



Exploring the Role of IT Capabilities and Digital Transformation Disclosure in the Relationship of Digital Leadership and Organizational Legitimacy with Continuous School Improvement among School Principals

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed at exploring the capabilities of IT capabilities and digital transformation disclosure in the relationship between digital leadership and organizational legitimacy with continuous school improvement among school principals. It was correlation using descriptive methods for applied goals based on structural equation modeling and the total count method. The statistical population was all school principals in Khoy City, numbering 283 people.

Method: To collect data, standard questionnaires were used for continuous school improvement (Al and Irtaimeh, 2021), IT capabilities (Mollah et al., 2023), digital transformation disclosure (Sun et al., 2023), digital leadership (Mollah et al., 2023), and organizational legitimacy (Fidan and Balci, 2018). Pearson correlation coefficient, confirmatory factor analysis, and structural equation modeling were used to analyze the findings and SPSS and PLS software were employed to examine the relationships between variables ($P \geq 0.05$).

Results: Based on the findings, IT capabilities and organizational legitimacy had a direct effect on continuous school improvement, as well as digital leadership and organizational legitimacy on IT capabilities and digital transformation disclosure; while, leadership and digital transformation did not have a direct effect on continuous improvement.

Conclusions: organizational legitimacy and digital leadership had an indirect effect on continuous improvement with IT capabilities but didn't have an indirect effect with the mediation of transformation disclosure. Thus, the ability of managers to utilize IT capabilities should be increased through retraining.

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Introduction

Changes in new era, increasing technology development, and changes in the quality of various businesses signify the need to new leadership styles to overcome uncertainties in many organizations (Sagbas & Erdogan, 2022). Although IT and communication have main roles in various areas of human life, they have been among the most effective technologies in educational areas (Mosapour Miyandehi et al., 2021). As the organizations, schools always focus on the improvement and work on their progress to fill the gaps in new era. This requires an exact planning for main preparation and developing strategies for creating strong cooperation between schools and outside worlds which is called continuous school improvement (Gray et al., 2022). In the digital era, the advent of new technologies makes organizations to search for new methods of improvement, progress, and competition. Specifically, IT capabilities and digital leadership play important roles in managing progresses which are deeply related with continuous organizational progress in the digital era (Mollah et al., 2023). IT consists of different electronic programs that offer learning materials and support learning process to lead to learning goals through this means (Zebarjadian and Nili Ahmadabadi, 2017). Expertise of organizations to coordinate resources, skills, and IT knowledge is correlated with reaching top performance and this organizational talent is called IT capabilities (Marchiori et al., 2022). Digital transformation disclosure is widely considered as a strategic measure to improve service performance, reinforce stockholders experience, model innovation, practicing social organizational responsibilities, and a strategic step for the companies to do social organizational responsibilities that require cooperation and support of stakeholders (Sun et al., 2023). On the other hand, Vial (2021) knows digital transformation a process that leads to strategic responses while disorder in digital technologies occur. Using IT along with transformational leadership is known as digital leadership (Mihardjo et al., 2019). Digital leadership is practice of merging leadership and digital capabilities to fully use the advantages of technology to improve continuous organizational performance (Amelda et al., 2021). Digital leadership is a model that digitalizes work environment and learning culture of organizations by performing digital transformation disclosure. Thus, it is an important element in the literature in guarantying competition and survival of organizations in the 21th century (Mollah et al., 2023). From one hand, legitimacy is a main factor for the organizational survival and responding to the environmental requirements (Kılıçoğlu & Kılıçoğlu, 2021). The term of organizational legitimacy by organizations has been understood as adoption with legal requirements. In this approach, an organization is legitimate to the extent that its activity is legal, based on the legal norms and procedures considering laws in developing their function (Díez-de-Castro et al., 2018). Different studies have been conducted in this field. Khabareh (2026) concluded that digital leadership creates positive dynamics and changes in educational environment, providing an environment leading to the increase of motivation and commitment among teachers. In fact, digital leadership acts as a driving force to increase dynamics and organizational commitment of teachers. In another study, it was concluded that using digital leadership can cause improving education and learning, creativity, updating and development, innovation and increasing educational quality and change educational culture and leadership patterns (Kalantari et al., 2023). Also, digital leadership has indirect effect on team acceptance, intellectual morality, and intelligent decision-making (Ahmadi et al., 2023). Che et al. (2023) considered digital transformation as a driving force to improve quality so that by increasing quality, information disclosure, and digital transformation, product or service quality increases. The study of Mollah et al. (2023) agreed the results of this study. They found that IT and organizational learning mediate the relationship between digital leadership and consistent organizational performance. Other studies referred to the effective factors in continuous school performance like digital

transformation and organizational legitimacy; but, the study that identifies the effect of important factors in continuous school performance and few factors were referred that can be regarded as a big gap in the literature. Despite success, an organization can be deterred from the environment and symbolic attitude and gaining organizational legitimacy is important in the organizational success. However, no study was found to examine organizational legitimacy in the industrial era with the advent of new technologies in Iranian schools. Another gap was the lack of new and comprehensive look at the effect of digital leadership and organizational legitimacy examining the mediation of IT capabilities and digital transformation disclosure on continuous school improvement among school principals, focusing on school as a complex organization rather than big firms.

Literature review

In their study titled "the capability of marketing, IT, and mediation of platform network centrality", Eriksson and Lycke (2025) showed that technological advances and global social changes deform production industry, stressing the need to develop competency of industrial experts. Also, there is agreement between different functions of high education institutes on the value production with the society. However, bureaucracy and university structure are obstacles of flexibility. Teams that create a "trust chain" across higher education institutes offer opportunities for progress in a learning organization along with the full support of management. In a study titled "The effect of IT capabilities on the relation between personal, group, and organizational factors and preserving knowledge", Amiri and Farhadpoor (2025) concluded that using IT capabilities reinforces the relationship between independent and dependent variables. Generally, managing and organizing personal, group, and organizational factors using IT can help the company in preserving organizational knowledge as a valuable asset, decreasing corporate dependency on foreign knowledge, providing value creation from knowledge assets. In their study titled "the effect of IT capabilities on innovation with the mediation of staff empowerment in the sport and youth organization", Darughe Arefi et al.(2024) showed that IT has a direct and significant effect on organizational innovation and staff empowerment. Mediating role of staff empowerment in the effect of IT capabilities on organizational innovation was also confirmed. So, developing and using IT and communication directly increases organizational innovation and purposefull strategies of education and development in improving the skills of using new communicative and information technologies can provide the grounds for developing organizational innovation. In their study titled" Identifying and developing content dimension of digital transformation strategy", Nabiee et al.(2024) concluded that organizations have no way but digital transformation for competition and survival and in case of resistance or delay for starting digitalization, their downfall stats. If organizations don't take strategies for digital transformation or implement it incorrectly, they will bear significant loss, endangering their survival.

In their study titled "Developing quality evaluation of information disclosure in social reports of business organizations in the module of digital transformation", Alekseeva et al.(2023) concluded that serious look at the needs of stakeholders and improving trust in the organization is vital. In case customers are not aware of the procedures and results, the company loses its legitimacy among them. In a study titled" the link of using social media and persistent performance of small and large firms: the role of digital leadership and innovation capabilities", Borah et al. (2022) showed that using social media can improve the persistent performance of small and large organizations when mediated with innovation capabilities and digital leadership. In a study titled" the effect of digital leadership on innovation: role of platform

digitalization”, Benitez et al. (2022) concluded that digital leadership improves innovative performance of the company by corporate platform digitalization, playing a vital role in digital success of the organization.

Method

This study was correlation using descriptive methods for applied goals based on structural equation modeling and the total count method. Its independent variables were digital leadership and organizational legitimacy; the mediating variables included IT capabilities and disclosure of digital transformation; and its dependent variable was continuous school improvement.

Sampling Procedures

The statistical population included all urban and rural government and non-government managers and teacher managers working in education management in Khoy City, totaling 283 people. 183 were women and the rest were men, for selection of which the total number method was used.

Results

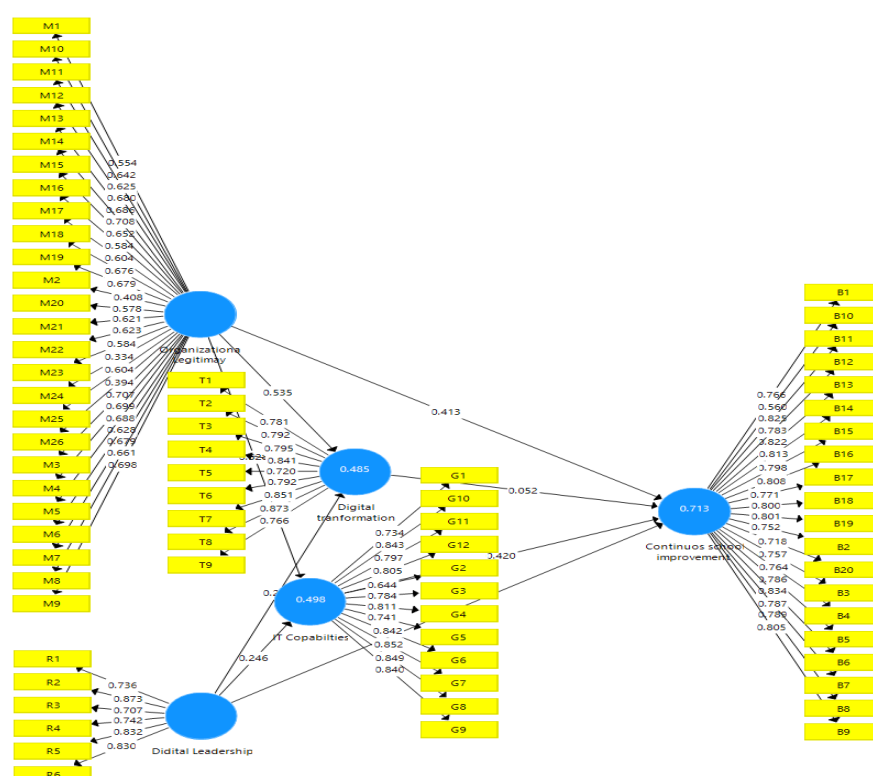


Chart 2. Factor loads of research variables (Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for testing consistency and rho-A for testing composite consistency of research variables were used).

Table 1. Validity and consistency of research variables

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	rho-A	Composite consistency
Digital leadership	0.87	0.88	0.90
Organizational legitimacy	0.93	0.93	0.95
Continuous school improvement	0.96	0.96	0.96
IT capabilities	0.94	0.95	0.95
Digital transformation disclosure	0.93	0.93	0.94

According to Table (1), all research variables have acceptable consistency.

Findings

In this section, descriptive indices of variables, including mean, standard deviation, kurtosis and coefficient of kurtosis are presented, examining the mediating effect of IT capabilities and digital transformation disclosure in the effect of digital leadership and organizational legitimacy on continuous school improvement. In the modeling analysis method, the data distribution must be normal. This index is the ratio of the coefficient of kurtosis to its standard error. If the value of this error is smaller than -2 or larger than +2, the assumption of normal data distribution is rejected. According to the results of Table (2), since the standard error of the kurtosis of all variables is between -2 and +2, the data distribution in all variables is normal.

Table 2. Descriptive indices of research variables

Variable	Mean	sd	Kurtosis	Sd of kurtosis
Digital leadership	4.24	0.66	-1.30	0.15
Organizational legitimacy	4.24	0.66	-1.30	0.15
Continuous school improvement	3.91	0.61	-0.47	0.15
IT capabilities	3.74	0.85	0.47	0.15
Digital transformation disclosure	3.69	0.79	-0.64	0.15

Based on Table (2), the highest mean is related to digital leadership and organizational legitimacy (4.24) while the lowest mean is related to digital transformation disclosure (3.69). As seen in Table (3), the correlation coefficients between the research variables are positive and significant. The highest correlation coefficient is between continuous school improvement and technological capabilities ($r = 0.94$) while the lowest correlation coefficient is between digital leadership and disclosure of digital transformation ($r = 0.64$).

Table 3. Correlation coefficients of research variables

Row	Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1	Digital leadership	1				
2	Organizational legitimacy	0.60**	1			
3	Continuous school improvement	0.56**	0.67**	1		
4	IT capabilities	0.56**	0.67**	0.94**	1	
5	Digital transformation disclosure	0.54**	0.66**	0.78**	0.78**	1

* $p < 0/05$, ** $p < 0/01$

Based on Table (3), the correlation coefficients between the research variables are positive and significant, ranging from 0.64 to 0.94. The highest correlation coefficient is between continuous school improvement and technological capabilities ($r = 0.94$) while the lowest correlation coefficient is between digital leadership and digital transformation disclosure ($r = 0.64$).

Table 4. Goodness of fit indices of the tested research model

Index	Observed value	Desired value	result
SRMR	0.07	Below 0.08	fit
NIF	0.93	Above 0.90	fit
RMS	0.22	Close to 0	fit
d-G	0.04	<95%	fit
d- ULS	0.03	<95%	fit

The fit indices of the model are SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residuals), NIF (Smoothed Index of Fit), and RMS (Root Mean Square). According to Table 4, comparing the desired values and the observed values shows goodness of fit of the research model.

Table 5.Fornell-Larcker values

Row	Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1	Continuous improvement school	0.77				
2	Digital leadership	0.57	0.78			
3	Digital transformation	0.69	0.55	0.80		
4	IT capabilities	0.77	0.56	0.78	0.79	
5	Organizational legitimacy	0.76	0.61	0.67	0.67	0.62

Based on Table 5, Fornell-Larcker values for all variables are above 0.5. Thus, their divergent validity was confirmed.

Table 6. HTMT index

Row	Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1	Continuous improvement school	0.77				
2	Digital leadership	0.57	0.78			
3	Digital transformation	0.69	0.55	0.80		
4	IT capabilities	0.77	0.56	0.78	0.79	
5	Organizational legitimacy	0.76	0.61	0.67	0.67	0.62

Based on the results of Table 6, HTMT index between variable pairs is below 0.9. thus, regarding this index, it can be said that the model is convergent.

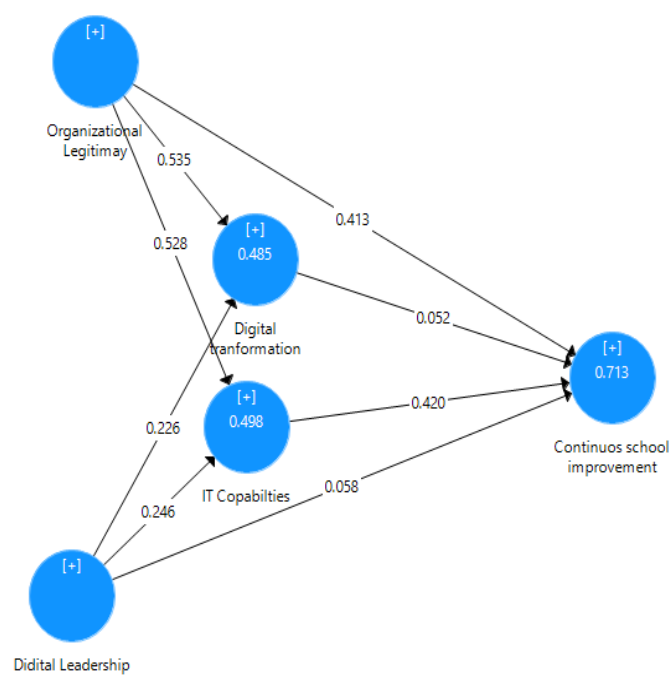


Chart (3). Research model based on path coefficients

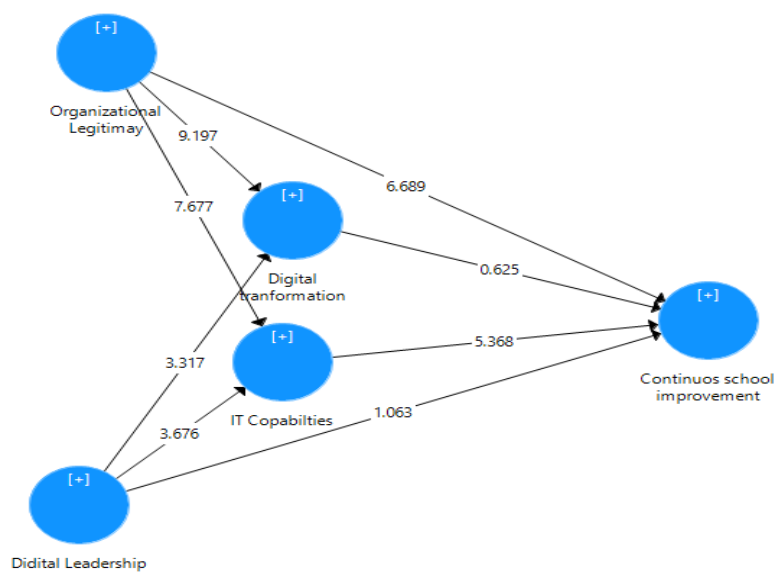


Chart 4. Research model based on t-coefficients

Table 7. Review of the research hypotheses

Hypothesis	Standard coefficient	t	sig	Result
IT capabilities on continuous school improvement	0.42	5.65	0.000	Direct Effect
Organizational legitimacy on continuous school improvement	0.41	6.92	0.000	Direct Effect
Digital leadership on continuous school improvement	1.04	0.05	0.297	No Direct Effect
Digital leadership on IT capabilities	3.60	0.24	0.000	Direct Effect
Organizational legitimacy on IT capabilities	7.49	0.52	0.000	Direct Effect
Digital transformation disclosure on continuous school improvement	0.05	0.61	0.537	No Direct Effect
Digital leadership on digital transformation disclosure	0.22	3.30	0.001	Direct Effect
Organizational legitimacy on digital transformation disclosure	0.53	9.42	0.000	Direct Effect
Organizational legitimacy on continuous school improvement with mediation of IT capabilities	0.25	4.49	0.000	Indirect Effect
Organizational legitimacy on continuous school improvement with mediation of digital transformation disclosure	0.02	0.59	0.551	No Indirect Effect
Digital leadership on continuous school improvement with mediation of IT capabilities	0.10	3.13	0.002	Indirect Effect
Digital leadership on continuous school improvement with mediation of digital transformation disclosure	0.01	0.61	0.542	No Indirect Effect

Based on the results, t-coefficient value of each path from the independent to the dependent variables is above 1.97 ($p < 0.05$). Thus, the general hypothesis of the research is confirmed and organizational legitimacy and digital leadership have an effect on continuous school improvement through the mediation of technological capabilities and digital transformation disclosure. According to Table (5), the coefficients of direct effects and the corresponding t-value of technological capabilities on continuous school improvement are 0.42 and 5.65. Then, the direct effect of this path is significant at 0.05 level because the t-value is above 1.96. So, IT

capabilities have a positive and significant effect on the continuous school improvement of school principals and H₁ is confirmed. About H₂, regarding Table (5), the coefficients of direct effects and corresponding t-values of organizational legitimacy on continuous school improvement are 0.41 and 6.92. Then, the direct effect of this path is significant at the 0.05 level since the t-value is above 1.96. Thus, organizational legitimacy has a positive and significant effect on the continuous school improvement of school and H₂ is confirmed.

About H₃, according to the Table (5), the coefficients of direct effects and corresponding t-values of digital leadership on continuous school improvement are 0.05 and 1.04. Then, the direct effect of this path is not significant at 0.05 level because the t-value is below 1.96. So, digital leadership does not have a positive and significant effect on the continuous school improvement of school principals and H₃ is not confirmed. About H₄ and regarding the results of Table (5), the coefficients of direct effects and the corresponding t-value of digital leadership on technological capabilities are 0.24 and 3.60. Then, the direct effect of this path is significant at the 0.05 level because the t-value is greater than 1.96. So, digital leadership has a positive and significant effect on the technological capabilities of school administrators and H₄ is confirmed. About H₅, considering Table (5), the coefficients of direct effects and the corresponding t-value of organizational legitimacy on technological capabilities are 0.52 and 7.49. Then, the direct effect of this path is significant at the 0.05 level because the t-value is above 1.96. As a result, organizational legitimacy has a positive and significant effect on the technological capabilities of school administrators and H₅ is confirmed. About H₆, given the results of Table (5), the coefficients of direct effects and the corresponding t-value of technological capabilities on the continuous improvement of schools are 0.05 and 0.61. Then, the direct effect of this path is not significant at the 0.05 level as the t-value is below 1.96. As a result, IT capabilities do not have a positive and significant effect on the continuous school improvement of school principals and H₆ is not confirmed. About H₇ and according to the results of Table (5), the coefficients of direct effects and the corresponding t-value of digital leadership on digital transformation disclosure are 0.22 and 3.30. Then, the direct effect of this path is significant at the 0.05 level because the t-value is above 1.96. As a result, digital leadership has a positive and significant effect on school principals' digital transformation disclosure and H₇ is confirmed. About H₈ and according to the results of Table (5), the coefficients of direct effects and the corresponding t-value of organizational legitimacy on digital transformation disclosure are 0.53 and 9.42. Then, the direct effect of this path is significant at the 0.05 level because the t value is greater than 1.96. As a result, organizational legitimacy has a positive and significant effect on the disclosure of digital transformation by school principals and H₈ is confirmed. About H₉ and according to the results of Table (5), the coefficients of indirect effects and the corresponding t value are 0.25 and 4.49 and the t value is above 1.96. As a result, the indirect effect of this path is significant at 0.05 level. Thus, as a mediator in the relationship between organizational legitimacy and continuous school improvement by school administrators, technological capabilities have a positive and significant effect and H₉ is confirmed. About H₁₀ and regarding Table (5), the coefficients of indirect effects and the corresponding t-value are 0.02 and 0.59 and the t-value is below 1.96. As a result, the indirect effect of this path is not significant at the 0.05 level and as a mediator in the relationship between organizational legitimacy and continuous school improvement of school administrators, digital transformation disclosure does not have a positive and significant effect and H₁₀ is not confirmed.

According to the results of Table (5) regarding H₁₁, the coefficients of indirect effects and the corresponding t-value are 0.10 and 3.13 and the t-value is above 1.96. As a result, the indirect effect of this path is significant at the 0.05 level and as a mediator in the relationship between

digital leadership and continuous school improvement of school principals, IT capabilities have a positive and significant effect and H_{11} is confirmed.

According to the results of Table (5) regarding H_{12} , the coefficients of indirect effects and the corresponding t-value are 0.01 and 0.61 and the t-value is below 1.96. As a result, the indirect effect of this path is not significant at the 0.05 level and as a mediator in the relationship between digital leadership and school principals, the disclosure of digital transformation has a positive and significant effect on continuous school improvement and H_{12} is confirmed.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the mediating effect of IT capabilities and digital transformation disclosure in the effect of digital leadership and organizational legitimacy on continuous school improvement among school managers using structural equation modelling. Findings showed that IT capabilities and digital transformation disclosure have mediating role in the effect of digital leadership and organizational legitimacy on continuous school improvement. This result agrees with those of Mollah et al. (2023), Eriksson and Lycke (2025), Amiri and Farhadpoor (2025), Darughe Arefi et al. (2024), Nabiee et al. (2024), and Alekseeva et al. (2023). The reason for this consistency can be the agreement of their theoretical foundation. In the study of Mollah et al. (2023), it was confirmed that digital leadership significantly and directly affects school improvement. Besides, no mediating effect of IT infrastructure and business existed. However, a predictive stance of IT fully mediated the relationship between digital leadership and persistent organizational performance. In the study of Borah et al. (2023), it was confirmed that using social media can increase continuous improvement while mediated by innovation capabilities and digital leadership. This result agrees with the finding of this study for the similarity of theoretical foundation in the role of mediators in both studies. Regarding findings, the variable of digital transformation disclosure didn't have a significant effect on other variables but all variables had a significant effect on it. This finding agrees with those of Vial (2021) and Sagba and Erdogan (2022). Because, based on Vial (2021), digital transformation is a process that manifests during crisis, especially at the time of emerging disorder in digital technologies, creating strategic responses. This is while the study group of this study had no correct understanding of critical conditions of disorder in technology for being in a bureaucratic, formal, and concentrated organization or had not exposed to such a crisis to examine the effect of digital transformation disclosure out of formal framework. Sagbas and Erdogan (2022) stress that digital leadership can digitalize work environment by performing digital transformation. So, in the conditions that work place is safe and not complex, digital transformation disclosure is not so effective. It was also found that organizational legitimacy has significant effect on continuous school performance improvement with mediation of technology capabilities and organizational legitimacy. This finding agrees with those of Eriksson and Lycke (2025), Marchiori et al. (2022), Zebarjadian and Nili Ahmadabadi (2017) so that Kılıcoglu and Kılıcoglu (2021) consider organizational legitimacy a main factor for the organizational survival in responding its environmental needs. Based on the finding of this study, continuous school performance improvement is related with responsiveness and survival. As the study of Zebarjadian and Nili Ahmadabadi (2017) showed, IT helps learning materials and supports learning process to lead to learning goals through this means. Thus, this agreement is justifiable. Based on the findings, organizational legitimacy had a significant effect on continuous school performance improvement with mediation of digital transformation disclosure. This consists with the study of Nabiee et al. (2024); since, they

concluded that organizations have no way but digital transformation for competition and survival.

Conclusions

in case of resistance and delay for starting digitalization, their downfall starts and their survival will be endangered. Future studies are suggested to examine if financial and non-financial organizational support is related with improving digital leadership skills. Also, for confirming the direction of the relationship between digital leadership and innovation, where digital culture is still unpredictable, more studies are needed. Finally, future studies can find the effect of cooperative government support in expanding digital environment since many schools don't have necessary digital infrastructure or school staff don't have necessary skills to utilize it. The managers of public organizations and education ministry are suggested to consider the role of digital leadership in persistent organizational performance in training school managers and university professors and schools should be equipped with IT facilities. Training periods should be held for the school staffs with the content of IT capabilities and new technologies and teachers and managers and all staff are required to learn necessary IT knowledge to play their digitalized role in the new era. To preserve organizational legitimacy, schools should take measures to make strong connections with the stakeholders and respond unpredicted changing needs in the formal structure

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

All authors contributed equally to the conceptualization of the article and writing of the original and subsequent drafts.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

Generative artificial intelligence and artificial intelligence-based technologies were not used in the writing process.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

Ethical considerations

The authors avoided data fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism, and any form of misconduct.

Data availability statement

Data available on request from the authors.

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