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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND HUMAN INTERACTION FROM THE NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVE: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the integration of AI and human interaction into the Nigerian social work system, including the opportunities and associated challenges related to the socio-economic, cultural, and technological realities in Nigeria. AI has the potential to supplement existing social work practices and enhance service delivery. By examining existing literature, ongoing trends and developments, as well as situational factors. This paper argues that even though AI holds substantial promise in overcoming the social service delivery challenges faced by Nigeria, including poor infrastructure, scarce resources, and local demand, the introduction of AI solutions should be culturally sensitive and culturally suitable. The practice of social work in Nigeria is based on the community models and infusion of AI should not compromise these models. It is recommended that Nigerian social workers should develop technological capacity and champion inclusive AI development that addresses the digital divide, language diversity, and solutions that are culturally sensitive. Furthermore, this paper also highlights the need to implement the Ubuntu philosophy which places special emphasis on communal values, empathy, and mutual respect, in order to make sure that the AI-based interventions are properly in line with the social welfare objectives of the country.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Social Work Practice, Nigeria, Digital divide, Cultural Competence, Ubuntu philosophy.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is encountering numerous problems in social work and these issues are worsened by the speed with which the world is embracing technological change (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Some of the reasons why Nigeria is a complex environment to implement artificial intelligence (AI) in social work include a large population of over 220 million people, over 40 percent of the population being affected by poverty social work, and lack of technological infrastructures (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). COVID-19 increased the digitalization of a range of industries, social work included, which made both the opportunities and obstacles to using technology to manage social needs apparent. The process of introducing AI technologies into global social work practice in the international community was not negative in any way, and its implementation into the system of the Nigerian socio-cultural and economic environment can be considered with certain reservations (Okafor and Adebayo, 2024). Although African values have persistently been incorporated in Nigerian social work, namely, community-based care and Ubuntu philosophy (Nworu, 2023), the integration of these two perspectives with new technologies is urgently needed to enhance the outcomes of the services provided and address vulnerable populations more effectively.

Western practices have a long history of impact on Nigerian social work development, albeit adjusted to the domestic context and combining the official standard of social work with the local knowledge systems (Ankoma-Sey and Mupedziswa, 2018). The emergence of AI-related technologies is novel, hence, it requires social workers to balance innovation and cultural relevance, among other factors, as well as to address local needs. This article examines the ways in which social workers in Nigeria can successfully incorporate AI without undermining their professional efficacy and cultural integrity. This paper argues that effective AI integration in the context of social work in Nigeria should be Africanized, meaning that it should be focused on community, empowerment, and culture preservation. The plan should be mindful of the digital divide and language gap, social-economic disparity in Nigeria, that the promise of AI exploitation could also be utilized to support the provision of additional access, quality and efficacy of services (Mbachu and Okoli, 2023).

Therefore, AI can contribute significantly to improving the delivery of services to the social work setting in Nigeria, but it must be culturally aware of local values, traditions, and challenges. Nigeria can embrace the positive aspects of AI, and still maintain the spirit of community-based care that characterizes its social work practice by ensuring a balanced and culturally appropriate approach.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Nigeria's Social Work Framework.

Nigeria developed its social work practice considerably since the advent of the colonial era and combined Western practice with local knowledge and practices (Okoye, 2022). Nigerian social work is currently struggling with multiple issues, such as insufficient government funding, poor infrastructure, excessive casework, and a variety of cultural backgrounds that may need different approaches (Adedokun and Balogun, 2023)). The profession functions in a socio-economic context where unemployment levels in the country are high, there is modernization pressure, and poverty is endemic (Adedokun and Balogun, 2023). The traditional social support structures such as extended family structures and interventions rolled out within the community still remain important in the delivery of social services. These local systems might not be overridden by AI applications, but rather supplemented by them. The Nigeria social work with populations living in both urban and rural areas that have different education levels, technological literacy

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and access to modern facilities. Such heterogeneity also presents some difficulties in the implementation of AI and requires structural flexibility that can be applied in many technological settings (Umaru and Mohammed, 2024). The application of AI technology will vary in the various geopolitical regions of Nigeria and therefore, region specific feasibility studies are necessary.

2.2 Technology Adoption in Nigeria

The rate of technological changes is rapidly growing in Nigeria, due to mobile phones and the internet already covering 90 and 70 percent of the population respectively (Nigerian Communications Commission, 2024). Nonetheless, there is a huge gap between towns and cities, and rural populations do not always have access to internet and other technologies required to use AI. Nigeria is a technologically advanced country, so the fintech industry has been technologically oriented thus far, and mobile banking and e-payment have shown that the nation can adopt the technology (Adeyemi and Ogunniyi, 2023).

However, these success stories provide a solid road map on how AI can be applied to social work and that is, they must address challenges relating to infrastructures, be user friendly and must be culturally relevant. There is still a barrier to digital literacy with a large disparity in age, education, and location. The less technologically competent group of people tends to be the old age demographic and the rural region, and the more digitally capable group is the young urban citizen (Olumide and Akinola, 2024). To prevent the escalation of the already existing inequalities, the social workers should address these inequalities when introducing the AI technologies.

2.3 AI in the African Setting.

Although there is not much data on the applications of artificial intelligence to social work in Africa, recent studies on the integration of AI in social works in South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana provide useful information to Nigeria (Mhlanga and Moloi, 2023). The area of healthcare and educational support and crisis response systems has had the most attention and with varying levels of successes depending on the type of technological systems and the acceptance of the systems by the users. Artificial intelligence-powered mobile health (mHealth) platforms have already proven the ability to deliver easy access to health care data, and mental health services in the areas that experience shortages (Adebola and Taiwo, 2023). These applications only point out how AI can help solve service delivery problems in an environment such as Nigeria, but also raise issues of implementation difficulties, such as language barriers and technological constraints. Educational applications of AI, including automated tutoring applications and language translation tools, have been deployed throughout Africa, where it has offered a model upon which social work applications are built, especially in youth and people with disability school-based programs and services (Ogundipe and Fashola, 2024).

3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Ubuntu Philosophy and AI Integration

The Ubuntu philosophy is often summarized in the phrase ‘I am because we are’, it explains the interconnectedness of individual well-being with that of the community. Among other theories, one that can be theoretically applied to implement AI in African social work could be the Ubuntu philosophy that made the concept of interdependence and shared humanity a reality (Mbeki, 2023). The I am because we are principle highlights the communal aspect of African communities, and suggests that AI technologies cannot be used to destroy a sense of community but rather improve it. This framework challenges the individualistic vision of AI adoption that is dominant in the Western mind-set, which embraces AI systems that produce community capacity, allow people to make

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decisions together, and support traditional helping networks (Asante and Gyekye, 2024). Ubuntu principles help Nigerian social workers to assess AI-based applications on the basis of the contribution to community unification and overall welfare. Additionally, Ubuntu focuses on human dignity and human respect and promotes AI systems that ensure respectful relations between users and providers (Nkomo and Sehoole, 2023). This especially applies to Nigeria where the value of traditional social hierarchy and respect to elders are still crucial cultural values.

3.2 Afrocentric Social Work Theory

The Afrocentric social work theory focuses on African worldviews, values, and experiences in different solutions to social problems (Schiele, 2023). According to this framework, AI applications in the field of social work in Nigeria must be based on African cultural values and solve problems in an African way. Afrocentric social work lays emphasis on collective care, spirituality, and holism, as well as, offers a mechanism to direct implementation of AI without neglecting culture (Adeleke and Adeyemi, 2024). Artificial intelligence needs to be capable of making decisions jointly, with references to spirituality and culture, and within the context of their larger communities. Additionally, the framework allows self-determination and cultural empowerment to take place in some way that would allow African agency and authority to facilitate the provision of social services and not to generate them (Makofane, 2023). Nigerian social workers must ensure that AI can be used to serve the needs of Africans, so that they are less reliant and that they gain ownership locally.

3.3 Indigenous Knowledge Systems Integration

The system of indigenous knowledge has always been a part of Nigerian social work, producing hybrid solutions, culturally embedded and locally acceptable (Egharevba and Iruonagbe, 2022). Such integration can serve as an example of integrating AI technologies in a manner that will complement, and not substitute, the social work system in Nigeria. The potential benefits of AI technology could be realized in areas such as traditional medicine and dispute management/community support systems (Okoro and Eze, 2024). Artificial intelligence can serve as a supportive tool for traditional healers by providing access to accurate health information, diagnostic insights, and evidence-based knowledge, while still allowing them to maintain indigenous practices and the trust of their communities..

Intellectual property and culture appropriation rights will also be addressed when transferring the indigenous knowledge to AI, and the possibility of commercializing the traditional knowledge should be examined (Adamu and Hassan, 2023). Nigerian social workers have to promote ethical development of AI that does not ignore the traditional knowledge but communities should gain accordingly.

4.0 CURRENT STATE OF AI IN NIGERIAN SOCIAL WORK

4.1 Government Initiatives and Policy Framework

Nigeria has already shown interest in AI development, and already the following are present in the country: the National Artificial Intelligence Research Scheme and the Digital Nigeria Strategy (Federal Ministry of Communications and Digital Economy, 2023). These policies recognize that AI has the potential to address developmental challenges and the need to build capacity and develop infrastructure. Still, the policies directly addressing the use of AI in social services are quite few, leaving some gaps in the regulations that cannot be addressed in a successful manner (Adebisi and Ogunleye, 2024). The economic growth and technological advancement are the main focus of the existing government policies, not the real-world use of AI related to social welfare. This brings out

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the need to ensure that social workers in the country are encouraged to propagate policies that are inclusive of the unique demands of the social service provision. AI applications have not been embraced fully by National Social Investment Programme (that has incorporated certain technological features digital payment systems to deliver condition cash transfers) (National Social Investment Programme Office, 2024). The presence of these programs is a potential venue to increase the scope of AI application, creating both opportunities and threats to the delivery of social services using technology.

4.2 Healthcare and Mental Health Applications of AI

In Nigeria, AI technology is also being implemented in healthcare institutions, particularly when it comes to patient management and diagnostic imaging (Oladipo and Adegbola, 2023). Little has been done regarding AI implementation in mental health services, which have historically been underdeveloped in Nigeria despite a considerable potential of bridging service gaps via AI-powered chatbots and teletherapy platforms. Other private healthcare service providers have launched AI-based mental health screeners and online mental health counseling, but these are accessible only to urban, educated, and economically privileged groups (Bello and Yakubu, 2024). These initial applications identify the opportunities and the shortcomings of AI in mental health services in Nigeria. Healthcare facilities have been interested in social workers using AI applications that may help them assess patients, coordinate care, and plan discharges. However, they have cast doubt on the effectiveness of the technology, the appropriateness of the culture, and how well it can integrate with already-established health care systems (Ogbuagu and Nwosu, 2023). Moreover, healthcare social workers have not been adequately trained and supported with AI, which has limited the application of AI in their practice.

4.3 Integration of Artificial Intelligence into Education and Youth Services

In the area of education, AI applications in Nigeria have been primarily applied to the domain of learning management systems and content delivery, with few applications to social work services (Ajayi and Omolola, 2024). In Nigeria, the opportunities of AI integration in learning settings are limited because school-based social work programs have not yet been developed as in other countries. The development of AI-based career guidance systems and skills assessment tools have been discussed within the framework of youth development programs, but all these practices have so far been available only in the urban environment where the necessary technological base is established (Ibrahim and Suleiman, 2024). The applications promise a new way to expand the range of social work services to underserved youth groups but also highlight the issue of access and coverage.

Youth-focused non-governmental organizations have been interested in AI-based program evaluation, needs assessment and service matching. These, however, have not been implemented due to lack of technical experience and financial resources (Adamu and Bello, 2023). The challenge of capacity building and mobilization of resources continues to challenge the expansion of AI in youth services.

5.0 OPPORTUNITIES AND BENEFITS OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

5.1 Addressing Challenges in Service Delivery.

Nigeria is a large geographical location, and there are not enough social workers in it, which creates acute issues connected to the provision of the service, which AI technologies will help to solve (Okafor, 2024). Teletherapy, crisis intervention chatbots, and remote assessment AI programs would allow social workers to reach rural populations with limited geographic

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access to services and offer better accessibility to social work services. AI applications based on mobile phones, given the high mobile phone penetration in Nigeria, may be used to provide social services via commonly used applications (Adeyemi and Ogunniyi, 2023). This would provide direct access to information, assistance and intervention services, particularly at crisis times when more traditional services may be unavailable or overloaded. Another way AI can help resolve human resources issues is automating activities like case evaluations, and decision support to social workers with large caseloads (Umaru and Mohammed, 2024). This efficiency boost would allow social workers to spend their time on complicated cases that demand the human element and ability to build relationships.

5.2 How Culture and Language is Impacted

The linguistic diversity of the country not only defines it, but the service delivery as well, and AI technologies will ensure the solution to the problem as, in Nigeria, one can find over 500 languages (Olumide and Akinola, 2024). Translators with automated services and interfaces that are culturally modified can overcome communication barriers between clients and social workers speaking different languages. The voice recognition and natural language processing features can also be adjusted to recognize languages and dialects of Nigeria, thus, allowing the AI apps to become more accessible to a larger audience (Ogundipe and Fashola, 2024). This technological change may serve to maintain the local languages and increase the availability of contemporary social services. Nigerian-friendly AI interfaces may incorporate cultural elements, such as symbols, narrative methods, and dialects commonly used by people in different Nigerian communities (Nkomo and Sehoole, 2023). This kind of cultural sensitivity can increase the interaction between users with AI applications and does not contradict local norms and values.

5.3 How AI can Improve Data-Driven Decision Making

To improve evidence-based practice in social work in Nigeria, AI can help analyse data on service delivery to determine which interventions will be effective and how the client will respond (Mbachu and Okoli, 2023). This quantitative approach may help improve service delivery and provide sponsors and other stakeholders with accountability data. Predictive analytics might be used to target those individuals and communities who might develop different types of social issues and implement interventions that might prevent the escalation and cost of a social problem (Adebola and Taiwo, 2023). Such a proactive strategy would prove quite useful in combating the high poverty levels in Nigeria, unemployment and social instability. The systems based on AI-assessment can monitor the programs and also measure the outputs that can provide the information regarding the efficiency of the offered services in real-time and enable the timely corrections (Egharevba and Iruonagbe, 2022). Such systems would improve program accountability and assist in supporting evidence-based funding decisions.

6.0 CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTATION

6.1 Digital Divide and Infrastructure Limitations

The digital divide is one of the biggest barriers to the implementation of AI in social services in Nigeria (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Rural regions usually have poor internet connection, power, and the technology required to use AI applications. This has a disproportionate impact on the vulnerable groups that social services are supposed to assist. Low-income people who are most likely to require social services also have the barriers of access to smartphones, computers, and internet services (Adedokun and Balogun, 2023). This challenge makes it possible that the people who need AI-enabled services the most might be

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the ones that cannot afford it. Another concern related to the infrastructure constraint regards frequent power interruptions and unreliable internet connection when providing AI services regularly (Nigerian Communications Commission, 2024). The AI application needs to be built to work well within low-bandwidth conditions and intermittent connectivity challenges.

6.2 Culture and Ethical Issues.

Some AI applications might be viewed skeptically by traditional Nigerian cultures, especially those that disrupt established social hierarchies or conventional ways of doing things (Okoro and Eze, 2024). The kind of cultural sensitivities that social workers should negotiate is that which encourages positive technological changes that do not violate the traditional values. Close-knit communities require anonymity that is hard to maintain, which is why privacy and confidentiality are particularly sensitive (Asante and Gyekye, 2024). When AI systems gather and process personal information, it could be an issue in a society where close bonds and trust play a major role. In addition to basic translation, there are also culture-specific concepts and idioms that may create a language barrier that an AI system will not be able to translate with the required level of accuracy (Adeleke and Adeyemi, 2024). These are the negative factors that may lead to the deficiency of knowledge or culturally inattentive reactions and is unable to justify the introduction of AI interventions.

6.3 Capacity and Resource Limitations

In Nigeria, education programs in the fields of social work lack the room to train practitioners in AI applications and digital literacy (Okoye, 2022). The technological skills required to implement AI effectively are not widespread among most current practitioners, and they will have to be taught, trained, and professionally developed. Social service organizations lack the financial means to invest in AI technologies, training and capacity development (Ogbuagu and Nwosu, 2023). A lack of government investment in social work means that most financial resources are focused on urgent service provision, and there is no spare capacity to invest in technological improvements. In most Nigerian environments, there is a lack of technical support and maintenance, which poses a risk that the AI systems will become inoperative without further maintenance (Bello and Yakubu, 2024). This drawback requires close attention in terms of sustainability and the development of local capacities in the planning of AI implementation.

7.0 THE ROLE OF NIGERIAN SOCIAL WORKERS

7.1 Cultural Brokers and Technology Mediators

Another assumption is that the Nigerian social workers will be turned into the brokers of culture (Mbeki, 2023), and AI must be incorporated in that aspect without losing the concept of culture and traditional support systems (Mbeki, 2023). This requires a deep understanding of not only the technology capabilities but also the cultural sensitivities so that social workers can help clients apply and use the technology in a way that will have a positive impact on their social services without offending the culture (Makofane, 2023). Social workers need to learn how to translate technological concepts in culturally accessible means that can appeal to local communities. Community involvement will be critical when social workers endeavor to instill trust and acceptance of the AI application by the traditional communities (Ankoma-Sey and Mupedziswa, 2018). This would mean showing how AI technologies can be used to complement and not to substitute the traditional helping systems and to have real and visible benefits to people living in the community.

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7.2 Advocates for Inclusive AI Development in social works

The needs of the localities, cultural values, and social justice issues are the primary advocacy specialty of Nigerian social workers and should be considered in the development of AI (Schiele, 2023). Such advocacy should cut across technology design, policy-making, and implementation planning. The language inclusion approach assumes cooperation with AI developers and requesting them to code the Nigerian languages and expressions related to Nigerian culture into AI (Olumide and Akinola, 2024). Social workers should introduce the cultural competencies that will usher in AI because cultural and social justice advocacy should be positively framed to allow tech to decrease but not enlarge social inequalities (Adamu and Hassan, 2023). The guardians must be social workers who will ensure that AI systems are applied fairly.

8.0 EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF AI FOR NIGERIAN SOCIAL WORK

8.1 Curriculum Development and Integration

Technological content should be included in the programs of Nigerian social work education without losing a cultural competence and indigenous knowledge systems focus (Okoye, 2022). This should be absorbed with a fine balance between culture and innovation. The introductory courses must give a brief touch on digital technologies impact on Nigerian societies in various cultural and socio-economic backgrounds (Egharevba and Iruonagbe, 2022). Students should be aware of the opportunities AI provides, as well as what cultural factors should be taken into account in its deployment. Training on AI applications, which can be utilized in the social work practice in Nigeria and which is culture-adaptive and situation-specific, must be included in practice courses (Adebisi and Ogunleye, 2024).

The students need to be practically exposed to AI devices, and the same time, they need to be allowed to think critically to determine the appropriateness of technologies and at the same time, have organizations which are already using the AI applications to give the student the opportunity to work with the technology-enhanced practice at the same time and closely supervised and assisted with the learning (Ibrahim and Suleiman, 2024). Such collaborations need to strike a balance between innovation and education and student safety.

8.2 Faculty Development and Institutional Capacity

The faculty development should meet the technological competency requirement of social work teachers without interfering with their knowledge of conventional practice approaches (Ajayi and Omolola, 2024). This should focus on synergy as opposed to substitution of existing knowledge and skills. In order to develop the institutional capacity, the technological infrastructure, software license, and technical support required to use AI enhanced education must be invested in (Adamu and Bello, 2023). The Nigerian institutions have serious resource limitations that will need to be overcome by collaborating and developing innovative methods of funding. One can support a chance to acquire AI experience and resources and make the learning content topical to the culture and applicable to the context with the help of collaboration with technological institutions and players around the globe (Mhlanga and Moloi, 2023).

9.0 POLICY AND PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 National AI Strategy for Social Services

National strategy must be adopted nationwide in Nigeria to apply AI to social service that would overcome the problems of infrastructure and capacity building,

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and ethics (Federal Ministry of Communications and Digital Economy, 2023). This strategy should be developed through a process coordinated with social workers, community members and technology gurus. The policy frameworks must also approve data security, data privacy, and AI accountability and must have the authority to allow useful AI use (Adebisi and Ogunleye, 2024). Such sets of frameworks will need to be adjusted to both legal and cultural aspects of Nigeria and be compliant with international ethical AI development criteria. The funding schemes will have to consider AI applications to address social justice and to benefit populations of vulnerability rather than operating on efficiency or cost-cutting criteria only (National Social Investment Programme Office, 2024). Social workers should promote priorities that response to professional values and community needs in terms of funding.

9.2 Professional Standards and Regulations

Professional organizations are expected to respond to the competence requirements, ethical requirements, and quality assurance policies by coming up with AI advanced standards of social work practice (Okafor, 2024). These standards must be culturally based and must comply with the international professional standards. Licensing and certification policies and regulations could also be updated to include AI related competence and ensure that technological needs do not act as a barrier to practitioners who work with traditional communities (Ogbuagu and Nwosu, 2023).

The continuation requirements must contain AI-related information and still offer flexible delivery approaches that may accommodate practitioners across geographical and technological settings (Okoye, 2022).

9.3 Research and Evaluation Priorities

The proposed directions of AI development in the future include culturally unique applications, the problem of applications in small contexts, and the impacts of AI on the existing social support system (Mbachu and Okoli, 2023). This study needs to use community members as partners and not subjects. When assessing the systems, the quality of technologies and the cultural appropriateness of AI applications will be considered, and the indicators, which will be considered in the assessment systems, should be based on the values and priorities of the Nigeria population (Umaru and Mohammed, 2024). Such frameworks must have measures of community-defined success and wellness. The international research interaction must be structured in a manner that the Nigerian view must be included in the global know-how and the global skill and resources must be applied (Ankoma-Sey and Mupedziswa, 2018).

10. FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

10.1 Indigenous Artificial Intelligence Development

There are emerging opportunities of social work collaboration and engagement where potential African specific AI applications are developing at the local technology firms and in higher education institutions (Olumide and Akinola, 2024). The design stage may be integrated in indigenous development using African languages, cultural values, and social structures. The innovation of AI could also save and develop old types of knowledge systems and incorporate new technology expertise (Nkomo and Sehoole, 2023). Such alliances would make AI development relevant to social work and community. The African Union AI projects provide examples of mutual development that can be used to positively influence the social work process in Nigeria and contribute to additional technological advancement in Africa (Mbeki, 2023). This would give rise to AI applications that would be natural and acceptable to Nigerian users and offer high-tech functionality.

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10.2 Regional and Continental Cooperation.

The leadership role of Nigeria in Africa puts the nation in the position of shaping the continental response to AI in social services (Makofane, 2023). The regional cooperation would support the opportunities to share resources and knowledge, as well as to develop policies coordinated among African nations. These continental initiatives should be addressed by social workers to incorporate social service viewpoints. Knowledge transfer of AI applications in various African settings could be supported by pan-African social work organizations to help countries learn about experiences of other ones and implement what works in the local context (Ankoma-Sey and Mupedziswa, 2018). Social impact applications are increasingly becoming the focus of startup programs and innovation incubators that provide social workers with a chance to fund and technical support AI development projects (Okafor, 2024).

Nigerian social workers can also become social entrepreneurs to create AI apps that can solve local social issues and build a sustainable business model (Adeyemi and Ogunniyi, 2023). This entrepreneurship may have social work skills and technological advancement together. Artificial intelligence in the practice of social work in Nigeria is a historic opportunity and a complex problem that must be approached with much sensitivity to technological, cultural and socio-economic factors. Such programs may help close the divide between social work practice and technology development. Social impact bonds and other new financing mechanisms, which can allow individuals to experience visible social gains in addition to monetary gains to investors, can serve to facilitate the implementation of AI (Federal Ministry of Communications and Digital Economy, 2023). Such funding strategies would help to ensure that AI development becomes more sustainable and scalable.

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