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Structural Relationships Between Digital Leadership and Teachers' Willingness to Accept Change: The Mediating Role of Strategic Decision-Making

Mostafa Mahmoudi[1], Shirkoh Mohammadi[2]✉ and Sakineh Jafari[3]

1. Department of Educational Administration, PhD candidate of the Educational Administration, University of Semnan, Semnan, Iran. Email: mostafamhd71@gmail.com
2. Corresponding author, Department of Educational Administration, Faculty of Educational Administration, University of Semnan, Semnan, Iran. Email: sh.mohammadi@semnan.ac.ir
3. Department of Educational Administration, Faculty of Educational Administration, University of Semnan, Semnan, Iran. Email: sjafari.105@semnan.ac.ir

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ABSTRACT (Times New Roman 12 Bold)

Objective: In contemporary educational environments, teachers' willingness to accept change is recognized as a pivotal determinant of successful educational transformation. Digital leadership and strategic decision-making play influential roles in fostering this willingness. Digital leadership leverages technology and cultivates a culture of continuous learning. At the same time, strategic decision-making provides forward-looking analysis and stakeholder engagement, thereby creating conditions that enhance teachers' readiness to embrace innovation and educational change. Accordingly, the present study aimed to examine the structural relationships between digital leadership and teachers' willingness to accept change, with strategic decision-making serving as a mediating variable.
Method: This study employed a descriptive-correlational design with a purposive approach, utilizing structural equation modeling (SEM). The statistical population consisted of all lower- and upper-secondary school teachers in Noor County (N = 620) during the 2023–2024 academic year. Using Cochran's formula, a sample of 237 teachers was selected through stratified random sampling. Data were collected using standardized questionnaires measuring digital leadership, strategic decision-making, and willingness to accept change.
Results: The reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) for these instruments were 0.92, 0.79, and 0.89, respectively. Data analysis included correlation matrices and structural equation modeling. Findings indicated that digital leadership had a direct and significant relationship with both strategic decision-making and teachers' willingness to accept change. Strategic decision-making also directly predicted willingness to accept change. Furthermore, digital leadership indirectly influenced willingness to accept change through the mediating role of strategic decision-making.

Conclusions: These findings underscore the importance of empowering educational leaders in digital leadership and strategic decision-making to facilitate innovation and change within schools.

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Introduction

The rapid acceleration of digital transformation has confronted organizations with profound challenges in sustaining long-term growth and maintaining competitive advantage. The increasing pace of technological advancements compels organizational members to adopt innovative approaches that enable effective adaptation to digital environments. From the perspective of organizational behavior and management theorists, the behavioral changes required in organizations must prioritize efficiency, innovation, and responsiveness. Consequently, innovation capacity and readiness for digital change have become critical components of organizational effectiveness, particularly within contemporary educational institutions (Ahmadi et al., 2025). With the widespread expansion of digital technologies, all stakeholders in the educational system—including teachers, administrators, instructional staff, and students—require continuous development of digital competencies. In this context, digital literacy is no longer optional; it is a prerequisite for the survival and effectiveness of educational institutions in today's competitive and technology-oriented landscape.

The accelerated growth of educational technologies and the rise of e-learning, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic, have underscored the need for teachers to effectively utilize digital media, educational software, and learning management systems. Teachers are increasingly expected to acquire and apply new technological skills in their teaching and learning processes. Educational organizations that recognize the inevitability of technological change have shifted their focus from the mere necessity of change to the sustainability and institutionalization of such change. As a result, teachers' willingness to adopt new technologies has emerged as a key research domain, given that effective technology integration is a crucial determinant of instructional quality. Teachers' readiness and willingness to embrace and integrate technology into educational processes can be viewed as fundamental and strategic behaviors in the transformation of educational systems (Scherer et al., 2021; Sharma & Srivastava, 2019; Zeid et al., 2017). Researchers have used a wide range of overlapping concepts to describe attitudes toward organizational change, including positive constructs such as readiness for change, commitment to change, openness to change, and acceptance of change, as well as negative constructs such as resistance to change and organizational cynicism toward change (Tai & Kareem, 2019). Readiness for change, one dimension of this attitudinal spectrum, reflects teachers' willingness, cognitive acceptance, and behavioral preparedness to effectively respond to organizational changes in educational settings (Arbiansyah et al., 2023). This mindset signals an individual's positive inclination and internal motivation to participate in changes necessary for achieving organizational goals (Ratnawati & Sugiarti, 2023).

Research indicates that employees with strong organizational identities are more inclined to adopt positive attitudes toward change. Such individuals actively engage in work processes and contribute constructively to organizational transformation and goal attainment (Liu et al., 2025). In educational environments, teachers serve as frontline implementers of change and thus play a central role in the success of school reforms (Kareem & Kin, 2018). Since resistance to change is one of the primary obstacles to organizational transformation, teachers' reactions to change represent a critical factor in implementing strategic improvement initiatives. Teachers with high readiness for change typically demonstrate openness to innovation, adaptability to dynamic work environments, and greater engagement in enhancing educational performance (Sengupta et al., 2023). This attitude not only strengthens schools' ability to manage challenges associated with

organizational change but also supports teachers' professional growth (Widyastuti & Ardiyanti, 2024).

However, successfully implementing digital transformation initiatives requires effective leadership capable of facilitating technology adoption, managing resistance to change, and aligning organizational teams with strategic goals (Aigbedion et al., 2025). In this regard, digital leadership has emerged as a pivotal factor in school digitalization efforts, enhancing institutional capacity to adapt to technological advancements by promoting acceptance of change at individual, team, and organizational levels (Yang et al., 2024).

Digital leadership can enhance organizational productivity by enabling the effective adoption of digital technologies and motivating teachers to cultivate innovative and creative work environments (Turyadi et al., 2023). Digital leadership is defined as leaders' ability to establish a clear and meaningful vision for school digitalization and to implement corresponding strategies (Zhu et al., 2022). This form of leadership combines transformational leadership with technological competencies, leveraging organizational digital resources to advance both individual and institutional goals. Attributes such as strategic thinking, flexibility, and openness to new ideas strengthen leaders' capacity to guide schools and elevate educational performance (Shin et al., 2023).

According to Zhu et al. (2024), digital leadership encompasses three core dimensions: digital business practices, social attitudes, and digital thinking patterns. Digital business practices involve the effective use of technology to exploit organizational advantages and direct teachers' talents toward strategic objectives. Social attitudes reflect leaders' relational proximity to teachers, fostering a supportive environment that enhances motivation and professional engagement. Digital thinking patterns enable leaders to understand and internalize digital transformation, allowing them to make precise and adaptive decisions in dynamic contexts (Alblooshi et al., 2020). Previous research shows that leadership styles constitute major contextual factors influencing organizational performance and strategic decision-making (Wu et al., 2017). Digital leaders, utilizing data, artificial intelligence algorithms, and analytical tools, can enhance school processes and improve organizational efficiency. Consequently, strengthening leaders' digital competencies is essential for informed, data-driven strategic decision-making (Masoumi et al., 2024). Teachers also play a vital role in knowledge creation and the acceptance of significant educational changes through the development of psychological ownership. Individual and organizational factors contribute to this ownership by providing autonomy, self-efficacy, and opportunities for decision-making within supportive environments (Chorli et al., 2024).

Strategic decision-making, as a pervasive managerial activity, is embedded in the core responsibilities of school administration and is inherently linked to the long-term future of the organization (Kolar et al., 2024). These decisions—rare, consequential, and directional—determine the ultimate success or failure of schools (Bayo & Akintokunbo, 2022). Through strategic decision-making, schools are able to pursue long-term objectives, allocate resources, and reinforce their competitive positioning. This process requires managing uncertainty, balancing competing goals, and aligning decisions with overarching organizational visions (Alhawamdeh & Alsmairat, 2019; Rivero, 2025). To contextualize findings within previous literature, a summary of the most relevant studies is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample of previous studies related to the research topic

Author	Year	Research Topic	Key Findings
Rahmadani et al.	2025	Strategies for overcoming teachers' resistance to change in 21st-century education	Facilitation and support (85%) and negotiation and agreement (90%) were the most effective strategies. Participation and involvement (75%) were moderately effective. Manipulation and authority-based strategies were less sustainable. Identified challenges included frequent changes, limited technological skills, and unclear communication.
Öngel & Taşkıran	2025	Commitment to change as a mediator between digital leadership and creative performance	Digital leadership had a positive effect on creative performance and commitment to change. Commitment to change positively influenced creative performance.
Taajobi et al.	2024	Shared leadership and innovative behavior with strategic decision-making as a mediator	Shared leadership had a direct and significant effect on strategic decision-making, which in turn positively influenced innovative behavior.
Ahmadi et al.	2023	Digital leadership and intelligent decision-making with team receptiveness as a mediator	Digital leadership had a direct and significant effect on team receptiveness and intelligent decision-making among elementary school principals.
Mohammadi & Ghanbari	2023	Visionary leadership and teachers' willingness to change with organizational learning as mediator	Visionary leadership indirectly and positively affected teachers' willingness to change through organizational learning.
Weber et al.	2022	Complementary leadership behaviors in managing digital transformation	Digital leadership enhanced employee support for change and was positively associated with organizational commitment.
Aziz et al.	2021	Leadership styles and strategic decisions in organizational change	Transformational and transactional leadership styles were identified as the most influential in strategic decision-making during organizational change.

Following a review of prior studies and the findings summarized in Table 1, it can be observed that existing research has predominantly focused on examining the direct effect of digital leadership on outcomes such as creative performance, commitment to change, support for organizational transformation, and intelligent decision-making. In several studies, the mediating role of variables such as organizational learning or team orientation has also been explored. Nevertheless, a substantial proportion of this body of research concentrates on the affective or

behavioral consequences of change, paying comparatively limited attention to the cognitive and analytical mechanisms through which the influence of digital leadership is transmitted to change acceptance. Yet, acceptance of organizational change is not merely an emotional or attitudinal reaction; rather, it reflects individuals' rational evaluations of the necessity of change, its long-term implications, its alignment with their professional goals, and their perceived level of control over the change process.

From this perspective, the gap in the literature does not lie in the absence of empirical investigation into the relationship between digital leadership and willingness to accept change. Instead, it lies in the insufficient conceptualization of the cognitive–strategic mechanisms through which this effect operates. Prior studies have predominantly relied on mediators of a motivational or emotional nature (e.g., commitment to change or organizational learning), whereas the role of analytical processes, future-oriented evaluation, and teachers' strategic involvement in school decision-making has received limited scholarly attention. To address this gap, the present study, drawing upon Social Cognitive Theory, introduces strategic decision-making as a mediating mechanism. According to this theoretical framework, individuals' behavior in the face of change is shaped by their perceptions of self-efficacy, perceived control, and anticipated future outcomes. Digital leadership—through articulating a clear vision, explicating the necessity of digital transformation, utilizing data to guide school management, and enhancing digital competencies— creates the cognitive conditions necessary for a rational appraisal of change. However, such a vision translates into genuine change acceptance only when teachers are actively engaged in strategic analysis, evaluation of alternatives, anticipation of long-term consequences, and participation in school-level decision-making processes.

In this regard, strategic decision-making functions as a cognitive process that:

1) reduces perceived ambiguity surrounding change;
2) strengthens feelings of control and psychological ownership;
3) reframes change from an imposed threat into a professional opportunity; and
4) enhances alignment between individual and organizational goals.

Accordingly, strategic decision-making is not merely a managerial skill; rather, it functions as a cognitive–organizational mechanism through which leaders' digital vision is translated into meaningful evaluations and the active acceptance of change by teachers. This line of reasoning provides the theoretical foundation for the mediating role of strategic decision-making in the proposed research model.

Beyond this theoretical gap, a contextual gap is also evident in the literature. The majority of prior studies have been conducted in commercial organizational settings or in educational systems within developed countries characterized by well-established digital infrastructures, where employee participation in organizational decision-making is relatively institutionalized. In contrast, digital transformation within Iran's educational system unfolds in a context marked by structural centralization, infrastructural disparities, and top-down policymaking. Under such conditions, many technological initiatives are designed at the macro level and subsequently communicated to schools, while the degree of teachers' strategic participation in decision-making processes varies considerably. Within this

institutional context, change acceptance may be influenced less by merely positive attitudes and more by the extent of teachers' analytical engagement and strategic participation in school processes. Therefore, examining the role of teachers' strategic decision-making can elucidate how their cognitive engagement and strategic involvement may strengthen or weaken the effect of digital leadership on willingness to accept change. These structural and cultural characteristics potentially differentiate the relationships among the study variables and justify testing the proposed model within this specific context.

Accordingly, by proposing a structural model, the present study seeks to bridge the existing gap in explaining the mechanism through which digital leadership influences willingness to accept change, through an examination of the mediating role of strategic decision-making. This approach not only contributes to the development of theoretical frameworks related to digital leadership in educational settings but also offers deeper insight into the cognitive and strategic pathways that shape digital transformation in schools operating within transitional contexts. Consequently, the primary research question is formulated as follows: **Is there a significant relationship between digital leadership style and teachers' willingness to accept change, as mediated by strategic decision-making?**

***Figure 1**: Conceptual model of research: Investigating the relationship of digital leadership style on the willingness to accept change, with the mediating role of strategic decision-making*

Research hypotheses:

1. Digital leadership has a significant relationship with teachers' willingness to accept change and with strategic decision-making.

2. Digital leadership directly predicts teachers' willingness to accept change.
3. Strategic decision-making directly predicts teachers' willingness to accept change.
4. Digital leadership indirectly predicts teachers' willingness to accept change through the mediating role of strategic decision-making

Method

Describe the study method, including

This study is classified as applied in purpose and employed a descriptive-correlational design, using structural equation modeling (SEM). The statistical population included all lower- and upper-secondary school teachers in Noor County (N = 620). Based on Cochran's formula, a sample of 237 teachers was selected using stratified random sampling to ensure adequate representation of the population.

Instruments

Three standardized and validated questionnaires were used to collect data related to digital leadership, strategic decision-making, and teachers' willingness to accept change.

1. Digital Leadership Questionnaire
   Developed and validated by Ulutaş and Arslan (2017), this instrument contains 18 items across three dimensions:
   - Information (Items 1–6)
   - Communication (Items 7–12)
   - Orientation (Items 13–18)

   Responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = very low to 5 = very high).
   Ulutaş and Arslan (2017) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.97.
   In the present study, reliability was confirmed with an alpha coefficient of 0.92.
2. Strategic Decision-Making Questionnaire
   Designed by Doostar (1999), this instrument includes 28 items measured on a five-point Likert scale. It encompasses five main dimensions:
   - Decision Orientation (Items 1–4)
   - Organizational Commitment (Items 5–12)
   - Culture of participation (Items 13–17)
   - Organizational Maturity (Items 18–22)
   - Risk Tolerance (Items 23–28)

   The original Cronbach's alpha was reported as 0.79, indicating acceptable reliability.
   Reliability was also confirmed in the present study.
3. Willingness to Accept Change Questionnaire
   Developed by Dunham et al. (1989), this tool includes 18 items across three dimensions:
   - Cognitive
   - Affective
   - Behavioral

   Each dimension contains six items, rated on a five-point Likert scale.
   The instrument's reliability ($\alpha = 0.89$) has been widely corroborated, and its validity was confirmed in this study by experts in educational management at Semnan University.

Content and face validity of the three instruments were reviewed and approved by faculty experts. Reliability was verified using Cronbach's alpha coefficients, all of which demonstrated acceptable to excellent internal consistency. Approval to distribute the questionnaires among teachers was obtained from the Education Department of Noor County. The questionnaires were administered and collected in person in coordination with the Department. Prior to participation, all respondents

were informed of the study objectives and provided informed consent. To reduce common method bias, the questionnaires were completed anonymously, with no identifying information collected. Additionally, they were distributed at different times and locations to minimize potential bias arising from simultaneous responses.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 19) and LISREL (Version 8.5).
Descriptive statistics included means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlation coefficients. Structural relationships among variables were tested using path analysis within the SEM framework, and model fit indices for the final model were reported.

Results

Descriptive statistics for the study variables are presented in Table 3. The mean score for digital leadership (M = 2.88) on a five-point scale indicates that teachers evaluated their principals' digital leadership style below the midpoint. A similar pattern was observed for strategic decision-making (M = 2.55) and

willingness to accept change (M = 2.75). Correlation analyses revealed statistically significant positive relationships among the key variables. Teachers' willingness to accept change was moderately and positively correlated with digital leadership ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.05$) and strongly correlated with strategic decision-making ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.05$). Additionally, digital leadership was significantly associated with strategic decision-making ($r = 0.39$, $p < 0.01$). To assess normality, skewness and kurtosis values were examined. For digital leadership, skewness was 1.01 and kurtosis 1.56; for strategic decision-making, skewness was 0.39 and kurtosis 0.95; and for willingness to accept change, skewness was 0.41 and kurtosis 0.86. All values fell within the acceptable range (–2 to +2), indicating normal distribution of data. Therefore, structural model testing was conducted. The demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	95	40.1
	Female	142	59.9
Age (years)	20–29	50	21.1
	30–39	90	38.0
	40–49	65	27.4
	50 and above	32	13.5
Educational Qualification	Bachelor's degree	120	50.6
	Master's degree	105	44.3
	Doctorate	12	5.1
Years of Service	0–5	40	16.9
	6–10	55	23.2
	11–20	95	40.1
	21 and above	47	19.8

Table 3: Mean, standard deviation and Pearson correlation coefficients of variables

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	1	2	3
Digital leadership style	2.88	0.64	-		
Strategic decision making	2.55	0.58	0.39**	-	
Willingness to accept change	2.75	0.29	0.48**	0.58**	-

*p <0.05, **p <0.01

For construct validity, two types of validity were assessed: convergent and discriminant validity. In examining convergent validity, the findings showed that the significance coefficients (t-values) for all factor loadings were greater than 2.58, indicating that all factor loadings were significant at the 99% confidence level. Additionally, all factor loadings exceeded 0.50 (reflecting the relationship between observed and latent variables). The average variance extracted (AVE) for all constructs was above 0.50, and the composite reliability of each construct was greater than its corresponding AVE. Therefore, it can be concluded that the convergent validity of the model constructs was confirmed. To assess discriminant validity, the Fornell–Larcker criterion was applied. The results indicated that the square root of the AVE for each latent variable was greater than its highest correlation with other latent variables in the model. Thus, the findings support the establishment of discriminant validity. In addition, reliability in this study was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient and composite reliability. The values of both coefficients for all research variables were above 0.70, and the AVE for each construct exceeded 0.30, indicating that the measurement instrument demonstrated acceptable reliability. The reported reliability and validity coefficients for the research scales are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability Coefficients

Construct	α	CR	ω	AVE	MSV	ASV
1. Digital Leadership Style	0.74	0.81	0.84	0.56	0.41	0.23
2. Strategic Decision-Making	0.79	0.83	0.86	0.58	0.44	0.26
3. Willingness to Accept Change	0.72	0.80	0.87	0.64	0.46	0.31

In the statistical model, digital leadership style has a positive and direct effect on willingness to accept change ($\gamma_{11} = 0.52$, $p < 0.05$, $t = 7.14$). Additionally, digital leadership style exerts a positive and direct effect on strategic decision-making ($\gamma_{12} = 0.43$, $p < 0.05$, $t = 9.58$). Another finding indicates that strategic decision-making has a positive and direct effect on willingness to accept change ($\beta = 0.55$, $p < 0.05$, $t = 5.37$). To test the significance of indirect effects and examine the mediating role, a bootstrapping method with repeated resampling was employed. For the indirect effect, the bootstrap standard error, the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (BCa), and the p-value were reported. Statistical significance was determined based on whether zero was excluded from the confidence interval. Accordingly, digital leadership style also has a significant indirect effect on willingness to accept change through the mediating role of strategic decision-making ($\beta = 0.236$, $p < 0.05$, $t = 4.17$).

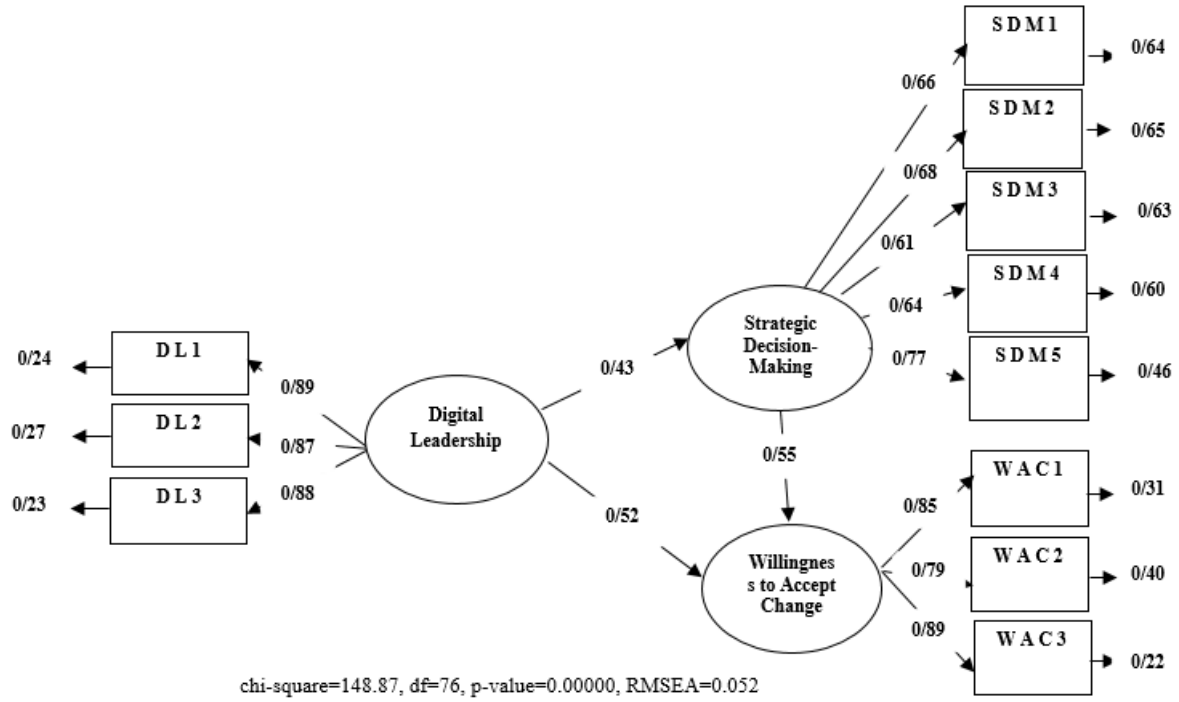

***Figure 2**: General empirical research model with standardized coefficients*

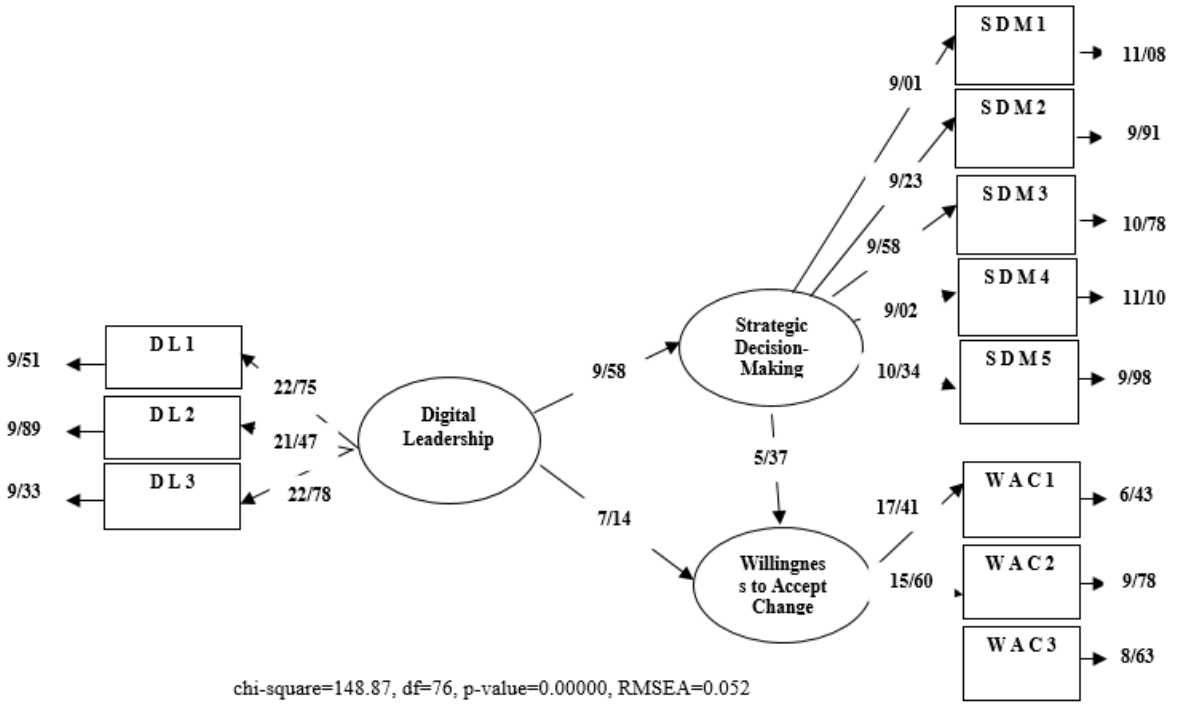

***Figure 3**: The general model of the T-index of the coefficients of the experimental model of the research*

Table 5: Direct, indirect and total effect of digital leadership style, strategic decision-making on willingness to accept change

Effect	Path	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Exogenous → Endogenous	Digital Leadership Style → Willingness to Accept Change	**0.43**	–	**0.43**		
	Digital Leadership Style → Strategic Decision-Making	**0.55**	–	**0.55**		
Endogenous → Endogenous	Strategic Decision-Making → Willingness to Accept Change	**0.52**	–	**0.52**		
Mediating	Digital Leadership Style → Strategic Decision-Making → Willingness to Accept Change	–	**0.236**	**0.236**	0.118	0.354
Total		**0.43**	**0.236**	**0.666**		

*Metric coefficients are reported **P < 0.001

As presented in Table 5:

- The direct effect of digital leadership on willingness to accept change was 0.43 ($p < 0.001$).
- The direct effect of digital leadership on strategic decision-making was 0.55 ($p < 0.001$).
- The direct effect of strategic decision-making on willingness to accept change was 0.52 ($p < 0.001$).
- The indirect effect of digital leadership on willingness to accept change (mediated by strategic decision-making) was 0.236.
- The total effect of digital leadership on willingness to accept change was 0.666.

Altogether, these findings provide robust support for the mediating role of strategic decision-making in the relationship between digital leadership and teachers' willingness to accept change.

Table 6: fit indices of the experimental research model

Index	Recommended Cutoff	Value
χ^2 (df = 76)	p > .05 (non-significant)	147.87
χ^2/df	< 3.00	1.94
RMSEA	≤ 0.08	0.052
GFI	≥ 0.90	0.95
AGFI	≥ 0.90	0.91
NFI	≥ 0.90	1.00
CFI	≥ 0.90	0.98
IFI	≥ 0.90	1.00

As shown in Table 6, the chi-square statistic was significant, $\chi^2(76) = 147.87$, $p < .001$. Given the well-documented sensitivity of the chi-square statistic to sample size and model complexity, reliance solely on this index is not recommended. Therefore, multiple goodness-of-fit indices were examined. The χ^2/df ratio was 1.94, which is below the recommended threshold of 3, indicating an acceptable model fit. The RMSEA value of 0.052 falls within the range of good fit (≤ 0.08). Furthermore, the absolute fit indices (GFI = 0.95; AGFI = 0.91) and incremental fit indices (CFI = 0.98; IFI = 1.00; NFI = 1.00) all exceeded the recommended cutoff value of 0.90. Collectively, these results suggest that the final modified model demonstrates a good fit to the observed data.

Discussion

The rapid digitalization of educational systems has transformed managerial expectations and reshaped the competencies required of school leaders. Against this backdrop, digital leadership has emerged as a key determinant in guiding educational institutions through processes of transformation and fostering favorable teacher attitudes toward innovation and change. The present study examined the extent to which digital leadership influences teachers' willingness to accept change, emphasizing the mediating role of strategic decision-making. The findings offer important theoretical and practical insights for educational policymakers and school leaders.

Conclusions

The study found a direct, positive, and significant relationship between digital leadership and teachers' willingness to accept change, consistent with prior research (Weber, 2022; Öngel & Taşkıran, 2025; Ahmadi, 2023). The alignment of this study's results with earlier findings suggests that digital leadership strengthens organizational readiness by promoting continuous learning, encouraging innovation, and creating supportive environments that reduce uncertainty associated with change. Digital leaders who integrate technological tools into administrative and instructional processes help cultivate a learning-oriented organizational culture in which adaptability and reflective practice are valued. Such conditions enhance teachers' organizational trust, self-efficacy, and motivation to engage in change initiatives.

Digital leadership also demonstrated a strong, direct effect on strategic decision-making. This result reinforces the notion that digital competencies are no longer supplementary leadership skills; rather, they form a critical component of effective strategic management in contemporary educational settings. The findings are consistent with Taajobi et al. (2024) and Ahmadi et al. (2023), who emphasized that leaders proficient in digital technologies are better equipped to interpret data, analyze emerging trends, and implement informed, future-oriented decisions. Digital leadership thus enables school leaders to navigate complex and uncertain environments, enhancing institutional agility and long-term sustainability.

The study also identified a significant direct relationship between strategic decision-making and teachers' willingness to accept change. This finding aligns conceptually with Rahmadani et al. (2025), who highlighted the importance of participatory strategies, facilitation, and

organizational alignment in reducing resistance to change. Strategic decision-making—grounded in environmental scanning, data interpretation, and collaborative dialogue—provides a cognitive and structural foundation for building teacher commitment to innovation. When decisions are transparent, evidence-based, and participatory, teachers perceive change as purposeful and achievable, increasing their willingness to engage constructively in transformational initiatives.

A major contribution of this study is confirming the mediating role of strategic decision-making in the relationship between digital leadership and willingness to accept change. The findings indicate that digital leadership does not merely exert influence through technological competence or inspirational guidance; rather, its effects are operationalized through systematic, informed decision-making. Leaders who utilize digital tools for data-driven planning, performance monitoring, and continuous evaluation translate digital leadership into actionable strategies that foster clarity, trust, and organizational alignment. This mediating mechanism is consistent with theoretical frameworks of digital transformational leadership, which emphasize the translation of digital vision into coherent, evidence-based decisions that empower teachers and reduce resistance to innovation.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

From a theoretical perspective, the study extends the literature on digital leadership by highlighting the central role of strategic decision-making as a pathway through which digital competencies shape teacher attitudes and behaviors. Practically, the findings emphasize the need for professional development programs that strengthen school leaders' digital literacy, analytical skills, and strategic decision-making capacities. Overall, the findings underscore the importance of digital leadership as a powerful facilitator of change in educational contexts. Strategic decision-making serves as a crucial mechanism that translates digital leadership competencies into teachers' enhanced willingness to accept and engage in educational innovation. Strengthening leaders' digital and strategic capacities can therefore play a pivotal role in building adaptive, resilient, and future-ready educational systems. Key practical recommendations include:

- implementing capacity-building programs in digital leadership for school administrators;
- fostering collaborative, participatory structures such as school strategic councils;
- systematically integrating digital tools into professional development programs;
- utilizing data analytics to support informed, strategic decision-making;
- institutionalizing digital leadership in school governance procedures;
- recognizing and rewarding exemplary digital transformation practices among school leaders

Limitations and Future Research

The use of cross-sectional quantitative data limits causal inference regarding the relationships among variables. Future studies could benefit from longitudinal, mixed-methods, or qualitative approaches to capture the dynamic and process-oriented nature of digital leadership, strategic decision-making, and change readiness. In-depth exploration of contextual factors, such as organizational culture or technological infrastructure, may also enrich theoretical understanding and practical application.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript." 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

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.

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of ABCD (Ethical code: IR.UT.RES.2025.500).

Data availability statement

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