcher conducted a systematic manual thematic analysis. The researcher reviewed interview notes repeatedly, coded them, compared them, grouped them into categories and developed themes in relation to the research questions. The researcher also retained notes on the development of codes and themes to maintain an audit trail and support dependability and confirmability. These procedures strengthened the credibility of the findings while maintaining transparency about how the data were collected and interpreted (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.10 Reliability

In qualitative research, reliability refers to the consistency and transparency of the research process. In this study, the researcher strengthened dependability through systematic data collection, documentation of methodological decisions and consistent thematic analysis.

The researcher used a semi-structured interview guide aligned with the research objectives and questions. The guide was refined after the pilot study, which identified questions that needed clearer framing, and this supported the decision to conduct individual interviews. The researcher used the same core questions across the 27 interviews, while follow-up questions allowed participants to clarify or elaborate on their experiences.

Because participants did not consent to audio recording, the researcher maintained detailed handwritten interview and field notes. The researcher also documented methodological decisions, including revisions from the pilot and the procedures used for data organization, coding, categorization and theme development. This documentation provided an audit trail showing how the study progressed from data collection to the final findings.

For analysis, the researcher systematically and manually reviewed all interview notes. The researcher followed the stages of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), including familiarization with the data, coding, development and review of themes and interpretation.

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These procedures strengthened the consistency and transparency of the research process and supported the reliability of the findings

3.11 Data Collection Procedures

The researcher first obtained ethical clearance from the Institutional Scientific and Ethics Review Committee (ISERC) of St. Paul's University (see Appendix C), approval from the University's Postgraduate Department (see Appendix B) and a research permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) (see Appendix D). The researcher then sought permission from CYIC management to conduct the study. During the initial visit, the researcher explained the purpose, scope, academic nature and confidentiality arrangements of the study.

The CYIC programme coordinator served as the key organizational contact person, and they helped in identifying and introducing potential participants who met the study's inclusion criteria. The researcher then adopted purposive sampling to select participants with direct experience of CYIC's communication and community engagement activities. Participation was voluntary. Before each interview, the researcher explained the purpose of the study, the nature of the participant's involvement, confidentiality arrangements and the right to decline participation or withdraw without consequence. Participants were given an opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification before deciding whether to participate. The researcher then obtained written informed consent from each participant before the interview began. Participants were also asked whether they were comfortable with audio recording. Most participants did not consent to audio recording, and the researcher respected their preference by taking detailed handwritten notes and field notes instead.

The researcher collected data through 27 individual semi-structured interviews conducted at convenient and appropriate locations within or near CYIC. The researcher used the same interview guide across interviews, asking follow-up questions when clarification or

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further detail was needed. Because participants did not consent to audio recording, the researcher took detailed handwritten interview notes and additional field notes during each interview.

Immediately after each interview, the researcher reviewed and expanded the notes while the discussion was still fresh to ensure important responses and contextual observations were captured. The researcher assigned each interview a participant code from P01 to P27 and stored the records securely to protect participants' confidentiality. The interview notes became the primary qualitative data source for the study and were later analyzed manually using thematic analysis.

The researcher held a contextual discussion with a CYIC programme coordinator in order to understand the Centre's communication history and the transition from predominantly face-to-face approaches to the increasing use of digital platforms. The discussion provided background information on earlier communication practices, including barazas, community meetings, drama and skits, church-based awareness activities and community mobilization, as well as more recent use of WhatsApp and other digital channels. This information was not treated as an additional participant interview or included in the 27-participant dataset, but it was used to contextualize and support interpretation of the primary interview findings.

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3.12 Data Analysis

The study analyzed the 27 semi-structured interview records using manual reflexive thematic analysis, informed by Braun and Clarke's (2021) approach. This method was appropriate because it provides a systematic yet flexible way to identify and interpret patterns of meaning across qualitative data. It also allows the researcher to remain engaged with the data and consider how themes relate to each research question and the study's wider context (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Byrne, 2022). The primary data source was handwritten interview

notes from P01-P27 and accompanying field notes. The interview notes were reviewed and expanded immediately after interviews while the discussions were still fresh. This process helped organize participants' accounts before the full analysis. The separate discussion with the CYIC programme coordinator and the available contextual information about earlier communication practices were treated as contextual information.

The analysis was conducted in phases. The first phase was the researchers' familiarization with the data. Analysis began during fieldwork by reviewing handwritten interview notes after each interview. The researcher revisited the notes, clarified incomplete sections where possible and recorded relevant contextual observations. After completing all 27 interviews, the researcher repeatedly read the full set of interview records to become familiar with the dataset and identify recurring ideas, differences and potentially significant accounts. This enabled the researcher to engage closely with the data before developing themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The second phase involved generating initial codes. The researcher then manually coded the 27 interview records. The researcher identified statements relevant to the research questions and assigned descriptive codes. They included community dialogue, community meetings, feedback, consultation, shared decision-making, youth participation, access to information, community ownership, collective action, WhatsApp communication, digital exclusion and digital literacy challenges

The third phase was developing categories and candidate themes. Related codes were compared and grouped to identify broader patterns of meaning. For instance, codes relating to dialogue, consultation, meetings and feedback were considered together in examining participatory communication practices. Codes relating to information sharing, WhatsApp and digital engagement were examined in relation to digital participation. Codes relating to confidence, decision-making, ownership, collaboration and collective action were considered

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in relation to community empowerment. This analysis was guided by the four research objectives. The researcher then compared codes across the data sources to determine which patterns were meaningful and supported by participant accounts to represent themes. This distinction is important in reflexive thematic analysis where themes represent patterns of shared meaning developed through engagement with the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Byrne, 2022).

The fourth phase reviewed and refined the themes. The researcher reviewed initial themes against the coded extracts and the complete interview data source. The researcher checked whether each theme had sufficient supporting evidence and whether it accurately represented the range of participant experiences. The researcher combined similar themes where appropriate. For instance, where participants described similar experiences, these were noted as patterns. Contradictory or minority accounts were retained where they provided important insight into differences in participation, digital access, age, occupation or other contextual factors.

The fifth phase defined and named themes. The refined themes were then clearly defined in relation to the study objectives and research questions. The analysis resulted in four dominant areas of findings: participatory communication approaches at CYIC; community empowerment outcomes; the role of digital technologies in participatory communication; and challenges affecting participation and empowerment.

Within these findings, we identified more specific subthemes from participants' accounts. These included the use of dialogue and community meetings, consultation and feedback, shared decision-making, access to information, confidence and collective action, digital communication, digital exclusion and the continued importance of face-to-face communication.

The contextual information obtained from the CYIC programme coordinator was used alongside this analysis to help explain the historical development of CYIC's communication

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practices. Information regarding earlier reliance on barazas, drama and skits, church-based awareness activities and community mobilization helped place participants' accounts within the Centre's transition from predominantly traditional communication practices towards a combination of traditional and digital channels. This contributed to the emergence of hybrid participatory communication as an important context-specific finding.

The sixth and final phase of the analysis was developing the findings. The final themes organized Chapter Four around the four research objectives. Participant accounts were identified as P01-P27 to maintain confidentiality.

Since the interview data were handwritten notes, participant evidence is presented carefully, with wording reported only to the extent supported by the notes. This approach maintains transparency about the data source.

The final analysis therefore moved beyond simply summarizing what participants said. It examined what their accounts suggested about how participatory communication operated at CYIC, including the relationship between dialogue, participation, influence and empowerment; the interaction between digital and face-to-face communication; and the socio-economic and institutional conditions that enabled or constrained participation.

3.13 Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical requirements for research involving human participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Scientific and Ethics Review Committee (ISERC) of St. Paul's University; see Appendix C. The researchers obtained a research permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI); see Appendix D. Permission to conduct the study was also obtained from the management of the Chuka Youth Information Centre (CYIC).

Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their right to decline participation or withdraw, and how the information provided would

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be used. Informed consent was obtained before each interview. Participants' identities were protected through codes P01 - P27. The researcher securely stored interview notes, field notes and consent forms and used them solely for academic purposes.

Most participants did not consent to audio recording. The researcher therefore respected their preference and relied on detailed handwritten interview notes and field notes as the primary account of the interviews. The researcher reviewed and expanded the notes immediately after each interview to preserve the accuracy and context of participants' responses.

Two participants took part in the pilot study and were excluded from the main sample. Information obtained during the pilot was treated confidentially and was used only to refine the interview guide and data-collection procedures.

3.14 Summary

This chapter presented the methodology used to examine participatory communication and community empowerment at the Chuka Youth Information Centre (CYIC) in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya. It described the qualitative case study design, study and target populations, purposive sampling and the selection of 27 participants with direct experience of CYIC activities. The chapter also outlined the use of semi-structured individual interviews, the pilot study and refinement of the interview guide and the use of a discussion with a CYIC programme coordinator to strengthen contextual understanding of the organization's communication practices.

The chapter further explained the data collection procedures, including the use of handwritten interview notes and field notes as most participants did not consent to audio recording. The chapter also described a separate contextual discussion with a CYIC programme coordinator, which provided background information on the Centre's earlier and current communication practices such as barazas, community meetings, skits, church-based awareness

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activities and its gradual adoption of WhatsApp and other digital platforms. This contextual information was not treated as a substitute for the primary interview data. The chapter described the measures used to enhance credibility and dependability, the manual thematic analysis of the interview data and the ethical procedures followed throughout the study. These methodological choices provided a systematic basis for presenting and interpreting the study findings in Chapter Four.

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CHAPTER FOUR: DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and analyzes the findings from the 27 participants through semi-structured interviews conducted with participants who had direct experience with the Chuka Youth Information Centre (CYIC) and its community activities in Tharaka-Nithi County, Kenya. The interview data was analyzed manually using thematic analysis by reviewing the handwritten interview notes and field notes, identifying recurring ideas, developing codes and grouping related codes into themes. Similarities, differences and contrasting experiences were retained to reflect the range of participant perspectives.

The findings are presented under four themes that emerged from the data. Theme One: Participatory Communication Practices; Theme Two: Community Empowerment Outcomes; Theme Three: Digital Technologies and Participatory Communication; and Theme Four: Challenges Affecting Participatory Communication. Participant accounts are used as the primary evidence, with relevant differences and contrasting experiences presented to provide a balanced interpretation of the findings.

4.2 Participant Characteristics

The study involved 27 participants with different levels of engagement with CYIC. Participants included community beneficiaries, youth, members of community and savings groups, volunteers and other community members who had participated in CYIC activities. Their involvement varied, with some participants reporting relatively long-term engagement while others participated more occasionally. This variation provided different perspectives on CYIC's participatory communication practices and their perceived contribution to community empowerment.

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4.2.1 Gender Distribution

The study included 27 participants: 14 females and 13 males. This relatively balanced representation provided perspectives from both women and men on CYIC's communication practices, community participation and empowerment outcomes. The participant accounts did not suggest that participatory communication was restricted to one gender. Instead, both female and male participants described participation through community dialogue, meetings, interpersonal communication and, for some, digital platforms such as WhatsApp.

4.2.2 Occupational Characteristics

The 27 participants represented diverse livelihood backgrounds such as farming, small businesses, trading, tailoring, carpentry, motorcycle transport, community volunteering and other local economic activities. This occupational diversity provided varied perspectives on participation in CYIC activities and highlighted how everyday livelihood responsibilities can shape opportunities for community engagement.

Participants who were involved in farming as their livelihood said that agricultural activities could sometimes make it difficult to attend scheduled meetings, especially when these activities coincided with the busy farming seasons. Traders and small-business owners also noted that work obligations sometimes affected their availability for physical meetings. These experiences highlight the importance of timely and flexible communication in order to sustain participation and community engagement.

Community volunteers and mobilizers occupied a different position because their roles involved sharing information, mobilizing participants and linking CYIC with community members. Their experiences also provided insight into how communication moved between the organization and the wider community.

The findings suggest that participation was influenced not only by willingness but also by the practical circumstances of participants' everyday lives. Work, farming, family

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responsibilities, mobility and the timing of activities could affect attendance and engagement. CYIC's combination of traditional approaches such as meetings and community outreach, with emerging digital communication, particularly WhatsApp, therefore provides alternative ways of maintaining contact with community members who may not always be able to attend physical activities.

This finding also helps explain why CYIC's gradual transition toward digital communication should be understood as a complementary method to its established face-to-face communication practices.

4.2.3 Length of Association with CYIC

Participants had different lengths of association with CYIC ranging from relatively recent involvement to longer-term engagement. This variation was useful in understanding how the Centre's communication practices have developed over time.

Participants with longer associations recalled a period when CYIC relied mainly on face-to-face and community-based communication, including barazas, community meetings, interpersonal mobilization, drama and skits, and awareness activities conducted in community spaces and churches. These approaches were used to reach community members on issues such as HIV/AIDS awareness and stigma reduction, support for vulnerable children and women, education and other community development initiatives. Participants with more recent involvement described a communication environment in which these approaches continue to be used alongside WhatsApp and other emerging digital platforms.

The historical information obtained from the CYIC programme coordinator showed that the Centre's earlier community outreach involved collaboration with development and donor partners such as USAID, Grace Africa, and Uwezo Fund; more recently, USAWA, in implementing community-oriented initiatives. These activities show that CYIC's participatory communication continues to evolve alongside its development programmes.

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The findings therefore point to a gradual transition from traditional to digital communication. Face-to-face approaches remain important for community mobilization, dialogue and relationship-building, while digital platforms, particularly WhatsApp, increasingly support information sharing, coordination and continued engagement between physical activities. This hybrid communication environment is important for understanding the findings on participatory communication and community empowerment at CYIC.

4.3 Data Analysis and Development of Themes

The interview data were analyzed manually using thematic analysis. After each interview day, the researcher reviewed and expanded the handwritten responses and field notes while the interview details were still fresh. The researcher then repeatedly read the P01–P27 interview records to become familiar with the dataset and identify meaningful sections of participants' accounts. Initial codes included dialogue, consultation, small-group discussion, community influence, feedback, information access, confidence, leadership, collective action, WhatsApp communication, digital access, community volunteers and participation barriers. Related codes were grouped into broader categories and compared across participants. The categories were thereafter organized into four themes aligned with the study objectives: Participatory Communication Practices Used by CYIC; Community Empowerment Outcomes of Participatory Communication; Role of Digital Technologies in Supporting or Constraining Participatory Communication; and Challenges Affecting Participatory Communication. The analysis highlighted similarities and differences among participants. In particular, P26 showed stronger digital engagement, while P27 provided a contrasting account characterized by more limited use of digital platforms and greater reliance on face-to-face communication, neighbors and community volunteers. The themes therefore emerged from recurring patterns across the 27 interviews. The analytical process followed the sequence of participant evidence, coding, category development, theme development and findings.

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4.3.1 Theme One: Participatory Communication Practices Used by CYIC

The first theme concerned the participatory communication approaches CYIC used to engage community members in dialogue and activities. Across the interviews, participants described communication as involving more than the transmission of information. They referred to community dialogue meetings, consultation, small-group discussions, community meetings, community mobilization, interpersonal communication, community volunteers, feedback and, increasingly, digital communication. The participant accounts therefore indicate that CYIC's communication practices generally provided opportunities for community members to express concerns, discuss priorities and contribute to activities.

A recurring pattern was using dialogue and consultation before planning activities. Participants described CYIC as starting discussions by asking community members to identify issues affecting them instead of simply presenting predetermined solutions. P01 captured this approach by stating that they appreciate that CYIC usually begins by listening to the community instead of arriving with ready-made solutions. P01 went on to further explain that dialogue meetings gave community members opportunities to discuss issues while small discussion groups allowed participants to identify concerns before presenting them to the wider group. Similar experiences were reported by P02, P03, P06, P10, P11, P13, P16, P17, P18, P19, P20, P21, P22, P23, P24, P25 and P27. These accounts show that dialogue and consultation were recurring patterns. The findings identify dialogue, consultation, small-group discussions and listening as recurring codes under the category of dialogue, consultation and inclusive engagement.

Smaller discussion groups also supported participation. Participants explained that small groups created opportunities for people who might be less comfortable speaking in larger meetings to express their views. P02 described using small groups during community dialogue, while P09, P10, P16, P17, P18 and others similarly referred to smaller discussion spaces. These

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accounts show that participation was facilitated not only by inviting community members to meetings but also by using communication methods that encouraged broader participation.

Some participants further described situations in which community input influenced practical aspects of programme implementation. This included changes in meeting times, venues, communication methods, meeting structure and follow-up arrangements. P01 described a situation in which participants indicated that a planned youth awareness activity coincided with market and work commitments after which the activity was spread across several days and some sessions were held at more convenient times. P02 also described changes to meeting schedules after participants shared that farming periods made attendance difficult. P03 stated that women raised concerns about having to for travel long distances to meeting venues after which activities were organized closer to the different villages. P08 described venue changes to improve accessibility while P17 reported meeting times being adjusted to accommodate young people who worked during the day.

These perspectives show that participants influenced the process. This also showed that community influence extended beyond scheduling and venues. P04 stated that participants requested more practical demonstrations during entrepreneurship training after which local entrepreneurs were involved in follow-up sessions. P19 similarly described participants requesting more interactive activities leading to the introduction of group exercises and practical demonstrations. P25 described participants requesting greater follow-up on recommendations after which progress updates were incorporated into subsequent meetings. These instances showed that participants' input influenced to some extent how activities were delivered.

Community volunteers and interpersonal communication also played an important role in CYIC's participatory approach. Participants described volunteers making community visits, sharing information, reminding members about activities and following up with people who

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were unable to attend meetings. P06, P13, and P21 particularly described volunteers' role in reaching households and supporting communication between CYIC and community members. This was important where some participants did not regularly use digital platforms. P21, for instance explained that volunteers could visit people who could not attend meetings and collect their views. This showed that interpersonal outreach functioned alongside community meetings and digital communication without replacing them.

The interviews also showed that CYIC's participatory communication has developed over time. Some participants recalled earlier reliance on face-to-face and community-based communication such as village meetings, barazas, church announcements, home visits, word of mouth, markets, storytelling, drama, role plays and songs. P18 described earlier reliance on barazas, church announcements, village meetings and word of mouth. P19 recalled drama, role plays and songs while P22 discussed storytelling and traditional songs. P23 described markets and trading centers as important spaces for exchanging community information. P25 also referred to barazas, church announcements, women's group meetings, home visits and conversations among neighbors. These accounts indicate that the digital era has added communication channels to an existing community communication environment. Feedback was another recurring component of CYIC's communication practices. Participants described facilitators asking what had been useful, what should be improved and what should happen after activities.

Several participants gave examples where suggestions led to changes in subsequent activities. P01 reported that a suggestion for more practical group activities was reflected in follow-up sessions. P03 described recommending greater involvement of women as facilitators and later observing increased participation by women. P11 suggested allowing more time for questions, while P18 recommended reviewing previous meeting actions at the beginning of meetings. P20 stated that the programme facilitators introduced progress reviews after

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participants suggested them on earlier occasions. P26 also reported that meeting summaries were shared more consistently after participants recommended that. The findings identify feedback, programme improvement, progress reviews and responsiveness as a recurring pattern. However, the analyses also showed that participation was not equally sustained. P05 noted that some people attended initial activities but did not continue participating, while P09 and P10 similarly indicated declining participation over time. P24 noted that first-time participants required additional encouragement before contributing. These different variations are important because they show that participatory communication opportunities do not automatically guarantee continuous participation by every community member involved.

Theme One shows that CYIC's participatory communication practices were characterized by dialogue, consultation, small-group discussion, community mobilization, interpersonal outreach, feedback and opportunities for practical community influence. The approaches combined established community communication practices with newer digital channels. The evidence also indicates that participation varied in intensity and continuity, and that community influence was most clearly demonstrated through practical adjustments to activities, communication arrangements and follow-up processes.

4.3.2 Theme Two: Community Empowerment Outcomes of Participatory Communication

The second theme examined how participants perceived participatory communication to contribute to community empowerment. The interviews indicated that empowerment was experienced in several interconnected ways such as improved access to information, greater confidence to express opinions, communication and leadership skills, increased participation, cooperation, collective action and a stronger sense of community responsibility.

Improved access to information was one of the most frequently reported outcomes. Participants explained that communication through community meetings, announcements,

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volunteers, WhatsApp and other channels enabled them to receive information earlier and prepare to participate. P02 stated that information previously reached some community members after meetings had already taken place but that community announcements and WhatsApp enabled earlier access. P03 also shared that women previously depended on neighbors for information but increasingly received information through WhatsApp, volunteers and community gatherings. P04 reported accessing information about entrepreneurship opportunities, training and community initiatives through CYIC activities. Similar accounts were provided by P06, P07, P08, P10, P11, P12 and P13. The findings identify access to information as a primary element of empowerment.

Access to information was linked to greater willingness to participate. Participants frequently described moving from primarily receiving information to becoming more active in community discussions. P01 described increased confidence among young people and said that younger people ask questions and contribute ideas. P03 also reported becoming more confident speaking during community meetings and discussions, while P08 also identified increased self-confidence. P11 and P12 described becoming more comfortable contributing during meetings. P27, who relied more heavily on face-to-face communication, stated that they became more willing to express opinions because facilitators listened respectfully. These accounts suggest that empowerment was not just about receiving information but also about opportunities to use it through participation and through dialogue.

Confidence and voice were particularly prominent in the participants' accounts. P01 reported that the young people felt more confident when asking questions and contributing ideas. P02 stated that participation increased his confidence in speaking and contributing during community discussions. P03 reported moving from mainly listening to expressing her views more openly. P04 described becoming more comfortable sharing ideas in public, while P08 identified confidence as one of the most important changes associated with participation that

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they have experienced. The recurrence of confidence across different participant groups indicates that voice and self-expression were important aspects of the observed empowerment process. Participants also associated participatory communication with developing communication, leadership, and facilitation skills.

P01 referred to learning communication skills, teamwork and facilitation. P04 described developing leadership skills and mentoring younger participants. P06 associated volunteering with improved communication and leadership skills. P09 described learning that leadership involves listening, while P10 explained that participation had improved her ability to facilitate discussions and encourage quieter members to contribute. These experiences show that participation was perceived not only as an opportunity to express views but also as a space for learning interpersonal and leadership skills.

Another aspect of empowerment involved teamwork and collective action. Several participants provided examples in which issues discussed during dialogue were followed by community-initiated activities. P02 described a self-help group organizing a community clean-up after a dialogue session. P06 also described environmental clean-up activities arising from community discussions. P09 reported joint environmental activities involving different community groups. P15 described teamwork among churches, women's groups and youth groups to support vulnerable families. P16 reported community members organizing a shared footpath rehabilitation activity, while P20 described community members organizing repairs to a damaged footbridge. These accounts indicate the connection participants perceived between dialogue and collective action.

Importantly, this suggests that community ownership was stronger when participants perceived the action as emerging from their own discussions. P06 clearly differentiated community-led action from activities directed by CYIC, while P16 also stated that CYIC facilitated discussion, but community members organized and carried out these activities. P17

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reported that young people volunteered for an activity because they felt the decision belonged to the community. P25 described the value of involving community members from planning through implementation. These accounts show that empowerment was directly linked to responsibility and ownership and not simply participating in an organization-led activity.

The findings, however, show that empowerment doesn't look the same for everyone and it is never truly finished. Some participants participated only occasionally, and some reported that attendance declined after initial activities. P05 noted that enthusiasm decreased when there was limited follow-up. P10 and P25 also highlighted the importance of continuous communication to maintain involvement. Although participants described positive changes in information access, confidence, teamwork and collective action, these outcomes depended on the continuity and accessibility of participation.

Theme Two shows that participants associated participatory communication with multidimensional empowerment. The outcomes extended from improved access to information and confidence to communication skills, leadership, cooperation, community ownership and collective action.

4.3.3 Theme Three: Role of Digital Technologies in Supporting or Constraining Participatory Communication

The third theme concerned the role of digital technologies in CYIC's participatory communication. Participants commonly identified WhatsApp and mobile phones as useful for sharing information, sending reminders, continuing discussions, sharing summaries and coordinating activities. At the same time, participants repeatedly emphasized that digital communication did not reach everyone equally. The evidence therefore points to digital technology as an extension of participation, not a replacement for face-to-face communication.

Participants who used digital platforms regularly described faster, more continuous communication. P01 stated that WhatsApp reminders reduced the likelihood of missing

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meetings and allowed discussions to continue even after physical meetings. P04 described WhatsApp as useful for receiving meeting reminders, training materials and follow-up discussions. P10 also reported that WhatsApp enabled immediate sharing of reminders and meeting summaries. P19 and P20 described faster circulation and sharing of announcements and updates, while P26, who was the most digitally engaged participant, reported using WhatsApp regularly to stay informed and continue discussions between meetings. P26 stated that digital communication extends participation without replacing it entirely. This indicates a broader pattern from the interviews: digital platforms increased the speed/timeliness and the continuity of communication while face-to-face dialogue remained important for meaningful discussion and decision-making.

Digital communication also supported coordination and follow-up. P01 said that discussions continued through WhatsApp after physical meetings. P18 stated that WhatsApp and phone calls enabled information to reach participants more quickly. P23 shared that participants informally discussed information received online at the market before attending meetings. P26 highlighted WhatsApp as useful for coordinating an environmental clean-up after the initial face-to-face dialogue. These different examples show that digital communication extended the communication process beyond the physical meeting.

However, this indicated significant differences in digital engagement. Some participants reported limited smartphone use, lack of internet bundles, unreliable network access or lower confidence in digital communication. P02 noted that some older community members did not use smartphones and that some participants could not afford internet bundles. P03 also reported that some women did not own smartphones or shared phones with family members. P08 mentioned internet costs and limited digital skills while P17 identified bundle costs as a challenge for some young people. P20 and P22 also reported network and access

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difficulties. These accounts show that affordability, device access, connectivity, digital literacy skills and communication preferences affected digital participation.

The contrast between P26 and P27 is particularly useful in understanding this variation. P26 described strong engagement with WhatsApp and viewed digital platforms as an important way to maintain communication between meetings. P27, in contrast, shared knowing about WhatsApp but did not use it regularly. He relied more on community meetings, neighbors and community volunteers in order to receive information. At the same time, P27 did not reject digital communication. Instead, he recognized its usefulness for faster communication, especially among younger participants, while emphasizing that digital communication should support and not replace community meetings.

The interviews also revealed that digital communication could create communication difficulties. P09 noted that written messages could sometimes be misunderstood because participants could not immediately ask questions. P10 and P12 referred to information overload when participants belonged to several WhatsApp groups. P26 noted that some participants read messages but did not respond. These experiences indicate that digital access alone does not guarantee meaningful participation. The quality of interaction, interpretation of information and willingness to engage also matter.

The participants therefore consistently favored combining digital communication with face-to-face and interpersonal approaches. P01 stated that both methods complement each other. P02 recommended integrating WhatsApp with face-to-face meetings and community visits. P06 described using WhatsApp alongside home visits, phone calls and community gatherings. P18, P20, P21, P24, P25 and P26 also characterized digital communication as a means for supporting community dialogue and not replacing it. P27's account provided the clearest contrasting case because their participation depended mainly on non-digital channels while still acknowledging the benefits of digital communication.

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The findings further show that the digital era has not eliminated earlier established community communication practices. Participants referred to barazas, church announcements, village gatherings, home visits, markets, storytelling, drama, songs, word of mouth and interpersonal communication. Instead of treating these approaches as obsolete, participants described them as continuing to perform important functions, especially where digital access was limited or where issues required detailed discussion and direct interaction. The resulting pattern is therefore one of communication continuity and adaptation.

Theme Three shows that digital technologies have expanded the speed, reach and continuity of CYIC's communication, particularly through WhatsApp and phone communication. However, unequal access, affordability, connectivity, digital confidence and communication preferences constrain their inclusiveness. The evidence therefore supports a hybrid communication pattern, in which digital tools extend participation while face-to-face, interpersonal and community-based communication remain important spaces for dialogue, explanation and collective decision-making.

4.3.4 Theme Four: Challenges Affecting Participatory Communication

The fourth theme addressed the challenges that affected participation and the effectiveness of CYIC's communication practices. Participants identified several interconnected barriers, including unequal digital access, internet and data costs, unreliable connectivity, work and livelihood responsibilities, family responsibilities, travel and meeting schedules, reluctance to speak, declining participation, expectations of material support and gaps in follow-up. The findings therefore show that barriers to participatory communication were not technological alone but were also social, economic and contextual.

Digital inequality was a recurring pattern. Some participants reported differences in smartphone ownership, internet access, affordability and digital confidence. P01 shared that some participants could not afford internet bundles regularly or did not own smartphones. P03

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also reported difficulties among some of the women in her savings group. P08 mentioned internet costs and having limited digital literacy skills as a key challenge. P17 noted that internet bundles were expensive for young people, while P22 reported unreliable network coverage. P27 provided the strongest contrasting case, stating that they sometimes missed digital messages because they did not regularly use their phone or have internet bundles. These accounts show that digital communication can increase access for some participants while creating or reinforcing exclusion for others.

Everyday livelihood responsibilities were another major constraint that was identified. Some participants mentioned farming, business, employment, family responsibilities and travel as factors affecting their attendance. P01 especially stated that others members were busy with farming or running businesses, making it difficult to participate consistently. P02 also described farming seasons as a major factor that affected meeting attendance, while P03 discussed the difficulty of balancing participation with family and business responsibilities. P11 shared that market days conflicted with some of the planned community activities. P17 stated that young people who depend on daily income may find it difficult to attend meetings. P20 and P21 also identified work and other family responsibilities as participation constraints, while P27 noted that farming and family responsibilities sometimes prevented or hindered attendance. These accounts show that participation takes place within competing livelihood demands.

Meeting schedules as well as accessibility were closely connected to participation. Participants shared how some community members sometimes requested changes in meeting times, venues and even formats to accommodate their different circumstances. P02 reported that meetings were adjusted to late afternoons and more convenient days. P03 shared that activities were held closer to villages after women raised concerns about traveling for long distances to attend and participate in meetings. P08 mentioned meeting-venue accessibility.

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These instances indicate that accessibility can determine if an opportunity for participation is functional.

The data also revealed barriers related to confidence and unequal voice. Some participants described quieter members, first-time participants or people who feared criticism as being less likely to contribute. P03 reported that some participants hesitated to express their views because they feared criticism. P04 referred to shy participants. P06 noted that some people still believed their opinions were less important than others'. P08 also mentioned concerns about being judged or misunderstood. P09 reported that some participants hesitated to disagree because they did not want to offend others. P24 noted that first-time participants might require encouragement. These accounts show that creating a participatory space does not automatically ensure equal voice.

Another challenge was on how to sustain participation over time. P05 shared that some people attended initial meetings but did not continue participating. P09, P10 and P25 also identified declining engagement or the need for continued follow-up. P26 shared that some participants remained less active after initial project excitement. These experiences show that participation requires ongoing communication, follow-up and visible responsiveness, not a single meeting invitation.

Participant expectations also affected sustained participation. P01 and P02 shared that some people expected immediate material or financial assistance from participation in programmes. When such expectations were not met continued involvement became difficult. This finding is important because it shows that participation is influenced not only by communication methods but also by participants' understanding of what an organization can provide. Clear communication about programme purposes and expected outcomes may therefore be important for maintaining realistic expectations.

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Feedback gaps were another challenge. Although participants generally reported opportunities to provide feedback, some stated that they did not always receive sufficient information about what happened to their recommendations. P03 noted that motivation declined when participants did not receive updates. P05 shared that suggestions were sometimes acknowledged without follow-up information. P10 and P25 emphasized the importance of showing how community suggestions were used. This is important: collecting feedback is not the same as demonstrating responsiveness.

The findings therefore show that participants identified practical ways of addressing these challenges. They repeatedly recommended multiple communication channels, community visits, village-based meetings, small-group discussions, regular feedback and continued use of digital platforms alongside face-to-face communication. P13 acknowledged the role of community volunteers in reaching many households. P15 also recommended working through already existing community groups. P21 highlighted home visits and community volunteers. P25 encouraged integrating established community approaches with digital technology. P26 suggested maintaining digital, face-to-face and interpersonal communication. P27 highlighted the importance of community volunteers and multiple communication methods. These recommendations emerged from participants' experiences of what enabled or constrained participation.

Theme Four shows that participatory communication at CYIC is affected by a combination of technological, economic, livelihood, social and organizational factors. Unequal digital access is significant, but it is only one part of the participation challenge. Work and farming schedules, family responsibilities, travel, confidence, expectations, sustained engagement and feedback gaps also influence participation. The findings therefore demonstrate the importance of flexible, inclusive and multi-faceted communication instead of relying on one communication method.

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4.4 Summary

The chapter presented findings from interviews with 27 CYIC participants and identified four themes: participatory communication practices, community empowerment outcomes, the role of digital technologies and challenges affecting participatory communication. Participants described CYIC as using dialogue, consultation, small-group discussions, community meetings, volunteers, feedback and digital communication to engage community members. Participants associated these practices with improved access to information, confidence, communication and leadership skills, cooperation, community ownership and collective action. Digital technologies, particularly WhatsApp were viewed as useful for timely information, mobilization and follow-up, but unequal access, costs and connectivity limited their inclusiveness. Everyday livelihood responsibilities, unequal voice, sustained participation and feedback gaps also affected engagement. The findings show that CYIC operates within an evolving hybrid communication environment in which digital communication extends instead of replacing face-to-face and interpersonal community dialogue.

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CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the study's findings in relation to the four research objectives, research questions, theoretical framework, conceptual framework and relevant literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The discussion focuses on the participatory communication approaches used by the Chuka Youth Information Centre (CYIC), their contribution to community empowerment, the role of digital technologies and the challenges affecting participation. The chapter distinguishes between access to information, participation, influence and empowerment because the findings show that these do not necessarily occur at the same level. The chapter concludes with the study's conclusions, recommendations and suggestions for further research.

5.2 Discussion of Key Findings

The discussion is organized according to the four research objectives. Each objective is examined in relation to the evidence presented in Chapter Four and interpreted using the theoretical and conceptual perspectives established in Chapter Two.

5.2.1 To examine the participatory communication approaches used by CYIC to promote community empowerment

The first objective examined the participatory communication approaches CYIC uses to support community engagement and dialogue. The findings showed that CYIC uses community meetings, dialogue sessions, small-group discussions, consultation, feedback, community mobilization through volunteers, interpersonal communication, and follow-up communication. Participants described communication as extending beyond receiving information to include expressing views, exchanging ideas, raising concerns and, in some cases, influencing programme arrangements. For instance, participants reported that

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community members were able to suggest changes to meeting times, venues and programme activities when existing arrangements did not suit their circumstances. These findings demonstrate that participation occurred at different levels, ranging from information sharing and consultation to dialogue and situational influence.

The findings are consistent with Freire's (1970) dialogical approach, which views communication as a process of dialogue through which people reflect on their experiences and participate in addressing issues affecting their lives. They also support Servaes' (2020) multiplicity perspective, which emphasizes context, local knowledge and communication processes that respond to the social and cultural realities of particular communities. In the CYIC case, local relationships, community networks, volunteers and face-to-face engagement shaped participation. This is also consistent with Gebeyehu and Jira (2023), who found that participatory communication can facilitate community involvement in rural development when communication processes are adapted to local circumstances. Fadipe and Molale (2024) also show the importance of dialogue and public participation within community-based development communication.

However, the findings show that participatory communication should not automatically be equated with empowerment or complete decision-making power. Participants influenced specific programme arrangements but this did not establish that community members controlled all organizational decisions. This aligns with Odoom et al. (2024) who found that participation can occur at different levels and that communication opportunities do not necessarily mean that communities exercise full decision-making power. The CYIC findings therefore indicate that the quality and depth of participation are more important than just the existence of meetings or communication channels.

The first objective demonstrates that CYIC's participatory communication is diverse, context-sensitive and evolving. Its effectiveness was reflected not simply in the number of

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communication methods used but also in the opportunities created for dialogue, consultation, feedback and participation in selected programme decisions. This finding supports the study's conceptualization of participatory communication as a process involving interaction, voice, knowledge exchange, feedback and influence, not one-way information transmission.

5.2.2 To assess how participatory communication contributes to community empowerment

The second objective examined how participatory communication contributes to community empowerment. The findings showed that participants linked their involvement to improved access to information, increased confidence in expressing views, stronger communication and leadership skills, participation in decision-making, collaboration and collective action. Participants described becoming more willing to speak during community meetings, contribute ideas, encourage others to participate and work collectively on community concerns. These findings suggest that empowerment was experienced through several interconnected aspects not a single outcome.

The findings support Freire's (1970) view that dialogue can contribute to awareness, voice and collective action. They also align with Rappaport's (1987) understanding of empowerment as greater capacity to influence matters affecting one's life and with Laverack's (2006) emphasis on participation, leadership, organizational capacity and collective action. Servaes (2020) further emphasizes that development processes should recognize local knowledge and enable communities to participate in ways that fit their social and cultural contexts. At CYIC, empowerment was characterized in participants' increased confidence, willingness to contribute, collaboration with others and involvement in community activities.

The findings, however, show that access to information, participation, influence and empowerment are related but distinct. Receiving information can create an opportunity to participate, but it does not necessarily provide decision-making power. Also, being consulted

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does not guarantee that others will act on one's views. This aligns with Vander Kelen et al. (2023), who found that community participation can contribute to empowerment, but the extent of empowerment depends on the depth and nature of participation and existing power relations. This also supports Odoom et al. (2024), who explain that participatory communication does not automatically result in empowerment. At CYIC, the strongest indicator of influence occurred when participants reported that their feedback resulted in changes to programme arrangements or encouraged collective community action.

The findings also show that empowerment was relational and collective. Participants described working with volunteers, neighbors, community groups and other residents to address shared concerns. This suggests that empowerment was not limited to individual confidence or knowledge but also involved the ability to work with others. Therefore, the second objective supports the conceptual relationship between participatory communication and community empowerment while showing that empowerment at CYIC was contextual and uneven. Participatory communication created conditions that supported empowerment, but the extent of empowerment depended on meaningful participation, organizational responsiveness and opportunities for collective action.

5.2.3 To examine the role of digital technologies in supporting or constraining participatory communication at CYIC

The third objective examined how digital technologies supported or constrained participatory communication. The findings showed that WhatsApp, mobile communication and, to a lesser extent, social media platforms supported rapid information sharing, meeting reminders, mobilization, follow-up and communication between physical meetings. Participants valued digital platforms because they enabled information to reach them more quickly and allowed communication to continue after face-to-face activities. However, digital communication did not replace face-to-face interaction. Instead, the findings showed that

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digital and face-to-face communication operated alongside one another establishing an evolving hybrid communication pattern.

This finding aligns with Githaiga and Wildermuth (2022) whose Kenyan study shows that mobile communication can support information access and empowerment while socioeconomic circumstances continue to shape participation. This also aligns with Ooko (2023) who shows that WhatsApp can create spaces for participation while raising questions about inclusion and the conditions under which digital spaces become meaningful participatory environments. Nyagaya and Mwau (2024) also found that unequal access can constrain digital participation in marginalized communities and argued for integrating physical and digital forms of engagement instead of treating digital participation as a replacement for other forms of communication.

The CYIC findings further show that access to a digital platform did not guarantee equal participation. Some participants were active WhatsApp users, while others relied more heavily on face-to-face meetings, neighbors, volunteers or other interpersonal channels. Participants identified smartphone ownership, internet costs, connectivity, digital literacy skills and usage patterns as factors affecting their ability to participate digitally. This supports the digital divide perspective which recognizes that digital inequality involves not only physical access to technology but also affordability, skills and meaningful use.

The findings therefore challenge the assumption that digitalization automatically produces participation or empowerment. In relation to Freire's (1970) dialogical perspective, a digital platform may provide an opportunity for interaction, but its existence does not guarantee equal voice, dialogue or influence. Servaes' (2020) emphasis on context is relevant because CYIC's digital practices developed within an already established community communication environment. The findings therefore show that digital technologies function most effectively at CYIC when they complement established face-to-face and interpersonal communication.

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The resulting hybrid approach extends the reach and continuity of participation while maintaining alternative channels for community members who are less digitally engaged.

5.2.4 Objective Four: To identify the challenges affecting participatory communication at CYIC

The fourth objective examined the challenges affecting participatory communication. The findings identified several barriers, including unequal access to smartphones and internet connectivity, the cost of mobile data, differences in digital skills and usage, work and family responsibilities, declining participation over time and differences in expectations concerning development programmes. These challenges show that participation is influenced not only by communication practices but also by community members' social, economic and technological circumstances.

Participants' accounts also showed digital inequality. Some participants reported relying on face-to-face communication, neighbors or community volunteers because they did not consistently use digital platforms or could not always afford internet bundles. This finding is consistent with Nyagaya and Mwau (2024) who identified unequal digital access as a constraint on participation in marginalized communities. It also aligns with Githaiga and Wildermuth (2022) who state that the benefits of mobile communication are shaped by broader socioeconomic conditions. The findings therefore emphasize the importance of maintaining multiple communication channels without assuming that digital communication independently can reach all community members equally.

Livelihood responsibilities also affected participation. Participants who were farmers, traders or parents explained difficulties attending activities because of farming, market days, work and other family responsibilities. In some instances, participants' concerns about timing and accessibility resulted in adjustments to programme arrangements. This finding is consistent with Muli et al. (2024) whose Kenyan study highlights the importance of stakeholder

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involvement and context-sensitive communication planning. It shows that effective participation requires communication strategies that account for people's everyday circumstances.

Another challenge was sustaining participation and maintaining feedback. Some of the participants shared that people attended initial meetings but became less involved when follow-up was limited or when they were unsure how their contributions were used. This highlights the importance of feedback and organizational responsiveness in participatory communication. Odoom et al. (2024) also show that institutional and resource-related conditions can affect participation. The findings therefore suggest that participatory communication requires continued engagement.

The fourth objective shows that the challenges affecting participation are interconnected. Digital exclusion, affordability, livelihood responsibilities, limited sustained engagement and differing expectations can restrict participation even where communication opportunities exist. The findings do not indicate that CYIC's communication approaches are ineffective. They show why participation needs to remain flexible and inclusive. Integrating digital platforms with face-to-face meetings, interpersonal communication and community volunteers provides alternative routes through which community members can remain connected to development activities.

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5.3 Conclusion

This study examined participatory communication and community empowerment at the Chuka Youth Information Centre (CYIC) in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya. Guided by four objectives, it examined participatory communication practices, community empowerment, the role of digital technologies and challenges affecting participation.

The study concludes that participatory communication at CYIC extends beyond one-way information sharing. Community dialogue, consultations, small-group discussions,

feedback, community mobilization and follow-up provided opportunities for community members to express views and participate in programme activities. The participant accounts, together with contextual information from the CYIC programme coordinator, also indicate that CYIC has long relied on face-to-face approaches such as barazas, community meetings, skits and community awareness activities, particularly in campaigns addressing HIV/AIDS, stigma reduction, education and support for vulnerable community members. These practices continue to provide an important foundation as CYIC gradually incorporates digital communication.

The findings additionally show that participatory communication was associated with different aspects of community empowerment such as access to information, confidence, skills development, participation in decision-making, collaboration and collective action. However, participation did not always translate into decision-making power. Participants were able to influence some programme arrangements, such as activity timing and communication practices, but this did not indicate control over all organizational decisions. Empowerment was therefore multifaceted, relational and uneven, depending on the depth of participation and the responsiveness of the organization.

Digital technologies, particularly WhatsApp and mobile communication, complemented CYIC's established communication practices by supporting information sharing, reminders, mobilization and follow-up. However, digital communication has not replaced face-to-face interaction. Instead, the findings show a hybrid communication context in which digital, interpersonal and face-to-face approaches serve complementary functions. This approach is important because participants differed in access to devices, internet affordability, digital skills, usage patterns and communication preferences.

The study also concludes that factors beyond communication channels influence effective participation. Livelihood responsibilities, internet costs, unequal digital access, varying digital engagement and difficulties sustaining participation can limit involvement.

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CYIC's continued use of multiple communication channels therefore offers important opportunities to maintain inclusion, particularly for community members who are less digitally engaged.

The study concludes that participatory communication can contribute to community empowerment when communication provides opportunities not only to receive information but also to express views, influence appropriate programme decisions and participate in collective action. The CYIC case demonstrates that this process is contextual and uneven, and it is not automatic. The study therefore contributes a context-specific understanding of participatory communication as a hybrid, locally grounded and evolving process, in which traditional community participation remains important while digital technologies enhance communication and participation.

5.4 Recommendations

5.4.1 Recommendations for CYIC Management

CYIC should strengthen participatory communication throughout the programme cycle by involving community members in identifying needs, planning, implementation, feedback and review. The organization should also make feedback mechanisms more visible by communicating how participants' suggestions have been considered and, where appropriate, incorporated into programme decisions. CYIC should maintain its hybrid communication approach by combining community meetings, interpersonal communication, community volunteers, mobile communication and digital platforms such as WhatsApp. Digital communication should complement, not replace, face-to-face engagement, especially for participants with limited digital access or use. The organization should also assess from time to time who is being reached and who may be excluded to adjust communication methods, meeting schedules and engagement strategies accordingly.

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5.4.2 Recommendations for Community Volunteers

Community volunteers should continue serving as communication links between CYIC and community members, especially those with limited or inconsistent digital access. They can support mobilization, share information about activities, clarify messages and identify barriers affecting participation. Volunteers should also share community feedback with CYIC so meeting schedules, information flow and engagement strategies can be adjusted as needed. However, volunteers should facilitate and not replace direct community participation. Their role should be to connect community members to CYIC and create opportunities for them to express their own views.

5.4.3 Recommendations for Government Agencies

National and county government agencies should support the conditions required for meaningful digital and face-to-face community participation. This is by improving affordable and reliable internet connectivity in marginalized communities and supporting accessible digital skills programmes. Government agencies should also recognize the role of community-based organizations and community volunteers in reaching groups that may not be consistently connected to digital platforms. Support for community-level digital inclusion should therefore complement, without replacing existing face-to-face communication structures.

5.4.4 Recommendations for Development Partners

Development partners supporting CYIC and similar community-based organizations should provide resources that support sustained community participation alongside programme implementation. This may include community meetings, volunteer engagement, communication materials, digital communication and appropriate digital skills development. Monitoring frameworks should assess participation beyond attendance numbers by considering whose voices were heard, whether participants influenced decisions, whether feedback was

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acted upon and whether less digitally connected groups were reached. This would provide a more meaningful assessment of participation and empowerment.

5.4.5 Recommendations for Communication Practitioners

Communication practitioners working with community-based organizations should avoid treating digitalization as a replacement for participatory communication. Communication strategies should reflect communities' actual technological, social and economic circumstances and integrate digital platforms with face-to-face dialogue, interpersonal communication and community networks. Practitioners should also distinguish between reach, engagement, influence and empowerment because receiving information does not necessarily constitute participation and digital interaction does not automatically demonstrate empowerment. Monitoring should therefore consider indicators such as voice, inclusion, feedback, influence, ownership and collective action.

5.5 Suggestions for Further Studies

Future research should examine participatory communication across different community-based organizations and counties in Kenya to evaluate whether the hybrid communication pattern identified at CYIC exists in other rural and semi-urban contexts. Comparative and mixed-methods studies could further look at the relationship between digital participation and meaningful influence on decision-making. Studying changes over time could assess whether empowerment outcomes are sustained. Further studies should also pay greater attention to less digitally engaged community members and examine how digital transitions may create or reduce exclusion. Research could additionally explore how community-based organizations are adapting established communication practices as digital technologies become more prominent, including the emerging role of artificial intelligence (AI), digital literacy, accessibility, trust, representation, data governance and community control in participatory communication.

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5.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed the findings in relation to the four research objectives, theoretical perspectives, conceptual framework and relevant literature. The study found that CYIC uses dialogue, consultation, small-group discussions, feedback, community mobilization, interpersonal communication and digital platforms to facilitate participation. These practices were associated with improved access to information, confidence, participation, influence and collective action. However, participation did not automatically result in empowerment or full decision-making power. Digital technologies, especially WhatsApp and mobile communication improved the speed/timeliness and continuity of information sharing but did not replace face-to-face engagement. Instead, the findings demonstrate an evolving hybrid communication pattern shaped by digital access, affordability, digital literacy skills, livelihood responsibilities and the ability to sustain participation. The study therefore concludes that meaningful participatory communication depends not simply on the availability of communication channels but on opportunities for dialogue, inclusion, responsiveness, influence and collective action within the local context.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction

My name is Gift Akinyi Rugendo, a final-year student at St Paul's University pursuing a Master of Arts in Communication, and as part of my studies, I am conducting research on Participatory Communication and Community Empowerment in the Digital Age: A Case Study of Chuka Youth Information Centre, Tharaka Nithi County.

All information you provide will be used solely for academic purposes and will remain confidential. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. This study aims to understand how participatory communication approaches used by Chuka Youth Information Centre contribute to community empowerment. Your information will be used solely for academic purposes and will be kept confidential.

Section A: Background Information

Can you briefly tell me about your involvement with CYIC and how you first became associated with the organization?.....

Section B: Participatory Communication Approaches

Can you describe how CYIC communicates and engages community members during the planning, implementation and evaluation of its programs? Please share examples from activities you have participated in……

Can you tell me about a time when community members influenced decisions made by CYIC? What happened, who participated, and what changes resulted?.....

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Section C: Community Empowerment Outcomes

How have CYIC's communication activities influenced community participation, access to information, confidence, decision-making or collective action? Please give examples……

What changes have you experienced because of participating in CYIC activities?.....

Section D: Digital Technology in Participatory Communication

How have digital technologies such as WhatsApp or Facebook supported or limited community participation? Can you think of a situation where digital communication made participation easier or more difficult?.....

Section E: Recommendations and Lessons Learned

How does CYIC gather and use feedback from community members after activities? Can you share an example?.....

What challenges affect the effectiveness of participatory communication in empowering the community?.....

What recommendations would you make to strengthen participatory communication and community empowerment within CYIC?.....

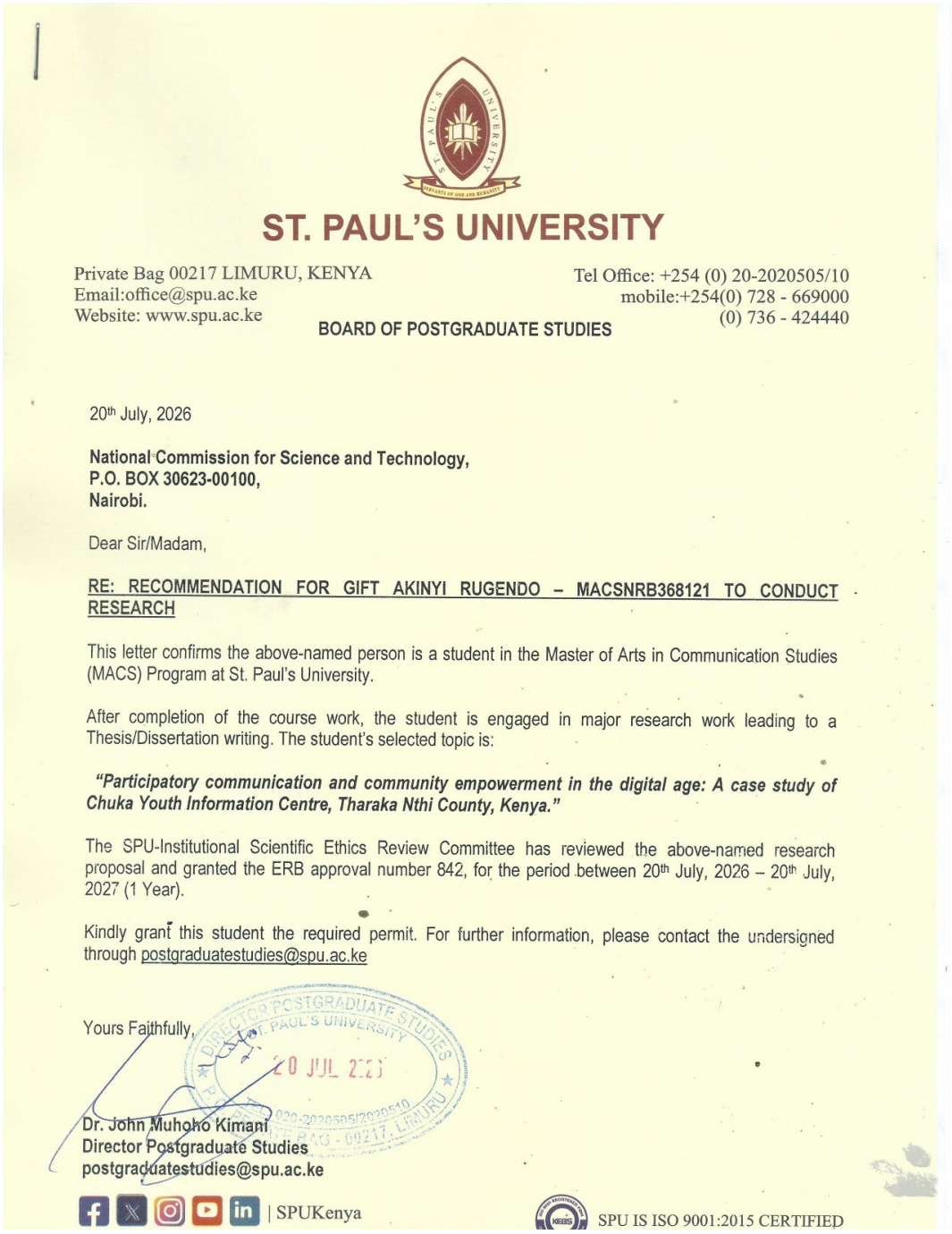
Thank the participant for their time and insights.

Signature of the participant…….

Signature of the Researcher…….

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APPENDIX B: POSTGRADUATE INTRODUCTORY LETTER



ST. PAUL'S UNIVERSITY

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BOARD OF POSTGRADUATE STUDIES

20th July, 2026

National Commission for Science and Technology,
P.O. BOX 30623-00100,
Nairobi.

Dear Sir/Madam,

RE: RECOMMENDATION FOR GIFT AKINYI RUGENDO – MACSNRB368121 TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

This letter confirms the above-named person is a student in the Master of Arts in Communication Studies (MACS) Program at St. Paul's University.

After completion of the course work, the student is engaged in major research work leading to a Thesis/Dissertation writing. The student's selected topic is:

"Participatory communication and community empowerment in the digital age: A case study of Chuka Youth Information Centre, Tharaka Nthi County, Kenya."

The SPU-Institutional Scientific Ethics Review Committee has reviewed the above-named research proposal and granted the ERB approval number 842, for the period between 20th July, 2026 – 20th July, 2027 (1 Year).

Kindly grant this student the required permit. For further information, please contact the undersigned through postgraduatestudies@spu.ac.ke

Yours Faithfully,

DIRECTOR POSTGRADUATE STUDIES ST. PAUL'S UNIVERSITY
20 JUL 2026

Dr. John Muhoho Kimani
Director Postgraduate Studies
postgraduatestudies@spu.ac.ke

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APPENDIX C: ISERC LETTER

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Tel Office: +254 (0) 20-2020505/10
Mobile: +254 (0) 728-669000
(0) 736-424440

REF: SPU/832/2026 **Date: 20th July 2026**

TO: Gift Akinyi Rugendo
St. Paul's University

Dear Gift,

==========

REF: Participatory Communication and Community Empowerment in the Digital Age: A Case Study of Chuka Youth Information Centre, Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya

==========

Greetings,

This is to inform you that SPU- Institutional Scientific Ethics Review Committee has reviewed the above-named research proposal. **Your ERB approval number is 842, for the period between 20th July 2026 – 20th July 2027 (1 year).**

This approval is subject to compliance with the following requirements;

i. Only approved documents including (informed consents, study instruments) will be used.
ii. All changes including (amendments, deviations, and violations) are submitted for review and approval by SPU- Institutional Scientific Ethics Review Committee.
iii. Death and life-threatening problems and serious adverse events or unexpected adverse events whether related or unrelated to the study must be reported to SPU- Institutional Scientific Ethics Review Committee within 72 hours of notification.
iv. Any changes, anticipated or otherwise that may increase the risks or affected safety or welfare of study participants and others or affect the integrity of the research must be reported to *SPU- Institutional Scientific Ethics Review Committee* within 72 hours.
v. Clearance for export of biological specimens must be obtained from relevant institutions.

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vi. Submission of a request for renewal of approval at least 60 days prior to expiry of the approval period. Attach a comprehensive progress report to support the renewal.
vii. Submission of an executive summary report within 90 days upon completion of the study to SPU-Institutional Scientific Ethics Review Committee.
viii. Should there be any publications from your research, note that you are supposed to anonymize the particulars of the respondents, the identifiers and the name of institution (s) where you collected data.
ix. Please note that it is within the ISERC's mandate to monitor your research and to do random visits to the site. All research is subject to post approval monitoring. Kindly provide a closure report after the research.

Prior to commencing your study, you will be expected to obtain a research license from National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) if you are collecting data in the country - https://research-portal.nacosti.go.ke **or obtain other clearances needed in the country where you will collect your data from.**

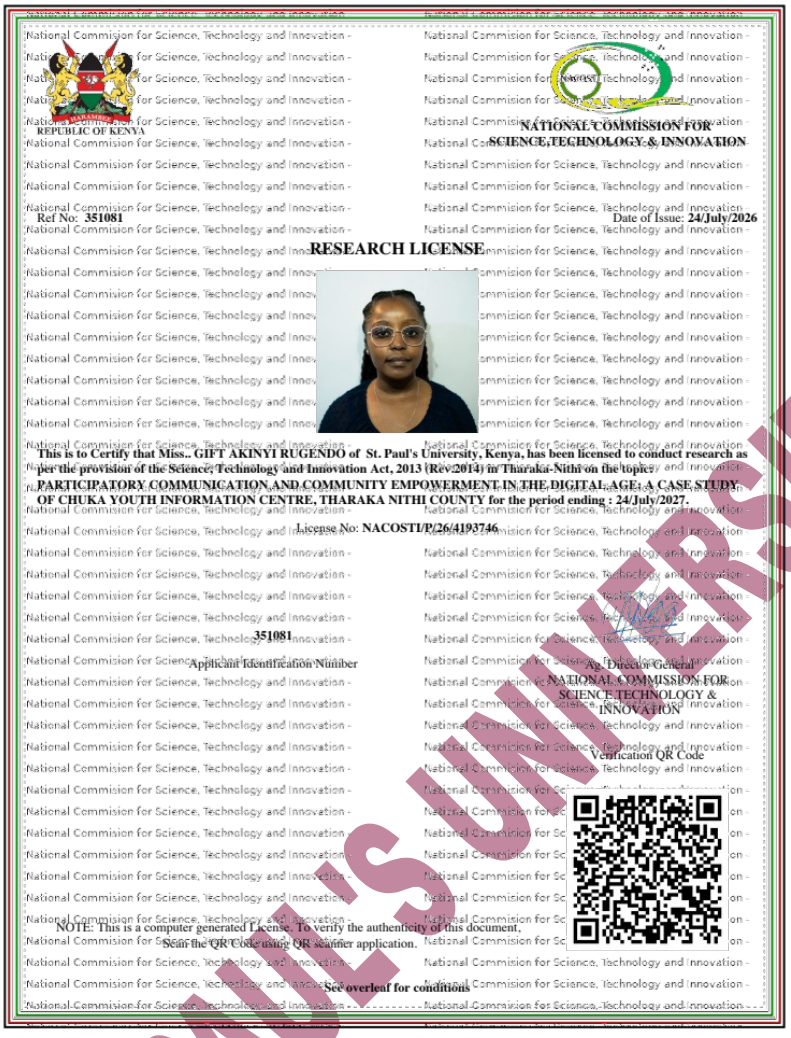
Yours sincerely,

Dr. Daniel Nzengya, PhD
Chairperson
SPU- Institutional Scientific & Ethics Review Committee

ST. PAUL'S UNIVERSITY
(ISERC)
APPROVAL WITH
CONTIGENCIES
RESEARCH
DIRECTORATE
INSTITUTIONAL SCIENTIFIC ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

ST. PA

APPENDIX D: RESEARCH LICENSE



REPUBLIC OF KENYA

NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION

Ref No: 351081

Date of Issue: 24/July/2026

RESEARCH LICENSE

This is to Certify that Miss.. GIFT AKINYI RUGENDO of St. Paul's University, Kenya, has been licensed to conduct research as per the provision of the Science, Technology and Innovation Act, 2013 (Rev.2014) in Tharaka-Nithi on the topic:

PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT IN THE DIGITAL AGE: A CASE STUDY OF CHUKA YOUTH INFORMATION CENTRE, THARAKA NITHI COUNTY for the period ending : 24/July/2027.

License No: NACOSTI/P/26/4193746

351081

Applicant Identification Number

Ag. Director General

NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION

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See overleaf for conditions

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