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Building trust through messaging and new e-government services in Kenya

Nuole Chen [a,*], Salim Kombo [b], Nathaniel Rabb [a], Leonard Waweru [b], Alisa Zomer [a], Lily L. Tsai [a]

[a] Department of Political Science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, USA
[b] Busara Center, Nairobi, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Many technology projects in government are developed and implemented with third party organizations through public-private partnerships. This project studies how e-government collaborations between third parties and government affect people's trust in government and uptake of online public services in Kenya. We use an endorsement-style survey experiment to study whether trust can be transferred from a trusted company to the government. Randomizing respondents into learning about a new online public service portal delivered by 1) a firm, 2) government, or 3) a partnership between the firm and government, we find that learning about the partnership does not increase respondents' trust in government and thus do not find support for trust transfer. However, we do find support for other pathways where this online portal impacted trust in government. Specifically, we find a substitution effect, where respondents are more willing to use the online portal when they learn it is delivered by the company, but also trust the government less. We also find that respondents' pre-existing levels of trust in government lead to differing results, where the substitution effect seems to be driven by those who already have low trust in government at baseline. This study helps us understand conditions under which trust transfer is more likely to occur and highlights other ways trust can be affected through digitization efforts.

1. Introduction

Many technology projects in government are developed and implemented through third-party organizations. This is particularly true in Sub-Saharan Africa where capacity and resources limit the ability of governments to fully develop, implement, and maintain their online services in-house. For example, the District Health Information System (DHIS2) is a common platform used for health information, and it is often implemented through support from the Health Information Systems Programme (HISP) (Braa & Sahay, 2017). In Kenya, Safaricom PLC, the largest telecommunications provider in Kenya, has been partnering with county governments to create an online portal that gives people access to county government services. As governments digitize with the help and collaboration of third parties, how do these public-private partnerships affect people's trust in government and uptake of online public services?

Current research shows that high levels of trust in government and trust in institutions are important factors for why citizens trust and use digital public services. Romanov, Dueñas-Cid, and Leets (2025) find that high institutional trust drives the use of internet voting and is a key factor for why there is high confidence in Estonia's online voting system. A review of e-government adoption identified citizens' distrust of government as an important barrier for technology adoption (Savoldelli, Codagnone, & Misuraca, 2014). However, what happens in contexts with generally lower trust in government or when there seems to be more trust in the third parties that collaborate with government for digitization efforts?

In this study, we explore how trust can be strengthened or dampened between citizen and government when third-party collaborations occur for e-government services. We examine whether the mechanism of *trust transfer*, studied in political science and economics, can work. Trust transfer occurs when, in deciding whether to trust a *trustee*, a *truster* relies on the assessment of a trusted *third party* who vouches for the trustee. Applied to this case of digitizing government services, we study whether citizens (the truster) can increase their trust in government (the trustee) through the help of a trusted third party company. As these types of government and third party collaborations are common, it is important to examine how citizens' trust in government is affected by them.

We study the case of an online portal called My County Hub in

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: nchen3@mit.edu (N. Chen).

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Nairobi, Kenya, a service that is being developed in partnership with Safaricom. The main purpose of this portal is to allow citizens to make payments, access financial services, and engage with county-level leadership (myCounty, 2023). Using an endorsement-style survey experiment, we tell respondents that 1) Safaricom, 2) their County Government, or 3) a Partnership between Safaricom and their County Government are rolling out a new online service called My County Hub. After learning more about the portal, respondents are asked how much they trust county government and will use the service. We hypothesize that for trust transfer to occur, groups who received the Partnership condition would show the most trust in government.

We note that our case may be hard test of the trust transfer mechanism. Previous research suggest that trust transfer may work best when the third party (company) can serve as social collateral or can be held directly accountable by the truster (citizens) (Karlan, Mobius, Rosenblat, & Szeidl, 2009; Tsai, Morse, & Blair, 2020). However, trust transfer can also work through the third party (company) providing social information about the trustee (government) to the truster (citizens) (Prentice & Paluck, 2020; Rendell et al., 2010), which would suggest that trust transfer could work in this setting.

We do not find support for trust transfer; instead, we find support for other pathways through which digitization impacts trust. In our exploration, we find that information about My County Hub generally increased trust in government, regardless of condition. We find evidence consistent with a substitution effect (Baldwin & Winters, 2020): respondents in the Safaricom condition reported lower trust in government but greater willingness to use the online portal. This effect is concentrated among individuals who already distrust government. For these respondents, learning that the portal is delivered by Safaricom further reduces trust in government while increasing willingness to use the portal. We also find some support for an additive effect: respondents who already trust Safaricom and trust the county government will trust the county government more in the Partnership condition compared to those in the other two conditions. This result suggests that respondents support collaborations between two trusted groups.

These results point to the important role of baseline levels of trust that are already present in participants, which other scholars have identified as a key factor for building trust from government digitization efforts (Bannister & Connolly, 2011; Parent, Vandebeek, & Gemino, 2005; Welch, Hinnant, & Moon, 2005). This study sheds light on the conditions needed for trust transfer to occur in third-party collaborations for e-government, but also exposes concerns about substitution effects which may hurt the trust between citizens and government.

This paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2, we provide an overview of the trust in government and government digitization literature. In Section 3, we focus on a discussion of the trust transfer mechanism, which we test in this study. In Section 4, we discuss the context of this study, government digitization efforts in Kenya, and describe the implementation of My County Hub in Kenya. Section 5 describes the methods for this study, including the survey experiment design, measurement, randomization, and regression specification. Section 6 discusses the results of the analysis and Section 7 provides a discussion of the results and their implications. We cover limitations to the study in Section 8 and conclude in Section 9.

2. Digitization and trust in government

Governments have been digitizing to modernize their public sectors. According to the World Bank, public service delivery is undergoing the significant digitization globally with the highest global average score according to the World Bank GovTech Maturity Index (GTMI). When executed well, digitizing public services allows governments to serve more people more efficiently.

While governments are trying to deliver more services, they are also experiencing a crisis in trust from their citizens. Trust in government (political trust) is low in many parts of the world (Edelman Trust Institute, 2024) and has measurably declined over recent decades in Latin America, North America, and Africa (Perry, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2023).[1] While some political scientists see distrust of government as healthy skepticism (Norris, Jennings, & Stoker, 2019) that forces policy improvements, many see it as problematic, arguing that without trust in government, citizens have no internal reasons to follow governments' laws and rules (Hetherington, 2005), which in turn leaves governments unable to enact solutions to pressing problems that require cooperation from the citizenry (Levi, 1988). Many governing organizations including the World Bank, United Nations, and OECD side with the latter camp, characterizing the decline of political trust as a "crisis of democracy" (Kumagai & Iorio, 2020) that threatens core governance goals (Perry, 2021) and warrants urgent countermeasures (OECD, 2022). Empirically, reduced trust in government has been associated with negative outcomes like tolerance for lawbreaking (Marien & Hooghe, 2011), tax noncompliance (Jimenez & Iyer, 2016), and disengagement from democratic processes (Martin, 2010). Similarly troubling patterns were evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, where lower trust in government was associated with reduced vaccination and masking (Algan, Cohen, Davoine, Foucault, & Stantcheva, 2021; Min, Shen, Yu, & Chu, 2020), greater movement during stay-at-home advisories (Bargain & Aminjonov, 2020), increased infection rates (Bollyky et al., 2022) and higher excess mortality (Zaki, Nicoli, Wayenberg, & Verschuere, 2022).

Though the explicit goals of digital public services are not necessarily to increase trust in government, there are many ways in which online services are connected to improving trust. For example, scholars have found that demonstrating competence or good performance is a way to increase political trust (Hetherington, 2005; Ho, Kim, Looi, & Leong, 2020), and a well-executed online public service shows competence. Parent et al. (2005) show through a survey in Canada that e-government, specifically online interactions with government, has a positive impact on trust in government and political efficacy. A review of user-centric digital public services identifies trust as an important public value that digital public services should strengthen (Weigl, Roth, Amard, & Zavolokina, 2024). At the same time, Bannister and Connolly (2011) note that the expectations of increasing citizen trust through government digitization efforts may be too high, and that the relationship between government digitization and citizen trust are multidimensional and complex, but important to study.

To explore the relationship between government digitization and trust further, we focus on a mechanism called trust transfer. We study this mechanism in a context where people generally have less trust in government and digitization includes third-party collaboration. Because there are collaborative efforts for digitization, there are many opportunities for trust to be transferred toward government.

2.1. Definitions of trust in government

Before describing the mechanism of trust transfer, we first discuss our conceptualization of trust in government. Efforts to define trust in general, and trust in government in particular, are numerous (see overviews in Welch et al. (2005) and Bannister and Connolly (2011)). We adopt a working definition of trust that draws on points of consensus from political science, organizational science, and psychology. At minimum, trust entails 1) two parties: a truster and a trustee, and 2) a judgment made by the truster about the trustee's behavior or tendencies to do a desired behavior (Bauer & Freitag, 2016; Gambetta et al., 2000; Hardin, 1993; Levi & Stoker, 2000; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Nahmias, Chen, Zomer, & Tsai, 2022; Nooteboom, 2002; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998).

When applied to trust in government, this means that the

[1] See Bannister and Connolly (2011) for a discussion about scholarship around the decline in trust in government.

government is the trustee and citizens are the truster. The desired behaviors from government include providing services, having integrity, and other beneficial actions that citizens expect. This conceptualization aligns closely with other definitions of trust in government. The American National Election Study asks people if they trust the government to "do the right thing," which is a common way to measure trust in government (Welch et al., 2005). Other scholars have asked about the perceived integrity and ability of government to provide a service (Bélanger & Carter, 2008). In these definitions, "doing the right thing" or acting with integrity and competence are similar to our understanding of the government's tendencies to do a desired behavior. We discuss our specific measure of trust in government in Section 5.2. This formulation implies that trust is a mental state of the truster (a citizen), a premise that we and many other (Hardin, 2002; Kramer, 1999; Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998) but not all (Lewis & Weigert, 1985) scholars accept. In addition, we assume that trust is a changeable mental state, a "moving average measure of relevant information" (Scholz, 1998) or "pragmatic running tally" (Hetherington, 2005). Thus, experiences can occur that change the level of trust that a truster (citizen) has for the trustee (government).

3. Trust transfer

Scholars have found that transferring trust is one way in which trust in government may increase. Theories around transferring trust hold that entities with higher trust can confer trustworthiness on less trusted entities (Karlan et al., 2009; Tsai et al., 2020). In other words, when a *truster* (citizen) is assessing whether to trust a *trustee* (government), a trusted *third party* (a company) can vouch for the trustee, which then leads the truster to have trust in the trustee. The trust transfer mechanism is depicted in Fig. 1. This transitive quality of trust likely follows from the informativeness of social norms information (Prentice & Paluck, 2020; Rendell et al., 2010): people look to those around them for guidance on all manner of other behaviors, and awareness that a trusted individual places trust in another person may be sufficient to confer trust on that person. In addition, the trusted third-party vouching for the trustee is important – the third party can serve as social collateral (Karlan et al., 2009) or can be punished (Tsai et al., 2020) by the truster if it turns out that the trustee is untrustworthy. This cost of punishment, which would be incurred by the third party, would give the truster more reason to trust the trustee through trust transfer as well.

The notion of trust transfer is widely discussed in organizational science (Bachmann, Gillespie, & Priem, 2015), although the concept has been used in a number of ways besides individual-to-individual or group-to-group transmission. For instance, Stewart (2003) applies the concept to trust in a business' website being conferred from its brick-and-mortar store and Meng, Guo, Peng, Lai, and Zhao (2019) take a similar approach in a study of in-person versus mobile health services. Ferrin, Dirks, and Shah (2006) show that trust transfer occurred between employees in firms. They mapped all dyadic connections and levels of trust between individuals by surveying nearly all employees of a single company and asking each respondent to rate how much they trusted all other employees and how often they interacted with all other employees. Trust in another employee was more likely when there was a third party who was trusted by both the survey respondent and the other employee. A similar approach uncovered trust transfer in money lending dynamics among friends and neighbors (Karlan et al., 2009).

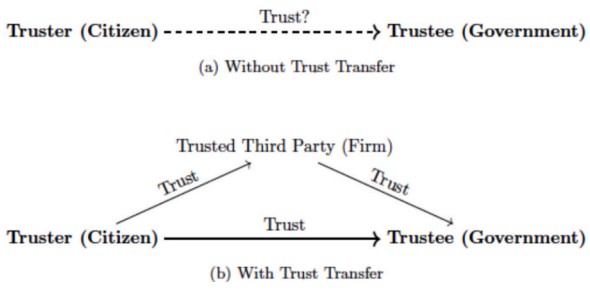

Fig. 1. Trust transfer.

In government, Tsai et al. (2020) found that higher trust in national government was associated with visits from local community representatives during the Ebola epidemic in Liberia. Follow-up interviews indicated that these representatives were considered trustworthy because the social cost of misinforming fellow community members was high. Representatives deliberately tried to transfer trust to government by alternating days that they wore Ministry of Health t-shirts versus shirts reflecting their NGOs. They also distributed coherent information that countered conspiracy theories and informed citizens about the resources and effort that the government was expending to combat Ebola.

Some studies on trust in government and digitization also use the mechanism of trust transfer implicitly. For example, Romanov et al. (2025) show that high trust in government and institutions leads people to have higher confidence in online voting technology, which suggests that trust in government transfers to trust in online technology used by government. We also see trust transfer occur with AI adoption; Aly, Volonte, Byrne, and Knijnenburg (2025) find that by having a human introduce an AI instructor in a learning experience increased participants' perceptions of the AI instructor's trustworthiness and improved the participants' enjoyment and perceptions of learning.

In this study, we design an intervention to explore how new e-government services created by public-private partnerships can affect trust in government. In contrast to political trust, trust in the private sector is consistently high in many parts of the world. In the 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report, the percentage of respondents who trusted business was larger than the share that trusted government in 24 of the 28 countries surveyed (Edelman Trust Institute, 2024). The gap was especially pronounced—30 or more percentage points—in Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Argentina, and Colombia. Another recent public opinion poll found average trust in various actors regarding a particular issue (the safe use of artificial intelligence) was higher for public-private partnerships than for government in 19 out of 21 countries (Loewen et al., 2024). As more and more e-government efforts involve public-private partnerships (Bharosa, 2022), we study if these collaborations increase trust in government.

Trust transfer should occur from trusted entities to those with less trust, as previous research delineated. In this case, we would expect to see a public-private partnership result in more trust in government when the private entity is already trusted. This trust can be transferred by the private entity to government through paths like social information, social collateral, and punishment, as discussed previously. Social information would suggest that people who already trust the private entity find it informative that the private entity is willing to work with government and thus would trust government more. Social collateral and punishment would suggest that there can be some sort of cost incurred by the private entity if the government turns out to be untrustworthy; if the private entity is willing to incur these costs, then that would suggest to citizens that the government can be trusted more than they previously thought. In all of these cases, trust transfer would occur.

We expect that this increase in trust in government should be more pronounced when the collaborative role between a private entity and government is made clear and emphasized, because people will then know more explicitly that the private entity they trust is working with government. Thus, we would expect the following hypothesis from a public-private partnership, where the private entity is generally understood to be highly trusted and the government is not:

H_1. Highlighting the partnership between government and a highly trusted private firm will increase trust in government.[2]

[2] This hypothesis was preregistered at https://osf.io/m7cqk.

We also consider a second hypothesis that is conditional on the perception of the third party by citizens. We expect that trust transfer should occur more when the third party (the private entity) is highly trusted by citizens. In contrast, we would expect less trust transfer to occur if a citizen does not trust the third party. Thus a second hypothesis is:

H_2. Highlighting the partnership between government and a private firm will increase trust in government among those who demonstrably trust the company.[3]

While we expect that trust transfer should occur in public-private partnerships where the private entity, as the third party, is highly trusted, we do acknowledge that there are two open questions about trust transfer in public-private partnerships.

First, for trust transfer to occur, how important is it for the citizens (the truster) to be able to punish the private entity (third party) if the government (trustee) proves to be untrustworthy? In some studies, the ability to punish the third party is one reason scholars argue that trust transfer can occur, while others point to the informativeness of social information. In the context we study, it may be more difficult for citizens (the trusters) to punish a large firm (third party), and thus the large firm may not have significant consequences for partnering with the government. Would this prevent trust transfer from occurring or could the social information pathway still lead to trust transfer?

Second, can trust transfer happen even if the truster (citizens) has strong prior views about the trustee (government)? In this study, citizens may already have relatively strong views about their trust toward government (the trustee), and it may be the case that trust transfer could work best in situations where the trustee is more unknown. The views that people already have about government could make trust transfer difficult, particularly if government is viewed negatively. In fact, strong negative views of government, or perceptions that the third party is much more competent than the government may lead to substitution effects, which we discuss in more detail in the below. Nevertheless, third party involvement is increasingly common as governments digitize their public services (Bharosa, 2022), and learning whether these third-party partnerships can increase trust will help us understand the parameters of trust transfer and provide implications for policymakers. This study will help us understand the limitations of when trust transfer may or may not work.

3.1. Additional pathways for affecting trust

While we focus on trust transfer in this study, there are other ways that digitizing public services through third-party partnerships with government can affect trust. We discuss some of those pathways here. First, simply digitizing public services may be a direct way that the government shows more competence, which increases trust in government (Hetherington, 2005). Further, there is prior evidence from random or quasi-random designs that simply having service improvements increases political trust. Alessandro, Cardinale Lagomarsino, Scartascini, Streb, and Torrealday (2021) observed increased political trust due to descriptions of local government's commitments to expand afterschool availability, pediatric care, public transit routes, and other city services. Potter and Sadin (2019) report a similar finding for public park improvements. Chukwuma, Bossert, and Croke (2019) found that physical proximity to newly renovated public health centers was associated with increased trust in government. A study using Pew U.S. survey data (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006) found an association between trust in local government and the extent to which respondents felt government websites increased accessibility and responsiveness. Another U.S. study found a strong association between political trust and satisfaction with government websites (Welch et al., 2005). More recent work from China suggests that the positive association between e-government use and trust in government is mediated by perceptions of government performance, responsiveness, and integrity (Li & Shang, 2023). Thus, trust in government may generally increase from the government provision of digital public services, regardless of the partnership into which the government enters. However, it is also possible for trust to decrease if the services are not delivered well. Therefore, the direct relationship between digitizing public services and more trust in Kenya may be complex, due to controversies and concerns about digitization there. These concerns are discussed more in Section 4.

Second, the third party could lead to a substitution effect of trust. A substitution effect may occur if citizens view the third-party as providing services *in place of* the government. While trust transfer would predict that a partnership between the third-party and the government leads to more trust in government, the substitution effect would have the opposite effect and lead to less trust or no increased trust in government. This occurs because citizens may start to question the usefulness of the state if they come to see the third party as the key deliverer of public services (Ostrom & Ostrom, 1977; Tsai, 2011). This might happen if the third party overshadows the government – the third party could be viewed as much more competent than the government or people are more aware of the role of the third party than the government. For instance, Tsai (2011) surveyed local government officials in China and found that nonstate management of public projects was associated with diminished perceived state authority and perceived citizen compliance. Similarly, Baldwin and Winters (2020) report reduced assessments of local government performance among Ugandan respondents when people were told that a private entity was funding NGOs to execute public sector projects. Cammett, Lynch, and Bilev (2015) find a modest relationship between private financing of healthcare systems and diminished trust in government in multiple European countries. Substitution effects do not always occur. Dietrich, Mahmud, and Winters (2018) find that telling Bangladeshi respondents that health care clinics were being funded by USAID *increased* confidence in the local government and Springman (2022) finds in a field study in Uganda that contact with an NGO-funded community health worker program had no effect on perceptions of government performance or legitimacy. Thus, though this study is designed to investigate trust transfer, we also explore substitution effects as a way that trust can be affected by digitizing public services through a government partnership.[4]

4. Online public services in Kenya

We conducted this study in Kenya, a country at the forefront of e-governance in Africa. The Kenyan government committed to digital transformation with the introduction of the Vision 2030 initiative on e-government activities (Imbamba & Kimile, 2017), established its Ministry of Information, Communications, and The Digital Economy in 2004 (Ochara, 2010), and has linked its digital transformation to its economic development (Mungai, 2017). As a consequence of these efforts, Kenya is ranked “high” on the GTMI (Dener, Nii-Aponsah, Ghunney, & Johns,

[3] This hypothesis was pre-specified as an exploratory analysis at https://osf.io/m7cqk.

[4] We note that the examples given here for the substitution effect are for third party entities that are NGOs, and the case that we will study is of a firm in Kenya. It may be the case that the substitution effect is stronger for NGOs than for companies. We might expect the substitution effect to work differently for firms because citizens could question the profit-seeking motivations of the firm to provide services. The NGOs in these listed studies have more closely aligned missions for public service delivery as the government, and thus citizens may be more likely to view NGOs as a substitute for government. However, we also know from the Edelman Trust Barometer that Kenyans trust companies at about the same rate as they NGOs. It seems likely that a substitution effect may be similar for both NGOs and companies, if their trust levels are also similar. For the scope of this paper, we are unable to compare NGOs to businesses, but that is an area for future research.

2021), the second highest classification in the index.[5]

The Kenyan government is a pioneer in adopting digital technology in many contexts. For instance, Kenya made strides in digitizing land records and the use of blockchain technology, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), remote sensing, and drone technology to enhance land registration and title management, which has led to reductions in fraud (Kenya News Agency, 2026). In response to violence around the 2007 general elections, the country invested heavily in digital solutions for the conduct of elections, including voter registration, voter verification and result transmission. While the first two have led to improvement in trust with the electoral process, the latter has led to controversy over the integrity of results during the 2017 general elections, where the Supreme Court annulled the results of the presidential elections due to, among other reasons, irregularities in how the results were transmitted (BBC News, 2017).

Other controversies have come up in Kenya over digitization because these processes have been marred by accusations of corruption and mismanagement. For instance, the Auditor General's report found that KSH 44.8 billion (approximately USD 34.5 million) paid by users of the eCitizen digital payments platform were unaccounted for during the 2023–24 financial year (Otieno, 2025). The government also faced backlash against different digitization initiatives, such as the Huduma Number, a nation-wide unique identifier system, because of fears of data protection risks (Mutung'u, 2021). These events were amplified by several high-profile hacks of government websites and platforms, including prominent websites belonging to the Presidency and several ministries (Nation Africa, 2025). With the advent of AI, as the Kenyan government looks to integrate new tools for government services in various sectors, such as health, agriculture, and finance, data and privacy concerns remain central to the question of trust between citizens and government (Akello, 2022; Thigo, 2025). While government digitization has improved services in some ways, there have also been many projects that have led citizens to question and doubt digitization efforts in Kenya; this context may make trust transfer to government more difficult.

4.1. My county hub

In 2010, Kenya promulgated a new constitution which marked a significant shift in the country's governance paradigm, transitioning Kenya's government structure from a centralized to a decentralized system. This resulted in the creation of 47 county governments, aimed at devolving power and decision-making authority closer to people at the local level. The key responsibilities of county governments include managing healthcare facilities, maintaining county roads, implementation of specific national government policies among others. These changes gave responsibilities and power to county governments, and our study focuses on digitization efforts at the county government level.

At the time of the study, county governments in Kenya were starting to roll out online portals to deliver county-level government services electronically. The initiative, called My County Hub, was developed and implemented in collaboration with Safaricom PLC, the country's largest telecommunications company and, anecdotally, a highly trusted firm.[6] This portal builds on the existing eCitizen online platform launched by the Kenyan government to provide citizens with convenient access to a wide range of national government services in a single place. My County Hub provides county-level services including paying for parking, single business permits, and land rates, as well as requesting emergency services and receiving information directly from county governments. Generally, the main services on My County Hub allow making payments for fees, permits, and county taxes (myCounty, 2023).

We identified this initiative, the partnership between Safaricom and county governments to develop My County Hub, as ideal for testing the trust transfer hypothesis. Leveraging the introduction of My County Hub, we highlighted the role of either county government, Safaricom, or their partnership in developing the portal in a survey experiment conducted in the Nairobi Metro Area.[7] The study examines short-term causal effects of learning about who is involved in My County Hub on trust in county government. We examine willingness to use the portal in the future and seeking more information about the portal as additional outcomes.

5. Methods

Survey respondents were initially recruited from the Busara Center's participant pool of roughly 100,000 Kenyan adults in the Nairobi Metro Area. From this planned recruitment that was intended to be representative of the area, we had a sample of $n = 1311$. An unplanned recruitment also occurred through snowball sampling, resulting in a much larger group of respondents $n = 10{,}646$.[8] Respondents who completed the survey in under 3 min and/or provided unlikely ages[9] were considered non-attentive and removed from the analysis $n = 667$. Every respondent had a verified phone number. Our final sample size is $n = 11{,}290$. As a result of the snowball sampling, this sample skews young (over 90% are under 35) and male (70%). A large percentage of the sample are students (43%). The majority of respondents live in Nairobi and are well distributed across the Assets Index, which we use to measure socioeconomic status, with a slight imbalance toward lower socioeconomic status. Though the sample does not represent the Nairobi Metro Area, it does reflect people who are highly likely to use online government services. The demographic breakdown is available in Table A1 in the Appendix.

The survey was administered online through SurveyCTO between January 18 and February 20, 2024 and available in English or Swahili. After giving informed consent, respondents answered a series of demographic questions, completed baseline trust measures, and received the primary treatment.[10] The survey concluded with a battery of questions about data privacy and a measure of political affiliation, which were not used for this analysis.

5.1. Study design

For the main survey experiment, respondents were randomly assigned through simple random assignment to one of three conditions where the party responsible for new e-government services varied by condition. Below is the text of the experiment; Kajiado is used for clarity, but each respondent saw their own county's name.

> **[Kajiado County Government is / Safaricom is / Kajiado County Government and Safaricom are]** rolling out a new portal called My County Hub. You can access this portal through the M-Pesa

[5] The African countries that rank higher are Tanzania, Uganda, and South Africa.

[6] Safaricom has over 44 million mobile phone subscriptions representing 65% market share (Communications Authority of Kenya, 2026). The Government of Kenya (with Vodacom) is the joint largest shareholder of Safaricom at 35% respectively (Safaricom, 2018).

[7] The Nairobi Metro Area encompasses Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya, and parts of its surrounding counties (namely Kiambu, Machakos, Kajiado and Murang'a counties). The region represents the main economic hub of Kenya, and is the center for commerce, finance, education, and government. The Nairobi Metro Area is also characterized as being highly urbanized with a rapidly growing population and economy.

[8] Note that the snowball sampling did not affect randomization, as each survey was randomized independently.

[9] We specified older than 80 as the cutoff because those respondents seem to enter their years or birth or phone numbers.

[10] Prior to receiving the primary treatment, some respondents also received another, unrelated survey experiment.

SuperApp, a website, or a USSD shortcode to handle your county services. The portal will offer a range of government services including making payments, managing parking services, and disaster recovery.

After reading one of the three variations, respondents were asked about their likelihood of using the portal, their trust in their county government, and whether they wanted to learn more about the portal. Those who elected to learn more were redirected to a more detailed description of the services My County Hub will offer.

5.2. Measurement

We are interested in three outcomes, all related to trust. The first outcome is *trust in county government*, which we consider a type of judgment or belief. We have chosen to study trust as a unidimensional measure, described in Table 1.[11] There is a deep question regarding whether trust-as-a-mental-state would be better understood as a composite of other mental states or types of judgment. While many studies have examined this issue, it seems difficult to break trust down into distinct components like competence, benevolence, honesty, and so on. Evidence from both factor analytic approaches (Alessandro et al., 2021; Burns et al., 2023; PytlikZillig et al., 2016) and direct experimental manipulation (Ouattara, Steenvoorden, & van der Meer, 2023) suggests unidimensionality in trust judgments. This need not mean that competence, benevolence, honesty, and related characteristics do not differentially determine trust; it is likely that they do. However, for measurement purposes, they tend to correlate strongly. Further, surveys in Kenya, specifically the Afrobarometer, also use a unidimensional measure of trust (Otele, Balongo, & Iberi, 2025) and we draw from their survey for the wording of our trust questions. Thus, for this study, we consider a single measure of trust, using an ordinal scale ranging from strongly distrust to trust, as sufficient to measure trust in government. We note that it is possible that distrust and trust are distinct quantities rather than endpoints of a single continuum (Bertsou, 2019), although comparative assessments of unipolar and bipolar trust scales show comparable validity (Robbins, 2024) and the Afrobarometer has continued to use a unidimensional measure in their surveys.

The second outcome is *willingness to use My County Hub*, which we consider a compliance measure. Because trust is related to voluntary compliance (Levi & Stoker, 2000), we view the willingness to use a government service portal as linked to the trust an individual has in government. The third outcome is *seeking more information*, operationalized as the option to click on a link to receive more information about My County Hub. We consider this a behavioral measure related to a respondent's trust in county government. By clicking on the link, the respondent is showing a willingness to potentially engage and comply.

Table 1 shows survey questions of key measures in the study. Trust in county government and willingness to use My County Hub were measured on 4-point scales which we treat as interval, while more information was measured with a binary yes/no option. We also collect baseline measures for trust in Safaricom and trust in county government, to understand the respondents' initial trust toward both entities of the My County Hub partnership.

Fig. 2 shows the descriptive statistics for baseline trust measures.[12] To confirm that the baseline levels of trust in our sample are similar to levels found in other surveys, we compare the average levels of trust between national government, county government, and Safaricom using *t*-tests. We find baseline trust in Safaricom to be higher than trust in county government ($M_{Safaricom} = 3.52$, $M_{county} = 3.15$, $t(11288) = 52.36$, $p < 0.001$), which aligns with other national surveys that find trust in the private sector to be higher than trust in the public sector in Kenya (Edelman Trust Institute, 2024). We also find that trust in county government is higher than trust in national government ($M_{county} = 3.15$, $M_{national} = 3.02$, $t(11288) = 21.88$, $p < 0.001$) in Kenya. This, again, aligns with findings that people frequently report higher trust in local government than trust in national governments (Fitzgerald & Wolak, 2016; Wolak, 2020), and in Kenya, people currently trust the county governors slightly more than the president (Otele et al., 2025). Nonetheless, we note that these averages are all high given the 1–4 scale, which suggests an unusually trusting sample. For purposes of comparison, the most recent survey data from Edelman (Edelman Trust Institute, 2024) show 42% of a representative sample of Kenyans responding 6 or higher on a 9-point scale measuring trust in government and the 2024 Afrobarometer survey in Kenya showed that only 45% of respondents reported trusting their president "somewhat" or "a lot" (Otele et al., 2025). Although our scales are not exactly equivalent, it is notable that 76% of our sample responded to the national government trust measure above the scale midpoint. Thus, this sample seems to have higher levels of baseline trust than samples from other surveys in Kenya, but the trends are comparable between this sample and the samples in other surveys.

Table 1
Key measures.

Measure	Question
Trust in Safaricom *(Pre-treatment)*	How much do you trust Safaricom? 1 = *Completely distrust*, 2 = *Somewhat distrust*, 3 = *Somewhat trust*, 4 = *Completely trust*
Trust in County Government *(Pre-treatment and post-treatment)*	How much do you trust [respondent's location] County government? 1 = *Completely distrust*, 2 = *Somewhat distrust*, 3 = *Somewhat trust*, 4 = *Completely trust*
Willingness to Use My County Hub *(Post-treatment)*	How likely are you to use My County Hub? 1 = *Definitely won't use it*, 2 = *Probably won't use it*, 3 = *Probably will use it*, 4 = *Definitely will use it*
More Information *(Post-treatment)*	Click here to see more information about My County Hub. 1 = *Show me more information*, 0 = *Not at this time*

5.3. Randomization and balance

We have three treatment conditions in this study: county government only, Safaricom only, and county government and Safaricom. For clarity, we will refer to the county government and Safaricom condition as the "Partnership" condition, Safaricom only as the Safaricom condition, and county government only as the County Government condition. We also consider the County Government condition as the reference group in the analysis. This is because we assume that the county government is the group most people would think of as affiliated with a new online portal for county government services. Table 2 shows the number of respondents in each condition.

We use an omnibus δ^2 to conduct a balance test (Hansen & Bowers, 2008). We conduct pairwise tests of each of the three treatment groups, and groups with *p*-values less than 0.2 would be considered imbalanced. Table 3 shows results from the balance test. We test if groups are all balanced across age, gender, education, employment, assets, recruitment strategy, and county. We include recruitment strategy as a variable due to the two forms of recruitment that occurred at the sampling stage,

[11] 11We also distinguish underlying dimensions of trust (what are the components of trust) from determinants of trust (what influences or causes trust). We do not measure determinants of trust in this paper, but there is also extensive work showing determinants affect trust in government, such as demonstrations of competence (Chukwuma et al., 2019), benevolence (Ho et al., 2020; Ouattara et al., 2023), and so on.

[12] Though we do not study trust in the national government in the analysis, we did ask respondents about their trust in national government prior to the survey experiment and present those descriptive statistics here.

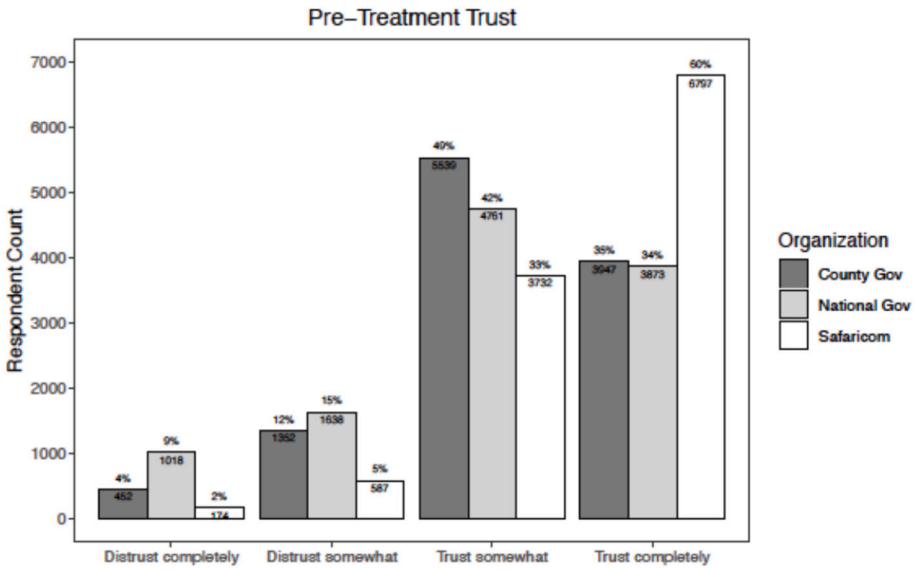

Fig. 2. Pre-treatment trust in county government, national government, and Safaricom in sample.

Table 2
Treatments.

Treatment Condition	n
County Government (reference group)	3793
Safaricom	3855
Partnership	3641

Table 3
Results from balance test. Test shows that groups are balanced across age, gender, education, employment, assets, county, and recruitment process.

	p-value
County Government – Safaricom	0.62
County Government – Partnership	0.63
Safaricom – Partnership	0.35

where some respondents were recruited through the planned process and others through the snowball process in the balance test. The large *p*-values in Table 3 suggest that the groups are balanced.

5.4. Estimation

We use OLS to conduct our analysis because, in a randomized experiment where treatment assignment is independent of potential outcomes, OLS provides an unbiased estimate of the average treatment effect and pre-treatment covariates can increase precision (Angrist & Pischke, 2009; Gerber & Green, 2012; Imbens & Rubin, 2015). We analyze H_1 with Eq. (1):

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T_{1,i} + \beta_2 T_{2,i} + \mathbf{X}' \delta + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where T_1 is an indicator for receiving the Partnership condition for individual i, T_2 is an indicator for receiving the Safaricom condition for individual i and $\mathbf{X}$ is a matrix of baseline measures for trust in Safaricom, trust in county government, and the county of residence for individual i. The reference group received the County Government condition. We use HC2 robust standard errors. We also report results without any covariate adjustment in the Appendix (Tables A2, A3, and A3).

In addition, we expect that the effects of the treatment will be higher among those who trust Safaricom more than their county government at baseline. We measure these heterogeneous effects with Eq. (1) without covariates, but with four different subgroups, which are created according to the respondent's baseline trust in county government and Safaricom. Those who report "distrust somewhat" or "distrust completely" are coded as "low trust"; those who report "trust somewhat" or "trust completely" are coded as "high trust." Table 4 shows the size of each group resulting from this 2 × 2 configuration.

6. Results

6.1. Main outcomes

We report results for three outcomes, focusing on trust in county government as the main outcome related to H_1. Fig. 3 shows the main regression results for the study.[13] The reference category is the County Government condition; the coefficients for the Safaricom condition and the Partnership condition are in comparison to the County Government condition. To see support for hypothesis H_1, we expect to see that the Partnership condition would have higher trust in government than the County Government condition. However, as Fig. 3 shows, the Partnership condition is not distinguishable from the County Government condition for the outcome, trust in county government. Interestingly, the Safaricom condition does lead to significantly lower trust in county government when compared to the County Government condition. Thus, overall, these results do not support the trust transfer hypothesis, H_1.

The second outcome we study is whether respondents are more willing to use My County Hub. Here, we see that respondents who received the Partnership condition are slightly more willing to use the portal compared to the County Government condition, but again this

Table 4
Subgroups for analyzing heterogeneous effects.

Subgroups	n
Safaricom: High Trust - Gov: High Trust	9199
Safaricom: High Trust - Gov: Low Trust	1330
Safaricom: Low Trust - Gov: High Trust	287
Safaricom: Low Trust - Gov: Low Trust	474

[13] Regression tables are reported in the Appendix; see Tables A2, A3, and A4.

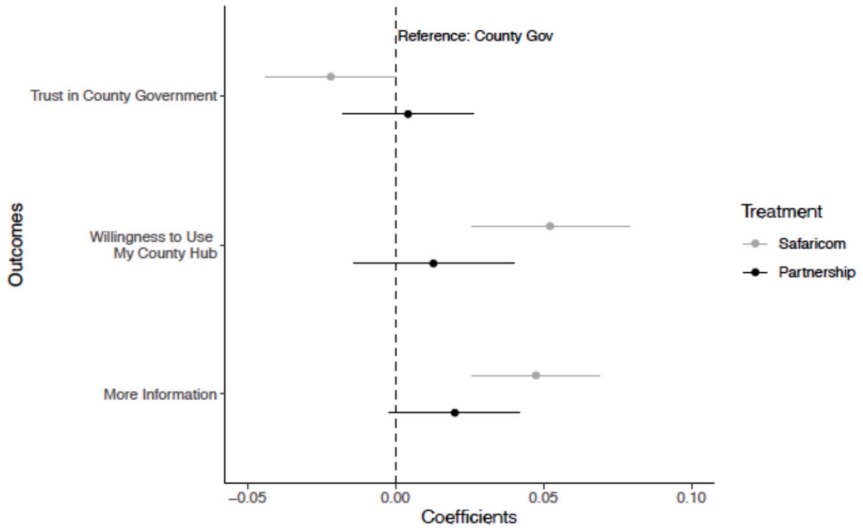

Fig. 3. Main results from survey experiment.

difference is not significant. However, respondents in the Safaricom condition are more willing to use the portal and this difference is, again, statistically significant.

Lastly, we studied whether respondents would click on an option to learn more about My County Hub. The Partnership condition is slightly more likely (2 percentage points) to seek out more information compared to the County Government condition, but this is not detectable. The Safaricom condition is much more likely (5 percentage points) to seek out more information, and this difference is statistically significant.

6.2. Results for additional pathways to affecting trust

In Section 3.1, we discuss two additional pathways that trust might be affected by digitization in this study. This first pathway is that digitization might directly increase trust in government, without going through trust transfer, because it can increase the perceptions of government competence which is closely connected to trust in government. We analyze this pathway descriptively. Fig. 4 shows trust measures pre- and post-treatment. In each case, we see that trust increased after the treatment. Using a *t*-test with all three conditions grouped together, we see an overall increase in trust after participants received the treatment

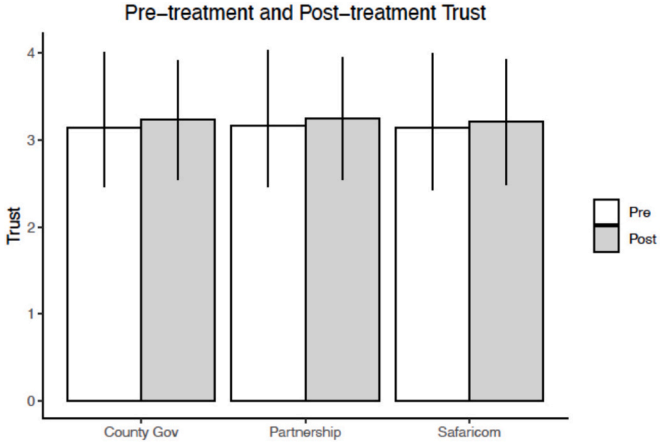

Fig. 4. Mean and standard deviations of pre- and post-treatment outcome measures.
$M_{pre\text{-}treatment} = 3.15$, $M_{post\text{-}treatment} = 3.23$, $t(11288) = 14.95$, $p < 0.001$.

($M_{pre-treatment} = 3.15$, $M_{post-treatment} = 3.23$, $t(11288) = 14.95$, $p < 0.001$). Whether this is due to competence or other changes to perceptions of government is not explored in this study. Nevertheless, it seems that digitization itself and the introduction of an online county government portal is correlated with an increase in trust in government, even in a place like Kenya where digitization efforts have been controversial.

The second pathway we discuss is that of a substitution effect, where citizens might view the third party that is involved with service provision as a substitute for government, and thus trust government less. We also seem to see support for a substitution effect in this study. Results show that respondents in the Safaricom condition trust county government less, but are more willing to use My County Hub and more interested in learning about the new portal. We may see this because citizens view Safaricom as providing services in place of county government (Nelson-Nuñez, 2019; Ostrom & Ostrom, 1977; Tsai, 2011). With the substitution effect, trust in government would not increase even though more services are provided, because the service provision from a company leads citizens to question the usefulness of the state. Respondents may see Safaricom as a substitute for government, rather than an entity that can transfer trust to government. Thus, if substitution did occur, then those in the Safaricom condition trust government less than the other two conditions, but they would still be willing to use the portal, which corresponds to the results that we find.

6.3. Heterogeneous effects

We explore our main results in more detail by analyzing heterogeneous effects. In H_2, we hypothesized that trust transfer would be more likely to occur among individuals who have high trust in Safaricom and low trust in county government at baseline. We posit that this group is most susceptible to trust transfer because the respondent's trust in county government could be influenced by their trust in Safaricom and seeing Safaricom collaborating with county government. The more trust the respondent has in Safaricom, the more likely it is that Safaricom could influence the respondent's trust in government. And, when the respondent's trust in government is low, there is more space for those perceptions to improve. Further, we may have ceiling effects from large number of individuals who already have high trust in government pre-treatment.

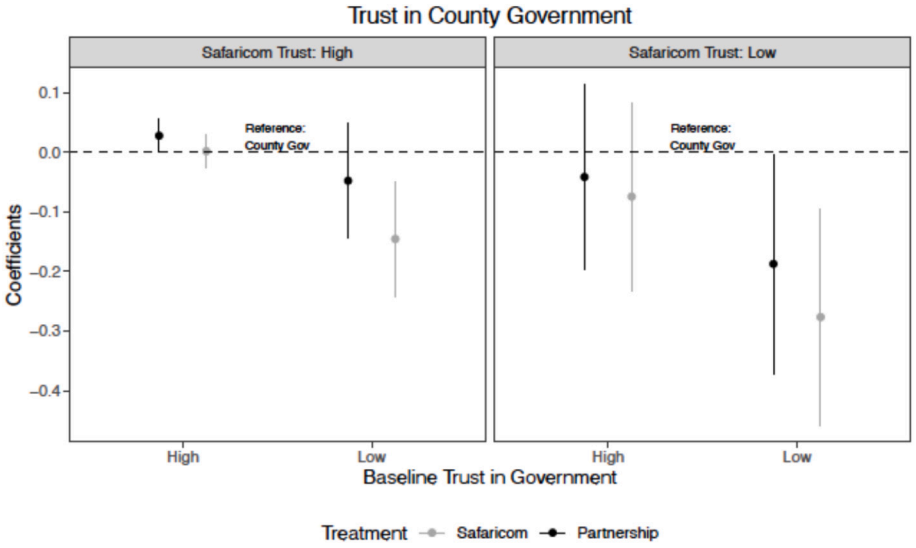

Fig. 5. Effect of treatment on trust in county government by subgroup.

We separate our sample into four groups to study heterogeneous effects (see Table 4). Fig. 5 shows how the effect of the treatment condition on trust in county government varies by each subgroup.[14] According to H_2, we would expect to see large positive effects for the Partnership condition in the group with high trust in Safaricom and low trust in county government at baseline. However, the results show that those who receive the Partnership condition are not distinguishable from the County Government condition, while those who received the Safaricom condition trust government less. Thus, we do not find support for H_2.

The results from Fig. 5 do help us understand the main trust results. Specifically, it appears that respondents in the Safaricom condition who have low trust in county government at baseline are driving the Safaricom results from the main analysis; the results from this group with low baseline trust in county government have statistically significant negative coefficients for trust in county government after they receive the treatment. We can imagine that someone who already does not trust government learns that Safaricom is coming in to provide an online portal to do the work *for* government. This information could further decrease that respondent's trust assessment of government. Thus, the substitution effect may be particularly strong for those who already have low trust in government.

We also note that among respondents who have high trust in Safaricom and high trust in county government at baseline, those in the Partnership condition do have higher trust in county government post-treatment. This is not the group where we would expect to see trust transfer, as these respondents already have high trust in government. Instead, this may be an additive effect, where combining two groups that the respondent already trusts simply leads to more trust.

We also explore heterogeneous effects for the outcome, willingness to use My County Hub in the future; Fig. 6 shows those results.[15] In the main results, the Safaricom condition has higher willingness while differences for the Partnership condition are not detectable. However, when separated by baseline trust levels, it appears that the group that has high trust in Safaricom at baseline is driving the willingness to use My County Hub results in the Safaricom condition. Regardless of the respondent's level of trust in county government, their high initial trust in Safaricom leads them to be more willing to use My County Hub in the Safaricom condition. Further, among those who have high trust in Safaricom and high trust in county government, the Partnership condition also leads to slightly more willingness to use My County Hub. Again, this might be an additive effect where the combination of groups that the respondent trusts leads to more willingness to use the portal.

Seeking more information to use My County Hub is the last outcome for which we study heterogeneous effects, and Fig. 7 shows those results.[16] Similar to the results for willingness to use My County Hub, respondents in the Safaricom condition are the most likely to seek out more information. Again, this effect seems to be mostly driven by respondents who at baseline have high trust in Safaricom, regardless of their level of trust in the county government. And again, there seems to be a positive effect for the Partnership condition among those who are high in both Safaricom and county government trust at baseline.

These subgroup analyses show that while H_2 is not supported, there are variations between groups that help us to understand who was more or less affected by their treatments. First, among people who have high trust in county government and high trust in Safaricom, the Partnership condition has the effects we expected to see from the main hypothesis. These respondents have higher trust in government, are more willing to use the portal, and are more likely to click for more information compared to the County Government condition. However, we do not view this as evidence of trust transfer, as those respondents already trust both Safaricom and the county government. Rather, we see this as an additive effect where the respondent learns about a partnership between two entities they already like, and that simply leads to more trust.

These analyses also help to explain why we see the Safaricom condition leading to less trust in government but more willingness to use My County Hub and more information seeking behavior. The reduced trust in government seems to be driven by those who already have low trust in county government, while willingness to use the portal and click for more information is driven by those who have high trust in Safaricom. The substitution effect may be occurring for those who already have low trust in county government, such that even though citizens have more access to services, they trust government less since they view Safaricom as providing services in place of government.

[14] See Table A5 in the Appendix for regression table.
[15] See Table A6 in the Appendix for regression table.
[16] See Table A7 in the Appendix for regression table.

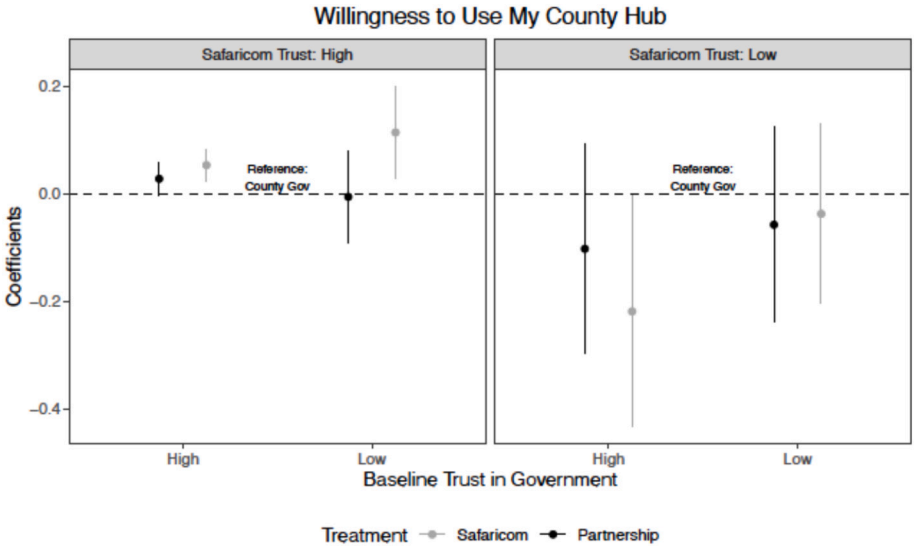

Fig. 6. Effect of treatment on willingness to use My County Hub by subgroup.

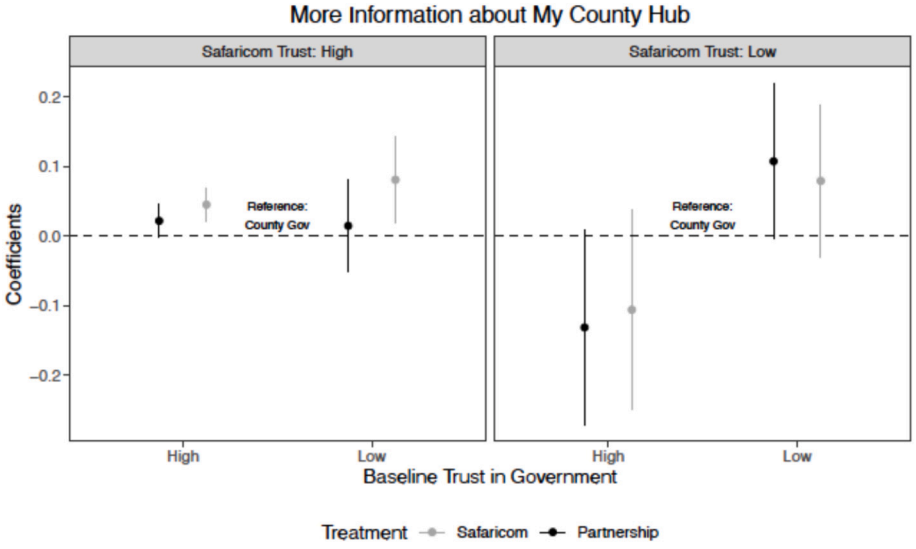

Fig. 7. Effect of treatment on seeking more information about My County Hub by subgroup.

7. Discussion

7.1. Lack of trust transfer

In this study we tested whether trust transfer can occur between a third party and a county government through a description about a new e-government portal. Our initial hypothesis—that describing the new service as a *partnership* between government and a trusted private firm would increase trust in government through trust transfer—was not supported. Why did trust transfer not occur? It may be that trust is only transferable when there is a degree of uncertainty about the trustee. Prior evidence of trust transfer showed that whether an employee of a company trusted another employee or whether friends and neighbors were willing to borrow money from each other was predicted by a trusted third party vouching for the trustee (Ferrin et al., 2006; Karlan et al., 2009). In these cases, trusters may not have held the kind of clear prior beliefs about potential trustees that people typically hold about their own government. The sole case of trust transfer from a non-government entity to government that we know of (Tsai et al., 2020) occurred during a time of high uncertainty—an epidemic—when beliefs about government were likely in flux (for examples of political trust changing rapidly due to pandemic conditions, see Liu, Shahab, and Hoque (2022) and Sibley et al. (2020).) In contrast, people may have very clear beliefs about the government in our study, and thus trust transfer cannot occur.

A second reason why trust transfer may not have occurred is because there is no clear cost or punishment for the third party, Safaricom, if the county government proves untrustworthy. In Tsai et al. (2020), the intermediaries who transferred trust to government were members of the local communities who could be punished by their community. Without a clear mechanism to punish Safaricom for conferring trust on an untrustworthy target, it may not be possible for trust transfer to occur.

A third reason why trust transfer may not have occurred is because the mechanism could vary widely between different types of services. Citizens may place greater trust in government on issues they encounter rarely—such as national security and foreign policy—and less on issues they encounter often—such as education, permits, and taxation. For everyday issues such as the ones provided by My County Hub, government may have a higher threshold to reach in order to gain the trust of citizens because these issues affect the everyday life of citizens. Further,

services where citizens have to pay government (like fees and payments) may be received differently than services where government gives something to citizens (like loans or education).

To explore this possibility, we conduct additional subgroup analysis, where the subgroups are the national government services that respondents ($n = 8647$) had most recently reported using. It is important to note that the services in this analysis are not what respondents will use on My County Hub, but they reflect the types of services for which respondents had interacted recently with government; thus, we believe that these services may be more top of mind or salient for respondents. Figs. 8, 9, and 10 in the Appendix show these service subgroup results. We do notice that for the group that had recently paid taxes and fees, which is a service provided on My County Hub, the direction of the coefficients are similar to the general main results. In contrast, for the group that recently had services where government provided something, specifically student services, we may see some evidence of trust transfer occurring. This result suggests that further research should be conducted on how trust transfer may be more or less likely depending on the type of digital public service.

Though overall, we do not find trust transfer, we do see it among some respondents qualitatively.

In additional interview follow up for our surveys, several respondents shared similar optimism for the county government-Safaricom partnership. One respondent explained that "services will be delivered well and access will be easier to all citizens since Safaricom is well-known and trusted by many people. The government will also reduce back log in their offices." Another respondent said "most people are affiliated with Safaricom the trust is there, there will be so much coverage and the service will be available to a lot of people. People will trust the government since there is that Safaricom trust albeit not 100%." A third respondent remarked, "Safaricom will pay taxes, the government will do more business with people since they trust Safaricom."

7.2. Trust, digitization, and substitution

Additional pathways for affecting trust seem to have been present in this study. We see an increase in trust in government between pre-treatment and post-treatment trust levels across all three conditions, which suggests that simply providing more digital public services is correlated with increasing trust in government, even in Kenya where there has been much controversy around digitization. This trend follows much of the previous research showing that simply improving services leads to increased trust in government.

Relatedly, we also explored if those who had an increase in trust in government from pre-treatment to post-treatment were more willing to use My County Hub in the future to further understand the connection between trust and the use of digital trust. We conducted an additional analysis of uptake as a function of difference scores (post-treatment trust minus pre-treatment trust).[17] Results show that a positive change in trust in government is associated with willingness to use the portal in the future. While this analysis is correlational, it is consistent with the possibility that those whose trust in government increased due to the treatment were more likely to use the service.[18]

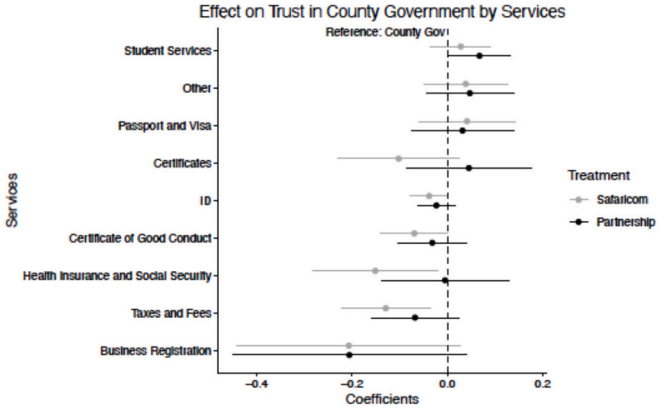

Fig. 8. Effect of treatment on trust in county government, separated by service.

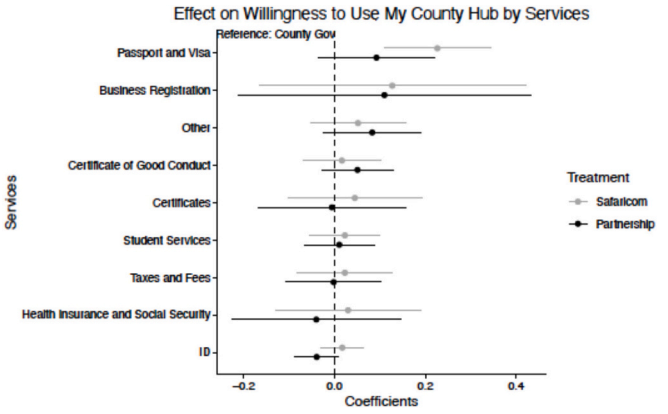

Fig. 9. Effect of treatment on willingness to use My County Hub, separated by service.

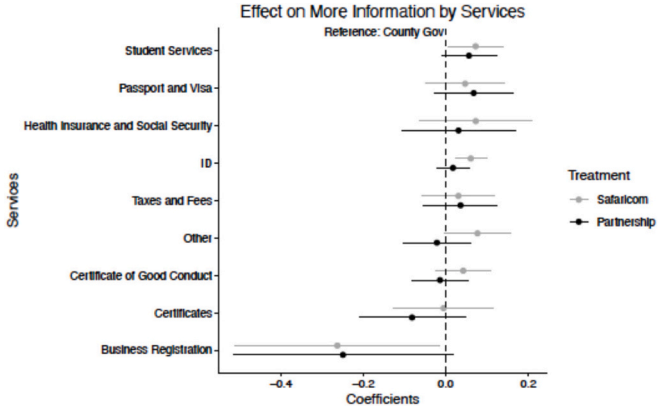

Fig. 10. Effect of treatment on more information, separated by service.

We end this section with a note of caution about the substitution effect. We see from the study that those who received the Safaricom condition trusted government less but were more willing to use the My County Hub in the future. For policymakers, this could be interpreted to mean that the shortest route to a standard policy aim—ensuring the use of new digital services—is to highlight private sector responsibility for public/private partnerships. However, we argue that this takeaway puts short term goals of immediate service uptake ahead of the longer-term project of building trust in government. We see, from the relationship between digital service provision and trust, that there is a feedback of sorts, where providing more digital services to people is correlated with increasing trust in government, and those who increased trust in government are also more willing to use My County Hub in the future. We also see from the analysis of heterogeneous effects that baseline levels of trust drive our findings: those who already do not trust county government pre-treatment are the ones who trust government less post-treatment, which aligns with previous work on trust and digitization (Bannister & Connolly, 2011; Parent et al., 2005; Welch et al., 2005). Trust in government plays an integral role in citizens' use of digital

[17] See Appendix, Table A8 details.

[18] For a related finding, see Teo, Srivastava, and Jiang (2008).

public services and trust is an important public value that should be a goal of e-government. Future research could focus on those with particularly low trust in government as they may require other, more comprehensive interventions to increase trust in government through digital public services, or it may generally be very difficult to change this groups' trust in government through digitization efforts alone.

8. Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, it measures transient effects on trust. The project of rebuilding trust in government will require a sustained effort encompassing many such interventions as well as longitudinal measures to assess success. Second, trust was measured on a single scale running from distrust to trust; we drew from measurement practices used in the Afrobarometer, but it is possible that distrust and trust are distinct quantities rather than endpoints of a single continuum (Bertsou, 2019). Third, the sample is not representative of the Kenyan population, skewing young and male, with a sizable proportion of students. Although younger people may be a key audience for e-services, our results are valid for our study sample but we cannot say whether they would generalize to all of Kenya, including older people or gender-balanced populations. Fourth, as this is a survey experiment pertaining to a specific sample and focused specifically on My County Hub in Kenya, the results are difficult to generalize to other contexts and countries. Other studies have shown that trust transfer does occur, and this study does not, but it may be that in this specific case for My County Hub in Kenya, trust transfer is not feasible because the reasons listed in the discussion. Finally, this study measures trust in *county* governments. The trust crisis so-described by large governing organizations is more typically thought of as a national government problem. We are limited in knowing whether the intervention we studied would have different implications if the trustee is national government.

9. Conclusion

In this study, we do not find evidence for trust transfer between the firm and the county government in Kenya. Rather, we find that learning about the online portal is correlated with more trust in government regardless of treatment condition. We find that there may be a substitution effect where citizens trust government less after learning that Safaricom is involved in My County Hub. We also find that baseline levels of trust in government led to differing results: people who already have low trust in government pre-treatment continued to trust government less post-treatment, while those who have high baseline trust in government and high baseline trust in Safaricom have more trust in government when they learn about the partnership.

These results have several implications for the government digitization literature. First, prior research has provided evidence that increasing trust through e-government efforts is highly dependent on baseline levels of trust and digitization efforts alone may be difficult to transform levels of trust (Bannister & Connolly, 2011; Parent et al., 2005; Welch et al., 2005). The heterogeneous effects from this study support these findings that pre-existing trust in government conditions how much trust increases in digitization efforts. In this study, people with high levels of trust at baseline have more trust in government after learning about the partnership; people with low levels of trust have less trust in government after learning about the partnership. Future research around government digitization efforts could focus on people with low levels of trust in government at baseline.

Second, more research around the specific service area for a digitization effort is needed. In this study, My County Hub focuses on taxes and fee payments. Much of the political science literature shows that people who trust government are more willing to pay taxes (Levi, 1988; Levi & Stoker, 2000), but the act of making payments may not help people trust their governments more as it does not allow for showing more competence, accountability, or other factors that people associate with government trustworthiness. Thus, perhaps trust transfer has an opportunity to work better for an online service where government immediately provides something to the citizen. We observed indirectly with data from this study that people who had recent interactions where the government provided student services were more likely to trust government more after learning about the partnership, which suggests that the area of service could be important for trust transfer to work.

Lastly, recent reviews of the e-government and government digitization literature point to the importance.

of context for studying digitization (Busch, Johannessen, & Pekkola, 2025; Janssen et al., 2025). Given the advances, but also the many setbacks, in Kenya's digitization efforts, trying to encourage trust transfer on digital platforms may be particularly difficult in Kenya especially among those who already do not trust government. Because of the controversies that Kenya efforts have faced, increases in trust in government through digital platforms and third party collaboration will require comprehensive efforts from government. Overall, trust in government is an important public value from digital public services and requires attention from government as it implements its digitization efforts.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Nuole Chen: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Salim Kombo:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Nathaniel Rabb:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Leonard Waweru:** Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation. **Alisa Zomer:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Data curation. **Lily L. Tsai:** Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Appendix

Table A1
Demographics of the sample. Fewer than 1% selected "Prefer not to say" for gender in each age range. Socioeconomic status is measured by the Assets Index where response options were radio, television, motor vehicle or motorcycle, computer, bank account, and mobile phone.

	n	%
Gender (Age)		
Female (18–34)	3014	27%
Male (18–34)	7397	66%
Female (35–54)	416	4%
Male (35–54)	293	3%
Female (55–64)	27	<1%
Male (55–64)	38	<1%
Female (65+)	4	<1%
Male (65+)	5	<1%
Education		
No school	30	<1%
Some/Complete primary	165	1.5%
Some/Complete secondary	1352	12%
Vocational training colleges	2048	18%
University	7505	66%
Other	190	2%
Employment		
Unemployed/retiree/housewife	1420	13%
Employed	1420	13%
Self-employed	2511	22%
Casual laborer	767	7%
Farmer	293	3%
Student	4879	43%
Assets Index (Owns 6 items max**)**		
1 item	2989	26%
2 items	1132	10%
3 items	1835	16%
4 items	1964	17%
5 items	1916	17%
6 items	1454	13%
County of Residence		
Kajiado	590	5%
Kiambu	1499	13%
Machakos	757	7%
Murang'a	655	6%
Nairobi	7789	69%

Table A2
Effect of treatments on trust in county government. Model 1 without covariates and Model 2 with covariates.

	Model 1 - Trust	Model 2 - Trust w/Cov
Partnership Treatment	0.02	0.00
	(0.02)	(0.01)
Safaricom Treatment	−0.02	−0.02*
	(0.02)	(0.01)
Trust in county gov (pre-treatment)		0.60***
		(0.01)
Trust in Safaricom (pre-treatment)		0.11***
		(0.01)
Constant (County Gov)	3.23***	0.97***
	(0.01)	(0.04)
R^2	0.00	0.52
Num. obs.	11,288	11,288

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$.

Table A3
Effect of treatments on willingness to use My County Hub. Model 1 without covariates and Model 2 with covariates.

	Model 1 - Uptake	Model 2 - Uptake w/Cov
Partnership Treatment	0.02	0.01
	(0.02)	(0.01)

(*continued on next page*)

Table A3 (*continued*)

	Model 1 - Uptake	Model 2 - Uptake w/Cov
Safaricom Treatment	0.05***	0.05***
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Trust in county gov (pre-treatment)		0.23***
		(0.01)
Trust in Safaricom (pre-treatment)		0.17***
		(0.01)
Constant (County Gov)	3.30***	1.98***
	(0.01)	(0.04)
R^2	0.00	0.16
Num. obs.	11,288	11,288

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$.

Table A4
Effect of treatments on more information. Model 1 without covariates and Model 2 with covariates.

	Model 1 - More Info	Model 2 - More Info w/Cov
Partnership Treatment	0.02	0.02
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Safaricom Treatment	0.05***	0.05***
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Trust in county gov (pre-treatment)		0.02**
		(0.01)
Trust in Safaricom (pre-treatment)		0.04***
		(0.01)
Constant (County Gov)	0.61***	0.41***
	(0.01)	(0.03)
R^2	0.00	0.01
Num. obs.	11,288	11,288

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$.

Appendix B. Regression tables - heterogeneous effects

Table A5
Heterogeneous effects of treatments on trust in county government.

	Safaricom-High/Gov-High	Safaricom-High/Gov-Low	Safaricom-Low/Gov-High	Safaricom-Low/Gov-Low
Partnership Treatment	0.03	−0.01	−0.10	−0.06
	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.10)	(0.09)
Safaricom Treatment	0.05***	0.11**	−0.22*	−0.04
	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.11)	(0.08)
Constant (County Gov)	3.37***	2.99***	3.18***	2.84***
	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.08)	(0.06)
R^2	0.00	0.01	0.02	0.00
Num. obs.	9198	1330	287	474

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$.

Table A6
Heterogeneous effects of treatments on willingness to use My County Hub.

	Safaricom-High/Gov-High	Safaricom-High/Gov-Low	Safaricom-Low/Gov-High	Safaricom-Low/Gov-Low
Partnership Treatment	0.02	0.01	−0.13	0.11
	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.07)	(0.06)
Safaricom Treatment	0.05***	0.08*	−0.11	0.08
	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.07)	(0.06)
Constant (County Gov)	0.62***	0.59***	0.66***	0.46***
	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.05)	(0.04)
R^2	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01
Num. obs.	9198	1330	287	474

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$.

Table A7
Heterogeneous effects of treatments on seeking out more information about My County Hub.

	Model 1 - Uptake	Model 2 - Uptake w/Cov
Change in Trust	0.12***	0.13***
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Age		0.00
		(0.00)
Gender: Female		−0.03*
		(0.01)
Gender: Prefer not to say		−0.33***
		(0.08)
Some/Complete Primary		0.03
		(0.16)
Some/Complete Secondary		0.14
		(0.14)
Vocational training colleges		0.18
		(0.14)
University		0.15
		(0.14)
Other		0.23
		(0.15)
Assets Index		−0.00
		(0.00)
Employed		0.09***
		(0.03)
Self-employed		0.13***
		(0.02)
Casual laborer		0.05
		(0.03)
Farmer		0.19***
		(0.04)
Student		0.13***
		(0.02)
Kajiado		0.01
		(0.03)
Kiambu		−0.01
		(0.02)
Machakos		0.10***
		(0.02)
Murang'a		0.02
		(0.03)
Constant	3.31***	3.06***
	(0.01)	(0.15)
R^2	0.01	0.02
Num. obs.	11,288	11,288

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$.

Appendix C. Regression table - correlation between trust and uptake

Table A8
Relationship between change in trust (post-treatment - pre-treatment) and willingness to use My County Hub.

	Safaricom-High/Gov-High	Safaricom-High/Gov-Low	Safaricom-Low/Gov-High	Safaricom-Low/Gov-Low
Partnership Treatment	0.03*	−0.05	−0.04	−0.19*
	(0.01)	(0.05)	(0.08)	(0.09)
Safaricom Treatment	0.00	−0.15**	−0.07	−0.28**
	(0.01)	(0.05)	(0.08)	(0.09)
Constant (County Gov)	3.39***	2.51***	3.11***	2.41***
	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.06)	(0.06)
R^2	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.02
Num. obs.	9198	1330	287	474

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$.

Regression tables showing main outcomes, with and without covariates, and showing the relationship between change in trust from pre-treatment to post-treatment and willingness to uptake My County Hub.

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Nuole Chen is the Research Director at MIT Governance Lab. She studies trust, bureaucracy, and the use of digital technology to improve the citizen-government relationship. She examines how governments' interactions with citizens affect citizens' trust in and compliance with the government.

Salim Kombo is an Engagement Director at Busara and leads the Social Stability Portfolio. He has a masters degree in International Relations from Universita Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. His current research focuses on applying behavioral science to build stable, inclusive and peaceful societies in the global south.

Nathaniel Rabb is a behavioral science researcher at the Human Cooperation Lab in MIT's Sloan School of Management. His research concerns knowledge representation and belief change; trust in abstract entities like government, AI, and civil society institutions; and how the two interact in collective cognition and behavior.

Leonard Waweru is a Senior Research Programme Manager at Shujaaz. He has a masters of science in statistics from the University of Nairobi. His work focuses on research, program design, and digital innovation to ensure data is used not just for reporting, but for continuous learning, adaptation, and strategic decision-making across Shujaaz work.

Alisa Zomer is a researcher and program manager focused on practitioner collaboration and translating evidence into practice with experience at MIT, Yale, and the World Resources Institute. Her research interests focus on environmental law and policy, climate change governance, urban sustainability, and international development.

Lily L. Tsai is the Director and Founder of the MIT Governance Lab and the Ford Professor of Political Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Her research focuses on accountability, governance, and political participation in developing contexts, particularly in Asia and Africa.