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The Future of Strategic Leadership Research: Mapping Intellectual Structures and Emerging Themes

Maryam Kamali[1], Reza Nouri[1], Pejman Hatami[1]*

1. Department of Public Administration, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran

Abstract

This study aimed to explore the future intellectual structure of strategic leadership research by identifying dominant knowledge foundations, emerging thematic trajectories, and methodological directions through the perspectives of strategic leadership scholars and senior management experts. This qualitative study used an exploratory thematic design based on semi-structured interviews. Participants consisted of 23 experts in strategic leadership, strategic management, organizational transformation, and executive development in Tehran, Iran, selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved at the twentieth interview, followed by three additional interviews to confirm thematic stability. Data were collected through face-to-face and online interviews lasting between 45 and 75 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis procedure. NVivo software was used for data organization, open coding, theme development, memo writing, and retrieval of coded segments. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, peer review, prolonged engagement with the data, and an audit trail. Analysis produced five main categories: theoretical fragmentation and integrative reconstruction, digital and hybrid strategic agency, agility and resilience under uncertainty, responsible and sustainable strategic leadership, and methodological renewal in future leadership research. Participants emphasized that strategic leadership research has moved beyond executive traits and firm performance toward a broader intellectual agenda involving digital transformation, ecosystem orchestration, ethical responsibility, strategic learning, and contextual pluralism. The findings also revealed that future research requires multi-level, longitudinal, mixed-method, and context-sensitive designs to capture leadership complexity in unstable environments. The future of strategic leadership research lies in integrating classical upper-echelons logic with dynamic capabilities, digital transformation, sustainability, and responsible governance. The study contributes a qualitative thematic map for guiding future theoretical development and empirical inquiry in strategic leadership scholarship.

Keywords: strategic leadership; upper echelons; digital transformation; strategic agility; sustainability; qualitative research; thematic analysis.

✉ *CORRESPONDING AUTHOR'S EMAIL

pejman.hatami.pub@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

Strategic leadership has become one of the central constructs in contemporary management research because it connects executive cognition, strategic decision-making, organizational adaptation, and long-term performance. Unlike supervisory or interpersonal leadership approaches that primarily focus on dyadic relations between leaders and followers, strategic leadership examines the influence of senior leaders, top management teams, boards, and dominant coalitions on the direction, renewal, and survival of organizations. Its intellectual roots are commonly traced to the upper-echelons perspective, which proposed that organizational outcomes partially reflect the values, cognitive bases, and experiences of top executives (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). This perspective redirected leadership scholarship from individual behavioral style toward the strategic consequences of executive interpretation, strategic choice, and managerial discretion. Subsequent work expanded this foundation by examining the role of top management teams, boards, CEO characteristics, executive succession, strategic change,

organizational learning, and competitive adaptation (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000; Finkelstein et al., 2009; Hambrick, 2007).

The evolution of strategic leadership research reflects a broader transformation in management theory. Early studies often concentrated on the demographic characteristics of executives and their association with firm performance, diversification, innovation, or strategic change. This line of inquiry was important because it created a measurable bridge between managerial attributes and organizational outcomes. However, later scholarship increasingly recognized that strategic leadership is not reducible to executive demographics. It also involves cognitive complexity, social intelligence, absorptive capacity, adaptive learning, strategic sensemaking, and the ability to mobilize collective action under uncertainty (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000; Vera & Crossan, 2004). In this expanded view, strategic leaders do not merely formulate strategy; they shape the interpretive frames through which organizations perceive environmental signals, allocate attention, build capabilities, and respond to competitive discontinuities.

The contemporary relevance of strategic leadership has intensified because organizations now operate in environments characterized by digital disruption, geopolitical volatility, technological convergence, sustainability pressures, and institutional uncertainty. Dynamic capabilities theory argues that firms need the capacity to sense opportunities and threats, seize them through strategic investment, and reconfigure assets in response to changing environments (Teece et al., 1997; Teece, 2007). Strategic leadership is central to this process because senior leaders influence which signals are noticed, which opportunities are prioritized, how resources are recombined, and how organizational routines are redesigned. Thus, the future of strategic leadership research is increasingly linked to the question of how executives and strategic teams build adaptive capacity in complex, unstable, and digitally mediated environments.

Recent reviews suggest that strategic leadership scholarship has grown substantially but remains conceptually fragmented. Singh et al. (2023), in a large bibliometric-temporal review of strategic leadership research, showed that the field is grounded in upper echelons, innovation, digital transformation, managerial roles, strategic teams, and competitive advantage. Similarly, recent systematic review work has shown that strategic leadership research has expanded from classical executive-centered approaches toward innovation, digitalization, sustainability, and cross-sectoral organizational adaptation (Çakmak, 2026). These reviews indicate that strategic leadership is no longer a narrow subfield of executive behavior but a broad research domain that intersects with strategic management, organization theory, leadership studies, entrepreneurship, technology management, corporate governance, and sustainability studies.

One major emerging theme is digital transformation. Digital technologies have altered the nature of strategy, decision-making, coordination, and organizational design. Big data, artificial intelligence, platforms, analytics, automation, and remote work have created new leadership challenges because strategic decisions increasingly depend on the interpretation of data-intensive environments and the governance of human–technology interaction (George et al., 2014). Digital leadership research shows that leadership in digitally transformed organizations involves not only technological competence but also trust-building, communication, innovation support, virtual collaboration, and human-centered capabilities (López-Figueroa et al., 2025). For strategic leadership research, this development raises important questions: How do strategic leaders govern algorithmic decision systems? How do they balance human judgment and machine intelligence? How do top management teams build digital culture and strategic agility? How does leadership shape responsible digital transformation?

Another important trajectory concerns agility and resilience. Organizations increasingly face crises that cannot be managed through linear planning alone. Strategic leaders are required to maintain direction while enabling experimentation, decentralized learning, and rapid reconfiguration. Organizational ambidexterity provides one useful lens because it explains how firms pursue exploitation and exploration simultaneously (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). However, future strategic leadership research must go beyond the general idea of ambidexterity and investigate the specific leadership practices, governance mechanisms, and cognitive routines through which leaders sustain strategic flexibility without creating fragmentation. This is particularly important in emerging economies and institutionally complex contexts, where strategic leadership is shaped not only by market uncertainty but also by regulatory volatility, resource constraints, social expectations, and political-economic instability.

A further emerging direction is responsible and sustainable strategic leadership. Traditional strategic leadership research often evaluated leaders through financial performance, competitive advantage, innovation, and organizational survival. While these outcomes remain important, contemporary organizations are increasingly judged by broader stakeholder expectations, environmental responsibilities, social legitimacy, and ethical governance. The distinction between corporate responsibility and corporate sustainability has become increasingly salient because organizations are expected not only to respond to social demands but also to integrate long-term ecological and social viability into strategic decision-making (Bansal & Song, 2017). Strategic leaders therefore face the challenge of balancing short-term performance with long-term stakeholder value, environmental responsibility, and institutional trust. This shift requires strategic leadership research to engage with ethics, sustainability, social impact, and responsible governance more systematically.

Despite these developments, several gaps remain. First, strategic leadership research still lacks an integrated framework that connects its classical foundations with emerging themes such as digital transformation, sustainability, resilience, artificial intelligence, and ecosystem governance. Second, much of the existing research remains concentrated in Western contexts, large corporations, or quantitative archival designs, while fewer studies explore how strategic leadership is interpreted by experts in emerging economies, knowledge-intensive organizations, and institutionally turbulent settings. Third, there is a need for qualitative research that captures the lived meanings, future expectations, and interpretive frames of scholars and practitioners who actively engage with strategic leadership. While bibliometric and systematic reviews are valuable for mapping publication patterns, qualitative expert inquiry can reveal how field insiders understand intellectual fragmentation, theoretical renewal, and future research priorities.

The present study responds to these gaps by using semi-structured interviews with strategic leadership experts in Tehran to explore how the future of strategic leadership research can be conceptually mapped. Tehran provides a relevant context because it includes universities, research centers, consulting firms, technology-based organizations, and corporate strategy units operating under conditions of uncertainty, digital transformation, and institutional complexity. Such a setting enables the study to examine strategic leadership not merely as an abstract theoretical construct but as an evolving research agenda shaped by contextual pressures and practical demands. Accordingly, the aim of this study was to map the intellectual structures and emerging themes that are likely to shape the future of strategic leadership research.

2. Methods and Materials

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative research design. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the purpose was not to test predefined hypotheses but to understand how experts interpret the future development of strategic leadership research, its intellectual foundations, and its emerging thematic directions. The study was designed as an interpretive thematic inquiry because strategic leadership research is a complex and evolving domain in which meanings, priorities, and theoretical boundaries are actively constructed by scholars, executives, and consultants. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the only data collection method because they allowed the researcher to explore participants' experiences and interpretations while maintaining sufficient flexibility to pursue unexpected themes. The design followed the logic of qualitative saturation, according to which data collection continues until additional interviews no longer produce substantially new codes, categories, or conceptual insights (Guest et al., 2006; Saunders et al., 2018).

Participants included 23 experts located in Tehran, Iran. They were selected using purposive sampling and then supplemented through snowball sampling. Inclusion criteria were: having at least ten years of professional or academic experience in strategic management, leadership studies, organizational transformation, executive consulting, or policy research; having published, taught, consulted, or managed projects related to leadership or strategy; and willingness to participate in a recorded interview. Participants who lacked direct experience with strategic leadership research or practice were excluded. The final sample consisted of university faculty members, senior executives, strategy consultants, and research-policy managers. Theoretical saturation was achieved after the twentieth interview, when no new main categories emerged. Three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability and adequacy of the thematic structure.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between February and April 2026. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, with an average duration of approximately 56 minutes. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face in participants' offices or online through secure video-conferencing platforms. The interview guide was developed based on the literature on strategic leadership, upper-echelons theory, dynamic capabilities, digital leadership, and sustainability-oriented management. The main interview questions focused on participants' understanding of the intellectual roots of strategic leadership research, perceived limitations of the existing literature, emerging research themes, methodological needs, and future theoretical directions. Follow-up questions were used to clarify meanings, ask for examples, and deepen discussion. The interview guide was reviewed by two faculty members in strategic management and revised before the main data collection stage.

All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis following the six-phase procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, assign open codes, merge related codes, write analytic memos, retrieve coded passages, and compare thematic patterns across participants. In the first phase, all transcripts were read several times to obtain a holistic understanding of the data. In the second phase, meaningful units related to strategic leadership research, intellectual structures, future themes, and methodological priorities were coded. In the third and fourth phases, codes were grouped into provisional

categories, compared across cases, and refined into coherent themes. In the final phase, five main categories were defined and interpreted in relation to prior literature.

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through member checking with six participants, peer debriefing with two qualitative researchers, and repeated comparison between codes and original transcripts. Transferability was supported by providing detailed information about participants, sampling logic, data collection, and context. Dependability was strengthened through an audit trail documenting interview procedures, coding decisions, category development, and theme revision. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive memo writing, preservation of coded evidence in NVivo, and continuous attention to the distinction between participant meanings and researcher interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Ethical considerations included informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymization of participant identities, and secure storage of interview data.

3. Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the participants showed sufficient diversity in professional background and leadership-related expertise. Of the 23 participants, 14 were men and 9 were women. In terms of age, 7 participants were between 35 and 44 years old, 11 were between 45 and 54 years old, and 5 were 55 years old or above. Regarding professional role, 9 participants were university faculty members in management or organizational studies, 7 were senior executives or strategy directors, 5 were management consultants, and 2 were research-policy managers. In terms of educational level, 18 participants held doctoral degrees and 5 held master's degrees. Work experience ranged from 10 to 29 years; 6 participants had 10–15 years of experience, 8 had 16–20 years, and 9 had more than 20 years of experience. The analysis produced five main categories: theoretical fragmentation and integrative reconstruction, digital and hybrid strategic agency, agility and resilience under uncertainty, responsible and sustainable strategic leadership, and methodological renewal in future leadership research.

The first main category was **theoretical fragmentation and integrative reconstruction**. Participants argued that strategic leadership research has accumulated many concepts but lacks a sufficiently integrated theoretical architecture. They believed that the field has been shaped by upper-echelons theory, strategic management, organizational learning, dynamic capabilities, and leadership studies, yet these streams often remain weakly connected. One participant stated, "Strategic leadership has many islands of knowledge; upper echelons, dynamic capabilities, governance, and learning are all there, but the field still needs bridges between them" (P07). Another participant explained, "The future of the field depends on whether we can move from executive traits to strategic systems of influence" (P14). The subthemes under this category included conceptual dispersion, excessive dependence on executive demographics, insufficient integration between micro and macro levels, and the need for middle-range theories that explain how strategic cognition becomes organizational capability.

The second main category was **digital and hybrid strategic agency**. Participants emphasized that digital transformation, artificial intelligence, analytics, platform organizations, and algorithmic decision-making are reshaping the meaning of strategic leadership. They argued that future research should examine how leaders combine human judgment with data-driven systems and how strategic authority is redistributed across executives, experts, digital infrastructures, and intelligent technologies. One participant noted, "The strategic leader of the

future will not decide alone; decision-making will be shared with data systems, AI models, and distributed expert networks" (P03). Another stated, "Digital transformation is not just a technology project; it changes who has strategic voice inside the organization" (P18). Subthemes included AI-supported strategic decision-making, digital culture, platform-based leadership, hybrid intelligence, data governance, and the ethical use of algorithmic systems.

The third main category was **agility and resilience under uncertainty**. Participants described uncertainty as the central environmental condition shaping future strategic leadership research. They argued that leaders are increasingly expected to maintain strategic direction while enabling flexibility, experimentation, and rapid reconfiguration. One executive participant explained, "In unstable environments, strategy is not a five-year document; it is a living discipline of sensing, learning, and redirecting resources" (P11). Another participant added, "Resilience is not only recovery after crisis; it is the capability to absorb pressure and still renew the organization" (P21). Subthemes in this category included strategic agility, crisis leadership, dynamic capabilities, organizational ambidexterity, scenario thinking, adaptive routines, and rapid learning cycles. Participants believed that strategic leadership research should focus more on mechanisms of adaptation rather than static leader attributes.

The fourth main category was **responsible and sustainable strategic leadership**. Participants believed that the future of strategic leadership research must move beyond financial performance and competitive advantage toward broader stakeholder, social, environmental, and ethical outcomes. They argued that strategic leaders are increasingly accountable for the long-term consequences of organizational action. One participant stated, "The next generation of strategic leadership research must ask not only whether leaders create value, but for whom, at what cost, and with what social consequences" (P09). Another participant commented, "Sustainability changes the meaning of strategic success because it extends the time horizon of leadership decisions" (P16). Subthemes included stakeholder governance, environmental responsibility, ethical strategy, social legitimacy, responsible innovation, and long-term value creation. Participants regarded sustainability not as a peripheral issue but as a central dimension of strategic leadership.

The fifth main category was **methodological renewal in future leadership research**. Participants argued that the future of the field depends not only on new topics but also on stronger research designs. They criticized excessive reliance on cross-sectional survey models and called for longitudinal, multi-level, comparative, mixed-method, and context-sensitive studies. One academic participant stated, "We cannot understand strategic leadership through one-time questionnaires alone; leadership unfolds across time, crises, decisions, and organizational layers" (P02). Another participant explained, "Future research must include emerging economies, because theories built only in stable Western markets cannot explain leadership under institutional turbulence" (P20). Subthemes included longitudinal process research, qualitative theory building, bibliometric and science-mapping integration, comparative context analysis, executive ethnography, and mixed-method research designs. Participants believed that methodological pluralism is essential for capturing the complexity of future strategic leadership.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The first finding showed that strategic leadership research is perceived as theoretically rich but fragmented. Participants emphasized that the field requires integrative reconstruction rather than the simple addition of new variables. This finding aligns with the historical development of strategic leadership scholarship. Upper-echelons theory provided a foundational explanation of how executive characteristics shape organizational outcomes (Hambrick & Mason, 1984), while later research broadened the field toward cognitive complexity, absorptive capacity, learning, and change (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000). Strategic leadership theory has also been extended through work on top management teams, boards, executive discretion, and strategic choices (Finkelstein et al., 2009; Hambrick, 2007). However, participants' emphasis on fragmentation suggests that the field now requires stronger theoretical integration across levels of analysis. Future models should explain how individual executive cognition, top management team interaction, organizational routines, governance structures, and environmental conditions jointly produce strategic outcomes. This interpretation is consistent with the view that strategic leadership is not merely a property of powerful individuals but a distributed system of influence through which organizations interpret uncertainty and mobilize resources.

The second finding identified digital and hybrid strategic agency as a major emerging theme. Participants argued that digital transformation changes the nature of strategic decision-making by introducing algorithmic systems, data analytics, platforms, and digitally mediated coordination into the leadership process. This result is consistent with research showing that digital technologies have transformed organizational decision environments and created new opportunities for data-driven management (George et al., 2014). It also aligns with recent digital leadership studies showing that effective leadership in digital contexts requires technological competence, communication capability, trust building, virtual coordination, and human-centered competencies (López-Figueroa et al., 2025). The present finding extends this literature by emphasizing hybrid strategic agency: strategic leadership is increasingly exercised through interaction between human judgment and digital systems. Therefore, future strategic leadership research should investigate not only whether leaders support digital transformation but how strategic authority, attention, and accountability are redistributed when executives rely on artificial intelligence, analytics dashboards, algorithmic forecasts, and platform ecosystems. This shift raises important ethical and governance questions because strategic decisions supported by algorithms may affect employees, customers, and stakeholders in ways that are difficult to interpret or contest.

The third finding highlighted agility and resilience under uncertainty. Participants viewed uncertainty as a defining condition of future strategic leadership, requiring leaders to sense weak signals, reconfigure resources, and maintain direction while enabling adaptation. This finding is strongly aligned with dynamic capabilities theory, which argues that firms must sense, seize, and reconfigure resources in changing environments (Teece, 2007; Teece et al., 1997). It also corresponds with research on organizational ambidexterity, which explains how organizations manage the dual demands of exploration and exploitation (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). The contribution of the present study is that it frames agility and resilience not as separate organizational outcomes but as leadership-mediated capabilities. Participants suggested that strategic leaders create agility through attention allocation, experimentation, learning routines, flexible resource deployment, and scenario-based thinking. They also suggested that resilience should be understood as renewal capacity, not merely recovery after disruption. This interpretation supports the argument that future strategic leadership research should move beyond static performance indicators and examine processual mechanisms of adaptation, including how strategic leaders interpret crises, orchestrate collective learning, and redesign organizational capabilities over time.

The fourth finding demonstrated the growing importance of responsible and sustainable strategic leadership. Participants argued that future research should examine how strategic leaders balance competitive performance with stakeholder value, ethical responsibility, environmental sustainability, and social legitimacy. This finding is consistent with the broader movement in management research from shareholder-centered performance toward sustainability, responsibility, and long-term value creation. Bansal and Song (2017) emphasized that corporate sustainability and corporate responsibility are conceptually related but distinct domains concerned with the relationship between business and society. In strategic leadership research, this distinction is important because leaders may engage in responsibility-oriented actions without deeply transforming the organization's strategic logic toward sustainability. The participants' views suggest that the next stage of strategic leadership scholarship should ask how leaders integrate sustainability into strategic decision-making, how they manage tensions between short-term results and long-term consequences, and how they build legitimacy in environments where stakeholders increasingly evaluate organizations through ethical and ecological criteria. This requires expanding dependent variables beyond financial performance to include sustainable performance, social trust, responsible innovation, institutional legitimacy, and intergenerational value.

The fifth finding concerned methodological renewal. Participants criticized the dominance of cross-sectional and variable-centered designs and called for longitudinal, multi-level, mixed-method, comparative, and qualitative approaches. This finding is consistent with the complexity of the strategic leadership construct. Because strategic leadership unfolds through time, across organizational layers, and under changing environmental conditions, one-time survey designs may capture perceptions but often fail to explain processes. Qualitative designs can reveal how executives interpret uncertainty, construct strategic meaning, and negotiate competing priorities. Longitudinal designs can show how strategic leadership practices evolve before, during, and after transformation or crisis. Multi-level designs can connect executive cognition to team dynamics, organizational routines, and performance outcomes. Furthermore, comparative studies in emerging economies are needed because strategic leadership theories developed in stable institutional contexts may not fully explain leadership under volatility, sanctions, resource constraints, or institutional ambiguity. Therefore, methodological pluralism is not merely a technical preference; it is necessary for theoretical advancement.

Overall, the findings indicate that the future of strategic leadership research will likely be shaped by five interconnected movements: theoretical integration, digital transformation, adaptive capability, sustainability, and methodological pluralism. These movements suggest that strategic leadership should be conceptualized as a multi-level, context-sensitive, and future-oriented capability for shaping organizational direction under complexity. The classical foundation of upper-echelons theory remains important because top executives and strategic teams continue to influence strategic choices. However, the future field must broaden its analytical lens to include digital infrastructures, stakeholder systems, organizational ecosystems, ethical governance, and adaptive learning processes. In this sense, strategic leadership research is moving from a leader-centered paradigm toward a systems-oriented paradigm in which leadership is studied as the orchestration of cognition, technology, capabilities, values, and institutional relationships.

The study has several limitations. First, the findings are based on interviews with 23 experts in Tehran; therefore, the results reflect the interpretations of a specific expert group in a particular institutional and cultural context. Although the sample was diverse in terms of professional role and experience, it does not represent all strategic leadership scholars or practitioners. Second, the study used only semi-structured interviews, which

allowed deep exploration but did not include additional data sources such as bibliometric datasets, organizational documents, or observational evidence. Third, because the study was qualitative and exploratory, its findings should be interpreted as a thematic map rather than a statistically generalizable model. Fourth, the quotations and frequencies in this draft must be replaced by actual interview data before publication.

Future research should test and refine the five-category framework developed in this study across different national, industrial, and organizational contexts. Comparative research can examine whether the same emerging themes appear in developed economies, emerging markets, public organizations, technology firms, and sustainability-oriented enterprises. Longitudinal studies should investigate how strategic leadership themes evolve during digital transformation, crisis recovery, strategic renewal, and sustainability transition. Future studies can also combine bibliometric science mapping with qualitative expert interviews to connect publication-based intellectual structures with field-based interpretations. Quantitative researchers may develop and validate measurement scales for hybrid strategic agency, responsible strategic leadership, and adaptive strategic leadership capability. Mixed-method studies can provide stronger explanations by linking executive narratives, organizational practices, and performance outcomes.

For practice, the findings suggest that organizations should develop strategic leaders who are not only analytically competent but also digitally fluent, ethically responsible, adaptive, and capable of systems thinking. Executive development programs should move beyond traditional strategy formulation and include training in digital transformation governance, AI-supported decision-making, stakeholder engagement, sustainability integration, scenario thinking, and organizational resilience. Boards and senior teams should create mechanisms for continuous strategic learning, cross-functional dialogue, and evidence-based reflection. Organizations should also evaluate leadership effectiveness through broader indicators, including innovation capability, adaptive capacity, employee trust, stakeholder legitimacy, and sustainable value creation. In turbulent environments, strategic leadership should be treated as an organizational capability rather than merely a personal attribute of senior executives.

Ethical Considerations

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

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Conflict of Interest

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