

Social Media as a Tool for Promoting Transparency and Participation in Local Governance: A Case Study of Suame Municipality

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Keyword:</p> <p>Local governance; Local development; Participation; Social media; Transparency</p>	<p>This study examines the role of social media in promoting transparency and citizen participation in local governance, using Suame Municipality in Ghana as a case study. While social media has become a transformative tool in democratic governance, its adoption and effective use at the local government level remain uneven. This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews with 12 municipal officials and 25 residents, complemented by content analysis of the Suame Municipal Assembly’s Facebook and WhatsApp pages. Findings revealed that Facebook was the dominant platform, used by 78% of respondents to access municipal information, while WhatsApp groups facilitated localized community updates. Although 62% of participants reported that social media enhanced transparency through timely dissemination of information, only 28% believed it significantly improved accountability, as citizen feedback often went unaddressed. Participation levels were highest among youth (71% of respondents aged 18–35 engaged actively), whereas older residents remained largely passive consumers. Challenges identified include inconsistent updates, digital divides, and perceived political bias in Assembly communications. The study concludes that while social media has improved information flow, its potential for two-way engagement and accountability is not effective. Recommendations include strengthening digital literacy, institutionalizing response mechanisms, and ensuring political neutrality in online communication. The findings contribute to scholarship on e-governance and provide practical guidance for enhancing participatory local governance in Ghana.</p>

INTRODUCTION

Social media has emerged as a transformative force in modern governance, reshaping the relationship between citizens and government institutions. Platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram have created new opportunities for transparency, accountability, and participatory decision-making (Gao & Lee, 2017; Mansoor, 2021; Park et al., 2016). In Ghana, while national-level institutions have adopted social media to varying degrees, local governments continue to face challenges in leveraging these platforms for meaningful citizen engagement. Suame Municipality, one of the newest urban municipalities in the Ashanti Region, presents a unique case for exploring the role of social media in enhancing transparency and citizen participation.

The growing body of literature highlights social media’s capacity to enhance transparency and foster citizen participation in governance. Bertot et al. (2010) argue that social media

facilitates openness by providing real-time access to government decisions, thereby reducing information asymmetry (Bertot et al., 2010). Bonson et al. (2017) demonstrate how municipalities in Europe have successfully used Facebook to increase public engagement (Bonsón et al., 2017). In Ghana, found that district assemblies with active social media presence were perceived as more transparent, although adoption levels varied widely (Armah-Attoh et al., 2020). Nevertheless, digital divides and low digital literacy may constrain participation in African contexts, particularly in rural areas (Myeong et al., 2014).

This underscores that social media plays a crucial role in strengthening the relationship between government and citizens through enhanced transparency and public participation (C. G. Reddick et al., 2017; Ribeiro et al., 2018; Tursunbayeva et al., 2017). In the context of Suame Municipality, social media can serve as a strategic instrument to improve two-way communication between local authorities and the community. Through platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, the government can disseminate information directly, provide space for citizens to give feedback, and build trust through information openness. However, the success of this strategy largely depends on how effectively the local government integrates social media into its official communication system and manages it consistently and professionally.

On the other hand, structural challenges such as the digital divide, low digital literacy, and limited telecommunications infrastructure in certain areas pose major barriers to the effectiveness of social media as a tool for participation (Fisdian Adni et al., 2024; Isabella et al., 2025). In the Ghanaian context, the unequal internet access between urban and rural areas continues to create disparities in citizens' digital participation. Therefore, efforts to enhance transparency and participation through social media must be accompanied by supportive policies that promote equitable access to technology and build community capacity to use digital platforms effectively. This approach will not only strengthen open governance but also ensure that citizen participation is genuinely inclusive and representative.

This study is grounded in the E-Government and E-Participation models, which emphasize the strategic use of digital platforms to enhance transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement. The E-Government model focuses on utilizing technology to improve the efficiency of information dissemination and the delivery of public services, ensuring that governance becomes more accessible and responsive. Meanwhile, the E-Participation model highlights the importance of citizen involvement in governance processes through interactive and participatory online tools that facilitate dialogue, feedback, and collaboration between government and the public (Ibrahim et al., 2023). Applying these models provides a nuanced analytical framework to understand how Suame Municipality leverages social media to promote transparency, foster accountability, and strengthen civic participation in local governance.

The research gap addressed in this study lies in the limited empirical investigations that explore in depth the role of social media in enhancing transparency and citizen participation at the local government level in Ghana, particularly in emerging areas such as Suame Municipality. Most previous studies have focused on national institutions or major cities, while the context of local governments—often characterized by limited digital resources and varying levels of public digital literacy—has received insufficient scholarly attention. The novelty of this research lies in its mixed methodological approach, combining qualitative interviews with content analysis of the local government's official social media platforms. This enables a more comprehensive understanding of how social media is used, received, and perceived in local governance practices.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the role of social media in promoting transparency and citizen participation in local governance within Suame Municipality, Ghana. Specifically, it aims to identify the extent to which platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp enhance access to public information, strengthen governmental accountability, and encourage active citizen engagement in local decision-making processes. The implications of this study suggest that optimizing the use of social media can serve as an effective strategy for local governments to strengthen transparency and public participation sustainably. Moreover, the findings highlight the importance of developing inclusive and responsive digital communication policies to ensure broader community involvement in local governance.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a qualitative case study approach focusing on Suame Municipality in Ghana to explore the role of social media in promoting transparency and citizen participation in local governance. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with 12 municipal officials—including public relations officers, IT staff, and administrative personnel—as well as 25 residents who were active social media users. The study also analyzed digital content from the Suame Municipal Assembly’s official Facebook and WhatsApp pages covering the period from 2020 to 2024, offering insights into communication patterns, engagement levels, and thematic priorities.

Purposive and convenience sampling techniques were applied to ensure that participants represented both government perspectives and community voices. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the interview data, identifying recurring themes related to transparency, accountability, and digital engagement. These qualitative findings were further complemented by descriptive statistics, providing a broader understanding of how social media functions as both a governance tool and a participatory platform within the municipality’s administrative context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that the Suame Municipal Assembly has adopted social media primarily as a one-way communication channel, with Facebook emerging as the dominant platform for disseminating public information. The reliance on Facebook—identified by 78% of respondents as their main source of updates—illustrates both the accessibility and popularity of the platform among residents. Through official Facebook posts, the Assembly shares policy announcements, local development initiatives, and service-related information such as sanitation schedules or road maintenance activities. This pattern demonstrates the Assembly’s recognition of the platform’s potential for expanding transparency and visibility. However, the communication approach remains largely top-down, with limited evidence of interactive engagement or structured mechanisms to gather citizen feedback. The focus on information broadcasting, rather than dialogue, reflects a broader institutional tendency in local governance where social media is treated as a public relations tool rather than an instrument for participatory governance.

Beyond Facebook, the use of WhatsApp has proven instrumental in facilitating more localized and community-based interactions. WhatsApp groups—often managed by Assembly members or local leaders—serve as informal channels for rapid information dissemination, especially in areas related to sanitation drives, public health campaigns, and emergency notices. This platform’s immediacy allows for timely communication and collective action within smaller communities. Nevertheless, the lack of a coordinated digital communication framework has resulted in fragmented and inconsistent outreach efforts. Platforms like Twitter and Instagram remain largely inactive, indicating a limited and unbalanced social media strategy. This underutilization not only constrains the Assembly’s ability to reach diverse demographic segments, such as younger and more tech-savvy users, but also undermines the potential of social media as a tool for inclusive governance. A more integrated and multi-platform approach would enable the Assembly to move beyond information sharing toward fostering dialogue, responsiveness, and genuine citizen participation in local decision-making.

The findings indicate that social media has had a tangible, though partial, impact on promoting transparency within the Suame Municipal Assembly. A majority of respondents (62%) acknowledged that the use of platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp had improved access to public information, particularly regarding Assembly decisions, infrastructure projects, and budgetary allocations. The ability to receive real-time updates and visual documentation of government activities fostered a sense of openness that traditional communication channels, such as notice boards or radio broadcasts, often failed to provide. This shift reflects a growing recognition of social media as a cost-effective and immediate tool for disclosing municipal operations, thereby reducing information asymmetry between government officials and citizens. However, the improvement in transparency appeared largely procedural, focusing more on the dissemination of information rather than on establishing systems of accountability or citizen oversight.

Despite these positive strides in transparency, accountability remains a critical weakness in the Assembly's social media engagement. Only 28% of respondents felt that social media had meaningfully strengthened accountability mechanisms. The primary reason lies in the limited responsiveness of municipal officials to citizen inquiries and complaints posted online. Many residents reported instances where feedback was either ignored or addressed after considerable delays, suggesting that digital communication had not yet been institutionalized as part of official governance processes. In effect, while social media serves as a window into government activities, it does not yet function as a two-way mirror through which citizens can demand explanations or monitor the performance of their leaders. This distinction highlights the difference between *transparency as visibility* and *transparency as accountability*, where the former is present but the latter remains underdeveloped.

Youth engagement emerged as one of the most dynamic aspects of the Assembly's online ecosystem. Among respondents aged 18–35, a significant 71% reported actively engaging with the Assembly's social media pages by commenting, sharing posts, or participating in online discussions. This pattern underscores the role of digital platforms as a space for civic expression among younger citizens who are both technologically adept and politically conscious. For many of them, social media represents not just an information source but a participatory arena for voicing concerns, debating policies, and holding local authorities to higher standards. The relatively high engagement rate among youth also suggests a generational shift in how citizens interact with government institutions—one that values immediacy, interactivity, and visibility over traditional, bureaucratic modes of communication.

In contrast, older residents—particularly those aged 50 and above—were found to be largely passive consumers of information. Their engagement was limited to reading posts or watching videos, with minimal participation in comment threads or feedback sessions. Two key barriers emerged from the data: digital illiteracy and mistrust toward the authenticity of online communication. Many older citizens either lacked the technical skills to navigate social media platforms effectively or questioned whether their online feedback would result in real policy responses. This generational divide raises concerns about inclusivity in digital governance, as the very tool designed to democratize information access may inadvertently exclude certain demographic groups. Bridging this divide would require deliberate efforts by the Assembly to promote digital literacy programs and create offline-to-online linkages that allow older citizens to participate meaningfully.

Overall, the interplay between transparency, accountability, and citizen participation in Suame Municipality reveals a complex and evolving dynamic. Social media has undoubtedly opened new channels for information flow and civic engagement, but its transformative potential remains constrained by institutional inertia and uneven participation patterns. The Assembly's digital presence has succeeded in projecting visibility and fostering youth involvement, yet it falls short of embedding responsiveness and accountability into the fabric of local governance. Moving forward, the challenge lies in transforming social media from a mere broadcasting tool into a participatory governance platform—one that not only informs citizens but also empowers them to influence decision-making processes in a transparent, inclusive, and accountable manner.

The study uncovered a number of interrelated challenges that hinder the effective use of social media by the Suame Municipal Assembly. A primary issue was the inconsistency of updates across different platforms, which created gaps in communication and reduced public trust in the reliability of online information. While Facebook was frequently updated, other channels such as Twitter and Instagram were rarely maintained, resulting in fragmented outreach. Moreover, citizens from low-income or rural areas, where internet access and smartphone ownership are limited, were effectively excluded from online participation. This digital divide not only restricted the inclusivity of e-governance initiatives but also reinforced existing inequalities in access to public information. Additionally, some respondents perceived a degree of political bias in the Assembly's online communication—particularly during election periods—when posts appeared to favor certain political actors. This perception risked undermining the credibility of the Assembly's social media platforms as neutral spaces for civic dialogue.

Another challenge identified relates to institutional capacity and resource constraints. Municipal officials reported that social media management was often treated as an auxiliary responsibility, with little formal training or dedicated staff to oversee communication strategies.

The absence of a structured digital communication policy resulted in ad hoc content creation, weak monitoring of public feedback, and a lack of standardized response procedures. Limited financial resources further constrained the ability to sustain regular updates or invest in professional tools for managing social media engagement. Consequently, despite recognition of the importance of digital platforms, their use remained reactive rather than strategic, reflecting broader capacity gaps common to local governments in developing contexts.

The discussion of these findings highlights that Suame Municipality's experience aligns with broader academic discourse on the ambivalent role of social media in governance. As noted by Bertot et al. (2010), social media serves as both an enabler of transparency and a potential constraint when institutional support structures are weak. The case of Suame demonstrates how platforms like Facebook can reduce information asymmetry and increase public visibility of government activities, yet fail to translate this visibility into sustained accountability or deliberative engagement. This duality reflects a recurring pattern across many developing democracies, where digital tools are embraced for their communicative potential but remain underutilized as participatory governance mechanisms.

Furthermore, the uneven patterns of citizen participation observed in this study mirror the generational digital divide highlighted by Myeong et al. (2014). Younger citizens, who possess higher digital literacy and familiarity with online platforms, were significantly more active in commenting, sharing, and engaging with municipal content. In contrast, older residents, constrained by technological barriers and skepticism toward online communication, remained largely passive. This disparity underscores the need for inclusive digital governance strategies that go beyond providing access to information, focusing instead on empowering diverse demographic groups to participate meaningfully in governance processes. Without targeted interventions to improve digital literacy and accessibility, social media risks reproducing existing inequalities rather than bridging them.

Finally, the limited accountability observed within the Assembly's social media practices resonates with critiques by Bonson et al. (2017), who argue that many government institutions employ social media primarily as a one-way channel for broadcasting information. This tendency reduces the transformative potential of digital platforms as spaces for dialogue, collaboration, and co-production of public policies. In Suame's case, the lack of systematic response mechanisms and the perception of political bias further weaken citizens' trust and willingness to engage. To move forward, the Municipality must institutionalize transparent, responsive, and politically neutral social media practices—supported by capacity-building and clear communication guidelines. Doing so would allow local governments not only to inform citizens but also to foster a culture of digital participation grounded in trust, accountability, and mutual respect.

In summary, the study illustrates that while social media has enhanced transparency and information dissemination within the Suame Municipal Assembly, its potential to foster genuine accountability and participatory governance remains underdeveloped. Facebook and WhatsApp have successfully improved public access to municipal updates and encouraged youth engagement, yet communication continues to operate largely as a one-way flow, constrained by institutional inertia, uneven digital literacy, and perceptions of political bias. Older citizens and marginalized groups remain digitally excluded, reinforcing socio-economic disparities in civic participation. Moreover, weak feedback mechanisms, limited resources, and the absence of a structured digital communication strategy hinder the transition from information broadcasting to meaningful citizen dialogue. To realize the transformative promise of social media in local governance, the Assembly must prioritize inclusivity, institutional responsiveness, and political neutrality, ensuring that digital platforms function not merely as publicity tools but as instruments for transparent, accountable, and participatory decision-making.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that while social media has significantly enhanced transparency in Suame Municipality by improving information accessibility and communication efficiency, its capacity to promote accountability and meaningful citizen participation remains limited. To bridge these gaps, the study recommends institutionalizing clear response mechanisms to guarantee timely and consistent replies to citizen inquiries, supported by targeted training for municipal staff to strengthen their social media management skills. Additionally, expanding

digital literacy programs—particularly for older residents and marginalized groups—will help reduce participation inequalities and foster inclusivity. Ensuring political neutrality in online communication is also crucial to maintaining public trust and credibility (Kanaan et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2021; Xin et al., 2022). Finally, social media engagement should be systematically integrated into the municipality's broader participatory governance framework, transforming digital platforms from mere information channels into spaces for dialogue, collaboration, and accountability (Abdulkareem et al., 2022; Criado et al., 2013; C. Reddick & Anthopoulos, 2014; Sobkowicz et al., 2012).

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