

DIGITAL LEADERSHIP FOR SUSTAINABLE ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSFORMATION: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

Digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped how organizations create value, compete, and sustain performance in dynamic environments. However, successful transformation depends not only on technological investment but also on leadership capabilities that align digital initiatives with organizational vision, culture, and sustainability objectives. This study aims to examine the evolution, theoretical foundations, and strategic role of digital leadership in enabling sustainable organizational transformation through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR). Relevant studies on digital leadership, digital transformation, dynamic capabilities, organizational agility, sustainability, and digital readiness were systematically analyzed using thematic synthesis to identify key patterns, theoretical perspectives, and emerging research directions. The findings indicate that digital leadership has evolved from a technology-focused concept into a strategic capability involving digital mindset, agility, data-driven decision-making, innovation, and change management. Digital leaders act as strategic orchestrators who facilitate sustainable transformation by developing organizational capabilities, enhancing digital readiness, and supporting human-centered change processes. This study contributes an integrated conceptual framework that positions digital leadership as a strategic organizational capability and provides theoretical and practical insights for advancing sustainable digital transformation research and practice.

Keywords: Digital Leadership; Digital Readiness; Digital Transformation; Dynamic Capabilities; Organizational Agility; Sustainable Organizational Transformation; Systematic Literature Review.

Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the way organizations create value, compete, and sustain their performance in increasingly dynamic and uncertain environments. Emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, big data analytics, cloud computing, and digital platforms, have reshaped organizational structures, business models, operational processes, and strategic priorities. However, digital transformation is not merely a technological adoption process; rather, it represents a complex organizational transformation that requires strategic alignment, cultural adaptation, capability development, and effective leadership. Despite significant investments in digital technologies, many organizations struggle to achieve sustainable transformation outcomes because they often prioritize technological implementation while underestimating the critical role of leadership in guiding organizational change.

Digital leadership has emerged as a strategic approach to addressing these challenges by emphasizing leaders' ability to integrate digital opportunities with organizational strategies, innovation initiatives, and sustainability objectives. Unlike traditional leadership approaches, digital leadership requires a broader set of capabilities, including the development of a clear digital vision, strategic agility, data-driven decision-making, organizational learning, and the ability to foster continuous adaptation. Previous studies have demonstrated that digital leadership contributes to digital transformation success, innovation capability, employee engagement, and sustainable organizational performance (Khaw et al. 2022) (Lin 2024) (Tigre, Curado, and Henriques 2023). Nevertheless, existing research remains fragmented, as digital leadership has frequently been examined independently from broader perspectives of organizational transformation and sustainability. Previous systematic literature reviews have provided valuable insights into the conceptual development, research trends, and contextual applications of digital leadership. However, existing reviews have predominantly focused on defining the construct, mapping publication patterns, or investigating specific sectors, such as education and public organizations. Limited attention has been directed toward understanding

how digital leadership functions as a strategic organizational capability that enables sustainable transformation. Moreover, the mechanisms through which digital leaders develop organizational agility, strengthen dynamic capabilities, enhance digital maturity, and facilitate sustainability-oriented transformation remain insufficiently integrated within the existing literature. This research gap highlights the need for a comprehensive synthesis that connects digital leadership, digital transformation, and organizational sustainability. Drawing upon the Dynamic Capabilities Theory, this study conceptualizes digital leadership as a strategic capability that enables organizations to sense technological changes, seize emerging opportunities, and reconfigure resources to achieve sustainable transformation. Digital leaders serve as strategic orchestrators who align technology, human capabilities, organizational processes, and institutional values to develop long-term competitive advantage in digitally disruptive environments.

This perspective is supported by (Qamariah and Muchtar 2021), who found that intrapreneurship orientation significantly enhances the commercialization capability of academics, indicating that leadership accompanied by innovation-oriented capabilities is essential for strengthening organizational capability and value creation. Although their study focuses on strategic leadership in higher education rather than digital leadership, the findings suggest that leadership should be viewed as a strategic organizational capability that facilitates innovation, organizational adaptation, and long-term competitiveness. This is further reinforced by (Muchtar, Muchtar, and Putra 2024), who demonstrated that digital leadership moderates the relationship between social media usage and innovation capability among SMEs, thereby strengthening the effect of social media usage on innovation capability and, in turn, sustainable SME performance. Their findings indicate that digital leadership does not merely enable technology adoption but actively strengthens an organization's capacity to convert digital resources into innovation outcomes, reinforcing the notion that digital leadership functions as a dynamic capability rather than a purely administrative role. Therefore, integrating Dynamic Capabilities Theory with digital leadership provides a robust theoretical foundation for explaining how organizations develop the capabilities required to achieve sustainable organizational transformation in digitally disruptive environments.

Based on this research gap, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How has the concept and development of digital leadership evolved in relation to sustainable organizational transformation?

RQ2: What key digital leadership capabilities contribute to successful and sustainable organizational transformation?

RQ3: Through what mechanisms does digital leadership enable organizations to develop dynamic capabilities, digital maturity, and sustainable performance outcomes?

Therefore, this study conducts a systematic literature review to consolidate fragmented knowledge and develop a comprehensive understanding of the role of digital leadership in sustainable organizational transformation. Specifically, this study aims to (1) identify the evolution and major research themes of digital leadership studies, (2) examine the key leadership capabilities that facilitate sustainable transformation, (3) explore the theoretical mechanisms linking digital leadership with transformation outcomes, and (4) propose future research directions for advancing the field.

This study contributes to the literature in three significant ways. First, it extends digital leadership research by positioning the concept as a strategic transformation capability rather than merely a set of leadership behaviors. Second, it integrates digital leadership with the Dynamic Capabilities Theory to explain how organizations sense, seize, and reconfigure resources to achieve sustainable transformation in digitally disruptive environments. Third, it provides a structured research agenda by synthesizing multidisciplinary perspectives and identifying opportunities for future theoretical and empirical investigations.

Methodology

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology to systematically identify, evaluate, synthesize, and interpret existing scholarly evidence regarding the role of digital leadership in enabling sustainable organizational transformation. An SLR approach was selected because it provides a rigorous, transparent, and reproducible procedure for consolidating fragmented knowledge, identifying theoretical developments, and generating future research directions. Compared with conventional narrative reviews, SLR enables researchers to reduce potential selection bias through predefined procedures for literature identification, screening, quality assessment, and evidence synthesis (Paul & Menzies, 2023). This study followed the methodological recommendations proposed by (Sauer and Seuring 2023) for conducting systematic reviews in management research, which emphasize several essential stages, including the formulation of research questions, development of search strategies, selection of relevant studies, assessment of research quality, systematic data extraction, and synthesis of findings. The review protocol was established prior to the literature search process to ensure methodological

consistency, transparency, and replicability throughout the study. To enhance the reliability and reporting quality of this systematic review, this study adopted the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) framework. PRISMA provides a standardized guideline for reporting the identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion processes of systematic reviews, thereby improving transparency and reproducibility (Page et al. 2021). The PRISMA framework was considered appropriate for this study because digital leadership research is distributed across multiple academic disciplines, including strategic management, organizational behavior, information systems, innovation management, and digital transformation studies. Therefore, applying a structured review framework was necessary to ensure that the reviewed evidence was identified and analyzed through a systematic and accountable procedure.

The objective of this systematic literature review was to examine how digital leadership functions as a strategic organizational capability in supporting sustainable organizational transformation. Based on the identified research gaps, this study was guided by four research questions: (RQ1) How has digital leadership research evolved in relation to digital transformation and sustainable organizational development? (RQ2) What key dimensions and capabilities characterize digital leadership in supporting organizational transformation? (RQ3) Through what mechanisms does digital leadership contribute to sustainable transformation outcomes? and (RQ4) What research gaps and future research directions emerge from the existing digital leadership literature? These research questions served as the analytical foundation for identifying research trends, examining theoretical developments, synthesizing empirical findings, and developing a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between digital leadership and sustainable transformation.

The literature search was conducted using the Scopus database as the primary source of academic publications. Scopus was selected because it provides extensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals across management, business, organizational studies, information systems, and related interdisciplinary research areas. The search strategy was developed by identifying three central concepts related to the research objectives: digital leadership, organizational transformation, and sustainability. Relevant keywords were derived from previous studies and combined using Boolean operators to improve the retrieval of relevant publications. The search was conducted within article titles, abstracts, and keywords using the following search string:

TITLE-ABS-KEY

("digital leadership" OR "digital leader*" OR "technology leadership" OR "digital transformational leadership")

AND

("digital transformation" OR "organizational transformation" OR "organizational change" OR digitalization)

AND

(sustainab* OR "sustainable performance" OR "sustainable organization*" OR "organizational resilience")

The publication period was limited to studies published between 2010 and 2025. This period was selected because digital transformation research experienced substantial growth following the emergence of Industry 4.0 technologies, artificial intelligence, big data analytics, cloud computing, and digital platforms, which have significantly influenced organizational structures, leadership requirements, and strategic capabilities (Reis and Melão 2023).

The study selection process was conducted using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure the relevance and methodological quality of the reviewed literature. Studies were included when they met the following criteria: (1) published as peer-reviewed journal articles indexed in Scopus; (2) written in English; (3) published between 2010 and 2025; and (4) directly related to digital leadership, digital transformation, organizational change, organizational capabilities, or sustainability-oriented transformation. In addition, selected studies were required to provide theoretical discussions, empirical evidence, or conceptual contributions relevant to the research questions. Studies were excluded when they focused exclusively on technological implementation without examining leadership or organizational implications, were published as conference papers, book chapters, editorials, or other non-peer-reviewed publications, lacked sufficient methodological explanations, or demonstrated limited relevance to digital leadership and sustainable organizational transformation. These criteria were established to ensure that the final dataset consisted of studies with significant theoretical and empirical contributions.

The article selection process followed the four stages of the PRISMA 2020 framework: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion (Page et al. 2021). During the identification stage, all records retrieved from Scopus were exported into reference management software, and duplicate records were removed. The remaining articles were screened based on their titles and abstracts to determine their relevance to the research objectives. Articles that did not address digital leadership, organizational transformation, or sustainability-related issues were excluded. Subsequently, full-text assessments were conducted to evaluate conceptual relevance, methodological rigor, and contribution to understanding digital leadership and sustainable transformation. Only studies that fulfilled all eligibility requirements were included in the final dataset for analysis. The complete selection procedure was

documented using a PRISMA flow diagram to provide transparency regarding the number of identified, screened, excluded, and included studies. To ensure the reliability and credibility of the synthesized evidence, each selected article was evaluated through a quality assessment process. The assessment considered several criteria, including clarity of research objectives, strength of theoretical foundations, appropriateness of research methodology, transparency of analytical procedures, and contribution to digital leadership and sustainable transformation research. Data extraction was conducted systematically using a predefined framework that recorded publication characteristics, research contexts, theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, digital leadership dimensions, transformation mechanisms, organizational outcomes, and identified research gaps. The extracted data were analyzed using thematic synthesis to identify recurring patterns, conceptual relationships, and emerging research themes (Sauer and Seuring 2023). This analytical process involved comparing findings across studies, categorizing related concepts, and integrating theoretical and empirical insights. Through this synthesis, the study develops an integrated understanding of digital leadership as a strategic capability that enables organizations to sense technological changes, seize emerging opportunities, reconfigure resources, strengthen dynamic capabilities, enhance organizational agility, and achieve sustainable transformation outcomes.

Results / Findings

Theme 1: The Evolution of Digital Leadership from Technology-Oriented Leadership toward Strategic Transformation Capability

The first thematic finding demonstrates a significant paradigm shift in the conceptual development of digital leadership. Early research primarily viewed digital leadership as a technology-oriented leadership approach, emphasizing leaders' ability to understand, adopt, and facilitate digital technology implementation. Within this perspective, digital leaders were mainly considered technology facilitators responsible for supporting digital infrastructure, improving operational efficiency, and ensuring successful technology adoption. However, recent studies indicate that this perspective is insufficient to explain contemporary organizational transformation, as digital transformation requires not only technological implementation but also strategic alignment, organizational adaptation, cultural change, and capability development (Lin 2024; Reis and Melão 2023).

The synthesis of the reviewed literature reveals that digital leadership has evolved into a strategic transformation capability that enables organizations to anticipate technological disruption, redesign business processes, foster innovation, and achieve sustainable competitive advantage. Digital leadership is no longer limited to technological knowledge or digital literacy but encompasses broader capabilities, including digital vision, strategic agility, data-driven decision-making, innovation orientation, and change management capability (Lin 2024; Tigre et al. 2023). Consequently, digital leaders increasingly function as strategic orchestrators who integrate technological opportunities with organizational objectives, human capabilities, and sustainability goals. The evolution of digital leadership is supported by empirical evidence demonstrating that digital leadership has become a multidimensional organizational construct rather than merely an individual leadership characteristic. (Tigre et al. 2023), through bibliometric analysis, found that digital leadership research has shifted from technology adoption and digital competence toward broader themes involving innovation, strategic transformation, and organizational capability development. Similarly, (Tigre, Henriques, and Curado 2025) conceptualized digital leadership as an emerging capability that integrates technological awareness, strategic orientation, innovation capability, and transformational influence, highlighting its importance in enabling organizational adaptation under uncertain conditions.

The reviewed literature further indicates that digital leadership has developed from an operational technology-focused role into a strategic mechanism for organizational transformation. Henderikx and Stoffers (2022) emphasize that leadership roles in digital transformation are increasingly associated with organizational learning, adaptation, and transformation readiness rather than technology implementation alone. Similarly, (Reis and Melão 2023) argue that successful digital transformation requires the integration of technology, organizational redesign, leadership capability, and cultural transformation. Recent studies also position digital leadership as a dynamic organizational capability that enables firms to respond effectively to environmental changes. Digital leaders create shared digital visions, encourage experimentation, develop innovation-oriented cultures, and facilitate organizational restructuring. Through these capabilities, organizations can identify emerging technological opportunities, mobilize resources, and continuously adapt their processes to maintain competitiveness in rapidly changing environments (Lin 2024; Tigre et al. 2025). Therefore, digital leadership should not be understood merely as a leadership style but as an organizational capability that supports sustainable transformation. Another important finding is the shift in research focus from individual leadership characteristics toward broader organizational outcomes. Earlier studies primarily examined digital competence and technological awareness at the individual level. However, contemporary research increasingly explores how digital leadership influences organizational-level outcomes, including digital maturity,

innovation capability, organizational agility, and sustainable performance (Khaw *et al.* 2022; Tigre *et al.* 2023). This development demonstrates that digital leadership functions as a bridge between technological advancement and organizational evolution by integrating strategic, human, and technological dimensions. Despite significant progress, existing literature remains fragmented because digital leadership, digital transformation, and sustainability have often been examined as separate research domains. Previous systematic reviews have primarily focused on defining digital leadership characteristics, identifying research trends, or examining its relationship with organizational performance (Khaw *et al.* 2022; Lin 2024). Limited attention has been given to explaining how digital leadership develops from technology-oriented competence into a strategic capability that enables sustainable organizational transformation. This study contributes to the literature by proposing an integrated understanding of digital leadership as a strategic transformation capability. The findings extend previous research by demonstrating that digital leadership operates through interconnected capabilities, including digital vision, strategic agility, innovation orientation, organizational learning, and change management. The novelty of this study lies in positioning digital leadership as the strategic mechanism that connects digital disruption with sustainable organizational evolution. This perspective provides a stronger theoretical foundation for understanding how organizations can leverage leadership capabilities to achieve adaptive, innovative, and sustainable transformation in the digital era.

Theme 2. Digital Leadership as an Enabler of Sustainable Organizational Transformation

The second thematic finding demonstrates that digital leadership has emerged as a critical enabler of sustainable organizational transformation. The reviewed literature indicates that successful transformation is not determined solely by technological investment, digital infrastructure, or the adoption of advanced technologies. Instead, sustainable transformation requires leadership capabilities that can strategically integrate digital technologies, organizational resources, and human capabilities to create long-term organizational value. In this context, digital leadership functions as a strategic mechanism that transforms digital initiatives from isolated technology-driven projects into integrated organization-wide transformation processes.

The synthesis of previous studies reveals that digital leaders play a central role in aligning digital transformation strategies with sustainability objectives. Rather than focusing only on short-term efficiency improvements, digital leaders facilitate sustainable transformation by developing digital visions, promoting innovation, strengthening organizational learning, and ensuring that technological advancement contributes to long-term organizational performance. Therefore, digital leadership represents a connecting mechanism between digital transformation capabilities and sustainability outcomes (Khaw *et al.* 2022; Reis and Melão 2023).

The evidence from the reviewed literature indicates that digital transformation success depends not only on technological capabilities but also on leadership capacity to direct, coordinate, and integrate transformation initiatives. Previous studies suggest that organizations often fail to achieve sustainable transformation when digital initiatives are approached primarily from a technological perspective. Such approaches may result in fragmented technology adoption, employee resistance, and limited organizational value creation. Conversely, digital leaders provide strategic direction by aligning digital initiatives with organizational objectives, employee capabilities, and sustainability priorities (Khaw *et al.*, 2022; Sacavém *et al.*, 2025).

The literature identifies three interconnected dimensions through which digital leadership enables sustainable organizational transformation: strategic sustainability, operational sustainability, and human sustainability. First, strategic sustainability refers to the ability of digital leaders to align digital transformation initiatives with organizational vision, competitive strategy, and long-term objectives. Digital leaders act as strategic translators who evaluate emerging technologies, determine their organizational relevance, and ensure that technology adoption supports strategic renewal rather than becoming an isolated investment. (Reis and Melão 2023) emphasize that digital transformation requires a holistic organizational approach in which technology adoption is integrated with organizational redesign, capability development, and strategic alignment.

Second, operational sustainability reflects the role of digital leadership in improving organizational efficiency, flexibility, adaptability, and resilience. Technologies such as artificial intelligence, analytics, automation, and digital platforms provide opportunities to redesign processes and enhance decision-making capabilities. However, the value generated by these technologies depends on leadership capability to integrate digital solutions effectively into organizational processes. (Cosa and Torelli 2024) demonstrate that digital transformation enables more flexible performance management systems, while effective leadership ensures that digital tools remain aligned with organizational priorities and operational objectives.

Third, human sustainability highlights the contribution of digital leadership to employee capability development, engagement, and organizational readiness for continuous transformation. Digital transformation changes employee roles, required competencies, and patterns of organizational interaction. Without appropriate

leadership support, technological change may create uncertainty, resistance, and capability gaps. The reviewed literature demonstrates that digital leaders address these challenges by fostering digital cultures, supporting employee learning, encouraging participation, and strengthening organizational commitment. (Qiao et al. 2024) found that digital leadership improves employee performance and organizational commitment by creating supportive digital environments and involving employees in transformation processes. A key finding from the reviewed studies is that digital leadership operates as an enabling mechanism between digital transformation capabilities and sustainable organizational outcomes. Digital technologies provide organizations with transformation opportunities; however, digital leadership determines how these opportunities are converted into sustainable value. Thus, digital leadership should not be viewed merely as an antecedent of digital transformation but as a strategic capability that shapes transformation effectiveness through strategic alignment, resource orchestration, cultural adaptation, and human capability development.

Based on the reviewed evidence, the relationship can be conceptualized as follows:

Digital Transformation Capability → Digital Leadership Mechanism → Sustainable Organizational Transformation

This conceptualization extends previous research by positioning digital leadership as a strategic bridge connecting technological capabilities with multidimensional sustainability outcomes. Although previous studies have examined digital leadership in relation to specific outcomes, such as innovation performance, employee outcomes, and sustainability performance, limited attention has been given to explaining how digital leadership integrates technological, organizational, and human dimensions of transformation. This study contributes to the literature by conceptualizing digital leadership as a strategic organizational capability that enables sustainable transformation through three interconnected dimensions: strategic sustainability, operational sustainability, and human sustainability. The findings demonstrate that digital leaders do not simply facilitate technology adoption; rather, they orchestrate the alignment between digital capabilities, organizational strategy, operational processes, and employee development. Theoretically, this perspective extends digital leadership research by integrating insights from digital transformation, sustainability management, and organizational capability theory. Practically, it highlights the importance of developing leadership capabilities that enable organizations to achieve sustainable transformation in increasingly complex digital environments.

Theme 3. Dynamic Capabilities as the Underlying Mechanism Linking Digital Leadership and Transformation Outcomes

The third thematic finding identifies Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT) as an important theoretical mechanism explaining how digital leadership contributes to successful organizational transformation. The reviewed literature indicates that digital leadership alone does not automatically generate sustainable transformation outcomes. Instead, digital leadership creates value by enabling organizations to develop, renew, and reconfigure their capabilities in response to technological disruption and environmental uncertainty. Dynamic capabilities provide a theoretical foundation for understanding this process because they emphasize an organization's ability to continuously sense changes, seize emerging opportunities, and reconfigure resources to maintain competitiveness in dynamic environments.

Within the context of digital transformation, organizations must move beyond static technological capabilities and develop adaptive mechanisms that allow them to respond effectively to continuous digital disruption. Digital leaders play a central role in activating these mechanisms by establishing strategic direction, facilitating organizational learning, coordinating resources, and legitimizing transformation initiatives. Therefore, dynamic capabilities function as the underlying process through which digital leadership is translated into organizational transformation outcomes.

The synthesis of the reviewed literature identifies three interconnected dynamic capabilities that explain the relationship between digital leadership and transformation: sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring capabilities. First, sensing capability refers to the ability of organizations to identify technological developments, changing customer expectations, competitive pressures, and emerging digital opportunities. Digital leaders strengthen sensing capability by encouraging environmental scanning, data-driven decision-making, and organizational awareness of technological trends. (Herold et al. 2023) demonstrate that successful digital transformation requires organizations to continuously identify and evaluate digital opportunities before implementing transformation initiatives. Without strong sensing capability, organizations may adopt technologies reactively rather than strategically.

Second, seizing capability represents the ability to transform identified opportunities into actionable strategies through appropriate investments, innovation initiatives, and digital business models. Digital leaders contribute to this capability by ensuring alignment between digital investments and organizational objectives. (Mele et al. 2024) emphasize that digital transformation depends on knowledge-based dynamic capabilities, where organizations integrate technological knowledge with existing organizational expertise. Through knowledge sharing, cross-functional collaboration, and innovation-oriented practices, digital leaders enable organizations to convert digital knowledge into strategic capabilities.

Third, reconfiguring capability reflects the ability of organizations to continuously modify structures, processes, routines, and cultural systems in response to changing digital environments. Digital transformation is not a one-time implementation process but an ongoing capability-building process that requires continuous renewal. Digital leaders support reconfiguration by promoting organizational agility, encouraging experimentation, developing employee capabilities, and reducing resistance to change. (Michelotto and Joia 2024) highlight that digital transformation readiness depends not only on technological resources but also on leadership commitment, cultural adaptation, and organizational flexibility.

The evidence presented in the reviewed studies demonstrates that dynamic capabilities provide a stronger theoretical explanation of why some organizations successfully achieve sustainable transformation while others struggle despite having access to similar technologies. Digital leadership functions as the antecedent that activates dynamic capabilities by providing strategic vision, governance mechanisms, coordination, and organizational legitimacy. Without effective leadership, capability development may remain fragmented because employees and organizational units lack shared direction and transformation priorities (Gledson et al., 2024; Hossain et al., 2025). Based on the synthesis of the literature, the relationship can be conceptualized as follows:

Digital Leadership → Dynamic Capabilities (Sensing–Seizing–Reconfiguring) → Sustainable Organizational Transformation

This framework explains both the source and process of digital transformation effectiveness. Digital leadership provides the strategic orientation required for transformation, while dynamic capabilities explain how organizations translate leadership actions into adaptive capacity and sustainable outcomes. This perspective extends previous research by positioning digital leadership not merely as a leadership behavior or direct antecedent of transformation success, but as a capability-building mechanism that enables continuous organizational renewal. Although previous studies have examined digital leadership and digital transformation independently, limited research has explicitly explained the organizational mechanisms through which digital leadership generates transformation outcomes. The integration of Dynamic Capabilities Theory addresses this limitation by demonstrating that transformation value emerges not simply from technology adoption, but from the organization's ability to sense environmental changes, mobilize resources, and continuously reconfigure capabilities.

This study contributes to the literature by developing an integrated perspective that connects digital leadership with dynamic capabilities and sustainable organizational transformation. The findings extend existing knowledge by conceptualizing digital leadership as a strategic capability that enables organizations to build adaptive capacity, enhance organizational learning, and achieve sustainable transformation in uncertain digital environments. Practically, this perspective highlights the importance of developing leaders who can foster capability renewal, strategic adaptability, and continuous organizational transformation.

Theme 4. Organizational Agility and Digital Readiness as Critical Transformation Outcomes

The fourth thematic finding highlights organizational agility and digital readiness as critical capabilities and transformation outcomes generated through effective digital leadership. The reviewed literature indicates that successful digital transformation depends not only on technological availability but also on an organization's ability to develop readiness, adapt internal systems, and continuously build capabilities in response to environmental uncertainty. In this context, digital leadership functions as a catalyst that strengthens digital readiness and organizational agility, enabling organizations to transform technological opportunities into sustainable strategic outcomes.

Digital transformation occurs within highly dynamic environments characterized by technological disruption, changing customer expectations, competitive pressures, and evolving business models. Therefore, organizations require more than digital technology adoption; they need adaptive capabilities that enable rapid and effective responses to environmental changes. Previous studies demonstrate that many digital transformation initiatives fail because organizations lack sufficient readiness in terms of technological infrastructure, employee capabilities, organizational culture, and change management capacity (Michelotto and Joia 2024; Veldhoven and Vanthienen

2023). Consequently, digital readiness has become a fundamental capability that determines whether organizations can successfully implement and sustain digital transformation. The synthesis of the reviewed literature identifies four interconnected dimensions of digital readiness enabled by digital leadership: technological infrastructure readiness, employee digital competence, adaptive organizational structures, and continuous learning capability. First, technological infrastructure readiness refers to the organization's ability to develop and utilize digital foundations that support transformation initiatives. Digital leaders ensure that technology investments are strategically aligned with organizational objectives rather than being treated as isolated technical assets.

Second, employee digital competence represents the human capability required to maximize the value of digital technologies. Digital transformation changes work processes, required skills, and organizational interactions; therefore, employee adaptability and continuous skill development are essential. Digital leaders contribute to this capability by fostering learning-oriented cultures, supporting digital competency development, and reducing resistance to technological change (Bouwman et al. 2024).

Third, adaptive organizational structures enable organizations to respond effectively to digital disruption. Digital leaders promote flexible structures characterized by collaboration, cross-functional coordination, decentralized decision-making, and rapid experimentation. These conditions allow organizations to respond more effectively to changing market conditions and technological developments (Veldhoven and Vanthienen 2023). Fourth, continuous learning capability enables organizations to sustain transformation beyond initial technology implementation by encouraging knowledge sharing, experimentation, and capability renewal.

The reviewed studies further demonstrate that organizational agility functions as an important mechanism linking digital leadership and sustainable transformation performance. While digital leadership provides strategic direction and transformation capabilities, organizational agility enables organizations to convert these capabilities into rapid responses, innovation outcomes, and sustainable competitive advantages. (Nguyen et al. 2025) highlight that organizational agility improves responsiveness, innovation capability, and performance outcomes by enabling organizations to adapt effectively to changing environments.

The evidence suggests that digital readiness represents the foundation for developing organizational agility. Organizations with limited readiness often experience difficulties in integrating digital technologies because they lack supporting infrastructure, skilled employees, and adaptive organizational mechanisms. (Michelotto and Joia 2024) emphasize that digital readiness is a multidimensional capability involving technological, organizational, and human factors. Therefore, readiness should not be understood as a one-time condition but as an evolving capability that must continuously develop throughout the transformation process.

Furthermore, digital leadership strengthens organizational agility by creating three essential organizational conditions. First, digital leaders encourage structural agility through flexible organizational designs, cross-functional collaboration, and faster decision-making processes. Second, they promote cognitive agility by developing digital mindsets, encouraging experimentation, and fostering openness toward change. Third, they enhance operational agility by integrating digital technologies into organizational processes to improve efficiency, responsiveness, and innovation capability (Gong and Ribiere 2025).

The synthesis of the literature suggests the following theoretical relationship:

Digital Leadership Capability → Digital Readiness → Organizational Agility → Sustainable Transformation Performance

This framework demonstrates that digital leadership does not directly generate transformation success; rather, it creates the conditions necessary for organizations to develop readiness and agility, which subsequently enable sustainable transformation outcomes. Digital leaders establish strategic priorities, allocate resources, develop employee capabilities, and shape organizational cultures that support continuous adaptation. Although previous studies have extensively examined digital transformation drivers, technology adoption, and performance outcomes, limited attention has been given to explaining the intermediate mechanisms through which digital leadership contributes to sustainable transformation performance. By positioning organizational agility as the connecting mechanism between leadership capability and transformation outcomes, this study extends existing literature by conceptualizing digital transformation as a capability-building process rather than merely a technological implementation process.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in integrating digital leadership, digital readiness, and organizational agility into a unified transformation framework. This perspective advances understanding of how organizations develop the internal capabilities required to navigate digital disruption and achieve sustainable transformation. From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that organizations should not focus solely on

technology investments but also develop leadership capabilities, employee competencies, adaptive structures, and continuous learning systems that strengthen organizational agility and long-term transformation resilience.

Theme 5. Human-Centric Digital Leadership and the Management of Organizational Change

The fifth thematic finding highlights that the sustainability of digital transformation is fundamentally determined by the ability of digital leaders to manage human adaptation and organizational change. The reviewed literature demonstrates that digital transformation is not merely a technological transition but a complex socio-organizational process involving changes in employee roles, organizational culture, work practices, and psychological responses. Therefore, effective digital leadership requires not only technological competence but also the ability to develop human capabilities, manage resistance, and create supportive conditions for continuous adaptation. Previous perspectives often emphasized technology adoption as the primary determinant of digital transformation success. However, recent studies indicate that technology-driven approaches alone are insufficient because digital transformation frequently creates human-related challenges, including employee uncertainty, resistance to change, digital skill gaps, and technostress. Organizations may possess advanced digital infrastructure but still experience transformation difficulties when employees lack psychological readiness, digital competence, and trust in the transformation process (Ertiö *et al.*, 2024; Rademaker *et al.*, 2025).

Within this context, digital leaders increasingly function as human-centered change agents who connect technological innovation with employee adaptation. Rather than focusing solely on digital implementation, these leaders create the cultural and social conditions required for transformation sustainability through digital culture development, employee engagement, psychological support, digital literacy development, and organizational learning. The literature suggests that sustainable transformation depends on the alignment between technological capabilities and human readiness. The synthesis of previous studies identifies five interconnected dimensions of human-centered digital leadership. First, digital culture development represents a fundamental responsibility of digital leaders. Digital transformation requires organizations to shift from traditional operational mindsets toward innovation-oriented, collaborative, and adaptive cultures. Digital leaders facilitate this transition by encouraging experimentation, knowledge sharing, openness toward technological change, and continuous improvement. (Ratajczak 2022) highlights that digital leadership involves not only technology adoption but also cultural transformation and organizational adaptation.

Second, employee engagement and participation are essential because transformation outcomes depend on employee commitment and involvement. Digital leaders enhance engagement by communicating transformation objectives clearly, involving employees in change initiatives, and creating a sense of shared ownership. When employees understand the purpose and benefits of digital transformation, they are more likely to adopt new technologies and contribute actively to innovation processes (Henderikx & Stoffers, 2022).

Third, psychological readiness and technostress management represent critical elements of sustainable transformation. Digital transformation often generates uncertainty because employees must adapt to new systems, changing workflows, and evolving competency requirements. Digital leaders address these challenges through transparent communication, emotional support, and participative change management. (Ertiö *et al.* 2024) demonstrate that emotional intelligence enables digital leaders to reduce employee technostress, strengthen confidence, and facilitate smoother adaptation to technological change. Similarly, (Rademaker, Klingenberg, and Süß 2025) emphasize that leadership practices influence whether technology-related change becomes empowering or stressful for employees.

Fourth, digital literacy development represents a key capability dimension of human-centered transformation. Employees require continuous development of digital skills to effectively utilize emerging technologies and adapt to changing work environments. Digital leaders support this process by establishing learning mechanisms, providing development opportunities, and encouraging knowledge exchange. (Caroline *et al.* 2025) demonstrate that digital literacy enhances employee adaptability and innovative work behavior, indicating that digital competence should be considered a strategic organizational capability rather than a short-term training activity.

Fifth, learning-oriented organizational capability enables organizations to sustain transformation beyond initial technology implementation. Since digital technologies continuously evolve, organizations must continuously acquire, share, and apply new knowledge. Digital leaders facilitate organizational learning by promoting experimentation, reflection, collaboration, and continuous capability development.

The synthesis of the literature suggests the following relationship:

Digital Leadership Capability → Human-Centered Change Management → Employee Adaptation → Sustainable Digital Transformation

This framework demonstrates that human-centered leadership is not merely a supporting element of digital transformation but a fundamental mechanism determining transformation sustainability. Digital leaders serve as change architects who ensure alignment between technological innovation, organizational culture, and employee capabilities. Although previous studies have examined digital leadership from technological, strategic, and performance perspectives, limited attention has been given to the human mechanisms through which digital leadership enables sustainable transformation. This study contributes to the literature by positioning human-centered digital leadership as a critical transformation capability that addresses the social and psychological challenges associated with digital change. The findings extend existing digital leadership research by demonstrating that successful transformation requires a combination of technological knowledge, strategic vision, emotional intelligence, employee empowerment, and organizational learning capability.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in integrating digital leadership with organizational change management and human sustainability perspectives. This integration expands the understanding of digital leadership from a technology-enabling role toward a broader human-centered transformation capability. From a practical perspective, organizations should develop digital leaders who possess balanced competencies, combining technological expertise, strategic thinking, and interpersonal capabilities. Ultimately, sustainable digital transformation is not solely a technological transformation managed through human resources; rather, it is a human transformation enabled and accelerated by digital technologies.

Theme 6. Barriers and Challenges in Achieving Sustainable Digital Transformation

The sixth thematic finding highlights that the effectiveness of digital leadership in achieving sustainable organizational transformation is strongly influenced by the organization's ability to overcome structural, technological, human, and governance-related barriers. The synthesis of the reviewed literature demonstrates that digital transformation failures are rarely caused solely by technological limitations. Instead, unsuccessful transformation initiatives often result from the inability to align digital technologies with organizational strategy, leadership capabilities, employee competencies, organizational culture, and governance mechanisms. Digital transformation requires organizations to simultaneously manage technological innovation and organizational complexity. Although digital leadership has been recognized as an essential capability for guiding transformation, its effectiveness can be constrained by internal resistance, insufficient leadership capabilities, limited digital skills, strategic misalignment, and ethical challenges. Therefore, digital leadership should be understood not only as a driver of transformation success but also as a strategic capability for identifying, managing, and overcoming transformation barriers.

The systematic synthesis identifies five major categories of barriers affecting sustainable digital transformation outcomes: organizational resistance to change, leadership capability gaps, digital skill shortages, technology–strategy misalignment, and governance and ethical challenges. The first barrier concerns organizational resistance to change. Digital transformation frequently disrupts established routines, professional identities, decision-making processes, and organizational power structures. Employees may resist transformation because of uncertainty regarding changing job roles, technological complexity, or concerns about their future competencies. However, resistance is not merely an individual-level issue; it is influenced by organizational culture, communication patterns, and leadership approaches. Digital leaders therefore play an important role as change facilitators by developing clear transformation narratives, encouraging employee participation, and building organizational trust. (Henderikx and Stoffers 2022) emphasize that effective digital transformation requires leaders who combine technological understanding with strong change management capabilities.

The second barrier relates to leadership capability gaps. Although digital leadership has become increasingly important, many organizations still lack leaders who possess an integrated understanding of technology, strategy, and organizational change. Traditional leadership approaches focused primarily on operational efficiency may not be sufficient in environments characterized by rapid technological disruption. Digital leaders require strategic foresight, innovation orientation, technological awareness, and the ability to coordinate complex transformation processes. Without these capabilities, organizations may implement digital initiatives without clear direction, resulting in fragmented adoption and limited value creation (Kempeneer and Heylen 2023).

The third barrier involves digital skill shortages among employees. Digital transformation requires employees to develop competencies related to digital literacy, data utilization, collaboration technologies, and innovation practices. However, many organizations underestimate the importance of workforce capability development and focus excessively on technology acquisition. (Gkrimpizi, Peristeras, and Magnisalis 2023) highlight

that insufficient digital competencies and limited organizational support represent major barriers to successful digital transformation. Therefore, digital leaders must establish continuous learning systems and capability-building programs to ensure that employees can effectively utilize emerging technologies.

The fourth barrier concerns technology–strategy misalignment. Organizations often invest in advanced technologies without sufficiently considering their strategic objectives, organizational capabilities, or long-term value creation. Such technology-centered approaches may lead to inefficient investments and fragmented transformation outcomes. Digital leaders address this challenge by acting as strategic translators who align technological opportunities with organizational vision, business objectives, and sustainability goals. Digital transformation should therefore be viewed as a strategic renewal process rather than merely a technological modernization initiative (Ben Slimane, Coeurderoy, and Mhenni 2022).

The fifth barrier involves governance and ethical challenges. Increasing dependence on artificial intelligence, analytics, automation, and digital platforms introduces concerns related to data privacy, cybersecurity, algorithmic transparency, and responsible technology use. Sustainable digital transformation requires governance mechanisms that balance innovation with accountability. (Haug, Dan, and Mergel 2024) emphasize that digitally induced organizational change requires effective governance structures, institutional adaptation, and leadership capacity to address emerging risks.

The findings suggest the following conceptual relationship:

Digital Leadership Capability → Barrier Identification and Mitigation → Organizational Adaptability → Sustainable Digital Transformation

This framework demonstrates that digital leadership functions not only as a transformation accelerator but also as a resilience capability that enables organizations to navigate complexity and overcome obstacles throughout the transformation process. Digital leaders create transformation momentum while simultaneously managing resistance, developing capabilities, ensuring strategic alignment, and establishing responsible governance practices. Although previous research has extensively examined digital leadership as an antecedent of digital transformation success, limited attention has been given to how digital leadership helps organizations overcome barriers that threaten transformation sustainability. This study contributes to the literature by reconceptualizing digital leadership as a transformational resilience capability that enables organizations to anticipate, manage, and overcome digital transformation challenges.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in integrating digital leadership perspectives with organizational change management, dynamic capabilities, and digital transformation barrier literature. This integration provides a more comprehensive explanation of why some organizations achieve sustainable transformation while others experience failure despite having access to similar technologies. From a practical perspective, organizations should develop digital leaders who possess not only technological competencies but also capabilities in change management, strategic alignment, ethical governance, and human-centered transformation. Ultimately, sustainable digital transformation depends not only on the ability to implement digital technologies but also on the ability of digital leaders to navigate the organizational complexities surrounding technological change.

Theme 7. Emerging Research Direction: Toward an Integrated Digital Leadership–Sustainability Framework

The seventh thematic finding highlights the need for an integrated digital leadership–sustainability framework that explains how organizations achieve sustainable transformation in increasingly dynamic digital environments. The systematic synthesis indicates that previous research has generated valuable insights into digital leadership, digital transformation, organizational capabilities, and sustainability; however, these research streams have largely developed independently. Consequently, the mechanisms explaining how digital leadership contributes to sustainable organizational transformation remain fragmented.

Existing digital leadership studies have primarily examined leadership competencies, technology adoption, innovation capability, and organizational performance. Meanwhile, digital transformation research has focused on technological implementation, organizational readiness, and capability development, while sustainability research has emphasized resilience, responsible value creation, and long-term organizational performance. Although these domains are interconnected, limited studies have integrated them into a comprehensive framework explaining how leadership capabilities generate sustainable transformation outcomes.

The findings of this review suggest that digital leadership should be conceptualized as a strategic organizational capability rather than merely an individual leadership competency. Digital leaders create transformation value by activating organizational mechanisms that enable firms to identify technological

opportunities, develop adaptive capabilities, restructure organizational processes, and embed sustainability principles into transformation strategies. This study therefore proposes the following integrated pathway:

Digital Leadership Capability → Dynamic Capabilities → Digital Transformation Readiness → Organizational Agility → Sustainable Organizational Transformation

The first component, digital leadership capability, represents the strategic foundation of transformation. Recent studies indicate that digital leadership has evolved beyond technology-oriented leadership toward a broader capability involving digital vision, strategic alignment, innovation orientation, and organizational change management (Lin 2024; Tigre et al. 2023). Digital leaders generate transformation value not simply through technological knowledge but through their ability to interpret digital opportunities and align them with organizational objectives.

The second component, dynamic capabilities, explains how digital leadership is converted into organizational adaptation. Through sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring capabilities, organizations can identify emerging opportunities, mobilize resources, and redesign processes in response to environmental changes. (Herold et al. 2023) emphasize that successful digital transformation requires continuous capability renewal rather than one-time technology implementation. Digital leaders facilitate these processes by encouraging organizational learning, experimentation, and strategic adaptation.

The third component, digital transformation readiness, represents the organizational condition required for effective transformation implementation. Readiness includes technological infrastructure, employee competence, strategic alignment, leadership support, and organizational culture. (Michelotto and Joia 2024) highlight that organizations with stronger digital readiness are better positioned to integrate digital technologies into their operations and generate transformation value.

The fourth component, organizational agility, functions as the mechanism that enables organizations to translate digital capabilities into strategic outcomes. In rapidly changing digital environments, agility allows organizations to respond quickly to technological disruption, changing customer expectations, and competitive uncertainty. (Gong and Ribiere 2025) demonstrate that organizational agility serves as a bridge between digital capabilities and transformation outcomes by improving responsiveness, innovation, and strategic flexibility.

The final component, sustainable organizational transformation, represents the long-term outcome of the capability-building process. Sustainability extends beyond financial performance and includes organizational resilience, innovation capability, employee development, and responsible technology utilization. (Khaw et al. 2022) demonstrate that digital leadership contributes to sustainability by integrating digital innovation with strategic objectives, while (Bindeeba et al. 2025) confirm that digital transformation generates sustainable outcomes through improved efficiency, innovation, and adaptability.

The integrated framework developed in this study suggests that sustainable transformation is not a direct consequence of technology adoption but the result of a sequential capability-development process: digital leaders provide strategic direction, dynamic capabilities enable adaptation, readiness facilitates implementation, and organizational agility accelerates sustainable transformation outcomes.

Discussion

The findings of this systematic literature review demonstrate that digital leadership has evolved from a technology-oriented leadership approach into a strategic organizational capability that enables sustainable transformation. Digital leadership now encompasses strategic vision, innovation capability, organizational change management, and human capability development. This finding supports (Lin 2024), who identifies digital leadership as a multidimensional construct involving strategic thinking, digital change capability, and talent development. Furthermore, (Reis and Melão 2023) emphasize that successful digital transformation requires alignment among technology, strategy, organizational processes, and human capabilities.

This study further reveals that digital leadership contributes to sustainable transformation through dynamic capabilities. Drawing on Dynamic Capabilities Theory, organizations achieve competitiveness by sensing environmental changes, seizing opportunities, and reconfiguring resources. Digital leaders serve as the managerial foundation that activates these processes by establishing transformation direction, aligning digital initiatives with organizational goals, and supporting continuous adaptation (Herold et al., 2023; Mele et al., 2024).

Another important finding is that sustainable transformation requires the integration of digital readiness, organizational agility, and human-centered leadership. Technology investments alone are insufficient because organizations must develop adaptive structures, employee digital competencies, and supportive cultures. This finding aligns with (Michelotto and Joia 2024), who identify readiness as a critical transformation capability, and (Ertiö et

al. 2024), who demonstrate the importance of emotional intelligence in supporting employee adaptation and reducing technostress. The primary theoretical contribution of this study is the development of an integrated digital leadership–sustainability framework that connects previously fragmented research domains. Unlike prior studies that examine digital leadership, digital transformation, and sustainability separately, this study explains the mechanisms through which leadership capability produces sustainable transformation outcomes. The framework extends digital transformation literature by positioning digital leadership as a strategic antecedent capability, while dynamic capabilities, digital readiness, and organizational agility function as intermediate mechanisms. From a managerial perspective, organizations should evaluate digital transformation success beyond technology implementation indicators. Sustainable transformation requires investment in leadership development, organizational capability building, employee competence enhancement, adaptive structures, and responsible digital governance. Therefore, digital leadership represents the strategic foundation through which organizations transform technological disruption into sustainable organizational advantage.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review provides a comprehensive understanding of the strategic role of digital leadership in enabling sustainable organizational transformation. The findings demonstrate that digital leadership has evolved from a technology oriented leadership perspective into a strategic organizational capability that facilitates continuous adaptation, innovation, and sustainability in dynamic digital environments. The study reveals that the influence of digital leadership on transformation outcomes extends beyond technology adoption by enabling the development of dynamic capabilities, digital transformation readiness, organizational agility, and human centered change management. These findings challenge the traditional assumption that technological investment is the primary driver of digital transformation success and highlight leadership capability as a critical mechanism for converting digital technologies into sustainable organizational value.

The main contribution of this study is the development of an integrated conceptual framework that explains the relationship between digital leadership and sustainable organizational transformation. This research strengthens previous studies by confirming that digital leadership functions as a strategic capability connecting digital transformation initiatives with sustainability outcomes. Furthermore, this study extends existing knowledge by integrating digital leadership capability, dynamic capabilities, digital transformation readiness, organizational agility, and sustainable organizational transformation into a unified framework. The findings contribute to Dynamic Capabilities Theory by positioning digital leadership as a managerial micro foundation that enables organizations to sense technological changes, seize digital opportunities, and reconfigure organizational resources to achieve sustainable transformation.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. As an SLR, the findings depend on the availability and quality of existing studies, which represent diverse organizational contexts, industries, and geographical settings. Moreover, empirical evidence regarding the causal relationships between digital leadership, dynamic capabilities, agility, and sustainability outcomes remains limited. Future research should validate the proposed framework through quantitative, longitudinal, and mixed methods approaches while examining contextual factors such as organizational size, industry characteristics, national culture, and regulatory environments. Further studies should also explore emerging issues related to responsible digital leadership, artificial intelligence governance, ethical technology adoption, employee well being, and sustainable digital innovation to advance understanding of how digital leaders build resilient and adaptive organizations in the digital era.

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