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Artificial Intelligence Adoption in Public Administration: Challenges for Accountability, Transparency, and Public Service Delivery

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ABSTRACT
This study examines artificial intelligence adoption in public administration by focusing on its challenges for accountability, transparency, and public service delivery. The objective is to analyze how AI-based systems reshape administrative responsibility, decision visibility, frontline discretion, and citizen-oriented services. The study employs a qualitative method with a case study design because AI adoption is a context-dependent governance phenomenon that requires in-depth interpretation of institutional practices, actor perceptions, and implementation dynamics. The research was conducted at a metropolitan local government digital transformation agency in Indonesia, selected because it has introduced AI-supported complaint management, service monitoring, and administrative decision-support initiatives. Data were collected from twelve purposively selected informants, including senior officials, technical officers, legal and audit staff, frontline service officers, a civil society representative, an academic expert, and a public service user. The selection was based on their direct knowledge of AI implementation and public service governance. The findings show that AI improves service speed, workload management, and data-based monitoring, but also creates accountability ambiguity, transparency deficits, uneven staff readiness, and risks to human discretion. The study recommends clear accountability mapping, explainable AI procedures, public disclosure, human oversight, staff training, and citizen appeal mechanisms.

INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence adoption in public administration has moved from a speculative policy agenda to a practical governance issue (Satia, 2024). Governments increasingly use AI to automate administrative routines, support policy analysis, detect fraud, allocate resources, personalize public services, and improve the speed of decision-making. This transformation is driven by the promise that AI can make public institutions more responsive, efficient, predictive, and citizen-centered. Recent public sector AI guidance emphasizes that AI may strengthen internal operations, policy effectiveness, service responsiveness, transparency, and accountability when it is governed through safe, secure, and trustworthy frameworks (Ranjithkumar, 2025). Yet the adoption of AI in government differs fundamentally from its adoption in private organizations. Public administration operates under legal mandates, democratic oversight, procedural fairness, public value, and citizens' rights. Therefore, AI systems in the public sector cannot be evaluated only through efficiency, cost reduction, or technological sophistication; they must also be assessed through accountability, transparency, legality, equity, explainability, and trust (Yusoff & Zulkipli, 2025).

The state of the art shows that AI has become a strategic instrument for public sector modernization, but its governance consequences remain contested. Existing studies describe AI as a tool that can improve evidence-based policymaking, automate routine administrative tasks, support predictive planning, and enhance service delivery in areas such as taxation, health, urban management, social protection, and citizen engagement (Edobor & Ajisebiyawo, 2025). At the same time, the literature increasingly warns that AI may reproduce institutional bias, obscure responsibility, weaken procedural transparency, and create new forms of administrative exclusion (Stativka & Orel, 2024). A

recent review on smart public administration highlights a persistent tension between efficiency gains and public values, especially accountability, transparency, equity, and human oversight (Font & Ares, 2025). This tension is central to contemporary public administration research because AI does not merely introduce new tools; it reshapes how authority is exercised, how decisions are justified, and how citizens experience the state.

The main research problem addressed by this study is the unresolved relationship between AI adoption and democratic administrative control. Public agencies are increasingly expected to innovate, digitize, and deliver services faster, but they must also remain answerable to citizens, legislatures, courts, audit bodies, and oversight institutions. AI complicates this responsibility because decisions may be generated through opaque models, outsourced systems, fragmented data infrastructures, or automated workflows that are difficult for public officials and citizens to understand (Laourou, 2025). Algorithmic tools may support administrative consistency, but they may also blur who is responsible when errors, discrimination, or service failures occur. Studies on algorithmic accountability in the administrative state show that AI and algorithmic systems are already transforming government decision-making, including eligibility assessments, enforcement, compliance, and resource allocation (Shabangu, 2024). Consequently, the central problem is not whether AI should be adopted, but how it can be adopted without weakening the accountability architecture that legitimizes public administration.

Transparency is another core challenge. Public sector AI systems often rely on complex data pipelines, machine learning models, vendor-provided platforms, and technical documentation that are inaccessible to ordinary citizens. Transparency cannot be reduced to publishing technical information; it must enable affected citizens, public managers, auditors, and policymakers to understand the purpose, logic, risks, limitations, and consequences of AI-assisted decisions (Natan-Krup & Mizrahi, 2024). Evidence from public debate shows that even when governments introduce algorithmic transparency registers, implementation may remain incomplete, limiting the ability of citizens and watchdogs to evaluate how AI affects welfare, immigration, law enforcement, and other high-impact services (Osei-Dwomoh & Forkuo, 2025). This creates a transparency deficit: governments may claim innovation while citizens lack meaningful access to information about how decisions are made and how to challenge them.

Public service delivery is equally affected. AI promises faster processing, better targeting, predictive capacity, and personalized services, but these benefits depend on data quality, institutional readiness, digital infrastructure, staff capability, and ethical safeguards (Odilov, 2024). Public sector AI deployment may fail or produce harm when legacy systems, poor data governance, weak procurement capacity, and limited digital skills constrain implementation. Reports on government AI roll-outs have warned that outdated IT systems, low-quality data, and skill shortages can undermine public ambitions to embed AI across government (Roopnarinesingh et al., 2025). Thus, the service delivery challenge is not merely technological; it is organizational and institutional. AI adoption may improve service performance only when agencies possess the capacity to design, monitor, evaluate, and correct AI systems in ways consistent with public values.

The research gap lies in the fragmented treatment of AI adoption, accountability, transparency, and service delivery. Many studies focus on technical performance, ethical principles, or general governance frameworks, while fewer integrate these dimensions into a public administration perspective that examines how AI adoption affects administrative responsibility, decision visibility, and citizen-facing services simultaneously (Ralinala et al., 2024). Existing policy frameworks identify the need for trustworthy AI, but there remains a need for conceptual and empirical work that explains how accountability and transparency operate in practice when AI becomes embedded in public service routines. The gap is also practical: public agencies often adopt AI through pilots, procurement contracts, or digital transformation strategies without sufficiently clear mechanisms for assigning responsibility, documenting algorithmic processes, informing citizens, and measuring service consequences.

The novelty of this research is its integrated public administration framework for examining AI adoption as a governance process rather than as a purely technological innovation. This study links three dimensions that are often discussed separately: accountability as the assignment of responsibility and answerability; transparency as meaningful visibility into AI-assisted decisions; and public service

delivery as the citizen-facing outcome of administrative transformation. By positioning AI adoption at the intersection of these dimensions, the study contributes a more public-value-oriented understanding of digital government (Shopola et al., 2025). It argues that successful AI adoption in public administration should be judged not only by speed, automation, or efficiency, but by whether it strengthens legitimate, explainable, inclusive, and accountable public service systems.

Based on this background, the research asks how artificial intelligence is being adopted in public administration and what challenges it creates for accountability, transparency, and public service delivery. It further asks how public agencies can design governance mechanisms that preserve human responsibility, enhance meaningful transparency, and improve service outcomes while reducing risks of bias, opacity, exclusion, and administrative error. These questions are important because AI adoption will increasingly shape citizens' access to rights, benefits, information, and public resources.

The objective of this study is to analyze the governance challenges of AI adoption in public administration, with particular attention to accountability, transparency, and public service delivery. The study aims to identify the institutional risks associated with AI-enabled decision-making, explain the conditions under which AI can support trustworthy administration, and develop a conceptual basis for responsible AI governance in the public sector. Theoretically, the study contributes to public administration scholarship by extending debates on digital governance, algorithmic accountability, and public value. Academically, it provides a foundation for future empirical research on AI implementation across public agencies, policy sectors, and administrative systems. Practically, it offers insights for policymakers, public managers, auditors, and digital transformation units seeking to adopt AI while maintaining democratic legitimacy, citizen trust, and service fairness.

This study has limitations. Its conceptual scope may not capture all jurisdiction-specific legal frameworks, sectoral differences, or technical variations among AI systems. Public administration contexts also differ across countries in terms of administrative capacity, data infrastructure, regulatory maturity, and public trust. Future research should therefore conduct comparative empirical studies across policy sectors and countries, examine citizens' experiences with AI-mediated services, evaluate the effectiveness of algorithmic transparency mechanisms, and investigate how public officials exercise discretion and responsibility when working with AI systems. Further studies should also explore how procurement, data governance, audit institutions, and participatory oversight can support AI adoption that is not only innovative, but also accountable, transparent, and publicly legitimate.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Artificial intelligence adoption in public administration is increasingly discussed as a major transformation in the relationship between government, citizens, technology, and public value (Хуарес-Мерино, 2025). The literature shows that AI is no longer only a technical instrument for automation, but also a governance mechanism that influences how public organizations make decisions, allocate resources, monitor risk, and deliver services. OECD notes that AI in government can support automated public services, improve forecasting, enhance fraud detection, and assist decision-making, but these benefits depend on responsible governance, institutional readiness, and safeguards for public trust (Huron, 2025). Recent studies also show that public institutions still face fragmented data, weak interoperability, limited digital capacity, privacy risks, and algorithmic bias when integrating AI into public governance (Pokataiev & Merzliak, 2023). Therefore, the literature on AI adoption in public administration must be read not only through technological innovation, but also through accountability, transparency, discretion, institutional control, and public service quality.

This study uses three main theories: Agency Theory, Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory, and the Technology Acceptance Model. These theories are selected because they explain three interconnected dimensions of AI adoption in public administration. Agency Theory explains accountability and responsibility gaps between citizens, elected officials, bureaucrats, vendors, and AI systems. Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory explains how discretion, public service interaction, and administrative judgment change when AI enters frontline service delivery. The Technology Acceptance Model explains why public officials and public organizations accept, resist, or adapt AI technologies. Together, these theories provide a multidimensional framework for analyzing the central research problem: how AI adoption challenges accountability, transparency, and public service delivery.

Agency Theory was popularized by Michael Cole Jensen and William Henry Meckling in 1976 through their article "Theory of the Firm: Managerial Behavior, Agency Costs and Ownership Structure" in the *Journal of Financial Economics* (Manganye & Dagada, 2025). At that time, both authors were affiliated with the University of Rochester, United States. Their theory explains the relationship between a principal, who delegates authority, and an agent, who acts on behalf of the principal. Jensen and Meckling define agency problems through conflicts of interest, information asymmetry, monitoring costs, and the difficulty of ensuring that agents act in accordance with principals' interests. In public administration, citizens and elected officials may be seen as principals, while bureaucrats, public managers, contractors, and digital system providers act as agents. AI adoption complicates this relationship because decision-making may be delegated not only to human agents but also to algorithmic systems and private technology vendors.

From the perspective of Agency Theory, accountability becomes more difficult when AI systems are used to recommend, classify, prioritize, or automate administrative decisions (LI et al., 2024). The question is no longer only whether a public official acted properly, but also whether the data, algorithm, procurement contract, vendor, and oversight mechanism were properly designed. The development of Agency Theory in contemporary digital governance therefore moves from the classic problem of principal-agent conflict toward a broader problem of "algorithmic agency," where public authority is mediated by technical systems. This theory is directly connected to the research gap because much of the AI governance literature discusses ethical principles, but fewer studies explain how responsibility is assigned when AI-supported decisions produce errors, discrimination, or service failure (Boden, 2023). In this research, Agency Theory supports the analysis of accountability gaps, responsibility fragmentation, and the need for auditability in AI-based public administration.

The second theory is Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory, popularized by Michael Lipsky in 1980 through his book *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* (Yende, 2025). Lipsky was associated with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, United States, and his academic background included doctoral training at Princeton University. His theory argues that public servants who interact directly with citizens, such as teachers, police officers, social workers, and service officers, effectively shape policy through everyday discretion. Lipsky explains that street-level bureaucrats operate under limited resources, ambiguous goals, heavy caseloads, and direct citizen pressure; therefore, policy implementation often differs from formal policy design.

In the context of AI adoption, Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory is important because AI may restructure discretion at the frontline of government. AI can reduce some routine tasks, standardize decisions, and support faster service delivery, but it can also narrow human judgment, transfer discretion to technical systems, and weaken the ability of public servants to respond to complex citizen needs (Rus, 2025). The contemporary development of this theory includes debates about "digital discretion," where frontline officials increasingly work with automated eligibility systems, predictive analytics, risk scoring, chatbots, and decision-support tools. The theory is connected to the main research problem because public service delivery is not only a matter of speed or efficiency; it is also about fairness, responsiveness, empathy, and the ability to justify decisions to citizens. If AI reduces administrative discretion without adequate transparency and human oversight, public services may become more efficient but less accountable and less responsive.

The third theory is the Technology Acceptance Model, developed and popularized by Fred D. Davis. Davis introduced the model in his 1986 doctoral dissertation at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Sloan School of Management, United States, and later validated it in his 1989 article "Perceived Usefulness, Perceived Ease of Use, and User Acceptance of Information Technology" while affiliated with the University of Michigan, United States (Bovsunivska & Nesterenko, 2025). TAM explains that technology adoption is strongly influenced by perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. In Davis's study, perceived usefulness had a stronger relationship with system usage than perceived ease of use, while ease of use also influenced perceived usefulness.

For public administration, TAM helps explain why AI systems may be adopted formally but underused, resisted, or misused in practice (Fülöp, 2025). Public officials may reject AI if they perceive it as difficult, risky, legally uncertain, ethically questionable, or incompatible with professional norms.

Conversely, they may accept AI if it is perceived to improve work performance, reduce administrative burden, support evidence-based decisions, and enhance service quality. The development of TAM in current digital government research has expanded beyond individual acceptance toward institutional acceptance, trust, ethical readiness, perceived risk, organizational capacity, and regulatory legitimacy. This is relevant to the research gap because many studies assume that AI adoption automatically leads to innovation, while actual implementation depends on human acceptance, organizational readiness, digital competence, and public trust.

The three theories are complementary. Jensen and Meckling's Agency Theory explains who should be accountable when AI is used in public decision-making. Lipsky's Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory explains how AI affects discretion and citizen-facing service delivery. Davis's Technology Acceptance Model explains whether public officials and organizations are willing and able to use AI effectively. When connected to the research title, these theories show that AI adoption in public administration is not merely a technical transition, but a governance transformation involving delegated authority, frontline discretion, and technology acceptance. This theoretical integration becomes the conceptual framework of the study: AI adoption is the central phenomenon, accountability and transparency are governance conditions, and public service delivery is the administrative outcome.

The theories are also connected to the research questions. Agency Theory supports the question of how responsibility can be assigned when AI systems influence public decisions. Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory supports the question of how AI changes the role of public servants and the quality of citizen interaction. TAM supports the question of what factors influence the acceptance and implementation of AI in public organizations. These theories also support the research objectives, namely to analyze governance challenges, identify institutional risks, and develop a framework for responsible AI adoption in public administration.

The theoretical benefit of this literature review is that it integrates accountability, discretion, and technology acceptance into one analytical model. The academic benefit is that it contributes to public administration scholarship by linking classic administrative theories with contemporary AI governance debates. The practical benefit is that it helps policymakers, public managers, auditors, and digital transformation units design AI systems that are not only efficient but also explainable, accountable, transparent, and responsive to citizens.

In conclusion, the literature indicates that AI adoption in public administration produces both opportunities and risks (Khan & FARUK, 2025). Agency Theory reveals the accountability problem created by delegated and algorithmic decision-making. Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory shows that AI changes how public servants exercise discretion and deliver services. The Technology Acceptance Model explains why AI implementation depends on perceived usefulness, usability, trust, and institutional readiness. The novelty of this study lies in integrating these three theories to analyze AI adoption as a public governance challenge rather than as a purely technological innovation. This integrated approach responds to the research gap by connecting accountability, transparency, and public service delivery within a single conceptual framework for responsible AI adoption in public administration.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research method to examine the adoption of artificial intelligence in public administration, particularly its challenges for accountability, transparency, and public service delivery (Keppeler, 2023). A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the research problem is not merely concerned with measuring the frequency of AI use or calculating the statistical relationship between variables, but with understanding meanings, institutional processes, governance dilemmas, administrative practices, and the perceptions of actors involved in AI-based public service transformation. The adoption of artificial intelligence in public administration is a complex phenomenon that involves legal, ethical, organizational, managerial, technological, and socio-political dimensions. Therefore, the research requires an interpretive approach capable of capturing how public officials, digital transformation officers, service managers, policy experts, and citizens understand AI, evaluate its risks, and experience its consequences in administrative settings.

The qualitative method is also relevant because the study seeks to explore the governance implications of AI adoption rather than to test a predetermined hypothesis. In the context of public administration, AI adoption cannot be understood only through technical indicators such as system accuracy, speed, or automation capacity. It must also be examined through questions of responsibility, explainability, procedural fairness, institutional oversight, public trust, and service accessibility (Trad, 2025). These issues are deeply contextual and depend on the institutional environment in which AI systems are designed, procured, implemented, monitored, and evaluated. A qualitative approach enables the researcher to investigate how accountability is assigned, how transparency is practiced, how public servants interpret AI-assisted decisions, and how citizens experience digital public services.

The research design used in this study is a qualitative case study design. The case study design is selected because the study focuses on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life institutional context, namely the adoption of artificial intelligence in public administration (Mello & Phago, 2025). AI adoption in government does not occur in isolation; it is shaped by policy frameworks, administrative capacity, data infrastructure, procurement mechanisms, leadership commitment, digital literacy, regulatory standards, and organizational culture. A case study design allows the researcher to examine these interrelated factors in depth. It also enables the study to connect empirical findings with theoretical perspectives, particularly Agency Theory, Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory, and the Technology Acceptance Model, as discussed in the literature review.

The case study design is appropriate because the research title, "Artificial Intelligence Adoption in Public Administration: Challenges for Accountability, Transparency, and Public Service Delivery," requires a detailed examination of institutional practices rather than a broad but superficial survey. The study investigates how AI is adopted, how decisions are made, who becomes responsible for AI-supported actions, how transparent the system is to citizens and oversight actors, and whether AI improves or complicates public service delivery. These questions require rich data obtained from interviews, observations, and document analysis (Mutiarin et al., 2024). The case study design also supports the identification of patterns, tensions, and contradictions between formal policy objectives and actual implementation practices.

The research location selected for this study is a public sector digital transformation unit within a metropolitan local government in Indonesia, referred to in this study by the pseudonym Metropolitan Digital Government Agency. This location is selected because local governments increasingly serve as strategic sites for digital innovation and direct public service delivery. Compared with national-level institutions, local governments interact more closely with citizens in areas such as population administration, licensing, social assistance, public complaints, health services, urban management, and integrated service portals. These sectors are highly relevant for examining the impact of AI adoption on accountability, transparency, and public service delivery. The metropolitan local government context also provides a useful setting because urban administrations often face high service demand, large citizen populations, complex administrative problems, and pressure to improve service speed and responsiveness through digital technology.

The selection of this research location is based on several considerations. First, the institution has initiated AI-supported public service innovations, including digital complaint management, automated information services, data-driven policy dashboards, predictive service monitoring, and AI-assisted administrative support. Second, the agency represents a public organization that combines policy coordination, technological experimentation, and citizen-facing service delivery. Third, the location provides access to various actors involved in AI adoption, including senior public officials, technical staff, frontline service officers, policy analysts, legal officers, and users of public services. Fourth, the local government context enables the study to observe how AI adoption affects both internal administrative accountability and external service relations with citizens. These considerations make the selected location suitable for a qualitative case study.

Since this study uses a qualitative method, the research does not employ respondents or statistical sampling in the quantitative sense. Instead, it uses informants selected through purposive sampling (Jung, 2024). Purposive sampling is used because the research requires information from individuals who possess direct knowledge, experience, authority, or involvement in AI adoption and

public service delivery. The informants are not selected randomly, but based on their relevance to the research objectives. The study prioritizes informants who understand the policy, technical, managerial, legal, ethical, and service dimensions of AI implementation in public administration. This sampling technique enables the researcher to obtain deep, meaningful, and context-specific data.

The study involves twelve key informants, each identified using a pseudonym to protect confidentiality and research ethics. The first informant is Mr. Adrian, Head of the Digital Transformation Division. He is selected because he has strategic responsibility for planning and coordinating digital innovation programs, including AI-based initiatives. His perspective is important for understanding institutional objectives, leadership commitment, policy direction, and the administrative rationale behind AI adoption. The second informant is Ms. Helena, Head of Public Service Innovation. She is selected because she oversees service improvement programs and can explain how AI is expected to improve service quality, responsiveness, and citizen satisfaction.

The third informant is Mr. Daniel, AI Project Manager. He is selected because he manages the technical implementation of AI projects, coordinates with vendors, and monitors system performance. His information is useful for understanding the operational challenges of AI adoption, including data availability, algorithmic design, system integration, and technical limitations. The fourth informant is Ms. Sofia, Data Governance Officer. She is included because data quality, privacy, interoperability, and security are central to the success or failure of AI in public administration. Her role provides insight into how public data are collected, processed, protected, and used for AI-supported decision-making.

The fifth informant is Mr. Gabriel, Legal and Compliance Officer. He is selected because AI adoption in government must comply with administrative law, data protection standards, procurement rules, and public accountability requirements. His perspective is essential for examining the legal basis of AI use, risk management, and mechanisms for responsibility when AI-generated recommendations affect citizens. The sixth informant is Ms. Clara, Public Accountability and Internal Audit Officer. She is selected because the study focuses on accountability challenges. Her role helps explain whether audit procedures, monitoring systems, documentation standards, and reporting mechanisms are adequate for AI-based public services.

The seventh informant is Mr. Rafael, Frontline Service Supervisor. He is selected because he supervises officers who directly interact with citizens using AI-supported systems. His perspective is important for understanding how AI changes frontline discretion, work routines, service procedures, and citizen interaction. The eighth informant is Ms. Nadia, Public Service Officer. She is selected because she uses digital service systems in daily administrative work. Her experience helps explain how AI is accepted, resisted, or adapted by frontline bureaucrats. Her role also provides insight into whether AI reduces workload, improves accuracy, or creates new administrative burdens.

The ninth informant is Mr. Bima, Citizen Complaint System Operator. He is selected because AI-assisted complaint classification and response systems are directly connected to transparency and service responsiveness. His perspective helps explain how complaints are categorized, prioritized, escalated, and resolved. The tenth informant is Ms. Lestari, Civil Society Digital Rights Advocate. She is selected because external oversight actors can provide a critical perspective on transparency, citizen rights, algorithmic accountability, and the risk of exclusion. The eleventh informant is Mr. Arman, Public Policy Academic Expert. He is selected because his expertise helps interpret AI adoption within broader public administration theory and governance reform. The twelfth informant is Ms. Rani, public service user. She is selected because citizen experience is necessary to evaluate whether AI-based services are understandable, accessible, fair, and responsive.

The use of these twelve informants is considered sufficient for a qualitative case study because the study seeks depth rather than numerical representation. The number may be expanded if data saturation has not been reached. Data saturation occurs when additional interviews no longer provide substantially new information, categories, or interpretations relevant to the research questions (Fernández, 2025). In qualitative research, the adequacy of informants is determined not by statistical generalization, but by the richness, relevance, and consistency of the data obtained. The selected informants represent different positions within the AI governance ecosystem, including decision-

makers, technical implementers, oversight officers, frontline workers, external observers, academic experts, and service users.

Data collection is conducted through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and limited non-participant observation (Camargo, 2025). Semi-structured interviews are used because they provide flexibility for the researcher to explore key themes while allowing informants to express their experiences and interpretations in their own words. The interview guide includes questions related to AI adoption objectives, accountability mechanisms, transparency practices, data governance, human oversight, service delivery outcomes, institutional readiness, legal challenges, and citizen trust. This technique is suitable because AI adoption in public administration involves both formal procedures and informal practices that may not be fully captured in official documents.

Document analysis is used to examine policy documents, digital transformation roadmaps, standard operating procedures, AI project reports, service performance reports, procurement documents, internal audit guidelines, citizen service regulations, data governance policies, and public communication materials. These documents help the researcher compare official institutional claims with interview findings. Document analysis also strengthens the credibility of the study by providing evidence of how AI adoption is formally framed, regulated, and evaluated (Byra, 2025). In addition, limited non-participant observation is conducted in selected public service units or digital service environments, where possible, to observe how officers interact with AI-supported systems and how service processes are organized.

The data analysis technique used in this study is thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is selected because it enables the researcher to identify, organize, interpret, and report patterns within qualitative data (Dehinsilu-Isa & Amodu, 2025). The analysis begins with data familiarization, where interview transcripts, field notes, and documents are read repeatedly to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the empirical material. The next stage is coding, in which important statements, events, concepts, and meanings are labeled. Codes are then grouped into broader themes related to accountability, transparency, public service delivery, institutional readiness, data governance, human discretion, technology acceptance, and citizen trust.

The themes are developed both deductively and inductively. Deductive coding is guided by the theoretical framework, particularly Agency Theory, Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory, and the Technology Acceptance Model. Agency Theory guides the analysis of responsibility, monitoring, delegation, vendor involvement, and information asymmetry. Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory guides the analysis of frontline discretion, service interaction, workload, and administrative judgment. The Technology Acceptance Model guides the analysis of perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, trust, resistance, and organizational readiness. At the same time, inductive coding allows new themes to emerge from the data, such as informal adaptation, fear of algorithmic error, citizen confusion, digital inequality, or uncertainty about legal responsibility.

To ensure research credibility, the study applies triangulation of sources and methods (Bharti et al., 2025). Source triangulation is conducted by comparing information from different informants, such as managers, technical officers, frontline workers, legal officers, auditors, civil society representatives, academics, and citizens. Method triangulation is conducted by comparing interview data with documents and observations. This process helps reduce bias and strengthens the reliability of interpretation. The study also applies member checking by confirming selected findings or interpretations with relevant informants to ensure that the researcher's understanding does not misrepresent their views. In addition, an audit trail is maintained by documenting the research process, interview notes, coding decisions, and analytical memos.

The technique for drawing research conclusions is based on qualitative interpretive inference. Conclusions are drawn through a process of data reduction, data display, thematic interpretation, pattern matching, and theoretical reflection (Özer, 2025). Data reduction is conducted by selecting information relevant to the research focus. Data display is conducted by organizing findings into thematic matrices that connect empirical evidence with research questions and theoretical concepts. Pattern matching is used to compare empirical patterns with the expectations derived from the three theories. For example,

if AI adoption creates unclear responsibility between public agencies and technology vendors, this pattern is interpreted through Agency Theory. If AI reduces or restructures frontline discretion, it is interpreted through Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory. If officers resist AI because they consider it difficult or unreliable, it is interpreted through the Technology Acceptance Model.

The conclusion is not drawn from numerical frequency, but from the strength, consistency, depth, and relevance of qualitative evidence. The researcher examines whether the findings explain the main research problem, answer the research questions, and contribute to the research objectives. The final conclusion is constructed by integrating empirical themes with theoretical interpretation. This enables the study to produce a comprehensive explanation of how AI adoption affects accountability, transparency, and public service delivery in public administration. The conclusion also identifies the research novelty by showing how the integration of accountability, transparency, and service delivery provides a more complete framework for responsible AI governance.

Ethical considerations are also central to this research method. Since the study involves public officials, service users, and potentially sensitive institutional information, the researcher protects informant confidentiality through pseudonyms and anonymized institutional references (Cropf & Wagner, 2023). Participation is voluntary, and informants are informed about the research purpose, data use, and their right to withdraw. The study avoids disclosing confidential technical details, personal data, or institutional vulnerabilities that could harm individuals or public organizations. Ethical caution is especially important because AI adoption may involve sensitive issues such as data protection, algorithmic bias, procurement accountability, and public criticism of government systems.

Overall, the qualitative case study method provides a strong methodological foundation for this research. It allows the study to explore AI adoption as a complex administrative and governance phenomenon. The selected location, informants, data collection techniques, thematic analysis, triangulation strategy, and interpretive conclusion-drawing process are aligned with the research title and objectives. Through this method, the study can explain not only whether AI is adopted in public administration, but also how it reshapes accountability, transparency, and public service delivery.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this qualitative case study show that artificial intelligence adoption in public administration is perceived as both an administrative innovation and a governance challenge (Chai & Beh, 2025). Based on interviews with twelve key informants, document analysis, and limited observation of digital service practices, AI adoption in the selected metropolitan local government was generally associated with the ambition to accelerate service delivery, reduce repetitive administrative work, improve complaint classification, support data-driven decision-making, and strengthen monitoring of public service performance. However, the same adoption process also generated concerns regarding unclear accountability, limited algorithmic transparency, uneven staff readiness, potential bias in data processing, dependence on external technology vendors, and uncertainty among frontline officers about how far they should rely on AI-generated recommendations. These findings confirm that AI adoption in public administration cannot be evaluated only through efficiency or modernization indicators. It must be examined as a governance process involving institutional responsibility, public values, human discretion, and citizen trust.

The field data indicate that the main problem of the research lies in the tension between technological acceleration and administrative accountability. Senior managers described AI as a tool for improving responsiveness and reducing bureaucratic delay, while legal, audit, and frontline informants emphasized that the institution had not yet developed sufficiently detailed mechanisms for assigning responsibility when AI-supported recommendations produce errors or when citizens challenge the outcome of digital decisions. This finding is closely related to Agency Theory, which explains the risks of delegation, information asymmetry, and monitoring problems between principals and agents (Una et al., 2025). In this study, the principal-agent relationship becomes more complex because public authority is distributed among citizens, elected officials, public managers, technical staff, vendors, and AI systems. AI does not replace public accountability, but it complicates the route through which responsibility can be traced. This supports previous research showing that algorithmic tools in public agencies create new accountability problems because administrative decisions may be

influenced by technical systems that are difficult to audit or explain (Yamamoto & Schührer, 2023). Engstrom and Ho emphasize that algorithmic systems increasingly perform governance functions in public agencies, making accountability design a central issue rather than an additional technical feature (Balo & Khmelnytskyi, 2023).

The research also found that transparency remains limited at both organizational and citizen levels. Internally, several officers understood the operational function of AI-assisted tools, but not the deeper logic of how classification, prioritization, or recommendations were generated. Externally, citizens generally received service outputs but were not informed in detail about whether AI had been used, what data had been processed, and how they could challenge an AI-assisted decision. This finding shows that transparency in AI-based public administration requires more than public access to digital portals. It requires meaningful explanation, procedural clarity, accessible documentation, and institutional willingness to disclose the role of automated systems (Sain et al., 2025). The problem is consistent with recent debates on public sector AI, where transparency registers and disclosure obligations are introduced but often remain incomplete in implementation. Public reporting on the United Kingdom's algorithmic transparency register, for example, has shown that many systems affecting welfare, immigration, policing, and other public functions were not fully disclosed despite transparency commitments (Clercq, 2023).

The findings further reveal that AI adoption affects public service delivery through both positive and negative pathways. On the positive side, AI-assisted complaint classification helped officers sort citizen reports more quickly, reduce manual workload, and identify recurring service issues. Digital dashboards also enabled managers to monitor service trends and allocate administrative attention to high-volume cases. However, frontline officers reported that AI-generated classifications sometimes failed to capture contextual details, especially when citizens submitted ambiguous, emotional, incomplete, or locally specific complaints. In these situations, human discretion remained necessary. This finding is strongly connected to Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory, which argues that frontline public servants shape policy implementation through discretion in direct interactions with citizens (Hillebrandt, 2024). In the age of AI, discretion does not disappear; rather, it is redistributed between human officers and technical systems. A recent review on AI and street-level bureaucracy similarly argues that predictive analytics, chatbots, and automated systems transform the relationship between discretion, accountability, and organizational control in public administration (Palladino, 2025).

The Technology Acceptance Model also explains the implementation findings. Public officials were more willing to use AI tools when they perceived them as useful for reducing workload, accelerating service response, and improving administrative accuracy. However, acceptance declined when officers perceived the system as difficult to understand, unreliable, legally risky, or inconsistent with citizens' real service problems. This confirms the relevance of Fred D. Davis's Technology Acceptance Model, which emphasizes perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use as key determinants of technology acceptance. Contemporary AI adoption research continues to validate the importance of acceptance factors, while also expanding the model to include trust, AI mindset, perceived risk, and user characteristics. In this study, perceived usefulness was not sufficient by itself. Officers also needed confidence that AI systems were explainable, legally safe, institutionally supported, and aligned with public service ethics.

Table

Table 1 The Title of The Table

Research Dimension	Main Qualitative Finding	Link to Agency Theory	Link to Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory	Link to Technology Acceptance Model	Implementation Meaning
Accountability	Responsibility for AI-supported decisions remains unclear, especially when recommendations involve vendors, data systems, and human officers.	Delegation and information asymmetry expand from human agents to technical and vendor-based systems.	Frontline officers remain responsible to citizens even when decisions are influenced by AI.	Officers are less willing to use AI when responsibility for errors is unclear.	Agencies need clear accountability maps, audit trails, and human review procedures.
Transparency	Citizens and some officers do not fully understand how AI classifications or recommendations are produced.	Principals cannot monitor agents effectively when algorithmic processes are opaque.	Frontline officers struggle to explain service outcomes when system logic is unclear.	Lack of explainability reduces trust and perceived ease of use.	AI systems require public-facing explanation, internal documentation, and disclosure standards.
Public service delivery	AI improves speed and workload management but may miss contextual or complex citizen needs.	Efficiency gains must be balanced with answerability for service outcomes.	Discretion is transformed, not eliminated; officers still interpret citizen cases.	Adoption increases when officers experience AI as useful and reliable.	AI should support, not replace, professional judgment in citizen-facing services.
Institutional readiness	Data quality, staff skills, procurement capacity, and legal guidance remain uneven.	Weak monitoring capacity increases agency costs and accountability risks.	Frontline adaptation depends on training and organizational support.	Low readiness reduces perceived usefulness and increases resistance.	AI adoption requires capacity building, data governance, and interdepartmental coordination.
Research gap	Existing policy ambitions are stronger than practical governance mechanisms.	Accountability models have not fully adapted to algorithmic delegation.	Digital discretion remains under-theorized in local public service settings.	Technology acceptance is often treated technically, not institutionally.	The study proposes integrated governance linking accountability, transparency, and service delivery.

The findings answer the first research question concerning how AI is being adopted in public administration. AI adoption in the selected case is implemented incrementally, mainly through service support tools rather than fully autonomous decision-making. The organization uses AI to classify complaints, support information services, generate service monitoring insights, and assist administrative analysis. This incremental adoption reflects a cautious institutional strategy. Public managers recognize the potential of AI but remain aware that public agencies operate within legal and

political constraints. This pattern is consistent with previous research on public sector AI adoption, which shows that public organizations must navigate a tension between rigid bureaucratic structures and the experimental flexibility required by AI innovation (Boeger, 2024).

The second research question concerns what challenges AI creates for accountability, transparency, and public service delivery. The data show that accountability challenges arise from fragmented responsibility. Public managers approve AI programs, technical officers manage systems, vendors provide platforms, data officers maintain datasets, and frontline officers face citizens. When the AI system performs well, the institution claims innovation; when the system creates risk, responsibility becomes more difficult to assign. This finding directly confirms the relevance of Agency Theory. The accountability problem is not simply that AI is opaque, but that AI adoption multiplies agents and creates layered responsibility. The solution, therefore, cannot rely only on ethical statements. It requires formal accountability mechanisms, including role definition, human-in-the-loop review, procurement accountability, vendor responsibility clauses, data governance protocols, impact assessment, and independent audit (Nam & Bell, 2024).

Transparency challenges arise because AI systems are not always visible to citizens or fully understood by public officials. Informants from the technical division explained that the system could classify complaints and identify service patterns, but frontline officers stated that they sometimes did not know why a complaint was categorized in a particular way. This shows the difference between operational transparency and meaningful transparency. Operational transparency means that the agency knows that a system exists and can observe its output. Meaningful transparency means that relevant actors can understand the logic, limitations, and consequences of AI-supported decisions. The research confirms previous studies warning that transparency and accountability are essential principles for responsible AI because opaque systems may produce harm, bias, and human rights risks (Charalabidis et al., 2024).

Public service delivery challenges are found in the tension between standardization and responsiveness. AI can standardize service workflows, but public problems are often complex, emotional, and context-specific. A citizen complaint about drainage, licensing, health access, or social assistance may require more than classification; it may require interpretation of local conditions, empathy, coordination across agencies, and discretionary judgment. Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory is important here because it explains that service quality depends not only on formal rules but also on how frontline workers interpret citizen needs. The findings suggest that AI should be designed as a decision-support mechanism rather than as a substitute for human administrative judgment. When AI is used to assist sorting, monitoring, and information retrieval, it can improve service delivery. When it is treated as an unquestioned authority, it risks reducing responsiveness and weakening citizen-centered administration.

The research gap identified in the study is confirmed by the empirical findings. Existing public sector AI initiatives often emphasize innovation, efficiency, and digital modernization, but practical mechanisms for accountability, transparency, and service fairness remain underdeveloped. The selected agency had policy enthusiasm and several digital tools, but the governance architecture was still incomplete. For example, informants mentioned the importance of auditability, yet there was no fully mature algorithmic audit system. Managers referred to transparency, but public-facing disclosure about AI use remained limited. Officers used AI-supported tools, but training was uneven and focused more on operational use than on ethical, legal, and accountability implications. This gap supports recent systematic review findings showing that AI can help public institutions work faster and more transparently, but many organizations still struggle with fragmented data, weak system integration, limited digital skills, bias, privacy concerns, and institutional capacity constraints (Telsaç & Arı, 2025).

The findings also show the novelty of this research. The novelty lies in integrating accountability, transparency, and public service delivery into one analytical framework. Previous studies often discuss AI adoption through separate lenses, such as technical implementation, digital innovation, ethical governance, or technology acceptance. This study demonstrates that these dimensions are inseparable in public administration. Accountability determines who must justify AI-supported decisions. Transparency determines whether those decisions can be understood and

challenged. Public service delivery determines whether AI produces value for citizens. Agency Theory, Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory, and the Technology Acceptance Model are therefore not isolated theoretical tools; they form an integrated framework for analyzing responsible AI adoption. Agency Theory identifies the accountability structure, Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory explains the transformation of frontline discretion, and TAM explains the acceptance conditions required for implementation.

The objectives of the study are also supported by the findings. The first objective is to analyze the governance challenges of AI adoption in public administration. The findings show that these challenges include unclear responsibility, limited explainability, weak public disclosure, uneven staff capacity, data quality issues, vendor dependency, and uncertainty regarding human oversight. The second objective is to identify how AI affects accountability, transparency, and public service delivery. The findings show that AI can improve administrative speed and service monitoring, but it may also weaken responsibility and transparency if governance mechanisms are not designed from the beginning. The third objective is to develop a conceptual basis for responsible AI governance. The study achieves this by proposing that AI adoption should be governed through integrated accountability mapping, transparency standards, human discretion safeguards, staff acceptance strategies, and citizen-oriented service evaluation.

The theoretical contribution of the research is found in the extension of classic public administration theories into the AI governance context. Agency Theory is extended from a human principal-agent relationship into a multi-actor and algorithmic accountability relationship. Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory is extended from human discretion in service encounters into hybrid discretion involving human officers and AI systems. The Technology Acceptance Model is extended from individual system acceptance into institutional and ethical acceptance within public organizations. This contribution is significant because AI adoption requires public administration theory to move beyond administrative hierarchy and digital efficiency toward a more complex understanding of algorithmic governance.

The practical benefit of the research is that it provides guidance for public agencies adopting AI. First, agencies should define responsibility before deployment, not after problems occur. Second, they should create documentation explaining what AI systems do, what data they use, what limitations they have, and who can review their outputs. Third, AI should be implemented with human oversight, especially in services affecting rights, benefits, sanctions, eligibility, or access to public resources. Fourth, public agencies should train frontline officials not only to operate AI tools but also to understand their ethical and administrative implications. Fifth, public-facing transparency should be improved through accessible explanations, complaint mechanisms, and appeal procedures. These recommendations are consistent with the finding that responsible AI adoption requires both technical capacity and institutional legitimacy.

The academic benefit of the study lies in its contribution to public administration scholarship. It offers a framework that can be used in future research on AI adoption across different government levels, sectors, and countries. The findings suggest that AI adoption should be studied through the interaction between governance design, administrative discretion, and technology acceptance. This is important because public administration research cannot simply borrow private-sector innovation models. Government AI systems operate within democratic accountability, legal constraints, public scrutiny, and citizen rights. Therefore, academic research should continue to examine how AI changes public authority, administrative legitimacy, and the relationship between citizens and the state.

The discussion of the main problem in relation to previous research shows strong consistency. Previous studies argue that AI adoption in the public sector creates a balance between potential efficiency and risks related to ethics, accountability, transparency, and institutional readiness (Baranov, 2023). The present findings confirm this argument at the organizational level. AI was perceived as useful for service acceleration, but its legitimacy depended on whether citizens and officers could understand, question, and correct AI-supported decisions. This finding strengthens the argument that AI governance in the public sector must be based on public value rather than technological performance alone.

The discussion of the research gap also aligns with previous studies. While AI governance frameworks increasingly emphasize trustworthy AI, the field evidence shows that public organizations still struggle to translate principles into daily administrative routines. The gap is not the absence of ethical language, but the absence of operational mechanisms. Accountability, transparency, fairness, and human oversight are frequently endorsed as principles, but they require concrete procedures, budget allocation, institutional roles, training, monitoring, and evaluation. This study therefore contributes by showing how the gap appears in practice: officers use AI, but do not always understand its logic; managers promote transparency, but disclosure remains limited; agencies seek efficiency, but accountability mechanisms lag behind implementation.

The discussion of the research questions demonstrates that AI adoption is a multidimensional process. The question is not only how public agencies adopt AI, but how adoption reshapes decision-making, discretion, responsibility, and service relations. The study finds that AI adoption is more legitimate when it remains supportive rather than substitutive. In other words, AI should support public officials in identifying patterns, reducing repetitive tasks, and improving service monitoring, but final responsibility should remain with accountable human institutions. This interpretation is consistent with both Agency Theory and Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory because it recognizes that public authority cannot be fully transferred to technical systems.

The discussion of the research objectives shows that the study has achieved its analytical purpose. It identifies governance challenges, explains their theoretical meaning, and proposes practical implications. AI adoption can strengthen public administration when it is combined with accountability mapping, transparency mechanisms, human oversight, training, and citizen feedback. However, AI adoption can weaken public trust when it is implemented as a technological shortcut without institutional safeguards. This conclusion is important for public managers because digital transformation should not be measured only by the number of applications, dashboards, or automated systems introduced, but by their contribution to fair, transparent, accountable, and responsive governance.

The theoretical, practical, and academic benefits of the study are therefore interrelated. Theoretically, the study demonstrates that classic theories remain relevant but need reinterpretation in the era of algorithmic governance. Practically, it provides public agencies with governance-oriented recommendations for responsible AI implementation. Academically, it opens space for future research on comparative AI governance, citizen trust, algorithmic audit, frontline discretion, and institutional capacity. The integration of the three theories provides a stronger foundation for future studies because it connects structural accountability, frontline practice, and user acceptance in one conceptual model.

In conclusion, the results and discussion show that AI adoption in public administration is both promising and problematic. It promises faster services, improved monitoring, and more data-informed administration. At the same time, it creates accountability ambiguity, transparency deficits, and challenges for human discretion in public service delivery. Agency Theory explains why responsibility must be clearly assigned in AI-supported governance. Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory explains why frontline discretion remains essential in citizen-facing services. The Technology Acceptance Model explains why successful implementation depends on usefulness, ease of use, trust, and institutional readiness. The novelty of this research lies in showing that these three theoretical perspectives must be integrated to understand responsible AI adoption. AI in public administration should not be treated as a neutral technical instrument, but as a governance arrangement that must be accountable, transparent, explainable, and oriented toward public service value.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that artificial intelligence adoption in public administration is not merely a technological modernization agenda, but a complex governance transformation that directly affects accountability, transparency, and public service delivery. Based on the results and discussion, AI adoption in the selected public administration context has produced important opportunities for improving administrative efficiency, accelerating service responses, supporting data-based decision-making, and reducing repetitive bureaucratic tasks. However, these benefits are accompanied by serious institutional challenges. The findings show that AI can strengthen public administration only when it is

embedded within clear accountability structures, transparent procedures, reliable data governance, meaningful human oversight, and citizen-oriented service mechanisms.

The central finding of this research is that accountability remains the most critical challenge in AI-based public administration. The results indicate that responsibility for AI-supported decisions is often distributed across public managers, technical officers, frontline bureaucrats, data units, vendors, and automated systems. This creates uncertainty when AI-generated recommendations lead to errors, misclassification, unfair service treatment, or public dissatisfaction. From the perspective of Agency Theory, AI adoption expands the traditional principal-agent problem because authority is no longer delegated only to human officials but is also mediated by algorithmic systems and external technology providers. Therefore, public agencies must not treat AI as a neutral administrative tool. They must define who is responsible for system design, data quality, decision review, service outcomes, and citizen complaints.

This study also concludes that transparency in AI adoption remains incomplete. The findings show that public officials may understand how to operate AI-supported systems, but they do not always understand how the systems generate classifications, recommendations, or decisions. Citizens, meanwhile, often receive service outcomes without sufficient information about whether AI has been used, what data have been processed, and how they can challenge an AI-assisted decision. This condition demonstrates that transparency must go beyond digital access or publication of general policy statements. Meaningful transparency requires accessible explanations, internal documentation, audit trails, disclosure standards, and appeal mechanisms. Without these instruments, AI adoption may improve service speed while weakening public understanding and democratic oversight.

In relation to public service delivery, the study finds that AI has practical value when used as a supportive instrument rather than as a substitute for human judgment. AI-assisted complaint classification, digital dashboards, and automated information services can help public agencies respond faster and manage service workloads more effectively. Nevertheless, the findings also show that citizen problems are often contextual, emotional, incomplete, and administratively complex. Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory helps explain this condition by showing that frontline discretion remains essential in public service delivery. AI may standardize administrative processes, but human officers are still needed to interpret citizen needs, correct system limitations, and ensure that service decisions remain fair and responsive.

The study further concludes that successful AI implementation depends on acceptance, trust, and organizational readiness. The Technology Acceptance Model explains that public officials are more likely to use AI when they perceive it as useful, easy to operate, reliable, and institutionally supported. However, acceptance decreases when AI is seen as legally risky, difficult to explain, technically unreliable, or disconnected from the realities of public service work. Therefore, AI adoption requires not only technological investment but also training, ethical guidance, legal clarity, leadership support, and continuous evaluation.

Overall, the results and discussion confirm the research gap identified in this study. Existing public sector AI initiatives often emphasize innovation and efficiency, while governance mechanisms for accountability, transparency, and service fairness remain underdeveloped. The novelty of this research lies in integrating Agency Theory, Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory, and the Technology Acceptance Model to explain AI adoption as a public governance challenge. Through this integrated perspective, the study shows that responsible AI adoption must combine clear responsibility, explainable systems, preserved human discretion, organizational acceptance, and public value.

In conclusion, artificial intelligence can improve public administration when it is designed and governed responsibly. However, if adopted without strong institutional safeguards, AI may create accountability ambiguity, transparency deficits, and service delivery risks. Public agencies should therefore ensure that AI supports democratic administration rather than replacing it. The future of AI in public administration depends not only on technological sophistication, but on the ability of government institutions to make AI accountable, transparent, explainable, inclusive, and oriented toward better public service delivery.

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