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From Traditional Public Administration to Digital Governance: A Conceptual Framework for Public Sector Transformation in the Digital Era

Mobina Albouyeh

Department of Business Administration, Islamic Azad University, Semnan Branch, Semnan, Iran

Member of the board of directors, KOOBESH KAVIR SEMNAN (KKS)

Email: Mobina.albouye05@gmail.com

Phone: +98 935 425 7876

Abstract

Purpose

The evolution of public administration has been shaped by continuous attempts to respond to increasing social complexity, technological advancement and changing expectations of citizens. Traditional bureaucratic models provided governments with stability, predictability and administrative control; however, their limitations in flexibility, innovation and citizen orientation have encouraged the emergence of new managerial paradigms. This conceptual paper aims to examine the transformation of public administration from bureaucratic governance toward digital governance by integrating perspectives from traditional public administration, New Public Management (NPM), public value management and digital transformation literature.

Design/methodology/approach

This study employs a conceptual review methodology by critically analysing influential theories and previous research related to administrative evolution and digital transformation. Drawing upon the foundational works of Weber (1947), Simon (1997), Hood (1991), Osborne and Gaebler (1992), Moore (1995), Janowski (2015), Vial (2019), Mergel et al. (2019), and Meijer and Bolívar (2016), the paper develops an integrated framework explaining how public organisations transition from hierarchical bureaucratic structures toward digitally enabled governance ecosystems.

Findings

The study argues that digital transformation in the public sector should not be perceived merely as the adoption of technological tools but as a comprehensive institutional, organisational and cultural transformation. Effective digital governance requires the integration of technological capabilities, managerial innovation, citizen participation, data-driven decision-making and public value creation.

Originality/value

This paper contributes to public management literature by connecting historical administrative paradigms with contemporary digital governance perspectives. The proposed framework provides a holistic understanding of how governments can achieve digital transformation while preserving accountability, transparency and legitimacy.

Keywords:

Public administration; Digital transformation; Digital governance; Public value; Smart governance; New Public Management; Public sector innovation

1. Introduction

Public administration has experienced profound transformations throughout modern history. The relationship between governments and citizens has continuously evolved due to political, economic, social and technological changes. Governments that once primarily focused on maintaining order, enforcing regulations and delivering standardized services are now expected to become more responsive, innovative, transparent and citizen-centred.

The classical model of public administration was strongly influenced by Weberian bureaucracy. Weber (1947) conceptualised bureaucracy as the most rational organisational form for modern states, emphasising formal rules, hierarchical authority, professional competence and administrative neutrality. This model enabled governments to achieve consistency, stability and predictability in public service delivery. For decades, bureaucratic administration represented the dominant paradigm of government management worldwide.

However, increasing societal complexity and growing demands for efficient public services gradually exposed the limitations of traditional bureaucratic systems. Rigid structures, excessive procedural requirements, slow decision-making processes and limited innovation capacity became significant challenges for public organisations. Simon (1997) highlighted that administrative decisions are not purely based on rational calculations but are influenced by limited information, cognitive constraints and organisational contexts. This perspective challenged the assumption that bureaucratic systems could always generate optimal administrative outcomes.

During the late twentieth century, governments began searching for alternative approaches to improve public sector performance. This movement resulted in the emergence of New Public Management (NPM). Hood (1991) identified NPM as a managerial reform movement that introduced private-sector principles into public administration, including performance measurement, managerial autonomy, competition and efficiency orientation.

Osborne and Gaebler (1992) further developed this perspective through the concept of entrepreneurial government. They argued that governments should move beyond traditional command-and-control mechanisms and adopt more flexible, innovative and outcome-oriented approaches. According to this perspective, public organisations should act as facilitators rather than merely providers of services.

Despite significant contributions, NPM also received criticism. Scholars argued that excessive emphasis on efficiency, competition and market mechanisms could weaken democratic accountability and ignore broader social objectives. Public organisations are fundamentally different from private organisations because their success cannot be measured solely through economic performance. Governments must also create social legitimacy, trust and collective value.

In response to these concerns, Moore (1995) introduced the concept of public value management. Public value theory suggests that the ultimate purpose of public organisations is not simply operational efficiency

but the creation of meaningful value for society. This perspective shifted attention from internal administrative processes toward citizen outcomes, democratic engagement and societal benefits.

In recent years, digital transformation has emerged as a new stage in the evolution of public administration. Advances in information technology, artificial intelligence, big data analytics, cloud computing and digital platforms have fundamentally changed how governments operate and interact with citizens. However, digital transformation represents a deeper phenomenon than technological modernisation.

Vial (2019) defines digital transformation as a process through which organisations respond to technological changes by modifying their structures, processes and value creation mechanisms. Similarly, Mergel et al. (2019) emphasise that digital transformation in government requires organisational change, cultural adaptation and new institutional capabilities.

The transition from electronic government (e-government) toward digital governance demonstrates this evolution. Janowski (2015) argues that digital government has progressed through different stages, moving from technology adoption and service digitisation toward contextualised and intelligent governance approaches. In this new environment, governments increasingly rely on data, collaboration networks and citizen participation.

Furthermore, smart governance literature highlights the importance of integrating digital technologies with participatory and collaborative approaches. Meijer and Bolívar (2016) argue that smart governance is not simply about implementing smart technologies but about creating new forms of interaction among governments, citizens and stakeholders.

Although previous studies have examined digital transformation, public sector innovation and smart governance separately, limited research has explored how different administrative paradigms collectively contribute to the development of digital governance. Understanding this evolutionary relationship is essential because digital transformation cannot succeed without considering historical administrative structures, managerial philosophies and institutional conditions.

Therefore, this paper addresses the following research question:

How can public organisations integrate traditional administrative principles, managerial reforms and digital capabilities to achieve effective digital governance?

To answer this question, this study develops a conceptual framework explaining the transformation pathway from traditional public administration toward digital governance.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Evolution of Traditional Public Administration: From Bureaucracy to Administrative Rationality

The foundation of modern public administration is deeply connected with the bureaucratic theory developed by Weber (1947). Weber viewed bureaucracy as a rational organisational structure capable of achieving efficiency through clearly defined responsibilities, formal procedures and hierarchical authority. In his perspective, modern societies required administrative systems that could replace arbitrary decision-making with predictable and rule-based processes.

The Weberian model established several fundamental principles that continue to influence public organisations today, including division of labour, professional expertise, impersonal decision-making and legal authority. These principles enabled governments to manage increasingly complex societies by creating organisational stability and administrative consistency.

However, although bureaucracy provided significant advantages in terms of reliability and control, critics have highlighted its limitations. Excessive formalisation, rigid procedures and hierarchical structures may reduce organisational flexibility and limit innovation. In rapidly changing environments, public organisations must respond quickly to emerging challenges, while bureaucratic systems often struggle with adaptability.

The increasing complexity of public problems, often described as “wicked problems”, has demonstrated that traditional administrative mechanisms alone are insufficient. Issues such as climate change, public health crises, digital inequality and economic uncertainty require collaborative, adaptive and technology-supported governance approaches.

Therefore, the evolution of public administration should not be interpreted as the replacement of bureaucracy but rather as a transformation in which traditional administrative values are integrated with new managerial and technological capabilities.

2.2 Administrative Behaviour and Decision-Making in Public Organisations

While Weber focused primarily on organisational structures, Simon (1997) provided a different perspective by examining decision-making processes within administrative organisations. Simon challenged the assumption of complete rationality by introducing the concept of bounded rationality.

According to Simon, administrators operate under conditions of incomplete information, limited cognitive capacity and environmental uncertainty. Therefore, decision-makers often seek satisfactory solutions rather than perfectly optimal solutions.

This perspective has important implications for contemporary digital governance. Modern governments generate enormous amounts of data through digital platforms, sensors and information systems. However,

access to data alone does not guarantee better decisions. Public organisations require analytical capabilities, institutional learning mechanisms and managerial competencies to transform data into meaningful knowledge.

Digital transformation therefore requires not only technological infrastructure but also improved decision-making capabilities. Artificial intelligence, predictive analytics and digital platforms can support public managers, but human judgement and institutional knowledge remain essential components of effective governance.

Consequently, Simon's theory provides an important foundation for understanding why digital transformation should be considered an organisational capability rather than merely a technological investment.

2.3 New Public Management: Efficiency, Performance and Entrepreneurial Government

During the 1980s and 1990s, many governments introduced reforms inspired by New Public Management (NPM). Hood (1991) identified NPM as a major transformation in public administration that aimed to improve efficiency by introducing managerial principles from the private sector.

The main characteristics of NPM include:

- * emphasis on performance measurement;
- * managerial autonomy;
- * output-based evaluation;
- * competition and market mechanisms;
- *customer-oriented service delivery.

NPM represented a significant shift from traditional bureaucratic administration because it focused on results rather than procedures. Instead of asking whether organisations followed correct administrative processes, NPM encouraged governments to evaluate whether public services achieved desired outcomes.

Osborne and Gaebler (1992) expanded this perspective through their influential concept of "reinventing government". They argued that governments should become more innovative, entrepreneurial and flexible. Their approach suggested that public organisations should focus on steering rather than rowing, meaning governments should create frameworks and partnerships rather than directly perform every activity.

The principles of NPM created important foundations for later digital transformation initiatives. Performance measurement systems, process optimisation and customer orientation became essential elements of digital government development.

However, NPM also faced criticism. Some scholars argued that applying private-sector logic to public organisations may ignore important differences between public and private value creation. Governments are not only service providers but also institutions responsible for social justice, democratic accountability and public trust.

This limitation created the need for a broader theoretical approach that could integrate efficiency with social outcomes.

2.4 Public Value Management: Moving Beyond Efficiency Toward Social Outcomes

Moore (1995) introduced the concept of public value as an alternative perspective for understanding public sector success. Unlike traditional approaches that emphasised administrative efficiency or market-based performance, public value theory focuses on whether government actions generate meaningful benefits for society.

Public value management suggests that successful public organisations must balance three dimensions:

1. Creating valuable outcomes for citizens
2. Maintaining institutional legitimacy and political support
3. Developing organisational capabilities to deliver services effectively

This perspective is particularly relevant in the digital era. Digital transformation initiatives should not be evaluated solely based on technological implementation, system adoption or cost reduction. Instead, their success should be measured through broader outcomes such as improved citizen experience, transparency, accessibility and trust.

For example, an online government service may technically function effectively, but if citizens cannot access it easily or do not trust digital systems, the initiative fails to create public value.

Therefore, public value management provides a critical bridge between administrative reform and digital governance by emphasising that technology must ultimately serve societal objectives.

2.5 Digital Transformation as a New Paradigm in Public Administration

The emergence of digital technologies has introduced a new phase in public sector evolution. Unlike previous reforms that mainly focused on organisational structures or managerial practices, digital transformation affects the fundamental mechanisms through which governments create and deliver value.

Vial (2019) conceptualises digital transformation as a process involving significant organisational changes triggered by digital technologies. These changes influence organisational strategies, processes, structures and relationships with stakeholders.

In public organisations, digital transformation includes:

- * redesigning administrative processes;
- * developing digital service ecosystems;
- * using data-driven decision-making;
- * increasing citizen participation;
- * improving inter-organisational collaboration.

Mergel et al. (2019) argue that government digital transformation differs from simple digitisation. Digitisation refers to converting analogue information into digital formats, whereas digital transformation involves broader changes in organisational logic and institutional practices.

For example, transforming a paper-based ap

plication form into an online PDF represents digitisation. However, creating an integrated digital platform where citizens can access personalised services, provide feedback and interact with multiple government agencies represents digital transformation.

This distinction is essential because many public organisations mistakenly consider technology implementation as transformation while maintaining outdated structures and processes.

2.6 From E-Government to Digital Governance

Janowski (2015) explains that digital government has evolved through several stages. Early e-government initiatives primarily focused on providing online access to existing services. The next stage involved transformation, where governments redesigned processes through technology. The current stage emphasises contextualisation, where digital systems are adapted to specific social, institutional and environmental conditions.

Digital governance represents a broader concept than e-government because it includes collaboration among governments, citizens, businesses and civil society organisations.

Unlike traditional government models characterised by vertical authority, digital governance relies increasingly on:

- * networks;
- * data sharing;
- * citizen participation;
- * collaborative problem-solving;
- * intelligent decision-support systems.

This transformation reflects a movement from government as a provider toward governance as a collaborative ecosystem.

Mechanis

3. Smart Governance and Digital Public Value Creation

3.1 The Emergence of Smart Governance

The evolution of digital government has gradually shifted the focus of public administration from technology-oriented service delivery toward a broader governance perspective. While early e-government initiatives primarily focused on improving administrative efficiency through information systems, contemporary approaches emphasise collaboration, participation and value creation.

Within this context, the concept of smart governance has emerged as an advanced form of public sector management that integrates digital capabilities with collaborative governance mechanisms. Meijer and Bolívar (2016) argue that smart governance should not be understood merely as the application of advanced technologies but as the development of new relationships among governments, citizens, communities and private-sector actors.

Smart governance represents a transition from government-centric models toward ecosystem-based governance. In traditional administrative systems, governments were considered the primary actors responsible for designing policies and delivering services. However, digital technologies have enabled new forms of interaction in which citizens, organisations and social networks actively participate in solving public problems.

The main characteristics of smart governance include:

- * Data-driven decision-making: using digital information and analytics to improve policy decisions;
- * Citizen participation: enabling citizens to contribute to public service design and evaluation;
- * Institutional collaboration: connecting different government agencies and external stakeholders;
- * Transparency and accountability: increasing openness through digital platforms;
- * Adaptive capacity: allowing governments to respond rapidly to changing conditions.

Therefore, smart governance should be viewed as an institutional transformation rather than simply a technological upgrade.

3.2 Digital Capabilities and Organisational Transformation

Successful digital transformation requires public organisations to develop specific capabilities that allow them to effectively utilise emerging technologies. Technology alone cannot generate meaningful transformation unless organisations possess the necessary strategic vision, leadership capacity and organisational culture.

Digital capability in public organisations includes several dimensions:

- Strategic Digital Vision

Government organisations need a clear understanding of why digital transformation is necessary and how technology contributes to public value creation. Without strategic alignment, digital initiatives often become isolated projects with limited organisational impact.

- Digital Leadership

Leadership plays a central role in overcoming resistance to technological change. Public managers must promote innovation, encourage organisational learning and create an environment where employees are willing to adopt new digital practices.

- Data Governance Capability

Data has become one of the most valuable resources in modern governance. However, effective use of data requires appropriate policies regarding data quality, security, privacy and ethical management.

- Organisational Agility

Traditional bureaucratic structures often struggle with rapid technological change. Digital governance requires more flexible organisational arrangements that encourage experimentation, innovation and continuous improvement.

These capabilities demonstrate that digital transformation is fundamentally a managerial and institutional challenge rather than a purely technological one.

3.3 Integrating Public Value and Digital Transformation

One of the central arguments of this paper is that digital transformation should be evaluated through the lens of public value creation. Technology adoption itself does not guarantee better governance outcomes.

A digital government initiative creates value only when it improves the relationship between citizens and public institutions. This value can appear through several

ms:

- Improved Accessibility

Digital platforms can reduce geographical and administrative barriers by allowing citizens to access government services anytime and anywhere.

- Enhanced Transparency

Open data platforms and digital communication channels can strengthen accountability by allowing citizens to monitor government activities.

- Increased Participation

Digital tools can create opportunities for citizens to participate in policy discussions, decision-making processes and service evaluation.

- Better Service Quality

Artificial intelligence, automation and data analytics can improve the speed, accuracy and personalisation of public services.

However, digital transformation may also create risks, including digital exclusion, privacy concerns and unequal access to technology. Therefore, governments must ensure that digital innovation contributes to inclusive public value rather than increasing social inequalities.

4. Conceptual Framework Development

Based on the reviewed literature, this study proposes an integrated framework explaining the evolution from traditional public administration toward digital governance.

The framework consists of five interconnected stages:

Stage 1: Bureaucratic Foundation

The first stage represents the Weberian administrative model, characterised by:

- * hierarchical structures;
- * formal rules;
- * administrative control;
- * professional bureaucracy.

This stage provides stability and legitimacy but may limit flexibility and innovation.

Stage 2: *Managerial* Reform

The second stage reflects New Public Management principles introduced by Hood (1991) and Osborne and Gaebler (1992).

Key characteristics include:

- * efficiency orientation;
- * performance management;
- * managerial autonomy;

- * customer-focused services.

This stage improves organisational performance but may insufficiently address broader social objectives.

Stage 3: Public Value Orientation

The third stage introduces Moore's (1995) public value perspective.

At this stage, governments move beyond efficiency and focus on:

- * citizen outcomes;
- * social benefits;
- * democratic legitimacy;
- * trust creation.

Public organisations become responsible not only for delivering services but also for creating meaningful societal value.

Stage 4: Digital Transformation Capability

The fourth stage represents the transition toward digitally enabled organisations.

Based on Vial (2019) and Mergel et al. (2019), this stage involves:

- * digital processes;
- * data-driven management;
- * technological innovation;
- * organisational redesign.

The focus shifts from implementing technology toward transforming organisational logic.

Stage 5: Smart Digital Governance

The final stage represents a mature governance model combining technology, participation and public value.

This stage includes:

- * intelligent decision-making;
- * collaborative networks;
- * citizen engagement;

* ecosystem-based governance.

The relationship between these stages can be represented as:

Traditional Public Administration



New Public Management



Public Value Management



Digital Transformation Capability



Smart Digital Governance

This framework suggests that digital governance does not replace previous administrative models completely. Instead, it integrates valuable elements from previous paradigms while overcoming their limitations.

5. Research Propositions

Based on the conceptual framework, several theoretical propositions are developed.

Proposition 1:

The transition from traditional public administration toward digital governance requires the integration of bureaucratic stability with organisational flexibility.

Although bureaucratic systems have been criticised for rigidity, elements such as accountability, professionalism and rule-based administration remain essential for legitimate digital governance.

Proposition 2:

New Public Management principles provide important foundations for digital transformation by promoting efficiency, performance measurement and innovation orientation.

Digital transformation initiatives are more successful in organisations where performance-oriented management practices already exist.

Proposition 3:

Public value orientation strengthens the relationship between digital transformation capabilities and citizen-centred governance outcomes.

Technology generates sustainable value only when aligned with societal needs and citizen expectations.

Proposition 4:

Digital capabilities positively influence the development of smart governance by enabling data-driven decision-making and collaborative public service delivery.

Organisations with stronger digital capabilities are more likely to develop innovative governance mechanisms.

Proposition 5:

Successful digital governance requires institutional, cultural and managerial transformation beyond technological adoption.

Without organisational change, digital technologies may simply reproduce existing inefficient processes in a digital format.

6. Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the public management and digital governance literature in several important ways.

First, this paper contributes to the understanding of administrative evolution by presenting digital governance as a continuation of previous public administration paradigms rather than as an isolated technological phenomenon. Previous research has often examined bureaucratic administration, New Public Management, public value management and digital transformation as separate theoretical streams. This study integrates these perspectives into a unified evolutionary framework.

The proposed framework demonstrates that contemporary digital governance is built upon accumulated administrative knowledge. Weberian bureaucracy contributes stability, accountability and institutional legitimacy; New Public Management contributes efficiency, performance orientation and managerial innovation; public value management contributes citizen-centred thinking and social legitimacy; and digital transformation provides technological capabilities that enable new governance mechanisms.

Second, this study extends digital transformation literature by emphasising the importance of institutional and managerial dimensions. Existing digital transformation studies frequently focus on technological adoption, digital platforms or information systems. However, this paper argues that technology represents only one component of transformation. Sustainable digital governance requires changes in organisational culture, leadership approaches, decision-making processes and institutional capabilities

This perspective is consistent with Vial (2019), who argues that digital transformation involves fundamental changes in organisational structures and value creation mechanisms. Similarly, Mergel et al. (2019) emphasise that government digital transformation requires organisational adaptation rather than simple technology implementation.

Third, this research contributes to public value theory by demonstrating the strategic role of digital technologies in creating public value. While Moore (1995) developed public value theory before the widespread emergence of digital technologies, the current digital era provides governments with new opportunities to create, measure and deliver public value.

Digital platforms, open data systems and artificial intelligence applications can enhance transparency, improve service accessibility and increase citizen participation. However, this paper highlights that digital innovation must remain aligned with democratic principles and social inclusion.

Fourth, this study advances smart governance literature by positioning smart governance as the outcome of administrative evolution rather than merely a technology-driven model. According to Meijer and Bolívar (2016), smart governance requires collaboration among multiple stakeholders. This paper expands this argument by suggesting that smart governance emerges when administrative capabilities, managerial reforms and digital competencies become integrated.

7. Managerial Implications

The conceptual framework developed in this study provides several practical implications for public managers, policymakers and government organisations.

7.1 Developing a Strategic Digital Transformation Vision

Public organisations should avoid approaching digital transformation as a collection of isolated technology projects. Instead, leaders should develop comprehensive digital strategies that connect technology investments with organisational goals and public value outcomes.

A successful digital transformation strategy should answer fundamental questions:

- * What public problems are we attempting to solve?
- * How can digital technologies improve citizens' experiences?
- * What organisational changes are required?
- * How can digital initiatives strengthen public trust?

Without a clear strategic vision, digital transformation efforts may result in expensive technological systems with limited societal impact.

7.2 Strengthening Digital Leadership

Capabilities

Leadership represents one of the most critical factors influencing digital transformation success. Public managers must move beyond traditional administrative roles and develop capabilities associated with innovation, collaboration and change management.

Digital leaders should:

- * encourage experimentation;
- * support organisational learning;
- * reduce resistance to change;
- * promote data-driven decision-making;
- * establish partnerships with external stakeholders.

The role of public managers is therefore shifting from administrators of procedures toward architects of digital ecosystems.

7.3 Balancing Efficiency and Public Value

One important implication of this research is that governments should avoid focusing exclusively on efficiency outcomes. Although reducing costs and improving productivity remain important, public organisations must also consider broader social consequences.

For example, implementing automated decision systems may increase administrative efficiency but create concerns regarding transparency, fairness and accountability.

Therefore, managers should evaluate digital initiatives according to multiple criteria:

- * efficiency;
- * accessibility;
- * fairness;
- * citizen satisfaction;
- * trust;
- * social impact.

This balanced approach ensures that digital transformation supports public value creation.

7.4 Building Data Governance Capabilities

Data has become a strategic resource for modern governments. However, effective data utilisation requires appropriate governance mechanisms.

Public organisations should develop:

- * data quality standards;
- * privacy protection mechanisms;
- * ethical guidelines;
- * inter-agency data-sharing frameworks;
- * analytical capabilities.

Poor data governance may undermine citizen trust and limit the effectiveness of digital initiatives.

7.5 Managing Digital Inclusion

Although digital technologies create significant opportunities, they may also increase inequalities among citizens who have different levels of technological access or digital skills.

Therefore, policymakers should consider digital inclusion as a fundamental component of digital governance.

Strategies may include:

- * improving digital literacy;
- * maintaining alternative service channels;
- * designing accessible digital platforms;
- * supporting vulnerable groups.

A digitally advanced government should ensure that technology reduces, rather than increases, social inequalities.

8. Conclusion

The transformation of public administration represents a continuous evolutionary process shaped by changing social expectations, managerial philosophies and technological developments. From Weberian bureaucracy to New Public Management, public value management and digital governance, each paradigm has contributed important elements to contemporary public sector management.

This paper argued that digital governance should not be viewed simply as the implementation of new technologies. Instead, it represents a comprehensive transformation involving organisational structures, administrative practices, leadership approaches and relationships between governments and citizens.

The proposed framework demonstrates that successful digital governance emerges through the integration of four fundamental dimensions:

1. Administrative legitimacy and stability derived from traditional bureaucracy;
2. Efficiency and innovation orientation developed through New Public Management;
3. Citizen-centred value creation introduced by public value management;
4. Technological and organisational capabilities enabled through digital transformation.

Therefore, the future of public administration does not depend on abandoning previous administrative models but on intelligently integrating their strengths with emerging digital capabilities.

Governments that successfully combine institutional stability, managerial innovation and technological intelligence will be better positioned to address complex societal challenges and deliver meaningful value to citizens.

9. Future Research Directions

Future studies can extend this conceptual framework through empirical investigation in different governmental contexts.

First, researchers may examine how institutional differences influence digital transformation outcomes across countries. Political systems, administrative traditions and cultural factors may significantly affect the adoption and effectiveness of digital governance.

Second, future research may investigate the role of artificial intelligence in public decision-making. While AI provides opportunities for improving efficiency and predictive capabilities, it also raises important questions regarding ethics, transparency and accountability.

Third, empirical studies could examine the relationship between digital leadership and public sector innovation. Understanding how leadership styles influence digital transformation success remains an important research opportunity.

Fourth, future studies may explore citizen perspectives regarding digital government services. Since public value depends heavily on citizen acceptance and trust, understanding user experiences is essential.

Finally, researchers may develop measurement frameworks for assessing digital governance maturity by integrating technological, organisational and societal indicators.

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