

The Complexities of Digitising Public Services in the City of Ekurhuleni



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DECLARATION

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Management in Governance at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other University. Where I have used the work of other authors, I have properly acknowledged them, and I have not copied any author or scholar's work with the intention of passing it off as my own. All the interviews and informal conversations that have been conducted for the purposes of this research report have also been cited correctly and I have not passed off any of my participants work, suggestions and quotes as my own.

Signature: S.Ngele

22 September 2024

Sixolisiwe Ngele

DEDICATIONS

Ndinje nje nje nguMama!

Your love and support sustained me.

To the people of Thokoza – Mshayazafe, Madala, Khuthuza and the womxn at Khutsong Ladies

Residence: I am forever indebted to you for your time, open minds, kindness, patience, and support.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is premised on the argument that while digital solutions in public service delivery offer significant potential for efficiency and accessibility, they also risk deepening existing divides if not carefully and inclusively implemented. The study examines the complex interplay of service delivery, governance, and community engagement within the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality, situated in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. Through a comparative lens, it juxtaposes the lived experiences of residents in Thokoza hostels with those in the affluent suburb of Bedfordview, this thesis aims to illuminate the nuanced dynamics at play when digital public services intersect with diverse socio-economic disparities. The central argument posits that while digital solutions in public service delivery offer significant potential for efficiency and accessibility, they also risk deepening existing divides if not carefully and inclusively implemented. Grounded in the historical context of Ekurhuleni, where hostels originally served as temporary dwellings for migrant labourers during apartheid, this study sheds light on the enduring struggle for dignity and improved living conditions among predominantly black residents. Employing a qualitative research methodology, the study draws evidence from 12 in-depth interviews and 6 focus group discussions across diverse groups, including hostels and suburban residents, municipal officials, and local leaders, to comprehensively capture their experiences and perceptions regarding the digitalisation of service delivery and governance. The research draws upon theoretical frameworks of governance, service delivery, and spatial inequality, particularly rooted in the literature of post-apartheid urban studies. The findings unearth a stark contrast in the delivery of basic services and governance structures between Thokoza and Bedfordview. In Thokoza, residents grapple with dilapidated infrastructure, unaddressed service delivery grievances, and a palpable sense of municipal neglect, leading to the emergence of community-driven solutions such as *'ukubhatala ngaphakathi'* (internal community funding for repairs). Conversely, Bedfordview residents enjoy relatively swift municipal responses and robust digital engagement, underscoring a digital divide that further entrenches existing disparities. Notably, the digital gap is epitomised by the My COE App, a municipal digital initiative aimed at streamlining service delivery reporting, which inadvertently side lines residents in Thokoza due to limited digital access and literacy. The contribution of the study lies in its illumination of apartheid's enduring spatial and socio-economic legacies on contemporary urban governance and service delivery, cautioning against the exclusionary impacts of technological advancements on marginalised populations.

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The struggle continues!

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VOCABULARY

Izinduna - A traditional Chief Advisor/Great leader/Headman

Indunankulu - Chief leader/Advisor

Millennials - Generation Y. The demographic cohort born in early 1980's ending in mid-1990's to early 2000s

Ukubhatala ngaphakathi - Paying inside as opposed to paying to the municipality directly

Ukufihla intloko - A temporary shelter

Ukungena ngopotsho - To enter a place illegitimately

Ukuma ngaphantsi ko baba - The womxn

Mamazala - Mother-In-Law

Bawozala/Tatazala - Father-in-Law

Isidima - Dignity

Mfundisi - A Reverend or Pastor

Dololo - Nothing/Nought

Womxn - A female adult

Factionalism – A state in which a group is divided into two or more groups with differing opinions or interests

Amakhosikazi – Women or wives

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ICT - Information Communications Technology

COE - City of Ekurhuleni

ANC - African National Congress

IFP - Inkatha Freedom Party

DA - Democratic Alliance

EMM - Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality

MKMVA - uMkhonto WeSizwe Military Veterans Association

FGDs - Focus Group Discussions

CCC - Community Customer Centre

CHAPTER 1

Bridging digital divides: My COE App and service delivery in Ekurhuleni

1.1. Introduction

In South Africa, government departments are increasingly turning to digital platforms ranging from mobile applications to social media platforms like X, Facebook, and WhatsApp – to enhance communication with citizens. This digital push, however, is not a panacea for the challenges in service provision, which demand a combination of political will, ethical governance, and the professionalisation of the public service. Crucially, the effectiveness of digital initiatives hinges on the support and active participation of the target communities, as well as the continuous education and training of public officials to bridge the service delivery gap.

Hamilton Mphidi's work (2008) on the digital divide and e-governance in South Africa underscores the pivotal role of the State Information and Technology Agency (SITA) in deploying new systems across government departments and harnessing ICT for governmental efficiency. Despite SITA's mandate, questions linger regarding its efficacy and, by extension, the readiness of the state to fully embrace public service digitalisation. Factors such as data privacy, security, the digital divide, economic disparities, accessibility, literacy, and resistance to change critically influence this readiness. Notably, Kroukamp (2005) draws attention to the enduring inequalities in South African society, which are exacerbated in under-resourced areas, including the hostels examined in this study, mirroring the infrastructural deficits highlighted in rural areas by the 2004 UN report.

Mutula and Mostert (2010), referencing the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2005), emphasise the transformative potential of ICT in public services. Such advancements promise to revolutionise service delivery, knowledge management, policy development, and civic engagement. The authors observe significant strides towards public service digitisation, evident in initiatives like the Gauteng Department of e-Government and the online National Traffic Information System (Natis). However, Nielsen (2016) cautions against indiscriminate digitisation that overlooks the socio-economic realities of underprivileged

communities. The transformation towards digital public services, therefore, must be critically assessed to ensure it brings about substantive, rather than superficial change.

Building on the technological initiatives discussed above, the City of Ekurhuleni took significant steps towards digitalisation by launching the My Ekurhuleni App in 2018, which was later replaced by the My COE App in 2020. This progression signals the municipality's advanced stance in embracing digital solutions, as evidenced by the city's Integrated Development Plan (IDP) and the efforts of the ICT Unit. These digital applications, including the My COE App, were developed with the aim of streamlining service delivery processes, allowing residents to report issues and access services more efficiently and transparently. Notably, the city's move towards digitalisation aligns with its broader vision of transforming Ekurhuleni into a digital city, focusing on developing a robust digital infrastructure to support businesses and enhance broadband access and connectivity for its residents. This digital strategy, encapsulated in the rollout of the My COE App and other online services like job application systems and the *Siyakhokha* platform for rate payments, reflects a commitment to modernising public services and making them more accessible to the community.

However, despite these advancements, Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality continues to grapple with fundamental service delivery challenges, including issues with electricity, waste removal, water and sanitation services. The push towards digital applications, while innovative, might appear as a luxury against the backdrop of these persistent problems. The presence of coalition governments adds a layer of complexity and instability, potentially aggravating existing inequalities and widening the divide between different socioeconomic groups within the municipality. Musakwa and Mokoena (2017) highlight the digital divide as a critical concern, echoing Odendaal's (2003) perspective on how digitalisation efforts can inadvertently deepen the inequalities that already plague underprivileged areas like the hostels in Thokoza. This scenario underscores the need for a balanced approach to digitalisation that considers the diverse needs and realities of all Ekurhuleni residents, ensuring that technological advancements do not leave behind the most vulnerable communities.

The exploration of digital initiatives in South African public services, particularly through platforms like the My COE App in Ekurhuleni, is set against a backdrop of wider governmental

efforts to enhance service delivery and citizen engagement through technology. This context is crucial for this study as it underscores the challenges and opportunities inherent in transitioning to digital governance in contexts marked by significant socio-economic disparities and digital divides. The effectiveness of the My COE App, as a case in point, not only reflects the city's ambitions to modernise public service but also highlights critical considerations around accessibility, inclusivity, and the readiness of both the municipality and its residents to fully embrace digital solutions.

The study explores the intricacies of service delivery within the City of Ekurhuleni Municipality, with a focus on the lived experiences of residents in both the affluent Bedfordview area and the historically marginalised Thokoza hostels. The primary aim is to uncover the dynamics of governance, community engagement, and the impact of technological interventions, particularly the My COE App, on bridging the service delivery gap in these contrasting communities. This investigation is motivated by the persistent service delivery protests and the apparent digital divide that seem to exacerbate rather than ameliorate the challenges faced by the less privileged sections of the Ekurhuleni population.

The central argument pursued in the thesis posits that while technological advancements like the My COE App are intended to streamline and enhance service delivery processes, their prospect is significantly diminished by the prevailing digital divide. This divide not only limits access to such technological solutions but also perpetuates a sense of exclusion among the already marginalised communities. The thesis further contends that the effectiveness of local governance and community engagement is intricately linked to the socio-economic dynamics of the respective areas, thus necessitating a more nuanced approach to service delivery that transcends mere technological interventions.

In addressing the central question of the thesis, I employed a qualitative research methodology, grounded in an interpretive approach, triangulating 6 focus group discussions, 2 in-depth interviews, and participant observations. This approach facilitated a rich, nuanced exploration of the lived experiences of service delivery from the perspectives of residents, municipal officials, and community leaders. The theoretical framing of the study is anchored in the intersectionality of digital divide theories and public administration, providing a lens through which to examine

the complexities of implementing digital solutions in diverse socio-economic settings. This approach was instrumental in uncovering the nuanced ways in which digital innovations in public service delivery intersect with the socio-economic realities of diverse communities, particularly the contrasting experiences of Bedfordview and Thokoza residents with the My COE App.

Key findings from this study underscore the stark contrast in the experiences of service delivery between Bedfordview and Thokoza residents. In Bedfordview, the My COE App emerged as a valuable tool for reporting and tracking service delivery issues, largely due to the residents' access to the necessary technological resources and their positive engagement with local governance structures. Conversely, in Thokoza, the lack of access to such technologies, coupled with a deep-seated mistrust in local governance, rendered the My COE App ineffective, leaving residents to rely on traditional, less efficient means of addressing service delivery challenges. The contribution of the study lies in its critical examination of the intersection between technology, governance, and socio-economic disparities within the context of service delivery in South African municipalities. By juxtaposing the experiences of Bedfordview and Thokoza residents, the thesis illuminates the complexities of implementing technological solutions in diverse socio-economic landscapes and the imperative for more inclusive strategies that accommodate the needs and realities of all citizens.

Based on these findings, the study recommends a multi-faceted approach to improving service delivery in Ekurhuleni. Firstly, there is a need for targeted initiatives aimed at reducing the digital divide, such as the provision of community access points and digital literacy programmes, to ensure that technological solutions like the My COE App are accessible to all residents. Secondly, efforts to enhance local governance should prioritise transparent and inclusive community engagement practices that build trust and foster a sense of ownership among residents. Lastly, the findings of the study suggest a need for continuous evaluation and adaptation of service delivery strategies to reflect the evolving needs and contexts of different communities within the municipality. For further research, this study suggests an in-depth analysis of the socio-political factors that influence community perceptions and interactions with local governance structures. Such research could provide valuable insights into developing more effective and responsive service delivery models that are grounded in the realities of South Africa's diverse urban landscapes.

1.2. Background to the study

Gauteng Province holds the status of being South Africa's economic powerhouse, contributing over 35% to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from 2015 to 2022, positioning it as the seventh-largest economy in Africa. Despite its relatively small geographic size, Gauteng boasts the highest population density in the country and is home to three key Metropolitan Municipalities: the City of Ekurhuleni, the City of Johannesburg, and the City of Tshwane. The City of Ekurhuleni, known as the 'Place of Peace,' derives its name from a history marked by political unrest during the apartheid era. Today, it is characterised by its high degree of urbanisation, with a diverse mix of residential settings that range from informal settlements to suburban neighbourhoods (Profile: City of Ekurhuleni COGTA, 2020).

The City of Ekurhuleni, located in the Gauteng Province, represents a dynamic urban and economic landscape within South Africa. The Ekurhuleni 2022/23 Integrated Development Plan reveals a municipality marked by diversity and contrast, housing 17 townships and nine towns, with a notable 62% of its residents dwelling in areas historically disadvantaged, including Thokoza. This demographic profile is predominantly African (Black) at 82%, with Whites and Indians constituting 14% and 2% respectively. Remarkably, despite 18.7% of its 1,299,190 households residing in informal settlements, a significant 93% have access to mobile devices, a critical consideration given the focus on digital tools for enhancing service delivery.

The City of Ekurhuleni stands as a crucial economic node, hosting the OR Tambo International Airport and spanning six administrative zones, influencing the dissemination of information and the uptake of digital services such as the My COE App. According to the Profile: City of Ekurhuleni COGTA (2020), the current demographic setup encompasses about 3,774 million individuals across 299,490 households, with a troubling 31% living beneath the poverty threshold alongside an unemployment rate of approximately 32%. This socio-economic backdrop is intricately linked to the governance structure of the city, notably characterised by coalition governance, which potentially influence a degree of political instability, impacting the efficacy of service delivery mechanisms.

While the widespread access to mobile devices suggests a readiness for digital engagement, this figure masks the underlying challenges of digital literacy, stable internet access, and the affordability of data, particularly in less privileged areas and informal settlements. The socio-economic and political intricacies of Ekurhuleni, as detailed in the Ekurhuleni 2022/23 IDP, present a complex landscape for the implementation and effectiveness of digital solutions such as the My COE App in enhancing municipal service delivery.

Furthermore, the political context and dynamics within the City of Ekurhuleni are crucial in understanding the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing digital solutions like the My COE App for public service delivery. The municipality operates under a coalition government, a structure that inherently brings together multiple political parties with potentially divergent agendas and priorities to govern collectively. This form of governance can lead to complexities in decision-making and policy implementation, given the need for consensus among coalition partners, which can sometimes result in compromises that may not always align with the optimal delivery of public services.

Notably, post 2021 local government elections, the presence of a coalition government has introduced a level of instability, as shifts in the balance of power among coalition members lead to changes in policies, priorities, and even leadership as witnessed in the past few years. This instability, arguably, has direct implications for the continuity and consistency of public service initiatives, including digitalisation efforts. Moreover, the historical political tensions within the region, notably between supporters of different political parties such as the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the African National Congress (ANC), have shaped the social and political landscape of Ekurhuleni. These tensions, though primarily rooted in the apartheid era, still influence the social cohesion and trust in local governance – as evidenced by many narratives from the field, which are critical for the successful adoption and utilisation of digital platforms by the community.

The gradual deterioration of public services in the area, coupled with the emergence of coalition governments, raises important questions about the causes of service delivery challenges over the years. The introduction of digital initiatives like the My COE App must therefore navigate these socioeconomic and political complexities. While the move towards digitalisation aims to enhance

the efficiency of service delivery and inclusivity, the realities on the ground: from economic hardship to infrastructural deficits, pose significant barriers to achieving these objectives. For digital solutions to be truly transformative, they must be accompanied by targeted efforts to improve digital literacy, ensure equitable access to technology, and address the underlying socioeconomic conditions that perpetuate the digital divide within the City of Ekurhuleni.

In this study, I explore the contrasting experiences of residents in the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality, specifically focusing on the Thokoza hostels and the Bedfordview suburb, in the wake of the introduction of My COE Apps. Thokoza, a township marked by its turbulent history of political violence between the IFP and the ANC, remains emblematic of underdevelopment within Gauteng. The hostels within Thokoza, namely Mshayazafe, Madala, and Khuthuza, stand as relics of apartheid-era policies, originally designed not for habitation but to house migrant laborers. Decades into democracy, these structures have seen little improvement, with residents living in conditions that starkly contrast with those in Bedfordview, an affluent suburb where service delivery challenges, while present, do not diminish the overall quality of life (Mail & Guardian, 2009; Damane, 2017).

The introduction of the My COE App by the City of Ekurhuleni in 2020 was intended to bridge service delivery gaps. However, the persisting socio-economic disparities and historical neglect raise questions about the digital divide and its exacerbation of existing inequalities. Service delivery protests, such as those documented in 2009 and more recently in 2023, highlight the ongoing struggles of Thokoza residents, underscoring the critical need for inclusive municipal services that cater to all segments of Ekurhuleni's diverse population (Nkosi, 2023; Profile: City of Ekurhuleni COGTA, 2020; Ekurhuleni 2022/23 Integrated Development Plan).

The selection of these fieldwork sites is driven by the desire to explore the impact of digital divide on various community segments, especially considering the older demographic and informal economy predominance in hostel residents. The stark disparities in living conditions and access to technology between these areas highlight critical questions about true beneficiaries of digitalisation within municipal strategies aimed at enhancing service delivery. This study seeks to provide an in-depth analysis of how the rollout of the My COE App impacts service delivery across different socio-economic contexts within Ekurhuleni. By examining the disparate realities

of Thokoza hostels and Bedfordview, this study seeks to uncover the broader implications of digitalisation in public services against a backdrop of deep-rooted socio-economic divides and the municipality's complex political landscape.

1.3. Problem statement

This study aims to explore the potential for a holistic shift towards digitalisation within the City of Ekurhuleni, focusing on the My COE App as a case study. It seeks to understand how the necessary infrastructure, alongside efforts to address energy reliability, language diversity, and literacy, can enhance service delivery and meet the expectations of the residents of the City of Ekurhuleni. It is important to note that although the study draws evidence from two research sites; Thokoza hostels and Bedfordview, this is not a comparative study. However, the study only seek to draw from different socioeconomic experiences. By examining these factors, the research contributes to a broader understanding of how to navigate the complexities of digitalising public services in a way that maximises citizen satisfaction and inclusivity, ensuring that the benefits of digital transformation are equitably distributed across all segments of society.

The transition towards digitalising public services in South Africa presents a complex array of challenges that extend beyond the mere implementation of new technologies (Kroukamp, 2005). Essential among these is the need for comprehensive skills and training programmes for both citizens and officials to navigate and leverage the digital landscape effectively. This requirement is pivotal to prevent a scenario where a significant portion of the population, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are left at a disadvantage, unable to access or benefit from the digital transformation of public services.

Moreover, the current energy crisis in South Africa poses a substantial impediment to the reliability and effectiveness of e-Governance initiatives. A stable energy supply is fundamental to the uninterrupted operation of ICT infrastructure, which in turn is crucial for the success of digital governance. This challenge is compounded by additional barriers such as lack of infrastructural development, diversity and varying literacy levels across the population, which can hinder the accessibility and usability of digital services.

The rapid digitalisation of public services globally promises transformative improvements in efficiency, accessibility, and transparency of governance. In South Africa, initiatives like the My COE App in the City of Ekurhuleni exemplify efforts to harness digital technologies to enhance municipal service delivery and foster citizen engagement. However, the integration of digital solutions in public services introduces complex challenges, particularly in urban settings like Ekurhuleni, marked by pronounced socio-economic disparities. This juxtaposition forms the crux of the problem statement for this study.

Scholarly investigations into digital governance underscore the potential of digital platforms to bridge service delivery gaps and promote inclusive governance (Heeks, 2001; Selwyn, 2004). Yet, these studies often overlook the nuanced interplay between digital initiatives and the socio-economic fabric of municipalities, where disparities in digital access and literacy can exacerbate the digital divide. For instance, Van Dijk (2020) and Warschauer (2004) highlight the multifaceted nature of the digital divide, emphasising that access alone does not equate to meaningful digital engagement. However, there remains a gap in the literature regarding how these dynamics manifest in the South African context, particularly within municipalities characterised by diverse historical and socio-economic conditions such as Ekurhuleni.

Furthermore, existing literature scarcely addresses the intersectionality of socio-economic factors, gendered dimensions of exclusion and their impact on the efficacy of e-governance initiatives within urban municipalities like Ekurhuleni (Heeks, 2001; Selwyn, 2004). The differentiation in digital engagement and access between economically marginalised areas like Thokoza hostels and affluent suburbs such as Bedfordview presents a critical area of exploration. The literature often lacks depth in examining how socio-economic conditions, intertwined with digital literacy levels, influence residents' capacity to utilise digitalised public services effectively (Hargittai, 2002; Van Dijk, 2020).

Moreover, the discourse on e-governance frequently side-lines the examination of the role of digital platforms in facilitating transparent, accountable, and participatory governance within the unique socio-political landscape of South Africa (Heeks, 2001; Thomas, 1995). Insights into how digital initiatives like the My COE App reshape citizen's government interactions and contribute to democratic engagement remain sparse. This study aims to bridge these gaps by offering a comprehensive examination of the impact of My COE App across Ekurhuleni's socio-economic spectrum. It seeks to elucidate the interrelations between the digital divide,

socio-economic conditions, gendered dimensions of exclusion and digital governance, providing nuanced understandings that can inform the design and implementation of inclusive digital public services. Through this lens, the research contributes to the scholarly debate on digital governance, particularly in the context of South African urban municipalities, by presenting empirical evidence and insights into the challenges and opportunities posed by digital public service initiatives in addressing service delivery issues and fostering civic engagement amidst significant socio-economic diversity.

By situating its inquiry within Ekurhuleni's context, this study not only addresses a critical gap in existing literature but also enriches the discourse on the potential and limitations of digital governance in urban settings marked by socio-economic disparities. It offers a valuable contribution to policy-making and the design of digital public services, advocating for approaches that ensure the digitalisation of public services contributes to narrowing socio-economic and gender divides rather than widening them (Norris, 2001; Warschauer, 2004).

1.4. Research purpose

The primary objective of this study is to assess the implications of digitalising public services in the City of Ekurhuleni, focusing on the role of My COE App in transforming service delivery, citizen engagement, and bridging the digital divide among diverse socio-economic groups within the municipality. This investigation aims to shed light on the effectiveness of the My COE App in enhancing municipal service efficiency, accessibility, and quality, particularly examining its application across varied socio-economic settings, such as the underprivileged Thokoza hostels and the more affluent Bedfordview area. This contrast serves to uncover the potential of digital solutions in narrowing service delivery disparities and promoting inclusive governance (Heeks, 2001; Lipsky, 1980).

Additionally, the research explores the realm of e-governance by examining how digital platforms, specifically the My COE App, redefine the interactions between citizens and municipal authorities. It assesses the contribution of the App to fostering transparency, accountability, and participatory governance, questioning its capacity to enhance public trust in municipal institutions (Heeks, 2001; Thomas, 1995). By exploring these critical areas, the study contributes to the broader discourse on the digitalisation of public services and its broader

implications for urban governance. Situating the analysis within the context of Ekurhuleni – a municipality marked by significant socio-economic diversity, the study provides valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of digital initiatives in addressing long-standing service delivery and civic engagement issues in South African cities.

1.5. Research questions

The study is guided by the following research question:

What are the experiences of City of Ekurhuleni residents of service delivery since the introduction of the My COE App?

To answer the main research question, the study is further guided by the following sub-questions:

1. What forms of support in terms of infrastructure and technical support have been provided to facilitate access to the My COE App in the Ekurhuleni municipality?
2. How has the My COE App improved the delivery of basic services in the City of Ekurhuleni?
3. What are the alternative ways of reporting service delivery issues for those who do not have access to My COE App?

1.6. Theoretical and conceptual framework

The theoretical framework is situated within the interplay between digital divide theory and social inequality theory, offering a robust framework for analysing the deployment and impact of the My COE App in the City of Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality. The digital divide theory provides a nuanced lens through which to examine the multifaceted nature of disparities in digital access, literacy, and utilisation across different segments of society (Van Dijk; 2020; Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013). This theory is particularly relevant in Ekurhuleni, where the contrast between affluent regions like Bedfordview and economically marginalised areas such as Thokoza hostels exemplifies the complexity of digital divide. The theory emphasises that bridging this divide requires more than just providing physical access to technology; it

necessitates enhancing digital literacy and ensuring the meaningful use of digital technologies for all individuals, thereby enabling them to reap tangible benefits from digital engagement (Hargittai, 2002; Selwyn, 2004).

Simultaneously, the social inequality theory sheds light on how existing social hierarchies and disparities influence access to and outcomes of public services and technological innovations (Massey, 2007; Wilson, 2012). This theory underscores the risk that digital public service initiatives, such as the My COE App, may inadvertently perpetuate or even deepen existing socioeconomic inequalities if they fail to consider the diverse capabilities and resources within the community (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001; Sen, 1999). It highlights the need for equitable digital governance strategies that ensure meaningful access to digital services for all citizens, regardless of their socio-economic status.

Integrating these theories, this study posits that an effective approach to implementing digital public services in Ekurhuleni must address both the digital and socio-economic divides. It advocates for inclusive digital strategies that encompass broad access to infrastructure and devices, comprehensive infrastructure, and service designs that are sensitive to the needs of all community members (Van Deursen & Helsper, 2015; Warschauer, 2004; Norris, 2001). By doing so, the deployment of the My COE App and similar digital initiatives can contribute to bridging not only the gap in digital engagement but also in socio-economic disparities and gendered dimensions of exclusion, ensuring that the move towards digitalised public services fosters equitable improvements across the municipality.

1.6.1 Digitalising public services

Reflecting on the evolution of local government post-apartheid, de Visser (2009) notes the transition from a system that was previously marred by inefficiency, racism, and criminality to one that is now democratically led, constitutionally recognised, and developmentally oriented. Despite these strides, the journey towards a fully transformed local governance structure capable of addressing the increasing service delivery demands of communities is ongoing. An assessment of progress since 1994 reveals significant achievements in areas like water supply, sanitation, and electricity access, underscoring the efforts made towards improving citizens' quality of life. However, these advancements are contrasted by persistent challenges, as

evidenced by the widespread service delivery protests that have emerged since 2005, signalling ongoing dissatisfaction with issues such as corruption, housing, electricity, and road maintenance (Atkinson, 2007).

The transition to e-Government within the City of Ekurhuleni, particularly through the My COE App, highlights a pivotal moment in the municipality's efforts to modernise and enhance service delivery. However, the success of such digital initiatives is contingent upon addressing several foundational challenges, notably the development of human capital and the integration of digital literacy programmes (Cloate, 2007). The scarcity of requisite skills among public service personnel stands as a significant barrier to the effective implementation and sustainability of e-Government projects across the African landscape, including Ekurhuleni (Southwood, 2005). However, the transition to digital governance is met with barriers, including resistance from municipal authorities due to a lack of political will and technical expertise. Nielsen (2016) highlights these challenges, emphasising the need for a cultural and operational shift within the municipal governance framework. The expertise gap among policymakers and municipal executives poses a significant risk to the effective implementation of digital policies and support systems. Investing in the professional development of municipal staff is thus crucial to ensure the successful operation of digital platforms like the My COE App.

In the context of Ekurhuleni, where a technological divide persists, the effectiveness and reach of digital solutions like the My COE App become critical areas of inquiry. The study explores how these digital platforms accommodate or overlook the varying levels of digital literacy and access among residents of Ekurhuleni, particularly those in historically marginalised communities. It seeks to explore the readiness and adaptive strategies of the City of Ekurhuleni public officials in embracing this digital shift, focusing on their preparedness to meet the demands of comprehensive digital service delivery. By examining the municipality's approach to enhancing digital literacy among its workforce and the broader community, this research aims to shed light on the potential of e-Government initiatives like the My COE App to transform public service delivery in a manner that is inclusive, effective, and reflective of the diverse needs of Ekurhuleni's residents.

1.6.2 State of digital readiness in the City of Ekurhuleni

Digital inclusion refers to efforts to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to and can effectively use Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) (Servon, 2002). This encompasses not only the availability of digital technologies but also the capacity to engage with these technologies meaningfully. In Ekurhuleni, digital inclusion implies that technologies such as the My COE App are accessible to all residents, not just in terms of physical access but also through ensuring that residents possess the necessary digital literacy to utilise these technologies effectively. This approach aims to mitigate any form of exclusion that may arise from the digital transformation of public services, ensuring that benefits are equitably distributed across the municipality's diverse socio-economic landscape (Servon, 2002).

E-governance, on the other hand, encapsulates the use of ICT by government agencies to improve the range, quality, and delivery of public services. It aims to make government processes more efficient and transparent, thereby enhancing public access to government information and services (Heeks, 2001). The My COE App, in this context, represents an e-governance tool designed to facilitate a more direct and efficient interaction between Ekurhuleni's residents and the municipal government. Through e-governance, services are expected to become more user-friendly, responsive, and accessible, promoting greater civic engagement and trust in public institutions.

The digital divide is a critical concept that highlights the gap between individuals who have access to and can effectively use digital technologies and the internet, and those who cannot. This divide is influenced by several factors, including ICT infrastructure availability, digital literacy skills, and socio-economic conditions such as poverty and the affordability of data services (Singh, 2004), as cited in Nyahodza and Higgs (2017). In the South African context, and particularly within Ekurhuleni, the digital divide mirrors and exacerbates existing socio-economic inequalities, posing a significant challenge to the universal adoption and beneficial use of digital platforms like the My COE App. Addressing the digital divide is crucial to ensuring that digitalisation efforts do not inadvertently marginalise already disadvantaged groups within the community.

The digital divide in South Africa presents a formidable barrier to the equitable digitalisation of public services. The limited access to digital technologies, with only 21.4% of households having access to a computer and merely 10.8% having home internet access, underscores the scale of this challenge (Uys & Pather, 2016). However, the effectiveness of such initiatives, is critically dependent on the municipality's ability to address the underlying digital divide. A study by the Business Leadership Group on well performing economies worldwide found that broadband costs in South Africa were 139 per cent higher than the average rate in the nations surveyed (Naidoo, 2007; Mutula & Mostert, 2010). Though some of the benefits to digitalising the public service include efficiency, transparency, cutting down on queuing times, and accountability to name a few, service delivery remains a sore point for many residents of Ekurhuleni. The disparity in digital access is further compounded by the inconsistencies in education and income levels across different communities, making it difficult for those in disadvantaged areas to benefit from technological innovations (Murenzi & Olivier, 2017).

Furthermore, the need for inclusive digitalisation strategies that encompass upskilling and active community engagement is crucial. Van Greunen and Steyn (2014) emphasise the importance of equipping residents with the necessary skills to leverage digital technologies and ensuring that government-led technological advancements are co-created with community inputs. This approach is essential to ensure that digital services like the My COE App are not only accessible but also meet the diverse needs of Ekurhuleni's population, including those in socio-economically disadvantaged areas like Thokoza's hostels. This study examines the extent of community engagement in Ekurhuleni's digitalisation efforts, especially among the underprivileged sectors, to ascertain if the digital transition is being conducted in a participatory and inclusive manner. The focus is on examining the implications of the My COE App on the spectrum of socio-economic conditions within Ekurhuleni, with a particular lens on its impact on the more marginalised residents. Through this exploration, the study aims to offer insights into how digital public services can be designed and implemented to foster inclusivity, ensuring that advancements in digital governance translate into improved service delivery for all citizens, irrespective of their socio-economic background. This approach aligns with the broader goal of mitigating the digital divide and leveraging technology as a tool for social and economic upliftment within the diverse community across the country.

1.6.3 Contextualising service delivery

The concept of service delivery, as defined by Mutula and Mostert (2010), encapsulates the quality and efficiency with which governmental services meet the needs of citizens. However, the interplay between political structures and administrative functions often complicates this straightforward objective. The phenomenon of clientelism, where services and benefits are distributed based on political loyalty or support, further complicates the equal distribution of public services. This practice can skew the allocation of resources, disadvantaging those not aligned with the dominant and influential political party or faction (Fox, 2012; Bénit-Gbaffou, 2011).

The democratic dispensation of post 1994 heralded a series of reforms aimed at transforming the previously segregated public service, with the objective of promoting social and economic development within local communities. The constitutional framework and subsequent policies were designed to foster a more inclusive and equitable public service system (Mbuyisa, 2013). Fitzgerald, McLennan, and Munslow (1997) encapsulate governance as a dynamic interaction between the state and its citizens, emphasising the imperative for government authorities to engage with and respond to the diverse needs and expectations of the populace.

In South Africa the constitutional and legislative frameworks lay a clear mandate for local government, emphasising its pivotal role in ensuring the provision of services to communities in a sustainable manner, as articulated in Section 152 (1) (b) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996). This directive underscores the responsibility of the local government to foster community development and enhance accountability through direct interactions with communities, delivering essential services and infrastructure critical to the well-being of citizens (White Paper on Local Government, 1998).

Furthermore, the White Paper on Local Government (1998) further delineates the ideal characteristics of developmental local government, emphasising the imperative to foster social development and economic growth. This entails not just the provisioning of essential services but also ensuring access to physical and social infrastructure, integral components of local governance and community development. These provisions are critical for nurturing an

environment conducive to community participation and accountability, facilitating the overall growth and development of communities within the local government's purview.

Despite these clear mandates, South Africa grapples with persistent service delivery challenges that mirror those encountered by numerous developing countries worldwide. In the contemporary landscape of local governance in South Africa, the capability of local governments to deliver essential services is a critical determinant of their legitimacy. However, the reality presents a grim picture where numerous municipalities, despite transitioning towards coalition governments in urban centers like Johannesburg, Tshwane, Ekurhuleni, and Nelson Mandela Bay, continue to face significant challenges in providing fundamental physical and social infrastructure such as roads, water, sanitation, and public recreational facilities. This pervasive inadequacy in service delivery has not only diminished the trust in local government authorities but has also sparked widespread protests among communities, voicing their dissatisfaction and demanding better services (Joshi & Moore, 2004; Mangai, 2017; Masiya, Davids, & Mangai, 2019).

In an effort to address service delivery challenges, the City of Ekurhuleni has ventured into the digital realm by introducing digital applications aimed at enhancing the efficiency and responsiveness of service delivery mechanisms. This digitalisation initiative represents a pivotal shift towards e-Government, aiming to streamline service provision and make it more accessible to the residents of Ekurhuleni. However, the shift towards digitising public services introduces new dimensions to these challenges. While digital platforms like the My COE App in Ekurhuleni aim to streamline and democratise access to services, they also raise questions about digital inclusivity. This study probes deeper into the efficacy of such digital interventions, questioning whether the transition to digitalised public services is genuinely transformative or if it merely perpetuates existing inequalities, especially considering the technological infrastructure gaps in marginalised communities within the municipality.

1.7. Overview of the research report

It is important to highlight for the reader on the onset that this research report deviates from the traditional structure commonly observed in research reports. Instead of adhering to a conventional format, the report allocates three separate chapters (*Chapters 3 to 5*), specifically

for presenting and analysing findings. Each of these chapters is organised around distinct themes, allowing for a thorough examination of each research objective. This unique structural choice enhances the depth of the analysis, enabling a detailed exploration of the themes of the study. This thematic organisation underlines the complex interplay between technological advancements and social equity, shedding light on the nuanced challenges and opportunities presented by the digital transformation of public services in diverse urban contexts.

Chapter 1 sets the stage for the thesis by introducing the focal point of the investigation: the digital divide and its implications for public service delivery within the City of Ekurhuleni. This chapter outlines the research problem, objectives, and the significance of exploring the intersection of technology and governance in a South African urban context. It lays the groundwork for understanding the complexities of implementing digital solutions like the My COE app in diverse socio-economic landscapes.

In *Chapter 2*, I explore the historical context of Ekurhuleni to provide a backdrop for current disparities in service delivery. The chapter also details the methodological approach of this research, emphasising the use of qualitative methods such as interviews and focus group discussions. This dual focus serves to illuminate both the historical underpinnings of current challenges and the means by which this study seeks to uncover the lived realities of the residents of Ekurhuleni.

Chapter 3 focuses on the lived experiences of hostel dwellers in Ekurhuleni, particularly in Thokoza, highlighting the persistence of legacies of the apartheid-era spatial and social divides. Through first-hand accounts, this chapter reveals how historical injustices continue to shape access to and perceptions of public services, underscoring the importance of considering these legacies in contemporary digital governance strategies.

Chapter 4 shifts the lens to womxn in hostels, examining their unique challenges and perspectives within the broader context of digital public service delivery. This chapter delves into the gendered dimensions of access to basic services and digital literacy, exposing how systemic inequalities compound the digital divide for womxn in marginalised communities.

In *Chapter 5* I synthesise insights from the research to critically assess the efficacy of governance and service delivery in Ekurhuleni. The chapter discusses the impact of the digital divide on equitable access to services, drawing on comparative analyses between affluent areas

like Bedfordview and economically marginalised communities like Thokoza. This chapter also addresses the role of community engagement and trust in shaping the effectiveness of digital solutions.

Finally, *Chapter 6* concludes the thesis by weaving together the key findings and their implications for bridging the digital divide in public service delivery. It offers a set of targeted recommendations aimed at enhancing inclusivity and effectiveness in digital governance. This chapter not only encapsulates the research contributions to the field but also offers some recommendations for further exploration of the topic and for policymakers and practitioners seeking to ensure equitable service delivery in diverse urban contexts.

CHAPTER 2

Bridging two worlds: Methodological approaches in diverse Ekurhuleni

2.1. Introduction

This chapter outlines the rationale behind the chosen qualitative methods, detailing how focus group discussions facilitated collective narratives among hostel residents, while semi-structured interviews provided individual insights from Bedfordview residents and municipal officials. The chapter further addresses the ethical dimensions of conducting research within these communities, emphasising informed consent, participant safety, and the careful navigation of sensitive topics. Positionality and reflexivity are also discussed, highlighting how my background, experiences, and interactions with participants influenced the research process and outcomes.

2.2. Research design

This study adopts an interpretivist epistemological stance, grounded in the qualitative research paradigm, to unpack the nuanced experiences of City of Ekurhuleni residents with the My COE digital application. The interpretivist approach is premised on the belief that reality is socially constructed and subjective, varying from person to person (Bryman, 2012). This perspective aligns with the objective of the study to understand the complex, lived experiences of individuals in their natural settings, recognising that their perceptions, feelings, and interactions with the digital application are influenced by their unique social, cultural, and historical contexts.

The qualitative methodology was selected for its flexibility and depth, allowing for a rich exploration of the participants' narratives, experiences, and interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It facilitates an in-depth understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics at play within the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality, particularly in the contrasting settings of Bedfordview and the Thokoza hostels. Through methods such as focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and participant observations, this approach provides a conduit to capture the

intricacies of how residents engage with and perceive the My COE App in relation to service delivery.

The ontological underpinnings of this study rest on the constructivist notion that social realities are multiple and fluid, shaped by individuals' interactions and perceptions (Crotty, 1998). This ontological stance justifies the qualitative approach, as it allows for the exploration of various perspectives and experiences, acknowledging that each participant's understanding and use of the My COE App are influenced by their personal history, socio-economic status, and the broader political and cultural milieu of Ekurhuleni. Epistemologically, the study is anchored in the interpretivist tradition, which posits that knowledge is constructed through social interactions and is thus subjective (Schwandt, 2000). This epistemological standpoint validates the qualitative methodology, emphasising the importance of situating the research within the participants' contexts to gain meaningful insights. It acknowledges the researcher's role in co-constructing knowledge with the participants, navigating through their narratives to understand the implications of the My COE App on service delivery from their perspectives.

The decision to engage with communities in both Thokoza and Bedfordview through qualitative means was informed by the need to grasp the depth of residents' experiences with the My COE App amidst the historical and contemporary socio-political complexities of Ekurhuleni. The methodology facilitated rich, contextualised data collection, enabling an exploration of the residents' interactions with the digital application against the backdrop of Ekurhuleni's diverse socio-economic landscape.

2.3. Accessing Thokoza hostels

Gaining access to the field for my study involved engaging with communities in two distinct areas of the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality: the Thokoza township, specifically the Mshayazafe, Madala, and Khuthuza hostels, along with the Khutsong Ladies hostel, and the suburban area of Bedfordview. My qualitative research approach facilitated deep, meaningful interactions with participants in their everyday environments, allowing for rich, open-ended conversations that revealed the nuanced layers of their experiences with the My COE App and its impact on local service delivery.

My entry into the field began with outreach to friends and contacts within Ekurhuleni. Initial concerns centered around the hostels on Khumalo Street in Thokoza, known for safety issues. Moreover, these concerns were voiced by a leader from the uMkhonto Wesizwe Military Veterans Association (MKMVA). My first visit to the hostels was enlightening, revealing a third hostel, Khuthuza, which subsequently became integral to my study following the inclusion of its residents in my focus group discussions.

Access to Thokoza was paved by an introduction to a former freedom fighter and current MKMVA leader, a connection that profoundly shaped my interactions within the community. This individual shared his harrowing past as an ANC member during the apartheid era, highlighting the deep-seated political and tribal tensions that have historically plagued the area. On my initial visit, he cautioned me about the lingering sensitivities around language and tribal affiliations, advising me to minimise the use of isiXhosa when communicating with the hostel leaders. This advice underscored the enduring impact of past conflicts and the delicate nature of present-day interactions in Thokoza.

My meeting with the hostel *iziNduna* was a pivotal moment. I was welcomed by a group of elder men, their ages ranging from 50 to 60, in a humble, makeshift meeting space. The presence of a young family in the adjoining room added a poignant backdrop to our discussion. Despite the late hour and the simplicity of our meeting place, the electricity was a small yet significant comfort. As I introduced my research and its aims, the warmth of their reception became evident. Their openness to assist was driven partly by the potential relevance of my study to their lives and partly by a sense of generational kinship, viewing me as a younger person navigating through their storied community.

Accessing the womxn for this study, particularly those residing in the Khutsong Ladies' Hostel, required a nuanced approach that respected the existing social structures and gender dynamics within the hostel communities. The initial intent was to engage with womxn living in the Mshayazafe, Madala, and Khuthuza hostels. However, the male residents and leaders of these hostels imposed restrictions, indicating a willingness to allow womxn to participate only under their supervision. This condition starkly illustrated the pervasive influence of patriarchy within these communities, where womxn's voices and participation were mediated by male gatekeepers.

Navigating this gendered landscape required adaptability and sensitivity to the cultural and social norms governing the hostels. The insistence by male hostel dwellers on overseeing women's participation reflected not only the traditional patriarchal order but also highlighted the contested and marginalised status of womxn within these spaces. Historically designed to house male migrant laborers, the hostels' adaptation to include womxn has not fully transcended their original patriarchal underpinnings. Womxn's presence, while physically acknowledged, was still framed as temporary or conditional by the male residents, mirroring broader societal issues of gender inequality.

In response to these constraints, I sought alternative avenues to include womxn's perspectives in the study. The discovery of the Khutsong Ladies' Hostel within the same ward presented an opportunity to engage with womxn in a space where their participation would not be directly controlled by the male hostel dwellers. This shift was crucial for ensuring that the study captured a more comprehensive and representative range of experiences and perspectives regarding service delivery and the My COE App.

The process of gaining access to the womxn at the Khutsong Ladies' Hostel was facilitated through the existing networks and the support of community leaders. Despite the historical and ongoing challenges related to gender dynamics in Thokoza, the engagement with the womxn at the Khutsong Hostel offered a critical counterpoint to the predominantly male narratives from the other hostels. It underscored the importance of creating spaces within the research process where womxn could share their experiences and insights without male oversight, thereby contributing valuable dimensions to the understanding of public service delivery and digital engagement in Ekurhuleni.

This experience of accessing womxn participants highlighted the complex interplay of gender, power, and space within the hostel communities. It also reflected the broader societal challenges of gender inequality and the need for research approaches that actively seek to include and amplify womxn's voices, particularly in contexts where their participation is constrained by traditional patriarchal norms. The experience of interacting with participants did not only facilitate open and transparent dialogue, but also deeply humanised my research process, allowing me to connect with the participants on a personal level. It was a reminder of the complex tapestry of histories, hopes, and daily realities that characterise the lives of the

residents of Ekurhuleni, shaping their interactions with digital innovations like the My COE App.

2.4. Research methods

For this research, I adopted a qualitative approach, which was instrumental in tapping into the experiences of Ekurhuleni residents regarding the My COE App, focusing particularly on those from Thokoza hostels and Bedfordview. This approach was chosen for its strength in capturing the nuanced complexities of personal experiences, perceptions, and the social context surrounding the use of digital platforms in public service delivery. It allowed for rich, descriptive data collection, where the subjective insights of participants could be explored in detail (Fossey et al., 2002). This method was particularly fitting given the interpretivist epistemological stance of the study, which acknowledges the constructed nature of reality and the importance of understanding people's experiences from their own perspectives.

2.4.1 Focus Group Discussions

The use of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in this study provided a dynamic and interactive platform for collecting data, especially among the residents of Thokoza's Mshayazafe, Madala, and Khuthuza hostels, as well as the Khutsong Ladies' Hostel (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). The FGDs were instrumental in eliciting collective insights and reflections on the My COE App's impact on service delivery, fostering a rich dialogue among participants that might not have emerged in individual interviews. A total of seven FGDs were conducted, with each group comprising approximately 8 to 12 participants. This size was optimal for encouraging active participation while allowing for a manageable discussion flow. The groups were organised based on the hostel they resided in to ensure the discussions were relevant to their specific living conditions and experiences with municipal services.

The first FGD was a revelation in itself. As we gathered in a modestly furnished communal room, the initial hesitation among participants gradually gave way to animated discussions, punctuated by laughter, sighs, and, at times, poignant silence. The guiding questions I had prepared served as mere starting points; the discussions quickly took on a life of their own, weaving through topics ranging from the practicalities of using the My COE App to heartfelt

narrations of the daily struggles faced by the residents. One particularly memorable moment occurred during a discussion with the men from Khuthuza hostel. As participants shared their experiences with the My COE App, it became evident that the digital divide was not just a theoretical concept for them; it was a lived reality. Many spoke of their struggles with digital literacy, recounting stories of frustration and confusion as they attempted to navigate the app. The camaraderie in the room was palpable as they joked about ‘pressing the wrong buttons’ or ‘accidentally calling someone’ when they were trying to report a service issue. Yet, beneath the laughter, there was a shared sense of exclusion, a feeling that the digital advancements supposed to improve their lives were somehow beyond their reach.

Interestingly, FGDs with the womxn of Khutsong hostel offered a different perspective. Conducted in the late afternoon to accommodate their schedules, these discussions highlighted the gendered dimensions of service delivery and digital access. The womxn shared stories of balancing the demands of piece jobs, family, and community, all while navigating the complexities of accessing municipal services. The My COE App, for many, represented a potential tool for empowerment, a way to voice their concerns and needs directly. However, challenges such as limited internet access and lack of digital devices often hampered this potential, leaving many to rely on traditional, less efficient means of communication with municipal authorities.

Each FGD was a journey into the collective heart of the community, revealing not only the challenges and frustrations but also the resilience and resourcefulness of the residents. The discussions illuminated the stark contrast between the promise of digital solutions and the reality of their implementation in communities grappling with deep-seated socio-economic issues. These FGDs, rich in detail and emotion, formed the backbone of my research, providing a window into the lived experiences of Ekurhuleni’s most marginalised residents. The insights gained from these discussions underscored the complexity of digitalising public services in a context marked by significant digital and socio-economic divides, offering critical reflections on the path towards truly inclusive and effective municipal service delivery.

2.4.2 Semi-structured interviews

In this study, semi-structured interviews played a crucial role in gathering nuanced insights, particularly from Bedfordview residents and Ekurhuleni Municipal officials. This method allowed for a more personalised engagement, offering participants the flexibility to express their thoughts and experiences in detail, while the open-ended nature of these interviews facilitated a rich, exploratory dialogue, enabling a deeper understanding of individual perspectives on the My COE App and its influence on service delivery within the City of Ekurhuleni.

I conducted a total of twelve (12) semi-structured interviews, offering a broad spectrum of viewpoints from various stakeholders. The participants included seven (7) residents of Bedfordview, who could provide first-hand accounts of their experiences with the My COE App in a more affluent setting, four (4) municipal officials who were directly involved in the development, rollout, and management of the digital platform. These officials, with at least five years of tenure at the City of Ekurhuleni, were selected for their potential to provide critical insights into the strategic and operational dimensions of digitalising public services through the My COE App. One (1) interview was conducted with the ward councillor in Thokoza.

The decision to use semi-structured interviews was underpinned by the need for a flexible yet focused method of data collection that could adapt to the diverse backgrounds and roles of participants (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, and Chadwick, 2008). This approach was particularly effective in accommodating the schedules and preferences of Bedfordview residents, many of whom opted for interviews in informal settings like coffee shops or via electronic correspondence, reflecting the socio-economic divide and access to digital resources between the different communities within Ekurhuleni.

For municipal officials, the interviews provided a platform to discuss not only the technical and logistical aspects of the My COE App but also the broader objectives and challenges associated with digital governance in the municipality. These conversations were invaluable in understanding the internal dynamics and considerations that shaped the deployment of the My COE App, including the strategies employed to enhance its adoption and effectiveness across Ekurhuleni's diverse communities.

The semi-structured interviews were guided by a pre-prepared set of questions, which served as a foundation for the discussions but allowed for spontaneous exploration of emerging themes and topics (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). This balance between structure and flexibility ensured that the interviews were both comprehensive and responsive to the unique experiences and insights of each participant. In conducting these interviews, I paid careful attention to ethical considerations, ensuring that participants were fully informed about the objectives of the study and their rights within the research process. The personal narratives and professional insights gathered through these semi-structured interviews enriched the findings of the study, offering a multifaceted view of the impact of the My COE App on service delivery and citizen engagement in Ekurhuleni.

2.5. Data analysis and interpretation

In analysing the data collected from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, I adopted a thematic analysis approach, which allowed me to identify, analyse, and report patterns within the data. This method proved invaluable in dissecting the complex layers of participants' experiences and perceptions regarding the My COE App and broader service delivery issues in Ekurhuleni. Thematic analysis, as detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006), provided a flexible and robust framework for organising and interpreting the rich qualitative data, ensuring that the analysis was grounded in the actual data while being informed by my research questions and objectives.

The process of coding was iterative and reflexive. Initially, I immersed myself in the data, reading and re-reading the transcripts to become familiar with the depth and breadth of the content. This immersion phase was crucial for identifying initial codes, which were essentially short phrases or words that succinctly captured the essence of a piece of data. For example, expressions of dissatisfaction with the hostel conditions and comparisons with the apartheid era emerged as significant codes in the early stages of analysis. These codes were not predetermined but emerged organically from the data, reflecting the inductive nature of thematic analysis.

Additionally, the coding process, patterns began to emerge, leading to the development of broader themes. For instance, the recurring references to “living like animals” and “apartheid

was better” coalesced into a theme that I conceptualised as ‘Nostalgia and Dissatisfaction,’ (see *Chapter 3*), reflecting a longing for aspects of the past combined with a critique of the current state of affairs. This theme was particularly pronounced among the older hostel dwellers, whose reflections on service delivery were inextricably linked with their life experiences spanning pre- and post-1994 South Africa.

One of the more unexpected themes that surfaced during the analysis was related to gender dynamics and patriarchy within the hostel communities. Initially, I had not anticipated that gender would play such a central role in the study. However, the visibility of womxn performing traditional domestic roles in the hostels and the resistance I encountered when attempting to engage with them directly highlighted the persistence of deeply ingrained patriarchal norms. This observation led to the development of a theme conceptualised as ‘Gendered Spaces and Roles’ (see *Chapter 4*), which explored ways in which traditional gender roles are maintained and reinforced within the hostel environment and how this impacted on experiences of womxn and their voices within these communities.

Furthermore, the theme of ‘Digital Disconnect’ emerged from the participants’ limited engagement with the My COE App (see *Chapter 5*). Many hostel dwellers expressed a lack of knowledge about the app, relying instead on traditional means of reporting service delivery issues. This theme underscores the digital divide within the community, revealing that despite the municipal push towards digitalisation, a significant portion of the population remain disconnected from these technological advancements due to factors such as device compatibility, digital literacy, and awareness.

Throughout the analysis, I remained cognisant of my positionality as a researcher and the potential impact of my own biases and perspectives on the interpretation of the data. Reflexivity was a key component of my approach, ensuring that I continuously questioned my assumptions and remained open to the complexities of data. This reflexive stance was particularly important when navigating the sensitive topics of apartheid nostalgia and gender dynamics, where my own background and views could inadvertently shape my interpretation.

Crucially, the thematic analysis culminated in an in-depth understanding of the multifaceted experiences of Ekurhuleni residents regarding service delivery and the My COE App. The identified themes provided a nuanced picture of the interplay between historical legacies, socio-

economic conditions, gender dynamics, and technological changes within the community (*see Chapter 6*). This approach not only facilitated a rich exploration of the research questions but also highlighted areas for further inquiry and consideration, particularly regarding the inclusivity and efficacy of digital public service initiatives in diverse urban settings.

2.6. Validity, reliability and dependability

In this study, I navigated the challenges of reliability and dependability by employing various strategies to ensure the credibility of my findings. Given the qualitative nature of my investigation, I aligned with Stenbacka's (2001) perspective that reliability in qualitative research extends beyond mere repeatability of results to encompass the depth and credibility of the researcher's engagement with the data. Lincoln and Guba's (1986) concept of dependability, along with Hoepfl's (1997) emphasis on the dependability of results and procedures, guided my approach to ensuring that findings of my study were robust and trustworthy.

To enhance the dependability for this study, I employed semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, utilising tape recorders and diligent note-taking to accurately capture participants' insights. This meticulous documentation ensured that perspectives of participants were faithfully represented, minimising the risk of misinterpretation. The triangulation of data collection methods further strengthened the credibility of my findings. By combining individual interviews with focus group discussions, I was able to cross-validate information, enriching the depth of the study and reducing potential biases.

Despite some challenges with resistance encountered at the hostels, the initial hesitancy among Thokoza hostel dwellers to openly engage with an outsider was overcome through strategic engagement with community leaders, facilitated by an introduction from a respected Umkhonto we Sizwe Military Veterans leader. This endorsement lent credibility to my presence, enabling more open and honest discussions among hostel residents. The dynamic nature of focus group settings, where participants could interact and build on each other's contributions, was particularly valuable. It allowed for a rich exchange of experiences and perspectives, enhancing the authenticity and depth of the data collected.

The trust established during these engagements was evident in the exchange of contact numbers with some hostel dwellers, although this exchange was nuanced by their socio-economic circumstances. This trust facilitated follow-up inquiries and deeper dives into specific topics, enriching the findings of the study. A notable instance of this was my return visit to the Khutsong Ladies Hostel to address a misunderstanding of the data information and engage with the hostel committee, which provided invaluable insights into the internal dynamics and leadership structures of the hostel.

In Bedfordview, the one-on-one interviews facilitated a more intimate exchange of personal anecdotes and reflections on the state of the municipality, providing a nuanced understanding of the perspectives of residents. Similarly, the interviews with municipal officials, conducted within their professional environment, allowed for candid discussions that drew upon their institutional memory, offering a historical context to the present challenges and processes within the municipality.

The documentation of interviews through both audio recording and note-taking was crucial for maintaining the integrity of the data. This dual approach not only ensured that I captured the full breadth of participants' contributions but also allowed for efficient referencing and analysis during the writing phase. The use of colour coding to organise emerging themes further streamlined the analysis process, enabling me to identify and explore patterns and connections within the data effectively. Overall, the strategies I employed to ensure the reliability and dependability of my study were grounded in a deep commitment to accurately capturing and interpreting the lived experiences of Ekurhuleni residents. This approach underscored the importance of flexibility, reflexivity, and rigor in qualitative research, particularly when exploring complex social phenomena within diverse community settings.

2.7. Reflexivity and positionality

Navigating the complexities of positionality in this study required a keen awareness of how my own identity and the perceptions of participants could influence the research dynamics. As Rowe (2014) suggests, positionality encompasses the researcher's beliefs and the myriad factors that shape the research process, including race, age, gender, and culture. These elements

have the potential to shape interactions in ways that can profoundly impact the research outcome.

Entering Thokoza's Khumalo Street, the site of historical political violence, evoked a palpable sense of fear in me. This fear was rooted in the area's violent past, particularly the clashes between the Inkatha Freedom Party and the African National Congress supporters during the 1990s. As a Xhosa woman born in the 90s and hailing from one of the townships in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, my apprehension was further heightened by the tribal tensions that characterised much of the violence during that era. The precautionary advice I received to minimize my use of isiXhosa as indicated earlier, and to adopt a specific dress code when meeting the *iZinduna* underscored the deeply ingrained cultural and patriarchal norms I was about to navigate.

Despite these initial apprehensions, my introduction to the *iZinduna* and the clarity of the purpose of my study helped to break the ice, setting a foundation for mutual respect and understanding. Interestingly, the engagement with the hostel dwellers during the focus group discussions revealed a surprising depth of trust and openness. The men, many decades my senior, shared their lived experiences with an honesty that spoke to the rapport we had established. Moreover, their vivid descriptions of their living conditions as 'living like animals' were a stark testament to their daily realities. Sadly though, my accidental revelation of being an employee of the Gauteng Provincial Government, while intended to build trust, inadvertently raised expectations about the potential impact of my study. This moment underscored the delicate balance required in managing the participants' expectations and the ethical considerations of my positionality. Furthermore, the focus group discussion at the women's hostel further highlighted the therapeutic potential of such engagements, providing a space for women to share their experiences and challenges since relocating to the city. Here, the need to manage expectations became even more apparent, as the hope for tangible change from the study was palpable.

It is important to note that interactions in Bedfordview contrasted sharply with those in Thokoza, underscored by the different socioeconomic contexts. The privilege of meeting Bedfordview participants in local coffee shops, a luxury afforded by my employment and student status, was a stark reminder of the socioeconomic disparities that pervade the City of Ekurhuleni. This privilege not only facilitated the research process but also served as a constant

reflection of the inequities that characterise the lived experiences of Ekurhuleni residents. In navigating these diverse settings, my positionality as a researcher was continuously at play, influencing interactions, shaping the data collected, and guiding the ethical considerations of the study. The acknowledgment of this positionality and the conscious efforts to manage its impacts were crucial in ensuring the integrity and credibility of the research process.

2.8. Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations formed a cornerstone of this study, underpinning every aspect from data collection to interactions with participants. Following Mapitsa and Ngwato (2020), safeguarding the rights and dignity of participants, particularly those in vulnerable positions, was paramount. I began the process with obtaining ethical clearance from the Wits School of Governance (WSG), ensuring that the study adheres to established ethical norms and laws. This clearance served as a reassurance to participants and the City of Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality that the research was conducted within ethical bounds.

Informed consent was also a critical aspect of this process. It was vital to communicate transparently with participants about the objectives of the study, potential risks, and their rights, including anonymity and the freedom to withdraw at any point without repercussions (Connelly, 2014; Lutabingwa & Nethonze, 2006). This approach fostered a trust-based environment, encouraging open and honest participation. I was particularly cautious to avoid any form of coercion, ensuring that participation was entirely voluntary and based on a clear understanding of the study's nature and purpose. During both the focus group discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured interviews, I was mindful to steer clear of questions that might pose risks or discomfort to participants. This included avoiding queries that could potentially expose or implicate public officials in misconduct, thereby ensuring safety of participants and maintaining the integrity of the research process.

Notably, my position as a public servant within the Gauteng Provincial Government necessitated a vigilant separation of my professional knowledge and experiences from the research process. It was crucial that my personal beliefs or insider knowledge did not influence the direction or outcomes of the study. This impartial stance extended to my interactions with all participants, regardless of their socio-economic status or the settings of our meetings.

The ethical complexities of this study were further highlighted during my engagements in Thokoza. An unexpected instance involved a monetary transaction with the *Indunankulu* (the senior leader among the hostel *iziNduna*), facilitated by an intermediary. This gesture, though unfamiliar and unanticipated, seemed to be a culturally ingrained practice within the hostel community. It is important to clarify that participants were informed upfront that their involvement in the study would not entail financial compensation, aligning with ethical standards that discourage incentivisation that could influence participants' responses or involvement.

The contrast between the affluent Bedfordview area and the economically challenged Thokoza hostels underscored the study's exploration of systemic inequalities within the Ekurhuleni municipality. This juxtaposition was not to draw direct comparisons but to illuminate the stark disparities in living conditions, access to services, and the digital divide that pervade South African society. The choice of these distinct communities was intentional, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of the varied experiences and challenges faced by residents across the socio-economic spectrum within a single municipal jurisdiction.

CHAPTER 3

Hostels in Ekurhuleni: A legacy of apartheid and contemporary challenges

3.1. Introduction

In this chapter I explore the lived experiences of hostel residents in Ekurhuleni, with a particular focus on how historical legacies and how present socio-economic conditions intersect to shape their daily realities. The primary aim is to illuminate the complexities of life within these hostels, exploring the enduring impact of the legacies of apartheid policies and the contemporary challenges faced by residents in the democratic dispensation. Through this lens, the chapter seeks to unravel the nuances of urban living in spaces that were originally designed to serve a very different social order and function.

I argue that the historical design and current use of hostels in Ekurhuleni are emblematic of broader systemic issues within South African urban governance and service delivery. Despite the significant political and social transformations that have occurred since the democratic transition, the legacy of these hostels as spaces of segregation and marginalisation persists, influencing the quality of life and access to services for their inhabitants. This historical continuity, juxtaposed with the slow pace of socio-economic change for many hostel residents, exposes the deep-rooted challenges of transforming urban spaces to meet the needs of all citizens in a post-apartheid society.

The findings of this chapter reveal a profound sense of community among hostel residents, alongside a shared frustration over the lack of substantial improvement in their living conditions. Interestingly, despite the adversities, there exists a resilient community spirit, with residents employing innovative, collective strategies to address some of their immediate challenges. However, the overarching sentiment among the participants points to a disillusionment with the pace of change and a longing for a more inclusive and equitable urban development that acknowledges their needs and aspirations. Furthermore, the findings on this chapter provide a grounded understanding of the micro-level impacts of the digital divide and broader governance issues within the context of Ekurhuleni hostels. By situating these individual and communal experiences within the historical and contemporary landscape of urban governance in South

Africa, this analysis offers critical insights into the complex interplay between space, history, and socio-economic dynamics in shaping urban life.

This chapter begins with providing a historical background context, illustrating how apartheid-era policies have left a lasting imprint on the physical and social landscapes of the hostels. I then move to an in-depth exploration of current living conditions, drawing from first-hand observations and interactions with residents to paint a vivid picture of the challenges and communal bonds that define hostel life. Through a series of focused narratives and thematic analyses, the chapter uncovers the resilience and resourcefulness of hostel dwellers as they navigate the complexities of urban living. I conclude the chapter with a critical analysis of the implications of these findings for urban governance and policymaking, emphasising the importance of inclusive and context-sensitive approaches to improving the quality of life in historically marginalised communities.

3.2. Collective memory, community resilience and nostalgia

It is an autumn Saturday morning on the infamous Khumalo Street in Thokoza, East of Gauteng, an area with a painful history for black people dating back to the 90s. A group of millennials, unlikely to have been born during the turmoil, is gathered outside a hostel room in the Mshayazafe block. I approach the group, accompanied by one of the *iziNduna*, who is leading a walkabout of the hostel precinct. The participants of the focus group discussion had insisted I get a first-hand experience of their daily lives by seeing the state of the hostels for myself. The *induna*, in a fatherly manner, reprimands the young men and womxn consuming alcoholic beverages in the morning. They respond in unison with laughter, and I turn to see a smiling face softened by a song of endearment acknowledging his leadership status in the hostel. The mutual respect shown to the *induna* and the father-child relationship between the leaders and the young adults made me realise that despite all that lacks in the hostels, the camaraderie that exists is what keeps the hostel dwellers functioning.

Walls separate the cubicles in the toilets, but there are no doors for privacy. Some toilets still flush, thanks to the interventions made by the hostel dwellers themselves, in what they term “*ukubhatala ngaphakathi*,” meaning paying among themselves to resolve issues inside the hostel as opposed to paying the municipality directly. Spaces previously used as showers have accumulated dirt, dust, and refuse. Pools of water greet you before you enter rooms, while some

water runs down the ceilings. The situation is similar to that of Glebelands, a hostel in uMlazi, Kwa-Zulu Natal, originally designed for men during the apartheid era and later occupied by womxn and children post-1994.

The fieldwork reflection on Khumalo Street in Thokoza presents a complex picture of community life, woven with historical significance, social structures, and collective resilience. The generational shift within the community is evident as millennials now occupy its hostels, indicating a significant transformation. This disconnect between the past and present is a poignant reminder of how communities evolve, with younger generations navigating a world vastly different from their predecessors', yet still influenced by the historical memories shaping the area's collective identity.

The role of leadership, embodied in the *induna*, is particularly striking. The interaction with the youth, a mix of reprimand, laughter, and song, exemplifies deep-seated respect for traditional leadership roles. Yet, this respect is expressed not through a rigid hierarchy but through a familial bond, suggesting a leadership style that blends authority with nurturing, fostering community and stability. Amid infrastructural decay and challenging living conditions, the spirit of camaraderie within the hostel community stands out. The residents' mutual respect and spontaneous expressions of solidarity, even in adversity, highlight a remarkable resilience. This social cohesion, emerging as a key survival mechanism, allows the community to maintain a sense of normalcy despite the infrastructure's physical decay.

A notable aspect of this resilience is the community's approach to addressing infrastructural issues. The practice of "*ukubhatala ngaphakathi*," where residents pool resources for repairs, bypassing inadequate municipal services, demonstrates a significant level of self-reliance and collective action. This grassroots solution to immediate problems exemplifies the community's adaptability and casts a spotlight on the broader inadequacies of municipal support and services for hostel communities. The situation in Thokoza's hostels, paralleling the Glebelands hostel in uMlazi, suggests a widespread pattern of neglect across South African hostels. These spaces, initially for male laborers during apartheid and now home to families and womxn, illustrate the evolving function of hostels in the post-apartheid landscape. The shared challenges between these hostels point to systemic housing and infrastructure issues, highlighting a national challenge extending beyond individual communities.

The Thokoza hostels, known as Madala, Mshayazafe, and Khuthuza, where I spent most of the time during my fieldwork. These sprawling complexes, segmented into multiple rooms by dividing walls, were originally designed to give the illusion of private spaces for individual migrant workers, primarily unskilled black males engaged in factory work (Kynoch, 2013). This architectural setup, now repurposed to accommodate both sleeping and cooking areas, speaks volumes about the adaptive use of space by the current residents, far removed from its initial purpose.

Historically, the creation of these hostels was driven by apartheid-era legislation, specifically the Native (Urban Areas) Act of 1923 and its subsequent amendments. These laws were instrumental in erecting hostels as tools for controlling the migrant labour force, thereby ensuring a steady supply of cheap labour for urban industrial centres. Xulu-Gama (2017) elucidates that these laws were pivotal in constructing hostels, positioning them as mechanisms for the systemic management of migrant labour in urban industrial centres. Thus, the hostels were not conceived as comfortable living spaces or to nurture a sense of community but rather as containment areas for labourers, segregating them from their rural homes and families.

Despite their grim origins and the often criticised architectural and living conditions described as “badly designed and poorly built,” a sense of nostalgia for the pre-apartheid era persists among the hostel residents (Thurman, 1997). This reminiscence, as expressed by participants from Thokoza, presents a stark contrast to both the historical intent behind the hostels and their current deteriorated state. It reflects a complex interplay between the residents’ memories, their present circumstances, and the identity of the spaces they occupy. This juxtaposition of nostalgia with the harsh realities and original purpose of the hostels provides insight into the nuanced dynamics of memory, space, and community identity within the context of Thokoza’s hostels. The current state of the Thokoza hostels is described against this juxtaposition, as one participant notes:

After black people came to power we never lived in better places. It was like that until we started killing each other because we did that, and they never fixed anything since then. It was from 1992 to 1993 and then it became better in 1994. Even after voting, things have never changed. Ever since I came here, there is no development. If you are writing, you must indicate that we live like animals or as people who are not South Africans. It is like we do not belong to South Africa. We came from our homes, and we found these houses they call hostels, and we lived in them so that we can work for our children but today it is not happening (Participant from Focus Group Discussion 4).

This excerpt offers a poignant reflection on the lived experiences of hostel residents, particularly in the context of the country's transition to democracy and the ongoing challenges of urban development and housing. The participant's narrative begins with the transition to black majority rule, a period marked by high expectations for improved living conditions. However, the participant notes a stark discrepancy between these expectations and the reality that unfolded, suggesting that the anticipated upliftment in housing and living standards for black South Africans did not materialise as hoped.

Furthermore, the reference to internal conflicts, specifically between 1992 and 1993, points to a tumultuous period in South Africa's history leading up to the end of apartheid, characterised by political violence and instability, which likely exacerbated the neglect of hostel maintenance and development. Yet, the participant expresses a sense of disillusionment, noting that the promise of change that came with voting has not translated into tangible improvements in their living conditions.

The sentiment expressed by the phrase "we live like animals or as people who are not from South Africa" poignantly captures the profound sense of alienation and marginalisation felt by hostel residents, marking them as the 'other' within their own nation. This powerful articulation emphasises the stark disconnect between their sacrifices for economic survival and the neglect they face, painting a vivid picture of their lived reality. The narrative highlights a grim stagnation in living conditions, contradicting the anticipated progress post-1994, leading to a nostalgic reminiscence of the apartheid era, not for its oppressive regime, but perhaps for the semblance of a community and identity now perceived as lost. This reflection signals a critical disillusionment with the post-apartheid development agenda, underlining the need for a re-evaluation of policies to genuinely address the needs and aspirations of marginalised communities.

Zooming into the apartheid era, the National Party implemented the Bantustan system as a racial segregation strategy, categorising African populations by ethnicity. The Bantu Self-Government Act, passed by the South African parliament in the late 1950s, ushered in "grand apartheid" by institutionalising exclusion and marginalisation through "separate development" principles (Jensen & Zenker, 2015). This policy fragmented Africans into distinct ethnic groups (Jensen & Zenker, 2015). Shepley (2023) notes that with the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) gaining official status in 1990, Gauteng, known then as Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging,

experienced a significant upsurge in violence, with over 200 hostels falling under Inkatha control (Shepley, 2023). This period of unrest has had a lasting effect on the community dynamics and ethnic relations within the region, echoing the Zulu-Xhosa conflicts of the apartheid era. Such historical complexities significantly influenced my apprehensions about conducting fieldwork in the hostels, as elaborated in Chapter 2. Relocating to urban areas, colloquially termed “town” by black individuals from rural locales or townships, was often seen as a sacrificial move by men seeking better prospects. Apartheid’s segregation policies strictly limited black residency in urban zones to roles serving the white population. This led to prolonged family separations, with many children growing up distant from their fathers, and womxn bearing the brunt of child-rearing alone. Moreover, such migrations prompted men to form new familial ties in their new urban settings.

The establishment of Bantustans, or homelands, further entrenched segregation, aligning black communities along tribal lines and fuelling intra-racial conflicts. Notably, the rivalry between Xhosa ANC supporters and Zulu IFP followers, endorsed by Inkosi Mangosuthu Buthelezi, resulted in violent outbreaks in areas like Thokoza, Sharpeville, and Boipatong. Despite the Inkatha’s long-standing alliance with the National Party, its dominance waned as the ANC sought to dismantle the Bantustans and reform migrant hostels, which had become bastions for IFP activity. Steve Biko (1978) cautions against the tribal division of the anti-apartheid struggle, emphasising unity across ethnic lines. The drive towards urban migration was largely fuelled by the dire conditions in rural areas, compelling individuals to seek a semblance of improvement in their lives despite the systemic challenges they faced.

Given this brief background on the formation of hostels in South Africa, it is crucial to focus on the enduring impact of violence within these spaces. Segal (2007) delves into the politics of space within hostels, which were initially designed as transitional accommodations for black males, providing temporary shelter away from their rural homes. Segal (2007) introduces the concept of a “bed-holder” as opposed to a “householder,” illustrating hostels as temporary lodgings where black male migrants could temporarily reside, a concept referred to in isiXhosa as “*ukufihla intloko*,” loosely translated as a place of temporary residence before transitioning to permanent housing.

Growing up in the dusty streets of Mdantsane, a township just outside East London, hundreds of Zulu migrants departed from Madala hostel to launch violent attacks on areas such as

Boipatong in Gauteng, resulting in the deaths of over 40 people. Thirty-one years later, I revisited this very place, spending extensive hours with *iziNduna*, primarily from Kwa-Zulu Natal, and others even from the Eastern Cape, who transcended tribal affiliations. Although our gathering did not explicitly address the past violence, which may have been perpetrated by themselves, their fathers, brothers, or uncles, it centered on issues affecting them in their daily lives. The reflection on the opening paragraph of this chapter speaks to some of the ways in which hostel dwellers are bridging the ethnic divides to create collective communal spaces. Behind the wrinkles and the weight of past hardships, I sensed humour and the lingering pain of bygone days. The warmth with which I was received later revealed itself in a meaningful manner, an experience that continues to resonate with me even months after my departure from the Thokoza hostels.

The historical segregation and socio-economic marginalisation experienced by residents of Thokoza hostels, underscore the critical gaps in a digital solution like the My COE App, especially when considering the diverse socio-economic realities. The legacy of apartheid, characterised by enforced tribal divisions and socio-economic disenfranchisement, has enduring effects on the socio-economic fabric of townships like Thokoza. These historical underpinnings contribute to present-day challenges such as digital divide, low digital literacy, and a general scepticism towards government initiatives, which are particularly pronounced in marginalised communities. This historical context, therefore, deepens the understanding of why a technology-centric approach to service delivery, such as the My COE App, might not fully resonate with or serve the needs of all community segments, particularly those in historically marginalised areas like Thokoza. While digital innovation represents a leap towards modern governance, the efficacy of such solutions is inherently linked to the socio-economic realities of its users.

3.3. Apartheid nostalgia: beyond longing for the past

The analysis of the experiences of Thokoza hostel dwellers as they reflect on the painful history of the past contrasting with present realities characterised by lack of basic services suggest that nostalgia for the apartheid era among some South Africans is not merely a longing for the past but reflects deeper anxieties about the uncertainties and challenges of post-apartheid South Africa. The continued existence of hostels, townships and the socio-economic disparities, serve

as stark reminders of the enduring legacy of apartheid, challenging the notion of a clean break between the past and the present.

In his book *Native Nostalgia*, Jacob Dlamini (2009), contextualises the apartheid nostalgia of the hostel dwellers by perfectly painting a picture of his relationship with the Afrikaans language. Afrikaans to him, is the language of the oppressor and the language of order and exclusion. Dlamini (2009) associates it with the many killings of young people across South Africa during the 1976 uprising where young people took to the streets, fighting against Afrikaans being the language of teaching in schools. Yet, in the same breath, Dlamini (2009), fondly remembers memories of the language being spoken by his mother and her friends, his mother and her grandmother, and the language used in court rooms, as well as in the newsroom during his time as a journalist.

However, Dlamini (2009) further explores the complex emotions tied to memories of the apartheid era, suggesting that such nostalgia may stem from apprehensions about the state of post-apartheid South Africa. He challenges the simplistic narrative of apartheid as a struggle between ‘resisters’ and ‘oppressors,’ proposing instead that the period was marked by numerous ambiguities, with individuals often navigating roles of both resistance and collaboration. While acknowledging that nostalgia for apartheid can be troubling, Dlamini highlights the continued presence of townships more than two decades after apartheid, pointing to the lasting impact and unresolved legacies of that time. These moments of ‘nostalgia’ run through some of the narratives collected from Thokoza hostels and Bedfordview, particularly when hostel dwellers reflected on deteriorating infrastructure and public services. Reflecting on the deteriorating infrastructure and the demolition of the existing ones, a participant from Mshayazafe hostel spoke about a building that once was the supermarket, but was now demolished:

Even horses do not live under such conditions, horses live in a clean place. If you could go inside rooms, you would be surprised. I think you saw the place that you went in when you were coming, the place we call our office. It is not even an office; it is a room that we took by force to make it our office. Before democracy, we had supermarkets inside the hostels. Living conditions deteriorated, whilst violence and killings increased (Participant from Focus Group Discussion 4).

This interview excerpt provides insights into the lived experiences and perceptions of hostel dwellers in Thokoza, reflecting broader themes of nostalgia, decay, and adaptation in post-apartheid South Africa. The participant draws a stark comparison between their current living conditions and those of animals, suggesting that even horses are afforded cleaner environments. This metaphor underscores the degradation and neglect they face, highlighting a sense of indignity and abandonment. Moreover, the reference to the demolition of a building that once housed a supermarket within the hostel complex serves as a tangible symbol of the decline in infrastructure and public services post-apartheid.

The participant nostalgically recalls a time when such amenities were available within the hostels, contrasting it with the current state of deterioration. The act of forcefully converting a room into an office reflects the resilience and agency of the hostel dwellers in adapting to their changing environment, albeit within the constraints of declining living conditions. Furthermore, the participant's reflections also touch on the increased violence and killings, hinting at the social and political unrest that has characterised parts of the post-apartheid period. This statement not only speaks to the physical deterioration of the hostels but also to the broader context of insecurity and turmoil that some communities have faced.

Commenting on poor service delivery, one of the participants – an *induna* from Madala Hostel, complained about refuse collection, and hostel infrastructure pre-1994, noting that:

There is a stair that side it had everything inside. There was a lounge, there were different shops, a supermarket inside there in that hostel. The other one was here inside and the other at number 2 hostel, there were supermarkets. Since that time those things were destroyed because they were saying they are things that belong to apartheid, and things for Boers. After black people came to power we never lived in better places (Participant from Focus Group Discussion 4).

The *induna* reflects on the loss of communal amenities such as lounges, shops, and supermarkets that once existed within the hostel complexes. These amenities were not just conveniences but essential components of a community's social and economic fabric, contributing to a sense of normalcy and community cohesion. The destruction of these facilities in the post-apartheid era, under the guise of eradicating symbols of apartheid, inadvertently led to a deterioration in the quality of life for the hostel dwellers. The *induna*'s lament that "after black people came to power we never lived in better places" underscores a disappointment in

the post-apartheid governance that failed to improve, or perhaps even worsened, their living conditions.

During a one-on-one interview, an official from Ekurhuleni municipality similarly refers to how systems in hostels were better placed during the apartheid regime as opposed to post 1994, echoing the apartheid nostalgia. The participant had this to say:

During apartheid, there was a transparent system of knowing who lives in what room, in which hostel, and with whom. Now, you cannot say who stays in what room because they (hostel dwellers) refuse to provide that information because they do not want to account and pay for services (Interview with participant 9).

The official from the municipality highlights a breakdown in administrative systems post-1994, specifically regarding the transparency and accountability of hostel residency and service usage. During apartheid, there was a clear system to identify who occupied each room within the hostels, which facilitated the management of services and resources. The current refusal of residents to provide such information, as noted by the official, points to a broader issue of mistrust and disengagement between the hostel dwellers and the authorities. This breakdown in communication and accountability contributes to the challenges in service delivery and infrastructure maintenance.

The reflections from participants cited above encapsulates the challenges of transitioning from apartheid to democracy, the erosion of certain public infrastructures and services, and the resultant nostalgia for a past that, while oppressive, offered a different set of lived experiences. They highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of post-apartheid legacies, particularly in communities like Thokoza that continue to grapple with the complexities of change, decay, and resilience. Furthermore, these reflections point to the urgent need for improved governance, transparency, and engagement between communities and authorities in the post-apartheid era. Addressing the decline in service delivery and infrastructure, and bridging the gap of mistrust between residents and officials, are crucial steps toward fulfilling the promises of a better life for all in the post-apartheid landscape. The narratives underscore the importance of not only physical reconstruction but also the restoration of dignity, community cohesion, and trust in public institutions.

The nostalgia expressed by the participant, while seemingly paradoxical given the oppressive nature of the apartheid regime, can be understood in the context of the relative stability and availability of certain amenities during that era, compared to the post-apartheid period. This sentiment reflects the complex and sometimes contradictory emotions associated with memories of apartheid, including the yearning for aspects of life that were perceived as better (Dlamini, 2009). However, as Dlamini further cautions, this nostalgia is complex and should not be seen as a longing for the return of an oppressive regime but rather as a critique of the unfulfilled promises of the post-apartheid era. It reflects a longing for the perceived order, functionality, and availability of services, regardless of the repressive context in which they were provided. The hostel life, including many poor townships, still continue to face service delivery challenges, while dealing with unresponsive government.

3.4. Disillusionment and service delivery challenges post-1994

Experiences of Ekurhuleni residents, as articulated by several participants, that despite the democratic advancements and the end of institutionalised racial segregation, the post-apartheid government struggles to meet the expectations of its citizens in terms of service delivery and transparent governance. The disillusionment and apathy towards governmental due to the decline in service delivery and infrastructure, and lack of action against corruption signify a deep erosion of trust in public institutions. This erosion of trust challenges the foundational basis of the post-apartheid democratic project, which promised not only political freedom but also social and economic upliftment.

Service delivery is a fundamental responsibility of the state, as explicitly mandated by legislation. As noted in *Chapter 1*, this obligation is enshrined in Section 152 (1) (b) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), which unequivocally states the duty of local governments to provide services to communities in a sustainable manner. However, despite the legislative clarity regarding the state's responsibility in service delivery, South Africa faces ongoing challenges in fulfilling this mandate (Joshi & Moore, 2004). The resultant gap between legislative mandates and actual service delivery has eroded public trust and spurred community protests, with citizens demanding the state fulfil its legislated duty (Masiya, Davids, & Mangai, 2019). The sentiments share above, echoing apartheid nostalgia, reflect

these frustrations of the failure of the state to address service delivery challenges. A participant from Bedfordview interviewed for this project reflected on these frustrations noting:

People are angry, they are disappointed and upset and the systems are just the way they are. We should be taking to the streets for service delivery and corruption but we do not. It is shocking. We read about corruption and theft and God knows when the councillor says there is no money for this, there is no money for that. What is going on, you know it is very complicated and I do not know how I could ever be... I do not know how I could ever come right. There are so many people here who are just so inherently on the tab, I just do not know (Interview with Participant 1).

The interview excerpt reflects deep-seated frustrations and disillusionment with the state's failure to meet its service delivery mandates, a sentiment that resonates with many citizens across the country. They highlight a collective feeling of anger, disappointment, and upset among the citizens, indicating a deep-seated frustration with the government's failure to meet basic service needs and manage resources effectively. This frustration is compounded by a sense of shock at the public's own inaction in the face of widespread corruption and mismanagement, despite a keen awareness of these issues. Furthermore, the mention of reading about corruption and theft, coupled with hearing councillors claim a lack of funds for essential services, points to a disconnect between the public's expectations of transparency and accountability and the reality of governance they experience. This discrepancy not only fosters distrust in local government but also contributes to a feeling of helplessness and confusion about the potential for positive change.

This narrative is shared by other participants reflecting on challenges of navigating and addressing the deep-seated issues within the local governance structures. For other participants, this has led to a state of despondency, where hostel communities end up taking up initiatives to service their communities. When residents or communities take matters into their own hands it is clear indication that all hope in the municipality is lost. The participant from the Thokoza had this to say:

Because of lack of service delivery, we end up using money from our pockets as the chair has said before he went out. Whenever the sewer is broken, the municipality does not help. We use money from our pockets and call a contractor named Makhabadaka to come and fix. As I speak there in my place, there is blasted pipe. We have already donated the money; it is there we are waiting for them to come and fix. I am trying to explain that we do not pay but

we end up contributing money because of poor service delivery that is supposed to be coming from the municipality. In our area the toilets were blocked the whole block and we donated R13 thousand, and we called a plumber and bought new toilet seats. Now we have good toilets because we contributed from our pockets (Participant from Focus Group Discussion 4).

The participant went on to point out to the contradictions where politicians, despite neglecting poor communities over time, they will still come to them to campaign for votes. This is the only time when residents of Thokoza get a taste of service delivery. He explains:

The municipality does not care about us, they will remember us when we are supposed to vote. Of which I think that does not work because in the end, we do not go to vote because we do not have service deliver (Participant from Focus Group Discussion 4).

In the first excerpt, the participant from Thokoza describes how the community has had to compensate for the lack of municipal service delivery by funding repairs themselves. For instance, when the sewer system fails, they do not receive any assistance from the municipality. Instead, they collectively contribute money to hire a contractor for repairs. The participant specifically mentions a recent incident where they pooled funds to fix a burst pipe and to address blocked toilets in their area, highlighting the extent of their reliance on self-funded solutions to infrastructural problems that are traditionally the responsibility of local government.

In the second excerpt, the same participant reflects on the cyclical nature of political engagement in their community, noting that municipal officials and politicians only appear to show concern for the residents' needs during election periods, using service delivery as a campaign promise. This periodic attention does little to address the ongoing service delivery issues and has led to voter apathy among the residents, who feel neglected and disillusioned with the empty promises made during campaigns. The participant expresses a sense of betrayal, pointing out the contradiction between the politicians' campaign promises and their lack of action in addressing the community's service delivery needs.

The challenges faced by residents of the City of Ekurhuleni are not isolated incidents but part of a national governance crisis. The experiences described by the participants resonate with broader themes of service delivery challenges in South Africa. Communities taking initiatives to address service deficiencies due to municipal inaction reflects a widespread issue in many

parts of the country, where local governments fail to meet their constitutional obligations for service provision. This self-reliance in service delivery, as described by the participant, is indicative of a broader governance crisis, where the state's inability to provide basic services undermines its legitimacy and erodes public trust (Bénit-Gbaffou, 2012; Von Holdt, 2010).

Scholars like Von Holdt (2010) and Bénit-Gbaffou (2012) have extensively discussed the implications of such governance failures, highlighting how they contribute to a cycle of protest, disillusionment, and disengagement among citizens. The phenomenon of “protest-neglect-repeat,” as some might describe it, underscores a systemic issue where communities feel compelled to take on roles traditionally ascribed to government due to persistent neglect (Alexander, 2010; Booysen, 2007).

Moreover, the cyclical engagement of politicians with communities only during election periods, as mentioned by the participant, reflects a transactional approach to governance, where service delivery is used as a bargaining chip for votes rather than an inherent governmental responsibility. This transactional nature of service delivery has been critiqued by scholars like Seekings (2009), who argue that it undermines the principles of democratic accountability and social citizenship enshrined in South Africa's constitution. The issue of service delivery in South Africa is further complicated by systemic challenges such as corruption, mismanagement, and fiscal constraints, which have been widely documented in the literature (Lodge, 2014; Plaatjies et al., 2019). These systemic challenges exacerbate the service delivery crisis, leading to situations like those described by the Ekurhuleni participants, where communities are left with no choice but to fend for themselves.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond merely improving service delivery mechanisms. It calls for systemic reforms to enhance governance, accountability, and public trust, ensuring that the state fulfils its constitutional mandate to provide services to all citizens equitably and efficiently. The insights derived from the narratives surrounding service delivery challenges in communities of Ekurhuleni offer a rich context for understanding the implications of introducing digital solutions such as the My COE App. These narratives underscore the complexity of the digital divide, which extends beyond mere access to technology. It encompasses a range of socio-economic disparities and governance issues that can impede the effective adoption and utilisation of digital platforms. This broader perspective is essential for the My COE App's development and implementation,

suggesting that any digital solution must be sensitive to the varied socio-economic backgrounds of its intended users. The findings suggest a need to reimagine approaches to digital public services that not only aim to bridge the technological gap, but also address the broader socio-economic disparities that underpin digital exclusion.

3.5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter explored the intricate dynamics within Ekurhuleni's hostels, exposing the effects of the historical legacies and contemporary socio-economic challenges. This analysis brought to light not only the physical and infrastructural decay rooted in enduring apartheid spatial policies, however, also showcased the vibrant community life that persists in defiance of these adversities. The discussions highlighted the enduring neglect by post-apartheid governance structures and underscored the urgent need for holistic urban renewal that encompasses both physical reconstruction and social revitalisation.

The findings of this chapter illustrate the profound urban governance and service delivery issues that need addressing. These insights call for the adoption of policies that are sensitive to the unique contexts of marginalised communities and that prioritise human-centric approaches. Furthermore, the findings also showcased the remarkable resilience and communal solidarity among the hostel residents, offering vital perspectives on community-driven responses to systemic failures. This narrative not only enriches our understanding of urban survival strategies but also serves as a crucial reminder for policymakers and urban planners to centre the voices and needs of the most marginalised in development initiatives.

CHAPTER 4

Gendered spaces and resilience: Voices of womxn from Ekurhuleni hostels

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter I shift the focus to the experiences of womxn living in hostels within the Ekurhuleni Municipality, exploring their unique challenges and the broader implications for urban governance and gender-sensitive policy making. The main aim of this chapter is to uncover the lived realities of womxn in these communal living spaces, shedding light on the intersection of gender, space, and socio-economic status within the urban context. The central argument I pursued in this chapter contends that the hostel environment, while traditionally male-dominated, presents a complex web of social dynamics where womxn navigate various forms of marginalisation and resilience. I argue that these experiences are reflective of broader systemic issues in urban governance and service delivery, where gendered perspectives are often overlooked. Furthermore, given the entrenched gender norms and power imbalances, womxn face obstacles not only in their physical communal spaces but also in accessing and utilising digital platforms like the My COE App for service delivery.

The findings from the analysis reveal that womxn in hostels face distinct challenges, including limited access to privacy, safety concerns, and socio-economic hardships. However, these adversities are counterbalanced by their strategies of resilience, community building, and informal economies, which not only sustain their daily lives but also contribute to the social fabric of hostel communities. These insights highlight the necessity of integrating gender-sensitive approaches in urban planning and policy formulation, that recognise and address the unique challenges faced by womxn in marginalised urban spaces, advocating for inclusive development strategies that ensure equitable access to resources and opportunities.

In the following sections of the chapter, I begin with providing an overview of the socio-historical context of hostels in Ekurhuleni, setting the stage for an in-depth exploration of the experiences of womxn in these spaces. This is followed by an analysis of the gendered dynamics within these spaces, drawing on personal narratives and observations to illustrate the complexities of hostel life for womxn. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the implications of these findings for

urban governance and policy making, advocating for a more inclusive and responsive approach to urban development.

4.2. Voices of displacement and womxn's struggles in Khutsong Ladies Hostels

In the Khutsong Ladies Hostel within the Ekurhuleni municipality, young womxn articulate a stark disenchantment with their current living conditions, sharply contrasting with their initial aspirations of finding opportunities in Gauteng. Their narratives, characterised by a longing for educational advancement and a safer environment, highlight the broader challenges faced by womxn in hostels. These challenges, reflect a complex interplay of gender, socio-economic status, and urban governance. The experiences of these womxn emphasise the urgent need for gender-sensitive urban planning and policy-making that addresses the unique adversities faced by womxn in marginalised urban spaces, advocating for inclusive development strategies that ensure equitable access to resources and opportunities, particularly for womxn in hostels. In some instances, those who hold positions of power and resources threaten the womxn about chasing them out of the hostels if they do not cooperate. The experiences of these womxn were captured in some of the interviews as womxn from the Khutsong Ladies Hostel reflected:

I moved to the hostels in 2023 from the Eastern Cape to join my mother after I passed Grade 12 in 2022. My intention was to take a gap year. This place is not good. I want to go back to school. I am also scared here. I have applied at University of Pretoria and the University of Free State for the 2024 intake (Participant from Focus Group Discussion 5).

A 23-year-old participant who moved to Johannesburg two years ago shared similar sentiments:

We want to leave here; it is not a good environment. I moved from the Eastern Cape two years ago. I had a call centre job, I left because of the environment but the situation at home forces me to go back. I will also be going back to school in 2024 (Participant from Focus Group Discussion 5).

We think we are better. If you do not want to collaborate with them, we will wake up in Natal. As I am from Natal, I will wake up there one day. If you are from the Cape you will wake up there, if you are from Mpumalanga you will wake up there because we are not from this place. He was saying this when he was going with his people. (Participant from Focus Group Discussion 6).

The interview excerpts from participants in the Khutsong Ladies Hostel reveal significant insights into the lived experiences and aspirations of young womxn in this marginalised urban space. The first participant, a recent high school graduate, articulates a sense of disillusionment with the hostel environment, which falls short of the opportunities she had hoped to find in Gauteng. Her mention of feeling “scared” highlights concerns about safety, a critical issue affecting the well-being of womxn in such communal living arrangements. Her desire to return to formal education underscores the gap between her aspirations for personal advancement and the reality of her current situation.

Similarly, the second participant, a young woman who came to Johannesburg two years ago echoes the sentiment of wanting to leave due to the unsatisfactory living conditions at the hostel. Her brief stint in a call center job and subsequent decision to quit due to the hostile environment further illustrate the challenges young womxn face in finding stable, dignified employment while residing in such spaces. Her intention to pursue further education in 2024 signifies a common thread between these young womxn: a pursuit of opportunities beyond the constraints of their current living conditions, driven by a desire for personal and professional growth. Both excerpts highlight a critical aspect of urban marginality, where the hostel not only represents a physical space but also a barrier to the aspirations of its residents. These narratives underscore the need for policy interventions that not only improve living conditions in hostels but also facilitate access to education and employment opportunities for womxn, enabling them to transcend the limitations imposed by their immediate environment.

Furthermore, the status of precarity is exacerbated by homelessness as womxn in the hostels continue to struggle with accommodation and other basic services. Many womxn that I spoke to at the hostels they share a common experience of the challenges related to housing and other related struggles. Some even share a common background: they left their rural homes, mostly in the Eastern Cape, in search of a better life in the city decades ago. They speak openly about their challenges, unencumbered by the presence of any man who might consider himself superior to them. During the interviews, one of the participants takes me back to when she first moved into the hostel and how the way of life has since changed:

I came in 1995 when we were sharing before it was renovated than the way it is now. When we arrived here we were sharing, two people in one room. It was a three-bedroomed and there were three in other rooms. We shared a kitchen and I think toilets were six, I cannot remember well. We were eighteen in one

house and twenty-one in those at the corner. It was nice here it was like we were family. Things were not like they are now as we live with our children, they were not allowed before. Now we live with them, and womxn sneak in men. They now stay with men as you see. It is no longer right to live like this. People fight over cleaning (Participant from Focus Group Discussion 5).

The participant provides insight into the living conditions within a communal housing setup at the hostel, from the perspective of a long-term resident. They recount their arrival in 1995, a time when the hostel had a different living arrangement compared to its current state. Initially, the accommodation was shared, with two people per room within a three-bedroom unit, resulting in eighteen to twenty-one individuals living together in one house. This setup also included shared amenities like a kitchen and possibly six toilets, although the participant is unsure of the exact number. Interestingly, the recount reflects a sense of nostalgia for the past, describing the earlier communal living experience as familial and harmonious, contrasting sharply with the present conditions. The introduction of children and ‘sneaking’ of men into the living spaces, which were previously not allowed, has altered the dynamics significantly. The participant observes that womxn now “sneak in men,” leading to cohabitation within these cramped quarters. This change has disrupted the erstwhile orderly and familial environment, giving rise to conflicts, particularly regarding cleaning duties.

Ramphela (1993) defines hostels as the “legacy of a policy of systemic racial discrimination and economic exploitation of indigenous people of South Africa.” It would seem that this legacy continues even with these womxn whom, while they have made their way into the urban city, hostels continue to be those spaces of temporality where they wait for better opportunities. Commenting on similar challenges related to housing, another participant from a focus group discussion explains how living in the hostels has eroded their dignity, bemoaning about foreigners in a housing development in Alberton:

Sky City is full of people who are not from South Africa. These are people who never fought for the struggle and people who do not even vote. Houses are full of foreigners while we still live here in hostels. We are tied up. People are living in our houses (Participant Focus Group Discussion 5).

The participant expresses feelings of frustration and disillusionment regarding housing allocation in a development named Sky City in Alberton. They also express a sense of injustice and loss of dignity stemming from the perception that non-South Africans, referred to as “foreigners,” are occupying housing units in a new development, while long-standing

residents, presumably those involved in the anti-apartheid struggle and participating in local elections, continue to live in substandard conditions in hostels. The participant's use of "we are tied up" metaphorically conveys a feeling of being trapped or constrained by the current housing situation, which contrasts with the perceived preferential treatment of foreigners in accessing new housing. The views expressed in this excerpt underscores the complexities surrounding housing allocation in post-apartheid South Africa, where historical injustices, current policies, and social tensions intersect. It also hints at underlying xenophobic sentiments that can arise in contexts of scarcity and competition for resources, a recurring theme in South African urban and peri-urban areas where housing remains a critical and contentious issue.

More important, to the womxn of Khutsong, the question of access to housing is both a question of dignity and a way of asserting their presence at the hostels. The struggle to attain houses has been so long so much that some feel they have lost their dignity in the process. However, the need for survival pushes them to continue the struggle. A participant from another FGD also explain:

I do not think we still have dignity we lost it ages ago. We no longer know what dignity means because we do not have houses. We live here because we do not have a choice (Participant from Focus Group Discussion 5).

This excerpt from the participant exposes the profound emotional and psychological consequences of prolonged housing insecurity. The participants notes that the persistent struggle to obtain adequate housing has eroded their sense of dignity, to the point where the concept of dignity has become alien and unattainable. The lack of housing is not just a logistical issue but is deeply tied to their self-worth and identity. Living in hostels, not out of choice but necessity, underscores a sense of powerlessness and resignation. The struggle for housing extends beyond the physical need for shelter; it represents a battle for recognition, respect, and the basic human right to live with dignity. This narrative highlights the intersection of housing insecurity with issues of dignity and identity, emphasising the profound impact that systemic failures in housing can have on individuals and communities.

In their struggle to exist in the urban city, and Khutsong hostel in particular, womxn have received little or no support at all from the public officials and local politicians who should be

in a position to advocate for the rights of their community members. Despite numerous attempts by these womxn to secure housing via the Human Settlements department, their efforts have been futile. While the My COE app logs various challenges faced by Ekurhuleni residents, with energy, water, and sanitation being predominant, it falls short when individual grievances go unresolved, benefiting only a minority. Furthermore, the worsening relationship between hostel leadership and the ward councillor hinders effective service delivery to the community, including those residing in hostels. One participant captures their experiences in their attempt to secure their own home by registering for a house. However, this is also a daunting process that continues to undermine the dignity of women as a marginalised group. The participant from a FGD explains:

One is required to go to the Human Settlements Customer Care Centre (CCC), where they are placed on a waiting list. We used to have lease agreements, now there is none of that. Things changed when the ward councillor came in. When someone leaves the hostel, people come in and live without processes. When the incumbent came in as ward councillor he brought in his own people. The councillor once made threats to some of us saying we ‘pretend to be living in the suburbs. One day you will wake up in Natal, Kapa, or Qumbu because you do not belong here (Participant from Focus Group Discussion 6).

The interview excerpt reveals the negative impact of a deteriorating relationship between hostel leadership and the ward councillor on service delivery to the community, including hostel residents. A focus group participant describes their experience trying to secure housing through the Human Settlements Customer Care Centre, where they encountered a bureaucratic and disorganised system. This system, which once provided lease agreements as a form of stability and transparency, has been disrupted by the new the conduct of the new ward councillor. The councillor, as the participant explains, is accused of favouring certain individuals for housing, bypassing established processes, and making threatening remarks to residents, implying they do not belong in the area. This situation highlights issues of governance, access to housing, and the treatment of marginalised groups within the community. It also adds a layer of struggle, revealing the different intersectionalities that womxn living at the hostels must navigate.

The experience captured by the FGD participant above, is, for many women in Khutsong, unexpected especially in the democratic dispensation. As the South African government champions the discourse of equality and bridging the gender gap, it would seem womxn from the margins of society are falling through the cracks while the country progresses. One

participant takes a reflection into the South African history of the anti-apartheid struggle and expresses her disappointment in the new dispensation. She relates:

I had never imagined that, over three decades later I would still be without a house. Our children ask where our homes are whether it is Khutsong. We come from far places, when you arrive at home, you are not working, you do not have a home, you are just a person you do not even have a house, you have nothing. We want houses (Interview with participant from focus group 5).

The excerpt reflects the deep-seated frustrations and disappointments of women in Khutsong, who, despite the promises of a democratic South Africa, continue to grapple with the lack of basic housing. The participant shares her disbelief and disillusionment that, over three decades after the end of apartheid, she and many others still lack their own homes. This stark reality contrasts sharply with the expectations of progress and equality that were anticipated with the country's transition to democracy. The reference to children's questions about their homes underscores the intergenerational impact of this issue, highlighting not just a personal or immediate problem, but a broader societal failure that affects the identity and stability of families. The sentiment "you are just a person you do not even have a house, you have nothing" poignantly encapsulates the loss of dignity and security associated with the absence of a home. This narrative brings to light the ongoing struggles against systemic issues that persist despite the country's advancements, revealing a gap between the ideals of the democratic dispensation and the reality faced by marginalised communities, particularly womxn. This situation once again highlights the intersectionality of plight of women, navigating not just gender inequality but also systemic failures in governance and housing policy, leaving them feeling invisible and marginalised in the broader narrative of national progress.

In examining the plight of womxn in Khutsong, particularly those residing in hostels, it becomes evident that their struggles for housing transcend mere accommodation needs, embedding deeper issues of gender inequality and marginalisation. The narratives shared by participants in focus group discussions illuminate the intersectional challenges faced by these womxn, resonating with broader themes in gender studies literature. For instance, Moser's (1993) concept of "gender planning" emphasises the need for urban planning and policies to consider the distinct needs and roles of womxn, a consideration seemingly overlooked in the housing strategies employed in Khutsong (Moser, 1993).

The sentiment expressed by a participant, reflecting on the disillusionment of still being without a house decades after the end of apartheid, echoes the findings of Walker (1995), who discusses the persistent gap between the promise of gender equality in post-apartheid South Africa and the reality on the ground. Walker points out that despite legal and constitutional commitments to equality, the actual experiences of womxn, particularly those from marginalised communities, reveal a different story (Walker, 1995). This gap is further widened for womxn in hostels, who not only face gender-based discrimination but also bear the brunt of systemic failures in housing policy and governance.

Moreover, the emotional and psychological impact of inadequate housing on these womxn's dignity aligns with the arguments presented by Patel, Satterthwaite, and Mitlin (2015), who highlight the intrinsic link between adequate housing and human dignity, especially for womxn in marginalised settings. Their research underscores how housing insecurity not only affects physical well-being but also erodes self-worth and identity, themes clearly reflected in the narratives of Khutsong womxn (Patel, Satterthwaite, & Mitlin, 2015). Lessons from the experiences of womxn of Khutsong suggest that the struggles faced by these womxn are emblematic of broader systemic issues that intersect with gender, socio-economic status, and spatial marginalisation. The case of Khutsong thus serves as a microcosm for understanding the multifaceted dimensions of gender inequality and marginalisation, necessitating a multi-pronged approach that addresses not only housing but also the underlying structures perpetuating gender disparities.

The discussion on the struggles of womxn in Khutsong for housing and their experiences of marginalisation provides a poignant context for understanding the implications of the digital divide highlighted in the study on the My COE app. This app, aimed at improving municipal services through digital innovation, sits at the intersection of South Africa's technological ambitions and the socio-economic realities that many of its citizens face. The central argument of the thesis – that the digital divide can exacerbate socio-economic disparities resonates deeply with the narratives from Khutsong. These womxn's stories underscore the risk of digital solutions inadvertently sidelining those who are already marginalised, particularly if these individuals lack the digital literacy or access required to benefit from such innovations.

4.3. Rejection of womxn and resistance against them

The experiences of womxn of Khutsong Ladies hostel and their navigation through the compounded challenges of gender inequality, systemic governance failures, and inadequate housing policies is deeply intertwined with the broader historical context of hostels in South Africa as exclusionary spaces. Traditionally, these hostels were designed with a male-centric perspective, often excluding womxn or relegating their presence to that of dependency on male counterparts for access and status within these communities. This historical backdrop is crucial for understanding the current plight faced by these womxn, as it lays the foundation for the systemic and gender-based disparities that persist.

The entrenched gender dynamics within these hostel settings, highlighted by the dependence of womxn on men for their status as “bed holders,” underline the marginalised position of womxn in these spaces. This marginalisation is not just a matter of physical space but extends to the denial of voice and agency, leaving womxn in a position where their needs and concerns are often overlooked or deprioritised. Ramphele (1989) highlights the potential for womxn to break free from these dependency relationships emphasising the critical role of economic independence and access to alternative accommodation. However, these are not easily attainable goals for many womxn, given the systemic barriers and socio-economic challenges they face. The ability to earn an independent income is more than just a financial issue; it’s a step towards autonomy and empowerment, allowing womxn to make choices about their lives without being beholden to the patriarchal structures that dominate hostel life.

Xulu-Gama’s (2017) description of hostels as “spaces of perplexity” aptly captures the complex interplay of gender, space, and power within these environments. The sense of loss articulated by a male hostel dweller regarding the increasing presence of womxn in these spaces reflects the shifting gender dynamics, albeit not necessarily translating into increased agency or empowerment for the womxn themselves. The sentiments on resistance and rejection of the presence of womxn at the hostels to an extent that they are not even allowed to speak in the presence of men have been expressed by different participants:

I can say if it is possible to allow sister to talk to womxn because they are not here in hostel, they do not have powers to talk about things that happen here in hostels, it will cause problems in things that we are doing here as leaders and

residents of hostels. They will talk for their rights; they do not have a right to voice their views because they will cause problems in things we do here in hostels. This is the reason that I say we cannot allow you to meet them. If you want womxn, we are the one who can choose and come with them, you cannot see them alone (Participant from Focus Group Discussion 4).

The excerpt highlights the deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and resistance to womxn's participation and voice within the hostel settings. This resistance is not merely a reflection of individual attitudes but indicative of broader systemic and cultural norms that regulate gender roles and power dynamics in such communal living spaces. The participant's assertion that womxn "do not have powers to talk about things that happen here in hostels" and the belief that allowing them to voice their views would "cause problems" underscores a deliberate exclusion of womxn from decision-making processes and discussions pertinent to their living conditions.

This sentiment is emblematic of a broader issue of marginalisation and exclusion faced by womxn in many societal contexts, but it is particularly pronounced in male-dominated environments like the hostels. The idea that womxn's rights and voices are seen as problematic or disruptive to the status quo highlights the pervasive nature of gender-based discrimination and the fear of challenges to entrenched power structures. The participant's statement that womxn cannot be met or chosen without the mediation of male residents further emphasises the control exerted over womxn's agency and mobility, effectively silencing their perspectives and needs.

Such dynamics are reflective of what Connell (1987) described as the social organisation of gender relations through the concept of hegemonic masculinity, where dominant gender norms suppress alternative voices, particularly those of womxn, to maintain existing power structures. This scenario within the hostels not only marginalises womxn but also denies them the fundamental right to participate in discussions and decisions that affect their daily lives and well-being. Another view held by another participant during the interview reflects how he is completely against womxn living in the hostel. Important to note, the agency of womxn continues to be a sore point for men. Though the fear of men may still be inherent among womxn, more and more womxn are finding their voices, or ways to express their dissatisfaction with men. The participant had this to say:

In this matter, my sister's child, matters that concern *izinduna* and *amakhosikazi*, womxn are not allowed because womxn have certain behaviours.

When there are misunderstandings at home, they are able to walk naked and say I am not going to sleep with you while walking naked around the house, this is because I live with her, this is the first reason. It could sound as we hate womxn, but we do not, it is because of their deeds. So, we do not want things that involve womxn when we are talking about the hostel. In hostels, men one side and womxn one side, thank you. Womxn do not have a say in hostels, *bame ngaphantsi ko baba* (Participant from Focus Group Discussion 45).

This interview excerpt unveils a more overtly hostile stance towards womxn's presence and participation within the hostel environment. The participant's reference to womxn's "certain behaviours" as a justification for their exclusion from matters concerning *izinduna* (traditional male leaders) and *amakhosikazi* (wives or womxn) reveals deeply ingrained gender stereotypes and prejudices. The example given, where womxn's potential to express dissent or frustration is caricatured and used as a rationale for their exclusion, reflects a broader pattern of trivialising and delegitimising womxn's voices and concerns.

Furthermore, the statement, "womxn do not have a say in hostels, *bame ngaphantsi ko baba*" (womxn are beneath men), encapsulates the patriarchal hierarchy deeply embedded within the hostel's social structure, where womxn's roles and contributions are minimised and their agency is systematically undermined. This perspective not only reinforces gendered boundaries within these communal spaces but also perpetuates a culture of silence and subjugation among womxn, making it challenging for them to assert their rights or express dissatisfaction.

According to Connell's (1987) concept of hegemonic masculinity, societal norms and practices often promote and sustain dominant masculine ideals that marginalise and subordinate womxn and other forms of masculinity. This theoretical lens helps to understand the dynamics at play in the hostel environment, where the dominance of traditional male authority figures and the marginalisation of womxn's voices and agency are evident. Moreover, the perspective that womxn's presence and participation could disrupt the existing order aligns with Bourdieu's (2001) notion of symbolic violence, where power relations are legitimised and naturalised in ways that perpetuate social inequalities. In the context of the hostel, symbolic violence is manifested in the silencing of womxn's voices and the imposition of restrictive norms on their behaviour.

Furthermore, the exclusion of womxn from decision-making processes and the justification of such exclusion through stereotypical behaviours, as mentioned by the participants, resonate

with Butler's (1990) idea of gender performativity. This concept suggests that gender identities and roles are constructed through repeated social practices and discourses, which in this case, reinforce traditional gender roles and maintain women's subordinate position within the hostel community. Feminist scholars like Hooks (1984) argue for the need to challenge and dismantle these oppressive structures and practices to achieve gender equality. Hooks (1984) emphasises the importance of creating spaces where marginalised voices, particularly those of womxn, are heard and valued. This aligns with the need to address the gender disparities highlighted in the hostel environment, promoting more inclusive and equitable community practices. The views expressed by the hostel participants reflect deep-seated patriarchal norms that limit womxn's agency and participation in communal life, reflecting broader societal structures of power and inequality that need to be critically examined and challenged to promote gender justice and equality.

The discussion on gender dynamics within the hostel environments has significant implications for the study on the My COE App, particularly in highlighting potential barriers to digital inclusion and accessibility for womxn. Given the entrenched gender norms and power imbalances, womxn face obstacles not only in their physical communal spaces but also in accessing and utilising digital platforms like the My COE App for service delivery. This underscores the need for gender-sensitive design and implementation of digital tools to ensure equitable access and participation. Moreover, understanding these social dynamics is crucial for comprehending how different community members, especially womxn, engage with the app, which in turn affects the app's effectiveness in addressing service delivery issues. This necessitates inclusive community feedback mechanisms in the app's development process to ensure that womxn's voices and experiences significantly inform the refinement and functionality of such digital solutions.

However, despite these oppressive dynamics, womxn are increasingly finding ways to articulate their discontent and assert their agency, indicating a shifting undercurrent within these traditionally male-dominated spaces. This burgeoning resistance among womxn, even in the face of ingrained patriarchal attitudes, suggests a critical juncture where interventions could further empower womxn and challenge the status quo.

4.4. Redefining hostel spaces through womxn agency

The examination of womxn's experiences in the Khutsong Ladies hostel unveils a nuanced landscape where womxn agency confronts and navigates entrenched patriarchal structures and informal governance mechanisms. This suggests that womxn, despite systemic barriers, actively engage in shaping their socio-political environment, as illustrated by the establishment of their leadership structures and the development of their own patronage networks. This phenomenon not only subverts traditional gender expectations but also carves a space of authority for womxn within a traditionally male-centric context.

The contrast that I observed between the experiences at the Thokoza men's hostels and the Khutsong Ladies hostel highlight the pivotal role of agency in the lives of womxn residing in these communal spaces. At the Khutsong Ladies hostel, womxn demonstrated a significant degree of autonomy and freedom of expression, choosing independently to engage in discussions and share their personal narratives. This environment, where both young and older womxn participated without inhibition, reflects a community where womxn's voices are valued and their rights to expression and assembly are respected. Conversely, the dynamics at the Thokoza men's hostels paint a different picture, one where womxn's ability to communicate and engage with outsiders is mediated and controlled by men. The necessity for requests to speak with womxn to be approved by male residents or leaders highlights a hierarchical structure that places men as gatekeepers to women's participation and visibility. This arrangement not only limits womxn's autonomy but also perpetuates a culture where womxn's voices are secondary to those of men, reinforcing gendered power imbalances.

The stark differences in the agency and freedom of expression between the womxn at Khutsong and those associated with the men's hostels highlight the importance of creating spaces that empower womxn and respect their autonomy. The ability for womxn at the Khutsong Ladies hostel to organise and express themselves freely is a testament to the strength and resilience of womxn when provided with an environment that supports their agency. This contrast serves as a critical reflection point for considering how communal living spaces can be structured and governed to promote inclusivity, equality, and respect for all residents, irrespective of gender.

More importantly, womxn have been able to assert their agency and controlling some of the spaces at the hostels. During fieldwork as the discussion with the womxn from Khutsong Ladies Hostel was winding down, an unexpected turn occurred. Two womxn entered abruptly, their political affiliations evident from their attire, introducing an immediate tension into the room. It was a moment that challenged my own assumptions, as I had not anticipated that the *izindunas* referenced earlier could be womxn. This was a stark revelation of the political undercurrents within the hostel, further compounded when the womxn carefully informed me that the ward councillor, elected in 2021, was effectively barred from the premises. This exclusion was a direct result of political factionalism within the ANC, casting a shadow over the hostel's governance and community dynamics. It was a poignant reminder of how deeply political strife can penetrate, even into the everyday lives of those seeking shelter and community in these spaces. The control of the space and womxn asserting their power and agency was demonstrated when they made me aware that they were the leaders of the place and therefore they controlled access to the hostel.

I received a warm welcome from the two ladies whom I later learnt form part of a committee of five womxn, with one of the sister's holding chair womxnship of the committee. All members vehemently resisted the title of being referred to as *iiNduna*, as previously referred to by the womxn hostel-dwellers. I was invited to the sisters' hostel room for the focus group discussion, where the five committee members joined, together with the gentleman who had accompanied me. The session took almost two hours, where the participants shared various stories of their experiences, politically, personally and from a leadership perspective. We reflected on the incident that took place on my initial visit to the hostel. The committee chairperson explained the processes that ought to have been followed prior to my visit to the hostel.

You went to the wrong places your marks could be so good but your friend now has brought you to the right place to say here is number one. Already we have number one, you know a first citizen is a councillor. The councillor was supposed to give you the right direction that there are people who are in charge there. He was supposed to tell you that people are staying there but he always denies us whenever people are coming. That is why you were not welcomed in good hands because he is a councillor who does not stay in hostels. He does not know the hostel culture and how we live. And that does not mean that if he is a councillor he is supposed to change how we live and how we do things here in the hostels (Participant from Focus Group Discussion 6).

The excerpt illustrates a vivid example of womxn asserting control and leadership within the hostel environment, a space traditionally dominated by male-centric governance structures. The warm reception by the committee members, coupled with their clear communication of leadership roles and hostel protocols, signifies a notable assertion of agency and autonomy by the womxn in this community. Moreover, the resistance to traditional leadership titles like “*iiNduna*” by the committee members reflects a conscious effort to redefine leadership roles within the hostel in terms that resonate with their identity and values as womxn. This act of resistance is significant, as it challenges the gendered norms and expectations traditionally associated with leadership and control in such communal living spaces.

The detailed explanation by the chairwoman regarding the proper protocols for engaging with the hostel community underscores the committee’s authority and control over access to the space. This level of organisation and clarity about procedures indicates a structured governance system that is respected and upheld by the community members. The critique of the councillor’s lack of engagement and understanding of the hostel’s culture and governance further emphasises the divide between the hostel’s internal leadership and the broader municipal governance structures. The womxn’s frustration with the councillor’s failure to recognise and respect their leadership and the established protocols within the hostel highlights a broader issue of invisibility and marginalisation faced by this community in the municipal governance framework. This scenario demonstrates the capacity of womxn to lead and control their environments, even in spaces that have historically marginalised their voices. It underscores the importance of acknowledging and respecting the autonomy and governance structures established by communities, particularly those led by womxn, in fostering more inclusive and equitable engagement with such communities.

The payment system as established by womxn in the hostels as their own network of patronage is also significant for reconstructing the agency of womxn leaders at the hostel, thereby redefining the hostel space. Following my discussions with the womxn at Khutsong Ladies residence, I sat down with the ward councillor who introduced to me the term “payment system” tells me that:

Two womxn who are the committee members of the hostel live in one room and have tried to take things over. Currently, three families live in one-unit houses, and there is no revenue being paid. Before, hostel-dwellers used to pay R70 per bed, and the two ladies suspended payment. There is now a payment system

where they rent out the rooms that were previously for themselves (Interview with Participant 8).

The interview excerpt reveals a transformative shift in the governance and economic management within the Khutsong Ladies hostel, orchestrated by the womxn leading the community. These womxn have redefined the hostel's financial model by suspending the traditional per-bed payment and introducing a new system where rooms, rather than individual beds, are rented out. This change signifies a departure from the conventional hostel arrangement, aiming for a more stable and perhaps community-focused living environment where entire families, as opposed to transient individuals, occupy units.

This innovative approach by the womxn leaders challenges the established norms and asserts their agency in reimagining the hostel space. It reflects a strategic move towards self-governance and autonomy, positioning these womxn as pivotal figures in the hostel's economic and social dynamics. However, this shift has also led to complexities, particularly in terms of the hostel's revenue generation. The ward councillor's comment that "there is no revenue being paid" under the new system points to potential challenges in formalising these arrangements and ensuring financial sustainability for the hostel's upkeep and services.

The new payment system represents not just a change in how finances are managed within the hostel, but also a broader assertion of women's leadership and their capacity to innovate and adapt to the needs of their community. It underscores the evolving nature of hostel spaces from transient accommodations to more stable, family-inclusive environments. However, this transformation also raises questions about the recognition and legitimisation of such informal governance systems and their implications for the broader municipal and governmental engagement within the hostel community.

In a conversation with the councillor, they explained that the money that is meant to be paid to the municipality is instead "directly paid to someone," implying the committee member. The payments ensure a level loyalty towards the committee members, thereby asserting control within the space.

They own a certain portion of the community. They said they just came because they were called by the community. That means there are people who are loyal to them. You can find out that they are paying them for that but even they see

that they are bad they no longer have a say. These ones need a strong person who will come in because talking will no longer help. They need a councillor that will come with an action who will detect to them that things will be done this way. Then this thing of staying in rooms should be sorted. The municipality has to come with... the municipality and officials from the human settlement should go in there. When they come the first thing that will happen is eviction. They should be evicted, then they should apply so that they have leases and addresses (Interview with participant 8).

The interview excerpt highlights a complex situation within the hostel, where an informal payment system established by the committee members has led to a shift in how control and loyalty are structured within the community. According to the councillor, payments that would typically go to the municipality for housing are being redirected to the committee members, effectively solidifying their influence and authority within the hostel. This arrangement suggests the committee has established a patronage system, where their control over the hostel is reinforced by financial transactions that bind the residents to them through a form of loyalty.

The councillor's assertion that the committee "owns a certain portion of the community" and was "called by the community" indicates a grassroots level of support or demand for this committee's leadership. This situation points to a potential vacuum or deficiency in formal governance and service provision that the committee members are filling. However, the councillor perceives this arrangement as problematic, implying that the committee's control undermines the formal governance structure and potentially the welfare of the hostel's residents.

The mention of needing a "strong person" to intervene and the suggestion that "eviction" should be the first step taken by municipal and human settlement officials reflects a confrontational approach to resolving the issue. It suggests that the councillor believes the situation has escalated beyond the point where dialogue is ineffective, advocating instead for a show of authority to reassert municipal control and formalise the housing arrangements within the hostel. This interview underscores the tensions between informal governance systems that emerge within communities and formal governmental structures. It highlights the challenges in addressing informal systems that have gained legitimacy and support within their communities, especially when they conflict with official policies and regulations. The situation calls for a careful and considerate approach, one that seeks to understand the root causes of the informal

system's emergence and addresses the community's needs while also working to integrate the hostel more effectively into the formal governance framework.

The exploration of womxn's experiences in the Khutsong Ladies hostel presents a complex interplay between female agency, patriarchal structures, and informal governance systems. This dynamic environment showcases how womxn actively shape their socio-political realities, despite systemic barriers, through the creation of leadership structures and patronage networks (Moser, 1993; Chant, 2013). The contrast observed between the Khutsong Ladies hostel and the Thokoza men's hostels underscores the critical role of agency in communal living spaces. In Khutsong, womxn's autonomy and freedom of expression were evident, reflecting a community where womxn's voices and rights are respected and valued. Conversely, the Thokoza men's hostels exhibited a hierarchical dynamic, with men controlling and mediating womxn's participation (Connell, 1987; Kabeer, 1994).

The assertion of control and leadership by womxn in the Khutsong Ladies hostel, particularly in resisting traditional male-dominated titles and establishing their own governance protocols, challenges conventional gender roles and redefines the hostel space (Lemanski, 2008). The introduction of a new payment system by the committee further illustrates this transformation, moving away from the per-bed payment to renting out rooms, thereby fostering a more stable, community-oriented environment (Moser, 1993; Patel et al., 2015).

However, this shift has led to tensions with formal municipal governance, as highlighted in conversations with a ward councillor. The redirection of payments from municipal dues to the committee's control has created a loyalty network that solidifies the committee's authority but conflicts with formal governance expectations. The councillor's call for intervention and eviction points to the challenges of reconciling informal community-led governance with formal municipal structures (Lemanski, 2008; Mitlin & Satterthwaite, 2013).

This situation reflects broader themes in urban studies and feminist geography, where womxn's agency in shaping their environments often intersects with, and challenges,

established power dynamics and governance models (Peake & Rieker, 2013; McIlwaine, 2013). The experiences of the Khutsong Ladies hostel offer valuable insights into the potential for womxn-led initiatives to transform communal living spaces, while also highlighting the need for more inclusive and flexible approaches to governance that recognise and integrate informal community systems within formal municipal frameworks (Chant, 2013; Patel et al., 2015).

4.5. Conclusion

The chapter has unpacked the intricate layers of gender dynamics, socio-economic challenges, and the community bonds that shape the lives of the womxn living in the hostels of Ekurhuleni, offering a nuanced understanding of their lived experiences within the urban fabric of Ekurhuleni. The key findings underscore the urgent need for gender-sensitive urban planning and policy interventions that acknowledge and address the unique challenges faced by womxn in hostels. It is clear that equitable urban governance must go beyond generic solutions to embrace a more nuanced, inclusive approach that considers the diverse needs of all community members, especially those of marginalised groups. This analysis of the findings emphasise the critical role of gender perspectives in understanding and improving urban governance and service delivery. It reinforces the argument that true inclusivity in urban development cannot be achieved without a deliberate focus on addressing gender disparities and ensuring that womxn's voices and needs are central to policy-making processes. The following chapter shifts the focus to encompass the broader community of Ekurhuleni, delving into the governance and service delivery mechanisms that impact the lives of all its residents.

CHAPTER 5

Between access and exclusion: Digital solutions and the My COE App in Ekurhuleni

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter I explore intersections of governance and service delivery within the Ekurhuleni municipality to uncover the nuanced interplay between local government actions, community responses, and the impact of digital divide on access to and efficiency of public services. This investigation is set against the contrasting backdrops of Thokoza hostels and the Bedfordview area, each presenting unique insights into the broader governance challenges and opportunities within the region. The central argument pursued in this chapter begins to weave the overall thesis argument. I argue that while digital innovations in governance hold the potential to enhance service delivery and transparency, the existing digital divide and entrenched socio-economic disparities significantly undermine these advancements, especially for marginalised communities. Through an in-depth examination of service delivery protests and the implementation and reception of digital governance tools like the My COE App, I seek to highlight the complex realities that residents of Ekurhuleni face in their interactions with local governance structures.

Key findings of this chapter suggest that service delivery protests serve a dual role within the municipality: they are vital for voicing the grievances of underserved communities and yet, paradoxically, may also contribute to further exclusion and neglect by the local government. Additionally, the chapter reveals how digital governance initiatives, despite their potential benefits, inadvertently exacerbate the gap between those with technological access and skills and those without, thereby perpetuating existing inequalities. The contribution of this chapter to the overall thesis argument lies in its detailed exploration of the challenges and opportunities present within local governance in Ekurhuleni. By shedding light on the importance of an inclusive approach to digital governance that actively addresses the digital divide, the findings provide valuable insights into how technological advancements in public service delivery can be leveraged to include rather than exclude the most vulnerable populations. This discussion not only enhances our understanding of local governance dynamics in a transitional society like South Africa, however, it also offers critical reflections on the broader implications of integrating technology into public administration.

The following sections explore the governance and service delivery landscape of Ekurhuleni, followed by a critical examination of the role and impact of service delivery protests from various community perspectives. I then turn into an analysis of digital governance efforts, particularly focusing on the My COE App, to assess the implications of digital divide on equitable access to services. Through this comprehensive examination, I offer a nuanced understanding of the complex challenges that define local governance in Ekurhuleni, thereby exposing the complexities of achieving effective, inclusive governance in diverse urban settings.

5.2. The dynamics of service delivery protests

The exploration of digital initiatives in digitising public services, particularly through platforms like the My COE App in Ekurhuleni, is set against a backdrop of wider governmental efforts to enhance service delivery and citizen engagement through technology. This context is crucial for this study as it underscores the challenges and opportunities inherent in transitioning to digital governance in contexts marked by significant socio-economic disparities and digital divides. The effectiveness of the My COE App, as a case in point, not only reflects the city's ambitions to modernise public service but also highlights critical considerations around accessibility, inclusivity, and the readiness of both the municipality and its residents to fully embrace digital solutions.

The study explores the intricacies of service delivery within the City of Ekurhuleni Municipality, with a focus on the lived experiences of residents in both the affluent Bedfordview area and the historically marginalised Thokoza hostels. The primary aim is to uncover the dynamics of governance, community engagement, and the impact of technological interventions, particularly the My COE App, on bridging the service delivery gap in these contrasting communities. This investigation is motivated by the persistent service delivery protests and the apparent digital divide that seem to exacerbate rather than ameliorate the challenges faced by the less privileged sections of the Ekurhuleni population. However, evidence presented through the preceding chapters (see *Chapter 2, 3 & 4*), have revealed significant socio-economic challenges, particularly among the residents of Thokoza, especially those from the hostels. These are exacerbated by historical legacies of exclusion and political tensions (see *Chapter 3*), as well as gendered forms of exclusion that are also rooted in the apartheid past (see *Chapter 4*).

The collective narratives emerging from the City of Ekurhuleni point to a governance crisis and a fraying social contract between the municipality and its constituents. This narrative emerging from the previous chapters reflect challenges of navigating and addressing the deep-seated issues within the local governance structures. This has led to a state of despondency, where hostel communities end up taking up initiatives to service their communities. It therefore not surprising that the City of Ekurhuleni has had its own fair share of protests as a response to these challenges. Some participants from Ekurhuleni have shared their experiences of participation in protests as a form of engaging the state.

Notably, protests are one of the repertoires that characterised state/society engagement during the anti-apartheid struggle. Experiences from participants Ekurhuleni offer insightful reflections on the enduring legacy of protest in South African society and its evolution from the anti-apartheid struggle to contemporary issues. These experiences highlight a nuanced understanding of the role of protests in shaping the country's history and the complexities surrounding their use in the present context. As one participant notes:

We led protests that got South Africa where it is today. Protesting for a cause is good. Vandalism, however, is not good as it reverses the gains of democracy. South Africans have not moved away from the activism against apartheid, we may be physically in 2023, but our mindsets are still in the resistance movement (Interview with Participant 4).

This participant reminisces about their involvement in the anti-apartheid movement, emphasising the instrumental role of protests in achieving democratic change in South Africa. This reflection serves as a reminder of the power of collective action and civil disobedience in challenging unjust systems. The participant draws a clear distinction between protesting for a cause, which they view as a positive and necessary form of expression and activism, and vandalism, which they criticise for undermining the very democracy that protests helped to establish. This perspective underscores a sense of concern that while the physical context has shifted to 2023, the mindset of resistance akin to the apartheid era persists, suggesting that the transition to more constructive forms of engagement has been incomplete.

Adding to the conversation a former ANC leader also reflected:

You know, protest as a form of expressing views is not a bad thing. You know, we led protests before which resulted to where South Africa is. We can say in 1994, we protested very hard about the state of education, about womxn to be treated equally... and so forth. As a form of demonstrating that you are unhappy about x, y, I do not think there is anything wrong (Interview with Participant 4).

This participant elaborates on the constructive aspects of protests, recalling how they were used effectively to advocate for crucial issues such as education reform and gender equality. This participant's viewpoint reinforces the idea that protests are a valid and potent means of expressing dissatisfaction and advocating for change, provided they are conducted peacefully and with a clear purpose. The emphasis on the historical significance of protests in bringing about the end of apartheid and the establishment of a democratic South Africa highlights the dual nature of protests as both a tool for liberation and a mechanism for ongoing social and political discourse.

The legacy of apartheid-era protests in South Africa is a critical area of examination within the broader discourse on social movements and political activism in the country. Protests during the apartheid era were a fundamental component of the broader resistance movement, serving as a powerful tool for challenging the oppressive regime and rallying international support for the cause of liberation. The narratives of participants from Ekurhuleni highlight the instrumental role of protests in achieving democratic transformation in South Africa. These accounts underscore the positive legacy of protests as a means of effecting social and political change (see Seekings, 2000; Swilling & Russell, 2002).

However, the transition from apartheid to democracy has not rendered protests obsolete. Instead, as the participants suggest, the practice of protesting has evolved, continuing to serve as a crucial form of expression and advocacy on various issues, including service delivery, education, and gender equality. This evolution reflects a broader trend within South African civil society, where protests remain a vital component of the democratic landscape, albeit with new challenges and contexts (Alexander, 2010; Booysen, 2009).

Notably, the distinction made by participants between peaceful protests and vandalism highlights a contemporary challenge within the landscape of South African protests. While peaceful protests are seen as a continuation of the constructive legacy of anti-apartheid activism, incidents of violence and vandalism during protests are criticised for undermining the

democratic gains achieved through such activism. This dichotomy is reflective of the ongoing debate within South African society about the role and nature of protests in a democratic context (Bond, 2004; Von Holdt, 2013).

This dichotomy is further observed from differing views on the relevance of protests from Ekurhuleni. A Bedfordview resident expressed their sentiments on protests noting that protests had the ability to bring about change.

I would imagine in areas like Thembisa and Daveyton where people protest. I do not know, I think people are just.... I do not know. I do not know much about protests. If handled correctly, they should be effective but I do not know if they are here. I do not know about protests (silence). Everybody is fed stuff, everybody is fed the information that these people want us to know (Interview with Participant 1).

This participant acknowledges the potential of protests to effect change but expresses uncertainty about their effectiveness in their local context. This ambivalence might stem from a lack of direct experience with protests or from observing mixed outcomes of protest actions in areas like Thembisa and Daveyton. The mention of “being fed information” suggests a scepticism towards the narratives presented by the media or authorities, highlighting a desire for more transparent and unmediated information to form a clearer stance on the issue.

Commenting on the same protest of Thembisa, another participant had the following to say:

Some protests are not genuine. You will find sometimes that people want to profile themselves ahead of elections whether the intentions are genuine or not. In the case of the Thembisa protest, no one was held accountable. It is high time that people are made to account for their actions. To what extent do we empower our security cluster? The main mobilisers of such violent protests should be held to account when lives are lost yet the law seems to protect anarchists (Interview with Participant 9).

This participant raises concerns about the authenticity of some protests, suggesting that they may be motivated by personal or political agendas rather than genuine grievances, particularly in the lead-up to elections. This perspective introduces the notion of accountability, especially in instances where protests turn violent. The participant calls for a reassessment of legal and security responses to such incidents, emphasising the need for those who incite violence to be

held responsible for the consequences, a sentiment that resonates with broader calls for justice and order in the face of civil unrest.

Presenting a contrary, another participant from Bedfordview felt that:

Protests do not change anything. Where the organisational policy is no work-no pay, disgruntled employees are the ones to suffer the most. A little bit of money is better than no money. In the area I stay in, protests are unionised and are mostly on lack of service delivery, salaries, and garbage collection (Interview with participant 3).

This participant expresses a more cynical view, questioning the overall efficacy of protests. By referencing the “no work-no pay” policy, they highlight the personal economic risks faced by individuals who participate in strikes or protests, especially those organised by unions. This perspective reflects a pragmatic concern over the immediate financial implications of protest participation, overshadowing the potential long-term benefits of collective action for addressing issues like service delivery, salaries, and garbage collection.

These diverse viewpoints illustrate the complexity of public attitudes towards protests in South Africa, shaped by personal experiences, perceived outcomes, and broader societal narratives. They underscore the ongoing tension between viewing protests as a vital tool for democratic expression and advocacy, and concerns over their potential to cause harm, disrupt order, and be co-opted by vested interests. However, at the core of these protests, there are genuine service delivery-related concerns that genuinely need attention from public officials.

During the focus group discussions the participants shared their numerous efforts to get the attention of municipal officials, however, these were met with ignorance, propping the community to take to the street.

I feel troubled because there is nothing we did not try. I think all men who are here know that there is nothing that we did not try to develop the hostel and rebuild it, there is nothing. We can talk about writing to them, that is done, we can talk about marching and closing roads, that is also done. There is nothing that we did not do. The municipality has memorandums, he has letters, but I do not know what we have not done for the development in hostels. There is one thing they do constantly, they come to hostels, take the money, and go here in hostels. We need to block people who come and say they want to do development for people here these days. When a person comes and say I have come to do development, or they say they want to build here. I want to say to you my sister, the problem of service delivery, as you have heard from *izinduna*,

there is no service delivery here. People come here to do research and make people write their problems door to door, asking them what they want to be built here. The worst part is that when it comes to things concerning hostels [interruption]. If I talk about the development of the hostel, the province, the municipality, and the councillors all know what is needed for the hostels. Redevelopment, what is needed here is infrastructure because if they can service the toilets but if the infrastructure is old, it is like playing, that will not help because the infrastructure is old. (Participant from Focus Group Discussion 4).

This excerpt highlights the exhaustive efforts by hostel residents to engage with municipal officials through formal channels, such as writing letters and submitting memorandums, to advocate for the redevelopment and improvement of hostel infrastructure. The participant's recounting of these efforts paints a picture of a community driven to desperation, having tried every available means to communicate their needs and grievances to the authorities. The mention of officials who "come to hostels, take the money, and go" reflects a deep mistrust in the intentions and actions of those tasked with development, suggesting a cycle of promises made and broken, leading to disillusionment among the residents.

The narrative further elucidates the community's resort to protests as a last-ditch effort to draw attention to their plight. The decision to "march and close roads" is not taken lightly but emerges from a profound sense of being ignored and sidelined by those in power. This action reflects a broader pattern observed in many communities, where protests become the most visible and compelling means to convey urgency and dissatisfaction with service delivery failures.

Similar sentiments on the instrumental nature of protests were shared by a participant from Thokoza revealing their many efforts that went unnoticed:

I think that one of the protests had an impact because there was some money that was released and something happened in some of the blocks, they tried to service some of the things, and it ended at that time. After that the former MMC's term ended and there has been nothing after that. I think I can say that was the only protest that had an impact but in some of those protests there was no change. They only proposed renovations, as we were saying that people come and take money then they go away. That is what they do what we call renovation where they come and fix maybe one side of the block then they take money and go (Participant from Focus Group Discussion 4).

This participant acknowledges the mixed outcomes of protests, noting a rare instance where a protest seemingly led to the release of funds for partial improvements. However, the overall sentiment remains one of frustration, as these efforts often result in superficial or temporary fixes rather than comprehensive solutions to systemic issues. The use of the term “renovation” to describe these piecemeal efforts suggests a perception that the authorities are more interested in cosmetic changes than in addressing the root causes of infrastructure decay and service inadequacies.

Collectively, the views shared by residents of Ekurhuleni underscore a critical reflection on the systemic failures in addressing service delivery concerns, particularly in marginalised communities. The residents’ narratives articulate a broader critique of the mechanisms of governance and public administration, highlighting the need for more responsive, accountable, and effective approaches to community development. These insights from the ground level illustrate the complexities of state-society relations in post-apartheid South Africa, where the legacy of exclusion and neglect continues to influence the dynamics of protest and public engagement.

The insights drawn from the experiences of Ekurhuleni residents offer a compelling glimpse into the nuanced dynamics of service delivery protests in contemporary South Africa. These narratives find echoes in the scholarly work on the multifaceted nature of such protests as more than mere expressions of dissent but as critical engagements between the state and its citizens (von Holdt et al., 2011). The frustration and desperation voiced by the residents, stemming from their exhaustive yet unfruitful attempts to engage with municipal authorities through formal channels, underscore a significant breakdown in conventional governance mechanisms. This phenomenon, where marginalised communities feel compelled to take to the streets, aligns with the notion of ‘insurgent citizenship,’ (von Holdt et al. 2011) highlighting how communities assert their rights and demands in the face of perceived neglect by the state.

Moreover, various accounts from Ekurhuleni reflect the complex role of protests as a means of communication from those feeling sidelined to the broader public and authorities, signalling deep-seated grievances and a call for urgent action. This ‘smoke signal,’ as articulated by residents, demonstrates the critical yet contentious role of protests in the civic landscape of post-apartheid South Africa. The efficacy of these protests, with some leading to momentary

solutions rather than addressing the systemic roots of service delivery issues, adds layers to the ongoing debate about the role and nature of collective action within a democratic framework (Alexander, 2010; Booysen, 2009).

Furthermore, the discussion on the instrumental nature of protests and the critical stance against the counterproductive outcomes of violence and vandalism during such actions underscore a broader reflection on the ethics and implications of protest in the democratic era. These perspectives from Ekurhuleni residents contribute to a richer understanding of the intricate dynamics between state authority, citizen agency, and the tangible impacts of collective action on governance and public service delivery (Bond, 2004; Seekings, 2000).

These discussions on service delivery protests and the perspectives shared by residents of Ekurhuleni are significant for the implications for rolling out My COE App in the City of Ekurhuleni, especially in understanding the interplay between socio-economic conditions, exclusion, and the digital divide. The narratives of residents' exhaustive attempts at formal engagement and subsequent protests underscore a broader issue of systemic exclusion and marginalisation, which are critical considerations for the implementation of digital solutions like the My COE App. These insights highlight the necessity for such digital initiatives to be designed and deployed with a deep understanding of the local socio-economic landscape and the existing digital divide. This means ensuring that the App is not only technologically accessible but also culturally and contextually relevant, addressing the specific needs and challenges of all community segments, including those historically marginalised.

5.3. Digital solutions in diverse socioeconomic contexts

The City of Ekurhuleni's launch of the My COE App in 2020 was a strategic move aimed at closing the gaps in service delivery. Nonetheless, enduring socio-economic disparities and a history of neglect prompt critical examination of the digital divide and its role in amplifying existing inequalities. Service delivery protests, documented over the years, including those highlighted on the previous section of this thesis, coupled with experiences of marginalisation and exclusion captured in the preceding chapters, underscore the persistent challenges faced by residents, particularly in Thokoza, accentuating the imperative for inclusive municipal services that address the needs of Ekurhuleni's diverse population.

However, despite these technological initiatives, Ekurhuleni continues to confront basic service delivery issues, such as electricity, waste management, and water services – as reflected from the views shared by participants, predominantly from Thokoza hostels. The introduction of digital tools, while forward-looking, evidence suggest that it could be hindered by ongoing challenges. The digital divide remains a critical issue, with concerns that digitalisation efforts could inadvertently worsen the disparities affecting disadvantaged areas of Thokoza (*see Chapter 3*), while widening the gender gap for the already marginalised womxn (*see Chapter 4*). This situation calls for a nuanced approach to digitalisation that considers the varied needs and circumstances of all residents, ensuring that technological progress does not sideline the most vulnerable segments of the community.

This study situates the exploration of digital initiative of the My COE App within the broader context of governmental efforts to improve service delivery and foster citizen engagement through technology. This backdrop is crucial, highlighting the challenges and potentials of adopting digital governance in environments characterised by pronounced socio-economic disparities and digital divides. The effectiveness of the My COE App, reflecting the city's modernisation goals, also brings to light essential considerations regarding accessibility, inclusivity, and the overall preparedness of both the municipality and its residents to integrate digital solutions into their service delivery frameworks. The investigation into the service delivery dynamics within the Ekurhuleni Municipality, particularly focusing on the contrasting experiences of Bedfordview and Thokoza residents, aims to unravel the complex interplay of governance, community engagement, and the impact of digital interventions in bridging the service delivery divide, driven by the enduring issue of service delivery protests and the evident digital divide.

The discernible tension between the womxn of Khutsong Ladies Hostel and their councillor contrasts sharply with the harmonious relationship Bedfordview residents share with their representative. My interactions in Bedfordview revealed commendable lines of communication between the community members and their councillor. At the onset of my research, the Bedfordview councillor was among the first individuals I consulted, seeking her support to engage with local residents. She facilitated my integration into the community by including me in various digital communication platforms established to maintain open dialogue about service delivery issues between the community and its leaders. Being added to Bedfordview's

community WhatsApp and Facebook groups allowed me to introduce my research topic and invite participants to contribute to my study.

This experience underscored the prevailing disparities between the communities under investigation. The availability of digital devices and data access significantly benefits the Bedfordview community, enabling efficient and timely communication with their leader. Consequently, this transparency mitigates frustration among community members, as they remain informed about ongoing developments in their area. Given the socioeconomic position on Bedfordview as an affluent suburb, there is no doubt that efforts of digitising public services and rolling out My COE App would flourish. Sharing their diverse experiences, participants from Bedfordview shared the following:

The road leading to the complex is full of potholes. Currently, there is no budget to fix it. I know it is a frustration I understand it is not the same frustration as people living in a township. It is completely different. You know, they only wish they have roads, they only wish they have lights, but the point is when you paying your rates, you paying your rates you expect to get something that you are paying for (Interview with Participant 3).

The participant highlights a common urban issue – potholes but contextualises it within the broader socioeconomic disparities between affluent suburbs and townships. The acknowledgment of different levels of frustration highlights an awareness of broader social inequities, yet there is a clear expectation that the rates paid by residents should translate into tangible service delivery outcomes. This sentiment underscores a fundamental aspect of municipal services: the expectation of direct reciprocity between what citizens contribute and the services they receive, which can often lead to dissatisfaction when expectations are not met.

One of the participants from Bedfordview lauded the My COE, saying:

Often cases are resolved. There is a good response time for water leaks and our councillor always keeps us up to date using WhatsApp (Interview with Participant 5).

The participant's positive feedback on the My COE App illustrates its potential effectiveness in affluent areas where residents have ready access to technology and digital literacy. The mention of a responsive councillor using WhatsApp for updates further indicates a high level of engagement and communication facilitated by digital platforms, suggesting that in such

contexts, digital solutions can significantly enhance the efficiency of service delivery and the responsiveness of local governance.

Another participant residing in Bedfordview said: I know of the app, although my main use for it is for generating statements. (Interview with Participant 3).

The third participant's experience reveals a nuanced perspective on digital service delivery platforms. While acknowledging the App, their primary use of it for generating statements rather than lodging service delivery complaints suggests varied user needs and preferences. This diversity underscores the importance of offering multiple engagement channels to accommodate different user behaviours and requirements.

In resolving service delivery challenges, the participant said she preferred lodging her complaints physically at service points. I do not bother to phone because they do not answer the phone and that is the challenge. When I went to the municipal offices in Van Riebeeck on issues around property rates, they were quite efficient, the wait was not too long, and the staff was friendly. It was a reasonably pleasant experience though other people have had unpleasant experiences. Despite the emphasis on digital solutions, the preference for in-person engagement expressed by another participant highlights the continued value of traditional service delivery mechanisms. The mention of inefficiencies in telephonic communication and a contrastingly positive experience at municipal offices points to the complex interplay between digital and physical service delivery channels. It emphasises that while digital solutions offer convenience and efficiency, the human element of service delivery, characterised by direct interaction and perceived efficiency at service points, remains crucial for many residents.

These diverse experiences from Bedfordview residents illustrate the multifaceted nature of public service delivery in affluent suburbs, where expectations for quality services are high, and the potential for digital solutions like the My COE App is significant. However, they also highlight the need for a balanced approach that integrates digital innovations with traditional service delivery mechanisms to cater to the varied preferences and needs of the community. This analysis underscores the broader implications for digitising public services, emphasising the importance of inclusivity, adaptability, and maintaining human-centric service channels alongside digital advancements.

Another participant from Bedfordview, who had little expectations for municipal services, did acknowledge some benefits of the My COE App as it relates to lodging complaints:

In relation to whether services have improved or worsened since the introduction of My COE, the digital App, it is a more positive response when considered as a reporting tool, as I have primarily used it – but, bearing in mind my low expectations of municipal services overall by now, with somewhat large provisions. Previously, if you had a municipal service issue, your point of contact was to call the relevant department directly but then, for various reasons, came the era of the Call Centre. The EMM Call Centre was generally an unpleasant experience in attempting to find a responsive municipality. Long holding times, frequently being cut off whilst in queue or logging the fault, uninterested or poorly trained staff and the frequent, infuriating experience of finally making it through the queue only to have the call answered, hearing chatter / laughter in the background and then put down in your ear. The benefit of the My COE App is that, for those fortunate enough to have smart devices and requisite data, it should be readily accessible, unrestricted by operational hours, covering a wide range of service issues that can be reported and returns a reference no. to indicate success at logging the matter (Interview with participant 2).

This excerpt provides a reflective evaluation of the My COE App, positioned against a backdrop of previously low expectations for municipal services. The participant outlines a journey from traditional, direct departmental engagement to the frustration-laden experiences with the Call Centre era, characterised by long wait times, disconnections, and unprofessional staff behaviour. These inefficiencies not only hampered effective communication but also contributed to a growing disenchantment with the municipality's ability to address service issues. The introduction of the My COE App is seen as noteworthy progress towards digital solutions, aiming to circumvent the pitfalls associated with traditional complaint lodging methods. The participant acknowledges the advantages of the App, such as its around-the-clock availability, its capability to cover a broad spectrum of service issues, and the provision of reference numbers for logged complaints, which serve as tangible acknowledgments of the municipality's receipt and recognition of the reported issues.

This transition to a digital platform is appreciated for its potential to streamline and enhance the user experience in reporting municipal service issues. The App's design to be "readily accessible" and "unrestricted by operational hours" addresses critical limitations of previous systems, offering a more efficient and user-friendly alternative. However, this positive assessment is qualified by the participant's recognition of the digital divide, the

acknowledgment that such digital solutions, while beneficial, are not universally accessible, especially for those without smart devices or sufficient data access.

The interviews from Bedfordview residents offer insightful perspectives on the implementation and effectiveness of digital solutions like the My COE App in addressing municipal service delivery issues. These local experiences provide a tangible context for discussing the broader implications of the digital divide, a significant concern in contemporary literature on digital inclusion and public administration. Bedfordview residents' experiences with the My COE App highlight the potential for digital platforms to streamline and improve the efficiency of service delivery. The transition from traditional call centers to a digital app reflects a broader trend towards digitalisation in municipal services, aiming to enhance accessibility, responsiveness, and user satisfaction (Jaeger (2012), underlining the transformative potential of digital government initiatives in enhancing public service delivery and citizen engagement (Reddick, 2011).

However, the acknowledgment of the digital divide in the Bedfordview interviews underscores a critical challenge in the deployment of digital solutions. While the My COE App offers a convenient and efficient means for lodging service complaints, its effectiveness is contingent upon residents' access to smart devices and the internet. As notes by Ragnedda and Muschert (2013), the digital divide extends beyond mere access to technology, encompassing disparities in digital skills and usage. The experiences of Bedfordview residents reflect this multifaceted nature of the digital divide, where socio-economic factors determine individuals' ability to engage with digital government services.

Noteworthy, the varied expectations and experiences of Bedfordview residents also highlight the role of socio-economic status in shaping perceptions of and interactions with digital government initiatives. The contrast between the relatively minor inconveniences faced by affluent residents and the more fundamental service delivery challenges in less affluent areas illustrates the socio-economic underpinnings of the digital divide. This observation aligns with the work of Norris (2001), who argues that socio-economic inequalities contribute to differing levels of access and usage of digital technologies, thereby influencing the effectiveness of digital government services across diverse communities. These socioeconomic disparities are more pronounced from experiences of residents of Thokoza.

The participants at the Thokoza hostels had this to say about the digital app, My COE:

Honestly sister, we do not know that, but we know that if there are blockages, we phone certain departments that are supposed to come and fix. We do not know the App, and we have no knowledge about it. I think from the hostel side, this is the first time we hear about it but before, if *izinduna* still remember, there was a person called the area manager to manage problems. I do not know how that person operated but there was an area manager who oversaw problems in hostels. Since people are doing things for themselves, I do not know what his responsibility is now, but he is there through triple C. The area manager is there who is supposed to attend problems for people, but I do not know how he is doing it. It is where people should report when they are having problems because he is paid for the purpose of hostels. I think in our side, this App will work for younger people but for my elders, it won't work. It is the same with something that says you must report to get reference number. You then hold that reference number forever but there will be no help you are going to get. Things are being reported but people hold those reference numbers, but the help does not come. I think this will depend on how fast it is for people to get help (Participant from Focus Group Discussion 4).

This excerpt reveals a significant gap in awareness and access to the My COE App among Thokoza hostel residents. The mention of traditional methods of reporting issues, such as phoning specific departments, indicates a reliance on conventional channels for service delivery complaints. The reference to an area manager as a point of contact for addressing problems suggests a structured, albeit outdated, system that residents are accustomed to. The scepticism expressed regarding the efficacy of the App, particularly for the older generation, and the cynicism about the utility of reference numbers in effecting actual solutions, underscores a broader issue of trust and effectiveness in digital service delivery mechanisms. The resident's insight reflects a critical viewpoint on the adaptability of digital solutions across different age demographics within the community, emphasising the challenges in transitioning to digital platforms.

This digital divide is evident in the case of the Thokoza hostel dwellers vs residents of Bedfordview who not only are aware of the digital app, but have access to utilise it:

Being left behind is a strong word, the reason being that 80% of the hostel is.... The problem with the hostel is not even having a smartphone. It is reluctance to change. Any type of change, so in ... let me call it in our brown areas. The biggest challenge is adaption to IT in the sense that our people have a lack of trust in technology. It is the biggest problem; I would say black people because it has been in my idea, there is a lack of trust. So, because we have a lack of

trust in technology there is a lack of adoption in a lot of areas. I can say from our 1970s, are comfortable doing online processes any other person after that still prefers to come to or wants to speak to our customer care centres (Interview with Participant 12)

This excerpt delves into the broader issue of the digital divide, highlighting the stark disparities in technology access and usage between affluent areas like Bedfordview and more disadvantaged communities like Thokoza. The participant points out that the challenge extends beyond mere access to digital devices; it encompasses a deeper issue of cultural and generational attitudes towards technology. The perceived “reluctance to change” and the “lack of trust in technology” among the hostel residents, particularly among older generations, are identified as significant barriers to adopting digital government initiatives.

These excerpts illustrate the complex landscape of digital government initiatives within socio-economically diverse communities. The experiences of Thokoza hostel residents underscore the need for digital government strategies to be inclusive and sensitive to the varied needs, preferences, and trust levels of different community segments. The insights call for a nuanced approach to digitalisation that considers the socio-cultural context and seeks to bridge the digital divide through targeted outreach, education, and support for disadvantaged communities.

Moreover, they highlight the importance of maintaining traditional service delivery channels alongside digital platforms to ensure that no resident is left behind in the digital transition. These socioeconomic differences require different responses from government. Public officials also noted the importance of these disparities. A City of Ekurhuleni official, working in the Information Technology and Systems Development department had this to say on the communication with the public about the introduction of the My COE App:

How we communicate to the public with the city we use the comms department, and we communicate with the communities through social platforms, and they also have the.... I will call it *imbizo* that they hold with the public and they would introduce some of those things. With *Siyakhokha*, we also had easy workshops, something like that, and we have been communicating with the public on how to use the solutions and what are the benefits of it. They are ongoing, they started around 2009. The communications department made use of various platforms to communicate the move to digital by the city including

social media platforms, *Imbizos*, *Siyakhoka* workshops, both physically and virtual.

The official outlines the comprehensive communication strategies employed by the city to inform the public about digital tools like the My COE App and *Siyakhokha*. The use of the communications department to disseminate information through social platforms and traditional events like *imbizos* underscores the city's attempt to bridge the digital divide by reaching a wide audience. The reference to "easy workshops" suggests an effort to educate residents on the use and benefits of these digital solutions, indicating a proactive stance in facilitating digital literacy among the populace.

The municipal official emphasised how the city valued public views through public participation sessions:

We run a program with MMCs our members of council and they would do what they call *imbizos* and threesomes, those are public participation events that we have taken. And throughout those events, as you know there are various challenges that the city would have but there will be an element where the city will be telling them that this is where we headed this is where we are going, and this is what is happening. So yeah, we can comfortably say we did that. (Interview with participant 10).

The emphasis on public participation sessions, as mentioned in the second excerpt, highlights the city's commitment to inclusivity and public input in the digital transition process. The use of *imbizos* and public events as platforms for dialogue between city officials and residents reflects an understanding of the importance of community feedback in shaping municipal policies and initiatives. This approach signifies an attempt to maintain a transparent and responsive governance model, even as the city navigates the complexities of integrating digital solutions into public services.

Officials in the City of Ekurhuleni municipality working in the Information Communications Technology (ICT) boast about the municipality being the first to have a fully integrated logging App, the My COE App. They mention the various forms that the unit makes use of to ensure citizen engagement and participation.

Communications is ongoing, however, there is room for growth. From a customer relations perspective, we run surveys, open days to get a sense of

community needs, campaigns, road shows, make use of local media and SMSs. We hold Imbizo's and Ntirhisano's where various challenges are raised by the public (Interview with Participant 11).

The official's pride in Ekurhuleni being a pioneer in integrated digital service logging through the My COE App points to the municipality's ambition to lead in digital governance. The mention of diverse engagement forms, including surveys, open days, campaigns, and roadshows, further illustrates the city's multifaceted approach to understanding and addressing community needs. The reference to local media and SMSs as part of the communication mix indicates an awareness of the varied technological access and preferences within the community, suggesting efforts to ensure no resident is left behind in the digital shift.

Collectively, these views expressed highlight Ekurhuleni's strategic approach to digital transformation and citizen engagement, showcasing a blend of modern digital platforms and traditional engagement methods to accommodate the diverse needs and preferences of its residents. This strategy acknowledges the socio-economic disparities within the municipality and strives to ensure inclusive access to municipal services, reflecting a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented by the digital transition in public service delivery.

The perspectives from both Bedfordview residents and City of Ekurhuleni officials paint a comprehensive picture of the municipality's efforts to integrate digital solutions like the My COE App into its service delivery framework. These narratives, set against the backdrop of varying socioeconomic contexts within Ekurhuleni, underscore the multifaceted challenges and opportunities presented by the digital transition in public services. Bedfordview residents, hailing from a relatively affluent suburb, have shared experiences that highlight the efficacy of the My COE App in improving service delivery, emphasising its convenience and the enhanced communication it facilitates with municipal officials. Their experiences suggest that in areas with higher digital literacy and access, digital government initiatives can significantly augment the efficiency and responsiveness of municipal services. This aligns with literature that champions digital governance for its potential to streamline public service processes and foster direct, transparent communication between citizens and government (Reddick, 2011; Jaeger, 2012).

Conversely, insights from Ekurhuleni officials reveal a concerted effort by the municipality to bridge the digital divide through diverse communication strategies and public participation

initiatives. The blend of traditional engagement methods, such as *imbizos*, with modern digital platforms aims to ensure broad-based access to municipal services and maintain an inclusive dialogue with all community segments. This approach acknowledges the critical literature on the digital divide, which highlights socio-economic disparities as significant barriers to digital inclusion, necessitating multifaceted strategies to ensure equitable access to digital services (Norris, 2001; Selwyn, 2004).

However, the experiences of Thokoza hostel residents, as juxtaposed with those from Bedfordview, bring to light the stark digital divide that persists within the municipality. The lack of awareness and access to the My COE App among Thokoza residents underscores the need for more inclusive digital governance strategies that cater to the diverse socio-economic landscape of Ekurhuleni. This observation resonates with scholarly discourse on the digital divide, emphasising that technological initiatives must be underpinned by a thorough understanding of the local context and the specific needs of different community segments (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013; Van Dijk, 2006).

As governments worldwide navigate the path of innovation and digitalisation, it is imperative that their approaches are not monolithic, potentially sidelining the very communities they aim to serve. The value of drawing insights from both developing and developed nations with governance models akin to South Africa's is undeniable. Yet, the distinct context of South Africa, marked by its history and the needs of its black majority, calls for bespoke solutions (Mukwena & Lolojih, 2002). This necessity is exposed by South Africa's painful history under apartheid and the ongoing quest for equality in the post-1994 democratic era. Local governments, including that of Ekurhuleni, bear the dual mandate of service delivery and development promotion, alongside the imperative of upholding good governance, as underscored by Section 152 of the Constitution, which emphasises sustainable service provision and the cultivation of safe, healthy environments.

The stark disparities in service standards between townships and more privileged areas are a point of contention, with Hattingh (2009) critically noting perceptions that marginalise township residents to subhuman status. Such narratives resonate deeply within the hostels of Mshayazafe, Madala, and Khuthuza, where residents liken their living conditions to those of animals, a stark contradiction to their constitutional rights to proper service provision. In a country leaning heavily on social grants, pivoting towards job creation becomes essential to

foster sustainable livelihoods and bridge the economic divide. However, the rush towards technological advancements, while beneficial in many respects, risks exacerbating existing inequalities, perpetuating the historical injustices that marginalised black South Africans based on racial discrimination.

5.5. Conclusion

In concluding this chapter, I have drawn upon a comparative analysis of governance and service delivery within the City of Ekurhuleni, specifically focusing on the lived experiences of residents in the contrasting settings of Thokoza hostels and Bedfordview to uncover the nuances of local governance and the disparities in service delivery that pervade the municipality, revealing a complex tapestry of challenges and inequities. The main argument in this chapter centered on the critical examination of the mechanisms of service delivery, particularly the adoption of digital platforms like the My COE App. The findings have illuminated a pronounced digital divide, which, albeit unintended, serves to exclude a significant segment of the population of Ekurhuleni, notably the impoverished black residents of Thokoza hostels. This exclusion not only exacerbates existing inequalities but also underscores the pressing need for governance models that are truly inclusive and reflective of the diverse needs of all citizens.

Furthermore, this chapter has delved into the complexities of local governance, highlighting the profound impact of political dynamics and the conduct of elected officials on the quality and accessibility of services. The narrative of the Khutsong Ladies Hostel and their interactions with the local ward councillor has particularly underscored the complexities and challenges inherent in ensuring effective governance and equitable service provision at the grassroots level. Findings of this chapter contribute to the overarching thesis by accentuating the imperative for inclusive and accessible governance and service delivery mechanisms. It underscores the critical need for local government to adopt more nuanced and considerate approaches to service delivery, ensuring that the needs of all citizens, especially the most vulnerable, are adequately met.

As I bring this chapter to a close, building on findings, analysis and arguments presented in the previous chapters (*Chapters 3 & 4*), it becomes apparent that the path to addressing the

multifaceted challenges of governance and service delivery in Ekurhuleni necessitates a comprehensive approach that prioritises inclusivity, accessibility, and responsiveness. The insights from the chapters, collectively lay a foundation for further exploration into the broader implications of governance challenges for democratic engagement and citizen participation in Ekurhuleni, while illuminating broader questions for the implications of these findings across the country. The next chapter present the overall findings, conclusions and recommendations of the thesis.

CHAPTER 6

Towards an inclusive digitalised Ekurhuleni: Conclusions and recommendations

6.1. Introduction

In this concluding chapter, I draw together the threads of collective experiences drawn from diverse contexts within the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality, from the economically marginalised Thokoza hostels to the relatively affluent suburb of Bedfordview. This thesis has undertaken a critical exploration of the consequences of the digital divide on public service delivery, especially through the perspective of the My COE app – a digital innovation designed to streamline and improve municipal services. The context of this study is framed against the larger backdrop of South Africa's continuing challenge to align its technological ambitions with the harsh realities of socio-economic inequality. The central argument of this thesis is the profound impact of the digital divide on equitable access to public services. This divide not only reflects, but also potentially exacerbates existing socio-economic disparities, particularly when digital solutions like the My COE app are implemented without fully considering the diverse needs and capabilities of the municipality's residents.

Drawing on qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions, this research delved into the lived experiences and perceptions of the residents, providing a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented by digital public service delivery. Theoretically, this study was framed within the context of digital divide and social inequality theories, offering a lens through which to view the complexities and implications of digital innovation in public service delivery. This approach allowed for a comprehensive examination of how digital strategies can be both beneficial and detrimental, depending on their deployment and the inclusivity of their design.

The findings from this study revealed a stark contrast in the accessibility and effectiveness of digital public services between the affluent Bedfordview and the economically disadvantaged Thokoza, underlining the urgent need for inclusive digital strategies that cater to the diverse population of Ekurhuleni. This discrepancy not only highlights the digital divide but also calls into question the broader implications for social equity and justice in the digital age. The contributions of this study extend beyond the academic sphere, offering practical insights and

recommendations for policymakers and municipal authorities. By shedding light on the lived realities of residents of Ekurhuleni, this thesis emphasises the importance of adopting a more inclusive and contextually sensitive approach to digital public service delivery. It is a call to action for policies and practices that ensure no resident is left behind in the move towards a more digitalised public service landscape. The study advocates for targeted interventions to enhance digital literacy and access in underprivileged communities, emphasising the need for robust community engagement processes that genuinely incorporate voices of residents in the design and implementation of digital services. Moreover, the study suggests the necessity of further research to explore the longitudinal impacts of digital service innovations on social equity, particularly in urban settings marked by significant socio-economic diversity.

6.2. Main argument

The central argument of this thesis revolves around the complex interplay between digital innovation in public service delivery and the socio-economic realities of diverse communities within the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality. Specifically, it critically examines the deployment of the My COE App as a digital solution aimed at enhancing service delivery efficiency and accessibility. While the app represents a significant stride towards modernising public administration, this study argues that its effectiveness is markedly influenced by the socio-economic conditions and digital literacy levels of the local residents.

This argument is built on the premise that digital solutions, despite their potential for broadening access to services, do not automatically translate into universal benefits across all community strata. In affluent areas like Bedfordview, where residents typically have higher levels of income, education, and digital access, the My COE App emerges as a valuable tool that enhances interaction with municipal services, streamlining reporting processes and improving response times (*see Chapter 5*). This effectiveness is underpinned by the ability of residents to leverage digital platforms, a proficiency that is bolstered by their socio-economic status.

Conversely, in Thokoza, a township characterised by lower socio-economic indicators and a historical backdrop of marginalisation (*see Chapter 3 & 4*), the potential of the My COE App is significantly curtailed. Factors such as limited access to digital devices, low levels of digital literacy, and a deep-seated mistrust in municipal systems stemming from past experiences of

under-service and neglect render the digital solution less impactful (*see Chapter 3*). This dichotomy highlights a crucial oversight in the one-size-fits-all approach to digital governance solutions: the failure to account for the deep-rooted inequalities that pervade South African society, which in turn affect the uniformity of service delivery improvements across diverse communities.

Furthermore, through the analysis of the deployment of the My COE App, this study highlights not only the socio-economic disparities between communities like Bedfordview and Thokoza, but also unravels the gendered experiences within these contexts. The findings underscore that digital solutions, while promising in theory, often overlook the specific challenges faced by women, particularly in marginalised communities (*see Chapter 4*). This gender dimension is crucial, as it reveals how digital initiatives can inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities, sidelining women's unique needs and their access to public services. Thus, this study asserts that an inclusive approach to digital public service delivery must address both the broad socio-economic disparities and the specific gendered barriers to ensure equitable access and benefits for all residents, especially women, in the diverse contexts of Ekurhuleni.

Thus, the thesis contends that for digital innovations like the My COE App to be truly transformative in the realm of public service delivery, there must be a concerted effort to address the underlying socio-economic disparities that exist within municipalities. This involves not only improving physical access to digital technologies but also enhancing digital literacy, building trust in municipal systems through transparent and inclusive governance, and tailoring digital solutions to meet the varied needs and capabilities of all community members, including those of women who continue to be marginalised systematically (*see Chapter 4*). Only then can the promise of digital innovation in public administration be fully realised, ensuring equitable benefits across the spectrum of socio-economic realities in the Ekurhuleni Municipality.

6.3. Methodological

In addressing the central question of the thesis, I employed a qualitative research methodology, grounded in an interpretive approach that allowed for an in-depth exploration of the complex social dynamics and individual experiences within the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality. This approach was instrumental in uncovering the nuanced ways in which digital innovations

in public service delivery intersect with the socio-economic realities of diverse communities, particularly the contrasting experiences of Bedfordview and Thokoza residents with the My COE App.

Data collection was triangulated a series of 12 semi-structured interviews, 6 focus group discussions, and participant observation. These interviews were carefully designed to elicit rich, detailed narratives from a diverse range of participants, including Thokoza hostel dwellers, Bedfordview residents, municipal officials, and local community leaders. This diverse participant pool ensured a multiplicity of perspectives, enriching the findings of the study with a broad spectrum of experiences and insights related to the implementation and impact of the My COE App. Additionally, focus group discussions, particularly in Thokoza, provided a platform for collective storytelling and shared experiences, revealing communal perceptions of service delivery, digital innovation, gendered forms of marginalisation and the broader socio-political context (*see Chapter 4*). These discussions were invaluable in understanding the communal dynamics and collective responses to the challenges and opportunities presented by digital innovations in public service delivery.

Furthermore, participant observation in community meetings and interactions with municipal services offered additional layers of contextual understanding, grounding the findings of study in the lived realities of the residents of Ekurhuleni. This immersive approach allowed for a more nuanced comprehension of the socio-economic disparities between Bedfordview and Thokoza and their implications for digital public service delivery (*see Chapter 5*). This methodological framework, underpinned by a commitment to capturing the complexity of human experiences within their socio-economic and cultural contexts, enabled a holistic analysis of the digital divide in public service delivery, illuminating the critical intersections between technological innovation, socio-economic status, and access to municipal services, providing a comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape the efficacy of digital solutions like the My COE App in enhancing service delivery across diverse communities.

6.4. Theoretical framing

The theoretical framing of this study is grounded in the digital divide and social inequality theories, offering a nuanced understanding of the challenges and implications associated with digital public service delivery in Ekurhuleni. The concept of the digital divide, which delineates

the disparities in access to and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), is central to this analysis (*see Chapter 1*). This framework allows for an exploration of how socio-economic factors, including income, education, and geographic location, contribute to unequal access to digital services. By applying this lens, the study sheds light on the specific barriers faced by residents of underprivileged areas like Thokoza, highlighting the need for more inclusive digital strategies that address these disparities.

Simultaneously, the study is anchored in social inequality and public administration theories that emphasise the role of government in ensuring equitable service delivery. These theories provide a foundation for understanding the responsibilities of local governments in adapting to technological advancements and ensuring that digital public services are accessible to all citizens, irrespective of their socio-economic status (*see Chapter 1*). This dual theoretical approach enables a comprehensive examination of both the technological and administrative dimensions of digital public service delivery, facilitating a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities inherent in transitioning to digital platforms within a diverse urban municipality like Ekurhuleni.

6.5. Discussion of main findings

In this thesis, I sought to explore the intricate dynamics of digital initiatives in public service delivery within the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality, with a particular focus on the My COE App and its implications across the socio-economic spectrum of the region. The primary aim was to dissect the impact of digital divide, scrutinising how it manifests in varying community settings, such as the contrasting localities of Bedfordview and Thokoza.

At the heart of this study was an investigation into the efficacy of digital tools in enhancing municipal service delivery. The narrative that emerged is one of stark contrasts: Bedfordview residents reported significant improvements in service responsiveness and efficiency, facilitated by their adept engagement with digital platforms. This stood in sharp contrast to the experiences in Thokoza, where the anticipated benefits of such digital initiatives were largely absent (*see Chapter 4*). This discrepancy was not merely a matter of technological access but was deeply rooted in a complex web of digital literacy, economic barriers, and a prevailing mistrust towards digital interventions, highlighting the nuanced nature of the digital divide within the municipality.

Moreover, the exploration of gendered experiences within this study revealed significant insights into the intersectionality of digital divide and gender in the context of public service delivery in Ekurhuleni. Particularly, the narratives from the Khutsong Ladies Hostel illuminated the unique challenges faced by women in accessing and benefiting from digital innovations like the My COE App (*see Chapter 4*). These findings underscore the compounded barriers that womxn, especially those from economically marginalised communities, encounter - ranging from limited digital literacy to socio-cultural dynamics that restrict their access to technological resources. This gendered lens on the digital divide not only amplifies the need for inclusive digital strategies but also highlights the crucial role of gender-sensitive approaches in ensuring equitable access to public services for all members of the community.

The study also delved into the dynamics of community engagement and its influence on the adoption of digital solutions. It became evident that the structure and vibrancy of community networks in Bedfordview played a crucial role in the seamless integration of digital tools for addressing service delivery concerns. Conversely, Thokoza's fragmented community engagement, characterised by ineffective communication channels and a palpable distrust in authorities, exacerbated the digital divide, limiting the potential impact of digital service delivery initiatives (*see Chapter 3*).

A critical aspect of this investigation centered on the trust and perceptions of residents towards digital solutions in the realm of public services. The findings paint a picture of varied trust landscapes: Bedfordview's residents exhibited a relatively higher degree of trust in digital solutions, sustained by positive first-hand experiences and a socio-economic backdrop that favoured technology adoption. In stark contrast, residents of Thokoza were mired in scepticism and mistrust towards digital platforms, a sentiment deeply ingrained in historical experiences of neglect and systemic exclusion (*see Chapter 3 & 5*).

The conclusions drawn from this study shed light on the multifaceted character of the digital divide and its profound repercussions on public service delivery in the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality. They underscore the imperative for an inclusive and nuanced approach towards digital innovation in public services, one that transcends mere technological provision to address the underlying socio-economic disparities, gendered dimensions of exclusion, and cultivates a sense of trust and belonging among all segments of the community. While highlighting the critical need for nuanced digital innovation strategies, these findings illuminate

broader questions for further research, particularly in developing inclusive digital platforms that pay attention to the diverse needs and realities of all community members.

6.6. Contributions

The contribution of the study is enriched by delving into the lived experiences of residents in Bedfordview and Thokoza, this research sheds light on the nuanced manifestations of the digital divide and its implications on the efficacy and inclusivity of digital service delivery platforms. This analysis enriches the discourse on digital governance in urban settings, while also offering critical insights into the socio-economic underpinnings that exacerbate digital disparities.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the expanding body of knowledge on digital inclusion by framing the digital divide not merely as a gap in access to technology but as a multifaceted issue influenced by a spectrum of socio-economic factors and gendered dimensions of exclusion. This approach encourages a re-evaluation of how digital solutions are conceptualised, developed, and deployed, advocating for gender-sensitive strategies that are rooted in the socio-economic realities of diverse urban populations.

Methodologically, the study employs a comparative analysis that illuminates the contrasting impacts of digital initiatives across different socio-economic settings within the same municipality: Thokoza hostels and Bedfordview. This methodology underscores the significance of context in assessing the effectiveness of digital service delivery solutions and highlights the importance of tailored approaches that cater to the specific needs and challenges of diverse communities.

Intellectually, the findings of this study challenge prevailing assumptions about the universal applicability and benefits of digital governance tools. By uncovering the disparities in the experiences and perceptions of digital service delivery among residents of Bedfordview and Thokoza, this research prompts a critical examination of inclusivity and equity in digital public service initiatives. It calls for a reimagining of digital governance strategies that prioritise accessibility, trust-building, and meaningful engagement with all community members, irrespective of their socio-economic standing.

Overall, the contribution of this study lies in its holistic examination of the digital divide, offering a nuanced understanding that can inform the design and implementation of more inclusive and effective digital public services. These insights are particularly valuable for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars seeking to bridge digital disparities and enhance the quality of public service delivery in urban settings.

6.7. Recommendations

In light of the findings of the study, a focused set of recommendations emerges, addressing the core challenges and opportunities identified within the digital public service delivery in Ekurhuleni. Firstly, the development and implementation of more inclusive digital platforms is paramount. These platforms should be intentionally designed to accommodate the diverse needs and capabilities of all community members, particularly those in underprivileged areas like Thokoza. By prioritising user-friendly interfaces, multilingual support, and offline access options, these digital services can become more accessible to individuals with varying levels of digital literacy and technological resources. This approach promises to bridge the digital divide and to ensure that the benefits of digitalisation in public service delivery are equitably distributed across all sectors of the municipality.

Secondly, enhancing digital literacy within these communities stands out as a critical need. Tailored educational programmes that cater to different age groups, literacy levels, and languages can empower residents to effectively utilise digital services. Collaborating with local organisations, schools, and community centres to deliver these programmes can further ensure their reach and relevance. Such initiatives could transform the residents' interactions with digital platforms, making them active participants in the digital ecosystem rather than passive recipients of its advancements.

Lastly, the study underscores a significant gap in research concerning the long-term impacts of digital public service initiatives on bridging the socio-economic divide. Future research should delve into the sustainability of such digital interventions, examining their ability to create lasting changes in communities like Thokoza. This research should not only assess the direct outcomes of digital services but also explore their broader implications on social equity, gender dynamics, economic development, and community empowerment. Through this focused lens, the field can gain deeper insights into the transformative potential of digital public services in

urban settings marked by significant socio-economic disparities and gendered forms of marginalisation.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews with Bedfordview residents

Participant 1, 22/08/2023

Participant 2, 23/08/2023

Participant 3, 31/08/2023

Participant 4, 18/09/2023

Participant 5, 18/09/2023

Participant 6, 18/09/2023

Participant 7, 09/10/2023

Interview with Ward Councillor

Participant 8, Ward 52, 20/09/2023

Interviews with EMM officials

Participant 9, Service Delivery Unit, 13/11/2023

Participant 10, ICT Unit, 18/01/2024,

Participant 11, ICT Unit, 18/01/2024

Participant 12, ICT Unit, 18/01/2024

Focus Group Discussions

Thokoza Men's Hostels

Meeting with community leader and MKMVA regional leader, 15/07/2023, Focus group discussion 1

Meeting with Ndunankulu and community leader, 09/08/2023, Focus group discussion 2

Thokoza Hostel Introductory Meeting, 15/08/2023, Focus group discussion 3

Discussions with Madala, Mshayazafe and Khuthuza Hostels, 19/08/2024, 26/08/2024, Focus group discussion 4

Khutsong Ladies Hostel

Meeting with hostel residents, 20/09/2023, Focus group discussion 5

Meeting with hostel committee, 24/1/2023, Focus group discussion 6

Appendix 2: Images



Image 1: A dilapidated shopping centre abolished post-democracy located at Mshayazafe Hostel, Thokoza



Image 2: Broken down sewage system at Mshayazafe Hostel, Thokoza

Appendix 3: Participant Information Sheet: Focus Group Discussions

Dear Sir / Madam

My name is Sixolisiwe Ngele. I am a Master of Management in Governance student at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. My supervisor is Dr Hlengiwe Ndhlovu I am conducting a research study to explore the impact of digital technology on service delivery in the City of Ekurhuleni. The main aim of the study is to understand the effectiveness of the digital application, My COE App, launched by the City of Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality in 2020 on service delivery. The study title is Digitalisation of public services – lessons from My COE App in Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality.

I am inviting you to take part in focus group discussions. If you decide to take part, your participation in this research study will last about it will take about 60 minutes to 2 hours of your time. The focus group discussions will take place in Thokoza Hostels, Mshayazafe and Madala, at a convenient time for you.

With your permission, I would like to audio record the focus group discussions. This data will be stored safely in a password locked device and deleted after 5 years. I am the only person who will have access to the data.

The focus group discussions will be confidential and anonymous. When I share the results of the research study, I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you. With your permission, other researchers may use the data collected from this research study, but your name and any personal information will not be used or passed on.

If you decide to take part in the research study, it should be because you want to volunteer. You do not have to take part. You can stop being in the study at any time. You do not have to answer any questions if you do not want to. You will not get any direct benefits if you choose to join the research study. You will not lose any services, benefits, or rights you would normally have if you decided not to join. Taking part in the research study will not cost you anything. You will not be paid for being in this research study.

The risks for this research study are no more than what happens in everyday life.

This research study will be written up as a research report. The report will be available on the university library website. If you would like to receive a summary of this report, I will be happy to send it to you.

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research study, feel free to contact me or my supervisor on the details listed below. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely,

Sixolisiwe Ngele

787110@students.wits.ac.za

0781821403

Supervisor:

Dr Hlengiwe Ndhlovu

hlengiwe.ndhlovu1@wits.ac.za

+27 11 717 3521

Appendix 4: Participant Consent Form

Digitalisation of public services – Service Delivery challenges and lessons from the My COE App in the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality

Sixolisiwe Ngele

I, agree to participate in this research project.

I agree to the following:

(Please circle the relevant options below)

The research study was explained to me. I understand what this study is about.

YES

NO

I understand that I can volunteer to take part in the study

YES

NO

I agree that the interview/focus group/other activity may be audio recorded.

YES

NO

I agree that direct quotations from my interview/focus group/other activity may be used by the researcher in their research report/manuscript/book chapter.

YES

NO

I agree that my participation will remain anonymous (my name will not be used by the researcher in their research report/manuscript/book chapter)

YES

NO

I agree that other researchers may use the information I provide in my interview/focus group/other activity (depending on their own ethics clearance being obtained) but my name and any personal information will not be used or passed on. YES NO

..... (signature)
..... (name of participant)
..... (date)

S. Ngele
Sixolisiwe Ngele
August 2023

Appendix 5: Research Permission Letter



Information, Communication and Technology Unit
Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality
Ekurhuleni

19 June 2023

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Request for permission to conduct research in the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality

I am a Master of Management candidate in the field of Governance at the Wits School of Governance at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. I am conducting research exploring the impact of digital technology on service delivery in the City of Ekurhuleni. The research is exploring the challenges faced by the state in shifting from traditional ways of delivering services to digitalisation of the public service, as well as the impact of the shift to digitalisation on the effectiveness of service delivery as reflected by Ekurhuleni residents. The main aim of the study is to understand the impact of the digital application, My COE App, launched by the City of Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality on service delivery in 2020.

This letter seeks to request access to the management in the Information Communications Technology unit in the municipality for the purpose of conducting this research to get an in-depth understanding of the City's digital strategy and subsequently the introduction of the My COE App launched in 2020. The maximum duration of the engagements would take a month, depending on the access and availability of the relevant participants in the unit.

To gather my primary data for this research I will be interested in talking to anyone responsible in the drafting of the municipality's digital strategy, and anyone who is responsible for service delivery related issues in the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality. The information gathered during the research will be considered as confidential and will be strictly used for the compilation of my Masters Research project in Management in the field of Governance at the University of the Witwatersrand School of Governance.

It would be my pleasure to provide the organisation with the final research paper and share the findings of the research with any department that has an interest on the findings of my study.

If you require any further clarity on the research project, you may contact my supervisor Dr Hlengiwe Ndhlovu on 011 717 3521 / Hlengiwe.ndhlovu1@wits.ac.za.

I look forward to your positive feedback.

Regards

Sixolisiwe Ngele (Ms)

Cell: 078 182 1403

Email: 787110@students.wits.ac.za

Appendix 6: Ethics Clearance Form



SCHOOL OF GOVERNANCE ETHICS COMMITTEE

CONSTITUTED UNDER THE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE: WSG-2023-71

PROJECT TITLE: Digitalisation of public services – lessons from My COE App in Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality

INVESTIGATOR Sixolisiwe Ngele

SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR School of Governance

DATE CONSIDERED 31 July 2023

DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE Approved unconditionally

RISK LEVEL Minimal Risk

EXPIRY DATE Date of submission of the Research Report

ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE 2 November 2023

CHAIRPERSON *Rekgotsofetsa Chikane*
Rekgotsofetsa Chikane

cc: Supervisor: Dr Hlengiwe Ndhlovu

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Chairperson of the School/Department ethics committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.


Signature

12/11/2023
Date

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES