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Strategic Digital Leadership in Marketing Ecosystems: A Qualitative Exploration

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Abstract. This qualitative study examines how strategic digital leadership shapes coordination and value co-creation within marketing ecosystems in Indonesia. Through in-depth interviews with chief marketing officers, digital directors, and ecosystem managers, we identify three leadership dimensions: vision-setting, ecosystem orchestration, and data-driven innovation. Findings reveal that effective digital leaders function as ecosystem architects, balancing competitive positioning with collaborative value creation. Key contributions include a framework linking digital leadership capabilities to governance structures and outcomes and context-specific insights for emerging markets. The research expands strategic leadership theory to platform ecosystems, offering practical advice for leaders, policymakers, and ecosystem orchestrators.

1 Introduction

Indonesia's digital ecosystem (with 275 million internet users and a $40 billion e-commerce market) exemplifies rapid digital transformation in emerging markets (Wiweko & Anggara, 2025). Yet this transformation extends beyond technology adoption; it restructures how organizations create value across interdependent networks. Marketing ecosystems (networks of platforms, agencies, complementors, and consumers co-creating value) represent a shift from firm-centric to network-centric competition (Karunakaran et al., 2025).

Understudied in ecosystem contexts, strategic digital leadership (the ability to coordinate digital and organizational resources for sustained advantage) is crucial.

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Leadership research typically focuses on internal transformation rather than multi-stakeholder coordination. Emerging markets present distinctive challenges: infrastructure heterogeneity, digital literacy variations, and inclusive growth imperatives that require context-adapted leadership.

This study looks at three important questions: (1) how leadership affects teamwork and creating value in ecosystems, (2) how leadership styles differ in developing countries, and (3) how leaders manage to create worth together while dealing with competition. Through qualitative analysis, we generate a framework linking digital leadership capabilities to ecosystem governance and outcomes, with specific insights for emerging markets.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Strategic Digital Leadership

2.1.1 Strategic Leadership Theory

Strategic leadership includes the mental and behavioral skills needed to lead organizations to long-term competitive advantage while dealing with uncertain and complicated situations (Alhameed & Emeagwali, 2026). The role of a strategic leader goes beyond just managing daily operations to also include (1) looking at the environment and understanding it, (2) getting everyone involved to agree on common goals, (3) organizing resources and developing skills, and (4) establishing

In digital contexts, strategic leadership assumes heightened importance because technological disruption fundamentally alters competitive dynamics, customer relationships, and organizational capabilities. Leaders must simultaneously operate at multiple temporal horizons, optimizing existing value delivery while exploring emerging technologies and business models (Suljic, 2025). This requires distinctive cognitive frameworks, organizational design, and stakeholder engagement approaches.

2.1.2 Digital Leadership Capabilities

Digital leadership capabilities are understood as integrated competency sets enabling leaders to guide digital transformation. Key dimensions include (Liu et al., 2026):

1. Digital Vision and Sense-Making: The capacity to synthesize emerging technologies, market trends, and organizational capabilities into coherent strategic narratives that inspire stakeholder commitment
2. Data-Driven Decision-Making: The ability to translate data analytics, consumer insights, and performance metrics into strategic choices while maintaining human judgment and ethical grounding (Nurani et al., 2025)
3. Agile Orchestration: The competency to coordinate fluid, cross-functional teams and external partners using iterative processes, rapid experimentation, and adaptive governance (Rajamani & Ramakrishnan, 2025)

4. Ecosystem Thinking: Understanding complex interdependencies among platform participants, complementary value creation, and systemic optimization beyond firm boundaries (Karunakaran et al., 2025)
5. Digital Literacy and Technical Fluency: Sufficient understanding of digital technologies, data governance, cybersecurity, and AI to engage meaningfully with technical specialists and make informed strategic choices (Shah, 2025)

2.1.3 Leadership in Digital Transformation Contexts

Digital transformation leadership differs fundamentally from traditional change management. Rather than top-down implementation of predetermined solutions, digital transformation requires leaders to create enabling conditions for continuous organizational renewal (Sestino et al., 2024). This involves establishing innovation-oriented cultures that embrace experimentation and managed failure, building distributed decision-making capability rather than centralized authority, fostering cross-functional collaboration and breaking down silos, and developing mechanisms for rapid learning and adaptation.

Research emphasizes that digital transformation success depends less on technology adoption than on leadership's capacity to align organizational culture, capability development, and strategic intent (Alhameed & Emeagwali, 2026). This is especially important in new markets, where differences in digital literacy and limited infrastructure mean that leaders need to be aware of and adapt to different cultures.

2.2 Marketing Ecosystems

2.2.1 Ecosystem Theory

Business ecosystems are defined as "communities of organizations, institutions, and individuals interacting with a shared set of evolving technologies, regulations, and customer needs" (Karunakaran et al., 2025). Unlike traditional industry structures where firms occupy defined competitive positions, ecosystems feature:

1. Interdependence: Value creation depends on contributions from diverse actors (platforms, complementors, service providers, end users)
2. Co-evolution: Ecosystem participants simultaneously compete and collaborate, with each actor's success depending on ecosystem health (Cozzolino et al., 2021)
3. Distributed Governance: Rather than hierarchical control, ecosystems rely on governance mechanisms including platform policies, standard-setting, incentive structures, and trust-building (Shaikh & Bogers, 2025)
4. Network Effects: Value increases non-linearly as more participants engage, creating powerful incumbent advantages but also barriers to entry for new participants

Platform ecosystems (ecosystems built around digital platforms connecting diverse users) have emerged as dominant organizational forms in digital markets. These platforms (such as Shopee, Tokopedia, Gojek, and emerging Indonesian platforms) facilitate transactions, information exchange, and value co-creation among millions of participants globally.

2.2.2 Platform Ecosystems and Value Co-Creation

Platform ecosystems function through coordinated value creation across multiple participant categories. Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) views value as something created collaboratively by various participants in the ecosystem, rather than being produced by companies and consumed by customers (Karunakaran et al.). In platform ecosystems, value co-creation manifests through:

1. Co-Design and Innovation: Complementors develop applications, content, and services leveraging platform capabilities, with platforms enabling this through boundary resources and governance mechanisms (Heimburg et al., 2025)
2. Co-Production: End users contribute data, reviews, and content that enhance platform value for other participants (Lu & Chen, 2024)
3. Co-Promotion: Marketing partners, influencers, and brand ambassadors amplify platform reach and credibility (Wiweko & Anggara, 2025)
4. Data-Driven Personalization: Platforms leverage user data and analytics to enhance experience quality and match supply with demand (Andaru et al., 2025)

To create value in an ecosystem, it's important to have what experts call "ecosystem orchestration", this means having leaders who bring together different participants, set up rules, create rewards, and help share knowledge.

2.1.3 Ecosystem Governance and Coordination

Marketing ecosystem governance encompasses the formal and informal mechanisms through which platform leaders guide participant behavior, allocate resources, and manage conflicts (Shaikh & Bogers, 2025). Key governance dimensions include:

1. Platform Rules and Policies: Explicit guidelines governing participant behavior, transaction terms, intellectual property, and dispute resolution
2. Incentive Structures: Mechanisms (commissions, bonuses, recognition, priority placement) that align participant interests with platform objectives
3. Trust and Reputation Systems: Technologies and processes enabling participants to evaluate counterpart reliability and commitment (Sun et al., 2025)
4. Collaborative Governance: Mechanisms including multi-stakeholder councils, feedback loops, and co-design processes that distribute governance authority (Conway et al., 2024)

Research on innovation ecosystems highlights how important orchestrators are—these are the people or groups that keep everything working smoothly, help share knowledge, manage connections, and lower costs for everyone involved. In marketing ecosystems, orchestrators typically include the platform owner, leading agencies, and industry associations.

2.3 Integrative Conceptual Model

This study proposes a combined model that links digital leadership skills, managing ecosystems, and the outcomes of creating value by integrating concepts from strategic digital leadership theory, ecosystem theory, and value co-creation perspectives.

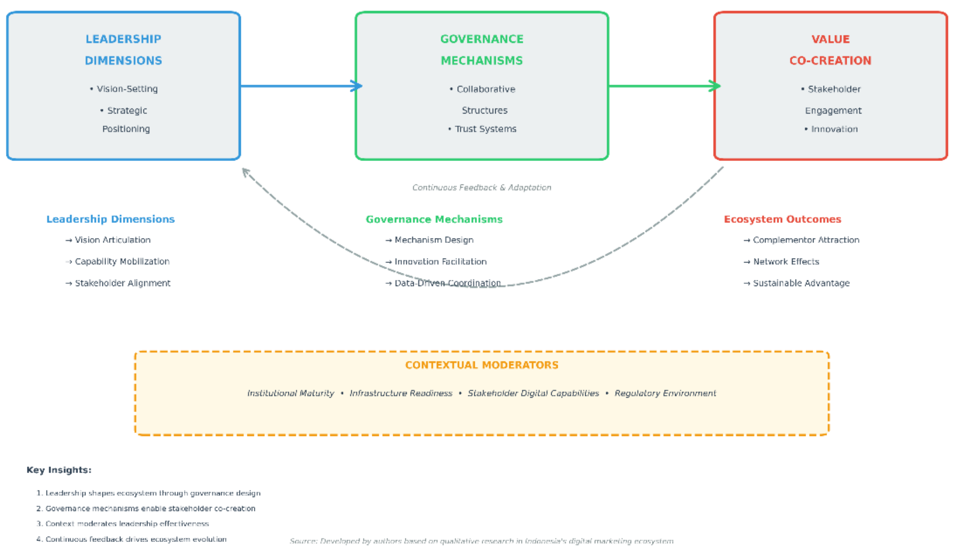

Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework of Strategic Digital Leadership in Marketing Ecosystems (Author, 2026)

The framework posits that strategic digital leaders shape ecosystem performance through three interconnected mechanisms:

1. Leadership Dimensions (Antecedents):
   a. Vision-Setting: Articulating compelling ecosystem narratives that inspire participation
   b. Strategic Positioning: Defining platform value proposition and competitive differentiation
   c. Capability Mobilization: Developing and coordinating human, technological, and relational resources
2. Ecosystem Governance Mechanisms (Mediators):
   a. Collaborative Governance: Structures enabling multi-stakeholder voice and participation
   b. Trust-Building Systems: Mechanisms fostering reliability, transparency, and fairness
   c. Innovation Facilitation: Processes enabling experimentation, learning, and rapid adaptation

3. Value Co-Creation Outcomes (Outcomes):
    a. Stakeholder Engagement: Active participation by complementors, partners, and end users
    b. Innovation Performance: New product/service introductions, process improvements, business model innovations
    c. Sustainable Competitive Advantage: Resilience to competitive threats, adaptability to market changes, inclusive growth

This framework acknowledges that leadership effectiveness depends not only on leader competencies but also on ecosystem context—institutional maturity, infrastructure readiness, stakeholder capabilities, and regulatory frameworks. In emerging markets like Indonesia, leadership must explicitly address these contextual factors through adaptive governance and inclusive engagement.

3 Results And Discussion

Leadership Dimensions: The analysis shows three main leadership roles: (1) Vision-Setting, creating clear value ideas and growth stories that encourage people to get involved (Wiweko & Anggara, 2025); (2) Ecosystem Orchestration, coordinating different stakeholders through structured partnerships, shared decision-making, and designing systems for cooperation (like how to handle disputes and work together on projects) (Shaikh & Bogers, 2025); and (3) Data-Driven.

Governance and Value Co-Creation: Successful ecosystems create various systems, including formal partnership levels with different types of support, peer-to-peer knowledge groups that enhance connections, programs that help partners grow their skills, and innovation spaces that protect new ideas (Conway et al.). One platform manager noted, "Effective orchestration isn't maximizing platform capturem it's designing value chains where complementors are profitable, customers gain value, and platforms receive adequate return."

Strategic Outcomes: Great leadership leads to (1) attracting and keeping more partners because they feel a real commitment; (2) strengthening network effects that create strong competitive advantages; (3) growing inclusively to reach more potential customers; and (4) making the ecosystem stronger through a diverse group of partners and teamwork.

Table 1. Digital Leadership Behaviors and Ecosystem Impact (Author, 2026)

Behavior	Description	Impact
Vision Articulation	Compelling narratives on platform value & inclusive growth	Attracts aligned complementors
Stakeholder Mapping	Identifying key actors, designing differentiated engagement	Ensures diverse stakeholder needs addressed
Mechanism Design	Governance structures, incentive systems, fairness protocols	Enables value distribution alignment

Behavior	Description	Impact
Trust Building	Transparency, accountability, performance visibility	Strengthens collaboration, reduces transaction costs
Collaborative Governance	Multi-stakeholder councils and feedback structures	Builds commitment, surfaces innovations
Data-Driven Orchestration	Analytics for health monitoring and optimization	Evidence-based leadership decisions
Innovation Facilitation	Sandbox environments, accelerators, feedback loops	Drives experimentation and adaptation

Table 2. Ecosystem Actors and Leadership Roles (Author, 2026)

Actor	Primary Interests	Leadership Role
Complementors	Profitability, capability, transparency	Support, co-design, fair revenue sharing
Platform Leader	Growth, sustainability, positioning	Vision, orchestration, governance
Customers	Value, convenience, trust	Experience design, fairness
Technology Partners	Innovation opportunities	Integration support, co-development
Government/Industry	Market development, standards	Policy alignment, transparency

4 Conclusion

Strategic digital leadership improves how ecosystems perform in three ways: (1) creating clear and inspiring visions, (2) setting up governance structures that allow for teamwork, and (3) promoting innovation through shared leadership (Karunak

This study improves strategic leadership theory by viewing leadership as a set of social practices (like setting visions, coordinating efforts, and designing systems) that help ecosystems work better, instead of just seeing it as personal traits. Focusing on Indonesia's unique situation (where infrastructure varies and there's a need for inclusive growth) questions Western ideas and shows that successful leadership in emerging markets needs to focus on building skills and developing institutions. The research integrates governance and value co-creation theory, showing how transparent, fair mechanisms enable stakeholders to create rather than merely transact value.

Practical Implications: Marketing leaders must shift from firm-centric to ecosystem-centric thinking, balancing competitive positioning with partner value creation. Platform organizations ought to allocate resources toward the enhancement of partner capabilities and the establishment of multi-stakeholder governance to facilitate the distribution of decision-making. Policymakers should support institutional development, infrastructure readiness, and inclusive frameworks while enabling experimentation.

Limitations: Findings are context-specific to Indonesia; longitudinal analysis would reveal leadership evolution across ecosystem life cycles; quantitative validation would strengthen outcome relationships. Future Research: This study could be expanded by comparing different emerging markets, focusing on studies that center around complementary businesses, and looking into new ways of governing, like decentralized organizations and blockchain

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