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The paradox of readiness: Exploring the fractured digital identities of Karang Taruna in economic empowerment

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ABSTRACT

Digital transformation has become increasingly important for non-profit organizations; however, digital readiness models remain largely oriented toward corporate contexts and rarely address the unique characteristics of volunteer-based youth organizations in developing countries. This study aims to evaluate the digital readiness of members of Karang Taruna Alfatih Young Community (AYC) in Kebalen Village, Indonesia, and to develop a context-specific digital readiness model that supports community and rural economic empowerment. A qualitative case study approach was employed using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis based on the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The findings reveal that although informants demonstrated adequate operational digital literacy and high perceived usefulness of digital technologies, substantial gaps remained in creative digital literacy, digital financial literacy, cybersecurity awareness, and data management skills. Digital readiness was further influenced by organizational and psychological factors, including self-efficacy, communication confidence, collaborative culture, and digital leadership, while financial constraints, skill inequality, limited infrastructure, and management perception gaps emerged as major barriers to digital transformation. Based on these findings, the study proposes a Context-Specific Digital Readiness Model (CDRM) consisting of five interconnected dimensions: Digital Foundations, Technology Acceptance, Organizational and Psychological Readiness, Digital Capability, and Digital Empowerment Outcomes. Rather than replacing established technology acceptance perspectives, CDRM incorporates TAM as an explanatory component within a broader context-sensitive framework. The model conceptualizes digital readiness as a dynamic and socially mediated organizational capability shaped by technological, psychological, organizational, and socio-economic conditions. The study contributes to Development and Organizational Communication by demonstrating that technological access and acceptance do not automatically produce meaningful digital transformation, particularly within volunteer-based rural organizations.

Keywords: *Digital Readiness, Digital Transformation, Youth Organizations, Community Empowerment, MSMEs.*

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia has more than 235 million internet users, with youth representing the country's largest digitally connected demographic. However, national digital literacy surveys continue to indicate substantial disparities in productive digital competencies, particularly in rural communities, where internet use remains dominated by entertainment rather than entrepreneurship and community development (Antara News, 2026). Existing digital transformation initiatives have largely focused on improving access to digital technologies and basic digital literacy. Nevertheless, relatively little attention has been devoted to understanding whether youth

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organizations possess the organizational readiness required to translate digital access into sustainable community empowerment and local economic development (Setiadi et al., 2023).

In this study, digital transformation is conceptualized not merely as the adoption of digital technologies but as an organizational change process that depends on the readiness of its members to utilize digital tools effectively. Within this framework, digital literacy represents a foundational individual capability that enables members to access, evaluate, and utilize digital information, whereas digital readiness reflects broader organizational and psychological preparedness to implement and sustain digital transformation initiatives. Accordingly, digital literacy is an enabling component of digital readiness, while digital readiness is a prerequisite for successful digital transformation that ultimately supports community and economic empowerment (Hussain & Phulpoto, 2024).

Digital transformation has become a fundamental pillar of technological and business strategy across sectors such as education, government, and industry. Globally, the adoption of digital technologies accelerated significantly after the COVID-19 pandemic, as societies were compelled to integrate digital systems into virtually all aspects of operations and daily life (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2021; Hantrais et al., 2020; Yao et al., 2024). In Indonesia, the transition toward the digital era extends beyond the mere adoption of new technologies; previous studies have identified three key dimensions of this transformation: organizational strategy, workplace culture, and data-driven operational models. While internet penetration and public digitalization have created substantial opportunities, the benefits remain highly dependent on organizational readiness, leadership, digital literacy, and equitable infrastructure development (Gusman, 2024; Rohayati & Abdillah, 2024; Wahyu et al., 2025).

In the era of Society 5.0, the challenges have become increasingly complex, as this concept emphasizes a human-centered society that balances economic advancement with the resolution of social problems through systems integrating cyberspace and physical space (Rohayati & Abdillah, 2024; Zulfikar et al., 2025). Youth play a crucial role as agents of change who influence development goals and contribute innovative ideas to national transformation. Young people involved in community-based organizations are expected not only to act as passive users of technology but also to become drivers of inclusive digital transformation (Maulana & Dečman, 2025; Nam, 2025; Wagimin et al., 2025).

Despite the rapid expansion of digital infrastructure across Indonesia, significant disparities remain in the capacity of youth organizations to transform digital access into meaningful community and economic outcomes. National digitalization initiatives have largely emphasized technology adoption and digital literacy training, yet evidence suggests that many community-based organizations continue to struggle with organizational readiness, strategic communication, and data-driven decision-making. As one of the largest grassroots youth organizations operating throughout Indonesia, Karang Taruna, Indonesia's community-based youth organization, has considerable potential to become a driver of rural digital transformation and MSME empowerment. However, without sufficient digital readiness, this potential may remain unrealized, limiting the long-term sustainability of government digital transformation programs and local economic development initiatives. These conditions highlight the urgent need to investigate digital readiness within youth organizations as a prerequisite for successful digital transformation.

Among various youth organizations in Indonesia, Karang Taruna represents a

Bricolage ; Jurnal Magister Ilmu Komunikasi
Vol.12 (No. 2) : 359 - 379 Th. 2026
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particularly relevant context for examining digital transformation because of its extensive grassroots presence and direct involvement in community development. The organization operates in nearly every village and urban neighborhood, bringing together young people from diverse educational, occupational, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Unlike campus-based or profession-specific youth organizations, Karang Taruna functions as a community institution that regularly collaborates with village governments, local MSMEs, and civil society organizations. Its expanding responsibilities in entrepreneurship promotion, digital village initiatives, and community empowerment make it an appropriate setting for investigating how digital readiness influences organizational transformation and local economic development. Despite this strategic position, empirical evidence regarding the digital readiness of Karang Taruna remains limited.

Karang Taruna serves as a platform for leadership development, social capital strengthening, and enhanced community participation in local development. According to Law No. 40 of 2009 concerning Youth, young people are expected to play an active role as both moral forces and agents of change across various dimensions of social life. One strategic role of Karang Taruna at the village level is to act as a catalyst for economic empowerment by strengthening Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). MSMEs form the backbone of Indonesia's economy, contributing about 61.9% of national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employing nearly 97% of the national workforce through about 65.5 million business units (Statistics Indonesia, 2025).

Economic empowerment has become an increasingly urgent priority for youth organizations due to persistent employment challenges, particularly in rural areas where access to stable jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities remains limited. Although MSMEs account for the majority of Indonesia's business sector and play a vital role in job creation, many rural enterprises still struggle with limited digital capability, restricted market access, and weak business management practices. Consequently, government and community development programs have increasingly positioned youth organizations, including Karang Taruna, as facilitators of entrepreneurship, local product promotion, and MSME digitalization. However, these expanded responsibilities require organizational digital readiness that extends beyond operational digital skills to include strategic communication, digital marketing, data utilization, and partnership development. Without such readiness, the potential contribution of youth organizations to local economic empowerment is unlikely to be fully realized.

Despite its considerable potential, Karang Taruna frequently faces challenges stemming from limited access to external resources and insufficient organizational capacity to establish strategic partnerships. Many members lack confidence in conducting formal communication, negotiating sponsorships, and developing persuasive marketing strategies to support local products (McCarthy et al., 2024; Mola et al., 2024; Purnawarman et al., 2025). Rural MSMEs are generally constrained by low levels of digital literacy, reliance on conventional marketing practices, and limited ability to utilize digital information in business operations (Handiman et al., 2025; Setiawan et al., 2021; Tjakrawala & Iskak, 2021). The most evident gap lies in the utilization of data for business decision-making within youth organizations and rural enterprises. Although numerous studies have examined basic digital marketing practices, relatively few have explored capabilities related to analytics, digital accounting, or sophisticated data governance (Desviona et al., 2025; Firman, 2024). This gap persists because interventions often focus on social media promotion and marketplace utilization rather than on more complex data-driven management

Bricolage ; Jurnal Magister Ilmu Komunikasi
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practices such as record-keeping, information evaluation, and transaction data control (Harida et al., 2023; Tjakrawala & Iskak, 2021). Consequently, while digital readiness appears to be a critical variable for youth organizations, its impact is likely to be strongest when organizations combine practical training, continuous mentoring, and data utilization capabilities to support local economic decision-making (Fuadi et al., 2021; Handiman et al., 2025; Khoirunnisa, 2025).

Beyond their traditional social functions, youth organizations are increasingly expected to contribute to local economic development. This expectation is driven by persistent youth employment challenges, the growing importance of entrepreneurship, and government efforts to strengthen village economies through MSME development. However, empirical evidence indicates that many rural MSMEs continue to face difficulties in adopting digital technologies, expanding market access, and utilizing digital information for business decision-making. Consequently, community-based youth organizations such as Karang Taruna are expected to become facilitators of local economic empowerment. Nevertheless, this role requires organizational digital readiness that extends beyond basic digital literacy to include strategic communication, digital marketing, data utilization, and partnership development.

Although young people are frequently characterized as digital natives, research indicates that their levels of digital literacy vary considerably and are often limited to basic operational skills. A significant gap exists between using social media for entertainment and creating innovative digital products with economic value. Many Karang Taruna members have access to stable 4G internet connectivity yet still lack the critical thinking skills necessary to identify misinformation and engage ethically in online collaboration. Digital financial literacy has also emerged as an urgent concern, particularly given the increasing prevalence of online investment scams and illegal digital lending schemes targeting productive-age populations (Ardiansyah & Yulianti, 2022; Sudiksa et al., 2025).

Digital readiness differs conceptually from digital maturity. While digital maturity focuses on the extent to which technology has been integrated into organizational processes and operations, digital readiness emphasizes the behavioral and psychological prerequisites necessary to initiate such transformation. The success of digital transformation within organizations largely depends on the readiness of individual members, including positive attitudes, motivation, and self-efficacy in adapting to technological change (Cyfert et al., 2025; Höyng & Lau, 2023; Machado et al., 2021; Rocha et al., 2024). Within Karang Taruna, this readiness is often hindered by intergenerational communication barriers, as rural sociocultural structures frequently place senior leaders with limited technological understanding in key decision-making roles.

The notion of “fractured digital identities” in this study refers to the uneven configuration of digital capabilities within the same organizational community. Members may simultaneously occupy different positions in the digital environment: they may be competent users of social media but inexperienced content producers; confident in routine digital communication but hesitant in formal communication; willing to adopt digital technologies but dependent on continuous mentoring; or capable of promoting local products while remaining vulnerable to digital financial and cybersecurity risks. Rather than treating these differences as temporary deficiencies on a linear path toward a predetermined state of digital maturity, this study interprets them as evidence that digital readiness is multidimensional, relational, and context-dependent. The concept therefore captures the coexistence of technological

Bricolage ; Jurnal Magister Ilmu Komunikasi
Vol.12 (No. 2) : 359 - 379 Th. 2026
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connectedness and capability gaps within the same organizational setting.

This study is grounded in the triangulation of several major theoretical perspectives. First, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) posits that technology adoption depends on perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh & Davis, 1996). In the context of organizational communication, TAM helps explain how messages regarding digital innovation can be framed to ensure that organizational members perceive technology as genuinely beneficial to their work processes (Anaam et al., 2023; Rahimi et al., 2018). Although the TAM was originally developed within a positivist tradition to explain technology adoption through perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, recent qualitative studies have increasingly employed TAM as a sensitizing theoretical framework rather than as a predictive model. In this study, TAM is not used to test causal relationships but to guide the exploration of how Karang Taruna members interpret the usefulness and ease of digital technologies within their organizational and community contexts.

Second, Empowerment Theory emphasizes the enhancement of individual competencies and organizational participation to enable communities to gain greater control over changes affecting their lives. Within youth organizations, empowerment encompasses psychological, social, and political dimensions (Zimmerman, 2000). Third, Social Cognitive Theory highlights the importance of self-efficacy in responding to environmental changes (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Stajkovic & Luthans, 2002). Through training and mentoring activities, Karang Taruna members can strengthen their confidence in utilizing digital tools to support organizational objectives. From a communication studies perspective, digital transformation is also understood as a social construction process in which technology functions not merely as a technical instrument but as a medium for building organizational digital identity and fostering meaningful relationships with stakeholders.

From a postmodern and contextual perspective, digital transformation cannot be assumed to follow a universal or linear trajectory in which technological access automatically leads to digital competence, empowerment, and development. Digital readiness is instead understood as a contingent and socially constructed condition whose meaning varies across organizational, cultural, economic, and interpersonal contexts. What counts as being “digitally ready” is therefore not necessarily determined solely by access to devices or the ability to operate digital applications, but also by how individuals and groups negotiate the meaning, usefulness, risks, and possibilities of technology within their everyday practices. This perspective is particularly relevant to grassroots organizations such as Karang Taruna, where digital transformation is shaped by differences in experience, confidence, leadership perceptions, intergenerational relations, financial resources, and local economic priorities. Accordingly, this study approaches digital readiness as a potentially fragmented condition: an organization may be technologically connected and willing to adopt digital tools while simultaneously remaining constrained in creative production, digital security, financial literacy, or organizational capability. The resulting “paradox of readiness” highlights the limitations of universal, access-centered assumptions and provides a basis for developing a context-specific understanding of digital transformation within development communication.

Despite the rapid growth of literature on digital transformation, several significant research gaps remain. Most existing digital maturity models have been developed for profit-oriented corporate sectors, thereby overlooking the unique characteristics of non-profit youth organizations such as Karang Taruna, which operate on a voluntary

Bricolage ; Jurnal Magister Ilmu Komunikasi
Vol.12 (No. 2) : 359 - 379Th. 2026
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basis and often face budgetary constraints. Furthermore, a substantial perception gap exists between management-level actors (village leaders and senior administrators) and operational-level actors (young members) regarding what constitutes digital readiness.

The novelty of this study lies in its integration of holistic digital readiness with two simultaneous empowerment outcomes: community-social empowerment and MSME economic empowerment within a single youth organizational framework in rural Indonesia. This research shifts the focus from merely developing technical ICT skills toward fostering creative digital communication competencies, including digital public speaking strategies, content marketing, and professional sponsorship negotiation. Moreover, this study contributes to the development of a context-specific digital readiness model for non-profit organizations in developing countries, an area that remains underexplored within the global literature.

The primary objective of this study is to evaluate the level of digital readiness among Karang Taruna members and to formulate effective digital transformation strategies that support community empowerment and rural economic development. Practically, the findings are expected to guide Karang Taruna administrators in establishing digital innovation divisions that can facilitate local product branding and expand market access. Theoretically, this study enriches the field of Communication Studies, particularly the subfields of Organizational Communication and Development Communication, by offering new insights into how digital transformation is interpreted and implemented by youth at the grassroots level.

To address the challenges, it is necessary to establish a clear conceptual understanding of digital transformation and digital readiness as the primary constructs underpinning this study. While the preceding discussion has highlighted the empirical urgency of examining youth organizations and their role in community and economic empowerment, a more precise explanation of these concepts is required to clarify how organizational digital readiness serves as a prerequisite for successful digital transformation. This conceptual foundation also provides the basis for interpreting the relationships examined in the present study.

Digital transformation is defined as a process of change aimed at enhancing an entity by triggering significant alterations in its characteristics through the integration of information technology, computing, communication, and connectivity. Structurally, digital transformation encompasses several core dimensions, including the technological dimension, which involves the adoption of innovations such as big data, artificial intelligence (AI), and blockchain, and the strategic dimension, which emphasizes how organizations formulate digital approaches to create added value. Consequently, digital transformation is not merely the adoption of new technologies but rather a fundamental shift in business strategy, organizational culture, and the development of data-driven operational models (Cyfert et al., 2025; Degada et al., 2021; Höyng & Lau, 2023; Plekhanov et al., 2023).

More broadly, digital transformation has become a core pillar of technological and business strategy across multiple sectors. This process fundamentally changes how organizations operate and deliver value to stakeholders. In the era of Society 5.0, organizations and communities are expected to balance economic advancement with the resolution of social challenges through systems that closely integrate cyberspace and physical space (Kliestik et al., 2024; Rohayati & Abdillah, 2024; Staab & Thiel, 2022). Therefore, non-profit and community-based organizations must also adapt to remain relevant and competitive in an increasingly volatile and complex digital environment.

Bricolage ; Jurnal Magister Ilmu Komunikasi
Vol.12 (No. 2) : 359 - 379 Th. 2026
p-ISSN: 2502-0935
e-ISSN: 2615-6423

It is also important to distinguish between digital readiness and digital maturity. Digital maturity refers to the extent to which an organization has integrated digital technologies into its processes, culture, and strategic operations. Digital maturity models serve as frameworks for evaluating and comparing the progress of organizational capability development over time. However, many existing maturity models primarily focus on the manufacturing sector, while service-oriented and non-profit sectors remain considerably underexplored (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2013).

In contrast, digital readiness emphasizes the behavioral and psychological prerequisites of individuals, as well as the organizational capacities required to initiate and successfully implement digital transformation initiatives. Digital readiness is considered a critical determinant of organizational transformation success because the effectiveness of technology depends largely on the readiness of organizational members rather than solely on the preparedness of technical systems. Key dimensions of digital readiness include digital literacy, psychological readiness, behavioral intention, and managerial as well as organizational support. Previous studies have demonstrated that substantial perception gaps often exist between organizational leaders and operational members regarding their levels of digital readiness (Höyng & Lau, 2023; Machado et al., 2021; Rocha et al., 2024).The studies summarized that reveal three major patterns. First, research on Karang Taruna has largely focused on digital literacy interventions, entrepreneurship training, and applying digital marketing or AI to improve youth capabilities. These studies consistently report positive short-term outcomes but rarely evaluate whether youth organizations possess the organizational readiness required to sustain digital transformation initiatives over time. Second, studies on digital readiness have largely been conducted in corporate, governmental, or formal organizational settings, where readiness is conceptualized through managerial support, leadership, employee behavior, and organizational capability. Consequently, existing models provide limited insight into volunteer-based organizations such as Karang Taruna, which operate under different governance structures and resource constraints. Third, research on digital transformation has primarily emphasized digital maturity, organizational capability, and technology adoption, whereas considerably less attention has been given to how digital readiness facilitates community empowerment and local economic development. These observations indicate that previous studies remain fragmented, treating digital literacy, organizational readiness, and economic empowerment as separate research domains rather than as interconnected elements within a holistic digital transformation framework. This study addresses these limitations by integrating digital readiness with community and MSME economic empowerment in the context of grassroots youth organizations.

METHOD

This study employed an intrinsic case study approach following Stake (1995) to obtain an in-depth understanding of digital transformation readiness within Karang Taruna Alfatih Young Community (AYC). An intrinsic case study was selected because the uniqueness of AYC as a grassroots youth organization undergoing digital transformation constituted the primary interest of the research, rather than generating statistical generalizations. Through this approach, the study seeks to understand how youth form social constructions of technology as instruments of community empowerment.

The research informants were active members of Karang Taruna AYC selected

Bricolage ; Jurnal Magister Ilmu Komunikasi
Vol.12 (No. 2) : 359 - 379Th. 2026
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through purposive sampling. The study involved 5 purposively selected informants, comprising the Chairperson (1), Vice Chairperson (1), Secretary (1), Treasurer (1), members of the social media division (1). The researchers selected informants based on predefined inclusion criteria to ensure the relevance and richness of the data. Specifically, informants were required to have been active members of Karang Taruna AYC for at least one year, to have participated in digital-related organizational activities, to be directly involved in MSME mentoring, digital promotion, or organizational communication, and to voluntarily agree to participate in the study by providing informed consent. The number of informants was determined based on the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection was concluded once no new themes or substantial insights emerged from the interviews and focus group discussions. This strategy ensured that the data were obtained from individuals possessing relevant knowledge and experience regarding the organization's digital resource utilization strategies. The number of informants was determined based on the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection was concluded once no new themes or significant information emerged from the interviews and discussions.

Data were collected through four primary techniques to ensure methodological triangulation. First, a Focus Group Discussion (FGD), conducted on June 13, 2026, served as the principal source of primary data. The FGD explored members' collective experiences, technical challenges in content creation, and perceptions of social media's effectiveness in attracting sponsorship support. Second, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to investigate individual perspectives concerning psychological readiness and motivation to adopt digital innovations. Third, participant observation was employed to examine members' involvement in organizational activities, their use of digital design applications such as Canva, and their communication dynamics within online platforms, particularly WhatsApp and Instagram. Finally, document analysis was undertaken, including the review of organizational structures, annual work plans, social media content, and archives of sponsorship proposals and partnership agreements.

The research instruments were developed through a theoretically informed but exploratory approach. TAM guided the identification of technology acceptance-related aspects, particularly perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, while Empowerment Theory informed the exploration of the psychological, social, and participatory dimensions of digital transformation. These theoretical perspectives were not treated as equivalent dimensions of the proposed CDRM. Rather, they functioned as sensitizing concepts that guided data collection and interpretation. During the thematic analysis, the empirical findings were subsequently organized into broader dimensions of context-specific digital readiness. This process resulted in five dimensions: Digital Foundations, Technology Acceptance, Organizational and Psychological Readiness, Digital Capability, and Digital Empowerment Outcomes. Thus, the five dimensions of CDRM represent an analytical synthesis emerging from the interaction between theoretically informed categories and empirically identified contextual conditions, rather than a direct aggregation of pre-existing theories.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles et al. (2014), consisting of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. FGD transcripts and interview data were analyzed through thematic coding to identify recurring patterns related to intergenerational communication barriers, the need for digital public speaking training, and creative content marketing strategies for rural MSMEs. The credibility and trustworthiness of the findings were ensured through

Bricolage ; Jurnal Magister Ilmu Komunikasi
Vol.12 (No. 2) : 359 - 379 Th. 2026
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source and method triangulation, as well as member checking procedures to verify the accuracy of the researchers' interpretations with the informants.

Research ethics were strictly observed throughout the study. All informants provided informed consent prior to their involvement in the research process. The confidentiality of informants was protected through the use of anonymized codes (e.g., Informant 1, Informant 2), and all data were treated anonymously to safeguard the privacy and security of informants within their organizational environment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

This study evaluated the level of digital readiness among members of Karang Taruna Alfatih Young Community (AYC) in Kebalen Village through participant observations and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The findings were categorized into five major themes: (1) digital literacy profiles, (2) perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use of technology based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), (3) community empowerment dimensions, (4) readiness for MSME economic empowerment, and (5) organizational barriers and future projections in the digital era.

Digital Literacy Profile: Between Operational Competence and Content Creativity

The initial findings indicate that all informants had access to smartphones and stable 4G internet connectivity. From an operational perspective, members of Karang Taruna AYC demonstrated relatively strong ICT literacy in basic internet usage, particularly for organizational coordination through WhatsApp groups and information seeking. However, a significant gap emerged in terms of creative digital literacy.

FGD data revealed that although informants regularly used social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, they struggled to transition from passive users to strategic content creators. For example, Informant 1 acknowledged that the primary challenge involved the creative and imaginative aspects of content production:

"The difficulty lies in finding design elements and generating ideas." Informant 1

This finding aligns with previous studies suggesting that rural youth often have adequate basic ICT literacy but remain limited in their ability to create digital products across diverse formats and platforms. In addition, digital security literacy remains an area requiring further attention. Most informants admitted that they rarely considered cybersecurity issues during content creation, and only a few demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of information ethics, including the importance of obtaining copyright permission before reposting content. These findings suggest that the digital readiness of AYC members remains at an "operational-consumptive" stage and has not yet reached a mature "creative-ethical" level.

Digital Readiness Analysis Through the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

Drawing on the TAM framework, two key variables shape AYC members' digital readiness: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. Regarding perceived usefulness, members viewed social media as an essential organizational tool. Informant

Bricolage ; Jurnal Magister Ilmu Komunikasi
Vol.12 (No. 2) : 359 - 379Th. 2026
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e-ISSN: 2615-6423

2 explained that social media significantly facilitates information dissemination because events occurring at night can be communicated and accessed instantly. Digital technologies were seen as important tools for strengthening the organization's public image through consistent publication of activity documentation on Instagram and other digital platforms.

In contrast, perceived ease of use remains a challenge for more complex technological applications. While platforms such as Canva and Instagram were generally regarded as intuitive and user-friendly, data management applications such as Microsoft Excel were frequently perceived as difficult, despite being recognized as necessary. Members expressed a strong willingness to embrace digital transformation; however, they emphasized the need for continuous technical mentoring to effectively master digital tools and strengthen organizational management.

Community Empowerment Dimension: Building Digital Social Capital

The findings indicate that digital transformation within Karang Taruna AYC has stimulated community empowerment processes encompassing both psychological and social dimensions.

A. Self-Efficacy and Confidence

One of the most significant findings concerns the relationship between digital competence and psychological confidence. Informant 3 emphasized that public speaking is a critical soft skill that young people must develop to remain relevant in an increasingly digital society. Previous sponsorship negotiation training, for example, demonstrated that improved communication skills reduced members' feelings of embarrassment and lack of confidence when interacting with external stakeholders. This finding reflects the core premise of Social Cognitive Theory, whereby self-efficacy increases alongside the acquisition of technical skills and practical experience.

B. Social Interaction and Collaboration

Digital technologies have also strengthened social capital within AYC. When facing challenges in content design, members frequently engaged in collaborative problem-solving by seeking advice and feedback from one another. This pattern reflects a culture of mutual support that resembles a family-centric approach. In this context, digital transformation extends beyond the adoption of technological tools and functions as a social process that strengthens interpersonal relationships and collective organizational goals.

Readiness for Rural MSME Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment constitutes the second major pillar of this study. AYC members have initiated several informal and sporadic efforts to support local MSMEs. Informant 2 observed that culinary businesses in the Kebalen area—including dimsum, takoyaki, and seblak vendors—have experienced rapid growth in response to market trends. Several AYC members, including Informant 4, possess direct entrepreneurial experience through managing their own food businesses and promoting friends' products on TikTok, with some content approaching viral status. These experiences demonstrate that AYC youth possess strong entrepreneurial instincts and considerable

Bricolage ; Jurnal Magister Ilmu Komunikasi
Vol.12 (No. 2) : 359 - 379 Th. 2026
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potential to act as catalysts for local MSME development.

Nevertheless, these empowerment efforts still face challenges from intergenerational digital divides. Informant 5 noted that many older MSME owners have limited familiarity with social media platforms and digital marketing tools. Consequently, AYC members occupy a strategic position as "digital translators" who help senior entrepreneurs navigate digital technologies. To perform this role effectively, however, members require greater competencies in digital financial literacy to mitigate risks associated with online fraud, e-commerce scams, and illegal digital lending schemes.

Barriers to Organizational Digital Transformation

Based on the FGD and observational data, several major barriers to digital transformation readiness were identified within Karang Taruna AYC. First, psychological barriers remain evident, particularly limited self-confidence. Many members continue to feel hesitant about speaking in public or representing the organization in formal negotiations. Second, creative skill limitations constrain organizational innovation. Dependence on a small number of members perceived as proficient in graphic design slows content production processes and reduces content diversity. Third, structural and financial constraints hinder organizational development. Similar to many non-profit organizations, AYC faces budget limitations that restrict investment in digital operations and professional supporting infrastructure. Fourth, management perception gaps remain a significant challenge. Consistent with previous literature, differences in perspective exist between organizational leaders (village administrators and senior managers) and younger members regarding the urgency and direction of digital transformation. While senior leaders tend to focus on routine operational matters, younger members often envision broader and more innovative digital futures.

Future Projection: A Five-Year Vision for Karang Taruna AYC

Informant 5 articulated a highly structured long-term vision for AYC's future development. Within the next five years, AYC is expected to become a cohesive organization capable of effectively leveraging digital technologies. The transformation roadmap begins with strengthening administrative competencies through training in basic software applications such as Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel during the first year. In the second year, the organization plans to intensify training in creative content production using Canva and related digital tools to enhance organizational visibility and public engagement. By the fifth year, AYC is envisioned to establish an independent digital innovation division capable of systematically facilitating community empowerment and local economic development initiatives. This vision aligns closely with the Smart Village concept, which positions youth as central actors within a self-sustaining digital ecosystem that promotes social inclusion, technological innovation, and economic competitiveness at the village level.

Discussion

The discussion interprets the empirical findings on the digital readiness of Karang Taruna AYC members and examines how they contribute to broader debates in

Bricolage ; Jurnal Magister Ilmu Komunikasi
Vol.12 (No. 2) : 359 - 379Th. 2026
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e-ISSN: 2615-6423

Communication Studies and community empowerment. Drawing upon triangulated evidence from FGDs, participant observation, and supporting literature, the discussion is organized into five major themes: the digital natives paradox, the social construction of digital transformation and organizational identity, psychological empowerment through communication transformation, youth as digital translators in rural economic empowerment, and structural barriers to digital transformation.

The Digital Natives Paradox: Between Access and Creative Competence

The findings confirm a digital natives paradox among rural youth in the Society 5.0 era. Although all AYC members had stable 4G internet access and demonstrated proficiency in operating digital devices, substantial gaps remained in creative digital literacy. This finding supports previous studies suggesting that digital literacy extends beyond functional skills and encompasses critical, creative, and reflective competencies required to produce meaningful digital content (Cardoso & Silva, 2018; Dimov, 2024).

During the FGDs, informants acknowledged that their greatest challenge was not learning how to use digital applications but rather generating creative ideas and designing engaging content. This suggests that the digital readiness of Karang Taruna members remains largely concentrated at the level of information consumption and social coordination through platforms such as WhatsApp. From a Communication Studies perspective, these findings indicate the need to shift from basic media literacy toward content communication competence. Without the ability to develop creative and ethically responsible messages, the digital economic potential of rural MSMEs is unlikely to be fully realized, as promotional content will remain repetitive and lack competitive value. Consequently, continuous training programs emphasizing creativity, innovation, and strategic communication are essential if youth organizations are to evolve beyond passive technology users and become active digital producers.

The Social Construction of Digital Transformation and Organizational Identity

Digital transformation within Karang Taruna AYC should not be understood merely as adopting technical tools; rather, it is a process of social construction through which technology acquires collective meaning. Consistent with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), AYC members' readiness is strongly influenced by perceived usefulness. Members viewed social media—particularly Instagram—not only as a communication channel but also as a strategic instrument for building organizational visibility, legitimacy, and public recognition.

The process of constructing a digital organizational identity is deeply embedded in social interaction. When members encounter technical difficulties in content design, they engage in collaborative problem-solving and peer consultation. This culture of mutual support generates digital social capital that strengthens organizational cohesion and solidarity. In this context, successful digital transformation depends less on technological infrastructure and financial resources than on soft organizational components, including an innovative organizational culture, collaborative learning practices, and communicative digital leadership (Buonocore et al., 2024; Cyfert et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the long-term vision articulated by organizational leaders—to "master technology" within the next five years—reflects a strong behavioral intention to institutionalize digital transformation as a permanent component of organizational

Bricolage ; Jurnal Magister Ilmu Komunikasi
Vol.12 (No. 2) : 359 - 379 Th. 2026
p-ISSN: 2502-0935
e-ISSN: 2615-6423

identity and practice. This finding reinforces the TAM proposition that positive perceptions of technology foster sustained commitment to digital adoption and innovation.

Psychological Empowerment: From "Requesting Support" to "Building Partnerships"

One of this study's most significant contributions is the shift in communication orientations in sponsorship negotiations. Before receiving communication training, many Karang Taruna members viewed negotiation primarily as requesting assistance from external parties. This hierarchical communication pattern reflected limited self-efficacy and low communicative confidence among rural youth.

Following training interventions, however, informants demonstrated signs of psychological empowerment characterized by a growing awareness of the organization's bargaining position and strategic value. Members increasingly understood the principles of mutually beneficial partnerships, recognizing that they could offer sponsors meaningful value through brand exposure and promotional opportunities delivered via social media content. Rather than merely seeking financial assistance, they began to position themselves as partners capable of contributing to sponsors' communication and marketing objectives.

From a Communication Studies perspective, this shift is particularly important because it transforms the relationship between youth organizations and external stakeholders from one of dependency and subordination into one of strategic partnership and reciprocity. The willingness to speak publicly, negotiate confidently, and accept constructive criticism during training sessions constitutes an essential foundation for future digital leadership that is adaptive, participatory, and responsive to organizational challenges.

Youth as Digital Translators in Rural MSME Empowerment

The findings demonstrate that Karang Taruna occupies a strategic position as a catalyst for rural economic empowerment through its engagement with local MSMEs. However, one of the most significant barriers identified in the field is the persistent intergenerational digital divide. Many senior MSME owners in Kebalen Village possess high-quality products but lack the digital competencies necessary to utilize online platforms effectively for marketing and business development.

In this context, Karang Taruna members function as digital translators, bridging the gap between traditional entrepreneurial practices and contemporary digital opportunities. Their familiarity with social media platforms, content creation, and digital communication enables them to facilitate technology adoption among older entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurial experiences of Informant 4, who successfully managed and promoted culinary products through TikTok, illustrate the potential of youth-led digital mediation in supporting local economic growth.

Nevertheless, digital readiness for economic empowerment should extend beyond promotional skills. Members also need stronger digital financial literacy, including knowledge of secure online transactions, digital payment systems, and the risks of illegal online lending and financial fraud. Without such competencies, entrepreneurial enthusiasm may expose young people and MSMEs to significant financial vulnerabilities. Therefore, sustainable rural digital transformation strategies must

Bricolage ; Jurnal Magister Ilmu Komunikasi
Vol.12 (No. 2) : 359 - 379Th. 2026
p-ISSN: 2502-0935
e-ISSN: 2615-6423

integrate creative marketing capabilities with financial risk management and digital security awareness to foster resilient local economic ecosystems.

Structural Barriers and Mitigation Strategies

Despite strong behavioral intentions toward digital transformation, Karang Taruna AYC continues to face several structural challenges. Limited financial resources for acquiring professional digital equipment and uneven internet connectivity in certain areas remain tangible obstacles to organizational development. Furthermore, organizational attention is often absorbed by routine operational activities, reducing the capacity for long-term strategic innovation.

In response to these challenges, FGD informants proposed the establishment of a dedicated "Digital Innovation and MSME Development Division" within the organizational structure. Such a division would institutionalize digital learning activities—including training in Microsoft Excel for administrative management and Canva for content production—ensuring that digital capacity-building becomes a continuous developmental process rather than a one-time initiative.

From the perspective of Organizational Communication, this recommendation represents a process of formalizing organizational change mechanisms that can sustain transformation momentum beyond individual leadership periods (Nurdin, 2014; Santosa & Ringo, 2017). Institutionalizing digital competencies within organizational structures is crucial for ensuring continuity, preserving organizational knowledge, and fostering a culture of innovation capable of adapting to future technological and societal changes.

A Context-Specific Digital Readiness Model for Rural Non-Profit Organizations in Developing Countries

Based on the empirical findings, this study proposes a Context-Specific Digital Readiness Model (CDRM) for rural non-profit organizations operating in developing countries (Figure 1). The model extends the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) by integrating organizational communication, psychological empowerment, digital capability development, and community empowerment into a unified framework. Unlike conventional digital readiness models that primarily emphasize technological infrastructure and technology adoption, the proposed model conceptualizes digital readiness as a multidimensional process shaped by organizational, social, and contextual factors.

In this study, the TAM is positioned as a sensitizing theoretical perspective rather than as the overarching theoretical foundation of the proposed CDRM. TAM provides a specific explanatory lens for understanding how organizational members interpret the perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use of digital technologies. These two dimensions are particularly relevant for explaining technology acceptance, but they do not, by themselves, capture the broader organizational, psychological, social, and contextual conditions required for sustained digital transformation. Therefore, CDRM does not replace or assume a higher theoretical position than TAM. Instead, it incorporates the explanatory insight of TAM as one component within a broader context-specific framework. The contribution of CDRM lies in situating technology acceptance within a wider configuration of organizational readiness, psychological preparedness, digital capability, and empowerment outcomes. In this sense, TAM

Bricolage ; Jurnal Magister Ilmu Komunikasi
Vol.12 (No. 2) : 359 - 379 Th. 2026
p-ISSN: 2502-0935
e-ISSN: 2615-6423

explains one mechanism of readiness namely, how technologies become meaningful and acceptable to organizational members while CDRM addresses the broader question of how such acceptance is translated, constrained, or enabled within a particular organizational and community context.

As illustrated in Figure 1, digital readiness begins with Digital Foundations, which include access to digital devices, internet connectivity, and basic operational digital literacy. These foundational resources provide the minimum requirements for organizational participation in the digital environment. The second stage, Technology Acceptance, reflects members' perceptions regarding the usefulness and ease of use of digital technologies, which subsequently influence their willingness to adopt digital tools for organizational activities. However, the findings demonstrate that technology acceptance alone is insufficient to achieve meaningful digital transformation. It must be accompanied by Organizational and Psychological Readiness, encompassing self-efficacy, communication confidence, collaborative organizational culture, digital leadership, and the development of a shared digital identity. These organizational dimensions strengthen members' capacity to implement digital transformation collectively rather than individually.

The model further proposes that organizational readiness facilitates the development of Digital Capability, including creative content production, ethical digital literacy, cybersecurity awareness, digital financial literacy, and data management competencies. These capabilities enable non-profit organizations to generate broader Digital Empowerment Outcomes, such as enhanced community empowerment, support for rural MSMEs, organizational sustainability, digital innovation, and contributions to Smart Village development. At the same time, the model recognizes that digital readiness is continuously influenced by cross-cutting barriers, including financial constraints, psychological barriers, unequal skill distribution, leadership perception gaps, limited infrastructure, and insufficient mentoring opportunities. Consequently, the proposed framework demonstrates that digital readiness within rural non-profit organizations is not merely a technological condition but rather a dynamic organizational capability that evolves through the interaction of technological, psychological, organizational, and socio-economic dimensions. This integrated perspective constitutes the primary theoretical contribution of the present study by providing a context-specific framework for understanding digital transformation in non-profit organizations across developing countries.

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Bricolage ; Jurnal Magister Ilmu Komunikasi
Vol.12 (No. 2) : 359 - 379Th. 2026
p-ISSN: 2502-0935
e-ISSN: 2615-6423

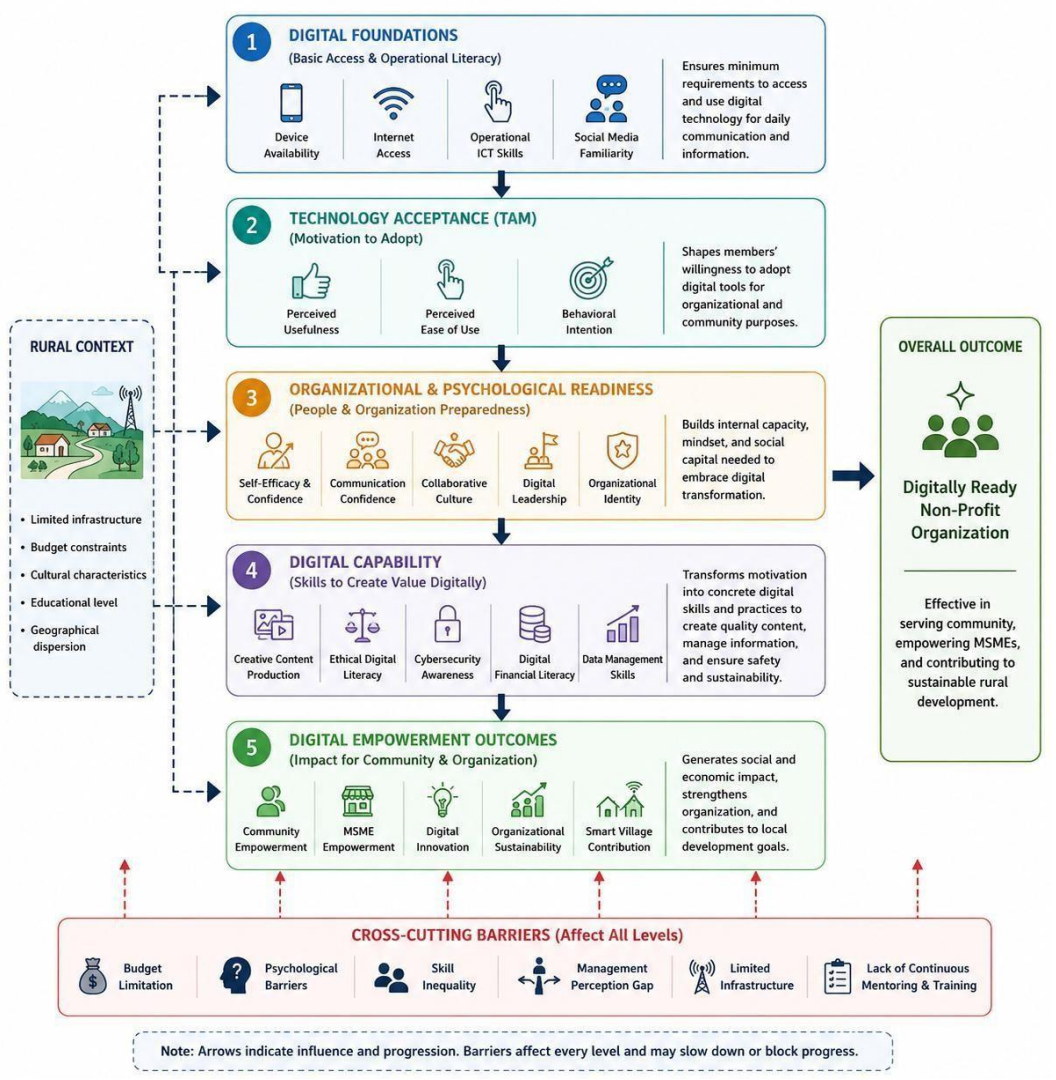

Figure 1. Context-Specific Digital Readiness Model for Rural Non-Profit Organizations in Developing Countries

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that digital readiness within rural youth organizations is a multidimensional construct that extends beyond technological access and operational digital literacy. Although members of Karang Taruna AYC exhibited adequate basic ICT competencies and recognized the usefulness of digital technologies, their readiness remained constrained by limited creative digital literacy, digital financial literacy, cybersecurity awareness, and data management capabilities. The findings further indicate that successful digital transformation depends not only on technology acceptance but also on organizational and psychological readiness, including self-efficacy, communication confidence, collaborative culture, and digital leadership. These factors collectively determine the capacity of youth organizations to utilize digital technologies for sustainable community and economic empowerment.

The principal theoretical contribution of this study is the development of a Context-Specific Digital Readiness Model (CDRM) for rural non-profit organizations in

Bricolage ; Jurnal Magister Ilmu Komunikasi
Vol.12 (No. 2) : 359 - 379 Th. 2026
p-ISSN: 2502-0935
e-ISSN: 2615-6423

developing countries. The proposed model conceptualizes digital readiness as a sequential process comprising five interrelated dimensions: Digital Foundations, Technology Acceptance, Organizational and Psychological Readiness, Digital Capability, and Digital Empowerment Outcomes, while recognizing that financial constraints, skill inequality, infrastructure limitations, and management perception gaps influence every stage of digital transformation. By integrating the Technology Acceptance Model with perspectives from organizational communication and community empowerment, the model extends existing digital readiness frameworks, which have predominantly been developed for corporate settings, into the context of volunteer-based youth organizations.

Practically, the findings suggest that strengthening digital readiness requires continuous mentoring rather than one-time technical training. Rural youth organizations should institutionalize digital transformation through dedicated digital innovation units, systematic capacity-building programs, and partnerships with government agencies, universities, and industry. Such initiatives would enable youth organizations to function not only as technology users but also as digital leaders capable of supporting MSME development, fostering community empowerment, and accelerating Smart Village implementation. Future studies are encouraged to validate the proposed model quantitatively across diverse non-profit organizations and rural contexts to examine its broader applicability and generalizability.

Theoretically, this study suggests that digital readiness should be conceptualized as a multidimensional organizational capability rather than merely an individual or technological condition. The findings extend the TAM by demonstrating that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use alone are insufficient to explain digital transformation in volunteer-based youth organizations. Instead, technology acceptance is mediated by organizational and psychological readiness, including self-efficacy, collaborative culture, communication confidence, and digital leadership. Furthermore, the study broadens existing digital readiness frameworks, which have largely been developed in corporate environments, by highlighting the importance of grassroots organizational dynamics and community empowerment in shaping digital transformation within rural non-profit organizations.

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