Memory Protection in the Digital Health Era: A New Direction for Alzheimer's Disease Prevention in Nigeria

Singhma Soyouzee

Department of Neurology and Digital Health, Department of Neurology and Digital Health, University of Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria

Abstract

Alzheimer's disease (AD) and other neurodegenerative conditions present significant public health challenges in Nigeria, with rising prevalence due to demographic aging and limited healthcare infrastructure. Digital therapeutics (DTx) offer promising approaches to address these challenges through evidence-based software interventions for prevention, management, and treatment of cognitive disorders. This perspective examines the current landscape of AD in Nigeria and explores the potential applications of digital therapeutics within this context. We analyze the unique challenges and opportunities for implementing DTx in Nigeria's healthcare system, considering cultural, infrastructural, and policy factors. We also propose a framework for future research directions integrating digital cognitive assessments, interventions, and monitoring systems tailored to the Nigerian population. By addressing the specific needs and constraints of the Nigerian healthcare environment while leveraging global advancements in digital health, researchers can develop effective, scalable solutions to mitigate the growing burden of Alzheimer's disease in Nigeria and similar low- and middle-income countries.

Keywords

Alzheimer's Disease, Digital Therapeutics, Nigeria, Cognitive Impairment, Neurodegenerative Diseases, Digital Health, Cognitive Assessment, Low- And Middle-Income Countries

1. Introduction

Alzheimer's disease (AD) and other neurodegenerative conditions have emerged as significant public health concerns in Nigeria, with rising prevalence attributed to demographic aging and epidemiological transition. As the most populous country in Africa, Nigeria faces unique challenges in addressing neurodegenerative diseases due to limited healthcare infrastructure, scarce specialist resources, and cultural factors affecting diagnosis and care. The growing burden of AD in Nigeria occurs against a backdrop of rapidly increasing dementia prevalence globally, with cases projected to rise from 50 million to 115 million by 2050, with low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) like Nigeria being disproportionately affected.

Digital therapeutics (DTx) represent an innovative approach to managing neurological and psychiatric conditions through evidence-based software interventions. Defined as medical interventions driven by software to prevent, manage, or treat medical conditions, DTx have shown particular promise in the realm of cognitive disorders, giving rise to the specialized field of cognitive digital therapeutics (CDTx). These technologies offer potential solutions to some of the most pressing challenges in AD care in resource-limited settings like Nigeria by enabling scalable, accessible, and cost-effective assessment, intervention, and monitoring solutions.

This perspective examines the current landscape of Alzheimer's disease in Nigeria and explores the potential applications of digital therapeutics within this context. We analyze the unique challenges and opportunities for implementing DTx in Nigeria's healthcare system, considering cultural, infrastructural, and policy factors. Furthermore, we propose a framework for future research directions integrating digital cognitive assessments, interventions, and monitoring systems tailored to the Nigerian population. By addressing the specific needs and constraints of the Nigerian healthcare environment while leveraging global advancements in digital health, researchers can develop effective, scalable solutions to mitigate the growing burden of Alzheimer's disease in Nigeria and similar LMICs.

2. The Burden of Alzheimer's Disease in Nigeria

2.1 Epidemiology and Risk Factors

The burden of neurodegenerative diseases, particularly Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, and all-cause dementia, represents an emerging public health challenge in Nigeria. According to GBD 2019 estimates, Western Sub-Saharan Africa, the regional cluster that includes Nigeria, has an age-standardized incidence rate (ASIR) of 75.3 per 100,000 (95% UI 64.1–86.5) for AD. While the ASIR has shown a slight annual decline (EAPC –0.11%), absolute incident cases continue to rise as the population ages, creating an increasing burden on the healthcare system and families.

Major risk factors for AD in the Nigerian population include advanced age and the APOE-ε4 allele, but several modifiable factors also contribute significantly to disease risk. These include mid-life hypertension, poorly controlled type-2 diabetes, chronic exposure to fine-particulate air pollution, and low educational attainment. A 2019 Nigerian systematic review found a pooled crude prevalence of 4.9% (95% CI 3.0–6.9) among adults aged ≥60 years, with significantly higher prevalence in women (6.7%) than men (3.1%). This gender disparity warrants further investigation but may reflect both biological and sociocultural factors [1].

2.2 Healthcare System Challenges

Nigeria's healthcare system faces substantial challenges in addressing AD and other neurodegenerative diseases effectively. With a population exceeding 200 million, the country has fewer than 90 neurologists, creating a significant specialist gap. Diagnostic resources such as neuroimaging equipment and memory clinics are concentrated in approximately six urban centers, creating access barriers for rural populations. Essential medications like cholinesterase inhibitors face frequent stock-outs, further complicating disease management.

The limited healthcare infrastructure contributes to delayed diagnosis and intervention. A recent hospital audit highlighted delayed presentation (>18 months after symptom onset) and limited follow-up due to travel costs. This diagnostic delay represents a critical missed opportunity for early intervention, which is particularly important in AD where earlier treatment may better preserve cognitive function [2].

2.3 Socioeconomic and Cultural Considerations

The socioeconomic impact of AD in Nigeria is substantial and disproportionately affects certain demographic groups. Informal caregivers, predominantly women, supply more than 70% of unpaid care hours, creating significant economic and psychosocial strain. Stigma rooted in supernatural explanations for cognitive symptoms delays formal diagnosis in approximately 30% of rural cases, further compounding caregiver stress and limiting appropriate interventions [3].

Cultural interpretations of dementia symptoms significantly impact help-seeking behaviors. Dementia is still widely misinterpreted as witchcraft in some communities, leading to social isolation, violence, and abandonment of affected individuals, particularly elderly women. These cultural factors, combined with financial barriers—monthly out-of-pocket costs for medications can exceed 25% of household income—create complex challenges for AD management in Nigeria.

Table 1. Current Status of Alzheimer's Disease in Nigeria

Aspect	Current Status	Implications for DTx
Specialist Availability	<90 neurologists for >200 million people	DTx could extend specialist reach through telemedicine and decision support
Diagnostic Resources	Concentrated in 6 urban centers	Digital cognitive assessments could increase access to screening
Medication Access	Frequent stock-outs of cholinesterase inhibitors	DTx could provide non-pharmacological management options
Cultural Factors	Stigma and supernatural beliefs delay diagnosis	Culturally adapted DTx could improve health literacy and reduce stigma
Caregiver Burden	>70% unpaid care hours by women	Caregiver-focused DTx components could provide support and training

Table 1: This table comprehensively reveals the five major challenges in Alzheimer's disease management in Nigeria:

- Scarcity of professional personnel
- Centralization of diagnostic resources
- Insufficient drug supply
- Cultural barriers
- Excessive caregiving stress for women

It also highlights the enormous potential of digital therapy (DTx) in areas such as telemedicine, early screening, non-pharmacological treatments, health education, and caregiver support.

3. Digital Therapeutics for Alzheimer's Disease: Global Perspectives

Digital therapeutics represent evidence-based interventions driven by high-quality software to prevent, manage, or treat medical disorders. Since the establishment of the Digital Therapeutics Alliance in 2017, DTx have been increasingly applied across various medical conditions, including neurodegenerative diseases. For Alzheimer's disease and related dementias, DTx encompass a range of technologies including computerized cognitive training, virtual reality interventions, digital biomarkers, and remote monitoring systems [4].

3.1 Digital Cognitive Assessment

Traditional paper-and-pencil cognitive tests such as the Mini-Mental State Examination and Montreal Cognitive Assessment have limitations including requirements for professional administration, potential for human bias, and

practice effects with repeated administrations. Digital cognitive assessments overcome these limitations by providing automated, standardized, and convenient multidimensional evaluations of cognitive function.

These assessments can be broadly categorized into three types: (1) computerized cognitive assessments, which include digital versions of standard cognitive tests and novel interactive tasks; (2) digital biomarker-driven assessments using data from wearables and sensors to monitor daily activities and behaviors; and (3) multimodal brain imaging assessments incorporating advanced analytical approaches [5]. Digital biomarkers are particularly promising for ecological monitoring, as they can be collected during daily activities with minimal intrusion. For example, reduced daily activity ranges and restricted movement patterns detected through wearable devices can provide early warnings of cognitive decline.

3.2 Digital Cognitive Interventions

Currently, there is no definitive cure for Alzheimer's disease, with existing management strategies primarily aimed at symptom control and slowing disease progression. Pharmaceutical approaches face significant challenges, with AD drug development showing a failure rate as high as 99.6%. In this context, DTx have emerged as promising non-pharmacological interventions to enhance and preserve cognitive function.

Digital cognitive interventions can be categorized into three primary types: (1) cognitive training programs designed to strengthen existing cognitive pathways; (2) compensatory approaches that teach alternative strategies to overcome cognitive deficits; and (3 multidomain interventions that combine cognitive training with other modalities such as physical exercise, diet, and social engagement. These interventions can be delivered through various digital platforms including computers, tablets, and virtual reality systems, offering the advantage of personalization, adaptivity, and scalability [6].

Table 2. Categories of Digital Therapeutics for Alzheimer's Disease

Category	Examples	Potential Applications in Nigeria
Digital Cognitive Assessments	Computerized neuropsychological tests, Digital biomarkers, Speech and language analysis	Community-based screening, Primary care triage, Remote monitoring
Cognitive Training Interventions	Computerized cognitive exercises, Virtual reality training, Adaptive learning algorithms	Community centers, Primary care facilities, Home-based interventions
Multidomain Interventions	Combined cognitive-physical training, Integrated lifestyle monitoring, Caregiver support platforms	Public health programs, Workplace wellness initiatives, Religious organization partnerships
Caregiver Support Tools	Education platforms, Remote monitoring systems, Stress management applications	Extended family caregiver training, Community health worker support

Table 2: This table systematically presents four main types of digital therapies for Alzheimer's disease and outlines how to localize these tools for application in Nigeria.

Key focuses include:

- Using digital assessment and training tools to address healthcare resource shortages;
- Promoting interventions through community, religious, and family networks;
- Providing technical support and educational resources for caregivers and primary healthcare workers.

Overall, digital therapies can serve as an innovative solution to the challenges of Alzheimer's disease care in Nigeria.

4. Current Public Health Strategies for Neurodegenerative Diseases in Nigeria

4.1 Existing Initiatives and Policies

Nigeria has initiated several public health strategies to address the growing burden of neurodegenerative diseases, though these efforts remain in early stages of development. The Nigerian government has developed national policies aligned with global frameworks such as the World Health Organization's Global Action Plan on the Public Health Response to Dementia (2017–2025) [7]. These policies emphasize dementia as a public health priority and advocate for risk reduction strategies, early diagnosis, and caregiver support, though specific details of Nigeria's national plan are not extensively documented.

Organizations like the Alzheimer's Disease Association of Nigeria (ADAN), established in 1999, have been instrumental in raising awareness and developing care infrastructure. ADAN has initiated monthly dementia awareness programs, established early dementia diagnosis clinics within primary healthcare settings, and conducts regular public health education meetings to dispel myths, reduce stigma, and encourage early consultation with healthcare professionals.

4.2 Lifestyle Modification Initiatives

Addressing modifiable risk factors represents a cornerstone of Nigeria's current approach to neurodegenerative disease prevention. Public health campaigns focus on promoting tobacco cessation, alcohol moderation, healthy diets rich in fruits, vegetables, and fish, regular physical activity, and management of comorbidities such as hypertension and diabetes. These lifestyle modifications are disseminated through community workshops, media campaigns, and collaborations with healthcare providers, leveraging evidence that such interventions can reduce dementia risk.

The U.S. POINTER trial results presented at AAIC 2025 provided robust support for structured lifestyle interventions, showing that programs combining exercise, MIND diet, cognitive training, and health monitoring delivered statistically significant gains in global cognition over self-guided approaches. These findings are particularly relevant for Nigeria, as they demonstrate the potential of non-pharmacological approaches in diverse populations [8].

4.3 Capacity Building and Traditional Medicine Integration

Enhancing the skills of healthcare professionals is vital for effective neurodegenerative disease management in Nigeria. Training programs focus on early detection, diagnosis, and management of these conditions, though such programs remain limited in scale and distribution. Additionally, research initiatives are being undertaken to understand the genetic and environmental factors contributing to neurodegenerative diseases in the Nigerian context, though funding and infrastructure constraints limit their scope.

A unique aspect of Nigeria's healthcare landscape is the integration of traditional and modern medicine. Traditional medicine practices remain widely utilized, particularly in rural areas, and their integration with evidence-based approaches represents an important opportunity for improving neurodegenerative disease care. Research exploring the efficacy and safety of traditional remedies, such as herbal preparations used for cognitive symptoms, could identify valuable treatments while promoting appropriate integration with conventional medicine [9].

5. Digital Therapeutics Research Directions for Nigeria

5.1 Adaptation and Validation of Existing DTx

A critical first research direction involves the adaptation and validation of existing digital therapeutics for the Nigerian context. Most currently available DTx have been developed and validated in high-income countries with different cultural, educational, and technological contexts. Research should focus on culturally adapting content, interfaces, and assessment paradigms to ensure their validity, acceptability, and effectiveness in Nigerian populations.

Key adaptation considerations include: (1) linguistic and literacy appropriateness, accounting for Nigeria's diverse languages and educational backgrounds; (2) cultural relevance of cognitive test items and intervention content; (3) technological accessibility given variable digital literacy and device availability; and (4) integration with local healthcare practices and traditional beliefs about cognitive health. Validation studies should establish normative data for digital cognitive assessments in diverse Nigerian populations and evaluate the efficacy of adapted interventions through randomized controlled trials [10].

5.2 Development of Novel DTx for Nigerian Specific Needs

Beyond adapting existing tools, research should explore novel DTx approaches designed specifically for Nigeria's unique needs and opportunities. These might include: (1) voice-based interfaces to accommodate variable literacy levels; (2) offline functionality to address connectivity limitations in rural areas; (3) integration with mobile money platforms to facilitate sustainable implementation; and (4) family-centered designs reflecting the central role of extended families in care provision.

An promising direction involves leveraging Nigeria's rapidly expanding mobile infrastructure to deliver DTx. With mobile penetration exceeding 80% and continuing to grow, phone-based interventions could reach substantial portions of the population, including in rural areas. Research should explore optimal delivery models—such as hybrid approaches combining basic mobile phone features (e.g., SMS, voice) with smartphone applications where feasible—to maximize accessibility while maintaining intervention effectiveness [11].

5.3 Implementation Science Research

Successful implementation of DTx in Nigeria requires understanding the systemic, cultural, and practical factors affecting adoption and sustainability. Implementation science research should examine: (1) integration pathways for DTx within Nigeria's tiered healthcare system, including roles for community health workers; (2) financing models encompassing public, private, and donor funding sources; (3) training requirements for healthcare providers at different levels; and (4) regulatory frameworks ensuring safety while encouraging innovation.

An important implementation consideration involves the deployment of blood-based biomarkers (BBMs), for which AAIC 2025 delivered the first clinical practice guidelines. These guidelines specify that biomarkers with ≥90% sensitivity and specificity can be used for confirmation, while those with ≥90% sensitivity and ≥75% specificity work for triage. Research exploring the integration of BBMs with digital assessments in Nigerian primary care settings could significantly improve diagnostic accuracy and accessibility [12].

6. Technological Infrastructure and Implementation Considerations

6.1 Connectivity and Access

The implementation of DTx in Nigeria must account for the country's technological infrastructure, including variable internet connectivity and device access. While urban areas generally have reliable internet access, rural regions may have limited or unstable connectivity, necessitating DTx solutions that can function offline or with intermittent synchronization. Research should explore technical architectures that support robust offline functionality while maintaining data security and user experience.

Device access patterns also inform appropriate DTx development. Smartphone penetration is growing but not universal, particularly among older adults and in rural areas. Feature phones remain widely used, suggesting potential for SMS-based or voice-based interventions as components of a comprehensive DTx strategy. Research should examine multi-platform approaches that adapt to users' available technology while maintaining intervention integrity [13].

6.2 Digital Literacy and User-Centered Design

Digital literacy varies substantially across Nigeria's population, influenced by factors such as age, education, urbanization, and socioeconomic status. Successful DTx implementation requires careful attention to user experience design that accommodates variable digital literacy. Research should explore: (1) intuitive interface designs minimizing navigation complexity; (2) comprehensive onboarding processes supporting skill development; (3) multimedia instruction accommodating different learning preferences; and (4) support systems (e.g., family members, community health workers) assisting with technology use.

User-centered design methodologies are particularly important for developing effective DTx for the Nigerian context. These processes should engage diverse stakeholders—including older adults, family caregivers, healthcare providers, and community leaders—throughout design and development to ensure cultural relevance, usability, and practical utility. Research comparing different engagement strategies and their impact on adoption and persistence could inform best practices for the field [14].

6.3 Data Privacy and Security

Data privacy and security require particular attention in DTx implementation, especially given the sensitive nature of cognitive health information and varying regulatory frameworks. Research should examine: (1) privacy expectations among Nigerian populations regarding health data; (2) appropriate security measures balancing protection with usability; (3) ethical considerations in data collection and use; and (4) regulatory compliance with evolving data protection standards.

Nigeria's National Information Technology Development Agency has issued the Nigeria Data Protection Regulation, providing a framework for data protection. DTx developed for the Nigerian context must comply with these regulations while addressing population-specific concerns and expectations. Research exploring these dimensions can inform both technical implementations and ethical frameworks for digital health in Nigeria.

7. Potential Impact and Future Directions

7.1 Addressing Healthcare Disparities

Digital therapeutics offer significant potential for reducing healthcare disparities in Alzheimer's disease management across Nigeria's diverse population. By enabling decentralized assessment and intervention, DTx can extend specialist expertise beyond major urban centers to rural and underserved communities. Research should quantify the impact of DTx on healthcare access gaps, examining differential effects across geographic, socioeconomic, and demographic groups to ensure equitable benefit.

Particular attention should focus on reaching vulnerable populations, including those with low literacy, limited financial resources, and restricted mobility. Tailored approaches might include: (1) community-based DTx delivery through primary care centers or religious organizations; (2) subsidized access programs for low-income individuals; and (3) integration with existing public health initiatives targeting aging populations. Research evaluating the effectiveness and cost-efficiency of these approaches can guide resource allocation and program scaling [15].

7.2 Multimodal Approaches and Integration with Emerging Biomarkers

Future research should explore multimodal DTx approaches combining digital interventions with emerging biomarker technologies. The development of blood-based biomarkers with high sensitivity and specificity for AD pathology presents opportunities for earlier and more accurate diagnosis. Research integrating BBMs with digital cognitive assessments could create powerful screening and monitoring tools appropriate for primary care settings in Nigeria.

Additionally, combining DTx with other non-pharmacological approaches may enhance effectiveness. For example, research might investigate integrations of digital cognitive training with physical exercise programs, nutritional interventions, or social engagement activities, potentially creating synergistic benefits. The success of structured lifestyle interventions in the U.S. POINTER trial suggests the potential of such multidomain approaches.

7.3 Building Research Capacity and International Collaboration

Advancing DTx research for Alzheimer's disease in Nigeria requires building local research capacity and fostering international collaboration. Research capacity building should include: (1) training Nigerian researchers in DTx development and evaluation; (2) establishing research infrastructure for digital health studies; (3) creating partnerships between academic institutions, healthcare providers, and technology developers; and (4) securing funding for large-scale, rigorous studies.

International collaboration can accelerate progress by facilitating knowledge transfer, avoiding duplication of effort, and enabling studies in multiple populations. However, such collaborations must ensure equitable partnerships with appropriate credit and leadership for Nigerian researchers. Research examining optimal collaboration models could enhance the effectiveness and fairness of international digital health research partnerships [16].

Table 3. Implementation Framework for DTx in Nigeria

Implementation Phase	Key Activities	Success Metrics
Needs Assessment	Stakeholder engagement, Infrastructure evaluation, Cultural adaptation planning	Comprehensive stakeholder mapping, Connectivity assessment, Cultural appropriateness validation
Pilot Testing	Usability studies, Feasibility trials, Initial efficacy evaluation	User satisfaction, Adherence rates, Effect sizes on primary outcomes
Implementation Research	ntegration pathway analysis, Training program development, Economic evaluation	Healthcare provider adoption, Fidelity of implementation, Cost-effectiveness
Scale-Up	System-wide deployment, Policy integration, Sustainable financing models	Population reach, Equity of access, Long-term sustainability

Table 3: This table outlines the four key phases required for the successful implementation of Digital Therapy (DTx) in Nigeria. Each phase has corresponding tasks and success criteria, forming a complete path from needs assessment to nationwide rollout.

1. Needs Assessment:

First, confirm the environment is ready, including infrastructure, stakeholders, and cultural fit.

Success means: Clear understanding, sufficient connectivity, and cultural compatibility.

2. Pilot Testing:

Small-scale trial runs to see if DTx is usable, feasible, and effective.

Success means: Users like it, are willing to continue using it, and initial therapeutic effects are visible.

3. Implementation Research:

In-depth analysis of how to integrate DTx into the real healthcare system, while ensuring healthcare professionals are competent and assessing economics.

Success means: High healthcare adoption, high-quality implementation, and reasonable cost-effectiveness.

4. Scaling Up:

Expanding DTx to a wider healthcare system, supporting long-term operation through policy and sustainable funding.

Success means: Broad coverage, equitable use, and long-term system sustainability.

8. Conclusion

Alzheimer's disease represents a significant and growing public health challenge in Nigeria, exacerbated by limited healthcare resources, socioeconomic constraints, and cultural factors. Digital therapeutics offer promising approaches to address these challenges through scalable, accessible, and cost-effective solutions for assessment, intervention, and monitoring. However, realizing this potential requires research directions specifically tailored to Nigeria's unique context, including adaptation and validation of existing DTx, development of novel solutions for specific local needs, and implementation science exploring integration within Nigeria's healthcare system.

Future research should prioritize culturally appropriate, evidence-based approaches that leverage Nigeria's technological assets while addressing its constraints. Multimodal strategies combining DTx with other interventions, such as lifestyle modifications and biomarker-based screening, may offer particularly promising directions. By building research capacity and fostering equitable international collaboration, Nigeria can develop effective DTx strategies that not only address its own Alzheimer's disease burden but also provide models for similar low- and middle-income countries facing comparable challenges.

The growing global momentum in Alzheimer's research, including developments presented at AAIC 2025 such as precision drug delivery, validation of anti-amyloid approaches, blood-based biomarker guidelines, lifestyle intervention evidence, and vascular targets, provides valuable foundations for Nigerian research directions. By integrating these global advances with local innovation and context-specific adaptation, Nigeria can make significant progress toward reducing the burden of Alzheimer's disease through digital therapeutics.

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