

Social Media, Digital Inequality and the Visibility of Marginalised Artists in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe: A Mixed-Methods Study of Emerging, Informal and Established Creatives

Sibanda Sithokozile

Faculty of Arts, Culture and Heritage Studies, Zimbabwe Open University; Arts Journalist, Arts Researcher, Artist Manager, Creatives Magazine Founder

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100601143>

Received: 24 June 2026; Accepted: 29 June 2026; Published: 13 July 2026

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores how marginalised artists in Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South provinces of Zimbabwe use social media platforms to promote their creative work, engage audiences and preserve cultural heritage. The study adopts a mixed-methods design involving 20 formally recognised artists and emerging/informal creators drawn from music, poetry, dance, visual arts, theatre and craft, alongside basic digital engagement analytics (views, shares, comments and reach) collected from participants' social media pages. The findings indicate that social media serves as a vital platform for visibility, cultural preservation and community engagement, enabling artists to bypass traditional gatekeepers and connect with local and diaspora audiences. However, despite these opportunities within structurally unequal digital environments, artists face persistent challenges including poor internet connectivity, high data costs, limited digital literacy, inadequate access to quality devices, algorithmic biases and minimal institutional support. Drawing on digital inequality theory (Norris, 2001; van Dijk, 2005), platform studies (Gillespie, 2018) and creative economy frameworks (Hesmondhalgh, 2019), the study demonstrates that visibility is unevenly distributed across platforms and shaped by both algorithmic structures and socio-economic constraints. Artists nevertheless exhibit resilience through content adaptation, collaborations and cross-platform circulation strategies.

Recommendations focus on infrastructure improvement, digital skills training, affordable data and devices, platform support, monetisation strategies, collaborative networks and policy inclusion. The study contributes to understanding the intersection of digital media, cultural inclusion, inequality and creative economy development in rural Zimbabwe.

Keywords: social media, marginalised artists, creative economy, Matabeleland North, Matabeleland South, Zimbabwe, cultural inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has emerged as a transformative tool in the global creative economy, providing unprecedented access to audiences, resources and collaborative opportunities (Fuchs, 2021). Across the world, digital platforms have disrupted traditional models of cultural production and distribution, allowing artists to bypass conventional intermediaries such as galleries, performance venues and media organisations. This disruption has particularly empowered marginalised and emerging artists, who historically faced systemic barriers to visibility and economic participation in the arts (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013).

This study is further grounded in digital inequality theory, which highlights unequal access to digital infrastructure, skills and meaningful use of platforms (van Dijk, 2005; Norris, 2001). It also draws on platform studies, which examine how algorithmic systems, content moderation and visibility architectures shape what content is seen and by whom (Gillespie, 2018). Additionally, creative economy frameworks (Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Throsby, 2001) are used to analyse how artistic labour is valued, monetised and distributed within digital markets.

Historical Context of the Creative Industry in Matabeleland

The creative and cultural industries in Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South include both formal, emerging and informal artistic ecosystems, ranging from recognised performers to self-taught digital creators operating outside institutional networks. Informal creators particularly rely on mobile phones, peer networks and short-form social media content, reflecting a shift from institutionally mediated creativity to platform-dependent cultural production. Imbube music, traditional dance, oral poetry and storytelling have historically played central roles in community cohesion and cultural preservation. Visual arts, craftwork and theatre have similarly contributed to local identity and social commentary, often reflecting historical narratives, indigenous knowledge systems and socio-political experiences unique to the region (Dube, 2022; Moyo, 2016).

However, artists from Matabeleland have faced systemic marginalisation due to historical socio-political factors, geographic isolation and uneven development of cultural infrastructure. This marginalisation has limited access to national media coverage, professional networks and commercial opportunities, making it difficult for talented artists to gain recognition beyond their immediate communities. Consequently, rural and emerging creatives have relied on informal networks, local festivals and occasional media exposure to showcase their work (Chiumbu & Nyoni, 2020; Mlambo, 2017).

The advent of social media has introduced a digital frontier for these artists, allowing them to overcome geographic and infrastructural constraints. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok and YouTube enable live performances, virtual exhibitions, collaborative projects and direct engagement with audiences locally and abroad. By leveraging these platforms, artists can preserve and promote their heritage, reach diaspora audiences and expand economic opportunities (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Van Dijk, 2013).

Key Terms and Definitions

To ensure clarity, the following key terms from the study are defined:

1. Social Media

These are digital platforms that enable users to create, share and interact with content and communities online. In this study, platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok and YouTube are considered primary tools for promotion and engagement (Fuchs, 2021; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

2. Marginalised Artists

Individuals or groups engaged in creative work who experience limited access to cultural, economic and institutional resources, often due to geographic, socio-economic or political factors (Sibanda, 2023; Chiumbu & Nyoni, 2020). In this study, artists from rural areas of Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South are considered marginalised.

3. Creative Work

Activities and outputs across artistic disciplines, including music, poetry, dance, visual arts, theatre and craft, that involve skill, imagination and cultural expression (Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Throsby, 2001).

4. Cultural Preservation

The act of maintaining and transmitting intangible and tangible cultural heritage, including traditional practices, language, storytelling and artistic expressions to current and future generations (Smith, 2006; Moyo, 2016).

5. Audience Engagement

The process through which artists interact with, influence and maintain relationships with viewers, listeners, or participants, including through likes, shares, comments, attendance and participation in cultural activities (Jenkins, 2006; Bruns, 2008).

6. Economic Participation

The ability of artists to derive financial benefits, income, or livelihood opportunities from their creative work, including through sales, commissions, performances or monetised digital content (Chiumbu & Nyoni, 2020; Throsby, 2001).

7. Infrastructure Limitations

Constraints related to internet connectivity, electricity access, digital devices and technological resources that impede effective use of social media by artists (Sibanda, 2023; Kapur & Vos, 2020).

Study Focus and Rationale

This study focuses on marginalised artists from Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South, provinces often underrepresented in Zimbabwe's creative landscape. Through a mixed-methods approach combining in-depth interviews with 20 artists (including emerging and informal creators) and analysis of social media engagement metrics, the research investigates how social media visibility is produced, unevenly distributed and experienced under conditions of digital inequality, cultural preservation and audience engagement. The study also examines the barriers faced by these artists, including infrastructural limitations, high data costs, digital literacy gaps and inequitable algorithmic exposure.

By exploring these dynamics, the research contributes to understanding how digital platforms facilitate cultural inclusion and economic participation among rural and marginalised creatives. It also provides insights into adaptive strategies employed by artists to navigate structural challenges, contributing to policy discussions, cultural development programs and strategies for digital empowerment within the Zimbabwean creative sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Inequality in Creative Participation

Digital inequality theory argues that access to digital technologies alone does not guarantee meaningful participation, as disparities exist in skills, usage quality and outcomes (van Dijk, 2005). In rural African contexts, inequalities are intensified by infrastructural deficits, economic constraints and uneven platform literacy. These inequalities directly affect how marginalised artists in Matabeleland produce and distribute content online, shaping visibility outcomes on social media platforms.

Platform Governance and Algorithmic Visibility

Platform studies examine how social media platforms structure visibility through algorithms, recommendation systems and moderation policies (Gillespie, 2018). These systems privilege high-engagement, urban-centred and monetised content, often marginalising rural creators. For Matabeleland artists, algorithmic ranking systems significantly influence audience reach, reinforcing existing socio-economic inequalities in digital creative spaces.

Social Media and the Creative Economy

Within creative economy frameworks, digital platforms operate as both enablers of creative entrepreneurship and gatekeeping systems that regulate access to visibility and monetisation (Hesmondhalgh, 2019) by enabling artists to produce, distribute and monetise content independently of traditional intermediaries such as galleries, performance venues and media houses (Fuchs, 2021). The digital platforms offer multiple modalities for creative expression. Instagram and TikTok are primarily visual and performance-based, supporting short-form content, reels and interactive live sessions, while Facebook and YouTube enable long-form videos, live streaming of performances and virtual exhibitions (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). These platforms also provide analytics and engagement metrics, allowing artists to understand their audience demographics, preferences and participation patterns, which informs marketing and creative strategies (Bakhshi, Shamma, & Gilbert, 2014).

Internationally, social media has allowed rural and emerging artists to reach global audiences without the need for intermediaries, breaking down historic barriers to entry in the creative economy (Flew, 2020). Digital platforms also facilitate cross-disciplinary collaborations, where musicians, poets, dancers and visual artists can co-create and package content for online consumption. Scholars argue that these platforms enable a participatory culture, where audiences are not merely consumers but collaborators who provide feedback, share content and co-create meaning (Jenkins, 2006).

In Africa, social media's potential for rural and marginalised artists is increasingly recognised. Research on creative economies in Southern Africa shows that artists leverage digital platforms to gain visibility, promote cultural heritage and interact directly with audiences, despite infrastructural and resource limitations (Chiumbu & Nyoni, 2020; Mlambo, 2017). While national creative economies face systemic challenges such as limited market access, institutional neglect and resource scarcity, social media has opened new avenues for expression and engagement (Friedman & Van der Merwe, 2021).

Recent research also indicates that social media offers innovative monetisation opportunities for artists in low-resource settings. Through live streaming, online sales of digital art, virtual workshops and crowdfunding campaigns, rural artists can supplement traditional income streams and reduce reliance on urban-based intermediaries (Adams & Goldbard, 2019; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). However, converting visibility into sustainable economic returns remains a challenge, particularly for marginalised creators lacking digital and financial literacy (Hearn & Foth, 2020).

Challenges for Marginalised Artists

Despite the opportunities afforded by social media, rural and emerging artists encounter technical, economic and structural barriers. Connectivity remains a significant issue where many rural areas in Southern Africa experience unstable internet, low bandwidth and frequent electricity outages, disrupting live streaming and online engagement (Friedman & Van der Merwe, 2021). High data costs further limit the frequency and quality of online content, forcing artists to make trade-offs between creative output and connectivity expenses.

Limited access to digital devices such as smartphones, cameras and editing tools compounds these challenges. Many artists rely on low-quality equipment that diminishes content production quality, making it harder to compete with urban-based creators on social media platforms (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Additionally, digital literacy gaps affect artists' ability to use analytics, optimise content for search algorithms and navigate monetisation tools (Graham, 2020).

Algorithmic biases in social media also pose significant challenges. Rural artists often struggle to achieve visibility because platforms prioritise content from urban or highly populated areas, resulting in unequal exposure (Gillespie, 2018). Institutional neglect compounds these issues, rural creatives receive minimal government support, training or access to networks that could enhance skills or marketing capabilities (Chiumbu & Nyoni, 2020). Collectively, these barriers highlight that social media alone cannot overcome structural inequalities and targeted interventions are necessary to ensure equitable participation.

Social Inclusion and Participatory Culture Theories

This study is guided by two interrelated theoretical frameworks: Social Inclusion Theory and Participatory Culture Theory.

Social Inclusion Theory stresses the importance of access, agency and structural support to enable equitable participation in social, economic and cultural spheres (Silver, 2015). Applied to the creative economy, this theory underscores the need for digital infrastructure, training and policy interventions to ensure marginalised artists can fully benefit from social media platforms. It also highlights the interplay between individual agency such as proactive content creation and collaboration and systemic barriers that may constrain participation (Sen, 1999).

Participatory Culture Theory emphasizes the active role of audiences in the co-creation and dissemination of content. Social media enables audiences to comment, share, remix and provide feedback, creating a collaborative

ecosystem where creators and audiences interact continuously (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). For rural artists, participatory culture not only amplifies visibility but also facilitates peer-to-peer learning, mentorship and community building, critical factors for sustaining creative practices in low-resource contexts.

Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how marginalised artists navigate digital platforms. They highlight both the opportunities for empowerment through visibility, engagement and co-creation and the constraints imposed by systemic, infrastructural and economic factors.

Research Gaps

While scholarship on social media, platform economies and creative labour is expanding, limited research integrates digital inequality theory with empirical studies of rural and informal artists in Zimbabwe. Most studies exclude emerging and informal creators who operate outside formal artistic institutions but form a significant portion of digital cultural production in Matabeleland. Most existing studies focus on urban centres such as Harare and Bulawayo (Chiumbu & Nyoni, 2020; Mlambo, 2017). There is limited empirical research on how rural creatives adapt social media strategies, overcome structural challenges and attempt to monetise digital platforms. Furthermore, few studies examine cross-disciplinary interactions among music, poetry, dance, visual arts and theatre in digital spaces. This study addresses these gaps by offering qualitative insights from twenty artists across multiple art forms, providing a nuanced understanding of social media as a tool for cultural preservation, visibility and economic participation.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed-methods research design combining qualitative interviews with quantitative digital analytics.

This includes:

Interviews (20 artists including emerging + informal creators)

Social media analytics (views, reach, engagement rates, shares, follower growth trends) to explore how marginalised artists in Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South use social media to promote their work, engage audiences and preserve cultural heritage. A qualitative design was selected because it allows for an in-depth understanding of lived experiences, perceptions and strategies of artists within their social and cultural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This approach is particularly suitable for exploring complex phenomena where quantifiable measures may fail to capture nuances, such as digital engagement practices, cultural preservation and resilience strategies.

Research Design

The research adopted an exploratory, descriptive design, focusing on generating rich, contextual insights into the experiences of marginalised artists using social media. The study integrated case-based inquiry through individual interviews, enabling the researcher to capture detailed accounts of personal experiences, creative practices and social media strategies. This design allows flexibility in probing unique experiences while maintaining a structured focus on the research objectives (Yin, 2018).

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling method was employed to select participants who could provide relevant, information-rich insights into the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2015). Twenty artists were selected across diverse disciplines, music, poetry, dance, visual arts, theatre and craft to ensure representation of the variety of creative practices in Matabeleland North and South.

Selection criteria included:

1. Artists must reside and actively practice in Matabeleland North or Matabeleland South.

2. They must have an active presence on at least one social media platform (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok or YouTube).
3. Participants must have a minimum of two years of creative practice to ensure sufficient experience.
4. Willingness to participate voluntarily and provide informed consent.

The sample included a balance of emerging and semi-established artists and male and female participants, to capture a diversity of experiences and challenges (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The sample included a balance of emerging and semi-established artists male and female participants, to capture a diversity of experiences and challenges.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to narrate their experiences while the researcher probed key areas of interest (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Semi-structured interviews provide a flexible framework, allowing participants to express their views freely while ensuring that discussions remain aligned with research objectives.

The interviews explored the following areas:

- Social media usage patterns and strategies
- Creative work and cross-disciplinary collaborations
- Audience engagement and interaction
- Cultural preservation and language inclusion
- Challenges faced in accessing and using social media platforms
- Economic benefits and limitations of online promotion

Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes depending on the depth of discussion and participant availability. To accommodate geographic spread and technological limitations, interviews were conducted both in-person and via WhatsApp calls and video conferencing. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent to ensure accurate transcription.

In addition to interviews digital engagement data were collected from participants' social media accounts, including Facebook, TikTok, Instagram and YouTube metrics such as post reach, engagement rate, number of shares, comment frequency and video views.

This allowed triangulation between lived experience (qualitative data) and platform performance (quantitative data).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to analyze the interview data. This approach is widely used in qualitative research to identify, analyze and report patterns and themes within data. The analysis followed a six-step process:

1. Familiarisation with data: The researcher repeatedly read and listened to interview transcripts to immerse in participants' narratives.
2. Generating initial codes: Key phrases, ideas and recurring concepts related to social media usage, challenges and cultural practices were coded.

3. Searching for themes: Codes were grouped into broader categories, forming potential themes such as social media strategies, engagement, resilience and cultural inclusion.
4. Reviewing themes: Themes were examined for coherence and relevance, ensuring they accurately reflected participants' experiences.
5. Defining and naming themes: Each theme was clearly defined, capturing its essence and significance in relation to the research questions.
6. Producing the report: Themes were synthesized into a cohesive narrative, integrating participant quotes to illustrate findings.

This method allowed for systematic analysis while retaining the richness and complexity of artists' experiences.

Thematic analysis was complemented by basic descriptive analysis of engagement metrics to identify patterns between visibility and content type.

This integration strengthens the study by combining interpretive analysis with platform-based evidence of visibility inequality.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

To ensure rigour and credibility, several strategies were applied:

- Triangulation: Data were corroborated through multiple sources, including interviews across disciplines, field notes and social media content observation.
- Member checking: Participants were provided summaries of their interviews to verify the accuracy of interpretations.
- Peer debriefing: Colleagues in the creative and academic fields reviewed coding frameworks and theme development.
- Audit trail: Detailed documentation of coding decisions, thematic development and analytic memos was maintained for transparency.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the study:

- Informed consent: Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits. Written or verbal consent was obtained prior to data collection.
- Confidentiality and anonymity: Participants' identities were anonymised using pseudonyms and any identifying information was excluded from transcripts and reports.
- Voluntary participation: Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.
- Data protection: Audio recordings, transcripts and notes were stored securely on password-protected devices. Only the researcher had access to the data.

These measures ensured compliance with ethical standards for research involving human participants and respected the dignity and rights of all participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Limitations of the Methodology

While the methodology was robust, some limitations were noted:

- Geographic constraints: Remote locations limited in-person interactions for some participants, necessitating reliance on WhatsApp or Zoom, which occasionally suffered from connectivity issues.
- Sample size: While twenty participants provided rich qualitative data, findings may not be generalizable to all marginalised artists in Zimbabwe.
- Self-reported data: Experiences and perceptions reported by participants could be influenced by personal biases or selective memory.

Despite these limitations, the qualitative approach provided deep insights into the lived experiences of marginalised artists, their use of social media and their strategies for overcoming barriers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented through an integrated mixed-methods lens combining interview narratives with social media analytics to illustrate how visibility is produced, constrained and unevenly distributed.

Musicians

Artist 1 – Imbube group (Matabeleland South):

"Before social media, our performances were only heard in our village. Now Facebook Live allows the diaspora to hear our songs and we even receive requests for specific traditional pieces."

This group emphasised the role of social media in expanding audience reach beyond local boundaries. Facebook Live enabled direct engagement with diaspora communities, creating new opportunities for cultural preservation and recognition. The group faced connectivity issues and high data costs, which occasionally disrupted scheduled performances. To overcome this, they collaborated with nearby groups to pre-record performances, creating a consistent online presence. The group's strategy demonstrates resilience and adaptation, aligning with Social Inclusion Theory, which highlights the importance of agency in overcoming structural barriers (Silver, 2015).

Artist 2 – Contemporary Singer (Matabeleland North):

"YouTube lets me share my music without a record label. Still, sometimes my videos are invisible because algorithms favour creators in big cities. I've learned to tag posts strategically to reach more viewers."

This artist highlighted algorithmic bias as a major challenge, where content from rural creators is less visible. To counter this, they employed tagging and strategic post timing, demonstrating digital literacy and innovation in self-promotion. YouTube provided autonomy from traditional gatekeepers, reflecting Jenkins' (2006) concept of participatory culture where creators and audiences co-engage independently of institutional mediation.

Artist 3 – Solo Acoustic Musician (Matabeleland South):

"I often pre-record songs on my phone and upload them when internet is stable. Social media has given me recognition I never had locally."

Pre-recording was a recurring adaptation strategy among rural musicians, mitigating connectivity challenges. The artist noted that online recognition helped build a local and diaspora fan base, providing social validation and enhancing cultural visibility.

Artist 4 – Gospel Singer (Matabeleland North):

"Instagram allows me to connect with my fans and receive feedback immediately. People comment and share, which motivates me."

Social media platforms allowed real-time engagement, enhancing the sense of community between the artist and their audience. Instant feedback motivated continuous content creation, demonstrating the interactive dimension of participatory culture (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013).

Poets and Spoken Word Artists

Artist 5 – Spoken Word (Matabeleland South):

"Posting short clips in Ndebele on TikTok helps me reach young people who would never attend my live shows. It also helps preserve our language."

The artist emphasized the dual role of social media in audience engagement and language preservation. TikTok's short-form content appealed to younger audiences, expanding reach while promoting indigenous cultural content.

Artist 6 – Oral Poet (Matabeleland North):

"WhatsApp groups are my main distribution method. Many elders cannot access Instagram or TikTok, so I record audio and share with them."

This strategy illustrates context-specific adaptation, where digital tools are tailored to audience access and preferences. The artist's approach highlights the importance of understanding community digital literacy and access disparities.

Artist 7 – Performance Poet (Matabeleland South):

"I live-stream some of my performances. Comments from viewers keep me engaged. But sometimes the data is so expensive, I have to choose carefully when to go online."

The high cost of data was a major constraint, forcing strategic decisions about content posting. Despite this, live streaming allowed real-time engagement, reflecting resilience and resourcefulness.

Artist 8 – Emerging Poet (Matabeleland North):

"I collaborate with visual artists to create short poetry videos. This increases engagement because people enjoy the combination of visuals and words."

Cross-disciplinary collaboration enhanced audience engagement and content appeal, reflecting the synergy between different art forms and the opportunities for creative innovation through digital platforms.

Dancers

Artist 9 – Contemporary Dance (Matabeleland South):

"TikTok lets me show traditional moves with modern choreography. Collaborating with musicians and poets makes our content more engaging."

Digital platforms facilitated fusion art forms, combining traditional and contemporary elements. TikTok's format encouraged creativity, audience interaction and virality.

Artist 10 – Traditional Dance (Matabeleland North):

"Social media keeps our traditions alive for young people who cannot attend cultural festivals."

This artist highlighted the role of social media in cultural preservation, demonstrating how digital tools can bridge generational and geographic gaps.

Artist 11 – Fusion Dance (Matabeleland South):

"I combine storytelling, music and dance for short Instagram videos. People love it because it's interactive and I get immediate feedback."

Integration of multiple art forms enhanced visibility and audience satisfaction, while enabling real-time engagement and peer-to-peer learning.

Artist 12 – Emerging Contemporary Dancer (Matabeleland North):

"I collaborate with other dancers online. We choreograph together even when we are in different towns and social media makes this possible."

Collaborative online practices expanded creative networks, reducing isolation for rural dancers and demonstrating the empowering potential of digital connectivity.

Visual Artists

Artist 13 – Painter (Matabeleland South):

"I tell stories through my paintings and share them online. People who have never been to my gallery can now learn about our culture."

Online sharing enhanced cultural visibility and broadened audience reach beyond local galleries. Digital documentation also facilitated archival and preservation efforts.

Artist 14 – Digital Illustrator (Matabeleland North):

"Instagram lets me experiment with digital art and animation. People outside my community see my work for the first time."

Platforms provided opportunities for creative experimentation and access to previously inaccessible audiences. The digital space became a virtual gallery and learning platform.

Artist 15 – Mixed Media Artist (Matabeleland South):

"Collaborating with musicians and poets makes my visual work more appealing online. Social media allows interdisciplinary promotion."

Collaboration enhanced visibility, engagement and artistic value, illustrating participatory culture principles in action.

Artist 16 – Emerging Painter (Matabeleland North):

"I use WhatsApp to share images with collectors who cannot visit in person. It helps me sell some of my work, although it's not enough to sustain me fully."

While social media facilitated economic participation, challenges in monetisation persisted, highlighting the need for policy and institutional support.

Theatre and Performance Artists

Artist 17 – Theatre Actor (Matabeleland South):

"Facebook Live allows people to watch our performances from anywhere. It's important for sharing local stories."

Digital streaming expanded geographic reach, allowing local narratives to gain national and diaspora attention.

Artist 18 – Theatre Director (Matabeleland North):

"I use Instagram to broadcast short plays in indigenous languages. Audience feedback keeps us motivated."

Real-time audience engagement increased motivation and creative iteration, supporting continuous improvement of performances.

Artist 19 – Storytelling Performer (Matabeleland South):

"I combine monologues with music for online performances. Social media gives visibility that I could never get on stage alone."

Blended media performances leveraged the strengths of multiple art forms to increase audience participation and engagement.

Artist 20 – Emerging Theatre Artist (Matabeleland North):

"Collaboration and online sharing allow us to perform in towns we cannot physically reach. Social media has changed our work entirely."

Social media expanded performance reach and collaborative networks, illustrating both opportunity and innovation in overcoming rural isolation.

Cross-Cutting Themes

From the narratives of all 20 artists, six overarching themes emerged:

1. **Visibility and Cultural Inclusion:** Social media amplifies reach, promotes indigenous languages and preserves local culture.
2. **Structural Challenges:** Poor connectivity, high data costs, limited devices and algorithmic bias impede participation, particularly for rural artists.
3. **Resilience and Adaptation:** Artists employ pre-recording, batch uploading, content repurposing and cross-disciplinary collaborations to mitigate barriers.
4. **Community Engagement and Peer Support:** Comments, shares, collaborations and mentorship foster creative exchange and learning.
5. **Cultural Preservation:** Integration of folklore, language, storytelling and heritage in digital content maintains traditions for younger generations.
6. **Economic Limitations:** Monetisation remains limited, online visibility does not always translate into sustainable income, emphasizing the need for institutional and policy support.

These findings align with Social Inclusion Theory (Silver, 2015) and Participatory Culture Theory (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013), demonstrating the tension between opportunity and structural constraints for marginalised artists. Social media emerges as both an enabler of empowerment and a space constrained by systemic inequalities.

Digital Visibility Inequality Across Platforms

Analysis of engagement data revealed that:

urban-based content received higher algorithmic amplification

video-based content outperformed text-based posts

informal creators experienced lower average reach despite high engagement quality

consistency of posting strongly influenced visibility outcomes

This confirms platform studies arguments that visibility is structurally produced rather than purely merit-based (Gillespie, 2018).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study examined how marginalised artists from Matabeleland North and South use social media to promote creative work, engage audiences and preserve cultural heritage. Through in-depth interviews with twenty artists across music, poetry, dance, visual arts, theatre and craft, the research highlighted both opportunities and challenges of digital engagement in rural contexts.

Findings reveal that social media has transformed visibility and audience engagement for artists who historically faced geographic, infrastructural and socio-economic barriers. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp and YouTube have enabled artists to reach local, national and diaspora audiences, collaborate across disciplines and preserve indigenous cultural expressions. Real-time feedback, interactive features and cross-disciplinary content creation demonstrate the principles of Participatory Culture Theory, where audiences actively engage, co-create and disseminate cultural content (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013).

However, structural challenges persist. Artists face poor internet connectivity, high data costs, limited access to devices, low digital literacy and algorithmic biases that restrict visibility. Economic participation remains limited; while social media provides avenues for monetisation, most artists reported that online engagement alone is insufficient for sustainable livelihoods. These findings align with Social Inclusion Theory, which emphasizes that equitable access, agency and institutional support are necessary for meaningful participation in socio-cultural and economic domains (Silver, 2015).

Despite these constraints, artists demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability. Strategies such as pre-recording, batch uploading, repurposing content, collaborating with other creatives, and tailoring platforms to specific audiences illustrate proactive problem-solving. Cross-disciplinary collaboration, integration of indigenous languages and creative storytelling further reinforce the role of social media in cultural preservation and community engagement.

In summary, Social media operates as a stratified digital ecosystem where visibility is unevenly distributed due to structural digital inequalities, platform governance systems and socio-economic disparities.

Artists from both formal and informal sectors benefit from increased exposure, but their visibility and monetisation outcomes differ significantly depending on digital access, algorithmic positioning and platform literacy.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study proposes several recommendations to enhance social media engagement, cultural preservation and economic sustainability for marginalised artists in Zimbabwe:

Infrastructure Improvement

- Expand internet connectivity and electricity access in rural areas of Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South to ensure consistent online engagement.
- Collaborate with telecommunications providers to establish rural data hubs or Wi-Fi access points for artists.

Digital Literacy and Skills Development

- Implement targeted training programmes for rural artists on social media strategies, content optimisation, audience engagement and monetisation.
- Include modules on digital storytelling, video production, cross-disciplinary collaboration and analytics interpretation to improve content reach.

Affordable Data and Devices

- Partner with mobile network operators to provide data subsidies for cultural content creators.
- Facilitate access to affordable smartphones, cameras and other essential digital devices through grants, loans or community resource centres.

Platform Support and Algorithm Guidance

- Advocate for social media platforms to provide rural content promotion and visibility support.
- Offer guidelines on algorithmic optimisation, best posting practices and strategies to increase reach for marginalised creators.

Monetisation Opportunities

- Support online sales of art, music and performance through e-commerce platforms and virtual marketplaces.
- Encourage virtual performances, workshops and commissioned projects as sustainable income streams.
- Explore partnerships with NGOs, government agencies and cultural institutions to fund digital creative projects.

Collaborative Networks and Mentorship

- Facilitate peer networks, mentorship programmes and interdisciplinary collaborations among artists to strengthen creative capacity and knowledge exchange.
- Establish local creative hubs that combine in-person and online collaboration spaces for artists.

Cultural Policy Integration

- Integrate digital engagement strategies into national and provincial cultural policies to formally recognise and support the role of social media in cultural preservation and creative economy development.
- Develop targeted policies that address rural creative sector inequalities, ensuring equitable access to resources, training and funding.

Implications for Research and Practice

This study contributes to:

digital inequality scholarship in African creative contexts

platform governance studies in rural digital economies

creative economy research focused on informal cultural labour

It demonstrates that visibility is not neutral but structurally produced through algorithmic systems and socio-economic conditions.

REFERENCES

1. Adams, D., & Goldbard, A. (2019). *Creative community: The art of cultural development*. New Village Press.
2. Bakhshi, H., Shamma, D. A., & Gilbert, E. (2014). Faces of engagement: Understanding audience participation in online creative communities. *Journal of Cultural Economics*, 38(2), 167–183. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10824-014-9212-1>
3. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
4. Chiumbu, S., & Nyoni, B. (2020). Digital media and emerging artists in Zimbabwe: Opportunities and constraints. *Journal of African Media Studies*, 12(3), 345–362. https://doi.org/10.1386/jams_00048_1
5. Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
6. Denzin, N. K. (2012). Triangulation 2.0. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 6(2), 80–88. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689812437186>
7. Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2018). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.
8. Flew, T. (2020). *Global creative industries*. Routledge.
9. Friedman, S., & Van der Merwe, L. (2021). Rural digital participation in Southern Africa: Challenges and prospects. *Information Technology for Development*, 27(4), 765–783. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02681102.2021.1886365>
10. Gillespie, T. (2018). *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media*. Yale University Press.
11. Hearn, G., & Foth, M. (2020). Digital media and creative participation in low-resource contexts. *Media International Australia*, 176(1), 66–78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X20931772>
12. Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. NYU Press.
13. Jenkins, H., Ford, S., & Green, J. (2013). *Spreadable media: Creating value and meaning in a networked culture*. NYU Press.
14. Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media. *Business Horizons*, 53(1), 59–68. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2009.09.003>
15. Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
16. Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications.
17. Mlambo, A. (2017). The challenges of cultural production in Zimbabwe: Marginalisation and resilience. *Zimbabwe Journal of Arts and Culture*, 5(2), 12–25.
18. Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 42(5), 533–544. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>
19. Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
20. Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.
21. Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, 22(2), 63–75. <https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-2004-22201>
22. Silver, H. (2015). *Social inclusion and social justice*. Routledge.
23. Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage Publications.