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Exploring the relationship between inclusion and digitalization in public participation: a qualitative study of administrators' perceptions

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Public officials play a central role in translating inclusion and digitalization into everyday participatory governance. Yet research has paid limited attention to how public officials themselves understand inclusive digital participation. Drawing on 41 semi-structured interviews with project managers involved in participatory projects in Emilia-Romagna, Italy, this qualitative study examines how public officials perceive the opportunities and limitations of digital tools for inclusive participation in the post-pandemic context. The findings show that digitalization is understood ambivalently: it can widen access, simplify communication, and support participation across constraints of time and distance, but it can also reproduce existing inequalities linked to age, digital skills, language, and access to devices. Inclusion is often framed as openness in principle, yet participants varied in the extent to which they critically recognized the structural barriers that continue to exclude some groups from meaningful participation. The analysis highlights a distinction between assumed inclusivity and critical inclusivity, showing how formally open processes may still reproduce exclusion. Overall, the study points to the importance of institutional reflexivity, hybrid participation formats, and targeted outreach if digital participation is to move from a formal aspiration to a genuinely inclusive practice.

KEYWORDS

digitalization, inclusion, local government, participation, public administration, public officials

1 Introduction

Participation is widely regarded as a core feature of democratic life because it enables citizens to express preferences, contribute to collective decisions, and hold institutions accountable (Nabatchi and Leighninger, 2015; Verba et al., 1995; Vissers and Stolle, 2014; Nabatchi, 2014). In public administration, participatory processes are also valued because they can improve legitimacy, strengthen policy quality, and create opportunities for dialogue between institutions and citizens (Fung, 2015; Fernandes-Jesus et al., 2012; Ferreira et al., 2012; Froncek and Rohmann, 2019; Irvin and Stansbury, 2004). Participation in public administration takes multiple forms, including consultative processes such as surveys, public hearings, and stakeholder meetings, as well as more deliberative formats such as citizens' panels and co-design workshops. These forms differ in their aims and intensity, but all raise questions about who is able

to participate, under what conditions, and with what influence (Fung, 2006; Smith, 2009).

Digitalization has reshaped this field by extending participation into the online realm through e-participation and related forms of digital engagement (Coleman and Moss, 2012; Kim and Lee, 2012; Doran et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this process, as public administrations adopted digital tools more rapidly and often out of necessity, thereby intensifying debates about the democratic opportunities and risks of digitally mediated participation (Krejns et al., 2023; Meijer and Webster, 2020).

Existing research on e-participation suggests that digital platforms can both broaden opportunities for engagement and reproduce existing inequalities, depending on platform design, recruitment strategies, and institutional arrangements (Borge et al., 2022; Rueß et al., 2023). Studies have shown that online participation processes often struggle to reach underrepresented groups unless specific inclusion measures are adopted (Rottinghaus and Escher, 2020; Baek et al., 2012; Chadwick, 2003). More recently, research has highlighted how the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital participation while simultaneously revealing persistent inequalities in access and engagement (Büll and Fegert, 2025; Strandberg and Grönlund, 2014). These concerns are often discussed through the lens of the digital divide. Importantly, digital divides do not refer only to internet access, but also to differences in digital skills, resources, confidence, language, and the capacity to use digital tools effectively (Norris, 2001; Van Dijk, 2020; Thijssen and Van Dooren, 2016). Exclusion may therefore arise from individual constraints, such as limited digital literacy, but also from the design of participation platforms, the complexity of authentication systems, and the institutional routines through which participation is organized (Cumbie and Kar, 2016; Elstub et al., 2021).

Inclusive participation implies more than formal openness; it concerns whether different groups are present, recognized, and able to exercise voice within participatory processes (García-Espín, 2025; Smith, 2009; Young, 2002). Digital tools may reduce barriers related to time, distance, and bureaucratic complexity, but they may also intensify inequalities if participation depends on technological access, digital skills, or the assumption that all citizens can engage in the same way (Shin et al., 2024; Van Dijk, 2020). Although these dynamics are well established, less is known about how public officials who design and manage participation interpret inclusion and digitalization in everyday administrative settings. This matters because their assumptions and practices shape how inclusion is translated from principle into practice. Previous research supports this focus: public managers' attitudes toward participation are shaped by individual beliefs, process design, organizational norms, and broader contextual factors (Migchelbrink and Van de Walle, 2022), and officials often view digitalization as useful while remaining concerned about its inclusiveness, particularly for vulnerable or hard-to-reach groups (Durman, 2020; Feeney and Welch, 2012). Taken together, this literature suggests that digital inclusion is shaped not only by technological infrastructure but also by the social and institutional conditions that affect who participates and whose voices are heard (Smith, 2009; Young, 2002).

The present study addresses this issue through a qualitative case study of Emilia-Romagna, a northern Italian region with a strong policy framework for participatory governance and digital innovation. Initiatives such as PartecipAzioni support digitally mediated civic involvement (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2022; Casula, 2015), while municipalities vary in size, administrative capacity, and levels of digitalization (Zola, 2025; Mariani et al.,

2025; AgID – Agenzia per l'Italia Digitale, 2023). This combination makes the region useful for examining how a shared participatory framework is enacted under uneven local conditions. As of January 2025, Emilia-Romagna had a resident population of approximately 4.48 million inhabitants. The region is characterized by an ageing population and foreign residents accounting for 12.9% of the population (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2025), reflecting increasing demographic diversity and highlighting the importance of inclusive participatory practices.

Three research questions guide the analysis:

- How do public officials understand inclusion in participatory governance processes?
- How do they perceive the opportunities and limitations of digital tools for promoting inclusive participation?
- What strategies do they adopt to address barriers to participation in digitally mediated participatory processes?

2 The present study

This study examines the meanings of inclusion and digitalization as perceived by the professionals responsible for implementing participatory projects developed within the policy framework promoted by the Emilia-Romagna Region. The regional framework includes guidelines, dedicated calls for proposals, and a structured evaluation system, which together provide methodological and operational support to project managers and shape expectations regarding participation and inclusion.

The study relies on interviews with professionals who played a central role in the design and execution of the projects (e.g., project managers, coordinators, and digital strategists). The analysis therefore concerns their perceptions, interpretations, and reported experiences.

3 Methodology

This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to capture participants' perspectives on inclusion, digitalization, and participatory governance. Interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams between November and December 2024 and lasted approximately one hour.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Bologna (Protocol No. 0313577, 11/10/2024). Before each interview, participants received detailed information about the study and provided written informed consent. All interviews were video-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim.

A total of 131 potential participants were contacted on the basis of a list provided by the Emilia-Romagna Region, which included individuals who had managed participatory projects between 2020 and 2024 (Table 1). In some cases, the initial contact redirected the invitation to a colleague more directly involved in participation activities; in a few cases, two colleagues joined together when both had contributed substantially to the same project. Forty-one interviews were completed (31.2% of the contacted sample). The study did not use thematic saturation as a predefined criterion for sample size. Instead, the aim was to include as many

TABLE 1 Demographic characteristics of the sample.

Participant ID ¹	Gender	Age	Organization	Municipality size ²
ID01_M_TS	Man	34	foundation	large
ID02_W_PA	Woman	45	public administration	large
ID03_M_PA	Man	30	public administration	large
ID04_M_TS	Man	72	voluntary organization	large
ID05_W_PA	Woman	61	public administration	large
ID06_W_PA	Woman	57	public administration	large
ID07_W_PC	Woman	61	private limited company	large
ID08_W_PA	Woman	54	public administration	medium large
ID09_M_TS	Man	46	cooperative	medium large
ID10_W_PA	Woman	57	public administration	medium large
ID11_W_PA	Woman	48	public administration	medium large
ID12_W_TS	Woman	29	cooperative	medium large
ID13_M_TS	Man	45	foundation	medium large
ID14_M_PA	Man	59	public administration	medium large
ID15_W_PA	Woman	56	public administration	medium large
ID16_W_PA	Woman	30	public administration	medium large
ID17_W_PA	Woman	49	public administration	medium large
ID18_W_PA	Woman	48	public administration	medium large
ID19_M_PA	Man	51	public administration	medium large
ID20_M_PA	Man	49	public administration	medium large
ID21_M_TS	Man	45	association	medium large
ID22_W_TS	Woman	65	association	medium large
ID23_W_TS	Woman	66	cooperative	medium small
ID24_W_PA	Woman	48	public administration	medium small
ID25_W_PA	Woman	54	public administration	medium small
ID26_W_PC	Woman	46	private limited company	medium small
ID27_M_TS	Man	64	foundation	medium small
ID28_W_PA	Woman	31	public administration	medium small
ID29_W_PA	Woman	34	public administration	medium small
ID30_W_PA	Woman	46	public administration	medium small
ID31_M_PA	Man	56	public administration	medium small
ID32_M_PA	Man	29	public administration	medium small
ID33_M_PA	Man	43	public administration	medium small
ID34_W_TS	Woman	46	association	small
ID35_M_TS	Man	56	association	small
ID36_M_PA	Man	63	public administration	small
ID37_W_TS	Woman	42	cooperative	small
ID38_M_PA	Man	44	public administration	medium small
ID39_M_SC	Man	57	high school	N/A
ID40_W_SC	Woman	59	high school	N/A
ID41_W_TS	Woman	34	association	N/A

¹Each participant ID is made up of a sequential number (e.g., ID03), followed by a letter that signals the participant's gender ("M" for men and "W" for women), and a code linked to the type of organization they work for (PA, Public Administration; TS, Third Sector Organization; PC, Private Limited Company; SC, School).

²Municipality size was categorized according to population size, following a classification inspired by the Italian Ministry of the Interior, which classifies municipalities into twelve demographic classes based on population size (Ministero dell'Interno, 2007), by merging every three categories into one, yielding a total of four. Municipalities are categorized as small (fewer than 2,000 inhabitants), medium small (2,000–9,999), medium large (10,000–99,999), and large (more than 100,000 inhabitants).

eligible professionals as possible from the population of project managers involved in participatory projects funded in that period. Given that participation was voluntary, the sample may overrepresent individuals who were already particularly engaged with participation, inclusion, or digitalization. The findings should therefore be interpreted as reflecting the perspectives of engaged practitioners rather than all professionals involved in participatory governance.

Among the interviewees, 29 were project managers and 12 held other relevant roles, representing 35 participatory projects. Most had overseen a single initiative, while five had coordinated between two and four projects. Six projects were represented by two participants, either from the same organization or from partner institutions. The sample included 24 women and 17 men, aged between 29 and 72 years ($M = 49$; $Mdn = 48$), working across public administration, third-sector organizations, schools, and private organizations. These characteristics are reported to describe the dataset rather than to imply statistical representativeness.

The semi-structured interview guide explored participants' professional background, their use of digital tools in participatory processes, their understanding of inclusion, and the challenges they perceived in making participation more accessible. The guide was organized around three thematic areas—background, digitalization, and inclusion—but remained flexible enough to allow follow-up questions and the exploration of issues raised by participants themselves.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), combining deductive and inductive coding. Initial categories were informed by the interview guide and by the literature on participation, digital inclusion, and digital divides, while additional codes were developed iteratively from recurring ideas, tensions, and examples emerging in the interviews. NVivo was used to support coding, memo-writing, and cross-case comparison.

The first author conducted the coding, but the analytic process was supported by regular in-depth discussions among the authors, during which codes, emerging themes, and interpretations were reviewed and refined. Formal intercoder agreement was not used because the aim was interpretive understanding rather than the measurement of coder concordance. Instead, analytic rigor was supported through iterative comparison across interviews, discussion of deviant cases, and repeated reflection on how participants' accounts related to the study's conceptual framework. Because the researcher conducting the analysis is affiliated with a university located within the regional context under study, reflexive attention was paid to how familiarity with the setting might have shaped interpretation. The analysis therefore focused on participants' meanings and reported experiences rather than on evaluating regional policies or programs.

4 Results

Participants' accounts reveal both the ideals guiding their work and the practical challenges they face in translating their ideals into

everyday practice. The analysis generated three interrelated themes: (1) how inclusion is understood and enacted, (2) how digitalization reshapes opportunities and barriers to participation, and (3) illustrative practices that participants described as useful for ensuring inclusion.

4.1 Inclusion

Inclusion emerged as a central theme in participants' understanding of participation. Interviewees conceptualized it both as a principle and as a practical challenge, highlighting the gap between aspirational goals and the realities of implementation. While some considered inclusion similar to general participation or diversity, others reflected on structural and procedural factors that enable or hinder equitable engagement. The results reveal two broad patterns: (1) a tendency to assume participation is inherently inclusive and (2) a more critical awareness of the difficulties in reaching marginalized or underrepresented groups. Across these perspectives, inclusion was consistently framed as context-dependent, shaped by social, cultural, and institutional constraints, and often requiring deliberate strategies to translate ideals into practice.

4.1.1 Meanings of inclusion

Participants commonly described inclusion as the practice of “leaving no one behind” and ensuring equitable access to participation. Eleven participants defined it simply as “including everyone.” Four of them clarified this as “everyone who wants to participate” (ID35_M_TS), while others provided concrete examples, most often referring to people with disabilities, other vulnerable groups, or characteristics such as gender and age. As one participant summarised it:

“Inclusion means managing to involve even those participants who have more difficulties in taking part: due to physical disabilities, age, or because they are busy during certain time slots, such as workers who cannot attend meetings during working hours, or due to distance” (ID24_W_PA)

Some participants chose to define inclusion through synonyms or antonyms. A common response was “the opposite of exclusion,” which was mentioned by three participants, while four described it as “a synonym of participation.” In the latter case, some argued that “participation” should be the preferred term, as it is already inherently inclusive:

“Inclusion means that someone has to include someone else, so it's already a somewhat hierarchical word. Participation is much more neutral. Perhaps it could be another way of saying the same thing” (ID37_W_TS)

One participant also reflected on the concept of “integration,” suggesting it as a more appropriate term, particularly when referring to people with a migratory background who have not been living in the area for long. Additionally, three participants reflected on the

relationship between participation and inclusion, stating that inclusion is a prerequisite for genuine participation: “If it is not inclusive, then it is not participation” (ID10_W_PA). One added the concept of continuity, defining inclusion as the continuity of the participatory process itself.

4.1.2 Inclusion through process design

Eight participants linked inclusion to procedural fairness: ensuring accessible information, tools, and opportunities for all: “Giving everyone the same base of information, skills, and knowledge so that all can be equally effective” (ID12_W_TS).

Others framed it as a policy-driven goal, tied to institutional directives or evaluation criteria, such as age or youth engagement: “There is a very strong focus on young people [...] even in the submission form, this was treated as a kind of rewarding aspect.” (ID09_M_TS).

However, a recurring concern was the disconnection between inclusive rhetoric and practical accessibility, especially regarding disability or linguistic diversity. As one participant explained:

“I’ve never seen the Region communicate in more than one language [...] or provide sign language interpretation [...] There are no clear signals that accessibility is treated as a must. [...] There is no attention to people with psychological disabilities [...] I have seen a person in a wheelchair, but not a blind one, not a deaf one, not an autistic one, not even foreign participants, unless the meeting was dedicated exclusively to them.” (ID34_W_TS).

4.1.3 Assumed inclusivity

In practice, inclusion often emerged as a taken-for-granted value. Sixteen participants who defined inclusion vaguely (e.g., “including everyone”) or using synonyms and antonyms (e.g., “the opposite of exclusion,” “a synonym of participation”) tended to assume their processes were automatically inclusive, without critically reflecting on who might be excluded. As one explained:

“In our initiatives, everyone has always been able to participate. [...] We never really reflected on it, because we’ve never experienced any kind of exclusion” (ID15_W_PA).

This type of comment highlights a broader lack of awareness among participants, which puts their work at risk of unintentionally reproducing exclusionary dynamics without fully realizing it.

Several revealed a limited or distorted understanding of minority groups, sometimes describing “parents with young children” as minorities, while others deflected the question altogether, preferring to speak of “diversity” in general. As one participant explained:

“I don’t know what we mean by minority groups [...] for me, there isn’t a majority or minority group; there’s just a community” (ID38_M_PA).

And another added:

“There is attention to diversity. I’m not sure which type of diversity exactly, because I tend to think of everyone as different from each other. I believe this is the best way to approach inclusivity. So, I don’t know if there’s a group or category that received more or less attention. I think it’s a general attention to diversity.” (ID35_M_TS).

This conceptual vagueness often masked the lack of targeted strategies to engage underrepresented communities. Some participants reflected symbolically on inclusion, associating it with physical or symbolic openness of places. One recalled:

“Once upon a time, places like the parish hall used to feel inclusive: doors were open, anyone could walk in. Today, participation tends to happen by appointment, in closed spaces” (ID23_W_TS).

While others noted how symbolic barriers, linked to venue or affiliation, can be more exclusionary than physical ones:

“When we meet in the parish hall, we automatically exclude a whole set of people who will not come. [...] Symbolic barriers are more powerful than others [physical ones]” (ID34_W_TS).

4.1.4 The struggle for inclusion: who is missing?

A more reflexive group of sixteen participants acknowledged the ongoing struggle to ensure inclusivity in practice. They described inclusion as an aspiration rather than an achieved reality, admitting that accessibility and diversity were often addressed reactively rather than by design. As one participant explained:

“We struggled to be inclusive. [...] Sometimes we didn’t design activities with people in mind who might have, say, motor or linguistic difficulties. We only became aware of it afterwards” (ID10_W_PA).

Others echoed this reactive approach:

“We are open to including, but I don’t think about it until I need to include. [...] We didn’t do any preventive communication: we just opened it to all” (ID29_W_PA).

Some drew on regional examples of compensatory measures such as childcare or translation, but they acknowledged that such tools were rarely implemented locally.

Participants identified recurring absences: youth (11 mentions), foreigners or people with a migratory background (15 mentions, three of which referred specifically to migrant women), and people with disabilities (4 mentions). Some also highlighted missing groups such as adults with young children (3 mentions) or women constrained by domestic labour (2 mentions).

The typical participant, they noted, was “someone who generally has the time, a job that is not exhausting, and a good level of education” (ID23_W_TS). As another added: “Participation usually tends to be dominated by experts, older people, well-informed individuals, and men” (ID09_M_TS).

Participants also reflected on the absence of these groups. For instance, three participants reflected on language, stating that Italian was the only language used in their project communications, and this may have been one of the factors behind the lack of participation among people with a migratory background. One participant mentioned an effort towards inclusive language (e.g., feminine and masculine). Four participants reflected on the challenges of bringing together very different age groups within the same participatory process.

Some interviewees elaborated on barriers linked to youth participation, intergenerational hierarchies, and structural bias. As one participant explained:

“Adults sometimes adopt a paternalistic attitude towards the younger ones [...] even a young facilitator was seen as ‘the little girl,’ though she was 29” (ID10_W_PA).

Others described hostile group dynamics that discouraged youth engagement:

“If I walked into a room at 9 p.m. with eight seventy-year-olds who insulted participants, I’d probably have lasted half an hour and gone to have a beer with my friends” (ID02_W_PA).

Participants also discussed how everyday constraints shape inclusion: adults with young children rarely attend meetings, and even those who wish to do so struggle with timing or caregiving demands.

4.1.5 A matter of targets: the paradox of inclusive design

Participants diverged on whether inclusion should be targeted or universal. Project managers of targeted initiatives (e.g., for youth or people with disabilities) naturally framed inclusion around their focus group, while others argued that specific targeting was essential to avoid reproducing the participation of “the usual people,” explaining that:

“If specific groups are not thought of, they won’t be included. [...] The usual participants take part: people already engaged and interested in the topic” (ID08_W_PA).

Conversely, some cautioned that excessive targeting risks reinforcing divisions: *“Saying, ‘I talk with foreigners about issues that concern foreigners,’ is wrong, because we should address them as citizens like everyone else”* (ID37_W_TS).

One participant reflected critically on the exclusion inherent in project design itself: *“Once the target group was chosen, that choice already excludes someone. [...] Choosing a process mainly online still means risking the exclusion of those uncomfortable with digital tools. [...] Honestly, I do not have any evidence of minority groups that may have been facilitated by our participatory processes.”* (ID19_M_PA).

Others framed inclusion as a matter of outreach and communication, noting that even well-designed projects fail if they do not reach their intended audiences:

“The issue is always whether you can reach people and achieve inclusivity within the proposal itself. [...] You may have the most

interesting content in the world, but if you keep it in a drawer, it’s only interesting to you” (ID05_W_PA).

4.1.6 Structural barriers and the risk of reinforcing inequality

A recurring theme across thirteen interviews was that participatory initiatives tend to attract the usual participants, namely people who are already active, educated, and civically engaged. This reproduces social inequalities rather than bridging them. As one participant observed:

“If I have to communicate that there is a participatory process, those who come are already the ones who have access to information or look for it. The others, by now, we lose track of” (ID13_M_TS).

Two participants explained the concept of people living in small municipalities on the outskirts of a larger city who *“treat the municipality as if it was a dormitory”* (ID32_M_PA) and, therefore, spend all day in the bigger city and do not get involved in the municipality where they actually reside.

A small subset of two participants discussed disability more deeply, emphasising that awareness often arose only after issues surfaced in practice. One participant shared: *“It was very useful to have in the group a young man in a wheelchair [...] Having him there forces you to make the switch [...] At the beginning, you do not think of it; then you find yourself saying, ‘Oops, how do I solve this?’”* (ID10_W_PA).

Another pointed to the systemic issue: *“People with disabilities and their families often do not see themselves as active subjects [...] Which, in a way, is convenient for us, because if they do not participate, we do not need to fix the room properly”* (ID09_M_TS).

4.2 Digitalization

Digitalization emerged as a central theme in participants’ reflections on how participatory practices have evolved in recent years. Interviewees described digital tools as both an opportunity to broaden access and a source of new barriers, often reinforcing existing inequalities. While many acknowledged the efficiency and reach of online platforms, they also highlighted issues of exclusion, technological dependency, and the loss of personal connection.

4.2.1 Digitalization as an opportunity

Digital tools were mostly used to make participation more manageable and efficient. Online questionnaires, for instance, were used to collect citizens’ needs and proposals, while online platforms mostly supported initiatives such as participatory budgeting. Both activities were sometimes complemented by paper versions. Municipal websites mainly served as repositories of information, ensuring transparency and accountability, even though they rarely attracted active engagement.

Social media, particularly Facebook and Instagram, were seen as key tools for sharing updates and creating dialogue. For instance, local neighbourhood pages proved especially effective for reaching residents with targeted information. WhatsApp groups also played a role when pre-existing relationships were in place. As one participant explained, people often replied on WhatsApp *“as if they were being*

messaged individually” (ID37_W_TS). Another described how a group chat used casually among residents became a crucial coordination tool during a flood, showing how informal digital spaces can suddenly support active civic engagement.

When designed carefully, online meetings were considered effective, particularly when they incorporated interactive tools such as Mentimeter or breakout rooms. However, some participants noted that while digital meetings often drew higher attendance, they risked encouraging multitasking and superficial engagement.

Two participants argued that within public administrations, digitalisation often remains superficial, such as *“the dematerialisation of paper”* (ID14_M_PA) rather than a real transformation. Others linked this to a lack of digital culture and integration between administrative innovation and participatory aims.

4.2.2 Digital divides and inclusion

Participants generally perceived digitalisation as widespread, describing society as “very digitalised” and everyday digital access as almost universal. For many, online tools seemed inherently inclusive:

“[Digital] participation was very democratic: from home, via computer or mobile phone. Practically very, very inclusive” (ID14_M_PA)

Yet others noted that this inclusivity was only partial. Six participants viewed digital tools as useful for overcoming logistical barriers such as time or distance: *“Digital tools are an excellent substitute when people have little time or face difficulties moving around a territory: sometimes it takes twenty minutes to cover just ten kilometres”* (ID23_W_TS), but most agreed that they cannot replace the depth of face-to-face interaction.

Several participants also highlighted how digital tools could make discussions “more balanced,” enabling quieter participants or women to contribute anonymously. As one participant explained:

“Otherwise, it’s always the same people speaking, often men who feel empowered, while those with less confidence or knowledge might stay silent [...]. Allowing anonymous responses to certain questions helps make participation more equitable” (ID33_M_PA).

However, thirteen participants pointed out that older people often struggled with digital processes, while younger people were more comfortable with them. Two described which tools could work with different groups, such as more computer-based tools for older people and smartphone-based ones for younger people, or certain apps can attract specific groups (e.g., Discord for young gamers). Two suggested that online participation simply reversed traditional barriers, privileging the young and digitally literate rather than the elderly and available.

Despite this, digital engagement with youth was not always successful. Three participants argued that online channels often failed to reach young people, as social media pages were mostly read *“by parents, educators, and other adults”* (ID18_W_PA). Two participants added that young people’s constant exposure to digital communication might reduce their interest in civic content. According to them,

this overload may diminish their ability to process information and can generate irritation, making conventional digital platforms ineffective.

Some interviewees also reflected on gender and cultural factors. One participant observed that online surveys often received a higher proportion of women’s responses, probably due to their limited time and the flexibility offered by short digital formats, explaining that *“they take advantage of that quick channel where in five or ten minutes they can still input their points of view, even though they cannot make it to the meeting”* (ID07_W_PC). Additionally, migrant women from Pakistan and Bangladesh were described as facing multiple barriers, such as lack of personal devices, language difficulties, and partner and family control, while women from Eastern Europe were seen as more digitally active.

Foreigners in general were said to face linguistic challenges, as online forms were usually only available in Italian, as a participant explained:

“Foreigners might not feel as comfortable using these tools, not necessarily because they can’t use them, but because reading and interpreting written text is different from hearing it spoken. This makes it harder for them to understand exactly what the question on the platform is asking” (ID03_M_PA)

Ultimately, participants agreed that digitalisation is not inclusive by default. It is a matter of engaging each group with the right tool, strategy, and location:

“It’s not the tool itself that guarantees participation... There’s always preparatory work to make people want to participate.” (ID37_W_TS)

“What really matters is the topic’s relevance for the target group” (ID34_W_TS)

4.2.3 Hybrid participation and the value of presence

Reflecting on different phases of digitalisation (pre-COVID, during lockdown, and post-COVID), most participants agreed that digital tools were useful but could not fully replace in-person engagement. Thirteen participants doubted that a participatory process could succeed entirely online.

As one explained, *“part of participation is also the socialisation between people”* (ID02_W_PA), while another noted that *“attention drops much sooner online, and you lose the physical presence: the chance to talk to each other at the end of a meeting [...] I find it hard to imagine an entire participatory process being carried out online”* (ID32_M_PA).

Additionally, three participants pointed out that sometimes digital tools can be perceived as colder than physical presence, as they allow for a connection that may feel less personal.

Successful approaches often mixed online and in-person strategies. For instance, two participants described a strategy where QR codes and social media posts were combined with direct contact in local venues to reach citizens.

As one of them observed, *“people will not fill out an online questionnaire just because you ask... you need someone they trust saying ‘look, there’s this thing, do it’”* (ID37_W_TS). Another confirmed that

“word of mouth works... local influencers, not online ones, make the difference” (ID18_W_PA).

Another participant described a situation in which older people met in person to attend an online participatory process together.

In this sense, online environments were considered best suited to complement, rather than replace, face-to-face encounters:

“Online can integrate, it can support, and in some cases it is indispensable. But it is not the same as meeting face-to-face” (ID37_W_TS)

4.2.4 Authentication, platform design, and the Italian SPID system

The Italian Public Digital Identity System (SPID) emerged as a key issue. Twelve participants described it as both a symbol of progress and a source of exclusion. Most found it overly complex and noted that it discouraged participation, especially among older citizens and those under 18, who cannot have a SPID. Specifically, three participants stressed age-related differences: two observed that older people were less likely to have activated SPID or to possess the necessary skills to use it effectively, which is in line with the findings on the digital divide, and one underlined that people younger than 18 are unable to have a SPID of their own.

Nine participants observed that SPID-restricted initiatives tended to attract fewer participants, while five mentioned that its lack of anonymity reduced openness and created a sense of “social control.”

Most participants focused on usability concerns, as ten participants considered the system overly complex, stressing the importance of simplifying access to digital services. From their perspective, SPID appeared somewhat outdated, as its multiple steps hindered accessibility.

Some participants suggested simple remedies, such as collective nicknames to preserve privacy, or training sessions to strengthen citizens’ digital skills. As one explained, such initiatives helped people learn *“how to register, log in, vote on proposals, and use SPID”* (ID11_W_PA).

Related concerns emerged around the regional participation platform, which many described as “rigid,” “complex,” and “inconvenient.” While it met legal requirements, its design discouraged use. Beyond technical issues, participants also mentioned privacy sensitivity, which is sometimes seen as excessive but still legitimate.

4.3 Illustrative practices for inclusion

Because the first two themes address inclusion and digitalization directly, the third theme presents illustrative practices that participants used to show what more inclusive participation can look like in everyday administrative work. Participants emphasized relational, low-tech, and context-sensitive strategies, such as trusted intermediaries, childcare support, multilingual communication, and practical adaptations of spaces and procedures. This suggests that digital tools support inclusion most effectively when embedded in broader organizational and relational efforts.

4.3.1 Small adjustments, meaningful change

Several participants highlighted how small, deliberate actions can make participatory processes more inclusive. Examples

included the use of gender-inclusive language in communications, such as both feminine and masculine nouns and pronouns when addressing a group, and targeted initiatives for underrepresented communities, including LGBTQ+ people. Although these adjustments were appreciated, most participants agreed that achieving full inclusion across all social groups remains a distant goal.

4.3.2 Personalized and community-based outreach

A particularly creative outreach strategy involved the use of a personal WhatsApp broadcast list to inform community members about upcoming initiatives. This approach was used to reach groups often overlooked by institutional communication channels, including immigrant women, older adults, volunteers, and people involved in local cultural activities. Using trusted contacts, local leaders, and informal interactions, such as encounters with migrant women renewing documents, information was disseminated to individuals often excluded from institutional communication channels.

4.3.3 Peer support and practical empowerment

Participants highlighted the importance of combining practical and social support measures to promote inclusion. One participant recounted a European project on gender equality that successfully engaged women from North Africa and Eastern Europe. The initiative addressed both practical and social barriers to participation: Italian women taught participants to ride bicycles to increase their mobility and independence, while multilingual peer groups supported the translation and interpretation of training materials. Grounded in mutual aid and empowerment, this approach was regarded as particularly effective in fostering inclusion within training contexts.

4.3.4 Family-friendly participation

Some municipalities introduced inclusive solutions for parents. In one case, a children’s area was set up alongside participatory workshops, with staff offering games and reading sessions. This allowed parents, especially mothers, to participate fully without childcare concerns. Although these arrangements required additional planning and resources, they demonstrated how thoughtful design can expand participation.

4.3.5 Accessibility-first approaches

Accessibility was another recurring concern. One notable example was the “barriere zero” (“zero-barriers”) desk, managed by volunteers, which offered consultations on accessibility and space adaptation. Practical interventions, such as verifying sidewalk width for wheelchairs and strollers, were combined with awareness-raising efforts within local administrations, integrating technical improvements with inclusive practice.

4.3.6 Language and cultural mediation

Several participants stressed that language is central to inclusion. Some projects paired recently arrived foreign young people with familiar educators who provided language support and reassurance.

Others adopted multilingual approaches, translating materials into French, Arabic, and English, and collaborating with local associations or mosques. Participants agreed that partnerships with trusted community organizations were far more effective than translation alone.

5 Discussion

This study examined how public officials involved in participatory projects understand the relationship between inclusion and digitalization in everyday governance. Its main contribution is to show that officials are not simply implementers of participatory procedures; they also interpret what inclusion means, which barriers matter, and how digital tools should be used to address them.

Regarding inclusion, the interviews revealed a recurring tension between formal openness and substantive inclusivity. Many participants described participation as open to everyone and therefore implicitly inclusive. However, a more reflexive group emphasized that formally open processes do not necessarily reach those most at risk of exclusion. This distinction helps explain why public officials may endorse inclusion as a principle while still reproducing unequal participation patterns in practice. We describe this contrast as the distinction between assumed inclusivity and critical inclusivity. Assumed inclusivity refers to the belief that participation is inclusive as long as opportunities are formally available to all. Critical inclusivity, by contrast, involves recognizing that meaningful inclusion requires active attention to structural, cultural, linguistic, and digital barriers. This distinction extends previous work on inclusion in participatory democracy by showing how different understandings of inclusion shape implementation within public administration, especially in relation to the dimensions of presence and voice discussed by Young (2002), Smith (2009), and García-Espín (2025).

With respect to digitalization, the findings confirm that digital tools are experienced ambivalently. Participants valued them for widening access, improving communication, and reducing some logistical barriers related to time and distance. At the same time, they repeatedly described how digital participation may reproduce inequalities linked to age, language, access to devices, digital skills, and familiarity with institutional procedures. This pattern is consistent with research showing that digital participation can broaden engagement while simultaneously reinforcing existing divides if technological and institutional conditions are not addressed critically (Rottinghaus and Escher, 2020; Van Dijk, 2020).

Many examples that participants identified as effective were hybrid or predominantly low-tech: trusted local intermediaries, personalized outreach, childcare support, multilingual mediation, and practical accessibility adjustments. These examples support a view of inclusive digital participation as a socio-institutional rather than a merely technical process. In Emilia-Romagna, a relatively advanced institutional framework provides important support, but local implementation remains shaped by municipal conditions, administrative routines, and practitioners' assumptions.

The findings also point to practical implications. Strengthening inclusive digital participation requires more than technical training on platforms and procedures. Public officials and facilitators may benefit from capacity-building that develops reflexive awareness of exclusion, familiarity with accessibility and outreach strategies, and the ability to select digital tools in ways that are responsive to specific groups and contexts. In this sense, hybrid designs, targeted outreach,

and critical reflection on platform requirements appear especially important.

The study has several limitations. First, it is based on interviews and therefore captures participants' perceptions, interpretations, and reported experiences rather than directly observed participatory practices. Second, participation in the study was voluntary, which means that the sample may overrepresent practitioners already engaged with questions of participation and inclusion. Third, because interviewees were involved in projects funded within the regional framework, some accounts may have been affected by social desirability or by a tendency to present projects positively. Finally, the case-specific nature of Emilia-Romagna limits transferability to settings with different institutional traditions, digital infrastructures, or participatory cultures.

Future research could build on these findings by combining interviews with observations of participatory processes, comparative case studies, or analyses of specific digital platforms and recruitment strategies. Such work could help clarify how officials' understandings of inclusion shape practice over time and how institutional settings enable or constrain more critically inclusive forms of digital participation. Overall, digital participation becomes more inclusive when technological choices are combined with organizational reflexivity, context-sensitive outreach, and sustained attention to who remains absent, unheard, or disadvantaged within participatory processes.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Bioethic Board of the University of Bologna (Protocol No. 0313577, 11/10/2024). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

SM: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation. CA: Writing – review & editing, Supervision. GP: Writing – review & editing, Supervision. EC: Project administration, Supervision, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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