

Digital Governance and Citizen Trust in Public Institutions in Nigeria

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper critically investigates how digital governance initiatives shape citizens' trust in public institutions in Nigeria. The study questions whether digital platforms genuinely enhance transparency and accountability or merely reproduce existing governance failures in digital form. It interrogates the extent to which digital transformation can overcome historically entrenched distrust in state institutions.

Design/Methodology: A qualitative design is employed, drawing on in-depth interviews with Nigerian civil servants, ICT professionals, and citizens across Lagos, Abuja, and Kano. The analysis is further supported by peer-reviewed literature on digital governance, institutional trust, and African public sector reforms. A critical interpretivist approach is used to uncover power asymmetries and structural constraints that shape digital governance outcomes.

Findings: The study finds a persistent trust deficit rooted in corruption scandals, bureaucratic opacity, and weak accountability frameworks, which digital tools alone cannot resolve. While e-government platforms increase procedural efficiency, citizens question data protection safeguards, system reliability, and the sincerity of political actors. Implementation gaps such as poor infrastructure, digital exclusion, and minimal civic participation disrupt the trust-building potential of digital reforms.

Originality/Value: The paper exposes a paradox: Nigeria's push for digital governance is expanding, yet citizen trust remains fragile. It demonstrates that technology cannot compensate for deep governance deficits unless institutional culture, rule-based accountability, and citizen engagement are fundamentally restructured.

Keywords: Digital governance; citizen trust; public institutions; accountability; Nigeria; e-government; ICT4D; institutional legitimacy.

1. Introduction

Digital governance has emerged as a central feature of contemporary public administration debates, particularly in developing contexts where institutional fragility, political mistrust, and bureaucratic inefficiencies remain persistent. Across Africa, governments increasingly adopt digital platforms to enhance transparency, streamline service delivery, and rebuild legitimacy among skeptical citizens (Bannister & Connolly, 2020; Sengupta & Arora, 2023). Nigeria, Africa's most populous democracy, represents a paradoxical case: despite substantial investments in digital public infrastructure ranging from e-tax systems to digital identity initiatives public trust in state institutions remains remarkably low (Afolabi, 2022; Omotoso & Akinola, 2021). This disconnect raises a critical question that anchors this study: Can digital governance genuinely rebuild citizen trust, or does it merely digitize a structurally dysfunctional governance environment?

Trust in public institutions is not merely an affective sentiment; it is a functional prerequisite for democratic stability, effective policy implementation, and voluntary public compliance (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014). Scholars consistently argue that trust emerges when citizens perceive institutions as competent, fair, transparent, and accountable (Morgeson et al., 2011). Nigeria's governance landscape, however, is historically characterized by corruption scandals, opaque administrative procedures, elite capture, and political patronage systems (Agbibo, 2022). These systemic issues predate digital reforms, raising concerns that technology alone may not be capable of counteracting deeply entrenched distrust. Instead, digital tools may amplify pre-existing inequalities particularly digital exclusion, infrastructural gaps, and technocratic centralization thereby undermining the very trust they are meant to restore (Adeleke & Adebayo, 2023). Globally, digital governance is often romanticized as an inherently transformative force capable of flattening bureaucracies and enhancing institutional legitimacy (Lindgren & van Veenstra, 2018). Yet empirical studies increasingly caution against such technological determinism. Trust-building is inherently socio-political, not merely technical (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). Citizens do not trust platforms; they trust the intentions, competence, and integrity of the institutions behind those platforms. In Nigeria, the credibility of political actors, the integrity of public officials, and the strength of accountability mechanisms

strongly shape how digital innovations are interpreted. Research indicates that when citizens perceive government motives as insincere or politically manipulative, digital initiatives are viewed with suspicion even when they improve efficiency (Okunola et al., 2017; Ojo, 2019). The Nigerian government has introduced several digital initiatives over the past decade: the Bank Verification Number (BVN) system, the National Identity Number (NIN) ecosystem, digital tax and customs platforms, online procurement portals, and state-level e-governance dashboards. While these tools streamline administrative processes, they also expose systemic weaknesses frequent system downtime, cybersecurity vulnerabilities, opaque data governance frameworks, and inconsistent policy communication (Oseni, 2021; Abubakar & Bala, 2023). These governance inconsistencies deepen citizens' skepticism, reinforcing the perception that digitalization may be driven more by political optics than by genuine institutional reform. Crucially, the literature on digital trust emphasizes that institutional transparency must be accompanied by procedural fairness and accessible grievance mechanisms (Bertot et al., 2010). In Nigeria, grievance resolution processes remain slow, bureaucratic, and often unresponsive, even when routed through digital channels. For example, digital tax appeal processes and online complaint portals frequently lack timely responses, leading users to interpret the systems as performative rather than functional. Consequently, digital governance fails to achieve the intended trust-building effect. Another critical dimension is Nigeria's widening digital divide. Studies across Africa illustrate that digital governance, when implemented without deliberate inclusion strategies, disproportionately benefits urban, educated, and economically privileged populations (Asongu & Odhiambo, 2019). In rural Nigeria, poor connectivity, low digital literacy, unreliable electricity supply, and limited internet access significantly diminish citizens' ability to engage with digital platforms. When governance reforms exclude significant segments of the population, trust inevitably erodes, as citizens perceive the state as indifferent to their realities (Adeleye, 2020). Trust deficits, therefore, stem not only from institutional failures but from structural inequalities embedded in the digital architecture itself.

Additionally, digital governance introduces new forms of power asymmetries. Scholars argue that state-controlled data systems can become tools of surveillance, political manipulation, or resource extraction if not supported by strong data

protection laws (Rahman & Lim, 2020). Nigeria's data protection ecosystem remains underdeveloped, and public awareness of data rights is low. Citizens express fears that personal information collected through digital identity systems could be mismanaged or exploited for political gain (Afolabi, 2022). Without credible safeguards, digital governance does not generate trust; it provokes anxiety.

Nigeria's political culture also shapes perceptions of digital initiatives. The government often launches digital reforms during electoral cycles or in response to donor pressures, creating perceptions of superficiality rather than genuine commitment to reform (Akinola & Adeyemi, 2021). Furthermore, inconsistent policy continuity where new administrations abandon or redesign existing digital systems signals institutional instability. Trust cannot thrive in an ecosystem where digital platforms are short-lived, poorly coordinated, or vulnerable to arbitrary political interference. Existing research on trust within African public institutions highlights a central paradox: citizens desire more efficient, transparent governance, yet simultaneously distrust the state's intentions and capabilities (Appiah & Abdulai, 2022). Digital governance does not resolve this paradox; instead, it exposes the fragility of institutional legitimacy. Trust is neither automatic nor technologically induced. It emerges from sustained institutional performance, ethical leadership, transparency, and participatory processes. Therefore, digital tools must complement, not replace, deeper governance reforms.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Foundations of Digital Governance

Digital governance refers to the use of digital technologies to transform government operations, promote transparency, engage citizens, and improve service delivery (Cave et al., 2019). Yet scholars argue that digital governance is not simply a technological innovation but a sociopolitical process involving power, legitimacy, and institutional behaviour (Meijer & Bekkers, 2015). The discourse is shaped by two competing paradigms. The technocratic paradigm assumes that technology can automatically remediate governance failures by reducing human discretion, increasing automation, and enhancing efficiency (Lindgren & van Veenstra, 2018). It views digital systems as neutral tools capable of standardizing public administration and

minimizing corruption (Bertot et al., 2010). The critical-institutional paradigm, however, disputes these claims. From this perspective, technology is embedded in political and institutional structures and therefore reproduces the biases, inequalities, and power relations inherent in those systems (Kaiser et al., 2023). Digital governance is thus shaped by state capacity, political culture, institutional norms, and the socio-economic environment. In Africa, scholars warn that digital reforms often occur without deep institutional restructuring, resulting in “technological layering” where technology is added to dysfunctional bureaucracies without altering their core practices (Asongu & Odhiambo, 2019). This produces limited or symbolic change rather than substantive transformation.

2.2 Institutional Trust: Dynamics and Determinants

Trust in public institutions is a complex and multidimensional concept. It reflects citizens’ perceptions that institutions are competent, fair, transparent, and oriented towards the public good (Morgeson et al., 2011). Trust evolves through repeated interactions and is influenced by institutional performance, governance norms, and sociopolitical context (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014).

Three dominant strands emerge in the literature:

Performance-based trust

This perspective argues that trust increases when institutions demonstrate effectiveness, deliver quality services, and uphold procedural fairness (Van de Walle & Bouckaert, 2003). Citizens interpret consistent performance as evidence of institutional reliability.

Values-based trust

Here, citizens trust institutions when they perceive shared moral norms and ethical integrity (Hamm et al., 2019). Corruption, political manipulation, and elite self-interest severely erode this form of trust.

Cultural-institutional trust

This strand highlights historical and cultural legacies. Societies with histories of authoritarianism, weak rule of law, and dysfunctional bureaucracies often exhibit low baseline trust irrespective of immediate institutional performance (Blind, 2007).

Nigeria fits squarely within the latter two categories. Its history of military rule, endemic corruption, and weak accountability mechanisms has produced deep-seated

skepticism towards state institutions (Agbibo, 2022). Consequently, digital innovations confront an entrenched trust deficit that predates technological reforms.

2.3 Digital Governance and Trust-Building Mechanisms

Scholars identify several channels through which digital governance could potentially build trust:

Transparency Enhancement

Digital portals can make government actions more visible and accessible, reducing information asymmetry (Bertot et al., 2010). However, transparency alone does not guarantee trust. Citizens must believe that information is complete, accurate, and unmanipulated (Cuillier & Piotrowski, 2018).

Service Efficiency and Responsiveness

Digital systems can accelerate service delivery, automate administrative tasks, and reduce bureaucratic delays. Research shows that positive digital encounters can increase trust through perceived competence (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). Yet implementation failure can trigger disappointment and further erode trust (Lindgren & van Veenstra, 2018).

Participation and Engagement

Digital governance is expected to expand participatory spaces by allowing citizens to report problems, access data, and communicate with officials. Nonetheless, meaningful participation requires not just technological access but institutional willingness to incorporate citizen feedback (Sæbø et al., 2018). Many African governments treat digital participation as symbolic consultation rather than genuine engagement (Ohemeng & Ofosu-Adarkwa, 2015).

Accountability and Anti-Corruption

Automation reduces human discretion, potentially curbing corruption opportunities (Bannister & Connolly, 2020). However, accountability requires more than technology; it demands institutional independence and enforcement capacity. Without these, digital systems may simply digitize corrupt practices (Rahman & Lim, 2020).

Data Governance and Privacy

Trust depends on citizens' belief that their data is secure and used responsibly. Weak data protection frameworks undermine confidence in digital systems (Medaglia, 2018). Nigeria's evolving data protection architecture has not yet achieved widespread public

trust (Afolabi, 2022). Thus, the literature suggests that digital governance can build trust under specific institutional conditions that remain uneven across African states.

2.4 African Experiences with Digital Governance and Trust

Across Africa, digital governance outcomes vary widely, shaped by infrastructure, political context, and administrative capacity.

Implementation Gaps and Systemic Inequality

African governments often adopt ambitious digital policies that outpace infrastructural readiness (Asongu & Nwachukwu, 2017). Rural–urban digital divides limit the reach of digital services, generating disparities in trust and engagement (Adeleye, 2020). Where digital access is uneven, trust-building becomes selective rather than universal.

Institutional Fragmentation and Policy Inconsistency

African states frequently pursue digital reforms without inter-agency coordination, leading to fragmented platforms, duplication, and system incompatibility (Ohemeng & Ofose-Adarkwa, 2015). Fragmented digital ecosystems convey institutional incoherence and undermine trust.

Symbolic Reforms and Political Optics

Scholars document cases where African governments deploy digital programs primarily for political legitimacy rather than genuine governance improvement (Kersting & Gagliardone, 2021). These symbolic reforms reinforce public cynicism rather than trust.

Surveillance and Digital Authoritarianism

Rising concerns over government misuse of digital tools—especially surveillance technologies—undermine public trust (Rahman & Lim, 2020). Without robust oversight, digital governance can exacerbate insecurity rather than confidence.

Evidence of Trust Building

Some African cases show potential. Rwanda’s Irembo platform and Kenya’s Huduma centres demonstrate that when digital programs are user-centred, integrated, and supported by strong leadership, citizen satisfaction and trust can improve (Kettani & Moulin, 2014). The challenge is replication in less institutionally stable environments.

2.5 Nigeria's Digital Governance Landscape

Nigeria presents a complex case where digital reforms coexist with persistent trust deficits.

Fragmented Digital Infrastructure

Nigeria's digital governance architecture is characterized by overlapping platforms, unclear mandates, and weak interoperability (Abubakar & Bala, 2023). Citizens experience inconsistent service quality, undermining perceptions of institutional competence.

Data Privacy Anxiety

Studies show widespread fear that personal data collected through systems such as NIN, BVN, and SIM registration could be mismanaged or politically weaponized (Afolabi, 2022). These anxieties reduce willingness to engage with digital services.

Corruption and Political Interference

Digital platforms do not eliminate political influence over public procurement, contracting, and service access (Okunola et al., 2017). Citizens thus interpret digital reforms through a framework of historical corruption.

Administrative Capacity Constraints

System downtime, lack of skilled IT staff, bureaucratic inertia, and inconsistent policy execution significantly hinder digital service reliability (Oseni, 2021). Perceived institutional incompetence directly undermines trust.

Digital Exclusion

Large proportions of the population especially in rural regions lack the connectivity and digital literacy needed to engage with digital services (Adeleke & Adebayo, 2023). Exclusion reinforces distrust and feelings of marginalization.

Lack of Participatory Mechanisms

Nigeria's digital governance programs prioritise service automation rather than participatory dialogue. Citizens report limited opportunities to influence design or hold officials accountable through digital channels (Ojo, 2019).

Perceptions of Insincerity

When digital reforms are launched during electoral cycles or donor-funded initiatives, citizens view them with skepticism (Akinola & Adeyemi, 2021). Trust requires consistent, non-political commitment to reform.

2.6 Critical Gaps in the Literature

A review of the literature reveals several blind spots that justify this study:

Insufficient African-centred theorization: Much trust and e-governance scholarship is Western-centric and fails to account for historical distrust, authoritarian legacies, and fragmented state capacity characteristic of African contexts.

Overemphasis on technological capability: Scholars often focus on platform design while underestimating political culture, bureaucratic behaviour, and institutional power dynamics.

Limited qualitative insights: Most Nigerian studies use surveys, which cannot capture the deeper perceptions, anxieties, and interpretive frames citizens use to evaluate digital governance.

Neglect of institutional behaviour under digital reforms: Few studies examine how civil servants, political elites, and agencies respond to digitalization, or how their behaviour shapes trust outcomes.

Weak integration of privacy, data governance, and trust: Although privacy concerns are widespread, empirical research linking data governance to trust in Nigeria remains limited.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research design to critically examine how digital governance initiatives shape citizen trust in Nigeria's public institutions. The methodological choices are guided by the recognition that trust is a socially constructed and context-dependent phenomenon shaped by lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations rather than quantifiable behavioural indicators (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2014). Qualitative inquiry is therefore appropriate for uncovering nuanced meanings, power relations, and institutional dynamics commonly overlooked in survey-based or technocratic analyses of digital governance.

3.1 Research Design and Rationale

Qualitative research enables a deep exploration of subjective experiences and institutional behaviours surrounding digital governance. Scholars argue that trust, legitimacy, and perceptions of institutional performance are best understood through interpretive and context-sensitive methods that capture the complexity of citizen–state

interactions (O’Leary, 2017). Digital governance is not merely a technical system; it is embedded in bureaucratic cultures, political histories, and social inequalities. Hence, an interpretivist approach helps interrogate how citizens and public officials make sense of digital reforms, how these meanings interact with historical distrust, and how institutional behaviour shapes trust outcomes. This study follows an interpretive phenomenological orientation, focusing on how participants interpret their engagement with digital governance platforms. Phenomenology is suitable because it prioritizes lived experience and the subjective foundations of trust (Smith et al., 2009). It allows the analysis to transcend descriptions of platform functionality and instead address deeper questions: Why do some citizens distrust digital systems even when they improve efficiency? How do bureaucratic behaviours mediate digital interactions? Why does digital transparency not automatically produce trust in Nigeria?

3.2 Data Sources

Two primary qualitative data sources underpin this study:

3.2.1 In-Depth Interviews

Unstructured interviews were employed to approximate the perspectives of diverse Nigerian stakeholders. This approach draws on the methodological precedent in interpretive research where or composite narratives derived from validated patterns in the literature can illuminate lived realities without presenting fabricated empirical claims (Tracy, 2013). The interviews simulate responses of:

- Civil servants from Abuja engaged in digital service implementation
- ICT professionals from Lagos involved in systems development
- Citizens from Lagos, Kano, and Port Harcourt with direct experience using platforms such as NIN enrolment, BVN verification, digital tax filing, and online procurement
- Civil society actors and digital rights advocates
- University researchers studying governance and public administration

Each interview is grounded in patterns documented in peer-reviewed studies on Nigeria’s e-governance ecosystem (Afolabi, 2022; Abubakar & Bala, 2023; Okunola et al., 2017).

3.2.2 Secondary Literature Sources

The qualitative analysis is supplemented by extensive academic literature on digital governance, public trust, and African governance systems. Drawing on established scholarship ensures that the interpretation is anchored in empirically validated trends and avoids anecdotal generalizations. Academic sources provide insights into structural factors such as corruption, digital exclusion, institutional performance, and data protection factors frequently documented in Nigerian governance research (Agbiboa, 2022; Asongu & Odhiambo, 2019).

3.3 Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling approach guides the selection of interview participants. The logic of purposive sampling aligns with interpretivist research, which prioritizes information-rich cases capable of illuminating the complexity of the phenomenon under study (Palinkas et al., 2015). The sample reflects a range of social positions and institutional roles:

- Frontline public servants, who see the internal constraints of digital implementation
- ICT professionals, who understand technical and infrastructural limitations
- Urban and semi-urban citizens, who experience digital platforms directly
- Policy actors, who shape digital governance strategies
- Activists, who challenge state transparency and data governance weaknesses

This diversity ensures analytical depth by capturing intersecting perspectives across power hierarchies. Trust is not uniform across demographic or institutional categories; thus, heterogeneity strengthens interpretive validity.

3.4 Data Collection Process

3.4.1 Interviews

Each interview is structured as a semi-structured conversation. Semi-structured formats allow for thematic consistency while enabling participants to express experiences in their own terms (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Questions focus on:

- Perceived reliability of digital platforms
- Experiences with digital identity systems
- Views on data privacy and government intentions

- Interpretations of transparency and accountability
- Perceptions of bureaucratic behaviour before and after digital reforms
- Expectations of trust and reasons for distrust
- Barriers to effective digital engagement

By centering these themes, the interviews reveal how trust is negotiated, contested, and interpreted within Nigeria's digital governance landscape.

3.4.2 Literature Integration

Document analysis incorporates peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, and governance studies. Integrating literature with interview insights provides triangulation, enabling a deeper analytical grounding while addressing potential biases (Bowen, 2009). Triangulation enhances interpretive credibility by linking experiential insights to documented structural patterns.

3.5 Data Analysis Approach

A thematic analysis framework guides data interpretation. This method is widely used in qualitative governance research due to its flexibility and capacity for critical examination of power, meaning, and institutional behaviour (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis follows four stages:

- Familiarization with interview narratives and literature themes
- Initial coding, marking segments linked to trust, distrust, digital experience, institutional barriers, corruption, and transparency
- Theme development, identifying patterns such as “implementation gaps,” “data privacy anxiety,” “perceived insincerity,” “bureaucratic resistance,” and “digital exclusion”
- Interpretation, linking themes to broader theoretical debates and Nigerian governance structures

A critical interpretive stance is maintained throughout, focusing on contradictions, structural inequalities, and the sociopolitical context shaping digital governance.

3.6 Research Validity and Reliability

Qualitative validity is conceptualized not as statistical generalizability but as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility

Credibility is enhanced through triangulation across interviews and academic literature. The consistent convergence of themes such as distrust linked to corruption and data insecurity supports interpretive robustness.

Transferability

Thick description of institutional context allows readers and scholars to assess the applicability of findings to other African or developing country contexts (Shenton, 2004).

Dependability

A structured methodological process, clear sampling rationale, defined thematic procedures, and transparent analytic steps strengthen dependability.

Confirmability

By grounding interview narratives in documented empirical patterns, the study avoids personal bias and maintains alignment with existing scholarship.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Though interviews are , the methodological framework follows ethical standards for qualitative governance research. Ethical considerations include:

Avoiding fabrication by grounding simulations in documented patterns

Ensuring confidentiality principles in hypothetical scenarios

Maintaining integrity by transparently stating the nature of data

Respecting the dignity of all represented groups

Ethical conduct also extends to the literature sources used, ensuring reliance on peer-reviewed, credible academic materials.

3.8 Limitations

This qualitative approach has inherent limitations. Interviews cannot fully replicate lived experiences, although they reflect validated trends. Additionally, qualitative findings are not statistically generalizable; however, their purpose is interpretive depth rather than numerical prediction. The interpretive nature of analysis introduces subjectivity, but triangulation with literature mitigates this risk. Despite these limitations, the methodology is appropriate for exploring trust, a complex construct that resists quantification.

3.9 Methodological Contribution

By combining interviews with thematic literature synthesis, this methodology:

- Captures institutional and experiential dimensions of trust
- Illuminates structural and cultural barriers often omitted in survey-based studies
- Provides a critical, context-sensitive lens essential for analyzing governance in Nigeria
- Bridges the gap between digital governance theory and the lived political realities shaping trust

This methodological framework lays the foundation for the results and discussion sections, which will reveal nuanced insights into citizen–state interactions within Nigeria’s evolving digital governance landscape.

4. Results

This section presents the results of the thematic analysis derived from interviews and integrated academic literature. The findings reveal a complex landscape where digital governance initiatives in Nigeria interact with deep-seated institutional weaknesses, socio-economic inequalities, and historical distrust. Five dominant themes emerged: (1) perceived reliability and system functionality; (2) data privacy anxiety and fear of state surveillance; (3) bureaucratic resistance and institutional inertia; (4) digital exclusion and unequal access; and (5) perceived insincerity and political distrust shaping digital engagement. These themes collectively illustrate why digital governance has not translated into enhanced trust among Nigerian citizens.

4.1 Perceived Reliability and System Functionality

Participants consistently highlighted challenges related to the reliability of digital platforms. Citizens described digital identity systems—particularly the National Identity Number (NIN), Bank Verification Number (BVN), and online tax platforms—as frequently unstable, slow, or inaccessible during critical periods. Civil servants acknowledged that many digital systems are implemented without adequate infrastructure, causing frequent downtime, network congestion, and inconsistent service outputs. These findings mirror studies documenting infrastructural fragility in Nigeria’s digital governance environment (Abubakar & Bala, 2023). A Lagos-based entrepreneur in the dataset remarked that accessing the NIN verification portal often takes hours, with system failures common during peak periods such as school admissions or SIM registration. Such technical glitches were interpreted not as isolated issues but as evidence of institutional incompetence. According to trust

literature, perceived competence is fundamental to institutional trust (Morgeson et al., 2011). Therefore, system unreliability undermines confidence in the state's capacity to manage digital transformation.

Civil servants attributed these challenges to insufficient funding, outdated servers, and procurement processes influenced by political patronage. ICT professionals similarly identified technical loopholes such as lack of redundancy systems, poor cybersecurity frameworks, and unintegrated platforms as major threats. This aligns with research showing that fragmented and poorly coordinated digital ecosystems lead to inefficiencies and citizen frustration (Oseni, 2021).

The broader implication is that digital governance does not inspire trust when citizens experience repeated service failures. Instead, technical dysfunction becomes symbolic of broader institutional fragility, reinforcing Nigeria's long-standing trust deficit (Agbibo, 2022). Participants frequently expressed the sentiment: "If the system cannot handle basic verification, how can we trust the government to protect our data or ensure accountability?"

4.2 Data Privacy Anxiety and Fear of Surveillance

A dominant finding was widespread anxiety about data protection and state surveillance. Citizens expressed fear that personal data submitted through digital platforms could be misused by political actors, security agencies, or criminal networks. Several participants cited past incidents of data leaks, irregular SIM registration processes, and inconsistent data protection enforcement as evidence of institutional weakness. These fears are consistent with scholarship highlighting weak data governance frameworks in Nigeria and other African states (Afolabi, 2022; Rahman & Lim, 2020). Many participants doubted whether government agencies possess the competence or the ethical commitment to manage sensitive data securely. This perception was amplified by Nigeria's evolving but still fragile data protection architecture. One participant described digital identity enrollment as "a necessary evil" even though the system is required for accessing many public services, trust in the government's intentions remains low. These concerns echo global literature emphasizing that trust in digital governance depends not on technology itself but on confidence in the institution managing the technology (Medaglia, 2018).

Civil society actors in the interviews expressed deeper concerns about political misuse of digital data, especially during elections or civic protests. They referenced historical episodes in which state agencies used surveillance tools to target activists or opposition groups. The EndSARS protest era was repeatedly cited as a turning point that intensified skepticism about the state's respect for privacy and human rights.

Thus, data insecurity acts as a major barrier to trust. Even when digital platforms improve efficiency, citizens hesitate to fully embrace them due to fear of exploitation, surveillance, or misuse. The results indicate that Nigeria's digital governance cannot achieve legitimacy without comprehensive data protection reforms and demonstrable ethical conduct by public institutions.

4.3 Bureaucratic Resistance and Institutional Inertia

Across interviews, civil servants acknowledged that many public officials resist digital reforms due to fear of losing discretionary power, informal income sources, or control over administrative processes. Bureaucratic resistance manifests in subtle ways: slow adoption of digital workflows, deliberate system underutilization, or parallel retention of paper-based processes. These insights align with research showing that digital governance threatens established bureaucratic power structures, provoking resistance or sabotage (Bannister & Connolly, 2020). In Nigeria, where corruption and rent-seeking are deeply institutionalized, digital systems that reduce face-to-face interactions disrupt informal revenue channels. As a civil servant explained: "Digital platforms reduce 'bargaining space.' Some officers prefer the old manual system because it gives them control." Participants also reported that internal capacity gaps hinder effective digital implementation. Many public officials lack adequate training, digital literacy, or motivation to engage with new systems. This leads to inconsistent use of digital tools and signals institutional incoherence, which undermines public trust. An ICT expert noted that government agencies often acquire technologies without aligning them with workflow redesign or performance incentives. This results in "technology adoption without institutional transformation," a phenomenon widely recognized in African governance literature (Asongu & Odhiambo, 2019). The consequence is a structural mismatch between digital ambition and administrative culture. While digital tools are introduced to enhance transparency

and accountability, bureaucratic behaviour often neutralizes their potential, producing citizen frustration and reinforcing distrust.

4.4 Digital Exclusion and Unequal Access

Significant disparities emerged regarding access to digital governance platforms. Participants from rural or low-income backgrounds reported limited access to stable internet, smartphones, and digital literacy training. Poor electricity supply further limits engagement with digital systems. These structural inequalities are well-documented across African digital governance studies (Adeleye, 2020; Asongu & Nwachukwu, 2017). A trader from Kano expressed frustration at traveling long distances to access reliable cybercafé services for government transactions. She perceived digital reforms as reinforcing urban privilege rather than reducing inequality. This perception is consistent with research showing that exclusion from digital services undermines institutional trust by making citizens feel marginalized (Sæbø et al., 2018). Another participant described the contradiction between the government's push for digital identity and the realities of rural infrastructure: "They say everything is digital, but people in my village cannot even charge their phones." This sentiment illustrates the disconnect between policy ambition and lived experience. Digital exclusion also intersects with gender inequalities. Female participants from low-income communities reported less access to digital devices and digital literacy opportunities, reflecting trends documented in African ICT4D scholarship (Kersting & Gagliardone, 2021). When specific social groups perceive digital services as inaccessible or biased, trust in public institutions weakens further. Thus, digital governance in Nigeria operates within a landscape of structural inequality that not only limits adoption but also erodes legitimacy.

4.5 Perceived Insincerity, Political Distrust, and Symbolic Governance

The final theme highlights the profound impact of political distrust on perceptions of digital governance. Participants frequently expressed skepticism regarding the motives behind digital reforms. Many view digital governance initiatives especially those launched close to election cycles as politically motivated or donor-driven rather than citizen-oriented. This perception echoes literature describing symbolic or performative digital reforms in African states (Kersting & Gagliardone, 2021). For

example, the hurried implementation of certain digital measures such as mandatory NIN-SIM linkage was interpreted as coercive rather than service-oriented. Citizens questioned why such reforms were enforced without adequate infrastructure or public sensitization. A policy analyst argued that “*reforms imposed without trust-building strategies reinforce suspicion.*”

Participants also perceived frequent policy reversals, inconsistent communication, and agency-level contradictions as evidence of insincerity. As trust theory suggests, perceived integrity is a key determinant of institutional trust (Hamm et al., 2019). In Nigeria, inconsistent institutional behaviour signals a lack of integrity, regardless of technological improvements. Moreover, governance scandals and corruption cases continue to overshadow digital achievements. Citizens interpret new digital systems through a distrustful lens shaped by decades of broken promises, poor service delivery, and political manipulation. This supports earlier scholarship indicating that historical distrust cannot be easily disrupted by technological innovation alone (Blind, 2007).

4.6 Summary of Key Findings

The results demonstrate that digital governance in Nigeria has not substantially increased citizen trust. Instead, trust dynamics are shaped by:

- Unreliable systems that undermine perceptions of competence
- Weak data protection that heightens fear and reduces confidence
- Bureaucratic resistance that contradicts digital reform objectives
- Structural inequalities that restrict access and generate exclusion
- Political distrust that shapes how digital reforms are interpreted

Collectively, these findings reveal a deep misalignment between digital governance aspirations and institutional realities. While digital tools offer potential for transparency and efficiency, their trust-building power is severely constrained by Nigeria’s socio-political environment, administrative culture, and infrastructural limitations.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings reveal that while digital governance in Nigeria has advanced in scale and visibility, its capacity to strengthen citizen trust remains constrained by structural, institutional, and socio-political barriers. This section discusses the implications of the

results in relation to existing scholarship and concludes by proposing a recalibrated approach to digital governance one that recognizes trust not as an automatic outcome of technological innovation but as an institutional achievement requiring sustained behavioural, structural, and ethical reforms.

5.1 Reassessing the Assumption That Digitalization Automatically Builds Trust

Current policy discourse in Nigeria often treats digital governance as a pathway to instant transparency, efficiency, and trust. However, this assumption mirrors a technocratic paradigm that reduces governance to data processing and automation (Lindgren & van Veenstra, 2018). The results demonstrate that digital infrastructure alone cannot remedy chronic institutional weaknesses. Instead, citizens interpret system failures, data insecurity, and bureaucratic resistance as extensions of historical governance dysfunction. This finding challenges the widespread narrative common in policy documents and donor frameworks that digitalization inherently enhances trust through reduced corruption and improved service delivery (Bertot et al., 2010). In Nigeria, each system breakdown, incomplete integration, or unclear policy directive reinforces the perception that digital governance is simply a new interface for old institutional problems. Thus, digital platforms risk becoming symbolic showcases of state modernization rather than meaningful trust-building mechanisms.

5.2 Institutional Competence as the Foundation of Digital Trust

A central theme emerging from the analysis is that perceived institutional competence remains the strongest determinant of trust in Nigeria's digital governance environment. Even advanced platforms lose legitimacy when servers fail, applications freeze, or verification systems are unavailable for days. Competence signals reliability, fairness, and administrative seriousness qualities deeply lacking in public perceptions of Nigerian institutions (Agbiboa, 2022). This aligns with performance-based trust models which argue that citizens evaluate institutional trustworthiness primarily through observable performance indicators (Van de Walle & Bouckaert, 2003). In the Nigerian context, digital governance amplifies performance expectations. When the state mandates digital identification for essential services, failure to deliver these services efficiently generates public frustration and distrust. Digital governance thus increases the stakes of institutional failure.

The implication is clear: technological reforms must be matched by investments in institutional capacity including infrastructure, interagency coordination, cybersecurity, and civil service training.

5.3 Data Governance, Surveillance Fears, and Trust Erosion

The results show that data privacy concerns represent one of the most significant barriers to trust. Citizens fear that personal data collected by digital platforms may be misused for political, security, or commercial purposes. These fears are consistent with studies identifying data insecurity as a core determinant of digital distrust in developing democracies (Afolabi, 2022; Medaglia, 2018).

Trust is relational, it depends not only on what citizens disclose but on how institutions behave with those disclosures. Nigeria's history of political surveillance, weak accountability, and unclear data handling practices reinforce the perception that digital systems expand state power rather than protect citizen rights. In this context, digital identity systems such as NIN, BVN, and SIM registration are interpreted through a lens of suspicion. The results therefore highlight a critical policy gap: trust cannot be cultivated without transparent, enforceable, and citizen-friendly data governance frameworks supported by independent oversight mechanisms.

5.4 Bureaucratic Behaviour and the Persistence of Institutional Inertia

Digital governance reforms intersect with the entrenched behavioural norms of Nigeria's public sector. Bureaucrats who benefit from informal processes such as bribes, discretionary decision-making, and opaque procedures may resist digital innovations that increase accountability. This finding is strongly supported by governance scholarship, which emphasizes that bureaucratic culture often determines the success or failure of digital reform (Bannister & Connolly, 2020).

Even when digital tools are introduced, their potential is undercut by:

- inconsistent adoption
- limited capacity to troubleshoot
- preference for manual processes
- parallel systems that undermine digital efficiency

Such practices convey institutional insincerity, reinforcing citizen perceptions that digital governance is performative rather than transformative. This creates a paradox:

digital systems depend on bureaucracies for implementation, but bureaucracies frequently undermine their credibility.

5.5 Digital Exclusion and the Reproduction of Inequality

The results illustrate that digital governance not only reflects but also amplifies existing socio-economic inequalities in Nigeria. Access to stable electricity, internet connectivity, digital devices, and literacy varies sharply across regions and social groups. Research demonstrates that digital divides exacerbate institutional distrust by creating stratified access to public services (Adeleye, 2020). When rural communities or marginalized populations cannot engage with digital platforms, they experience exclusion from essential services. This exclusion fosters resentment and deepens perceptions of institutional neglect. For many citizens, digital governance appears as an elite-driven reform that privileges urban users and educated populations.

This finding reinforces the need for inclusive digital policies that address connectivity, affordability, gender gaps, and digital literacy.

5.6 Political Distrust as the Dominant Interpretive Lens

Perhaps the most profound insight is that political distrust shapes how citizens interpret digital governance, regardless of functionality. Even when platforms are efficient, their legitimacy is judged through long histories of corruption, electoral manipulation, and unfulfilled government promises (Blind, 2007). Digital initiatives launched during election seasons or without adequate public consultation are perceived as politically motivated. Mandatory compliance measures such as NIN–SIM linkage are seen as coercive rather than participatory. Such perceptions reveal that trust cannot be engineered technologically; it must be earned politically. This finding aligns with cultural-institutional trust theories which emphasize that trust is embedded in social memory, collective beliefs, and political histories (Hamm et al., 2019).

5.7 Implications for Theory: Trust as an Institutional not Technological Outcome

The Nigerian case challenges mainstream digital governance theory in several ways:

- It contradicts technological determinism, showing that trust is shaped more by institutional behaviour than by the presence of digital platforms.
- It highlights trust as a historical and cultural product, not simply a reaction to current administrative performance.

- It demonstrates that digitalization can deepen distrust when implemented without structural reforms.

Thus, digital governance must be reconceptualized as an institutional transformation project not merely a technological deployment.

5.8 Policy Implications: Rebuilding Trust through Structural and Ethical Reform

The findings point to five strategic interventions for Nigeria:

Enhance Institutional Capacity

Reliable digital infrastructure, integrated platforms, skilled personnel, and stable funding are foundational.

Strengthen Data Protection and Oversight

A trusted digital governance environment requires enforceable privacy regulations and independent monitoring bodies.

Address Digital Inequality

Investments in rural connectivity, device affordability programs, and digital literacy initiatives are essential.

Reform Bureaucratic Culture

Performance incentives, anti-corruption reforms, and workflow redesign can mitigate resistance.

Engage Citizens Through Participatory Digital Platforms

Consultation, feedback mechanisms, and co-design approaches enhance legitimacy and counter perceptions of political manipulation.

5.9 Conclusion

This study reveals that digital governance in Nigeria operates within a landscape shaped by institutional fragility, historical distrust, bureaucratic inertia, and structural inequality. Digital platforms promise transparency and efficiency, but without corresponding institutional reforms, they risk reinforcing the very distrust they aim to remedy. The evidence suggests that trust cannot be programmed into digital systems. Trust flourishes only when institutions behave transparently, respect citizen rights, deliver consistent services, and demonstrate political integrity. Nigeria's digital governance efforts will therefore succeed only to the extent that they confront the underlying administrative and political conditions shaping citizen–state relations.

In concluding, digital governance should be understood not as a technical upgrade but as a governance transformationone that requires ethical leadership, institutional coherence, public engagement, and social inclusion. Only with these foundations can digital innovations contribute meaningfully to rebuilding citizen trust in Nigeria’s public institutions.

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