

# EMPOWERING EMERGING CREATIVES THROUGH DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT IN KIGALI, RWANDA

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of digital engagement on the development of emerging creatives in Kigali, Rwanda. Despite significant government investment in digital infrastructure to promote youth inclusion, many creatives struggle to turn digital access into stable, sustainable careers. Adopting an interpretive qualitative approach, the research investigates the lived experiences of young creatives who use digital platforms to enhance their visibility, foster creativity, and establish livelihood strategies. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with 10-12 participants aged 18-35, active in creative areas such as music, fashion, and digital art. Guided by reflective learning and empowerment theories, the study explores how these creatives acquire knowledge, adapt, and innovate with digital tools in informal, resource-limited settings. The findings inform a process model that frames digital engagement as both a technical and social process, linking empowerment to how success is defined among emerging creatives. Based on these insights, the study offers recommendations for policy and education to promote creative-sector-driven digital inclusion in Rwanda and similar economies.

**Keywords:** Digital Engagement, Empowerment, Emerging Creatives, Creative Economy, Kigali, Rwanda

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## INTRODUCTION

Global development increasingly relies on the creative economy, where innovation and technology drive economic growth and social equity. The spread of digital technologies enables creators to access global audiences directly, bypassing traditional intermediaries. However, this shift also introduces challenges related to algorithmic visibility, platform dependency, and precarious labour conditions (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Cunningham & Craig, 2019). As a result, the creative economy empowers some while perpetuating persistent inequalities.

In Africa, the creative sector is vital for employment, youth engagement, and cultural diplomacy, particularly given that nearly 60% of the continent's population is under 25 (UNCTAD, 2024). Countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, and Rwanda are investing in creative ecosystems that integrate technology, entrepreneurship, and education. Rwanda, in particular, is positioning itself as a regional hub for digital innovation through policies including Vision 2050, the Smart Rwanda Master Plan, and the Made in Rwanda policy. These initiatives reflect governmental recognition of digital engagement as a catalyst for inclusive development and youth empowerment. Despite these policy efforts, emerging creatives continue to face significant barriers in accessing infrastructure, funding, mentorship, and market opportunities. These obstacles hinder translating digital accessibility into sustainable empowerment.

A tension between opportunity and risk marks Kigali's creative sector. Young creatives in music, fashion, visual art, and digital writing use platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok to reach audiences. Yet, they face disparities in digital access, inconsistent earnings, and limited investment in the creative ecosystem. This situation raises a key question: Can digital participation alone empower creatives, or do broader reforms in policy, infrastructure, and education need to occur?

The study addresses the question: In what ways does digital engagement empower emerging creatives in Kigali, Rwanda?. Rather than equating empowerment solely with technological access, this research conceptualizes empowerment as a multidimensional process encompassing agency, visibility, skills, and economic participation. Drawing on empowerment theory (Kabeer, 1999; Zimmerman, 2000), the study integrates digital engagement research to examine the interplay between online participation, lived experience, and social context.

With a qualitative, interpretive approach, this research examines how young creatives navigate opportunities and limitations in Kigali's digital environment. It argues that digital engagement is both a pathway to empowerment through creative expression, learning, and networking and a process shaped by inequality and resource gaps. The study builds on African digital creative ecosystem theory and practice. It proposes a contextual model of digital empowerment for emerging economies.

## LITERATURE REVIEWS

### The Global Creative Economy

The rise of digital media has changed how cultural knowledge is produced globally. Traditional institutions have shifted, and digital platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Spotify now serve as intermediaries, replacing record labels and publishing houses (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). Content ownership lets creators reach audiences directly. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube have increased demand for diverse and original work. While these changes have expanded opportunities and reduced barriers to entry, they have also brought new power dynamics. Platform algorithms, data control, and dominance introduce challenges (Gillespie, 2014).

Although digitalisation is often credited with democratising creativity, it has also intensified precarity and competition. Project-based creative work is frequently characterized by unstable income and blurred boundaries between work and leisure (Gill & Pratt, 2008). The autonomy and personal expression afforded by digital activity can obscure underlying exploitation, in

which visibility itself constitutes unpaid labor (Abidin, 2016). Creatives must continually engage with audiences, cultivate a public persona, and adapt to algorithmic demands, exemplifying the concept of "visibility labor" (Duffy & Hund, 2015).

The global creative economy presents a paradox. Digital tools increase reach but also tie creators to unstable and extractive systems. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed these vulnerabilities by pushing cultural sectors further into digital dependency. As live events stopped, digital platforms became the main way for culture to circulate. This shift revealed persistent gaps in digital readiness and infrastructure, especially in the Global South. Problems with bandwidth, costs, and monetization persist (Flew, 2022). As a result, recent scholarship examines who benefits from digital transformation and the extent of the empowerment it enables. New theoretical work argues that the creative economy must be understood through the lens of justice, inclusion, and sustainability (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Banks, 2017).

### **African Creative Industries.**

Creative industries are seen as economic drivers that promote youth job creation, innovation, and cultural diplomacy in Africa. Industries including music, film, fashion, crafts, digital arts, and others strongly contribute to the national gross domestic product, national economic stability, and social cohesion (Afreximbank, 2024). The African Union's Plan of Action on Cultural and Creative Industries highlights the role of creativity in advancing Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, despite this acknowledgement, African creative economies tend to operate within fragmented networks where financing, informal labour, and proper enforcement of intellectual property are scarce (Snowball & Haines, 2024).

The digitisation of the creative industries on the continent is posing both potential opportunities and challenges. Digital media have enabled African artists to circumvent traditional gatekeepers and tap into global markets, as seen in the worldwide popularity of Afrobeats and Nollywood. While these developments appear to be consistent with Cunningham and Craig's (2019) concept that "creativity is platformized," they are also moments when content is created and disseminated via digital platforms —networks that allow creators to engage audiences, advertisers, and algorithms. But this platformization has also left creators vulnerable to new dependencies on multinational tech companies that control visibility, monetization, and data analytics. Yet if African creatives are not subject to equitable regulatory frameworks, they risk being absorbed into exploitative global mechanisms in their current forms (Woodcock & Graham, 2020).

In Rwanda, the government actively promotes digital innovation through Vision 2050, the Smart Rwanda Master Plan, and the Kigali Innovation City programs. Such policies are intended to turn the country into a knowledge-based economy by strengthening young people's skills and knowledge base and fostering entrepreneurship. Several economic sectors within the creative industry, specifically music, fashion, and design, have been reported in the context of national efforts (MINICT, 2023). But there are still significant gaps in infrastructure, training, and market access, empirical research has seen. Indeed, youth in Kigali are technology-literate but lack the means to engage in professional production on their own or profit from their creativity (Ndahiro, 2023). In addition, stratification by socioeconomic level, gender, and educational attainment structures who are made to participate in digital society and who are left out (Noble, 2018).

African academics argue that power in the creative sphere extends beyond access to digital technologies to the broader cultural policy, education, and financing ecosystem (UNESCO, 2022). Creative ecosystem encompasses the interdependence of individuals, institutions, and infrastructure that keeps creative work alive (Potts et al., 2008). In these ecosystems, digital engagement serves as a link that connects creators to consumers, partners, and markets. When these connections are underpinned by mentorship, access to capital, and policy consistency,

digital engagement can become empowerment. On the other hand, the lack of such support can lead to the precarity of creatives and a situation of dependency that prevents them from benefiting from digitalization (Scott, 2014).

### **Empowerment and Digital Engagement**

The concept of empowerment has evolved from a development buzzword into a multidimensional framework at the centre of the new approach to social innovation and participatory development. Kabeer (1999) defines empowerment as the process by which people acquire the capacity to make decisions and create the goals and results they want. Similarly, Zimmerman (2000) recognizes empowerment as a process and outcome: access to resources, agency, and decision-making. Within creativity, empowerment extends beyond economic self-sufficiency; it involves expressive agency, cultural recognition, and identity construction (Fehér et al., 2017).

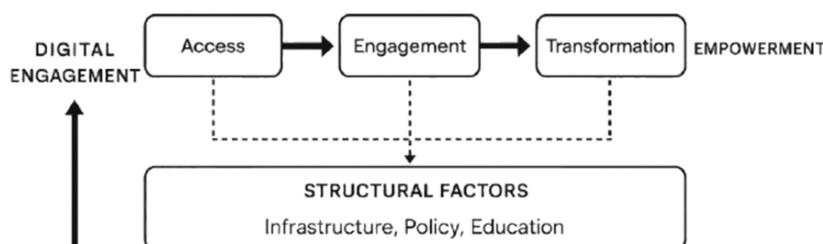
Where empowerment meets digital engagement offering pathways of self-expression, education, and partnership. For Selwyn (2021), meaningful digital engagement requires not just technical expertise but also social and critical skills to use technology for transformative purposes. In the creative economy, that means being able to generate, distribute, and profit from creative content while preserving control over your own work and your identity, both cultural and authentic. Yet academics argue against the simplistic idea that digital engagement is always inherently empowering and therefore can't be justified as such. Empowerment does not occur; instead, it arises from individuals engaging with structural conditions (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). When access, skills, and institutional support are unequal, digital engagement often reproduces existing hierarchies rather than dismantling them.

Multiple studies have addressed the role of digital tools in enabling youth and creatives of emerging economies. Abah (2020), for instance, showed how Nigerian filmmakers took to digital media to contest dominant narratives and regain cultural representation, and Raji (2021) observed that online collaboration opened the possibility for innovative peer-co-facilitated mentoring. Similarly, in Kenya, social media has been used by digital art collectives to increase visibility and raise resources for community activities (Wambui, 2022). These examples show how digital interactions can serve as channels of collective empowerment, enabling groups to empower individuals and find their own voices, rather than gaining power by learning in groups and engaging collectively in advocacy.

But empowerment through digital engagement is still less universal. Which voices get amplified is determined by algorithmic visibility; monetisation models favor creators from the Global North. The digital divide—defined as differences in connectivity, skill sets, and access to technology—continues to restrict participation by marginalized groups (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2019). In many African contexts, gender norms and socio-cultural expectations also limit women's digital involvement and recognition in creative spaces (Etta & Elder, 2020). Given these structural constraints, the analysis of empowerment must consider a relational aspect, noting how social power, digital infrastructure, and policy frameworks interrelate to create or defeat agency.

By connecting these threads, this study takes a process-focused view on empowerment in an evolving web of digital creative ecosystems. It views digital engagement as an enabler and an outcome of empowerment — as one that opens access to knowledge, networks, opportunities — but is also informed by the wider sociotechnical dynamics. The literature suggests that, rather than focusing on technological determinism, we should adopt a contextual perspective to understand the roles of policy, mentoring, and social capital in translating digital engagement into sustained empowerment. This outlook, however, shapes the conceptual framing that comes in the next section, laying out the paths through which digital engagement creates visibility, learning, and economic opportunity for emergent creatives in Kigali, Rwanda.

## Conceptual Framework



**Figure 1** Conceptual Framework

**Note:** Figure 1 illustrates how digital engagement empowers emerging creatives in Kigali through three pathways — visibility and voice, learning and mentorship, and economic empowerment — moderated by inequality, technological access, and policy support. It shows empowerment as a dynamic, cyclical process shaped by structural and contextual factors.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative interpretive research design was employed to examine how digital engagement fosters empowerment among emerging creatives in Kigali, Rwanda. This approach was selected to capture the complex, multi-dimensional perspectives of participants regarding their lived experiences and to deepen understanding of the interactions among digital engagement, creativity, and agency. The interpretivist paradigm guided the study, emphasizing participants' meaning-making processes over quantitative variable measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study utilized a qualitative case study approach focused on a creative and digital innovation hub in Kigali, East Africa. Participants were emerging creatives aged 18-35, actively engaged in music, fashion, design, photography, and digital arts. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to recruit twelve participants who met the inclusion criteria of active involvement in digital creative work and residence in Kigali. The sampling strategy ensured diversity across creative sectors and gender representation.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect primary data on participants' experiences within the digital creative ecosystem. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and was conducted either in person or virtually via Zoom, depending on participant availability. Field notes and online reviews of participants' digital portfolios were used to triangulate interview data. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized to ensure participant confidentiality.



**Figure 2** Braun and Clarke's (2006) Six-Phase Framework for Thematic Analysis

**Note:** This figure presents Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis, outlining an iterative process from data familiarization and coding to theme development, refinement, and reporting. It emphasizes a systematic yet reflexive approach that links emergent themes to participants' lived experiences and theoretical insights.

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-phase thematic analysis framework: familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Key themes were identified inductively, focusing on empowerment, visibility, learning, and inequality. To enhance rigour, member checking and reflexivity were employed to verify interpretations. Ethical approval was granted by the Thammasat University Institutional Review Board (IRB), and written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymization and pseudonyms were used throughout to protect participant identities and uphold ethical standards.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

### Participant and Context

Explicit inclusion criteria guided participant selection for this study: individuals aged 18 to 35, currently residing in Kigali, and actively engaged in digital creative practices across disciplines such as music production, digital illustration, filmmaking, fashion design, photography, and content creation. All participants demonstrated at least moderate proficiency in digital literacy, a prerequisite for inclusion. Recruitment employed purposive and snowball sampling to ensure diversity in gender, creative sector representation, and levels of digital engagement. Of the twelve selected participants, seven identified as male and five as female. The sample comprised both self-taught digital artists with robust social media engagement and early-career creatives seeking increased visibility through smaller digital networks. Participants collectively depicted Kigali's creative ecosystem as dynamic and unpredictable, with career opportunities arising primarily through informal networks and online platforms rather than formalized market

structures. Despite recognizing the aspirational goals of Rwanda's national digital transformation initiatives, participants consistently reported systemic barriers, including insufficient infrastructure, lack of structured mentorship, and constrained financial resources.

### **Visibility and Voice as Gateways to Empowerment**

Visibility and voice emerged as central pillars of creative empowerment among participants, who consistently linked their sense of empowerment to being recognized and heard both locally and globally. Social media platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, were identified as principal vehicles for gaining recognition and circumventing traditional gatekeepers in the creative industries. One participant explained, "Sharing my music videos on YouTube has given me an audience far beyond Kigali—people from other countries send messages and invitations for collaboration." Another participant noted the transformative potential of Instagram, stating, "When I posted my latest fashion collection, I received inquiries from clients in Kenya and the UK; it made me believe in the value of my work." However, participants also highlighted significant disparities in digital visibility. Algorithmic biases and dominant content trends tended to prioritize Western aesthetics or creators with already substantial followings, which, in the words of one interviewee, "makes it hard for new voices from Africa to break through noisy feeds." This pressure to sustain visibility led to constant production and self-promotion, with several participants reporting fatigue and creative burnout: "If I stop posting for even a week, my views and engagement drop. It's exhausting mentally and creatively." Despite these obstacles, early-stage visibility was widely perceived as a necessary antecedent to empowerment, underpinning processes of identity formation, social affirmation, and collective belonging. Online recognition instilled a sense of legitimacy and purpose, especially in a societal context where creative careers often lack formal recognition or support. Thus, digital platforms have served as crucial sites for both gaining exposure and constructing self-defined narratives within Rwanda's changing cultural tapestry.

### **Learning, Mentorship, and Informal Knowledge Networks**

Learning and mentorship emerged as fundamental mechanisms driving empowerment within Kigali's creative sector. Participants characterized digital environments as informal yet dynamic spaces for skill acquisition, where knowledge was primarily accessed through video tutorials, collaborative peer interaction, and self-directed observation. YouTube remained the dominant platform for technical skill development, with TikTok and Instagram used for creative inspiration and community engagement. This reliance on digital learning compensated for the inadequate presence of formal educational pathways in Rwanda's creative fields. Despite these affordances, many interviewees articulated a pronounced deficit in structured mentorship and delineated career trajectories. This mentorship gap became particularly evident in participants' accounts of seeking guidance on complex professional matters, such as negotiating fair pricing, understanding copyright law, and using audience analytics. For example, one fashion designer recounted the challenge of determining market-appropriate pricing without access to industry veterans, resulting in frequent undervaluation of her work and missed business opportunities. The lack of formalized mentorship not only forced creatives to navigate their development independently but also obstructed their progression from technical proficiency to sustained professional empowerment. While informal peer networks and online communities offered some support, these arrangements remained inadequate substitutes for institutionalized mentoring frameworks, thereby perpetuating structural inequalities. Participants noted that creatives with privileged access to established professionals, often through family or educational background, moved more seamlessly into sustainable careers, highlighting the critical role of mentorship in mediating pathways to empowerment.

### **Economic Empowerment and Precarity**

The third major theme concerns economic empowerment, which participants identified as a key indicator of creative success. Although digital engagement has enabled new income streams through freelancing, brand partnerships, and monetization, most creatives reported unstable and unpredictable earnings. Only a few participants secured paid work via digital platforms, while the majority relied on part-time employment or family support to sustain their creative activities. Respondents emphasized that increased digital exposure did not necessarily translate into revenue, given Rwanda's limited monetization infrastructure. Many were unable to access platforms such as YouTube monetization or international freelance sites due to regional restrictions and a lack of foreign bank accounts. The dominance of international creators and global platforms further exacerbated economic vulnerability. As noted by Woodcock and Graham (2020), the gig economy offers autonomy but often destabilizes those who work in it. Participants' experiences reflected this paradox: digital engagement provided flexibility and creative agency, yet normalized precarious working conditions.

### **Structural Barriers and Inequalities**

Economic empowerment was not solely defined by financial gain; some participants valued creative independence and the ability to produce work that reflected their personal narratives, highlighting both material and symbolic dimensions of empowerment. Many creators identified inadequate internet access and expensive data as significant impediments to uploading large files and streaming tutorials. Female participants reported additional challenges, such as limited familial support and societal stereotypes that discourage women's participation in the arts. These factors contribute to a policy gap that restricts creative growth. Participants expressed frustration with fragmented government initiatives that prioritize technology start-ups over creative enterprises. This policy bias aligns with Hesmondhalgh and Baker's (2011) concept of unequal cultural valuation, where creative labor outside technical or entrepreneurial domains receives less institutional recognition. The findings indicate that digital empowerment requires systemic interventions to address infrastructural, financial, and policy disparities. The research model conceptualizes these structural elements as mediators influencing the pathways and stability of empowerment.

### **The Empowerment Cycle:**

Process Model of Empowerment: The study conceptualizes empowerment as a dynamic and cyclical process comprising three interconnected stages: Access, Engagement, and Transformation.

1) Access: The first stage refers to the acquisition of requisite digital tools and the development of foundational digital literacy skills, enabling creatives to participate in online creative environments. Access includes infrastructural readiness, connectivity, and the capacity to utilize diverse digital platforms.

2) Engagement: In the second stage, creatives actively generate content, cultivate their online visibility, and participate in professional networking. Engagement is characterized by the curation of public personas, the dissemination of repeated content, and the establishment of collaborative relationships within digital ecosystems.

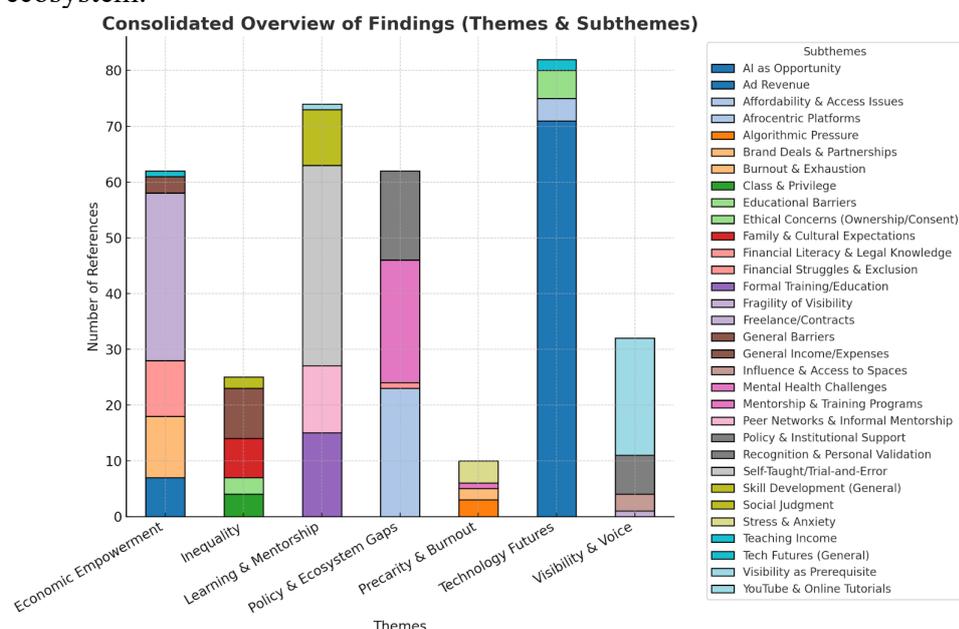
3) Transformation: The final stage occurs when sustained engagement results in substantive positive outcomes. Transformation encompasses the realization of material (economic benefits, monetization), symbolic (increased visibility and social capital), and psychological (enhanced self-efficacy and a sense of agency) gains.

Importantly, this empowerment cycle is iterative and nonlinear, frequently interrupted by structural impediments, such as unequal access to digital resources, a lack of mentorship, and unstable monetization frameworks. As such, empowerment is conceptualized not as a static end state but as an ongoing, relational, and context-dependent process shaped by continuous interaction between individual agency and systemic structures. This process model is grounded in Kabeer's (1999) theorization of empowerment as the progression from access to resources,

through agency, to meaningful outcomes, and further aligns with Zimmerman’s (2000) emphasis on psychological empowerment involving competence, control, and community participation. In the Rwandan context, the model encapsulates collective aspirations for creative self-determination through digital means while directly acknowledging the persistent influence of infrastructural, economic, and policy constraints.

### Summary of Key Findings.

The results show digital engagement is empowering and precarious at the same time for new creatives in Kigali. Three interdependent pathways (Visibility and Voice, Learning and Mentorship, and Economic Empowerment) govern how empowerment occurs. However, systemic inequities in terms of access, infrastructure, and policy moderate these pathways. Visibility and Voice are self-affirming and recognize identity while still requiring ongoing self-promotion — potentially leading to burnout. And while Learning and Mentorship promote long-term self-directed growth, the institutional support they offer can be limited. Economic Empowerment creates autonomy but remains fragile without stable monetization mechanisms. Taken together, the results above contribute to an integrated approach to digital empowerment that considers individual, structural, and relational dimensions. Digital engagement is both the access to empowerment and an expression of systemic inequalities encoded in a creative ecosystem.



**Figure 3** Collated Summary of Findings (Themes & Sub-themes)

**Note:** This figure visualizes the seven main themes and their subthemes across all interviews, showing the frequency of coded references per theme. It highlights Technology Futures and Learning & Mentorship as the most dominant, reflecting how innovation and self-taught learning drive creative empowerment among participants.

## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The findings of this study suggest that digital engagement functions as both a pathway and a process of empowerment for emerging creatives in Kigali, Rwanda. Digital platforms provide visibility, self-learning, and audience access, but empowerment is contingent and fragile. These outcomes resonate a larger paradox of digital creative economies: Technology generates agency as it buttresses systems of inequality (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Gill & Pratt, 2008). For this study, empowerment was not merely the absence of economic constraints but a lived phenomenon related to creative identity, opportunity, and recognition in digital environments.

The first broad theme — Visibility and Voice — illustrates that recognition is the pivot point of empowerment. The ability to publish creative work online enables Rwandan youth to bypass traditional gatekeepers and gain symbolic validation. This is consistent with Abidin's (2016) concept of visibility labour, in which creators repeatedly produce and market their work to remain discoverable. Visibility became, for Kigali's creatives, both empowering and extractive. It could reach new audiences but required unfettered content production, dictated by algorithms. Consequently, visibility-based empowerment depends upon sustainability and mental health—both areas often neglected in policy agendas grounded in economic indicators. The second theme—Learning and Mentorship—highlights that empowerment also flourishes when digital engagement is mediated through knowledge sharing and community. Participants' dependence on self-directed online learning attests to the democratizing potential of digital spaces (Selwyn, 2021). Yet this potential is hindered by a lack of structured mentorship channels. For example, empowerment cannot be achieved solely through an individual's digital literacy; it requires organizational support to foster creative growth and develop professional knowledge. This absence of mentorship networks is also symptomatic of the structural inequalities that favor those who are connected and sideline others. As Zimmerman (2000) argues, empowerment consists not only of individual competence but also of participatory mechanisms that sustain agency.

The third theme—Economic Empowerment—illustrates a disconnect between creative autonomy and material goods. Though digital interactions offer more ways to make money, Rwanda's monetization infrastructure is limited. As participants described, internet visibility doesn't come with a return on money. This reflects Woodcock and Graham's (2020) work on the gig economy, in which self-determination and insecurity coexist. Rwandan creatives have similar struggles, working within what can be labeled as a “precarious empowerment” space. Yet many appreciated the symbolic and cultural capital earned from these social currency-makers, even amid fluctuating income, proving that empowerment transcends tangible gains into psychological and social aspects.

In all the themes, structural barriers, i.e., disparities in access to digital technologies, ineffective policy framework, gender bias, and moderate empowerment effects. These results support Kabeer's (1999) proposition that empowerment is context-related and is determined by the distribution of resources. Access to digital resources in Kigali is still categorized according to social class, complicating the development of scale towards digital inclusion. Policies that focus on digital infrastructure while ignoring the creative industry fail to account for the cultural and human dimensions of empowerment. As such, empowerment through digital engagement must not be thought of as a simple outcome of access, but as a process mediated by power, knowledge, and social capital.

The study adds to the theory itself as a process-based view by promoting digital empowerment through process theory in the creative industry. The model presents empowerment as dynamic and cyclic—with opportunities in stages: access, engagement, and transformation. Access enables participation; engagement constructs skills, networks, and visibility; transformation turns participation into agency and opportunity. But for many, this cycle is very easily interrupted, particularly when resources or institutional supports are lacking. By centering the process and concept of empowerment over an instrumental approach to digitalization, the study extends the relational understanding of structure and agency.

This study examined how digital engagement empowers emerging creatives in Kigali, Rwanda, and found that empowerment manifests through intertwined pathways of visibility, learning, and economic participation. However, these pathways are moderated by systemic inequalities related to infrastructure, education, and policy. Digital tools expand opportunities for creativity and connection, but their empowering potential depends on contextual factors—particularly access to mentorship, stable monetization systems, and equitable policy support.

The findings underscore that sustainable empowerment extends beyond overcoming the digital divide; it requires the holistic development of the creative ecosystem. Enhancing digital literacy should proceed in tandem with targeted interventions that cultivate collaboration, structured mentorship networks, and equitable access to financial and creative resources. Policymakers are advised to institutionalize creative education within national innovation strategies and to develop dedicated funding streams that foreground the economic and cultural significance of creative work. As a specific policy recommendation, establishing a publicly funded Creative Innovation Fund could support emerging artists by providing grants and mentorship tailored to the digital creative sector. Moreover, higher education institutions should systematically integrate digital skills and entrepreneurial competencies into creative curricula, equipping young creatives with the tools necessary to participate effectively in evolving digital economies.

Theoretically, the study contributes to understanding empowerment as a process shaped by digital participation, social structure, and self-determination. In practice, it underscores the importance of designing inclusive digital policies that go beyond infrastructure to address creatives' lived realities. As Rwanda continues to position itself as a digital hub, attention to cultural industries will be essential for ensuring that digital transformation translates into equitable empowerment for all.

In conclusion, digital engagement in Kigali's creative economy represents both a promise and a paradox. It offers unprecedented access to knowledge, audiences, and global platforms, yet empowerment remains fragile without structural support. Sustainable empowerment requires a holistic approach—one that recognizes the creative economy as not merely a site of production but as a vital space of identity, innovation, and social change.

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