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DIGITAL SOCIAL WORK IN NIGERIA: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF ADOPTION, CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Digital social work is the use of information and communication technologies to deliver social services, support vulnerable populations and enhance professional practice. However, Nigeria is yet to systematically integrate these tools into mainstream practice despite high mobile phone penetration. This conceptual study, grounded in Diffusion of Innovations Theory and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology, synthesizes existing literature to assess adoption, challenges and future directions. Evidence shows Nigeria is in an early-adoption stage, with initiatives like UNICEF's Digital Villages programme (reaching over 80,000 children) demonstrating proof of concept. However, efforts remain fragmented and donor-dependent. Key barriers include poor infrastructure, low digital literacy, curriculum gaps in social work education, unreliable electricity, data privacy concerns and gender-disparities in device access. The digital divide risks excluding the most vulnerable. Realizing digital social work's potential requires deliberate intervention: developing a national policy framework, integrating digital competencies into social work curricula, investing in rural connectivity and establishing ethical standards. This paper contributes to emerging discourse on technology-mediated social work in the Global South.

Keywords: Digital Social Work, Social Work Practice, Technology Adoption, Nigeria, ICT in Social Services, Diffusion of Innovations

Introduction

Digital social work is a growing field of practice across the world. It involves the use of digital tools to deliver social services, including smartphones, computers, mobile applications and online platforms. Social workers use these technologies to counsel clients, manage cases, conduct assessments and monitor interventions. In developed countries, digital social work has become mainstream, with agencies using telehealth, online therapy and digital case management systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this shift globally. Lockdowns forced social workers to adopt remote service delivery and demonstrated that digital social work is not merely convenient but essential (Pink, Ferguson & Kelly, 2022). However, the adoption of digital social work is uneven globally. Developing countries lag behind due to structural and resource constraints, a disparity that has attracted increasing scholarly attention.

Nigeria presents a unique case for studying digital social work. As Africa's most populous nation, with over 200 million people and a young population characterised by high mobile phone usage, Nigeria possesses considerable technological potential. Yet social work practice in the country remains predominantly traditional. Most social workers operate in government ministries, non-governmental organisations and hospitals, with practice largely face-to-face through home visits, office consultations and community outreaches.

Some limited digital integration is evident. A few urban-based NGOs use social media for awareness campaigns and WhatsApp for staff communication. UNICEF's Digital Villages initiative has demonstrated that structured digital service delivery is feasible in Nigerian contexts, reaching over 80,000 children (UNICEF, 2025). In IDP camps in North-East Nigeria, digital tools have been used for humanitarian coordination and case management (PRIF, 2026). Omokhabi (2021) documented that Nigerian social workers already deploy digital tools in aspects of their work. However, systematic, scaled digital practice remains rare and no national policy or regulatory guidelines govern technology-mediated services (Okoye & Okpala, 2021).

The need for digital social work in Nigeria is urgent. Poverty affects over 40 per cent of the population. Gender-based violence remains pervasive. Over 11 million children are currently out of school (UNICEF, 2025). Internally displaced persons number in the millions due to insurgency and flooding. The social work workforce is wholly insufficient to meet these needs, with the ratio of social workers to the population being extremely low and many rural communities having no access to any form of social welfare service.

Digital social work offers a pathway to bridge this gap. It can extend the reach of social workers, reduce costs associated with travel, enable real-time data collection for better planning and provide anonymity for clients who fear stigma. For survivors of domestic violence, for instance, online counselling may be safer than physical office visits (Chibueze, Obi & Nwachukwu, 2023).

This conceptual paper aims to analyse the state of digital social work in Nigeria, explore the factors influencing adoption, identify barriers and opportunities and propose a theoretical framework for understanding digital social work in the Nigerian context. The paper draws from existing literature and synthesises findings from studies in technology adoption, social work education and ICT for development. The paper is structured into the following sections: statement of the problem, concept of digital social work, technology adoption in Nigerian social services, digital literacy and social work education, ethical and legal considerations, theoretical framework, discussion, conclusion and recommendations.

Statement of the Problem

Social work practice in Nigeria is confronted with a widening gap between the demand for services and the capacity to deliver them. The country's social welfare system is underfunded and understaffed, with approximately one social worker for every 100,000 Nigerians. In rural areas, this ratio is even worse, with many local government areas having no professional social worker at all. Vulnerable populations — including orphans, widows, persons with disabilities and survivors of abuse — often fall through the cracks of an overstretched system.

The traditional model of social work requires physical presence: workers must travel to communities and clients must travel to offices. This model is slow, expensive and inefficient in a country with poor road networks and ongoing security challenges. Meanwhile, mobile phone penetration in Nigeria exceeds 100 per cent, with over 150 million Nigerians having access to mobile devices and internet usage continues to grow, particularly among young people.

This creates a significant paradox. There is considerable technological readiness within the population, yet the social work profession has not leveraged this infrastructure to expand its reach. While some digital social work initiatives exist — such as UNICEF's Digital Villages reaching over 80,000 children and social workers' use of smartphones and social media for casework — these efforts remain fragmented, lack policy guidance and have not been systematically evaluated or scaled (Adebayo & Ogunleye, 2022; UNICEF, 2025). The problem, therefore, is not an absolute absence of technology but rather the failure to integrate technology into mainstream professional practice in a coherent, equitable and sustainable way.

A second dimension of the problem is the absence of a coherent policy and educational framework for digital social work. Nigerian universities offering social work degrees do not include digital practice in their curricula. Students graduate without training in online counselling, digital case management, or data protection principles. Regulatory bodies such as the Nigeria Social Workers Registration Board have not developed standards for technology-mediated practice, leaving practitioners who attempt to use digital tools without formal training or institutional support.

This exposes both workers and clients to risks. Data may be mishandled. Confidential communications may be intercepted. Clients may be excluded due to lack of digital access. Without deliberate policy intervention, digital social work in Nigeria will remain fragmented, unsafe and inequitable. This conceptual paper addresses this gap by synthesising existing knowledge and proposing a structured framework for understanding and advancing digital social work in Nigeria (Ezeh, Nwosu & Okafor, 2021).

The Concept of Digital Social Work

Digital social work is a broad concept encompassing all forms of social work practice that involve digital technologies. This includes direct service delivery through video conferencing, chat platforms and mobile applications, as well as indirect services such as digital record keeping, data analytics and online supervision. Importantly, digital social work is not a separate specialisation but an extension of traditional social work values and methods into the digital space. The core principles of social work — respect for human dignity, social justice and professional integrity — remain unchanged. However, the medium of interaction changes, requiring new competencies.

Social workers engaging in digital practice must understand how to build rapport without physical presence, manage boundaries when clients contact them outside office hours and protect client data in environments that may not be secure (Turner, 2023). These are not trivial adjustments; they represent significant expansions of professional skill sets that require deliberate training and institutional support.

The adoption of digital social work varies significantly across regions. In the United Kingdom, digital tools in children's services are widespread, with social workers using tablets and smartphones to complete assessments in the field. In Australia, telehealth services are integrated into mental health social work. In the United States, online therapy platforms have grown exponentially, supported by national policies, professional guidelines and insurance reimbursement models. These developments reflect not only technological capacity but sustained institutional commitment to digital transformation.

In contrast, digital social work in Africa remains largely underdeveloped at the systemic level. South Africa has made some progress. Kenyan social workers use mobile money to deliver cash transfers. Ugandan NGOs use SMS for health education. Nigeria's UNICEF Digital Villages initiative demonstrates that structured digital social service delivery is achievable, reaching over 80,000 children and their caregivers (UNICEF, 2025). However, these remain largely isolated or pilot-scale initiatives without a continental or national framework for digital social work practice. Despite Nigeria's economic size and technological potential, systematic integration of digital tools into mainstream social work has not kept pace (West & Heath, 2022).

Several factors explain the slow adoption. Infrastructure is a major barrier: internet connectivity is unreliable and expensive in many areas, electricity supply is erratic and many social workers lack access to institutional computers or software licences. Digital literacy presents another challenge, as both social workers and clients may lack the skills to use digital platforms effectively. Cultural factors also play a role: many Nigerians prefer face-to-face interaction, with trust built through physical presence and scepticism about the effectiveness of helping relationships conducted through screens.

These perceptions must be addressed through evidence and education. Digital social work is not a replacement for traditional methods. It is a complementary approach that can expand access and improve efficiency when implemented appropriately (Olusegun, Bamidele & Afolabi, 2023).

Technology Adoption in Nigerian Social Services

The adoption of technology in Nigerian social services has been slow and uneven. Government social welfare ministries still rely heavily on paper-based records, with case files stored in physical cabinets and information retrieval dependent on manual searching. This leads to delays, inefficiencies and an inability to aggregate or analyse data for planning purposes. Non-governmental organisations perform somewhat better: some use simple databases to track beneficiaries and a few have adopted mobile data collection tools such as KoboToolbox and ODK for monitoring and evaluation purposes (Adeleke & Salami, 2021).

However, these tools are used primarily for programme management, not for direct service delivery. Social workers rarely use video calling for counselling sessions. There are no publicly funded telehealth services for mental health. Online support groups remain uncommon. The use of social media for social work is largely informal, with workers using personal WhatsApp accounts to communicate with clients — an arrangement that raises serious ethical concerns about institutional oversight, secure record-keeping and professional boundary management (Adeleke & Salami, 2021).

There are, nonetheless, promising examples of innovation. One NGO in Lagos developed a mobile application for survivors of domestic violence, providing information on legal rights, referral pathways and a confidential chat function. A project in northern Nigeria uses interactive voice response systems to deliver maternal health information to caregivers. Social workers in Abuja have piloted a digital case management system for orphan care (Musa, Ibrahim & Yusuf,

2022). In North-East Nigeria, digital tools have been deployed for coordination and case tracking in IDP camps, representing an emergent form of digital social service practice (PRIF, 2026).

These examples demonstrate proof of concept — that digital social work can function in the Nigerian context. However, these initiatives remain small-scale and donor-dependent and there is no evidence that they have influenced national policy or practice standards. Sustainability is a persistent concern: when donor funding ends, digital tools often become defunct and the knowledge gained is lost as staff move on, software licences expire and servers are decommissioned (Okonkwo, Nwosu & Anozie, 2022).

Furthermore, equity dimensions of digital adoption require urgent attention. Research by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS, 2024) on digital cash and voucher assistance in North-East Nigeria found that access to technology-mediated humanitarian services is profoundly unequal: participants observed that 'those with big phones have the upper hand,' illustrating how digital service channels can inadvertently disadvantage the most vulnerable clients. These findings resonate with broader concerns about the digital divide in Nigerian social services and must inform any strategy for scaling digital social work (Omotoso & Adebayo, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a natural experiment in digital social work adoption. During lockdowns, many social workers were unable to conduct home visits and some organisations turned to phone calls and WhatsApp to maintain contact with clients. This was an emergency response rather than a planned transition: workers received no training, there were no protocols for remote service delivery and privacy was frequently compromised. Despite these shortcomings, the experience demonstrated that remote social work is possible and revealed the depth of the digital divide within Nigeria. The pandemic did not, however, lead to lasting systemic change. Once restrictions lifted, most organisations returned to face-to-face practice and the opportunity to institutionalise digital social work was largely missed (Uche, Okonkwo & Eze, 2022).

Digital Literacy and Social Work Education

Digital literacy is a foundational requirement for digital social work practice. For social workers, it goes beyond basic computer skills to encompass the ability to assess the credibility of online information, understand digital security and privacy protections and adapt communication styles for digital mediums. Research indicates that digital literacy among Nigerian social workers is generally low. Many practitioners trained before the widespread adoption of the internet and did not receive formal instruction on technology use during their professional education. Continuing professional development programmes rarely address digital skills (Okafor, Ugwu & Nnadi, 2023).

Younger graduates may be more familiar with social media and mobile applications, but familiarity with personal technology does not automatically translate into competence in professional digital practice. Moreover, Omokhabi (2021) found that while Nigerian social workers demonstrate high knowledge of the risks associated with digital technology use — suggesting an awareness of what is at stake — this knowledge has not been matched by structured training or institutional frameworks for safe practice. This gap between risk awareness and practice readiness is itself a significant finding that underscores the urgency of curriculum reform.

Social work education in Nigeria faces a critical curriculum gap. The benchmark minimum academic standards for social work degrees do not include courses on technology in social work. Students may take general computer studies courses, but these are not contextualised for social work practice and do not cover online counselling, digital ethics, or case management software. A recent systematic review by Olajide et al. (2026) on digital transformation in social

work training and service delivery in Nigeria confirmed that, while a body of scholarship exists, it remains limited compared to Global North contexts, with consistent calls for curricula reform remaining unaddressed. There are no specialised postgraduate programmes in digital social work in Nigeria and few academic staff have expertise in this area.

The implications of this educational gap are significant. Clients increasingly expect digital options: young people often prefer text-based communication and survivors of gender-based violence may find it safer to seek help online than to visit a physical office (Chibueze, Obi & Nwachukwu, 2023). Social workers who lack digital skills cannot meet these evolving needs and are also less able to participate in global professional conversations, much of which now occurs through digital platforms and online continuing education. There is also a gendered dimension: the APC Women's Rights Programme (2025) has documented how online gender-based violence and digital safety concerns disproportionately affect women's participation in digital spaces, an issue social workers must be equipped to address with clients and within their own practice.

There is also an equity dimension to the educational gap. By failing to prepare students for digital practice, educational institutions are perpetuating structural inequities, producing graduates equipped to serve only those who can physically reach an office. This directly contradicts the social work commitment to reaching the most marginalised (Agboola & Oyedeji, 2022; Bello & Mohammed, 2021).

Ethical and Legal Considerations

Digital social work raises complex ethical questions. Traditional ethical frameworks were developed for face-to-face practice, assuming physical co-presence, private office spaces and secure paper records. The digital environment disrupts these assumptions. Confidentiality becomes harder to guarantee: emails can be forwarded, screenshots can be taken, conversations conducted in public spaces can be overheard and cloud storage may be located in jurisdictions with different data protection laws. Informed consent is more complicated online, as clients may not fully understand how their data will be used or stored (Reamer, 2023).

Omokhabi (2021) found that Nigerian social workers have high awareness of the risks associated with digital technology use, indicating that the profession is not uninformed about these dangers. However, awareness has not been matched by institutional safeguards, professional standards, or ethical guidelines specific to digital practice. Social workers must currently navigate these challenges without formal guidance from regulatory bodies.

Nigeria has some relevant legal frameworks. The Nigeria Data Protection Regulation (NDPR), issued in 2019, establishes rules for the collection, storage and processing of personal data, requiring organisations to obtain consent, ensure data security and allow individuals to access their own information. However, awareness of the NDPR among social service organisations remains low, compliance is inconsistent and many small NGOs have neither data protection policies nor appointed data protection officers. The NDPR also does not address profession-specific issues such as the retention period for digital case records or the use of personal devices for professional purposes (Nwankwo, Ekwueme & Okeke, 2023).

A particularly important ethical dimension concerns digital safety for vulnerable populations. The APC Women's Rights Programme (2025) has documented how online gender-based violence and harassment create specific barriers to digital participation for women and girls, a concern that has direct relevance for social workers engaging with female clients in digital spaces or helping survivors of gender-based violence navigate online environments safely. Practitioners must be equipped to understand and address these dynamics.

Another significant concern is the digital divide as an ethical issue. If social service organisations shift toward digital channels without ensuring equitable access, clients without smartphones, data bundles, or reliable electricity will be further marginalised. Social workers have an ethical obligation to advocate for equitable access, to ensure digital social work supplements rather than replaces face-to-face services and to design interventions that accommodate low-tech environments. Without such safeguards, digital social work risks inadvertently deepening inequality (Omotoso & Adebayo, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

This conceptual paper is anchored on two complementary theoretical perspectives: the Diffusion of Innovations Theory and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT). Together, they provide a multi-level analytical framework for understanding digital social work adoption in Nigeria.

The Diffusion of Innovations Theory was developed by Everett Rogers (2003). It explains how, why and at what rate new ideas and technologies spread through social systems. According to Rogers, adoption is influenced by five key attributes of the innovation itself: relative advantage (whether the innovation is perceived as better than what it replaces); compatibility (alignment with existing values and needs); complexity (difficulty of use); trialability (capacity to experiment on a limited basis); and observability (visibility of results to others). Innovations that score favourably on these attributes are adopted more rapidly. The theory also identifies categories of adopters — innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards — and recognises the role of change agents in influencing adoption decisions.

Applying Diffusion of Innovations Theory to digital social work in Nigeria reveals several insights. Digital social work offers clear relative advantages — reduced travel time, service delivery in remote or insecure areas, faster documentation and real-time data analysis. However, compatibility may be low, given the cultural privileging of face-to-face interaction. Complexity is high for practitioners with limited digital literacy. Trialability is constrained by resource limitations. Observability is low: there are few visible success stories of scaled digital social work in Nigeria for potential adopters to observe. The theory further highlights the role of change agents — professional association leaders, university lecturers and policymakers — few of whom currently advocate actively for digital social work. Accelerating adoption requires strategies that address each of the five attributes and support early adopters to demonstrate visible practice models (Okoro, Nwachukwu & Ugwu, 2022).

The Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology was developed by Venkatesh et al. (2003), synthesising eight prominent technology acceptance models. It proposes four core determinants of technology acceptance: performance expectancy (the belief that using technology will improve job performance); effort expectancy (perceived ease of use); social influence (the degree to which important others believe one should use the technology); and facilitating conditions (the organisational and technical infrastructure supporting use). Moderating variables include age, gender, experience and voluntariness of use.

Applying UTAUT to the Nigerian context suggests that performance expectancy may be relatively high among social workers who recognise the limitations of traditional methods. However, effort expectancy may be low, as workers may perceive digital tools as difficult to learn. Social influence is mixed: younger colleagues may be supportive, while senior colleagues and supervisors may be sceptical. Facilitating conditions are generally poor, with agencies lacking hardware, software, technical support and reliable internet. The theory recommends targeted interventions: training to reduce effort expectancy; peer champions to create positive social

influence; infrastructure investment to improve facilitating conditions; and outcome documentation to strengthen performance expectancy. UTAUT also highlights the importance of tailoring interventions to different workforce segments, particularly given the likely variation by age and prior technology experience (Ogunleye, Adeyemi & Fasasi, 2023).

Together, the two theories provide a comprehensive multi-level framework. Diffusion of Innovations Theory explains the macro-level process of how digital social work spreads through the professional community over time, focusing on characteristics of the innovation and social system. UTAUT explains micro-level individual decisions to accept and use digital tools, focusing on practitioner perceptions and organisational context. Integrating these perspectives enables analysis across the levels of technology, individual, organisation and broader environment — all of which shape digital social work adoption in Nigeria.

Theoretical Propositions and Analytical Insights

This conceptual analysis yields several theoretical propositions about digital social work in Nigeria. These are presented not as empirically derived conclusions but as evidence-informed analytical insights, derived from the synthesis of existing literature and the application of the dual theoretical framework. Table 1 below summarises the evidence base and qualifications for each proposition.

Table 1: Summary of Theoretical Propositions, Supporting Evidence and Counter-evidence

Proposition	Supporting Evidence	Counter-evidence / Qualifications
1. Digital social work in Nigeria is in early-adoption stage, not pre-adoption	UNICEF Digital Villages reaching 80,000+ children; IDP camp digital coordination (PRIF, 2026); NGO mobile app for GBV survivors (Musa et al., 2022)	Initiatives remain donor-funded, fragmented and unscaled; no national policy framework (Okoye & Okpala, 2021)
2. Existing initiatives are not institutionalised or sustainable	Donor-dependency cycle observed across health and education ICT pilots (Okonkwo et al., 2022); no government funding for digital tools	Some NGOs show multi-year continuity (Musa et al., 2022)
3. The digital divide threatens equitable service delivery	IDS (2024) found 'those with big phones have the upper hand' in humanitarian digital payments; gender gap in smartphone ownership (Omotoso & Adebayo, 2021)	Mobile penetration exceeds 100%; fintech growth demonstrates broad potential (Adebayo & Ogunleye, 2022)
4. The social work workforce lacks readiness for digital practice	Okafor et al. (2023) document low digital literacy in Enugu State; Olajide et al. (2026) confirm limited digital training integration nationally	Omokhabi (2021) found social workers have high awareness of digital risks, suggesting latent capacity
5. An ethical and regulatory vacuum	No NSRWB digital practice standards; NDPR compliance low	NDPR (2019) provides baseline data protection;

exposes clients and workers to risk	among NGOs (Nwankwo et al., 2023); Omokhabi (2021) confirms risk awareness	National Health Act offers partial coverage
6. Significant structural opportunities exist for accelerated adoption	National Digital Economy Policy; vibrant fintech ecosystem; youth demographics; growing government interest in e-governance	Social welfare not yet prioritised in digital transformation agenda (Oyedele et al., 2021)

Proposition 1 holds that digital social work in Nigeria is at an early-adoption stage, not complete pre-adoption. Evidence from UNICEF's Digital Villages programme, IDP camp digital coordination in North-East Nigeria and NGO-developed mobile applications for domestic violence survivors (Musa et al., 2022; PRIF, 2026; UNICEF, 2025) demonstrates that digital social service delivery is occurring and has been for some years. However, these initiatives remain fragmented, donor-funded and unscaled; they have not been integrated into government systems or translated into national policy or practice standards. The distinction between early-adoption and pre-adoption is analytically important: it implies that the relevant challenge is not creating digital social work from nothing but rather scaling, institutionalising and regulating what already exists.

Proposition 2 concerns the sustainability challenge. Existing digital initiatives are almost exclusively project-based and donor-dependent, embedded in no sustainable institutional structures and rarely evaluated rigorously. This pattern has been observed across sectors in Nigeria, with health and education experiencing similar cycles of pilots that fail to scale. Breaking this cycle requires systemic reform — embedding digital social work within government ministries, regulatory frameworks and professional standards — rather than perpetuating project-based thinking (Okonkwo, Nwosu & Anozie, 2022).

Proposition 3 addresses the digital divide as a social justice concern. Nigeria's digital landscape is sharply stratified: Lagos possesses world-class internet infrastructure while some rural communities have no network coverage. Men are more likely to own smartphones than women. Young, educated, urban Nigerians are digitally connected; elderly, poor, rural Nigerians are not. IDS (2024) research on humanitarian digital payments in North-East Nigeria powerfully illustrates how these inequalities translate into unequal access to services. Digital social work must therefore be designed as appropriate technology — meeting people where they are, not where planners wish they were. This may mean prioritising SMS and voice calls over video conferencing and community-based digital access points over assumptions of individual device ownership (Idowu & Babalola, 2021).

Proposition 4 concerns workforce preparedness. The social work workforce is not equipped for digital practice and this is a systemic failure of education and continuing professional development rather than an individual failing. The systematic review by Olajide et al. (2026) confirms that digital training has not been integrated into Nigerian social work education in any meaningful way. Importantly, Omokhabi (2021) found that Nigerian social workers already demonstrate high awareness of digital risks, indicating latent capacity that structured training could activate. Regulatory bodies must incorporate digital competencies into licensing requirements and professional associations should create special interest groups in digital social work to signal its legitimacy and value.

Proposition 5 identifies an ethical and regulatory vacuum as a critical concern. In the absence of profession-specific digital practice standards, Nigerian social workers operate without guidance on fundamental questions: How should informed consent be obtained in online counselling? How should client identity be verified in digital interactions? What are the professional boundary standards when clients can message workers at any time? How long should digital case records be retained and how should they be securely destroyed? The NDPR provides a baseline, but profession-specific standards — developed through consultation with practitioners, educators, clients and legal experts — are urgently needed (Adebisi, Yusuf & Ogunyemi, 2022; Nwankwo, Ekwueme & Okeke, 2023).

Proposition 6 affirms the existence of significant opportunities. Nigeria's young, dynamic population, high mobile phone penetration, vibrant fintech ecosystem and growing government interest in digital transformation collectively create a favourable environment for advancing digital social work. The National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy provides an overarching framework within which social welfare advocates must make the case for inclusion. Evidence-based advocacy, coalition building and sustained engagement with policymakers at federal and state levels are required to translate this potential into practice (Oyedele, Alabi & Ogunbiyi, 2021).

Conclusion

This conceptual paper has examined digital social work in Nigeria, defining the concept, reviewing the current state of adoption, identifying barriers and opportunities and applying a dual theoretical framework to analyse adoption dynamics. Multiple barriers were identified, including infrastructure deficits, policy gaps, educational shortcomings, cultural factors and ethical uncertainties. Equally, significant opportunities exist through high mobile penetration, favourable youth demographics, existing proof-of-concept initiatives and growing government interest in digital transformation.

The central conclusion is that digital social work in Nigeria is at a critical juncture. Contrary to a view of complete non-adoption, evidence shows that digital social service delivery is already occurring in Nigeria — through UNICEF Digital Villages, IDP camp coordination and NGO-developed tools. What is absent is the institutional architecture to sustain, scale, equitably govern and professionally legitimise these efforts. The building blocks exist; what is missing is the coordinated will to assemble them. This requires leadership from government, professional bodies, educational institutions and practitioners themselves, combined with investment, policy development, curriculum reform and culture change.

Recommendations

1. Developing a national digital social work framework that provides policy coherence and professional standards; integrating digital competencies into social work curricula at all levels, informed by the systematic evidence base
2. investing in rural digital connectivity as a prerequisite for equitable service reach; establishing profession-specific ethical guidelines under the auspices of the Nigeria Social Workers Registration Board; and learning from existing initiatives to document what works and build a contextually grounded Nigerian evidence base.

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