A Critical Analysis of Artificial Intelligence and Service Delivery in South Africa: Exploring Opportunities and Obstacles

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ABSTRACT

The ever-growing use of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies has enormously transformed global public services. Even though these cutting-edge technologies have been applauded for their improved operational efficiency, streamlined processes, and enhanced productivity, they have been prone to issues, such as ethical concerns and regulatory frameworks, which usually hinder their full realization. The primary objective of this paper is to critically probe the nexus between AI and service delivery in South Africa. Underpinned by a constructivist philosophy, this paper employs a qualitative approach, utilizing the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) as the methodological choice. The findings reveal that, despite strides to revolutionize service delivery through AI-enabled technologies, South Africa still lags in realizing the full benefits AI offers. By implication, impediments such as infrastructural deficit, ethical issues (e.g., data privacy, security, and accountability), and the regulatory framework appear to be stumbling blocks to AI. This paper advocates for the urgent development and implementation of legislative and regulatory frameworks governing AI to thrive in the increasingly turbulent and erratic digital landscape. Policymakers, practitioners and decision-makers can find the impact of this paper fundamental to the formulation of AI policy and strategy. The paper contributes to academic discourse by developing a conceptual model derived from the findings.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, Service delivery, Public administration, South Africa, PRISMA

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI) has profoundly improved public services for citizens. AI tools, including machine learning, virtual assistants and natural language processing, among others, have not only leveraged innovative approaches and best practices to deliver services but also helped the public sector achieve strategic objectives (Tomazevic, Murko & Aristovnik, 2024). While AI has been commended for its ability to deliver public services effectively and efficiently and boost economic growth, particularly in developed countries, developing countries like South Africa seem to be lagging (Giwa & Ngepah, 2024). Further to this, it is argued that the well-known socio-economic challenges (inequality, poverty, and unemployment) have adversely affected the adoption of AI and other emerging technologies in the South African public sector (Baloyi, Rossouw & Meyer, 2025). Although South Africa has been keen to embrace AI-driven technologies by introducing an AI policy strategy, such as the "*South African National Artificial Intelligence Policy Framework*", aimed to tackle these cutting-edge technologies, its approval seems daunting. In other words, the policy is still in progress and has not yet been endorsed by parliament (Department of Communications and Digital Technologies, 2024).

Recently, though, a paradigm shift from traditional public administration (paper-based) to a digital landscape has become evident across most public sectors worldwide, driven by radical changes in business conditions that necessitate delivering services through modernized systems that utilize AI (Cloete, 2024; Henk & Henk, 2025). To this end, the application of AI by public sectors across the globe has been cherished for streamlined internal processes, intensified employee productivity and increased operational efficiency and effectiveness (Baloyi et

al., 2025). Globally, while countries are prone to extensively utilizing resources as a pathway to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is imperative to fast-track the adoption of AI technologies to improve citizens' and other stakeholders' access to online services. Additionally, since South Africa is not exempt from achieving the SDGs outlined in the country's National Development Plan (NDP), which is fast approaching, accelerating the uptake of AI is a central priority for responding to citizens' demands and achieving those SDGs. For instance, the South African public sector is currently beleaguered by increasing service delivery challenges, which mostly lead to vandalism of government property during violent protests by citizens (Baloyi, 2026). These practices not only exacerbate the existing state of affairs but also make it difficult for the South African government to realize its mandates and other long-term goals.

The application of AI in the South African public sector's internal operations (e.g., human resource management) to provide services to the citizens is in a nascent phase. Since the public sector's AI is in an early stage, it is crucial to investigate the opportunities and obstacles it presents for serving South African citizens. Furthermore, the draft of the above-mentioned AI Policy has recently been approved (on the 09th of April 2026) by the Minister of the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies in South Africa (Department of Communications and Digital Technologies, 2026). In essence, AI tools and mechanisms (e.g., the Home Affairs automated biometric identification system) have been introduced in the public sector without an approved National Policy (Molobi, 2024). Although research on AI and service delivery has been conducted in the South African public sector (see, for example, Lungu, 2024; Chipps, Sibindi, Cromhout & Bagula, 2025), a great deal was the absence of an endorsed AI National Policy aiming to govern the use of various AI technologies by diverse institutions in the public sector. Moreover, while AI is rapidly permeating public administration at a fast pace, investigating how the South African public sector copes with AI adoption to enhance service delivery is a non-trivial task. From this vantage point, this paper aims to critically explore the nexus between AI and service delivery in South Africa. To realize the aim of this study, the secondary objectives of this paper are to:

- To identify opportunities brought by AI applications in the public sector.
- To evaluate the obstacles hindering the successful adoption of AI in the South African public sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section offers a substantial body of literature on AI in the public sector. This paper begins with the theory that underpins the study: The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM).

Theoretical Perspective

This paper is underpinned by the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), initially developed by Fred Davis, primarily to guide research on information systems (IS) (Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw, 1989). The justification for embracing this theory is that it predicts individuals' preparedness to either adopt or reject new technologies (Musa, Fatmawati, Nuryakin & Suyanto, 2024). Although TAM is closely related to the acceptance of technologies, it provides a theoretical basis for understanding individuals' social actions and behavioral intentions when confronted with the adoption of ICT initiatives (Davis, Granić, & Marangunić, 2024). TAM is underpinned by two intertwined theoretical concepts, which were hypothesized and validated as key factors (measures) of user acceptance of ICT application: *perceived ease of use* and *perceived usefulness* (Davis et al., 1989). These critical dimensions can influence public servants' preferences, intentions and attitudes toward adopting the ICT systems of the PSOs. Perceived ease of use, according to Davis et al. (1989:26), is defined as "*the degree to which an individual believes that using a particular system would be free of physical and mental effort*". In contrast, perceived usefulness is "*the degree to which an individual believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance*" (Davis et al., 1989:26). These two theoretical concepts are central in determining whether individuals within the public sector accept or reject new technologies.

Artificial Intelligence in the Public Sector

According to Selten and Klievink (2024:2), AI is defined as "systems that display intelligent behavior by analyzing their environment and taking actions – with some degree of autonomy- to achieve specific goals". Disparate AI-driven technologies and tools have been prevalent in the public sector, including, but not limited

to, machine learning, robotics, facial recognition, automated algorithms, virtual assistants, natural language processing, and deep learning (Tomazevic et al., 2024). To this end, the burgeoning use of AI has profoundly revolutionized various areas of the public sector, including healthcare, education, rural development, and transport (Malope, 2025; Saal, Chetty, Ntshayintshayi, Moosa, & Masuku, 2025; Naidoo, 2024). Most importantly, the assimilation of AI into public administration processes has not only reduced costs associated with service delivery (e.g., geographic distance) but also increased the efficiency of accessing those public services (Baloyi et al., 2025). However, this may not be true, particularly in emerging economies like South Africa, due to contextual factors that may obstruct AI achievement.

Although AI-enabled technologies have been valued for their automated decision-making processes, especially in advanced economies, they have often been associated with complexities that hinder the complete implementation of these initiatives in developing countries worldwide (Naidoo, 2024). These complexities (or contextual factors) include insufficient proficiency in operating AI, limited funding for emerging digital technologies (including AI), a digital infrastructure deficit, and a paucity of legislative frameworks guiding AI (Osei, 2024; Shekgola & Modiba, 2025). While these contextual factors are pandemic and continuously experienced in most developing countries, particularly in Africa (Plantinga, 2024), they hinder the adoption of AI-enabled services. Aside from that, ethical concerns have been seen as impediments in environments where AI is prevalent. These include, but are not limited to, data privacy, security, bias, discrimination, fairness, public trust, accountability, and transparency (Shekgola & Modiba, 2025; Barodi & Lalaoui, 2025; Malope, 2025). Therefore, without addressing these concerns and challenges, AI in emerging countries will remain a nightmare, leading to failures in recognizing its potential.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

To achieve the paper's primary and secondary objectives, a rigorous, systematic literature review was conducted to enhance the inclusivity and transparency of the sources. The paper is grounded in the interpretivist worldview. It employs a qualitative approach, using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) as the methodological framework to investigate the link between AI and service delivery in South Africa. The application of the PRISMA technique for detecting, selecting, and scrutinizing sources has been recognized as a prominent method for gathering readily available data (Page et al., 2021). The advantages of PRISMA include: (1) it assists eliminating interviewer bias in selecting and analyzing data, therefore, leading to increased rigor, (2) since the technique depends on the secondary (readily available) data, it saves time and costs related to the collection of primary data in the field, and (3) the technique necessitates lesser attainment of ethical considerations (Sohrabi et al., 2021). The PRISMA procedure consists of four stages: "identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion" (Knobloch, Yoon & Vogt, 2011:92). These stages are indicated below.

Identification

The data (records) of this paper were extracted from the Web of Science (WoS) database. The search strings were limited to key terminologies such as "*artificial intelligence*", "*service delivery*", "*public administration*", "*public services*", "*public sector*", "*service delivery*", and "*South Africa*". Given the ongoing variation in business circumstances and the pervasive nature of trailblazing technologies (e.g., AI), the paper included studies spanning 2024-2025. This significantly assisted the researcher in incorporating the most recent studies to identify current trends in the body of knowledge on AI in the public sector.

Selection and Screening

After systematically identifying studies on the WoS scholarly database, the screening process commenced. Initially, the researcher meticulously scanned the abstracts to determine their appropriateness and relevance. After that, the full texts were screened to detect relevant themes and patterns. To prevent bias in source screening, two independent evaluators were assigned to enhance the reliability and validity of the studies. Any disagreements between the evaluators were resolved through a mutually agreed-upon compromise. The EndNote Reference Manager (Version 21) was utilized to handle all the sources. This helped identify duplicate records and, simultaneously, establish a consolidated data file.

Eligibility Criteria

After the detailed screening procedure, the researcher assessed the eligibility (inclusion and exclusion) criteria for the studies. Most importantly, only studies published in the public sector milieu were included to ascertain their relevance in this paper. Furthermore, only studies written in English were included in the systematic analysis, covering the period from 2024 to 2025. This helped identify current research trends. Additionally, irrelevant studies or non-abstract studies were excluded. Peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers and grey literature were appropriate for inclusion in the paper. To ensure data quality considerations, this paper examined studies published in prominent journals. Taking everything into account, 15 sources (i.e., 13 peer-reviewed journal articles, 1 conference paper, and 1 grey literature source) were included in the systematic analysis.

RESULTS

Figure 1 (PRISMA flow chart) illustrates the process that was followed in undertaking a systematic analysis. The search results from the two scholarly databases yielded 975 studies on AI in the public sector. Of the 975 studies, 704 were eliminated as irrelevant, leaving 271. Additionally, during the screening process, 176 sources were deleted, leaving 55 studies remaining. Additionally, as screening continued, 14 studies remained, leaving 41 excluded. Finally, the 17 sources (including 15 peer-reviewed journal articles, 1 conference paper, and 1 grey literature source) were deemed eligible for inclusion in the paper.

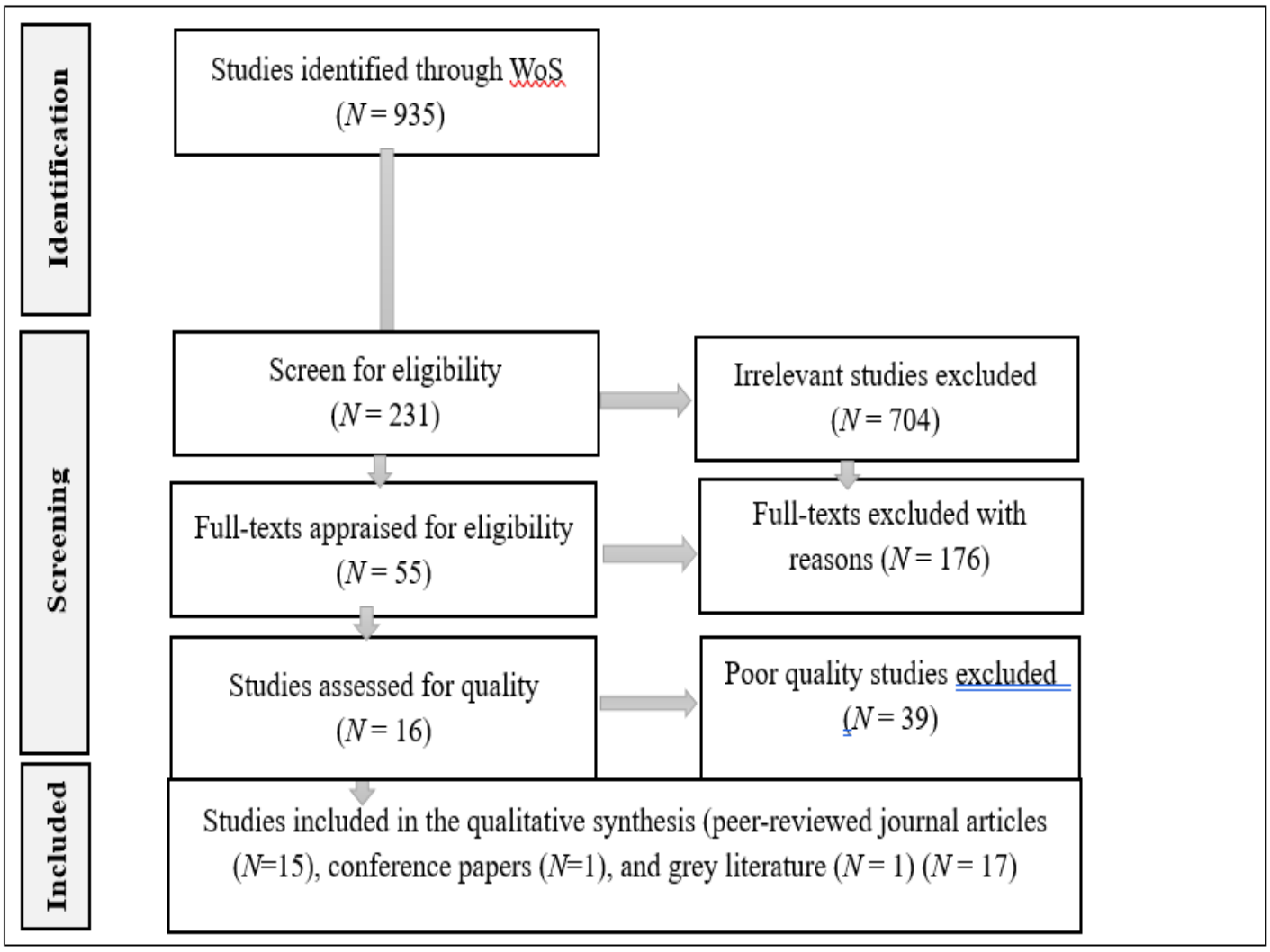

Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram (Page et al. 2021).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study aimed to critically explore the nexus between AI and service delivery in South Africa. This section underscores the findings identified from the PRISMA technique. The following themes were derived from academic discourse related to AI in the public sector.

Opportunities Brought by Artificial Intelligence

The adoption of AI in public-sector systems and processes has driven economic growth and improved efficiency. The sections below describe those opportunities AI offers in the public sector.

Economic Growth

It is argued that integrating AI algorithms (e.g., deep learning, natural language processing, virtual assistants, and facial recognition) into the public sector's internal processes and procedures has contributed to the country's economic growth (Maleka & Maidi, 2024). This aligns with Naidoo's (2024) view that incorporating AI-enabled tools into rural development programs and initiatives has successfully boosted the country's economic growth. More to this, it is reiterated that the technological environment, particularly through the application of AI-related technologies, is a key aspect of the country's investment and economic growth (Ioan-Franc & Gâf-Deac, 2024). Although various factors may contribute to the country's economy in the technological milieu, it is contended that AI-related technologies and their effective employment in the business setting have had a positive impact on economic growth, particularly in the most advanced economies worldwide (Choudhary, 2024).

Improved Efficiency and Cost Reduction

The burgeoning academic discourse suggests that implementing AI-driven technologies can enhance efficiency and service delivery to society (Henk & Henk, 2025; Shekgola & Modiba, 2025). Apart from that point, AI automation has enabled cost savings by reducing the need for extended travel (that is, transport costs) to government buildings (Baloyi et al., 2025). In other words, citizens can access basic services remotely (e.g., buying electricity and water), wherever they are. While AI has been applauded for its enhanced efficiency in modernizing government value chain activities and processes, it has also been effective in reallocating slack resources, thereby ensuring customized and automated service delivery to the community (Naidoo, 2024). Notwithstanding this, the entire process also serves to address the time and delays associated with the acquisition of services for public premises (e.g., departments and municipalities) by citizens.

Obstacles Hindering the Successful Adoption of AI

Apart from the opportunities outlined above, the effective use of AI-enabled technologies has been hindered by obstacles that impede their effective acceptance in the public sector. This study identified three fundamental obstacles using the PRISMA approach. These are discussed below.

Infrastructural Deficit

Without appropriate digital infrastructure, as is the case with other emerging technologies, it is impossible to adopt cutting-edge technologies like AI. In other words, AI depends heavily on the availability of and investment in sound digital infrastructure to succeed in the digital realm (Barodi & Lalaoui, 2025). Digital infrastructure encompasses, but is not limited to, reliable networks, internet connectivity, mobile broadband, AI platforms (including machine learning and deep learning), and user devices, among other determinants. These are the drivers for successful AI-related technology adoption not only in the public sector but also in any private institution aspiring to adopt those technologies. It is argued that a digital infrastructure deficit appears to be the main obstacle to the realization of AI initiatives in the public sector, particularly in emerging economies around the world (Baloyi et al., 2025). At the core of this obstacle, it is also critical to invest in cybersecurity infrastructure to address the ethical conundrums (e.g., data security, fairness and privacy concerns) faced in the public sector in South Africa (Henrico & Els, 2025).

Ethical Issues

Nowadays, ethical issues are rife in the technological environment and adversely affect individuals' lives. Although the public sector continues to adopt AI technologies to deliver seamless services to society, ethical issues such as data privacy, security, public trust, fairness and bias remain hurdles to the successful application of AI (Dagada, 2024; Baloyi et al., 2025). For example, emerging economies like South Africa are continually affected by cyberattacks, disrupting services across most public sector organizations, including the National Health Laboratory Service (NHLS) (Pillay, 2024), the City of Johannesburg, Transnet and the Department of Justice (Henrico & Els, 2025). These institutions were susceptible to ransomware attacks resulting from severe security breaches. This resonates with a South African study by Dagada (2024:1), which corroborates that "the pace of digital transformation also has some implications for cybersecurity" for the government and its citizens.

Lack of Regulatory Framework

Since AI is still in its preliminary stage in the South African public sector, the policy and legislative framework governing AI-related technologies appears to be lacking (Baloyi et al., 2025). Despite the progress made by the South African government in designing the AI policy, such as the "*South African National Artificial Intelligence Policy Framework*", the policy has now been endorsed by the Cabinet and approved by the Minister of the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies (Department of Communications and Digital Technologies, 2026). In contrast, it impedes the effective adoption of AI-powered technologies in the South African public sector. Moreover, given the growing need to integrate AI-driven technologies into value chain activities to render cost-effective services, the South African public sector must expedite AI-driven policy development to thrive in the digital era.

Towards the Development of an AI Conceptual Model

This paper proposes an integrated conceptual model to facilitate the adoption of AI in the South African public sector. The conceptual model presented is derived from the paper's findings. Although AI adoption cannot be regarded as a one-size-fits-all approach due to the varying contextual factors encountered by public sectors in emerging economies, the model serves as a guide to the efficient consideration of AI. All things considered, it assimilates AI-related technologies (tools) with critical success factors (such as digital infrastructure, ethics, and a legislative framework), and also considers indispensable opportunities to provide efficient public services to citizens. As already indicated, the integrated conceptual model highlights an interaction among AI tools, critical success factors (i.e., obstacles to the successful adoption of AI), and opportunities enabled by AI technologies. Figure 2 depicts the linkage between those.

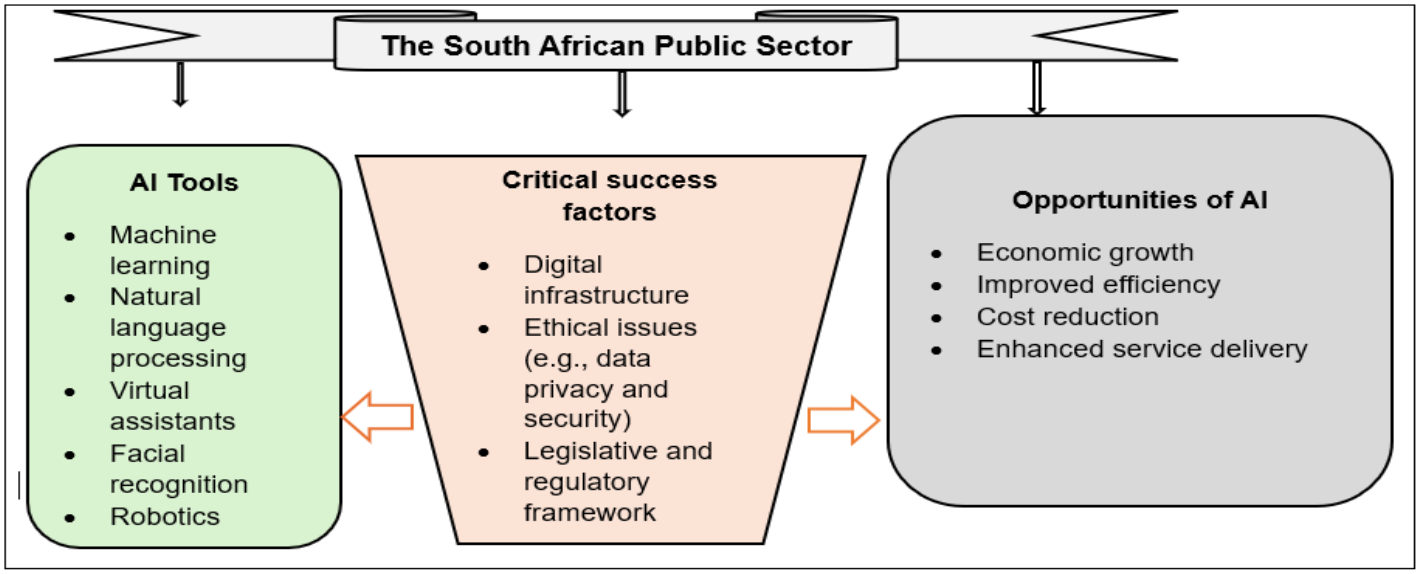

Figure 2: An integrated AI conceptual model

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The primary objective of this paper was to investigate the nexus between AI and service delivery in South Africa, with a focus on identifying opportunities and obstacles. Guided by the widely used TAM framework and the PRISMA methodology, the paper identified opportunities arising from AI applications, including economic growth, improved efficiency, and cost reduction. Aside from these opportunities, the paper examined the obstacles hindering the successful adoption of AI, including infrastructural deficits, ethical concerns, and a lack of a regulatory framework. To contribute to the policy-making process in the South African public sector, this paper develops an integrated conceptual model that highlights the key concepts to facilitate the rapid adoption of AI-enabled technology. This can help policymakers, decision-makers, and practitioners identify the most impactful constructs for improving policy development and implementation in the digital landscape. More to this, the paper contributes to the body of knowledge by providing a critical understanding of the opportunities and challenges of AI, culminating in the development of an integrated conceptual model that can serve as a blueprint for AI adoption in the South African public sector to enhance innovative ways of delivering services to the citizens.

It is recommended that the South African government ring-fence funds to address the current digital infrastructure deficit. It is also imperative to build a comprehensive cybersecurity infrastructure to respond to the constant cyberattacks occurring in public sector organizations, while promoting the ethical use of AI technologies. Additionally, a robust legislative framework governing AI is crucial in guiding the application of AI-driven technologies, including machine learning, natural language processing, robotics, virtual assistants, and facial recognition. It is believed that addressing these challenges can help streamline internal processes, thereby improving service delivery.

Future studies can employ quantitative methods to formulate and test hypotheses regarding the integrated conceptual model proposed in this paper. The approach can assist in generalizing the research findings by using a survey design to consider a large sample of respondents. Alternatively, future studies can utilize qualitative methodology to gather rich data from respondents. For instance, in-depth interviews, case studies, or focus groups can be used to gain insight into AI in the public sector. These can help address the limitation of relying solely on systematic literature reviews by emphasizing the secondary data available across diverse databases.

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