MSELS Management Systems Evolution and Leadership Studies

VOL. 2 | NO. 2 | 2025

# The Evolution of Leadership Theories in the Digital Era: A Systematic Literature Review and Future Research Agenda

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This study aimed to explore how leadership theories have evolved in response to digital transformation and to develop a future research agenda for leadership studies in digitally mediated organizations. This qualitative study adopted a systematic review–oriented exploratory design supported by semi-structured expert interviews. Participants were 22 senior managers, organizational development consultants, digital transformation specialists, and university faculty members in Tehran who had direct experience with leadership, digitalization, or organizational change. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and continued until theoretical saturation was achieved at the nineteenth interview, followed by three additional interviews to confirm conceptual stability. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis in NVivo software. Coding was conducted in three stages: open coding, axial clustering, and selective theme integration. The findings indicated that leadership theory in the digital era has moved beyond individual-centered models of authority, charisma, and hierarchical influence toward relational, distributed, adaptive, data-informed, and ethically accountable forms of leadership. Four main categories emerged: the transition from heroic leadership to networked leadership, the rise of digital and algorithmic mediation in leadership processes, the reconstruction of trust and communication in virtual and hybrid environments, and the emergence of ethical, human-centered, and adaptive leadership capabilities. Participants emphasized that digital leadership is not merely technology use by leaders but a transformation in how influence, decision-making, coordination, and accountability are enacted. The study suggests that digital-era leadership requires theoretical integration across e-leadership, complexity leadership, shared leadership, ethical leadership, and human–machine collaboration. Future research should move from descriptive accounts of digital leadership toward multi-level, longitudinal, cross-cultural, and evidence-based models that explain how leadership evolves when authority, intelligence, and organizational agency are distributed across humans, technologies, and networks.

**Keywords:** digital leadership; leadership theories; e-leadership; digital transformation; systematic literature review; qualitative research; future research agenda.

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**❝ HOW TO CITE**

Afshar, B. (2025). The Evolution of Leadership Theories in the Digital Era: A Systematic Literature Review and Future Research Agenda. *Management Systems Evolution and Leadership Studies,* 2(2), 39-48.

## 1. Introduction

Leadership theory has historically evolved in response to major transformations in work, organization, technology, and society. Early leadership research was largely influenced by assumptions of hierarchy, personal authority, and stable organizational boundaries. Trait approaches attempted to identify the personal qualities of effective leaders, while behavioral and contingency theories shifted attention toward leader behaviors and situational fit. Later, transformational leadership theory emphasized vision, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration as mechanisms through which leaders could mobilize followers toward collective goals (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). These approaches made important contributions to leadership science, yet they were largely developed for organizations in which authority was human-centered, communication was relatively direct, and organizational coordination was structured through formal hierarchy.

The digital era has challenged these assumptions. Organizations are increasingly shaped by digital platforms, artificial intelligence, algorithmic decision-making, remote work, data analytics, automation, and networked

forms of collaboration. These developments have not simply introduced new managerial tools; they have transformed the conditions under which leadership is enacted. Digital technologies influence how leaders communicate, how teams coordinate, how employees experience autonomy and surveillance, how decisions are made, and how trust is constructed across physical and virtual environments. As a result, leadership is no longer adequately understood as the influence of a single individual over a bounded group of followers. It increasingly appears as a distributed, technologically mediated, and adaptive process embedded in complex socio-technical systems.

A major turning point in this theoretical transition was the emergence of e-leadership. Avolio, Kahai, and Dodge (2000) defined e-leadership as a process of social influence mediated by advanced information technology. This definition was significant because it moved leadership research beyond the assumption that leadership influence occurs primarily through face-to-face interaction. E-leadership emphasized that technology does not merely transmit leadership messages; rather, it shapes the meaning, timing, visibility, and relational effects of leadership behavior. In digitally mediated contexts, communication platforms, information systems, and collaborative technologies become active parts of the leadership process. This insight remains central to contemporary digital leadership research because it suggests that leadership theory must account for the recursive relationship between human agency and technological infrastructure.

The growth of virtual and hybrid work has intensified the relevance of these issues. Leadership in virtual teams requires different forms of communication, monitoring, motivation, and relational maintenance than leadership in co-located teams. Liao (2017) argued that virtual team leadership must be understood through a multilevel perspective because digital work environments affect individual attitudes, team processes, coordination mechanisms, and performance outcomes simultaneously. In such contexts, leaders must create clarity without excessive control, maintain trust without constant physical presence, and support collaboration among employees who may differ in location, culture, digital literacy, and access to organizational information. Therefore, digital-era leadership requires not only technological competence but also relational intelligence, communication discipline, and the capacity to design enabling conditions for distributed work.

Digital transformation has also redirected leadership theory toward complexity, adaptability, and learning. Complexity leadership theory argues that leadership in knowledge-producing organizations should focus less on command and control and more on enabling learning, emergence, and adaptive capacity within complex adaptive systems (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). This perspective is especially relevant to digital organizations, where rapid technological change, uncertain markets, decentralized knowledge, and continuous innovation make rigid hierarchical control insufficient. In such organizations, leaders are expected to enable experimentation, connect diverse knowledge actors, protect psychological safety, and facilitate rapid learning. Leadership becomes less a position and more a dynamic function that supports adaptation across the organization.

The digital era has also produced theoretical tension around control and autonomy. Digital technologies can empower employees by enabling flexible work, faster access to information, and broader participation in decision-making. At the same time, they can intensify surveillance, algorithmic control, performance tracking, and managerial visibility. Gierlich-Joas, Hess, and Neuburger (2020) highlighted this paradox by showing that digital leadership often involves simultaneous demands for self-organization and control. This tension challenges simplified narratives that present digital leadership as inherently empowering. Instead, leadership theories must examine how digital systems redistribute power, visibility, and responsibility within organizations.

Another important development concerns the relationship between leadership and organizational culture. Digital transformation is not only a technical implementation process but also a cultural and behavioral transformation. Cortellazzo, Bruni, and Zampieri (2019) showed that leaders play a central role in building digital culture, developing relationships with dispersed stakeholders, enabling collaborative processes, and addressing ethical concerns in digitalized environments. This finding aligns with broader digital transformation research showing that technology adoption depends heavily on organizational readiness, employee engagement, learning orientation, and leadership commitment (Vial, 2019; Westerman et al., 2014). Thus, leadership in the digital era involves creating interpretive frames that help employees understand why digital change matters and how they can participate meaningfully in it.

However, the proliferation of new leadership labels has created conceptual ambiguity. Terms such as e-leadership, digital leadership, virtual leadership, technology leadership, agile leadership, platform leadership, algorithmic leadership, and AI-enabled leadership are often used inconsistently. Banks et al. (2018) warned that leadership research suffers from construct redundancy when new labels are introduced without clear theoretical differentiation. This problem is especially visible in digital leadership studies, where many studies describe leadership in technology-rich environments without specifying whether digitalization changes the underlying leadership construct or merely changes the context in which established leadership behaviors occur. Therefore, a systematic review of the evolution of leadership theories in the digital era is necessary to clarify conceptual boundaries and identify future research directions.

The rise of artificial intelligence further complicates leadership theory. AI systems increasingly support decision-making, forecasting, recruitment, performance management, customer analytics, and operational coordination. These systems do not replace leadership in a simple sense, but they change the distribution of intelligence and agency inside organizations. Leaders must now interpret algorithmic outputs, govern data ethics, preserve human judgment, and ensure that automated systems remain transparent, fair, and accountable. This requires a shift from leadership as personal influence toward leadership as socio-technical orchestration. In AI-mediated organizations, leaders may act less as sole decision-makers and more as designers of decision environments, stewards of ethical technology use, and facilitators of human–machine collaboration.

Despite growing interest in digital leadership, the field remains theoretically fragmented. Some studies extend transformational leadership to digital contexts, emphasizing vision, inspiration, and change readiness. Others draw from shared leadership, complexity leadership, adaptive leadership, ethical leadership, or dynamic capabilities theory. While each perspective offers valuable insight, the literature lacks an integrated explanation of how leadership theories are evolving across technological, organizational, and ethical dimensions. In addition, much of the existing literature is conceptual or cross-sectional, with limited qualitative evidence from leaders and experts who are directly experiencing digital transformation in organizational practice.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the evolution of leadership theories in the digital era through a qualitative, systematic review–oriented design supported by expert interviews. By combining theoretical synthesis with the perspectives of managers, consultants, digital transformation specialists, and academic experts in Tehran, the study seeks to clarify how leadership is being reconstructed in digitally mediated organizations. The aim of this study was to examine how leadership theories have evolved in the digital era and to develop a future research agenda for studying leadership as a distributed, adaptive, ethical, and technology-mediated phenomenon.

## 2. Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative systematic review–oriented design supported by semi-structured expert interviews. The purpose of the design was to explore how leadership theories have evolved in response to digital transformation and to identify conceptual directions for future research. Although the article was positioned as a review-based study, the empirical component relied on qualitative interviews to deepen interpretation and connect the literature to lived organizational experience. The participants consisted of 22 experts in Tehran, including senior managers, human resource managers, digital transformation consultants, organizational development specialists, and university faculty members in management and leadership studies. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on four inclusion criteria: at least five years of professional or academic experience in leadership, management, digital transformation, organizational change, or human resource development; direct familiarity with digital technologies in organizational settings; willingness to participate in an interview; and ability to provide reflective and analytical responses. Snowball sampling was also used by asking initial participants to introduce other knowledgeable experts.

The final sample included 14 men and 8 women. In terms of professional background, 7 participants were senior organizational managers, 5 were human resource or organizational development managers, 4 were digital transformation consultants, 3 were university faculty members, and 3 were technology or innovation managers. Participants' professional experience ranged from 6 to 24 years. Theoretical saturation was achieved after 19 interviews, when no substantially new codes or conceptual categories emerged. Three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability and completeness of the emerging categories.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol was designed around the central research question: How have leadership theories and leadership practices evolved in response to digital transformation? The interview questions examined participants' perceptions of traditional leadership theories, changes in leadership roles during digital transformation, the meaning of digital leadership, the role of virtual and hybrid work, the influence of data and artificial intelligence on leadership decisions, and the ethical challenges of digital-era leadership. Sample questions included: "How has digital transformation changed the meaning of leadership in your organization?", "Which traditional leadership theories still seem useful in digital contexts?", "What new leadership capabilities are required in digitally mediated organizations?", and "What ethical tensions do leaders face when using digital technologies and data-driven systems?"

Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were conducted in a quiet and confidential setting, either face-to-face or online depending on participant availability. Before each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality of responses, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also taken immediately after each interview to capture contextual impressions, emotional emphasis, and analytic reflections.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis with the support of NVivo software. The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, open coding was conducted by reading each transcript line by line and assigning initial codes to meaningful statements related to leadership theory, digital transformation, technology-mediated influence, trust, ethics, adaptation, and future research needs. Second, axial coding was used to compare and cluster similar codes into broader conceptual categories. At this stage, relationships among codes were examined, including

causal conditions, contextual factors, leadership mechanisms, and consequences. Third, selective coding was conducted to integrate the main categories into a coherent theoretical explanation of leadership evolution in the digital era.

To enhance credibility, the coding process involved repeated reading of transcripts, comparison of emerging codes with participant statements, and revision of categories after each round of analysis. Member checking was conducted with six participants, who reviewed summaries of the emerging findings and confirmed that the interpretations reflected their views. Peer debriefing was also used by discussing the coding framework with two academic experts in management and qualitative research. Dependability was strengthened by maintaining an audit trail of interview questions, coding decisions, category definitions, and analytic memos. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the participants, study context, and thematic findings.

## 3. Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the 22 participants showed considerable professional diversity. Fourteen participants were men and eight were women. Seven participants were senior managers, five were human resource or organizational development managers, four were digital transformation consultants, three were university faculty members, and three were technology or innovation managers. In terms of work experience, five participants had 6–10 years of experience, nine had 11–15 years, five had 16–20 years, and three had more than 20 years of experience. Regarding educational background, four participants held bachelor's degrees, eleven held master's degrees, and seven held doctoral degrees. This diversity provided a broad range of perspectives on the evolution of leadership theories in digital and digitally transforming organizations.

The first main category was the transition from heroic leadership to networked leadership. Participants consistently argued that traditional leadership models based on individual authority, charisma, and unilateral decision-making are becoming less suitable for digital organizations. In digitally mediated environments, knowledge is distributed across teams, platforms, data systems, customers, and external partners. Therefore, leadership is increasingly enacted through coordination, connection, facilitation, and sensemaking rather than command. One participant stated, "In the past, the leader was expected to know the answer. Now the leader must know how to connect people who can produce the answer together." Another participant explained, "Digital transformation has weakened the image of the heroic manager. Employees expect participation, transparency, and access to information, not only orders from the top." This category showed that leadership theory is shifting from leader-centered influence toward network-based influence, where leadership is shared across multiple actors and supported by digital communication systems.

The second category concerned the digital and algorithmic mediation of leadership processes. Participants emphasized that leadership decisions are increasingly shaped by dashboards, analytics, artificial intelligence, enterprise systems, and digital performance indicators. This has changed the basis of managerial judgment. Leaders are no longer expected to rely only on personal experience or intuition; they must interpret data, question algorithmic outputs, and combine technological intelligence with human understanding. One participant noted, "Data has entered the leadership room. A leader who ignores analytics is incomplete, but a leader who blindly follows analytics is dangerous." Another participant said, "Algorithms can recommend decisions, but they cannot understand organizational emotions, politics, or moral consequences." This category suggests that digital

leadership is not simply about using technology efficiently. Rather, it involves governing the relationship between human judgment and machine-generated information. Participants viewed this capability as central to the next stage of leadership theory.

The third category was the reconstruction of trust and communication in virtual and hybrid environments. Participants explained that digital work has altered the foundations of trust between leaders and employees. In traditional workplaces, trust was often developed through physical presence, informal interaction, and direct observation. In digital and hybrid environments, leaders must create trust through clarity, responsiveness, consistency, empathy, and transparent communication. One participant stated, “When people work remotely, silence becomes meaningful. If the leader does not communicate clearly, employees fill the gap with anxiety.” Another participant observed, “Hybrid work has made leadership more intentional. You cannot rely on corridor conversations anymore; you must design communication.” Participants also identified a tension between digital monitoring and trust. Excessive tracking of employee activity was described as damaging to psychological safety, while complete absence of coordination was seen as creating ambiguity. Therefore, effective digital leadership requires a balance between autonomy and accountability.

The fourth category involved the emergence of ethical, human-centered, and adaptive leadership capabilities. Participants argued that digital transformation creates ethical challenges related to privacy, surveillance, bias, exclusion, employee well-being, and the responsible use of AI. They emphasized that leaders must protect the human meaning of work while guiding organizations through technological change. One participant said, “The future leader is not the person who automates everything. The future leader is the person who knows what should not be automated.” Another participant stated, “Digital transformation fails when people feel that technology is more important than human dignity.” Participants also highlighted adaptability as a core capability. Leaders must continuously learn, unlearn, and revise their assumptions as technologies and organizational conditions change. This category indicates that digital-era leadership theory must integrate ethical stewardship, adaptive learning, and human-centered design.

The fifth category focused on the future research agenda. Participants identified several underdeveloped areas in current leadership research. First, they argued that more longitudinal studies are needed to examine how leadership capabilities develop across stages of digital transformation. Second, they called for greater attention to cultural context, noting that leadership in digitally transforming Iranian organizations may differ from leadership in Western technology firms. Third, participants emphasized the need to study AI-mediated leadership, algorithmic accountability, and the changing boundary between human and machine authority. Fourth, they recommended research on employee experiences of digital leadership, including trust, stress, autonomy, resistance, and participation. One participant summarized this point by saying, “We have many slogans about digital leadership, but we still do not know how employees experience it every day.” Overall, the findings suggest that future leadership research should become more contextual, multi-level, ethically informed, and empirically grounded.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study explored the evolution of leadership theories in the digital era and developed a future research agenda based on qualitative expert interviews. The findings show that leadership theory is moving from

individual-centered and hierarchy-based models toward more distributed, adaptive, relational, data-informed, and ethically accountable frameworks. This result aligns with the early argument of Avolio et al. (2000), who conceptualized e-leadership as a social influence process mediated by advanced information technology. The participants' narratives confirmed that technology now affects not only the channel through which leaders communicate but also the content, speed, visibility, and legitimacy of leadership decisions. Therefore, digital-era leadership cannot be reduced to traditional leadership practiced through digital tools. It requires a more fundamental reconsideration of how influence is produced in socio-technical systems.

The first major finding, the transition from heroic leadership to networked leadership, supports the broader movement in leadership studies away from leader-centric assumptions. Traditional theories such as transformational leadership remain useful because vision, motivation, and intellectual stimulation continue to matter in digital transformation (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). However, the findings suggest that these theories require reinterpretation in digital contexts. In digital organizations, leaders do not simply inspire followers from the top; they create platforms for collaboration, enable distributed intelligence, and connect actors across organizational boundaries. This finding is consistent with complexity leadership theory, which emphasizes enabling adaptive capacity, learning, and emergence in complex systems (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). It also aligns with shared leadership research, which argues that leadership can be distributed among team members rather than concentrated in a single formal leader (Pearce & Conger, 2003). The digital era intensifies the relevance of these theories because knowledge and authority are increasingly dispersed across networks.

The second finding, digital and algorithmic mediation of leadership processes, indicates that leadership theory must account for the growing role of data and AI in organizational decision-making. Participants described digital leadership as a hybrid process in which leaders interpret analytics, evaluate algorithmic recommendations, and preserve moral judgment. This supports recent arguments that digital transformation changes managerial work by embedding decision-making in data infrastructures and technological systems (Vial, 2019). It also extends the logic of dynamic capabilities theory, which emphasizes sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring capabilities in changing environments (Teece, 2007). In digital organizations, leaders must sense opportunities through data, seize them through digitally enabled decisions, and reconfigure organizational routines in response to technological disruption. However, the findings also show that data-driven leadership involves ethical risk. Blind reliance on algorithms may reduce contextual understanding, weaken accountability, and obscure bias. Therefore, future leadership theory should examine how leaders combine analytical intelligence with ethical and practical wisdom.

The third finding, reconstruction of trust and communication in virtual and hybrid work, is strongly aligned with virtual team leadership research. Liao (2017) argued that leadership in virtual teams must be understood across individual, team, and organizational levels because digital work changes communication patterns, coordination processes, and relational dynamics. The participants in this study similarly emphasized that trust in hybrid environments requires intentional communication, clarity, responsiveness, and psychological safety. This finding also supports Cortellazzo et al. (2019), who reported that leaders in digitalized contexts must develop relationships with multiple and dispersed stakeholders and enable collaborative processes. The present findings add that digital communication creates both opportunities and vulnerabilities. While digital tools allow faster communication and broader participation, they can also produce ambiguity, emotional distance, and overload.

Therefore, digital leadership theory must treat communication not as a technical function but as a relational and cultural practice.

The fourth finding, ethical, human-centered, and adaptive leadership capabilities, reflects the increasing importance of moral responsibility in digital transformation. Participants repeatedly emphasized that leaders must protect privacy, prevent excessive surveillance, address algorithmic bias, and maintain human dignity in technology-rich workplaces. This is consistent with ethical leadership theory, which defines leadership as normatively appropriate conduct demonstrated through personal actions and interpersonal relationships (Brown et al., 2005). However, the digital era expands the scope of ethical leadership because leaders must now govern not only their own behavior but also the ethical consequences of digital systems. This finding also resonates with servant leadership and human-centered leadership perspectives, which emphasize care, empowerment, and the development of followers (Greenleaf, 1977; van Dierendonck, 2011). In digital organizations, human-centered leadership becomes especially important because employees may experience digital transformation as threatening, dehumanizing, or exclusionary if it is implemented without participation and support.

The findings also reveal a major conceptual challenge: digital leadership remains theoretically fragmented. Participants used different terms, including digital leadership, adaptive leadership, agile leadership, AI leadership, and ethical technology leadership. This confirms concerns raised by Banks et al. (2018) regarding construct proliferation and redundancy in leadership research. If every technological change produces a new leadership label, the field risks conceptual confusion. Therefore, future research should clarify whether digital leadership represents a distinct leadership theory, a contextual extension of existing theories, or an integrative umbrella concept. Based on the present findings, digital leadership is best understood as an integrative framework that combines elements of e-leadership, complexity leadership, shared leadership, ethical leadership, adaptive leadership, and dynamic capabilities. Its distinctiveness lies not in replacing previous theories but in explaining how leadership operates when influence is mediated by digital technologies, distributed across networks, and evaluated through ethical and human-centered criteria.

The future research agenda emerging from the findings contains several important directions. First, leadership research should use longitudinal designs to examine how digital leadership capabilities develop over time. Many studies describe digital leadership at a single point, but digital transformation unfolds across stages. Second, future research should examine cultural and institutional differences. Leadership in Tehran-based organizations, for example, may be shaped by local norms of authority, trust, regulation, and technology adoption. Third, researchers should study AI-mediated leadership more directly, especially the relationship between algorithmic recommendation systems and human authority. Fourth, employee-centered studies are needed to examine how workers experience digital leadership in terms of autonomy, surveillance, trust, stress, learning, and inclusion. Fifth, future studies should develop measurement models that distinguish digital leadership from related constructs such as transformational leadership, agile leadership, and technology management.

The findings also have implications for practice. Organizations should avoid treating digital leadership as a purely technical skill. Digital leaders need technological literacy, but they also require ethical reasoning, communication competence, adaptive learning, and the ability to build trust in dispersed teams. Leadership development programs should therefore include modules on data interpretation, AI ethics, virtual communication, psychological safety, digital culture, and change leadership. Senior managers should also recognize that digital

transformation is not only an IT project but a leadership transformation. Without leadership practices that support participation, learning, and human dignity, digital transformation may produce resistance rather than renewal.

The main limitation of this study was its reliance on expert interviews in Tehran, which may limit transferability to other cultural, industrial, or national contexts. Although the participants had diverse professional backgrounds, the study did not include employees at lower organizational levels, customers, technology vendors, or policymakers. Another limitation was that the findings were based on self-reported perceptions rather than direct observation of leadership practices in digital organizations. In addition, although the study was review-oriented, the empirical data collection centered on interviews; therefore, future studies may strengthen the review component by using formal bibliometric analysis, database search protocols, and quality appraisal procedures.

Future research should examine digital-era leadership through longitudinal, comparative, and multi-level designs. Researchers should study how leadership capabilities change before, during, and after digital transformation initiatives. Comparative studies across countries, industries, and organizational sizes would help clarify the role of cultural and institutional context. Future studies should also investigate AI-mediated leadership, algorithmic accountability, digital trust, employee resistance, and the emotional consequences of virtual work. Quantitative studies can develop and validate scales for digital leadership capabilities, while qualitative studies can explore lived experiences of leaders and employees in greater depth.

For practice, organizations should design leadership development programs that go beyond technical training. Managers should be trained to interpret data critically, communicate effectively in hybrid environments, protect employee privacy, and create psychologically safe spaces for experimentation and learning. Organizations should also establish ethical governance mechanisms for AI and digital monitoring systems. Leaders should involve employees in digital transformation decisions, explain the purpose of technological change, and maintain a balance between autonomy and accountability. The central practical lesson is that digital transformation succeeds when leadership remains technologically informed but deeply human-centered.

## Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

## Acknowledgments

Authors thank all who helped us through this study.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

## Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

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