

Transformational Leadership and Strategic Innovation in Cambodia's Digital Media Sector: Evidence from an Emerging Economy

Yorn Sophearith
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Swiss School of Business Research (SSBR)*

Abstract

Cambodia's digital media sector has experienced substantial transformation alongside the expansion of internet connectivity, social media, e-commerce, digital payments, and technology-enabled business practices. This changing environment creates strategic challenges for locally established digital enterprises seeking to sustain growth while responding to technological disruption, workforce capability constraints, evolving consumer behaviour, regulatory requirements, and competition from global digital platforms. This study examines how transformational leadership contributes to strategic innovation and organizational adaptability within Cambodia's emerging digital media sector, drawing on the organizational experience of BizKhmer Digital Media between 2020 and 2025.

Developed from research undertaken as part of a PhD by Portfolio, the study adopts an organizational case-based approach integrating portfolio evidence, organizational experience, and secondary academic, industry, and policy sources. Transformational leadership provides the principal theoretical lens, complemented by strategic-management perspectives concerning organizational capabilities, continuous improvement, competitive positioning, and adaptation. The analysis focuses particularly on leadership practices related to employee empowerment, delegation, workforce development, knowledge transfer, technology adoption, and strategic responses to changes in Cambodia's digital business environment.

The analysis indicates that transformational leadership within the organizational case is closely connected with efforts to strengthen employee participation, continuous learning, digital capability development, and organizational adaptation. The study further highlights the importance of contextualizing leadership practices within Cambodia's cultural, institutional, and market environment, particularly where interpersonal relationships, trust, workforce capabilities, regulatory conditions, and rapidly changing digital technologies influence strategic decision-making.

The article proposes an integrative framework connecting transformational leadership, employee empowerment and knowledge development, digital capability, and strategic innovation and organizational adaptability. It contributes a context-sensitive perspective to the study of leadership and digital transformation in an emerging economy while providing practical implications for digital-media entrepreneurs and organizational leaders operating in Cambodia and comparable developing-market environments.

Keywords: transformational leadership; strategic innovation; digital transformation; digital media; organizational adaptability; emerging economy; Cambodia

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Context

Digital transformation has altered the competitive foundations of media, marketing, and knowledge-intensive enterprises. Digital platforms, social media, data analytics, artificial intelligence, e-commerce, and digitally mediated customer relationships increasingly influence how firms create value, organize work, reach markets, and respond to competitive change (Bharadwaj et al., 2013; Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021). These developments make digital transformation not simply a technological issue, but an organizational and strategic challenge involving leadership, capabilities, structures, learning, and business-model adaptation (Hanelt et al., 2021; Warner & Wäger, 2019).

Cambodia provides a relevant emerging-economy setting in which to examine these relationships. National digital-development strategies emphasize the expansion of a digital economy, digital capabilities,

and workforce skills, while research on Cambodian enterprises continues to identify capability and adoption constraints among MSMEs (Kanayama et al., 2025; Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2021; Ministry of Post and Telecommunications, 2024; Roth et al., 2021). Within this environment, local digital enterprises must respond simultaneously to changing technologies, customer behaviour, workforce-development needs, platform dependence, and evolving competitive conditions.

Leadership is therefore potentially important not only for setting strategic direction but also for developing the people and organizational capabilities required to translate technological opportunities into organizational adaptation.

1.2 Organizational Context

BizKhmer Digital Media provides the focal organizational case. The organization developed from a Cambodian media initiative into a broader digital-marketing and technology-enabled service organization. During the 2020–2025 research period, its professional practice included digital media, marketing services, workforce development, technology adoption, knowledge transfer, and strategic diversification.

The longitudinal case offers an opportunity to examine digital transformation as an organizational process rather than as a single technology-adoption event. It also provides a setting in which leadership practices can be considered alongside employee development, internal learning, digital capability, and strategic adaptation.

1.3 Research Problem

Transformational leadership theory emphasizes vision, motivation, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and the capacity of leaders to influence followers beyond transactional exchange (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Yet the relationship between transformational leadership and digital transformation should not be assumed to operate directly. Digital transformation requires organizational capabilities, learning, technology integration, and strategic renewal (Hanelt et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2023; Warner & Wäger, 2019).

A further challenge concerns context. Leadership theories developed largely through international scholarship may remain useful in Cambodia, but their organizational expression may be shaped by interpersonal trust, hierarchy, relationships, workforce conditions, and institutional development. The research problem is therefore not simply whether transformational leadership is beneficial, but how leadership interacts with people, knowledge, digital capability, and contextual conditions to support strategic innovation and organizational adaptability in a Cambodian digital enterprise.

1.4 Research Questions

Central research question: How does transformational leadership contribute to strategic innovation and organizational adaptability in Cambodia's emerging digital media sector?

1. How are transformational leadership practices manifested within the organizational case?
2. How do employee development, knowledge transfer, and digital capability contribute to strategic innovation and organizational adaptation?
3. How does Cambodia's cultural, institutional, and market context shape these relationships?

1.5 Purpose and Contribution

The purpose of this study is theory building and contextual understanding rather than statistical representation of Cambodian enterprises. It examines one longitudinal organizational case and develops a

framework connecting leadership, empowerment and knowledge development, digital capability, and strategic adaptation.

The intended contribution is threefold. First, the study provides a Cambodia-focused interpretation of transformational leadership within a digitally changing private enterprise. Second, it connects leadership with workforce development, knowledge transfer, and digital capability rather than assuming a direct leadership-to-performance relationship. Third, it develops the Cambodian Digital Leadership–Innovation Framework (CDLIF) as a case-derived framework for subsequent empirical testing.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Transformational Leadership in Digitally Changing Organizations

Transformational leadership provides the principal theoretical foundation for this study. Bass and Riggio (2006) conceptualize transformational leadership through behaviours that elevate motivation, development, intellectual engagement, and commitment. Broader leadership research likewise emphasizes the importance of leader–follower processes, trust, development, and contextual conditions (Avolio et al., 2009; Podsakoff et al., 1990).

For digitally changing organizations, the relevance of transformational leadership lies not only in motivation but also in its potential to create conditions for experimentation, learning, delegation, and capability development. Recent research has connected transformational and adaptive leadership with dynamic capabilities in digital-transformation projects (Huang et al., 2023), while emerging-economy evidence indicates that IT-enabled dynamic capabilities and organizational readiness can mediate the relationship between transformational leadership and digital business-model innovation (Montasser et al., 2023).

2.2 Transformational Leadership in the Cambodian Context

Cross-cultural frameworks such as Hofstede et al. (2010) and the GLOBE study (House et al., 2004) provide lenses for considering how hierarchy, collectivism, and social relationships may influence leadership practices. Such frameworks should not be treated as deterministic descriptions of Cambodian employees. Rather, they help identify contextual questions concerning how authority, trust, interpersonal relationships, and participation may interact.

The BizKhmer case is therefore used to examine how established leadership concepts are expressed in one Cambodian organizational setting rather than to assume that international leadership theory transfers unchanged across contexts.

2.3 Transformational Leadership and Digital Transformation

Digital transformation extends beyond the adoption of individual technologies. It involves changes in value creation, organizational processes, capabilities, structures, and strategy (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021). Systematic reviews likewise show that digital transformation is deeply connected with organizational change and strategy (Hanelt et al., 2021; Nadkarni & Prügl, 2021).

In this study, digital transformation is therefore interpreted as a socio-organizational capability-building process in which technology, people, knowledge, and strategic decision-making interact.

2.4 Employee Empowerment and Knowledge Development

Employee empowerment is relevant because delegation alone does not ensure that employees possess the confidence, knowledge, or capability to act effectively. Spreitzer (1995) conceptualizes psychological empowerment through meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Learning environments also depend on conditions in which employees can ask questions, experiment, and learn from errors (Edmondson, 1999).

Knowledge development provides an additional mechanism. Nonaka (1994) emphasizes organizational knowledge creation as a dynamic process rather than the accumulation of isolated individual expertise. For digital enterprises, the strategic value of training therefore depends partly on whether individual learning can be shared, applied, and embedded within organizational practice.

2.5 Digital Capability as a Bridge

Digital capability is broader than digital literacy. It concerns the ability to combine technological resources with human skills, organizational processes, and strategic application. Digital business strategy increasingly blurs the separation between IT strategy and business strategy (Bharadwaj et al., 2013), while contemporary SME research associates digital capability with business-model innovation and organizational performance (Fang et al., 2024; Prakasa & Jumani, 2024).

This study consequently positions digital capability as a bridge between employee knowledge development and strategic adaptation.

2.6 Strategic Innovation and Organizational Adaptability

Strategic innovation is interpreted broadly to include service innovation, process adaptation, technology integration, capability development, and business-model change. Dynamic-capabilities theory provides an important foundation for understanding how organizations sense opportunities and threats, seize opportunities, and reconfigure resources in changing environments (Teece, 2007; Teece et al., 1997).

Digital transformation can therefore be viewed as an ongoing process of strategic renewal rather than a one-time technological project (Warner & Wäger, 2019).

2.7 Cambodia Research Gap

Cambodia-specific evidence increasingly recognizes the importance of digital capability. Roth et al. (2021) examine demand for and supply of digital skills in Cambodia, while Kanayama et al. (2025) identify barriers to digital adoption among Cambodian MSMEs. Official policy frameworks likewise position digital capability and skills development as national priorities (Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2021; Ministry of Post and Telecommunications, 2024).

Leadership research is also emerging. Ly (2025) examines leadership and digital transformation in Cambodia's public sector. However, less is known about the organizational processes through which leadership, employee development, knowledge transfer, and digital capability interact to support strategic innovation within entrepreneur-led Cambodian digital enterprises. This study addresses that process-oriented and private-sector gap through an in-depth organizational case.

2.8 Cambodian Digital Leadership-Innovation Framework (CDLIF)

The literature and organizational evidence are integrated through the Cambodian Digital Leadership-Innovation Framework (CDLIF). The framework contains four interconnected domains: (1) transformational leadership; (2) employee empowerment and knowledge development; (3) digital capability development; and (4) strategic innovation and organizational adaptability.

The framework is recursive rather than strictly linear. Strategic adaptation generates new experience and learning, which can influence subsequent leadership decisions, employee development, and capability formation. The process is embedded within contextual conditions including interpersonal trust, hierarchy, workforce capability, institutional development, technological change, and market dynamics.

The core proposition is that transformational leadership facilitates strategic innovation not simply through leader behaviour itself, but through its capacity to empower people, develop and circulate knowledge, and strengthen organizational digital capabilities within a specific cultural and institutional environment.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study adopts an organizational case-based research design focused on BizKhmer Digital Media during 2020–2025. Case-study research is appropriate when the objective is to understand organizational processes in their real-world context and to develop analytically grounded explanations rather than population estimates (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2018). The study was developed from research undertaken within a PhD by Portfolio and integrates organizational experience, portfolio evidence, and external scholarly and contextual sources.

3.2 Case Selection

The case was selected purposefully because it provides longitudinal access to an organization operating directly within Cambodia's evolving digital-media environment. BizKhmer experienced technological change, workforce development, service adaptation, and strategic diversification during the research period. The case is not treated as representative of all Cambodian enterprises; its value lies in analytical depth and theory development.

3.3 Researcher Position and Insider Research

The author held a senior leadership role within the focal organization. This insider position provided longitudinal access to organizational developments, leadership practices, strategic decisions, and workforce-development activities. It also creates risks of favourable interpretation, prior assumptions, retrospective sense-making, and insufficient distance from organizational decisions.

The study addresses these risks by separating organizational claims from theoretical interpretation, distinguishing internal evidence from external contextual evidence, using restrained causal language, and explicitly identifying evidentiary limitations. Insider knowledge is therefore treated as a research resource requiring reflexive control rather than as independent proof of organizational effectiveness.

3.4 Evidence Base

The evidence base contains three categories. First, organizational and portfolio evidence documents leadership practices, workforce development, knowledge-transfer activities, technology adoption, service development, and strategic responses. The existence of these practices is not treated as proof that they caused performance outcomes.

Second, peer-reviewed scholarship, authoritative policy documents, and institutional research provide theoretical foundations and external context. These sources are used to interpret rather than substitute for organizational evidence.

Third, the original doctoral methodology planned a survey of 100 respondents and included a survey instrument. However, the available Project 1 manuscript does not contain completed statistical results. The present article therefore does not report percentages, correlations, means, significance tests, or conclusions attributed to that planned survey.

3.5 Analytical Strategy

The analysis uses a theory-informed thematic synthesis. Organizational evidence is interpreted through four domains corresponding to the CDLIF: transformational leadership; employee empowerment and knowledge development; digital capability; and strategic innovation and organizational adaptability. Thematic analysis is used as an organizing logic for identifying recurring patterns, while the framework itself remains a theoretical synthesis rather than a statistically established model (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.6 Contextual Analysis

Cambodian cultural, institutional, workforce, technological, and market conditions are incorporated as contextual influences. Cultural frameworks are used cautiously and are not treated as fixed characteristics of all Cambodian employees or organizations.

3.7 Quality and Trustworthiness

Research quality is supported through evidence transparency, source differentiation, theoretical triangulation, reflexive acknowledgement of the researcher's position, and analytical restraint. The manuscript distinguishes among documented organizational practice, theoretical interpretation, association, and causal explanation.

3.8 Ethics

The original doctoral methodology states that confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent, voluntary participation, and secure data handling were considered. The journal manuscript avoids disclosing confidential commercial information or personally identifying information. It does not claim formal ethics-committee approval unless documentary evidence is available.

3.9 Limitations of the Method

The principal methodological limitations are the single-case design, insider-researcher position, dependence on portfolio-origin evidence, absence of completed survey results in the available manuscript, and the rapidly changing digital environment. The study therefore aims at analytical and theory-building contribution rather than population-level causal generalization.

3.10 Methodological Position

The study is best characterized as an insider-informed, theory-building organizational case study situated within Cambodia's emerging digital economy. The CDLIF is a theoretically informed, case-derived framework requiring independent testing.

4. Findings

4.1 Overview

The analysis identifies five interconnected findings. These findings describe recurring relationships within the organizational case and should not be interpreted as statistically demonstrated causal effects.

4.2 Finding 1: Leadership Evolved Beyond Centralized Direction Toward Empowerment and Delegation

The organizational evidence indicates that leadership practices included employee empowerment, delegation, participation, mentoring, continuous improvement, and knowledge transfer. These practices are consistent with transformational-leadership characteristics emphasizing development and involvement rather than exclusive reliance on centralized direction.

Finding 1: Within the BizKhmer case, transformational-leadership characteristics were manifested principally through empowerment, delegation, employee participation, mentoring, and continuous improvement.

4.3 Finding 2: Knowledge Development Connected Leadership with Organizational Capability

Internal training, mentoring, digital-literacy development, and Training-of-Trainers practices indicate that capability development was not limited to recruiting expertise. The organization also attempted to create mechanisms through which knowledge could be developed and circulated internally.

Finding 2: Knowledge development and internal knowledge transfer emerged as an important connecting mechanism between leadership practices and the development of organizational capability.

4.4 Finding 3: Digital Transformation Was Accompanied by Human-Capability Development

The case documents technology adoption alongside workforce development and internal learning. This suggests a distinction among digital access, individual competence, and organizational digital capability. Technology becomes strategically relevant when employees and organizational processes can apply it to work, service delivery, decision-making, and adaptation.

Finding 3: Within the organizational case, digital capability developed through the interaction of technology adoption and human-capability development rather than technology adoption alone.

4.5 Finding 4: Strategic Innovation Operated as Continuous Adaptation and Diversification

The organizational trajectory involved service development, digitally enabled practices, diversification, capability building, and continuing adjustment to changing market conditions. Innovation was therefore not confined to a single disruptive product or technological breakthrough.

Finding 4: Strategic innovation within the case was characterized by continuous adaptation, service development, technology integration, and diversification rather than by a single transformative innovation.

4.6 Finding 5: Cambodian Context Shaped the Expression of Leadership and Adaptation

Leadership practices operated within a relationship-oriented organizational environment in which trust, mentoring, interpersonal interaction, and recognizable hierarchy coexisted with delegation and employee participation. Workforce capability, technological development, market change, and institutional conditions also influenced strategic decision-making.

Finding 5: The expression of leadership and organizational adaptation within the case was shaped by Cambodia's relationship-oriented organizational environment and the country's evolving digital-market, workforce, technological, and institutional conditions.

4.7 Findings Synthesis

Taken together, the findings suggest a process in which the leadership environment supports human-capability development; human capability contributes to digital capability; and digital capability supports strategic adaptation. These relationships remain embedded within Cambodian contextual conditions.

4.8 Refined CDLIF

The findings refine the CDLIF as a dynamic cycle rather than a one-directional chain. Strategic adaptation produces new organizational experience, which can create new learning requirements and influence subsequent leadership decisions, knowledge development, and technology application.

4.9 Summary of Findings

The five findings collectively support a capability-based interpretation of leadership-driven digital transformation. They do not demonstrate that transformational leadership alone explains organizational performance; rather, they identify mechanisms and relationships for theoretical interpretation and future empirical testing.

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpreting Transformational Leadership in Cambodia's Digital Media Sector

The central interpretive argument is that transformational leadership contributes to strategic adaptation not simply through leader actions but through the capabilities that leadership helps people and organizations develop. This moves the analysis away from a direct Leader → Outcome assumption and toward a process of Leadership → People → Knowledge → Digital Capability → Strategic Adaptation.

5.2 Transformational Leadership as a Capability-Enabling Mechanism

Transformational leadership is conventionally associated with motivation, vision, intellectual stimulation, and individualized development (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The BizKhmer case suggests that these behaviours become strategically relevant when they create conditions for capability formation. Recent research similarly connects transformational leadership with dynamic capabilities in digital-transformation settings (Huang et al., 2023; Montasser et al., 2023).

Empowerment without knowledge may simply transfer responsibility without increasing capability. The strategic contribution of leadership may therefore lie partly in combining delegation with learning, mentoring, and opportunities to apply knowledge.

5.3 Knowledge Development as a Connecting Mechanism

The findings indicate that knowledge development is a potential bridge between individual leadership relationships and organizational capability. Nonaka's (1994) organizational knowledge perspective is useful here because individual learning becomes strategically important when knowledge is shared, combined, and applied beyond the individual.

Training-of-Trainers and internal mentoring can therefore be interpreted as mechanisms for converting individual learning into more distributed organizational capability.

5.4 Digital Transformation as a Human-Capability Process

The case supports a distinction among access to digital technology, competence in using it, and organizational capability to integrate it strategically. This interpretation is consistent with contemporary digital-transformation research emphasizing organizational change, capabilities, and strategic renewal (Hanelt et al., 2021; Verhoef et al., 2021; Warner & Wäger, 2019).

The central managerial question consequently becomes not only what technology the organization possesses, but what the organization is capable of doing with technology through its people, knowledge, and processes.

5.5 Strategic Innovation as Continuous Adaptation

The case suggests that strategic innovation can be cumulative and adaptive. Service development, technology integration, process improvement, learning, and diversification can collectively constitute strategic renewal even where no single innovation is radically disruptive. This interpretation aligns with dynamic-capabilities theory and the idea of continuing organizational reconfiguration (Teece, 2007; Teece, 2018).

The process can be represented as Experiment → Learn → Adapt → Integrate → Experiment.

5.6 Contextualizing Transformational Leadership for Cambodia

A significant interpretive insight concerns the coexistence of hierarchy and empowerment. Within the case, empowerment did not necessarily require the removal of hierarchical authority. Responsibility could instead be delegated through trusted relationships, mentoring, and continuing leader–employee interaction.

This study uses the term relational empowerment to describe this case-emergent pattern: employee autonomy and responsibility developed through interpersonal trust, mentoring, delegated authority, and supportive relationships. The concept is not presented as a validated Cambodian construct; it is an interpretation requiring independent empirical investigation.

5.7 From Imported Theory to Context-Sensitive Application

The findings do not require either rejecting international leadership theory or assuming that it applies identically across contexts. A more defensible position is that established theory provides useful constructs while their organizational expression is shaped by cultural, institutional, workforce, technological, and market conditions.

5.8 CDLIF as an Integrative Synthesis

The distinctive contribution of the CDLIF lies in the integration of transformational leadership, empowerment and knowledge development, digital capability, strategic adaptation, continuous learning, and contextual conditions. None of these constructs is individually new. The contribution lies in the case-derived configuration and the process explanation connecting them.

5.9 Relationship with Dynamic Capabilities

The CDLIF is compatible with dynamic-capabilities reasoning. Leadership can contribute to sensing opportunities by encouraging learning and external awareness, to seizing opportunities by enabling delegated action and resource commitment, and to reconfiguration by supporting changes in people, processes, and technology (Teece, 2007). Leadership therefore may support dynamic capabilities indirectly by developing the human and organizational conditions through which sensing, seizing, and reconfiguration become possible.

5.10 Implications for Cambodian Digital Enterprises

The case suggests that technology investment without corresponding people and organizational capability may have limited strategic value. For resource-constrained firms, internal learning, mentoring, and knowledge sharing may be particularly important because they allow external knowledge and new technological practices to diffuse through the organization.

5.11 Implications for Leadership Development

Leadership development in digitally changing enterprises should extend beyond conventional supervisory competence. Leaders increasingly need to connect people, technology, knowledge, and strategy.

This includes communicating direction, delegating meaningful responsibility, supporting learning, mobilizing knowledge, and maintaining sufficient digital strategic awareness to connect technological developments with business priorities.

5.12 Theoretical Contributions

The study makes four theoretical contributions. First, it repositions transformational leadership as a capability-enabling mechanism. Second, it identifies knowledge development as a bridge between leadership and organizational digital capability. Third, it interprets digital transformation as socio-organizational capability development rather than technology adoption alone. Fourth, it embeds leadership within contextual conditions rather than treating leadership behaviour as context-free.

5.13 Emerging Propositions

P1. Transformational leadership is positively associated with employee empowerment and knowledge-development practices in digitally transforming Cambodian enterprises.

P2. Employee empowerment and knowledge development contribute to digital capability through the ability to apply and share digital knowledge.

P3. Digital capability facilitates strategic innovation and organizational adaptability by enabling organizations to integrate technological opportunities into services, processes, and strategic responses.

P4. The relationship between transformational leadership and organizational adaptability is mediated partly by human- and digital-capability processes rather than operating exclusively as a direct effect.

P5. Cambodian contextual conditions, including trust, hierarchy, workforce capability, and institutional and market development, shape the enactment of transformational leadership and empowerment.

P6. Relational empowerment, characterized by trust, mentoring, delegated authority, and responsibility, may represent a contextually relevant mechanism in Cambodian enterprises.

5.14 Discussion Synthesis

The case does not demonstrate that transformational leadership alone explains BizKhmer's development. Instead, it supports a more nuanced question: how do leaders develop people, knowledge, and organizational capabilities that enable enterprises to continually adapt as technology and markets change? The CDLIF provides one case-derived answer to that question.

6. Contributions and Practical Implications

6.1 Overview

The significance of this study lies not in presenting BizKhmer Digital Media as a model that should be replicated unchanged, but in using longitudinal organizational evidence to develop a more context-sensitive explanation of leadership-driven digital adaptation in Cambodia. This positioning is consistent with case-study approaches that emphasize analytical explanation and theory development rather than statistical representation (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2018). The study contributes at four levels: theoretical development, conceptual integration, Cambodia-focused research, and managerial practice.

6.2 Theoretical Contribution: From Leadership Behaviour to Capability Development

The first contribution is theoretical. Rather than interpreting leadership practices as evidence that leadership directly produced organizational performance, the study proposes an intermediate process:

Transformational Leadership → Employee Empowerment & Knowledge Development → Digital Capability → Strategic Innovation & Organizational Adaptability. This process is compatible with research linking transformational leadership to dynamic capabilities and digital business-model innovation through intermediate organizational mechanisms (Huang et al., 2023; Montasser et al., 2023).

The contribution is therefore not a new definition of transformational leadership, but a context-sensitive explanation of how transformational leadership may become organizationally consequential through capability development.

6.3 Conceptual Contribution: The Cambodian Digital Leadership-Innovation Framework

The CDLIF integrates four domains: transformational leadership; employee empowerment and knowledge development; digital capability development; and strategic innovation and organizational adaptability, connected through continuous organizational learning and embedded within Cambodian contextual conditions. Its contribution lies in integration and contextualization rather than claiming that the individual constructs are new.

6.4 Contribution to Cambodia-Focused Management Research

The study moves beyond treating Cambodia merely as a location in which an internationally developed theory is applied. It asks how established leadership concepts are expressed within Cambodian organizational conditions. Relational empowerment emerges as a potentially useful case-derived interpretation of how autonomy and responsibility may develop through trust, mentoring, delegated authority, and supportive leader–employee relationships. It requires broader empirical investigation before generalization.

6.5 Practical Implications for Cambodian Digital Enterprises and MSMEs

The findings suggest that digital transformation should not be reduced to technology acquisition. Contemporary research similarly treats digital transformation as a combination of technology, organizational change, strategy, and capability development (Hanelt et al., 2021; Verhoef et al., 2021; Vial, 2019). Managers should consider both a technology question—what digital tool or system is needed—and a capability question—what must people know and be able to do for that technology to create organizational value?

A practical sequence emerging from the case is: Develop people → enable knowledge sharing → apply technology → institutionalize capability → adapt the business.

6.6 Practical Implications for Leadership Development

Digitally oriented leadership increasingly requires the ability to connect People + Knowledge + Technology + Strategy. Leaders may need competencies in strategic direction, meaningful delegation, mentoring, knowledge mobilization, and digital strategic awareness.

6.7 Implications for Workforce and Training Development

Workforce development should not be understood solely as participation in isolated training events. Organizational-learning and knowledge-creation research emphasizes the importance of converting individual knowledge into shared organizational practice (Nonaka, 1994), while Cambodia-focused research identifies continuing digital-skills and capability-development needs (Roth et al., 2021). A stronger organizational cycle is Learn → Apply → Share → Coach → Improve → Relearn. This makes learning capability itself a potential strategic organizational resource.

6.8 Implications for Business Support and Digital-Skills Programs

Enterprise-development programs may benefit from integrating digital skills with leadership development, business application, and organizational implementation. This is particularly relevant in Cambodia, where recent evidence identifies skills shortages and other capability-related barriers to MSME digital adoption (Kanayama et al., 2025), and national policy frameworks emphasize digital skills and capability development (Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2021; Ministry of Post and Telecommunications, 2024). Training can move beyond tool understanding by asking what business problem the capability addresses, who will apply it, how knowledge will be transferred, what process must change, and how usefulness will be assessed.

6.9 Implications for Strategic Innovation

The case suggests that innovation does not always require major technological invention. Dynamic-capabilities and digital-transformation research likewise conceptualizes strategic renewal through the reconfiguration of resources, capabilities, processes, and business models (Teece, 2007, 2018; Warner & Wäger, 2019). Resource-constrained enterprises can innovate through new services, process changes, technology integration, capability development, and recombination of existing resources.

6.10 Research-to-Practice Contribution

The PhD by Portfolio origins of the study illustrate how longitudinal professional experience can become a scholarly resource when practitioner observations are subjected to theoretical interpretation, evidentiary boundaries, reflexivity, and critical analysis. Professional experience alone does not constitute research; the relevant progression is experience → evidence → interpretation → theoretical contribution.

6.11 Summary of Contributions

The overarching contribution is that, in Cambodia's emerging digital-business environment, digital transformation can be understood not simply as technological adoption but as a leadership-enabled process of developing people, mobilizing knowledge, building digital capability, and continually adapting organizational strategy.

7. Limitations and Future Research

7.1 Overview

The findings and the CDLIF should be interpreted within the methodological boundaries of the study. The research draws primarily on a single organizational case and an insider-research perspective developed from a professional doctoral portfolio. Case-study research can provide contextual and theory-building insight while requiring caution about statistical generalization (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2018). These characteristics provide longitudinal insight but constrain statistical generalization and causal interpretation.

7.2 Single-Case Research Design

BizKhmer provides an information-rich setting, but one organization cannot represent the diversity of Cambodia's private sector. The appropriate form of generalization is analytical rather than statistical, consistent with established case-study methodology (Yin, 2018). The case contributes concepts and relationships that can inform subsequent empirical investigation.

7.3 Insider-Researcher Position

Long-term professional involvement provides access to strategic decisions and organizational developments, but it also introduces risks of prior assumptions, favourable emphasis, and retrospective interpretation. Future studies should therefore examine the CDLIF using independent researchers and multiple organizational cases.

7.4 Limitations of the Available Empirical Evidence

The original doctoral methodology proposed a quantitative survey targeting 100 respondents and contains the survey instrument. However, the available Project 1 manuscript does not contain the completed survey analysis. The present article therefore does not treat the intended sample as completed empirical evidence. The CDLIF should currently be regarded as a case-derived conceptual framework rather than an empirically validated structural model.

7.5 Measurement and Causal Limitations

The available evidence does not permit strong causal conclusions. Leadership practices, workforce development, digital-capability activities, and strategic adaptations occurred within the same organizational environment, but other technological, market, competitive, customer, and workforce factors may also have contributed. Future quantitative studies should operationalize the CDLIF constructs using established scales and test direct, mediating, and moderating relationships.

7.6 Temporal Limitation

The study focuses primarily on 2020–2025. Because digital technologies and AI-enabled practices change rapidly, the findings should be interpreted as reflecting organizational development within a defined period. Longitudinal research should examine whether the proposed relationships remain stable across different stages of digital maturity.

7.7 Contextual and Cultural Limitations

Cambodian organizations differ by generation, education, industry, organizational size, ownership, geography, and exposure to international management practices. Cultural dimensions should therefore be treated as contextual lenses rather than fixed characteristics. Relational empowerment requires independent examination before it can be considered a broader Cambodian leadership pattern.

7.8 Sectoral Limitation

BizKhmer operates within digital media and marketing, where creativity, knowledge, technology, and platform change are particularly important. The CDLIF should initially be considered most relevant to digital enterprises, knowledge-intensive businesses, technology-enabled SMEs, media and marketing organizations, and firms undergoing significant digital transformation. Applicability to other sectors should be tested rather than assumed.

7.9 Future Research: Empirical Validation of the CDLIF

The immediate research priority is empirical validation. Larger quantitative research could test relationships among transformational leadership, empowerment and knowledge development, digital capability, and strategic innovation and adaptability while examining contextual effects of trust, hierarchy, firm size, workforce capability, and digital maturity. Existing studies provide useful precedents for testing leadership–capability relationships in digital-transformation settings (Huang et al., 2023; Ly, 2025; Montasser et al., 2023).

7.10 Future Research Across Cambodian MSMEs

The CDLIF could be tested among enterprises at different stages of digital transformation, from primarily offline businesses to digitally integrated firms. This is especially relevant given documented variation and barriers in digital adoption among Cambodian MSMEs (Kanayama et al., 2025). Research could examine whether leadership plays a stronger capability-building role during early adoption, whether knowledge sharing becomes more important as technological complexity increases, and whether internal learning mechanisms influence adaptability.

7.11 Future Research Across Cambodian Provinces

Future studies could compare Phnom Penh with provincial enterprises and examine differences in workforce availability, digital skills, infrastructure, market access, customer behaviour, and access to training. Cambodia-focused skills research already indicates the importance of examining workforce capability and training conditions systematically (Roth et al., 2021). Such comparisons would reduce the risk of treating capital-city experience as representative of the national business environment.

7.12 Future Research Across Industries

Cross-sector research could examine digital media, e-commerce, professional services, education, tourism, retail, financial technology, manufacturing, agriculture-related enterprises, and other technology-enabled sectors to determine which CDLIF relationships are context-specific and which have wider explanatory value.

7.13 Future Research on Relational Empowerment

Future qualitative research should investigate how Cambodian employees interpret empowerment, how trust affects delegated responsibility, when hierarchy supports or inhibits development, how mentoring influences autonomy, and whether relational empowerment varies across generations and organizational types. Quantitative research could subsequently determine whether it represents a distinct measurable construct.

7.14 Future Research on AI and Leadership

AI creates an additional research direction. Future studies could examine whether AI changes the importance of employee digital capability, how leadership influences willingness to experiment with AI, whether knowledge sharing accelerates responsible adoption, and how AI changes decision-making authority and required organizational capabilities.

7.15 Future Research Through Longitudinal Design

Digital transformation is a process rather than a single event. Research on digital transformation and dynamic capabilities similarly emphasizes ongoing strategic renewal and organizational reconfiguration (Teece, 2007; Warner & Wäger, 2019). Longitudinal research could follow leadership changes, workforce-development investments, digital-capability formation, strategic responses, and organizational learning over several years and identify both successful and failed capability-development pathways.

7.16 Proposed Cambodia Research Agenda

The broader research program can progress from the present theory-building case to multi-firm quantitative validation, geographic comparison, sector comparison, qualitative mechanism development, longitudinal validation, and emerging-technology extensions.

7.17 Limitations and Future Research Synthesis

The CDLIF is not presented as a finished or universally applicable model of Cambodian leadership. It is a case-derived, theoretically informed framework designed to generate testable questions about how leadership, people, knowledge, technology, and strategic adaptation interact within Cambodia's evolving digital economy.

8. Conclusion

8.1 Conclusion

Digital transformation presents both opportunities and organizational challenges for enterprises operating within emerging economies, where technological change intersects with organizational capabilities, strategy, and workforce development (Hanelt et al., 2021; Vial, 2019). In Cambodia, digital-economy and skills-development priorities have also been formalized through national policy frameworks (Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2021; Ministry of Post and Telecommunications, 2024). This study examined how transformational leadership contributes to strategic innovation and organizational adaptability in Cambodia's emerging digital media sector through the organizational case of BizKhmer Digital Media during 2020–2025.

The case suggests that the relationship between leadership and strategic adaptation is best understood as a capability-development process rather than a direct leader-to-performance relationship. The central process identified is: Leadership enables people → people develop and share knowledge → knowledge strengthens digital capability → digital capability supports strategic innovation and adaptability → organizational experience generates further learning.

Digital transformation is therefore simultaneously a technological, human, organizational, and strategic process.

8.2 The Cambodian Digital Leadership-Innovation Framework

The principal conceptual outcome is the CDLIF, integrating transformational leadership, employee empowerment and knowledge development, digital capability development, strategic innovation and organizational adaptability, and continuous organizational learning. These relationships are embedded within Cambodian contextual conditions.

The CDLIF is not presented as a statistically validated model. It is a case-derived theoretical synthesis providing propositions for subsequent empirical investigation.

8.3 Contribution to the Cambodian Context

The Cambodian context is central rather than incidental. The case suggests that empowerment can coexist with recognizable hierarchy when responsibility is developed through trust, mentoring, supportive relationships, and delegated authority. This study describes that pattern as relational empowerment while emphasizing that it requires broader empirical validation.

8.4 Contribution to Research and Practice

The study contributes theoretically by positioning transformational leadership as a capability-enabling mechanism; conceptually by developing the CDLIF; and practically by suggesting that digital transformation should integrate investments in technology with investments in people, learning, knowledge transfer, leadership, and organizational capability. This interpretation builds on established work connecting

leadership, organizational learning, dynamic capabilities, and digital transformation (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Nonaka, 1994; Teece, 2007; Verhoef et al., 2021).

For enterprises, the key question is therefore not only 'What technology should we adopt?' but also 'What capabilities must our people and organization develop to use technology strategically?'

8.5 Boundaries of the Contribution

The conclusions remain proportionate to the evidence. BizKhmer is one organizational case; the researcher is an insider; and the planned 100-respondent survey is not treated as completed evidence because the available doctoral manuscript does not contain the results analysis. The study therefore does not claim that the CDLIF is statistically validated, that transformational leadership caused BizKhmer's outcomes, or that the findings automatically apply to all Cambodian enterprises.

8.6 Final Conclusion

The BizKhmer case demonstrates that understanding digital transformation requires attention not only to technology but also to the organizational capabilities through which technology becomes useful. This capability-oriented interpretation is consistent with research describing digital transformation as organizational and strategic renewal rather than technology adoption alone (Hanelt et al., 2021; Vial, 2019; Warner & Wäger, 2019). Leadership, employee development, knowledge transfer, digital capability, and strategic adaptation emerged as interconnected elements of organizational change.

The broader implication is that digital transformation is ultimately not only about becoming more digital. It is about developing organizations and people that are capable of learning, adapting, and creating value as the digital environment changes.

The Cambodian Digital Leadership–Innovation Framework provides one research-based explanation of how this process may occur. Its value lies not in presenting a final model of Cambodian leadership, but in providing a theoretically grounded framework that future research can test, challenge, refine, and extend.

Author Note

This article was developed from research undertaken as part of the author's PhD by Portfolio at the Swiss School of Business Research (SSBR). The journal manuscript narrows and reframes the original portfolio research around transformational leadership, capability development, strategic innovation, and organizational adaptability in Cambodia's digital media sector.

Citation and Evidence Note

In-text citations are used for external theoretical, methodological, policy, and contextual claims. Findings derived from the focal BizKhmer organizational case are reported as study findings and are not artificially attributed to external literature. The planned 100-respondent survey is not cited as completed empirical evidence because the available portfolio manuscript does not contain the completed results analysis.

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