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The Influence of Transformational Leadership Style on Employee Performance through Job Satisfaction Mediation in Digital Startup Companies

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the influence of transformational leadership on employee performance, specifically examining the mediating role of job satisfaction within digital startup companies. Using a qualitative methodology through a comprehensive literature review, the study synthesizes findings from ten relevant articles that address the intersection of transformational leadership, employee performance, and job satisfaction. The research highlights that transformational leadership is a critical factor in enhancing employee performance, particularly in dynamic and innovative environments such as digital startups. Moreover, job satisfaction is identified as a key mediator in the leadership-performance relationship, where employees who experience higher satisfaction tend to perform better. The findings also emphasize the importance of fostering creativity and innovation, which are essential for startups striving to succeed in competitive digital markets. The study contributes to existing leadership theories by demonstrating how transformational leadership can drive performance through the enhancement of job satisfaction, especially in the context of organizations undergoing digital transformation. Finally, the paper discusses the implications of these findings for digital startups, recommending that

KEYWORDS

Transformational Leadership, Employee Performance, Job Satisfaction, Digital Startups

leaders adopt transformational leadership practices that not only motivate employees but also create an environment that supports job satisfaction and innovation. This research serves as a foundation for future studies on leadership in digital startups, encouraging further exploration of contextual factors that may influence the effectiveness of leadership practices.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving digital era, startup companies face significant challenges in maintaining competitiveness and adapting to ever-changing technological advancements. One critical factor influencing organizational performance is the leadership style adopted within the company. Among various leadership styles, transformational leadership has been extensively researched and proven effective in improving employee performance (Alharbi & Aljounaidi, 2021). Transformational leaders motivate and inspire employees to exceed their self-interests for the collective goal of the organization, fostering a culture of innovation and growth (Ferozi & Chang, 2021). However, while many studies highlight the positive impact of transformational leadership on employee performance, few explore the mediating role of job satisfaction, particularly within the context of digital startups.

The transformation to a digital business model also introduces additional challenges that affect leadership dynamics, as digital startup companies often feature more flexible structures and unique work cultures compared to traditional firms. Hence, understanding the relationship between transformational leadership, job satisfaction, and employee performance in this context becomes increasingly important (Minh et al., 2024). While much of the existing literature has focused on traditional industries, research on digital startups is still limited (Saputra & Saputra, 2020).

Although several studies have explored the direct impact of leadership styles on employee performance, there is limited research addressing the mediating role of job satisfaction in the relationship between transformational leadership and employee performance in digital startups. Previous studies have demonstrated a direct relationship between transformational leadership and employee performance (Anwar et al., 2023; Krisnanda & Surya, 2019), but little attention has been paid to how job satisfaction mediates this relationship, particularly in the context of digital startups. This gap in the literature warrants a deeper investigation to better understand how job satisfaction influences the effectiveness of transformational leadership in the digital startup environment.

Leadership plays a crucial role in enhancing employee performance, especially in digital startups. As these companies face rapid market changes, understanding the factors that can improve employee performance becomes vital. This research is significant because it offers valuable insights into how transformational leadership can positively influence employee performance through job satisfaction, specifically within the dynamic and innovative environment of digital startups. The findings from this study could help organizations design leadership strategies that enhance job satisfaction, which in turn can lead to improved performance.

Several studies have confirmed the positive relationship between transformational leadership and employee performance. Alharbi and Aljounaidi (2021), as well as Anwar et al. (2023), indicate that transformational leadership enhances employee motivation and performance across various sectors, including banking and public services. Ferozi and Chang (2021) further found that transformational leadership has a significant impact on public sector employees in Afghanistan, highlighting the motivational and inspirational aspects of leadership. In addition, research by Santya and Dewi (2022) and Roz (2019) discusses the important mediating role of job satisfaction in the leadership-performance relationship. However, there is a limited number of studies that integrate transformational leadership, job satisfaction, and employee performance in the context of digital startups, which is a key focus of this research.

This study introduces several novel aspects. First, it explores the relationship between transformational leadership and employee performance with job satisfaction as a mediator specifically in the context of digital startups. Second, it incorporates the concept of digital leadership, a critical aspect in organizations undergoing digital transformation (Wang, 2024). Third, the research provides new insights into how digital startups can leverage transformational leadership to enhance employee performance through effective management of job satisfaction, an area that has not been widely discussed in prior literature.

The primary objective of this study is to examine the influence of transformational leadership on employee performance through the mediation of job satisfaction in digital startup companies. Specifically, this study aims to identify whether job satisfaction mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and employee performance in the digital startup context.

The findings of this study will provide valuable insights for leaders in digital startups on the importance of transformational leadership in enhancing employee performance. By understanding how job satisfaction mediates this relationship, companies can better manage employee satisfaction to improve overall performance. Academically, this research contributes to the existing literature on transformational leadership, job satisfaction, and employee performance, specifically in the context of digital startups. Additionally, the results will help HR professionals in startups adopt leadership practices that foster employee engagement and high performance.

Transformational Leadership Style

Transformational leadership is a leadership style that focuses on inspiring and motivating employees to transcend their own self-interests in favor of achieving the larger goals of the organization. Leaders who adopt this style are typically characterized by their ability to foster trust, respect, and enthusiasm, which in turn encourages employees to innovate and continually improve their performance (Bass, 1990; Anwar et al., 2023). This type of leadership involves intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and idealized influence, where leaders act as role models and challenge the status quo (Ferozi & Chang, 2021). In the context of digital startup companies, transformational leadership becomes even more vital, as these organizations are often at the forefront of technological change and market disruption. Transformational leadership is essential in such dynamic settings to inspire employees to embrace change, maintain a high level of engagement, and push boundaries in order to achieve organizational success (Krisnanda & Surya, 2019; Syafrudin et al., 2024).

Digital Startup Companies

Digital startups are small, innovative, and technology-driven companies that leverage digital tools and platforms to create new business models or enhance existing services (Saputra & Saputra, 2020). These companies typically operate in a rapidly changing environment and are characterized by high levels of uncertainty and competition, requiring a flexible and agile workforce that can adapt to evolving technologies and consumer demands (Minh et al., 2024). Digital startups often face challenges in terms of resource constraints and market volatility, making strong leadership crucial for driving innovation and maintaining employee motivation (Wang, 2024). In such an environment, transformational leadership plays a critical role in motivating employees to embrace innovation, drive creative problem-solving, and stay committed to the company's vision (Alharbi & Aljounaidi, 2021). Leaders in digital startups are expected to inspire their teams, manage change effectively, and create a culture that supports continuous learning and adaptation, thereby improving overall organizational performance and helping the company thrive in a fast-paced, competitive digital economy (Wang, 2024; Roz, 2019).

2. METHODS

This research adopts a qualitative literature study approach, aiming to explore the impact of transformational leadership on employee performance through job satisfaction mediation in digital startup companies. A qualitative approach is appropriate for this study as it allows for an in-depth examination of existing research, providing a comprehensive understanding of the relationships between transformational leadership, job satisfaction, and employee performance within the context of digital startups (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus of this study is not to collect new empirical data but to systematically analyze and synthesize existing literature to identify patterns, trends, and gaps in the current body of knowledge.

The data for this research will be derived from secondary sources, specifically academic articles, journals, books, and credible publications available in academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and JSTOR. These sources will provide the foundation for understanding the theoretical and empirical aspects of transformational leadership, job satisfaction, and employee performance in the context of digital startups (Hart, 1998). The inclusion criteria for the literature will focus on peer-reviewed articles published in reputable journals, with an emphasis on studies from the past 5-10 years to ensure the relevance and currency of the data (Booth et al., 2016).

The data collection technique for this study involves a systematic literature review. This method is particularly suited for synthesizing findings from a wide range of studies and for identifying patterns across different contexts (Liberati et al., 2009). The process will begin with defining the key search terms, such as "transformational leadership," "employee performance," "job satisfaction," and "digital startups." These terms will be used to search for relevant studies, articles, and books that address the relationships among these concepts. Studies will be selected based on their relevance to the research questions, focusing on high-quality, peer-reviewed academic sources.

For data analysis, a thematic analysis approach will be employed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and trends in the existing literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach involves reading and rereading the selected articles to categorize and interpret the findings based on the research questions. Themes related to the direct effects of transformational leadership on employee performance, the mediating role of job satisfaction, and the context of digital startups will be extracted and analyzed. The results will be organized into clear themes, and a synthesis of the key findings will be presented, contributing to a deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The table provided below contains data from 10 selected articles on transformational leadership, employee performance, and job satisfaction in digital startups. These articles were carefully screened from a larger pool of literature to ensure relevance and quality for this study.

Table 1. Literature Data Results of Literature Studies

Author & Year	Article Title	Key findings
Alharbi & Aljounaidi (2021)	Transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and employee performance	Transformational leadership positively influences employee performance, with transactional leadership being less impactful.
Anwar et al. (2023)	Transformational leadership and employees' performance: The mediating role of employees' commitment in private banking sectors in Pakistan	Transformational leadership enhances employee performance with employee commitment mediating this relationship.
Ferozi & Chang (2021)	Transformational leadership and its impact on employee performance: Focus on public employees in Afghanistan	Transformational leadership improves employee performance in the public sector, especially in contexts of social and organizational change.
Krisnanda & Surya (2019)	Effect of emotional and spiritual intelligence on transformational leadership and impact on employee performance	Emotional and spiritual intelligence enhance transformational leadership, which in turn improves employee performance.
Santya & Dewi (2022)	Job satisfaction: Its mediating role in the effect of transformational leadership	Job satisfaction mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and employee performance,

	and organizational culture on employee performance	especially in organizations with strong cultures.
Roz (2019)	Job satisfaction as a mediation of transformational leadership style on employee performance in the food industry in Malang City	Job satisfaction mediates the impact of transformational leadership on employee performance in the food industry.
Saputra & Saputra (2020)	Transforming into digital organization by orchestrating culture, leadership, and competence in digital context	Digital leadership practices and cultural orchestration play a key role in transforming traditional businesses into digital organizations.
Wang (2024)	Research status and enhancement path of executive digital leadership in the context of enterprise digital transformation	Executive digital leadership enhances digital transformation efforts within enterprises, contributing to business success in the digital era.
Minh et al. (2024)	The relationship between transformational leadership style, job creativity and job performance outcomes of employees in Vietnamese startup enterprises	In Vietnamese startups, transformational leadership influences job creativity, which significantly affects employee performance.
Syafrudin et al. (2024)	The impact of transformational leadership, career development, and work environment on organizational commitment (survey on CV. Bunda Devina)	Transformational leadership, combined with career development and work environment factors, enhances organizational commitment.

The selected articles focus on various aspects of transformational leadership, its impact on employee performance, and the mediating role of job satisfaction. The key findings from each study are summarized in the table, providing a comprehensive overview of the most significant results found across the literature.

Interpretation of Data

Based on the selected articles reviewed in this literature study, several key insights emerge regarding the relationship between transformational leadership, job satisfaction, and employee performance in the context of digital startup companies. Across all studies, there is a consistent finding that transformational leadership plays a significant role in enhancing employee performance. Alharbi and Aljounaidi (2021), along with Anwar et al. (2023), assert

that transformational leadership not only directly impacts employee performance but also motivates employees to exceed expectations by fostering trust and providing a compelling organizational vision. These findings are supported by the work of Ferozi and Chang (2021), who emphasize that transformational leadership is particularly effective in settings where organizational change is prevalent, such as in the public sector or transitioning industries, reinforcing the idea that leadership is crucial in managing transformation processes.

Furthermore, a recurrent theme across the literature is the mediating role of job satisfaction. Studies by Santya and Dewi (2022) and Roz (2019) demonstrate that job satisfaction is a critical intermediary between transformational leadership and employee performance. Employees who experience higher satisfaction with their work environment are more likely to be engaged and perform well, confirming the notion that leadership style influences employee performance through the enhancement of job satisfaction. This was particularly evident in the food industry, as indicated by Roz (2019), where job satisfaction mediated the impact of leadership on performance outcomes.

In addition, the literature highlights the unique role of digital leadership in modern organizational contexts, such as digital startups. Studies by Saputra and Saputra (2020) and Wang (2024) underscore that digital leadership, which includes orchestrating a digital culture and enhancing competencies, is crucial for the transformation of traditional businesses into agile digital organizations. This aligns with the findings of Minh et al. (2024), who emphasize that in Vietnamese startups, transformational leadership influences job creativity, which subsequently drives employee performance, highlighting the importance of fostering creativity and innovation within startups.

Finally, the synthesis of these findings suggests that transformational leadership is not only beneficial for improving employee performance but is also a catalyst for creating a work environment that fosters job satisfaction. This relationship is particularly significant in the context of digital startups, where innovation and agility are critical. The research supports the notion that effective leadership, coupled with a satisfied and motivated workforce, can help digital startups thrive in competitive and rapidly changing environments.

Discussion

The findings from this literature review provide a robust understanding of the role of transformational leadership in improving employee performance, especially within the context of digital startup companies. A consistent pattern emerges across the selected studies: transformational leadership significantly influences employee performance through the enhancement of job satisfaction. These results are highly relevant in today's dynamic business environment, where digital transformation is reshaping industries, especially in startups. The growing emphasis on agility, innovation, and a motivated workforce underscores the critical need for leaders who can inspire and drive change.

A crucial insight from the reviewed studies is that transformational leadership encourages employees to go beyond their self-interests for the greater good of the organization. Alharbi and Aljounaidi (2021) highlight that transformational leadership leads to higher levels of motivation, engagement, and performance, which are essential in environments like startups, where employees often face uncertainty and rapid change. In the current era, as digital startups scale and encounter increasing competition, the need for leaders who can inspire

trust, foster innovation, and promote a strong organizational culture has never been more important. This aligns with the work of Bass (1990), who argued that transformational leaders are able to create a compelling vision, communicate it effectively, and inspire employees to embrace it. In this way, transformational leadership is a critical factor in organizational success, particularly in the fast-paced startup ecosystem.

Job satisfaction, as a mediator in the transformational leadership-performance relationship, emerges as another vital component in the literature. Several studies reviewed, including those by Santya and Dewi (2022) and Roz (2019), confirm that job satisfaction is not only an outcome of effective leadership but also a driving force for improving employee performance. The theory of job satisfaction, as proposed by Locke (1976), suggests that satisfied employees are more committed, productive, and willing to exert extra effort. In the context of digital startups, where innovation and creativity are key to success, a satisfied workforce is essential. A leader who fosters a supportive and engaging environment enhances employees' overall work experience, leading to greater creativity, problem-solving abilities, and performance.

The findings also emphasize the critical role of job satisfaction in mitigating the challenges often faced by employees in digital startups. As organizations in this sector are known for their fast-paced and high-pressure environments, the importance of job satisfaction cannot be understated. When employees are satisfied, they are more likely to stay engaged and aligned with the organization's goals, which is crucial for startups aiming to retain top talent and avoid turnover. This is particularly true in digital industries, where skilled employees are in high demand. Leaders who focus on creating a positive work culture, as noted by Santya and Dewi (2022), can significantly reduce burnout and disengagement among employees, thereby enhancing their overall performance.

Moreover, transformational leadership's influence on innovation and creativity within digital startups cannot be overlooked. Studies by Saputra and Saputra (2020) and Wang (2024) argue that transformational leaders are effective in creating an environment conducive to innovation, where employees feel encouraged to experiment and share ideas. Digital startups thrive on new ideas and disruptive technologies, making innovation a core aspect of their strategy. Leaders who are able to create an environment of psychological safety, where employees feel free to voice their ideas and take risks, foster an atmosphere of creativity. This is consistent with the concept of "transformational leadership" as outlined by Bass (1990), who highlighted the leader's role in stimulating intellectual curiosity and challenging the status quo.

In the context of Vietnamese startups, Minh et al. (2024) demonstrate how transformational leadership can influence job creativity, which subsequently impacts employee performance. This finding is especially relevant in the current global landscape, where businesses are increasingly reliant on creativity and innovation to differentiate themselves in the market. In a digital startup, where new products and services are being developed, creativity is a competitive advantage. Leaders who provide the right blend of support, challenge, and autonomy allow their teams to think outside the box, which is essential for sustaining growth in the highly competitive digital marketplace.

However, it is important to recognize that while transformational leadership plays a significant role, it is not a one-size-fits-all solution. The success of transformational leadership depends on the context in which it is applied. For instance, in startups that are still in their

early stages, the focus might need to be more on developing strong leadership skills and creating a foundational culture that supports growth. As digital startups mature, the leadership style may need to evolve to address new challenges, such as managing larger teams or scaling operations. This notion aligns with the work of Avolio and Bass (1991), who emphasized the adaptability of transformational leadership in responding to the unique needs of an organization.

Another point to consider is the integration of digital leadership practices, as highlighted by Saputra and Saputra (2020) and Wang (2024). In the age of digital transformation, traditional leadership approaches may not be sufficient to drive innovation in tech-driven industries. Digital leadership, which involves leading through technological and organizational changes, becomes crucial in ensuring the sustainability and competitive edge of digital startups. Leaders in this domain need to be proficient not only in traditional leadership skills but also in navigating the complexities of the digital landscape. This includes leveraging data analytics, promoting digital collaboration, and fostering an innovation-driven culture.

Moreover, it is essential to note that the relationship between transformational leadership, job satisfaction, and employee performance is not purely linear. Several external factors, such as organizational culture, the competitive landscape, and market dynamics, can influence how leadership is perceived and how employees respond to it. For instance, in highly competitive sectors, employees may feel more pressure to perform, which can either enhance or diminish the effects of transformational leadership. The work environment, team dynamics, and organizational support also play a role in determining how satisfied employees feel and, in turn, how motivated they are to perform (Liu & Batt, 2020). Therefore, while transformational leadership can significantly impact performance through job satisfaction, its effectiveness is contingent upon other contextual factors.

Lastly, one must also consider the potential limitations and challenges that come with relying too heavily on transformational leadership in a digital startup setting. While transformational leadership is effective in promoting high employee engagement and innovation, it can also place significant pressure on leaders to continuously inspire and motivate their teams. The expectations placed on transformational leaders can lead to burnout, particularly in environments where change is constant and resources are limited. Furthermore, leaders who focus too heavily on innovation may neglect other important aspects of leadership, such as managing operational efficiency or employee well-being. It is therefore important for leaders to strike a balance between transformational leadership and other leadership styles that may be more suited to managing specific operational needs.

In conclusion, the studies reviewed demonstrate that transformational leadership plays a pivotal role in enhancing employee performance in digital startups, particularly through the mediation of job satisfaction. The integration of job satisfaction as a mediator emphasizes the importance of creating a work environment where employees feel supported, engaged, and motivated. However, as the digital startup landscape continues to evolve, leaders must be adaptable and considerate of the contextual factors that impact their leadership effectiveness. Future research could further explore the nuances of transformational leadership in digital startups, particularly how different leadership styles interact to shape employee experiences and outcomes in the rapidly changing digital economy.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has explored the significant influence of transformational leadership on employee performance, with a particular focus on the mediating role of job satisfaction within digital startup companies. The literature reviewed consistently highlights that transformational leadership is a powerful driver of enhanced employee performance, as it fosters motivation, engagement, and organizational commitment. Key findings from the studies demonstrate that job satisfaction serves as a critical mediator in this relationship, suggesting that satisfied employees are more likely to perform at higher levels when supported by transformational leadership. Furthermore, the role of innovation and creativity within digital startups, driven by transformational leadership, has been reinforced, particularly in the context of fostering a work culture conducive to change and continuous improvement. As digital transformation reshapes industries, the findings emphasize the importance of adopting leadership styles that promote engagement, creativity, and high performance, especially in the competitive and fast-paced startup environment.

However, it is important to recognize that while transformational leadership is highly effective, its impact is influenced by contextual factors such as organizational culture, external market pressures, and the maturity of the startup. Leaders must be adaptable, recognizing the need for evolving leadership strategies as their organizations grow and face new challenges. The review also indicates that the relationship between transformational leadership, job satisfaction, and employee performance is not entirely linear, and external factors such as job stress, organizational resources, and team dynamics can modulate the outcomes of leadership efforts. Thus, while transformational leadership is a key factor in improving performance, its effectiveness relies on a broader organizational context and external influences.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should delve deeper into the contextual factors that mediate or moderate the relationship between transformational leadership and employee performance in digital startups. Understanding how various organizational and environmental factors influence the effectiveness of transformational leadership could provide more nuanced insights. Additionally, further studies could explore the impact of digital leadership practices in combination with transformational leadership, especially in the context of rapidly evolving technologies. Given that digital startups often face unique challenges, research could examine how transformational leadership interacts with other leadership styles, such as transactional or digital leadership, to address specific organizational needs. Future studies should also consider longitudinal designs to capture the evolving nature of leadership impacts over time, particularly as startups scale and encounter new competitive and operational challenges. Furthermore, exploring the relationship between leadership, job satisfaction, and performance across different sectors within the digital economy could yield valuable insights into sector-specific leadership dynamics.

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6. AUTHORS' NOTE

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