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The Influence of Social Media on Leadership Styles and Behaviour

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Abstract

Social media has transformed leadership by reshaping communication patterns, authority structures, and follower expectations in organisational and social contexts. This study examines the influence of social media on transformational and transactional leadership behaviours through a systematic literature review of peer-reviewed articles, books, and literature published between 2005 and 2025. Databases searched included Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, using keywords such as “social media and leadership,” “digital leadership,” “transformational leadership online,” and “transactional leadership social media.” Thematic analysis revealed that social media amplifies transformational leadership by enhancing visibility, emotional engagement, narrative influence, and participatory interaction. Digital platforms facilitate inspirational motivation, idealised influence, intellectual stimulation, and relational connectivity, contingent on perceived authenticity and ethical consistency. Transactional leadership is similarly reconfigured, with public recognition, digital feedback, and informal reward and sanction systems shaping behavioural compliance and accountability. Leaders who integrate online and offline practices demonstrate greater effectiveness, fostering trust, commitment, and organisational alignment. The findings underscore the hybrid nature of contemporary leadership, in which digital and traditional behaviours interact to influence follower perception and organisational outcomes. The study also identifies gaps in longitudinal research, cross-cultural comparisons, and platform-specific leadership strategies, offering directions for future empirical investigation. In practice, the study recommends leadership development programmes, organisational policies, and strategic guidance that address the ethical, participatory, and reputational dimensions of digital leadership.

Keywords: Social media, Transformational leadership, Transactional leadership, Digital leadership, Follower engagement, Ethical leadership.

Introduction

Leadership theory has undergone significant transformation over the past several decades, reflecting changes in organisational structures, communication technologies, and social relations

(Avolio& Bass, 2002; Avolio& Gardner, 2005; Avolio& Kahai, 2003; Bass & Bass, 2008; Eaton et al., 2024; Esenyel, 2024; Liden et al., 2025; Sacavém et al., 2025; Yukl, 2013). Traditionally, leadership styles such as transformational and transactional leadership were examined primarily within face-to-face, hierarchical, and institutionally bounded environments (Bass, 1990; Bass & Bass, 2008; Burns, 1978). However, the rapid expansion of digital communication technologies, particularly social media platforms, has disrupted conventional leadership dynamics. Social media has altered how leaders communicate, influence, and mobilise followers across organisational, political, and social domains. Platforms such as Twitter (X), Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and YouTube have created new spaces for leadership visibility, interaction, and accountability. These developments necessitate a re-examination of leadership behaviour beyond traditional organisational boundaries. Consequently, leadership scholarship must adapt to understand how digital environments reshape leadership influence and follower engagement.

Social media has become a central mechanism through which leaders construct identities, disseminate visions, and interact with diverse audiences in real time. Unlike traditional communication channels, social media enables multidirectional communication, allowing followers to respond, critique, and co-create leadership narratives (Castells, 2012). This interactive nature challenges the unidirectional assumptions embedded in classical leadership models. Leaders are no longer solely message senders but are increasingly subject to continuous public scrutiny and feedback. As a result, leadership behaviour on social media often requires heightened authenticity, emotional intelligence, and relational sensitivity. The immediacy and permanence of digital content further amplify the consequences of leadership actions and communication styles. These dynamics suggest that leadership in the social media era operates within fundamentally different behavioural and ethical conditions.

Transformational leadership, characterised by vision articulation, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration, appears particularly compatible with social media environments. Social media platforms allow leaders to articulate compelling narratives, inspire collective purpose, and engage followers through symbolic and emotive communication (Bass & Riggio, 2006). At the same time, transactional leadership behaviours, including contingent rewards and corrective actions, are also reshaped by digital visibility and performance metrics such as likes, shares, and public endorsements. Social media introduces novel forms of reward and sanction, including reputational capital, social validation, and public criticism. These mechanisms operate alongside, and sometimes independently of, formal organisational systems. Despite these developments, existing leadership research has not sufficiently theorised how social media mediates the expression and effectiveness of transformational and transactional leadership behaviours. This conceptual gap limits the explanatory power of traditional leadership frameworks in digitally mediated contexts.

Empirical research on social media and leadership has grown, yet it remains fragmented across disciplines such as communication studies, political science, management, and sociology. Many studies focus narrowly on political leadership, influencer culture, or crisis communication, often neglecting broader integration with leadership theory. Moreover, existing studies frequently prioritise descriptive analyses of online presence or engagement metrics rather than behavioural leadership processes. There is limited comparative analysis examining how social media

simultaneously enables transformational and transactional leadership behaviours. Additionally, much of the literature is concentrated in Western contexts, with insufficient attention to cultural variation in digital leadership practices. The absence of integrative frameworks hampers the development of cumulative knowledge in this emerging field. These empirical limitations highlight the need for a theoretically grounded synthesis that bridges leadership theory and digital communication research.

Methodologically, the study of social media leadership presents further challenges that have not been fully addressed in the literature. Quantitative studies often rely on surface-level metrics that do not capture the depth of leadership influence or follower interpretation. Qualitative studies, while insightful, are often limited to case studies and do not permit broader theoretical generalisation. There is also a lack of systematic reviews that synthesise findings across organisational, political, and community leadership contexts. Furthermore, ethical considerations related to authenticity, manipulation, and performative leadership on social media remain under-theorised. These methodological gaps constrain understanding of how leadership behaviours evolve in digital environments. Addressing these limitations requires integrative approaches that combine theory-driven analysis with rigorous synthesis of existing evidence.

In response to these gaps, this paper examines the influence of social media on leadership styles and behaviour, with a particular focus on transformational and transactional leadership. By integrating leadership theory with digital communication scholarship, the study conceptualises social media as a behavioural context that reshapes leadership influence, accountability, and follower engagement. The paper aims to synthesise existing empirical evidence to identify patterns in leadership behaviour mediated by social media platforms. It also seeks to clarify how digital interaction alters traditional mechanisms of motivation, reward, and control. Through this approach, the study contributes to leadership theory by extending its applicability to contemporary digital environments. Ultimately, the paper offers theoretical and practical insights for scholars, practitioners, and organisations navigating leadership in an increasingly networked and visible world.

Problem Statement

Despite growing scholarly interest in digital leadership, much of the leadership literature continues to privilege traditional, face-to-face organisational settings. This emphasis underestimates the extent to which social media platforms have fundamentally transformed leadership communication, authority, and behavioural expectations. Contemporary leaders increasingly operate in obvious digital environments where their actions, statements, and decisions are publicly scrutinised, rapidly disseminated, and continuously evaluated by diverse audiences. Unlike conventional leadership contexts, social media collapses organisational boundaries, allowing followers, stakeholders, and the wider public to engage directly with leaders in real time. This heightened visibility alters power dynamics, as influence is no longer derived solely from formal authority but also from online presence, credibility, and engagement. Consequently, leadership behaviour is shaped not only by internal organisational norms but also by external digital audiences and algorithm-driven attention structures. However, existing leadership theories often fail to account for these digitally mediated dynamics adequately.

The limited integration of social media into leadership theory restricts understanding of how leaders adapt their styles and behaviours in networked societies. In particular, the behavioural consequences of social media use for leadership effectiveness, authenticity, and accountability remain underexplored. Leaders are increasingly required to balance transparency with impression management, responsiveness with strategic restraint, and personal authenticity with organisational representation. Social media feedback mechanisms, such as likes, comments, and shares, may reinforce or constrain certain leadership behaviours, influencing whether leaders adopt more transformational, transactional, or performative styles. Despite these developments, empirical research examining how leaders modify their behaviour in response to digital engagement remains fragmented. This gap is especially evident in studies analysing leadership style adaptation under conditions of constant online feedback and public evaluation. Accordingly, this study addresses the central research question: How does social media influence leadership styles and behaviour in contemporary organisational and social contexts?

Research Questions

1. How does social media influence the expression of transformational leadership behaviours?
2. In what ways does social media reshape transactional leadership processes and accountability mechanisms?
3. How does digital visibility affect leader-follower relationships and leadership legitimacy?
4. What are the implications of social media-mediated leadership for leadership development and organisational practice?

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in a dual theoretical framework that integrates transformational-transactional leadership theory with digital leadership and social media communication theory. Transformational-transactional leadership theory explains how leaders influence followers through vision, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and contingent exchanges (Bass, 1990; Burns, 1978). Digital leadership theory extends these principles by examining how leadership influence is enacted through technologically mediated environments characterised by visibility, interactivity, and immediacy (Avolio et al., 2014). Social media platforms create novel leadership contexts in which authority is less hierarchical and more relational, negotiated through engagement and public perception. Leaders must therefore adapt both transformational and transactional behaviours to digitally networked audiences. This integration conceptualises leadership as a communicative and behavioural process shaped by platform affordances. The framework positions social media not merely as a tool but as a structural environment influencing leadership practice.

Transformational leadership is particularly salient in social media environments, where symbolic communication, narrative construction, and emotional resonance are emphasised. Social media enables leaders to repeatedly articulate visions, personalise messages, and mobilise collective identity through storytelling and visual representation (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Inspirational motivation is amplified through viral dissemination and follower interaction, allowing leadership messages to transcend organisational boundaries. Intellectual stimulation emerges through

dialogic engagement, crowdsourced problem-solving, and public debate facilitated by digital platforms. Individualised consideration is enacted through direct messaging, personalised responses, and visible empathy toward follower concerns. These behaviours collectively enhance leader visibility and perceived authenticity. The framework, therefore, conceptualises social media as a catalyst that intensifies transformational leadership behaviours while simultaneously exposing them to public evaluation.

Transactional leadership, although often associated with formal organisational exchanges, is also reshaped by social media dynamics. Digital environments introduce informal yet powerful reward systems, such as likes, shares, endorsements, and reputational capital, that function as contingent reinforcers. Public recognition on social media serves as a symbolic reward, while criticism, unfollowing, or reputational damage operate as corrective mechanisms. These exchanges occur in real time and are visible to broad audiences, intensifying their behavioural impact. Unlike traditional transactional systems, digital rewards and sanctions are often decentralised and follower-driven. This shifts some control over reinforcement from leaders to online communities. The framework thus reconceptualises transactional leadership as a socially mediated exchange process embedded in digital visibility and audience participation.

By synthesising leadership theory with social media scholarship, this framework conceptualises leadership behaviour as both performative and relational. Leadership influence is understood as emerging from continuous interaction between leaders, followers, and platform algorithms. The framework accounts for the blurring of personal and professional identities, which complicates traditional distinctions between leadership roles and private conduct. It also recognises ethical challenges related to authenticity, impression management, and performative leadership in online spaces. Notably, the framework provides a basis for examining how leadership effectiveness is judged through engagement, trust, and credibility rather than positional authority alone. This integrative perspective enables a more nuanced analysis of leadership behaviour in contemporary digital contexts. As such, the framework guides the study's examination of how social media reshapes transformational and transactional leadership styles and outcomes.

Literature Review

Social Media and Leadership

Social media has fundamentally transformed leadership by enabling leaders to communicate directly with large, diverse, and geographically dispersed audiences. Unlike traditional hierarchical communication channels, social media platforms facilitate rapid information sharing and continuous interaction between leaders and followers (Kane et al., 2014; Sacavém et al., 2025). This immediacy allows leaders to bypass organisational gatekeepers and engage stakeholders in real time, thereby reshaping how influence is exercised. Leadership communication on social media often incorporates emotional appeal, symbolism, and narrative framing to convey values and priorities. As a result, leadership increasingly relies on visibility and narrative coherence rather than solely on formal authority. These platforms provide leaders with opportunities to construct public personas that reflect both organisational objectives and

personal identity. Consequently, leadership effectiveness is closely linked to the ability to manage communication in digital spaces strategically.

Social media also enables leaders to craft and disseminate public narratives that shape organisational meaning and collective identity (Torre& Sarti, 2020). Through posts, videos, and interactive content, leaders can articulate vision, signal moral positions, and reinforce shared values. This narrative capacity is particularly evident during periods of crisis, where timely communication can stabilise uncertainty and mobilise collective action. Leaders who effectively leverage social media during crises are often perceived as decisive, transparent, and empathetic. However, the speed of digital communication reduces opportunities for message refinement and increases the likelihood of misinterpretation. Errors or inconsistencies can be rapidly amplified, affecting the leader's credibility and trust. Thus, narrative leadership in digital contexts requires heightened awareness of tone, timing, and audience diversity.

While social media expands leadership influence, it simultaneously exposes leaders to constant public scrutiny and reputational vulnerability. Leadership behaviour becomes performative, as actions and statements are observed, evaluated, and archived indefinitely. This visibility pressures leaders to engage in impression management and strategic self-presentation to maintain legitimacy. The permanence of digital content means past behaviours can resurface, influencing future perceptions of leadership integrity. Additionally, leaders must navigate competing audience expectations, balancing organisational representation with personal authenticity. Negative feedback, online criticism, or misinformation can quickly erode authority and morale. Consequently, leadership effectiveness increasingly depends on reputational resilience and adaptive communication strategies.

The social media environment has also reshaped expectations surrounding transparency, responsiveness, and authenticity in leadership (Treem& Leonardi, 2013). Followers increasingly expect leaders to be accessible, communicative, and accountable through digital channels. Delayed responses or perceived disengagement may be interpreted as indifference or incompetence. At the same time, excessive visibility or overexposure risks diminishing authority and professional boundaries. Leadership authority is therefore increasingly contingent on digital engagement, perception management, and relational credibility rather than positional power alone. This shift reflects broader changes in how leadership legitimacy is constructed in networked societies. Understanding social media as a constitutive element of contemporary leadership is thus essential for analysing leadership behaviour in modern organisational and social contexts.

Transformational Leadership in Digital Contexts

Transformational leadership behaviours are significantly amplified through social media's capacity for storytelling, emotional appeal, and collective identity formation. Digital platforms enable leaders to communicate their vision and values through narratives that resonate with followers across organisational and social boundaries. Through symbolic communication such as personal stories, moral statements, and visual imagery, leaders can articulate shared purpose and meaning (Bass & Riggio, 2006). This form of communication fosters emotional connection and

reinforces leader-follower identification. Unlike traditional leadership settings, social media enables repeated and sustained exposure to leadership messages. This continuity strengthens message internalisation and alignment with organisational goals. Consequently, social media enhances the reach and persistence of transformational leadership influence.

Inspirational motivation is particularly strengthened when leaders share narratives that evoke hope, resilience, and collective aspiration. Social media allows leaders to highlight achievements, acknowledge challenges, and frame setbacks as opportunities for growth. Such emotionally resonant messaging encourages followers to transcend individual interests in favour of collective objectives. Inspirational posts often generate high engagement, reinforcing shared commitment through digital affirmation. The interactive nature of social media further enables leaders to reinforce motivation through direct feedback and encouragement—followers who publicly endorse leadership messages co-construct organisational meaning. As a result, inspiration becomes a dynamic, participatory process within digital environments.

Idealised influence in digital contexts is closely linked to perceptions of authenticity, consistency, and moral positioning. Leaders who demonstrate congruence between their online messaging and offline behaviour are more likely to be perceived as credible and trustworthy. Social media amplifies both ethical leadership and moral failure, as inconsistencies are quickly exposed. Transparent communication and principled stances on social and organisational issues enhance moral legitimacy. Followers often assess a leader's character through digital footprints, including tone, responsiveness, and alignment with values. This visibility reinforces role-modelling behaviours central to transformational leadership. Thus, idealised influence is sustained through ethical consistency and authentic digital engagement.

Social media also facilitates intellectual stimulation through interactive dialogue, feedback mechanisms, and participatory content creation. Leaders can invite discussion, challenge assumptions, and encourage innovation by posing questions and responding to diverse viewpoints. Digital platforms provide spaces for collective problem-solving that transcend hierarchical constraints. Followers are empowered to contribute ideas, critique strategies, and co-create solutions in real time. This participatory environment aligns with transformational leadership's emphasis on learning and cognitive engagement. Social media, therefore, extends intellectual stimulation beyond formal organisational forums. Overall, digital platforms transform transformational leadership into a networked, dialogic, and co-creative process.

Transactional Leadership and Social Media

Social media increasingly reshape transactional leadership through digitally mediated monitoring, feedback, and accountability mechanisms. Unlike traditional transactional processes that operate within closed organisational systems, social media introduces greater visibility into performance management and behavioural regulation. Leaders now use digital platforms to communicate expectations, monitor compliance, and provide real-time feedback. This immediacy enhances the efficiency of transactional exchanges but also increases pressure on followers to conform to publicly articulated standards. The transparency of social media reduces informational asymmetries between leaders and followers. As a result, transactional leadership

becomes more participatory and socially regulated. These developments highlight how digital environments transform conventional transactional leadership dynamics.

Performance recognition and reward systems are particularly affected by the public or semi-public nature of social media platforms. Leaders increasingly acknowledge individual and team achievements through online praise, endorsements, and symbolic gestures visible to broad audiences (Burns, 1978). Such recognition extends the motivational impact of rewards beyond material incentives by reinforcing social status and professional reputation. Digital engagement metrics, including likes, shares, and comments, function as informal reward mechanisms that signal approval and reinforce desired behaviours. Followers often internalise these signals as indicators of success and organisational value. However, the public nature of these rewards may also intensify competition and impression management among followers. Consequently, transactional leadership rewards become socially amplified within digital spaces.

The affordances of social media similarly transform corrective action within transactional leadership. Public criticism, negative feedback, or online backlash can serve as powerful corrective mechanisms that influence behaviour. Unlike traditional disciplinary processes, digital sanctions may occur rapidly and without formal procedural safeguards. This immediacy can enhance accountability but also risks reputational harm and psychological distress. Leaders must therefore exercise discretion when managing corrective feedback in online environments. Ethical leadership requires balancing transparency with fairness and respect for follower dignity. These challenges underscore the complex moral terrain of transactional leadership in digital contexts.

Overall, social media increases the visibility and immediacy of transactional leadership, altering power relations and behavioural compliance. Authority is increasingly derived not only from positional power but also from digital influence and audience perception. Followers adjust their behaviour in anticipation of both organisational consequences and public evaluation. This dual accountability intensifies behavioural regulation while reshaping leader-follower exchanges. Transactional leadership thus becomes embedded within broader social and reputational systems beyond the organisation. Understanding these dynamics is essential for analysing leadership behaviour in contemporary networked environments. Social media, therefore, reconfigures transactional leadership as a digitally mediated and socially accountable process.

Empirical Studies

Empirical research consistently indicates that followers perceive leaders who actively engage on social media as more accessible, transparent, and responsive. Studies suggest that digital visibility reduces perceived hierarchical distance, enabling more relational forms of leadership interaction (Avolio et al., 2014). Followers often interpret timely online responses as indicators of leader attentiveness and concern. This perceived accessibility strengthens leader-follower relationships and enhances leadership legitimacy. However, the quality of engagement is more influential than the quantity of online activity. Superficial or automated communication tends to generate weaker relational outcomes. Thus, meaningful interaction is central to effective digital leadership.

Research further demonstrates that social media engagement enhances trust and fosters identification with followers when leadership communication is authentic and value-driven. Leaders who consistently align their digital messaging with organisational values and ethical principles foster stronger emotional bonds with followers. Authentic self-disclosure and transparent communication contribute to perceptions of integrity and credibility. Conversely, excessive self-promotion or inconsistencies between online and offline behaviour undermine a leader's trustworthiness. Followers are susceptible to performative or manipulative digital communication. Empirical studies highlight that credibility is fragile in digital environments due to continuous public scrutiny. As a result, authenticity emerges as a critical determinant of digital leadership effectiveness.

Empirical evidence also suggests that effective digital leadership depends on strategic platform use rather than on posting frequency alone. Leaders who tailor their communication style to specific platforms achieve greater engagement and clarity. Strategic content planning allows leaders to balance informational, relational, and symbolic communication. Research indicates that leaders who overload followers with content risk disengagement and message dilution. Platform literacy and audience awareness are, therefore, essential leadership competencies. Leaders who understand digital affordances can better manage attention and influence. These findings underscore the importance of intentional digital leadership strategies.

Finally, studies show that leaders who successfully integrate online and offline behaviours demonstrate higher overall leadership effectiveness. Consistency between digital communication and organisational action reinforces credibility and trust. Followers evaluate leadership authenticity by comparing online narratives with lived organisational experiences. Leaders who align digital presence with operational practices are perceived as more reliable and ethical. Empirical research suggests that misalignment between online and offline leadership undermines authority and follower commitment. This integration enhances both transformational and transactional leadership processes. Collectively, these findings support the argument that social media significantly shapes leadership behaviour, influence, and perception in contemporary contexts.

Methods

This study employed a systematic literature review to synthesise existing research on the influence of social media on leadership styles and behaviour. Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and relevant literature published between 2005 and 2025 were included to capture contemporary trends and insights. The review focused on studies that examined leadership behaviours in digital or social media contexts, with particular attention to transformational and transactional leadership. Databases searched included Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar to ensure comprehensive coverage of multidisciplinary literature. Keywords utilised in the search process included “social media and leadership,” “digital leadership,” “transformational leadership online,” and “transactional leadership social media.” Studies were included if they addressed leadership style adaptation, follower engagement, or digital communication strategies in organisational, political, or community settings. This approach provided a robust foundation for identifying patterns and gaps in the literature.

The inclusion criteria were deliberately designed to focus on empirical studies, theoretical contributions, and case-based analyses that explored leadership in digitally mediated environments. Only studies published in English and accessible through the selected databases were considered. Exclusion criteria included studies that focused solely on offline leadership, without reference to digital platforms or social media engagement. Each article was assessed for relevance, methodological rigour, and theoretical alignment with the research questions. The selection process ensured that the dataset captured both quantitative metrics (e.g., engagement analytics and performance outcomes) and qualitative insights (e.g., follower perceptions and narrative analysis). By systematically reviewing a diverse range of studies, the review achieved both breadth and depth in understanding digital leadership. This comprehensive approach allowed for the identification of common themes and divergent findings across contexts.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in how leaders adapt transformational and transactional behaviours to social media environments. Key themes included digital communication strategies, narrative construction, ethical challenges, follower engagement, and the interplay between online and offline leadership. Thematic coding was conducted iteratively, enabling cross-study comparison and synthesis. Patterns were interpreted in light of the integrated theoretical framework combining transformational-transactional leadership theory with digital communication theory. This framework facilitated understanding of how social media reshapes leadership influence, visibility, and accountability. Emergent findings were cross-validated against empirical evidence to ensure theoretical and practical relevance. Themes were refined to highlight both consistent behaviours and context-specific adaptations.

Finally, the methodological approach ensured that findings were both theoretically grounded and culturally contextualised. By integrating empirical studies from organisational, political, and community leadership contexts, the review captured a broad spectrum of social media usage and leadership behaviours. The use of multiple databases and keywords enhanced comprehensiveness. It reduced potential bias in study selection, and data synthesis through thematic analysis allowed for the identification of both convergent and divergent patterns across studies. Interpretation within the dual theoretical framework provided clarity on how transformational and transactional leadership behaviours are modified by digital environments. The approach also highlighted research gaps, particularly regarding cross-cultural comparisons, longitudinal studies, and platform-specific leadership strategies. Overall, the methodology provided a rigorous foundation for analysing the influence of social media on contemporary leadership styles and behaviour.

Findings

Social media significantly amplifies the impact of transformational leadership by increasing leader visibility and extending influence beyond traditional organisational boundaries. Leaders who consistently communicate vision, values, and goals through digital platforms foster stronger identification and commitment among followers. Storytelling, visual content, and narrative framing enable leaders to evoke emotional resonance and reinforce collective purpose (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The immediacy and interactivity of social media allow followers to engage

actively, co-creating meaning and contributing to collective sense-making. These platforms also facilitate rapid mobilisation during organisational initiatives or crises, enhancing the practical impact of transformational behaviours. However, effectiveness is contingent on perceived authenticity, as followers are sensitive to performative or inconsistent messaging. Leaders who align online communication with offline behaviour are perceived as more credible and morally legitimate.

Inspirational motivation is strengthened when leaders use social media to convey narratives that resonate emotionally with followers. By highlighting shared values, recognising achievements, and framing challenges as opportunities, leaders encourage commitment to collective goals. Digital engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments serve as indicators of message reception and influence. Leaders who actively respond to feedback foster a participatory environment, enhancing intrinsic motivation and organisational cohesion. Interactive dialogue through comments, live sessions, and collaborative content allows leaders to stimulate follower creativity and problem-solving. This engagement not only strengthens emotional bonds but also cultivates a sense of shared identity. Consequently, social media transforms inspirational motivation into a dynamic, networked process.

Idealised influence is similarly augmented through social media visibility, perceived consistency, and ethical positioning. Leaders who demonstrate integrity online, such as adhering to stated values and transparent decision-making, are more likely to be trusted and emulated by followers. Digital platforms magnify both positive and negative behaviours, making ethical consistency essential for maintaining authority. Followers evaluate moral credibility by comparing online narratives with observable actions, strengthening relational legitimacy. Public expressions of accountability, transparency, and responsiveness reinforce perceptions of authenticity and ethical stewardship. Social media, therefore, creates a heightened environment where role-modelling is continuously visible and evaluated. Leaders who succeed in this context enhance both transformational influence and organisational trust.

Social media facilitates intellectual stimulation through opportunities for dialogue, feedback, and participatory engagement (Castells, 2012). Leaders can invite followers to contribute ideas, challenge assumptions, and co-create solutions in open forums or collaborative digital spaces. This interactive process encourages critical thinking and innovation, key components of transformational leadership. Followers are empowered to engage with strategic issues, resulting in shared problem-solving and knowledge generation. Digital tools such as polls, live discussions, and collaborative content platforms extend the reach and impact of these cognitive processes. Leaders who cultivate intellectual engagement online demonstrate adaptability and responsiveness to diverse perspectives. Ultimately, social media fosters a more inclusive and participatory form of transformational leadership.

Social media also reshapes transactional leadership through enhanced visibility and accountability mechanisms. Public recognition, praise, and informal rewards such as social approval and engagement metrics reinforce desired behaviours beyond formal organisational structures (Burns, 1978). Conversely, public criticism, digital backlash, or reputational consequences serve as corrective mechanisms, increasing follower compliance and ethical

accountability. Leaders are required to balance the immediacy of feedback with fairness and proportionality in enforcement. Digital platforms decentralise some aspects of transactional authority, as follower engagement contributes to the perception of legitimacy and reward. This creates an environment in which transactional leadership is socially regulated and publicly observed. Consequently, performance monitoring and behavioural reinforcement are embedded within both formal and informal digital processes.

Overall, leaders who integrate transformational inspiration with digitally mediated transactional accountability demonstrate higher effectiveness in social media contexts. The interplay between visible moral leadership, participatory engagement, and public reinforcement strengthens both follower motivation and compliance. Followers perceive these leaders as authentic, ethical, and capable of balancing relational and performance-focused leadership objectives. Social media enables leaders to cultivate trust, encourage collective action, and sustain organisational alignment across networks. However, success depends on the strategic, consistent, and authentic use of digital platforms. Leaders who fail to align messaging with behaviour or who neglect feedback risk undermining credibility and authority. These findings underscore the transformative impact of social media on both transformational and transactional leadership behaviours, highlighting new opportunities and challenges for contemporary leadership practice.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that social media fundamentally reshapes leadership behaviour by altering communication patterns, authority structures, and follower expectations. Unlike traditional hierarchical environments, digital platforms create obvious and interactive leadership spaces where messages are continuously evaluated (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Sacavém et al., 2025). Transformational and transactional leadership behaviours are not replaced but reconfigured, as leaders adapt their strategies to suit participatory and networked audiences (Eaton et al., 2024). Social media extends leadership reach, allowing influence to cross organisational and geographical boundaries while simultaneously increasing scrutiny and reputational vulnerability. The performative nature of digital leadership necessitates careful management of tone, timing, and content. Leaders must therefore navigate visibility strategically to maintain credibility and legitimacy. This environment challenges conventional assumptions that leadership power derives solely from position or formal authority.

Transformational leadership in digital contexts is particularly enhanced through storytelling, emotional resonance, and participatory engagement. Social media allows leaders to articulate vision, reinforce values, and inspire followers across multiple platforms (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Sacavém et al., 2025). Inspirational motivation is strengthened when narratives align with follower values, shared goals, and cultural expectations. Idealised influence is reinforced through consistent ethical behaviour, transparency, and responsiveness to feedback. Intellectual stimulation is facilitated through interactive content, dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving initiatives. These behaviours demonstrate that digital platforms can extend the reach and depth of transformational leadership beyond organisational boundaries. However, leaders must maintain authenticity, as inauthentic or performative communication undermines follower trust and commitment.

Transactional leadership is also reconfigured within social media environments, particularly in terms of accountability, recognition, and behavioural regulation. Digital platforms enable performance monitoring and feedback to occur publicly, creating both informal and formal reward and sanction systems (Burns, 1978). Likes, shares, and follower engagement act as symbolic rewards, while negative feedback, online criticism, and reputational damage function as corrective mechanisms. This public and participatory accountability reinforces behavioural compliance while highlighting the social nature of transactional exchanges. Leaders must carefully balance transparency, fairness, and ethical conduct to avoid reputational harm. Digital feedback also decentralises authority, as followers' responses influence perceptions of legitimacy. Consequently, transactional leadership effectiveness depends on both relational awareness and strategic use of digital tools.

The interaction between transformational and transactional leadership in digital contexts reflects the hybrid nature of contemporary leadership practices. Leaders who integrate inspirational messaging with responsive accountability demonstrate higher effectiveness in maintaining follower motivation, trust, and engagement. Social media enables leaders to align relational, ethical, and performance-focused behaviours in ways not possible in offline-only environments. This hybrid approach supports a more holistic understanding of leadership as both relational and performative, shaped by continuous interaction with followers and digital audiences. Leadership effectiveness depends on managing the complexity of online engagement without sacrificing ethical and organisational standards. Digital visibility amplifies both opportunities and risks, requiring deliberate and strategic leadership practices. These findings suggest that leadership theory must account for digital platforms as structural and behavioural influencers.

The study also highlights the ethical and practical challenges inherent in social media leadership. Constant visibility and digital permanence create pressures for impression management and strategic self-presentation. Leaders must navigate tensions between transparency, authenticity, and organisational confidentiality. Failure to align online and offline behaviour can result in diminished credibility and follower disengagement. Additionally, social media accelerates the diffusion of both praise and criticism, intensifying reputational stakes. These dynamics emphasise the moral and strategic dimensions of leadership in digitally mediated environments. Effective digital leadership, therefore, requires both technical literacy and ethical discernment.

Finally, these findings extend traditional leadership theory by incorporating digital context as a core explanatory factor. Leadership is best understood as a hybrid, online-offline practice in which both structural and relational dynamics shape authority, influence, and behaviour. Social media acts as a catalyst, magnifying both transformational and transactional behaviours while introducing new accountability mechanisms. This reconceptualisation provides a framework for understanding contemporary leadership in networked societies. Furthermore, the study identifies gaps for future research, including cross-cultural comparisons, platform-specific leadership strategies, and longitudinal analyses of digital engagement. Understanding how leaders adapt to rapidly evolving social media environments will be critical for organisational effectiveness. Overall, digital platforms are no longer peripheral tools but central components in the exercise and study of leadership.

Recommendations

Leadership development programmes should integrate digital literacy alongside transformational and transactional competencies to prepare leaders for social media-mediated contexts. Training should emphasise ethical communication, transparency, and authenticity, enabling leaders to maintain credibility as they navigate obvious digital spaces. Simulation exercises, case studies, and platform-specific strategies can equip leaders to manage narrative framing, feedback, and reputational risks effectively. Programmes should also focus on participatory leadership techniques, teaching leaders to foster collaboration, collective problem-solving, and intellectual stimulation online. Emphasising the hybrid nature of digital and offline leadership will enhance adaptability and situational awareness. By embedding social media competencies into development frameworks, organisations can cultivate leaders who are both strategically practical and ethically grounded. This approach ensures leadership practice aligns with contemporary organisational expectations and societal scrutiny.

Organisational reward and accountability systems should reflect the digital visibility and participatory nature of contemporary leadership. Recognition and corrective measures may occur in public or semi-public spaces, where social approval and follower engagement act as symbolic rewards. Leaders should balance digital reinforcement with formal performance evaluation to maintain fairness and mitigate bias. Ethical oversight mechanisms are essential to ensure that digital feedback does not undermine inclusivity, trust, or relational harmony. By integrating online and offline evaluation processes, organisations can sustain compliance, motivation, and moral accountability. Clear guidelines on digital engagement help prevent misuse, overexposure, or reputational harm. Ultimately, culturally and digitally sensitive reward systems strengthen both transformational and transactional leadership effectiveness.

Researchers should conduct empirical studies examining the impact of social media on leadership behaviours, styles, and outcomes across different sectors and cultural contexts. Longitudinal research would provide insights into how leaders adapt over time and how digital influence evolves with platform changes. Cross-cultural comparisons can reveal whether social media shapes leadership differently in hierarchical versus egalitarian contexts. Studies should also explore platform-specific strategies, as Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, and other platforms offer distinct affordances and audience expectations. Mixed-method approaches that combine quantitative engagement metrics with qualitative narrative analysis can provide a more holistic understanding of leadership impact. Research into ethical dilemmas, reputational risk, and follower perception will further inform best practices. Filling these gaps will strengthen both theory and practical guidance for digital leadership.

Policymakers and organisational strategists should acknowledge social media as a core factor influencing leadership legitimacy and organisational culture. Digital engagement policies should provide leaders with guidance on appropriate conduct, transparency, and accountability. Ethical frameworks must address the complexities of online visibility, information dissemination, and audience interaction. Organisations should support leaders in managing the dual pressures of performance expectations and public scrutiny. By recognising the hybrid nature of leadership, policies can effectively bridge the divide between offline and online responsibilities.

Policymakers should also encourage ongoing evaluation and adaptation of digital strategies to reflect evolving social media dynamics. Such guidance ensures that leadership practices remain effective, credible, and ethically aligned in contemporary networked environments.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of social media on leadership styles and behaviours through a combined transformational-transactional lens. The findings indicate that social media fundamentally reshapes how leadership is enacted, perceived, and evaluated in contemporary organisational and social contexts. Transformational leadership is amplified through digital storytelling, emotional resonance, participatory engagement, and the cultivation of shared purpose among followers (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Simultaneously, transactional leadership is reinforced through visibility, public accountability, and digitally mediated reward and corrective mechanisms (Burns, 1978). These digital affordances extend the reach and immediacy of leadership influence beyond traditional face-to-face interactions. The study highlights that leaders must strategically manage both online and offline behaviours to maintain credibility and effectiveness. Overall, social media functions as a central platform for shaping leadership practice and follower perception.

The research also demonstrates that digital leadership introduces both opportunities and risks for contemporary organisational governance. Opportunities include enhanced follower engagement, rapid mobilisation, broader dissemination of vision, and participatory problem-solving. Conversely, risks emerge as reputational vulnerability, ethical dilemmas, performative pressures, and the constant scrutiny of leadership actions. Leaders must therefore balance authenticity with strategic communication to sustain trust and legitimacy. The study underscores the importance of integrating ethical, relational, and performance-focused competencies in digital leadership practice. This balance is essential for maintaining follower motivation, organisational alignment, and moral credibility in highly networked environments. Digital leadership is thus a hybrid practice that requires continuous adaptation and reflexivity.

Finally, the findings highlight the need for further empirical research to advance understanding of platform-specific leadership behaviours. Future studies could examine longitudinal outcomes of digital leadership, cross-cultural variations, and the differential effects of various social media platforms on transformational and transactional practices. Research should also explore how digital metrics, audience feedback, and interactive participation influence leader effectiveness. By doing so, scholars can provide evidence-based guidance for leadership development programmes and organisational policy design. Understanding digital leadership is crucial for preparing leaders to navigate increasingly networked, transparent, and participatory organisational landscapes. The study affirms that social media is no longer a peripheral tool but a central component of contemporary leadership practice. In conclusion, effective leadership in the digital age requires strategic, ethical, and relational competence to optimise both follower engagement and organisational outcomes.

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