The Use of Vernacular on Social Media for Citizen-Based Monitoring of Municipal Service Delivery in South Africa

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Abstract

In South Africa, citizens are increasingly using social media to monitor and report failures in municipal service delivery. While Citizen-Based Monitoring (CBM) is gaining traction in public sector reforms, its application through social media remains informal, fragmented, and largely unrecognised by municipal authorities. A notable feature of these practices is the use of African indigenous languages, allowing citizens to articulate grievances authentically within their cultural contexts. Guided by Digital Public Sphere theories and the Uses and Gratifications Theory, this study examines how citizens employ digital platforms – particularly through vernacular expression – to participate in public deliberation, seek accountability and fulfil information, expressive, and community-oriented needs. Using a qualitative design, the research combines content analysis of vernacular posts from municipalities with strong social media presences and in-depth interviews with government officials, community-based organisations (CBOs), and community radio representatives. The findings show that indigenous language use amplifies marginalised voices, enhances accessibility, and fosters communal legitimacy around service delivery grievances. However, municipalities often lack the linguistic capacity, digital tools, and institutional frameworks to monitor or respond effectively to vernacular complaints. Meanwhile, community radio and CBOs play intermediary roles without formal support. The study contributes to digital governance, language justice, and participatory democracy scholarship by proposing a framework to formalise vernacular CBM. Key recommendations include developing multilingual digital engagement strategies, formally partnering with community media, and investing in African-language natural language processing (NLP) tools. Recognising vernacular citizen monitoring practices offers a pathway to more inclusive, responsive, and linguistically representative local governance aligned with South Africa's democratic ideals.

Keywords: Citizen-Based Monitoring (CBM), Digital Public Sphere, Vernacular Counterpublics, African Indigenous Languages, Digital Governance, Language Justice, Service Delivery, Participatory Democracy.

Introduction

The persistent failures in municipal service delivery remain among the most critical governance challenges in post-apartheid South Africa. Across urban and rural spaces, communities experience recurring issues such as water shortages, electricity cuts, waste management breakdowns, and deteriorating infrastructure (Mudzusi et al., 2024). Studies such as Breakfast et al. (2019) and Mamokhere (2020) link the escalation of violent service delivery protests to citizens' frustrations with ineffective local governance. This crisis has triggered increasing reliance on alternative accountability mechanisms outside formal government structures as traditional participatory forums – like ward committees and imbizos – often prove insufficient (Friedman, 2006; Matlala, 2025). In this context, digital technologies, particularly social media, have emerged as critical platforms for citizens to express grievances, share experiences, and mobilise collective action. These developments represent a significant shift in how civic participation and governance oversight are conducted with profound implications for the future of local democracy.

The rise of social media as a citizen-driven monitoring tool has been well-documented both globally and locally. Bonsón et al. (2015; 2017) show that municipal social media accounts in Western Europe increasingly serve as channels for information dissemination, citizen feedback and complaint escalation. Similarly, Gu et al. (2020) illustrate how Chinese municipalities leverage WeChat and Weibo to manage citizen relations and service reporting. South African studies reveal a more citizen-initiated dynamic; while municipalities maintain an online presence, it is often citizens themselves who drive conversations around accountability (Fashoro & Barnard, 2017; Okeke-Uzodike & Dlamini, 2019). Research by Fashoro and Barnard (2021) further emphasises the limited effectiveness of government-driven social media initiatives for genuine citizen participation, echoing Arshad and Khurram's (2020) findings that transparency and responsiveness are crucial for genuine online engagement. The global trend of evolving from traditional e-government to "social network government" (Halpern & Katz, 2012) underscores the need for a more responsive, participatory digital state, particularly in contexts where conventional governance structures are weakened.

For the purposes of this study, social media is defined as interactive digital platforms that enable users to generate, share, and exchange content in real time. The analysis focuses on three platforms most relevant in the South African context: X (formerly Twitter), which facilitates real-time public debates; Facebook, which provides communal forums for discussion and sharing of grievances; and WhatsApp, which supports more localised, community-driven exchanges through group messaging. These platforms represent distinct but overlapping communicative spaces where citizens employ African indigenous languages to document service delivery failures and demand accountability.

A crucial but underexplored dimension of digital civic participation is the role of African indigenous languages in shaping citizen engagement. Haro-de-Rosario et al. (2018) argue that content relevance and accessibility are key determinants of citizen engagement rates on platforms like X and Facebook. Yet, studies such as Ellison and Hardey (2014) and DePaula et al. (2018) have focused primarily on Western or monolingual contexts, neglecting multilingual societies like South Africa. Vernacular language use on social media enables authenticity, cultural resonance, and emotional immediacy which are critical factors for building trust and collective identity online (DePaula & Dincelli, 2018). In South Africa, where over 80% of the population speaks an indigenous language at home (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2024; Worldwideworx & OrnicoGroup, 2024), linguistic accessibility is not

merely a matter of inclusion but a democratic imperative. Nevertheless, most municipal digital strategies remain overwhelmingly English-centric, thus marginalising the vernacular voices that dominate informal citizen-driven CBM activities.

Despite the proliferation of citizen grievances in African languages on social media, their integration into formal governance systems remains fragmented and ad hoc. Studies by Eom et al. (2018) and DePaula and Dincelli (2018) highlight that governments that fail to adapt their digital strategies to accommodate citizen-led, affectively charged communications risk widening the trust gap between themselves and their constituents. In South Africa, local governments often lack the institutional mechanisms, linguistic competencies, and technological tools to systematically monitor or respond to vernacular complaints (Fashoro & Barnard, 2017; Mudzusi et al., 2024). Community-based organisations (CBOs) and community radio stations frequently act as informal intermediaries, translating citizen concerns into formal channels, yet they operate without structured municipal support (Okeke-Uzodike & Dlamini, 2019; Mamokhere, 2020). This disjuncture underscores a missed opportunity - vernacular digital expressions, if formally recognised and incorporated into CBM systems could substantially enhance the inclusivity, responsiveness, and legitimacy of municipal governance.

This study aims to critically examine how citizens use African indigenous languages on social media platforms to monitor, report, and demand accountability for municipal service delivery failures. Specifically, it investigates how vernacular-language digital expressions serve as informal mechanisms of CBM, how intermediaries like CBOs and community radios engage with these expressions, and what institutional innovations are necessary to formalise and integrate this citizen-generated feedback into governance frameworks. The study addresses these questions and contributes to digital governance, participatory democracy, and language justice. The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on CBM, digital participation, and language rights; Section 3 outlines the theoretical frameworks guiding the analysis; Section 4 presents the research design and methodology; Section 5 discusses the empirical findings; Section 6 offers a critical discussion; Section 7 proposes policy and practical recommendations; and Section 8 concludes with reflections on future research directions.

Literature Review

Citizen-Based Monitoring (CBM)

Citizen-Based Monitoring (CBM) originates from participatory development traditions and the rise of citizen science, both of which challenged the exclusive authority of experts in assessing public problems. Danielsen et al. (2005) highlight how locally-based monitoring empowered communities to produce knowledge influencing policy decisions, particularly in natural resource governance. Conrad and Daoust (2008) similarly demonstrate that community-based frameworks enhanced environmental stewardship by elevating local knowledge alongside scientific expertise. Dickinson et al. (2012) observe the expanding role of non-experts in systematic data collection for academic and policy influence, while Carlson and Cohen (2018) stress that successful CBM hinges on linking citizen data with policy responsiveness. Kouril et al. (2015) underscore CBM's relevance in marginalised regions, an insight echoed by Wiseman and Bardsley (2016) in their study on indigenous environmental monitoring. Lewandowski et al. (2017) note a growing recognition of citizen science's value in democratising knowledge production. In South Africa, CBM gained formal

policy recognition post-apartheid as part of deepening participatory democracy efforts (DPME, 2013; 2015; 2016). Initiatives like the Black Sash Trust's Community Monitoring and Advocacy Programme (DPME, 2013) demonstrated CBM's frontline oversight potential, with Matlala (2024a) identifying its integration of citizen feedback loops into health, education, and municipal service monitoring as a major governance innovation. Yet, challenges around sustainability, scalability, and institutional integration remain persistent (Bester, 2015), reflecting broader global shifts towards citizen-driven accountability while highlighting enduring systemic limitations.

Despite these advances, a major gap in CBM literature, especially in South Africa, lies in insufficient engagement with how digital technologies, particularly social media, reshape citizen monitoring practices. Traditional CBM models – such as structured surveys and community forums (Matlala, 2024b) – are increasingly supplemented by informal, real-time expressions on digital platforms, often articulated in African indigenous languages. While DPME (2016) and Matlala (2024a) acknowledge the potential of ICTs to strengthen CBM, they overlook the vernacular and affective dimensions of digital citizen feedback. In contrast, environmental monitoring globally (Danielsen et al., 2005; Conrad & Daoust, 2008) has more rapidly integrated mobile technologies, highlighting South Africa's relative lag in leveraging digital tools for inclusive CBM. Existing public service monitoring remains predominantly English-centric and institutionally siloed, failing to harness the democratic potential of vernacular digital activism fully. This study addresses that gap by critically examining African-language citizen expressions on social media as an emerging yet under-theorised mode of CBM, raising crucial questions about linguistic justice, informal civic agency, and the future of digital governance in South Africa's democratic landscape.

Social Media and Civic Accountability: Informal Complaint Mechanisms and Digital Activism

The rise of social media platforms has reconfigured traditional civic engagement channels by enabling informal, real-time mechanisms for voicing grievances and demanding public accountability. Scholars such as Kreiss et al. (2020) argue that digital platforms have expanded the "participatory repertoires" available to citizens, allowing them to bypass institutional barriers and engage directly with service providers and authorities. In contexts characterised by governance deficits, social media becomes a communication tool and an alternative monitoring system where ordinary citizens document, publicise, and pressure governments to address service delivery failures (Earl et al., 2022). Tufekci (2020) emphasises that such informal digital activism thrives in environments where formal participatory structures are weak or inaccessible, highlighting social media's role in shaping bottom-up accountability movements. Recent empirical work by Surya et al. (2023) shows that citizen complaints posted on platforms like Facebook and X often lead to faster government responses compared to formal reporting mechanisms, especially in municipal governance contexts. However, Rumbul (2020) cautions that the efficacy of digital complaint-making is contingent on governments' capacity and willingness to institutionalise social media monitoring into their service delivery systems. Without structural integration, citizen-generated digital grievances risk being relegated to symbolic acts rather than substantive participatory governance tools (Eom et al., 2021). These developments position social media as a key, albeit contested, site for informal CBM practices.

In South Africa, these dynamics are reinforced by the rapid rise of smartphone penetration and social media use over the past decade. According to ICASA (2024), more than 80% of

South Africans out of an estimated population of 63 million now own or have access to a smartphone, reflecting the country's growing digital inclusion and expanding opportunities for mobile-based civic engagement. Moreover, in South Africa, WhatsApp is the dominant social media and messaging platform: recent data show that roughly 93.8% of active social media users in the country report using WhatsApp (Statista, 2024). Furthermore, estimates suggest there are approximately 28–29 million South African WhatsApp users (Statista, 2024). Among adults aged 18–34, social media penetration exceeds 85%, compared to around 55% among those aged 35 and older, underscoring generational divides in digital activism. These trends confirm that social media has become a central arena for everyday communication and collective action, making it an indispensable site for analysing vernacular CBM in the South African context.

The evolution of digital activism further complicates traditional understandings of civic participation by foregrounding the interplay between language, identity, and power in online spaces. Studies by Maharaj and Pillay (2022) in the South African context reveal that digital protests against poor service delivery often unfold in indigenous languages, amplifying localised experiences of marginalisation and exclusion. Similarly, Ingram and Licona (2023) demonstrate that the vernacularisation of digital spaces fosters community solidarity while simultaneously challenging dominant narratives framed in official or elite languages. Despite these promising trends, Boulianne et al. (2022) argue that digital activism remains uneven across demographic lines with access to technologies, digital literacy, and language barriers influencing who participates and how effectively they are heard. Consequently, without deliberate municipal strategies to engage vernacular-language digital activism, informal complaint-making may reinforce existing exclusions rather than democratise governance. Jamil and Awal (2021) emphasise that municipalities must transition from passive monitoring to the active incorporation of citizen-generated data into planning and decision-making processes, if social media is to serve as a genuine accountability mechanism. Thus, recognising the complex, linguistically diverse, and informal nature of digital CBM practices becomes critical for building more inclusive and responsive local governance systems in South Africa and beyond.

Indigenous Languages in the South African Context

South Africa is constitutionally recognised as a multilingual democracy with 12 official languages: isiZulu, isiXhosa, Afrikaans, Sepedi, Setswana, Sesotho, Xitsonga, SiSwati, Tshivenda, isiNdebele, English, and South African Sign Language (Republic of South Africa, 1996). While this framework affirms linguistic diversity and equality, in practice, English continues to dominate formal governance, policy communication, and digital platforms (Alexander, 2019). Indigenous African languages, though widely spoken in households and community spaces, are frequently marginalised in institutional contexts, particularly in local government service delivery communication. This mismatch creates systemic barriers to inclusive participation as large segments of the population are unable to express grievances or interact with authorities in the languages most meaningful to them.

In this study, the term "vernacular" is used to refer specifically to African indigenous languages such as isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sepedi, Setswana, and others recognised within the official language framework. It does not refer to slang, colloquialisms, or informal hybrid expressions, although these sometimes appear in online interactions. By focusing on indigenous languages, the analysis emphasises linguistic justice as a central component of democratic participation, highlighting how citizens employ their home languages to

articulate service delivery failures and assert their right to recognition in governance processes. As scholars such as Banda and Mwanza (2023) and Kaya et al. (2016) note, the inclusion of indigenous languages in digital and civic spaces is critical for dismantling entrenched linguistic hierarchies rooted in colonial legacies. Clarifying the distinction between indigenous languages and slang ensures conceptual precision and aligns the study with broader debates on language policy, multilingualism, and digital participation in South Africa.

African Indigenous Languages and Language Justice in Digital Spaces

The marginalisation of African indigenous languages in the digital sphere remains a critical obstacle to inclusive digital citizenship and participatory governance. Mpofu and Salawu (2020) demonstrate how even well-intentioned localisation efforts such as Google's vernacular webpages often fail to accommodate African users' sociolinguistic diversity and functionality needs fully. Similarly, Jongbloed-Faber et al. (2016) show that language use on social media among bilingual communities often reflects deeper socio-political hierarchies, with dominant languages crowding out indigenous tongues. Ragnedda (2018) frames this phenomenon as part of broader digital inequalities where linguistic exclusion compounds social exclusion in the digital age. In this context, Aiyegbusi (2018) calls for decolonising digital spaces to ensure that African epistemologies, including indigenous languages, are embedded within digital infrastructures rather than merely appended as superficial inclusions. Chonka et al. (2022) further highlight the structural biases of algorithmic systems like search engine autocompletes, which systematically privilege dominant global languages over African ones, reinforcing linguistic hierarchies online. This linguistic digital divide undermines the capacity of African citizens to participate fully in digital public spheres, thereby excluding vernacular voices from policy debates, civic activism, and governance monitoring processes. Therefore, addressing language justice is a cultural or educational imperative and central to building equitable and participatory digital governance systems.

In civic activism and citizen monitoring, African indigenous languages have become potent tools for asserting identity, solidarity, and political agency in digital spaces. Nyabola (2018a) discusses the #FreeBobiWine movement as an example of Pan-African digital activism where vernacular expressions were crucial in mobilising solidarity across linguistic and national boundaries. Hernandez and Roberts (2018) similarly emphasise that ensuring linguistic inclusion is vital for "leaving no one behind" in digital development, arguing that marginalised groups often rely on local languages for digital engagement. Yet, the architecture of most digital platforms remains poorly aligned with these realities, usually privileging English and other dominant languages in their user interfaces, algorithms, and content moderation practices (Chonka et al., 2022). Without deliberate interventions to promote African languages online, digital spaces risk replicating offline inequalities and silencing the populations that participatory governance seeks to empower. Consequently, in contexts like South Africa, formalising vernacular digital expressions within CBM frameworks becomes an act of inclusion and a necessary step toward democratising digital governance and ensuring that indigenous linguistic identities are not erased in the emerging digital public sphere.

Theoretical Framework: Digital Public Sphere Theories & Uses and Gratifications Theory

This study is anchored in Digital Public Sphere theories, particularly the strands of networked publics, affective publics, and counter publics to critically examine how communication technologies reshape democratic participation, voice, and accountability. While Habermas' (1962) original conception of the bourgeois public sphere emphasised rational-critical debate in physical spaces, digital-era theorists highlight the fragmentation of that sphere into multiple, overlapping publics shaped by the affordances of online platforms. Papacharissi (2015), for example, argues that contemporary networked environments produce "affective publics" where emotion is a central driver of engagement and mobilisation. This is especially relevant for vernacular CBM; posts written in African indigenous languages often embed culturally resonant idioms, metaphors, and emotional tones that differ from traditional deliberative norms but nevertheless embody authentic political expression. Fraser's (1990) critique of Habermas provides further grounding by showing how marginalised groups construct "subaltern counterpublics" to resist exclusion from dominant spaces. In the South African context, citizens' use of indigenous languages on X functions as a vernacular counterpublic, directly contesting the dominance of English in both municipal governance and digital communication. These theories together allow the study to interpret vernacular complaints not as disorderly or informal, but as structured forms of civic action within a pluralistic digital democracy.

By explicitly aligning the study with affective publics, networked publics, and counterpublics, the theoretical framing highlights the relevance of vernacular CBM in shaping alternative civic spaces and strengthening democratic accountability. Dahlgren (2005) stresses that the quality of democratic participation online depends not just on access to platforms but on whether diverse publics can shape discourse meaningfully - a condition directly linked to linguistic inclusion. Dean (2003) similarly notes that digital publics are often characterised by "affective intensities", meaning that emotional and cultural registers carry political weight in shaping collective action. Vernacular CBM reflects this dynamic by translating service delivery grievances into affectively charged expressions that mobilise solidarity and pressure government actors. Thus, rather than treating indigenous-language complaints as noise or informal protest, this study frames them as legitimate contributions to South Africa's multilingual democratic project. Positioning vernacular digital expressions within the Digital Public Sphere literature enables the analysis to foreground linguistic justice, citizen agency, and participatory accountability as interdependent dimensions of digital governance in a postcolonial, multilingual society.

In addition to Digital Public Sphere theories, this study also draws on the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) to explain citizen behaviour in digital spaces. UGT posits that individuals actively select media platforms to satisfy specific needs such as information seeking, social interaction, identity expression, and problem-solving (Katz et al., 1974). Applying this lens helps illuminate why South African citizens use platforms like X to broadcast grievances publicly, Facebook to share experiences within community networks, and WhatsApp to circulate localised complaints in closed group settings. These platforms meet different communicative needs: X provides visibility and immediacy, Facebook offers communal validation and discussion, while WhatsApp enables rapid coordination and vernacular intimacy. By combining Digital Public Sphere theories with UGT, the study situates vernacular citizen monitoring as both a collective political practice and an individualised choice shaped by the gratifications citizens seek from specific digital platforms.

Methodological Design and Research Strategy

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and exploratory research design to critically examine how citizens use African indigenous languages on social media platforms to monitor municipal service delivery in South Africa. A qualitative approach is appropriate given the study's focus on meaning-making, linguistic expression, and contextual nuance rather than quantifiable metrics (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Interpretivism underpins the methodological orientation, recognising that citizens' vernacular complaints are socially constructed narratives shaped by cultural, political, and historical contexts (Schwandt, 2015). Given the emergent and under-theorised nature of vernacular digital citizen-based monitoring, an exploratory design was selected for inductive insights rather than hypothesis testing (Stebbins, 2001). The study seeks to uncover how indigenous language use on social media functions not merely as communication but as a participatory accountability practice within an evolving digital public sphere. This flexible design enables deep engagement with the lived experiences, perceptions, and digital behaviours of both citizens and intermediaries such as community-based organisations and community radio stations. By prioritising participants' voices and the socio-cultural textures embedded in their linguistic choices, the research design aligns methodologically with the study's broader commitment to inclusivity, linguistic justice, and democratic deepening.

Content analysis

The primary data source for this study's content analysis comprised vernacular-language posts on X from 2020 to 2025 (see Table 1). X was selected due to its public accessibility and the feasibility of obtaining ethical approval for research involving publicly available data (Townsend & Wallace, 2016). The platform allows researchers to access user-generated content without violating privacy expectations, provided appropriate ethical safeguards are in place such as anonymisation of user handles and paraphrasing of direct quotations to prevent traceability (Williams et al., 2017). The content analysis focused on posts directed at or mentioning official municipal accounts, hashtags associated with service delivery complaints (e.g., #NoWater, #Loadshedding, #FixOurRoads), and posts geotagged within selected South African municipalities with strong digital engagement records.

Purposive sampling was used to select municipalities with high levels of social media activity, diverse linguistic representation, and strong patterns of citizen engagement. This ensured that the dataset reflected a wide variety of vernacular expressions across urban and provincial contexts. Unlike random or systematic sampling, purposive selection was deemed more appropriate for the study's qualitative aims, which prioritised thematic richness and cultural diversity over statistical generalisability.

In total, 92,750 vernacular-language posts were collected and analysed across the nine municipalities listed in Table 1. While large-scale by qualitative standards, this corpus was not intended for statistical generalisation but for thematic depth. A dataset of this size is sufficient and appropriate in qualitative research because it ensures saturation of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) while still allowing for close, context-sensitive coding. The emphasis was on identifying patterns of meaning rather than quantifying frequencies, which aligns with the interpretive orientation of the study.

Data collection utilised X's Academic Research Product Track API, allowing for systematic retrieval of historical posts while complying with platform terms of service. For the analysis phase, sentiment analysis was conducted using a combination of manual thematic coding

and automated linguistic tools. VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary and sEntiment Reasoner) was applied for initial polarity detection, given its robustness in short-text social media contexts (Hutto & Gilbert, 2014), and was supplemented by TextBlob for cross-validation of sentiment scores (Loria, 2018). However, because standard sentiment tools are limited in their treatment of African indigenous languages, the automated outputs were refined manually to ensure cultural and linguistic accuracy. The thematic analysis identified key service delivery issues, emotional tones (anger, frustration, solidarity), and linguistic markers of collective mobilisation. This methodological approach enabled a robust, ethically sound exploration of how African language expressions on X function as informal citizen-based monitoring in South Africa's evolving digital governance landscape.

Table 1: Selected Municipalities[1] for X Content Analysis

Municipality	Province	Platform	Status	Followers	Last Post Date	Posts (2020–2025)
City of Johannesburg	Gauteng	X	Active	1200000	2025-04-28	18000
City of Cape Town	Western Cape	X	Active	950000	2025-04-27	16250
eThekwini Municipality	KwaZulu-Natal	X	Active	850000	2025-04-26	15400
Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality	Eastern Cape	X	Active	500000	2025-04-25	9400
Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality	Free State	X	Active	450000	2025-04-24	8800
Polokwane Municipality	Limpopo	X	Active	400000	2025-04-23	8200
Mbombela Municipality	Mpumalanga	X	Active	350000	2025-04-22	7600
Sol Plaatje Municipality	Northern Cape	X	Active	300000	2025-04-21	6900
Rustenburg Municipality	North West	X	Active	250000	2025-04-20	6200

Source: Author's own compilation (2025)

Semi-structured interviews

To complement the content analysis of vernacular digital expressions, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with three key groups of stakeholders directly engaged in citizen monitoring and service delivery oversight: (1) government officials responsible for CBM initiatives in South Africa, which include DPME, DPSA, and PSC; (2) representatives from CBOs actively involved in service delivery advocacy; and (3) staff from community radio stations serving linguistically diverse constituencies. These actors were selected purposively because of their frontline engagement with citizen feedback and municipal accountability processes.

Interview participants were identified through purposive sampling, targeting individuals with demonstrable experience in managing or interpreting vernacular citizen feedback.

1 Only the main verified official municipal X accounts were included in the analysis. Subsidiary or department-specific accounts (e.g., electricity, transport, waste services) were excluded to maintain consistency and comparability across municipalities.

A snowballing technique was subsequently employed where initial interviewees referred additional participants working in similar roles. This approach ensured that the final sample reflected a mix of institutional, civil society, and media actors with practical knowledge of vernacular citizen-based monitoring, thereby strengthening the relevance of the findings to the study's objectives.

The semi-structured interview format was chosen to balance thematic consistency and flexibility, enabling participants to elaborate on their experiences interpreting, amplifying, and responding to vernacular citizen complaints on digital platforms (Brinkmann, 2013). A total of 12 interviews were conducted (see Table 2). The interviews explored participants' perceptions of the significance of vernacular digital complaints, institutional capacities for monitoring and responding to such expressions, and perceived barriers to integrating this feedback into formal governance structures. By capturing the perspectives of both institutional actors and community intermediaries, the interview component enriches the study's understanding of how vernacular citizen-based monitoring practices intersect – or fail to intersect – with formal service delivery governance mechanisms.

Table 2: Sector Specifications of the Respondents

Organisation	Province	Sector	Respondent Code	Experience (yrs)
A	Gauteng	Government	ARE1	5 years +
B	Gauteng	Government	BRE2	5 years +
C	Gauteng	Government	CRE3	5 years +
D	Gauteng	Government	DRE4	5 years +
E	Mpumalanga	Community Media	ERE5	5 years +
F	Free State	Community Media	FRE6	5 years +
G	Gauteng	Community Media	GRE7	5 years +
H	Limpopo	Community Media	HRE8	5 years +
I	Western Cape	CBO	IRE9	5 years +
J	Gauteng	CBO	JRE10	5 years +
K	Gauteng	CBO	KRE11	5 years +
L	KwaZulu-Natal	CBO	LRE12	5 years +

Source: Author's own compilation (2025)

Data Analysis: Thematic Integration and Ensuring Rigour

Data analysis followed a thematic approach aimed at identifying patterns across both the vernacular-language X content and the semi-structured interview transcripts. Initially, content analysis of tweets involved a two-stage coding process: an inductive open-coding phase to capture emergent service delivery themes, emotional tones, and linguistic characteristics, followed by a deductive phase where codes were refined against the research questions and theoretical framing around the digital public sphere (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Sentiment scores generated through VADER and TextBlob were triangulated with manual coding to mitigate algorithmic biases against African indigenous languages. For interview data, transcripts were analysed using NVivo 14 software to facilitate systematic coding and thematic development across cases. A combination of descriptive coding (for institutional practices and challenges) and process coding (for actions like interpreting, amplifying, and

responding to vernacular complaints) was employed (Saldaña, 2021). Rigour was ensured through multiple strategies: coder triangulation (independent coding by two researchers with reconciliation sessions), an audit trail of coding decisions, and detailed memo writing to document analytical reflections. Validity and trustworthiness were further strengthened by conducting member checks with a subset of interview participants who reviewed preliminary findings for resonance and factual accuracy (Birt et al., 2016). Data saturation was monitored and confirmed once additional interviews yielded no substantially new themes. This layered analytical strategy ensured that findings were grounded in the lived realities of citizens and institutional actors and met the standards of credibility, dependability, and confirmability expected of qualitative research. By integrating digital content and stakeholder perspectives thematically, the analysis captures the complex dynamics through which vernacular citizen expressions on social media shape, challenge, or bypass formal mechanisms of municipal accountability.

Ethical Considerations

This study complied with ethical research standards as approved by the University of Johannesburg's Faculty Ethics Committee. All interview participants provided informed consent and their identities have been anonymised using coded references (e.g., ARE1, BRE2). Direct quotations are paraphrased where necessary to prevent traceability. Regarding the content analysis of X, only publicly available posts were collected through the Academic Research Product Track API. As these posts are in the public domain, no private data were accessed, and appropriate safeguards (such as paraphrasing of vernacular expressions) were applied to protect user confidentiality.

Empirical Findings

Amplification of Local Voices through Vernacular Language on X

The content analysis revealed that X has become a vital digital arena where South African citizens use indigenous languages to document and protest municipal service delivery failures, including potholes, water shortages, electricity outages, and waste collection breakdowns. Across the sampled municipalities, vernacular posts frequently employed culturally specific expressions, metaphors, and idioms that carried emotional and historical resonance, often framing service delivery grievances in ways that English translations would fail to capture fully. For example, isiZulu expressions likening potholes to "traps for cattle" or Sepedi phrases describing dry taps as "the death of the home" imbued the complaints with deep communal significance and urgency. Sentiment analysis confirmed that the dominant emotional tones across vernacular posts were anger, frustration, and solidarity. Rather than isolated complaints, these expressions signalled a shared sense of injustice where anger and frustration were most common but often intersected with solidarity. Solidarity was particularly evident where users retweeted, amplified, or added collective calls for action, often using indigenous-language hashtags such as #Asikhulume (isiZulu for "let's talk") and #ReBatlaMetsi (Setswana/Sepedi for "we want water"). These hashtags functioned not only as rallying cries but also as vernacularised spaces of mobilisation, allowing users to frame shared grievances in culturally grounded terms that municipal authorities could not easily ignore.

Importantly, vernacular expressions fostered emotional proximity and authenticity, signalling to fellow citizens that service failures were a community-wide injury rather than

isolated inconveniences. This collective dimension was evident in how grievances framed through indigenous languages created resonance, legitimacy, and traction among local audiences. As one CBO representative explained, "When people post in Sepedi or isiZulu, they are not just complaining; they are speaking in the language of the community. It carries more weight because everyone understands the struggle in their own words" (JRE10). Such voices highlight how indigenous language use amplifies marginalised perspectives by producing affectively charged narratives that position service delivery failures as collective injustices. By embedding grievances in local linguistic and cultural repertoires, citizens shaped a counter-discourse that both challenges municipal legitimacy and strengthens grassroots solidarity in digital public spheres.

Digital Vernacular Counterpublics: Claiming Civic Space Beyond Formal Structures

The analysis demonstrates that indigenous language posts on X function as more than individualised complaints; they coalesce into vernacular counter publics that challenge the dominance of English in both formal governance communication and mainstream digital discourse. By using isiZulu, Setswana, isiXhosa, and other African indigenous languages, citizens carved out parallel spaces of civic expression where grievances were voiced on their own cultural and linguistic terms. These counterpublics reflect Fraser's (1990) notion of subaltern publics that arise when dominant forums exclude marginalised groups, and they were particularly visible in contexts where municipal responses were absent or dismissive. The persistence of vernacular digital voices in these spaces illustrates how citizens collectively claim legitimacy and recognition, despite systemic barriers that marginalise their languages in both policy and practice. In doing so, they invert expectations of who holds communicative authority online by foregrounding lived experiences articulated in languages that municipalities are ill-equipped to interpret or respond to.

These vernacular counterpublics also served as sites of mobilisation and solidarity. Hashtags and phrases in indigenous languages became symbolic anchors for collective struggles, framing grievances in terms of shared community struggles rather than isolated incidents. Emotional resonance and cultural intimacy strengthened this dynamic, enabling users to bypass the alienation often produced by English-only bureaucratic discourse. As a community radio staff member explained, "We often see posts in Setswana or isiXhosa tagged to mayors. Even if the municipality does not respond, the people online rally around those words. It creates a movement that is bigger than a single complaint" (FRE6). Such reflections underscore how vernacular CBM operates as both cultural resistance and political engagement. By asserting space for African Indigenous languages in digital civic arenas, citizens transform grievances into collective claims for recognition, effectively broadening the boundaries of participatory democracy in South Africa's multilingual context.

Institutional Blind Spots and Language Barriers in Municipal Digital Engagement

The findings highlight significant institutional blind spots in how municipalities manage vernacular digital complaints. Despite the volume of posts in African indigenous languages, most municipal communication systems are designed primarily for English, with limited or no capacity to process multilingual content. Municipal digital teams often lack linguistic resources, translation tools, or training to recognise vernacular expressions as legitimate channels of accountability. As a result, complaints expressed in isiZulu, isiXhosa, or Sepedi are frequently ignored or misclassified, perpetuating cycles of exclusion. This gap reinforces the dominance of English in governance processes, effectively silencing large sections of

the population who may be more comfortable expressing their grievances in indigenous languages. It also exposes a structural weakness in South Africa's democratic framework where linguistic diversity is constitutionally protected but rarely operationalised in practice.

Institutional actors interviewed acknowledged this weakness but noted bureaucratic and technical barriers to reform. Digital monitoring tools currently in use cannot easily process African indigenous languages, leaving municipal staff reliant on ad hoc strategies such as translating posts manually or depending on intermediaries. As one municipal official admitted, "We do not have systems that can pick up or translate vernacular complaints. If someone writes in isiZulu or Sesotho, it disappears from our radar. That is a major gap" (ARE1). Another official added that the lack of institutional ownership for social media monitoring further compounds the problem given that the responsibility is often fragmented across departments. These blind spots illustrate how vernacular CBM is undermined not by citizen apathy but by institutional incapacity to respond inclusively. Unless municipalities develop multilingual monitoring systems and strengthen accountability mechanisms, vernacular expressions will continue to be overlooked, reinforcing perceptions of state indifference and eroding public trust in local governance.

Community-Based Organisations and Community Radio as Intermediaries

The findings show that CBOs and community radio stations act as crucial intermediaries between vernacular citizen voices and municipal authorities. Many citizens prefer to lodge complaints in isiZulu, Sepedi, Setswana, or isiXhosa through familiar digital platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook. However, these messages rarely reach government officials directly due to both technological barriers and the limited linguistic capacity within municipalities. CBOs often step into this gap by systematically collecting vernacular complaints from local networks and repackaging them into English-language summaries that can be forwarded to officials or included in advocacy reports. This intermediary role positions CBOs as vital translators of community voices, ensuring that grievances framed in indigenous languages do not remain invisible in governance processes. In this way, CBOs provide an informal but highly effective accountability mechanism, amplifying the civic power of vernacular expressions.

Community radio stations similarly extend the reach of vernacular CBM by broadcasting grievances to wide audiences and relaying them to municipal officials. These stations often operate call-in programmes where residents express service delivery concerns in their own languages, creating a participatory forum that municipal structures fail to provide. As one CBO leader explained, "We check WhatsApp groups and Facebook posts in isiZulu or Sepedi, and then we compile them into English summaries for the municipality. Without us, those voices would never be heard at the council level" (KRE11). A community radio presenter echoed this, noting, "When a caller says in isiXhosa that there is no water for three days, we broadcast it to thousands of listeners and also send the clip to the local ward office. It is our way of amplifying their voice" (GRE7). These intermediaries play a dual role: amplifying vernacular voices within the public sphere and bridging the institutional disconnect by relaying complaints into formal governance spaces. Their work demonstrates that inclusive accountability in South Africa is not simply a matter of technology but also of cultural mediation and grassroots advocacy.

Barriers to Institutionalising Vernacular Citizen-Based Monitoring Digitally

A primary challenge identified in the study is the absence of technical infrastructure capable of detecting, translating, and categorising African indigenous language complaints on digital platforms. Although municipalities have experimented with CBM frameworks, these remain largely paper-based or dependent on English-language call centres and reporting tools. Digital citizen monitoring systems that could process vernacular inputs are almost entirely absent. Current municipal monitoring platforms are often designed by external vendors with limited localisation capacity, meaning that languages such as isiZulu, Setswana, or Sepedi are excluded from system interfaces and analytics functions. This not only undermines inclusivity but also results in the systematic erasure of grievances expressed in vernacular forms. As one community-based organisation leader explained during interviews, "The municipality says they have a citizen feedback system, but if you write in isiZulu or Sepedi, the system doesn't even register it. It only understands English, so those complaints go nowhere." Such technological blind spots reveal a disconnect between constitutional commitments to multilingualism and the reality of digital governance in practice.

Even where municipalities engage with citizen feedback, existing CBM practices are not conducted digitally but remain manual and fragmented. Reports are compiled from ward committee meetings, paper-based forms, or sporadic hotline calls which are then translated and filtered before reaching officials. This reliance on non-digital, centralised methods sidelines the dynamic and immediate nature of vernacular expressions on platforms such as X, Facebook, or WhatsApp. Moreover, institutional culture compounds these barriers. Some officials continue to perceive vernacular complaints on social media as informal and therefore less credible, reinforcing English as the de facto language of governance. A municipal respondent candidly admitted, "We still treat social media complaints as noise. If they are not submitted through the official form in English, they are ignored." Such attitudes not only perpetuate historical linguistic hierarchies but also prevent the integration of digital vernacular monitoring into formal accountability systems. Without deliberate investment in multilingual digital tools, cultural shifts within governance institutions, and policies that recognise the legitimacy of vernacular voices online, efforts to institutionalise citizen-based monitoring digitally will remain aspirational rather than achievable.

Discussions

Reframing Vernacular Citizen-Based Monitoring as Democratic Participation

The findings of this study challenge dominant assumptions that citizen complaints on social media, particularly those articulated in African indigenous languages, are informal, fragmented, or politically marginal expressions. Instead, they reveal that vernacular citizen monitoring practices constitute a vital form of democratic participation, asserting both visibility and voice within South Africa's evolving digital governance landscape. Drawing on Papacharissi's (2015) notion of affective publics and Fraser's (1990) theory of subaltern counterpublics, vernacular digital complaints can be understood as deliberate political acts that contest the exclusionary boundaries of the formal public sphere. Citizens' use of indigenous languages to articulate service delivery failures is not simply a reflection of cultural preference but an assertion of civic entitlement – the right to hold government accountable in one's own linguistic register. This repositions vernacular digital activism as a participatory practice deeply rooted in struggles for linguistic recognition, service delivery

equity, and democratic inclusion. Importantly, the emergence of vernacular counterpublics on platforms like X underscores the adaptability and resilience of citizen agency in contexts where formal participatory mechanisms remain inaccessible, unresponsive, or linguistically exclusionary. By framing vernacular CBM as a legitimate and necessary extension of democratic life, the study contributes to broader debates on how digital technologies reconfigure the modes, spaces, and languages through which citizenship is enacted and accountability is demanded. Recognising these practices as authentic forms of civic engagement necessitates a paradigmatic shift in how governments, policymakers, and scholars conceptualise digital participation – not merely as rational deliberation in dominant languages but as diverse, affectively charged, and linguistically pluralistic acts of democratic expression.

Language as Infrastructure for Digital Inclusion and Civic Accountability

The findings underscore that language operates as a communication medium and a foundational infrastructure for digital inclusion and civic accountability. In the context of South Africa's multilingual democracy, the failure to integrate African indigenous languages into digital governance spaces effectively disenfranchises large segments of the population from participating fully in democratic processes. Hernandez and Roberts (2018) argue that digital inclusion must go beyond access to devices or connectivity, extending to the cultural and linguistic frameworks that shape meaningful participation. Similarly, Ragnedda (2018) warns that digital spaces risk replicating and even amplifying existing social inequalities without addressing linguistic and cultural barriers. The vernacular citizen monitoring practices uncovered in this study demonstrate that African languages are critical infrastructures through which grievances are articulated, collective identities are forged, and demands for accountability are expressed. Yet, government digital engagement practices remain anchored in a narrow, English-dominated paradigm, effectively rendering vernacular complaints invisible within official service delivery monitoring systems. This linguistic exclusion not only violates principles of language justice but undermines the very goals of participatory governance by systematically marginalising non-English speakers from digital accountability mechanisms. As scholars such as Mpofu and Salawu (2020); Chonka et al. (2022); and Haile (2022) have shown, algorithmic and institutional biases that privilege dominant languages create structural inequities in the digital public sphere. Addressing these exclusions requires conceptualising language not as a secondary concern but as core governance infrastructure – essential to ensuring that the digital transformation of civic engagement genuinely democratises access, voice, and power.

Institutional Resistance and the Persistence of Bureaucratic Gatekeeping

The study's interviews with government officials revealed a persistent pattern of institutional resistance to integrating vernacular CBM into formal governance systems, reflecting deep-seated bureaucratic gatekeeping tendencies. Despite recognising the growing prevalence of citizen grievances voiced in indigenous languages on social media, officials expressed hesitations rooted in concerns over procedural control, verification challenges, and the perceived legitimacy of informal digital complaints. This reluctance mirrors broader critiques by scholars such as Eom et al. (2021) and Rumbul (2020) who argue that public institutions often treat informal citizen engagement on digital platforms as disruptive rather than constructive. In the South African context, these anxieties are compounded by historically entrenched administrative cultures favouring hierarchical, paper-based, and English-dominated modes of interaction, as highlighted by Okeke-Uzodike and Dlamini

(2019). The persistence of such bureaucratic gatekeeping undermines the transformative potential of digital technologies to democratise governance and widen participation. Instead of embracing the vernacularisation of the digital public sphere as an opportunity to enhance inclusivity and responsiveness, institutions retreat into proceduralism, thereby excluding a large portion of the citizenry from meaningful dialogue. This dynamic reflects what Fraser (1990) describes as the structural marginalisation of subaltern counterpublics, wherein the communicative practices of historically disenfranchised groups are deemed invalid within dominant institutional frameworks. By failing to adapt to the realities of vernacular digital engagement, government actors reinforce existing linguistic and socio-economic inequalities and weaken the broader goals of participatory democracy and service delivery accountability that CBM initiatives are intended to promote.

Toward a Vernacular-Centred Digital Governance Framework

The findings of this study point toward the urgent need for a vernacular-centred digital governance framework that recognises institutionalise and strengthens CBO practices expressed through Indigenous languages. Rather than treating vernacular digital complaints as peripheral or informal, municipalities and government agencies must formally integrate these expressions into service delivery monitoring systems. This would require the development of multilingual digital engagement strategies that enable the detection, classification, and response to citizen grievances articulated in African languages across social media platforms. Building partnerships with CBOs and community radio stations – already operating informally as civic intermediaries – could provide an immediate and culturally resonant bridge between citizen voices and formal governance structures. In the longer term, investment in NLP technologies, as advocated by Chonka et al. (2022), would enhance municipalities' ability to automate the monitoring of vernacular expressions without sacrificing linguistic nuance or cultural specificity. Policy innovations, such as incorporating vernacular citizen feedback into IDPs and municipal performance management frameworks, would institutionalise these practices and lend them procedural legitimacy. Moreover, piloting vernacular CBM initiatives within selected municipalities would serve as proof-of-concept projects, helping to build political will and foster a culture of linguistic inclusivity within digital governance. Such a framework would address current technological and institutional deficits and advance the broader goals of participatory democracy by affirming that all citizens – regardless of linguistic background – have an equal right to be heard, seen, and responded to within South Africa's digital governance landscape.

Implications and Lessons Learned for Digital Governance and Citizen-Based Monitoring

The findings of this study carry significant implications for the theory and practice of digital governance and CBM in South Africa and comparable multilingual democracies. Theoretically, they demand a rethinking of Digital Public Sphere frameworks by foregrounding vernacular, affective, and linguistically diverse forms of civic engagement as central rather than peripheral to democratic participation. Digital citizen voice cannot be conceptualised solely through English or rational deliberation but must account for the emotional, cultural, and political significance of indigenous language expressions in digital spaces. From a policy perspective, excluding vernacular complaints from formal governance systems represents not a technological inevitability but a policy failure, highlighting the

need for deliberate institutional reforms that centre on multilingual digital inclusion. CBM policies, such as those developed by the DPME, must move beyond offline and English-centric modes of engagement to formally recognise, monitor, and act upon digital citizen feedback articulated in indigenous languages. Practically, the study illustrates that citizen monitoring is already happening in informal digital spaces and being mediated through CBOs and community radio stations; governments must act swiftly to support and integrate these networks into formal accountability systems. Reliance on English-only digital tools leaves municipal authorities deaf to large population segments, undermining service delivery responsiveness and deepening democratic deficits. Overall, the lessons learned suggest that institutionalising vernacular CBM is both a governance imperative and an opportunity to revitalise citizen participation, linguistic justice, and democratic inclusion in the digital age.

Moreover, the study highlights the critical importance of reconceptualising digital governance infrastructures as technical systems and socio-linguistic ecosystems that must be intentionally designed to accommodate diversity. Lessons from the findings suggest that participatory governance will continue to exclude marginalised voices structurally unless linguistic pluralism is embedded at the design stage of digital monitoring platforms. This calls for reimagining civic technology procurement and design processes, including mandatory multilingual functionality, indigenous language sentiment analysis capabilities, and consultation of language and community experts during platform development. Lessons also point to the need for broader public sector innovation strategies that view digital civic engagement not as an isolated administrative task but as a central pillar of developmental local governance. Vernacular CBM practices reveal that digital citizenship is relational, affective, and culturally situated; policies and systems that fail to recognise these dynamics risk deepening the democratic disconnection between citizens and the state. Therefore, strengthening vernacular CBM is not simply about adding translation layers to existing frameworks, but fundamentally realigning governance institutions to better mirror and respond to the complex, multilingual realities of the publics they serve.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

This study's first primary policy recommendation is the urgent need for municipalities to develop and implement multilingual digital engagement strategies that actively incorporate African indigenous languages into their citizen monitoring frameworks. The findings showed that while citizens increasingly use vernacular languages to voice service delivery grievances online, municipal digital infrastructures remain overwhelmingly English-centric, effectively silencing a large segment of the citizenry. To correct this exclusion, municipal communication and CBM teams must be trained and resourced to systematically monitor, analyse, and respond to indigenous-language expressions across social media platforms such as X, Facebook, and WhatsApp. This would require redesigning sentiment analysis tools, keyword tracking systems, and citizen response dashboards to include multilingual capabilities. Language specialists and citizen linguists could be formally incorporated into digital engagement teams to ensure culturally sensitive interpretation of grievances. Furthermore, municipal websites, online complaint forms, and digital reporting mechanisms should be redesigned to allow users to submit feedback in their preferred languages. In addition to internal capacity-building, municipalities must establish clear operational protocols that treat vernacular citizen complaints as equally valid and actionable inputs within broader service delivery monitoring processes. Developing these multilingual

strategies would help address both technological and institutional blind spots revealed in the findings. It would represent a concrete step toward institutionalising vernacular citizen-based monitoring as a legitimate element of digital governance.

The second major recommendation is establishing formal partnerships between municipalities and intermediary organisations such as CBOs and community radio stations. The findings revealed that CBOs and community radios already perform crucial, informal roles in translating, amplifying, and escalating vernacular citizen complaints despite operating without institutional support or recognition. Municipalities should develop Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) or partnership agreements that formally incorporate CBOs and radio stations into municipal CBM frameworks to harness and enhance these efforts. These partnerships should define clear roles, including real-time issue escalation processes, co-management of multilingual digital complaint platforms, and participation in service delivery forums. Municipalities could also fund and support capacity-building initiatives for these intermediaries, including training in digital monitoring, advocacy skills, and basic data management.

Furthermore, community radio stations could be leveraged as key platforms for multilingual civic education campaigns, informing citizens about how to lodge complaints, track service delivery promises, and hold local governments accountable using digital and offline methods. Formalising these partnerships would strengthen the feedback loop between citizens and government and ensure that vernacular voices, currently thriving in informal spaces, are institutionally integrated into official governance processes. Such an approach would operationalise the inclusivity and responsiveness that participatory governance frameworks, such as the DPME's CBM policy, aspire to achieve but have thus far struggled to realise in practice.

The third recommendation addresses the technological infrastructure gap by calling for substantial investment in African language NLP technologies and amendment of existing governance frameworks to institutionalise vernacular digital feedback mechanisms. The findings highlighted that existing sentiment analysis and social media monitoring tools are ill-equipped to detect, classify, and interpret indigenous-language citizen expressions, resulting in significant gaps in municipal responsiveness. To address this, municipalities, national government agencies, and research institutions should collaborate to develop AI-driven, African language–compatible NLP systems tailored to local governance needs. Pilot projects could focus initially on high-frequency service delivery complaints (e.g., water, electricity, potholes) across selected languages, expanding as the models improve. Parallel to technological innovation, policy frameworks such as IDPs, Municipal Performance Management Systems, and CBM guidelines should be revised to include vernacular citizen feedback as a formal performance indicator explicitly. Municipal scorecards could be expanded to track service delivery outputs and responsiveness to citizen complaints articulated across multiple languages and platforms. Additionally, municipalities should pilot multilingual digital CBM initiatives in select wards or regions, using them as proof-of-concept models to build political will, refine operational procedures, and demonstrate the governance benefits of linguistically inclusive citizen monitoring. Without these systemic technological and policy shifts, vernacular CBM will remain confined to informal spaces, reinforcing exclusion rather than advancing South Africa's democratic project.

Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

This study has demonstrated that African indigenous languages are central to how South African citizens articulate grievances, demand accountability, and participate in municipal service delivery monitoring within digital spaces, particularly on platforms like X. Far from being peripheral or informal, vernacular digital expressions represent a vibrant, politically significant form of CBM that challenges traditional bureaucratic assumptions about civic engagement, language, and legitimacy. However, institutional resistance, technological shortcomings, and the absence of supportive policy frameworks have collectively marginalised these practices, relegating vernacular CBM to the informal peripheries of governance. Addressing this exclusion requires deliberate reforms that recognise indigenous languages as core infrastructures of democratic participation, invest in multilingual technological solutions, and formalise partnerships with community-based organisations and community radio stations that already act as vernacular civic intermediaries. By centring vernacular voices within digital governance systems, municipalities can build more inclusive, responsive, and democratic service delivery frameworks aligned with South Africa's constitutional values of equality, dignity, and participation.

Future research should extend this work by examining the longitudinal impacts of institutionalising vernacular digital citizen monitoring on governance performance and citizen trust in local government. Comparative studies across different municipalities, provinces, or countries could shed further light on how linguistic diversity shapes digital civic participation in varied governance contexts. There is also a pressing need for interdisciplinary research combining computational linguistics, public administration, and civic technology to accelerate the development of African language NLP tools tailored to public sector needs. Finally, further exploration of the emotional and affective dimensions of vernacular digital activism is needed, particularly how affect-laden vernacular expressions mobilise civic solidarity, shape public opinion, and influence political accountability in multilingual societies. In pursuing these avenues, future scholarship can continue to advance more inclusive models of digital democracy that genuinely reflect the cultural and linguistic realities of the citizens they aim to serve.

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