

Bridging Leadership and AI Adoption: The Mediating Role of Phenomenological Learning and the Moderating Effect of Digital Culture

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of transformational leadership, phenomenological learning, and digital culture in shaping the successful adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) within Indonesian organizations. Using a quantitative survey design, data were collected from 412 respondents across the service and manufacturing sectors. Structural Equation Modeling Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) was employed to test the hypothesized relationships. The findings reveal that transformational leadership significantly enhances phenomenological learning, which in turn positively influences AI adoption. Moreover, phenomenological learning mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and AI adoption, while digital culture strengthens the link between leadership and learning. These results highlight the importance of integrating phenomenological learning as a reflective and human-centered process in organizational digital transformation. The study contributes to theory by extending Phenomenological Learning Theory into technology adoption research and underscores the moderating role of digital culture in shaping organizational readiness. Practically, the findings suggest that leaders should foster reflective learning environments and cultivate adaptive digital cultures to accelerate inclusive and sustainable AI adoption.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Digital Culture, Adoption AI, Phenomenological Learning

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INTRODUCTION

The adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become a strategic priority in the digital transformation agenda of organizations across various industrial sectors, both in developed and developing countries (Dwivedi et al., 2019; McElheran et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2023). AI technology promises operational efficiency, data-driven decision-making, and increased innovation (S. M. Gama et al., 2025) but its implementation still faces complex technical and non-technical challenges, including individual resistance, ambiguity about the meaning of technology, and limited leadership and organizational cultural readiness (Fatima et al., 2023; Herath et al., 2025; Sheng et al., 2022).

According to a Business Horizons report (2024), individuals' limited understanding of AI is often a major barrier to successful technology adoption. This indicates that conventional instructional and procedural learning approaches are inadequate to address the transformative complexity presented by AI (Übellacker, 2025). A more reflective, contextual, and humanistic learning approach is needed that not only enhances technical competence but also broadens the meaning and awareness of technology's role in work life (Parker & Roumell, 2020; Van Manen, 2016).

In Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, the dynamics of AI adoption show uneven patterns due to disparities in digital literacy, infrastructure readiness, and digital leadership capacity (King & Prasetyo, 2023; Pillai & Sivathanu, 2020). Research shows that the role of leaders in shaping strategic direction, fostering a culture of learning, and creating digital awareness are key determinants of successful AI adoption (Abubakar et al., 2024; Salminen et al., 2025). However, many organizations remain trapped in a technical training logic that fails to bridge employees' subjective experiences in facing technological disruption (Herath et al., 2025; Kolb, 2015).

In this context, transformational leadership plays a central role. This leadership style emphasizes vision, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and attention to individual needs, which are essential for managing complex technological change (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Salminen et al., 2025). However, the effectiveness of such leadership depends heavily on organizational learning processes that enable the internalization of meaning, reflection on experiences, and the creation of a shared understanding of AI (Kolb, 2015; Senge, 1990).

This is where the importance of a phenomenological learning approach lies an approach grounded in direct experience, reflective awareness, and embodied meaning-making of technology (Parker & Roumell, 2020; Van Manen, 2016). Phenomenological learning provides a space for individuals to understand AI not merely as a technological

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instrument, but as part of a work experience that influences how they think, feel, and act in digital environments (Pereira et al., 2024). In situations full of uncertainty and ambiguity of meaning that are characteristic of AI transformation, this approach enables the creation of a deeper and more contextual understanding (Making Sense of AI Limitations, 2023; Business Horizons, 2024).

However, despite its significant potential, phenomenological learning has not been widely explored in the literature as a mediating variable in AI adoption studies. Most research still focuses on structural and technical aspects, or explicit procedural learning (Fatima et al., 2023; S. M. Gama et al., 2025). This creates a significant conceptual gap in understanding how subjective experience and personal reflection can bridge the relationship between leadership and successful technology adoption, particularly in developing countries with varying levels of digital maturity (Nguyen et al., 2023).

Furthermore, digital culture also plays a crucial role in shaping the context in which learning and leadership take place. A culture that encourages collaboration, experimentation, and openness to new technologies can accelerate the adoption of AI (Nasiri et al., 2022; Schein & Schein, 2017). Digital culture not only influences how individuals accept technology but also shapes organizational mindsets in building collective learning and knowledge (Kumar et al., 2025; Serpa et al., 2022). Unfortunately, the role of digital culture as a moderator in the relationship between leadership, learning, and AI adoption has received little empirical discussion and is often conceptual in nature (Nguyen et al., 2023).

Building on these theoretical and empirical gaps, this study aims to empirically examine the relationship between transformational leadership, phenomenological learning, digital culture, and successful AI adoption. Specifically, this study positions phenomenological learning as a mediator that bridges the influence of leadership on AI adoption and examines the role of digital culture as a moderating variable that can strengthen or weaken this relationship.

The novelty of this study lies in the integration of a phenomenological learning approach into a conceptual framework for AI adoption that incorporates theories of leadership and organizational culture. By combining Phenomenological Learning Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, and Organizational Learning Theory, this study offers a new perspective that views AI adoption not merely as a technological process, but as a social and learning process experienced reflectively by individuals within organizations.



The urgency of this research is reinforced by the growing need for a more contextual and human-centered approach to digital transformation, particularly in the post-pandemic era, marked by accelerated digitalization and changes in work structures. The findings of this study are expected to provide theoretical and practical implications for organizational leaders, digital policy makers, and academics interested in building a sustainable, inclusive, and meaningful digital work ecosystem.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Grand Theory: Phenomenological Learning Theory

Phenomenological learning theory is rooted in a philosophical approach that emphasizes direct experience, reflection on meaning, and subjectivity in understanding reality (Parker & Roumell, 2020; Van Manen, 2016). In an organizational context, this theory offers a framework that allows individuals to experience digital transformation not only technically but also existentially. Kolb (2015) explains that learning rooted in lived experience enables a deeper understanding of technological change, including the adoption of AI. With this approach, learning becomes an active and reflective process, bringing together technological realities with the personal awareness of individuals within the organization (Pereira et al., 2024).

The phenomenological approach rejects the assumption that learning is simply the transfer of external knowledge. Instead, it emphasizes that the meaning of technologies like AI is shaped through direct experience, social interaction, and internal reflection. In uncertain environments, such as those where AI is being widely adopted but ambiguously, this approach helps employees interpret technology in a more human and contextual way (Übellacker, 2025). Therefore, the phenomenological approach is highly relevant as a primary theory in explaining how individuals and organizations respond to digital transformation through meaningful and reflective learning.

Contextual Theoretical Approach: Transformational Leadership Theory and Digital Culture

Transformational leadership is a relevant theory to explain how organizational leaders can strategically and inspiringly direct digital change. Bass & Avolio (1994), emphasized that transformational leaders possess four main dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. In the context of AI adoption, this leadership style is able to create a shared vision, encourage experimentation, and facilitate reflective processes among team

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members (Salminen et al., 2025). Transformational leadership not only drives technical achievement but also fosters a culture of deep and inclusive learning. A study by Abubakar et al., (2024) demonstrated that visionary leaders can improve digital literacy and AI awareness through a humanistic and contextual approach. In organizations with low levels of digital readiness, transformational leadership becomes a key catalyst for building a continuous learning orientation.

Furthermore, an organization's digital culture also serves as a context that shapes leadership effectiveness and learning processes. A digital culture that is open to change, collaborative, and adaptive to new technologies fosters positive attitudes toward AI (Schein & Schein, 2017). This culture not only shapes behavioral norms but also creates an epistemological space where technology and meaning intersect (Serpa et al., 2022). Therefore, in this model, digital culture is positioned as a moderating variable that strengthens the relationship between transformational leadership and phenomenological learning in supporting AI adoption (Nasiri et al., 2022; H. M. Nguyen et al., 2019).

Relationships between Variables and Hypothesis Development

Transformational Leadership and Phenomenological Learning

Transformational leadership plays a key role in creating a deep, reflective, and adaptive learning environment amidst the complexity of digital technology. Dimensions such as intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration encourage organizational members to critically and personally explore their experiences (Bass & Avolio, 1994). This process creates a safe psychological space for reflection, dialogue, and the creation of new meanings around the use of technology, including AI.

In the context of phenomenological learning, transformational leaders act as facilitators who not only provide direction but also inspire new meanings through collective narratives and shared experiences (Kolb, 2015; Parker & Roumell, 2020). This leadership support is crucial in transitional situations filled with uncertainty, as it enables in-depth reflection and sensemaking regarding complex technologies (Herath et al., 2025; Salminen et al., 2025). Thus, the influence of transformational leadership on phenomenological learning is not only motivational but also structural and epistemological.

H1: Transformational leadership has a positive effect on phenomenological learning.



Phenomenological Learning and AI Adoption

Phenomenological learning is an epistemological bridge that connects individual subjective experiences with collective understandings of technology. Through the embodied learning process, employees not only receive information about AI but also develop deeper personal meanings regarding the technology's functions, risks, and impacts in their work environment (Pereira et al., 2024; Van Manen, 2016). This approach is particularly useful in overcoming technology resistance and anxiety, as it provides space for individuals to engage emotionally and existentially in the digital transformation process (Parker & Roumell, 2020)

Several studies have shown that reflective and experiential learning can improve organizational readiness to integrate AI in a more contextual and humanistic way (Fatima et al., 2023; F. Gama & Magistretti, 2025). This type of learning helps strengthen cognitive readiness, increase applicable AI literacy, and strengthen emotional engagement with digital transformation goals.

H2: Phenomenological learning has a positive effect on successful AI adoption.

Transformational Leadership and AI Adoption

Although phenomenological learning is positioned as a mediator, the direct relationship between transformational leadership and AI adoption remains relevant for empirical testing. Strong transformational leadership can directly influence employee motivation, openness to change, and commitment to digital initiatives, including AI adoption (Abubakar et al., 2024; Salminen et al., 2025). Leaders who are able to articulate a digital vision and create a conducive organizational climate can often accelerate the adoption process without having to go through the full mediation of learning. Therefore, it is important to examine whether there is a significant direct effect of leadership on the success of AI adoption.

H3: Transformational leadership has a positive effect on the success of AI adoption.

Moderating Digital Culture

Digital culture reflects a pattern of organizational values, norms, and practices that support the exploration and integration of new technologies. This culture significantly determines the effectiveness of leadership in shaping learning patterns, particularly in the complex and often ambiguous context of AI (Parker & Roumell, 2020; Schein & Schein, 2017). Organizations with a strong digital culture tend to be more open to reflective



learning and experimentation, which are key characteristics of phenomenological learning.

On the other hand, if an organizational culture is bureaucratic, hierarchical, and resistant to change, transformational leaders' efforts to instill experiential learning will encounter obstacles (H. M. Nguyen et al., 2019). In this context, digital culture functions not only as a catalyst but also as an enabler, enabling the synergy between leadership and learning to be more effective (Kumar et al., 2025; Nasiri et al., 2022).

H4: Digital culture moderates the effect of transformational leadership on phenomenological learning.

Transformational Leadership and AI Adoption through Learning Mediation

The relationship between transformational leadership and successful AI adoption is not linear, but rather occurs through complex learning mechanisms. Transformational leaders create social and cognitive conditions that enable individuals to experience and internalize new values, including understanding and adopting AI (Senge, 1990). In this context, phenomenological learning serves as a channel for processing leadership stimuli into deeper, more contextual understanding.

Learning mediation is crucial because it enables the transition from inspirational leadership to concrete action and commitment to AI (Kolb, 2015). Studies by Salminen et al., (2025) and Herath et al., (2025) show that successful technology adoption depends on the extent to which employees interpret change as part of personal transformation, not simply organizational policy.

H5: Phenomenological learning mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and successful AI adoption.

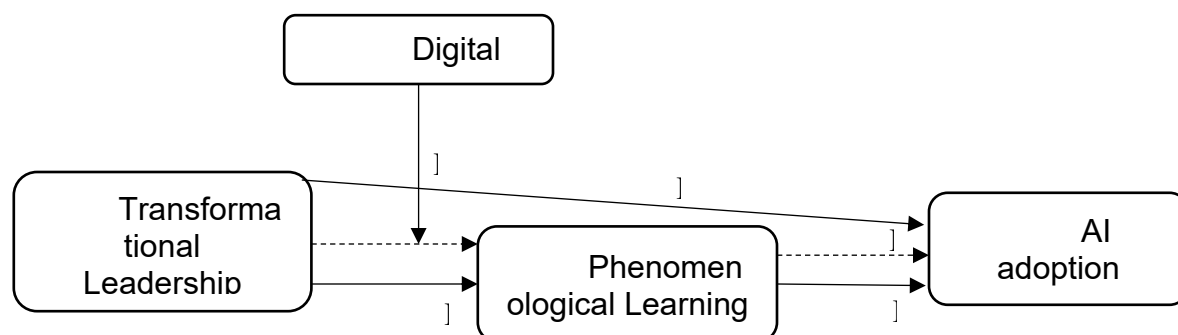


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a quantitative approach with a questionnaire-based survey design. This approach was chosen because it is appropriate for testing causal relationships between variables, namely transformational leadership, phenomenological learning, digital culture, and AI adoption. This method allows for testing a theory-based conceptual model using empirical data (Hair et al., 2021).

The research population was managers, supervisors, and employees involved in the implementation of AI technology in service and manufacturing sector organizations in Indonesia. The selection of this sector was based on the fact that services and manufacturing are the two sectors most impacted by digital transformation. The sampling technique was purposive sampling, namely respondents were selected based on certain criteria relevant to the research context. The respondent criteria were: (1) Working in an organization that has adopted AI technology for at least the last 1 year, (2) Having a position as an employee, supervisor, or manager directly involved in AI-related work processes, and (3) Willing to complete the questionnaire voluntarily and completely. Respondents who did not meet the above criteria or filled in incomplete data were eliminated.

The sample size collected was 412 respondents. This number meets the minimum sample size requirement for SEM-PLS as suggested by Hair et al., (2021), which is more than 10 times the number of indicators in the largest construct. Data were collected through an online questionnaire (Google Form) distributed via email and professional social media. The research instrument used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) adapted from previous literature and has been tested for reliability. The construct of transformational leadership was measured with eight indicators (Bass & Avolio, 1994) adapted by Salminen et al., (2025), phenomenological learning with seven indicators (Kolb, 2015; Parker & Roumell, 2020; Pereira et al., 2024), digital culture with six indicators (Nasiri et al., 2022; Schein & Schein, 2017), and AI adoption with six indicators (Fatima et al., 2023; F. Gama & Magistretti, 2025).

Data analysis was conducted using Structural Equation Modeling based on Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) using SmartPLS 4 software. This was done through two main stages, namely (1) testing the outer model to assess the validity and reliability of the construct, and (2) testing the inner model to examine the relationship between variables, including the mediation effect of phenomenological learning and the moderating effect of digital culture. Hypothesis testing was conducted by bootstrapping 5,000 resamplings to obtain the t-statistic and p-value.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**Result**

In this study, SEM PLS was used to process data to understand the interactions between factors and the influence of additional variables on these relationships. The study involved 412 respondents who completed a questionnaire via Google Form. The survey results yielded descriptive data, highlighting various characteristics of respondents across the service (61.2%) and manufacturing (38.8%) sectors in Indonesia. The majority of respondents were aged 26–35 (45.6%), with 54.1% male and 45.9% female. In terms of job title, 32.4% of respondents were managers/supervisors, while the remainder were operational staff. This profile provides representative data for testing AI adoption models at the organizational level.

Table 1. Outer Loading, Construct Reliability and Validity

	Indicator	Loading	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
Leadership Transformational	TL1-TL8	0,73-0,89	0,66	0,91	0,88
Learning Phenomenological	PL1-PL7	0,71-0,85	0,61	0,88	0,85
Digital Culture	DC1- DC6	0,72–0,86	0,59	0,87	0,83
AI Adoption	AI1-AI6	0,74–0,88	0,62	0,89	0,84

Based on the analysis results in Table 1, the analysis of this study was conducted in one stage and the results show that all variables are declared valid and reliable, as shown in Table 1 with an AVE value of more than 0.5, according to the standards proposed by Fornell & Larcker (1981) and Anderson & Gerbing (1988). In addition, the validity and reliability of each questionnaire item are also strengthened by the Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) values that exceed the minimum limit of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2017).

The results of the Fornell-Larcker criterion discriminant validity test showed that the square root of the AVE value was greater than the correlation between constructs. The HTMT ratio of all constructs was <0.90. Therefore, discriminant validity was met, and the constructs were empirically distinct. These results confirm that the four constructs



(transformational leadership, phenomenological learning, digital culture, AI adoption) are unique and do not overlap. This means that respondents were able to empirically differentiate the concepts of leadership, learning, culture, and AI adoption.

Table 2. R Square

	R Square Adjusted
Phenomenological Learning	0,48
AI Adoption	0,61

Based on the analysis results in Table 2, the Adjusted R Square value for the Phenomenological Learning variable is 0.48, which is in the moderate category. In other words, the model is quite good at describing the variables that influence Phenomenological Learning, while the remaining 52% is influenced by additional variables not part of the model. In addition, the Adjusted R Square for the AI Adoption variable is 0.61, of which 61% can be explained by the independent variables in the model. While the remaining 39% is determined by other factors. This means that the research model is able to explain 48% of the variation in phenomenological learning and 61% of the variation in AI adoption. Thus, the model used has quite good predictive ability.

Moderation testing resulted in digital culture values moderating transformational leadership on phenomenological learning ($DC*TL \rightarrow PL$) by 0.08, indicating a small effect. Nevertheless, the influence of transformational leadership on phenomenological learning was proven to be very strong, and phenomenological learning made a significant contribution to AI adoption. Conversely, the direct effect of transformational leadership on AI adoption was relatively small, thus confirming that phenomenological learning plays an important role as a mediating variable in this relationship.

Furthermore, the Q^2 Predictive Relevance value was 0.29 for phenomenological learning and 0.41 for AI adoption. These values indicate that the model has good predictive relevance, making it suitable for use in predicting AI adoption phenomena in organizational settings.

Table 3. Goodness of Fit (GoF) Model

SRMR	0,056	0,056	(<0,08 $\rightarrow$ fit).
NIF	0,921	0,921	(>0,90 $\rightarrow$ baik).
Chi-square/df	2,13	2,13	(<3 $\rightarrow$ baik).



Based on the analysis results in Table 3, the Goodness of Fit (GoF) value for this indicator indicates a good fit for the research model. Thus, the relationships between variables in the model can be trusted to explain the AI adoption phenomenon.

Table 4. Path Coefficients

	Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	t-statistic	p-value	Results
H1	Transformational Leadership -> Phenomenological Learning	0,692	14,327	0,000	Accepted
H2	Phenomenological Learning -> AI adoption	0,457	8,912	0,000	Accepted
H3	Transformational Leadership -> AI adoption	0,241	4,765	0,000	Accepted
H4	Moderating Effect -> Phenomenological Learning	0,198	3,221	0,001	Accepted
H5	Transformational Leadership -> Phenomenological Learning -> AI adoption	0,316	6,284	0,000	Accepted

Based on the analysis results in table 4, it shows that the transformational leadership variable has a positive coefficient (0.692) which indicates that transformational leaders have a positive coefficient on phenomenological learning significantly seen from the p value of $0.000 < 0.05$. Furthermore, phenomenological learning has a significant relationship seen from the p value of $0.000 < 0.05$. And transformational leadership has a positive coefficient of 0.241 with a p value of $0.001 < 0.05$ which means that transformational leaders are able to adopt AI in their organizations. Then the results of the moderation effect on phenomenological learning, there is a significant relationship with a p value of < 0.05 , with a coefficient value of 0.198, which means that the role of the moderation effect exists but the influence is not large.

Furthermore, the analysis results in Table 4 show a total relationship through a mediation pathway with a coefficient value of 0.316 having a significant influence with a t-statistic value of 6.284 and a p-value of $0.000 < 0.05$. This means that transformational leadership through phenomenological learning can improve employee AI adaptation. Therefore, this influence is in accordance with the intuition that transformational leaders



who are able to create social and cognitive conditions enable employees to experience and internalize new values, including in understanding and adopting AI (Senge, 1990). In this case, phenomenological learning functions as a channel to process leadership stimuli into a deeper and more contextual understanding. Thus, employees can adopt technology not only as an organizational policy, but as part of their self-transformation.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that transformational leadership has a positive effect on phenomenological learning, supporting the theory of Bass & Avolio (1994) and the findings of Salminen et al., (2025). Transformational leaders encourage exploration, reflection, and reinterpretation of digital experiences, thus better preparing employees to face the uncertainty inherent in AI implementation. These results confirm that leadership is not only instructional but also transformative, creating a deep and reflective learning space.

Furthermore, phenomenological learning has been shown to influence the success of AI adoption. This aligns with Kolb (2015), Parker & Roumell (2020), and Pereira et al., (2024), who emphasize the importance of experiential learning in facing technological disruption. Indonesia's context as a developing country reinforces the relevance of these findings. Amid disparities in digital literacy and infrastructure readiness (King & Prasetyo, 2023), phenomenological learning provides a space for employees to build personal understanding, thereby reducing resistance and increasing readiness for AI adoption.

This study also revealed that phenomenological learning acts as a mediator in the relationship between transformational leadership and AI adoption. This mechanism supports Senge's (1990) perspective that leadership creates learning conditions that enable the transformation of organizational values and behaviors. In other words, without reflective learning, transformational leadership is potentially less effective in accelerating AI adoption.

Furthermore, digital culture has been shown to strengthen the relationship between transformational leadership and phenomenological learning. This supports the findings of Schein & Schein (2017), Nasiri et al., (2022), and Serpa et al., (2022) that adaptive organizational culture accelerates collective learning. In organizations that are still bureaucratic or hierarchical, the effect of transformational leadership tends to weaken, in line with the findings of Nguyen et al., (2019). Therefore, these findings confirm the role of digital culture as a crucial enabler in the context of AI transformation.



Overall, this study contributes to the literature by introducing phenomenological learning as a rarely explored mediating mechanism and positioning digital culture as a moderating variable. The integration of these two aspects complements the discourse on AI adoption, which has previously emphasized technical or structural aspects.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMENDATIONS

This study examined the relationship between transformational leadership, phenomenological learning, digital culture, and AI adoption in Indonesian organizations. The results indicate that transformational leadership positively influences phenomenological learning and AI adoption, both directly and indirectly through the mediation of phenomenological learning. Furthermore, digital culture strengthens the relationship between leadership and phenomenological learning.

The novelty of this research lies in its placement of phenomenological learning as a mediating variable in the context of AI adoption, as well as its affirmation of the role of digital culture as a moderator. Its primary contribution is expanding the understanding of AI adoption as a socio-reflective process, rather than simply a technical one.

Theoretical Implications this research extends the application of Phenomenological Learning Theory in the study of technology adoption, by demonstrating that employees' reflective experiences play a crucial role in the internalization of new technologies. The integration of Transformational Leadership Theory with the context of phenomenological learning enriches the understanding of how leadership can influence AI adoption through non-linear pathways. The placement of digital culture as a moderator enriches the Organizational Learning literature by adding a crucial contextual dimension to digital transformation. Practical implications include the need for organizational leaders to adopt a transformational leadership style that inspires, provides intellectual stimulation, and pays attention to the individual needs of employees. Organizations need to build an open, collaborative, and experimental digital culture to strengthen the reflective learning process. For policymakers, this research emphasizes the importance of policy interventions that focus not only on providing digital infrastructure but also on developing leadership capacity and organizational culture in managing AI.

However, this study has several limitations. First, the data was collected cross-sectionally, so it cannot capture the long-term dynamics of AI adoption. Future longitudinal research would provide a more comprehensive picture. Second, this study focused on the service and manufacturing sectors in Indonesia, so generalization to other industrial contexts or other countries is limited. Comparative studies between countries

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could enrich cross-cultural understanding. Third, the study variables were limited to leadership, phenomenological learning, and digital culture. Future research could add other variables such as individual digital literacy, technological readiness, or innovation climate.

Thus, this study opens up opportunities for broader follow-up studies to test this conceptual model in different contexts, as well as strengthening the contribution to the literature on technology adoption and digital leadership.

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