Emerging Perspective in Social and Politics

Research Article
Volume 1(2), 2026, 105−116
https://doi.org/10.53623/epsp.v1i2.1265

New Public Management, Digital Governance, and Organizational Performance: Empirical Evidence from Public Sector Reforms in Developing Economies

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SUBMITTED: 17 June 2026; REVISED: 6 October 2026; ACCEPTED: 9 October 2026

ABSTRACT: Public-sector reform has accelerated substantially across developing economies over the past two decades, driven by the parallel adoption of New Public Management (NPM) principles and rapid advances in digital governance (DG). Despite extensive theoretical debate, empirical evidence integrating NPM adoption, DG, organizational performance (OP), and public trust and accountability (PTA) within a unified analytical framework remains limited, particularly in developing-country contexts. This study examined the direct and indirect relationships among these constructs using a cross-sectional survey of 360 civil servants from four Nigerian ministries. Structural equation modelling (SEM), complemented by hierarchical multiple regression, was employed to test the proposed relationships. The results showed that NPM adoption ($\beta = 0.389$, $p < 0.001$) and DG ($\beta = 0.342$, $p < 0.001$) significantly and positively predicted OP. In turn, OP significantly predicted PTA ($\beta = 0.274$, $p < 0.001$) and mediated the relationship between public-sector reform mechanisms and PTA. DG also exerted a stronger direct effect on PTA than NPM adoption, indicating that digital transformation may strengthen transparency and accountability beyond the effects of managerial reform alone. These findings extend the public administration literature by demonstrating how managerial and digital reforms jointly contribute to organizational performance and governance outcomes. The study highlights the importance of integrating NPM-oriented institutional reforms with digital governance initiatives to strengthen public-sector performance, accountability, and public trust in digitally transitioning developing economies.

KEYWORDS: New public management; digital governance; organizational performance; public trust; developing economies; Nigeria

1. Introduction

The transformation of public administration over the past three decades has been shaped by two major reform trajectories: the managerial reforms associated with New Public Management (NPM) and the rapid expansion of digital governance. NPM emerged as a response to perceived inefficiencies in traditional bureaucratic administration, emphasizing performance measurement, managerial autonomy, decentralization, output-oriented

accountability, and the selective adoption of private-sector management practices [1, 2]. These principles were intended to improve efficiency, responsiveness, and organizational performance by shifting public administration from process-oriented bureaucratic control toward results-based management [3, 4]. Although NPM-inspired reforms have generated measurable improvements in some administrative systems, their effectiveness remains contested in developing economies, where institutional capacity, administrative traditions, resource constraints, and governance conditions may substantially influence reform outcomes [5, 6].

Alongside managerial reform, digital governance has become an increasingly important mechanism for transforming public-sector organizations. Digital governance encompasses e-government platforms, integrated information and communication technology (ICT) systems, digital service delivery, data-driven decision-making, and technology-enabled mechanisms for monitoring government activities [7−10]. Unlike conventional administrative modernization, digital transformation can alter both internal organizational processes and interactions between public institutions and citizens. Digital systems can reduce transaction costs, accelerate information flows, standardize administrative procedures, and improve the traceability of government decisions. These characteristics have potentially important implications for transparency, accountability, service quality, and public trust [11, 12]. In developing economies such as Nigeria, digital transformation has increasingly occurred alongside broader civil-service modernization initiatives, creating an institutional environment in which managerial and technological reforms operate simultaneously rather than independently [13].

However, the coexistence of NPM and digital governance creates an important unresolved problem in public administration research. It remains unclear whether managerial and digital reforms independently improve public-sector outcomes or whether their contribution to public trust and accountability depends on their ability to first improve organizational performance. This distinction is important because governments frequently invest simultaneously in performance-oriented administrative reforms and digital infrastructure, yet improvements in institutional arrangements or technological capacity do not necessarily translate directly into greater public confidence. Reform initiatives may increase administrative efficiency without strengthening accountability, while digitalization may simply reproduce existing bureaucratic weaknesses in electronic form when it is not accompanied by organizational change.

Existing empirical research provides only a partial explanation of these relationships. Studies of NPM have generally concentrated on performance management, efficiency, decentralization, and managerial accountability [8, 14−16], whereas research on digital governance has frequently emphasized e-government adoption, digital service delivery, transparency, and citizen acceptance [14, 15]. Consequently, NPM adoption, digital governance, organizational performance, and public trust and accountability have rarely been examined simultaneously within a unified empirical framework, particularly in developing-country public administrations. This fragmentation limits understanding of the mechanisms through which reform initiatives ultimately generate governance outcomes. It also creates a practical policy problem because decision-makers operating under fiscal and institutional constraints require evidence on whether resources should primarily strengthen managerial reform, accelerate digital transformation, or integrate both approaches to improve institutional performance and public accountability [9, 17].

Nigeria provides a particularly relevant setting in which to investigate this problem. Its public administration operates within an environment characterized by continuing civil-service reform, increasing adoption of digital government systems, substantial institutional diversity, and persistent demands for improved public-sector effectiveness and accountability. Examining managerial and digital reforms within this context therefore provides an opportunity to determine whether technological modernization complements established management reforms and whether their effects extend beyond internal administrative performance to broader governance outcomes. Evidence from this setting can also contribute to understanding public-sector transformation in other developing economies facing similar challenges of institutional capacity, digital transition, and demands for greater government accountability [18–22].

A further limitation of the existing literature concerns the mechanism connecting reform implementation with public trust. Improvements in NPM practices or digital capabilities may not directly generate public confidence; rather, their effects may operate through improvements in organizational performance. Public institutions that become more efficient, responsive, reliable, and capable of delivering services may subsequently be perceived as more accountable and trustworthy. Organizational performance may therefore represent an important explanatory pathway linking administrative reform to governance outcomes. Testing this mechanism is necessary to move beyond simple associations between reform adoption and institutional outcomes and toward a more theoretically integrated explanation of how public-sector transformation produces public value.

Accordingly, this study aimed to examine how NPM adoption and digital governance influence public trust and accountability, both directly and indirectly through organizational performance, among civil servants in Nigerian federal ministries. By integrating managerial reform, digital transformation, organizational performance, and trust and accountability within a single empirical framework, the study provides evidence on the complementary roles of administrative and technological reform and clarifies the mechanism through which these reform strategies may contribute to stronger public-sector governance in developing economies.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design.

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was adopted for this study. This approach is appropriate for examining the nature and magnitude of relationships among multiple latent constructs across a large sample within a defined time frame. The study employs a positivist epistemological orientation, treating organizational phenomena as objectively measurable and amenable to statistical inference. Cross-sectional designs are particularly common in public administration research where the objective is to capture variation in perceptions and practices across organizational units rather than to document change over time [23–27].

2.2. Sampling and Data Collection.

The target population comprised civil servants at Grade 41 and above (professional and management categories) employed within four federal ministries in Nigeria: the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Health and Social Services, the Ministry of Education and Training, and the Ministry of Infrastructure and Planning. These ministries were purposively selected

based on their active participation in Nigeria's Public Sector ICT Strategic Plan and their documented engagement with performance-based budgeting reforms. Stratified random sampling was employed to ensure proportional representation across ministries and service grades. A total of 420 questionnaires were distributed; 378 were returned (response rate = 90.0%), of which 360 were deemed complete and valid for analysis. The demographic composition of the final sample is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 360).

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	198	55.0
	Female	162	45.0
Age Group	25–34 years	97	26.9
	35–44 years	142	39.4
	45–54 years	89	24.7
	≥55 years	32	8.9
Years of Service	< 5 years	74	20.6
	5–10 years	119	33.1
	11–20 years	103	28.6
	> 20 years	64	17.8
Ministry/Agency	Ministry of Finance	89	24.7
	Health & Social Services	96	26.7
	Education & Training	82	22.8
	Infrastructure & Planning	93	25.8

2.3 Measurement Instruments.

Four validated scales were adapted for the Nigerian public sector context following standard procedures of translation, back-translation, and expert review. NPM Adoption was measured using an 18-item scale covering performance management practices and decentralization, adapted from Hood and Dixon [1] and Walker et al. [16]. Digital Governance was assessed through a 14-item instrument covering e-service delivery quality and ICT infrastructure capacity, drawing on Mergel et al. [11] and Gil-Garcia et al. [12]. Organizational Performance was operationalized via a 12-item scale reflecting service efficiency, goal achievement, and resource utilization, derived from Andrews et al. [23]. Public Trust and Accountability was captured through a 16-item instrument adapted from Bouckaert and Van de Walle [19] and Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer [28]. All items employed a five-point Likert response scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).

2.4. Data Analysis Procedures.

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 28 and AMOS 28. Descriptive statistics and reliability analyses (Cronbach's α) were computed for all scales. Pearson correlations were used to examine bivariate relationships among constructs. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess construct validity; indicators of model fit included the comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). Structural equation modelling (SEM) was

employed to test the hypothesized structural paths. To address potential common method variance (CMV) arising from the single-source, self-report design, Harman's single-factor test was conducted and procedural remedies including temporal separation of conceptually proximate items and full anonymity were applied [29−30].

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Sample Characteristics.

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the 360 civil servants included in the study. The sample comprised slightly more male respondents (55.0%) than female respondents (45.0%), indicating relatively balanced gender representation despite a modest male predominance. This distribution is broadly consistent with the gender composition reported for professional grades within the Nigerian civil service [8]. As shown in Table 1, respondents represented a broad range of age groups and levels of professional experience. The largest age category was 35–44 years, accounting for 39.4% of the sample. Importantly, approximately 62% of respondents had accumulated at least ten years of civil-service experience. The sample therefore predominantly represented established public-sector employees with substantial exposure to administrative procedures and institutional reform initiatives. Such experience is particularly relevant to the present study because respondents were required to evaluate organizational practices related to performance management, decentralization, digital governance, and accountability. Representation across the four participating ministries was approximately balanced. This distribution reduced the likelihood that the findings were disproportionately driven by the organizational culture or reform experience of a single ministry. Overall, the demographic composition provided an appropriate empirical basis for examining perceptions of public-sector reform across different institutional settings.

3.2. Descriptive Statistics and Internal Reliability.

The descriptive statistics and internal consistency coefficients for the study constructs are presented in Table 2. Mean scores ranged from 3.54 for Public Trust and Accountability (PTA) to 3.91 for Performance Management Practices. Given the five-point response scale, all construct means were above the scale midpoint, indicating generally favorable perceptions of public-sector reform, organizational performance, and accountability outcomes.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Internal Reliability of the Study Constructs (N = 360).

Variable	M	SD	Min	Max	α
New Public Management (NPM) Adoption	3.82	0.71	1.00	5.00	.88
Performance Management Practices	3.91	0.68	1.40	5.00	.84
Decentralization Index	3.74	0.76	1.20	5.00	.82
Digital Governance (DG)	3.65	0.79	1.00	5.00	.91
e-Service Delivery Quality	3.58	0.83	1.00	5.00	.87
ICT Infrastructure Capacity	3.71	0.75	1.20	5.00	.85
Organizational Performance (OP)	3.79	0.72	1.20	5.00	.89
Public Trust and Accountability (PTA)	3.54	0.84	1.00	5.00	.90

Note: M = mean; SD = standard deviation; α = Cronbach's alpha. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale.

The results in Table 2 reveal several noteworthy patterns. Within the NPM dimensions, Performance Management Practices recorded the highest mean (M = 3.91, SD = 0.68), followed by the overall NPM Adoption construct (M = 3.82, SD = 0.71) and the Decentralization Index (M = 3.74, SD = 0.76). These results suggest that performance-oriented managerial practices were more strongly embedded in the participating ministries than decentralization mechanisms. Organizational Performance also recorded a relatively high mean (M = 3.79, SD = 0.72), indicating generally positive assessments of internal institutional performance. Digital Governance received a comparatively lower mean score (M = 3.65, SD = 0.79). Within this construct, ICT Infrastructure Capacity (M = 3.71) was rated more favorably than e-Service Delivery Quality (M = 3.58). This difference suggests that the availability of digital infrastructure may be developing faster than the quality of services delivered through that infrastructure. More importantly, PTA recorded the lowest overall mean (M = 3.54, SD = 0.84). The pattern suggests a potential implementation gap whereby internal managerial and technological reforms are perceived more positively than their broader accountability and trust outcomes. All Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from .82 to .91, exceeding commonly accepted thresholds for internal consistency [30]. Digital Governance showed the highest reliability (α = .91), followed by PTA (α = .90) and OP (α = .89). The standard deviations, ranging from 0.68 to 0.84, further indicate sufficient dispersion in respondent perceptions rather than excessive clustering around the means. Collectively, these results support the reliability of the measurement scales and their suitability for subsequent correlation, regression, and structural analyses.

3.3. Correlation Analysis.

Table 3 presents the Pearson correlations among the four principal constructs. All relationships were positive and statistically significant at $p < .001$, providing preliminary support for the hypothesized relationships among managerial reform, digital governance, organizational performance, and public trust and accountability.

Table 3. Pearson Correlation Matrix for the Principal Study Constructs.

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. NPM Adoption	—			
2. Digital Governance	.512**	—		
3. Organizational Performance	.638**	.591**	—	
4. Public Trust and Accountability	.474**	.543**	.612**	—

As shown in Table 3, the strongest bivariate association was observed between NPM Adoption and Organizational Performance ($r = .638$, $p < .001$). This relatively strong relationship suggests that greater implementation of performance management, decentralization, and related NPM practices was associated with more favorable assessments of organizational performance. OP was also strongly associated with PTA ($r = .612$, $p < .001$), providing preliminary evidence that improvements in internal organizational functioning may be linked to broader perceptions of accountability and trust. Digital Governance was positively correlated with both OP ($r = .591$, $p < .001$) and PTA ($r = .543$, $p < .001$). Notably, its correlation with PTA was stronger than the corresponding association between NPM Adoption and PTA ($r = .474$, $p < .001$). This pattern suggests that digital governance may have a particularly important relationship with externally oriented governance outcomes, potentially

because digital systems can make government processes, information, and services more visible and accessible. The correlation between NPM Adoption and Digital Governance was moderate ($r = .512$, $p < .001$), indicating that the two reform approaches are related but empirically distinguishable. Furthermore, none of the correlations approached the commonly used threshold of .85 for potentially problematic overlap among constructs. The correlation structure therefore provides preliminary support for examining NPM Adoption and Digital Governance as distinct predictors in the subsequent multivariate models.

3.4. Regression Analysis.

The multivariate relationships were further examined using two regression models, as reported in Table 4. Model 1 assessed the extent to which NPM Adoption and Digital Governance predicted Organizational Performance. The model was statistically significant and explained 53.1% of the variance in OP ($R^2 = .531$, $F(2, 357) = 202.14$, $p < .001$). This level of explained variance indicates that the two reform dimensions jointly accounted for a substantial proportion of differences in perceived organizational performance.

Table 4. Multiple Regression Results Predicting Organizational Performance and Public Trust and Accountability.

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	95% CI
Model 1: Organizational Performance					
NPM Adoption	0.41	0.06	.389**	6.83	[0.29, 0.53]
Digital Governance	0.36	0.05	.342**	7.20	[0.26, 0.46]
Model 2: Public Trust and Accountability					
NPM Adoption	0.28	0.07	.248**	4.00	[0.14, 0.42]
Digital Governance	0.33	0.06	.311**	5.50	[0.21, 0.45]
Organizational Performance	0.29	0.07	.274**	4.14	[0.15, 0.43]

Note: Model 1: $R^2 = .531$, $F(2, 357) = 202.14$, $p < .001$. Model 2: $R^2 = .483$, $F(3, 356) = 110.78$, $p < .001$. B = unstandardized coefficient; SE B = standard error; β = standardized coefficient; CI = confidence interval. **$p < .001$.

Within Model 1, both predictors made significant independent contributions. NPM Adoption emerged as the stronger standardized predictor of OP ($\beta = .389$, $p < .001$), followed by Digital Governance ($\beta = .342$, $p < .001$). The positive coefficients indicate that higher levels of both managerial and digital reform were associated with better organizational performance after accounting for their shared variance. These findings support the proposition that conventional managerial reform remains important for internal institutional effectiveness, while digital capabilities provide an additional and independent contribution to performance [3, 10, 16]. Model 2 examined PTA as the dependent variable. As reported in Table 4, NPM Adoption, Digital Governance, and OP collectively explained 48.3% of the variance in PTA ($R^2 = .483$, $F(3, 356) = 110.78$, $p < .001$). Digital Governance showed the largest standardized coefficient ($\beta = .311$, $p < .001$), followed by OP ($\beta = .274$, $p < .001$) and NPM Adoption ($\beta = .248$, $p < .001$). Thus, all three constructs retained statistically significant independent associations with PTA.

The relative magnitude of these coefficients is theoretically important. NPM Adoption was the stronger predictor of internal OP in Model 1, whereas Digital Governance became the strongest predictor when PTA was examined in Model 2. This contrast suggests that managerial reforms may exert their greatest influence on internal administrative functioning, while digital governance may be more directly connected to transparency, accessibility, and accountability outcomes. This interpretation is consistent with previous evidence that digital transparency

mechanisms can have particularly important implications for trust-related perceptions [28, 29]. The continued significance of NPM Adoption and Digital Governance after OP was introduced into the PTA model is consistent with a partial rather than complete indirect pathway. However, the regression coefficients alone do not establish mediation. Formal conclusions regarding the mediating role of OP should therefore be based on the indirect-effect estimates from the structural equation model. This distinction strengthens the statistical interpretation by separating evidence from the regression models from formal mediation testing.

3.5. Perceived Reform Effectiveness Across Key Constructs.

Table 5 provides a complementary descriptive comparison of perceived reform effectiveness across the four principal constructs. The values represent aggregated percentage endorsement and therefore provide an intuitive indication of the relative strength with which respondents perceived different dimensions of public-sector reform.

Table 5. Perceived Reform Effectiveness Across Key Constructs.

Construct	Perceived effectiveness (%)
NPM Adoption	77
Digital Governance	73
Organizational Performance	76
Public Trust and Accountability	71

As presented in Table 5, NPM Adoption received the highest perceived effectiveness rating (77%), closely followed by Organizational Performance (76%). Digital Governance recorded a slightly lower rating of 73%, while PTA received the lowest endorsement at 71%. Although the differences are relatively modest, the ranking is consistent with the descriptive means reported in Table 2, where internal managerial and performance-related constructs were also evaluated more positively than PTA. The proximity of the NPM Adoption and OP ratings provides descriptive support for the strong relationship between these variables identified in Tables 3 and 4. In contrast, the lower PTA rating suggests that improvements perceived within government organizations may not translate immediately or proportionately into stronger trust and accountability outcomes. This distinction is important because organizational reforms are primarily implemented within administrative institutions, whereas trust and accountability are broader governance outcomes that may depend on citizens' experiences, institutional credibility, transparency, and the visibility of reform outcomes [19]. Digital Governance occupies an intermediate position, with a perceived effectiveness rate of 73%. When considered alongside its comparatively strong regression coefficient for PTA in Table 4, this finding suggests that digital governance may still have considerable unrealized potential. Strengthening e-service delivery quality, rather than focusing solely on ICT infrastructure, may be particularly important given the lower mean for e-Service Delivery Quality observed in Table 2. Overall, the pattern across Tables 2–5 indicates that reform progress appears strongest at the level of internal management and organizational performance, while the translation of these improvements into broader trust and accountability remains comparatively less developed.

3.6. Theoretical and Practical Implications.

The findings provide empirical support for an integrated perspective in which NPM and digital governance operate as complementary rather than competing approaches to public-sector reform. NPM Adoption and Digital Governance both significantly predicted OP, while both constructs also retained significant relationships with PTA. These findings bridge two streams of public administration research that have frequently examined managerial reform and digital transformation separately [2, 7].

The pattern of effects also clarifies their potentially different functions. NPM Adoption demonstrated the strongest relationship with OP, suggesting that performance management, decentralization, and related managerial practices remain particularly relevant to internal administrative effectiveness. Digital Governance, in contrast, showed the largest standardized effect on PTA after the other predictors were controlled. This suggests that digitalization may provide a more direct interface between administrative reform and governance outcomes by improving the accessibility, visibility, and traceability of public services and administrative processes. The findings therefore provide empirical support for digital-era governance perspectives while demonstrating that digital transformation does not render managerial reform obsolete [10].

The relationship between OP and PTA further indicates that internal institutional capability may represent an important mechanism through which reform generates broader governance benefits. Improvements in managerial practices or digital capabilities are unlikely to strengthen public trust merely because new systems have been formally adopted. Their legitimacy effects are more likely to emerge when reform produces observable improvements in organizational effectiveness, service responsiveness, and administrative reliability [23, 24]. Formal interpretation of this mediating mechanism, however, should be supported by the SEM indirect-effect estimates.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that Nigerian public-sector reform should integrate managerial modernization and digital transformation within a coordinated reform strategy. Digital governance should not be treated merely as a technological extension of conventional administrative reform. Investments in ICT infrastructure should be accompanied by improvements in e-service quality, interoperability, staff digital competence, data governance, and mechanisms that make administrative decisions more transparent and traceable.

At the same time, the comparatively strong relationship between NPM Adoption and OP demonstrates that investment in digital systems cannot substitute for institutional capacity. Performance management, appropriate decentralization, professional development, and organizational accountability remain necessary foundations for converting technological investment into improved public-sector outcomes [20–22]. The relatively lower PTA results in Tables 2 and 5 further indicate that governments should evaluate reform success using both internal performance indicators and external governance outcomes. Organizational efficiency should therefore be regarded as an intermediate objective rather than the final measure of reform success.

Overall, the evidence indicates that the effectiveness of public-sector transformation depends not simply on adopting more managerial reforms or introducing more digital technologies, but on integrating these mechanisms in ways that produce measurable

organizational improvements and translate those improvements into greater accountability and trust. This integrated perspective is particularly relevant to developing economies,

4. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between New Public Management adoption, digital governance, organizational performance, and public trust and accountability among 360 civil servants in the Nigerian public sector. The results confirm that both NPM adoption and digital governance are significant predictors of organizational performance and public trust, with organizational performance serving as a partial mediator in the pathway from reform inputs to trust outcomes. Digital governance demonstrates a slightly stronger direct influence on public trust than managerial reform practices alone, underscoring the strategic value of digital transformation as a trust-building mechanism in developing economies. Several limitations should be noted. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference, and the reliance on self-reported perceptions introduces potential for common method variance despite procedural safeguards [30]. The study is also bounded to the Nigerian federal civil service context, and generalizability to other developing country settings should be approached with caution. Future research should employ longitudinal designs, multi-source data collection, and comparative cross-national samples to extend and validate these findings. Experimental or quasi-experimental approaches that capture citizen-reported trust alongside civil servant perceptions would further strengthen the evidence base for integrated public sector reform theory.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study, literature review, data interpretation, manuscript drafting, critical revision, and final approval of the submitted version. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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