



Transformational Leadership Communication in Building Digital Culture within Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

This study examines the role of transformational leadership communication in building digital culture within higher education institutions. As universities face increasing pressure to adapt to rapid technological advancements, digital transformation extends beyond the adoption of technology and requires a fundamental shift in organizational culture, values, and practices. This research adopts a qualitative approach using an exploratory multiple case study design to capture in-depth insights into leadership communication processes. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and observations involving academic leaders and faculty members engaged in institutional transformation initiatives. The findings reveal that visionary communication plays a crucial role in articulating a shared direction and aligning stakeholders, while dialogic communication fosters trust through open, participatory engagement. In addition, strategic communication helps manage resistance by addressing concerns, reframing change, and promoting acceptance. Communication also functions as a driver of organizational learning by enabling knowledge sharing, reflection, and continuous adaptation. The study highlights that effective leadership communication is not limited to information dissemination but involves meaning-making, relationship-building, and cultural integration. The integration of transformational and adaptive communication practices emerges as a key factor in sustaining digital transformation and embedding digital values into institutional practices. This research contributes to the literature by emphasizing the centrality of communication in leadership and digital culture development, particularly within the context of higher education in Indonesia.

Introduction

The rapid acceleration of digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of higher education institutions worldwide (Mohamed et al., 2022; Nieto-Taborda & Luppicini, 2025; Mamanazarov et al., 2025). This transformation extends far beyond the mere integration of digital technologies into teaching and administrative processes; it represents a profound shift in organizational culture, institutional identity, and modes of interaction among stakeholders (Akour & Alenezi, 2022). Universities are increasingly expected to operate as agile, innovation-driven ecosystems capable of responding to evolving societal demands, technological disruptions, and global competition (Saha et al., 2026). In this context, the success of digital transformation is not determined solely by technological infrastructure but is deeply contingent upon leadership practices, particularly how leaders communicate change and construct shared meaning across the organization (Zhang et al., 2022).

The urgency of digital transformation in higher education has been amplified by both global pressures and national policy initiatives such as Independent Campus and Independent Learning. These initiatives aim to foster flexibility, innovation, and digital integration within academic systems. However, despite these policy advancements, many institutions continue to face significant challenges, including infrastructural limitations, uneven digital literacy, and resistance to change among academic staff (Ntorukiri et al., 2022). These challenges highlight that digital transformation is not merely a technical endeavor but a complex social and cultural process that requires effective leadership communication to navigate uncertainty and align diverse stakeholder interests (Yeasmin, 2024).

Leadership communication has emerged as a critical mechanism through which institutional transformation is articulated, negotiated, and enacted. Rather than functioning as a unidirectional transmission of information, leadership communication in contemporary organizations involves dialogic engagement, trust-building, and the co-construction of organizational meaning (Piatanom & Thongkamhaeng, 2025). Within higher education, where autonomy, collegiality, and disciplinary diversity are deeply embedded, communication plays an even more strategic role in bridging structural complexities and fostering collaboration across academic and administrative domains (Yamamoto, 2025). Ineffective communication can lead to fragmented implementation, mistrust, and resistance, whereas strategic communication can enhance engagement, strengthen institutional cohesion, and support sustainable change.

Transformational leadership communication is particularly relevant in this context, as it emphasizes the articulation of vision, the inspiration of collective commitment, and the alignment of organizational values with strategic goals (Anders, 2025). Transformational leaders use communication not only to inform but to inspire, employing narratives, symbolic actions, and emotionally resonant messages to mobilize stakeholders toward a shared future. In higher education institutions undergoing digital transformation, such communication is essential for fostering a sense of purpose and direction, especially when organizational members face uncertainty and ambiguity (Díaz et al., 2023). By framing digital initiatives as part of a broader institutional mission, leaders can shift perceptions from compliance-driven change to meaningful participation in organizational evolution (Rodzi et al., 2025).

Transformational leadership communication alone may not be sufficient to address the complexities of digital transformation. Emerging evidence suggests that leaders must also adopt adaptive communication practices characterized by flexibility, empathy, and responsiveness to stakeholder concerns (Sott & Bender, 2025). Adaptive communication enables leaders to manage resistance, facilitate organizational learning, and create “holding environments” where individuals can engage with uncertainty and experiment with new practices. In Indonesian higher education, where hierarchical structures and bureaucratic traditions often coexist with communal values, the integration of transformational and adaptive communication becomes particularly important for achieving both strategic direction and relational stability (Pambudi et al., 2025).

Empirical insights from recent studies indicate that digital transformation challenges in higher education are often rooted in human and cultural factors rather than technological limitations. Academic staff may resist digital initiatives due to concerns about increased workload, loss of autonomy, or lack of competence in using new technologies. In such contexts, leadership communication serves as a critical tool for addressing fears, building trust, and fostering a culture of openness and innovation. Leaders who engage in dialogic communication characterized by listening, empathy, and mutual respect are more likely to reduce resistance and enhance stakeholder engagement (Piatanom & Thongkamhaeng, 2025). Moreover,

communication that is tailored to different stakeholder groups, such as senior faculty and younger lecturers, can further improve the effectiveness of transformation initiatives.

Another critical dimension of digital transformation is the development of digital culture within higher education institutions. Digital culture refers to shared values, norms, and practices that support innovation, collaboration, and the effective use of digital technologies. It encompasses not only technical competencies but also attitudes toward change, learning, and experimentation. Building such a culture requires sustained communication efforts that reinforce desired behaviors, celebrate successes, and normalize the use of digital tools in everyday academic practices (Lizares et al., 2024). Leadership communication plays a central role in this process by shaping organizational narratives, influencing perceptions, and embedding digital values into institutional identity.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of leadership communication in digital transformation, there remains a significant gap in understanding how transformational leadership communication specifically contributes to the formation of digital culture within higher education institutions, particularly in the Indonesian context. Existing studies have largely focused on technological adoption or general leadership practices, with limited attention to the communicative dimensions of leadership and their impact on cultural change. This gap is especially given the unique characteristics of higher education institutions, where organizational change is often influenced by complex social dynamics, professional autonomy, and institutional traditions.

This study seeks to explore the role of transformational leadership communication in building digital culture within higher education institutions. By examining how leaders articulate vision, engage stakeholders, and manage resistance through communication, this research aims to provide deeper insights into the communicative processes that underpin successful digital transformation. Ultimately, understanding these dynamics is essential for developing leadership strategies that not only drive technological change but also foster sustainable cultural transformation in higher education.

Methods

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach with an exploratory multiple case study design to investigate how transformational leadership communication contributes to the development of digital culture within higher education institutions. A qualitative design is particularly appropriate because the phenomenon under investigation leadership communication and cultural transformation is complex, context-dependent, and deeply embedded in social interactions and organizational dynamics. Rather than seeking generalizable causal relationships, this study aims to generate rich, in-depth insights into how leaders construct meaning, influence stakeholders, and shape institutional culture through communication practices.

The exploratory nature of the design allows the researcher to capture emerging patterns and nuanced behaviors that may not yet be fully theorized, particularly within the context of Indonesian higher education. The multiple case study strategy strengthens the analytical depth by enabling cross-case comparison, thereby identifying both shared patterns and context-specific variations in leadership communication practices. This approach is aligned with the objective of understanding not only what leaders do, but how and why communication practices contribute to digital culture formation.

Research Setting and Context

The study is conducted within selected higher education institutions in Indonesia that have actively engaged in digital transformation initiatives, particularly in the post-pandemic period. These institutions represent diverse organizational characteristics, including private universities with varying levels of technological readiness, organizational complexity, and leadership structures. The Indonesian higher education context provides a particularly relevant setting due to its ongoing transition toward digitalization, coupled with persistent challenges such as infrastructural disparities, bureaucratic rigidity, and varying levels of digital literacy among academic staff.

The selected institutions are characterized by their active efforts to integrate digital technologies into teaching, administration, and governance processes. This includes the implementation of Learning Management Systems (LMS), digital communication platforms, and data-driven decision-making tools. The context is also marked by strong hierarchical traditions combined with relational cultural values, making leadership communication a critical mechanism for bridging formal structures and informal interactions. This setting allows for a comprehensive exploration of how transformational leadership communication operates within real-world organizational complexities.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

This study utilizes purposive sampling to select participants who are directly involved in leadership and decision-making processes related to digital transformation. The primary participants include senior academic leaders such as rectors, vice-rectors, deans, and program heads, as well as selected faculty members who actively engage with institutional change initiatives. The inclusion criteria require participants to have at least three years of leadership or strategic involvement experience and to be directly engaged in communication processes related to organizational change.

A total of approximately 9 to 12 participants are targeted across the selected institutions to ensure both depth and diversity of perspectives. This range is considered sufficient to achieve data saturation while maintaining analytical rigor. The selection of participants also considers variation in roles, institutional hierarchy, and disciplinary backgrounds to capture a comprehensive view of leadership communication dynamics. By including both leaders and academic staff, the study is able to examine communication practices from both the sender and receiver perspectives, thereby enhancing the validity of the findings.

Data Collection Methods

Data are collected through multiple qualitative methods to ensure depth, richness, and triangulation. The primary method of data collection is semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which allow participants to articulate their experiences, perceptions, and reflections on leadership communication and digital transformation. Each interview is conducted for approximately 60 to 90 minutes, either face-to-face or via online platforms such as Zoom, depending on participant availability. The interview protocol is designed to explore key themes, including vision communication, stakeholder engagement, resistance management, and cultural change.

In addition to interviews, document analysis is conducted to examine institutional artifacts such as strategic plans, digital transformation roadmaps, internal communication memos, and policy documents. These documents provide contextual insights into how leadership communication is formally structured and implemented within the organization. Furthermore, non-participant observations are carried out where possible, focusing on leadership interactions in meetings,

forums, or digital communication platforms. Field notes are recorded to capture non-verbal cues, interaction patterns, and contextual dynamics that may not be fully expressed in interviews. The combination of interviews, documents, and observations enhances the robustness of the data by allowing cross-verification of findings and reducing reliance on a single data source.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis is conducted using thematic analysis, following the systematic procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke. The process begins with data familiarization, where interview transcripts and field notes are read repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content. This is followed by initial coding, where meaningful units of data are identified and labeled according to emerging patterns related to leadership communication and digital culture.

Subsequently, codes are organized into broader themes and sub-themes, such as transformational communication practices, adaptive communication strategies, trust-building mechanisms, and cultural transformation processes. The analysis also involves identifying relationships between themes to construct an integrated understanding of how communication practices influence digital culture. Cross-case comparison is conducted to identify similarities and differences across institutions, thereby enhancing the explanatory power of the findings.

To support systematic analysis, qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo may be utilized for coding, categorization, and visualization of thematic relationships. This ensures transparency, consistency, and traceability in the analytical process.

Results and Discussion

Visionary Communication as the Foundation of Digital Culture

Visionary communication serves as the cornerstone in building digital culture within higher education institutions, particularly in contexts undergoing rapid technological and organizational transformation. In such environments, leaders are not merely responsible for implementing digital systems but are required to articulate a clear, compelling, and future-oriented vision that provides meaning and direction to change initiatives. This vision acts as a guiding framework that aligns institutional goals with the expectations of stakeholders, ensuring that digital transformation is perceived not as a series of fragmented technical adjustments but as a coherent and purposeful evolution of the institution. Through visionary communication, leaders are able to frame digitalization as an integral part of institutional identity, thereby fostering long-term commitment rather than short-term compliance.

At a deeper level, visionary communication functions as a sensemaking process, enabling organizational members to interpret complex changes and reduce uncertainty. Higher education institutions are inherently pluralistic, characterized by diverse disciplines, professional autonomy, and layered governance structures. In such settings, the absence of clear communication often leads to ambiguity, misinterpretation, and resistance. Visionary communication addresses this challenge by connecting digital initiatives to broader institutional aspirations, such as enhancing academic quality, increasing global competitiveness, and preparing students for future workforce demands. By consistently reinforcing these connections, leaders help stakeholders understand the rationale behind transformation and their role within it, thus fostering cognitive alignment across the organization.

A critical dimension of visionary communication lies in its reliance on strategic narratives and storytelling. Rather than presenting digital transformation through technical language or policy directives, effective leaders employ narratives that resonate with the values, experiences, and

aspirations of academic communities. These narratives often emphasize future-oriented goals and collective progress, transforming digital initiatives into meaningful institutional journeys. Through storytelling, leaders are able to bridge the gap between abstract vision and everyday practice, making transformation more relatable and actionable. This narrative approach not only enhances understanding but also stimulates motivation, encouraging stakeholders to actively participate in the change process.

In addition, visionary communication is reinforced through symbolic engagement and continuous interaction. Leaders utilize both formal and informal communication channels such as institutional meetings, digital platforms, and interpersonal discussions to repeatedly embed the vision within organizational discourse. This repetition is essential for ensuring that the vision remains visible, consistent, and internalized over time. Symbolic actions, including thematic forums, collaborative events, and shared discussions, further strengthen this process by translating abstract ideas into tangible experiences. As a result, digital culture is gradually constructed through sustained communication practices that shape shared norms, values, and behaviors.

Another important aspect of visionary communication is its role in fostering inclusivity and collective ownership. Effective leaders move beyond top-down communication by creating opportunities for dialogue and participation, allowing stakeholders to engage with, interpret, and contribute to the institutional vision. This participatory approach enhances commitment by making individuals feel valued and involved in the transformation process. When stakeholders perceive the vision as collectively owned rather than externally imposed, they are more likely to support and sustain digital initiatives. In this way, visionary communication becomes a collaborative process that strengthens organizational cohesion and cultural integration.

Empirical insights from the interviews further illustrate the significance of visionary communication in shaping digital culture. Participants consistently highlighted that clarity of vision played a crucial role in reducing confusion and resistance during the early stages of digital transformation. One participant noted:

“At the beginning, many of us were unsure why the changes were happening so quickly. But when the leadership explained the bigger vision about preparing students for the future and keeping the institution competitive it became easier to understand and accept.”

This statement reflects how visionary communication functions as a cognitive alignment mechanism, helping stakeholders connect immediate changes with long-term institutional goals. By providing a clear and meaningful narrative, leaders are able to transform uncertainty into understanding and acceptance.

Furthermore, the interviews reveal that visionary communication is most effective when it incorporates emotional engagement and a sense of shared purpose. Leaders who communicate in ways that inspire and connect with stakeholders at a personal level are more successful in fostering commitment to digital transformation. As another participant explained:

“It wasn’t just about introducing new systems. The way leaders communicated made us feel like we were part of something bigger. It gave meaning to what we were doing, not just instructions to follow.”

This insight underscores the importance of the affective dimension of communication, where emotional resonance enhances motivation and strengthens institutional identity. When stakeholders feel connected to the vision, they are more likely to internalize digital values and contribute actively to cultural change.

Moreover, the findings indicate that visionary communication must be consistent and sustained over time to effectively shape digital culture. Participants observed that leaders who continuously reinforced the same vision across different platforms and interactions were more successful in embedding it within organizational practices. Repetition and consistency ensure that the vision becomes part of everyday thinking and behavior, rather than remaining a one-time message. However, the interviews also highlight challenges related to alignment, as inconsistent messaging across leadership levels can create confusion and weaken the impact of the vision.

Dialogic Communication and Trust Building

Dialogic communication plays a pivotal role in building trust within higher education institutions undergoing digital transformation. Unlike traditional top-down communication, dialogic communication emphasizes two-way interaction, mutual understanding, and openness, where leaders and organizational members actively engage in the exchange of ideas, concerns, and feedback. In complex academic environments characterized by autonomy, diverse perspectives, and institutional hierarchies, trust cannot be imposed through authority alone; it must be cultivated through continuous, meaningful communication. Dialogic communication enables leaders to move beyond directive approaches and instead foster relationships grounded in transparency, respect, and shared understanding.

Dialogic communication functions as a relational mechanism that strengthens the connection between leaders and stakeholders. Through active listening and responsiveness, leaders demonstrate that they value the perspectives and experiences of organizational members. This approach is particularly important in digital transformation contexts, where uncertainty and resistance are common. By creating spaces where individuals can voice their concerns without fear of judgment, leaders help reduce anxiety and build psychological safety. Trust, in this sense, emerges not from the absence of conflict, but from the presence of open and honest dialogue that acknowledges and addresses challenges collectively.

A critical dimension of dialogic communication is its emphasis on active listening and empathy. Effective leaders do not merely transmit information but engage in conversations that allow them to understand the emotional and cognitive responses of stakeholders. In higher education, where faculty members often have strong professional identities and expectations of autonomy, empathetic communication becomes essential for maintaining trust. Leaders who listen attentively and respond thoughtfully are more likely to gain credibility and foster a sense of inclusion. This empathetic engagement signals that transformation is a shared process rather than a unilateral decision, thereby encouraging stakeholders to participate more actively in change initiatives.

Dialogic communication also contributes to trust building by enabling collective problem-solving and shared decision-making. Rather than presenting predetermined solutions, leaders invite stakeholders to contribute ideas and collaborate in addressing challenges. This participatory approach enhances ownership and accountability, as individuals feel that their input has a tangible impact on organizational outcomes. In the context of digital transformation, where new systems and processes often require adaptation and learning, such collaboration is crucial for ensuring successful implementation. Trust is strengthened when stakeholders perceive that decisions are made transparently and inclusively, rather than imposed without consultation.

Dialogic communication is reinforced through the use of informal and flexible communication channels. In many higher education settings, trust is often built outside formal structures, through everyday interactions and informal conversations. Leaders who engage with

stakeholders through accessible platforms such as group discussions, messaging applications, or casual meetings are able to create a more approachable and responsive communication environment. These informal interactions allow for more candid exchanges, enabling leaders to capture concerns and feedback that might not surface in formal settings. As a result, trust is developed through ongoing engagement rather than isolated communication events.

Empirical evidence from the interviews highlights the significance of dialogic communication in fostering trust during digital transformation. Participants consistently emphasized that opportunities for open dialogue were crucial in helping them feel heard and valued. One participant noted:

“What made a difference was that we were not just given instructions. We were asked what we thought, what challenges we faced, and how we felt about the changes. That made us trust the process more.”

This statement illustrates how dialogic communication transforms communication from a one-way directive into a collaborative engagement, where stakeholders become active participants rather than passive recipients. By involving individuals in conversations, leaders create a sense of inclusion that strengthens trust and commitment. Another participant highlighted the importance of informal communication in building trust:

“Sometimes the real discussions happened outside formal meetings. In smaller groups or casual chats, we felt more comfortable expressing our concerns, and the leaders were open to listening.”

This insight underscores the role of informal dialogic spaces in fostering authentic communication. In such settings, hierarchical barriers are reduced, allowing for more honest and meaningful exchanges. These interactions contribute significantly to trust building, as they demonstrate leaders’ willingness to engage beyond formal obligations.

The interviews also reveal that the effectiveness of dialogic communication depends on consistency and responsiveness. Trust can be undermined if leaders invite dialogue but fail to act on feedback or respond to concerns. Participants noted that meaningful dialogue requires not only listening but also visible follow-through, where stakeholder input is acknowledged and integrated into decision-making processes. This highlights that dialogic communication is not merely a technique but a sustained commitment to relational engagement.

The findings suggest that dialogic communication must be adapted to different stakeholder groups. Faculty members, administrative staff, and leadership teams may have varying communication preferences and expectations. Effective leaders recognize these differences and tailor their communication approaches accordingly, ensuring that dialogue remains inclusive and accessible. This adaptability further enhances trust by demonstrating sensitivity to diverse needs and perspectives within the organization.

Managing Resistance through Strategic Communication

Managing resistance is an inevitable and critical component of digital transformation within higher education institutions. Resistance does not merely reflect opposition to change but often signals deeper concerns related to uncertainty, identity, competence, and organizational culture. In this context, strategic communication becomes a key instrument through which leaders interpret, address, and transform resistance into constructive engagement. Rather than perceiving resistance as a barrier to be eliminated, effective leaders approach it as a diagnostic resource a source of insight into stakeholder perceptions, fears, and expectations. Through deliberate and well-crafted communication strategies, leaders are able to reduce anxiety, build trust, and facilitate smoother transitions toward digital culture.

At the core of managing resistance through strategic communication is the ability to frame change in a meaningful and context-sensitive manner. Resistance often arises when stakeholders perceive transformation as disruptive, irrelevant, or imposed without sufficient explanation. Strategic communication addresses this by clearly articulating the rationale behind change, linking digital initiatives to institutional goals, and emphasizing long-term benefits. By providing a coherent narrative, leaders help stakeholders make sense of transformation and understand its necessity. This framing process reduces ambiguity and mitigates the perception of threat, thereby lowering resistance and fostering acceptance.

Another crucial dimension of strategic communication is empathetic engagement, where leaders acknowledge and validate the concerns of stakeholders. In higher education environments, resistance is frequently rooted in fears of increased workload, loss of autonomy, or lack of digital competence. Leaders who engage empathetically do not dismiss these concerns but instead create spaces for open discussion and emotional expression. This approach transforms communication from a purely informational process into a relational one, where stakeholders feel heard and respected. Empathy plays a vital role in building trust, which in turn reduces defensive attitudes and encourages more constructive responses to change.

Strategic communication also involves the use of dialogic and participatory approaches to address resistance. Rather than relying on one-way directives, leaders facilitate two-way interactions that allow stakeholders to contribute ideas, ask questions, and co-create solutions. This participatory process enhances ownership and reduces resistance by giving individuals a sense of control over the transformation. When stakeholders are involved in decision-making, they are more likely to perceive change as legitimate and aligned with their interests. As a result, resistance is gradually transformed into collaboration, supporting the development of a more inclusive and adaptive organizational culture.

Message framing and timing are critical elements of strategic communication in managing resistance. Leaders must carefully balance transparency with reassurance, ensuring that information is delivered in a way that is honest yet constructive. Premature or poorly framed communication can create confusion or amplify anxiety, while delayed communication may lead to mistrust and speculation. Effective leaders therefore adopt a phased communication approach, gradually introducing information, addressing concerns, and reinforcing positive narratives. This strategic pacing allows stakeholders to process change incrementally, reducing the likelihood of overwhelming reactions.

The importance of tailoring communication to different stakeholder groups is also evident in managing resistance. Higher education institutions consist of diverse actors, including senior faculty, junior lecturers, administrative staff, and leadership teams, each with distinct perspectives and concerns. Strategic communication requires leaders to adapt their messaging to these different audiences, using appropriate language, channels, and levels of detail. Personalized communication, particularly with senior faculty members, can be especially effective in addressing resistance, as it acknowledges their experience and professional identity. This targeted approach enhances the relevance and impact of communication, thereby reducing resistance across different organizational segments.

Empirical evidence from the interviews highlights how strategic communication plays a decisive role in transforming resistance into engagement. Participants emphasized that resistance often stemmed from uncertainty and lack of understanding rather than deliberate opposition. One participant explained:

“At first, many of us resisted because we didn’t fully understand what was happening. It felt like everything was changing too fast. But when the leaders started explaining the reasons behind it and listened to our concerns, we became more open to trying.”

This statement illustrates how strategic communication functions as a clarification and reassurance mechanism, helping stakeholders move from confusion to understanding. By addressing informational gaps and engaging in dialogue, leaders are able to reduce resistance and build acceptance. Another participant highlighted the importance of empathy and responsiveness in managing resistance:

“Some lecturers were not comfortable with the new systems, and instead of forcing them, the leaders tried to understand their difficulties. They provided support and gave us time to adapt, which made a big difference.”

This insight underscores the role of empathetic and supportive communication in mitigating resistance. When leaders demonstrate patience and understanding, stakeholders are more likely to feel supported rather than pressured, leading to more positive attitudes toward change.

However, the interviews also reveal that ineffective communication can exacerbate resistance. In cases where messages were inconsistent or lacked clarity, participants reported increased confusion and skepticism. This finding highlights the necessity of communication alignment and consistency across leadership levels. Without a unified message, stakeholders may receive conflicting information, which can undermine trust and reinforce resistance.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that resistance management is not a one-time effort but a continuous communicative process. As digital transformation evolves, new challenges and concerns emerge, requiring ongoing dialogue and adaptation. Leaders must therefore maintain open communication channels and remain responsive to stakeholder feedback throughout the transformation journey. This sustained engagement ensures that resistance is continuously addressed and transformed into learning opportunities.

Communication as a Driver of Organizational Learning

Communication plays a central role as a driver of organizational learning within higher education institutions, particularly in the context of digital transformation. As institutions navigate rapid technological change, learning becomes not only an individual activity but a collective, continuous, and socially constructed process. In this regard, communication functions as the primary medium through which knowledge is shared, experiences are reflected upon, and new practices are developed. Rather than serving merely as a tool for information dissemination, communication enables institutions to transform experiences into insights and insights into organizational capabilities. This dynamic is essential for fostering a digital culture that values adaptability, innovation, and continuous improvement.

At its core, communication facilitates knowledge sharing and knowledge creation across organizational levels. In higher education environments, knowledge is often distributed across departments, disciplines, and professional roles. Without effective communication, this knowledge remains fragmented and underutilized. Leaders who prioritize open and inclusive communication create opportunities for individuals to exchange ideas, share best practices, and collaboratively solve problems. Through such interactions, tacit knowledge such as teaching experiences, technological adaptations, and problem-solving strategies can be externalized and integrated into institutional learning processes. This collective exchange not only enhances individual competencies but also strengthens the organization’s capacity to respond to change.

A key dimension of communication as a driver of organizational learning is the creation of reflective and dialogic spaces. Leaders play a crucial role in establishing environments where

stakeholders can reflect on their experiences, discuss challenges, and explore new approaches without fear of judgment. These spaces may take the form of formal meetings, workshops, or informal discussions, but their effectiveness lies in their ability to encourage open dialogue and critical reflection. Through continuous interaction, organizational members are able to reinterpret their experiences, identify patterns, and generate new insights. This process of reflection and dialogue is fundamental to organizational learning, as it transforms isolated experiences into shared understanding and collective knowledge.

Furthermore, communication supports organizational learning by enabling experimentation and adaptive learning processes. Digital transformation often requires institutions to adopt new tools, methods, and practices, which may involve trial and error. Effective communication allows leaders to frame experimentation as a legitimate and necessary part of learning, rather than as a risk to be avoided. By encouraging stakeholders to share both successes and failures, leaders foster a culture where learning is continuous and iterative. This openness reduces fear of failure and promotes innovation, as individuals feel supported in exploring new possibilities and adapting to changing circumstances.

Another important aspect is the role of communication in building a learning-oriented culture. Organizational learning is sustained when communication consistently reinforces values such as curiosity, collaboration, and openness to change. Leaders who actively communicate these values help shape a mindset that embraces learning as an integral part of organizational life. Through repeated messaging, storytelling, and recognition of learning efforts, communication becomes a mechanism for embedding learning behaviors into daily practices. Over time, this contributes to the development of a digital culture where continuous learning is normalized and expected.

Communication also enhances organizational learning through feedback mechanisms and iterative improvement. Feedback loops both formal and informal allow organizations to assess the effectiveness of digital initiatives and make necessary adjustments. Leaders who encourage feedback and respond constructively demonstrate a commitment to learning and improvement. This responsiveness not only enhances decision-making but also strengthens trust and engagement among stakeholders. When individuals see that their input leads to tangible changes, they are more likely to participate actively in learning processes and contribute to organizational development.

The interview findings strongly support the role of communication as a driver of organizational learning. Participants highlighted that the availability of open communication channels significantly enhanced their ability to learn and adapt during digital transformation. One participant explained:

“We learned a lot not from formal training, but from discussions with colleagues. When we shared our experiences using new systems, we could understand what worked and what didn’t.”

This statement illustrates how communication facilitates peer-based learning, where knowledge is generated through interaction rather than formal instruction. Such collaborative learning processes are particularly important in dynamic environments, where formal guidelines may not fully address emerging challenges.

Another key insight from the interviews is the importance of reflective dialogue in shaping learning outcomes. Participants emphasized that opportunities to discuss challenges and reflect on experiences were essential for improving their understanding and performance. One respondent noted:

“After trying new teaching methods online, we often discussed them in small groups. Those conversations helped us realize our mistakes and find better ways to improve.”

This highlights the role of communication in enabling collective reflection, where individuals learn not only from their own experiences but also from the experiences of others. Through dialogue, organizational members are able to reinterpret challenges and develop more effective practices.

The interviews also reveal that communication encourages experimentation and innovation by creating a supportive environment for learning. Participants reported that when leaders openly communicated that trial and error were part of the process, they felt more confident in trying new approaches. One participant stated:

“The leaders kept telling us that it’s okay to try and fail as long as we learn from it. That made us more willing to experiment with new tools and methods.”

This finding demonstrates how communication shapes attitudes toward learning, transforming uncertainty into opportunity and fostering a culture of innovation. The findings indicate that feedback-driven communication plays a significant role in organizational learning. Participants appreciated when leaders actively sought feedback and used it to improve systems and processes. This responsiveness created a sense of involvement and encouraged continuous participation in learning activities. However, some participants also noted that inconsistent feedback mechanisms could limit learning opportunities, emphasizing the need for structured and sustained communication practices.

The findings of this study show that transformational leadership communication plays an important role in building digital culture within higher education institutions. Digital culture does not emerge only from the adoption of digital platforms, learning management systems, or administrative technologies, but from the ability of leaders to communicate meaning, direction, and shared commitment. This supports Akour and Alenezi (2022), who argue that digital transformation in higher education requires institutional readiness, leadership support, and cultural adaptation. In line with the findings of this study, digital transformation becomes more sustainable when communication helps academic members understand why change is necessary and how it contributes to institutional development La Sociale vol 7 (3) 969.docx.

Visionary communication was found to be a key foundation for digital culture. This finding is consistent with Alenezi (2021), who emphasizes that digital transformation in higher education involves strategic, pedagogical, and organizational change. Leaders must therefore communicate a clear vision so that digital initiatives are not perceived as isolated technical programs. Similarly, Carvalho et al. (2022) found that transformational leadership is closely related to digital transformation and institutional performance in higher education. The present study strengthens this argument by showing that leadership vision becomes effective when it is communicated repeatedly, emotionally, and meaningfully to stakeholders.

The findings also support Niță and Guțu (2023), who explain that leadership and digital transformation influence engagement in higher education. In this study, engagement was strengthened when leaders framed digital transformation as part of the institution’s long-term mission. This indicates that visionary communication functions as a sensemaking process. It helps lecturers and staff interpret digital change not as an additional workload, but as part of academic improvement, student readiness, and institutional competitiveness.

Dialogic communication also emerged as an important mechanism for building trust. This finding is aligned with García-Peñalvo (2021), who warns that digital transformation in higher education may fail when institutions focus too much on technology and neglect human and

pedagogical support. The present study shows that trust is built when leaders listen, respond, and create opportunities for dialogue. This is also consistent with Langseth et al. (2023), who emphasize the importance of support units and institutional actors in building capacity for online learning. However, this study adds that support must be accompanied by open communication so that stakeholders feel involved rather than instructed.

Strategic communication was also found to be crucial in managing resistance. Resistance in digital transformation is often caused by uncertainty, lack of digital competence, fear of workload increase, and limited understanding of institutional goals. This supports Aditya et al. (2021), who identified several barriers to digital transformation in higher education, including cultural, technical, and organizational barriers. Aditya et al. (2022) further argue that barriers to digital transformation must be identified and prioritized according to institutional context. The present study confirms that leaders need to adapt their communication to different stakeholder groups, especially because senior lecturers, junior lecturers, and administrative staff may respond differently to digital change.

The findings are also related to Bygstad et al. (2022), who argue that digital transformation in higher education often involves fragmented digital practices. In this study, leadership communication helped connect fragmented initiatives into a more coherent institutional direction. Through shared narratives, leaders can link digital learning, administration, and governance into a broader digital culture. Therefore, communication becomes a bridge between technological implementation and cultural integration.

Communication also functions as a driver of organizational learning. This supports Bisri et al. (2023), who identify leadership as one of the key success factors in digital transformation in higher education. The present findings show that organizational learning occurs when leaders encourage knowledge sharing, reflection, feedback, and experimentation. This is consistent with Muslim et al. (2024), who found that digital leadership and digital literacy influence higher education performance through digital innovation. In this study, digital literacy was not only treated as an individual skill, but as a collective learning process developed through communication.

The importance of institutional culture is also supported by Hamdani et al. (2021), who found that corporate culture and digital transformation strategy are closely related in Indonesian universities. The present study extends this by showing that communication connects strategy and culture. Without communication, digital strategies may remain formal documents; through communication, those strategies become shared values and everyday practices. This also agrees with Rodríguez-Abitia and Bribiesca-Correa (2021), who argue that digital transformation in universities must be assessed through multiple institutional dimensions, not only technology adoption.

Furthermore, the findings are consistent with Nguyen et al. (2021), who highlight the importance of readiness for digital transformation in higher education. This study shows that readiness can be strengthened through leadership communication. Visionary communication builds understanding, dialogic communication builds trust, and strategic communication reduces resistance. In this way, communication helps institutions prepare their members psychologically, socially, and professionally for digital change.

The study also supports Schneider and Kokshagina (2021), who explain that digital transformation requires organizational capability, innovation, and continuous adaptation. In higher education, this capability is developed when communication encourages experimentation and learning from failure. Barzman et al. (2021) also emphasize the need for future-oriented thinking in higher education transformation. The present findings show that

visionary communication helps institutions imagine and prepare for future academic challenges. Similarly, Suárez et al. (2021) argue that digital transformation should be understood systemically. This study confirms that communication integrates different parts of the institution, including leadership, faculty, technology, and organizational culture.

Mabotha (2025) explains that digital transformation in higher education involves skills, barriers, benefits, and institutional change. The present study contributes to this discussion by emphasizing that communication is not merely a supporting activity, but a central leadership practice in building digital culture. Overall, the findings indicate that transformational leadership communication supports digital culture through four main functions: providing direction, building trust, managing resistance, and encouraging organizational learning. Therefore, higher education institutions need leaders who are not only technologically aware but also communicatively capable of shaping meaning, relationships, and cultural change.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that leadership communication is a decisive force in shaping and sustaining digital culture within higher education institutions. Visionary communication provides direction and meaning, enabling stakeholders to understand and internalize the purpose of digital transformation, while dialogic communication builds trust through openness, empathy, and participatory engagement. At the same time, strategic communication plays a critical role in managing resistance by reframing concerns, addressing uncertainties, and fostering acceptance, and continuous communication processes further act as a driver of organizational learning by facilitating knowledge sharing, reflection, and innovation. The integration of these communication dimensions highlights that digital transformation is not merely a technological shift but a deeply communicative and cultural process. Ultimately, institutions that prioritize clear, consistent, and inclusive communication are better positioned to cultivate a resilient digital culture characterized by collaboration, adaptability, and sustained organizational growth.

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