Guest editorial: Digital transformation and sustainable development of Chinese enterprises

1. Introduction

The intersection of digitalization and sustainability, two defining themes of the 21st century, presents both unparalleled opportunities and complex challenges for society and has profound implications for organizational transformation (Guandalini, 2022). This convergence offers novel approaches and solutions to pressing sustainability concerns. Tech giant Google exemplifies this potential with its ambitious goal of achieving net-zero emissions across all operations by 2030. Leveraging its technological prowess, Google, through its artificial intelligence (AI) subsidiary DeepMind, has developed an innovative solution for optimizing energy consumption in data centers. By collecting and analyzing real-time data from various sensors, including temperature, pressure, power consumption and cooling equipment status, DeepMind has constructed a sophisticated model of the cooling system. This model has yielded significant results, achieving a remarkable 40% reduction in cooling system energy consumption and substantially enhancing energy efficiency.

Digital transformation, defined as the organizational change process triggered and shaped by the pervasive spread of digital technologies (Hanelt *et al.*, 2021), presents unprecedented opportunities for achieving sustainability. Sustainability, aiming to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Guandalini, 2022). Digital technologies enable organizations to manage the environmental sustainability of their business operations more effectively, facilitating sustainable transformation through various avenues, such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions, conserving biodiversity, promoting resource circularity and supporting sustainable development goals across the value chain (Hilali and Manouar, 2020; Castro *et al.*, 2021; Liu *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, within organizations, digital technologies bridge information gaps within and between organizations (Castro *et al.*, 2021; Liu *et al.*, 2024; Si *et al.*, 2024), reduce internal inequalities and improve access to financial services (Asongu and Odhiambo, 2019).

While digital technology presents an opportunity to advance sustainable development, its implementation is not inherently aligned with sustainability goals. Absent effective governance, digital technologies may negatively impact sustainability across economic, social and environmental dimensions (Carnerud *et al.*, 2020). Economically, the complexities associated with integrating digital technologies and sustainability initiatives can challenge organizational leaders, hindering overall firm performance (Ardito *et al.*, 2021). Socially, emerging technologies may disrupt labor markets by creating a mismatch between labor demand and existing skill sets, potentially leading to job displacement in low-skill sectors (Rodrik, 2018; Brenner and Hartl, 2021; Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2018). Environmentally, the increased energy efficiency offered by digitalization is often

Erratum: It has come to the attention of the publisher that article Liu W., Guo B., Zou B. and Jie W. (2025), "Guest editorial: Digital transformation and sustainable development of Chinese enterprises", – Chinese Management Studies, Vol. 19 No. 3, pp. 631-639. https://doi.org/10.1108/CMS-04-2025-997, incorrectly listed the city name of the Guest Editor Bo Zou in the affiliation section. The city name of guest editor was initially published as Shenzhen and has now been amended to reflect the correct city name, Guangzhou. This error was introduced during the article publication process. The publisher sincerely apologises for this error and any inconvenience caused.

The authors would acknowledge the financial support from the Social Science Planning and Research Project of Shandong Province (Grant Number 23CKFJ09).

Chinese Management Studies
Vol. 19 No. 3, 2025
pp. 631-639

1750-614X
DOI 10.1108/CMS-04-2025-997

accompanied by higher resource consumption and pollution (Beier *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, addressing the potential frictions between digitalization and sustainability is crucial for harnessing digital technologies to foster sustainable development (Aksin-Sivrikaya and Bhattacharya, 2017).

In the context of an increasingly intertwined relationship between digitalization and sustainability, China possesses a unique research advantage in these fields. First, Chinese enterprises leverage their vast data and user base, amassing extensive experience in digital technologies that provide a solid technical foundation for corporate digital transformation. Second, as an emerging economy, China faces dual challenges: optimizing its energy structure and controlling carbon emissions. The country's energy consumption is still predominantly reliant on nonrenewable resources, and its carbon emissions rank among the highest globally. This situation poses significant challenges to achieving the national strategic goals of reaching peak carbon emissions by 2030 and achieving carbon neutrality by 2060. Thus, this editorial, which is part of a special issue, aims to expand the knowledge boundaries in the relevant fields by exploring digitalization and sustainability issues within the Chinese context.

2. Digital transformation and sustainable development: current research state

There is a growing scholarly interest in the intersection of digitalization and sustainability, evidenced by the increasing number of publications in academic journals. In March 2023, the *Academy of Management Perspectives* dedicated a special issue to "Digital Sustainability." This initiative aims to harness global scholarly expertise to explore the conceptual underpinnings, quantitative measures and operational mechanisms of digital sustainability practices at the organizational level, as well as their impact on value creation. Concurrently, the academic community has undertaken a series of literature reviews. While these reviews primarily focus on specific domains (Guandalini, 2022; George and Schillebeeckx, 2022; Grybauskas *et al.*, 2022; Niehoff, 2022; Ciulli and Kolk, 2023), they provide crucial insights into the current state of research in this field. Building on a systematic analysis of these review articles, this study adopts a theoretical perspective to synthesize and categorize existing research.

By summarizing existing research streams, we find that while the potential of digital technologies to advance sustainability is widely acknowledged, a nuanced understanding of their underlying mechanisms and how firms can balance economic objectives with sustainability goals remains underexplored. This research gap manifests across three key dimensions. First, industry heterogeneity in digital infrastructure maturity leads to diverse implementation pathways and outcomes for digitalization-driven sustainability initiatives. Digitally mature sectors may hold a first-mover advantage, while traditional industries might face steeper challenges in leveraging digital tools for sustainability. Second, existing research primarily focuses on specific applications or case studies of digital technologies (Sgibnev and Rekhviashvili, 2020; Bencsik *et al.*, 2023), neglecting the systemic examination of collaborative mechanisms among diverse stakeholders within the broader ecosystem. How to foster a digital ecosystem conducive to sustainability, effectively integrating technological innovation with policy support to generate wider societal benefits, remains a critical question. Finally, the confluence of global challenges – the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and rising nationalism – poses significant threats to sustainability progress. While for-profit enterprises, particularly multinational corporations, require innovative stakeholder engagement models to navigate this complex landscape, research exploring the synergistic effects of digitalization and sustainability from an internationalization perspective remains limited.

3. About this special issue

This special issue received over 100 submissions, reflecting substantial interest and ongoing research momentum in this domain. Following a rigorous review process with multiple rounds of revisions, we selected 10 exceptional studies for inclusion, summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of articles in this special issue

No.	Research question	Context	The role of digitalization		
			Moderator	IV	DV
1	The impacts of digital processes, digital operations, and digital ecosystems on sustainable performance (economic and environmental performance). The moderating role of a firm's core technological capability			✓	
2	The impact of CEO career horizon on green innovation. The moderating role of enterprise digitalization and industrial digital transformation		✓		
3	The impact of entrepreneurial ecosystem orientation, dynamic capabilities, and digital transformation on sustainable competitive advantage from a configuration perspective			✓	
4	The impact of dynamic integration and coordination between digital technologies and traditional resources on sustainable high growth of enterprises			✓	
5	How circular companies, based on digital platforms, expand sustainable value through diversification of business models?	✓			
6	Does digital transformation in enterprises mitigate the negative impact of pandemics on innovation activities?		✓		
7	The impact of digital transformation on multidimensional workforce structure			✓	
8	The impact of external and internal opportunity windows on enterprise digital transformation, and the role mechanisms of strategic cognition and entrepreneurial spirit				✓
9	The impact of artificial intelligence (AI) technology on environmental, social, and governance (ESG) performance			✓	
10	The impact of digital business model innovation on common prosperity (sustainable development) through effective resource orchestration			✓	

Note(s): IV refers to the independent variable, while DV denotes the dependent variable. Moderator indicates the moderating variable. Each of these may potentially represent one of the roles assumed by digitalization in various contexts
Source: Table created by authors

While diverse in their thematic foci, each study contributes novel insights, advancing the existing body of knowledge on corporate digitalization and/or sustainability. Notably, all studies can be grouped based on their contributions to either corporate digitalization or sustainability, or both.

3.1 Digitalization as an independent variable

In these 10 studies examining the relationship between digitalization and sustainability, research using digitalization/digital technology as the independent variable dominates (six papers). These studies, including Xi *et al.* (2025), Du *et al.* (2025), Wang *et al.* (2025), Lv *et al.* (2025), Chen and Zhang (this issue) and Sun *et al.* (2025), employ diverse research methods to investigate the impact mechanisms of digitalization on corporate sustainability across different dimensions, scenarios and configuration patterns. A particularly noteworthy contribution emerges from Xi *et al.* (2025), who address the longitudinal and phased characteristics of digital transformation. Through computational program, they develop an innovative evaluation framework encompassing three dimensions: digital processes, digital operations and digital ecosystems. This study advances our theoretical understanding of digital transformation's complex phased characteristics by establishing a multi-level evaluation system linking digital transformation to sustainable performance outcomes, providing both novel theoretical insights and empirical evidence.

Chen and Zhang (this issue) take a different approach from Xi *et al.*'s focus on overall digitalization phases by examining AI as a specific digital technology and its impact mechanisms on ESG performance. As Castro *et al.* (2021) note, China's AI market demonstrates rapid growth under strong government policy support, having developed relatively comprehensive systems for AI policy support, industrial development and intellectual property protection. Chen and Zhang's (this issue) study makes two significant contributions: it addresses the research gap regarding digital technology's impact on sustainability performance in emerging markets (particularly China) and provides important empirical evidence from emerging markets to complement existing research that primarily focuses on developed markets.

Digital transformation's impact on labor market structures and social common prosperity remains a central focus in management research. The studies by Lv *et al.* (2025) and Sun *et al.* (2025) provide novel theoretical insights and empirical evidence on these critical issues within the Chinese context. Lv *et al.* (2025) develop a multidimensional framework for analyzing labor force structure by innovatively applying text analysis methods. This framework encompasses skill levels, job characteristics and age demographics. Their findings demonstrate that digital transformation significantly drives labor force structural optimization, characterized by an increased proportion of high-skilled talent, growth in non-routine positions and a younger workforce age structure. The study reveals substantial industry heterogeneity and regional variations in these effects, with industry competition intensity and regional digitalization levels serving as key moderating factors.

Sun *et al.* (2025) integrate business model innovation with resource orchestration theory to examine the mechanisms through which digitalization promotes common prosperity. Through case study methodology, they demonstrate that the effective combination of digital technology and resource orchestration capabilities enhances both the scale and quality of common prosperity outcomes. The research highlights how strategic connections with stakeholders, established through demand aggregation, trust building and relationship reconfiguration, significantly strengthen firms' market competitiveness. Their findings advance our understanding of how digital transformation contributes to broader societal goals while maintaining business performance.

The relationship between digital transformation and sustainable development in organizations exhibits complex heterogeneous characteristics, significantly moderated by multidimensional factors including organizational resource endowments, dynamic capabilities and environmental

dynamism. A systematic examination of how resource coordination capabilities, dynamic integration abilities and environmental dynamics influence digital technology effectiveness holds substantial theoretical and practical significance. This issue has made important advances in understanding these relationships.

Du *et al.* (2025) and Wang *et al.* (2025) have conducted rigorous investigations into how digital technologies and other key elements jointly influence organizational sustainable development, drawing from configurational theory and resource coordination perspectives. Specifically, Du *et al.* (2025) employed qualitative comparative analysis to examine how configurations of entrepreneurial ecosystem orientation, dynamic capabilities and digital transformation affect sustainable competitive advantage. Their findings reveal three effective configurations − adaptive response, dynamic adjustment and opportunity-resource integration − that significantly enhance sustainable competitive advantage, while four other configurations potentially generate negative effects. Complementing this work, Wang *et al.* (2025) identified three archetypal resource coordination strategies that organizations employ to align traditional resources with digital technologies across different developmental stages. These strategies − trust-oriented, demand-oriented and efficiency-oriented approaches − correspond to organizational startup, expansion and maturity phases, respectively. Their research demonstrates how these strategies effectively promote sustainable high-growth performance.

3.2 Digitalization as a moderator variable

Two studies in this special issue examine the moderating effects of digitalization and digital technologies on sustainable development (Yin *et al.*, 2025; Yang *et al.*, 2025), elucidating the mechanisms through which digital technologies function as contextual factors in sustainability processes. Yin and colleagues investigate how CEO career horizon − defined as chief executives' attention to their professional prospects − influences green innovation, while examining the moderating roles of both firm-level digitalization and industry-wide digital transformation. Their research illuminates how individual managerial factors shape green innovation outcomes, thereby expanding the boundaries of sustainability research. Yang and colleagues focus on how public health crises, specifically the pandemic shock, negatively affect both the quality and quantity of innovation, while testing the mitigating effects of corporate digital technologies. Their findings highlight the positive role of digital technologies in addressing unexpected crises and promoting sustainable development.

3.3 Digitalization as a research context and dependent variable

This special issue further explores the relationship between digitalization and sustainability through two studies that utilize digitalization as both a contextual factor and a variable. Chen *et al.* (2025) employ a case study approach to analyze how ATRenew, a circular economy company, generates sustainable value through business model diversification. The authors emphasize the importance of activating platform users as both suppliers and consumers during the development of a digital platform ecosystem, highlighting the significance of managing stakeholder relationships in circular economy companies, a finding that aligns with the conclusions of Sun *et al.* (2025). Zang *et al.* (2025), drawing upon strategic cognition theory, investigates the impact of external and internal opportunity windows on firms' digital transformation during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study elucidates the intricate process by which companies leverage both external opportunities and internal capabilities to drive digital transformation, offering valuable insights for organizations seeking to address sustainability challenges through digitalization.

4. Future research directions in digital transformation and sustainable development

The 10 articles in this special issue respond to our call for contributions on digitalization and sustainability. In the process, these papers advance our understanding of the relationship between digitalization and sustainability, while also providing direction for future development in this field.

4.1 Ecosystem perspective on digitalization and sustainability

Recent research underscores the necessity of constructing digital ecosystems conducive to sustainable development, emphasizing the organic integration of technological innovation and policy support to enhance broader societal benefits. However, existing studies lack a systematic framework that examines the relationship between digitalization and sustainability from a systems and ecological perspective. Within organizations, different teams often manage digitalization and sustainability business modules separately, leading to information silos that hinder the creation of integrated value. Therefore, a more comprehensive and systemic perspective − an ecosystem perspective − is urgently needed to understand and address this challenge.

Several articles in this special issue call for and are dedicated to exploring the relationship between digitalization and sustainability from an ecosystem perspective (Du *et al.*, 2025; Wang *et al.*, 2025; Chen *et al.*, 2025). These studies employ methods such as configurational analysis and case studies to incorporate ecosystem concepts into research on digitalization and sustainability, considering stakeholder interactions and contributing to a comprehensive analysis of factors influencing sustainable development.

Examining digitalization and sustainability from an ecosystem perspective is a long-term and challenging endeavor. This perspective requires researchers to focus not only on the impact of individual technologies or policies but also on the interactions and dynamic evolution of various elements within the system. Embedding the ecosystem concept into discussions of digitalization and sustainability helps avoid potential negative effects of digitalization, such as labor market frictions and energy consumption issues.

However, current research still lacks a theoretical framework for the relationship between digitalization and sustainability from an ecosystem perspective. Although there has been considerable research on concepts such as digitalization, sustainability and ecosystems (including innovation ecosystems, industrial ecosystems and stakeholder networks), these concepts and their interrelationships remain fragmented. An integrated analytical framework is crucial as it provides a systematic and comprehensive thinking framework to help coordinate potential conflicts and benefit both stakeholders and enterprises. More importantly, it lays the foundation for knowledge spillovers and innovative synergies within the ecosystem.

4.2 International perspective on digitalization and sustainability

Recent research by Ciulli and Kolk (2023) highlights the multifaceted challenges multinational enterprises (MNEs) face when leveraging digital technologies to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in complex international environments. This complexity stems from significant cross-national differences in digital literacy, infrastructure, network connectivity and data regulation (Nambisan and Luo, 2021). These disparities not only risk exacerbating social and economic inequalities but also create institutional barriers for MNEs in developing and implementing digital solutions. In some cases, these challenges may even lead to tensions between MNEs and local governments or communities (George and Schillebeeckx, 2022). Consequently, a deeper exploration of the relationship between digitalization and sustainable performance in international business contexts is crucial.

While existing research has not fully addressed the interplay between MNEs, digital technologies and sustainable development, some scholars have begun to examine the dual

impact of digital technologies or platforms on sustainability (Kolk and Ciulli, 2020; Tatarinov *et al.*, 2023; George and Schillebeeckx, 2022). However, these studies often employ generic analytical frameworks, failing to delve into the inherent characteristics, opportunities and challenges of specific digital technologies and their unique effects on MNEs' sustainable development efforts. Several critical questions remain unanswered: How does institutional diversity influence the sustainability activities of digital MNEs in host countries? How do host country data protection and data sovereignty regulations affect MNEs' entry modes, particularly for digital MNEs? How do digital technologies impact MNEs' ability to acquire new knowledge and develop new capabilities? In-depth research into these issues will enhance our understanding of how MNEs can better utilize digital technologies to achieve sustainable development goals in complex international environments.

To address this research gap, Ciulli and Kolk (2023) propose using affordance theory to analyze the impact of specific digital technologies on sustainable development. This theoretical approach posits that the value of technology is not absolute but contingent on its interaction with stakeholders. In the context of internationalization, affordance theory can enhance our understanding of how specific digital technologies − such as the Internet of Things (IoT), cloud computing, cybersecurity, blockchain and big data analytics − influence the sustainable development practices of MNEs.

5. Conclusion

Digitalization and sustainable development, initially distinct research areas, appeared unconnected. However, the growing potential of advancing digital technologies to foster sustainability has garnered increasing scholarly attention as their societal applications expand. Early research often treated digitalization as a background factor in sustainability or employed generic frameworks to explore the relationship. As the unique characteristics and diverse applications of specific digital technologies, like the IoT, AI and blockchain, became more apparent, research shifted toward examining their individual impacts on sustainability. Furthermore, deeper investigations reveal digitalization's role not merely as a backdrop or tool, but as a crucial moderator influencing key processes within sustainable development, including resource allocation, innovation diffusion and stakeholder engagement. Ultimately, effectively leveraging digital technologies for sustainability requires considering the encompassing ecosystem and the demands and influence of various stakeholders. Only through the synergistic interaction of technological, economic, social and environmental factors can digitalization's full potential be realized and optimal sustainable development outcomes achieved.

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