

Upsouth: Digitally Empowering Rangatahi (Youth) and Whaanau (Families) to Build Skills in Critical and Creative Thinking to Achieve More Active Citizenship in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract : In a post-colonial Aotearoa New Zealand, solutions by rangatahi (youth) for rangatahi are essential as is civic participation and building economic agency in an increasingly tough economic climate. Upsouth was an online community crowdsourcing platform developed by The Southern Initiative, in collaboration with Itsnoon that provides rangatahi and whānau (family) a safe space to share lived experience, thoughts and ideas about local kaupapa (issues/topics) of importance to them. The target participants were Māori indigenous peoples and Pacifica groups, aged 14 - 21 years. In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, this participant group is not likely to engage in traditional consultation processes despite being an essential constituent in helping shape better local communities, whānau and futures. The Upsouth platform was active for two years from 2018-2019 where it completed 42 callups with 4300+ participants. The web platform collates the ideas, voices, feedback, and content of users around a callup that has been commissioned by a sponsor, such as Auckland Council, Z Energy or Auckland Transport. A callup may be about a pressing challenge in a community such as climate change, a new housing development, homelessness etc. Each callup was funded by the sponsor with Upsouths main point of difference being that participants are given koha (money donation) through digital wallets for their ideas. Depending on the quality of what participants upload, the koha varies between small micropayments and larger payments. This encouraged participants to develop creative and critical thinking - upskilling for future focussed jobs, enterprise and democratic skills while earning pocket money at the same time. Upsouth enables youth-led action and voice, and empowers them to be a part of a reciprocal and creative economy. Rangatahi are encouraged to express themselves culturally, creatively, freely and in a way they are free to choose - for example, spoken word, song, dance, video, drawings, and/or poems. This challenges and changes what is considered acceptable as community engagement feedback by the local government. Many traditional engagement platforms are not as consultative, do not accept diverse types of feedback, nor incentivise this valuable expression of feedback. Upsouth is also empowering for rangatahi, since it allows them the opportunity to express their opinions directly to the government. Upsouth gained national and international recognition for the way it engages with youth: winning the Supreme Award and the Accessibility and Transparency Award at Auckland Council's 2018 Engagement Awards, becoming a finalist in the 2018 Digital Equity and Accessibility category of International Data Corporation's Smart City Asia and Pacific Awards. This paper will fully contextualize the challenges of rangatahi and whānau civic engagement in Aotearoa New Zealand and then present a reflective case study of the Upsouth project, with examples from some of the callups. This is intended to form part of the Divided Cities 22 conference New Ground sub-theme as a critical reflection on a design intervention, which was conceived and implemented by the lead author to overcome the post-colonial divisions of Māori, Pacifica and minority ethnic rangatahi in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Keywords : rangatahi, youth empowerment, civic engagement, enabling, relating, digital platform, participation

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