

Digital Exclusion and E-Government Access: A Systematic Literature Review of Barriers to Digital Governance in Rural Nigeria

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Abstract

Digital governance has become a critical pathway for enhancing efficiency, transparency, and accountability in public administration, consistent with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16.6, which advocates effective, accountable, and transparent institutions. In Nigeria, however, the expansion of e-government initiatives has not translated into equitable access, as rural households remain disproportionately digitally excluded, limiting their ability to access and utilise digital public services. This study examined digital exclusion and e-government access in rural Nigeria through a systematic synthesis of existing empirical evidence. Guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA)

framework, a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design was adopted. The review covered 26 peer-reviewed empirical studies and authoritative institutional reports published between 2015 and 2025. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) served as a theoretical lens for explaining how access barriers shape engagement with e-government platforms. Data were analysed using thematic synthesis, involving line-by-line coding and the development of descriptive and analytical themes. The findings reveal that digital exclusion in rural Nigeria is shaped by four interrelated barriers: infrastructural deficits, economic constraints, human-capital limitations, and institutional weaknesses. These barriers collectively restrict awareness and utilisation of e-government services, resulting in uneven realisation of digital governance benefits and continued concentration of institutional efficiency in urban areas. The study concludes that inclusive digital governance in Nigeria requires a shift from urban-centric approaches to rural-sensitive interventions that address structural and capacity-related barriers, thereby supporting progress toward SDG 16.6.

Keywords: Digital exclusion; e-government; rural Nigeria; digital divide; Technology Acceptance Model; SDG 16.6

1. Introduction

Governments across the world are increasingly deploying digital technologies to enhance public service delivery, improve administrative

efficiency, and strengthen transparency and accountability in governance. This approach, commonly referred to as e-government, involves the application of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to facilitate interactions between government institutions and citizens, businesses, and other stakeholders (Oyedokun, Adeolu-Akande, & Oyedokun, 2023). The adoption of e-government has been widely promoted as a mechanism for achieving inclusive governance and aligns closely with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16.6, which calls for the development of effective, accountable, and transparent institutions at all levels (United Nations, 2015).

In Nigeria, successive administrations have articulated digital transformation agendas aimed at modernising public administration and improving access to government services. National and sub-national initiatives have sought to digitise processes such as tax administration, identity management, social protection, and service registration. Within this policy context, e-government is increasingly positioned as a strategic tool for enhancing institutional performance and citizen engagement. However, the benefits of these initiatives have not been evenly distributed across the population.

Empirical evidence indicates that access to digital infrastructure and public e-services in Nigeria is highly uneven, with urban areas enjoying significantly greater connectivity, institutional capacity, and service availability than rural

regions (Adeleke, 2021; Omweri, 2024). Rural communities often face weak broadband coverage, unreliable electricity supply, and limited institutional outreach, conditions that constrain their ability to engage with digital government platforms. As a result, large segments of the rural population remain excluded from digitally mediated public services that are increasingly central to governance processes.

Digital exclusion in rural Nigeria extends beyond physical connectivity. Studies show that low levels of digital literacy, limited awareness of existing e-government platforms, and economic constraints further restrict meaningful engagement with digital public services (Okunola, Rowley, & Johnson, 2017; Paul & Eghe, 2023). These challenges intersect with institutional weaknesses, including fragmented platform design and inconsistent policy implementation, to deepen rural-urban disparities in access to governance resources.

Against this backdrop, understanding digital exclusion as a multidimensional phenomenon is critical for assessing the effectiveness of e-government initiatives in rural Nigeria. Given the growing reliance on digital platforms for public service delivery, a systematic synthesis of existing empirical evidence is necessary to clarify the nature, scope, and implications of access barriers faced by rural households. Such an approach provides a foundation for evidence-based policy interventions aimed at promoting inclusive digital



governance and advancing Nigeria's commitment to SDG 16.6.

2. Statement of the Problem

Despite sustained investments in digital governance and the expansion of e-government initiatives in Nigeria, rural households continue to experience significant barriers that limit their access to and utilisation of digital public services. While government platforms are increasingly positioned as primary channels for service delivery and citizen engagement, large segments of the rural population remain unable to benefit from these digital systems.

Scholars consistently identify poor internet connectivity, unreliable electricity supply, high costs of digital devices and data subscriptions, and low levels of digital literacy as major constraints affecting rural engagement with e-government services (Okunola, Rowley, & Johnson, 2017; Abdulrazaq, 2024). These challenges are compounded by limited awareness of existing government platforms and weak institutional mechanisms for reaching rural users. Consequently, digital public services that are designed to enhance efficiency and inclusiveness often fail to reach the populations that require them most.

The persistence of these barriers raises critical concerns about the effectiveness of Nigeria's digital governance agenda. As public services increasingly migrate to online platforms, rural exclusion from digital systems risks deepening

existing inequalities in access to governance resources, civic participation, and public accountability. This situation undermines the core objectives of e-government and poses a challenge to Nigeria's commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 16.6, which emphasises inclusive, accountable, and transparent institutions (United Nations, 2015).

Although several studies have examined aspects of digital exclusion and e-government in Nigeria, much of the evidence remains fragmented, context-specific, or focused on single dimensions of the problem. There is a lack of consolidated empirical understanding of how multiple access barriers collectively influence awareness and utilisation of e-government services among rural households. Without such synthesis, policy responses risk being piecemeal and insufficiently responsive to the realities of rural communities.

Against this background, the problem addressed by this study is the persistent digital exclusion of rural households in Nigeria and its implications for awareness of and access to e-government services. By systematically reviewing and synthesising existing empirical evidence, the study seeks to clarify the nature and interaction of access barriers that continue to limit inclusive digital governance in rural Nigeria.

3. Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How aware are rural households of available e-government services according to existing empirical studies?
2. How do digital access challenges affect the utilisation of e-government services by rural residents?

4. Conceptual Clarifications

This section clarifies the key concepts that underpin the study and delineates how they relate to the phenomenon of digital exclusion and access to e-government services among rural households. The discussion focuses on digital exclusion, e-government, and the multidimensional digital divide, which together frame the scope of the inquiry.

4.1 Concept of Digital Exclusion

Digital exclusion refers to the condition in which individuals or communities are unable to fully access, use, or benefit from digital technologies and services. Contemporary scholarship conceptualises digital exclusion as a multidimensional phenomenon that extends beyond physical connectivity to include disparities in skills, usage, and outcomes (Scheerder, van Deursen, & van Dijk, 2017; Shaban, 2024). It reflects structural inequalities shaped by socioeconomic status, geography, education, and institutional capacity.

In rural contexts, digital exclusion is closely linked to longstanding patterns of marginalisation. Limited infrastructure, lower income levels, and

constrained access to education interact to restrict meaningful digital participation (Niyitunga, 2024). Within governance systems, digital exclusion manifests in reduced awareness of online public services, difficulties in navigating digital platforms, and limited ability to benefit from digitally mediated interactions with the state.

4.2 Concept of E-Government

E-government refers to the application of information and communication technologies by public institutions to deliver services, provide information, and facilitate interaction between government and citizens (Oyedokun, Adeolu-Akande, & Oyedokun, 2023). It encompasses a wide range of digital activities, including online service delivery, electronic records management, and digital communication channels.

E-government is widely promoted as a mechanism for enhancing efficiency, transparency, and accessibility in public administration (United Nations Development Programme, 2022). However, access to e-government is unevenly distributed. Where digital exclusion persists, particularly in rural areas, the availability of digital platforms does not automatically translate into effective access or utilisation. As a result, e-government initiatives may inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities if contextual barriers are not adequately addressed (Omweri, 2024).

4.3 The Multidimensional Digital Divide

The concept of the digital divide provides a critical lens for understanding digital exclusion. Rather than a single gap, the digital divide is increasingly understood as operating at multiple levels. The first-level digital divide concerns disparities in physical access to digital infrastructure and devices. The second-level digital divide relates to differences in digital skills and competencies. The third-level digital divide focuses on unequal outcomes, referring to the extent to which digital engagement produces social, economic, or civic benefits (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014; Scheerder et al., 2017).

In rural Nigeria, these levels of the divide are mutually reinforcing. Inadequate infrastructure limits access, low digital literacy constrains effective use, and institutional weaknesses restrict the translation of digital engagement into meaningful governance outcomes (Okunola, Rowley, & Johnson, 2017; Adeleke, 2021). Consequently, rural residents often remain excluded from the benefits of digital governance despite the expansion of e-government initiatives.

5. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), originally developed by Davis (1989), which provides a robust framework for explaining individuals' engagement with information systems. The model posits that technology adoption is primarily influenced by users' perceptions of a system's usefulness and ease of use. TAM has been widely

applied in studies of e-government adoption and digital public service delivery, particularly in developing-country contexts where access constraints shape user behaviour.

In the context of rural Nigeria, the relevance of TAM lies in its capacity to explain how structural and contextual barriers influence engagement with e-government platforms. Scholars posit that infrastructural deficits, high costs of digital access, limited digital skills, and institutional weaknesses shape how rural residents experience and interact with digital government systems (Okunola, Rowley, & Johnson, 2017; Abdulrazaq, 2024). These factors affect the extent to which e-government platforms are perceived as accessible and worthwhile avenues for engaging with public services.

Recent scholarship has further extended the applicability of TAM to e-government in Nigeria by highlighting the importance of trust and institutional reliability in shaping citizens' engagement with digital platforms. AbdulKareem and Oladimeji (2024) demonstrate that digital literacy and trust in government systems significantly influence citizens' interaction with e-government services. In rural settings, where institutional presence is often weak, concerns about system reliability and responsiveness can discourage engagement with digital platforms even where access exists.

Within this study, TAM is employed as an explanatory lens rather than a predictive model.

The model supports the interpretation of how the multidimensional barriers identified in the literature, namely, infrastructural, economic, human-capital, and institutional factors, shape engagement with e-government services among rural households. By situating technology use within broader structural and institutional contexts, TAM provides a coherent framework for understanding why digital governance initiatives may fail to achieve inclusiveness in rural Nigeria, despite their potential to enhance public service delivery and accountability.

6. Empirical Review

Studies conducted in Nigeria consistently show that broadband penetration, network reliability, and electricity supply are disproportionately concentrated in urban centres, leaving rural communities underserved (Adeleke, 2021; Okunola, Rowley, & Johnson, 2017). These infrastructural deficiencies limit the frequency and reliability of rural residents' interaction with digital government platforms.

Evidence from broader sub-Saharan African contexts reinforces these findings. Cariolle (2020) and the International Telecommunication Union (2024) report persistent rural–urban disparities in internet access, with rural areas experiencing slower connectivity and lower service quality. Such infrastructural gaps reduce the feasibility of sustained engagement with e-government services and constrain the effectiveness of digital governance initiatives in rural settings.

Furthermore, economic barriers are also widely documented as significant impediments to e-government access and utilisation. Abdulrazaq (2024) finds that the high cost of internet data and digital devices constitutes a major obstacle for rural households in Nigeria. Similarly, Dodel (2024) demonstrates that device-related inequalities, particularly reliance on mobile-only access, restrict users' ability to complete complex e-government transactions.

Mwansa, Ngandu, and Mkwambi (2025) show that high data costs discourage sustained engagement with digital public services among rural communities in South Africa. These findings suggest that affordability constraints remain a critical determinant of digital exclusion, even in areas where basic connectivity exists.

Moreso, scholars highlight low levels of awareness of e-government services among rural residents. Adeleke (2021) and Paul and Eghe (2023) document widespread lack of knowledge regarding the existence and functionality of government digital platforms in rural Nigeria. Limited awareness reduces the likelihood of engagement with e-government services and weakens the reach of digital governance initiatives.

In addition to awareness gaps, digital skills deficits further constrain utilisation. Olanrewaju, Adebayo, Omotosho, and Olajide (2021) report that limited digital competence among rural populations restricts independent navigation of

online systems. These findings indicate that access alone is insufficient to ensure effective use of e-government platforms without adequate digital skills.

Institutional factors also feature prominently in empirical studies of e-government access. Research indicates that fragmented digital platforms, a lack of interoperability among government agencies, and poor user-centred design undermine citizens' engagement with digital public services (Oyedokun, Adeolu-Akande, & Oyedokun, 2023; Sukare & Abdullahi, 2025). Where platforms are perceived as complex or unreliable, rural users are less likely to utilise digital channels for interacting with government institutions.

AbdulKareem and Oladimeji (2024) provides empirical evidence that institutional reliability and digital competence significantly influence engagement with e-government services in Nigeria. These findings underscore the importance of institutional capacity and platform design in shaping rural households' interaction with digital governance systems.

The reviewed literature demonstrates that digital exclusion in rural Nigeria is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon shaped by interconnected infrastructural, economic, human-capital, and institutional factors. Studies consistently show that rural households face persistent barriers to accessing and utilising e-government services, despite the growing

adoption of digital platforms in public administration.

The literature indicates that inadequate digital infrastructure and high costs of connectivity constrain physical access to e-government services, while limited awareness and low digital literacy restrict effective utilisation even where access exists. In addition, institutional weaknesses, such as fragmented platform design, limited interoperability, and weak outreach mechanisms, further reduce rural engagement with digital public services. These factors collectively reinforce rural–urban disparities in access to governance resources and civic participation.

Overall, the literature underscores that awareness of e-government services and their utilisation by rural residents are shaped by the interaction of multiple access barriers rather than by single factors in isolation. This synthesis highlights the need for an integrated analytical approach that considers structural and institutional conditions alongside user capabilities. The gaps identified in existing studies justify the present study's systematic review design and provide a foundation for the methodological approach adopted in the subsequent sections.

7: Methodology

This study adopted a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) research design to examine digital exclusion and access to e-government services among rural households in Nigeria. The SLR



design is well-suited for consolidating fragmented empirical evidence, identifying recurring patterns, and generating comprehensive insights from existing studies. It is widely used in public administration and digital governance research where the objective is to synthesise findings across multiple contexts and methodologies.

To ensure methodological rigour and transparency, the review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. The PRISMA framework provides a structured process for identifying, screening, assessing, and synthesising relevant literature, thereby enhancing the replicability and credibility of the review process. Through this approach, the study systematically identified empirical studies and authoritative reports that addressed digital exclusion and e-government access in rural and comparable contexts.

The adoption of an SLR design was particularly appropriate given the absence of extensive, standardised primary data on rural e-government access across Nigeria. By relying on secondary empirical evidence, the study was able to draw on a broad range of methodological perspectives and regional experiences, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the barriers influencing awareness and utilisation of e-government services among rural households.

Data for this study were collected exclusively from secondary sources, consistent with the

systematic literature review design. The data collection process involved a comprehensive and structured search for relevant empirical studies and authoritative institutional reports that address digital exclusion and access to e-government services in rural contexts. This included journal articles and refereed conference papers that reported empirical findings on digital access, e-government adoption, and public service delivery in Nigeria and comparable developing contexts.

The literature search was conducted using recognised academic databases and repositories, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and African Journals Online (AJOL). Additional searches were undertaken in institutional repositories of Nigerian universities to capture context-specific studies. The use of multiple databases enhanced the comprehensiveness of the search and reduced the risk of omitting relevant studies.

A predefined search strategy guided the retrieval process. Keywords and Boolean operators were systematically applied to identify studies related to digital exclusion, digital divide, e-government, rural households, and access barriers. The search process was iterative, allowing for refinement of terms to ensure relevance and coverage. Only studies that met the inclusion criteria and were published within the specified timeframe were retained for further screening and synthesis.

Data analysis in this study was conducted using thematic synthesis, a systematic approach suitable

for integrating findings from qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies within a systematic literature review. The analytical procedure followed the framework proposed by Thomas and Harden (2008), which enables the generation of higher-order themes from diverse empirical evidence.

The analysis proceeded through three interrelated stages. First, line-by-line coding was conducted on the findings sections of the selected studies to identify statements relevant to digital exclusion, awareness of e-government services, and utilisation of digital public services. Codes were assigned to recurring issues such as infrastructure limitations, affordability constraints, digital skills deficits, and institutional challenges.

Second, the initial codes were organised into descriptive themes based on conceptual similarity. This stage resulted in the identification of broad thematic categories reflecting infrastructural, economic, human-capital, and institutional barriers to e-government access. These descriptive themes provided a structured summary of empirical patterns across the reviewed studies.

Third, analytical themes were developed by interpreting the relationships among the descriptive themes in light of the study's research questions. This stage moved beyond description to explain how multiple access barriers interact to influence awareness and utilisation of e-government services among rural households. The

thematic synthesis thus enabled systematic comparison, integration, and interpretation of empirical evidence across the selected studies.

With respect to awareness of e-government services, the reviewed studies consistently indicate that rural households exhibit low levels of awareness of available digital public services. Empirical evidence shows that limited institutional outreach, low digital literacy, and weak communication channels contribute to poor awareness of e-government platforms in rural Nigeria (Adeleke, 2021; Paul & Eghe, 2023). The recurrence of these findings across multiple studies and contexts confirms that awareness remains a fundamental challenge to inclusive digital governance.

Regarding utilisation of e-government services, the empirical synthesis demonstrates that digital access challenges significantly influence rural residents' engagement with digital public services. Infrastructural deficits, high costs of connectivity, limited digital skills, and institutional weaknesses are repeatedly identified as barriers that constrain utilisation, even in contexts where awareness exists (Okunola, Rowley, & Johnson, 2017; Abdulrazaq, 2024; Oyedokun, Adeolu-Akande, & Oyedokun, 2023). The convergence of evidence across diverse methodologies supports the conclusion that utilisation is shaped by the interaction of multiple access barriers rather than by isolated factors.

Overall, the consistency of empirical findings across the reviewed studies provides a robust evidentiary basis for the study's conclusions. The thematic convergence observed in the literature verifies that persistent digital exclusion undermines both awareness and utilisation of e-government services among rural households, thereby limiting the inclusiveness and effectiveness of digital governance initiatives in Nigeria.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper examined digital exclusion and access to e-government services among rural households in Nigeria through a systematic synthesis of existing empirical evidence. Drawing on 26 peer-reviewed studies and authoritative reports, the study demonstrates that digital exclusion in rural Nigeria is not a single-dimensional problem but a complex interaction of infrastructural, economic, human-capital, and institutional barriers.

The findings show that limited awareness of e-government services among rural households is closely linked to weak institutional outreach, low levels of digital literacy, and constrained access to enabling digital infrastructure. In addition, the utilisation of e-government services is significantly shaped by persistent access challenges, including unreliable connectivity, high costs of data and devices, limited digital skills, and fragmented institutional systems. These barriers collectively restrict rural

participation in digitally mediated governance processes.

Anchored on the Technology Acceptance Model as an explanatory lens, the study underscores how structural and contextual conditions influence engagement with digital public services. The evidence indicates that without deliberate efforts to address rural-specific barriers, e-government initiatives risk reinforcing existing inequalities rather than promoting inclusive governance.

Overall, the study concludes that achieving effective, accountable, and inclusive digital governance in Nigeria requires policy approaches that explicitly recognise and address the realities of rural digital exclusion. By consolidating fragmented empirical evidence, the study provides a foundation for informed policy action and contributes to ongoing scholarly discourse on digital governance and public administration in developing contexts.

Based on the findings of this systematic literature review and in direct alignment with the two research questions, the study makes the following recommendations:

1. Government should strengthen Awareness and Digital Literacy among Rural Households. In a bid to improve awareness of e-government services, government institutions responsible for digital governance, government should prioritise targeted awareness campaigns and digital literacy initiatives in rural communities. Community-

based ICT centres, partnerships with local governments, civil society organisations, and traditional institutions can be leveraged to disseminate information about available e-government platforms and provide basic digital skills training. Improving awareness and digital competence is essential for enabling rural households to recognise, access, and engage with digital public services.

2. Reduce Digital Access Barriers to Enhance Utilisation of E-Government Services. Increasing utilisation of e-government services among rural residents, policymakers should address persistent access challenges by improving affordability, infrastructure, and platform usability. Measures such as subsidising rural broadband expansion, reducing the cost of data for essential government platforms, and simplifying platform design for low-end mobile devices can enhance access and sustained use. Addressing these barriers will support more equitable participation in digital governance and strengthen inclusive public service delivery.

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