

Transformational Virtual Leadership and Marketing Team Performance in the E-Commerce Sector: An Integrated Review

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Abstract

The rapid advancement of digital technology has transformed leadership dynamics within e-commerce organizations operating under virtual work systems. This study aims to explore the impact of virtual transformational leadership on the performance of marketing teams using a descriptive qualitative approach. Conducted over three months (February–April 2025), the research involved direct observation and in-depth interviews with marketing teams from three digital companies. The analysis identified five dominant aspects—idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and active digital communication—that significantly enhance team creativity, collaboration, motivation, and loyalty. These findings reaffirm the relevance of transformational leadership theory in remote work settings and highlight the importance of developing digitally competent and empathetic leaders capable of sustaining engagement and productivity in virtual environments. The study concludes that responsive, human-centered leadership is essential for achieving sustainable success in the evolving e-commerce industry..

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid evolution of digital technology has fundamentally transformed organizational operations and strategic management across industries, including the e-commerce sector. E-commerce represents a digital business model that facilitates online buying and selling processes, enabling transactions that transcend geographical and temporal boundaries. Within this digital ecosystem, innovative marketing strategies—such as personalized marketing, social media engagement, customer data analytics, and loyalty programs—have emerged as pivotal tools in fostering customer satisfaction and long-term loyalty. Effective application of these strategies allows e-commerce firms to expand market reach, strengthen customer relationships, and sustain business growth in an increasingly competitive digital economy (Sudirjo et al., n.d.). However, the virtualization of workplaces introduces complex challenges in leadership and team management. Marketing teams are often geographically dispersed and rely heavily on digital communication platforms. Consequently, leaders must navigate the intricacies of remote communication,

motivation, and performance monitoring to maintain high team effectiveness. In this environment, transformational virtual leadership has gained prominence as a leadership paradigm capable of inspiring motivation, building trust, and enhancing emotional engagement among remote team members.

While transformational leadership has been widely studied for its positive impact on organizational performance across multiple sectors, empirical investigations focusing specifically on its implementation in e-commerce-based organizations remain scarce. This research seeks to address this gap by examining the relationship between virtual transformational leadership and marketing team performance within the e-commerce context. The findings aim to enrich academic discourse in human resource management and provide actionable insights for e-commerce practitioners managing virtual teams through adaptive and inspirational leadership approaches.

Literature Review

Transformational Leadership in Digital and Virtual Environments

Transformational leadership, as conceptualized by Bass and Avolio (1994), encompasses four core dimensions: *idealized influence*, *inspirational motivation*, *intellectual stimulation*, and *individualized consideration*. These components collectively empower leaders to foster creativity, commitment, and intrinsic motivation among followers. Within virtual organizations, transformational leadership translates into behaviors that transcend physical boundaries by leveraging digital tools to maintain connection, engagement, and shared vision (Pratiwi, 2025).

Empirical evidence consistently supports the efficacy of transformational leadership in enhancing team performance, innovation, and job satisfaction. However, the transition to digital workplaces demands an evolution of this leadership style—what has been termed “transformational virtual leadership.” This concept integrates the principles of transformational leadership with advanced communication technologies, emphasizing emotional intelligence, digital literacy, and virtual collaboration (Andreano et al., 2025)

In virtual marketing environments, the absence of face-to-face interaction amplifies the importance of transparent communication, trust-building, and empathy. Transformational virtual leaders must use digital communication platforms not merely as tools for coordination but as strategic instruments of influence and inspiration, maintaining team cohesion despite spatial separation (Sutiasih et al., 2022)

Transformational Leadership and the Smart Integrated Model

Transformational leadership also aligns closely with the “smart integrated leadership” paradigm—a framework central to achieving the *Society 5.0* vision, wherein technological advancement is designed to serve human-centered innovation (Putra Ardinata et al., 2022). In this context, smart leadership encompasses digital governance, intelligent human resource management, and adaptive infrastructures that integrate artificial intelligence and data-driven decision-making.

For small and medium enterprises (SMEs), the incorporation of e-commerce and digital strategies not only enhances efficiency but also strengthens competitiveness. With governmental support and technological integration, e-commerce becomes a critical driver for inclusive economic growth, empowering SMEs to reach wider markets and operate sustainably (Siagian, 2021). Transformational leaders play a pivotal role in this transition, guiding teams toward innovation and ensuring technology adoption aligns with human values and organizational ethics.

Transformational Virtual Leadership and Marketing Team Performance

Transformational virtual leadership has been shown to positively influence marketing team performance in e-commerce firms. Leaders who provide intellectual stimulation encourage employees to question established assumptions and experiment with new digital marketing tactics, fostering innovation in strategy formulation. Meanwhile, inspirational motivation—communicating an energizing vision—cultivates collective enthusiasm toward achieving organizational goals, even within remote settings (Pratiwi, 2025).

The four foundational elements of transformational leadership manifest distinctively in virtual contexts:

1. Idealized Influence – Leaders act as digital role models who exemplify integrity and accountability in online interactions, setting ethical standards for virtual engagement.
2. Inspirational Motivation – Virtual leaders articulate compelling visions through digital storytelling, uniting dispersed team members under shared aspirations.
3. Intellectual Stimulation – Leaders encourage experimentation with new technologies such as AI-driven analytics or customer behavior modeling tools, promoting adaptive learning.
4. Individualized Consideration – Leaders demonstrate empathy by providing personalized digital feedback, mentorship, and support through online platforms.

Such behaviors collectively enhance emotional connection and motivation, leading to higher creativity, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment among remote marketers (Purwanto & Utomo, 2025).

Transformational Leadership and Organizational Adaptation in E-Commerce

E-commerce organizations operate in highly volatile environments characterized by rapid technological changes, evolving consumer behavior, and intense competition. In such settings, transformational leadership functions as a catalyst for organizational adaptability and resilience (Kusuma, 2024). Through visionary communication and emotional engagement, leaders foster a sense of shared purpose, enabling teams to swiftly adapt to market fluctuations and technological disruptions.

Transformational leadership also reinforces a culture of collaboration and innovation, both crucial in digital marketing teams. By empowering employees to contribute creative solutions, leaders stimulate collective intelligence and agility. Moreover, transformational leaders are adept at aligning technological transformation with human needs, ensuring that innovation remains ethically and socially responsible.

E-Commerce Marketing and Leadership in Practice

The successful implementation of digital marketing strategies is deeply intertwined with leadership effectiveness. Several case studies from Indonesian e-commerce enterprises exemplify this relationship:

- Sakura Cosmetics transitioned from manual to digital marketing systems, integrating automated data recording, coordinated reporting, and online promotions that expanded its market reach. Intensive training and mentorship mitigated technological adjustment barriers, demonstrating that transformational leadership facilitates digital adoption and enhances SME competitiveness .

- Startup e-commerce ventures often struggle with limited resources, insufficient marketing technology utilization, and skill gaps. Through *fishbone analysis*, (Saefullah et al., 2025) identifies strategic bottlenecks related to planning, tool optimization, and external pressures such as regulation and competition. Transformational leadership enables startups to restructure marketing frameworks by fostering innovation, developing human capital, and adapting to market dynamics.
- Lakupon's marketing success illustrates the power of integrated leadership. By combining digital communication channels (Instagram, Twitter, and official websites) with direct sales interactions, the company strengthened brand relationships and increased conversion rates. Such integration reflects a transformational orientation, merging vision-driven communication with practical engagement to sustain competitiveness (Setiadi, 2025)..

Collectively, these cases highlight the practical relevance of transformational virtual leadership in navigating the dynamic landscape of digital marketing and sustaining organizational performance.

Conceptual Analysis

Digital Transformation and Human-Centered Leadership

In the digital economy, leadership effectiveness is no longer defined solely by authority but by connectivity, adaptability, and empathy. Transformational virtual leaders must balance technological competence with emotional intelligence to maintain human connection in virtual settings. The absence of physical proximity requires deliberate efforts to foster trust through transparent communication and continuous feedback.

E-commerce teams thrive under leaders who combine data-driven decision-making with emotional resonance. For example, employing AI-based analytics to personalize consumer engagement must be complemented by a human understanding of customer values and cultural nuances. This synthesis of technological and emotional intelligence embodies the *smart integrated leadership* ideal (Haryanto et al., 2023).

Communication and Motivation in Virtual Teams

Virtual marketing teams depend heavily on digital communication platforms such as Slack, Zoom, and collaborative CRM systems. Transformational leaders optimize these tools not merely as communication channels but as motivational ecosystems. Through consistent online engagement, digital recognition of achievements, and transparent reporting, leaders cultivate psychological safety and team accountability.

Motivation in virtual settings is further reinforced through goal alignment and autonomy. By granting employees ownership of digital campaigns and encouraging creative experimentation, transformational leaders sustain engagement and reduce the sense of isolation that often accompanies remote work environments.

The Role of Transformational Leadership in Innovation

Innovation in e-commerce marketing demands rapid iteration, cross-functional collaboration, and tolerance for failure. Transformational leadership encourages these behaviors by creating a psychologically safe climate where team members feel empowered to propose unconventional ideas. Intellectual stimulation promotes continuous learning, particularly critical in the fast-paced context of digital advertising, data analytics, and customer engagement algorithms.

Furthermore, transformational leaders act as *innovation architects*—integrating technological trends with strategic foresight. They guide teams in leveraging emerging technologies such as predictive analytics, machine learning, and augmented reality marketing to deliver superior customer experiences.

Theoretical Integration: Virtual Leadership and Performance Outcomes

Drawing from the social exchange theory, transformational leadership enhances follower commitment by fostering reciprocal trust and mutual respect. In virtual contexts, this relationship is mediated by digital communication quality and perceived leader presence. The proposed conceptual model can be outlined as follows:

Transformational Virtual Leadership → Digital Communication Quality → Team Cohesion → Marketing Performance

In this model, communication quality functions as a mediating factor, transforming leadership vision into tangible performance outcomes. Teams with strong digital cohesion exhibit higher creativity, responsiveness, and customer-centric orientation—key determinants of e-commerce competitiveness.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore the impact of virtual transformational leadership on the performance of marketing teams within e-commerce organizations. The qualitative approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpersonal interactions within digital work environments. Unlike quantitative research, which seeks to measure variables numerically, qualitative inquiry emphasizes the interpretation of meaning, social context, and the construction of reality through human communication (Firmansyah et al., 2021).

The study aimed to understand how leaders inspire, motivate, and manage their teams in virtual spaces where physical interaction is absent. By adopting a descriptive orientation, the research sought to depict these leadership phenomena naturally, without manipulating variables or imposing pre-determined frameworks.

Research Participants and Sampling

The participants consisted of marketing team members and their leaders working in selected e-commerce companies. A purposive sampling technique was applied to ensure the inclusion of individuals directly involved in virtual marketing operations and leadership practices. The criteria for selection included:

1. Active participation in virtual marketing activities for at least six months;
2. Experience working under a virtual leadership system; and
3. Willingness to share insights on leadership and team collaboration.

This sampling strategy ensured data richness and relevance, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of leadership dynamics and team performance in online business environments.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation to capture both verbal and behavioral dimensions of leadership interactions. The interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and focused on themes such as motivational strategies, communication effectiveness, individual support, and innovation within virtual marketing teams. Participants were encouraged to share specific experiences that illustrated their perceptions of leadership effectiveness in virtual contexts.

Complementing the interviews, participant observation was conducted during online meetings and digital collaboration sessions. This allowed the researcher to observe communication patterns, coordination processes, and expressions of motivation in real time. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach to identify recurring patterns and core meanings. The analysis followed three main stages:

1. Open coding – identifying significant statements and concepts related to leadership behavior, communication, and team outcomes;
2. Categorization – grouping similar codes into broader themes such as “virtual communication quality,” “inspirational leadership,” and “team collaboration”;
3. Interpretation – integrating these themes to build an explanatory understanding of how virtual transformational leadership influences marketing team performance.

To enhance analytical rigor, findings were continuously compared with existing literature on transformational leadership, ensuring theoretical coherence and validity.

Observed Parameters

Five major parameters were used to frame the analysis:

- Inspirational leadership: the ability to articulate vision and motivate followers virtually.
- Virtual communication: clarity, frequency, and emotional resonance in digital exchanges.
- Individual support: personalized attention and feedback provided by leaders.
- Collaboration and innovation: teamwork quality and creative problem-solving capacity.
- Adaptability: team responsiveness to technological or market changes.

These parameters provided structured lenses for understanding leadership effectiveness in remote e-commerce environments.

Ensuring Trustworthiness

The study applied several strategies to maintain research credibility and trustworthiness:

- Triangulation: combining interviews, observations, and document analysis to verify consistency across data sources.
- Member checking: sharing key interpretations with participants to confirm accuracy.
- Reflexivity: maintaining a research log to identify and minimize potential researcher bias.

These techniques ensured that the interpretations were grounded in authentic participant experiences rather than subjective assumptions.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were upheld throughout the research process. Participants were informed of the study’s purpose, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview, and confidentiality was guaranteed by anonymizing names and storing data securely (Hanyfah et al., 2022).

Methodological Rationale

In summary, this qualitative descriptive design was deemed appropriate to explore how transformational leadership behaviors manifest in virtual marketing settings and how such practices influence team performance. By emphasizing human experience, communication, and contextual understanding, the approach offers a nuanced and holistic perspective on leadership effectiveness in the e-commerce industry—bridging the gap between theoretical leadership frameworks and practical digital management realities.

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation involving eight informants, consisting of marketing team members and their leaders from three e-commerce companies operating under fully virtual work systems. Thematic analysis yielded five major themes that capture the relationship between virtual transformational leadership and marketing team performance. These themes reflect how leadership behaviors—exercised through digital platforms such as Zoom, Slack, and Microsoft Teams—shape motivation, communication quality, creativity, collaboration, and overall team effectiveness in virtual environments.

Table 1. *Table 1. Thematic Relationship Between Virtual Transformational Leadership and Marketing Team Performance in E-Commerce Firms*

Dimension of Virtual Transformational Leadership	Observed Aspect	Impact on Marketing Team Performance
Idealized Influence	Work ethics and discipline	Enhances integrity and commitment among marketing team members in virtual settings.
Inspirational Motivation	Strategic vision and goal alignment	Strengthens motivation and synchronizes team direction with e-commerce marketing targets.
Intellectual Stimulation	Innovation and problem-solving	Promotes creativity in digital marketing strategies and technological adaptability.
Individualized Consideration	Empathy and personal support	Increases loyalty, reduces job stress, and improves job satisfaction.
Effective Virtual Communication	Digital interaction and feedback	Improves collaboration and task execution accuracy through online platforms.

Discussion

The results demonstrate that virtual transformational leadership plays a decisive role in optimizing marketing team performance across multiple dimensions—motivation, communication, creativity, and personal well-being. Leaders who successfully articulate a clear strategic vision and provide individualized attention through digital platforms were found to foster a productive, cohesive, and psychologically safe virtual work environment.

(1) Idealized Influence: Building Integrity and Trust

Informants consistently emphasized that leaders who act as role models in discipline, ethics, and digital professionalism significantly enhance team integrity. In virtual work settings—where self-management is essential—this modeling behavior establishes behavioral norms and accountability. Such alignment between leader behavior and organizational values generates trust and strengthens collective responsibility. This aligns with (Yosua, 2024), who highlighted that transformational leaders act not merely as supervisors but as moral exemplars capable of fostering shared commitment and ethical consistency.

(2) Inspirational Motivation: Vision-Driven Performance

Leaders who communicate a compelling vision through online meetings and digital broadcasts create a strong sense of direction and enthusiasm among dispersed marketing teams. Participants described how inspirational messages, even when delivered virtually, helped clarify objectives, sustain morale, and maintain alignment toward common marketing goals. This finding reinforces the premise that motivation in remote settings depends on symbolic leadership communication, where purpose replaces proximity as the primary source of cohesion.

(3) Intellectual Stimulation: Encouraging Digital Innovation

Virtual transformational leaders were found to actively stimulate creative problem-solving, particularly in areas such as social media analytics, search engine optimization, and personalized advertising strategies. By encouraging experimentation and calculated risk-taking, leaders fostered a digital innovation mindset within their teams. Informants noted that freedom to propose new marketing ideas and use emerging technologies (e.g., AI-based customer analysis tools) enhanced engagement and adaptability. This result supports (Zduroikhan, 2025), who asserted that virtual leadership strengthens organizational effectiveness by integrating technology mastery with adaptive innovation.

(4) Individualized Consideration: Fostering Emotional Connection

The study found that empathetic engagement remains a central determinant of team satisfaction in virtual workplaces. Leaders who provided individualized feedback, personal mentoring, and emotional support via chat or video calls successfully reduced burnout and reinforced loyalty. Participants expressed that being “heard and valued” virtually generated a sense of belonging despite the absence of physical interaction. This resonates with (Syarif Hidayat & Hilmiana, 2020) who observed that emotionally intelligent leadership—transformational, resonant, and mindful—enhances employee engagement and psychological attachment in remote contexts.

(5) Effective Virtual Communication: Sustaining Collaboration and Accuracy

Communication emerged as the backbone of leadership effectiveness in virtual environments. Frequent feedback, transparent information flow, and open digital dialogue enhanced both collaboration and execution precision. Informants acknowledged that digital communication tools helped minimize misunderstandings and synchronize work progress in real time. However, they also emphasized the importance of maintaining emotional tone and clarity, since over-reliance on text-based channels could risk misinterpretation or detachment. This underscores the dual role of leaders as communicators and connectors in digitally mediated teams.

Integration with Theoretical Perspectives

The results strongly support the foundational dimensions of transformational leadership theory (Connelly et al., 2019) while extending its applicability to virtual and technology-mediated contexts. The evidence confirms that digital transformation does not diminish the relevance of transformational principles; instead, it amplifies their importance. The leader's capacity to inspire, intellectually engage, and personally support employees remains vital for sustaining organizational effectiveness in e-commerce settings.

Furthermore, findings corroborate (Sinaga et al., 2021). (Adhitya & Bangun, 2022), who asserted that virtual leadership contributes significantly to achieving organizational synergy through mastery of digital communication, adaptability, and participatory decision-making. However, consistent with *Yosua (2024)*, this study also recognizes persistent challenges—limited supervision capacity, uneven digital infrastructure, and weakened organizational culture—that may hinder the consistent practice of virtual leadership in Indonesia's e-commerce sector.

Practical Implications

The implications of these findings are both managerial and developmental.

1. For leaders, virtual transformational leadership demands mastery of digital tools, emotional intelligence, and intercultural communication skills. Leaders must be able to merge technological fluency with empathy to sustain engagement in remote teams.
2. For organizations, structured leadership development programs focusing on digital communication, empathy training, and psychological safety can enhance team productivity and retention.
3. For policymakers and educators, there is a need to incorporate digital leadership competencies into management curricula to prepare future leaders for hybrid and virtual work realities.

The integration of transformational leadership principles into digital leadership frameworks may thus serve as a strategic response to the evolving demands of Society 5.0, where technology serves humanity through inclusive innovation and sustainable performance.

Overall, this research affirms that virtual transformational leadership is a highly relevant and effective approach within the contemporary digital workplace, particularly for e-commerce organizations. By aligning technological engagement with human-centered leadership values—vision, inspiration, empathy, and communication—leaders can drive superior performance even in geographically dispersed teams.

The study highlights that leadership excellence in virtual environments depends not solely on technological proficiency but on the ability to connect, inspire, and empower others across digital

boundaries. Strengthening digital leadership competence and cultivating virtual empathy are thus recommended as key priorities in human resource development initiatives aimed at achieving sustainable organizational performance in the post-digital era.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study demonstrate that virtual transformational leadership exerts a strong positive influence on the performance of marketing teams in e-commerce organizations. Leaders who embody inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration are able to foster motivation, creativity, collaboration, and loyalty among team members despite the absence of physical interaction. Effective digital communication and empathetic support further enhance team synergy, adaptability, and productivity within virtual work environments. These findings reinforce the relevance of transformational leadership theory in remote contexts and emphasize the necessity of integrating technological competence with emotional intelligence in digital leadership practices. Accordingly, e-commerce companies are encouraged to implement leadership development programs that strengthen virtual empathy, communication effectiveness, and innovation-oriented collaboration. Improving digital infrastructure and aligning performance evaluations with transformational principles—such as creativity, initiative, and loyalty—will also contribute to sustained organizational growth. Furthermore, cultivating a digital organizational culture through inclusive virtual engagement, recognition programs, and open communication forums can enhance employee commitment and satisfaction. Future research is advised to compare transformational leadership with other models, such as transactional or resonant leadership, to gain deeper insights into the most effective leadership styles for managing virtual teams in today's dynamic digital marketplace.

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