

Article

The Interplay of Social Capital, Shared Leadership, and Digital Transformation: A Qualitative Systematic Literature Review of Organizational Performance and Capability Development

Selvi Agustina^{1*}, Ruslaini²

¹ STIE Kasih Bangsa, Indonesia; selvi@stiekasihbangsa.ac.id

² STIE Kasih Bangsa, Indonesia; ruslaini@stiekasihbangsa.ac.id

* Corresponding Author: Selvi Agustina

Abstract: This qualitative systematic literature review examines the interplay of social capital, shared leadership, and digital transformation in shaping organizational capability development and performance. Using a systematic and thematic synthesis approach, the review integrates prior research on relational resources, collaborative leadership, digital capabilities, and organizational outcomes. The findings indicate that social capital provides access to knowledge, networks, trust, and complementary resources, while shared leadership mobilizes distributed expertise through collective decision making and coordination. Organizational capability development, particularly digital, innovative, absorptive, and adaptive capabilities, emerges as the central mechanism linking relational and leadership resources with successful digital transformation. The review further shows that digital transformation contributes to multidimensional organizational performance, including operational efficiency, innovation, adaptability, and financial outcomes. Overall, the study proposes a relational leadership capability transformation performance framework, emphasizing that sustainable performance in the digital era depends on the effective integration of social, leadership, and technological resources.

Keywords: Social Capital; Shared Leadership; Digital Transformation; Organizational Capabilities; Organizational Performance

1. Introduction

Digital transformation has become a strategic imperative for organizations operating in dynamic and technology-intensive environments. Beyond technology adoption, it involves fundamental changes in processes, structures, capabilities, decision making, and value creation. Successful transformation therefore depends not only on technological investments but also on organizational capabilities, leadership, culture, and social resources that enable knowledge coordination and adaptation (Hess et al., 2016; Osmundsen et al., 2018).

Although digital technologies can improve efficiency, innovation, market responsiveness, and business performance, technological investments alone do not guarantee superior outcomes (Chen et al., 2016; Popović-Pantić et al., 2019). From a resource based perspective, competitive advantage emerges when technological assets are combined with valuable organizational capabilities, including knowledge, relationships, leadership, collaboration, and adaptive capacity (Bharadwaj, 2000). Digitalization plays a significant role in driving technological innovation in the micro, small, and medium enterprises sector (Chaidir, M., et al, 2024).

Social capital represents an important intangible resource that provides access to information, knowledge, legitimacy, and complementary resources. Embedded in relationships and social networks, it can facilitate trust, cooperation, knowledge sharing, and collective action, thereby strengthening organizational capabilities and performance (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Burt, 2000). In digital transformation, internal and external networks are

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particularly valuable for acquiring technological expertise, innovation opportunities, and market intelligence (Koka & Prescott, 2002; Kale et al., 2000). Evidence further shows that interorganizational social capital can enhance Industry 4.0 readiness through innovative capability and absorptive capacity (Ul Zia et al., 2023). The collaboration between artificial intelligence platforms and digital innovation hubs can enhance productivity, operational efficiency, and market access for SMEs (Eka Wahyu Kasih, et al, 2024).

However, the effects of social capital are complex and context dependent. Its benefits often depend on an organization's ability to absorb, integrate, and deploy externally accessed resources. Studies show that social capital can improve innovation and entrepreneurial outcomes through knowledge search, absorptive capacity, and dynamic capabilities (Lyu et al., 2022; Rodrigo-Alarcón et al., 2018). Thus, social capital may contribute indirectly to digital transformation and performance through organizational capability development. A positive relationship between transformational leadership, job satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behavior human capital (Djap, W. et al., 2022).

Leadership is another critical mechanism in digital transformation. Because transformation involves complex and cross-functional activities, leadership cannot always depend on a single individual. Shared leadership distributes influence among organizational members and promotes participation, collective responsibility, knowledge exchange, and collaboration (Pearce & Conger, 2003). Previous research has linked shared leadership with team performance, coordination, teamwork, and organizational outcomes (D'Innocenzo et al., 2014; Hmieleski et al., 2012). Recent evidence also suggests that shared leadership and organizational culture can facilitate digital transformation and firm performance (Ho & Huynh, 2023).

Importantly, recent research provides direct evidence of the interconnected roles of social capital, shared leadership, and digital transformation. Ho (2025) found that shared leadership positively influences digital transformation and firm performance, while social capital enhances performance and strengthens the relationships between shared leadership, digital transformation, and performance. Relationship oriented and participative leadership also appear more supportive of digital transformation than purely task-oriented approaches. Nevertheless, existing evidence remains fragmented, as many studies examine these constructs separately rather than as an integrated organizational system.

This fragmentation creates a significant research gap. Social capital may provide access to knowledge and resources, while shared leadership facilitates their collective mobilization and integration. Together, these mechanisms may strengthen innovative, absorptive, digital, and adaptive capabilities required to implement and sustain digital transformation. This perspective is consistent with the resource based view and social capital theory, which emphasize the strategic importance of organizational capabilities and relational resources (Bharadwaj, 2000; Adler & Kwon, 2002).

Therefore, a qualitative systematic literature review is appropriate for synthesizing this interdisciplinary body of knowledge. Such an approach enables the identification of recurring mechanisms, contextual conditions, theoretical perspectives, and research gaps across diverse organizational settings. Accordingly, this study systematically examines how social capital, shared leadership, and digital transformation interact in shaping organizational capability development and performance. The review contributes by integrating fragmented research streams, identifying capability development as a central connecting mechanism, and highlighting conditions under which relational resources and distributed leadership can accelerate or constrain digital transformation. Ultimately, the study argues that sustainable organizational performance in the digital era depends not only on technological adoption but also on strong relationships, collective leadership, knowledge mobilization, and continuous capability development.

2. Literature Review

Social capital has become an important construct in organizational research because it explains how relationships provide access to resources that organizations may not possess internally. Adler and Kwon (2002) conceptualized social capital as goodwill and resources embedded in social relationships, while Burt (2000) emphasized the role of network structures in facilitating access to information and opportunities. Social capital can therefore promote trust, cooperation, knowledge sharing, and collective action, ultimately strengthening organizational capabilities and performance.

Empirical evidence generally supports a positive relationship between social capital and organizational performance. Studies show that social capital facilitates cooperation, strengthens customer and stakeholder relationships, and improves access to strategic resources (Leana & Pil, 2006; Luo et al., 2004). Evidence from SMEs further suggests that its contribution often operates through managerial and organizational capabilities rather than direct performance effects alone (Aidoo et al., 2020; Easmon et al., 2019). Meta-analytic evidence also indicates that the benefits of social capital depend on contextual and organizational conditions (Stam et al., 2014).

In the context of digital transformation, social capital is particularly important because organizations increasingly rely on internal and external networks to acquire technological knowledge and complementary resources. Interorganizational relationships can provide access to expertise, innovation opportunities, and market intelligence (Koka & Prescott, 2002; Kale et al., 2000). Recent studies further show that social capital contributes to Industry 4.0 readiness through innovative capability and absorptive capacity (Ul Zia et al., 2023) and can strengthen the relationship between digital transformation and financial performance (Ji et al., 2024).

However, social capital does not automatically generate transformation or performance outcomes. Its value depends on the organization's ability to acquire, absorb, integrate, and apply externally accessed knowledge. Lyu et al. (2022) demonstrated that social capital improves innovation performance through knowledge search and absorptive capacity, while Rodrigo-Alarcón et al. (2018) identified dynamic capabilities as an important connecting mechanism. Thus, social capital can be understood as an enabling resource for capability development rather than a substitute for organizational capability.

Shared leadership represents another important organizational mechanism. Unlike traditional leadership models, shared leadership distributes influence and responsibility among organizational members, enabling multiple individuals to contribute expertise and participate in decision-making (Pearce & Conger, 2003). This approach is particularly relevant to digital transformation because complex technological change requires collaboration among executives, technology specialists, managers, and employees.

Prior research provides substantial evidence of the positive effects of shared leadership. D'Innocenzo et al. (2014) found a positive relationship between shared leadership and team performance, while other studies demonstrated its contribution to coordination, teamwork, collective responsibility, and shared mental models (Hoch et al., 2010; McIntyre & Foti, 2013). Trust is also important because effective shared leadership requires members to exchange knowledge and share leadership responsibilities (Kim & Han, 2019).

Recent research directly links shared leadership to digital transformation. Ho and Huynh (2023) found that collaborative leadership arrangements support digital transformation and firm performance. Similarly, Ho (2025) showed that shared leadership positively influences both digital transformation and organizational performance, with relationship-oriented and participative leadership being more supportive of transformation than task-oriented approaches.

The literature further suggests that social capital and shared leadership are mutually reinforcing. Social capital creates trust, cooperation, and access to knowledge, whereas shared leadership enables organizational members to collectively mobilize these resources. Their interaction can strengthen knowledge integration, absorptive capacity, innovation, and adaptive capability. Consequently, organizational outcomes may emerge through a sequence in which social capital provides resources, shared leadership mobilizes collective action, organizational capabilities transform resources into strategic benefits, and digital transformation enables their application.

Overall, the literature supports an integrated perspective in which social capital provides relational resources, shared leadership mobilizes collective expertise, organizational capabilities facilitate knowledge integration and adaptation, and digital transformation converts these capabilities into organizational performance. The relationship is therefore not purely linear but dependent on contextual conditions, capability development, and the organization's capacity to combine social, leadership, and technological resources effectively.

3. Methods

This study employs a qualitative systematic literature review (SLR) to examine the interplay among social capital, shared leadership, and digital transformation and their implications for organizational capability development and performance. A qualitative SLR is

appropriate for synthesizing fragmented and interdisciplinary knowledge because it enables transparent identification, evaluation, and interpretation of theoretical mechanisms, relationships, and contextual conditions rather than statistical aggregation of effect sizes (Snyder, 2019).

The review follows the principles of PRISMA 2020 to improve transparency in study identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion (Page et al., 2021). The methodological process consists of six stages: (1) formulating research questions, (2) developing a search strategy, (3) identifying relevant studies, (4) screening and assessing eligibility, (5) conducting quality assessment and data extraction, and (6) performing qualitative thematic synthesis.

The review aims to explain how social capital, shared leadership, and digital transformation interact in shaping organizational capabilities and performance. The research questions examine: (1) the role of social capital in capability development and performance; (2) the contribution of shared leadership to coordination and knowledge integration; (3) mechanisms linking social capital with digital transformation; (4) the role of shared leadership in transformation processes; (5) the combined effects of the three constructs on performance; and (6) the organizational capabilities that connect relational resources, leadership, transformation, and performance.

The search strategy is structured around five domains: social capital, shared leadership, digital transformation, organizational performance, and organizational capability development. Boolean search strings combine related terms, including relational capital, distributed leadership, digitalization, Industry 4.0, dynamic capability, digital capability, absorptive capacity, and innovation capability. Additional keyword combinations are used because relevant studies may examine only selected relationships rather than all constructs simultaneously.

The search prioritizes internationally recognized academic databases and peer-reviewed sources, while supplementary searches may identify influential studies and citation networks. The review includes both foundational and recent research to capture theoretical development and emerging digital transformation evidence.

Studies are included when they are academically credible, relevant to at least one core construct, theoretically or empirically informative, organizationally relevant, available in English, and accessible in full text. Studies are excluded when they lack scholarly quality, sufficient methodological information, or relevance to the conceptual relationships under investigation.

The selection process consists of four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Duplicate records are removed, titles and abstracts are screened, full texts are assessed, and eligible studies are included in the final synthesis. The process is documented using a PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Page et al., 2021).

The methodological quality of included studies is assessed based on the clarity of research objectives, theoretical foundation, research design, data collection and analysis procedures, validity and reliability, consistency between evidence and conclusions, and relevance to the research questions. Because the review may include quantitative, qualitative, mixed-method, conceptual, and review studies, the assessment emphasizes rigor and relevance rather than methodological uniformity.

A standardized data extraction form records bibliographic information, research context, methodology, theoretical foundations, key constructs, capability variables, performance outcomes, major findings, and contextual factors. This process supports the systematic identification of recurring patterns while preserving differences across organizational contexts.

The final analysis uses qualitative thematic synthesis to identify recurring concepts, mechanisms, relationships, and contextual conditions across the literature. Findings are extracted and coded, descriptive codes are grouped into broader themes, and these themes are interpreted to explain the interaction among social capital, shared leadership, digital transformation, organizational capabilities, and performance.

The main analytical themes include: Social capital as a relational resource; Shared leadership as a collective coordination mechanism; Social capital as an enabler of capability development; Shared leadership and digital transformation; Digital transformation as a capability-based process; Organizational performance outcomes; and

Contextual and boundary conditions.

The synthesis integrates these themes into the following analytical logic: Social Capital → Access to Knowledge and Resources → Shared Leadership → Collective Coordination

and Knowledge Integration → Organizational Capability Development → Digital Transformation Capability → Organizational Performance.

The analysis also considers reciprocal and moderating relationships, particularly the possibility that social capital strengthens the effects of shared leadership and digital transformation on organizational performance.

Trustworthiness is enhanced through predefined search strings, transparent inclusion criteria, PRISMA-guided screening, structured data extraction, study quality assessment, and iterative thematic analysis (Snyder, 2019; Page et al., 2021). Ethical principles are maintained by accurately representing previous studies, avoiding plagiarism, applying consistent selection procedures, and providing appropriate citations.

This qualitative SLR systematically synthesizes fragmented research to explain not only whether relationships exist among the key constructs, but also how social capital provides relational resources, shared leadership mobilizes collective expertise, organizational capabilities facilitate adaptation, and digital transformation contributes to sustainable organizational performance.

4. Results

The qualitative synthesis indicates that social capital, shared leadership, digital transformation, organizational capability development, and organizational performance form an interconnected socio-organizational system. These factors interact through relational, leadership, learning, and technological mechanisms, demonstrating that technology alone is insufficient to generate sustainable performance benefits. Organizations require relational resources, collective leadership, and adaptive capabilities to acquire knowledge, coordinate change, and reconfigure resources.

The findings are organized into five themes: social capital as a strategic relational resource, shared leadership as a collective transformation mechanism, organizational capability development as a connecting mechanism, digital transformation as a driver of multidimensional performance, and the moderating role of social capital.

First, social capital provides access to external knowledge, business relationships, technological expertise, institutional support, trust, and collaborative opportunities. Adler and Kwon (2002) emphasized that social capital consists of resources embedded in social relationships. Ul Zia et al. (2023) further found that inter-organizational social capital strengthened Industry 4.0 readiness through innovative capability. Thus, social capital should not be viewed only as a direct predictor of performance because its value often depends on the organization's ability to transform relational resources into innovative capability, absorptive capacity, and digital readiness.

Second, shared leadership mobilizes distributed expertise during digital transformation. Because transformation requires contributions from executives, managers, digital specialists, employees, and external partners, collective decision-making, participation, relationship-building, and knowledge integration become increasingly important. Ho (2025) found that shared leadership positively influenced digital transformation and firm performance among Vietnamese SMEs, particularly through relationship-oriented, representative, and participative leadership behaviors.

Third, organizational capability development emerges as the central mechanism connecting social capital and shared leadership with digital transformation and organizational performance. Social capital provides access to knowledge and resources, while shared leadership enables their collective interpretation and mobilization. However, performance improvements depend on the development of innovative, absorptive, digital, knowledge integration, adaptive, and dynamic capabilities. Ul Zia et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of innovative capability and absorptive capacity, while Samsuden et al. (2024) demonstrated that digital capabilities are closely associated with business performance.

Fourth, digital transformation contributes to multidimensional organizational performance. Its outcomes include improved financial performance, operational efficiency, innovation, organizational responsiveness, customer value, strategic flexibility, and long-term competitiveness. Ho (2025) found that digital transformation significantly improved firm performance, while Samsuden et al. (2024) showed that digital capabilities influence performance beyond financial indicators.

Finally, social capital may also function as a moderating and enabling resource. Ho (2025) found that external social capital strengthened the relationships between shared leadership and firm performance and between digital transformation and firm performance, although its

direct effect on digital transformation was insignificant. This suggests that social capital may create favorable conditions through access to technological expertise, market information, institutional support, financial resources, and knowledge-sharing opportunities.

Overall, the review supports the following integrated framework: Social Capital → Access to Knowledge and Resources → Shared Leadership → Collective Coordination and Knowledge Integration → Organizational Capability Development → Digital Transformation Capability → Organizational Performance.

Social capital may simultaneously strengthen the relationships between shared leadership, digital transformation, and organizational performance. Organizational performance and capability development in the digital era are shaped by the interaction of relational, leadership, and technological resources. Social capital creates relational capacity, shared leadership mobilizes collective expertise, organizational capabilities transform resources into digital readiness, and digital transformation translates these capabilities into multidimensional organizational performance. Future research should therefore examine these factors as an integrated configuration rather than as isolated variables, particularly by exploring capability-mediated relationships, the moderating role of social capital, and differences across organizational and institutional contexts.

5. Discussion

The findings of this qualitative systematic literature review demonstrate that social capital, shared leadership, digital transformation, organizational capability development, and organizational performance are fundamentally interdependent. Digital transformation should therefore not be viewed as a purely technological process because its success depends on relational resources, collective leadership, organizational learning, and the ability to reconfigure resources. Organizational capability development emerges as the central mechanism connecting social capital and shared leadership with digital transformation and performance (Samsuden et al., 2024).

Regarding social capital, the review confirms that relationships provide access to external knowledge, technological expertise, business networks, and complementary resources (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Ul Zia et al. (2023) found that inter-organizational social capital enhanced Industry 4.0 readiness through innovative capability, supporting the argument that relational resources become strategically valuable when transformed into organizational capabilities. The present review further positions social capital within a broader relational leadership capability system, where shared leadership and organizational capabilities determine whether externally accessed knowledge can be effectively mobilized.

However, the role of social capital may be context dependent. Ho (2025) found no significant direct effect of social capital on digital transformation among Vietnamese SMEs, although it strengthened the relationships between shared leadership and firm performance as well as digital transformation and firm performance. Thus, social capital may function either as a capability-enabling resource or as a moderating condition that amplifies leadership and transformation outcomes.

The review also emphasizes shared leadership as a critical mechanism for digital transformation. Since digital transformation requires expertise distributed across managers, specialists, employees, and external partners, organizational change cannot depend solely on vertical leadership. Shared leadership supports collective decision-making, knowledge integration, and coordinated problem-solving (Pearce & Conger, 2003; D'Innocenzo et al., 2014). Ho (2025) further found that relationship-oriented, representative, and participative leadership positively supported digital transformation and firm performance.

A central contribution of the review is the identification of organizational capability development as the bridge between resources and performance. Technology investments alone do not guarantee improved outcomes because organizations must develop the ability to absorb knowledge, integrate technologies, redesign routines, and adapt to changing environments. Samsuden et al. (2024) similarly demonstrated that digital capabilities are strongly associated with multidimensional business performance. The present review extends this perspective by explaining that digital capabilities can be strengthened through social capital and shared leadership: Social Capital → Shared Leadership → Capability Development → Digital Transformation → Organizational Performance.

Digital capability should therefore be understood as an organizational outcome produced through relational learning, collective leadership, knowledge integration, and resource reconfiguration.

Comparison with eight previous studies further demonstrates the contribution of this review. Adler and Kwon (2002) emphasized relational resources embedded in social networks, while Koka and Prescott (2002) highlighted strategic alliances as forms of social capital. D'Innocenzo et al. (2014) demonstrated the positive relationship between shared leadership and team performance, whereas Nwankpa and Roumani (2016) connected IT capability and digital transformation with firm performance. Rodrigo-Alarcón et al. (2018) identified dynamic capabilities as a mediator between social capital and entrepreneurial orientation, while Lyu et al. (2022) linked social capital with innovation through knowledge search and absorptive capacity. Ul Zia et al. (2023) demonstrated the role of innovative and absorptive capabilities in Industry 4.0 readiness, and Ho (2025) provided direct evidence that shared leadership and digital transformation improve performance while social capital strengthens key relationships.

Taken together, these studies show that earlier research has often examined selected relationships separately. Social capital research has emphasized networks and knowledge access, shared leadership research has focused on collective influence and performance, and digital transformation research has highlighted technological capabilities. The present review integrates these fragmented perspectives into a unified explanatory framework.

The findings can also be interpreted through the Resource-Based View (RBV). Social capital represents a relational resource, while shared leadership mobilizes distributed expertise. However, resources alone do not create sustainable competitive advantage; organizations must combine and deploy them effectively. The review therefore supports a capability-based interpretation in which social capital provides resource access, shared leadership mobilizes collective knowledge, organizational capabilities enable learning and reconfiguration, and digital transformation converts these capabilities into operational and strategic value.

Finally, organizational performance should be interpreted as multidimensional, encompassing financial performance, operational efficiency, innovation, learning, adaptability, and strategic responsiveness. The strongest outcomes are likely to occur when social capital, shared leadership, and digital capabilities operate simultaneously. Strong networks may have limited value without collective leadership, while technology investments may fail without learning and adaptive capabilities.

Overall, the review concludes that sustainable organizational performance emerges from the complementarity of relational, leadership, technological, and capability resources. Social capital functions as both a strategic resource and moderating condition; shared leadership operates as both a leadership approach and a collective capability; and digital transformation represents both technological change and organizational capability building. The resulting integrated mechanism is: Social Capital → Relational Resource Access → Shared Leadership and Collective Mobilization → Organizational Capability Development → Digital Transformation → Multidimensional Organizational Performance.

Social capital may also strengthen the effects of shared leadership and digital transformation, creating a reinforcing cycle among relational resources, collective leadership, capability development, and performance.

6. Conclusions

This qualitative systematic literature review examined the interplay among social capital, shared leadership, digital transformation, organizational capability development, and organizational performance. The findings indicate that these constructs form an interconnected organizational system in which relational resources, collective leadership, technological transformation, and capability development reinforce one another.

Social capital provides a strategic relational foundation by facilitating access to knowledge, technological expertise, complementary resources, and institutional support through networks, trust, and collaboration. However, its value depends on the organization's ability to absorb, integrate, and utilize these resources. Shared leadership further strengthens this process by promoting participation, distributed decision making, knowledge sharing, and cross-functional coordination, thereby transforming individual expertise into collective organizational action.

Organizational capability development represents the central mechanism connecting social capital, shared leadership, digital transformation, and performance. Relational resources and collaborative leadership generate value when organizations develop learning, innovation, knowledge integration, adaptive, absorptive, digital, and dynamic capabilities. Digital

transformation should therefore be viewed not merely as technology adoption, but as a socio-technical and capability-building process integrating technology with leadership, learning, knowledge management, employee participation, and resource reconfiguration.

Organizational performance extends beyond financial outcomes to include operational efficiency, innovation, adaptability, strategic flexibility, customer responsiveness, and long-term sustainability. Overall, the review supports the pathway: Social Capital → Knowledge and Resource Access → Shared Leadership → Capability Development → Digital Transformation → Multidimensional Organizational Performance. These relationships are reciprocal and reinforcing.

The main theoretical contribution is a relational leadership capability transformation performance perspective integrating previously fragmented research streams. Managerially, organizations should simultaneously strengthen trust and networks, collaborative leadership, employee participation, organizational capabilities, and digital infrastructure, rather than relying on technology-centered initiatives alone.

7. Limitations

Despite its theoretical and practical contributions, this qualitative systematic literature review has several limitations. First, relevant studies may have been excluded due to database coverage, search terms, publication types, language restrictions, or differences in terminology. Second, considerable conceptual and methodological heterogeneity exists in how social capital, shared leadership, digital transformation, organizational capabilities, and performance are defined and measured, limiting direct comparison across studies.

Third, contextual diversity across countries, industries, organizational sizes, and institutional environments may influence the relationships among the key constructs. Fourth, qualitative thematic synthesis identifies recurring patterns and mechanisms but does not measure the statistical strength of relationships; future studies could therefore employ meta-analysis, bibliometric analysis, and large-scale empirical testing. Fifth, publication bias and the prevalence of cross-sectional studies may limit evidence concerning contradictory findings and causal relationships.

Finally, the review primarily focuses on the organizational level, while these constructs also operate at individual, team, and interorganizational levels. Future research should adopt longitudinal, multilevel, cross-country, and sector-specific approaches to examine mediating and moderating mechanisms and how emerging technologies reshape these relationships.

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