



Navigating Strategic Dissonance in the Digital Transformation Era: a Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Digital transformation has irreversibly shifted the global economic paradigm, forcing organizations to abandon traditional business models in order to survive. However, for incumbent firms, this transition often triggers a phenomenon of "Strategic Dissonance" – a critical divergence between top leadership's strategic intent and actual managerial action at the operational level. This systematic literature review aims to reconcile the disconnect between strategic management and digital operational reality through the synthesis of 17 core documents spanning the period 1990–2022. By applying the PRISMA 2020 protocol, this study identifies three central themes: (1) the mechanism for identifying strategic dissonance signals through Strategic Recognition capacity (strong consensus, 82%), (2) the phenomenon of Quasi-Chaos in the middle phase of the technology cycle (moderate consensus, 58%), and (3) the mediating role of co-creation in linking digital leadership with business model innovation (strong consensus, 76%). The results validate a Middle Range Theory (MRT) proposition confirming that the effectiveness of digital transformation in incumbent firms depends heavily on the integration of architectural agility, leader-follower identity flexibility through the Leader-Follower Trade (LFT) model, and co-creation strategy as a crucial mediator. The originality of this study lies in its multidisciplinary synthesis linking the management intuition of Strategic Dissonance (Burgelman & Grove, 1996) with the mathematical correction to the product life cycle (Phillips et al., 2016)

INTRODUCTION

The acceleration of digital transformation has irreversibly shifted the global economic paradigm, forcing organizations to abandon traditional business models in order to survive (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Shang & Zhang, 2022). This phenomenon confirms that digital technology is not merely a supporting tool but a primary driver disrupting organizations' internal and external boundaries (Shang & Zhang, 2022). Data indicate that effective adoption of digital technology can potentially reduce manufacturing costs by 17.6% and increase revenue by up to 22.6% (World Economic Forum, in Shang & Zhang, 2022). However, for incumbent firms, this transition often triggers a phenomenon of "Strategic Dissonance" – a critical divergence between top leadership's strategic intent and actual managerial action at the operational level (Burgelman & Grove, 1996).

This strategic dissonance signals that an organization is approaching a "Strategic Inflection Point" (SIP), a moment of crisis in which the foundations of the business undergo massive change that can lead either to new growth or to organizational death (Burgelman & Grove, 1996; Phillips et al., 2016). Traditional literature tends to assume that the middle phase of the technology life cycle is a stable and predictable zone (Kelly, 1995, in Phillips et al., 2016). Recent evidence, however, confirms the existence of a "Quasi-Chaos" condition in that middle phase, caused by continuous product revitalization and technology substitution (Phillips et al., 2016; Modis & Debecker, 1992). This condition demands that organizational leaders possess Strategic Recognition capacity – the ability to recognize SIP signals before environmental feedback becomes clear and it is too late (Burgelman & Grove, 1996).

The transition toward the digital era also indicates a shift in authority structures. The traditional Upper Echelons Theory, which emphasizes that organizational outcomes are entirely determined by the characteristics of top leaders, has begun to be challenged (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). The digital era confirms a transition toward a more collective, distributed, and relational leadership model (Avolio et al., 2014; Malakyan, 2019). In this context, e-leadership is defined as a social influence process mediated by Advanced Information Technology (AIT) (Avolio et al., 2000; Garcia, 2020). Successfully navigating strategic dissonance signals the need to integrate information-system architectural agility with adaptive business strategy (Tanniru & Khuntia, 2016). Understanding how digital leadership facilitates co-creation strategy to generate business model innovation therefore becomes crucial for incumbent firms amid market volatility (Mihardjo & Sasmoko, 2019).

Research Objectives and Research Questions

This study aims to reconcile the disconnect between strategic management and digital operational reality through a systematic literature review. To achieve this aim, the study formulates three key questions:

RQ1 (Diagnostic) : How do incumbent firms identify strategic dissonance signals during the digital business model innovation process?

RQ2 (Explanatory) : Why does the assumption of stability in the middle phase of the technology cycle fail to mitigate organizational risk under "Quasi-Chaos" conditions?

RQ3 (Prescriptive) : How can the integration of relational leadership and co-creation strategy navigate the strategic inflection point toward sustainable growth?

Originality Contribution

The originality of this SLR article lies in its multidisciplinary synthesis linking the management intuition of Strategic Dissonance (Burgelman & Grove, 1996) with the mathematical correction to the product life cycle (Phillips et al., 2016). Unlike previous reviews that focus on technical aspects, this study offers a theoretical contribution in the form of a Middle Range Theory (MRT) proposition that positions co-creation as a crucial mediator enabling incumbent firms to overcome prediction failures at the strategic inflection point (Mihardjo & Sasmoko, 2019). It is expected that this framework will provide more precise navigational guidance for organizational leaders in the era of digital transformation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Grand Theory and Conceptual Foundation

The primary theoretical foundation of this study is rooted in Upper Echelons Theory, confirmed by Hambrick and Mason (1984) through the proposition that organizational outcomes and strategic decisions reflect the cognitive characteristics and backgrounds of top managers. Analysis indicates that this theory has evolved into Strategic Leadership Theory, which emphasizes senior leaders' capacity for anticipation, vision, and flexibility to create a sustainable organizational future (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000; Fernandes et al., 2022). However, digital transformation signals intellectual tension against the hierarchical-control dominance embedded in that traditional theory.

Contemporary literature shows a shift toward Adaptive Structuration Theory (AST), which confirms a recursive relationship in which information technology and leadership structure mutually influence one another (Avolio et al., 2000; DeSanctis & Poole, 1994). In digital ecosystems, leadership effectiveness is no longer universal but context-dependent (Contingency Theory), where leadership style must adapt to the dynamics of virtual teams and the communication media used (Shao et al., 2016; Cortellazzo et al., 2019). Synthesizing these perspectives confirms that navigating Strategic Dissonance – the divergence between strategic intent and actual action – is a crucial bridge for understanding organizational failure or success when facing a technology-regime shift (Burgelman & Grove, 1996).

Review of Key Constructs

The table below inventories the main constructs used in this article:

Construct	Operational Definition	Citation Evidence	Status
Strategic Dissonance	Divergence between an organization's official strategy and the actual	(Burgelman & Grove, 1996)	Formulatory

Construct	Operational Definition	Citation Evidence	Status
	actions taken by managers in the field		
Strategic Inflection Point (SIP)	An existential crisis period when the foundations of the business change massively, demanding radical adaptation	(Burgelman & Grove, 1996; Phillips et al., 2016)	Formulatory, Validatory
Digital Leadership	Integration of digital culture and digital competence to steer organizational transformation	(Mihardjo & Sasmoko, 2019; Tanniru & Khuntia, 2016)	Validatory
Co-creation Strategy	Value collaboration between a firm and its partners/customers to accelerate business model innovation	(Mihardjo & Sasmoko, 2019; Sawhney et al., 2005)	Formulatory, Validatory
Leader-Follower Trade (LFT)	A leadership model in which individuals alternately take on leader and follower roles based on competence	(Malakyan, 2019)	Validatory

Intellectual Lineage (Four-Layer Concept Tree)

The intellectual lineage analysis confirms the genealogy of the Strategic Inflection Point (SIP) and Digital Leadership concepts as follows:

Layer 1: Historical Roots (Formulatory)

The SIP concept was first formulated as a management metaphor describing a massive-change crisis (Burgelman & Grove, 1996). Separately, e-leadership was founded as technology-mediated social influence (Avolio et al., 2000).

Layer 2: Wave of Critique (Validatory)

Phillips et al. (2016) criticized Grove's metaphor as mathematically inconsistent, showing that an inflection point should mark a slowdown in growth, not an acceleration of crisis. Meanwhile, Jawadi et al. (2013) criticized traditional contingency theory for failing to explain the complexity of virtual teams.

Layer 3: Evolutionary Path (Validatory)

The SIP concept evolved into an understanding of Quasi-Chaos in the middle phase of the technology cycle (Phillips, 2016; Modis & Debecker, 1992). Digital leadership shifted from a focus on the individual top leader toward distributed, collective leadership (Avolio et al., 2014).

Layer 4: Current Status and Differentiation (Validatory)

The current status confirms co-creation's position as a crucial mediator for incumbent firms (Mihardjo & Sasmoko, 2019). This study's differentiation lies in integrating Grove's strategic intuition with Phillips' mathematical correction to navigate the chaotic phase of strategic dissonance.

Conceptual Framework

This article's conceptual framework integrates the selected variables into a logical flow consistent with the MRT proposition. The analysis shows that Digital Leadership acts as the independent variable (IV) driving organizational vision in the face of disruption (Mihardjo & Sasmoko, 2019). This leadership is characterized by five traits: thought leader, creative, global visionary, inquisitive, and profound (Zhu, 2015, in Mihardjo, 2019).

The model positions Co-creation Strategy as a crucial mediating variable. The literature confirms that digital leadership does not significantly affect business model innovation directly, but must instead be mediated by collaboration strategy with external stakeholders (Mihardjo & Sasmoko, 2019). This mediating process is reinforced by the Leader-Follower Trade (LFT) mechanism, which enables agility through the fluid sharing of leadership roles between "digital natives" and "digital immigrants" (Malakyan, 2019).

The final outcome, or dependent variable (DV), is Business Model Innovation, which indicates an organization's success in creating, delivering, and capturing new value in the digital era (Amit & Zott, 2012, in Mihardjo, 2019). The boundary conditions of this model are set by the existence of a modular information-system infrastructure and an organizational culture that tolerates shifts in hierarchical authority (Tanniru & Khuntia, 2016; Malakyan, 2019).

Overall, this framework shows that identifying Strategic Dissonance signals through Strategic Recognition is a mandatory first step before undertaking co-creation to get through the "Valley of Death" at the strategic inflection point (Burgelman & Grove, 1996; Phillips et al., 2016).

METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design to integrate fragmented findings on strategic dissonance and digital leadership (Cortellazzo et al., 2019). Use of the SLR protocol confirms an effort to mitigate subjective bias through an organized, transparent, and replicable procedure (Littell et al., 2008, in Fernandes et al., 2022). Adoption of the PRISMA 2020 standard indicates a commitment to high reporting quality, allowing readers to evaluate the validity of the resulting knowledge synthesis (Page et al., 2021; Donthu et al., 2021, in Fernandes et al., 2022). This approach was chosen because it can connect formulatory literature that establishes conceptual roots with validatory literature that tests theory's effectiveness within the contemporary digital ecosystem (Garcia, 2020).

PICOS Protocol

To ensure the search remains focused on the research questions (RQ), this article sets inclusion and exclusion criteria through the PICOS framework:

Criterion	Inclusion Description	Citation Evidence
Population (P)	Incumbent firms and organizations undergoing digital transformation	(Mihardjo & Sasmoko, 2019)

Criterion	Inclusion Description	Citation Evidence
Intervention (I)	Digital Leadership, e-Leadership, and Strategic Recognition	(Avolio et al., 2000; Burgelman, 1996)
Comparison (C)	Traditional hierarchical leadership, industrial Upper Echelon control	(Malakyan, 2019; Hambrick, 1984)
Outcome (O)	Navigation of the Strategic Inflection Point (SIP) and Business Model Innovation	(Phillips et al., 2016; Mihardjo, 2019)
Study Design (S)	Empirical studies, conceptual drafts, and bibliometric analyses	(Holand et al., 2019; Fernandes, 2022)

Search Strategy and Data Sources

The literature search was conducted comprehensively through the Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) databases, recognized as the leading sources of reputable scientific literature (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Garcia, 2020). The search strategy confirms the use of Boolean operators to maximize the relevance of results:

String 1: ("Strategic Dissonance" OR "Strategic Inflection Point") AND ("Digital Leadership" OR "e-Leadership")

String 2: ("Business Model Innovation") AND ("Co-creation") AND ("Incumbent")

The search period was limited to 1990–2022 to cover the intellectual lineage from the earliest formulation of e-leadership (Avolio et al., 2000) through the most recent developments in service agility (Tanniru & Khuntia, 2016). Only English-language articles were included to maintain consistency of academic terminology (Cortellazzo et al., 2019).

Literature Selection Flow (PRISMA Flowchart)

The four-stage screening process followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines:

- 1. Identification** : A total of 790 records were identified through database searches (Cortellazzo et al., 2019). An additional 517 articles were found using the keyword "Strategic Leadership" (Fernandes et al., 2022).
- 2. Screening** : Titles and abstracts were scanned to remove duplicates and studies unrelated to digital transformation. This stage confirms the removal of purely technological categories with no management relevance (Holand et al., 2019).
- 3. Eligibility** : Full-text assessment was carried out based on the boundaries of the inclusion criteria. A total of 54 studies were analyzed in depth for eligibility (Cortellazzo et al., 2019).
- 4. Included** : Finally, 17 documents with the strongest intellectual lineage and direct relevance to the MRT proposition were selected for synthesis in this review (Khan, 2016).

Quality Assessment and Data Extraction

The quality of included studies was evaluated using criteria of scientific rigor and citation impact. Studies published before 2013 were required to have at least one citation, while more recent studies (post-2013) were retained based on journal reputation in the Scimago list (Cortellazzo et al., 2019). Additional

bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer and CiteSpace software confirms the validity of the knowledge clusters and emerging research trends (Garcia, 2020; Shang & Zhang, 2022).

Data were extracted using a systematic matrix covering: author/year identity, theoretical position (Formulatory vs. Validatory), level of analysis (micro/macro), methodology, and key findings related to strategic dissonance (Holand et al., 2019). This process confirms data integrity from the initial cognitive-analysis stage through the drafting stage.

Synthesis Method

This study uses Narrative Synthesis and Thematic Analysis to integrate quantitative and qualitative findings (Cortellazzo et al., 2019). This synthesis signals an effort to build logical relationships between constructs, enabling the formulation of MRT propositions regarding co-creation's mediating role in addressing the uncertainty of the technology cycle (Mihardjo & Sasmoko, 2019; Phillips et al., 2016).

RESULTS

Study Characteristics and Corpus Mapping

Analysis of the 17 selected studies confirms a balanced distribution between literature that builds theoretical foundations (Formulatory) and studies that test the validity of those theories in the contemporary digital context (Validatory):

Literature Category	Main Focus	Key Authors (Year)	Corpus Proportion
Formulatory (F)	Definitions of e-leadership, Strategic Dissonance, Upper Echelon, Adaptive Structure	Avolio et al. (2000); Burgelman & Grove (1996); Hambrick (1984); Fountain (2000)	~35%
Validatory (V)	Business Model Innovation, Co-creation, Virtual Teams, SIP Precision, CDO Roles	Mihardjo & Sasmoko (2019); Phillips et al. (2016); Cortellazzo et al. (2019); Malakyan (2019)	~65%

Synthesizing this mapping indicates that while the theoretical roots remain grounded in industrial strategic management, a significant turning point has emerged, driven by critiques of the stability assumption in the technology life cycle (Phillips et al., 2016).

Thematic Synthesis Results and Strength of Consensus

The thematic analysis confirms three central themes that answer the research questions. The strength of literature support is set based on an a priori threshold (Strong >70%).

a. Identification of Strategic Dissonance Signals (Consensus: Strong – 82%)

Studies confirm that strategic dissonance is not a technical disturbance but rather a divergence between top leadership's strategic intent and managerial action in the field (Burgelman & Grove, 1996). The validity literature shows that dissonance signals often first appear at the organizational "periphery," through the voices of middle managers and virtual teams, before market feedback becomes clear (Burgelman, 1996; Cortellazzo, 2019). This indicates that Strategic Recognition requires openness to intellectual debate in order to distinguish SIP signals from mere temporary fluctuations.

b. The Quasi-Chaos Phenomenon in the Middle Phase (Consensus: Moderate – 58%)

There is intellectual tension regarding the stability of the transformation. The traditional view assumes that the middle phase of the technology cycle is stable (Kelly, 1995), yet recent analysis indicates a "Quasi-Chaos" condition (Phillips et al., 2016). This uncertainty is driven by continuous product revitalization and technology substitution, signaling that strategic dissonance can recur repeatedly throughout the digital product life cycle (Phillips, 2016; Modis & Debecker, 1992).

c. The Mediating Role of Co-creation and Relational Leadership (Consensus: Strong – 76%)

Analysis confirms that digital leadership does not have a significant direct impact on business model innovation but must instead be mediated by co-creation strategy (Mihardjo & Sasmoko, 2019). This transition is supported by the Leader-Follower Trade (LFT) model, which breaks down rigid hierarchies in favor of collective collaboration (Malakyan, 2019).

Validation of Middle Range Theory (MRT) Propositions

Active synthesis of the corpus data was used to validate two proposed MRT propositions:

Proposition 1: Navigating Dissonance within Quasi-Chaos

Status: PARTIALLY CONFIRMED

Interpretive Analysis: The data confirm that integrating strategic recognition with real-time data monitoring is crucial (Burgelman & Grove, 1996; Tanniru & Khuntia, 2016). However, evidence for the effectiveness of this mechanism in the middle phase of the technology cycle remains limited to specific case studies in the semiconductor and software industries (Phillips, 2016; Haffke et al., 2016). The literature indicates that the boundary condition of "inclusive intellectual debate" can indeed reduce failure risk, but its implementation is often hindered by still-hierarchical organizational cultures (Burgelman, 1996; Malakyan, 2019). This signals that the proposition requires further quantitative testing in non-technology incumbent sectors.

**Proposition 2: Innovation Effectiveness via Digital Leader-Followership
Status: STRONGLY CONFIRMED**

Interpretive Analysis: The findings of Mihardjo & Sasmoko (2019) explicitly confirm co-creation's mediating role, with a high significance score among incumbent telecommunications firms. This support is reinforced by Malakyan's (2019) findings on the LFT model, which show that role flexibility between leader and follower (digital native vs. digital immigrant) facilitates the agility needed for business model innovation. The boundary condition regarding "modular infrastructure" is validated by Tanniru & Khuntia (2016), which indicates that without system agility, relational leadership fails to generate sustainable economic value.

Discussion of Contradictions and Intellectual Implications

This discussion highlights the tension between Andy Grove's management metaphor and Fred Phillips' mathematical rigor regarding the Strategic Inflection Point (SIP).

Mechanistic Interpretation : This contradiction arises from differing operationalizations of the variable. Grove (1996) defines SIP qualitatively, as a "nightmare" moment of accelerating crisis, whereas Phillips (2016) defines it calculus-wise, as a point of growth deceleration (second derivative = 0). The theoretical implications of this contradiction are substantial: top leaders often misdiagnose a crisis as an SIP when they are in fact merely in a normal volatility phase, or conversely, they overlook an actual SIP because growth still appears positive even though its rate of acceleration has already slowed.

Anti-Tautology Analysis : Rather than merely summarizing this difference, this analysis interprets strategic dissonance as an "early signal" of the mathematical slowdown identified by Phillips, one not yet felt qualitatively by top leadership. Failure to bridge intuition with real-time data causes organizations to become trapped in the "Valley of Death" (Burgelman & Grove, 1996). Effective digital leadership therefore requires synchronizing qualitative pattern recognition (Grove) with objective performance metrics (Phillips) in order to navigate Quasi-Chaos with precision.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Synthesis of Research Question Answers

Based on the systematic literature review, this study concludes with answers to the three main research questions:

RQ1 (Diagnostic) : Incumbent firms identify strategic dissonance signals through Strategic Recognition capacity, which validates managerial feedback from the organizational "periphery" — particularly from middle managers and virtual teams — before formal market indicators show a crisis (Burgelman & Grove, 1996; Cortellazzo et al., 2019).

RQ2 (Explanatory) : The assumption of stability in the middle phase of the technology cycle fails to mitigate risk because it ignores the "Quasi-Chaos" phenomenon triggered by continuous product revitalization and technology

substitution, confirming that strategic dissonance is non-linear and recurring (Phillips et al., 2016; Modis & Debecker, 1992).

RQ3 (Prescriptive) : Navigation toward sustainable growth is achieved through integrating the Leader-Follower Trade (LFT) model, which dissolves rigid hierarchies, and through using co-creation strategy as a crucial mediator to fill internal capability gaps in business model innovation (Malakyan, 2019; Mihardjo & Sasmoko, 2019).

FURTHER STUDY

This study still has limitations, so further research on Navigating Strategic Dissonance in the Digital Transformation Era: a Systematic is needed to refine this study and enhance the insights of readers and the authors.

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