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From Data to Dignity: Rethinking Privacy and Consent in Nigeria's Digital Age

Amobi P. Chiamogu, PhD; & Uchechukwu P. Chiamogu

Department of Public Administration, Federal Polytechnic, Oko 423121, Anambra State, Nigeria.

Corresponding Author: amobi.chiamogu@federalpolyoko.edu.ng

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Abstract

In an era where data has become the new currency of power, Nigeria's rapid digital transformation presents both immense promise and profound ethical challenges. From financial technologies and e-governance systems to surveillance infrastructures and artificial intelligence applications, the expansion of digital ecosystems has far outpaced the ethical, legal, and institutional mechanisms designed to protect citizens' privacy. This paper interrogates this disjuncture by foregrounding the interactions between technological innovation, human rights, and the moral economy of data. The paper adopts a documentary and analytical research design to examine how weak data governance regimes, limited digital literacy, and the commodification of personal information have collectively undermined autonomy, consent, and public trust in Nigeria's digital space. Drawing on case evidence from both state and corporate actors, it reveals how opaque data practices and exploitative surveillance cultures threaten not only individual rights but also the moral legitimacy of digital governance. The study argues for a paradigm shift from a profit-driven data culture to a dignity-centered digital ecosystem grounded in accountability, transparency, and respect for cultural values. It concludes that embedding privacy, consent, and human dignity into the architecture of Nigeria's digital transformation is indispensable for achieving inclusive and ethical technological progress. By reframing data governance as a question of human dignity rather than mere compliance, Nigeria can lead the Global South in crafting a rights-based model of digital development.

Keywords: Digital Ethics, Informed Consent, Surveillance, Data Protection, Data Governance, Human Dignity, Kantian Ethics, Privacy Rights

Introduction

In the 21st century, data has emerged as the defining asset of social, economic, and political power. Across the globe, personal information has become a critical resource for decision-making, innovation, and governance. The Fourth Industrial Revolution, driven by artificial intelligence (AI), big data analytics, Internet of Things (IoT), and digital platforms, has profoundly transformed how individuals interact, transact, and are governed (Schwab, 2017; Zuboff, 2019; Chiamogu & Chiamogu, 2025). Yet, this digital acceleration has also precipitated a crisis of ethics and human dignity, especially in developing nations where digital infrastructures have evolved faster than the accompanying legal and ethical safeguards (Taddeo & Floridi, 2018; UNCTAD, 2022).

Nigeria stands at the center of this paradox. As Africa's largest digital economy: with over 122 million internet users and a rapidly expanding fintech, e-governance, and digital services ecosystem; Nigeria's data-driven transformation is undeniable (NCC, 2024; NITDA, 2023). From the integration of biometric data in national identification systems, voter registration, and mobile banking to the proliferation of surveillance technologies in security operations, data has become indispensable to public administration and private enterprise. However, the ethical foundations governing its collection, processing, and usage remain fragile, inconsistent, and often violated (Ajaykumar, 2023).

The *Nigeria Data Protection Regulation (NDPR)* of 2019 was intended as a watershed in safeguarding personal data and ensuring responsible digital practices. Nonetheless, its enforcement has been weak, fragmented, and poorly understood by both institutions and citizens (NITDA, 2020). Studies indicate that most Nigerians are unaware of their data rights, with many routinely surrendering sensitive information to public agencies and digital platforms without informed consent (Odusote, 2021; Akinroye & Lawal, 2025). This creates an environment where surveillance, data commodification, and cyber exploitation thrive; eroding trust and undermining the ethical foundations of Nigeria's digital transformation.

Extant literature underscores the global urgency of embedding human dignity at the center of data governance. Scholars such as Zuboff (2019) and Floridi (2016) warn against the rise of *surveillance capitalism*: a system that commodifies human experience for profit and control. Similarly, West (2019) and Tisné (2020) argue that the dominance of private data brokers and algorithmic decision-making threatens autonomy and social justice, particularly in low-regulation environments. In the Nigerian context, Afolabi (2024) highlight the deep ethical vacuum surrounding data collection and consent, pointing to systemic disregard for

privacy rights and the absence of strong institutional accountability.

Despite growing awareness, the existing body of research has largely focused on the technical or legal dimensions of data protection, with limited attention to its ethical, philosophical, and cultural underpinnings (Stahl, 2025). There is a critical need to rethink data governance not merely as a compliance issue but as a human dignity imperative rooted in the principles of autonomy, consent, and respect for personhood. Such a shift is especially necessary in Nigeria, where historical distrust in government institutions, low digital literacy, and weak policy enforcement exacerbate vulnerability to data misuse (UNDP, 2023).

This study, therefore, interrogates the intersection of technology, ethics, and human rights in Nigeria's digital age. It seeks to unravel how weak data governance regimes and exploitative data practices threaten human dignity and undermine public trust in digital systems. By adopting a documentary and analytical approach, the paper explores case evidence from Nigeria's public and private sectors to identify policy gaps, emerging risks, and pathways for ethical reform. It argues that meaningful digital transformation must be anchored on respect for privacy, informed consent, and cultural values of human dignity.

The rationale for this study lies in the imperative to reimagine Nigeria's digital evolution through a human-centered lens that prioritizes ethical accountability and inclusive progress. As the nation aspires to a knowledge-based economy, the central question is not just how data drives innovation, but how its governance safeguards the humanity of citizens. The issues canvassed in this paper thus revolve around: (1) the ethical implications of Nigeria's data revolution; (2) the inadequacies of existing data protection frameworks; (3) the commodification of personal information; and (4) the necessity of embedding dignity, consent, and cultural ethics into Nigeria's digital policy architecture.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to examine the ethical and human rights implications of data governance in Nigeria's digital age, with emphasis on privacy, consent, and human dignity. The specific objectives are to:

1. Evaluate the adequacy and ethical foundations of Nigeria's existing data protection frameworks in relation to global standards and human dignity principles.
2. Analyze how weak governance mechanisms, limited public awareness, and exploitative data practices undermine consent, autonomy, and trust in Nigeria's digital ecosystem.
3. Propose an ethical and culturally responsive framework for integrating privacy, consent, and human dignity into Nigeria's digital transformation agenda.

Review of Related Literature

Clarification of Key Concepts

Data and Digital Transformation

Data refers to raw facts, figures, and digital traces that, when processed and contextualized, become valuable information for decision-making (Floridi, 2016). In the contemporary era, data functions as the lifeblood of innovation, shaping governance, commerce, and daily life. The phenomenon known as digital transformation encapsulates the integration of data-driven technologies into all facets of society and economy (Schwab, 2017). According to UNCTAD (2022), developing countries like Nigeria are experiencing rapid digitalization in governance, education, and finance, yet the supporting ethical and legal frameworks lag significantly behind technological growth.

Privacy and Consent

Privacy denotes an individual's right to control access to personal information and to decide how it is collected, stored, or shared (Solove, 2021). It is both a moral and legal principle grounded in autonomy and human dignity. Consent, on the other hand, implies the informed and voluntary agreement of an individual before their personal data is processed or shared (Tisné, 2020). In the digital era, consent has become increasingly complex due to opaque terms of service, algorithmic decision-making, and asymmetrical power between data collectors and users (Zuboff, 2019; West, 2019). Scholars argue that consent should transcend formalistic checkbox agreements to embody transparency, comprehension, and respect for individual agency (Ju et al., 2026).

Human Dignity in the Digital Age

Human dignity, as a moral concept, represents the intrinsic worth and inviolable value of every human being (Waldron, 2012). In digital ethics, dignity translates to safeguarding individuals from being reduced to data points or commodities (Floridi, 2016; Zuboff, 2019). As technologies increasingly mediate identity, communication, and governance, ensuring that digital systems respect human dignity becomes an ethical and democratic imperative. For Nigeria, this implies embedding cultural values, transparency, and accountability into the architecture of data governance (Ologunebi & Taiwo, 2025).

Thematic Review

a) ***Adequacy and Ethical Foundations of Data Protection in Nigeria*:** The introduction of the *Nigeria Data Protection Regulation (NDPR)* in 2019 represented an attempt to align with international standards such as the EU's *General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)* (NITDA, 2023). However, scholars have questioned its effectiveness, citing weak institutional enforcement, fragmented oversight, and limited public education (Arowolo, 2025). Uwadinma (2025) found that fewer than 30% of surveyed Nigerians understood their data rights, and less than 15% had ever read privacy policies before

granting access to personal data. Ethically, the NDPR's implementation reflects a compliance-oriented rather than a dignity-oriented framework (Ugbedeojo, 2025; Diyoke & Edeh, 2020). While it establishes formal requirements for consent and data minimization, it lacks the philosophical grounding that situates privacy within broader notions of human rights and respect for personhood. Scholars like Floridi (2016) and Taddeo and Floridi (2018) argue that a sustainable data protection regime must integrate moral accountability and the principle of "informational dignity": the idea that individuals must be respected as informational entities with agency over their digital identities.

b) ***Weak Governance, Exploitation and the Crisis of Consent***: Nigeria's data ecosystem exhibits structural weaknesses rooted in institutional incapacity, policy incoherence, and corporate opacity. As Ekpo et al. (2024) observe, state agencies and private firms often collect personal data without transparent purpose limitation or consent mechanisms. The proliferation of digital lending apps and biometric databases has deepened citizens' exposure to surveillance and exploitation (Idowu, 2025). Globally, Zuboff (2019) describes this phenomenon as *surveillance capitalism*—a system that monetizes human behaviour through continuous data extraction. In Nigeria, this manifests in the unregulated commodification of personal information by telecom companies, banks, and even public agencies. Omoruyi (2024) notes that such practices erode autonomy and public trust, while West (2019) argues that algorithmic profiling exacerbates inequality by reinforcing socio-economic biases embedded in data. Ethically, this situation raises the question of *informed consent*. A study by Ekpo et al. (2024) reveal that citizens often provide personal data without genuine understanding of how it will be used, reflecting a structural imbalance between data controllers and subjects. Consequently, digital participation in Nigeria frequently occurs within an environment of *coerced consent*—where users must trade privacy for access to essential services such as mobile banking or identity registration.

c) ***Reimagining Data Governance Through Human Dignity***: The call to embed human dignity in data governance represents an ethical and cultural reorientation of Nigeria's digital transformation. Dignity-centered governance emphasizes transparency, accountability, and respect for personhood over profit maximization (Floridi, 2016; Tisné, 2020). It situates the human being, not the algorithm, at the heart of digital innovation. In African contexts, this also requires grounding data ethics in indigenous values of communalism, respect, and moral responsibility (Fadare et al., 2025). Ugbedeojo (2025) argues that Nigeria's data policy discourse must transcend imported frameworks like the GDPR to reflect local socio-cultural realities and collective notions of identity. Embedding dignity into digital systems thus entails co-developing culturally informed consent models, participatory oversight mechanisms, and ethical education to enhance citizens' digital agency. Despite Nigeria's growing digital infrastructure, a profound ethical and institutional gap persists between technological advancement and

moral accountability. The central problem lies in the *instrumentalization of personal data*; where individuals are reduced to informational commodities within unregulated digital markets. While the NDPR provides a legal basis for data protection, its enforcement remains weak, and its ethical foundation is shallow. Most existing studies privilege technical and legal dimensions of data governance while neglecting the philosophical, cultural, and human rights aspects that undergird dignity and autonomy (Diyoke & Edeh, 2020). Consequently, Nigeria's digital transformation continues to advance without sufficient reflection on its implications for human dignity, trust, and social justice. This intellectual and policy lacuna underscores the need for a reimagined data governance framework anchored in ethics, culture, and human rights.

Empirical Review

Empirical studies on data protection in Nigeria reveal a dissonance between policy aspirations and societal realities. Izu and Ganihu (2023) examined citizens' perceptions of privacy and found a low level of awareness regarding data rights, with most respondents expressing skepticism about institutional trustworthiness. Similarly, Ekpo et al. (2024) discovered that 62% of sampled businesses lacked formal data protection policies, citing cost and lack of enforcement as primary barriers.

Fadare et al. (2025) conducted a qualitative assessment of data practices among Nigerian banks and telecommunications firms, concluding that privacy violations were routine and rarely penalized. In a cross-sectional survey, Uwadinma (2025) found that only 23% of respondents had read privacy policies before registering for digital services, suggesting a culture of uninformed consent. At the continental level, Fadare et al. (2025) observed that African states often adopt Eurocentric regulatory models like the GDPR without adapting them to local contexts, resulting in ineffective enforcement.

Comparative studies also highlight the success of dignity-based approaches elsewhere. In Estonia, for instance, digital governance is guided by principles of transparency and user autonomy, resulting in high levels of public trust (Tisné, 2020). Similarly, the European Union's GDPR explicitly anchors data protection in the concept of human dignity, offering a normative model that could inform Nigeria's policy evolution (West, 2019).

Summary and Literature Gap

The reviewed literature underscores a global consensus on the ethical imperatives of privacy, consent, and dignity in digital governance. However, while substantial scholarship exists on the legal and technical dimensions of data protection, the *ethical, cultural, and human dignity* perspectives remain underexplored, particularly within the Nigerian context. Existing studies (e.g., Izu & Ganihu, 2023; Omoruyi, 2024; Ekpo et al., 2024; Fadare et al., 2025) tend to focus on compliance and enforcement rather than moral accountability and societal trust.

Furthermore, few studies integrate indigenous philosophical perspectives or examine how cultural values can shape dignity-centered data governance. The empirical gap thus lies in

understanding *how Nigeria can reimagine data governance through a human-centered ethical lens that reconciles innovation with dignity, consent, and social justice.* This study seeks to fill that gap by proposing a normative and policy framework that anchors Nigeria's digital transformation in the principles of human dignity and ethical accountability.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The ethical interrogation of data governance in Nigeria's digital age demands a normative foundation that transcends mere compliance with legal statutes. The guiding theoretical anchor for this study is drawn from Kantian ethics, human dignity theory, and the evolving scholarship on digital ethics frameworks. Together, these frameworks provide a moral lens for assessing the relationship between technological progress, individual autonomy, and the preservation of human worth in the digital era.

a) ***Kantian Ethics and the Imperative of Moral Autonomy*:** Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy, particularly as articulated in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), posits that every human being must be treated as an end in themselves and never merely as a means to an end (Kant, 1996). The *categorical imperative*: "act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law"; provides an ethical foundation for human-centered decision-making. Kantian ethics, therefore, foregrounds rational autonomy, moral agency, and inherent dignity as non-negotiable in human interactions, including those mediated by technology (Wood, 2008; Hill, 2012). In the context of digital governance, the Kantian view challenges the instrumentalization of personal data for profit, surveillance, or political manipulation. Treating individuals merely as data points or commodities violates the Kantian moral duty to respect persons as autonomous agents (Floridi, 2016). The rampant commodification of personal information in Nigeria's digital economy: where consent is often uninformed or coerced; thus raises profound ethical concerns (Itanyi, 2022). Kantian ethics demands that data collection and processing be guided by respect for autonomy and informed consent, aligning digital practices with moral responsibility and universal respect for personhood (Taddeo & Floridi, 2018).

b) ***Human Dignity Theory and the Right to Privacy*:** It provides the philosophical bridge between ethical imperatives and human rights frameworks. Human dignity, as a foundational value in international human rights law: especially Article 1 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)*; posits that all human beings possess inherent worth that must be protected and respected (McCrudden, 2008; Beyleveld & Brownsword, 2001). The concept of dignity links directly to the right to privacy, as personal autonomy and self-determination are integral to one's sense of moral and social identity (Solove, 2008). Applied to the Nigerian digital context, human dignity theory emphasizes that data protection is not a technical privilege but a moral and constitutional right grounded in respect for human worth. As Beyleveld and

Brownsword (2001) argue, the protection of human dignity requires preventing individuals from being reduced to mere instruments of state or corporate objectives. Nigeria's weak enforcement of the *Nigeria Data Protection Regulation (NDPR)* (2019) and the limited recognition of privacy as a fundamental right have exposed citizens to violations that undermine their dignity (Adeleke & Egbetokun, 2021; Nwachukwu, 2021). The human dignity perspective thus calls for an ethical recalibration of digital governance that prioritizes rights, respect, and recognition over efficiency or economic expediency.

c) ***Digital Ethics and the Moral Economy of Data*:** Emerging from the broader field of information ethics, digital ethics examines the moral implications of digital technologies on individuals and society. Scholars such as Floridi (2016), Zuboff (2019), and Moor (2020) have argued that data-driven systems generate new moral contexts where traditional ethical boundaries become blurred. Digital ethics frameworks emphasize principles such as transparency, accountability, justice, and privacy as central to sustainable technological governance. Floridi (2013) introduces the concept of "*infosphere ethics*," proposing that moral action in the digital age should protect both human and informational entities within the interconnected digital environment. In this light, privacy is not merely a right to seclusion but an expression of informational self-determination; where individuals control the narrative of their own data (Tisné, 2020). In Nigeria, the dominance of surveillance capitalism: marked by opaque data collection, profiling, and political data manipulation; undermines this ethical ideal (Nyitse et al., 2025; Singler & Babalola, 2025). A robust digital ethics framework, therefore, insists on balancing technological innovation with normative values such as consent, equity, and human dignity. It aligns with Kant's deontological ethics and human rights principles, ensuring that digital progress does not come at the expense of moral responsibility or social justice (West, 2019; UNDP, 2023).

Synthesizing these frameworks provides a multidimensional lens for rethinking privacy and consent in Nigeria's digital transformation:

1. From Kantian ethics, the study draws the moral principle of respecting human autonomy and informed consent as foundational to ethical data governance.
2. From human dignity theory, it emphasizes that data protection is a matter of preserving inherent worth and preventing dehumanization through digital exploitation.
3. From digital ethics frameworks, it integrates the need for transparency, accountability, and justice in managing digital systems and institutions.

Collectively, these perspectives conceptualize data governance as a *moral ecosystem* rather than a technical infrastructure: one that must uphold personhood, autonomy, and respect in every transaction involving personal data. The conceptual framework (see Figure 1 below) thus envisions a "Dignity-Centered Data Governance Model", where privacy, consent, and accountability interact dynamically to sustain ethical digital citizenship in Nigeria.

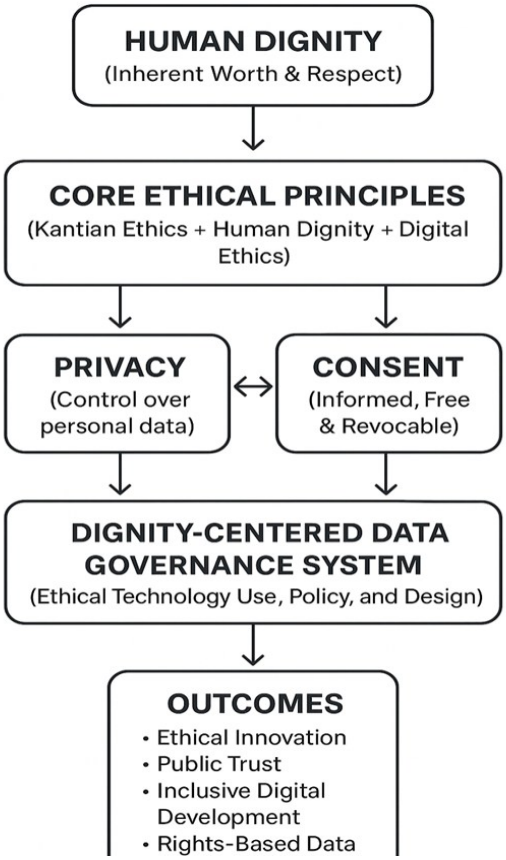


Figure 1: Dignity-Centered Data Governance Model

Explanation of the Model

1. **Human Dignity (Top Tier):** Serves as the *moral anchor* of the framework. It emphasizes that all data practices must respect the intrinsic worth of individuals, aligning with Kant's imperative that humans should never be treated merely as means to an end.
2. **Core Ethical Principles (Middle Tier):** This layer integrates:
   a) **Kantian Ethics:** Moral duty, autonomy, and respect for persons.
   b) **Human Dignity Theory:** Upholding inherent worth and integrity.
   c) **Digital Ethics Frameworks:** Accountability, transparency, and fairness in data use.
3. **Privacy and Consent (Operational Pillars):**
   a) Privacy represents *control* and *boundaries*: ensuring individuals decide how their data is collected and used.
   b) Consent represents *agency* and *informed participation*: ensuring users' choices are free, reversible, and meaningful. The interaction between privacy and consent reinforces personal autonomy and guards' dignity.

4. **Dignity-Centered Data Governance (Systemic Layer):** This is the *institutional mechanism* for applying ethical principles through data protection laws, design protocols, and governance practices that ensure respect for human dignity in every digital transaction.
5. **Outcomes (Foundational Layer):** When the model is effectively implemented, it results in ethical innovation**,** public trust**,** inclusive development, and a rights-based digital ecosystem: enabling Nigeria's digital progress to align with human values.

This theoretical synthesis reinforces that Nigeria's digital transformation must not merely advance efficiency or economic growth but also preserve the moral integrity of its citizens. Kantian ethics supplies the deontological imperative, human dignity theory grounds the rights-based rationale, and digital ethics provides the operational principles for ethical governance. Together, they frame the conceptual foundation for this study's analysis and its call for a dignity-centered rethinking of privacy and consent in Nigeria's digital age.

Methodology

This study adopted documentary and analytical research design within a qualitative paradigm. The design is appropriate given the philosophical and normative nature of the research, which seeks to interrogate the ethical, legal and human rights dimensions of data governance rather than measure statistical relationships. The documentary approach allows for the critical synthesis of secondary data, official reports, legal documents, and scholarly literature to draw insights into how privacy, consent, and dignity are negotiated in Nigeria's digital environment (Bowen, 2009; Ahmed, 2021). Analytical reasoning, guided by Kantian ethics and the theory of human dignity, is applied to interpret the findings and develop a conceptual model for dignity-centered data governance.

The study relied exclusively on secondary sources of data drawn from multiple reputable and triangulated repositories including:

1. Legal and policy documents such as the Nigeria Data Protection Regulation (NDPR, 2019), the Nigeria Data Protection Act (2023), the Freedom of Information Act (2011), and related international instruments like the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2018) and the African Union Convention on Cybersecurity and Personal Data Protection (2014).
2. Institutional reports from the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), National Identity Management Commission (NIMC), Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), and global bodies such as the UNDP, UNCTAD, and World Bank on digital governance and ethics.
3. Academic literature: peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and conference proceedings; covering themes of digital ethics, surveillance capitalism, data privacy, and human rights.
4. Media and civil society publications from organizations such as Paradigm Initiative, Enough is Enough (EiE) Nigeria, and Privacy International to capture contemporary cases and citizen experiences.

Data were systematically gathered through targeted document review and literature mapping conducted between March and September 2025. The researchers employed a multi-stage search and selection process using academic databases and institutional websites. Documents were screened for relevance, credibility, and currency, emphasizing materials published between 2016 and 2025 to capture Nigeria's post-digital transformation era.

The study utilized thematic content analysis to identify, categorize, and interpret recurring ethical and governance themes within the reviewed documents (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). The analysis followed three interrelated stages:

1. Summarizing existing knowledge on Nigeria's digital governance and ethical concerns;
2. Grouping insights into themes aligned with the study objectives: ethical foundations of data governance, consent and autonomy in digital systems, and dignity-centered frameworks;
3. Applying Kantian deontological reasoning and human dignity theory to interpret how privacy and consent reflect respect for personhood within Nigeria's socio-cultural context.

The methodology is anchored on the adopted theoretical frameworks whose philosophical traditions serve as interpretive lenses for analyzing how Nigeria's data practices either uphold or violate the moral imperative of treating individuals as ends in themselves (Kant, 1785/1997). The frameworks enable a value-oriented critique, emphasizing moral accountability, respect for autonomy, and the centrality of human dignity in the governance of data systems.

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, data triangulation was maintained through cross-verification from diverse documentary sources. Interpretive validity was enhanced through reflective analysis and consistency with the theoretical constructs guiding the study. Since the study relied exclusively on secondary data, there were no direct ethical risks to participants. However, the researchers adhered to academic integrity standards by ensuring accurate attribution, citation, and intellectual transparency.

The study's main limitation lies in its dependence on existing documents and secondary data, which may not fully capture emerging informal data practices or the lived experiences of ordinary citizens. Nevertheless, its philosophical and conceptual orientation provides deep normative insights and theoretical contributions that can inform empirical follow-up studies.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal a persistent ethical deficit in Nigeria's data governance system, characterized by weak institutional frameworks, low public awareness, and pervasive disregard for individual autonomy and consent. Through the combined lens of Kantian ethics, human dignity theory, and digital ethics frameworks, these findings underscore the moral tensions inherent in Nigeria's digital transformation; where efficiency and innovation often eclipse ethical accountability and respect for personhood.

a) **Kantian Ethics and the Violation of Autonomy:** Kantian moral philosophy emphasizes that every individual must be treated as an end in themselves, never merely as a means to an end (Kant, 1785/1997). Within this moral schema, consent represents the rational expression of autonomy; a non-negotiable precondition for ethical action. However, the study finds that data practices in Nigeria's public and private sectors routinely undermine this autonomy. For instance, biometric data are collected in national identification, voter registration, and fintech platforms without sufficient disclosure or informed consent. Individuals are often compelled to provide sensitive information as a prerequisite for accessing public services, thereby rendering consent coercive rather than voluntary (Burkhardt et al., 2023). From a Kantian perspective, such practices amount to instrumentalization of citizens, treating them as data points for surveillance, profit, or bureaucratic convenience rather than as autonomous moral agents. This breach reflects a profound ethical contradiction in Nigeria's digital governance, where the means (technological efficiency) subverts the end (human dignity) that governance ought to uphold.

b) **Human Dignity Theory and the Erosion of Personhood:** Human dignity theory, as articulated by scholars like Donnelly (2013) and Kateb (2011), conceives dignity as the inherent worth that commands respect for every individual irrespective of status or utility. The study's analysis shows that Nigeria's digital transformation, while economically progressive, has failed to embed this recognition in its data governance culture. Citizens are often excluded from decisions about how their data are stored, shared, or monetized, leading to data exploitation and commodification that strip individuals of control over their digital identities (Quach et al., 2022; Mattiello, 2024). This commodification reflects what Zuboff (2019) calls "surveillance capitalism": a system where human experience is translated into behavioral data for commercial or political gain. The erosion of personhood in Nigeria's digital environment manifests not only through inadequate data protection but also through lack of recourse mechanisms, where individuals have limited capacity to challenge violations. The failure to protect data privacy thus becomes synonymous with a failure to protect dignity itself; violating both moral and constitutional expectations of respect for the individual.

c) **Digital Ethics Framework and Governance Accountability:** Applying the digital ethics framework, the study interprets Nigeria's data governance failures as symptoms of an ethics lag: a situation where technological advancement outpaces moral, legal, and institutional oversight. Documentary evidence from NITDA (2023), NDPR implementation reports, and UNDP (2023) assessments reveal fragmented regulatory enforcement, poor inter-agency coordination, and inadequate stakeholder engagement. This ethics lag is compounded by low digital literacy, weak institutional capacity, and minimal transparency in algorithmic decision-making. The absence of a value-sensitive design in data systems: one that integrates fairness, transparency, and accountability; undermines public trust and reproduces existing social inequities. The digital ethics

framework suggests that effective data governance must move beyond compliance to embrace ethical foresight, ensuring that human values are embedded in every stage of technological design and implementation.

d) **Methodological Reflections - Interpreting the Ethical Deficit:** Through its documentary and analytical methodology, this study synthesized multiple policy documents, reports, and academic perspectives to expose the systemic nature of Nigeria's ethical challenges in data governance. Thematic content analysis revealed that while Nigeria has made regulatory strides (notably with the NDPR 2019 and the Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023), these instruments remain largely performative rather than transformative: lacking strong enforcement, judicial backing, and citizen ownership. The evidence shows that ethical failures are not merely technical or administrative but deeply normative, reflecting a governance culture that prioritizes control over care, and efficiency over empathy. This methodological approach reinforces that ethical digital transformation cannot be externally imposed through laws alone but must be internally cultivated through institutional ethics, civic education, and moral consciousness.

e) **Towards a Dignity-Centered Digital Future:** The findings coalesce around a critical insight: Nigeria's data governance crisis is fundamentally a crisis of moral imagination. The Dignity-Centered Data Governance Model developed in this study (see Figure 1) illustrates that privacy, consent, and dignity are not isolated values but interdependent pillars of ethical digital governance. Restoring this equilibrium demands a paradigm shift: from data-centric efficiency to person-centric ethics. Institutional actors must internalize Kantian respect for autonomy, operationalize human dignity as a policy principle, and mainstream digital ethics as an evaluative standard for all technological interventions.

In sum, the study finds that Nigeria's digital evolution, though transformative, remains ethically shallow. The absence of a dignity-centered governance ethos perpetuates a cycle of coercive consent, data exploitation, and citizen disempowerment. Through the interpretive lenses of Kantian ethics, human dignity theory, and digital ethics, the study underscores that meaningful digital transformation must begin not with technology, but with the moral recognition of the individual as the irreducible unit of value in the digital age.

Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for Nigeria to recalibrate its data governance architecture toward a dignity-centered framework that harmonizes technological advancement with ethical responsibility. Drawing from Kantian ethics, human dignity theory, and the digital ethics framework, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Institutionalize Human Dignity as a Core Principle of Digital Governance**: Nigeria's digital transformation policies particularly the Nigeria Data Protection Act (NDPA, 2023) should explicitly enshrine human dignity as a foundational value guiding all data-related operations. Government institutions, private data controllers, and digital

platforms must be legally bound to treat individuals not as data objects but as moral subjects whose autonomy must be respected. This requires embedding dignity clauses in all data policies, contracts, and algorithmic governance instruments.

2. **Strengthen the Ethical and Regulatory Capacity of Data Protection Institutions**: The Nigeria Data Protection Commission (NDPC) should be strengthened through adequate funding, training, and inter-agency collaboration to enforce compliance with dignity-centered data standards. Regulatory audits should move beyond procedural checklists to include ethical impact assessments that evaluate how data practices affect privacy, consent, and autonomy. A specialized Ethical Oversight Board should be established within the NDPC to review data practices from a human rights perspective.
3. **Mainstream Digital Ethics and Data Literacy in Civic and Professional Education**: Public education on data rights is essential for restoring autonomy and informed consent. The study recommends integrating digital ethics and data literacy curricula into Nigeria's secondary and tertiary education systems, with emphasis on ethical reasoning, human rights, and responsible technology use. Professional training for ICT practitioners, civil servants, and policymakers should incorporate modules on value-sensitive design and ethical data handling.
4. **Promote Transparency and Accountability in Data Practices**: Both government and corporate actors should adopt transparency-by-design and accountability-by-default principles. This involves disclosing how data are collected, processed, shared, and monetized; publishing periodic transparency reports; and providing accessible mechanisms for citizens to challenge misuse. Aligning with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) model can strengthen Nigeria's ethical legitimacy and foster international trust in its digital economy.
5. **Foster a Culturally Grounded Digital Ethics Framework**: Ethical governance in Nigeria must draw from indigenous African moral philosophies such as Ubuntu; that emphasize communal respect, interdependence, and shared humanity. Embedding these cultural ethics in policy design can make data governance more contextually relevant and socially resonant (Igwe & Okwurume, 2025). Such a culturally anchored approach ensures that privacy and consent are not seen as foreign impositions but as extensions of collective dignity.
6. **Encourage Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration and International Alignment**: Digital governance should not be the sole purview of the state. Civil society organizations, academia, the private sector, and international partners should collaborate to develop a national charter on ethical data governance: a soft law instrument setting standards for ethical digital behavior across all sectors.

Conclusion

The course of Nigeria's digital transformation reveals both technological promise and ethical peril. As demonstrated by this study, the expansion of data-driven systems in finance,

governance, and security; has outpaced the moral and institutional safeguards necessary to protect human autonomy, privacy and dignity. The result is an environment where citizens are often reduced to data commodities, stripped of meaningful consent, and subjected to opaque surveillance regimes.

Through the interpretive lens of Kantian ethics, it is clear that Nigeria's digital governance frequently treats individuals as means to economic or administrative ends, violating the categorical imperative of respect for personhood. The human dignity theory further illuminates how these practices erode the intrinsic worth of the citizen, transforming personal data into instruments of control rather than empowerment. Complementarily, the digital ethics framework reveals a structural ethics gap; where technological advancement has raced ahead of normative reflection, creating a governance void that privileges efficiency over empathy.

To bridge this gap, Nigeria must shift from a data-centric to a dignity-centric paradigm. This involves reimagining the digital environment as a moral common: one governed not only by algorithms and codes but by conscience and compassion. Embedding privacy, consent, and human dignity into the very architecture of Nigeria's digital systems is essential for restoring public trust, ensuring social justice, and realizing the full promise of digital transformation.

Ultimately, the path forward lies in balancing innovation with integrity. A nation's digital progress is meaningful only when it upholds the dignity of its people. In Nigeria's quest for a knowledge-based economy, the measure of success should therefore not be the volume of data collected, but the value of humanity preserved in every byte of information processed.

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