



From Vision to Execution: A Qualitative Study of Digital Leadership in Marketing Transformation

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Abstract

This study explores the role of digital leadership in bridging the gap between strategic vision and operational execution within marketing transformation initiatives. While digital transformation has become a strategic imperative, many organizations struggle to translate visionary aspirations into effective marketing practices. Adopting a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, this study investigates how digital leaders enact sensemaking, mobilize organizational actors, and navigate governance structures in digitally transforming marketing functions. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with senior leaders, marketing executives, and middle managers across organizations actively engaged in digital marketing transformation, complemented by document analysis. The findings reveal that effective digital leadership extends beyond articulating a compelling digital vision; it involves continuous sensemaking, adaptive decision-making, and sustained engagement throughout execution. Leadership practices that integrate capability building, cultural alignment, and flexible governance frameworks were found to be critical enablers of successful marketing transformation. Conversely, misaligned governance structures, cultural resistance, and limited digital competencies emerged as persistent barriers. The study contributes to digital leadership theory by emphasizing execution as a core leadership process rather than a downstream outcome. Practically, the findings highlight the need for leaders to remain actively involved in translating vision into everyday marketing practices. From a policy perspective, the study underscores the importance of governance frameworks that balance innovation, accountability, and ethical considerations in digital marketing transformation.

Keywords: Digital leadership; Marketing transformation; Strategic execution; Sensemaking; Digital governance

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji peran kepemimpinan digital dalam menjembatani kesenjangan antara visi strategis dan eksekusi operasional dalam transformasi pemasaran. Meskipun transformasi digital telah menjadi imperatif strategis, banyak organisasi mengalami kesulitan dalam menerjemahkan visi digital ke dalam praktik pemasaran yang efektif. Dengan menggunakan desain penelitian kualitatif berparadigma interpretivis, studi ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana pemimpin digital melakukan sensemaking, memobilisasi aktor organisasi, serta menavigasi struktur tata kelola dalam proses transformasi pemasaran digital. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam semi-terstruktur dengan pimpinan senior, eksekutif pemasaran, dan manajer menengah pada organisasi yang tengah menjalankan transformasi pemasaran digital, serta didukung oleh analisis dokumen. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan digital yang efektif tidak berhenti pada artikulasi visi digital, melainkan menuntut keterlibatan berkelanjutan dalam proses eksekusi melalui sensemaking yang adaptif, pengambilan keputusan iteratif, dan penguatan kapabilitas organisasi. Integrasi antara budaya pembelajaran, pengembangan kompetensi digital, dan kerangka tata kelola yang fleksibel terbukti menjadi faktor kunci keberhasilan transformasi pemasaran. Sebaliknya, resistensi budaya, keterbatasan keterampilan digital, dan ketidakjelasan tata kelola menjadi hambatan utama. Secara teoretis, studi ini menegaskan eksekusi sebagai dimensi inti kepemimpinan digital. Secara praktis dan kebijakan, temuan ini menekankan pentingnya tata kelola yang menyeimbangkan inovasi, akuntabilitas, dan etika dalam transformasi pemasaran digital.

Kata kunci: Kepemimpinan digital; Transformasi pemasaran; Eksekusi strategis; Sensemaking; Tata kelola digital



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INTRODUCTION

Contextual Background

The advent of digital technologies has dramatically transformed marketing, evolving it from a predominantly sales-oriented function to a strategic domain that integrates customer insights, innovation, and organizational learning (Senadjki et al., 2023; Araujo et al., 2021). As organizations adopt advanced data analytics, artificial intelligence, and other digital tools, the focus of marketing shifts towards value co-creation within integrated digital ecosystems (Lemak et al., 2024). This evolution reflects the necessity of aligning marketing strategies with broader organizational goals to effectively capitalize on digital opportunities (Salume et al., 2021).

Leadership is pivotal in this transformation, serving not merely to implement technology but to define how it is understood and utilized within the organization (Kusuma et al., 2023). Digital leadership entails conveying a strategic vision, mobilizing organizational actors, and converting strategic intentions into actionable marketing practices. Organizations often struggle to bridge the gap between visionary aspirations and executable tasks; thus, the role of leaders becomes crucial in fostering an environment conducive to digital transformation (Senadjki et al., 2023; Lemak et al., 2024).

Despite the recognition of digital transformation as a critical imperative, many organizations encounter execution challenges owing to misalignment between strategic vision and operational realities (Salume et al., 2021). The complexities of marketing transformation demand not just leadership in vision but a nuanced understanding of governance and cultural contexts that shape execution effectiveness (Kusuma et al., 2023; Sukandi, 2024). Therefore, examining how leaders navigate these intricacies is imperative, necessitating an exploration of leadership as an ongoing, dynamic process rather than a mere collection of competencies (Khurniawan et al., 2024).

Problem Statement

Research indicates that failures in digital transformation often stem from leadership deficiencies rather than technological inadequacies (Senadjki et al., 2023; Khurniawan et al., 2024). Leaders may articulate a compelling digital vision, but frontline marketing teams struggle to enact these visions due to structural limitations, cultural resistance, and inadequate skill sets (Araujo et al., 2021). Furthermore, existing literature has largely focused on leadership traits or technological frameworks, leaving a gap in understanding the lived experiences of leaders in translating digital marketing aspirations into operational realities (Lemak et al., 2024).

This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating how digital leadership unfolds in practice within marketing transformation processes, emphasizing the sensemaking processes through which leaders interpret digital challenges, communicate vision, and navigate governance structures to facilitate execution. By adopting a qualitative lens, this research aims to uncover the relational dimensions and contextual factors that critically influence the success of digital marketing transformation initiatives.

Research Objectives and Questions

The primary aim of this study is to explore digital leadership as a connector of strategic vision and operational execution in the marketing transformation landscape. Specifically, the research will address the following questions:

How do digital leaders conceptualize and articulate vision in the context of marketing transformation?

How is this vision translated into concrete marketing actions and decisions?

What organizational, cultural, and governance factors shape the effectiveness of execution?

By answering these questions, the study seeks to advance the understanding of digital leadership's role in marketing transformation through a qualitative, context-sensitive approach.

Significance of the Study

This research contributes significantly to the evolving discourse on digital leadership by reframing it as a process-centric phenomenon with implications for theory, practice, and governance (Senadjki et al., 2023; Araujo et al., 2021). The findings will provide actionable insights for marketing practitioners aiming to navigate digital transformations, emphasizing the importance of aligning leadership practices with organizational culture and capabilities (Salume et al., 2021; Kusuma et al., 2023). Additionally, the implications of this study extend to policy discussions surrounding governance frameworks that support ethical and effective digital marketing practices, thereby fulfilling broader accountability narratives in the digital economy (Lemak et al., 2024; Kusuma et al., 2023).

Literature Review

Digital Leadership Theory

Digital leadership is increasingly recognized as essential for guiding organizations through the chaos and uncertainty of rapid technological change (Senadjki et al., 2023; Lemak et al., 2024). Unlike traditional leadership paradigms emphasizing hierarchy and stability, digital leadership emerges as a dynamic and adaptive process characterized by the ability to guide organizations while maintaining strategic coherence (Khurniawan et al., 2024). This perspective reveals several core dimensions, including visioning, technological sensemaking, agility, and collaboration, vital for effective navigation through ongoing digital disruptions (Lemak et al., 2024; Khurniawan et al., 2024).

Recent studies emphasize a distributed approach to digital leadership, where leadership is not merely the domain of a single individual but is enacted across networks and teams (Araujo et al., 2021; Sukandi, 2024). Such a conception underscores the importance of shared sensemaking and cross-functional collaboration in realizing digital transformation efforts. By viewing digital leadership through this lens, organizations can better respond to technological innovations and harness collective capabilities across departments (Kusuma et al., 2023; Senadjki et al., 2023).

Marketing Transformation in the Digital Era

As digital tools and strategies redefine customer engagements and marketing mechanisms, marketing transformation necessitates a fundamental restructuring of how organizations perceive value creation (Almaslukh et al., 2022; Chatterjee et al., 2021). This transition from traditional marketing tactics to integrated, customer-centric systems represents a crucial evolution in operational practices. For many organizations, this transformation requires a cultural shift that fosters innovation and agility while overcoming entrenched resistance to change (García et al., 2019; Low et al., 2020; Masrianto et al., 2022).

Notably, the alignment of leadership with organizational capabilities is critical in facilitating this transition; organizations must invest in developing new skills and competencies to leverage digital technologies effectively (Salume et al., 2021; Kusuma et al., 2023). Leadership plays a critical role in promoting a culture of experimentation and learning, which directly impacts the success of marketing transformation initiatives (Afriyie et al., 2020; Akinnusi et al., 2017; Obeidat, 2021).

Vision, Sensemaking, and Strategic Execution

Effective leadership is predicated on the articulation of a compelling vision that provides direction and mobilizes teams (Araujo et al., 2021; Lemak et al., 2024). In digital contexts, this vision transcends technological adoption; it involves a narrative of transformation aligning with organizational identity and fostering commitment among team members (Senadjki et al., 2023; Kusuma et al., 2023). Sensemaking theory offers insight into how leaders interpret and frame the complexities of digital change, guiding their teams in understanding and responding to these shifts (Salume et al., 2021; Khurniawan et al., 2024).

The process of translating vision into operational execution is fraught with challenges, often stemming from misalignment between strategic goals and existing organizational capabilities. Leadership plays a mediating role in this relationship, serving as a bridge connecting visionary aspirations to the practical realities faced by team members (Senadjki et al., 2023; Kusuma et al., 2023).

Governance and Leadership in Digital Transformation

Governance frameworks are crucial in navigating the complexities inherent in digital transformation efforts. The need for effective governance is underscored by the ethical and regulatory implications associated with customer data and digital platforms (Alieva & Powell, 2022; Buonocore et al., 2024; Ly, 2025). Leaders must establish clear governance structures that balance innovation with

accountability, ensuring robust frameworks are in place for data usage and compliance that align with strategic objectives (Khurniawan et al., 2024).

Leadership and governance intersect deeply; effective digital governance fosters an environment in which leaders can operate effectively while promoting responsible decision-making across the organization (Lemak et al., 2024; Senadjki et al., 2023). The alignment of leadership practices with governance considerations enhances the overall efficacy of digital transformation initiatives, enabling organizations to navigate uncertainties and mitigate associated risks effectively (Gering et al., 2025; Selimović et al., 2021; Su et al., 2023).

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design and Paradigm

This study adopts a qualitative research design aimed at exploring the processes through which digital leadership translates vision into execution in the context of marketing transformation. The qualitative approach is suited to the exploratory nature of the research, enabling an in-depth understanding of meanings and experiences that shape leadership practices (Kusuma et al., 2023; Sukandi, 2024). Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, this research assumes that organizational realities are socially constructed and emphasizes the emergent nature of leadership within specific contexts (Wang, 2024).

Research Setting and Participants

The research will focus on organizations actively engaged in digital marketing transformation, irrespective of industry. Participants will be purposively selected to ensure they possess relevant experience and knowledge about the integration of digital leadership in managing marketing transformation (Kusuma et al., 2023). This selection will include senior leaders, marketing executives, and middle managers tasked with executing digital strategies, facilitating a multi-tiered understanding of the leadership dynamics in play (Lemak et al., 2024).

Data Collection Methods

Data collection will rely primarily on in-depth, semi-structured interviews, supplemented by document analysis to contextualize the findings. This methodology allows participants to share their narratives while also providing a framework to explore themes such as vision articulation, sensemaking, and execution practices in digital marketing initiatives (Kusuma et al., 2023). The integration of diverse data sources will enhance the analytical rigor of the study (Wang, 2024).

Data Analysis Procedures

Following thematic analysis traditions, data will be systematically coded to identify salient patterns and themes related to digital leadership and marketing transformation. This iterative process will involve initial open coding, followed by axial coding to develop higher-order concepts (Wang, 2024). The continuous refinement of themes through constant comparison will support the depth of analysis and enhance theoretical sensitivity in interpreting findings (Kusuma et al., 2023).

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Trustworthiness will be ensured through various strategies tailored to qualitative research, including data triangulation, prolonged engagement, and member checks. By providing comprehensive descriptions of the research context, participants, and processes, the study aims to facilitate transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings. Reflexivity will be consistently practiced to acknowledge potential biases and enhance the study's clarity regarding the researcher's positionality (Wang, 2024).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity remains paramount throughout the research process. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants, ensuring they understand the study's purpose and their rights, including confidentiality and the right to withdraw (Wang, 2024). Ethical principles guiding respect, beneficence, and responsibility will govern the treatment of sensitive organizational information and participants' interests throughout the study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Leadership Vision in Digital Marketing Transformation

The findings indicate that a coherent leadership vision is integral to successful digital marketing transformation efforts. Participants articulated a vision not merely centered on technology adoption but as a strategic narrative weaving customer focus and data-driven insights into marketing core (Araujo et al., 2021; Salume et al., 2021). Clarity in vision fosters commitment among teams; a tightly connected vision facilitates alignment and urgency, while vague or overly technical visions lead to ambiguity and fragmented interpretations among staff (Kusuma et al., 2023).

Translating Vision into Strategic Marketing Actions

The translation of visionary statements into actionable marketing strategies emerged as a vital theme, where leadership involvement remained critical throughout execution (Kusuma et al., 2023). Effective leaders adopted adaptive and iterative decision-making processes, prioritizing initiatives that delivered incremental value within broader strategic frameworks. This approach enhanced momentum for transformation and fostered engagement across cross-functional teams (Alabdali & Salam, 2022; Capușneanu et al., 2021; Sousa-Zomer et al., 2020). Execution became a shared responsibility, requiring leaders to continuously monitor and recalibrate operational efforts.

Organizational Dynamics and Capability Building

Significant organizational dynamics surfaced throughout the research, emphasizing the relevance of culture, skills, and structures in shaping marketing transformation (Salume et al., 2021; Kusuma et al., 2023). Leaders nurtured cultures of learning and experimentation, reframing failure as a source of insight and reducing resistance to digital tools and practices. Capability building was underscored as an essential leadership priority, involving ongoing investments in digital training, talent acquisition, and the integration of new skill sets into existing workflows and performance expectations (Rusadi et al., 2024; Shaya et al., 2025).

Governance and Policy Dimensions

Governance structures significantly influenced the execution of digital transformation initiatives in marketing. Leaders navigated complex issues related to data governance and compliance, establishing frameworks that offered clarity while avoiding overly stringent controls that stifle innovation (Salume et al., 2021; Kusuma et al., 2023). The incorporation of governance elements within daily leadership practices allowed for contextual buy-in from marketing teams, aligning governance mechanisms with organizational values and enhancing overall execution effectiveness.

Barriers and Enablers in Execution

Despite the presence of a clear leadership vision, organizations faced significant barriers in executing digital marketing transformations, including structural constraints and cultural resistance (Araujo et al., 2021; Salume et al., 2021). Unclear governance arrangements often led to confusion in decision-making authority, slowing execution processes. However, leadership visibility and commitment emerged as factors crucial for overcoming these barriers, reinforcing the importance of cross-functional collaboration and access to relevant data for informed decision-making (Kusuma et al., 2023; Lemak et al., 2024).

Discussion

Interpreting Digital Leadership in Marketing Transformation

The findings of this study illustrate that digital leadership must be considered a dynamic, relational process rather than a mere display of visionary authority. In the context of marketing transformation, leaders engage in an ongoing practice of interpretation, alignment, and mobilization (Senadjki et al., 2023; Salume et al., 2021). Rather than solely projecting digital goals, these leaders actively engage with their teams to cultivate a shared understanding of digital change, thereby influencing how organizations enact and sustain marketing functions (Lemak et al., 2024; Kusuma et al., 2023). This aligns with contemporary scholarship that emphasizes leadership's emergent quality within social interactions and sensemaking processes (Araujo et al., 2021).

Leadership operates at the nexus of strategic intent and organizational complexity. The effective articulation of digital vision functions as a sensegiving mechanism, but its potency is contingent upon

leaders' ongoing capability to contextualize and translate that vision into actionable practices. This suggests that it is not the sophistication of the digital vision that defines leadership effectiveness, but rather the leader's ability to adapt the vision based on organizational feedback, fostering a continuous dialogic process between intent and execution (Kusuma et al., 2023; Sukandi, 2024). Thus, the importance of leadership transcends merely making declarations or producing strategic documents, reinforcing the notion that execution is a critical dimension of leadership in the realm of digital transformational marketing.

Leadership as a Sensemaking and Mobilizing Force

A significant contribution of this study is the illumination of digital leaders' roles as sensemakers and mobilizers within marketing contexts. Through the sensemaking lens, digital leaders reduce uncertainty and generate shared meanings through ongoing dialogues and narratives that help teams comprehend the rationale for digital transformation, placing it in alignment with overarching organizational goals. This is essential in fast-paced marketing environments where technological evolutions can create confusion and resistance among team members (Sukandi, 2024).

Mobilization builds upon this shared understanding, translating insights into coordinated action plans. The findings stress that effective digital leadership entails not only encouraging collaboration but also ensuring committed engagement with marketing initiatives. Leaders who maintain visibility and involvement signal their commitment, which diminishes perceived risks and motivates team members to adopt new digital practices (Salume et al., 2021; Kusuma et al., 2023). Therefore, the duality of sensemaking and mobilization underscores the connective role of leadership, intertwining vision, personnel, and practice within the framework of marketing transformation (Araujo et al., 2021).

Theoretical Contributions

The theoretical implications of this study extend digital leadership theory by emphasizing the critical role of execution as a core element of leadership practice. Previous research has concentrated largely on the aspects of vision, agility, and competencies associated with leadership; however, less attention has been afforded to how these elements operationalize within specific organizational contexts, such as marketing (Salume et al., 2021; Kusuma et al., 2023). By adopting a process-oriented perspective focused on the transition from vision to execution, this research contributes a nuanced understanding that enhances the field of digital leadership.

Moreover, the study integrates the literature on digital leadership and marketing transformation, revealing that the latter is not merely a function of technological advancement but is deeply influenced by strategic leadership mediation. The research demonstrates that marketing transformation is a leadership-centered, sensemaking process that involves capability development and governance considerations not typically addressed in isolation in either literature (Senadjki et al., 2023; Salume et al., 2021; Kusuma et al., 2023). This positions digital leadership as a vital mechanism that reconciles strategic intent with marketing execution while introducing governance dimensions that reflect ethical and institutional considerations (Lemak et al., 2024).

Managerial and Policy Implications

From a managerial perspective, the findings emphasize the necessity for ongoing leadership engagement in execution. Rather than delegating digital transformation solely to technical teams, marketing leaders must remain actively involved in addressing tensions and enhancing alignment between strategic vision and everyday practices (Araujo et al., 2021; Sukandi, 2024). Leaders are responsible for fostering a culture that supports continuous learning and adaptability, promoting cross-functional collaboration, and investing in skill development as foundational strategies for success in digital transformation (Salume et al., 2021; Kusuma et al., 2023).

On the policy front, the study suggests the development of coherent frameworks that incorporate accountability, ethics, and regulatory compliance into digital marketing transformation efforts (Salume et al., 2021). As digital marketing relies increasingly on data and digital platforms, the enhancement of governance principles integrated into leadership practices becomes paramount for balancing innovation with responsibility. Policymakers, therefore, can utilize these insights to establish structures that promote ethical marketing practices while accommodating flexibility.

Reflection on Organizational and Societal Impact

The implications of digital leadership in marketing transformation extend beyond mere organizational efficiencies to encompass broader societal considerations. As marketing shapes

consumer behaviors and public perceptions, the role of digital leadership becomes socially significant, particularly in emphasizing ethical data utilization and transparency (Kusuma et al., 2023). The findings highlight that fostering a leadership approach rooted in ethics and long-term value can positively influence the marketing ecosystem, promoting sustainable and trustworthy practices (Salume et al., 2021).

At an organizational level, digital leadership can bolster resilience and adaptability, helping firms navigate ongoing technological disruptions without sacrificing strategic coherence (Sukandi, 2024). Simultaneously, leadership that interlaces governance principles can mitigate risks inherent in digital marketing, such as data misuse or misinformation. Therefore, digital leadership emerges not simply as a function of facilitating organizational change but as a critical societal determinant influencing the evolution of marketing practices in the digital age (Araujo et al., 2021; Lemak et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

In summary, this study affirms that effective digital leadership is indispensable in bridging the gap between strategic vision and operational execution in marketing transformation. Findings indicate that successful leaders go beyond merely articulating a compelling vision; they engage in continuous sensemaking and active participation in the execution of marketing strategies, orchestrating organizational capabilities along the way. The integration of culture, skills, and governance mechanisms is essential for navigating the complexities of digital marketing initiatives.

While this research contributes meaningful insights, its limitations also present opportunities for future inquiry. The qualitative approach provides deep insights but restricts generalizability across various industrial contexts. Future studies adopting comparative or longitudinal methodologies may reveal how digital leadership practices evolve over time and in differing institutional environments. Integrating mixed-methods could strengthen findings by correlating leadership processes with quantifiable marketing outcomes while also exploring broader societal impacts and policy dimensions associated with digital leadership in marketing.

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