



Digital Capability and the Performance of Youth-Owned Socio-Economic Enterprises in Marani Sub-County, Kisii County, Kenya

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Abstract: *Digital transformation has reshaped how small enterprises operate, yet differences in digital capability continue to influence the success of youth-owned enterprises in developing economies. This study examined the influence of digital capability on the performance of youth-owned socio-economic enterprises in Marani Sub-County, Kisii County, Kenya. Guided by the Technology Acceptance Model, the Resource-Based View, and Human Capital Theory, the study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected from 335 youth-owned enterprises using structured questionnaires, while qualitative data were obtained through interviews with enterprise owners and managers. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analyses, whereas qualitative data were analysed thematically. The findings revealed a high level of digital capability among enterprise owners (composite mean = 3.96). Regression analysis showed that digital capability had a positive and statistically significant influence on enterprise performance ($p < 0.05$), with entrepreneurs reporting improved digital marketing, customer engagement, innovation, market expansion, and operational efficiency. Qualitative findings complemented these results, with participants explaining that digital skills enabled them to reach wider markets, reduce marketing costs, strengthen customer relationships, and respond more effectively to changing business conditions. However, respondents also highlighted limited employee digital skills as a major constraint to enterprise-wide digital transformation. The study concludes that digital capability is a strategic development resource that enhances enterprise competitiveness, youth livelihoods, and sustainable local economic development. It recommends strengthening digital entrepreneurship programmes, promoting workforce digital skills development, and integrating practical digital entrepreneurship training into youth enterprise support initiatives.*

Keywords: Digital capability; Enterprise performance; Youth entrepreneurship; Development Studies; Kenya

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1. Introduction

The rapid diffusion of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the way enterprises create value, communicate with customers, access markets, and

compete in increasingly interconnected economies. Digital communication technologies—including social media, mobile applications, e-commerce platforms, cloud computing, and digital financial services—have become integral to business operations, particularly for small and

medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), where they facilitate market expansion, customer engagement, innovation, and operational efficiency. Recent studies suggest that digital technologies are no longer optional business tools but strategic resources that enable enterprises to adapt to changing market conditions and sustain competitiveness in an increasingly digital economy (Bharadwaj et al., 2013; Verhoef et al., 2021; OECD, 2023). However, while investments in digital infrastructure have expanded considerably across both developed and developing countries, access to technology alone does not automatically translate into improved enterprise performance. Increasingly, attention has shifted towards entrepreneurs' ability to effectively exploit digital technologies as the critical factor determining whether digital investments generate tangible business value (Warner & Wäger, 2019; World Bank, 2023).

Digital capability has therefore emerged as a central determinant of enterprise success in the digital era. It encompasses the knowledge, skills, confidence, creativity, and adaptive capacity required to strategically integrate digital technologies into business processes, communication, marketing, customer relationship management, and decision-making. Rather than referring only to basic digital literacy, digital capability reflects an entrepreneur's ability to use digital technologies to identify opportunities, solve business problems, innovate, and respond to changing customer needs (Van Laar et al., 2020; European Commission, 2022). Enterprises led by digitally capable entrepreneurs are generally more innovative, productive, and resilient because they are able to combine technological resources with entrepreneurial knowledge to create competitive advantage (Warner & Wäger, 2019; IFC, 2023). From a Development Studies perspective, digital capability also represents an important form of human capital that enables individuals to participate more effectively in the digital economy, improve livelihoods, and contribute to inclusive economic development.

The growing importance of digital capability is particularly evident among youth-owned enterprises. Across the world, youth entrepreneurship is increasingly recognised as an important pathway for addressing unemployment, reducing poverty, and promoting inclusive economic growth (ILO, 2023). Young entrepreneurs are often early adopters of digital technologies and are more willing to experiment with innovative business models than older business owners. Nevertheless, the ability to convert digital technologies into sustainable business outcomes depends not only on access to smartphones, internet connectivity, or digital platforms but also on the competencies required to use these technologies strategically. Recent empirical studies have shown that entrepreneurs with stronger digital capabilities achieve

higher levels of business growth, innovation, customer satisfaction, and enterprise resilience than those with limited digital competencies (Nambisan et al., 2019; Kraus et al., 2022; World Bank, 2023). These findings suggest that digital capability has become a key driver of entrepreneurial success within rapidly changing business environments.

The significance of digital capability is even greater in developing countries, where digital entrepreneurship is increasingly viewed as a catalyst for socio-economic transformation. In Sub-Saharan Africa, youth-owned enterprises play an important role in employment creation, household income generation, and local economic development. However, many continue to operate under constraints such as limited access to finance, inadequate business support services, weak market linkages, and uneven digital skills (African Development Bank, 2023). Although the widespread adoption of smartphones, mobile money services, and social media has expanded opportunities for entrepreneurship, many young business owners still face challenges in effectively applying digital technologies to improve enterprise performance (UNCTAD, 2024). Consequently, differences in digital capability increasingly explain why some enterprises successfully exploit digital opportunities while others struggle to remain competitive.

Kenya provides an important context for examining this relationship. Over the past decade, the country has made remarkable progress in digital transformation through expanded mobile broadband coverage, widespread adoption of mobile money, growth in e-commerce, and implementation of national digital economy initiatives. These developments have created new opportunities for youth entrepreneurship and enterprise innovation (KNBS, 2023). However, despite improvements in digital access, disparities remain in the advanced competencies required to leverage digital technologies for enterprise growth. Studies have reported that while many young entrepreneurs possess basic digital literacy, fewer demonstrate advanced capabilities in digital marketing, customer analytics, content creation, digital communication strategy, and technological adaptation. Such challenges are particularly evident in peri-urban settings, where opportunities for specialised digital training and enterprise support remain limited.

Despite growing scholarly interest in digital entrepreneurship, several gaps remain in the existing literature. First, many studies conceptualise digital capability narrowly by focusing on basic digital literacy or internet use while overlooking broader dimensions such as digital marketing competence, customer analytics, management of multiple communication platforms, technological adaptability, and continuous learning (Van Laar et al., 2020). Second, much of the available evidence

is derived from developed countries or large urban centres, limiting understanding of how digital capability influences youth-owned enterprises operating in peri-urban contexts in developing economies. Third, previous studies have relied predominantly on quantitative approaches, offering limited insight into how entrepreneurs develop digital capabilities and apply them in everyday business practice. Finally, relatively little research has examined digital capability as part of a broader digital communication capability framework that interacts with technology adoption, accessibility, and communication diversity to shape enterprise performance.

This study addresses these conceptual, contextual, and methodological gaps by examining digital capability as a multidimensional organisational capability influencing the performance of youth-owned socio-economic enterprises in Marani Sub-County, Kisii County, Kenya. Guided by the Technology Acceptance Model, the Resource-Based View, and Human Capital Theory, the study conceptualises digital capability as encompassing digital skills, digital marketing competence, customer analytics, management of multiple communication platforms, continuous learning, and technological adaptability. By integrating quantitative findings with qualitative evidence from youth entrepreneurs, the study provides a richer understanding of how digital capability contributes to enterprise performance and, more broadly, to youth empowerment, enterprise development, and inclusive local economic growth. The findings provide evidence to inform entrepreneurship policy, digital skills development, and enterprise support initiatives aimed at strengthening the contribution of youth-owned enterprises to Kenya's socio-economic transformation.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Digital technologies have created new opportunities for youth entrepreneurship by improving market access, customer engagement, and business efficiency. However, despite increased access to smartphones, digital financial services, and online business platforms in Kenya, many youth-owned enterprises continue to experience low growth and limited competitiveness. This suggests that access to digital technologies alone is insufficient to improve enterprise performance; entrepreneurs must also possess the digital capabilities needed to apply these technologies strategically (World Bank, 2023; OECD, 2023). Although existing studies generally report a positive relationship between digital capability and enterprise performance, most have focused on basic digital literacy, relied on quantitative methods, and been conducted in developed or urban contexts. Consequently, little is known about how multidimensional digital capability influences the performance of youth-owned enterprises in peri-urban settings such as Marani Sub-County, Kenya. This study

addresses this gap by examining digital capability as a multidimensional organisational capability and integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence to provide a deeper understanding of how it contributes to enterprise performance and youth enterprise development.

1.3 Objective of the Study

The objective of this study was to evaluate the influence of digital capability on the performance of youth-owned socio-economic enterprises in Marani Sub-County, Kisii County, Kenya. Specifically, the study examined how entrepreneurs' digital competencies contribute to customer engagement, innovation, market expansion, operational efficiency, and overall enterprise performance, while generating evidence to inform digital entrepreneurship and youth enterprise development policies.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualizing Digital Capability

The rapid digitalisation of economies has fundamentally reshaped how enterprises operate, compete, and create value. Digital technologies have transformed traditional business models by enabling enterprises to communicate with customers in real time, access wider markets, streamline operations, and innovate more rapidly. As digital technologies become embedded in everyday business activities, enterprise success increasingly depends not only on access to digital infrastructure but also on the capability to use these technologies strategically. Recent studies argue that the competitive advantage of enterprises lies less in technology ownership than in their ability to integrate digital tools into business processes, decision-making, and innovation (Bharadwaj et al., 2013; Warner & Wäger, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021). Consequently, digital capability has emerged as a critical organisational resource that enables enterprises to transform digital opportunities into sustainable business outcomes.

Digital capability extends beyond basic digital literacy or the ability to operate technological devices. While digital literacy focuses primarily on foundational ICT skills, digital capability encompasses a broader set of technical, cognitive, strategic, and behavioural competencies that enable entrepreneurs to apply digital technologies effectively in dynamic business environments (Van Laar et al., 2020). It includes the ability to create digital content, manage customer relationships through digital platforms, analyse customer and market data, adopt emerging technologies, protect digital information, collaborate through online networks, and continuously adapt to technological change. The European Commission (2022) similarly conceptualises digital capability as a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and problem-solving

abilities that empower individuals and organisations to participate effectively in the digital economy. This broader perspective recognises that digital capability is not merely about using technology but about creating value through its purposeful and innovative application.

From an organisational perspective, digital capability represents a dynamic capability that enables enterprises to sense new opportunities, respond to changing market conditions, and continuously reconfigure resources to maintain competitiveness (Teece, 2018). Entrepreneurs with strong digital capabilities are better positioned to use digital communication technologies to strengthen customer engagement, improve marketing effectiveness, optimise internal operations, and expand into new markets. Digital capability also supports evidence-based decision-making by enabling entrepreneurs to analyse customer feedback, monitor market trends, and evaluate business performance using digital data. In this sense, digital capability functions as a strategic organisational asset that enhances productivity, innovation, resilience, and long-term enterprise sustainability rather than simply facilitating routine business operations.

Recent scholarship further emphasises that digital capability should not be viewed solely as an individual attribute of enterprise owners. Successful digital transformation depends on the collective digital competencies embedded within the organisation, including those of managers and employees (Warner & Wäger, 2019; OECD, 2023). Enterprises where digital knowledge is shared across the workforce are generally better able to integrate new technologies, foster organisational learning, encourage innovation, and respond to external shocks. Conversely, where digital competence is concentrated in the hands of business owners, enterprises often experience operational bottlenecks, reduced adaptability, and slower organisational transformation. This shift from individual to organisational capability highlights the importance of developing enterprise-wide digital competence as a foundation for sustainable growth.

Within the context of youth entrepreneurship, digital capability assumes even greater significance. Young entrepreneurs operate in highly competitive and rapidly evolving markets where digital technologies increasingly determine business visibility, customer engagement, and access to economic opportunities. From a Development Studies perspective, strengthening digital capability contributes not only to enterprise performance but also to broader development outcomes, including youth employment, income generation, social inclusion, and local economic development (UNDP, 2023; UNCTAD, 2024). As digital economies continue to expand, entrepreneurs who possess strong digital capabilities are

better equipped to create resilient enterprises, participate in emerging markets, and contribute to inclusive and sustainable development.

Drawing on these perspectives, this study conceptualises digital capability as a multidimensional organisational capability comprising digital skills, digital marketing competence, customer analytics, management of multiple digital communication platforms, technological adaptability, continuous digital learning, and workforce digital competence. This broader conceptualisation recognises that enterprise performance depends not only on entrepreneurs' ability to use digital technologies but also on their capacity to integrate these competencies strategically across organisational processes. By adopting this perspective, the study moves beyond conventional measures of digital literacy and provides a more comprehensive understanding of how digital capability enhances the performance of youth-owned socio-economic enterprises in Marani Sub-County, Kisii County, Kenya.

2.2 Digital Capability and Enterprise Performance

The relationship between digital capability and enterprise performance has attracted increasing scholarly attention as digital technologies become central to entrepreneurship and business competitiveness. While earlier studies largely focused on the adoption of digital technologies, contemporary research increasingly recognises that the benefits of digital transformation depend on entrepreneurs' ability to deploy these technologies strategically. In other words, digital technologies create value only when supported by the knowledge, skills, and organisational capabilities required to integrate them into business processes, customer engagement, innovation, and strategic decision-making (Verhoef et al., 2021; Warner & Wäger, 2019). This shift has repositioned digital capability from being viewed as a technical competence to being recognised as a strategic organisational asset that drives enterprise performance.

Global evidence consistently demonstrates a positive association between digital capability and enterprise success. The World Bank (2023) reports that enterprises managed by digitally capable entrepreneurs achieve higher productivity, improved operational efficiency, and stronger customer relationships than those with limited digital competencies. Similarly, the International Finance Corporation (2023) found that digitally capable entrepreneurs are more likely to integrate customer relationship management systems, digital financial technologies, online marketing, and business analytics into their operations, thereby improving innovation and long-term competitiveness. The Organisation for Economic Co-

operation and Development (OECD, 2023) further argues that enterprises with stronger digital capabilities are more resilient during economic shocks because they can rapidly adapt business models, maintain customer engagement through digital platforms, and respond to changing market conditions. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that digital capability enables enterprises to convert digital technologies into tangible business outcomes rather than merely facilitating technology use.

Beyond organisational performance, digital capability has important development implications. The United Nations Development Programme (2023) identifies digital capability as a catalyst for entrepreneurship, employment creation, and inclusive economic growth, particularly among young entrepreneurs operating in resource-constrained environments. Similarly, UNCTAD (2024) argues that entrepreneurs who possess advanced digital competencies are better positioned to access regional and international markets, adopt digital financial services, participate in e-commerce, and strengthen enterprise resilience. These findings suggest that digital capability contributes not only to business performance but also to broader development outcomes by enhancing livelihoods, reducing barriers to market participation, and supporting sustainable local economic development.

Evidence from Africa mirrors these global trends while highlighting persistent disparities in digital competence. According to the African Development Bank (2023), although investments in digital infrastructure have expanded across the continent, entrepreneurs vary considerably in their ability to apply digital technologies strategically. Enterprises managed by digitally capable entrepreneurs consistently report stronger customer engagement, higher innovation, greater market responsiveness, and improved financial performance than those with weaker digital competencies. However, the report also notes that inadequate digital skills remain a major constraint among many small and medium-sized enterprises, limiting their ability to fully benefit from ongoing digital transformation initiatives.

Within Kenya, recent empirical studies provide growing evidence of the contribution of digital capability to enterprise performance. Scholars have found that youth entrepreneurs with stronger digital competencies achieved significantly higher levels of customer engagement, enterprise visibility, digital marketing effectiveness, and business growth than their counterparts with lower digital capability. Their qualitative findings further revealed that digital capability enabled entrepreneurs to independently create promotional content, coordinate customer interactions across multiple digital platforms, and expand markets beyond their immediate localities. Likewise, other

established that digital capability positively influenced customer communication, online marketing, digital financial management, enterprise resilience, and overall business competitiveness among Kenyan SMEs. Collectively, these studies indicate that digital capability has become an important driver of enterprise performance within Kenya's expanding digital economy.

An emerging strand of literature also emphasises that digital capability is a dynamic rather than a static resource. Rapid technological change requires entrepreneurs to continuously update their knowledge, acquire new competencies, and adapt to evolving digital business environments. The OECD (2023) observes that entrepreneurs who invest in continuous digital learning through training, mentoring, networking, and self-directed learning demonstrate higher levels of innovation and organisational adaptability. UNESCO (2023) similarly argues that lifelong digital learning has become indispensable because technological advances continually reshape the competencies required for business success. This perspective aligns with the concept of dynamic capabilities, which views continuous learning and adaptation as essential for sustaining competitive advantage in volatile markets (Teece, 2018).

Although the literature overwhelmingly supports a positive relationship between digital capability and enterprise performance, several important gaps remain. First, many studies continue to conceptualise digital capability narrowly by focusing on basic ICT literacy while paying limited attention to strategic competencies such as customer analytics, management of multiple communication platforms, technological adaptability, and workforce digital capability. Second, much of the existing evidence originates from developed economies or major urban centres, providing limited understanding of youth-owned enterprises operating in peri-urban contexts where digital ecosystems and business support services are less developed. Third, previous research has relied predominantly on quantitative approaches that establish statistical relationships but offer limited insight into how entrepreneurs acquire, apply, and strengthen digital capabilities in everyday business practice. Finally, relatively few studies have examined digital capability within a broader digital communication capability framework that considers its interaction with technology adoption, accessibility, and communication diversity in shaping enterprise performance.

This study addresses these gaps by conceptualising digital capability as a multidimensional organisational capability encompassing digital skills, digital marketing competence, customer analytics, management of multiple digital communication platforms, continuous learning,

technological adaptability, and workforce digital competence. By integrating quantitative evidence with qualitative insights from youth entrepreneurs in Marani Sub-County, Kisii County, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of how digital capability contributes to enterprise performance within a peri-urban setting. In doing so, it extends the literature on digital entrepreneurship while generating evidence that can inform policies and programmes aimed at strengthening youth enterprise development, digital inclusion, and sustainable local economic development.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the Resource-Based View (RBV), and Human Capital Theory (HCT) to explain how digital capability influences the performance of youth-owned socio-economic enterprises. Although each theory offers a different perspective, together they provide a comprehensive understanding of how entrepreneurs develop, apply, and sustain digital capabilities that enhance enterprise performance. TAM explains why entrepreneurs embrace digital technologies, RBV views digital capability as a strategic organisational resource that creates competitive advantage, while Human Capital Theory highlights the importance of investing in knowledge and skills as a foundation for enterprise growth. Together, these theories provide a strong basis for understanding how digital capability contributes to sustainable business performance.

2.3.1 Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The Technology Acceptance Model, developed by Davis (1989), explains why people choose to adopt and continue using new technologies. The model argues that technology is more likely to be accepted when users perceive it as useful and easy to use. Although initially developed to explain individual technology adoption, TAM has become one of the most widely used frameworks for understanding digital transformation in organisations and entrepreneurship.

In the context of youth-owned enterprises, entrepreneurs with stronger digital capabilities are more likely to appreciate the value of digital communication technologies in improving business operations. They tend to view digital tools as practical solutions for marketing products, communicating with customers, processing payments, managing business information, and responding to changing market demands. As entrepreneurs become more confident in using these technologies, they are more willing to integrate them into their daily business activities. This continued use strengthens customer relationships, improves efficiency, supports innovation, and ultimately contributes to better enterprise performance. TAM is

therefore relevant to this study because it explains how digital capability encourages the effective adoption and sustained use of digital technologies within youth-owned enterprises.

2.3.2 Resource-Based View (RBV)

The Resource-Based View, advanced by Barney (1991), argues that enterprises achieve sustainable competitive advantage when they possess valuable resources that competitors cannot easily imitate or replace. While physical assets such as computers, smartphones, or internet connectivity can be acquired by many businesses, the ability to use these resources strategically is much more difficult to replicate. It is this capability that often distinguishes successful enterprises from less competitive ones.

From this perspective, digital capability represents an important intangible organisational resource. It reflects the knowledge, experience, creativity, and problem-solving ability that entrepreneurs develop over time as they learn to apply digital technologies to business challenges. Entrepreneurs who possess strong digital capabilities are better able to identify new market opportunities, communicate effectively with customers, analyse business information, adopt emerging technologies, and respond quickly to changing market conditions. These capabilities enable enterprises to create value that extends beyond technology ownership itself. For this reason, the Resource-Based View provides an appropriate lens for understanding why digital capability can become a source of long-term enterprise competitiveness and improved performance.

2.3.4 Human Capital Theory (HCT)

Human Capital Theory, proposed by Becker (1993), emphasises that investments in education, knowledge, skills, and training enhance individual productivity and organisational performance. The theory views people's knowledge and competencies as valuable assets that contribute directly to economic growth and enterprise success. In today's digital economy, digital capability has become an increasingly important form of human capital because it enables entrepreneurs to exploit technological opportunities, innovate, and adapt to rapidly changing business environments.

For youth-owned enterprises, continuous learning plays a critical role in strengthening digital capability. Entrepreneurs who regularly update their digital knowledge are better able to improve their marketing strategies, understand customer needs, analyse market trends, and make informed business decisions. Equally important, enterprise performance depends not only on the capabilities of business owners but also on the digital competence of employees. When digital skills are shared across the organisation, enterprises become more

innovative, collaborative, and resilient. Human Capital Theory therefore highlights the importance of continuous investment in digital learning as a pathway to sustainable enterprise development.

Rather than competing with one another, these three theories complement each other in explaining the relationship between digital capability and enterprise performance. TAM explains why entrepreneurs are willing to adopt and continue using digital technologies. RBV explains how digital capability becomes a valuable organisational resource that creates competitive advantage. Human Capital Theory explains why continuous investment in digital knowledge and skills strengthens enterprise productivity, innovation, and long-term performance.

Taken together, the theories suggest that successful digital transformation is not simply about acquiring digital technologies. Sustainable enterprise performance depends on entrepreneurs having the knowledge, confidence, and organisational capacity to use these technologies strategically, continuously improve their digital competencies, and embed digital capabilities throughout the enterprise. Guided by this integrated perspective, the present study conceptualises digital capability as a multidimensional construct comprising digital skills, digital marketing competence, customer analytics, management of multiple digital communication platforms, technological adaptability, continuous digital learning, and workforce digital competence. These dimensions are expected to enhance customer engagement, operational efficiency, innovation, market expansion, and the overall performance of youth-owned socio-economic enterprises in Marani Sub-County, Kisii County, Kenya.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a convergent mixed-methods research design to examine the influence of digital capability on the performance of youth-owned socio-economic enterprises in Marani Sub-County, Kisii County, Kenya. The design was appropriate because it enabled the integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence, providing both statistical measurement of the relationship between digital capability and enterprise performance and a deeper understanding of entrepreneurs' lived experiences in using digital technologies. The study was guided by the pragmatic research paradigm, which recognises that combining quantitative and qualitative approaches generates a more holistic understanding of complex social and economic phenomena.

The study targeted youth-owned socio-economic enterprises operating in key sectors of the local economy, including retail trade, agribusiness, hospitality, transport, beauty and personal care, tailoring, information

technology, and small-scale manufacturing. A sample of 335 enterprise owners and managers, aged between 18 and 35 years, was selected using a multistage sampling procedure that combined proportionate and simple random sampling to ensure adequate representation across enterprise categories. In addition, purposive sampling was employed to identify information-rich participants for in-depth interviews, enabling the study to capture diverse experiences regarding the use of digital communication technologies in enterprise management.

Data were collected using structured questionnaires and semi-structured interview guides. The questionnaire assessed digital capability through indicators such as digital skills, digital marketing competence, customer analytics, management of multiple digital communication platforms, continuous digital learning, employee digital competence, and technological adaptability. Enterprise performance was measured using indicators including sales growth, customer acquisition, innovation, operational efficiency, market expansion, and business sustainability. To ensure the quality of the data, the research instruments were reviewed by experts for content validity and pilot-tested before the main survey. Reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients, all of which exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

Quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics summarised respondents' characteristics and key study variables, while Pearson's correlation and multiple linear regression were used to examine the relationship between digital capability and enterprise performance. Qualitative data were transcribed verbatim, coded systematically, and analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns and explanations that complemented the quantitative findings. The integration of both datasets during interpretation strengthened the credibility of the findings by providing complementary statistical and contextual evidence.

Ethical standards were observed throughout the study. Ethical approval and the necessary research authorisations were obtained from the relevant institutions before data collection. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process. Research data were securely managed and used solely for academic purposes in accordance with accepted research ethics.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Digital Capability of Youth-Owned Socio-Economic Enterprises

Digital capability was examined using eight indicators reflecting enterprise owners' and managers' ability to apply digital communication technologies in business

management, customer engagement, digital marketing, innovation, and decision-making. Respondents rated each statement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from **1 = Strongly Disagree** to **5 = Strongly Agree**.

Table 1: Distribution of Responses on Digital Capability (N = 335)

Statement	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean	SD
I possess adequate digital skills to manage my enterprise effectively	2.5	5.6	8.4	46.3	37.2	4.10	0.83
I can independently create digital marketing content	3.8	7.2	10.0	44.7	34.3	3.98	0.89
I use digital tools to analyse customer engagement	4.7	8.4	11.3	42.8	32.8	3.91	0.94
I effectively manage multiple digital communication platforms	5.0	9.4	10.3	43.4	31.9	3.88	0.96
I regularly update my digital skills	3.4	6.6	12.2	45.0	32.8	3.97	0.91
Employees possess adequate digital skills	7.8	14.1	16.6	38.4	23.1	3.55	1.08
My enterprise readily adopts emerging digital technologies	3.4	7.2	10.9	46.9	31.6	3.99	0.87
Digital capability has improved enterprise performance	1.9	2.8	6.3	45.6	43.4	4.27	0.71

Source: Field Survey Data (2026)

The findings presented in Table 1 reveal that youth-owned socio-economic enterprises in Marani Sub-County have made notable progress in developing digital capability. Across all the indicators, between 75.3% and 89.0% of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statements, while the composite mean score of 3.96 (SD = 0.90) indicates a generally high level of digital capability among enterprise owners and managers. The strongest level of agreement was recorded for the statement that digital capability has improved enterprise performance (89.0%; M = 4.27, SD = 0.71), followed by the perception that respondents possessed adequate digital skills to manage their enterprises effectively (83.5%; M = 4.10, SD = 0.83). High levels of agreement were also observed for the adoption of emerging digital technologies (78.5%), the ability to create digital marketing content (79.0%), continuous improvement of digital skills (77.8%), the use of digital tools to analyse customer engagement (75.6%), and the management of multiple digital communication platforms (75.3%). Collectively, these findings suggest that digital capability is no longer viewed simply as a technical skill but as a strategic resource that enables young entrepreneurs to strengthen customer relationships, improve business visibility, expand market reach, and enhance operational efficiency.

The qualitative findings reinforce this interpretation by illustrating how entrepreneurs translate digital competencies into everyday business practice. Many participants described digital capability as a turning point in the growth of their enterprises. One entrepreneur explained, "Before learning digital marketing, I relied on customers who passed by my shop. Today, most customers contact me through WhatsApp and Facebook before they even visit, and my sales have increased because I can reach

many more people" (Participant P08). Another participant noted, "*I design my own posters using my phone and post them on WhatsApp, Facebook and TikTok. Customers respond almost immediately, and I no longer spend money paying someone to advertise for me*" (Participant P17).

These narratives demonstrate that digital capability extends beyond knowing how to use technology; it enables entrepreneurs to apply digital tools strategically to solve business problems, communicate with customers more effectively, reduce operational costs, and respond quickly to changing market opportunities. Similar observations have been reported by the World Bank (2023) observed that digitally capable entrepreneurs are better positioned to improve productivity, innovate, and respond to changing market conditions because they are able to use digital technologies strategically rather than simply possessing access to them.

Despite these encouraging findings, the results also reveal an important organizational challenge. Employee digital capability emerged as the weakest dimension of digital transformation, recording the lowest mean score (M = 3.55, SD = 1.08) and the highest proportion of disagreement (21.9%), even though 61.5% of respondents agreed that their employees possessed adequate digital skills. This suggests that while many enterprise owners have embraced digital technologies, these competencies have not been equally transferred to the wider workforce. The relatively higher standard deviation further indicates considerable variation across enterprises, reflecting unequal levels of workforce preparedness for digital transformation. Interview participants consistently acknowledged this challenge. As one entrepreneur explained, "*Most of the online work is done by me because my employees are not confident using WhatsApp Business*

or responding to customers through social media” (Participant P18). Another added, “Whenever I attend digital training, I improve, but I rarely have enough resources to train my employees. When I am away, business slows down because they are not comfortable handling digital customer enquiries on their own” (Participant P33). These accounts suggest that digital capability remains largely owner-centred, creating a dependency that may limit organizational learning, business continuity, and long-term enterprise growth.

The findings corroborate those of the International Labour Organization (2023), which identified limited employee digital skills as one of the major barriers to digital transformation among micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises. Similarly, the OECD (2023) argues that

sustainable digital transformation requires organizations to invest in the digital competencies of the entire workforce rather than focusing solely on enterprise owners. From a Development Studies perspective, these findings underscore that digital transformation is fundamentally a capacity development process. The benefits of digital technologies are most likely to be realized when investments in digital infrastructure are matched with continuous skills development, organisational learning, and inclusive workforce empowerment. Strengthening digital capability across both entrepreneurs and employees is therefore essential for enhancing enterprise resilience, promoting innovation, creating sustainable employment opportunities, and supporting inclusive local economic development.

Table 2: Ranking of Digital Capability Indicators

Rank	Indicator	Mean	SD
1	Digital capability has improved enterprise performance	4.27	0.71
2	I possess adequate digital skills	4.10	0.83
3	My enterprise readily adopts emerging digital technologies	3.99	0.87
4	I create digital marketing content	3.98	0.89
5	I regularly update my digital skills	3.97	0.91
6	I analyse customer engagement digitally	3.91	0.94
7	I manage multiple digital communication platforms	3.88	0.96
8	Employees possess adequate digital skills	3.55	1.08

Source: Field Survey Data (2026)

The findings presented in Table 1 demonstrate that digital capability has become an important driver of enterprise performance among youth-owned socio-economic enterprises in Marani Sub-County. The composite mean score of 3.96 (SD = 0.90) indicates that respondents generally perceived themselves as digitally capable and able to integrate digital technologies into their business operations. Across all eight indicators, between 75.3% and 89.0% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statements, suggesting that digital capability is increasingly embedded in the management of youth enterprises. The strongest agreement was recorded for the statement that digital capability has improved enterprise performance (89.0%; M = 4.27, SD = 0.71), followed by respondents' confidence in their own digital skills (83.5%; M = 4.10, SD = 0.83). Similarly, high levels of agreement were reported for creating digital marketing content (79.0%), adopting emerging digital technologies (78.5%), regularly improving digital skills (77.8%), using digital tools to analyse customer engagement (75.6%), and managing multiple digital communication platforms (75.3%). The relatively low standard deviations across these indicators further suggest that respondents shared broadly similar experiences regarding the value of digital capability in supporting enterprise growth.

Beyond the numerical results, the qualitative findings reveal how these digital capabilities are shaping everyday business practice. Many entrepreneurs explained that digital skills had fundamentally changed how they attract customers, market their products, and manage business operations. One participant observed, “Before learning digital marketing, I depended on customers who passed by my shop. Today, most customers contact me through WhatsApp and Facebook before they even visit, and my sales have increased because I can reach many more people” (Participant P08). Another entrepreneur remarked, “I design my own posters using my phone and post them on WhatsApp, Facebook and TikTok. Customers respond almost immediately, and I no longer spend money paying someone to advertise for me” (Participant P17). A third participant explained, “Technology has made my work easier. I can respond to customers immediately, receive payments through my phone and even monitor which products are selling most online” (Participant P27). These experiences demonstrate that digital capability is not merely about possessing technical knowledge but about using digital technologies strategically to solve business challenges, strengthen customer relationships, improve efficiency, and expand market opportunities. From a Development Studies perspective, these findings suggest

that digital capability functions as a livelihood asset that enables young entrepreneurs to build more resilient and adaptive enterprises within an increasingly competitive digital economy.

The findings also indicate that respondents are moving beyond the basic use of digital technologies towards more strategic and innovative applications. High levels of agreement on creating digital marketing content, analysing customer engagement, and managing multiple digital communication platforms suggest that entrepreneurs are increasingly using digital technologies not only for communication but also for market intelligence and business decision-making. During the interviews, respondents explained that they monitored customer feedback, online enquiries, product reviews, and engagement statistics to understand consumer preferences and adjust their products and marketing strategies accordingly. As one participant noted, “When I post new products online, I check how many people view, like or ask questions. This helps me know what customers want before I buy more stock” (Participant P13). Another added, “Different customers prefer different platforms. Younger customers contact me through Instagram or TikTok, while others use WhatsApp. Using several platforms helps me reach more customers” (Participant P29). These findings suggest that digital capability is enabling entrepreneurs to make evidence-based business decisions, diversify communication channels, and strengthen customer engagement. Such practices reflect a gradual transition from simple technology use to strategic digital entrepreneurship, where information generated through digital platforms becomes an important resource for enterprise growth.

The results further demonstrate that continuous learning has become an important dimension of digital capability. More than three-quarters of the respondents (77.8%) reported that they regularly update their digital skills, reflecting an awareness that digital technologies evolve rapidly and require ongoing learning. Interview participants consistently described digital learning as a continuous process rather than a one-time achievement. One entrepreneur explained, “Technology changes very fast. Every few months there is something new to learn. I watch online tutorials and attend training whenever I get the opportunity because I don't want my business to be left behind” (Participant P31). Another participant stated, “Most of the digital skills I use today were not learned in school. I learned them from YouTube, webinars and interacting with other business owners” (Participant P22). These accounts demonstrate that entrepreneurs are actively investing in self-directed learning to remain competitive in dynamic digital markets. Continuous learning therefore emerges as an important mechanism through which digital

capability is strengthened, enabling enterprises to adapt to technological change and sustain innovation over time.

Despite these encouraging findings, the study also exposes an important organisational weakness. Among all the indicators, employee digital capability recorded the lowest mean score ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.08$) and the highest level of disagreement (21.9%), although 61.5% of respondents still agreed that their employees possessed adequate digital skills. This finding suggests that digital capability remains concentrated among enterprise owners and managers rather than being institutionalised across the workforce. The comparatively larger standard deviation indicates greater variation in employee competence across enterprises, highlighting uneven organisational preparedness for digital transformation. The qualitative findings provide important insight into this challenge. One participant explained, “Most of the online work is done by me because some of my employees are not comfortable using WhatsApp Business or responding to customers through social media” (Participant P18). Another respondent remarked, “Whenever I attend digital training, I improve, but I rarely have enough resources to train my employees. When I am away, business slows down because they are not confident handling online customer enquiries” (Participant P33). Similarly, another entrepreneur observed, “My employees know how to use smartphones for personal communication, but using digital platforms professionally for business is something they still need to learn” (Participant P06). These narratives reveal that digital transformation within many youth-owned enterprises remains heavily dependent on the capabilities of business owners, creating organisational vulnerabilities that may limit business continuity, innovation, and future growth.

The findings of this study are consistent with a growing body of international and regional evidence demonstrating that digital capability is a critical determinant of enterprise performance. The World Bank (2023) reported that enterprises led by digitally capable entrepreneurs achieve higher productivity, stronger customer engagement, and greater resilience because they are able to integrate digital technologies into strategic business processes. Similarly, the International Finance Corporation (2023) found that entrepreneurs with advanced digital competencies are more likely to utilise customer relationship management systems, digital marketing, and business analytics to improve competitiveness and enterprise growth. The United Nations Development Programme (2023) likewise argues that digital capability enables entrepreneurs to access wider markets, stimulate innovation, and create employment opportunities, thereby contributing to inclusive economic development. Within Africa, the African Development Bank (2023) observed that while access to digital technologies has expanded considerably,

differences in digital capability continue to explain variations in enterprise competitiveness and business performance. In Kenya, digitally capable entrepreneurs were more successful in implementing digital marketing strategies, strengthening customer engagement, and improving business resilience. Similarly, it is evident that entrepreneurs with stronger digital competencies were better able to expand into new markets, innovate, and sustain enterprise growth. However, the present study extends these findings by demonstrating that the benefits of digital capability are not limited to individual entrepreneurs but are closely linked to organisational learning and workforce competence. The findings therefore suggest that investments in digital infrastructure alone are unlikely to deliver sustainable enterprise development unless they are accompanied by continuous capacity building for both entrepreneurs and employees.

Overall, the evidence indicates that digital capability has evolved into a strategic development resource that enhances enterprise productivity, innovation, adaptability,

and competitiveness among youth-owned enterprises. Rather than being viewed simply as a set of technical skills, digital capability represents a broader process of capacity development that enables entrepreneurs to participate more effectively in the digital economy. From a Development Studies perspective, strengthening digital capability contributes not only to improved enterprise performance but also to youth employment, local economic development, business resilience, and inclusive growth. At the same time, the organisational digital skills gap identified in this study underscores the need for enterprise support programmes to move beyond technology provision and prioritise continuous digital skills development, organisational learning, and workforce empowerment as critical components of sustainable digital transformation. This finding reinforces the view that digital inclusion is ultimately achieved not through access to technology alone, but through the development of the human capabilities needed to use technology productively and equitably.

Table 3: Composite Analysis for Digital Capability

Variable	Composite Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Digital Capability	3.96	0.90	High

Source: Field Survey Data (2026)

Table 3 presents the composite statistics for digital capability among youth-owned socio-economic enterprises in Marani Sub-County. The composite mean score of 3.96 (SD = 0.90) indicates that respondents generally reported a high level of digital capability, suggesting that digital knowledge and competencies have become an integral part of enterprise management. The relatively moderate standard deviation further demonstrates that respondents shared broadly similar perceptions regarding their ability to use digital technologies in their businesses. Overall, the findings suggest that digital capability is no longer viewed simply as a technical requirement but as a strategic resource that enables entrepreneurs to improve communication, strengthen customer relationships, expand market opportunities, and enhance enterprise performance. From a Development Studies perspective, these results point to the growing importance of digital capability as a form of productive capital that supports enterprise resilience, livelihood improvement, and local economic development.

The qualitative findings provide important context for understanding these results. Many entrepreneurs explained that developing digital skills had transformed the way they operated their businesses by reducing costs, improving customer engagement, and increasing market visibility. One participant remarked, *“Learning how to use social media for business has helped me reach more customers*

than I ever imagined. I can advertise my products, respond to enquiries instantly, and receive orders without customers visiting my shop” (Participant P09). Another entrepreneur explained, *“I used to depend on others to create posters and promote my business online, but now I can do it myself. This has reduced my marketing costs and made my business more visible”* (Participant P24). Similarly, another respondent observed, *“Every time I learn a new digital skill, I find a better way of serving my customers. I can now communicate faster, receive payments more easily and market my products without leaving my shop”* (Participant P27). These experiences illustrate that digital capability extends beyond the acquisition of technical skills. Rather, it empowers entrepreneurs to use digital technologies creatively and strategically to improve business performance, respond to customer needs, and remain competitive in increasingly digital markets.

However, the qualitative evidence also reveals that the benefits of digital capability are not evenly distributed across enterprises. Several respondents acknowledged that while enterprise owners had invested in improving their own digital competencies, many employees lacked the confidence and practical skills needed to use digital technologies effectively. As one participant explained, *“Most of the online work is done by me because some of my employees are not comfortable using WhatsApp*

Business or responding to customers through social media” (Participant P18). Another added, “When I attend digital training, I improve, but I rarely have enough resources to train my employees. If I am away, business slows down because they are not confident handling online customer enquiries” (Participant P33). These accounts suggest that digital capability remains concentrated among enterprise owners, creating an organisational skills gap that may limit knowledge sharing, reduce operational efficiency, and constrain long-term business growth. The findings therefore highlight that sustainable digital transformation requires the development of digital competencies across the entire workforce rather than among entrepreneurs alone.

The present findings are consistent with a growing body of empirical evidence showing that digital capability is a key determinant of enterprise success. The World Bank (2023) reported that digitally capable entrepreneurs achieve higher productivity and greater business resilience because they are better able to integrate digital technologies into strategic decision-making and customer engagement. Similarly, the International Finance Corporation (2023) found that entrepreneurs with stronger digital capabilities make greater use of digital marketing, customer relationship management systems, and business analytics, leading to improved enterprise competitiveness and growth. The OECD (2023) further argues that digital capability is strengthened through continuous learning and organisational adaptation, while UNCTAD (2024) identifies advanced digital competencies as essential for innovation, market expansion, and participation in the digital economy. Within the Kenyan context, digital capability enhances customer communication, digital marketing, and enterprise resilience among small and medium-sized enterprises, whereas the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS, 2023) highlights continuing disparities in advanced digital skills despite increased access to digital technologies. The present study extends this body of knowledge by demonstrating that enterprise performance depends not only on the digital competence of entrepreneurs but also on the extent to which those capabilities are embedded throughout the organisation.

The findings also provide empirical support for the study's theoretical framework. Consistent with the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989), entrepreneurs who perceive digital technologies as useful and manageable are more likely to integrate them into everyday business operations, resulting in improved communication, marketing, and customer engagement. The findings equally support the Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991), which conceptualises digital capability as a valuable, intangible organisational resource that enables enterprises to create and sustain competitive advantage beyond the

mere ownership of digital technologies. In addition, the results reinforce Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993) by demonstrating that continuous investment in digital knowledge and skills enhances entrepreneurial productivity, innovation, and enterprise performance. Viewed together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that digital capability is not simply an individual attribute but a strategic organisational asset that enables youth-owned enterprises to adapt to changing market conditions, exploit digital opportunities, and achieve sustainable business growth.

Generally, the composite findings demonstrate that digital capability has become a cornerstone of enterprise development among youth-owned businesses in Marani Sub-County. While the generally high level of digital competence reflects encouraging progress in digital entrepreneurship, the organisational skills gap identified among employees underscores the need for more inclusive approaches to digital capacity development. Strengthening digital capability across both enterprise owners and employees is therefore likely to enhance organizational learning, improve business resilience, support innovation, and contribute to more inclusive and sustainable local economic development. From a Development Studies perspective, this reinforces the view that digital transformation is fundamentally a process of building human and organizational capabilities that enable individuals and enterprises to participate meaningfully in the digital economy.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined the influence of digital capability on the performance of youth-owned socio-economic enterprises in Marani Sub-County, Kisii County, Kenya. The findings demonstrate that digital capability is a critical determinant of enterprise performance. Overall, respondents reported high levels of digital competence, particularly in digital marketing, adoption of emerging technologies, continuous digital learning, customer engagement, and the use of multiple digital communication platforms. The regression analysis further established that digital capability exerts a positive and statistically significant influence on enterprise performance, confirming that entrepreneurs with stronger digital competencies are better positioned to improve operational efficiency, strengthen customer relationships, enhance market visibility, and sustain business growth.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings shows that digital capability extends beyond technical

This study contributes to Development Studies by demonstrating that digital capability is an important driver of youth empowerment and socio-economic transformation. It shows that the success of youth-owned enterprises depends not only on access to digital technologies but also on the ability of entrepreneurs to use these technologies strategically to improve productivity, innovation, and market participation. By integrating quantitative evidence with the lived experiences of young entrepreneurs, the study provides a deeper understanding of how digital capability supports enterprise development and contributes to broader development outcomes such as employment creation, income generation, and inclusive local economic growth. The study also extends existing knowledge by highlighting that digital transformation is fundamentally a human development issue. Sustainable enterprise growth requires investment in people's knowledge, skills, and adaptive capacities alongside investments in digital infrastructure. In this way, digital capability emerges as a form of human capital that enables young entrepreneurs to build resilient enterprises, seize new economic opportunities, and contribute to sustainable community development.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

Future research should explore how digital capability influences wider development outcomes, including youth employment, household income, poverty reduction, social inclusion, and community resilience. Comparative studies involving rural, peri-urban, and urban enterprises would provide a richer understanding of how local contexts shape digital transformation and enterprise performance. Further research should also examine how factors such as gender, access to finance, institutional support, social networks, and public policy interact with digital capability to influence the success and sustainability of youth-owned enterprises. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable in assessing how continuous investment in digital skills contributes to enterprise growth and local economic development over time.

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