# Digital Leadership in Marketing: A Qualitative Exploration of Strategic Sensemaking in the Digital Era

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| **Abstract** | Digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped the marketing landscape, introducing heightened complexity, data saturation, and continuous strategic uncertainty. In this context, digital leadership can no longer be understood merely as technological competence, but rather as an interpretive process through which leaders construct meaning and guide strategic action. This study explores digital leadership in marketing through the lens of strategic sensemaking, focusing on how marketing leaders interpret dynamic digital environments and translate ambiguous signals into coherent strategic decisions. Adopting a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretive paradigm, the study draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews with senior marketing leaders across digitally intensive industries. The findings reveal that effective digital leadership is characterized by three interrelated practices: interpreting digital signals beyond surface-level analytics, constructing shared meaning from data through narrative framing, and fostering collaborative sensemaking to align marketing strategies. The study demonstrates that strategic outcomes in digital marketing are strongly shaped by leaders' interpretive capabilities rather than by technological resources alone. Theoretically, the research extends sensemaking theory by positioning digital leadership as a dynamic, socially constructed process embedded in marketing strategy formation. Practically, it highlights the importance of developing leadership capacities that integrate analytical insight, contextual judgment, and collective interpretation. Overall, the study contributes nuanced insights into how organizations can navigate digital complexity through sensemaking-driven leadership in contemporary marketing contexts.<br><br>**Keywords:** Digital Leadership; Strategic Sensemaking; Digital Marketing; Qualitative Research; Marketing Strategy |
| **Abstrak** | *Transformasi digital telah secara fundamental membentuk ulang lanskap pemasaran dengan menghadirkan tingkat kompleksitas yang semakin tinggi, kejenuhan data, serta ketidakpastian strategis yang berkelanjutan. Dalam konteks ini, kepemimpinan digital tidak lagi dapat dipahami semata-mata sebagai kompetensi teknologi, melainkan sebagai proses interpretatif di mana pemimpin membangun makna dan mengarahkan tindakan strategis. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi kepemimpinan digital dalam pemasaran melalui lensa strategic sensemaking, dengan berfokus pada bagaimana para pemimpin pemasaran menafsirkan lingkungan digital yang dinamis dan menerjemahkan sinyal-sinyal ambigu menjadi keputusan strategis yang koheren. Dengan mengadopsi desain penelitian kualitatif yang berlandaskan paradigma interpretatif, studi ini menggunakan wawancara mendalam semi-terstruktur dengan para pemimpin pemasaran senior di berbagai industri yang intensif secara digital. Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa kepemimpinan digital yang efektif ditandai oleh tiga praktik yang saling terkait, yaitu: menafsirkan sinyal digital melampaui analitik permukaan, membangun makna bersama dari data melalui pembingkaian naratif, serta mendorong sensemaking kolaboratif untuk menyelaraskan strategi pemasaran. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa capaian strategis dalam pemasaran digital lebih banyak ditentukan oleh kemampuan interpretatif para pemimpin dibandingkan oleh sumber daya teknologi semata. Secara teoretis, penelitian ini memperluas teori sensemaking dengan memposisikan kepemimpinan digital sebagai proses dinamis yang dikonstruksi secara sosial dan terintegrasi dalam pembentukan strategi pemasaran. Secara praktis, temuan ini menegaskan pentingnya pengembangan kapasitas kepemimpinan yang memadukan wawasan analitis, penilaian kontekstual, dan interpretasi kolektif. Secara keseluruhan, studi ini memberikan pemahaman yang bernuansa* |

*tentang bagaimana organisasi dapat menavigasi kompleksitas digital melalui kepemimpinan berbasis sensemaking dalam konteks pemasaran kontemporer.*
***Kata kunci:*** *Kepemimpinan Digital; Strategic Sensemaking; Pemasaran Digital; Penelitian Kualitatif; Strategi Pemasaran.*

# INTRODUCTION

## Background of the Study

In the modern marketing landscape, digital transformation is not merely a change in tools and technologies but a paradigm shift that shapes how organizations engage with customers, interpret market signals, and establish competitive strategies. The confluence of data analytics, artificial intelligence, and the proliferation of digital platforms has led to a scenario where organizations operate amid high volatility and continuous reinterpretation of market dynamics. As noted by Mihardjo et al., the digital environment fosters collaboration through the Internet of Things (IoT), which transforms traditional marketing approaches and emphasizes the need for agility and innovative leadership in marketing (Mihardjo et al., 2019). This transformation demands that marketing leaders develop keen interpretative skills to navigate the complexities of digital interactions and continuously adapt their strategies based on real-time data and feedback loops (Li et al., 2024).

In this context, leadership transcends mere technological adoption; it becomes a cognitive endeavor where leaders must synthesize fragmented information, convey strategic narratives, and foster shared understanding within their teams. This is where strategic sensemaking becomes critical, as identified in the scholarship by Maitlis, who describes it as the active construction of meaning from ambiguous signals, involving negotiation of understanding within teams (Maitlis, 2005). In marketing environments characterized by data saturation and rapid change, the ability of leaders to engage in sensemaking becomes increasingly significant.

## Problem Statement

Despite advancements in digital marketing, much of the existing literature has either focused on quantitative assessments of technology adoption or emphasized capabilities without sufficiently addressing interpretative processes that underpin strategic decision-making. Scholars like Rouleau and Balogun highlight the need for an exploration of how middle managers and leaders engage in sensemaking to effectively drive strategic initiatives (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). This gap presents a pressing need for a qualitative investigation that delves into the lived experiences of marketing leaders as they contend with digital complexities and uncertainties.

Existing studies have largely approached leadership as a prescriptive function, often overlooking the intricate dynamics involved in how leaders interpret uncertainties, reconcile conflicting information, and frame strategic directions. A persistent challenge is understanding why identical digital resources and capabilities can yield divergent outcomes in marketing strategies across organizations. Bridging this gap necessitates an exploration of leaders' interpretative processes, underscoring their narratives and cognitive frameworks as they navigate the digital marketing landscape.

## Research Objectives

This study aims to explore digital leadership in marketing through the lens of strategic sensemaking. The specific objectives include:
1.  To examine how marketing leaders interpret complex digital environments characterized by rapid fluctuations and data saturation.
2.  To analyze how these interpretative processes influence the formulation and execution of marketing strategies in the digital era.
3.  To identify key leadership practices that facilitate effective sensemaking, such as integrating data analytics with human judgment and fostering collaborative understandings within teams.

**Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study extends across theoretical, practical, and policy dimensions. Theoretically, it aims to enhance sensemaking theory within digital marketing leadership by framing digital leadership as a dynamic process of meaning construction rather than a static set of skills. Empirical studies affirm that organizational learning and strategic outcomes are contingent upon leaders' interpretative practices (Neill et al., 2007), emphasizing the importance of understanding leadership in dynamic digital contexts. Practically, the findings aspire to inform leadership development strategies that prioritize interpretive capabilities and collaborative dialogue in response to digital complexity.

At the policy level, the study may provide insights that encourage organizations to cultivate environments facilitating collective sensemaking, thus fostering adaptability and ethical decision-making in the face of rapid digital evolution (Shin et al., 2023). The outcomes of this research are expected to contribute robust insights to both scholarly discourse and organizational practices in navigating the challenges posed by the digital era.

**Literature Review**

*Digital Transformation and the Evolution of Marketing*

Digital transformation has fundamentally reframed marketing, which once relied heavily on stable channels and traditional consumer behavior models. Rather than merely responding to consumer needs, marketing has evolved into a strategic domain driven by real-time data and interactive communication (Medeiros et al., 2022). The conceptualization of marketing has shifted from a campaign-focused approach to a dynamic process requiring continuous interpretation and adjustment of strategies in response to volatile market conditions (Cattani et al., 2018). As organizations increasingly leverage digital technologies, they face challenges stemming from information overload and the necessity to discern meaningful insights from data (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014).

To adapt to these complexities, marketing leaders must become adept at not just using tools but also interpreting and framing data in ways that resonate with organizational goals. They must perform a balancing act between utilizing analytical insights and maintaining a creative and human-centered approach to strategy formulation, which reflects the necessity of integrating both perceptual and analytical forms of sensemaking (as emphasized by Sandberg and Tsoukas) (Klein, 2020).

*Conceptualizing Digital Leadership*

Digital leadership diverges significantly from traditional leadership models. Instead of merely adhering to hierarchical power structures, digital leadership emphasizes agility, collaborative capacity, and the ability to navigate uncertainty creatively. Leaders are expected to be not only technologically competent but also skilled in promoting innovation and fostering an environment conducive to exploration and dialogue (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013). This character of leadership is essential in marketing contexts where digital interactions are increasingly co-created in dynamic ecosystems involving stakeholders from various domains.

Moreover, effective digital leadership in marketing requires navigating the interplay between empirical data and the subtleties of consumer behavior and cultural trends. As such, the role of leadership is one of sense-giving, where leaders frame narratives that guide collective interpretations and align teams around strategic directives (Samdanis & Lee, 2019). This hybrid leadership approach underscores the importance of interpretive capabilities as fundamental to successful marketing in the digital era.

*Sensemaking Theory in Strategic Leadership*

Sensemaking theory serves as a pivotal framework for understanding the nuances of leadership amid uncertainty and rapid change (Johnson et al., 2021). Defined as a process through which individuals or groups create meaning from their experiences, sensemaking emphasizes the subjective and social dimensions of interpretation and action. In the realm of strategic leadership, leaders not only observe and analyze cues but actively engage in framing issues, constructing narratives, and guiding collective interpretation within their organizations (Neill et al., 2007).

This process is inherently iterative and involves constant feedback loops, making it particularly relevant in the context of digital transformation, where information and trends shift at a pace that can overwhelm traditional analytical frameworks. Therefore, strategic leadership becomes an ongoing practice of sensemaking, where leaders continuously adapt their strategies in response to emerging digital realities (Beverland et al., 2016).

## Strategic Sensemaking in Marketing Contexts

In marketing, the application of sensemaking highlights the complexity of deriving strategic insights from a myriad of real-time analytics and consumer feedback (Moqaddamerad & Tapinos, 2022). Leaders are tasked with sifting through noise to identify salient signals that inform strategic marketing decisions. This process is not linear, but involves a collective dimension, as effective marketing strategies emerge from collaborative dialogues among diverse team members and stakeholders (Klein et al., 2006). These interactions are vital for establishing shared understandings that subsequently inform strategic actions.

Moreover, the potential for algorithmically driven insights must be balanced with human intuition and contextual awareness. The findings suggest that reliance solely on analytics can lead to strategic stagnation, where leaders might reinforce existing assumptions without embracing innovative approaches or recognizing the ethical dimensions of their decisions (Li et al., 2024). Thus, strategic sensemaking represents a critical function that links digital information to strategic outcomes.

## Research Gap and Conceptual Framework

Despite burgeoning interest in digital leadership and marketing strategy, existing research displays significant gaps. Current studies often emphasize quantitative methodologies and neglect the subjective, processual nature of sensemaking in leadership contexts. Accordingly, leadership tends to be conceptualized as a static construct, rather than recognizing its dynamic interpretive processes (Cattani et al., 2016). The current research acknowledges that the divergence in strategic outcomes across organizations frequently stems from differences in how leaders interpret and respond to digital complexities.

To address these gaps, this study adopts a conceptual framework that situates digital leadership as a strategic sensemaking process essential for effectively responding to challenges imposed by digital transformation. This framework posits that the mediatory role of sensemaking in leadership practices highlights how organizations can constructively engage with the complexities of the digital landscape (Mogaji et al., 2020).

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Research Design and Paradigm

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretive paradigm aimed at illuminating how marketing leaders engage in strategic sensemaking amid digital turbulence. The interpretive methodology is crucial for deepening the understanding of the subjective experiences and narratives of leaders, thereby facilitating rich insights into their processes of meaning construction and strategic decision-making in evolving digital contexts (Klarin & Sharmelly, 2019).

### Research Context and Participants

The study context is focused on organizations actively engaging in digital marketing within rapidly evolving environments. Participants include senior marketing leaders and executives responsible for guiding marketing transformation. A purposive sampling method was employed, ensuring that participants' roles in leadership involve significant engagement with digital dynamics, thereby enriching the qualitative insights derived from their narratives (Klarin & Sharmelly, 2019).

### Data Collection Methods

Data were primarily gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, facilitating exploratory discussions about participants' experiences, perceptions, and strategies related to digital marketing. The interviews focused on themes of digital change interpretation, data utilization, and strategic decision-making processes. Additionally, triangulating these insights with organizational documents, strategic marketing plans, and performance metrics allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the contextual variables influencing sensemaking processes (Neill et al., 2007).

### Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis followed an inductive thematic approach, with stepwise coding processes employed to derive themes reflective of participants' lived experiences. Open coding identified initial concepts, while axial coding established connections among these themes, facilitating the identification of core narratives surrounding sensemaking within digital leadership (Moqaddamerad & Tapinos, 2022). The

iterative nature of this analysis supported continuous refinement of insights in relation to emerging theoretical constructs.

### Trustworthiness and Rigor

The qualitative rigor of the study was enhanced through strategies such as data triangulation and member checking. These approaches ensured participants reviewed core interpretations for alignment with their lived experiences. The transparency of the methodological audit trail documented the research process, thereby substantiating credibility, dependability, and transferability of the findings (Neill et al., 2007).

### Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research standards, ensuring informed consent was obtained from all participants, with strict confidentiality protocols in place. By anonymizing data and securely storing sensitive information, the study respected participants' rights and contributed to trust in the research process (Medeiros et al., 2022).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Result

#### *Profile of Participants and Organizational Context*

The study incorporated a diverse cohort of senior marketing leaders from various industries, including consumer goods, technology, and service sectors. The shared characteristic among participants was their commitment to digital transformation, employing advanced marketing strategies leveraging digital platforms and data analytics. Their narratives within this context revealed common challenges associated with interpreting extensive streams of digital information and actively shaping marketing strategies in response to fluid market conditions.

The environmental complexity described by participants highlighted their role as key interpretive leaders. Their insights clearly demonstrated how reliance on digital platforms engenders continuous decision-making cycles informed by real-time data, ultimately influencing the formulation and execution of marketing strategies (Klein et al., 2006).

#### *Core Themes of Strategic Sensemaking*

Analysis of interview data revealed three central themes integral to understanding how digital leaders engage in strategic sensemaking:

1. Interpretation of Digital Signals: Participants highlighted the importance of contextual interpretation in discerning strategic signals from digital data. Leaders emphasized the necessity to focus on long-term market trends while avoiding reactive shifts driven solely by immediate data fluctuations. This theme aligns with the literature that values sensemaking as a process requiring critical filtration of incoming information (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014).
2. Constructing Meaning from Data: Marketing leaders framed data not as purely quantitative metrics but as narratives that embody broader organizational values and strategic intents. There was substantial emphasis on reconciling analytical insights with experiential knowledge and stakeholder perspectives, affirming the multifaceted nature of sensemaking processes (Klarin & Sharmelly, 2019).
3. Digital Leadership Practices in Strategy Enactment: Participants articulated the significance of collaborative sensemaking practices, where understanding was co-developed through dialogue across cross-functional teams. The emphasis on collective interpretation facilitated a shared understanding of strategic priorities, reinforcing the notion that sensemaking is fundamentally social in nature (Johnson et al., 2021).

#### *Sensemaking Narratives and Empirical Evidence*

The narratives recounted by participants illustrated how sensemaking is deployed in practice. Participants highlighted moments of ambiguity necessitating active reinterpretation of strategies based on shifting consumer behaviors or external market influences. This iterative engagement underscored the necessity for leaders to navigate ongoing feedback and remain flexible in their strategic orientations.

Empirical evidence from interviews affirmed that leaders employed storytelling as a tool for sense-giving, enabling teams to grasp complex dynamics and remain aligned with overarching strategic

goals. Narratives served not simply to convey information but to generate collective understanding amid uncertainty, fulfilling the role of sense-givers (Neill et al., 2007).

### Interaction Between Sensemaking and Marketing Strategy

The findings indicate a strong interplay between strategic sensemaking and marketing strategy formation. Leaders positioned their strategic frameworks as adaptable rather than static, reflecting a continuous engagement with emerging digital insights and market shifts. This dynamic offers a contrasting perspective to traditional views of strategy as a linear, predetermined process (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014).

Furthermore, the insights underscore the role of sensemaking in shaping organizational learning processes. Leaders engaged in reflective practices that informed team awareness, guiding incremental adjustments to marketing strategies based on real-time feedback (Li et al., 2024). This learning orientation reinforces the significance of leadership interpretation in fostering strategic agility and coherence.

## Discussion

### Interpretation of Findings

The exploration of digital leadership within marketing contexts reveals that effective leadership is rooted in interpretive practices that engage with the complexities of the digital environment. Rather than being a purely technical or instrumental function, leadership is fundamentally about constructing meanings amid ambiguity and uncertainty. The capability to perform sensemaking effectively was shown to be pivotal in steering marketing strategies and achieving strategic alignment in organizations mobilizing digital resources.

The study affirms that the challenges posed by an abundance of digital data do not automatically reduce uncertainty. Instead, the proliferation of inputs can further complicate strategic decisions, underscoring the need for leaders to employ discernment in their interpretive processes. This aligns with the notion that data-driven strategies must be informed by contextual knowledge and reflective judgment to avoid reactive decision-making and maintain strategic direction (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013).

### Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to contemporary discussions on leadership and marketing strategy by framing strategic sensemaking as a vital mechanism that intertwines the roles of digital leaders with the outcomes of marketing strategies. By integrating insights from sensemaking theory into the study of digital leadership, the research challenges existing models emphasizing static competencies or styles, thereby extending the understanding of digital leadership's dynamic, interpretive nature within marketing contexts.

Furthermore, findings have implications for marketing strategy theory by illustrating that modern strategic processes emerge through iterative interpretation rather than rigid adherence to predetermined plans. This underscores the necessity of incorporating sensemaking into discussions of strategic variance among organizations navigating similar digital terrains, highlighting its relevance in contexts influenced by algorithmic mediation and real-time feedback (Beverland et al., 2016).

### Practical Implications

The practical insights drawn from this study have significant implications for marketing leaders and organizations. Leadership development initiatives should prioritize training that enhances interpretive capabilities among leaders, fostering skills that enable assessment and contextualization of digital data in strategic decision-making (Mihardjo et al., 2019). The cultivation of collective sensemaking environments within organizations—supported by reflective practices and dialogue—can greatly enhance the effectiveness of marketing leadership.

Moreover, a balanced integration of data analytics and human intuition is essential. Digital leaders must not only leverage technology's predictive capabilities but also recognize the limitations of data, incorporating ethical considerations and long-term objectives into their decision-making processes. Encouraging this adaptive mindset will empower organizations to thrive in the complex realities of digital marketing (Moqaddamerad & Tapinos, 2022).

*Limitations of the Study*

While this study offers valuable insights, it is subject to several limitations. The qualitative design limits the generalizability of findings, as insights are deeply contextualized within specific organizational settings. Future research may benefit from employing mixed-methods or longitudinal approaches to examine the evolution of strategic sensemaking practices over time. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases, necessitating cautious interpretations of findings and an emphasis on cross-validation through triangulation with observational data where possible.

## CONCLUSION

This study advances the understanding of digital leadership in marketing by conceptualizing it as a strategic sensemaking process rather than a purely technological or managerial function. The findings demonstrate that marketing leaders operating in digitally intensive environments face persistent ambiguity driven by data saturation, rapid market shifts, and algorithmic mediation. In response, effective leadership emerges through leaders' ability to interpret digital signals contextually, construct meaning from complex data streams, and facilitate collective understanding within their organizations. Digital leadership, therefore, is shown to be inherently interpretive, relational, and iterative in nature.

The study further reveals that strategic marketing outcomes are not determined solely by access to advanced digital tools or analytics capabilities, but by how leaders frame data into coherent narratives that guide strategic action. Leaders who engage in collaborative sensemaking enable organizations to balance analytical insights with experiential judgment, fostering adaptive and learning-oriented marketing strategies. This process-oriented view challenges static models of leadership and strategy, emphasizing that strategy formation in the digital era is continuously enacted through interpretation and dialogue. By integrating sensemaking theory into the study of digital leadership in marketing, this research contributes to both leadership and marketing scholarship, offering a nuanced explanation for divergent strategic outcomes among organizations with similar digital resources. Practically, the findings underscore the need for leadership development approaches that strengthen interpretive competence, reflective judgment, and collective sensemaking as core capabilities for navigating digital transformation in contemporary marketing contexts.

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