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**Upsouth: Digitally enabling rangatahi (youth) and their whānau  
(families) to build critical and creative thinking towards 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 (Hunia et al. 2021), as are civic participation and building economic agency in an increasingly challenging economic climate. Upsouth was an online community crowdsourcing platform developed by The Southern Initiative in collaboration with Itsnoon (TSI, 2021), which provided rangatahi and whānau (family) a safe space to share lived experience, thoughts and ideas about local kaupapa (issues/topics) of importance to them (TSI, 2019b). This chapter contextualises the potential and the challenges of rangatahi and whānau civic engagement in Aotearoa New Zealand, and presents a brief reflective case study of the Upsouth project with some of the unexpected outcomes, presented through examples. This chapter formed part of the *Urban Ecologies of Divided Cities 2022* conference *New Ground* sub-theme as a critical reflection on a design intervention, conceived and implemented by the lead author to overcome the post-colonial divisions of Māori, Pacific and minority ethnic rangatahi and whānau in South Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand.

## Keywords

rangatahi; youth empowerment; civic engagement; enabling; relating; digital platform; participation; critical thinking; creative thinking

## 1. Whakatauki (opening proverb)

**Tuia ki te rangi**

**Tuia ki te whenua**

**Tuia ki te moana**

Bound by the sky, the land, the sea and each other.

Everything and everyone is connected and nothing in isolation.

## 2. Background and context

This chapter introduces Upsouth, a digital community platform for South Auckland rangatahi (youth) and their whānau (families), which aimed to build critical and creative thinking towards more active citizenship in Aotearoa New Zealand through tino rangatiratanga (self-sovereignty) whānaungatanga (strong whānau) and manaakitanga (nurture).

South Auckland has the largest and most diverse population of Māori and Pacific people than anywhere else. In the heart of the small suburban landscape almost one in ten (9% or 52,236) people who identify as Māori reside here (Wai-pareira Trust, 2017). In South Auckland, Māori and Pacific rangatahi and whānau face many challenges. The history of South Auckland has seen considerable growth in inequality and repeated issues of ill-considered city planning, insufficient housing, cultural segregation, and racial systemic issues that make it difficult for rangatahi and whānau to achieve

and uphold tino rangatiratanga. In a post-colonial Aotearoa New Zealand, solutions by rangatahi (youth) for rangatahi are essential (Hunia et al. 2021), as is civic participation and building economic agency in an increasingly challenging economic climate. Upsouth committed to enabling rangatahi-led stories, focusing on their place in South Auckland, fostering innovation, creativity, and critical thinking through tino rangatiratanga (self-sovereignty), whānaungatanga (strong whānau) and manaakitanga (nurture).

Tino rangatiratanga is sovereignty, autonomy, control, self-determination and independence (Smith, 1999). It allows and encourages Māori and indigenous peoples to reclaim and control their own culture, aspirations, and destiny (Smith, 1999) through expressing Māori tikanga (correct procedure), that is tika (true), aroha (with love) and pono (genuine). Due to a history of colonisation, tino rangatiratanga has been a struggle. Upsouth aimed to embody tino rangatiratanga by acknowledging Māori tikanga, indigeneity and Pacific values.

Whānau, meaning family, and whānaungatanga, meaning the practices that strengthen the connections, are central concepts within Māori and Pacific culture (Smith, 1999; Bishop, 1999; Walker, 1990). The concept of whānau connects to the opening whakatauki which encompasses a Polynesian worldview, being holistic and connected to all life forces. Whānau emphasises benefiting the collective rather than the individual, whether iwi (tribe), hapū (subtribe), whānau or all people.

Manaakitanga is the standard of behavior of Māori (Mead, 2003; Martin, 2008). Manaakitanga is acknowledging and respecting the mana (authority) of others (Walker, 1990), through behaviors which express support, aroha (love), generosity, nurture, mutual respect, concern, equality, and humility (Hall, Poutu & Wilson, 2012). Thus, it was an obligation of the Upsouth platform to enhance these behaviors.

### 3. Research Design & Methodology

Upsouth was an online community crowdsourcing platform developed by The Southern Initiative, in collaboration with Itsnoon (TSI, 2021, 2022) that provided rangatahi and whānau (family) a safe space to share lived experience, thoughts and ideas about local kaupapa (issues/topics) of importance to them (TSI, 2019b).

The target participants were Māori, Pacific and minority ethnic groups, aged 14 - 21 years. In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, this participant group is not likely to engage in traditional consultation processes (Auckland Council, 2020, TSI, 2019a) despite being an essential constituent in helping shape better local communities, whānau and futures. Māori are tangata whenua (indigenous people of the land). Māori also means ma (to be pure) and oriori (intention), which is to be of pure intention.

The Upsouth platform was active for two years from 2017- 2019 where it completed 42 callups with 4300+ participants. A callup was about a pressing challenge in a community such as climate change, a new housing development, homelessness etc. Each callup was funded by a sponsor such as Auckland Council, Z Energy or Auckland Transport to generate youth voice for a strategic plan, local initiative or decision-making process. Upsouth collated the ideas, voices, and content from the callup and encouraged rangatahi to express themselves culturally, creatively and freely through their choice of expression. This often resulted in artwork, song, dance, video, drawings, and poetry.

A key point of difference was Upsouth's payment and koha (donation) process. Participants were given koha through digital wallets and paid a financial reward for their ideas and contributions. Depending on the quality of the uploaded content, the koha varied between small micropayments and large payments. This encouraged participants to develop their creative and critical thinking to improve their ideas and rewarded them as experts in their own lived experience and knowledge.

A reciprocal process was important to build a creative economy enabling youth-led action and developing skills for future focused jobs and financial literacy. Upsouth challenged the current systems of acceptable community engagement by local governing bodies since many traditional engagement platforms are not as consultative, do not accept diverse

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types of feedback, nor incentivize this valuable expression of feedback. Upsouth was also empowering for rangatahi since it allowed them the opportunity to express their opinions directly to the government.

## **4. Unexpected outcomes (positive and negative)**

### ***4.1 Banking and financial literacy***

Financial literacy, basic banking skills and Inland Revenue (IRD) accounts became key learnings for students, their schools and Upsouth. It was apparent that some rangatahi up to the age of 16, did not own bank accounts and IRD numbers and needed support to create accounts and/or access existing IRD numbers. It was more common for Pacific rangatahi not to have personal bank accounts. We heard from some Pacific students that their whānau had one bank account holder in the household and income was directed to them. There were several of them who expressed a desire to have the independence of a personal account to earn for themselves however, needed guidance and permission from parents to set them up.

### ***4.2 Technology challenges: Data***

Callup sponsors wanted to engage with data and feedback that was meaningful and creative, however data analysis systems were limiting. Auckland Council and other organizations' data systems were not able to translate creative content due to their technical capabilities. Upsouth's platform data collection system was also unable to support the download of creative content through the platform and content had to be compiled manually into an excel report.

### ***4.3 Rangatahi ideas connecting to community projects***

Upsouth became an important connector and outlet for students to link existing schoolwork to projects and initiatives relevant in their community. Upsouth also connected students to projects where their designs could be sourced and commissioned. Trixie, aged 14, posted her idea to a callup about preparing young people for the unpredictable future of work (Fig. 17.1). She created a picture of a person walking through a city, tracing and coloring her design and posted this to the callup. She was later selected and earned a koha of \$120. She went on to buy a digital tablet and make drawing commissions online and earned more koha for her designs.

"Upsouth is a website dedicated to South Auckland and you get paid for completing tasks that they post every month or two. A safe community to share your voice to other people and earn a few bucks. Young people like me who can't get a job at this age can earn money just for showing our creativity and talent that we have to our community." Trixie, 2018



**Fig 17.1.** Video clip of Trixies submission. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPRnL4lwSJI&t=2s>.

There are two significant examples of how Upsouth enabled rangatahi ideas to be locally celebrated in the community-built environment. The first was Manukau Outdoor Gallery showing the public display of rangatahi artwork and ideas in the Manukau Square (Fig. 17.2). The work that was exhibited was from local rangatahi who shared their stories, ideas and images in the Upsouth callup “*what is the face of Manukau? What does this place mean to you?*” The exhibition displayed the abundance of knowledge and creative talent in South Auckland through 50 images and ideas that were selected for the gallery display from a total of 300 postings from the callup. The gallery display was open to the public (free of charge) and exhibited in outdoor public space for four weeks. In that period, they remained damage-free reflecting a great sense of mana (esteem) in an area that frequently receives vandalism.



**Fig 17.2.** The Manukau Outdoor Gallery.

The second example was a light show video experience exhibiting rangatahi haiku (poems) and images inspired by Matariki on buildings during Matariki (Māori New Year celebration) (Fig. 17.3). During this festival, many images and 30 outstanding haiku were projected on the Manukau civic building for three nights during Matariki. As a way to celebrate the special time, whānau were invited to view the showcasing of the Matariki content, take pictures and learn about the significance of the Māori New Year. The building was 35 meters high, so the work of the rangatahi was made widely visible in their community.



Fig 17.3. The Manukau light show exhibition.

## 5. Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the potential of Upsouth as an intervention to bridge the division between rangatahi students and whānau and government agencies to strengthen civic engagement in South Auckland and Aotearoa New Zealand. In line with the *Urban Ecologies of Divided Cities 2022* conference, through this reflective case study, we have explored key learnings and insights and the impacts that are affected by youth led voices to overcome a city of divide and issues of misrepresentation, mistrust and meaningful connections.

This case study demonstrated the potential for a project like Upsouth, which made use of local indigenous concepts from Aotearoa including tino rangatiratanga (self-sovereignty) whānaungatanga (strong whānau) and manaakitanga (nurture) to support the authentic bridging of government and local communities. Although there are still significant technological hurdles to the continuation of Upsouth, the success of the project in terms of the positive experiences of participants has led the authors to find ways to reconstitute the website to enable the continuation of the empowerment of rangatahi as agents of local community change.

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