The Chilling Effect of State Digital Surveillance on the Shrinking Civic Tech Space

Research Report

Project: Strengthening Civic-Tech Engagement Among Youth in Mombasa Due to Digital Surveillance by the State

A Case Study of Mombasa County, Kenya

Year: 2026

Contents

Executive Summary

Digital platforms have become critical spaces for civic participation amongst young people in Mombasa County. Social media platforms, online campaigns, and digital civic engagements increasingly enable youth to express opinions, mobilize around social and political issues, and demand accountability from public institutions. However, the growth of digital civic engagement has coincided with increased awareness and concern about digital surveillance by the state, raising questions about how monitoring practices may be influencing youth participation in online civic spaces.

This study by Ajenda Kenya, in partnership with Scroll Bila Troll and YPL, examined the impact of digital surveillance on youth civic-tech engagement in Mombasa. The research was conducted as part of the project *"Strengthening civic-tech engagement amongst youth in Mombasa due to digital surveillance by the state,"* which was funded by the European Union, Deutsche Welle Akademie under the TrustLab Consortium. The survey sought to document youth experiences, perceptions, perspectives and behavioural changes related to digital surveillance, while also identifying barriers and opportunities for strengthening safe and inclusive digital civic participation.

A total of 145 youth respondents aged between 18 and 35 years participated in the survey. The findings confirm that digital platforms play a significant role in youth civic participation. 66% of respondents reported that they frequently or very frequently engage in civic or political discussions online, highlighting the importance of digital spaces as key avenues for civic engagement.

The findings also show that awareness of state digital surveillance is widespread amongst the youth, with 75% of respondents reporting that they are aware of government monitoring practices. This awareness has important implications for digital civic participation. Many respondents indicated concerns about online monitoring, intimidation, and potential consequences of expressing critical views online.

One of the most significant findings of the study is the prevalence of self-censorship among youth engaging in digital civic spaces. The finding reveals that 84% of respondents reported that they sometimes or very often censor themselves when discussing civic issues online. This suggests the presence of a strong "chilling effect," where fear of surveillance or repercussions leads individuals to limit their online expression and participation.

The research also found that digital surveillance appears to be influencing civic engagement patterns. While 38% of respondents reported increased civic-tech engagement, 37% indicated that their engagement had decreased or stopped entirely due to concerns related

to monitoring, intimidation, or other perceived risks. These findings indicate that state digital surveillance may be contributing to a gradual contraction of open civic dialogue in digital spaces.

In addition to surveillance concerns, respondents identified several barriers to safe civic-tech engagement among the youth, including fear of state retaliation, online harassment, limited knowledge of digital safety practices, and weak legal protections for digital rights.

Despite these challenges, the study also highlights the resilience of youth civic participation in Mombasa. Many respondents continue to engage actively in digital civic spaces, demonstrating the continued importance of technology as a tool for civic expression and accountability.

The findings underscore the need for stronger protections for digital rights, increased transparency in surveillance practices, and expanded digital safety capacity-building programs for youth. Strengthening these areas will be essential for ensuring that digital platforms remain open, safe, and inclusive spaces for civic engagement.

Acknowledgement.

Introduction

Digital technologies have significantly transformed how citizens participate in governance, public discourse, and civic action. In recent years, social media platforms and digital civic technologies-often referred to as civic-tech-have created new opportunities for citizens to engage in democratic processes, mobilize around social issues, and hold governments responsive and accountable. These technologies have become particularly important for young people, who are among the most active users of digital platforms and increasingly rely on them to express political views, organize advocacy initiatives, and participate in civic dialogue (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Tufekci, 2017).

In Kenya, youth have increasingly used digital platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp to engage in civic discourse, advocacy campaigns, and governance-related discussions. Digital civic engagement has played an important role in shaping political narratives and mobilizing public participation in democratic processes. For example, youth-led digital mobilization during public debates on governance and policy issues has demonstrated the growing importance of online platforms in facilitating civic participation and accountability (Freedom House, 2024).

However, the growth of digital civic engagement has coincided with the expansion of digital surveillance practices by governments across the world. Advances in digital technology have enabled states to adopt tools such as biometric identification systems, facial recognition technologies, social media monitoring systems, and communication interception technologies. While these technologies are often introduced to enhance national security and improve governance, they also raise concerns about privacy, freedom of expression, and the protection of civic space (Lyon, 2018; Zuboff, 2019).

In Kenya, the expansion of digital governance infrastructure and legal frameworks has generated debate regarding the implications of surveillance for civil liberties and digital rights. Legal instruments such as the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act (2018) and the Data Protection Act (2019) were introduced to regulate digital communication, cybersecurity, and data protection. While these frameworks aim to address emerging digital threats, civil society organizations have raised concerns that some provisions may also be used to monitor online activities and restrict digital expression in certain contexts (CIPESA, 2025).

Recent reports on civic space in Kenya have highlighted increasing pressures on civic actors, including journalists, activists, and civil society organizations operating in digital spaces. These reports note that digital surveillance and monitoring practices can contribute to environments where civic actors feel exposed to monitoring, harassment, or legal risks,

potentially affecting their willingness to participate openly in civic discourse (Defenders Coalition, 2025).

Research on surveillance and civil liberties suggests that awareness or perception of monitoring can significantly influence how individuals behave in digital environments. Scholars have documented how surveillance practices can lead to behavioural changes such as self-censorship, avoidance of sensitive political discussions, and reduced participation in civic dialogue. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the "chilling effect," where individuals voluntarily limit their speech or engagement due to fear of monitoring or potential consequences (Penney, 2017).

Studies conducted in several countries have found that digital surveillance can weaken civic participation by discouraging citizens from engaging in political conversations online. For example, research examining the impact of surveillance disclosures found that individuals who believed they were being monitored were significantly less likely to search for politically sensitive information or participate in political discussions online (Penney, 2017). Similar findings have been reported in other contexts where civic actors face perceived risks associated with digital monitoring and online expression (Lyon, 2018).

In Kenya, youth participation in formal governance processes has historically been limited due to structural, political, and institutional barriers. As a result, digital platforms have increasingly become alternative spaces where young people can express opinions, share information, and mobilize around civic issues. However, the increasing visibility of digital civic activism may also expose young people to new forms of surveillance and monitoring, potentially influencing how they participate in digital civic spaces.

Problem Statement

Despite the growing role of digital platforms in facilitating youth civic participation in Kenya, there is limited empirical evidence documenting how digital surveillance influences youth engagement in online civic spaces at the local level. While digital technologies have expanded opportunities for civic participation and political expression, increasing awareness of digital monitoring and surveillance practices may influence how individuals interact in digital civic environments.

Research has shown that the perception of surveillance can significantly alter online behaviour. Individuals who believe their online activities may be monitored are more likely to avoid discussing politically sensitive topics, limit their participation in civic debates, or withdraw from online engagement altogether (Penney, 2017; Lyon, 2018). This behavioural response is often described as the "chilling effect," where the fear of surveillance discourages individuals from exercising their rights to free expression and civic participation (Tufekci, 2017).

In Kenya, concerns about shrinking civic space have increasingly been raised by civil society organizations and human rights groups. Reports indicate that activists, journalists, and civil society actors operating in digital spaces have faced surveillance, intimidation, or legal pressures that may discourage participation in civic discourse (Defenders Coalition, 2025). These dynamics may contribute to an environment where individuals become cautious about engaging in online political discussions or advocacy activities.

At the same time, studies on youth participation in governance indicate that young people in Kenya often experience limited opportunities for meaningful engagement in formal political processes. As a result, digital platforms have become important alternative spaces where youth can express opinions, organize collective action, and participate in public debate (Freedom House, 2024). During the Gen-Z protest in 2024, digital platforms were used to educate the masses and create awareness on the contents of the Finance Bill 2024. As a result, the government retaliated by monitoring social media accounts and abducting key figures in an attempt to suppress dissent. However, when digital civic spaces are perceived to be monitored or unsafe, youth may adopt coping strategies such as self-censorship or reduced participation in civic-tech activities.

These trends suggest that surveillance, whether real or perceived, may contribute to the gradual shrinking of civic-tech spaces by discouraging open dialogue and reducing participation in digital civic engagement (CIPESA, 2025). Yet, there remains limited localized evidence documenting how youth themselves perceive these dynamics and how surveillance influences their civic participation behaviours.

Mombasa County provides an important context for examining these dynamics. As one of Kenya's major urban centres with a large youth population and active digital communities,

Mombasa offers a relevant setting for understanding how surveillance practices intersect with youth civic-tech engagement. However, there is limited systematic research documenting youth experiences, perceptions, and behavioural responses to digital surveillance in the country. Without such evidence, policymakers, civil society organizations, and digital rights advocates may lack the data necessary to design effective interventions aimed at protecting and strengthening digital civic space.

This study, therefore, sought to address this gap by examining how digital surveillance practices and perceptions influence youth civic-tech engagement in Mombasa County

Research Objectives

The overall objective of this study was to research and document the impact of digital surveillance on the shrinking civic-tech engagement among youth in Mombasa.

The survey was guided by the following specific objectives:

1. To examine the level and forms of youth engagement in digital civic spaces in Mombasa.
2. To assess youth awareness and perceptions of state digital surveillance and online monitoring practices.
3. To document lived experiences of intimidation, monitoring, or self-censorship linked to online civic engagement.
4. To analyze how digital surveillance affects youth participation, confidence, and willingness to engage in civic-tech activities.
5. To assess youth knowledge and use of digital rights, privacy, and online safety practices.
6. To identify key barriers and risks limiting safe civic-tech engagement among youth.
7. To gather youth-driven recommendations for strengthening secure, inclusive, and responsible civic-tech spaces in Mombasa.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative survey research design to assess the impact of digital surveillance on youth civic-tech engagement in Mombasa County. The survey approach was selected to enable the systematic collection of data on youth experiences, perceptions, and behavioural responses related to digital surveillance and online civic participation.

The research focused on understanding how state digital surveillance practices influence youth engagement in digital civic spaces, including social media platforms, online advocacy campaigns, and civic-tech initiatives.

Study Population and Target Group
The study targeted youth aged between 18 and 35 years residing in Mombasa County. This demographic group was selected because young people represent the most active users of digital platforms and play a central role in shaping online civic engagement. The survey particularly targeted youth who are active or interested in civic engagement within digital spaces. This included student leaders in universities and colleges, civic-tech activists and online mobilizers, human rights defenders, digital content creators and creatives, grassroots community organizers and general social media users engaged in civic discussions. The study also captured perspectives from youth involved in civil society initiatives and grassroots activism.

Sampling Approach
A non-probability purposive sampling approach was used to reach youth actively engaged in digital civic spaces within Mombasa County. Respondents were recruited through youth networks, civil society organizations, digital civic communities, and social media platforms.

This approach was appropriate given the study's focus on individuals who have direct experience with digital civic engagement and are therefore more likely to have encountered or observed digital surveillance dynamics.

Data Collection
Data was collected through a structured online survey questionnaire. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and open-ended questions designed to capture quantitative data as well as contextual insights into youth experiences. The survey instrument covered several thematic areas, including demographic characteristics of respondents, levels and forms of civic-tech engagement, awareness and perceptions of digital surveillance, lived experiences of monitoring, intimidation, or harassment, behavioural changes in civic engagement due to state digital surveillance, knowledge and use of digital rights and online safety practices, barriers to safe civic-tech engagement and youth recommendations for strengthening digital civic space. The survey was distributed through social media platforms, student platforms and youth networks within Mombasa County.

Sample Size
A total of 145 valid responses were collected and analyzed. The sample included respondents from different age groups, genders, and civic engagement backgrounds within the youth population of Mombasa County.

Data Analysis
The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques to identify patterns and trends across responses. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarize key variables such as engagement levels, awareness of surveillance, and self-censorship behaviours. The analysis also incorporated insights from open-ended

responses to provide contextual understanding of youth perceptions and experiences related to digital surveillance and civic-tech engagement.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical principles for research involving human participants. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study before providing consent. Respondents were assured that their participation was voluntary, they could skip any question they were not comfortable answering, their responses would remain confidential and that data would be used solely for research and advocacy purposes. No personally identifiable information was collected during the survey process, ensuring the privacy and safety of respondents.

Results and Discussion

1. Respondent Demographics

A total of 145 youth respondents participated in the survey, representing diverse backgrounds across Mombasa County. The age distribution shows that the majority of respondents fall within the 24–29 age group (51%), followed by 18–23 years (31%), 30–35 years (16%), and above 35 years (2%). This indicates that the survey largely captures the perspectives of Gen-Z and young millennials, who are the most active users of digital platforms and the primary demographic shaping civic-tech spaces.

Figure 1; Age Distribution

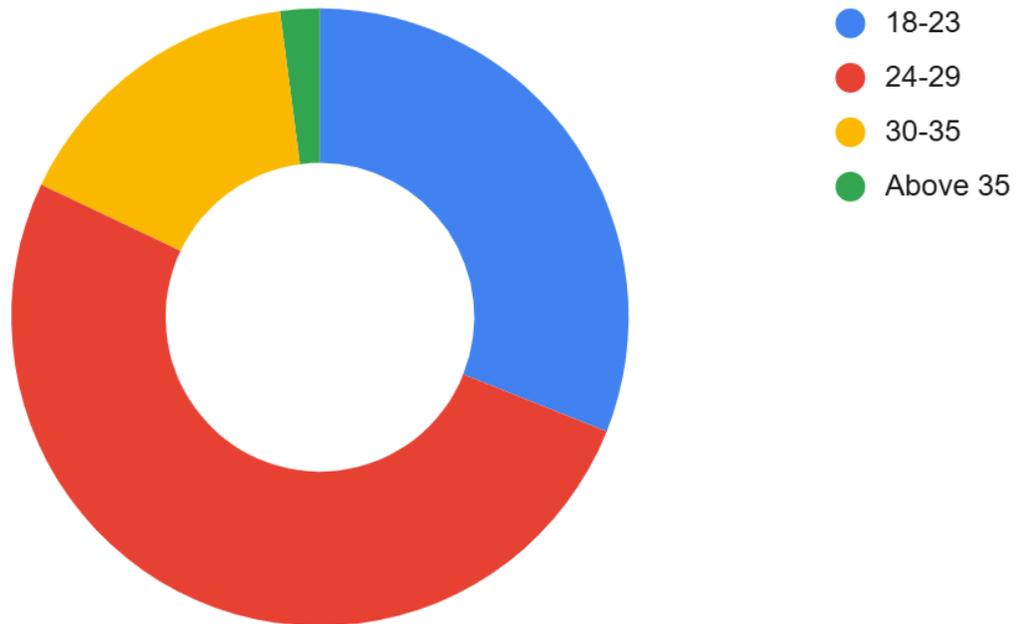The gender distribution was balanced, with 50.3% female respondents and 49.7% male respondents. This parity strengthens the reliability of the dataset by ensuring that insights reflect experiences across gender groups. The demographic composition confirms that the study successfully reached its intended target population: youth actively participating or interested in digital civic engagement within Mombasa.
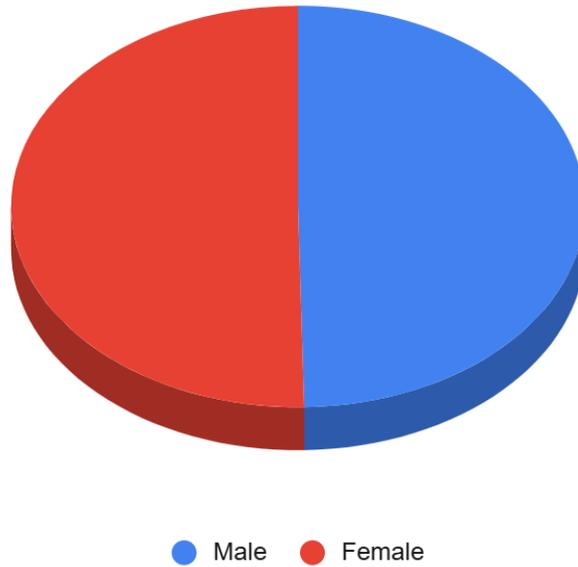
Gender

Male ● Female ●

2. Levels and Forms of Civic-Tech Engagement

Findings reveal that digital platforms have become a central avenue for youth civic participation. 66% of respondents reported engaging either frequently or very frequently in online civic or political discussions, while 25% reported occasional participation, with only 8% indicating rare engagement.
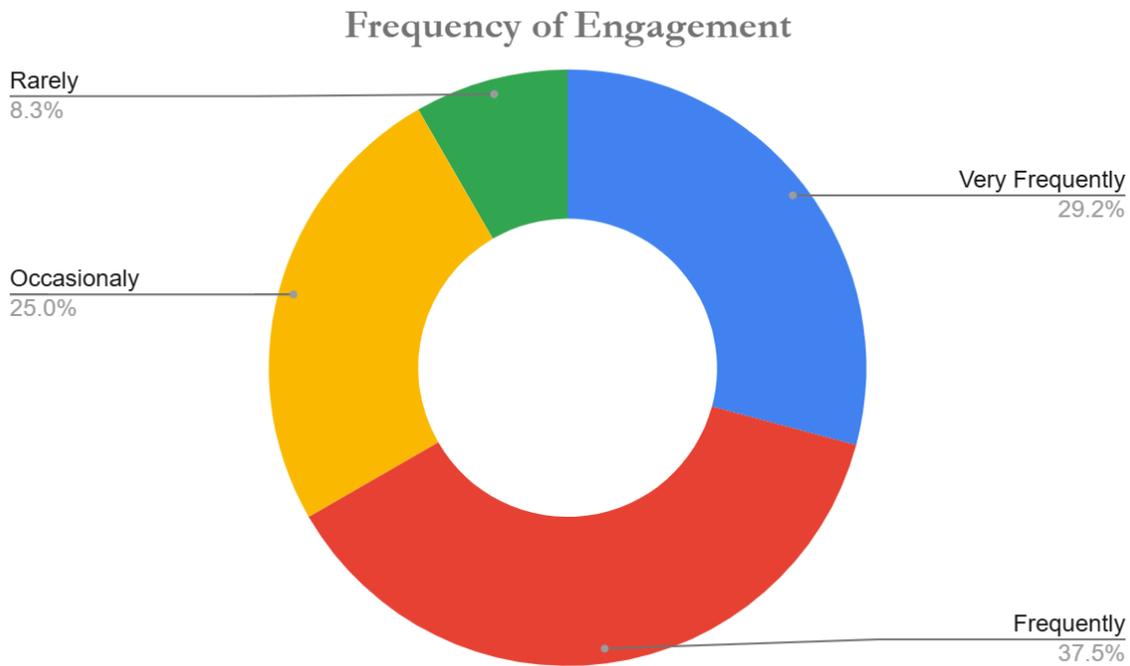
Frequency of Engagement

- Rarely 8.3%
- Occasionaly 25.0%
- Very Frequently 29.2%
- Frequently 37.5%

Figure 3; Frequency of Engagement

These results demonstrate that digital civic spaces—such as social media platforms, online campaigns, and messaging groups—serve as important platforms for youth political expression and civic participation. In contexts where formal civic participation channels may be inaccessible or perceived as ineffective, digital spaces provide youth with opportunities to mobilize, express opinions, share information, and advocate for accountability. The survey results indicate that WhatsApp is the dominant platform for civic-tech engagement among youth, with 84.8% of respondents reporting that they actively use it to discuss civic or political issues. This reflects WhatsApp's central role in Kenya as a primary communication and mobilization tool due to its accessibility, affordability, and encrypted messaging features.

Other widely used platforms include Facebook (43.4%), Instagram (42.8%), and X/Twitter (41.4%), suggesting that youth engagement spans across both traditional social networks and microblogging platforms. A smaller proportion (18.6%) reported using blogs and websites for civic participation. This suggests that most civic discourse occurs in informal social media environments rather than structured digital civic platforms.

Youth civic-tech engagement is largely discursive and advocacy-based, with many respondents participating in digital conversations and campaigns. 66.9% reported using these platforms to comment and share civic issues online, while 51% share political content. 46.9% use these platforms to participate in online campaigns or hashtags
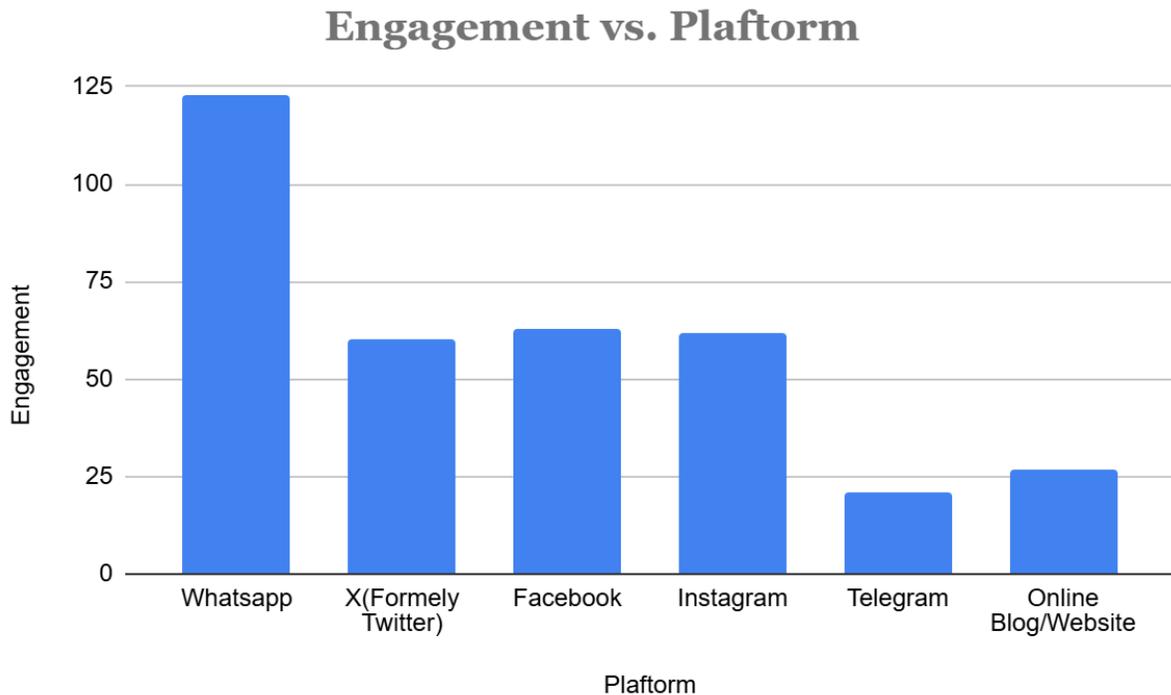
Engagement vs. Plaftorm

Figure 4; Engagement vs. Platform

However, the strong presence of youth in online civic discussions also increases their exposure to surveillance, monitoring, and digital threats. As a result, digital civic engagement operates within a complex environment where opportunities for participation coexist with emerging risks.

3. Awareness and Perceptions of State Digital Surveillance

The survey reveals high levels of awareness regarding state digital surveillance practices among youth in Mombasa. 75% of respondents indicated that they were either very aware or somewhat aware of government digital surveillance practices, while 21% reported being slightly aware, and only 4% indicated no awareness. The most recognized forms of digital surveillance include social media monitoring with seventy-eight percent (78.6%), Online content monitoring (70.3%) and Phone tracking (51.7%). The least recognized forms were Biometric systems (34.5%) and Facial recognition technologies (26.2%). This awareness of digital surveillance by the state may contribute to self-censorship and reduced civic participation online.

The survey also revealed that digital surveillance affects the freedom of expression among youth in Mombasa. 55% of the respondents indicated that surveillance affects freedom of expression to a great deal while 37% indicated that surveillance affects freedom of expression to some extent.
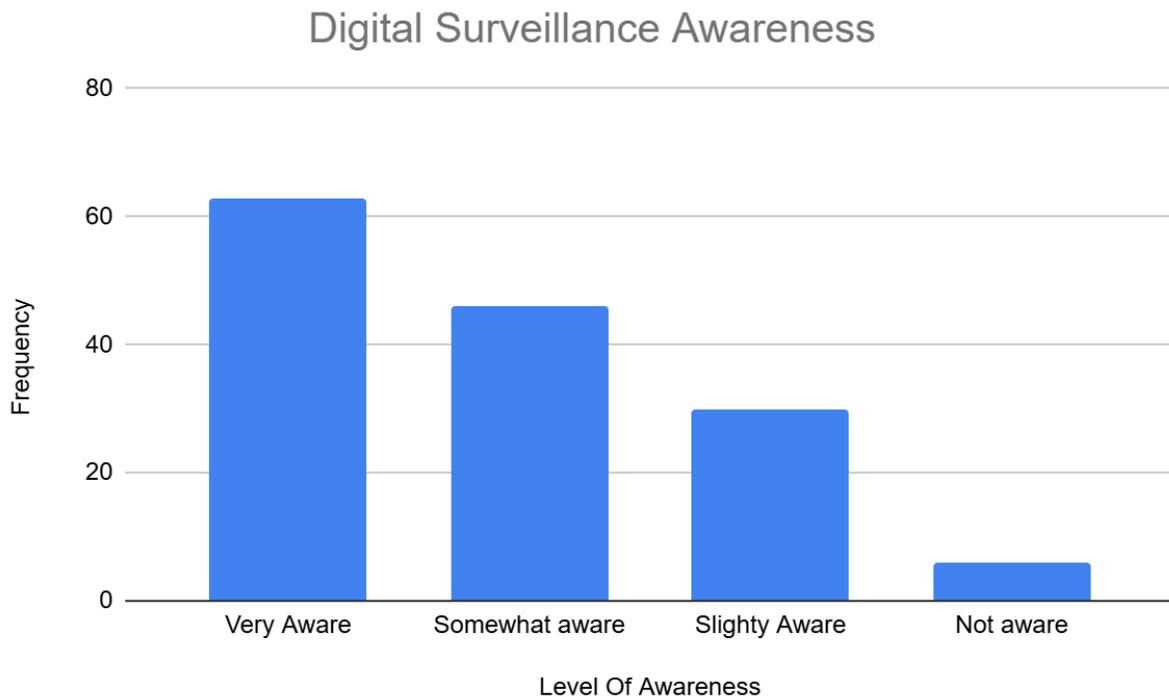
Digital Surveillance Awareness

Figure 5; Digital Surveillance Awareness

This widespread awareness suggests that digital surveillance has become a prominent topic within youth civic spaces and online discussions. The high awareness levels may be attributed to increasing public discourse surrounding digital monitoring, as well as experiences shared by activists, journalists, and civic actors who have reported surveillance-related concerns.

From a civic engagement perspective, this awareness is significant because perceptions of surveillance can influence how individuals behave online. When individuals believe that their activities are being monitored, they may adjust their communication patterns, reduce engagement, or avoid discussing sensitive civic issues altogether. Thus, awareness of surveillance does not merely reflect knowledge of state practices; it also shapes the psychological environment within which digital civic participation occurs.

4. Lived Experiences of Surveillance and Fear of Monitoring

Although not all respondents reported direct experiences with surveillance or intimidation, the survey indicates that perceived risk plays a significant role in shaping civic behaviour. 18% of respondents indicated experiencing online harassment, monitoring, and intimidation due to their civic engagement. One respondent said that during the 2025 finance bill, their WhatsApp group was being monitored by the government. They were forced to switch off their phones and use VPNs for a whole week.

Another respondent said, "*During an attempt to online analyze and discuss a blogger's defilement story, I became cautious about possible digital surveillance and backlash. To*

protect my privacy and safety, I refrained from using my personal account and instead engaged through a pseudonymous account. This helped me continue participating in the discussion while minimizing personal risk online". Similarly, another respondent shared their experience. *"During the 2024 public discussions surrounding the Finance Bill, I was advised to refrain from expressing my views on my social media platforms. A similar situation occurred when I was actively analyzing and discussing an issue involving a blogger in Mombasa who had made accusations against the governor; this also resulted in a serious warning to avoid posting about it publicly. As a result, I became more cautious in how I engaged online and occasionally used alternative accounts to continue expressing my perspectives while minimizing direct exposure."*

In addition, many respondents reported fear of potential consequences such as being monitored by authorities, experiencing online harassment or threats, having their accounts restricted or flagged and facing possible legal repercussions for online activism. 50% of the respondents feared intimidation, while 49% feared their social media accounts being blocked. 43% of the respondents feared police surveillance and monitoring, while 31% feared being summoned or being abducted by the state. These fears demonstrate how state digital surveillance contributes to psychological deterrence, discouraging youth from freely expressing civic views online.
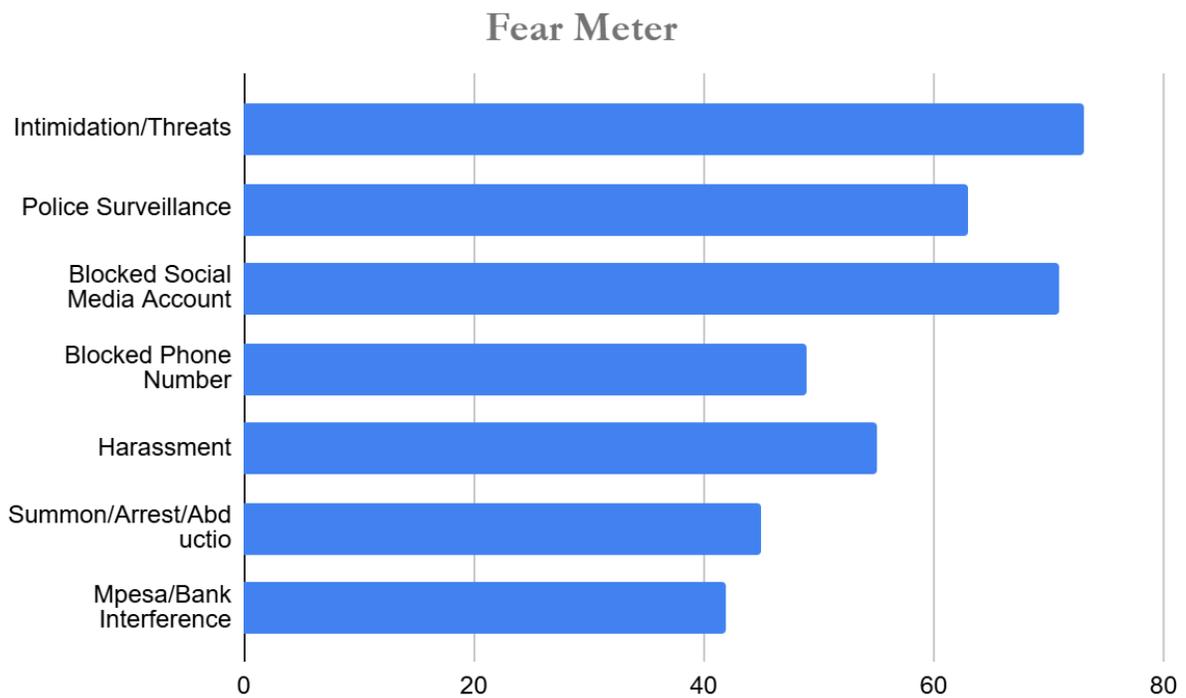

Figure 6; Fear Meter

These fears reflect a broader climate in which youth perceive digital civic engagement as increasingly risky. Even where direct incidents are limited, the perception of surveillance alone can influence behaviour and participation patterns. Such perceptions contribute to

the emergence of a "chilling effect," where individuals voluntarily limit their speech or engagement to avoid potential consequences.

5. Impact of Surveillance on Civic-Tech Engagement

One of the central objectives of the study was to assess whether digital surveillance is affecting youth participation in civic-tech activities. The findings show mixed but significant impacts. When asked if digital surveillance has led to the shrinking civic tech space in Mombasa, 66% felt that digital surveillance has led to the shrinking civic tech space in Mombasa. When asked how it has contributed, one respondent said, "*By creating fear of monitoring and possible repercussions when discussing governance or accountability issues online. As a result, many young people practice self-censorship, avoid engaging in civic discussions, or hesitate to develop digital tools that address sensitive public matters. This limits innovation and reduces active participation in civic tech initiatives.*"

When asked how their civic-tech engagement had changed over time, 38% reported that their engagement had increased, while 33% reported that their engagement had decreased. 25% reported no change, and 4% reported that they had stopped engaging completely. These results highlight the dual dynamics shaping digital civic engagement.

Change in Civic Tech Engagement Over Time

- Remained the same 24.8%
- Increased 37.9%
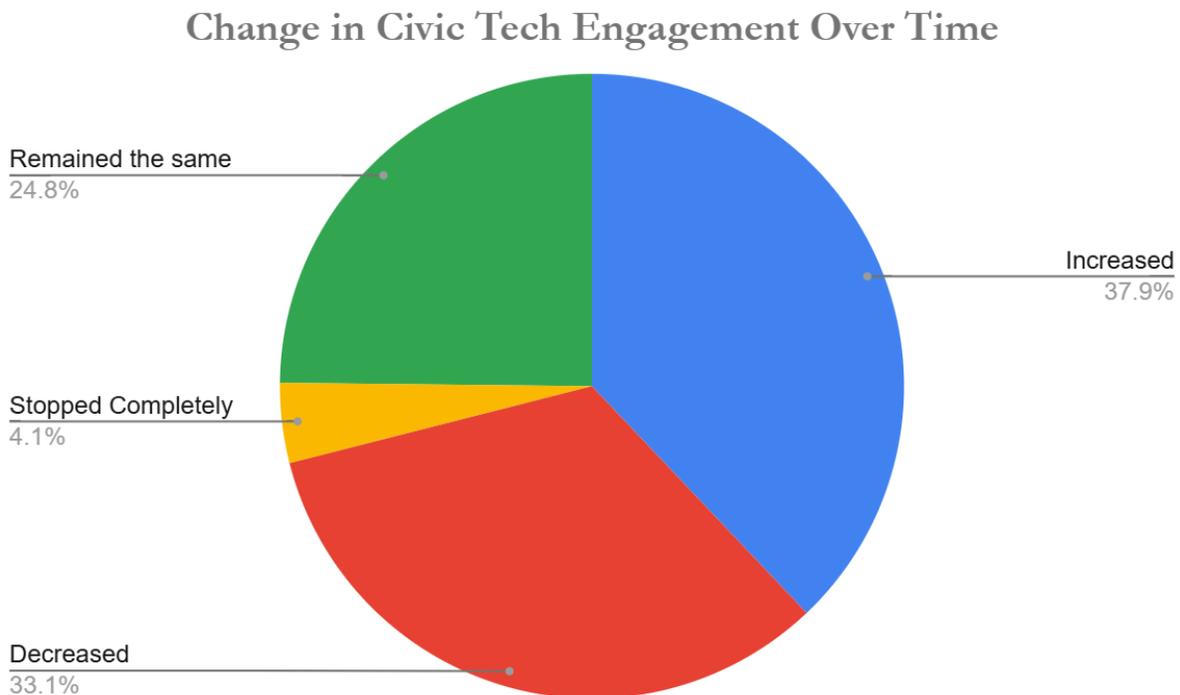- Stopped Completely 4.1%
- Decreased 33.1%

Figure 7; Change in Civic Tech Engagement over time

On one hand, some youth demonstrate resilience and continue to participate actively in digital civic spaces despite perceived surveillance risks. For these individuals, digital

platforms remain powerful tools for mobilization, advocacy, and accountability. On the other hand, a significant proportion of respondents have reduced or discontinued their participation due to concerns related to surveillance, harassment, or fear of retaliation. This indicates that surveillance practices and perceptions can discourage engagement and reduce the vibrancy of digital civic spaces.

When asked to indicate reasons for their decline in engagement, 55% of the respondents attributed it to fear of being abducted or arrested, while 51% attributed it to fear of being monitored by authorities. 37% of the respondents attributed it to a lack of knowledge of digital skills and safety.

Overall, the findings suggest that digital surveillance is contributing to a partial contraction of civic-tech participation, rather than a complete collapse of digital activism.

6. Self-Censorship and the Chilling Effect

The most striking finding of the survey relates to self-censorship among youth when discussing civic issues online. The results show that 43% of respondents reported self-censoring very often when engaging online, while 41% reported self-censoring sometimes. 13% reported rarely self-censoring, while only 3% reported never self-censoring
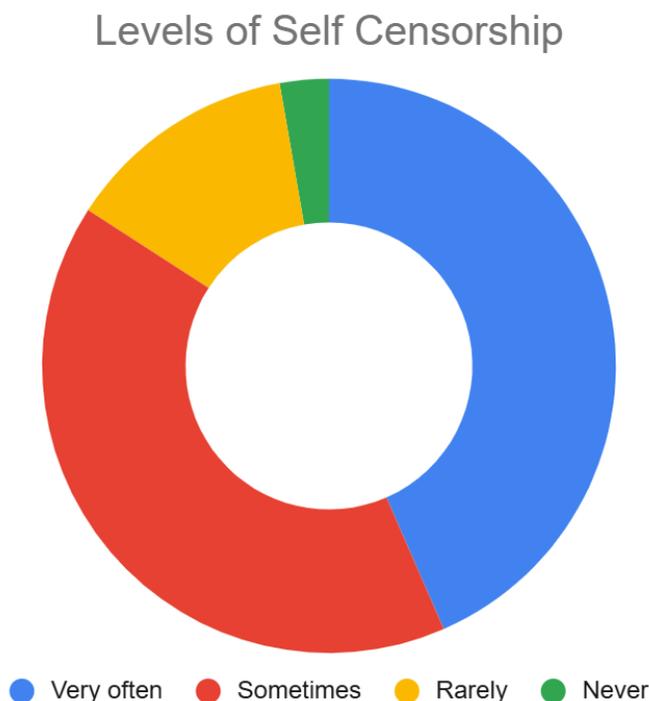

Figure 8; Levels of Self-Censorship

In total, 84% of respondents indicated that they self-censor when discussing civic issues online. This finding strongly suggests that digital surveillance—whether real or

perceived—is contributing to a significant chilling effect within civic-tech spaces. Digital surveillance has created fear and self-censorship among young people. Most of the youths avoid openly engaging in civic-tech discussions, advocacy, or online accountability spaces because they worry about being monitored, profiled, or facing consequences. This reduces participation, innovation, and open collaboration within the civic tech space.

Self-censorship represents a subtle yet powerful form of civic space restriction. Unlike direct repression, it operates through psychological pressure, leading individuals to voluntarily limit their participation due to fear of state retaliation. As a result, digital civic spaces may appear active on the surface while simultaneously experiencing reduced openness, critical debate, and democratic dialogue.

7. Digital Rights Awareness and Safety Capacity

The survey also examined youth awareness of digital rights and their ability to protect themselves online. While some respondents indicated familiarity with digital rights concepts such as privacy, data protection, and freedom of expression online, the findings suggest that knowledge and practical use of digital safety tools remain uneven. 45% of the respondents were very familiar with digital rights and freedom of expression, while 35% were moderately familiar.

Digital Rights Awareness

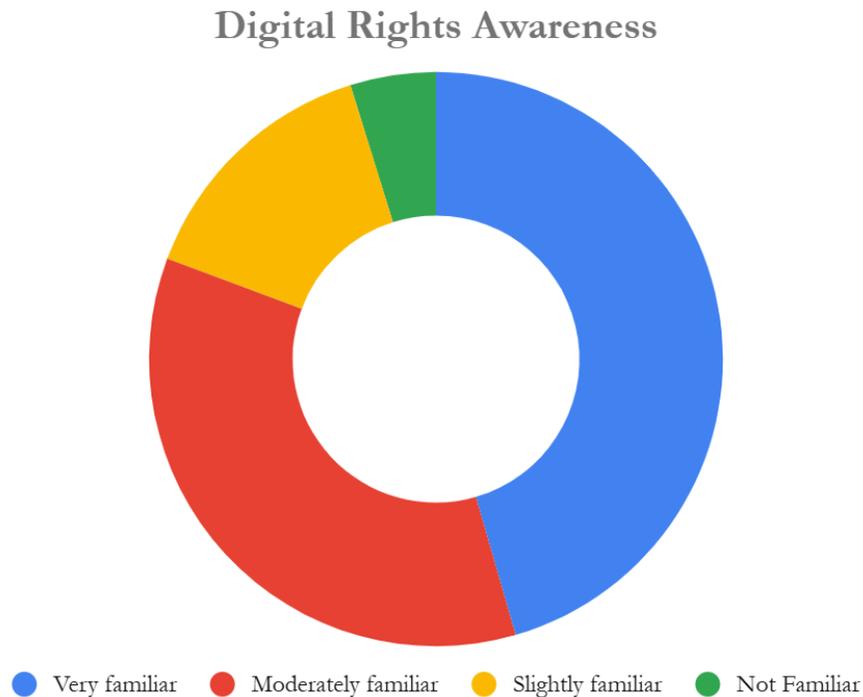● Very familiar   ● Moderately familiar   ● Slightly familiar   ● Not Familiar

Figure 9; Digital Rights Awareness

Some respondents reported using digital security practices such as strong passwords and two-factor authentication, encrypted messaging platforms and secure browsers or VPNs. 83% of the respondents confirmed using Two-Factor Authentification (2FA) while 37%

confirmed using encrypted messaging apps 31% percent of the respondents confirmed using secure browsers to navigate the digital space. However, a significant number indicated limited knowledge or a lack of consistent use of these tools.
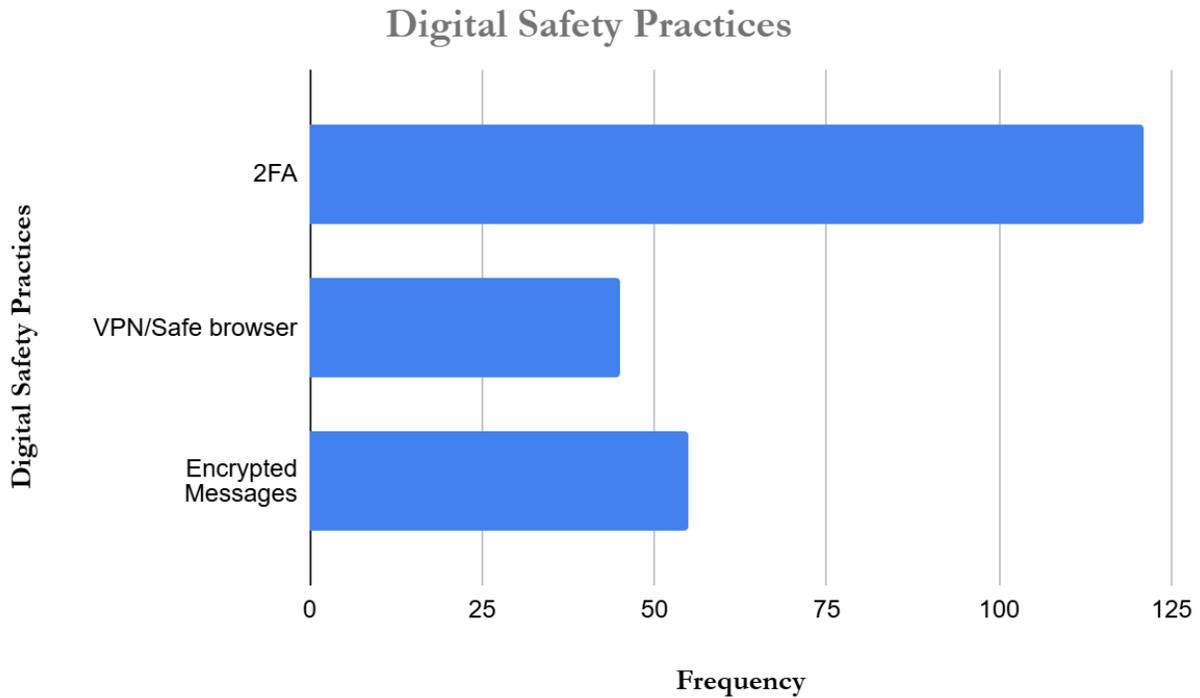
Figure 10; Digital Safety Practices

This gap highlights the need for capacity-building initiatives focused on digital security and rights awareness, particularly for youth engaged in civic-tech activism.

8. Barriers to Safe Civic-Tech Engagement

Respondents identified several key barriers limiting safe and effective participation in digital civic spaces. 56% percent of the respondents felt that digital surveillance is the leading barrier to safe civic-tech engagement, while 55% percent of the respondents felt that fear of state retaliation is a barrier. Lack of digital literacy skills was identified as a barrier by 47% percent of the respondents, while 43% percent of the respondents identified online harassment as a barrier.

Barriers to Safe Civic Tech Engagement

Figure 11: Barriers to Safe Civic Tech Engagement

These barriers collectively contribute to a shrinking civic-tech environment where participation is shaped not only by access to technology but also by perceived risks and institutional protections.

Policy and Advocacy Recommendations

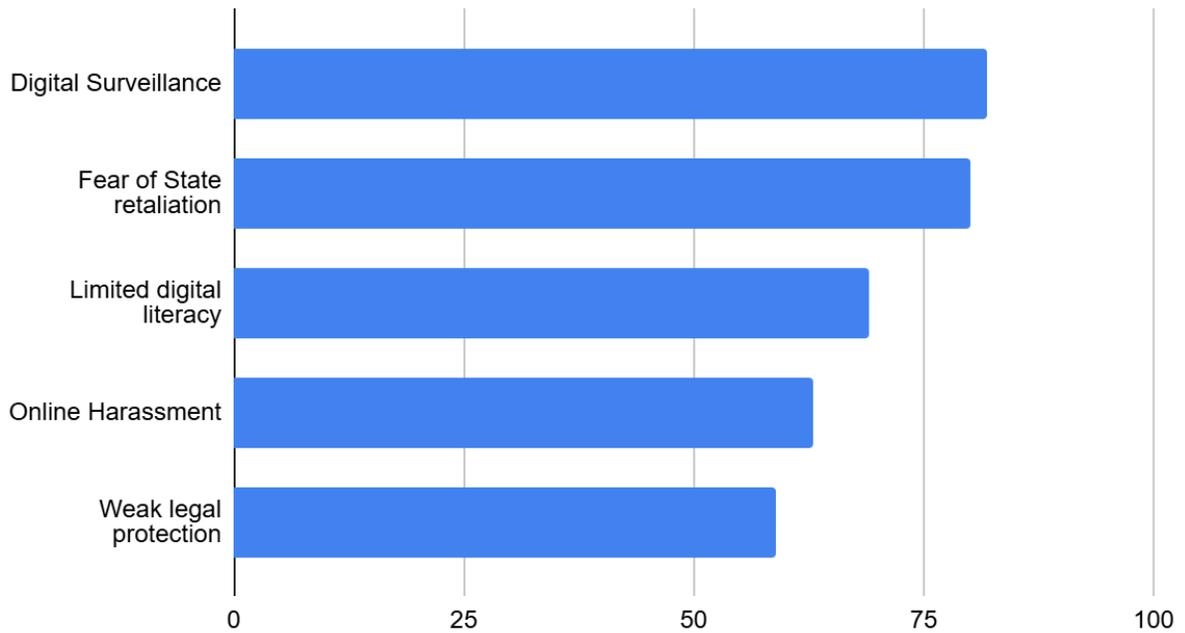The findings of this study highlight the need for coordinated action by government institutions, civil society organizations, technology stakeholders, and youth groups to ensure that digital platforms remain safe and open spaces for civic engagement. The following recommendations are proposed to strengthen civic-tech participation while safeguarding digital rights among youth in Mombasa.

1. Strengthen Legal and Institutional Safeguards for Digital Rights

Government institutions should strengthen the protection of digital rights by ensuring the effective implementation of existing legal frameworks, such as the Data Protection Act (2019) and other laws governing digital governance. Clear safeguards should be established to prevent the misuse of digital surveillance technologies against civic actors.

Independent oversight mechanisms should also be strengthened to ensure that digital monitoring practices are lawful, proportionate, and consistent with constitutional protections of freedom of expression and privacy.

2. Improve Transparency and Accountability in Digital Surveillance Practices

Greater transparency in the use of surveillance technologies is necessary to build public trust and reduce fear-driven disengagement from civic participation. The Directorate of Criminal Investigations should provide clear information on the scope, purpose, and legal basis of digital monitoring activities. Transparency reports, public oversight mechanisms, and multi-stakeholder dialogues can help ensure that surveillance practices do not undermine democratic participation.

3. Expand Digital Literacy Training for Youth

Civil society organizations, digital rights groups, and educational institutions should invest in digital literacy capacity-building programs for youth. These programs should focus on practical skills such as protecting personal data online, secure communication practices, recognizing digital threats and misinformation that have been weaponized to justify digital surveillance by the state, and safe use of social media platforms for civic engagement.. Strengthening digital safety skills will empower youth to engage confidently and responsibly in civic-tech activities.

4. Establish Safe and Inclusive Civic-Tech Spaces

Organizations working on youth empowerment and civic participation should create safe environments—both physical and digital—where young people can engage in civic dialogue without fear of intimidation or surveillance. This may include civic-tech innovation hubs, youth civic dialogue platforms, online communities for safe digital activism and collaborative spaces for youth-led digital advocacy initiatives. Such platforms can strengthen democratic participation while fostering innovation in civic-tech solutions.

5. Strengthen Legal Support Systems for Digital Civic Actors

Civil society organizations should develop mechanisms to support individuals who face threats or legal challenges due to their online civic engagement. This may include access to legal aid and digital rights defense networks, rapid response mechanisms for activists facing harassment or intimidation and documentation of digital rights violations. These support systems will help reduce the risks associated with digital civic participation.

6. Promote Youth Participation in Digital Governance Policy

Youth voices should be actively included in policy discussions related to digital governance, surveillance technologies, and internet regulation. Policymakers should create structured opportunities for youth participation in national and county-level digital policy dialogues, civic-tech innovation forums and consultations on data protection and digital rights frameworks. Engaging youth in these processes ensures that policies affecting digital civic spaces reflect the lived realities and needs of young people.

7. Support Continued Research and Evidence Generation

Further research is needed to deepen the understanding of how digital surveillance affects civic participation in Kenya. Future studies should explore regional variations, sector-specific impacts, and the long-term implications of surveillance practices on democratic engagement. Continued research and documentation will help strengthen advocacy efforts and inform evidence-based policymaking aimed at protecting civic space.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the impact of digital surveillance on youth civic-tech engagement in Mombasa County, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings.

First, the study employed a non-probability purposive sampling approach, which targeted youth who are active or interested in digital civic engagement. While this approach was appropriate for capturing the experiences of individuals most likely to encounter

surveillance dynamics, the findings may not fully represent the perspectives of all youth in Mombasa County, particularly those who are less active in digital civic spaces.

Second, the data collected relied on self-reported perceptions and experiences of respondents. As a result, some responses may reflect perceived or anticipated risks rather than verified incidents of surveillance or intimidation. However, perceptions themselves are important because they shape behavioural responses such as self-censorship and reduced civic participation.

Third, the study was conducted using an online survey instrument, which may have limited participation among youth with restricted internet access or lower digital literacy. Consequently, the sample may slightly overrepresent digitally connected youth populations.

Fourth, the survey primarily focused on quantitative data, with limited qualitative exploration of respondents' experiences. While open-ended questions provided useful contextual insights, future research could benefit from in-depth interviews or focus group discussions to better understand the lived experiences of youth navigating digital surveillance.

Despite these limitations, the study provides important preliminary evidence on the relationship between digital surveillance and youth civic-tech engagement in Mombasa. The findings offer a valuable foundation for further research, advocacy, and policy dialogue on digital rights and civic space.

Conclusion

Drawing on the evidence generated through this study, it is clear that digital civic spaces in Mombasa County remain both critical and contested arenas for youth participation. While digital platforms continue to enable access to civic discourse, mobilization, and accountability processes, the findings demonstrate that this participation is increasingly shaped by perceived and experienced risks associated with digital surveillance.

The study establishes a strong correlation between awareness of surveillance and behavioural adaptation, particularly through widespread self-censorship and cautious engagement. With 84% of respondents reporting some level of self-censorship and a significant proportion indicating reduced or discontinued participation, the data confirms the presence of a systemic chilling effect within civic-tech spaces. This trend does not suggest a complete withdrawal from digital engagement, but rather a qualitative shift in how youth participate—less openly, less critically, and often under perceived threat.

Importantly, the findings highlight a dual dynamic. On one hand, youth in Mombasa demonstrate resilience and continued reliance on digital platforms as tools for civic expression. On the other hand, surveillance-related fears—ranging from monitoring and harassment to potential legal repercussions—are contributing to a gradual constriction of open civic-tech dialogue and innovation within civic-tech ecosystems. This dynamic presents a significant risk to democratic participation, particularly in contexts where digital platforms serve as primary alternative spaces for youth engagement.

The study further underscores that digital surveillance is not operating in isolation, but interacts with other structural barriers, including limited digital safety capacity, uneven awareness of digital rights, and insufficient institutional safeguards. These compounded factors create an environment where youth participation is not only enabled by technology but also constrained by governance and protection gaps.

From a development and governance perspective, these findings point to an urgent need for multi-stakeholder intervention. Ensuring that digital civic spaces remain open, inclusive, and secure will require strengthened legal protections, enhanced transparency and accountability in surveillance practices, and sustained investment in youth digital resilience. Without such interventions, there is a risk that digital civic spaces—once seen as democratizing tools—may increasingly become regulated, restricted, or self-limited environments.

Ultimately, this study contributes critical localized evidence to the broader discourse on digital rights and shrinking civic-tech space in Kenya. It reinforces the need to reposition digital civic engagement not only as a technological issue, but as a governance, rights, and development priority. Safeguarding these spaces is essential to ensuring that youth can continue to participate meaningfully in democratic processes, both online and offline.

Annexes

Survey Questions

SECTION A: Consent

1. Do you consent to participate in this study on civic-tech engagement and digital surveillance?

   - ○ ☐ Yes (Continue)
   - ○ ☐ No (End the questionnaire)

SECTION B: Demographic Information

2. Age:

   - ○ ☐ 18–24
   - ○ ☐ 25–29
   - ○ ☐ 30–35
   - ○ ☐ Above 35

3. Gender:

   - ○ ☐ Male
   - ○ ☐ Female
   - ○ ☐ Non-binary
   - ○ Prefer not to say

4. Select Your Sub-county:
5. Select your (Ward)
6. Primary Occupation:

   - ○ ☐ Student
   - ○ ☐ Employed
   - ○ ☐ Self-employed
   - ○ ☐ Unemployed
   - ○ ☐ Creative (e.g., poet, designer, blogger
   - ○ ☐ Other: _____

7. Do you identify as: (Select all that apply)

   - ○ ☐ Civic-tech activist
   - ○ ☐ Content creator / digital creative
   - ○ ☐ Community organizer
   - ○ ☐ Human rights defender

- ○ ☐ Social media user (general)
- ○ Journalist
- ○ ☐ Other: _____

SECTION C: Levels and Forms of Civic Engagement

7. Which digital platforms do you actively use for civic engagement? (Select all)

   - ○ ☐ Facebook
   - ○ ☐ X (Twitter)
   - ○ ☐ Instagram
   - ○ ☐ TikTok
   - ○ ☐ WhatsApp/Telegram groups
   - ○ ☐ YouTube
   - ○ ☐ Online blogs/websites
   - ○ ☐ Others(Specify

8. How frequently do you engage in civic or political discussions online?

   - ○ ☐ Very Frequently
   - ○ ☐ Frequently
   - ○ ☐ Occasionally
   - ○ ☐ Rarely
   - ○ ☐ Never

9. What type of civic-tech activities do you participate in? (Select all that apply)

   - ○ ☐ Commenting on & sharing civic issues
   - ○ ☐ Commenting & sharing Political content
   - ○ ☐ Participating in online campaigns/hashtags
   - ○ ☐ Organizing or mobilizing for civic action
   - ○ ☐ Monitoring & Reporting rights violations
   - ○ ☐ Other (Specify)

SECTION D: Awareness and Perceptions of Digital Surveillance

10. How aware are you of government digital surveillance practices in Kenya?

- ● ☐ Very aware
- ● ☐ Somewhat aware
- ● ☐ Slightly aware
- ● ☐ Not aware

11. Which forms of digital surveillance by the state are you aware of? (Select all that apply)

- ● ☐ Social media monitoring

- ☐ Phone tracking
  ☐ Facial recognition technology
- ☐ Biometric data systems (Huduma/Maisha Namba)
- ☐ Online content monitoring
- ☐ other (specify)

12. In your opinion, how much does digital surveillance by the state affect the freedom of expression online among the youth in Mombasa?

☐ A great deal

☐ To some extent

☐ Very little

☐ Not at all

SECTION E: Lived Experiences of state digital Surveillance among the youth in Mombasa.

13. Have you personally experienced the following due to your online civic-tech engagement? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Intimidation or threats
- ☐ Police/surveillance monitoring
- ☐ Phone number being blocked
- ☐ M-Pesa or bank account interference
- ☐ Social media account being locked/flagged
- ☐ Harassment or stalking
- ☐ Summons, Arrest, or abduction attempt
- ☐ Other (specify)

14. Have you personally feared the following due to your online civic-tech engagement? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Intimidation or threats
- ☐ Police/surveillance monitoring
- ☐ Phone number being blocked
- ☐ M-Pesa or bank account interference
- ☐ Social media account being locked/flagged
- ☐ Harassment or stalking
- ☐ Summons, Arrest, or abduction attempt
- ☐ Other (specify)

15. Do you personally know anyone who has faced threats, intimidation, or arrest because of online civic activism in Mombasa?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

16. If Yes, give more information about their experience including how you navigate the digital surveillance by the state

17. How has awareness of state surveillance affected your willingness to engage online?

- ☐ I engage more
- ☐ No change
- ☐ I engage less
- ☐ I stopped engaging entirely

SECTION F: Impact of Surveillance on Civic-Tech Engagement among the youth in Mombasa

18. Compared to the past, how has your civic-tech engagement changed?

- ☐ Increased
- ☐ Remained the same
- ☐ Decreased
- ☐ Stopped completely

19. If your engagement has reduced, what are the main reasons for the reduced or discontinued engagement? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Fear of being monitored by the state
- ☐ Fear of arrest or harassment by the state
- ☐ Lack of digital safety knowledge
- ☐ Distrust in government institutions
- ☐ Pressure from family or community
- ☐ Loss of motivation
- ☐ Other: Specify _____

20. To what extent do you self-censor when discussing civic issues online?

- ☐ Very often
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Rarely

- ☐ Never

21. Do you think digital surveillance by the state has led to the shrinking of the civic tech space in Mombasa?

Yes

No,

22. If yes, to what extent?

23. In your opinion, how has digital surveillance by the state impacted the shrinking civic tech space in Mombasa? (Short answer- Open-ended)

SECTION F: Digital Rights, Safety, and Capacity

24. How familiar are you with digital rights (privacy, data protection, freedom of expression online)?

- ☐ Very familiar
- ☐ Moderately familiar
- ☐ Slightly familiar
- ☐ Not familiar

25. Which digital safety practices do you use? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Strong passwords / 2FA
- ☐ Encrypted messaging apps
- ☐ VPNs or secure browsers
- ☐ None
- ☐ Not sure

26. How confident do you feel engaging in civic-tech activities safely online?

- ☐ Very confident
- ☐ Somewhat confident
- ☐ Not confident
- ☐ Not confident at all

SECTION G: Barriers and Risks to Civic-Tech Engagement

27. What do you consider the biggest barriers to safe civic-tech engagement in Mombasa? (Select up to three)

- ☐ Digital surveillance by the state
- ☐ Fear of state retaliation
- ☐ Limited digital literacy
- ☐ Weak legal protection
- ☐ Online harassment
- ☐ Lack of safe civic spaces

28. In your view, which groups of youth are most at risk when engaging in civic-tech?

SECTION I: Recommendations and Future Interventions

29. What interventions would best strengthen safe civic-tech engagement for youth in Mombasa? (Select all that apply)

☐ Digital safety training

☐ Civic-tech hubs or maskani spaces

☐ Legal aid and protection

☐ Media and advocacy support

☐ Research and documentation

☐ Policy reform

30. What recommendations would you give to policymakers to protect youth digital civic engagement?

31. What recommendations would you give to civil society to protect youth digital civic engagement?

32. What general recommendation would you give to strengthen the shrinking civic tech space?