

Online Platforms and In-Person Public Services: Improving Citizen Trust, Satisfaction, and Uptake with New Public Sector Technologies

Nuole Chen (MIT) | Salim Kombo (Busara) | Nathaniel Rabb (MIT) | Leonard Waweru (Busara) | Alisa Zomer (MIT) | Lily L. Tsai (MIT)



Introduction

As governments around the world increasingly digitize, citizen-facing public services naturally follow. However, little research has directly compared the online and in-person modes of public service delivery, which hinders understanding of how digitization affects government-citizen interactions (Lindgren, Madsen, Hofmann, & Melin, 2019). We conduct a study in Kenya to consider how in-person and online service modes impact citizens' trust in government and uptake of public services. Kenya is a context well suited to in-person versus online comparisons because the country's in-person Huduma Centres and online eCitizen portal are widely used and offer many of the same government services.

Among those who have recently used both eCitizen and Huduma Centres, we expect that people primed to think about their eCitizen experience will perceive the government as having higher capacity and people primed to think about their Huduma Centre experience will perceive that the government as being well-intentioned. Why do we expect this?



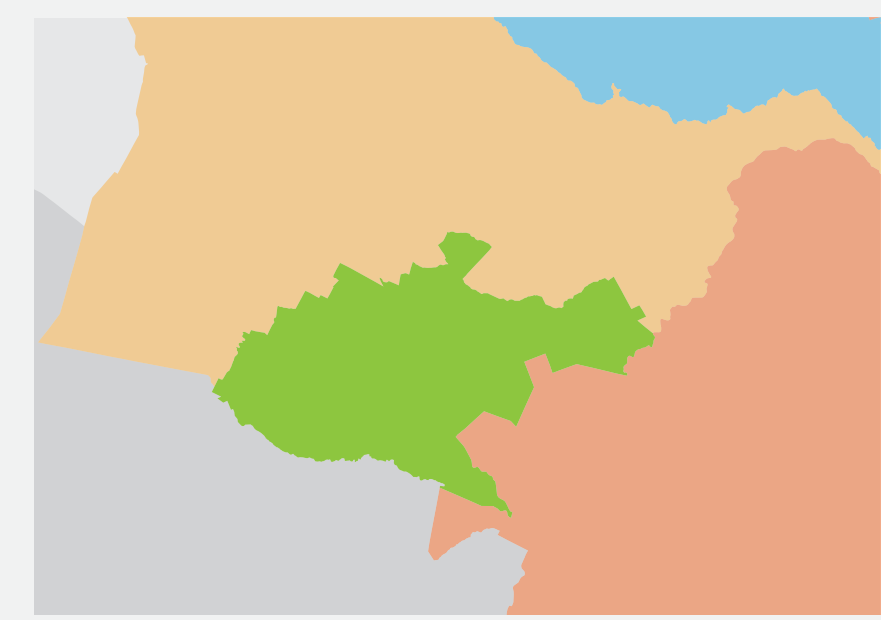
Online services can demonstrate capacity because they depend on technical competence.



Huduma Centres are incentivized to have good citizen interactions (and good customer service) which allows civil servants to show their intent.

Methods

We tested this hypothesis in a survey experiment of respondents who had recently used both in-person and online services (N = 2,860).



Respondents

- Nairobi Metropolitan Area
- Including neighbouring counties:
 - Kajiado
 - Kiambu
 - Machakos
 - Murang'a

Data collection

January-February 2024

Recruitment methods

1. Purposive through Busara's respondent pool
2. Snowballing

RESPONDENT POOL

Largely youth (>90% are 34 or younger) Mostly male (~70%) Currently students (43%) Gone to university (66%)

← Had high trust in general →

Sampling

n=2,860

Total number of respondents included in the study

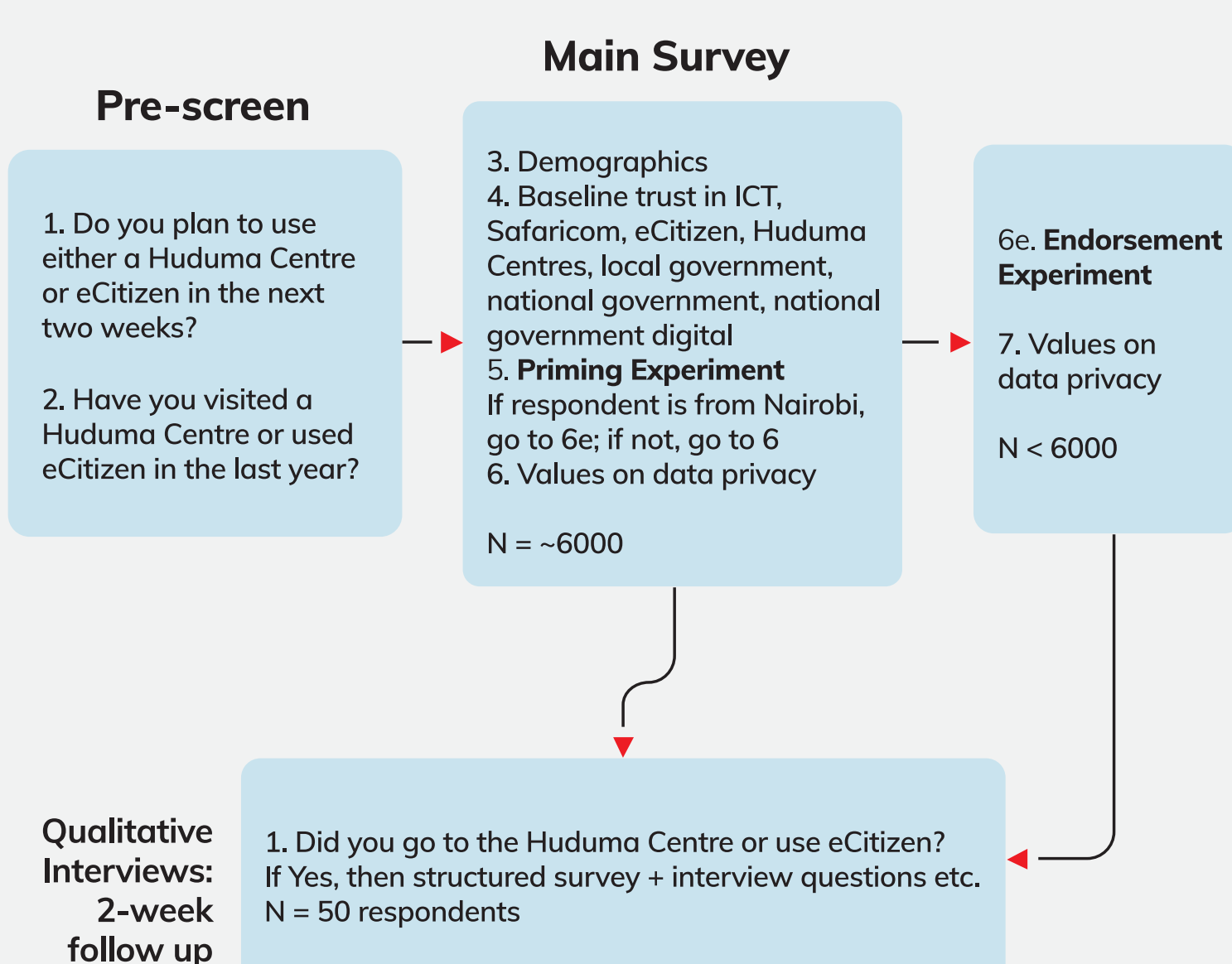
From this planned recruitment that was intended to be representative of the area, we had a sample of n = 1,311. An unplanned recruitment also occurred through snowball sampling, resulting in a much larger group of respondents (n = 10,646). The experimental group constituted those who had used both eCitizen and a Huduma Centre (n=2,860).

Randomization

Respondents who used both eCitizen and a Huduma Centre and thus were randomized into one of two treatments. In these treatments, they were prompted to recall one or the other event adapted from Geiselman, Fisher, MacKinnon, and Holland (1986)'s cognitive interview procedure. The groups were the Huduma Centre condition (n=1,454) and the eCitizen condition (n=1,406). A test for balance was conducted between the two groups which found treatment groups are balanced across age, gender, education, employment, assets, and county.

Procedure

Surveys were administered through SurveyCTO between January 18 and February 20, 2024, conducted online, and available in English or Swahili.



Measurement

The key outcome measures we examine are:

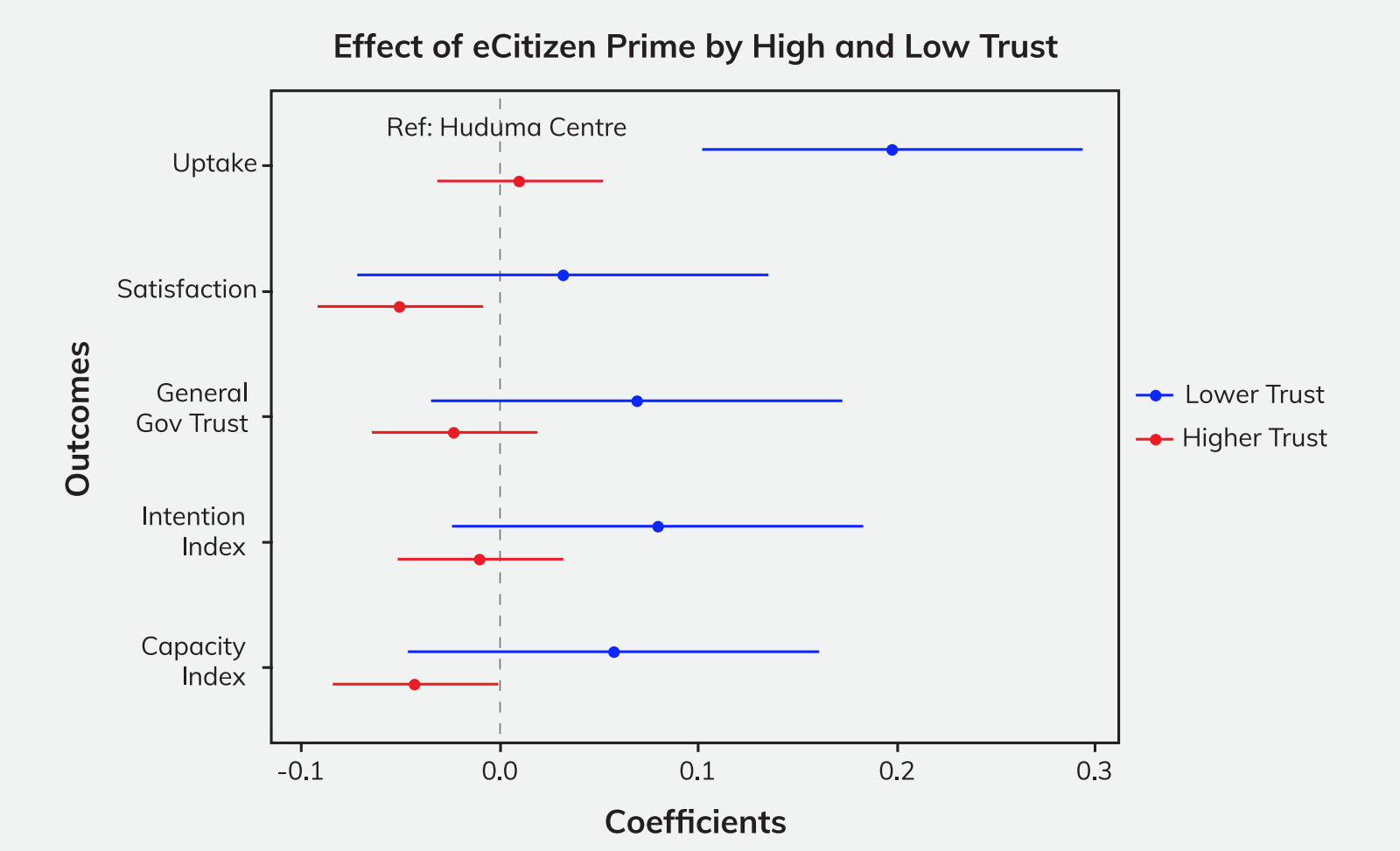
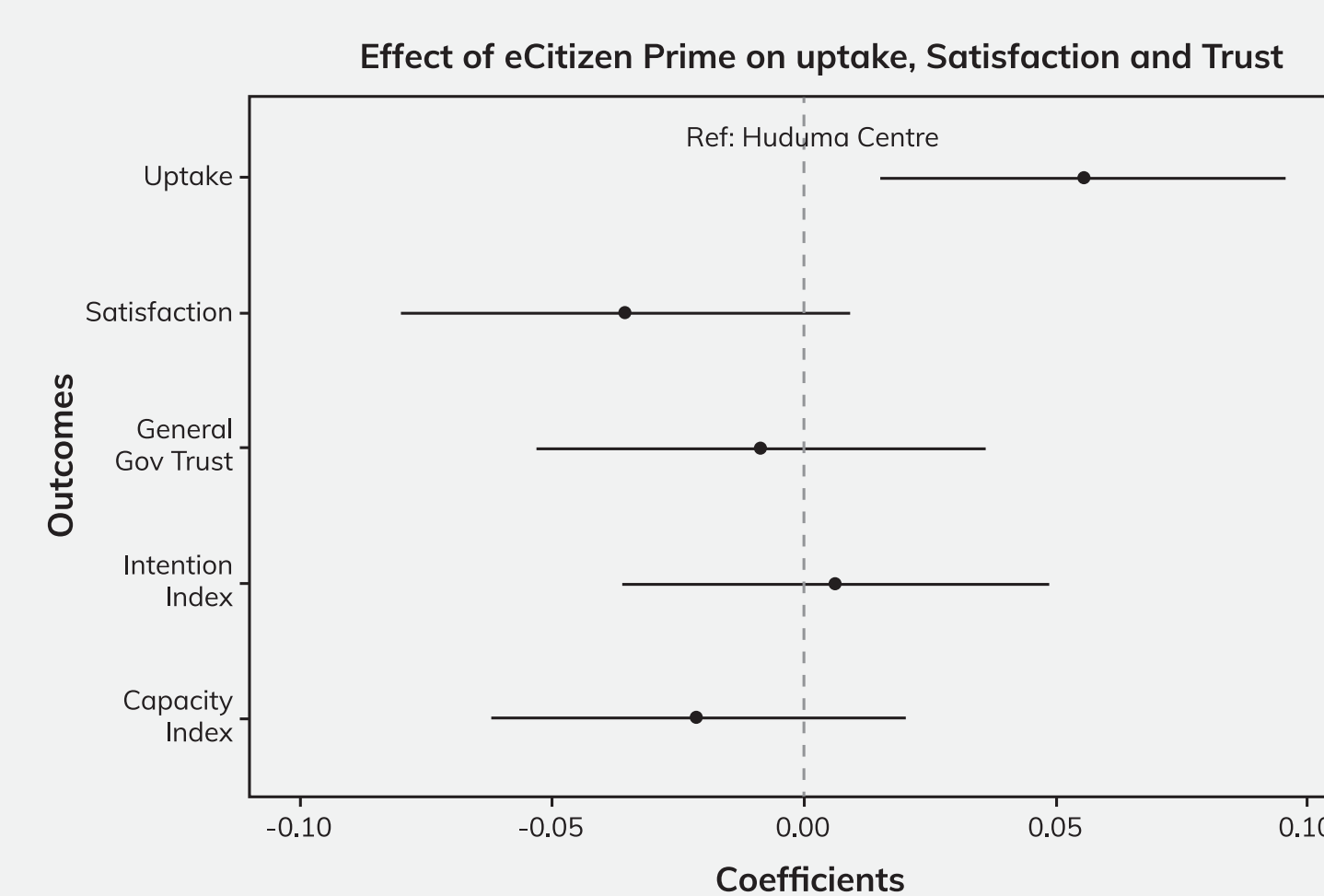
- Trust in government intention (trust in what the government is willing to do)
- Trust in government capacity (trust in what the government is able to do)
- General trust in national government
- Satisfaction with service (informed by Welch et al., 2005)
- Intention to reuse the service (informed by Levi & Stoker, 2000)

Results

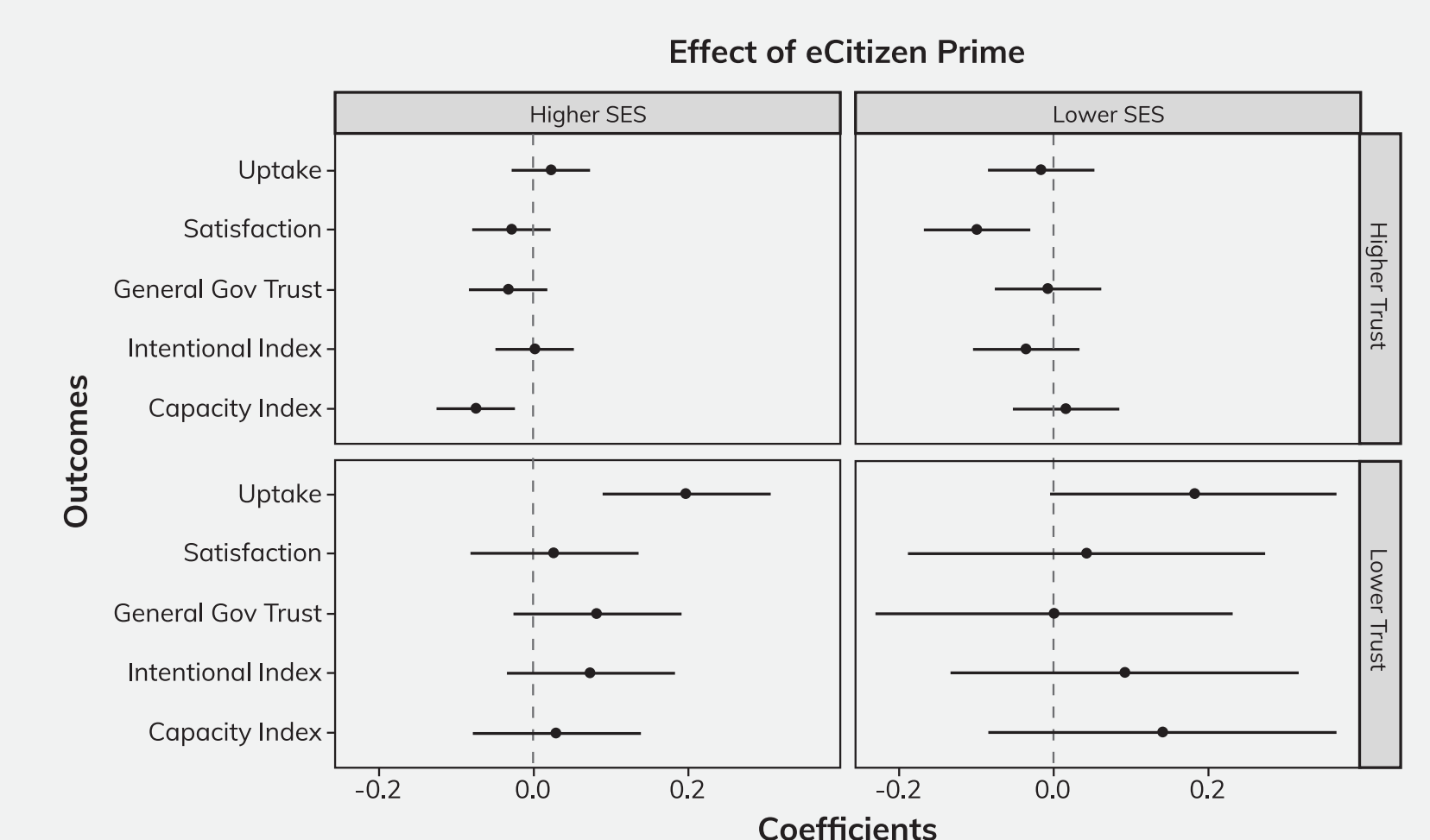
Interestingly, heterogeneous effects reveal that people with low baseline trust in government are much more likely to reuse online services, while people with high trust in government were more satisfied with in-person services and perceived greater government capacity after in-person experiences.

Finding 1: We do not find support for one mode of service affecting perceived intention or capacity more than the other, but we do find that citizens are more willing to reuse online than in-person services.

Finding 2: People with low baseline trust in government are much more likely to reuse online services, while people with high trust in government were more satisfied with in-person services and perceived greater government capacity after in-person experiences.



Finding 3: Regardless of SES, people with lower trust in government will use eCitizen more than Huduma Centres and people with high trust in government like eCitizen less than Huduma Centres.



Conclusions

Conclusion 1: Since people who have higher trust in government prefer in-person services (like Huduma Centres), moving to more online services (like on eCitizen) may have the unintended effect of decreasing general trust in government.

The result suggests that the two modes of service delivery serve different segments of the population, a finding with direct policy implications. It has been argued that governments' responsibility to serve all citizens requires understanding the effects of service delivery modes on outcomes other than traditional metrics of program success like cost/benefit ratios (Kim et al., 2019). Since digitization of government services is all but inevitable (Epstein, 2022; UN DESA, 2022), and in some cases there is pressure to make services available only by electronic means (Tangi et al., 2021), our results suggest that phase out of in-person services may negatively affect the people who trust government the most—surely an unintended consequence of such pressure.

Conclusion 2: This study contradicts the assumption that trust is a prerequisite for e-government use.

The result also complicates the assumption that e-government use is related to trust, a premise derived from correlational findings (Y. Li & Shang, 2023; Porumbescu, 2016a). In our randomized experiment, negligible effects of service delivery mode on trust in government in the overall population were caused by opposite directions for the low and high trust subgroups. We know of only one prior service delivery mode study to use an experimental intervention (Prokop & Tepe, 2022), and it found no effect of mode (in person, electronic, or self-service kiosk) on satisfaction with services, perhaps masking differences by subgroup.



Scan for email address

Contact: Salim Kombo
salim.kombo@busara.global

MITGOV/LAB

Busara
www.busara.global