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## Digital Disruption and Democratisation in South African Filmmaking: A Qualitative Study of Practitioner Perspectives

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### Abstract

This research investigates the transformative impact of digital technology on South African filmmaking, analysing how digital tools have reframed the aesthetics, economics, and socio-political dynamics of film production, distribution, and consumption in the region. This research draws on film studies, digital media theory, cultural economics, and Schumpeterian innovation theory to interpret the transition from traditional celluloid production to digital filmmaking practices, as well as the practitioner experiences associated with that transition. This transformation has democratised access to cinematic expression and reshaped narrative structures, visual languages, and the spatiotemporal modalities of storytelling specific to South Africa's diverse cultural milieu. This research, grounded in a qualitative methodology, employs semi-structured interviews with a purposeful sample of ten South African filmmakers to examine how digital media have facilitated new forms of expression for historically marginalised voices. The findings suggest a notable transition from conventional analogue methods to digital processes, propelled by cost-effectiveness, accessibility, and the rising demand for high-quality, economical content. The research further indicates that digital cameras, lighting, and sound equipment are increasingly replacing traditional film cameras and analogue recording systems, enabling filmmakers to shoot, review, and apply colour looks on set. Film practitioners emphasised the significance of digital technology in democratising filmmaking by lowering production costs, enhancing visual storytelling, and facilitating greater experimentation among independent filmmakers in South Africa. The research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on digital transformation in the creative industries. It underscores the critical importance of policy support, infrastructure development, and relevant skills training in sustaining the momentum of digital filmmaking in South Africa. The results are significant for filmmakers, educators, cultural legislators, and digital entrepreneurs aiming to leverage technology for creative and economic advancement in the industry.

**Keywords** Digital technologies; Filmmaking; Digital democratisation; Streaming platforms; South African cinema; Qualitative research

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## Introduction

The South African film industry has experienced substantial transformation in the last three decades, influenced by socio-political changes, economic fluctuations, and technological advancements. The evolution of filmmaking in South Africa is fundamentally linked to the emergence of digital technology, which has transformed not only the technical dimensions of the craft but also the conceptualisation, production, distribution, and consumption of films. Digital technology in filmmaking encompasses a range of tools and platforms, such as digital cameras, editing software, and online distribution methods, which have either replaced or enhanced traditional celluloid-based production methods. This digital transition, according to Tryon (2013), has facilitated broader access to filmmaking tools, reduced production expenses, and introduced novel aesthetic opportunities. Digital technology has significantly transformed the sector, allowing independent filmmakers to circumvent traditional barriers linked to capital-intensive production and state-controlled narratives. This transformation has further enabled a generation of creators, especially those from marginalised communities, to tell their own stories based on their own perspectives. As a developing nation, South Africa has proactively adopted digital transformation as an essential approach for inclusive growth (Manda & Dhaou, 2019). This initiative has resulted in a fundamental change in the South African film industry's value chain.

The use of digital media technologies in post-production and the incorporation of digital tools in animation and special effects are transforming filmmaking in South Africa. The sector currently uses sensors on cameras and microphones, utilising bits and bytes to encode audio and visual elements. Editors and directors use computers to manipulate raw footage rather than light boxes and scissors (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2021). Despite the myriad technological breakthroughs, including the introduction of sound, colour, and television, digitalisation has exerted a greater influence on the industry than these earlier developments (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2021). Alongside the production process, technology has transformed the distribution and exhibition of films. Thus, digital platforms have significantly facilitated a novel form of cinematic visibility. Online streaming platforms such as Netflix and Showmax currently include South African films, thereby broadening their international presence and changing the perception of African cinema as being underdeveloped or insular (Lobato, 2019).

In addition, smartphone filmmaking and social media distribution have enabled the emergence of micro-cinemas, which contest conventional definitions of “film” and the criteria for being a “filmmaker” (Couldry, 2012). As South Africa advances in digital transformation, the sector is at the forefront of utilising innovations to reshape storytelling, production methodologies, and audience interactions. Institutional barriers have historically marginalised emerging Black South African filmmakers and rural storytellers, and participants in this study suggest that this transition has created

new openings for them. Mbura (2022) notes that digital technology has transformed the dynamics of the South African film industry, leading to new trajectories in filmmaking. Schumpeterian innovation theory offers one way to interpret such technological transformation as a process of industry disruption and adaptation, as elaborated in the Theoretical Framework section below.

## **Literature Review**

### ***The Evolution of the Film Industry***

Globally, digitalisation has transformed the film value chain, affecting image capture, post-production, distribution, exhibition, and audience measurement. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2021) describe this process as a structural transformation rather than merely a change in format, as production has shifted from photochemical processes to data-driven workflows, while distribution and exhibition increasingly rely on digital files and direct-to-consumer services. Recent scholarship on over-the-top (OTT) streaming platforms similarly demonstrates that streaming affects not only where films are watched but also how they are financed, commissioned, released, and promoted, as well as how audiences are analysed and local content gains visibility (Hashim & Zhao, 2025). Digitalisation is therefore understood as a reorganisation of cultural production in which technological innovation, market structures, and changing audience behaviour interact.

These developments form part of a longer history of technological disruption in the film industry. Cinema evolved from silent filmmaking towards feature-length narrative production. By the late 1920s, the introduction of synchronised sound was a significant technological development within an increasingly standardised Hollywood film production system (Bordwell et al., 1985). Competition from television subsequently encouraged innovations such as widescreen formats, colour technology, and blockbuster filmmaking. By the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, digital cinematography and computer-generated imagery (CGI) had further transformed production practices and expanded cinema's visual and narrative possibilities (Prince, 2011). The emergence of online streaming platforms in the 2010s further disrupted conventional theatrical distribution and broadened opportunities for digital circulation, including the international visibility of African film industries such as Nollywood (Tryon, 2013).

Contemporary digital filmmaking has extended this transformation by making sophisticated production technologies increasingly accessible. Digital cameras, non-linear editing, computer-generated imagery, algorithm-assisted editing, three-dimensional (3D) technologies, smartphones, and drones have enabled filmmakers to produce complex visual content with greater flexibility and, in some cases, lower production costs (Weinberg et al., 2020; Fang & Xiong, 2020; Stump, 2014). Advances in camera technology, including high-resolution digital cameras such as the Arri Alexa and Red systems,

as well as smartphones and drones, have further expanded the range of tools available to both established and independent filmmakers (Stump, 2014; Weinberg et al., 2020).

Digitalisation has also altered access to film production and distribution, although its democratising effects remain uneven. More affordable production technologies, cloud-based collaboration, online distribution, and streaming services lower traditional barriers, allowing filmmakers to produce and circulate films more independently. At the same time, digital platforms introduce new forms of gatekeeping through commissioning decisions, recommendation systems, control of audience data, and the visibility afforded to particular content. Evidence from Southeast Asia, for example, indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the movement towards streaming while local platforms continued to distinguish themselves through culturally specific content (Wang et al., 2021). Democratisation should therefore not be understood as the elimination of gatekeeping, but rather as a redistribution of access, visibility, and economic power within the film value chain.

In the South African context, these global developments provide a useful foundation for examining how digital technologies are transforming filmmaking practices. Digital cameras and storage, editing software, digital special effects, smartphones, drones, and online distribution reduce some of the financial and technical barriers historically associated with filmmaking and create opportunities for both established and independent producers. At the same time, access to technology alone does not necessarily guarantee equitable participation, visibility, or commercial success, particularly where distribution, financing, audience reach, and platform control remain important constraints. The evolution of digital filmmaking in South Africa should therefore be understood as an interaction between technological innovation, creative opportunity, economic structures, and changing forms of industry gatekeeping. This perspective provides the basis for examining whether, and to what extent, digital disruption is democratising film production and distribution from the perspectives of South African film practitioners.

### ***Digital Transformation in African Film Industries: A Global South Perspective***

African screen industries illustrate particularly clearly how digital transformation creates new opportunities for film production and distribution, even as existing financial, infrastructural, and institutional constraints continue to shape participation in the industry. Scholarship on African cinema has long emphasised shortages of technical and financial resources and persistent difficulties in establishing viable systems of film distribution and exhibition (Andrade-Watkins, 1995). More recent research demonstrates that these conditions have been altered, although not eliminated, by technological transformation. The introduction of analogue and, subsequently, digital technologies contributed to the emergence and expansion of commercial video and film industries across several sub-Saharan African

countries. However, the specific forms these industries assumed were shaped by local political, economic, and infrastructural conditions (Jedlowski, 2018). Digital technology has consequently enabled increasingly varied forms of filmmaking and new approaches to production, exhibition, and distribution across the continent (Bisschoff & Overbergh, 2012).

Nollywood provides a particularly significant example of this transformation. The Nigerian film industry demonstrates how digital technologies support alternative models of production and circulation outside conventional film-industry structures. Advances in Internet and digital media technologies have enabled a new generation of Nigerian filmmakers to explore alternative funding mechanisms, including crowdfunding, and to distribute their work through online platforms to audiences beyond national boundaries (Ebelebe, 2019). This illustrates how digitalisation expands both creative participation and the potential international circulation of African screen content.

However, the opportunities created by digital technologies should not be interpreted as removing the structural conditions that shape African filmmaking. Research across African contexts continues to demonstrate the importance of financial resources, infrastructure, institutional support, and access to distribution networks in determining whether filmmakers can participate sustainably (Andrade-Watkins, 1995; Jedlowski, 2018; Odabaşı, 2021). South Africa can therefore be situated within this wider African and Global South pattern, in which digital technologies expand opportunities for production and circulation while economic, infrastructural, and institutional conditions continue to shape who can participate sustainably.

### ***The Evolving Digital Landscape of the South African Film Industry***

The advancement of digital technology has contributed to significant technological, economic, and cultural changes in South African filmmaking, reshaping production and distribution practices. These developments should be understood within the country's broader socio-political history, as South African cinema has consistently reflected questions of race, national identity, and political change. Maingard (2007) demonstrates how cinema contributed to the construction and entrenchment of racialised national identities during apartheid and how the transition to democracy created possibilities for imagining a more inclusive national film culture. Nevertheless, historical inequalities continue to influence participation in the industry. Research on low-budget digital filmmaking in post-apartheid South Africa indicates that digital technology has made aspects of cinematic production and consumption more accessible. However, production, distribution, and exhibition remain unequal and inaccessible to significant sections of the population (Treffry-Goatley, 2011). Digital transformation should therefore not be understood as eliminating the structural conditions that have historically shaped South African cinema.

At the production level, digital technologies have created new possibilities for lower-budget and independent filmmaking. Treffry-Goatley (2011) demonstrates that low-budget digital cinema broadens access to cinematic production and consumption, although digital technology alone is insufficient to enable independent filmmakers to operate sustainably. These developments correspond with wider transformations in African cinema, where digital technologies have contributed to increasingly varied forms of film production, exhibition, and distribution (Bisschoff & Overbergh, 2012). Distribution and exhibition remain particularly important because greater accessibility in production does not necessarily guarantee access to audiences. Mboti and Tomaselli (2015), through their examination of the ReaGilè concept, highlight the importance of alternative distribution and exhibition models for historically underserved South African township audiences. Digitalisation, therefore, lowers certain barriers and creates alternative opportunities for filmmakers and audiences, while economic, infrastructural, and institutional conditions continue to determine who can participate sustainably.

The significance of these changes is also evident in the economic position and vulnerability of the South African film industry. According to the National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF, 2021), the industry supported approximately 31,444 full-time equivalent jobs and generated R7.18 billion in direct, indirect, and induced economic activity in 2019/20. The COVID-19 pandemic substantially disrupted production, with the industry's estimated economic contribution declining to approximately R2.92 billion and employment falling to 12,775 full-time equivalent jobs in 2020/21. These figures demonstrate both the economic importance of South African film production and its vulnerability to wider disruptions. Digital technologies offer new possibilities for production and circulation, but the industry's sustainability remains tied to financing, skills, infrastructure, institutional support, and access to distribution channels.

The policy environment consequently remains important to the continuing development of the South African film industry. In 2026, the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition (the DTIC) reaffirmed its commitment to the Film and Television Incentive Programme. They initiated a review of its guidelines following delays and concerns surrounding the processing of applications and claims (the DTIC, 2026). The Adjudication Committee was scheduled to resume meetings on 27 August 2026, while substantial demand for film and television incentives continued across the 2024/25 and 2025/26 financial years (applications valued at approximately R1.2 billion). These developments demonstrate that both technological expansion and continuing institutional dependence characterise contemporary South African filmmaking. Digital technologies reduce certain barriers to production and circulation, but sustainable participation continues to depend on financing systems, public policy, skills development, infrastructure, and access to distribution channels. Within this context, the present study explores South African film practitioners' experiences of digital transformation, focusing on

democratisation and access, digital disruption and adaptation, and evolving approaches to film marketing.

### ***Digital Tools and Methods for Filmmaking***

Within the evolving South African film industry, digital transformation is reflected in the growing use of digital tools and methods across different stages of the filmmaking process. These technologies have reshaped creative and production practices, influencing how films are shot, edited, produced, distributed, and promoted. From digital cameras and non-linear editing software to CGI and virtual production environments, digital tools have enabled new modes of storytelling, expanded access to production resources, and redefined filmmaking practices. Stump (2014) notes that a significant technological advancement has been the development of digital film technology and data compression, which facilitate the digital recording, editing, storage, distribution, and transportation of films. Computer-based editing tools further enable filmmakers to integrate digital video and film files within a unified production workflow and reproduce edited elements as a single file. Digital filmmaking has therefore contributed to more efficient and economical production processes.

The increasing use of smartphones for filmmaking represents another development in digital production (Ledesma, 2020). Improvements in smartphone camera quality, together with the low cost and portability of mobile devices, have expanded their potential as filmmaking tools (Ledesma, 2020; Seo, 2016). While films have conventionally been produced using professional cameras, including DSLR and mirrorless systems, smartphones have expanded the range of technologies available to filmmakers. In South Africa, filmmaker Aryan Kaganof demonstrated the possibilities of mobile filmmaking with *SMS Sugar Man*, an early feature film produced using mobile phone technology (Africa in Motion, 2008). Compared with costly, complex professional camera equipment, smartphones offer advantages in affordability, portability, and accessibility. Smartphone filmmaking consequently represents an important development in the democratisation of film production, creating additional opportunities for filmmakers to experiment with alternative forms of production and storytelling.

Digital technologies have also expanded the possibilities for animation and visual effects. Film production companies increasingly use two-dimensional (2D) and 3D animation and CGI to create and enhance cinematic environments. CGI encompasses a broad range of digital effects and techniques used to create, modify, or integrate special effects, backgrounds, and characters into filmed material (Booker, 2020; Eliashberg et al., 2006; Netzley, 2000). CGI has become increasingly important in contemporary filmmaking because of its potential to enhance visual quality while, in some circumstances, reducing production costs (Wales, 2017; Waterman, 2007; Abbott, 2006). The increasing availability of modelling, animation, and rendering technologies has also expanded access to tools that were

previously primarily associated with large production companies with substantial budgets and specialised rendering infrastructure. Consequently, independent filmmakers and smaller production enterprises have greater opportunities to incorporate advanced animation and CGI techniques into their work.

Virtual reality (VR) represents a further development in digital filmmaking by creating opportunities for immersive and interactive forms of storytelling. Research demonstrates the growing application of VR technologies across different industries and contexts (Flavián et al., 2019; Alzayat & Lee, 2021; Nesenbergs et al., 2021; González-Zamar & Abad-Segura, 2020; Sukotjo et al., 2021; Pinto et al., 2021). Head-mounted displays with head-tracking capabilities provide expanded viewing environments (Sera et al., 2016), while immersive technologies can shift audiences from passive observation towards more active engagement with virtual environments (Flavián et al., 2019; Guttentag, 2010; Heim, 2000). Although VR theoretically provides a 360-degree viewing environment, narrative design continues to influence where viewers direct their attention (Fearghail et al., 2019). VR films may also produce stronger emotional responses than conventional 2D films (Ding et al., 2018).

Within filmmaking, VR contributes to pre-production planning, immersive production, and post-production processes while providing filmmakers with new approaches to audience experience and narrative construction. However, evidence concerning VR-specific applications within the South African film industry remains limited in the literature reviewed; consequently, the present study treats VR primarily as contextual evidence of broader technological developments rather than as an established feature of South African filmmaking practice. Collectively, developments in digital cameras, smartphone filmmaking, CGI, and immersive technologies demonstrate how digitalisation continues to reshape filmmaking tools, workflows, and creative possibilities.

### ***Film Marketing in the Digital Era***

The emergence of digital technologies has transformed film marketing, shifting emphasis from conventional advertising towards more interactive, immediate, and data-driven approaches. Traditional techniques such as posters, trailers, and television advertising are increasingly supplemented by digital-first strategies that enable greater personalisation and audience interaction (Tryon, 2013; Lobato, 2019). Social media has been central to this transformation because of its accessibility, interactivity, and capacity to establish direct relationships between films and their audiences (Dasgupta, 2016). As marketing remains an essential component of the film industry (Sifaki & Papadopoulou, 2022), digital platforms have expanded the range of promotional opportunities available to filmmakers while changing how films are positioned and communicated to prospective audiences.

Social media platforms have transformed audience engagement, enabling filmmakers, distributors, and production companies to communicate directly with viewers (Smith & Telang, 2017). Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and X provide opportunities for content dissemination, real-time interaction, and audience feedback through features such as hashtags, live streaming, and social media stories (Barger et al., 2016). Social media, therefore, functions simultaneously as a promotional tool and a space for developing fan communities (Vukanović, 2013). Viral marketing and user-generated content further encourage audiences to participate in the circulation and promotion of films. Within this participatory culture, viewers increasingly assume active roles in promoting and circulating media content rather than remaining passive consumers (Jenkins et al., 2013). Hashtags, memes, interactive challenges, and influencer participation similarly contribute to audience engagement and cultural visibility (Kerrigan, 2017). Digital marketing also extends into transmedia and immersive experiences, including interactive websites, augmented reality (AR), and virtual reality (VR), through which promotional content expands the narrative world surrounding a film (Jenkins, 2006; Booth, 2017; Zeiser, 2015).

Data analytics and platform technologies have introduced a further dimension to contemporary film marketing. Audience analytics enable marketers to customise campaigns for particular audience segments and improve the targeting of promotional messages (Redvall & Sørensen, 2018). Streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Showmax use viewing data and algorithmic recommendation systems to personalise content presentation for different audiences (Lobato, 2019). Data analytics also supports the assessment of audience engagement during pre-release stages and informs marketing-related decisions (Rogers, 2013). Alongside these practices, search engine optimisation (SEO), influencer partnerships, and programmatic advertising have expanded the mechanisms available for increasing film visibility and reaching targeted audiences (Kerrigan, 2017; Smith & Telang, 2017). As films increasingly circulate through digital platforms, marketing strategies have consequently become more closely connected to platform algorithms, audience behaviour, and globally coordinated digital campaigns (Curtin et al., 2014).

Film marketing should nevertheless be understood as an ongoing process that extends across the film value chain rather than ending at release. Marketing often begins during the early conceptualisation and production stages (Mingant et al., 2015) and continues through distribution, exhibition, websites, social media, audience discussions, and subsequent engagement with filmmakers' work (Kerrigan, 2017). Film festivals and premieres have similarly incorporated digital elements, including live streaming, digital press materials, and online promotional content, thereby creating additional opportunities for audience reach and interaction (Iordanova & Cunningham, 2012). However, digital marketing also presents challenges. Tryon (2013) cautions against treating digital strategies as complete replacements for traditional marketing, while Wayne (2018) highlights the

difficulty independent films face in gaining visibility within highly saturated digital environments. Concerns surrounding data collection, privacy, and the use of personal information for targeted communication further raise ethical questions about increasingly data-driven marketing practices (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Digital film marketing, therefore, provides substantial opportunities for audience engagement and targeted promotion while simultaneously introducing challenges relating to visibility, platform dependence, and data ethics.

### ***Modern Methods of Streaming Films***

Digital streaming services have transformed media consumption by reshaping conventional distribution strategies and audience behaviour. Streaming has gained increasing prominence within the broader media industry (Spilker & Colbjørnsen, 2020), supported by its convenience, flexibility, and ability to provide audiences with on-demand access to content. These characteristics have contributed to the growing preference for consuming films outside traditional cinema environments, particularly from home (Mbombo, 2024). Consequently, streaming represents an important development in the digitalisation of film distribution, providing audiences with greater flexibility in when, where, and how they access films.

The expansion of streaming became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when digital services provided audiences with access to cinematic entertainment through smart televisions, laptops, tablets, and other digital devices (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2021). The rapid adoption of services such as Netflix and Showmax reflects a broader transition towards on-demand and increasingly personalised content distribution, supported by widespread Internet connectivity and mobile technologies (Lotz, 2022). Subscription-based streaming models have also challenged established broadcasting and distribution structures by providing alternative routes for audiovisual content to reach audiences (Lotz, 2022). These developments have altered expectations surrounding accessibility and convenience while strengthening the role of digital platforms within contemporary film distribution.

The streaming environment has also evolved into a diverse, continually changing platform ecosystem. Although services such as Netflix and YouTube remain prominent within discussions of streaming, several platforms have emerged, evolved, or disappeared as companies experiment with different versions of the streaming model (Spilker & Colbjørnsen, 2020). The commercial development of subscription streaming has also encouraged major media and technology companies to establish services such as Disney+, Max, and Apple TV+. Consequently, contemporary film distribution increasingly takes place across multiple digital services that compete for audiences, content, and subscription revenue. This expansion has diversified how films are distributed while contributing to significant changes in the structure of the global screen industry.

Digital streaming is therefore understood as both a technological development and a disruptive form of media distribution (Spilker & Colbjørnsen, 2020). Research on streaming has nevertheless often concentrated on particular forms of content or specific media industries, including music, television, film, and other digital media (Dixon, 2013; Johansson et al., 2018). Scholars have also distinguished between different streaming practices, including live and on-demand streaming (Taylor, 2018) and professionally produced and user-generated content (Burgess & Green, 2018). Within the film industry, streaming platforms have introduced alternative distribution and revenue models that operate alongside, and sometimes outside, conventional theatrical and broadcasting channels. The ongoing development of these platforms demonstrates how digitalisation is reshaping not only how audiences consume films but also the economic and distribution structures by which films reach their intended markets.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on four complementary perspectives: film studies, digital media theory, cultural economics, and Schumpeterian innovation theory to examine how digital technologies are reshaping filmmaking practices, representation, distribution, and participation. Film studies situates technological transformation within questions of cinematic form, authorship, representation, and spectatorship, making it useful for interpreting changing visual practices, mobile production, indigenous-language storytelling, and the relationship between global conventions and locally grounded aesthetics. Digital media theory extends this analysis by examining how digitisation transforms participation, distribution, and gatekeeping. Rather than assuming that streaming and social media eliminate intermediaries, this perspective highlights the enduring influence of platform infrastructures, data-driven visibility, and evolving producer–audience relationships. Together, these perspectives provide a basis for understanding how digital technologies shape creative practices in filmmaking while influencing the distribution, accessibility, and visibility of South African films (Tryon, 2013; Jenkins, 2006).

Cultural economics complements these perspectives by explaining the economic conditions that shape the adoption and use of digital technologies. Digital cameras, editing software, and online distribution have reduced production and transaction costs, creating opportunities for smaller production teams and alternative routes to audiences. However, reduced technical barriers do not necessarily eliminate inequalities in financing, skills, marketing, discoverability, and sustainable revenue. Digital transformation, therefore, expands opportunities for participation, while existing economic and structural inequalities continue to shape who benefits from these opportunities. This perspective is particularly relevant to the study’s examination of democratisation and access, since greater access to filmmaking technologies does not automatically translate into equal access to capital, audiences, or commercial opportunities (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2021).

Schumpeterian innovation theory further conceptualises digitalisation as a process of creative destruction, whereby technological innovations and new business models disrupt established production practices, organisations, and market relationships (Schumpeter, 1975). From this perspective, digital workflows, streaming distribution, and mobile production constitute technological and organisational changes that create new opportunities while challenging established production, distribution, and exhibition practices. The theory is therefore particularly relevant to understanding digital disruption and adaptation within the South African film industry, including how practitioners respond to changing technologies, workflows, and distribution models.

Collectively, the four perspectives provide an integrated framework for interpreting digital transformation in South African filmmaking. Film studies illuminates changes in cinematic practices, representation, and aesthetics; digital media theory explains changing forms of participation, platform mediation, visibility, and producer–audience relationships; cultural economics addresses the costs, incentives, access conditions, and market constraints that influence participation; and Schumpeterian innovation theory explains the disruption and adaptation associated with technological change. The framework consequently conceptualises digital transformation as a creative, economic, technological, and institutional process. It also provides the conceptual basis for interpreting the study’s themes of democratisation and access, digital disruption and adaptation, and changing film marketing methods, while recognising that the opportunities associated with digital transformation remain unevenly distributed.

## **Research Methodology**

### ***Research Approach***

The study adopted an exploratory qualitative approach to develop a complex and holistic understanding of the transformative impact of digital technology on South African filmmaking. Qualitative research facilitates the examination and interpretation of meanings emerging from social phenomena (Du Plooy, 2009; Babbie, 2011; Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019). This approach was therefore appropriate for exploring film practitioners’ experiences and perceptions of how advances in digital technology have influenced filmmaking practices and approaches within the South African film industry.

### ***Sampling and Participant Selection***

Ten South African film practitioners were purposively selected for the study. To be eligible for participation, individuals had to be filmmakers working in the South African film industry and have direct professional experience in producing, directing, screenwriting, creative direction, and editing. Participants were required either to have worked on at least five film projects or to have at least five years of professional experience in the industry. They were also required to be familiar with digital

technologies used in contemporary filmmaking, enabling them to provide informed accounts of how digital transformation has influenced film production, distribution, and related industry practices.

These selection criteria were designed to ensure that participants had sufficient practical experience to meaningfully reflect on technological transformation in South African filmmaking. Potential participants were identified through referrals from acquaintances in the South African film industry and through direct approaches to film professionals using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn. The purposive sampling was intended to obtain information-rich practitioner perspectives rather than to produce a statistically representative sample of the South African film industry.

The final sample comprised six females and four males. In terms of racial composition, four participants were White, two were Indian, and four were Black. The participants represented a range of professional roles within the film industry, including a creative director, a video editor, six film and/or executive producers, a screenwriter, and a cinematographer. Several participants performed multiple roles across different projects, including combinations of writing, producing, directing, and cinematography. Participants are therefore identified by their primary professional role at the time of interview (Table 1). As six (60%) of the ten participants held producer roles, the findings are weighted towards production-side perspectives on digital transformation. Although screenwriting, direction, creative direction, cinematography, and editing perspectives are represented, they constitute a smaller proportion of the sample.

Table 1 Participant codes and primary professional roles

| Participant   | Primary professional role       |
|---------------|---------------------------------|
| Participant A | Creative director               |
| Participant B | Video editor                    |
| Participant C | Producer-director (also writes) |
| Participant D | Film producer                   |
| Participant E | Screenwriter                    |
| Participant F | Executive producer              |
| Participant G | Film producer                   |
| Participant H | Executive producer              |
| Participant I | Film producer                   |
| Participant J | Cinematographer                 |

### ***Data Collection***

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect qualitative data. Wisker (2001) argues that semi-structured interviews provide flexibility for both researchers and participants, while De Vos et al. (2004) emphasise their usefulness in facilitating engagement with participants' perspectives. An interview schedule was therefore used to guide the interviews while allowing sufficient flexibility to explore issues arising from participants' experiences of digital transformation in South African filmmaking. Each interview was digitally recorded and accompanied by the researcher's notes with the participants' explicit consent. This process enabled the researcher to preserve participants' accounts accurately and

subsequently revisit the recordings during analysis. The interviews focused on practitioners' experiences and perceptions of how digital technology has influenced filmmaking in South Africa. Interviews were conducted as part of the fieldwork undertaken between April and June 2023. Although face-to-face interviews were initially planned, most participants preferred to be interviewed via Microsoft Teams; two interviews were conducted in person. Each interview lasted less than twenty minutes.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

Ethical clearance for the research was granted by the University of Johannesburg Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee (FREC), under ethical clearance number REC-01-182-2021. Potential participants received an invitation letter explaining the study and their rights, and informed consent was obtained before the interviews commenced. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw from the study without providing a reason, and that their identities would remain confidential. Participant identities were anonymised in the reporting of the findings, with quotations attributed to each participant by their assigned pseudonym and professional role (e.g., "Participant C, producer-director").

### ***Reflexivity and Positionality***

Demographic categories were retained because race remains institutionally and historically relevant to questions of access and transformation within the South African screen industries. These categories were used descriptively to contextualise the sample's composition rather than as deterministic explanations of participants' views. The researcher was based in Durban during the study, while most participants were based in Johannesburg. Recruitment relied in part on referrals from acquaintances within the South African film industry, thereby creating a degree of researcher proximity to the field. The researcher occupied an insider-researcher position, having worked within the film industry for several years prior to becoming an academic and conducting this study. This professional experience contributed to the researcher's interest in film and television as an area of academic inquiry and provided contextual familiarity with the industry. At the same time, this prior industry experience may have shaped the researcher's assumptions, interactions with participants, and interpretation of the data; accordingly, reflexive attention was maintained throughout the research process. To limit the influence of this proximity on interpretation, the study maintained records of analytical decisions, used verbatim interview transcripts and direct participant quotations, and subjected the findings to third-party peer evaluation.

## ***Data Analysis***

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis. Matthews and Ross (2010) identify thematic analysis as an appropriate method for examining qualitative data, while the analytical process was informed by the six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

In practice, the researcher first transcribed the interviews, repeatedly read the transcripts, and listened again to the digital recordings to become familiar with the dataset. Coding was conducted manually and solely by the researcher through systematic reading and rereading of the transcripts; no qualitative data analysis software or a second coder was used. Meaningful features of the data were identified and labelled before related codes were organised into candidate themes. The coded material was then examined for parallels, overlaps, relationships, and contradictions. Emerging themes were reviewed against both the coded extracts and the complete dataset and refined to ensure that they adequately addressed the research questions. The final themes were defined and presented with illustrative participant quotations, and patterns were subsequently interpreted in relation to the study's theoretical framework.

The analysis did not assume that participants' accounts needed to converge or represent a single shared perspective. Divergent and contradictory accounts were retained and considered alongside more commonly expressed views. Contrasting accounts of the same underlying issue were incorporated into broader themes to demonstrate variation in participants' experiences and perspectives. Where participants expressed substantially different views, these differences were retained within the relevant theme to ensure that contrasting perspectives were represented. Relevant transcripts were revisited during theme refinement to ensure that the final themes adequately reflected both commonly expressed and divergent perspectives.

## ***Trustworthiness***

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was supported through the purposive recruitment of South African film-industry practitioners, maintenance of research decision records, use of substantial verbatim accounts, third-party peer evaluation of the findings, and the opportunity for participants to verify that their perspectives had been represented accurately. The third-party peer evaluation was conducted by a colleague who worked at a different institution. Although all participants were given the opportunity to verify their perspectives and the accuracy of their representation, only one participant elected to review the interview transcript. Dependability was strengthened by documenting the research design, data-

collection procedures, and analytical process. Transferability was supported by describing the participants' roles, experience criteria, and industry context, enabling readers to judge the applicability of the findings to other settings. Confirmability was supported through verbatim transcription, repeated engagement with recordings and transcripts, and the use of participant quotations to demonstrate that interpretations were grounded in practitioners' accounts rather than solely in the researcher's perspective.

## Results

This research aims to critically examine how digital technology is reshaping the practices, aesthetics, and production frameworks of South African filmmaking. It explores how digital tools are enabling new modes of storytelling, altering production and distribution practices, and contributing to more inclusive and diverse cinematic representations within the South African context. The findings were organised thematically to reflect the key patterns that emerged from the data analysis. Table 2 presents the themes identified during the analysis and their relevance to the research objectives.

Table 2 Themes that emerged from the data analysis

| Themes                                            | Relevance                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Democratisation and access</b>                 | The theme highlights how digital filmmaking techniques and instruments have lowered the entry hurdles for novice filmmakers and diversified the narratives within the South African film industry.              |
| <b>Digital Disruption and industry adaptation</b> | The theme explores the tensions between conventional production paradigms and the shift towards digital-first methodologies, emphasising streaming services as a contemporary strategy for cinema distribution. |
| <b>Film marketing methods</b>                     | The theme examines diverse digital strategies for film promotion, facilitating broader audience engagement.                                                                                                     |

The identified themes illustrate how South African film practitioners experience the influence of digital technology across different aspects of filmmaking. Digital tools have reshaped production practices by expanding access to filmmaking technologies and creating new opportunities for storytelling and creative participation. At the same time, digital disruption has driven changes in established production and distribution practices, particularly through the growing use of streaming platforms and digital content delivery methods. These developments are also reflected in film marketing, where digital platforms offer alternative ways to promote films and engage audiences. Within the South African context, however, these changes occur within an industry historically shaped by socio-political conditions, economic inequalities, and cultural diversity. Digital transformation should therefore be understood not only in terms of technological transformation, but also in relation to questions of access, representation, industry adaptation, and the changing ways in which South African films are produced, marketed, distributed, and consumed.

### ***Theme 1: Democratisation and Access***

Digital filmmaking has established itself as the norm, enabling South African filmmakers to merge artistry with digital technology and expedite production. The research indicates various advancements that suggest a more inclusive and accessible film industry in South Africa. The sector has adopted digital tools and techniques, revolutionising post-production processes, allowing filmmakers to incorporate intricate special effects, and enhancing visual storytelling. Film experts in South Africa further emphasise that structural changes, technological advancements, grassroots initiatives, and favourable regulations are beginning to alter the previously exclusive nature of South African cinema.

A prominent positive outcome is the increasing accessibility of filmmaking equipment and platforms, particularly among the younger generations of producers and historically marginalised areas. Digital technology, especially mobile devices and cost-effective editing software, has facilitated a proliferation of creative expression. Participant I, a film producer, shared that, *“For the first time, I can shoot, edit, and distribute my film using only a phone and a laptop”*.

Participants consistently emphasised the increasing prevalence of community-based film festivals and training programs. Participant F, who is an executive producer, mentioned, *“A decade ago, one needed to be affiliated with someone in Johannesburg to succeed. Currently, talent from Limpopo, Eastern Cape, and rural Mpumalanga is being acknowledged”*. Several participants recognised the augmented assistance from governmental and non-governmental entities, particularly the NFVF and the Department of Sport, Arts, and Culture. Several emerging filmmakers attributed their professional advancement to NFVF-funded development laboratories and scholarship programs. Participant E, a film screenwriter, mentioned, *“Without the NFVF scriptwriting lab, I would likely still be attempting to learn how to convey my narrative”*. These findings align with literature highlighting the importance of public funding in promoting a varied and representative cinema culture (NFVF, 2024).

The rise of streaming services and social media platforms has further widened access, not only to content consumption but also to exhibition and distribution. YouTube, Netflix South Africa, and Showmax were frequently identified as essential platforms that enable independent filmmakers to distribute their work to broad audiences without relying on conventional theatrical distribution channels. Participant C, a producer-director, stated, *“I uploaded my short film to YouTube, and within a week, I received calls from individuals in Kenya and other parts of the world”*.

Education and skills development were recognised as significant domains of beneficial innovation. Film schools in historically marginalised institutions were commended for creating spaces that enable young Black South Africans to obtain formal education in the cinematic arts. Participant H,

an executive producer, declared that *“The distinction now is that one does not need only to attend UCT or AFDA to receive a quality film education”*.

The decolonisation of storylines and the heightened visibility of genuine, localised storytelling also emerged as significant findings. Participants highlighted the increasing need for films in indigenous languages and those that portray township life, rural experiences, and traditional African cosmologies. Participant I, a film producer, further expressed, *“We are no longer attempting to emulate Hollywood in appearance or sound...we are ultimately telling our experiences in our own languages”*.

Additionally, certain participants highlighted the increasing regional cooperation and pan-African co-productions as signs of a more interconnected and empowered South African film industry. Participant D, a film producer, noted that *“We are now collaborating with filmmakers from various regions of Africa without requiring approval from Europe”*. This perception of continental unity is deemed essential for countering the persistent colonial frameworks of international film financing and distribution (Bakari & Cham, 1996).

While acknowledging that challenges persist, including limited funding pools, high production costs, and persistent industry gatekeeping, participants generally expressed optimism about the trajectory of South African cinema. Participant G, who is a film producer, shared, *“For the first time in decades, I perceive that this industry is starting to resemble the nation it depicts”*. These attitudes indicate a wider tendency towards inclusion and engagement.

The democratisation and improved accessibility of the film industry in South Africa seem to have yielded positive results. The sector is progressing towards more inclusivity through technological empowerment, educational growth, narrative decolonisation, and digital dissemination. Testimonies from participants and the academic literature suggest that the South African film industry is evolving in progressive and significant ways to represent a more diverse and democratic society. Interpreted through the lens of cultural economics, participants’ emphasis on cheaper equipment and software suggests that falling production costs broaden access to cultural production. At the same time, their accounts of ongoing barriers to funding and distribution show that cost reduction alone does not translate into market equality. Schumpeterian innovation theory further frames this pattern as creative destruction: digital workflows unsettle established production hierarchies while generating new capabilities and new forms of competition.

## ***Theme 2: Digital Disruption and Industry Adaptation***

The research uncovered a multifaceted, dynamic landscape in which technological advancements disrupt established filmmaking paradigms while concurrently offering novel opportunities for innovation and inclusivity. The participants, who were experts in the South African film industry, recognised the profound changes brought about by digital disruptions. Participant C, a producer-director, stated that *“Digital has completely rewritten the script....suddenly, you do not need a massive budget or institutional backing to tell a story, but that does not mean the old guard has stepped aside; it just means the battlefield has shifted”*. This viewpoint highlights a consistent dialogue in research, indicating that digital technologies democratise access to production while simultaneously establishing new hierarchies based on digital literacy, infrastructure, and platform visibility.

Several participants further recognised a persistent tension between conventional production frameworks, such as unionised labour, scheduled filming, and established studio systems, and more agile, streamlined digital production models. Participant C further articulated, *“Planning a shoot previously required months due to the necessity of renting costly film equipment, navigating location permits, and awaiting funding approvals; currently, using a mirrorless camera and proficient post-production tools, we are generating premium content within weeks”*. The divergence between traditional and contemporary paradigms has also influenced educational and training frameworks. Despite the assertion that education is now more accessible, several participants noted that film schools in South Africa have been slow to update their curricula to align with contemporary industry standards.

Participant A, a creative director, noted that *“They are still teaching students how to light for celluloid; simultaneously, the primary problem resides in the management of data, colour workflows, and the live streaming of dailies from remote locations”*. Such insights resonate with scholarly literature that critiques the lag between digital disruption and institutional response (Boutellier & Raptis, 2023). Some participants further expressed their concern about unequal access to digital tools and platforms. While digital disruption lowers barriers for some, it reinforces them for others. Participant G, an independent female film producer from Johannesburg, said, *“It is simpler to shoot, but where can it be exhibited?”* The streaming platforms are global; nonetheless, gatekeeping persists, albeit in a transformed manner. This corresponds with Van Dijck et al. (2018), who argue that digital streaming platforms restructure control and visibility rather than erasing it.

Participant B, a video editor who had recently worked in both a Netflix production and a local community film, highlighted the dichotomy of industry methods, stating, *“On one end, we have slick international co-productions with stringent deliverables and platform metrics. On the other hand, there exists guerrilla-style storytelling on TikTok and YouTube. The tension is palpable; are we filmmakers or content creators?”* This dichotomy reflects the findings of Cunningham and Silver (2013), who

observed a growing division between traditional screen production and “digital first” economies of content. Nonetheless, there was a consensus on the need for industry adaptation. The majority of participants perceived digital disruption not as a threat but as a call for industry evolution. Participant F, an executive producer, mentioned, *“We need to stop romanticising the past; there’s a new language of cinema emerging, shorter formats, mobile screens, and AI-driven editing. South Africa has a chance to leapfrog if we play it right”*.

These findings on industry adaptation also sit within a changing public support environment. During 2026, parliamentary and departmental updates acknowledged delays and uncertainty affecting the Film and Television Production Incentive Programme. The DTIC subsequently announced that adjudication meetings would resume in August 2026 and that the programme guidelines would undergo review. This context reinforces participants’ observations: digital tools lower technical barriers, but the financing and institutional infrastructure required for sustainable production remains consequential (Parliament of South Africa, 2026; the DTIC, 2026). This research revealed that digital disruption has profoundly impacted the South African film industry, challenging traditional production models while offering new creative and economic opportunities.

On the other hand, the shift is uneven, and significant tensions persist across generational, institutional, and technological dimensions. As Participant A, the creative director succinctly concluded, *“We are no longer just making films; we are navigating an ecosystem in constant flux, adapt or fade”*. Through a Schumpeterian lens, this tension reflects creative destruction at the industry level: new digital production and distribution routines pressure established institutions to adapt. Digital media theory adds that the shift does not eliminate gatekeeping; rather, power is redistributed among platforms, funders, institutions and data-driven systems of visibility.

### ***Theme 3: Film Marketing Methods***

Film marketing is a vital phase before a film’s release, comprising several stages within an integrated process. In the South African context, film marketing strategies align with global trends in digital transformation while incorporating localised adaptations shaped by distinctive socio-economic, cultural, and infrastructural factors. This research indicates that South African film practitioners are increasingly leveraging digital platforms to market films in a cost-effective, targeted, and interactive manner, thereby bypassing traditional gatekeepers of promotion and distribution. The methods include social media campaigns, influencer collaborations, digital trailers, online premieres, email marketing, search engine optimisation, and user-generated content strategies. Digital marketing serves not only as an alternative to traditional advertising but also as a strategic instrument for engaging audiences in a participatory and culturally resonant manner.

Several participants observed the transition from conventional print, radio, and television advertising to digital-centric campaigns. Participant C, a producer-director, stated, *“Previously, you would have to hope the papers covered your premiere or that you could afford TV slots. Now, if your trailer goes viral on TikTok or Instagram, it can reach more people than a billboard ever could”*. Global literature substantiates this transition by acknowledging the democratisation of cinema marketing through digital media. Digital platforms, according to Lobato (2019), decentralise access and boost visibility for content that traditional media frameworks might otherwise marginalise.

Participants underscored the accessibility and cost-effectiveness of digital technologies. Participant I, a film producer, stated that *“We do not need a huge budget anymore. With a solid online strategy and creative assets, we can run a campaign that looks professional and reaches people directly where they are...on their phones”*. Participants further highlighted that success in digital marketing hinges on understanding platform-specific audiences and content formats. For example, Participant D, who is a film producer, noted that *“You cannot just post a trailer. You have to craft platform-native content, reels, memes, behind-the-scenes clips, and interviews, each suited to a different social media algorithm”*. Smith and Telang (2017) confirm that algorithmic visibility is a key determinant of content reach in the digital economy, making media literacy and digital analytics critical skills for film marketers.

The use of influencers and micro-celebrities has become a potent tool for advertising films. Participant G, a film producer, noted that *“Collaborating with local influencers is vital. Their audiences trust them. When they promote your film, it is like a word-of-mouth endorsement on steroids”*. This discovery aligns with ideas of networked influence in digital marketing, as examined by Abidin (2016), who highlights the cultural capital that influencers possess within particular digital networks. Some participants also addressed the influence of film festivals and online premieres on platforms like YouTube and Showmax in generating a buzz. Participant H, an executive producer, shared that *“We premiered our short film on YouTube, and it got picked up by bloggers and digital magazines. That would not have happened without strategic tagging, metadata optimisation, and audience engagement plans”*. This underscores the growing significance of SEO and digital visibility in film promotion, as emphasised by Cunningham and Craig’s (2019) research on the global online video industry. However, challenges persist. Participants expressed concerns regarding digital fatigue, the constraints imposed by platform algorithms on organic reach, and the financial burden of data on viewers. Participant I, a film producer, asserted, *“You can make the most beautiful online campaign, but if your audience can’t afford the data to watch it, it’s pointless”*. This view highlights the ongoing digital divide in South Africa, where research by ICASA (2023) indicated that disparities in data affordability and infrastructure hinder equitable access to digital content.

This finding is consistent with broader South African audience research; Viljoen-Stroebe's (2023) study of Gauteng-based millennial television viewers during the COVID-19 pandemic similarly found that affordability and infrastructure constraints shaped platform choice, with over-the-top streaming services becoming the preferred option despite these barriers. From a digital media perspective, such constraints demonstrate that participatory access is materially conditioned by connectivity and platform infrastructures; cultural economics likewise highlights affordability as a determinant of who digital marketing and distribution reach. The film marketing methods in South Africa's digital age illustrate a complex interplay of creativity, accessibility, and adaptability. Digital platforms offer remarkable opportunities for visibility and audience engagement, but their effectiveness is amplified when rooted in local knowledge and socio-economic conditions. Insights from South African film practitioners underscore the imperative for sustained investment in digital skills development, platform-specific strategies, and inclusive infrastructure to effectively capitalise on digital film marketing in a rapidly evolving media landscape.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This research suggests that digital technology functions not simply as an auxiliary tool in the South African film industry but as a significant agent of change in how films are conceptualised, produced, distributed, marketed, and consumed, as reflected in the perspectives of the ten practitioners interviewed. The findings indicate that access to more affordable cameras, editing software, mobile production tools, digital marketing channels, and online distribution platforms has lowered some of the financial and technical barriers traditionally associated with filmmaking. These developments have created new opportunities for independent filmmakers and historically marginalised voices to participate in film production and develop locally grounded narratives. However, technological accessibility should not be equated with complete democratisation, since access to funding, infrastructure, professional skills, distribution networks, audience visibility, and sustainable revenue remains uneven. Digital transformation also introduces new forms of gatekeeping, in which filmmakers remain dependent on funding institutions, commercial platforms, algorithms, connectivity, and increasingly competitive digital markets.

The findings, therefore, point to the need for greater policy and institutional support to widen meaningful access to digital filmmaking opportunities. Such access extends beyond the availability of cameras and software to include affordable connectivity, production and post-production facilities, training, financing, distribution opportunities, and pathways to sustainable employment. Government agencies and film-development institutions should continue working towards transparent and accessible funding and incentive mechanisms that support both established and emerging independent filmmakers. Investment in technology should also be accompanied by investment in digital skills development. Film

schools, universities, training organisations, industry bodies, and production companies should strengthen practical training in digital cinematography, editing, sound, visual effects, mobile filmmaking, digital marketing, streaming distribution, and emerging production technologies, with particular attention to filmmakers from historically marginalised and under-resourced communities.

Greater support should also be directed towards locally grounded and culturally diverse South African storytelling. Digital technologies provide opportunities for filmmakers to produce stories in indigenous languages and represent township, rural, regional, and other experiences that have historically received limited visibility within dominant production and distribution structures. Funding bodies, broadcasters, streaming platforms, educational institutions, and other industry stakeholders should therefore encourage the development and circulation of culturally diverse South African content. At the same time, greater attention should be given to digital distribution, marketing, and audience development. Although streaming services and social media provide alternative routes to audiences, digital availability does not automatically guarantee discoverability or commercial sustainability. Strengthening filmmakers' capabilities in audience analytics, social media engagement, digital promotion, platform strategy, intellectual property management, and alternative distribution models is therefore important for improving their ability to reach audiences and derive sustainable value from their work.

The findings further underscore the importance of addressing persistent inequalities in digital infrastructure and affordability. Uneven connectivity and high data costs constrain filmmakers' participation in digital production and limit audiences' access to locally produced digital content. Continued investment in affordable and reliable digital infrastructure is, therefore, important if the opportunities associated with digital filmmaking and streaming are to extend beyond practitioners and audiences with relatively strong technological and financial resources. Stronger collaboration between the government, film institutions, educational institutions, technology providers, broadcasters, streaming platforms, and filmmakers should accompany such investment. A more coordinated approach is necessary to align skills development, infrastructure, funding, technological innovation, distribution, and market access, particularly for independent and emerging filmmakers who have greater access to production technologies but continue to encounter structural barriers to financing, professional development, distribution, and visibility.

These recommendations should be interpreted within the scope and limitations of the study. They arise from the experiences and perspectives of the ten South African film practitioners interviewed. They should therefore be regarded as practical implications that emerge from this qualitative investigation rather than as universally applicable prescriptions for the entire South African film industry. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that the contribution of digital technology to a more

accessible and inclusive filmmaking environment depends not simply on the availability of digital tools, but also on the economic, institutional, infrastructural, and educational conditions that determine who has access to these technologies and who benefits from them. Sustaining digital transformation in South African filmmaking, therefore, requires attention to both technological opportunities and the structural inequalities that continue to shape participation, representation, distribution, and economic sustainability.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

This study used a purposive sample of ten South African film practitioners and therefore does not claim statistical generalisability to the national film industry. The sample was weighted towards production perspectives, with six participants occupying producer roles, and fieldwork was concentrated around Durban and Johannesburg. The research was conducted immediately after the COVID-19 period, when many people remained cautious about face-to-face meetings and remote communication practices established during the pandemic were still common. Although face-to-face interviews were initially intended, most participants preferred to be interviewed via Microsoft Teams, with only two interviews conducted in person and all interviews lasting less than twenty minutes. Future research should therefore draw on larger, more geographically diverse samples, incorporate more distributor and audience perspectives, compare practitioners across segments of the film value chain, and use complementary methods such as focus groups and surveys. Longitudinal research would also provide insight into how practitioner experiences evolve alongside changes in digital technologies, streaming platforms, production practices, and the film industry's funding environment.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

Digital transformation in South African filmmaking is neither linear nor uniformly advantageous, but is characterised by expanding opportunities alongside persistent structural challenges. The findings suggest that digital technology has significant potential to reshape storytelling, participation, audience engagement, and creative innovation; however, these benefits depend on more than technological adoption. Supportive policy frameworks, sustainable funding, investment in digital infrastructure and skills, stronger pathways to distribution and audience visibility, and inclusive industry practices remain essential. Within the limitations of this study, the findings indicate that the contribution of digital technology to South African filmmaking depends not only on the availability of digital tools but also on the economic, institutional, and infrastructural conditions that determine who is able to access, use, and benefit from them.

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## **Authors' Bio**

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