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A blended perspective on digital mastery and sustainable firm performance in emerging economies: A conceptual paper

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Abstract

Holistic relationship of digital transformation to sustainable firm performance appears conceptually underdeveloped. With special attention to the mediating role of organizational capabilities (OC) and the moderating influence of organizational size (OS), this concept paper attempts to develop a conceptual framework that examines how digital mastery (DM), conceptualized as the integration of both technological and leadership capabilities, influences triple bottom line performance (TBL-P) across economic, environmental, and social dimensions. Through the identification, analysis, and synthesis of existing literature across the domains of digital transformation, sustainability, and organizational behaviour, the research aims to build a blended conceptual model by combining insights from the resource-based view, contingency theory, and modern productivity paradox using a narrative literature review methodology. Based on the synthesized conceptual themes, DM is unlikely to directly improve TBL-P. The relationship seems to be contextually dependent, mediated by organizational capabilities that allow businesses to convert digital investments into significant results. In addition, the relationship appears to be moderated by organizational size, which produces various implementation-related structural advantages and constraints. While acknowledging that results may differ significantly across organizational contexts and unfold unevenly over time, this study offers a blended conceptual model that positions organizational capabilities as crucial mediators and organizational size as a crucial boundary condition. This model lays the groundwork for future empirical research in resource-constrained, emerging economy settings, and suggests that successful digital transformation for sustainability requires simultaneous investment in technological infrastructure and leadership development.

Keywords: Digital mastery, Triple bottom line performance, Organizational capabilities, Emerging economies, Conceptual model

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Introduction

Emerging economies possess distinctive structural and institutional characteristics, such as institutional voids, weaker digital infrastructure, large informal sectors, and resource-constrained firms (Côté & Hu, 2025; Esposito et al., 2025; Nilusha Erangi & Stecenko, 2023; Rassool & Dissanayake, 2019; Sandaruwani, 2021; Van Hoang et al., 2025). Within this context, although the digital revolution is reshaping how businesses operate, compete, and create value, the conceptualization, definition, and relationship between digital transformation, here examined through the lens of digital mastery (DM), and sustainability remain insufficient, as highlighted in recent studies (Ologeanu-Taddei et al., 2025). Much of the existing scholarship tends to address isolated aspects of firm performance, thereby overlooking potential synergies and trade-offs across triple bottom line (TBL) dimensions (Sapukotanage et al., 2018). This gap appears significant in emerging economies like Sri Lanka, where digital transformation intersects with environmental and social challenges (Dissanayake et al., 2022). Illustrative evidence from South Asia highlights both progress and unevenness in digital adoption, with advances in infrastructure and government-led initiatives tempered by persistent barriers such as resource constraints, organizational resistance, and limited strategic alignment (Arachchi et al., 2022; Gunawardene, 2017; Hemachandra & Sharkasi, 2023; Shirakawa & Nikarilkanth, 2024; Thundeniya & Dissanayake, 2024). Ologeanu-Taddei et al. (2025) further contend that notions of sustainability and digital transformation are ambiguous or “fuzzy” and the theory linking the two is thin, particularly when it comes to mediators, moderators, and outcomes.

Some academics have therefore called for multi-theoretical approaches. For instance, DM is positioned by the resource-based view (RBV) as a collection of organizational resources that have the potential to produce competitive advantage (Wójcik, 2015). Adding to this, contingency theory (CT) highlights that contextual elements like organizational structures or industry conditions affect the effectiveness of DM (Park, 2020). Lastly, the modern productivity paradox (MPP) highlights complementarities and misalignments in reaching results to explain why the performance gains of DM could not materialize in isolation (Brynjolfsson et al., 2019).

Together, these viewpoints offer a multi-layered framework for analysing how DM might help businesses achieve sustainability goals while also highlighting that its effects are likely to be conditional, uneven, and delayed. However, as of this review, no coherent conceptual model exists that can be readily applied to investigate the relationship between digital mastery and sustainable firm performance.

The present investigation is therefore motivated by this gap in existing literature. The objective is to offer a heuristic for organizing and analysing the enabling or restricting role of digital mastery in sustainable firm performance, rather than to create a prescriptive paradigm. Based on research that questions the idea that sustainability is a trade-off, the model is intended to consider the possible social and environmental advantages of DM, in contrast to profit-only viewpoints. Since narrative literature reviews enable flexible and interpretive synthesis across several fields, it was chosen as the methodological approach (Green et al., 2006; Al-Tabbaa, 2023; Luft et al., 2022; Reddy et al., 2022).

In such endeavours, conceptual scholarship is especially important. Rather than testing theories empirically, this form of scholarship seeks to clarify definitions, integrate competing viewpoints, and propose preliminary models (Jabareen, 2009; Torraco, 2016). Within this approach, frameworks serve as heuristic tools that provide coherence without asserting causal certainty by organizing complexity into representational forms (Eriksson, 2003; Shields & Tajalli, 2006). The concept paper, thus, expands on current discussions on digital transformation, elevated through the distinct construct of DM, and sustainable business performance.

Material and Method

This conceptual paper explores the link between DM and TBL-P by developing a blended theoretical model using a narrative literature review methodology due to its ability to integrate disparate and disjointed literatures into a cohesive conceptual model (K. Zhang & Ran, 2022). The paper followed the standards for conceptual model construction established by Torraco (2016) and Snyder (2019), which included a search of accessible literature, critical analysis, and synthesis to provide a basis for theoretical and practical insights (Figure 1). In order to address the complex nature of digital transformation and its organizational effects, the method sought comprehensiveness by incorporating ideas from a variety of fields, such as information systems, strategic management, sustainability, and organizational theory, allowing for the identification of gaps in the literature and the creation of a model that integrates concepts of digital transformation, sustainability, and organizational behaviour (Chowdhury & Oredo, 2023; Elia et al., 2024).

Thus, a multi-stage process was adopted:

- a. Identification: Digital terms, "digital transformation," "digital mastery," "digital capabilities," "digitalization," "digital maturity", performance terms, "triple bottom line," "sustainability," "economic performance," "social performance," "environmental performance", and capability terms: "organizational capabilities," "dynamic capabilities," "leadership capabilities" were used in searches in Scopus and Google Scholar. Comprehensiveness was attempted by tracking citations both forward and backward, 174 articles formed the initial screening pool.
- b. Analysis: Definitions, connections, mediators, moderators, and conceptual gaps were found by content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Krippendorff, 2018) of articles within the last 10 -15 years published in English that contributed conceptually or theoretically to the development of the proposed model. Studies lacking conceptual relevance were excluded and 91 articles were retained.
- c. Synthesis: The review identified 35 articles on digital transformation (DT1), 7 on digital paradoxes and tensions (DT2), 17 on organizational/dynamic capabilities (OC1), 5 on knowledge and learning capabilities (OC2), 11 on sustainability and triple bottom line performance (P1), 7 on firm performance not focused on sustainability (P2), 9 on firm size and structural factors (OS1), and 7 on contextual conditions in emerging economies such as Sri Lanka and the global South (C1). Concepts were clustered into higher-order thematic categories, distilled into four dominant themes, and subsequently examined

against the overarching theoretical scaffolding to surface conceptual linkages and theoretical tensions. The suggested conceptual paradigm was informed by theoretical integration between RBV, CT, and MPP.

- d. Quality Assurance: Reflexivity was used at every stage of the procedure to detect possible biases and constraints (Larsson, 2010). Openness in search tactics and inclusion standards improves rigour, and acknowledging limits highlights the exploratory nature of the model.

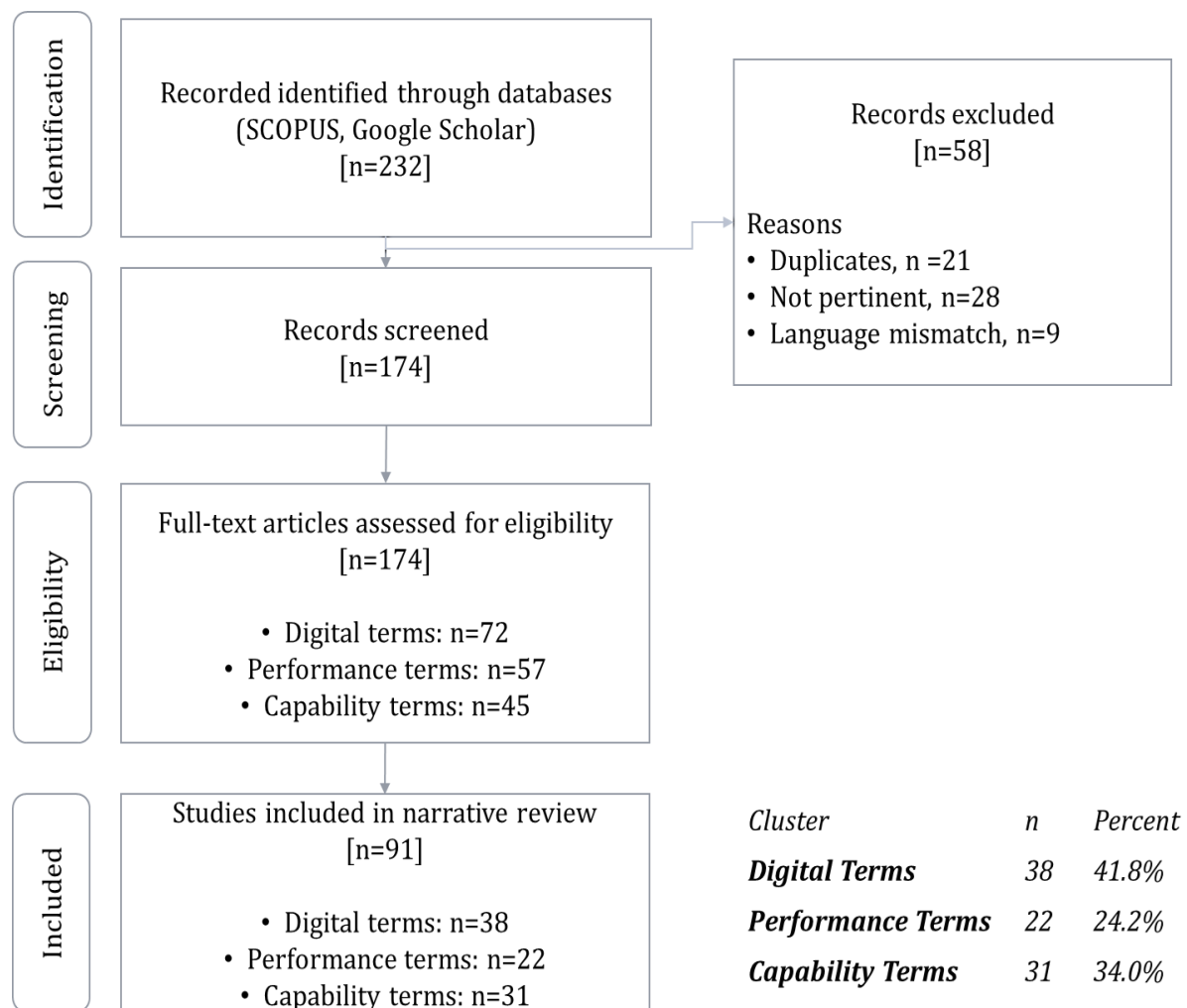


Figure 1. Flow diagram of narrative literature review

Results

Four themes arose from the analysis of literature.

Theme 01: Digital mastery: A capability perspective

Early debates on business process reengineering and IT-enabled organizational change in the late 1990s and early 2000s was where the concept of digital transformation as an academic and managerial construct first emerged (Schallmo & A. Williams, 2018). One of the main points of contention appears to be whether digital transformation is more of an organizational or

technology problem. Technocentric viewpoints contend that investments in cutting-edge technologies (cloud, IoT, digital platforms) generate competitive advantage (Xu & Zhang, 2016). However, detractors contend that these investments lead to fragmented or superficial changes in the absence of strategic alignment and leadership vision (Crummenerl et al., 2020; Saputra, 2023).

Additionally, conflicts were observed between considering digital transformation as a continuous, evolving capability and as a discrete endeavour (AlNuaimi et al., 2022; Karippur & Balaramachandran, 2022; Magesa Mwita & Joanthan, 2020; Mollah et al., 2024; Reis et al., 2018; Verhoef et al., 2021).

Westerman et al. (2014) introduced the concept of DM, providing a blended model for understanding and evaluating the level of maturity of digital transformation in an organization. DM places a strong emphasis on the alignment of two key competencies: leadership capabilities, which are necessary for developing and carrying out a transformative vision, and digital capabilities, which use technological innovation to improve business operations and consumer interaction (Nasution et al., 2020; Rattanawiboonsom et al., 2018; Saputra, 2023; Saputra et al., 2021). This two-dimensional construct highlights that capable leadership is equally as crucial as technological advancements in driving and sustaining digital transformation. Consequently, a distinct conceptual lens that is holistic in and of itself is provided.

This integration is conceptualized as a continuum rather than a binary state, wherein businesses can demonstrate different levels of mastery according to their internal alignment and strategic coherence (Nasution et al., 2020). Their paradigm appears to have been credited with helping to conceptualize the two pillars of effective digital transformation since it makes a distinction between leadership and digital skills (Saniagati & Welly, 2021).

Theme 02: Triple bottom line performance (TBL-P) framework in strategic management

Ologeanu-Taddei et al. (2025) argue that changing interpretations of the triple bottom line framework as a proxy for corporate sustainability can be used to track the historical evolution of sustainable firm performance. TBL was first put forth by John Elkington in the late 1990s as a reporting tool that encouraged businesses to consider social and environmental consequences in addition to financial ones to broaden their focus (Innocent, 2014). However, this paradigm seems to have developed into a more strategic perspective over time, especially as market and institutional pressures about sustainability standards have increased (Hubbard, 2009).

More recently, the reframing of TBL as a performance-based model instead of a disclosure tool is apparent, particularly considering growing global issues like biodiversity loss, climatic instability, and growing social inequality. This development might imply that TBL-P is now important to strategic management thinking rather than being only a side issue (Bindeeba et al., 2025; Gunasekara, 2023; Loviscek, 2021; Schulz & Flanigan, 2016).

Three interrelated dimensions were found to be included in the TBL-P, according to Noor et al. (2023):

1. **Economic performance:** Indices such as higher operational profit, sales, return on investment (ROI), return on assets (ROA), and profits per share (EPS) are used to quantify the capacity of a company to attain financial sustainability and growth, which includes increased cash flow efficiency and lower expenses for purchase of materials, energy, and waste disposal.
2. **Social performance:** This includes how a company affects the welfare of society, such as through enhancing employee occupational health and safety, community health and safety, and relationships with community stakeholders. Social performance considers increases in overall stakeholder welfare, a decrease in community complaints, a boost in customer satisfaction, and an improved image of the firm.
3. **Environmental performance:** Indicates how well a company is doing at reducing its ecological impact, including reduced use of energy and water, lowered wastewater emissions, and reduced use of non-renewable resources. Along with measures to lessen noise, odor emissions, landscape damage, and the likelihood of serious accidents, environmental performance also includes reductions in solid waste, hazardous inputs, air emissions, and soil contamination.

Theme 03: Digital-sustainability paradox and the role of capabilities

One important, albeit contentious, development in this field is the incorporation of digital technologies into sustainability plans. Proponents contend that digital tools, such as blockchain and artificial intelligence, have the potential to improve efficiency, traceability, and transparency, supporting sustainability goals across industries (Martínez-Peláez et al., 2023). But an increasing amount of empirical research seemingly that without leadership alignment, governance frameworks, and strategic clarity, technology would not be able to produce these results on its own (Ahmad & Wong, 2019; Đorić, 2022). This conflict serves as the foundation for what some academics are starting to allude to as a "digital-sustainability paradox": even though businesses may make significant investments in digital transformation, their sustainability outcomes may fall short without the necessary capabilities to orchestrate these efforts meaningfully (Czerny & Letmathe, 2024; Heeks, 2022; Minh Sang, 2024; Ologeanu-Taddei et al., 2025; Ozanne et al., 2016; Sun & Guo, 2022). Guo et al. (2023) and Tagscherer & Carbon (2023) have highlighted the significance of ecosystem integration and strategic coherence, implying that external alignment may be just as important to the success of digital projects as internal capabilities (Elia et al., 2024). There, multiple stages of scholarly interest in organizational capacities (OC) were observed, beginning with the more general investigation of firm-level variability (Aggarwal et al., 2015). Strategic capabilities (related to vision, alignment, and prioritization), operational capabilities (concerned with execution, process integration, and responsiveness), and relational capabilities (which facilitate stakeholder engagement and external collaboration) are some of the thematic categories into which OC are categorized in literature (Koufteros et al., 2014; Teece, 2018; Warner & Wäger, 2019). This thematic categorization is useful in understanding the multifaceted nature of transformation and the different ways through which digital mastery may be incorporated into

daily practices and sustainable business outcomes (Gupta et al., 2024; Konopik et al., 2022; Razzak et al., 2022). Moreover, these capabilities are increasingly seen as developing competencies that may arise from experience, awareness, and adaptation rather than being fixed endowments (Rafi et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023). Given the evolving nature of technologies, legal frameworks, and societal expectations, this adaptability may be especially crucial in the context of digital transformation and sustainability (Castro-Lopez et al., 2023; Protogerou et al., 2012).

Thus, OC appears to enable firms to outperform competitors by leveraging resources more effectively and responding proactively to shifts in market conditions (Inan & Bititci, 2015; Konopik et al., 2022; Schilke et al., 2018). When extended to digital transformation, this implies that firms able to continuously adapt their organizational structures, workflows, and stakeholder relationships may be better positioned to translate digital investments into strategic outcomes, including, potentially, TBL-P (Bhatti et al., 2020; Koufteros et al., 2014).

Theme 04: Organization size as a contextual factor

Prior empirical research from the 1970s and 1980s connected firm size to formalization, hierarchical structures, and the capacity to attain economies of scale (Csaszar, 2012). However, as digital technologies started to change organizational processes in the 1990s, research focused on how organizational size influenced the adoption of innovations and the diffusion of technologies (Nason et al., 2015). Particularly in emerging economies where institutional volatility is prevalent, this investigation has lately broadened to include sustainability and digital transformation contexts (Conti et al., 2024; Githaiga et al., 2022).

A constellation of themes that regard size as both a facilitator and a limitation appear to emerge from this corpus of work. Larger companies may be better positioned to adopt enterprise-wide digital technologies (Ali et al., 2024) and pursue long-term sustainability initiatives (Wu et al., 2024), since they are thought to have more financial slack, institutional credibility, and access to competent talent (Jung & Shegai, 2023; Park, 2020). However, according to Josefy et al. (2015), these same companies are often characterized as structurally inflexible, plagued by inefficiencies in coordination and bureaucratic inertia, which can hinder innovation and postpone strategy recalibration (Nwankpa & Roumani, 2016). On the other hand, while having fewer resources, smaller businesses are frequently praised for their organizational agility (Cenamor et al., 2019; Jung & Shegai, 2023), flatter hierarchies, and stronger stakeholder relationships, all of which may promote quicker adaptation and more contextually based sustainability initiatives (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013; Bjerke & Johansson, 2015). However, they may face resource constraints, limited technological expertise, and financial barriers that may restrict the scope and sophistication of their digital transformation efforts (Li et al., 2020). These opposing viewpoints have sparked discussion on whether size functions as a neutral contextual moderator, a structural benefit, or a liability (Cruz et al., 2019; Dzeraviah, 2023; Luo & Yu, 2022; Yadav et al., 2022).

At a conceptual level, size is observed to be positioned as a boundary condition within broader organizational models (Josefy et al., 2015). In studies on firm performance, size appears to feature as a moderating variable, posited to amplify or attenuate the effects of digital investments depending on internal capabilities and external pressures (Ali et al., 2024; Conti et al., 2024; Raguseo et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2024). Hence, based on the literature, organizational size may be

better viewed as a context-sensitive moderator that influences how businesses pursue and accomplish sustainability outcomes made possible by digital technology, rather than as a deterministic variable (Hörisch et al., 2015; Raguseo et al., 2020).

Discussion

Important themes that guide the conceptual model are identified in our findings. First, digital transformation is reframed distinctly as DM, which is different from simple technology deployment or adoption, and incorporates leadership capabilities in addition to digital capabilities. Second, the TBL performance framework provides a means of operationalizing sustainable firm performance. Third, mediating elements are revealed to be organizational capabilities. Fourth, firm size may moderate the relationship between DM and TBL-P outcomes. Thus, the theoretical foundation for this concept paper evolves in response to growing recognition that no single theory fully accounts for the complex and context-dependent dynamics of digital transformation and sustainable performance (Ologeanu-Taddei et al., 2025). A case for synthesis appears to emerge: a comprehensive framework that can explain the internal forces and external factors that may influence how digital transformation results in sustainable business outcomes. Therefore, a triadic foundation consisting of the RBV, CT, and MPP, not as discrete lenses but as interwoven logics that jointly illuminate the phenomenon under consideration was utilized.

RBV as originally proposed by Barney (1991) and later refined by Wernerfelt (2013), has long been a pillar of strategic management theory, emphasizing the value of firm-specific assets and competencies in gaining a competitive edge. According to RBV, having and strategically using resources that are valuable, rare, unique, and non-substitutable (VRIN) may give an organization a competitive edge (Porter & School, 2016). This perspective has gained popularity in digital transformation since digital technologies have been reframed as strategic resources that need complementary competencies to create value, rather than just tools (Nwankpa & Roumani, 2016). Therefore, digital technologies emerge as a good fit for DM, as it positions internal capabilities like stakeholder responsiveness, operational agility, and strategic foresight as ways that digital investments may influence sustainable performance outcomes (Ketokivi & Schroeder, 2004; Koufteros et al., 2014). However, RBV is critiqued for paying insufficient attention to external dynamics but providing a strong internal logic. Thus, CT is presented as a supplementary logic that emphasizes the contextual fit principle in order to counteract this inward tendency. CT contends that alignment—or misalignment—between internal capabilities and external situations determines organizational effectiveness rather than claiming uniform best practices (Garavan & O'Brien, 2024). In the literature on digital transformation, where businesses function under disparate sectoral, institutional, and geographic restrictions, this is especially relevant (Grover et al., 2018; Mikalef et al., 2020), this theory holds that organizational effectiveness is contingent on the degree of alignment between internal structures, strategic responses, and the external environment. In the context of this concept paper, it is conceivable that the relationship between DM and TBL-P is not uniform but instead mediated or moderated by contextual variables such as OS. While some literature points to the utility of this approach in understanding varied digital outcomes across industries and geographies (Aragón-Correa & Sharma, 2003; Wijethilake et al., 2018), the conditions under which DM supports sustainability goals remain unclear. This ambiguity justifies the inclusion of contingency thinking in the conceptual model, particularly to account for why similar digital strategies may yield different performance profiles in comparable

firms. The model thus attempts to reflect not only firm-level capabilities, but also the broader socio-economic contexts that might shape the impact of DM.

However, the empirical discrepancy in the relationship between digital investment and firm success remains seemingly unsolved, and even this combined viewpoint appears to fall short in explaining it. As a result, a third theoretical foundation is derived from the developing discussion of MPP, which poses significant queries regarding the presumed linearity between performance outcomes and digital investment (Brynjolfsson et al., 2019; Brynjolfsson & Unger, 2023). This paradox highlights the empirical ambiguity surrounding the returns on digital transformation and stems from Solow's remark that "you can see the computer age everywhere but in the productivity statistics." (Sun & Guo, 2022). Thus, scholars increasingly challenge whether digital transformation produces proportional benefits, particularly when those returns are presented not only in economic terms but also in environmental and social aspects. A digital-sustainability paradox emerges in this expanded framework: businesses, particularly in emerging economies, find it difficult to show quantifiable improvements in all areas of sustainable business performance, even in the face of growing digital expenditures (Duc & Leick, 2023; Javed & Al-Mulali, 2025; Liu et al., 2023).

Theoretical blending

The integration of the theories suggest some key dimensions. A mapping of possible contributions of each theory to important elements of the literature-based conceptual model is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Mapping of key components (Theory & conceptual model)

Theoretical perspective	Contribution to DM	Contribution to mediating effect of OC	Contribution to TBL-P	Contribution to moderating effect of OS
RBV	Conceptualizes DM as a VRIN resource bundle comprising digital technologies and leadership capabilities	Explains how OC develop and evolve as distinctive competencies that deploy resources	Lays the groundwork for comprehending how distinct resource arrangements produce long-term competitive advantage in the areas of economics, society, and the environment.	Addresses resource heterogeneity across different sized organizations
CT	Emphasizes the need for alignment between digital strategies and organizational context	Positions capabilities as context-dependent mechanisms for organizational adaptation	Explains variability in performance outcomes based on contextual factors	Establishes OS as a key contingency factor influencing structural complexity and resource availability

MPP	Justifies inclusion of DM as leadership abilities are crucial since digital technology alone often doesn't improve performance.	Highlights capabilities as essential mediators for translating digital investments into performance outcomes	Clarifies why digital investments may not directly yield performance improvements across TBL dimensions	Elucidates why different sized organizations may experience varying implementation challenges

Proposed conceptual model

Building on the results, the author suggests a hybrid conceptual model that uses OS as a potential moderator and OC as a mediator to examine the interaction between DM and TBL-P. Figure 2 illustrates this conceptual framework.

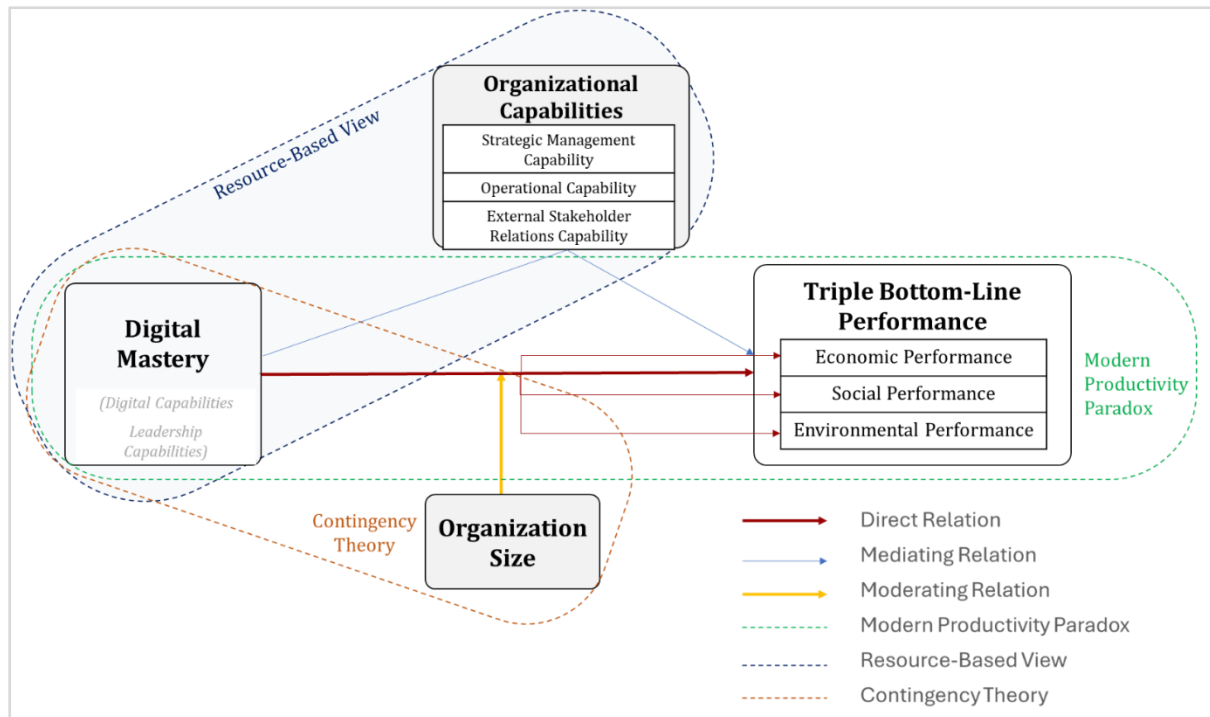


Figure 2. posed Blended Conceptual Model

Although conceptual in nature, the model implies to organizational leaders that attaining DM would necessitate concurrent investments in leadership and technology capabilities, a combination that might, in principle, promote more comprehensive sustainability results. While the consistency of these impacts across contexts has not yet been proved, the hypothesized role of OC emphasizes the significance of internal readiness, particularly in areas like process efficiency, innovation, and stakeholder involvement. Given that digital transformation research has largely been developed in advanced economies (Calvino & Criscuolo, 2019; Dissanayake et al., 2016), this paper extends its applicability to an emerging market context, where economic, institutional, and technological conditions differ significantly. The framework highlights the

potential benefits of a more comprehensive policy approach to digital transformation for policymakers in Sri Lanka and similar emerging economies. This approach should go beyond infrastructure development and consider the social and environmental factors that facilitate sustainable digitalization. Furthermore, inclusion of OS as a moderating factor suggests that differentiating support measures are necessary.

Acknowledging theoretical tensions

While these theories offer complementary insights, they also highlight tensions that merit further exploration:

- i. Determinism vs. strategic choice: While CT proposes contextual determinism, RBV stresses managerial agency in resource development. By considering both strategic intent and environmental restrictions, the suggested model aims to strike a balance between both viewpoints.
- ii. Internal vs. external focus: CT gives priority to external fit, whereas RBV concentrates on internal resources. This concept paper considers both viewpoints and suggests that DM should align with external influences while utilizing internal capabilities.
- iii. Static vs. dynamic perspectives: The focus of MPP on adaptation and learning complements more static understanding of resource advantages in RBV. This paper takes a dynamic approach, acknowledging that the impact of DM on TBL-P may change over time.

Conclusion

While foundational constructs derive from global scholarship, this concept paper provides an organized empirical contribution to the call for more clarity on how sustainability and digital transformation might be operationalized in emerging economies, as well as how antecedents, consequences, mediators, and moderators may influence their interaction.

This conceptual paper acknowledges observed limitations that should be considered. Empirical investigations testing the suggested model would be beneficial for future study. Thus, with this conceptual framework a cross-sectional survey design could be used to assess digital mastery, organizational capabilities, and TBL performance in emerging economies, with SEM or PLS to examine direct, mediating, and moderating effects. Existing frameworks like digital mastery and GRI standards or perceptual measures could be adapted, with organization size measured through indicators like employee count and revenue.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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