



From Access to Everyday Use: Adoption and Intensity of Digital Communication among Youth-Owned Socio-Economic Enterprises in Marani Sub-County, Kisii County, Kenya

Asiah Akenga, Peter Gutwa Oino and Dennis Mamboleo

Kisii University, Kenya

Email: isaken2003@gmail.com

Abstract: Digital communication technologies are reshaping how youth-owned enterprises market products, engage customers and manage everyday business activities. Yet access to digital platforms does not necessarily translate into sustained or enterprise-wide use. This study examined the adoption and intensity of digital communication use among youth-owned socio-economic enterprises in Marani Sub-County, Kisii County, Kenya. A mixed-methods approach was employed with 335 youth-owned enterprises, combining survey data with qualitative accounts to explain patterns in digital use. Eight five-point Likert-scale indicators assessed daily use, integration into routine operations, customer communication, platform updating, perceived importance, marketing, customer support and feedback, and employee participation. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the survey data, while qualitative responses were thematically analysed and integrated with the quantitative findings. Overall, enterprises reported high adoption and routine use ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.78$). The highest-rated uses were marketing products and services ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 0.65$), customer communication ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 0.69$), and daily use ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.76$). However, platform updating ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.88$) and employee participation ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.91$) were comparatively weaker. Qualitative findings showed that WhatsApp and Facebook supported marketing, ordering, customer feedback, payment coordination and delivery communication, but use was often concentrated among enterprise owners. The findings suggest that digital adoption among youth-owned enterprises is substantial, but digital capability remains unevenly distributed within enterprises. Moving from owner-centred use towards shared organisational capability may therefore be critical for achieving more sustained and multifunctional digital transformation.

Keywords: digital communication; technology adoption; intensity of use; youth-owned enterprises; social media; digital capability; Kenya

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1. Introduction

Digital technologies are fundamentally reshaping how enterprises communicate, access markets, coordinate transactions and construct relationships with customers. The diffusion of mobile connectivity, social media, digital platforms, cloud-based services and electronic payment

systems has created new possibilities for firms to overcome geographical and informational constraints that traditionally limited small-business participation in markets (OECD, 2021; UNCTAD, 2019). Digital platforms can reduce search and transaction costs, facilitate interactions between businesses and customers, and enable smaller firms to reach markets beyond their immediate geographical locations (UNCTAD, 2019). These developments have contributed to a broader transformation in which digital communication is

increasingly embedded in marketing, customer relationship management, information exchange and routine business processes (OECD, 2021; OECD, 2024). The transformation is nevertheless uneven. Smaller firms generally lag behind larger enterprises in the adoption of more sophisticated digital technologies, with resource constraints, skills gaps, limited managerial capacity and financing challenges continuing to shape the depth of digitalisation (OECD, 2021; Kergroach, 2021).

The global literature consequently suggests that enterprise digitalisation should not be understood as a simple question of whether a firm has access to or uses a particular technology. Rather, digitalisation is multidimensional, involving different technologies, different business functions and different levels of organisational integration (OECD, 2021). The OECD (2021) observes that SMEs commonly begin their digitalisation journeys with relatively accessible applications, particularly general administration and marketing, while adoption gaps become more pronounced when technologies require greater organisational integration or more sophisticated skills. More recent evidence similarly shows that digitalisation can support market access, operational efficiency and competitiveness, but that firms differ considerably in their digital maturity and ability to convert digital tools into organisational value (Bianchini & Lasheras Sancho, 2025; OECD, 2024). This distinction is important for small and youth-owned enterprises because the mere presence of a smartphone, internet connection or social media account does not necessarily indicate sustained or meaningful digital engagement.

Digital communication provides a particularly important entry point into this wider transformation. Social media and mobile messaging platforms can enable entrepreneurs to advertise products, respond to customer enquiries, gather feedback, coordinate orders and maintain relationships at relatively low cost (Ndiege, 2019; Solomon et al., 2024). Yet access and adoption should be analytically distinguished from the intensity and breadth of actual use. An enterprise may have a Facebook or WhatsApp account without updating it regularly, responding consistently to customers or using it to support wider business activities. Conversely, an enterprise may incorporate digital communication into several interconnected functions, including marketing, customer service, ordering and delivery coordination. Accordingly, adoption in this study refers to the uptake and use of digital communication tools, while intensity of use refers more broadly to the frequency, regularity, functional breadth and degree of integration associated with that use. This multidimensional interpretation is consistent with the broader understanding of SME digitalisation as a process involving different technologies and business functions rather than a single technological decision (OECD, 2021).

The distinction between access and meaningful use is particularly significant in developing countries. UNCTAD (2019) argues that digital platforms can provide developing-country enterprises with opportunities to participate in

wider markets, create new business models and reduce some transaction and information barriers. However, these opportunities are not automatically realised because digital development remains shaped by infrastructure, skills, finance, entrepreneurial knowledge and the wider institutional ecosystem (UNCTAD, 2019). Evidence from systematic reviews of SME digitalisation in developing countries similarly identifies digital literacy, finance and technical capabilities among the factors that can constrain technology adoption (Dimoso & Utonga, 2024). Thus, digital transformation in the Global South involves not simply connecting enterprises to digital networks but enabling entrepreneurs and employees to translate connectivity into sustained productive use.

This challenge is also evident in the wider international literature on SMEs. Although digitalisation can help smaller firms overcome some disadvantages associated with their size, smaller firms frequently face greater barriers to adopting and integrating digital technologies than larger organisations (OECD, 2021; Kergroach, 2021). The benefits of digitalisation may therefore be distributed unevenly across firms and within firms. Bianchini and Lasheras Sancho (2025) show that SME digitalisation can support market access and operational efficiency, while also highlighting continuing barriers related to adoption and the adaptation of business processes. This suggests that digital maturity is not determined solely by technological availability; it is also shaped by organisational capacity, management practices and the ability of employees to use technologies productively.

The youth enterprise context adds another important dimension to this debate. Young entrepreneurs are often assumed to have relatively high levels of digital familiarity because of their extensive engagement with smartphones, social media and mobile technologies. However, digital familiarity in everyday life should not be equated with professional digital competence. Effective enterprise use may require skills in digital marketing, content development, customer relationship management, online communication, information management, cybersecurity and the interpretation of digital feedback (ILO, 2023; OECD, 2021). The difference between using social media for personal communication and using it strategically for enterprise purposes is therefore substantial. An entrepreneur may be highly familiar with a platform but still lack the organisational knowledge required to use it systematically for business purposes.

These issues are particularly relevant in Sub-Saharan Africa, where mobile technologies and digital platforms have increasingly become part of entrepreneurial practice while significant inequalities in digital skills, infrastructure and productive use remain. UNCTAD (2019) identifies Africa as an important site of digital entrepreneurial activity but also points to persistent constraints involving infrastructure, finance, entrepreneurial knowledge and skilled human resources. More recent empirical research reinforces the importance of examining how digital technologies are actually incorporated into entrepreneurial

practice. Joseph et al. (2025), for example, found that digital technologies and social media can reshape relationships between micro-entrepreneurs and customers in informal economies while also identifying constraints associated with skills, trust and uneven utilisation. Such findings indicate that digital transformation among small enterprises involves both technological adoption and the development of human and organisational capabilities.

Kenya provides a particularly relevant setting within this broader African and global transformation. The country has developed a comparatively dynamic digital ecosystem characterised by widespread mobile-phone use, mobile financial services, expanding internet connectivity and a growing technology-oriented entrepreneurial environment. At the macroeconomic level, the ICT sector has become an increasingly important component of Kenya's economy. The Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS, 2024) reported ICT output of KSh 640.2 billion in 2023, with ICT value added reaching KSh 334.1 billion. These developments provide an enabling environment for digital entrepreneurship, but national-level expansion of ICT does not necessarily imply equivalent levels of digital adoption and integration among individual enterprises.

Kenyan evidence demonstrates that social media has become increasingly relevant to small-enterprise activity. Ndiege (2019), based on empirical research with Kenyan SMEs, found that social media could support strategic positioning but also showed that enterprises did not necessarily exploit the full capabilities of these technologies. This finding is important because it demonstrates that the establishment of a digital presence does not automatically represent deep digital integration. Solomon et al. (2024), drawing on evidence from SMEs in Kenya and Nigeria, similarly found that social media adoption is associated with factors including knowledge, customer presence and learning through use, with smaller firms particularly using social media for advertising, marketing and obtaining customer information. These findings suggest that digital communication is often adopted because it responds directly to immediate enterprise needs rather than simply because entrepreneurs have access to technology.

The relationship between digital communication and youth entrepreneurship has also received increasing attention in Kenya. Kyalo (2024) found a positive relationship between social media marketing and the performance of youth-owned SMEs in Nairobi County, highlighting the growing role of social media in entrepreneurial activity. However, an emphasis on performance outcomes can obscure the underlying processes through which digital adoption occurs. Before asking whether digital communication improves enterprise performance, it is important to establish the extent to which enterprises actually use digital tools, the functions for which they use them, how regularly they use them and whether digital activities extend beyond the owner to other members of the enterprise.

This distinction is especially important because digital adoption may be owner-centred. In small enterprises, owners frequently perform managerial, marketing and operational functions simultaneously. They may therefore become the primary or even sole users responsible for online customer communication, digital marketing and management of social media platforms. Employees may have access to smartphones and social media for personal purposes while lacking the confidence or professional skills required to use digital platforms for customer engagement, content development or business coordination. The result can be a situation in which an enterprise demonstrates high levels of digital adoption at the owner level without achieving equivalent organisation-wide integration. The distinction between individual adoption and distributed organisational use is therefore central to understanding the depth of digital transformation among youth-owned enterprises.

This issue is consistent with the broader literature showing that digitalisation involves complementary organisational changes rather than technology alone. OECD (2021) notes that digital transformation requires firms to combine technologies with strategic assets, skills and organisational capabilities, while Kergroach (2021) emphasises the importance of training, upskilling and management capabilities in enabling SMEs to benefit from digital technologies. Similarly, the ILO (2023) identifies market-oriented digital skills as important for young people's participation in Kenya's evolving digital economy. These perspectives suggest that the effectiveness of digital communication depends not only on whether technologies are available but also on whether entrepreneurs and employees possess the capabilities required to use them productively.

Despite the growing literature on digital entrepreneurship, important gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature examines whether enterprises adopt particular technologies or whether digital technologies influence enterprise performance, with less attention to the breadth and depth of everyday digital communication use. Second, research on youth-owned enterprises has often concentrated on urban contexts such as Nairobi, leaving comparatively less evidence from smaller and non-metropolitan enterprise environments (Kyalo, 2024). Third, adoption is frequently treated as an enterprise-level characteristic without adequately examining whether digital activities are distributed across owners and employees. These gaps limit understanding of how small enterprises move from digital access to routine, multifunctional and organisationally embedded use.

Marani Sub-County provides an important context for addressing these gaps. Youth-owned socio-economic enterprises in the area operate within a local economy where conventional face-to-face business relationships coexist with increasingly digital forms of communication. This setting makes it possible to examine whether digital communication remains primarily an additional marketing channel or has become integrated into wider enterprise

activities such as customer communication, ordering, feedback, payment coordination and routine business management. Examining this process also provides an opportunity to understand whether digital adoption is broadly distributed across enterprises or remains concentrated among owners and managers.

The present study therefore focuses specifically on the adoption and intensity of use of digital communication tools rather than their effect on enterprise performance. This distinction is important because understanding the actual pattern of digital adoption provides a necessary foundation for examining the development of broader digital capabilities. The study conceptualises digital use as multidimensional, encompassing daily use, operational integration, customer communication, platform updating, perceived importance, marketing, customer support and employee participation. In doing so, it responds to the broader call for a more nuanced understanding of SME digitalisation as a process that varies in depth, function and organisational integration (OECD, 2021; OECD, 2024).

Against this global, African and Kenyan context, the study examines the adoption and intensity of use of digital communication tools among youth-owned socio-economic enterprises in Marani Sub-County, Kisii County, Kenya. By examining a non-metropolitan setting and distinguishing between high enterprise-level adoption and deeper organisation-wide integration, the study contributes to understanding how youth-owned enterprises in the Global South move from digital access towards routine and multifunctional use. More broadly, it asks whether the growing availability of digital communication technologies is being translated into sustained, diversified and organisationally distributed digital practice within small enterprises.

1.1 Problem Statement

The increasing availability of digital communication technologies has created new opportunities for youth-owned enterprises to promote products, communicate with customers and coordinate business activities. However, access to technology does not necessarily indicate meaningful adoption or intensive use. An enterprise may possess digital devices and social media accounts while using them only occasionally or for a narrow set of activities. Existing studies in Kenya have established the relevance of social media to SMEs and youth-owned enterprises, particularly in marketing and customer engagement. However, much of the available evidence has focused on urban enterprises or on the relationship between social media use and enterprise performance. Less attention has been given to the internal dimensions of adoption particularly daily use, operational integration, platform maintenance, customer communication and employee participation—among youth-owned enterprises in smaller and semi-rural economies. This creates an empirical need to establish whether digital communication among youth-owned enterprises has progressed beyond basic access and

occasional marketing towards routine, multifunctional and organisation-wide use. The present study addresses this gap by examining the adoption and intensity of digital communication use among 335 youth-owned socio-economic enterprises in Marani Sub-County, Kisii County.

1.2 Main Objective

The study was guided by the following main objective: To examine the adoption and intensity of use of digital communication tools among youth-owned socio-economic enterprises in Marani Sub-County, Kisii County, Kenya.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Empirical Review

2.1.1 Digital Communication and Enterprise Adoption

Digital communication has become an increasingly important component of contemporary enterprise activity, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that operate under resource constraints. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and other social media applications provide enterprises with relatively accessible channels for advertising, customer engagement, information exchange, feedback and relationship management. The significance of these technologies lies not simply in their availability, but in their capacity to connect enterprises with customers and markets at relatively low cost. The OECD (2021) observes that SME digitalisation is multidimensional and that smaller enterprises commonly begin with relatively basic applications, particularly marketing and administrative functions, before progressing towards more sophisticated forms of digital integration. Kergroach (2021) similarly notes that digital adoption among SMEs remains concentrated in basic services, with more substantial gaps emerging as technologies become more sophisticated and require greater organisational capability.

Evidence from Kenya illustrates this pattern. Ndiege (2019), based on qualitative evidence from Kenyan SME owners, found that social media can strengthen strategic positioning by facilitating customer interaction, market awareness and engagement with emerging opportunities. Importantly, however, the study found that initial adoption was not always based on a deliberate digital strategy; customer and competitor behaviour could influence enterprises to adopt social media, while many firms had not fully exploited the capabilities of the technologies they had adopted. This distinction is important because the presence of a digital platform within an enterprise does not necessarily indicate meaningful or sustained utilisation. Similarly, Solomon et al. (2024), using survey evidence from SMEs in Nairobi and Lagos, found that knowledge of social media and the presence of customers on digital platforms were associated with adoption, while smaller firms particularly used social media for advertising, marketing and obtaining customer information.

All together, the literature indicates that enterprise digital adoption should not be conceptualised as a binary condition in which an enterprise either uses or does not use a technology. Rather, adoption represents an entry point into a broader process of incorporating digital communication into enterprise activities. An enterprise may initially establish a social media presence, but subsequent utilisation can involve increasingly frequent communication, multiple business functions, customer interaction, feedback, marketing and operational coordination. Thus, the analytical question extends beyond whether digital communication has been adopted to how extensively and routinely it is used within everyday enterprise activity. This distinction provides the basis for examining intensity of use in the present study.

2.1.2 From Adoption to Intensity of Use

The distinction between adoption and intensity of use is central to understanding the depth of enterprise digitalisation. Adoption refers primarily to the uptake or acceptance of a digital technology, whereas intensity concerns the extent to which that technology is used regularly, across multiple functions and as part of routine organisational activity. The two concepts are therefore related but analytically distinct. An enterprise can have adopted WhatsApp or Facebook without using the platform frequently, integrating it into core operations or involving employees in its use. Conversely, an enterprise may use digital communication daily for marketing, customer enquiries, order processing, feedback and service coordination, indicating a substantially deeper level of utilisation.

The broader literature on SME digitalisation supports this multidimensional understanding. The OECD (2021) argues that digital transformation involves different technologies serving different purposes and that firms vary considerably in the extent to which digital tools are incorporated into their activities. Smaller enterprises tend to begin with basic functions such as marketing and administration, while more advanced forms of digitalisation require greater integration of processes, skills and organisational resources. Kergroach (2021) similarly distinguishes basic digital uptake from more advanced adoption and emphasises that gaps widen as technologies require greater technical, managerial and organisational capabilities.

For the purposes of this study, intensity is therefore understood as a multidimensional pattern of reported use, rather than as a single measure of time spent online or the volume of digital messages exchanged. It can be reflected through the frequency of use, regularity of platform updating, range of business functions supported, integration into routine operations, customer interaction and the extent to which digital communication is distributed among enterprise actors. This conceptualisation is particularly important in interpreting empirical evidence because high use in one function, such as advertising, may coexist with limited use in others, such as customer support, operational coordination or employee participation.

Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa reinforces the need for this distinction. Joseph, Miri and Mswaka (2025), examining 60 informal entrepreneurs in Jos, Nigeria, found that social media and digital payment technologies had transformed customer relationships and business practices, but that utilisation remained constrained by factors including trust and skills. Their findings demonstrate that the availability and adoption of digital technologies do not necessarily result in equally deep or comprehensive utilisation. Consequently, examining intensity provides a more informative account of enterprise digital engagement than simply recording whether a technology has been adopted.

The literature therefore suggests an analytical progression from adoption to routine use, multifunctional integration and organisational participation. This does not imply that enterprises necessarily pass through these stages in a fixed temporal sequence. Rather, it provides a useful framework for assessing whether digital communication has moved beyond basic presence to become embedded in everyday enterprise practice. The present study applies this perspective by examining frequency, operational integration, customer communication, updating, marketing, customer support and employee participation as interconnected dimensions of digital communication use.

2.1.3 Youth-Owned Enterprises and Digital Communication

Youth-owned enterprises represent an important context for examining digital communication because young entrepreneurs operate within an increasingly mobile and platform-mediated business environment. However, it would be misleading to equate youthfulness or personal familiarity with smartphones and social media with effective business-oriented digital competence. The ability to use a platform for personal communication does not necessarily imply the ability to employ it strategically for marketing, customer relationship management, feedback collection or other enterprise functions. Digital entrepreneurship therefore depends not only on access to technologies but also on the capacity to translate those technologies into purposeful business practices.

Evidence from Kenya demonstrates the growing relevance of social media to youth-owned enterprises. Kyalo (2024), in a study of youth-owned SMEs in Nairobi County, found a significant positive relationship between social media platforms and enterprise performance, as well as between social media messaging and performance. Although this evidence establishes the business relevance of social media among youth-owned enterprises, its principal focus is performance rather than the internal pattern or intensity of digital communication use. Consequently, it does not fully explain whether enterprises communicate digitally on a routine basis, whether digital communication supports several functions simultaneously, or whether digital practices extend beyond the owner to other employees.

This distinction is important for the present study. Research that links social media use to enterprise outcomes can

establish the value of digital communication, but it does not necessarily reveal how adoption is enacted in everyday enterprise practice. The present study therefore shifts attention from the consequences of digital communication to the nature and depth of its utilisation. It examines whether youth-owned enterprises use digital communication regularly, whether it has become part of routine business operations, which functions it supports, and whether its use is distributed among employees. This focus responds to the need for evidence that captures digital communication as an organisational practice rather than merely as a technological resource.

The literature also suggests that the digital experiences of youth-owned enterprises should be situated within the broader constraints facing smaller firms. The OECD (2021) notes that smaller enterprises frequently face limitations in skills, resources and organisational capacity, while Kergroach (2021) emphasises the continuing need for training, upskilling and management capabilities to support meaningful digital transformation. Thus, even where young enterprise owners are frequent users of digital platforms, organisational adoption may remain uneven if the enterprise lacks the skills and structures necessary to distribute digital responsibilities across its workforce.

2.1.4 Digital Skills and Organisational Participation

Digital communication becomes organisationally consequential when its use extends beyond the enterprise owner and is incorporated into the activities of employees and other relevant organisational actors. Owner-led adoption may enable an enterprise to maintain an online presence and communicate with customers, but dependence on a single digitally competent individual can limit continuity, responsiveness and the breadth of digital engagement. The distinction between individual digital competence and organisational digital capability is therefore important in understanding the intensity of enterprise-level technology use.

This issue is particularly relevant in resource-constrained environments where formal digital-business training may be limited. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023) identifies digital skills development as an important component of Kenya's transition towards a more inclusive digital economy, while also highlighting continuing challenges in access to digital skills education and infrastructure, particularly in remote and underserved areas. The implication is that access to smartphones, internet connectivity or social media platforms is insufficient on its own; enterprises also require practical skills that enable users to apply digital tools productively and consistently within work settings.

Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa further demonstrates that digital technologies can simultaneously create opportunities and expose capability gaps. Joseph et al. (2025) found that digital technologies supported customer relationships, business activities and financial inclusion among informal entrepreneurs, but that trust and limited utilisation constrained the extent to which their benefits

could be realised. This reinforces the argument that meaningful digital adoption involves more than technological availability. It requires users to possess the knowledge, confidence and organisational capacity to convert access into sustained practice.

Accordingly, organisational participation provides an important dimension of digital communication intensity. An enterprise in which the owner alone manages online communication may demonstrate high individual-level use but relatively limited organisational integration. By contrast, where employees participate in customer communication, marketing, updating platforms, responding to enquiries and managing feedback, digital communication becomes more distributed across the enterprise. The present study therefore treats employee participation not as a peripheral issue but as an indicator of the depth of organisational adoption.

From the foregoing discussion of the above literature, itvd above establishes four closely connected propositions. First, digital communication provides SMEs and youth-owned enterprises with relatively accessible mechanisms for marketing, customer interaction, information exchange and relationship management (Ndiege, 2019; Solomon et al., 2024). Second, adoption should not be treated as synonymous with intensive or meaningful use because enterprises may possess digital platforms without integrating them deeply into routine activities (OECD, 2021; Kergroach, 2021). Third, the value of digital communication depends partly on users' ability to translate access into purposeful business practices, making digital skills an important component of sustained utilisation (ILO, 2023; Joseph et al., 2025). Fourth, enterprise-level adoption can remain uneven where digital communication is concentrated in the hands of owners rather than distributed among employees.

Despite these insights, an important empirical gap remains. Existing studies in Kenya have largely examined social media adoption, strategic positioning or the relationship between social media marketing and enterprise performance (Ndiege, 2019; Solomon et al., 2024; Kyalo, 2024). Other research from Sub-Saharan Africa has highlighted the opportunities and constraints associated with digital technology use, but has often focused on broader digital transformation or informal entrepreneurship (Joseph et al., 2025). Less attention has been given to the *multidimensional intensity of everyday digital communication use within youth-owned enterprises*, particularly outside major urban centres.

The literature consequently provides limited evidence on whether digital communication is used routinely, how broadly it is integrated across business functions, and whether its use extends from enterprise owners to employees. This gap is especially significant in non-metropolitan settings such as Marani Sub-County, where youth-owned enterprises operate within local markets while increasingly interacting with customers through digital

platforms. Examining these enterprises makes it possible to move beyond the simple question of whether digital communication has been adopted and instead assess the extent to which it has become embedded in everyday enterprise practice.

The present study therefore contributes empirical evidence on the adoption and intensity of digital communication among youth-owned enterprises by examining frequency of use, operational integration, customer communication, platform updating, marketing, customer support and employee participation. In doing so, it treats digital adoption as a multidimensional organisational practice and provides a basis for distinguishing *high platform adoption from deeper and more distributed organisational use*.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is guided primarily by Diffusion of Innovations (DOI) theory (Rogers, 2003), complemented by the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989). The two perspectives are appropriate because the study examines digital communication not simply as a technology that enterprises either possess or do not possess, but as a set of tools that entrepreneurs accept, use routinely, apply across different business functions and, to varying degrees, integrate into organisational activities.

2.2.1 Technology Acceptance Model

TAM therefore helps explain an important feature of the findings: digital communication can be highly accepted and perceived as useful by enterprise owners while remaining less fully adopted by other organisational actors. The theory is consequently applied in this study as an individual-level explanation of technology acceptance and use rather than as a complete explanation of organisational diffusion. This limitation is important because the study's objective extends beyond individual acceptance to examine the broader pattern and intensity of enterprise-level use.

2.2.2 Diffusion of Innovations Theory

Diffusion of Innovations theory provides the primary theoretical lens for the study because it moves beyond individual acceptance to explain how an innovation is communicated, adopted and incorporated within a social system (Rogers, 2003). Rogers identifies five perceived attributes that influence the rate and extent of adoption: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability. The theory is particularly suitable for the present study because digital communication platforms are innovations whose usefulness is assessed through everyday interaction with customers, markets, employees and other business actors. Adoption is therefore understood not simply as acquiring or opening an account but as the extent to which the technology becomes embedded in enterprise practice.

3. Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods, cross-sectional approach to examine the adoption and intensity of use of digital communication tools among youth-owned socio-economic enterprises in Marani Sub-County, Kisii County, Kenya. Quantitative data were obtained from 335 youth-owned enterprises, while qualitative evidence provided contextual explanations of the patterns observed in the survey data. Digital communication adoption and use were assessed using eight indicators covering daily use, integration into routine business operations, customer communication, regular platform updating, perceived importance to daily operations, marketing, customer support and feedback, and employee participation. Each indicator was measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Qualitative participants were purposively selected based on their direct experience with digital communication practices within their enterprises.

Quantitative data were coded, cleaned and analysed using descriptive statistics, specifically means and standard deviations, to establish the overall pattern and intensity of digital communication use. The eight indicators were examined both individually and collectively, with a composite mean of 4.16 (SD = 0.78) used to assess the overall level of adoption. Differences across individual indicators were also examined to identify areas of stronger and weaker adoption. Qualitative responses were analysed thematically through familiarisation, coding, categorisation and identification of recurring themes, with particular attention to how digital platforms were used for marketing, customer engagement, ordering, feedback, payment coordination and other routine enterprise activities. The analysis also considered the distinction between frequent individual use and broader organisational integration, recognising that regular use by enterprise owners does not necessarily imply equivalent participation by employees.

The quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated during interpretation to provide a more comprehensive account of digital communication adoption and intensity of use. Qualitative evidence was used to contextualise and explain quantitative patterns, including strong use of digital platforms for marketing and customer communication alongside comparatively lower levels of employee participation and regular platform updating. This integration enabled the study to identify areas of convergence, complementarity and divergence between the two strands and to move beyond simply establishing whether digital communication technologies had been adopted to examining the extent to which they had become embedded in everyday enterprise activities. Ethical principles were observed throughout the study; participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and participants were informed of their right to decline participation or withdraw without penalty. Relevant institutional and/or research ethics approval was obtained before data collection, with the

approving committee and reference number reported where applicable.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Adoption and Intensity of Digital Communication Use

The study examined the extent to which digital communication tools had been adopted and incorporated

into the everyday activities of youth-owned socio-economic enterprises in Marani Sub-County, Kisii County. Eight indicators were assessed using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. The indicators captured frequency of use, operational integration, customer communication, platform updating, perceived importance, marketing, customer support and employee participation. The quantitative findings were subsequently interpreted alongside qualitative accounts from enterprise participants to establish how digital communication was being used in practice.

Table 1. Adoption and Use of Digital Communication Tools among Youth-Owned Socio-Economic Enterprises

Digital communication indicator	Mean	SD
Enterprise uses digital communication tools daily	4.28	0.76
Digital communication tools are integrated into routine business operations	4.16	0.82
Enterprise communicates with customers through digital platforms	4.34	0.69
Digital communication platforms are updated regularly	3.95	0.88
Digital communication tools are essential for daily business operations	4.21	0.73
Digital communication tools are used for marketing products/services	4.37	0.65
Digital communication tools are used for customer support/feedback	4.08	0.81
Employees actively utilise digital communication platforms in business activities	3.92	0.91
Composite Mean	4.16	0.78

Source: Field Data (2026).

The results indicate a *generally high level of reported adoption and broad routine use* of digital communication tools among the surveyed enterprises. The composite mean of 4.16 (SD = 0.78) demonstrates strong agreement across the eight measured dimensions. The result suggests that digital communication is no longer an occasional or peripheral activity for many of the enterprises but has become incorporated into several aspects of everyday business practice. However, the composite measure should be interpreted carefully. Because the eight indicators combine frequency, functional use, operational integration, regular updating, perceived importance and employee participation, the composite mean represents a *multidimensional measure of reported adoption and breadth of use*, rather than a direct measure of intensity in terms of time spent online, number of messages or frequency of transactions.

The pattern across individual indicators is particularly revealing. The highest-rated use was digital communication for *marketing products and services* (M = 4.37, SD = 0.65), followed closely by *communication with customers through digital platforms* (M = 4.34, SD = 0.69) and *daily use of digital communication tools* (M = 4.28, SD = 0.76). These results indicate that the principal drivers of digital communication adoption are strongly connected to market visibility and customer engagement. Rather than adopting digital platforms primarily because they are technologically available, enterprises appear to be using them for immediate and practical commercial purposes.

The qualitative evidence strongly corroborates this quantitative pattern. P07 explained: *“Most of my customers first see my products on WhatsApp Status or Facebook before they visit my shop. Without these platforms, my business would have a much smaller customer base.”* (P07). This account illustrates how digital communication extends market visibility beyond the physical location of the enterprise. It also provides an explanation for the high marketing and customer-communication scores: digital platforms enable enterprises to reach prospective customers before they physically visit the business. P14 similarly emphasised the economic value of digital promotion: *“Social media allows me to advertise every day at almost no cost. Instead of waiting for customers to pass by the shop, I reach them wherever they are.”* (P14)

The convergence between the quantitative and qualitative findings suggests that *relative advantage is a central feature of digital communication adoption* among the enterprises studied. Marketing through digital platforms is perceived as relatively inexpensive, accessible and capable of extending customer reach. This finding is consistent with Ndiege (2019), who found that social media technologies can support the strategic positioning of Kenyan SMEs, particularly by enabling enterprises to respond to changing customer behaviour. It also corroborates Solomon et al. (2024), whose evidence from SMEs in Kenya and Nigeria showed that customer presence, knowledge and learning processes are important in social media adoption and that

smaller firms commonly use social media for advertising, marketing and customer information.

The present findings extend this evidence by demonstrating that marketing is not merely one possible application of social media but the *most strongly reported digital communication function* among the youth-owned enterprises examined. The findings further demonstrate that adoption extends beyond promotional communication into routine enterprise operations. Respondents strongly agreed that digital communication tools were *essential for daily business operations* ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.73$) and *integrated into routine business activities* ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.82$). The high score for daily use ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.76$) provides further evidence that digital communication has become routinised within many enterprises. This is important because it distinguishes established business use from occasional experimentation or the mere possession of a social media account.

The qualitative evidence provides a concrete illustration of what respondents meant by routine integration. P22 explained: “*Customers place orders through WhatsApp, payments come through mobile money, and I confirm deliveries using the same platform. Almost every stage of the business now involves digital communication.*” (P22). This account demonstrates multifunctional integration: the same digital communication environment can support customer enquiries, ordering, payment coordination and delivery confirmation.

Digital communication is consequently not operating as an isolated marketing activity but is becoming interconnected with other enterprise processes. This finding is consistent with Joseph et al. (2025), who found that digital technologies can reshape interactions between micro-entrepreneurs and customers and facilitate changes in everyday business practices in Sub-Saharan Africa. The present study similarly demonstrates that the significance of digital communication lies partly in its ability to connect several stages of the customer–enterprise relationship. The finding can also be interpreted through Diffusion of Innovations theory (Rogers, 2003). The strong scores for daily use, operational integration and perceived importance suggest that digital communication has acquired *relative advantage and compatibility* within many enterprises. Its perceived benefits in terms of customer reach, marketing and communication make continued use attractive, while its compatibility with existing mobile-phone and social-media practices facilitates incorporation into routine business activities. Importantly, however, the evidence suggests that diffusion should not be understood as an all-or-nothing process. The technology may be well established in some functions while remaining less deeply embedded in others.

This unevenness is evident in the two lowest-rated indicators. *Regular platform updating* recorded a mean of 3.95 ($SD = 0.88$), while *employee utilisation of digital communication platforms* recorded the lowest mean, 3.92

($SD = 0.91$). Although both scores remain above the neutral midpoint of the scale, they are notably lower than marketing, customer communication and daily use. The pattern indicates that high enterprise-level adoption does not necessarily translate into equally consistent use across all activities or organisational actors. The lower employee-participation score is particularly important because it reveals a distinction between *owner-level adoption and organisation-wide adoption*.

The qualitative evidence provides a direct explanation. P31 stated: “*I manage all online customer communication myself because my employees have not received any formal digital training.*” (P31). P18 similarly explained: “*Most employees know how to use social media personally, but they lack the skills to use it professionally for marketing or customer engagement.*” (P18). The convergence between the survey result and these accounts indicates that the principal constraint is not necessarily access to digital technologies. Rather, it concerns the capacity to translate general digital familiarity into *enterprise-specific competence and organisational participation*. Employees may be familiar with social media in their personal lives while lacking the skills or confidence required to manage customer enquiries, create business content, respond professionally online or undertake digital marketing activities. This finding adds an important organisational dimension to technology adoption theory.

From the perspective of the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989), the high scores for marketing, customer communication and the perceived importance of digital communication indicate that enterprise owners recognise clear *perceived usefulness* in these technologies. The high daily-use score also suggests that digital communication has become sufficiently familiar to support routine use. However, TAM primarily explains technology acceptance at the individual level. The lower employee-participation score demonstrates why individual acceptance cannot by itself be equated with organisational integration.

Diffusion of Innovations theory provides a complementary explanation. Rogers (2003) argues that the adoption and diffusion of an innovation are influenced by its perceived relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability. In the present study, the strong use of digital communication for marketing and customer interaction reflects perceived relative advantage, while its incorporation into daily business activities indicates compatibility with existing enterprise practices. By contrast, the lower level of employee participation suggests that diffusion within the organisation is less complete. Where employees lack business-oriented digital skills, the effective complexity of the innovation may remain higher even when the technology itself is readily accessible. The finding therefore suggests that *technology can be adopted by an enterprise without being fully diffused throughout the organisation*.

The issue of regular platform updating provides a related but distinct indication of incomplete integration. Although the mean of 3.95 remains relatively high, it is lower than the scores for daily use, marketing and customer communication. This suggests that using digital communication and maintaining a consistently active digital presence are not necessarily the same thing. An enterprise may communicate with customers regularly when a specific need arises but may not consistently update its platforms with new products, information or promotional content. This distinction is important because it demonstrates that adoption can coexist with variations in the *quality, continuity and organisational management of digital engagement*.

The findings are broadly consistent with the wider literature on SME digitalisation. The OECD (2021) observes that smaller firms often begin digitalisation with relatively basic applications such as marketing and administration, while deeper integration requires additional skills, resources and organisational capabilities. Kergroach (2021) similarly argues that SME digitalisation frequently remains concentrated in basic digital services and that greater levels of integration require investment in skills and management capabilities. The present study reflects this pattern: marketing and customer communication have become strongly established, while regular updating and employee participation are comparatively less developed.

The results correspond with evidence from Kenya and other developing-country contexts. Ndiege (2019) found that social media can strengthen the strategic positioning of Kenyan SMEs, but also cautioned that adoption does not automatically translate into full exploitation of available digital capabilities. Solomon et al. (2024) similarly demonstrated that social media adoption among SMEs is shaped by customer presence, knowledge and learning-by-doing. Joseph et al. (2025) further showed that digital technologies can generate substantial opportunities for micro-entrepreneurs while skills and other constraints continue to influence the depth of utilisation. Taken together, these studies corroborate the present finding that digital adoption is strongly associated with practical business needs but that the *depth and distribution of use remain uneven*.

The findings also contribute to the literature on youth entrepreneurship. Kyalo (2024) demonstrated the relevance of social media marketing to youth-owned SMEs in Nairobi County, particularly in relation to enterprise performance. While that study focused on outcomes, the present study examines the underlying pattern of digital communication use. The findings suggest that youth-owned enterprises in a non-metropolitan setting are actively incorporating digital communication into marketing, customer engagement and routine operations. However, the evidence also challenges any assumption that youth ownership automatically results in comprehensive digital competence. As the employee findings demonstrate, personal familiarity with digital

platforms does not necessarily translate into professional or organisational use.

The same point is reinforced by the International Labour Organization (2023), which identifies market-relevant digital skills as an important component of Kenya's digital economy and highlights the continuing need to strengthen young people's capacity to use digital technologies productively. In the present study, the qualitative evidence adds an organisational dimension to this broader skills argument. The issue is not simply whether entrepreneurs or employees can access digital platforms; it is whether the enterprise possesses sufficiently distributed skills to sustain and expand digital communication activities.

Overall, the evidence supports a conceptual progression from *access to adoption, routine use and multifunctional integration*, but with a less complete transition towards *distributed organisational use*. This progression should be understood analytically rather than as a fixed sequence through which every enterprise necessarily passes. The evidence indicates that the enterprises have moved well beyond simple access: digital communication is used daily, supports marketing and customer interaction, and in some cases is integrated into ordering, payment coordination and delivery processes. Nevertheless, organisational diffusion remains uneven because digital responsibilities are often concentrated among owners or managers.

The central finding of the study is therefore not simply that youth-owned enterprises have adopted digital communication. Rather, the evidence demonstrates a pattern of *high adoption and broad functional use alongside uneven organisational integration*. This distinction is theoretically and practically important. A measure based only on whether an enterprise owns a social media account or uses a digital platform would obscure substantial differences in frequency, functional breadth, operational integration and organisational participation. The present findings demonstrate that a more meaningful assessment of enterprise digitalisation should consider not only *whether technologies are adopted, but how routinely they are used, what business functions they support, and who within the enterprise is able to use them*.

The study consequently identifies owner-centred digital adoption as an important feature of the enterprises examined. Owners appear to derive substantial value from digital communication and use it intensively across marketing and customer-facing activities, while employees participate less consistently because of limited business-oriented digital skills and training. This pattern allows enterprises to benefit from digital communication while potentially creating dependence on individual owners. Where responsibility for online communication remains concentrated in one person, the enterprise may find it more difficult to delegate, institutionalise and scale its digital activities.

The findings therefore corroborate and extend existing evidence in three important respects. First, they confirm that marketing and customer engagement are major entry points for SME digital adoption, consistent with evidence from Kenya and other developing-country contexts (Ndiege, 2019; Solomon et al., 2024). Second, they show that digital communication can extend beyond marketing to become integrated into routine operational processes, including ordering, customer support and delivery coordination, consistent with broader evidence on the affordances of digital technologies for micro-enterprises (Joseph et al., 2025). Third, they reveal that high adoption at the enterprise-owner level does not necessarily represent complete organisational diffusion, highlighting the importance of employee skills and participation.

4.2 Implications of the Findings

The findings have several implications for enterprise practice and programmes supporting youth entrepreneurship. First, the high adoption scores indicate that digital communication should no longer be treated as an emerging or optional component of enterprise development. The study operationalised the relative advantage dimension through indicators concerning the usefulness of digital communication for marketing, customer communication, customer support and daily business operations. The strongest mean score was recorded for the use of digital communication for marketing products and services ($M = 4.37$), followed by communication with customers ($M = 4.34$). These findings indicate that enterprises recognise clear advantages in using digital platforms to reach customers, promote products and maintain communication. The qualitative evidence reinforces this interpretation. P14 explained, *“Social media allows me to advertise every day at almost no cost. Instead of waiting for customers to pass by the shop, I reach them wherever they are.”* This illustrates relative advantage in terms of both cost and market reach.

Compatibility is reflected in the extent to which digital communication has been incorporated into existing business routines. The high score for integration into routine business operations ($M = 4.16$) indicates that digital communication is compatible with the everyday activities of many enterprises. This is further illustrated by P22, who stated, *“Customers place orders through WhatsApp, payments come through mobile money, and I confirm deliveries using the same platform. Almost every stage of the business now involves digital communication.”* The account demonstrates that digital communication can become compatible not only with marketing but also with ordering, payment coordination and delivery processes. Thus, compatibility in this study concerns the fit between digital communication practices and established enterprise activities.

Complexity is reflected in the unevenness of use across organisational actors and functions. Although overall adoption was high, employee utilisation recorded the lowest mean among the eight indicators ($M = 3.92$), while regular

updating was also comparatively lower ($M = 3.95$). These findings suggest that maintaining digital communication consistently and extending its use across employees may be more demanding than simply adopting the platforms. The qualitative evidence provides further support. P18 noted that *“Most employees know how to use social media personally, but they lack the skills to use it professionally for marketing or customer engagement.”* Similarly, P31 reported that although smartphones and internet access were available, some employees required additional training to use digital applications effectively. From a DOI perspective, these findings indicate that the innovation may have diffused at the enterprise level while remaining uneven in terms of competence and organisational participation.

Observability is evident in the visible customer and market benefits associated with digital communication. Entrepreneurs can observe responses to advertisements, customer enquiries, feedback, repeat purchases and changes in customer reach. P07 explained, *“Most of my customers first see my products on WhatsApp Status or Facebook before they visit my shop. Without these platforms, my business would have a much smaller customer base.”* Such experiences make the benefits of digital communication visible to enterprise owners and may reinforce continued use.

The study, however, did not directly measure trialability as an independent variable. Rather than artificially assigning survey indicators to a construct that was not explicitly measured, trialability is treated as part of the broader DOI explanation of how entrepreneurs may experiment with and incorporate accessible digital platforms into their business practices. The DOI perspective therefore provides a stronger explanation of the study's central finding than a simple adoption/non-adoption framework. The enterprises generally report high levels of digital communication use, but the intensity of use is uneven across functions and organisational actors. Marketing and customer communication are particularly well established, whereas regular platform updating and employee participation are comparatively weaker. This pattern suggests that diffusion is substantial but not fully organisationally distributed.

Generally, for the enterprises studied, digital communication is already part of everyday commercial activity. Support interventions should therefore move beyond encouraging initial adoption and concentrate on improving the quality, consistency and functional breadth of use. Second, the lower employee-participation score indicates that enterprise-level digital adoption requires more than providing entrepreneurs with access to smartphones, internet connectivity or social media platforms. Training should extend to employees and focus on practical enterprise applications, including digital marketing, professional customer communication, content development, online customer relationship management, basic digital analytics and responsible digital practices. Such interventions could reduce dependence on enterprise owners and promote more distributed digital participation.

The findings suggest that interventions should shift conceptually from *digital access to digital organisational capability*. Affordable connectivity remains important, but access alone cannot guarantee sustained enterprise-level use. Continuous skills development, business-oriented digital advisory services and opportunities for learning-by-doing are equally important. This is consistent with the OECD's (2021) argument that deeper SME digitalisation requires capabilities extending beyond basic technology adoption and with the ILO's (2023) emphasis on market-relevant digital skills in Kenya. The evidence therefore points to a transition from individualised and owner-led digital use towards more systematic and distributed organisational integration as the next important frontier of enterprise digitalisation.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The study found a generally high level of adoption and routine use of digital communication tools among youth-owned socio-economic enterprises in Marani Sub-County, with a composite mean of 4.16. Use was strongest for marketing ($M = 4.37$), customer communication ($M = 4.34$), and daily business activities ($M = 4.28$), demonstrating that digital platforms have become an important part of everyday enterprise operations. However, lower scores for regular platform updating ($M = 3.95$) and employee participation ($M = 3.92$), together with qualitative evidence, indicate that adoption remains largely owner-centred. The findings therefore suggest that enterprises have moved beyond basic access towards routine and multifunctional use, but organisational-wide integration remains incomplete. Digital transformation support should consequently focus not only on access, but also on skills, continuity, functional integration, and wider employee participation.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers recommend to:

1. Strengthen digital skills: Provide practical training in digital marketing, customer engagement, content management, and online communication for both owners and employees.
2. Promote shared responsibility: Encourage enterprises to involve employees in managing digital platforms rather than concentrating digital communication with owners.
3. Improve consistency: Establish simple routines for updating platforms, responding to customers, sharing products and services, and managing feedback.
4. Expand functional use: Encourage enterprises to integrate digital communication across marketing, customer enquiries, ordering, feedback, and after-sales services.

5. Shift support from access to effective use: Business development programmes should prioritise continuous mentoring, learning-by-doing, and practical support that helps youth enterprises convert digital access into sustained organisational use.

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