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Digital Infrastructure, Innovation, and Productivity Dynamics in Emerging Economies Evidence from Synthetic Multi-Country Enterprise Data (2010-2022)

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Keywords

Digital Adoption;
Innovation; Productivity;
Spatial Spillovers;
Dynamic Panel;
Development Economics.

Abstract

Productivity growth remains a central challenge for emerging economies, where firms often struggle with technological adoption and innovation diffusion. The rapid yet uneven spread of digital infrastructure presents both an opportunity and a policy dilemma, particularly regarding how digital access interacts with firm-level innovation to drive productivity. This research investigates the role of digital infrastructure, innovation, and productivity dynamics in emerging economies evidence from synthetic multi-country enterprise data (2010–2022) in shaping productivity performance in emerging economies. Using a novel synthetic dataset inspired by multi-country Enterprise Surveys covering 12,400 firms across 92 regions in Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia between 2010 and 2022, we estimate a comprehensive suite of econometric models—OLS, Fixed Effects, Random Effects, IV-2SLS, System GMM, and Spatial Econometric Models (SAR, SDM, SEM). Results indicate that innovation raises firm productivity by 5–12%, while digital adoption contributes an additional 10–15%, with strong complementarities between the two. Spatial spillover effects account for 30–42% of total innovation gains, demonstrating the importance of regional digital ecosystems. Robustness checks (placebo tests, alternative instruments, alternative spatial matrices, sub-sample analyses) confirm the stability of results. Policy implications highlight the need for digital infrastructure investment, managerial capability upgrading, and targeted innovation stimuli.



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INTRODUCTION

In the modern business and organizational landscape, crises are no longer a possibility but a necessity (Conz et al., 2023; Kutieshat & Farmanesh, 2022; Miller, 2021; Polinkevych et al., 2021). No organization, large or small, is completely immune to a potential crisis (Grözinger et al., 2022; Zakaria Ali et al., 2024). Crises can arise from a variety of unexpected sources, ranging from natural disasters, technological failures, and human error to sensitive reputational issues in the digital realm. The information age, marked by the massive penetration of the internet and social media, has fundamentally changed the dynamics of the crisis. Information, both accurate and disinformational, can now spread at lightning speed around the world, magnifying the impact of crises and shortening the time for organizations to respond. This phenomenon is reinforced by a shift in the information landscape, where public trust in traditional media is declining while social media is increasingly dominant as a major news source (Surya & colleagues, 2021; Cusolito et al., 2020; Xu & colleagues, 2024; Hwang et al., 2021; Simamora, 2024).

In recent years, developing countries have experienced rapid yet uneven digitalization. While metropolitan areas benefit from high-speed internet, digitally skilled labor, and integrated supply chains, peripheral regions often lag far behind. This digital divide impacts firms' ability to introduce new products, improve processes, or integrate into global value chains. Moreover, digital technologies amplify knowledge spillovers, enabling firms to imitate successful practices and absorb external knowledge. The regional distribution of digital infrastructure therefore shapes not only firm-level outcomes but also broader spatial development patterns (Bloom et al., 2016; Cirera and Maloney, 2017; Aghion et al., 2019).

A substantial body of literature has established a positive correlation between technology adoption, innovation, and firm performance. Studies using enterprise survey data, such as those by Hall et al. (2009) on SMEs in Italy and Javorcik & Spatareanu (2008) on FDI spillovers, have consistently highlighted the role of knowledge and technology in boosting productivity. Research in developing countries, including analyses of World Bank Enterprise Surveys, has further underscored the importance of access to finance, managerial capability, and institutional quality in facilitating innovation (World Bank, 2020). Similarly, spatial econometric studies have demonstrated that geographic proximity and agglomeration economies are key channels for knowledge diffusion (LeSage & Pace, 2009; Duranton & Puga, 2020).

However, despite these contributions, the empirical evidence remains fragmented and marked by significant limitations, creating a clear research gap. Existing studies are often constrained by: (1) a narrow geographical focus, typically examining a single country (e.g., Vietnam or Kenya), which limits generalizability; (2) an analytical focus on a single outcome (either productivity or innovation), failing to capture their interrelated dynamics; (3) reliance on a singular, often simplistic, econometric strategy (primarily OLS or basic Fixed Effects models) that may not adequately address endogeneity or dynamic persistence; and (4) a prevalent non-spatial framework that ignores the critical role of geographic knowledge spillovers and the contextual influence of regional digital ecosystems.

This study introduces several novel contributions that collectively address the identified gaps in the existing literature. First, it provides multi-country evidence through a harmonized synthetic dataset, encompassing 12,400 firms across Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia from 2010 to 2022. This dataset replicates the structure and heterogeneity of real enterprise surveys while enabling cross-country comparability rarely feasible with actual survey waves (Bento & Restuccia, 2022). Second, it employs a comprehensive and robust econometric strategy. Unlike prior studies that often rely on a single model, we implement a suite of methods—including OLS, Fixed and Random Effects, IV-2SLS, System GMM, and Spatial Econometric Models (SAR, SDM, SEM)—to ensure rigorous identification of both direct and spillover effects while addressing endogeneity and dynamic biases (Arellano & Bover, 1995; Elhorst, 2014). Third, the research integrates digital and spatial analytical frameworks, demonstrating that digital infrastructure not only boosts firm productivity directly but also amplifies the geographic diffusion of innovation. This highlights that innovation outcomes are embedded within a broader regional and technological ecosystem (Duranton & Puga, 2020; Hidalgo et al., 2021). Fourth, the study delivers policy-relevant mechanistic insights by elucidating three core channels through which digitalization influences productivity: the complementarity effect, the capability effect, and the spatial spillover effect. These findings offer actionable evidence for policymakers focused on digital public goods, innovation incentives, and regional development in emerging economies (McKinsey Global Institute, 2019; World Bank, 2021). Together, these contributions provide a more integrated, methodologically sound, and practically applicable understanding of the digital-innovation-productivity nexus in developing regions.

The primary objective of this study is to provide a comprehensive, empirically robust assessment of how digital infrastructure and firm-level innovation jointly shape productivity dynamics in emerging economies, accounting for spatial interdependencies. Specifically, it seeks to quantify the direct productivity returns to innovation and digital adoption, measure the magnitude of spatial spillovers, and identify the key contextual factors that amplify or constrain these effects.

The benefits and implications of this research are twofold. For academia, it advances the literature by providing harmonized cross-country evidence and demonstrating the value of integrating spatial and dynamic econometrics into firm-level productivity analysis. For policy and practice, the findings offer clear guidance for governments and development institutions. They underscore the necessity of coordinated investments in broadband infrastructure, programs to enhance firm-level innovation capabilities and digital skills, and regionally cohesive policies designed to harness positive spillovers and reduce inter-regional productivity disparities.

METHOD

Overview of the Synthetic Enterprise Dataset

This study uses a large, cross-country, harmonized synthetic dataset constructed to replicate the structure of enterprise surveys typically implemented in emerging economies. The dataset

includes 12,400 firms across 92 subnational regions in 12 developing countries, spanning Africa (4 countries), South Asia (4), and Southeast Asia (4), observed in three survey rounds: 2010, 2016, and 2022.

The sampling follows stratification by:

1. firm size (micro, small, medium, large),
2. sector (manufacturing, services),
3. region (administrative subnational unit),
4. ownership type (domestic, foreign).

Firms are tracked over time where possible, generating an unbalanced panel of 32,100 firm-year observations.

Table 1. Sample Composition by Region and Country

Region	Country	Firms	Regions	Waves
Africa	Kenya	1,000	10	2010/16/22
	Ghana	820	8	2010/16/22
	Tanzania	750	7	2010/16/22
	Ethiopia	900	11	2010/16/22
South Asia	India	2,400	20	2010/16/22
	Bangladesh	820	8	2010/16/22
	Sri Lanka	600	6	2010/16/22
	Nepal	400	5	2010/16/22
Southeast Asia	Indonesia	1,600	18	2010/16/22
	Vietnam	1,400	16	2010/16/22
	Philippines	860	8	2010/16/22
	Cambodia	450	5	2010/16/22

Source: Authors' synthetic dataset construction (2025), inspired by the structure and stratification of the World Bank Enterprise Surveys

This composition mimics realistic heterogeneity across developing regions, making the dataset suitable for comparative development analysis.

The synthetic dataset preserves features commonly seen in enterprise surveys:

1. Right-skewed productivity and sales distributions
2. Higher capital intensity among large firms
3. Low but non-zero innovation frequency
4. Moderate digital adoption with high variation
5. High incidence of credit constraints
6. Cross-regional institutional quality differences

Measurement units follow survey conventions:

1. Sales: USD thousands
2. Employment: number of workers
3. Capital stock: replacement value of assets
4. Innovation: binary and index-based

5. Digital adoption: composite index (0 mean, SD = 1)

Construction of Variables

Outcome Variables

1. Labor Productivity (log):

$$[LP_{it} = \log\left(\frac{Sales_{it}}{Employees_{it}}\right)]$$

2. Total Factor Productivity (TFP):

Estimated from firm-level Cobb–Douglas function:

$$[\ln Y_{it} = \alpha \ln K_{it} + \beta \ln L_{it} + \omega_{it}]$$

TFP = residual (standardized).

3. Value Added per Worker:

Used for robustness.

Key Explanatory Variables

Innovation Index (standardized)

Composed of:

1. New or significantly improved product
2. New production processes
3. Introduction of quality certification
4. Adoption of new machinery

Index scaled ($\mu=0$, $\sigma=1$).

Digital Adoption Index (standardized)

Derived from:

1. Email use for sales
2. Digital bookkeeping
3. Online procurement
4. E-commerce engagement
5. Usage of automated equipment

Access to Finance

Binary: 1 if firm applied for a loan and was approved.

Credit Constraint Index

Principal component of:

1. Rejected loan applications
2. High collateral requirements
3. Lack of credit history
4. Perceived interest rate burden

Institutional Quality Score

Region-level composite measure of:

1. Regulatory quality
2. Corruption perception
3. Policy predictability
4. Infrastructure governance

Control Variables

1. Firm age (log)
2. Firm size (log employees)

3. Capital intensity (log)
4. Exporter status
5. Foreign ownership
6. Sector fixed effects
7. Region fixed effects
8. Country-year fixed effects

Descriptive Statistics

Summary Statistics

Table 2. Summary Statistics (Pooled, N = 32,100 firm-years)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Labor productivity (log)	9.76	0.97	6.80	13.11
TFP (std)	0.00	1.00	-3.20	3.40
Innovation index	0.00	1.00	-2.30	2.50
Product innovation (0/1)	0.29	0.45	0	1
Process innovation (0/1)	0.25	0.43	0	1
Digital adoption index	0.00	1.00	-2.50	3.10
Access to finance (0/1)	0.41	0.49	0	1
Credit constraint index	0.00	1.00	-2.10	2.40
Capital intensity (log)	10.87	1.15	7.91	14.02
Firm size (log employees)	3.32	0.79	1.10	6.40
Exporter	0.17	0.38	0	1
Age (log years)	2.41	0.68	0.69	4.62

Source: Authors' calculations based on the synthetic dataset (2025)

Patterns resemble typical enterprise surveys:

1. low innovation frequency,
2. high digital variation,
3. strong size and capital skew.

Correlation Matrix

Table 3. Correlation Matrix (Selected Variables)

Variable	LP	Innov	Digital	Finance	Capital	Size
Labor Productivity	1	—	—	—	—	—
Innovation Index	0.33	1	—	—	—	—
Digital Adoption	0.39	0.47	1	—	—	—
Access to Finance	0.21	0.24	0.22	1	—	—
Capital Intensity	0.44	0.18	0.30	0.10	1	—
Firm Size	0.41	0.16	0.23	0.17	0.51	1

Source: Authors' calculations based on the synthetic dataset (2025)

Notable insights:

1. Strong correlation between productivity and digital adoption (0.39).
2. Innovation and digital adoption strongly correlated (0.47).
3. Finance and innovation moderately related.

Descriptive Patterns

To understand foundational patterns, we plot (conceptually) productivity by firm characteristics:

1. Productivity rises sharply with digital adoption
- Low-digital vs. high-digital firms show a 22–35% productivity gap.
2. Innovation is more common among exporters (41%) than non-exporters (23%).
3. Regions with stronger institutional quality exhibit both higher digital adoption and innovation frequency.
4. Manufacturing firms innovate slightly more than service firms.

Overall trends align with theoretical expectations: capabilities, market access, and regional institutions shape firm outcomes.

Baseline Econometric Specification

We estimate the following OLS baseline:

$$[LP_{\{i,r,c,t\}} = \beta_1 \text{Innov}_{\{i,t\}} + \beta_2 \text{Digital}_{\{i,t\}} + X_{\{i,t\}}\gamma + \mu_r + \theta_c + \tau_t + \epsilon_{\{i,r,c,t\}}]$$

Where:

1. (μ_r) = region fixed effects
2. (θ_c) = country fixed effects
3. (τ_t) = year fixed effects
4. (X) = controls

Standard errors clustered at the region level.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Baseline Regression Results

Table 4. OLS Results (Dependent variable: log productivity)

Variables	(1) Basic	(2) + Controls	(3) Full-FE
Innovation index	0.112***	0.084***	0.073***
Digital adoption	0.158***	0.141***	0.133***
Access to finance	—	0.034**	0.022
Credit constraint	—	-0.019*	-0.011
Capital intensity	—	0.351***	0.328***
Firm size	—	0.219***	0.206***
Exporter	—	0.061**	0.056**
Region FE	No	Yes	Yes
Country-Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	32,100	32,100	32,100

Source: Authors' OLS regression estimates (2025)

Interpretation:

- Innovation increases productivity **7.3–11.2%**.
- Digital adoption has a strong impact: **13.3–15.8%**.
- Exporters are ~6% more productive.
- Capital intensity remains the strongest predictor.

Panel Data Models: Fixed And Random Effects

Given the panel structure of the dataset (unbalanced: 32,100 firm-year observations), we estimate firm productivity using:

$$[LP_{\{i,r,c,t\}} = \beta_1 \text{Innov}_{\{i,t\}} + \beta_2 \text{Digital}_{\{i,t\}} + X_{\{i,t\}}\gamma + \alpha_i + \tau_t + \epsilon_{\{i,r,c,t\}}]$$

Where:

- (α_i) = firm-specific unobserved heterogeneity (Fixed Effects)
- (τ_t) = year fixed effects
- (X) = controls

Fixed Effects (FE) Estimation

Table 5. Fixed Effects Results

Variables	FE Coefficient	Std. Error
Innovation index	0.069***	0.010
Digital adoption	0.125***	0.012
Capital intensity	0.321***	0.018
Firm size	0.201***	0.015
Exporter	0.051*	0.027
Access to finance	0.019	0.012
Credit constraint	-0.012	0.008

Source: Authors' Fixed Effects model estimates (2025)

- FE results confirm that **innovation** and **digital adoption** remain strong predictors after controlling for unobserved firm-level heterogeneity.
- Marginal effects: 1 SD increase in innovation → +6.9% productivity; 1 SD increase in digital adoption → +12.5%.

Random Effects (RE) Estimation and Hausman Test

RE estimation allows inclusion of time-invariant variables (e.g., foreign ownership). The Hausman test rejects RE in favor of FE ($\chi^2 = 34.8$, $p < 0.001$), indicating correlation between firm effects and regressors.

Instrumental Variables: Addressing Endogeneity

Problem: innovation and digital adoption may be endogenous due to reverse causality or measurement errors.

Instruments

1. **Lagged R&D subsidies at regional level**→Predicts innovation
2. **Regional broadband penetration**→Predicts digital adoption
3. **Exogenous shocks to electricity supply**→Predicts digital adoption for smaller firms

IV-2SLS Estimation

$$[LP_{\{it\}} = \beta_1 \hat{\text{Innov}}_{\{it\}} + \beta_2 \hat{\text{Digital}}_{\{it\}} + X_{\{it\}}\gamma + \epsilon_{\{it\}}]$$

Table 6. IV-2SLS Results

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error
Innovation index (IV)	0.081***	0.014
Digital adoption (IV)	0.137***	0.016

Capital intensity	0.318***	0.020
Firm size	0.199***	0.017

Source: Authors' Instrumental Variables Two-Stage Least Squares (IV-2SLS) estimates (2025)

Diagnostics:

- Hansen J-statistic $p = 0.37 \rightarrow$ instruments valid
- Kleibergen-Paap F-stat = 18.2 \rightarrow strong instruments

Interpretation: Instrumented innovation and digital adoption still have strong positive effects.

Dynamic Panel: System GMM

To account for persistence in productivity and dynamic adjustment:

$$[LP_{it} = \rho LP_{i,t-1} + \beta_1 Innov_{it} + \beta_2 Digital_{it} + X_{it}\gamma + \alpha_i + \epsilon_{it}]$$

- System GMM uses lagged levels and differences as instruments.
- Corrects for potential endogeneity and dynamic bias.

Table 7. System GMM Results

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error
LP_{t-1}	0.428***	0.034
Innovation index	0.071***	0.011
Digital adoption	0.119***	0.012
Capital intensity	0.303***	0.017
Firm size	0.198***	0.014

Source: Authors' System Generalized Method of Moments (System GMM) estimates (2025)

- AR(1) $p < 0.01$; AR(2) $p = 0.27 \rightarrow$ no second-order autocorrelation
- Hansen $p = 0.41 \rightarrow$ instruments valid

Dynamic effects suggest **lagged productivity explains ~43%** of current productivity.

Spatial Econometric Analysis

We consider spatial dependence due to geographic clustering of innovation and digital infrastructure.

- Spatial weight matrix: contiguity-based (W_{ij}) (neighboring regions = 1, else 0, row-normalized)
- Models estimated: SAR, SDM, SEM

Spatial Autoregressive Model (SAR)

$$[LP = \rho W LP + X \beta + \epsilon]$$

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error
Innovation	0.069***	0.010
Digital adoption	0.123***	0.012
ρ (spatial lag)	0.312***	0.045

- $\rho = 0.312 \rightarrow$ **strong positive spillovers** from neighboring regions' productivity

Spatial Durbin Model (SDM)

$$[LP = \rho W LP + X \beta + W X \theta + \epsilon]$$

Variable	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect (spillover)
Innovation	0.067***	0.045***

Digital adoption	0.121***	0.052***
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- Spillover effects: nearby regions' innovation/digital adoption raise own productivity by **4.5–5.2%**
- Total effect = direct + indirect

Spatial Error Model (SEM)

$$[LP = X \beta + u, \quad u = \lambda W u + \epsilon]$$

- $\lambda = 0.288*** \rightarrow$ unobserved spatial correlation present
- Confirms SAR/SDM results are robust

Robustness Checks

- Alternative spatial matrices: distance-based, inverse-distance \rightarrow consistent results
- Subsample analyses: manufacturing vs. services \rightarrow coefficients slightly higher in manufacturing
- Placebo tests: lagged outcomes of unrelated sectors \rightarrow insignificant
- Alternative TFP calculation \rightarrow results stable

Marginal Effects, And Productivity Gains

To quantify the economic significance of innovation and digital adoption:

$$[\Delta LP] = \beta \cdot \Delta X$$

Where $(\Delta X) = 1$ standard deviation increase.

Table 8. Marginal Effects			
Variable	Coefficient	Std Dev	Marginal Effect ($\Delta\%$)
Innovation index	0.071	1	+7.1%
Digital adoption	0.119	1	+11.9%
Capital intensity	0.303	1	+30.3%
Firm size	0.198	1	+19.8%

Source: Authors' calculation of marginal effects based on core model estimates (2025)

- Interpretation:** Digital adoption has the largest impact among innovation-related variables.
- Spillover from neighboring regions adds an **additional ~4–5% productivity gain**, confirming spatial externalities.

Policy Simulation

We simulate the impact of raising innovation and digital adoption in **low-productivity regions (bottom quartile) to median levels**.

Table 9. Policy Scenario: Productivity Gains			
Region Quartile	Baseline LP	Post-Policy LP	% Increase
Bottom 25%	8.92	9.53	+6.9%
Median 50%	9.73	10.12	+4.0%
Top 25%	10.68	10.85	+1.6%

Source: Authors' policy simulation based on spatial model estimates and baseline parameters (2025)

- a. Policies focusing on **innovation subsidies, digital infrastructure, and access to finance** could significantly reduce regional productivity gaps.
- b. Spillovers amplify effects in neighboring regions by **3–5%**, highlighting importance of regional coordination.

Graphical Illustrations

(Conceptual, for journal figures)

1. **Figure 1:** Labor Productivity vs. Innovation Index
 - Positive linear relationship; steeper in high-digital regions.
2. **Figure 2:** Spatial Spillovers of Productivity (SDM)
 - Heatmap showing bottom quartile regions catching up when neighbors improve adoption.
3. **Figure 3:** Dynamic Effects (System GMM)
 - Lagged productivity contributes ~40% of current productivity; innovation/digital adoption add ~7–12%.

Appendices: Mathematical Derivations

1. Spatial Autoregressive (SAR) Model

$$[y = \rho W y + X \beta + \epsilon, \quad \epsilon \sim N(0, \sigma^2 I)]$$

- Reduced form:

$$[y = (I - \rho W)^{-1} X \beta + (I - \rho W)^{-1} \epsilon]$$

- Maximum Likelihood Estimation:

$$[\hat{\rho}, \hat{\beta}] = \arg \max \left[-\frac{n}{2} \ln(2\pi \sigma^2) + \ln |I - \rho W| - \frac{1}{2\sigma^2} \epsilon' \epsilon \right]$$

2. Spatial Durbin Model (SDM)

$$[y = \rho W y + X \beta + W X \theta + \epsilon]$$

- Direct effect: $(\frac{\partial y}{\partial X}) = (I - \rho W)^{-1} \beta$
- Indirect effect (spillover): $((I - \rho W)^{-1} \theta)$

3. System GMM

Dynamic panel:

$$[y_{it} = \rho y_{i,t-1} + X_{it} \beta + \eta_i + \epsilon_{it}]$$

- Instruments: lagged levels for differenced equations, lagged differences for level equations
- Moment conditions:

$$[E[y_{i,t-s} \Delta \epsilon_{it}] = 0, \quad s \geq 2]$$

- Hansen J-statistic used to test over-identifying restrictions.

4. IV Identification Scheme

- First-stage regression: $(X = Z \gamma + W)$
- Instruments: regional broadband, R&D subsidies, electricity shocks
- Validity checked via Hansen J-statistic and Kleibergen-Paap F-test

Table 10 Diagnostic Tests

Test	Statistic	p-value	Interpretation
LM test for spatial lag	15.8	<0.001	Spatial lag significant
Moran's I	0.276	<0.001	Positive spatial autocorrelation
Hansen-Sargan	21.4	0.37	IV valid
AR(1) (GMM)	-2.87	0.004	First-order autocorr
AR(2) (GMM)	1.08	0.27	No second-order autocorr

All diagnostics indicate robustness and consistency of estimated models.

CONCLUSION

Innovation and digital adoption are the most critical drivers of firm-level productivity in developing regions, with strong dynamic persistence showing that about 40% of current productivity reflects past performance. The study also reveals important spatial spillovers, where productivity improvements in neighboring areas contribute an additional 4–5% gain, highlighting the importance of coordinated regional policies. It recommends expanding support for firm-level R&D and innovation, enhancing digital infrastructure and broadband access—especially in underserved regions—easing credit constraints through better financial inclusion, and promoting cross-regional collaboration to fully leverage spillover effects. This research is novel in integrating dynamic, spatial, and IV-GMM methods within a unified panel framework, providing detailed quantitative insights into both direct and indirect productivity influences. Future research could explore the role of sector-specific digital technologies and innovation capacities to better tailor policies across diverse industries within emerging economies.

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