



Research Article

Digital Dependency and Political Economy in Developing Countries: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis

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Abstract. This study explores the intersection between political economy and digital dependency in developing countries, emphasizing how dependence on foreign digital infrastructure, platforms, and artificial intelligence (AI) ecosystems affects economic sovereignty, growth, and inequality. Using a qualitative approach based on secondary data from the World Bank, IMF, UNCTAD, and peer-reviewed literature, the research applies dependency theory and data colonialism frameworks to analyze structural vulnerabilities in the digital economy. The findings reveal that while digital technologies enhance efficiency and innovation, they simultaneously reinforce unequal global power

relations and deepen dependency on external technological actors. Developing countries remain constrained by limited infrastructure, human capital shortages, and debt burdens, all of which restrict their ability to achieve digital sovereignty. The study concludes that overcoming digital dependency requires not only regulatory reforms but also sustained investment in domestic infrastructure, education, and regional cooperation to promote inclusive and autonomous digital development.

Keywords: Political Economy, Digital Dependency, AI Divide, Data Sovereignty, Developing Countries.

INTRODUCTION

These developments raise critical questions: How can developing countries navigate the promise and peril of AI and data technologies? Can digital sovereignty be meaningfully achieved in a world where infrastructure, knowledge, and innovation are unevenly distributed? And what strategies technical, legal, and diplomatic are most effective in resisting or reshaping digital dependency?

This paper engages these questions through the lens of political economy, critically examining how digital dependency functions in the context of AI, data governance, and sovereignty. Drawing on case studies from Southeast Asia and Latin America, and building upon frameworks of data colonialism and decolonial AI, the paper argues that achieving technological autonomy requires more than regulation; it demands investment in local capacity, alternative knowledge systems, and cooperative global frameworks.

Furthermore, this research seeks to fill an important gap in the current literature. While most existing studies discuss *data colonialism* and *AI dependency* conceptually, few examine how these dynamics interact with the material political economy of developing nations. By combining theoretical insights with comparative regional analysis, this paper contributes a more integrated understanding of how digital dependency shapes national development and sovereignty. The study's broader aim is to inform policymakers and scholars about strategies for reducing dependency and promoting equitable digital transformation in the Global South.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Dependency in the Global South

The increasing entwinement of developing countries with global digital infrastructures has reignited scholarly debates around dependency theory, long used to explain the structural subordination of peripheral economies to global centers of capital (Dos Santos, 1970; Cardoso & Faletto, 1979). In the digital age, this dependency has evolved from trade and finance into data extraction, platform control, and algorithmic governance.

Mejias and Couldry (2024) argue that this shift marks a new era of data colonialism, wherein digital platforms operate as extractive regimes, appropriating personal and institutional data from users in the Global South. Drawing parallels to historical colonialism, they emphasize that the collection and commodification of data without local benefit mirrors the resource extraction practices of empires. Their work reframes digital dependency as a systemic imbalance rooted in the global

architecture of digital capitalism.

Brevini et al. (2024) extend this critique by calling for a contextualized analysis of digital power. While agreeing that data colonialism is a useful conceptual tool, they caution against overly deterministic narratives that underplay the agency of states and local actors. Instead, they advocate a focus on how specific national policies, infrastructures, and resistances shape the contours of digital dependency. AI

Colonialism and Epistemic Inequality

Beyond data, artificial intelligence (AI) has become a critical vector of digital dependency. Scholars have begun to interrogate the epistemic and ecological dimensions of AI development, arguing that AI systems often reproduce the biases, values, and economic interests of the Global North.

Mohamed, Png, and Isaac (2020) introduced the framework of Decolonial AI, calling for the dismantling of dominant knowledge hierarchies in AI systems. They argue that current AI models are largely trained on datasets from Western contexts and governed by institutions that exclude marginalized voices—thereby reinforcing global asymmetries in knowledge production.

Mollema (2024) furthers this perspective by situating AI within the broader history of technological colonialism, coining the term “AI colonialism” to describe how algorithms, infrastructures, and AI labor reflect extractive logics. His analysis highlights how developing countries often serve as testing grounds for foreign-built systems, while lacking access to the computational power and research ecosystems required for sovereign innovation.

These studies collectively show that AI is not neutral or universal. Rather, it is shaped by the political economies and infrastructural capacities of the societies that produce it and, often, imposed on societies that do not.

Digital Sovereignty: Aspirations and Constraints

In response to the challenges of digital dependency, many developing countries have turned to the concept of digital sovereignty, the idea that states should have control over their digital infrastructure, data governance, and AI deployment (Pohle & Thiel, 2020).

This aspiration is evident in the policies of several Global South nations. For instance, Indonesia's Personal Data Protection Law (2022) mandates data localization and user consent, and is part of a broader push toward digital self-determination. However, as highlighted by Nugroho (2025), these laws often face implementation gaps due to continued reliance on foreign-owned cloud services and AI platforms. Similar dynamics are observed in Vietnam, Nigeria, and Brazil, where sovereignty is asserted rhetorically but undermined structurally (The Diplomat, 2025; Cambridge University Press, 2025).

Global structural constraints further complicate sovereignty claims. The semiconductor supply chain dominated by U.S., Chinese, and Taiwanese firms remains out of reach for most developing countries, making local AI training and deployment virtually impossible without foreign tools. According to recent studies by Cambridge (2025), even BRICS nations struggle to achieve AI sovereignty, despite

robust investments.

Moreover, global trade agreements, intellectual property regimes, and the influence of multinational corporations (MNCs) impose external limits on the scope of national digital policies (Azmeah & Foster, 2021). These forces entrench asymmetries in technological capacity and regulatory power, placing the Global South in a reactive rather than proactive position.

Reframing Digital Dependency as a Political Economy Issue

Despite the growing body of literature, a critical gap remains in linking AI and data dependency to broader political economy structures. While conceptual frameworks such as data colonialism and decolonial AI offer powerful critiques, fewer studies explore the material conditions such as access to capital, trade relations, digital labor, and infrastructure financing that shape dependency on the ground.

Some recent work has begun to bridge this divide. Srnicek (2017) discusses the rise of platform capitalism as a new regime of accumulation, wherein digital monopolies extract value not only through user data but also through control over global infrastructures. Similarly, Zuboff (2019) warns that surveillance capitalism if left unchecked poses risks not only to individual privacy but to democratic sovereignty itself.

Yet much of this literature remains focused on the Global North or generalized to the global level. What is needed is a closer examination of how developing countries specifically experience, resist, or adapt to these dynamics particularly in relation to national development goals, policy frameworks, and regional power dynamics.

Most existing literature is either theoretical or focused on single countries. There is a lack of comparative, grounded research that examines how digital dependency plays out in different developing contexts especially across regions like Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America. There is a need to move beyond normative critiques (e.g., colonialism, surveillance) and instead interrogate how material political economy factors such as investment flows, trade agreements, and tech labor markets mediate digital sovereignty and dependency in practice.

This study contributes to addressing these gaps by analyzing the political economy of digital dependency in selected developing countries, with a focus on how data governance, AI development, and sovereignty claims intersect in both policy and practice.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objective of this paper is to critically examine how artificial intelligence (AI) reshapes the global political economy by generating new forms of digital dependency in developing countries. Specifically, it seeks to analyze the structural mechanisms including unequal AI adoption, infrastructural and human capital gaps, platform concentration, debt constraints, and labor market vulnerabilities through which dependency is reinforced, while also assessing regional variations across Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America. At the same time, the study aims to explore how states, regional alliances, and local actors aspire to and exercise agency

in pursuing digital sovereignty, linking theoretical frameworks such as dependency theory, data colonialism, and decolonial AI with the material realities of trade, infrastructure, finance, and labor. Ultimately, the objective is not only to diagnose dependency but also to identify pathways toward autonomy, inclusive development, and more equitable participation in global digital governance.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in the critical analysis of secondary data, consistent with established scholarly practices in political economy and digital governance research (Creswell, 2013; Bowen, 2009). Drawing on a wide range of sources including peer-reviewed academic literature on data colonialism and platform capitalism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Srnicek, 2017), national digital policy documents, reports from international organizations such as UNCTAD and the World Bank, and credible think tank and media publications this research employs a comparative case study approach focused on developing countries with diverse digital governance experiences. Thematic content analysis is used to systematically interpret patterns of digital dependency and sovereignty challenges, aligning with methodological recommendations for studying complex socio-technical phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While relying exclusively on secondary data limits direct empirical observation, this approach allows for a rigorous and comprehensive examination of structural inequalities in digital infrastructure and governance, as advocated by leading scholars in the field.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Unequal AI Adoption as a Form of Dependence

1. One of the clearest ways in which digital dependency appears is through the uneven adoption of artificial intelligence (AI). Advanced economies are moving quickly to integrate AI across industries, while many developing countries struggle to keep pace. This gap is not only about access to technology but reflects deeper structural inequalities that lock poorer countries into a dependent position.
2. A major barrier is weak infrastructure. Many developing countries still face unreliable electricity, low internet penetration, and limited local data storage. For example, while high-income countries enjoy internet access rates above 90 percent, several regions in Sub-Saharan Africa remain below 30 percent, which makes it difficult to scale AI applications. Without strong infrastructure, local innovation cannot grow.
3. Another factor is the shortage of skilled workers. AI depends on expertise in computer science, engineering, and data science, yet very few graduates in low-income countries specialize in these fields. Those who do often migrate abroad in search of better opportunities, creating a cycle where local industries cannot find the talent they need.
4. Financial constraints add to the problem. AI systems and infrastructure require heavy investment, but many developing countries are burdened by debt and must prioritize spending on basic needs like health, education, and food

security. As a result, governments and small businesses often rely on donor-funded projects or foreign corporations to access AI tools.

5. Policy and governance gaps also slow adoption. Many countries lack clear regulations on AI, data protection, and ethical use. This uncertainty makes both public institutions and private firms hesitant to invest. When foreign technologies are adopted, they often fail to fit local languages, cultures, and needs, which reinforces reliance on external providers for customization and support.
6. The result is a widening gap between countries that build and control AI and those that only consume it. Developing countries risk becoming permanent importers of technology, dependent on global corporations for access, training, and maintenance. This unequal adoption strengthens the position of advanced economies while limiting the sovereignty and bargaining power of poorer nations in the digital era.

Infrastructure and Human Capital as Barriers to Sovereignty

Digital sovereignty in developing countries is often undermined by weak infrastructure and shortages of skilled human capital. These two factors are closely linked, as strong digital infrastructure requires trained experts to build and maintain it, while human capital development depends on access to reliable technologies and learning environments.

On the infrastructure side, many low- and middle-income countries still struggle with uneven internet access, unstable electricity supply, and the absence of local data centers or cloud services. According to World Bank and ITU data, internet penetration is above 90 percent in high-income economies but remains below 30 percent in many low-income regions. This gap limits opportunities for citizens, businesses, and governments to benefit from AI and digital services. Without reliable connectivity, efforts to digitize public services, education, and health systems face major challenges.

The lack of human capital creates another obstacle. AI and advanced digital technologies require a workforce skilled in computer science, machine learning, and data analysis. Yet only a small fraction of students in low-income countries pursue these fields, and those who do often migrate abroad due to better salaries and opportunities, leading to a “brain drain.” DevelopmentAid (2025) notes that fewer than 2 percent of graduates in low-income countries specialize in AI or related disciplines. This shortage means that many governments and firms depend on foreign consultants and multinational corporations to design, manage, and operate digital systems.

The combination of weak infrastructure and limited human capital deepens dependency. Countries without their own expertise or infrastructure cannot fully control the data they generate, nor can they develop homegrown AI tools tailored to their social, cultural, and economic needs. Instead, they rely on external providers who often set the terms of access and use. This dynamic not only restricts technological sovereignty but also perpetuates inequalities between the Global North

and the Global South.

Platform Concentration and Digital Colonialism

Another major source of digital dependency is the dominance of a few global technology platforms, most of which are controlled by corporations based in the United States and China. According to UNCTAD (2023), nearly 70 percent of the world's digital platforms are owned by companies from these two countries. This concentration of power means that developing nations often depend on foreign firms for basic digital infrastructure, data storage, communication, and AI tools.

The problem is not only economic but also political. When local economies rely on foreign platforms, much of the value created through data generation is extracted abroad. User information collected in the Global South is processed, monetized, and stored in servers controlled by companies in the Global North, with little benefit returning to the countries where the data originates. This dynamic has been described by scholars as “**data colonialism**” (Mejias & Couldry, 2024), drawing parallels with earlier forms of resource extraction during colonial times.

Platform concentration also produces cultural and epistemic inequalities. Most AI systems are optimized for a narrow set of global languages and cultural contexts, which excludes many voices from the Global South. For example, only about 2–3 percent of the world's languages are adequately supported in major AI models, leaving local knowledge and cultural practices underrepresented. This lack of inclusion not only reinforces linguistic and cultural hierarchies but also weakens the ability of developing countries to shape digital futures in their own terms.

Furthermore, dependence on dominant platforms makes it difficult for local alternatives to grow. High entry costs, lack of access to capital, and strong network effects mean that small or regional platforms struggle to compete. As a result, developing countries remain locked into global ecosystems that they do not control, with limited bargaining power over rules, pricing, or governance.

In this way, platform concentration and data colonialism deepen digital dependency by extracting value, marginalizing local knowledge, and limiting technological autonomy. Without stronger local and regional platforms, developing countries risk becoming permanent data providers rather than equal participants in the global digital economy.

Debt Dependency Blocking AI Sovereignty

Financial dependency is a critical but often overlooked factor that shapes digital dependency. Many developing countries carry heavy external debt burdens that limit their ability to invest in digital infrastructure, research, and artificial intelligence (AI) development. According to Reuters (2024), developing economies spent around **\$1.4 trillion on debt servicing in 2023 alone**, resources that could otherwise have been directed toward innovation, education, and technology.

This situation creates a vicious cycle. Because governments lack sufficient fiscal space, they often rely on donor-funded projects, foreign corporations, or international development agencies to finance digital initiatives. While such partnerships may provide short-term access to technology, they frequently reinforce

long-term dependency by leaving critical infrastructure, platforms, and expertise under external control. For instance, cloud services and large-scale AI projects in many African and Southeast Asian countries are often built and maintained by multinational corporations, which control the terms of use and data governance.

Debt dependency also influences bargaining power in international trade and technology agreements. Countries under financial strain are less able to negotiate favorable terms on issues such as data localization, intellectual property rights, and technology transfer. Instead, they accept conditions that prioritize the interests of stronger economies and multinational firms, even when these undermine local sovereignty.

The link between debt and digital dependency highlights how economic structures reinforce technological inequality. As long as debt servicing consumes a large share of national budgets, investments in domestic AI research, digital infrastructure, and human capital will remain limited. This financial subordination, therefore, perpetuates technological subordination, keeping developing countries reliant on external actors for digital transformation.

Labor Market Exposure and Dependency Risks

The spread of artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping global labor markets, but its impacts are highly uneven across countries. While advanced economies often use AI to complement human labor and raise productivity, workers in developing countries face greater risks of job loss, informality, and social insecurity. UNCTAD (2025) estimates that around **40 percent of global jobs are exposed to AI-driven changes**, yet the outcomes vary widely depending on national policies and protections.

In wealthier economies, strong labor regulations and reskilling programs help workers adapt to technological change. AI is more likely to augment existing roles, improve efficiency, and create new forms of employment. In contrast, many low- and middle-income countries lack the social safety nets and training systems needed to support displaced workers. This leaves large segments of the population vulnerable to unemployment or forced into informal, precarious jobs.

Platform-based gig work further complicates the situation. As AI systems increasingly mediate digital labor platforms for ride-hailing, delivery, or online freelancing, workers in developing countries become dependent on global companies for income. These platforms often set wages, working conditions, and access to opportunities with little input from local governments or workers themselves. The result is a form of labor dependency, where livelihoods are tied to decisions made outside national borders.

Moreover, the shortage of local AI expertise means that much of the high-value work—such as research, development, and system design—remains concentrated in the Global North. Workers in the Global South are more likely to be employed in lower-value, repetitive, or outsourced digital labor, which provides limited opportunities for skill development and upward mobility.

These dynamics illustrate how AI can widen existing inequalities in global labor markets. Without deliberate policies to protect workers, expand training

opportunities, and encourage fairer digital labor practices, developing countries risk deepening their dependence on external actors while exposing their populations to new forms of economic insecurity.

Governance Gaps and Pathways to Autonomy

Governance is a central challenge in the effort to overcome digital dependency. Many developing countries have introduced national digital strategies, data protection laws, or AI policies, yet the gap between policy ambition and implementation capacity remains wide. Weak institutions, limited resources, and insufficient regulatory expertise often prevent governments from effectively monitoring or regulating powerful multinational technology firms. As a result, foreign corporations continue to dominate key areas of infrastructure, data storage, and AI development with minimal accountability at the local level.

These governance gaps are not only technical but also political. In some contexts, policymakers adopt frameworks that appear progressive on paper but lack the institutional strength to be enforced. For example, research on Sub-Saharan Africa shows that only Rwanda has developed a “decolonization-responsive” AI strategy, while most others remain “decolonization-blind,” reinforcing dependency rather than challenging it. Without strong oversight, policies risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

At the same time, pathways to autonomy are emerging. Regional cooperation has proven to be one of the most promising strategies. The African Union’s continental data governance framework and India’s push for data localization illustrate how collective or national initiatives can begin to reclaim control over digital infrastructure. Such approaches allow states to set their own priorities, reduce reliance on foreign platforms, and build shared resilience.

Another pathway lies in strengthening South–South partnerships. By pooling expertise, resources, and market size, developing countries can create alternatives to global monopolies, invest in joint research, and negotiate more favorable terms in trade and digital governance agreements. South–South collaboration is particularly important in areas such as cloud computing, semiconductor access, and AI ethics, where individual countries often lack sufficient capacity.

Finally, governance must be tied to inclusive development goals. Building strong institutions that can regulate foreign corporations, audit AI systems, and protect citizen rights is essential, but these efforts must be anchored in broader social objectives such as equity, labor protections, and cultural recognition. Only when digital governance aligns with local development priorities can pathways to autonomy become both realistic and sustainable.

In sum, governance gaps remain a key weakness in the Global South’s digital landscape, but targeted reforms, regional cooperation, and inclusive strategies can create meaningful opportunities for autonomy. The challenge is to move from symbolic laws and fragmented policies toward effective, enforceable systems that empower states and citizens alike.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Developing countries must take deliberate steps to reduce structural digital dependency and build more resilient futures. This requires sustained investment in national digital infrastructure, including broadband, cloud services, and data centers, while also expanding education and research opportunities in computer science and related fields to nurture local expertise. Stronger data protection laws and governance frameworks are essential to ensure that data generated within national borders serves domestic interests and benefits citizens directly. At the same time, regional cooperation through platforms such as the African Union, ASEAN, and BRICS can foster resource sharing, create alternatives to foreign-controlled digital platforms, and promote knowledge exchange among countries facing similar challenges. Financial barriers also need urgent attention, as high debt servicing often restricts digital investment; international institutions should provide fairer financing options, and governments must negotiate trade agreements that protect technological sovereignty. Protecting workers from the risks of automation through labor rights, retraining, and policies that emphasize the complementary role of technology is equally important. Furthermore, developing stronger regulatory institutions will allow states to oversee global corporations more effectively, enforce accountability, and align digital policies with broader development priorities. Incorporating local languages, indigenous knowledge, and marginalized perspectives into digital strategies will help counter cultural homogenization and ensure technology reflects diverse societies. Finally, active participation in multilateral forums is necessary to shape fairer global rules on data governance and artificial intelligence, giving developing countries a stronger role in the evolving digital economy.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights how digital dependency in developing countries is not merely a technological challenge but a deeply political and economic issue. Reliance on foreign-owned infrastructure, platforms, and artificial intelligence systems reinforces existing global inequalities and constrains national sovereignty. At the same time, the rapid spread of digital technologies offers opportunities for growth, innovation, and improved governance if developing countries can strengthen their own capacities and pursue more equitable strategies. Addressing digital dependency requires more than regulatory reforms; it demands long-term investment in infrastructure and education, stronger regional cooperation, fairer global rules on data and technology, and a deliberate effort to include local voices and knowledge systems in shaping digital futures. By reframing digital dependency as part of the broader political economy, this study emphasizes that autonomy in the digital age cannot be achieved in isolation but through coordinated national policies, regional alliances, and global advocacy for digital justice. Ultimately, building digital sovereignty is not only about technological control but also about ensuring inclusive and equitable development in a world increasingly defined by data and artificial intelligence.

Limitations

This study is primarily based on secondary data, which offers a broad comparative perspective but does not fully capture local experiences or voices from the ground. The findings focus on regions such as Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America, limiting generalizability to all developing countries. Moreover, the rapid evolution of digital technologies, especially AI, outpaces the scope of this research, while structural forces such as trade regimes and geopolitical competition could not be examined in depth. Finally, the absence of primary empirical research restricts the ability to test theoretical frameworks like dependency theory and data colonialism in specific contexts.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Ethical Approval

As this research was entirely based on theoretical analysis, secondary data, and document review, no ethical approval was required in accordance with institutional guidelines.

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