

Digital Transformation in the Creative Economy: Management Strategies for Business Sustainability

Tenriola Idris¹, Mukhid²

^{1,2}Swadaya Institute of Business and Communication, Indonesia

E-mail: gadistenriola3@gmail.com

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Abstract

Digital transformation has become a major driving force for creative economic growth across various subsectors, from design and culinary arts to fashion and the digital content industry. The accelerated adoption of technology has forced creative businesses to reimagine their marketing, distribution, and human resource management strategies to remain competitive and sustainable. While previous studies have generally discussed digital transformation in MSMEs and the manufacturing industry, research specifically integrating adaptive management strategies with business sustainability indicators in the small and medium-sized creative economy sector remains limited. This study aims to analyze how management strategies within the context of digital transformation can strengthen the sustainability of creative economy businesses, while also offering a conceptual framework that integrates digital capacity, transformational leadership, and ecosystem collaboration as elements of innovation. The study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with case studies of creative businesses in the graphic design and culinary sectors, supported by in-depth interviews, observations, documentation studies, and triangulation of sources and methods. The results indicate that the adoption of digital technologies, including social media, e-commerce platforms, big data, and cloud computing, significantly expands market reach and operational efficiency, while adaptive leadership, digital literacy, and cross-actor collaboration are key factors in the success of the transformation. This research contributes to the development of innovative, adaptive, and sustainable creative economy management strategies in the digital era

Keywords: digital transformation; creative economy; management strategy; business sustainability; transformational leadership

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Corresponding Author:

Tenriola Idris
gadistenriola3@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Digital transformation has become one of the most significant structural forces reshaping the global business landscape in the past decade. Developments in digital technology, from social media and e-commerce platforms, big data, artificial intelligence, and cloud computing, have not only transformed the way organizations operate but also created new business models that are more adaptive to changing consumer behavior (Chen, Li, & Shahid, 2024; Hosseini & Meybodi, 2023). The creative economy, a sector that relies on ideas, knowledge, and creativity as its primary resources, has been one of the sectors most impacted and benefited from this wave of transformation. Subsectors such as graphic design, culinary arts, fashion, music, film, and digital content now rely on digital channels to produce, distribute, and market their work to a much wider market than they did a decade ago (Judijanto & Wulansari, 2025; Murdana et al., 2026).

Globally, the creative economy is recognized as a faster-growing contributor to economic growth and job creation than many conventional sectors, due to its innovation-intensive characteristics and low barriers to entry for new entrepreneurs. Digitalization is accelerating this trend by lowering content production costs, expanding cross-border market access through marketplaces and social media, and enabling new business models such as content subscriptions, online classes, and cross-creator collaboration (Hosseini & Meybodi, 2023). However, this acceleration also brings consequences in the form of increasingly fierce competition and demands for continuous innovation, so creative entrepreneurs who cannot adapt risk losing market relevance quickly.

The growth of a digital-based creative economy does not occur automatically. It depends heavily on the strategic readiness of business actors in responding to technological changes. Digitalization forces creative economy actors to reimagine their marketing strategies, product distribution, human resource management, and revenue models to remain relevant and competitive. Guandalini (2022) emphasized that business sustainability in the digital era is not solely the result of technology adoption, but rather the alignment between technology, strategy, and organizational capabilities. This view is reinforced by Plekhanov, Franke, and Netland (2022), who point out that digital transformation is a multidimensional process encompassing changes at the strategic, structural, and cultural levels of an organization, not simply the adoption of new technological tools.

The creative economy has unique characteristics that distinguish it from the manufacturing sector and natural resource-based industries. Its primary added value stems from individual and collective creativity, making leadership, organizational culture, and talent management far more crucial than mere production efficiency (Wardana et al., 2022). Furthermore, the majority of creative economy players operate as small and medium enterprises (SMEs) with limited capital, technological infrastructure, and digital literacy. This situation creates a distinct digital divide: some businesses are able to leverage digital transformation to significantly expand their markets, while others are left behind due to limited access to training, capital, and technological assistance (Yaqub & Alsabban, 2023; Vrontis, Chaudhuri, & Chatterjee, 2022).

Several international studies have emphasized the importance of alignment between digital transformation and business sustainability. Katsamakos (2022) developed a conceptual model linking digital transformation to business model sustainability, while Martínez-Peláez et al. (2023) demonstrated that stakeholders, key capabilities, and technology play a crucial role in achieving sustainability through digitalization. Da Rocha, De Oliveira, Espuny, Da Motta Reis, and Oliveira (2022) expanded on this perspective by emphasizing that Industry 4.0-based business transformation can only be sustainable if accompanied by transformations in managerial and human resource aspects. Similarly, Gomez-Trujillo and Gonzalez-Perez (2021) emphasized that digital transformation should be positioned as a strategy, rather than simply a technical initiative, to ensure its measurable and long-term impact on sustainability. Casciani, Chkanikova, and Pal (2022), in the context of the fashion industry, also show that digital transformation opens up opportunities for supply chain innovation and sustainability-oriented business models, although their implementation is highly dependent on the company's internal managerial capacity.

Unfortunately, most literature discussing the relationship between digital transformation and business sustainability still focuses on large-scale manufacturing industries or SMEs in general (Chatzistamoulou, 2023; Kim, 2021), with few specifically targeting the creative economy sector with its unique business characteristics. A systematic review study by Mick, Kovalski, and Chiroli (2024) even found that of the dozens of sustainable digital transformation roadmaps available in the international literature, none comprehensively integrates all digital transformation principles with the three pillars of sustainability (economic, social, and environmental) while also focusing on SMEs. This finding highlights a significant research gap between general digital transformation studies and the practical needs of small and medium-scale creative economy actors, who face different challenges than the manufacturing sector.

This gap is even more pronounced when linked to the role of management and leadership strategies. Billi and Bernardo (2025) empirically demonstrated that sustainability strategies and IT innovation significantly impact company performance, but their research was conducted on large companies across sectors, not on micro- and small-scale creative economy players. Nichifor, Turcu, Zait, Țimiraș, and Prihoanca (2025) demonstrated that the integration of digital technology into sustainable business models is highly contextual and varies across industries, so cross-sector generalizations risk missing important nuances. Meanwhile, Suljic (2025) and Vulapula, Kumar, Suganya, and Aleeswari (2025) highlighted the importance of AI-based strategic leadership and intelligent workforce management as key to the success of sustainable digital transformation, but again in the context of large companies and not community-based creative economy ecosystems and SMEs. Naldi, Gusty, and Saqdiyah (2025) and Muthuraman (2026) also emphasized that innovation management and digital business strategy are prerequisites for business sustainability, but have not yet offered an integrated framework that can be specifically applied to the local creative economy context.

Based on this mapping, three main gaps can be identified. First, the sectoral context gap: the majority of digital transformation and sustainability studies focus on manufacturing or generic SMEs, while the creative economy, with its foundation in creativity and intellectual capital, has distinct strategic dynamics. Second, the conceptual integration gap: not many research frameworks explicitly combine three elements—digital capacity, transformational leadership, and cross-actor ecosystem collaboration—as a unified management strategy for creative business sustainability. Third, the methodological-empirical gap: many studies are large-scale quantitative or purely literature reviews, resulting in limited in-depth understanding of actual managerial practices in the field, particularly in small and medium-scale creative businesses.

The novelty of this research lies in three aspects. First, it develops a framework for a creative economy sustainability management strategy that explicitly integrates three pillars: business actors' digital capacity and literacy, transformational leadership that fosters a culture of innovation, and cross-actor ecosystem collaboration (government, training institutions, and fellow creative entrepreneurs), which have previously been discussed separately in the literature. Second, it presents empirical evidence based on case studies in the graphic design and culinary sectors, two creative economy subsectors with distinct operational and market characteristics. Therefore, its findings have more contextual generalizability than generic studies on SMEs. Third, it offers a thematic model that directly links digital technology adoption with business sustainability indicators (market reach, operational efficiency, customer loyalty, and business resilience), thus serving as a practical reference for creative entrepreneurs and policymakers in designing more targeted digitalization assistance programs.

Based on the description above, this study aims to analyze how management strategies in the context of digital transformation can support business sustainability in the creative economy sector, by emphasizing the role of digital capacity, adaptive leadership, and ecosystem collaboration as differentiating elements from previous studies. More specifically, this study is directed to answer three questions: (1) how do digital technology adoption patterns affect the operational efficiency and market reach of creative economy actors; (2) what is the role of management strategies and transformational leadership in managing the digital transformation process; and (3) what factors determine the sustainability of creative economy

businesses amidst the dynamics of digitalization. By answering these three questions, this study is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of strategic management literature in the creative economy sector, as well as practical contributions for business actors and policymakers in formulating sustainable digital transformation strategies.

2. Method

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a purposively selected case study method to gain an in-depth understanding of the managerial practices of creative economy actors in responding to digital transformation. The qualitative approach was chosen because the phenomena of management strategy and business sustainability are contextual, multidimensional, and rich in meaning, requiring exploration that cannot be fully captured through a quantitative approach alone.

The research subjects were creative economy actors in two sub-sectors, namely graphic design and culinary, who have implemented digital transformation in their business operations for at least the past two years. These two sub-sectors were chosen because they represent different characteristics of the creative economy: graphic design represents businesses based on intellectual property and digital creative services, while culinary represents businesses based on physical products that rely on digitalization for marketing, distribution, and customer interaction. Subject selection was carried out purposively with the following criteria: (1) having adopted at least two digital platforms in business operations (social media, e-commerce, or online payment systems); (2) having a trackable record of business growth; and (3) being willing to provide data access and in-depth interviews.

Data was collected through three main techniques. First, in-depth interviews with business owners or managers to explore their perceptions, strategies, and experiences in undergoing digital transformation. Second, direct observation of operational practices, including the use of digital platforms in marketing, production, and customer service. Third, documentary studies of digital promotional materials, sales reports, and customer interactions on business operators' online channels. These three techniques were combined to strengthen the depth and reliability of the data obtained.

Data analysis was conducted thematically by grouping findings into key themes: digital technology adoption, managerial strategy, leadership and organizational culture, ecosystem collaboration, and business sustainability indicators. The analysis process followed a sequence of data familiarization, initial coding, theme grouping, theme review, and narrative development of the findings. Data validity and reliability were tested through source triangulation (comparing information from business owners, employees, and supporting documents) and method triangulation (comparing interview results, observations, and documentation) to ensure consistency of findings from various perspectives.

This research also includes a systematic literature review to strengthen the theoretical foundations of the creative economy, strategic management, and sustainable digital transformation. References were drawn from reputable scientific journals, mostly published within the last five years, to ensure the conceptual framework's relevance to current developments in the literature.

In summary, the stages of this research can be described as a linear-cyclical flow as presented in Figure 1, which begins with the purposive determination of the research subject and object, followed by multi-source data collection, thematic analysis, validity triangulation, and final interpretation in the form of a digital transformation management strategy model for the sustainability of creative economy businesses. This flow is iterative, meaning that findings at the analysis stage can trigger additional data collection before the final interpretation is formulated, in line with the principle of flexibility in qualitative case study research.

Figure 1. Flow of Qualitative Research Method in Case Study

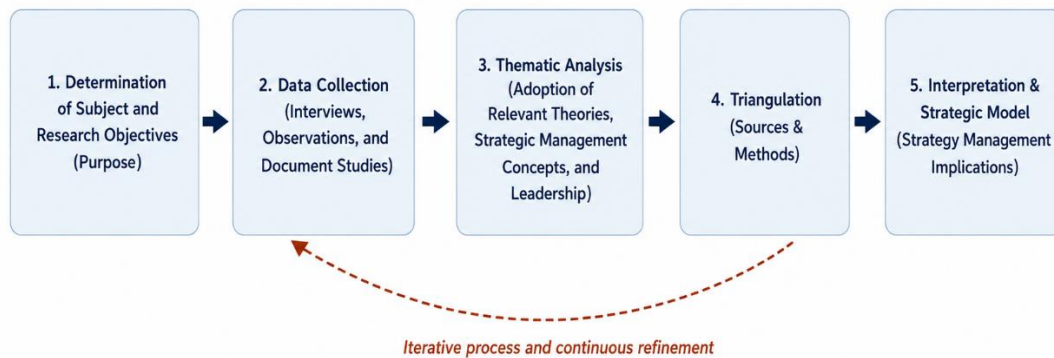


Figure 1. Flow of Qualitative Case Study Research Method

3. Results and Discussion

The results of the study indicate that digital transformation has a significant impact on operational efficiency and market reach expansion for creative economy players in the two subsectors studied. Graphic design businesses that actively utilize digital platforms for online portfolios and social media marketing are able to reach clients across cities and even across countries, something that is difficult to achieve through conventional marketing strategies. Meanwhile, culinary businesses that adopt online delivery platforms and social media experience increased transaction volume and an expansion of their customer base beyond their geographic area. These findings align with the research of Chen, Li, and Shahid (2024) which shows that digital capabilities and digitalization strategies contribute significantly to sustainable business performance, and reinforce the argument of Hosseini and Meybodi (2023) regarding the role of digital transformation as a foundation for sustainable creative economy development.

The first theme emerging from the thematic analysis was the adoption of technology as a growth enabler. Social media, e-commerce platforms, simple big data (in the form of platform-built analytics), and cloud computing for data storage and collaboration were the technologies most widely used by research subjects. The use of analytical data from digital platforms has been shown to help businesses understand consumer behavior, seasonal demand patterns, and market segmentation more precisely than purely intuitive approaches. Guandalini (2022) and Katsamakos (2022) both emphasized that digital transformation impacting sustainability is not simply about technology ownership, but rather the organization's capacity to transform data into strategic decisions. This is evident in culinary businesses that have successfully adjusted menus and operating hours based on digital ordering patterns, thereby reducing raw material waste and increasing cost efficiency.

The second theme is adaptive management strategies as a determinant of transformation success. Businesses that implement data-driven management demonstrate superior strategic decision-making compared to those that rely solely on intuition. Companies that routinely evaluate digital metrics, such as online sales conversion rates and customer retention, are able to respond more quickly to changing market trends. This finding reinforces the findings of Billi and Bernardo (2025), who demonstrated the significant influence of sustainability strategies and IT innovation on company performance, although in this study the context shifted from large corporations to small and medium-sized creative economy businesses. Strategic flexibility is also evident in the emergence of new platform-based business models, such as subscription or membership models for digital creative content (online design classes, paid digital templates) and menu subscription packages in culinary businesses. These changes in business models demand a more flexible and innovation-

oriented managerial approach, as outlined by Nichifor, Turcu, Zait, Țimiraș, and Prihoanca (2025) regarding the contextual nature of digital technology integration into sustainable business models.

The third theme relates to transformational leadership and a culture of innovation. Business leaders who inspire their teams, encourage experimentation with new technologies, and create space for failure as part of the learning process are better prepared to face the challenges of digitalization than leaders who tend to maintain old ways of working. In a graphic design business, leadership that is open to experimenting with artificial intelligence-based design tools accelerates production efficiency without sacrificing creative quality. In a culinary business, leadership that involves employees in managing social media accounts creates a sense of ownership that encourages consistent marketing content. These findings are relevant to the emphasis of Suljic (2025) and Vulapula, Kumar, Suganya, and Aleeswari (2025) on the importance of strategic leadership in digital transformation based on cutting-edge technology, although in the context of this study, the scale of leadership is much more personal and direct than in large corporations.

The fourth theme is ecosystem collaboration as a strategy to strengthen sustainability. Collaboration between creative businesses, whether in the form of cross-promotional partnerships, sharing production resources, or establishing communities of similar businesses, has been shown to reduce operational costs while expanding distribution networks. Furthermore, the availability of digital training programs and business incubation programs from the government and non-governmental organizations significantly helps creative economy players improve basic digital literacy and online marketing strategies. These findings reinforce the argument of Vrontis, Chaudhuri, and Chatterjee (2022) regarding the role of entrepreneurial orientation in moderating the adoption of digital technology for sustainability and value creation in SMEs. However, access to such programs remains uneven; businesses located in urban areas with better access to information tend to have easier access to mentoring programs than those in rural areas.

However, this study also identified a number of consistent challenges across both subsectors. The primary challenge is internal system integration, particularly aligning traditional management systems with newly adopted digital technologies, such as digital point-of-sale systems, cloud-based inventory management, and automated bookkeeping. Some businesses experience duplicated record-keeping because they have not yet fully abandoned manual methods, potentially leading to inefficiencies and the risk of data errors. This finding aligns with the results of a systematic review by Mick, Kovaleski, and Chiroli (2024), which found that most digital transformation roadmaps in the literature do not adequately address the aspect of technology integration at the operational level of SMEs, forcing businesses to develop their own solutions through trial and error.

The second challenge is the digital literacy and human resource gap. Not all team members, especially in micro-family businesses, possess adequate digital skills. This requires management to regularly provide internal training and create a work environment that supports continuous technological experimentation and learning. Yaqub and Alsabban (2023) also emphasized that human resource readiness is a key instrument for the success of Industry 4.0-based digital transformation, aligning with the findings of this study in a more micro-scale context. Feroz, Zo, and Chiravuri (2021) also emphasized that without adequate organizational and human resource readiness, digital transformation risks being unsustainable even after technical implementation.

The third identified challenge is limited capital for advanced technology investments. Some culinary businesses reported that they are unable to invest in more sophisticated cloud-based inventory management systems due to monthly subscription fees, so they continue to combine manual record-keeping with free, limited-feature applications. A similar situation is also experienced by some graphic design businesses in accessing premium design software or paid artificial intelligence tools. This situation reinforces the findings of Casciani, Chkanikova, and Pal (2022) that sustainability-oriented digital transformation in small businesses is heavily influenced by limited financial resources. Therefore, an effective

management strategy lies in prioritizing technology investments that have the greatest impact on efficiency and growth, rather than adopting technology across the board.

From a long-term business sustainability perspective, this study also found that customer loyalty is the sustainability indicator most consistently influenced by the quality of digital interactions. Culinary businesses that actively respond to customer reviews on digital platforms and adjust their services based on this feedback show higher repeat order rates than those that passively respond. Similarly, in graphic design businesses, responsive communication through digital channels increases client trust and encourages digital word-of-mouth referrals. This pattern aligns with Martínez-Peláez et al.'s (2023) view that stakeholder engagement, including customers, is a crucial mediator between digital transformation and achieving business sustainability. These findings also reinforce the findings of Da Rocha, De Oliveira, Espuny, Da Motta Reis, and Oliveira (2022), which emphasize that digital transformation-based business sustainability is inextricably linked to the relational dimension between an organization and its external stakeholders.

This research also confirms the views of Gomez-Trujillo and Gonzalez-Perez (2021) and Kim (2021) that the impact of digital transformation on business sustainability varies significantly across industry sectors. Therefore, generic strategies designed for SMEs are generally not always appropriate for the creative economy without contextual adjustments. For example, sustainability indicators in the manufacturing sector generally emphasize supply chain efficiency and waste reduction, while in the creative economy, more relevant indicators include the speed of product or work innovation, the strength of the entrepreneur's personal brand, and the quality of relationships with the customer community. This difference in emphasis is one of the main arguments why the strategic management framework developed in this research needs to be formulated specifically for the creative economy context, as also mentioned by Chatzistamoulou (2023) in the context of the sustainability transition of European SMEs, who highlighted the importance of policies and strategies tailored to sectoral characteristics.

To summarize the relationship between digital technology adoption, challenges faced, and business sustainability indicators achieved in the two subsectors studied, Table 1 presents a thematic comparison of the research results.

Table 1. Thematic Comparison of Digital Technology Adoption and Business Sustainability in the Graphic Design and Culinary Sectors

Dimensions	Graphic design	Culinary
Key digital technologies	Social media (portfolio), freelance service platform/marketplace, cloud storage, AI-based design tools	Social media, online delivery applications, digital payment systems, simple cashier applications
Impact on operational efficiency	Accelerate the revision and delivery process; automate repetitive tasks with AI	Efficient stock management based on order data; reduced raw material waste
Impact on market reach	Clients across cities/countries; online portfolio increases potential client confidence	Customers outside the original geographic area; increased daily transaction volume
Prominent sustainability indicators	Digital reputation and online word of mouth	Customer loyalty (repeat orders) and supply chain efficiency
The main challenge	Premium AI software/tools costs; digital project management integration	Integration of digital cashier and inventory systems; limited technology investment capital
Mitigation strategies	Leadership is open to experimenting with new tools; collaboration among designers	Regular digital training for employees; cross-promotional collaboration between culinary businesses

Table 1 shows that while both subsectors face relatively similar challenges in terms of system integration and digital literacy, their impacts and mitigation strategies exhibit distinct patterns according to the characteristics of each business. Graphic design businesses benefit more from digital-based production efficiency and cross-geographic market reach, while culinary businesses benefit more from supply chain optimization and customer loyalty based on personalized digital interactions.

The findings regarding the central role of digital literacy and entrepreneurial attitudes in this study also align with the results of Wardana et al. (2022), which show that digital literacy and business sustainability in the creative economy are significantly moderated by the entrepreneurial attitudes of entrepreneurs themselves. Entrepreneurs with an open attitude to change and learning new technologies tend to more quickly convert digital opportunities into real business growth, compared to those who view digitalization as merely a formality following trends. This confirms that digital transformation management strategies cannot be separated from the psychological and motivational dimensions of entrepreneurs, an aspect that is relatively rarely highlighted explicitly in technical-themed studies such as Judijanto, Khamaludin, Mahmudin, and Arisa (2025) and Judijanto and Wulansari (2025), which emphasize the macro aspects of business models and marketing management transformation. Overall, the results of this study reinforce the premise that digital transformation, accompanied by adaptive management strategies, transformational leadership, strengthening human resources' digital capacity, and ecosystem collaboration, will strengthen business sustainability in the creative economy sector. These findings provide an empirical contribution to the fragmented conceptual framework in the literature, as discussed by Guandalini (2022) and Plekhanov, Franke, and Netland (2022), by offering a thematic model that explicitly links the four elements of managerial strategy to measurable business sustainability outcomes at the small and medium-sized creative enterprise level. This model also provides practical implications: creative economy digitalization mentoring programs should not only focus on technical training in platform use but also target strengthening adaptive leadership and facilitating collaboration among business actors as a complementary package of interventions

4. Conclusions and Suggestions

This research confirms that digital transformation has become a key pillar of growth and sustainability in the creative economy sector, particularly in the graphic design and culinary subsectors, the focus of the case study. The adoption of digital technologies, such as social media, e-commerce platforms, simple big data, and cloud computing, has been shown to expand market reach, improve operational efficiency, and strengthen customer loyalty through more personalized and responsive digital interactions.

The success of this digital transformation is largely determined by four interrelated elements of management strategy: human resource capacity and digital literacy, adaptive data-driven management strategies, transformational leadership that fosters a culture of innovation and experimentation, and ecosystem collaboration across business actors and supporting institutions. These four elements form the framework for a creative economy sustainability management strategy, which is the main novelty of this research, while also addressing a gap in the literature that has tended to discuss digital transformation and sustainability separately or in the context of generic SMEs that do not consider the unique characteristics of the creative economy.

This research also revealed that challenges related to internal system integration, the digital literacy gap, and limited capital remain significant barriers that need to be addressed through more targeted policy interventions, including not only technical training on digital platform use but also leadership mentoring and facilitating collaboration between business actors. Therefore, a supportive ecosystem, including government, non-governmental organizations, and fellow creative entrepreneurs, plays a crucial role in accelerating and maintaining the sustainability of digital transformation in this sector.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of a conceptual framework that integrates technological, managerial, leadership, and relational dimensions into a single model of creative economy business sustainability based on digital transformation. Practically, these

findings can serve as a reference for creative business actors in designing more targeted digitalization strategies, and for policymakers in formulating more holistic mentoring programs. Future research is recommended to test this framework in other creative economy subsectors using a quantitative or mixed-method approach, to strengthen the generalizability of the findings and more precisely measure the relationship between each element of the management strategy and the identified business sustainability indicators.

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