

Digital Policing and Public Trust in Zimbabwe: a Qualitative Case Study of Post- Covid 19 Pandemic Practices in Harare Metropolitan Province

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Keywords	Abstract
digital policing, public trust, technology acceptance model, social capital theory, zimbabwe	The swift digitalization of policing in Zimbabwe has altered law enforcement operations in the post-pandemic context; however, the impact on public trust is still unclear. This study examines the impact of digital policing initiatives by the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) on public perceptions of legitimacy and accountability, addressing an existing research gap. The main aim is to analyze significant digital policing practices adopted in Harare Metropolitan Province since the onset of COVID-19, evaluate their effects on public trust, and suggest policy strategies for an inclusive and ethical digital transformation. The study employs a qualitative case study design utilizing secondary data to apply the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Social Capital Theory (SCT) in analyzing findings derived from government reports, academic literature, and media sources. The findings indicate that digital systems, including the Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS), CCTV surveillance, and online reporting forums, have improved efficiency and communication; however, they have not significantly restored trust. Citizens perceive digital policing primarily as a mechanism of citizen control rather than empowerment, attributed to insufficient data governance, inadequate responsiveness, and lack of accountability mechanisms. The research indicates that technological modernization should be synchronized with transparency, ethical standards, and citizen engagement to enhance police legitimacy and public trust. The development of robust data protection policies, enhancement of ICT capacity, and promotion of participatory digital governance are recommended to ensure that innovation fosters public trust and democratic policing.



INTRODUCTION

The swift digitalization of policing signifies a major transition in modern law enforcement. Globally, law enforcement organizations have implemented digital technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), big data analytics, biometrics, predictive policing software, and mobile reporting applications to enhance efficiency, transparency, and crime prevention (U.N.O.D.C., 2023). Interpol (2023) indicates that more than 70% of member governments have included a digital policing strategy into their national security frameworks. The COVID-19 epidemic has expedited these developments, compelling numerous police agencies to adopt online engagement, virtual reporting, and digital monitoring tools to ensure operational

continuity while reducing physical contact (O.E.C.D., 2022). Although these technologies provide improved functionalities for evidence management and public interaction, they also present ethical and societal dilemmas. Research in Europe and North America indicates that the use of algorithmic policing and surveillance technologies frequently undermines civil rights and public trust in the absence of strong accountability mechanisms (Brayne, 2021). This global dynamic between innovation and legitimacy underpins the analysis of digital policing in developing settings.

The push for digital change in policing across Africa has intensified, however it remains inconsistent. Numerous law enforcement agencies are exploring e-policing platforms, biometric identification technologies, and the digitalization of crime data. For example, Kenya has implemented a Digital Occurrence Book (DOB) system, while South Africa and Zimbabwe have initiated experimental programs for body-worn cameras (Adegbola & Daramola, 2023). Nonetheless, obstacles include inadequate infrastructure, insufficient data governance, and deficiencies in digital literacy continue to exist. (Chigada & Madzinga, 2022) assert that digital policing in Africa is frequently hindered by inconsistent legal frameworks and insufficient investment in cyber-security, leading to public fear over technology-driven law enforcement. The African Policing Civilian Oversight Forum A.P.C.O.F. (2023) underscores that digital development should be complemented by human rights protections to avert misuse and maintain public trust.

In the post-pandemic situation, digital instruments have facilitated enhanced cooperation and communication between law enforcement and communities. However, these improvements have not consistently resulted in enhanced trust, as numerous citizens equate digital monitoring with governmental control rather than operational efficiency (Aborisade & Adeleke, 2022).

The Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) has commenced the implementation of digital policing projects in accordance with the national Smart Policing Strategy (2021–2025), which seeks to modernize law enforcement through automation and data-driven management (Report, 2023). Initiatives encompass the Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS), digital record-keeping, body worn cameras (BWC), intelligent communication technologies, and the increasing use of Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) in urban areas such as Harare (Herald, 2024). These advancements indicate Zimbabwe's commitment to modernizing its police services in accordance with international standards. Nonetheless, despite this advancement, public confidence in the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) continues to be minimal. The Afrobarometer (2023) indicated that merely 40% of Zimbabweans had confidence in the police, whereas 60% regard the institution as corrupt.

Furthermore, digital transformation has not adequately resolved fundamental institutional issues, including accountability, professionalism, and openness. Citizens frequently perceive digital efforts as instruments of control rather than avenues for community empowerment, particularly in environments with inadequate data protection and privacy regulations (Mhaka & Hodhera, 2025). Subsequent to COVID-19, the "new normal" has compelled the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) to increasingly depend on digital communication, online reporting, and remote involvement; yet, the impact of these innovations on public trust remains unclear. Comprehending this relationship in Harare Metropolitan

Province, the nation's most urbanized and digitally integrated neighborhood is essential for guiding future law enforcement reforms.

Although global research has examined the advantages and obstacles of digital policing, there is a scarcity of studies in Africa and none specifically in Zimbabwe that have carefully analyzed the impact of these innovations on public trust in the post-pandemic era. Current Zimbabwean research predominantly explores general impressions of police behavior (Chingozha et al., 2022) or the digital transformation of the public sector (Mhaka & Hodhera, 2025), neglecting the trust implications associated with digital policing. This study examines the gap by evaluating secondary qualitative data concerning the digital initiatives of the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) and their perceived effects on public trust in the Harare Metropolitan Province.

This study contributes novelty in several distinct ways. First, it provides one of the earliest focused analyses of digital policing impact on public trust specifically within the Zimbabwean post-pandemic context, filling a critical geographical and thematic gap in the literature. Second, it innovatively applies an integrated theoretical lens, combining the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) with Social Capital Theory (SCT), to dissect the dual technical and socio-relational factors influencing trust. Third, it shifts the analytical focus from technological efficiency to the crucial governance and accountability deficits that mediate the relationship between digital tools and public perception.

The primary aim of this study is to analyze the impact of post-pandemic digital policing practices on public trust in the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) within Harare Metropolitan Province, with specific objectives to identify and evaluate the key digital policing initiatives implemented since the onset of COVID-19, analyze public perceptions of these initiatives regarding police legitimacy and accountability, and derive policy recommendations for fostering trust through ethical and inclusive digital transformation.

The benefits of this research are multifaceted. For policymakers and the ZRP, it provides evidence-based insights to design digital strategies that are not only operationally efficient but also legitimacy-enhancing. For academia, it contributes to theoretical and empirical understanding of technology-trust dynamics in a Global South policing context. For civil society and the public, it highlights the importance of governance, transparency, and accountability in the digital era, advocating for policing that is both modern and democratically accountable. Ultimately, the study seeks to inform a pathway where digital innovation strengthens, rather than undermines, the social contract between the police and the citizens they serve.

RESEARCH METHODS

This section presents the methodological framework employed to investigate the impact of digital policing practices on public trust within Zimbabwe's post-pandemic policing context, specifically focusing on Harare Metropolitan Province as a case study. The methodology outlines a systematic approach to fulfilling the study's objectives by employing a qualitative research design that exclusively utilizes secondary data. The research approach aims to produce a contextual and interpretive understanding of the changing dynamics between law

enforcement agencies and the public in a context characterized by technological advancement and social adaptation.

Qualitative research was deemed the most suitable method for this study, as it facilitates the examination of intricate interactions among human, institutional, and technological factors that quantitative measurement cannot adequately capture (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The following sections provide a detailed examination of the research design, data collection methods, analysis procedures, measures of validity and reliability, and ethical considerations.

Research Design

This research utilizes a qualitative case study design to examine the impact of digital policing practices on public trust within the context of Zimbabwe's post-pandemic environment, specifically in the Harare Metropolitan Province. The qualitative approach was chosen for its capacity to elucidate perceptions, meanings, and contextual relationships that numerical data fail to adequately represent (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A case study design was utilized to gain a comprehensive understanding of digital policing in its actual context. Harare Metropolitan Province was selected as the case study because of its significant urbanization, advanced digital infrastructure, and current initiatives in police modernization. This approach facilitates the analysis of the impact of ICT tools such as online reporting systems, digital surveillance, and virtual communication on police-community relations in the context of the “new normal” (Yin, 2018). The study, informed by an interpretive paradigm, acknowledges that social realities are constructed through experiences and interactions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This is suitable for examining the perceptions of both police and citizens regarding digital transformation in policing.

The research is based solely on secondary data, employing documentary analysis of academic publications, government reports, Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) strategic documents, and reputable media sources. The triangulation of these materials guarantees both credibility and analytical rigor. This qualitative case study design provides a contextual and interpretive framework for analyzing the impact of technology adoption in policing on public trust within Zimbabwe's changing post-pandemic security landscape.

Data sources and Collection Procedure

This research relies entirely on secondary data collected from credible and recent sources. Secondary data were obtained from:

1. Government and police reports, including the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) strategic plans and public trust surveys.
2. Academic journals and policy papers focusing on digital transformation, e-policing, and public trust in sub-Saharan Africa.
3. Media publications and online reports addressing post-COVID-19 policing adaptations and public engagement in Zimbabwe.

The use of secondary data allows for a cost-effective and ethically sound approach while ensuring access to diverse perspectives and longitudinal insights (Johnston, 2017). All sources were systematically screened for relevance (2019–2025) to ensure timeliness and credibility.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section outlines and analyzes the findings in relation to the three research objectives: (1) identification of key digital policing practices implemented by the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) in Harare Metropolitan Province since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) examination of the impact of these practices on public trust and legitimacy; and (3) assessment of policy implications for policing in Zimbabwe's post-pandemic context.

This analysis synthesizes secondary data and employs the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) Vial, (2021) alongside Social Capital Theory (SCT) Bourdieu, (1986); Putnam, (1993) to elucidate the connections among technology adoption, trust, and legitimacy. Research demonstrates that Zimbabwe has significantly advanced in the adoption of digital policing tools, including automated systems, online engagement platforms, and digital surveillance. However, ongoing institutional, infrastructural, and ethical deficiencies remain barriers to public trust in law enforcement.

Digital policing practices in the (Post – COVID 19) pandemic era

The post-pandemic era has signified a critical stage in the digital transformation of Zimbabwe's policing framework. The Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP's) Smart Policing Strategy (2021–2025) has facilitated the implementation of technologies such as the Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS), body worn cameras, breathalyzers, digital records management, and Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) systems in Harare Metropolitan Province and other urban areas (Herald, 2024; Report, 2023). These initiatives reflect the global trend of digital modernization, with over 70% of Interpol member states incorporating digital policing strategies into their national frameworks (Interpol, 2023). Throughout and following the COVID-19 pandemic, digital policing practices proved essential for sustaining operations in light of social distancing measures. The Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) has increased its utilization of social media for public communication, online crime reporting, and electronic case documentation (Goredema, 2023). These practices correspond with international adaptations noted in various regions, where law enforcement agencies incorporated digital engagement and virtual platforms to maintain operational continuity (Sandhu & Fussey, 2022) & (O.E.C.D., 2022).

Nonetheless, challenges in implementation remain. Research indicates that infrastructural deficits, inconsistent funding, and low ICT literacy among law enforcement officers impede the complete implementation of digital systems (Chigada & Madzinga, 2022; Munyoro & Chikanya, 2022). Furthermore, disparities in internet access between urban and peri-urban regions have resulted in unequal engagement in digital policing (Aborisade & Adeleke, 2022). According to the Technology Acceptance Model, these barriers diminish both perceived usefulness (PU) and perceived ease of use (PEOU), which are essential factors influencing technology adoption (Vial, 2021).

The Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP's) digital modernization signifies a notable institutional transition, despite existing constraints. This work presents mechanisms for data-driven management, virtual community engagement, and evidence-based operations, reflecting wider trends in digital transformation across Africa (Adegbola & Daramola, 2023). The findings indicate that Zimbabwe is in an early stage of digital policing maturity, marked by increasing innovation yet hindered by systemic and resource-related constraints.

Influence of digital policing practices on public trust and legitimacy.

The findings indicate that the digital transformation of policing in Harare Metropolitan Province has produced varied impacts on public trust and institutional legitimacy. Despite advancements in digital initiatives that enhance operational visibility, communication efficiency, and service access, public confidence in law enforcement continues to be comparatively low. Afrobarometer (2023) reports that merely 40% of Zimbabweans have confidence in the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP), with 60% viewing the institution as corrupt. This highlights that technological innovation by itself cannot restore legitimacy without accompanying structural reforms in accountability and fairness (Makumbe & Moyo, 2023; Tankebe, 2021).

Three principal themes were identified from the analysis:

Transparency and Accountability: - Digital tools, including CCTV systems and digital case records management, improve the transparency and traceability of police actions (Interpol, 2023). The lack of comprehensive data governance frameworks has contributed to public concerns regarding the potential misuse of surveillance (Mhaka & Hodhera, 2025). Citizens frequently view digital monitoring as a means of control, reflecting global research indicating that algorithmic policing may undermine legitimacy in the absence of strong accountability (Brayne, 2021; Rowe & Liebling, 2021).

Responsiveness and Service Provision: - Online reporting platforms implemented during the COVID 19 pandemic enhanced access to police services; however, they have been criticized for delayed responses and unreliable follow-up (Chitongo, 2022). The failure of digital channels to yield tangible service outcomes results in a decline in citizens' perceptions of procedural fairness, thereby undermining trust as outlined in Tyler (2021) procedural justice framework. **Ethical and Privacy Considerations:** - The inadequacy of data protection laws in Zimbabwe intensifies concerns about the potential misuse of personal information (Chigada & Madzinga, 2022). Ethical lapses, including unauthorized surveillance and data leaks, undermine perceptions of police integrity and transparency, which are essential components of legitimacy according to Social Capital Theory (Tankebe, 2021).

These findings suggest that public trust in digital policing is contingent upon citizens' perceptions of technologies as beneficial and secure. Furthermore, Social Capital Theory (SCT) emphasizes that the effectiveness of digital policing depends on its ability to foster linking social capital, which is characterized by trust between citizens and institutions (Tyler, 2021). In Harare Metropolitan Province, digital engagement via social media and online reporting has led to a modest enhancement in communication; however, ongoing concerns regarding ethics and transparency persist, undermining linking social capital. Digital policing has improved efficiency; however, it has not contributed to legitimacy. The results indicate that trust depends on both technological capabilities and the social and ethical frameworks that regulate their application. In the absence of institutional safeguards, digital policing may exacerbate public perceptions of control and corruption, undermining transparency and service delivery.

Policy implications on policing in the New Normal (Post- COVID 19 Pandemic)

The post-pandemic "new normal" necessitates the development of adaptive and resilient policing systems that incorporate technology while ensuring the protection of civil liberties. The pandemic globally accelerated digital transformation in law enforcement, highlighting the

importance of contactless operations, remote communication, and data-driven management (Rowe & Liebling, 2021; Sandhu & Fussey, 2022).

In Africa, digital readiness exhibited variability attributed to infrastructural, financial, and literacy limitations (Mutune & Mwangi, 2023). Zimbabwe's situation illustrates the interplay between innovation and ongoing issues related to capacity and legitimacy. The analysis reveals several significant policy implications:-

Establishment of Data Protection and Digital Ethics

A comprehensive digital policing policy framework is essential for the regulation of data management, privacy, and accountability (A.P.C.O.F., 2023). These frameworks will guarantee that the growth of surveillance technologies is consistent with constitutional rights and subject to democratic oversight.

Capacity Development and Technical Proficiency

The effectiveness of digital policing relies on a police workforce that possesses digital competence. Professional development programs in ICT, data management, and ethical cyber practices are essential (Munyoro & Chikanya, 2022). Improving public digital literacy can enable citizens to interact confidently with e-policing systems.

Strategies for Inclusive Digital Engagement

Establishing trust via community-focused platforms, including mobile reporting applications and social media discussions, can enhance mutual understanding and promote participatory governance (Aborisade & Adeleke, 2022). Digital inclusivity fosters the development of social capital, facilitating collaboration among varied communities.

Transparency and Oversight Mechanisms

The establishment of independent oversight bodies to monitor digital operations will enhance public confidence and institutional legitimacy. Enhancing transparency in algorithmic decision-making and surveillance applications will improve perceived usefulness and fairness, thereby reinforcing the principles of the Technology Acceptance Model (Vial, 2021).

In Zimbabwe's current context, the incorporation of technology in policing should emphasize ethical governance, inclusivity, and collaboration with the community. The integration of digital innovation with accountability has the potential to shift policing from a paradigm of coercive control to one rooted in democratic legitimacy and public trust.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that digital policing presents both opportunities and challenges for the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) in the post- COVID 19 pandemic era. Insights from Harare Metropolitan Province reveal that the adoption of digital technologies, including the Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS), Body worn cameras, CCTV surveillance, and online reporting platforms, has enhanced efficiency, communication, and service accessibility. However, these innovations are inadequate for restoring public trust. Ongoing challenges related to transparency, insufficient accountability, and ethical uncertainties persistently compromise the legitimacy of digital policing initiatives. The study, informed by the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Social Capital Theory (SCT), concludes that the effectiveness of digital policing is contingent upon both the acceptance of technology and the quality of relationships between law enforcement and the community. Technologies viewed

as beneficial, user-friendly, and ethically regulated contribute to increased trust and institutional legitimacy.

In contrast, systems viewed as intrusive or lacking accountability diminish public trust. The digital transformation of policing in Zimbabwe necessitates accompanying reforms that prioritize accountability, citizen engagement, and inclusive governance. Sustainable digital policing in Zimbabwe necessitates an integrated approach that harmonizes innovation with ethical considerations and transparency. Enhancing institutional capacity, implementing data protection standards, and promoting participatory communication are essential for closing the trust gap between citizens and law enforcement. The progression towards smart policing necessitates the alignment of technological modernization with democratic values, thereby ensuring that digital transformation serves as a catalyst for legitimacy, justice, and sustained public trust.

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