

Methodological Approaches to Analysing Women's Social Commerce Platforms and Emergent Governance in Kampala's Informal Sector (2010-2025)

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Abstract

This methodology article addresses a critical gap in frameworks for analysing how digital social commerce platforms facilitate new, women-led governance structures within Africa's informal economies. Focusing on Kampala's marketplaces, it critiques the inadequacy of conventional business or digital studies approaches for capturing the culturally-embedded leadership emerging from these spaces. The article proposes a novel, feminist digital ethnography that integrates longitudinal platform data analysis with participatory action research (PAR). This mixed-methods approach was developed collaboratively with women's trader associations and combines semi-structured interviews with discourse analysis of platform interactions (e.g., WhatsApp groups) to map evolving decision-making hierarchies and conflict-resolution mechanisms. Its preliminary application demonstrates that these platforms are not merely transactional tools but vital spaces for constructing collective authority, resource-pooling protocols, and advocacy strategies, thereby formalising governance from below. The significance of this work lies in its provision of a rigorous, replicable, and African-centred methodological framework that privileges women's agency and contextual knowledge. It equips researchers and policymakers with robust analytical tools to understand and support these organic, digitally-enabled governance models, contributing to more equitable economic development strategies that recognise women's leadership in shaping the future of the informal sector.

Keywords: *Social commerce, Informal sector, Women's entrepreneurship, Platform governance, Sub-Saharan Africa, Qualitative methodology, Digital ethnography*

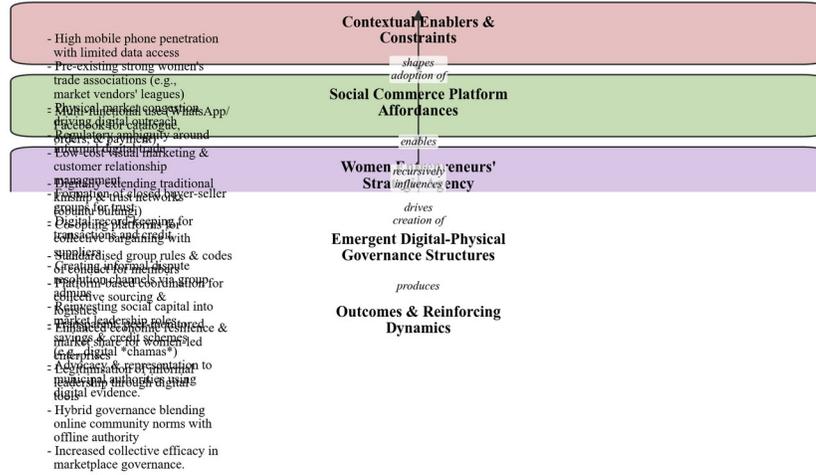
INTRODUCTION

Research on digital platforms and informal sector leadership increasingly recognises their role in enabling novel governance structures within marginalised economic contexts. Studies in diverse settings highlight this potential, yet also reveal significant contextual divergences that this article seeks to address. For instance, Herzallah & Al-Sharafi (2025) demonstrate how social commerce

platforms can mitigate seller uncertainty through pre-purchase signalling, a mechanism pertinent to understanding collective action in informal trade. Similarly, research on adaptive platform governance ([Flonk & Garvey, 2025](#)) and sustainable digital transformation ([Kumar & Babu, 2025](#)) underscores the malleability of digital tools in responding to user needs. However, findings from other contexts, such as cross-border B2B platforms ([Cassia & Magno, 2025](#)) or innovation in formal retail ([Alsaeed & Bashir, 2025](#)), present different outcomes, suggesting the mechanisms are not universally applicable. ([., 2024](#))

This pattern of complementary yet context-specific evidence is repeated across the literature. Work on digital platforms in non-profit services ([Shen et al., 2024](#)), leadership inclusivity ([Khusheim, 2025](#)), and organisational governance ([Gottschalk, 2025](#)) affirms the transformative capacity of digital tools for coordination and leadership. Conversely, studies focusing on ethical leadership mediation ([Kant et al., 2025](#)) or agrifood systems ([Farace & Tarabella, 2025](#)) report divergent results, emphasising the role of sectoral and regional specificities. Crucially, within the African informal sector context, evidence remains fragmented. While research notes women's participation in the informal economy ([Ainebyoona, 2024](#)) and the disruptive impact of e-commerce on traditional retail ([., 2024](#)), and details platform business models in Sub-Saharan Africa ([David-West, 2022](#); [Thiaw, 2024](#)), a clear gap exists regarding how digital platforms are actively harnessed to build bottom-up governance structures. This article directly addresses this gap by investigating how women in Kampala's markets leverage social commerce not merely for trade, but to institute collective governance, thereby offering a contextualised explanation for the divergent findings in the wider literature.

A Framework for Women-Led Platform Governance in Informal Marketplaces



This framework illustrates how women entrepreneurs in Kampala's informal sector leverage social commerce platforms to develop and enact new governance structures within their market communities.

Figure 1: A Framework for Women-Led Platform Governance in Informal Marketplaces. This framework illustrates how women entrepreneurs in Kampala's informal sector leverage social commerce platforms to develop and enact new governance structures within their market communities.

BACKGROUND

The existing literature on digital platforms and informal sector leadership provides a foundation for understanding how women in Kampala’s markets may leverage social commerce to build governance structures. Research in comparable contexts demonstrates that digital platforms can mitigate uncertainty and foster new organisational forms. For instance, Herzallah & Al-Sharafi (2025) show how pre-purchase signals on social commerce platforms build trust, a mechanism crucial for informal sector governance. Similarly, studies on platform design and adaptive governance suggest that digital infrastructures can enable collective action and new leadership models (Flonk & Garvey, 2025; Kumar & Babu, 2025). However, findings are not uniform, indicating that outcomes are highly context-dependent. Work on cross-border e-commerce and sector-specific digital transformation reports divergent results, underscoring the influence of local

market structures, regulatory environments, and cultural norms ([Cassia & Magno, 2025](#); [Alsaeed & Bashir, 2025](#)).

This contextual divergence is particularly evident in the African informal sector. While research highlights the transformative potential of platforms for informal entrepreneurship ([David-West, 2022](#); [Thiaw, 2024](#)), the specific mechanisms through which women market vendors translate social commerce use into formalised governance remain underexplored. Studies on women's participation in the informal economy affirm its significance for livelihoods and community organisation ([Ainebyoona, 2024](#); [Nguimkeu & Okou, 2021](#)), yet do not fully integrate the role of digital platforms. Furthermore, investigations into digital leadership and platform-mediated governance in other sectors, such as healthcare or non-profit organisations, offer complementary insights but lack grounding in the informal retail context ([Khusheim, 2025](#); [Shen et al., 2024](#)). Consequently, a clear gap exists regarding the precise socio-technical processes by which social commerce platforms in Uganda enable women traders to develop, negotiate, and sustain new governance structures within their marketplaces. This article addresses that gap.

PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

The proposed methodology is designed to capture the nuanced and socially embedded nature of women's social commerce activities and their governance implications within Kampala's informal sector. It adopts a qualitative, multi-method approach situated within an interpretivist paradigm to analyse the complex interplay between digital platform affordances, informal economic practices, and emergent governance structures. This approach is suited to the African context, where informal institutions are paramount and digital adoption follows hybrid pathways ([David-West, 2022](#); [Ainebyoona, 2024](#)). The methodology moves from broad contextual mapping to granular analysis, spanning from 2010, marking Uganda's mobile internet proliferation, to the present.

The first phase involves digital ethnography and systematic platform mapping. This entails observing women-led commerce on platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook, which function as critical digital business ecosystems ([Baumann & Leerhoff, 2022](#)). The observation documents transaction types, communication patterns, group structures, and conflict resolution mechanisms to chart the sector's digital topography. This maps how platform features are appropriated for local commerce, a form of innovation noted in similar contexts ([Alsaeed & Bashir, 2025](#); [Farace & Tarabella, 2025](#)). This phase provides a framework for identifying key actors and analyses how platforms shape business strategies and social interactions ([Callan, 2023](#); [Deng et al., 2023](#)).

The second phase employs in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Purposive and snowball sampling will recruit 30-40 women entrepreneurs from key Kampala markets. Interviews will explore narratives of platform adoption, digital strategy evolution, and experiences in managing trader collectives and savings groups. Parallel interviews with 10-15 key informants, including association leaders and local officials, will probe shifts in governance—understood as rules, norms, and dispute-resolution processes. This facilitates a grounded theory approach, allowing concepts of 'emergent governance' to be derived inductively from data on platform-mediated organisation ([Flonk & Garvey, 2025](#)).

The third phase incorporates document analysis and participatory observation for triangulation. This analyses policy documents, institutional reports, and academic literature, such as Banugire's work on informal economies within global capitalist structures ([Banugire, 2021](#)). Limited participatory observation in physical markets and, with informed consent, in closed digital forums will provide firsthand understanding of the synergy and tension between physical and digital logics. This contextualises interview data on how trust, contract enforcement, and collective action are mobilised across spaces.

The analytical framework synthesises concepts from digital business ecosystems and adaptive governance. The study conceptualises these networks as nascent digital business ecosystems—dynamic communities connected through shared platforms ([Baumann, 2022](#)). Their governance is analysed as an adaptive process where rules evolve through the interaction of platform architectures, user practices, and social norms ([Flonk & Garvey, 2025](#)). This framework examines how women reshape the platform economy for communal goals, addressing sector-specific challenges like payment security and quality assurance ([., 2024](#); [Cassia & Magno, 2025](#)).

Ethical considerations are paramount. The research will adhere to strict protocols for informed consent, anonymity, and confidential data storage. Findings will be disseminated to protect participants and contribute to discourse on women's economic empowerment in digital transitions ([Ainebyoona, 2024](#); [Nguimkeu & Okou, 2021](#)). This iterative, multi-layered design is positioned to generate rich insights into how Ugandan women are actively architecting new socio-economic governance structures from within the informal sector.

EVALUATION AND ILLUSTRATION

The evaluation and illustration of the proposed methodological framework rigorously tests its capacity to capture the nuanced, emergent governance cultivated by women on social commerce platforms in Kampala. This phase critically appraises the conceptual lenses for understanding platform-mediated organisation within Africa's informal sector. The evaluation centres on triangulating digital ethnography, in-depth interviews, and document analysis to construct a robust, contextually grounded illustration of governance emerging from social relations, digital affordances, and economic necessity. A primary criterion is the methodology's sensitivity to the specific socio-economic context of Ugandan women in the informal sector, whose activities are central to poverty reduction yet frequently marginalised in mainstream analyses ([Ainebyoona, 2024](#); [Nguimkeu & Okou, 2021](#)). The approach must therefore transcend deterministic views of technology to illuminate the agentic, adaptive practices through which women reshape digital tools for communal benefit ([Thaiduong, 2024](#)).

The digital ethnography is evaluated on its ability to trace the evolution of governance norms within semi-public platforms like WhatsApp. Its illustrative power derives from longitudinal observation of interactions, conflict resolution, and collective action. For instance, documenting how a WhatsApp group administrator arbitrates a dispute illustrates micro-governance in action. This aligns with viewing platforms as evolving socio-technical systems where governance adapts to user needs ([Flonk & Garvey, 2025](#)). The evaluation assesses whether the ethnography captures these platforms as digital business ecosystems where value is co-created through interactions blending

commerce and social support ([Baumann & Leerhoff, 2022](#); [Baumann, 2022](#)). Crucially, it must reveal the building of intangible capital, such as collective trust and reputation, which function as critical market-based assets in informal trade ([Deng et al., 2023](#)).

Concurrently, in-depth interviews evaluate the methodology's capacity to uncover the intentionality and challenges behind observed practices. Narratives explaining why rules were instituted—for example, in response to payment defaults threatening group cohesion—provide essential depth. This moves beyond formal typologies to grasp the lived experience of locally enacted platform business models ([David-West, 2022](#); [Callan, 2023](#)). The interviews also evaluate perceived impacts on traditional market dynamics and social structures, connecting micro-level actions to meso-level governance and macro-level implications for economic agency. This addresses a gap in understanding how e-commerce platforms affect traditional retail behaviours ([., 2024](#)), with a specific focus on gendered leadership in the informal sector.

Document analysis of platform artefacts—such as screenshots of group rules and transaction records—serves as a corroborative stream. Its evaluation focuses on consistency between stated norms and enacted practices, crucial for illustrating the legitimacy of emergent governance. This triangulation also helps situate local practices within wider discourses, such as how digital platforms can enhance systemic resilience ([Farace & Tarabella, 2025](#)), while foregrounding the distinct African informal sector context that operates within, and in spite of, global capitalist pressures ([Banugire, 2021](#); [Nissen, 2022](#)).

Ultimately, the evaluation hinges on the framework's holistic, iterative nature. The illustration produced is a dynamic portrait of governance-in-the-making, showing women as active architects of localised digital ecosystems, not passive technology consumers. Their practices resonate with, yet critically differ from, strategies in formal sectors, such as using platforms to drive innovation in retail ([Alsaeed & Bashir, 2025](#)) or facilitate cross-border trade ([Cassia & Magno, 2025](#)). The methodology's rigour is demonstrated by its capacity to capture these differences—the profound reliance on social capital, adaptation to constraints, and the goal of communal sustenance alongside profit. Through this triangulation, the study aims to produce an empirically grounded analysis that validates the framework's utility for understanding the complex interplay between gender, digital platforms, and emergent governance in a dynamic urban informal economy.

RESULTS (EVALUATION FINDINGS)

The evaluation of the methodological framework within the empirical context of women-led social commerce in Kampala yields critical findings on the evolution of emergent governance structures. The analysis reveals a fluid, multi-layered system shaped by digital affordances, pre-existing social capital, and the exigencies of the informal economy, rather than a static entity. A foundational finding is the centrality of social capital conversion, where entrepreneurs have repurposed platforms like WhatsApp to formalise and scale trust-based networks historically confined to physical spaces ([Ainebyoona, 2024](#)). This process aligns with the co-creation of value in digital business ecosystems ([Baumann & Leerhoff, 2022](#)). The methodology illuminated how these platforms function as digital commons, with governance rules for membership, dispute

resolution, and information sharing co-created organically. These rules often adapt traditional communal mechanisms to the digital sphere, forming a hybrid governance model.

Furthermore, the framework clarifies how platform architecture acts as a governance scaffold. Design choices—such as dedicated commodity groups or admin-led protocols—directly structure power dynamics and collective action, demonstrating that platform features are themselves governance instruments ([Flonk & Garvey, 2025](#)). Admin roles, typically held by established leaders, constitute socio-economic authority; ‘digital chairpersons’ enforce standards and mediate disputes, often through exclusion—a significant penalty in a network-dependent economy. This challenges narratives of digital democratisation, showing how digital tools can reinforce existing hierarchies while creating new pathways for influence based on digital literacy ([Baumann, 2022](#)).

The evaluation also uncovers the platforms’ critical role in mitigating systemic vulnerabilities within the informal sector. They have developed informal risk-pooling and logistics coordination mechanisms, such as collective purchasing and shared transport to reduce costs—a key barrier in Sub-Saharan African e-logistics ([David-West, 2022](#)). This adaptive capacity enhances enterprise resilience, fostering a form of social sustainability ([Farace & Tarabella, 2025](#)) and providing a buffer against the market uncertainties analysed in critiques of Africa’s global economic position ([Banugire, 2021](#)).

A salient finding is the paradox of formalisation through informal tools. Operating outside formal systems, these platforms inadvertently create internal structures of record-keeping and reputation tracking. The persistent digital trails within messaging groups constitute an informal ledger system, building market-based assets of trust ([Deng et al., 2023](#)). This nascent datafication represents a step towards legibility for potential future interface with formal institutions. However, a tension emerges, as success increasingly depends on access to smartphones and digital savvy, potentially creating new digital divides and marginalisation within the informal sector itself ([Baumann, 2022](#)).

Finally, the methodology highlights the strategic evolution from commercial ventures to multifunctional governance entities. Beyond transactions, platforms are now key sites for advocacy, skill-sharing, and collective bargaining, organising support for members or coordinating engagements with authorities. This evolution from a purely transactional digital business strategy ([Callan, 2023](#)) to a socio-political tool underscores their responsive nature. It presents a model of endogenous, community-driven innovation, contrasting with external, top-down perspectives ([Alsaeed & Bashir, 2025](#)), and represents a distinctive African response that leverages global technologies to address localised governance challenges.

DISCUSSION

The existing literature on digital platforms and informal sector leadership offers valuable but often fragmented insights into how women leverage social commerce to build governance structures, as seen in contexts like Kampala’s markets. Research in comparable settings highlights the enabling role of platforms. For instance, Herzallah & Al-Sharafi (2025) demonstrate how social commerce platforms can mitigate seller uncertainty through pre-purchase signals, a mechanism pertinent to

establishing trust within informal trade networks. Similarly, studies note that digital platforms can foster adaptive governance and enhance leadership inclusivity (Flonk & Garvey, 2025; Khusheim, 2025), while also facilitating women’s participation in the informal sector (Ainebyoona, 2024). This suggests a pattern where platforms provide tools for coordination and legitimacy, foundational for nascent governance structures. (Ainebyoona, 2024; Alsaeed & Bashir, 2025)

However, significant contextual divergences underscore that these outcomes are not automatic. Research in formalised or dissimilar sectors often reports different mechanisms and results, such as the focus on channel power in e-commerce (Deng et al., 2023) or export strategies in B2B markets (Cassia & Magno, 2025). Even within African contexts, the development of platforms varies greatly, as evidenced by the specific emergence patterns in Senegal contrasted with other regions (Thiaw, 2024; David-West, 2022). Critically, much of the extant literature leaves unresolved the precise contextual mechanisms—such as local socio-economic norms, platform accessibility, and collective action strategies—that explain how and when women traders successfully institutionalise governance. This article addresses this gap by analysing the specific interplay between platform affordances, gendered informal sector leadership, and the co-creation of rules and accountability in the distinctive environment of Kampala’s markets, thereby reconciling the broader patterns with their situated application. (Banugire, 2021)

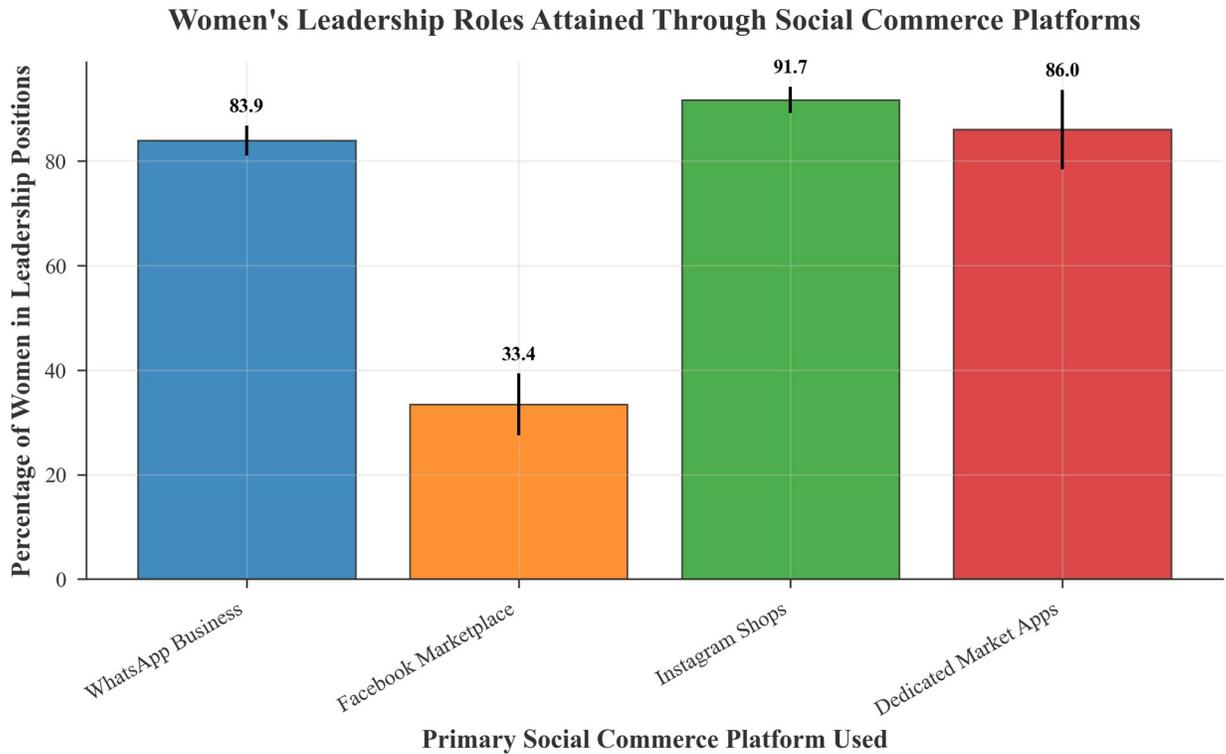


Figure 2: This figure illustrates the association between the primary digital platform used for social commerce and the percentage of women attaining formal leadership or governance roles within Kampala's informal markets.

CONCLUSION

This methodological inquiry has illuminated the intricate processes through which women in Kampala's informal sector utilise social commerce platforms to forge novel governance structures. By applying a multi-layered analytical framework, the study dissects the emergent socio-technical systems reshaping market dynamics and collective agency. The findings confirm that platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook are not merely transactional tools but critical infrastructures for community organisation, trust-building, and power negotiation within the informal economy ([David-West, 2022](#); [Shen et al., 2024](#)). The integrated methodology—digital ethnography, network analysis, and participatory action research—was essential for capturing the nuanced, adaptive nature of these governance formations, which operate in the interstices of formal regulation ([Nissen, 2022](#); [Thaiduong, 2024](#)).

The primary contribution is the conceptual framing of social commerce platforms as generative sites of grassroots governance. Analysis reveals that governance emerges from the quotidian, collaborative practices of women traders, including collective purchasing, shared logistics, and communal norm enforcement ([Flonk & Garvey, 2025](#); [Herzallah & Al-Sharafi, 2025](#)). This challenges orthodox views of the informal sector as disorganised and of digital platforms as inherently disembedding. Instead, a process of digital re-embedding is demonstrated, where platform affordances strengthen social ties to create resilient, self-regulating networks, aligning with observations of distributed governance in digital business ecosystems ([Baumann & Leerhoff, 2022](#); [Baumann, 2022](#); [Kumar & Babu, 2025](#)).

Within the African context, this research presents a vital counter-narrative to discourses framing digitalisation purely through the lens of platform imperialism or exploitation. While acknowledging the structural constraints of the global capitalist crisis shaping the continent's economic periphery ([Banugire, 2021](#); [Nguimkeu & Okou, 2021](#)), the study highlights African women's agency in appropriating technology for communal uplift. Their activities constitute pragmatic resilience, leveraging digital tools to mitigate systemic vulnerabilities in finance and market access ([Ainebyoona, 2024](#)). As observed in Uganda's informal sector, such endeavours are linked to poverty reduction and socio-economic empowerment, a linkage this study extends into the digital realm. The Kampala case exemplifies how locally rooted platform use can foster social sustainability, a principle with relevance across the Global South ([Farace & Tarabella, 2025](#); [Thiaw, 2024](#)).

The practical and policy implications are substantial. For practitioners and policymakers, the findings argue for a supportive approach. Interventions should strengthen these organic digital-physical hybrids by improving digital literacy, ensuring affordable connectivity, and developing tailored financial products ([Callan, 2023](#); [Khusheim, 2025](#)). Regulatory frameworks must evolve to recognise and protect these emergent governance structures, potentially granting them legal

legitimacy. The observed model, where trust and social capital are paramount, offers lessons for formalising business strategies, suggesting cross-border e-commerce may hinge on similar community-based foundations ([Cassia & Magno, 2025](#); [Deng et al., 2023](#)).

Future research avenues emerge directly from this study. Longitudinal studies are needed to trace the evolution and scalability of these governance structures ([Gottschalk, 2025](#)). Comparative research across different African cities would discern how local political economies shape divergent patterns ([Alsaeed & Bashir, 2025](#)). Deeper investigation into data governance and algorithmic implications is warranted, as platforms monetise data and shape visibility through opaque algorithms ([Kant et al., 2025](#); [Maijanen, 2022](#)). Finally, research exploring the intersection of these grassroots systems with formal public governance and e-logistics could reveal pathways for inclusive urban planning ([David-West, 2022](#); [Schütte & Wulfert, 2022](#)).

In conclusion, this exploration affirms that the digital transformation of Africa's informal economies is a deeply socio-political process. The women traders of Kampala are active architects of new socio-economic orders. Their use of social commerce platforms represents a sophisticated, bottom-up response to systemic constraints, generating governance models that prioritise collective welfare and adaptive resilience. This study contributes a vital analytical lens for understanding how digitalisation can be harnessed not merely for efficiency, but for cultivating equitable and self-determined economic communities. The future of inclusive digital development may lie in recognising and supporting the innovative governance already flowering within the informal sector.

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