DIGITAL GOVERNANCE AND YOUTH EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA: REIMAGINING PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract: *The digital era is transforming public administration through the introduction of tools that improve effectiveness, transparency, and participatory governance. Youth play a pivotal role in this evolution, as their aspirations, digital fluency, and civic engagement position them as both beneficiaries and catalysts of administrative reform. This research investigates the impact of digital technologies in public administration on youth empowerment in Nigeria. Digital platforms are increasingly influencing service delivery and citizen engagement, necessitating adaptations in administrative frameworks to address evolving demands. This study employs a desk-based qualitative approach, utilising secondary sources such as policy documents, government reports, and academic literature to analyse institutional responses and emerging patterns of youth agency in digital governance. A hybrid theoretical framework that integrates Digital Era Governance (DEG), Empowerment Theory, and New Public Governance (NPG) informs the analysis. The findings indicate that digital tools enhance administrative accessibility, facilitate information dissemination, and promote interactive engagement among youth. Persistent structural inequalities, digital divides, institutional inertia, and limited capacity hinder equitable youth participation. The research underscores the necessity for intentional strategies to mitigate these obstacles. The conclusion presents actionable recommendations for public administrators and policymakers, emphasising inclusive digital policies, youth-oriented institutional reforms, and collaborative governance models. These measures are crucial for developing responsive, participatory, and*

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equitable public administration systems that empower youth and effectively address the complex demands of 21st-century governance.

Keywords: *Digital governance; Youth empowerment; Public administration; Nigeria; Participatory governance*

1. Introduction

Governance plays a critical role in determining the socio-political and economic direction of a nation. It encompasses the structures, processes, and relationships through which authority is exercised, decisions are made, and public resources are managed. Beyond government operations, governance involves collaboration among public institutions, civil society, and private actors to ensure accountability, transparency, and inclusive decision-making (Engvall & Flak, 2022). Within this framework, public administration serves as the mechanism through which policies are implemented, public services are delivered, and interactions between the state and citizens are facilitated (Nwanisobi & Christopher, 2020).

Historically, Nigeria's public administration has relied on bureaucratic structures rooted in Weberian principles of hierarchy, rules, and standardised procedures. These systems have been instrumental in maintaining institutional order and predictability, especially in post-colonial settings (Kari & Mshelia, 2023). However, their rigidity often limits responsiveness to dynamic socio-political conditions and evolving citizen needs. Critics have pointed to inefficiencies, procedural red tape, and a disconnect from citizens' lived experiences as major shortcomings (Kadakure & Twum-Darko, 2024).

In response to these challenges, digital governance has emerged as a transformative model, driven by the rapid growth of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Digital governance refers to the use of tools such as online platforms, mobile apps, big data, and artificial intelligence to enhance public sector efficiency, transparency, and citizen engagement (Kari & Mshelia, 2024; Van der Waldt, 2023). It represents a shift from hierarchical command structures to more participatory, transparent, and citizen-centric models of governance (Engvall & Flak, 2022).

The transition from e-government to digital governance includes innovations such as open data platforms, blockchain technologies, and AI-driven public service systems. The progression of digital governance worldwide has transitioned from basic digitisation of administrative documents and online service portals to more cohesive, citizen-focused, and data-informed governance frameworks. The process

Public Administration & Regional Studies

involves the digitisation of internal bureaucratic functions, and the creation of interactive platforms designed to improve citizen engagement, enable data-driven policymaking, and foster collaborative service delivery (Engvall & Flak, 2022). These innovations aim to foster inclusive and responsive governance by enabling real-time citizen participation and data-informed policymaking. In developing countries like Nigeria, these tools have the potential to reduce inefficiencies and promote civic inclusion.

Nigeria's youthful population—over 60% under the age of 30 (Ibrahim et al., 2023)—makes the effective integration of digital governance particularly urgent. Yet, traditional administrative systems have struggled to engage youth or address their socio-economic aspirations. Bureaucratic inertia limited civic spaces, and exclusionary political structures have left many young Nigerians marginalised from governance processes (Enaifoghe et al., 2024).

Youth empowerment is more than a development goal—it is a governance imperative. It involves equipping young people with the skills, resources, and opportunities necessary for meaningful participation in political, social, and economic life (Udeh et al., 2023). Digital platforms offer promising avenues for youth to engage in political advocacy, entrepreneurship, and participatory policymaking (Anosike & Adejare, 2023). However, the extent to which Nigeria's public administration has adapted to leverage these tools remains underexplored.

This study uses a qualitative desk-based method, analysing secondary data from 2015 to 2024—including government reports, policy briefs, academic literature, and media sources. It employs Digital Era Governance (DEG), Empowerment Theory, and New Public Governance (NPG) as a hybrid theoretical framework. DEG highlights digital integration and citizen-focused service delivery; Empowerment Theory explains how youth gain agency; and NPG emphasizes network-based, collaborative governance (Zimmerman, 2012; Wojciech, 2017; Ravšelj et al., 2022; Krogh & Triantafillou, 2024). The framework emphasises the potential of digital governance to improve public administration in Nigeria, engage youth groups, and create participatory, multi-stakeholder governance systems.

The study seeks to examine the strategic application of digital governance in augmenting youth empowerment and transforming public administration in Nigeria in the 21st century. By so doing, the paper contributes to contemporary discourse on governance transformation in developing contexts, offering insights into how Nigeria can strategically leverage digital innovations to foster participatory

governance and inclusive development, while positioning its youth as pivotal agents of democratic renewal and sustainable development.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Public Administration

Public administration refers to the organised frameworks through which governmental functions are executed for the public good. Heady (2001, p. 2) defines it as "that sector of administration found in a political setting", underscoring its dual role in policy execution and formulation. Onah (2009) views it as the systematic management of government institutions, focused on resource utilisation to achieve societal objectives.

Traditionally, public administration has been rooted in the Weberian bureaucratic model, marked by hierarchy, specialisation, rule-based procedures, and impersonality (Johnston, 2001). These structures aimed to promote efficiency and procedural consistency, particularly in complex governance environments. However, their rigidity drew criticism in the late 20th century, prompting reform movements such as the New Public Administration (NPA). The NPA advocated for decentralisation, the incorporation of private sector practices, subcontracting, and results-oriented approaches, aligning public service with market-driven efficiency (Indahsari & Raharja, 2020, as cited in Kadakure & Twum-Darko, 2024).

2.2 Digital Governance

Digital governance represents a transformative approach to public administration through the integration of digital technologies into governance systems, with the goal of enhancing administrative efficiency, transparency, and citizen participation. It encompasses tools such as the internet, mobile applications, AI, and big data analytics (Zheng, 2023). Initially focused on basic information-sharing, digital governance has evolved into platforms for real-time engagement, transactional services, and collaborative public service design (Lin & Yaakop, 2024).

Engvall and Flak (2022) note that digital governance now includes complex ICT infrastructures that address public challenges and promote participatory policymaking. The incorporation of AI and big data has allowed for automation and the democratisation of governance, enabling citizens to influence service delivery and decision-making processes.

2.3 Youth Empowerment

Youth empowerment entails equipping young people with the skills, resources, and opportunities needed to influence their lives and contribute meaningfully to national development. The UN identifies youth as individuals transitioning from dependence to independence, typically aged 15–24, while recognising the need for flexible definitions based on national contexts (UNDESA, n.d.). Nigeria's National Youth Policy defines youth as those aged 15–29 (FMYSD, 2019); however, this study adopts a broader range of 18–35 to reflect demographic realities and policy consistency at national and regional levels.

Youth empowerment is a cornerstone of inclusive development. It involves building agency, fostering leadership, and ensuring active participation in economic, political, and social systems (Zimmerman, 2012). This process includes access to education, entrepreneurship, and civic platforms, positioning youth as active agents of change (Heath & Moreau, 2024). Targeted interventions are necessary to address systemic exclusion and integrate youth into formal governance and policy processes.

This conceptual review establishes a framework linking public administration, digital governance, and youth empowerment. Together, these concepts provide the basis for exploring how Nigeria's governance structures can evolve to harness the creativity, agency, and digital engagement of its growing youth population.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Digital Transformation and Public Administration

The integration of digital technologies into public administration has redefined governance practices, moving beyond digitisation to structural transformation. Digital transformation entails the incorporation of technologies such as cloud computing, artificial intelligence (AI), mobile platforms, and big data analytics into administrative systems to enhance transparency, efficiency, and citizen engagement (Kraus et al., 2021b). As Kane et al. (2015, as cited in Kraus et al., 2021b) argue, such transformation is not merely technical—it demands leadership, a shift in public sector culture, and a redefinition of work models.

Historically rooted in Weberian bureaucracy, traditional public administration prioritised hierarchy, rules, and standardisation (Johnston, 2001). While effective in consolidating state authority, particularly in postcolonial contexts like Nigeria, this model often proved inflexible and unresponsive to citizen needs (Kadakure & Twum-Darko, 2024). The New Public Management (NPM) approach of the 1980s

introduced performance metrics and market mechanisms but fell short on democratic accountability (Okunmahie & Igbinovia, 2024). In contrast, the digital governance model of the 21st century fosters networked, participatory administration (Białożyt, 2017).

Global exemplars such as Estonia's X-Road platform, Singapore's Smart Nation initiative, and South Korea's AI-based governance have shown how digital systems can streamline service delivery and improve public trust (Mechitov & Moshkovich, 2021; Ishak et al., 2024). In Africa, Rwanda's Irembo portal, Smart Kigali, and mobile tax platforms illustrate how digital innovation can modernise governance, even in low-resource environments (Twizeyimana et al., 2018; Portion et al., 2023).

In Nigeria, digital transformation has supported both administrative reforms and civic activism. The Open Treasury Portal (FRN, 2019) enhances public accountability by providing real-time financial data. Meanwhile, digital platforms like Twitter and Facebook enabled the #EndSARS movement to coordinate mass protests and demand police reform, exemplifying how digital tools redefine citizen-state relations (Olanrewaju et al., 2024).

3.2 Nigeria's Digital Governance Landscape

Nigeria's digital governance strategy is anchored by national frameworks like the e-Government Master Plan (2019) and the National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy (NDEPS) 2020–2030. Developed with support from the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), the e-Government Master Plan prioritises interoperability, cloud computing, and citizen-centred service delivery (FMC, 2019; Dariem, 2024). NDEPS seeks to transform Nigeria into a leading digital economy through eight pillars, including infrastructure, cybersecurity, and digital skills development (FMCDE, 2020). Its goals include 70% broadband penetration and 95% digital literacy by 2030, positioning youth as key enablers of innovation and growth.

Foundational systems such as the National Identification Number (NIN) and Treasury Single Account (TSA) have streamlined public service access and financial management, improving efficiency and curbing corruption (Kari & Mshelia, 2023). The Bank Verification Number (BVN) has similarly increased transaction security and transparency (Kari & Mshelia, 2024).

Subnational initiatives further demonstrate innovation. Lagos State has implemented e-tax, digital land records, and the LSETF portal to facilitate youth entrepreneurship and job creation (Bailey, 2022). Kaduna State's KADRIMA system

uses real-time digital feedback to improve responsiveness in sectors like education and health (Agbe, 2023).

Digital engagement is growing: 58% of Nigerians are active internet users, with youth representing the most digitally engaged demographic (Statista, 2023). Platforms like BudgIT, NOCOPO, and EiE Nigeria promote budget transparency and participatory monitoring (Olasupo, 2023). However, access remains uneven, constrained by rural-urban disparities, poor infrastructure, and high data costs (NCC, 2023). These factors contribute to persistent exclusion, particularly among women, youth, and the physically challenged (Buhari, 2024).

3.3 Digital Governance and Youth Empowerment in Nigeria

Nigeria's demographic profile—over 60% of its population is under 30—presents both a challenge and an opportunity (Ibrahim et al., 2023). Digital governance provides a pathway for youth to participate meaningfully in governance, co-create policy solutions, and access economic opportunities (Anosike & Adejare, 2023).

Social media platforms have become central tools for political engagement and collective action. The 2020 #EndSARS movement demonstrated how Nigerian youth used Twitter to organise protests, crowdsource funding, and document human rights abuses (Olanrewaju et al., 2024). It revealed the strategic role of digital technologies in amplifying youth voices and holding public institutions accountable (Olasupo, 2023).

Beyond activism, digital platforms support electoral participation and governance monitoring. INEC's online voter registration and results portals promote transparency and accessibility (Anosike & Adejare, 2023). Civic tech groups like BudgIT use tools such as Tracka to enable citizens to monitor public projects, while EiE's platforms foster youth-led accountability campaigns (Olasupo, 2023).

Innovation hubs like CcHub, Wennovation Hub, and Civic Hive are cultivating digital entrepreneurs and civic leaders. These youth-led initiatives use technology to address social problems, from budget tracking to historical archiving (Osanebi & Odeke, 2024). Archivi.ng, for instance, is digitising Nigerian newspapers and magazines to preserve national memory and improve access to historical knowledge.

Government-led e-governance programs have expanded digital empowerment. The LSETF offers digitised access to vocational training and microfinance, while the Nigerian Youth Investment Fund (NYIF)—with ₦12.5 billion in seed funding—

seeks to create 500,000 youth-led jobs (CBN, 2020). These initiatives reduce bureaucratic friction and support youth participation in economic development.

However, structural barriers persist. The digital divide, marked by inequalities in access, infrastructure, digital literacy, and affordability, limits inclusion for rural and disadvantaged youth (Kari & Mshelia, 2023). The NCC (2023) identifies challenges including limited awareness, high costs, gender inequality, and language barriers. Addressing these issues is vital to ensure equitable digital empowerment.

3.4 Toward a Participatory Digital Governance Model

Positioning digital governance at the core of youth empowerment is essential for reimagining public administration in Nigeria. A participatory model must integrate digital inclusion, civic engagement, and innovation. This approach will help build a more transparent, responsive, and resilient governance ecosystem aligned with 21st-century realities.

Youth must be seen not only as beneficiaries of digital services but as co-creators of public value. Strengthening digital infrastructure, ensuring affordable access, and embedding civic tech into policy frameworks are key priorities. Through inclusive digital policies, Nigeria can harness its youth potential to renew democratic institutions and drive sustainable development.

4. Reimagining Public Administration in Nigeria in the 21st Century

Public administration in Nigeria has historically been shaped by its colonial roots, marked by centralisation, bureaucratic rigidity, and limited public engagement (Ani & Anieti, 2023; Songklin, 2024). While this model helped consolidate authority, it has struggled to respond to contemporary governance challenges, especially in a country where over 60% of the population is under 30 (Ibrahim et al., 2023). In the 21st century, the urgency to transition toward more transparent, responsive, and participatory models of governance is amplified by both demographic pressures and technological advancements.

Digital transformation provides a viable path for modernising public administration. Key reforms—such as the Treasury Single Account (TSA), Bank Verification Number (BVN), and Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS)—have improved transparency, streamlined service delivery, and curbed fiscal leakages (Kari & Mshelia, 2023; 2024). The Open Treasury Portal, launched in 2019,

has also enhanced financial accountability by allowing citizens to track federal expenditures in real time (Atiku, 2020).

Subnational innovations, such as Lagos State's digital tax system and the Lagos State Employment Trust Fund (LSETF), exemplify how digitisation can be deployed to boost entrepreneurship, support vocational training, and reduce administrative inefficiencies (Bailey, 2022). Similarly, Kaduna State's digital feedback mechanism, KADRIMA, has created a more responsive relationship between government and residents (Agbe, 2023).

Digital technologies have also empowered youth-led civic engagement. Platforms like BudgIT, Enough is Enough (EiE), and Follow the Money have enabled citizens — especially young people — to monitor public projects, demand accountability, and influence governance outcomes (Olasupo, 2023). The #EndSARS protests demonstrated how social media could mobilise nationwide movements, crowdsource resources, and amplify reform demands (Olanrewaju et al., 2024).

Innovation hubs such as Co-Creation Hub (CcHub) and Civic Hive are incubating youth-led civic tech solutions that address public service gaps and enhance state-citizen engagement (Osanebi & Odeke, 2024). These examples align with the principles of New Public Governance (NPG), which emphasises stakeholder collaboration, co-creation of public value, and citizen participation (Krogh & Triantafillou, 2024).

Nevertheless, the promise of digital transformation is constrained by persistent structural challenges, including digital divides, infrastructural deficits, low digital literacy, and regulatory concerns (Van der Waldt, 2023; Buhari, 2024). Rural-urban inequalities in access to technology continue to marginalise significant segments of the population (NCC, 2023).

Reimagining public administration in Nigeria requires more than adopting digital tools — it demands a paradigm shift toward inclusive, citizen-centric governance. By integrating digital innovation with institutional reform and participatory practices, Nigeria can reposition its public administration as a catalyst for youth empowerment, democratic renewal, and sustainable development in the digital age.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

This study examined the evolution of digital governance in Nigeria since 2015, highlighting its role in advancing youth empowerment through improved service access, information flow, and participatory governance. The convergence of digital

transformation and youth empowerment presents a critical opportunity to reimagine public administration for inclusive development.

While notable progress has been made, persistent challenges require targeted interventions. These include expanding rural internet access, subsidising data costs, improving digital literacy for marginalised youth, strengthening institutional capacity, and fostering inclusive, collaborative policymaking.

Drawing on New Public Governance (NPG), the study advocates for a shift from state-centric governance toward multi-actor engagement that includes youth, civil society, and the private sector. An integrated application of Digital Era Governance (DEG), NPG, and Empowerment Theory provides a comprehensive framework to build participatory, youth-responsive public institutions.

Future research should incorporate primary data to capture young people's lived experiences and deepen understanding of how digital governance can support transformative youth engagement in Nigeria.

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