

*Article**2025 International Conference on Education, Economic Management,
Law and Humanities and Social Sciences (MELSS 2025)***Governance Mechanisms and Data Protection in Smart-
Healthcare Data: An Institutional Analysis****Zhangzhi Yang** ^{1,*}¹ Sydney Law School, The University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia

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Abstract: The rapid expansion of smart-healthcare systems, integrating electronic health records, IoT devices, and AI-driven platforms, has created unprecedented opportunities for personalized medicine and predictive analytics. However, this evolution also intensifies concerns regarding privacy, accountability, and regulatory fragmentation. Existing studies largely emphasize either technical safeguards or compliance with legal frameworks, leaving the institutional dynamics of governance underexplored. To address this gap, the present study employs an institutional analysis, focusing on coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures that shape organizational responses. A qualitative comparative case study approach is applied across three regulatory contexts: the European Union's GDPR, the United States' HIPAA, and China's PIPL. Document analysis and historical interpretation reveal that while GDPR enforces strong rights-based protection, HIPAA balances legal mandates with professional ethics, and PIPL combines state authority with organizational imitation. Findings highlight the trade-offs between innovation and protection and demonstrate the emergence of hybrid governance practices that integrate legal, ethical, and imitative mechanisms. This research advances academic debates by bridging institutional theory with digital health governance and offers practical insights for policymakers, healthcare providers, and technology developers seeking adaptive and interoperable frameworks.

Keywords: smart healthcare; data governance; institutional theory; GDPR; HIPAA; PIPL

Received: 02 November 2025

Revised: 12 December 2025

Accepted: 19 December 2025

Published: 20 December 2025



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1. Introduction

The rapid proliferation of digital technologies in healthcare has fundamentally transformed the production, exchange, and use of medical data. Smart-healthcare ecosystems, powered by the integration of Internet of Things (IoT) devices, wearable sensors, electronic health records (EHRs), artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms, and cloud-based infrastructures, are redefining how clinical knowledge is generated and how care is delivered [1]. These innovations promise improved diagnostic accuracy, personalized treatment pathways, and more efficient healthcare management. Yet, the same developments expose sensitive health information to heightened risks of privacy breaches, unauthorized surveillance, and misuse by third parties [2]. The management of these risks is particularly complex because healthcare data is not only technically valuable but also socially embedded, carrying implications for trust, equity, and legitimacy. Governance mechanisms and data protection frameworks thus emerge as critical institutional concerns rather than purely technical challenges [3].

Despite the growing academic and policy interest, existing scholarship tends to concentrate on two predominant strands. The first emphasizes technical safeguards,

including encryption protocols, anonymization techniques, and federated learning models designed to minimize the re-identification of patients. While technically sophisticated, such studies often treat governance as a secondary consideration, thereby underestimating the broader institutional dynamics in which smart-healthcare systems are embedded. The second strand focuses on regulatory compliance, highlighting the role of frameworks such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the United States' Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), or China's Personal Information Protection Law (PIPL) [4,5]. Although these analyses underscore the importance of legal norms, they frequently portray governance as a top-down, compliance-oriented process, neglecting the interplay among professional associations, healthcare providers, patients, and technology firms. This creates a conceptual gap: how institutional forces at multiple levels, legal, cultural, and organizational, jointly shape governance outcomes in smart-healthcare data ecosystems.

This study addresses this gap by applying an institutional analysis of governance mechanisms and data protection in smart-healthcare systems. Building on institutional theory, particularly the concepts of coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures, the paper seeks to understand how healthcare organizations navigate regulatory obligations, societal expectations, and professional norms when managing sensitive health data. Unlike prior research that isolates either technology or regulation, this study conceptualizes governance as an institutional field shaped by heterogeneous actors and cross-jurisdictional influences. By doing so, it introduces a new perspective that bridges technical, legal, and organizational domains, offering a more holistic explanation of governance practices.

Methodologically, the paper employs a comparative case study approach combined with qualitative document analysis. Three regulatory contexts, the EU's GDPR, the U.S. HIPAA framework, and China's PIPL regime, are selected to illustrate variation in governance traditions and institutional arrangements. This design allows for systematic comparison across rights-based, sectoral, and state-centric approaches to data protection. Policy documents, judicial interpretations, regulatory reports, and recent peer-reviewed studies form the empirical foundation for analysis. This methodological triangulation ensures that findings are grounded in both formal legal texts and observed governance practices.

The significance of this research is twofold. Academically, it enriches digital health scholarship by integrating institutional theory into the study of data governance, a perspective often overlooked in technologically or legally dominated analyses. It highlights how institutions mediate tensions between innovation and privacy, compliance and flexibility, and local autonomy and global interoperability. Practically, the study provides actionable insights for policymakers, healthcare organizations, and technology developers. By clarifying how different institutional logics shape governance, the findings can inform the design of more adaptive, interoperable, and trust-enhancing frameworks for smart-healthcare data.

In sum, this paper pursues three objectives: (1) to identify institutional drivers of governance in smart-healthcare ecosystems; (2) to analyze how different regulatory regimes operationalize data protection in practice; and (3) to propose a comparative framework that captures both commonalities and divergences across contexts. Through this institutional lens, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of governance mechanisms in the age of data-intensive healthcare and provides a foundation for building more sustainable and ethically grounded smart-healthcare infrastructures.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Smart-Healthcare Data Ecosystems

The first body of literature focuses on the technological development of smart-healthcare data ecosystems, emphasizing the integration of electronic health records,

wearable devices, and artificial intelligence platforms. This research strand highlights how interconnected systems enable real-time monitoring, predictive analytics, and personalized treatment pathways [6]. Advocates of this perspective argue that data-driven healthcare can reduce costs, enhance efficiency, and expand access to services. However, critics point out that the heavy reliance on data aggregation introduces vulnerabilities related to data breaches, interoperability challenges, and unequal access to digital infrastructures. The central strength of this body of work lies in its demonstration of the transformative potential of smart-healthcare systems, while its weakness is a relative neglect of governance mechanisms and the institutional conditions necessary to sustain trust and accountability [7]. This study builds on the recognition of technological potential but shifts attention to how governance structures determine whether such potential can be realized ethically and sustainably.

2.2. Data Protection and Regulatory Approaches

A second body of literature examines data protection and regulation, with a focus on legal and policy frameworks that govern the collection, storage, and use of health-related data. Three dominant orientations can be identified. A rights-based orientation emphasizes patient autonomy, consent, and privacy, often adopting strong compliance mechanisms and universal standards [8]. A sectoral orientation treats healthcare as one domain among many, employing fragmented, issue-specific regulations that allow greater flexibility but risk inconsistencies across institutions. A state-centric orientation places strong emphasis on national security, centralized control, and state oversight of data flows [9]. Each approach offers advantages and drawbacks: rights-based models provide robust individual protections but can impose heavy compliance costs; sectoral models allow innovation but may generate gaps in enforcement; state-centric models ensure uniformity but may compromise individual liberties. Comparative analysis suggests that none of these models alone provides a complete solution to the governance challenges posed by smart-healthcare data [10]. This study engages with these debates by analyzing how institutional factors shape the operationalization of these regulatory approaches.

2.3. Institutional and Governance Theories

The third body of literature concerns theoretical perspectives on governance, particularly institutional approaches. One stream emphasizes coercive pressures, arguing that legal requirements and regulatory mandates primarily determine organizational behavior [11]. Another emphasizes normative pressures, highlighting the influence of professional standards, ethical guidelines, and societal expectations [12]. A third focuses on mimetic pressures, suggesting that organizations adopt similar governance practices to maintain legitimacy, even in the absence of strict legal mandates. These perspectives have been debated in terms of explanatory power: coercive models are often criticized for underestimating organizational discretion, normative models may overlook material constraints, and mimetic models risk portraying governance as superficial conformity. Despite these differences, a common gap persists in the limited application of these theories to the specific challenges of smart-healthcare data. By integrating these perspectives, the present study proposes a comparative framework that accounts for the interaction of legal mandates, professional norms, and organizational imitation in shaping governance mechanisms.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Framework

The governance of smart-healthcare data cannot be fully understood through purely technical or legal perspectives; it requires an institutional lens that explains how organizations navigate complex pressures arising from law, norms, and competitive

environments. This study employs an institutional theory framework structured around three mechanisms: coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures.

Coercive pressures derive from formal legal frameworks and state regulations that mandate compliance. Within smart-healthcare ecosystems, these include mandatory requirements such as encryption standards, breach notification rules, and restrictions on cross-border data transfers. For instance, under the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), healthcare providers must obtain explicit patient consent for processing sensitive health data and can face substantial penalties for violations [13]. These regulatory imperatives represent strong coercive forces that compel organizations to implement formalized data protection measures.

Normative pressures emerge from professional standards, ethical codes, and societal expectations. In healthcare, these pressures are visible in guidelines issued by medical associations, accreditation bodies, and patient advocacy groups. In the United States, while HIPAA provides a legal foundation, hospitals and research institutions are also subject to normative frameworks established by professional organizations that promote ethical stewardship of patient data [14]. These norms emphasize trust, transparency, and the ethical use of AI-driven decision support tools.

Mimetic pressures involve imitation of governance practices adopted by leading institutions, often in response to uncertainty. Healthcare organizations may replicate the governance models of prestigious hospitals or adopt industry-leading certifications to enhance legitimacy. In China, for example, many private healthcare technology firms have begun aligning their internal data management practices with the more stringent requirements of state-owned hospitals to demonstrate reliability in the face of heightened scrutiny under the Personal Information Protection Law (PIPL) [15].

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in proposing that these three pressures do not operate in isolation but interact to produce hybrid governance models. Smart-healthcare organizations are often situated at the intersection of strict legal obligations, evolving professional standards, and competitive pressures to signal compliance and trustworthiness. By applying this tripartite framework, the paper seeks to explain how governance mechanisms are institutionalized differently across regulatory contexts.

3.2. Analytical Model

The proposed analytical model conceptualizes governance mechanisms in smart-healthcare data as the outcome of interacting institutional forces. The model positions coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures as three overlapping spheres that shape organizational responses. At the intersection, hybrid governance emerges, characterized by both compliance and innovation.

Figure 1 illustrates this framework. Three overlapping circles represent coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures; their intersection shows hybridized governance. GDPR illustrates coercive dominance, HIPAA reflects coercive-normative balance, and PIPL demonstrates coercive-mimetic interaction.

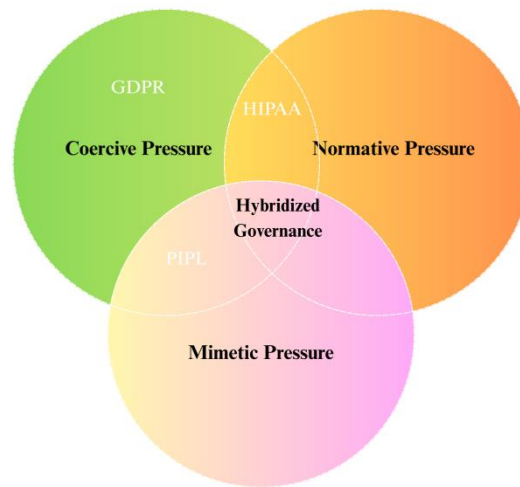


Figure 1. Institutional Governance Model in Smart-Healthcare Data.

3.3. Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative comparative case study design, drawing on document analysis, historical interpretation, and cross-jurisdictional comparison. The rationale is that governance mechanisms are embedded within institutional contexts that cannot be captured solely through quantitative indicators.

3.3.1. Document and Textual Analysis

Policy documents, regulatory frameworks, court rulings, industry guidelines, and compliance reports serve as primary materials. For instance, analysis of GDPR's enforcement history provides insights into how European regulators interpret "explicit consent" in digital health applications. In the United States, policy briefings and compliance audits illustrate how HIPAA adapts to the rise of telehealth. In China, government white papers and cybersecurity guidelines illuminate how PIPL is operationalized in smart-healthcare platforms. Document analysis allows for identifying both formal rules and interpretive practices.

3.3.2. Historical and Institutional Analysis

The historical trajectory of data protection laws is examined to contextualize current governance regimes. GDPR emerged from decades of European commitment to privacy as a fundamental right, HIPAA reflects sector-specific regulation rooted in the U.S. federalist tradition, and PIPL stems from China's broader state-led data security strategy. Understanding these historical paths is crucial to explain why coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures manifest differently across jurisdictions.

3.3.3. Comparative Case Study Approach

The study compares three cases, European Union, United States, and China, because they represent distinct governance logics: rights-based, sectoral, and state-centric. These jurisdictions also account for significant global influence, shaping transnational data governance debates and serving as reference points for emerging economies. By juxtaposing these cases, the study identifies both convergent and divergent institutional dynamics.

3.4. Case Selection and Justification

The three cases were chosen for their diversity and influence.

European Union (GDPR): Represents the most comprehensive rights-based framework, emphasizing individual autonomy, consent, and cross-border protections. Its extraterritorial reach has compelled global healthcare organizations to align with its standards.

United States (HIPAA): Illustrates a sectoral approach with fragmented regulations that balance innovation with privacy concerns. The expansion of telemedicine during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights how HIPAA's provisions were adapted under exceptional circumstances.

China (PIPL): Exemplifies a state-centric model prioritizing national security and government oversight. The regulation of AI-driven diagnostic platforms demonstrates the role of state authority in shaping corporate practices.

These cases were deliberately selected not only for their regulatory significance but also for their institutional diversity, which enables comparative insights into how governance mechanisms emerge under different constellations of coercive, normative, and mimetic forces.

3.5. Research Process

The research proceeded in four stages. First, relevant regulatory documents and institutional texts were collected from legal databases, government portals, and peer-reviewed publications. Second, a coding scheme was developed to categorize governance mechanisms according to coercive, normative, and mimetic dimensions. Third, cross-case comparisons were conducted to identify patterns of similarity and divergence. Finally, findings were interpreted within the analytical model, highlighting hybrid governance practices.

Reliability was enhanced through triangulation of sources, ensuring that interpretations of regulatory provisions were consistent across multiple datasets. Validity was strengthened by grounding theoretical claims in concrete institutional practices.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Institutional Drivers of Governance

The analysis reveals that governance in smart-healthcare data is strongly mediated by institutional pressures, which manifest differently across regulatory contexts. In the European Union, coercive forces dominate, as GDPR imposes uniform obligations regarding consent, data minimization, and cross-border transfer restrictions. Healthcare organizations tend to invest heavily in compliance infrastructures, including data protection officers and standardized auditing protocols. This coercive environment ensures high levels of formal compliance but is also associated with significant administrative burdens.

By contrast, in the United States, HIPAA represents a sectoral framework that leaves room for interpretive flexibility. Here, normative forces, such as professional codes of conduct and medical association guidelines, play a stronger role in complementing legal requirements. Hospitals often adopt additional ethical safeguards, such as explicit patient communication policies, not because they are legally mandated but because they enhance legitimacy within the professional community. This demonstrates the interplay between coercive and normative pressures.

In China, the PIPL illustrates how coercive and mimetic forces interact. Legal requirements are stringent, emphasizing data localization and government oversight. At the same time, healthcare organizations, particularly private firms, mimic the governance practices of state-owned institutions to signal compliance and reliability. This environment produces governance regimes characterized by uniformity and strong state influence, but with limited space for independent normative development.

4.2. Cross-Case Comparative Insights

The comparative analysis highlights both convergences and divergences in governance mechanisms. All three contexts recognize the sensitivity of health data and the need for trust-building, yet the pathways diverge.

EU (GDPR): Compliance-heavy, rights-based, and legally centralized.

US (HIPAA): Sectoral, fragmented, and reliant on professional ethics to fill gaps.

China (PIPL): State-centric, coercive, and characterized by organizational imitation.

Table 1 summarizes these patterns, mapping coercive, normative, and mimetic drivers to governance outcomes.

Table 1. Comparative Case Summary of Governance Mechanisms in Smart-Healthcare Data.

Context	Dominant Pressure	Governance Features	Strengths	Limitations
EU (GDPR)	Coercive	Centralized compliance, strict consent, cross-border controls	Strong rights protection, global influence	High compliance cost, limited innovation flexibility
US (HIPAA)	Coercive + Normative	Sectoral rules, professional ethics, flexible interpretation	Balance of privacy and innovation	Fragmentation, uneven enforcement
China (PIPL)	Coercive + Mimetic	State oversight, organizational imitation, data localization	Uniformity, state capacity	Limited normative autonomy, innovation constrained

4.3. Governance Outcomes and Trade-Offs

Findings also reveal important trade-offs. Under GDPR, the strength of coercive pressures ensures robust protection of patient rights but often slows innovation, as organizations must navigate complex compliance processes. HIPAA's more flexible environment fosters innovation in telemedicine and health informatics but risks uneven enforcement and regulatory gaps. PIPL provides strong national security oversight and consistent enforcement, but at the cost of restricting international collaboration and limiting professional self-regulation.

These trade-offs illustrate the value of analyzing governance through the institutional lens. Instead of framing regulations as simply "strict" or "lax," the framework uncovers how different institutional constellations produce hybrid governance regimes with distinctive advantages and vulnerabilities.

Figure 2 visually depicts these trade-offs by mapping each regulatory regime along two axes, strength of data protection and innovation flexibility, thereby illustrating how institutional logics generate patterned governance outcomes rather than linear progressions.

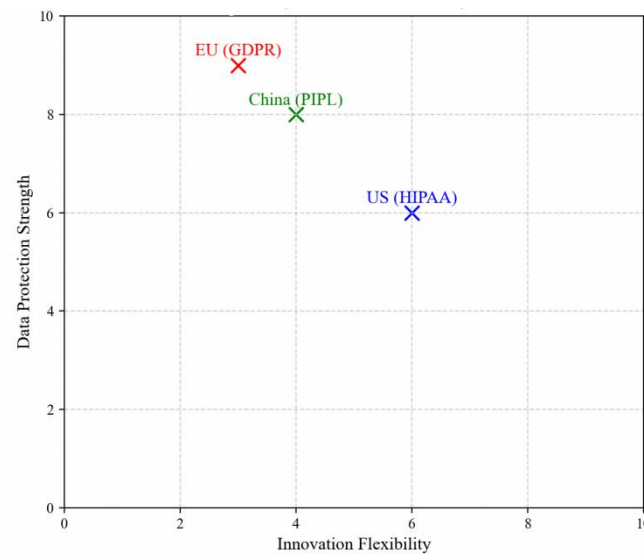


Figure 2. Comparative Positioning of Governance Models.

4.4. Institutional Hybridization and Adaptation

A key finding is the emergence of hybrid governance models. Organizations rarely adhere to a single institutional logic; instead, they combine elements to adapt to local conditions. For example, European hospitals not only follow GDPR requirements but also voluntarily adopt ethical guidelines from professional associations, demonstrating coercive-normative hybridity. In the United States, many institutions increasingly mimic the compliance documentation styles associated with GDPR to reassure international partners, indicating the spread of mimetic forces across borders. In China, private hospitals experiment with patient communication practices that resemble Western transparency norms, though still operating under state-driven frameworks.

These adaptations demonstrate institutional hybridization, where organizations blend coercive, normative, and mimetic responses to address both regulatory and legitimacy demands. Such hybridity creates governance regimes that are more resilient and responsive, though also more complex to manage.

Figure 3 highlights this hybridity by showing overlapping governance practices across the three jurisdictions.

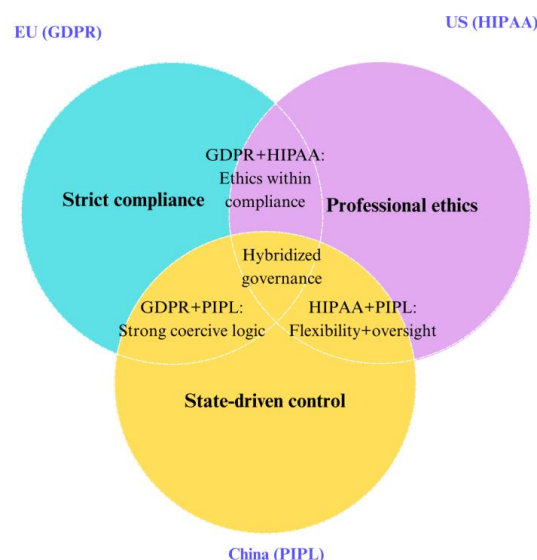


Figure 3. Hybrid Governance Practices in Smart-Healthcare Data.

This visualization reinforces the argument that governance outcomes are not static but dynamically negotiated through institutional interactions.

4.5. Contributions and Theoretical Implications

The findings make three main contributions.

First, they demonstrate that institutional theory provides explanatory power for understanding variations in smart-healthcare governance. Coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures do not act in isolation but interact in ways that generate hybrid practices.

Second, the analysis shows that governance regimes are shaped by trade-offs between protection and innovation. The institutional framework helps to explain why the EU sacrifices flexibility for strong rights protection, why the U.S. balances innovation with ethical norms, and why China emphasizes state authority at the expense of normative autonomy.

Third, the study highlights the importance of institutional hybridization as a source of governance innovation. Hybrid practices, such as the adoption of federated learning under GDPR constraints or the integration of transparency measures in PIPL-governed contexts, illustrate how organizations creatively reconcile conflicting pressures.

These contributions extend prior scholarship, which often dichotomized governance as either strict or permissive, by showing that institutional logics shape governance in more nuanced, layered ways.

4.6. Practical Implications

For policymakers, the findings underscore the importance of designing governance frameworks that are adaptive and interoperable. Policymakers in rights-based systems may consider introducing flexibility mechanisms to encourage innovation, while those in state-centric systems may benefit from incorporating professional and ethical guidelines to enhance legitimacy.

For healthcare providers, the study suggests that institutional hybridization can be leveraged as a strategy to navigate multiple pressures. By aligning compliance with professional ethics and mimicking best practices across jurisdictions, providers can both reduce risks and enhance patient trust.

For technology developers, the findings indicate that privacy-enhancing technologies such as federated learning, homomorphic encryption, and AI explainability tools can serve as cross-context governance instruments that respond simultaneously to coercive, normative, and mimetic demands.

4.7. Summary

In sum, the findings demonstrate that governance in smart-healthcare data is institutionally embedded, shaped by the interplay of coercive, normative, and mimetic forces. Comparative analysis of GDPR, HIPAA, and PIPL reveals distinctive governance trajectories but also shared tendencies toward hybridization. This institutional perspective not only explains current variations but also suggests pathways for building more adaptive and trust-enhancing governance frameworks in the future.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined governance mechanisms and data protection in smart-healthcare data through an institutional lens, highlighting how coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures interact to shape organizational practices. By conducting a comparative analysis of three influential regulatory frameworks, GDPR in the European Union, HIPAA in the United States, and PIPL in China, the research demonstrates that governance outcomes are neither uniform nor static but the result of dynamic institutional configurations.

The findings reveal three major contributions. First, the institutional framework employed in this study extends existing scholarship beyond purely technical or legal perspectives. It shows that governance in smart-healthcare data cannot be explained solely by regulatory compliance or technological innovation, but requires attention to institutional forces that drive organizational behavior. This theoretical contribution advances academic debates by integrating institutional theory with digital health governance.

Second, the comparative analysis underscores the diversity of governance trajectories. GDPR represents a rights-based but compliance-heavy model; HIPAA reflects a sectoral regime reinforced by professional ethics; and PIPL illustrates a state-centric framework where organizations adopt mimetic strategies to demonstrate compliance. These differences highlight the trade-offs between innovation and protection and demonstrate the importance of contextualizing governance within specific institutional environments.

Third, the study identifies the emergence of hybrid governance practices that combine coercive, normative, and mimetic elements. Such hybridization enhances resilience by allowing organizations to balance regulatory demands with professional legitimacy and global interoperability. This insight contributes to practice by offering healthcare providers, policymakers, and technology developers strategies for navigating complex governance landscapes.

For the academic community, the research suggests the value of cross-disciplinary approaches that link institutional theory with digital health studies. For practitioners, it provides guidance on designing governance frameworks that are adaptive, interoperable, and trust-enhancing. Policymakers can use these insights to balance strict regulation with flexibility, while healthcare providers can leverage hybrid strategies to strengthen patient trust and compliance.

Future research should expand the comparative scope to include emerging economies, where governance regimes are still evolving and hybrid practices may take different forms. In addition, greater attention should be given to the role of new technologies such as explainable AI, blockchain, and federated learning in mediating governance outcomes. By pursuing these directions, scholars and practitioners can continue to refine governance mechanisms that safeguard data protection while fostering innovation in smart-healthcare systems.

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