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Guest editorial: Beyond Industry 4.0: humancentricity, resilience and sustainability in the age of digital transformation

1. Introduction

The 21st century has been shaped by rapid advances in the adoption and application of digital technologies and tools, in a process now popularly described as digital transformation (DT). DT has been described as a disruptive, evolutionary process that has radically changed the ways we live and do business (Melović *et al.*, 2020). Increasingly, digital technologies are being deployed to upend traditional business models, as organisations find new ways to deliver and capture value (Li, 2020; Kolade *et al.*, 2021; Kraft *et al.*, 2022; Troise *et al.*, 2022).

The past decade, for example, has been marked by the rise of multisided digital platforms and the concomitant emergence and growth of the sharing economy, defined as an economic model that is based on trading, swapping and renting products and services (Kolade *et al.*, 2022b). In the finance sector, fintech organisations are deploying blockchains and other Industry 4.0 technologies to drive growth and inclusion, while challenging the dominance and strategies of traditional finance institutions (Palmié *et al.*, 2020). In the manufacturing sector, the introduction of additive manufacturing, or 3D printing, has precipitated significant disruption of the traditional supply chain and offers a departure from centralised high-volume production and large inventory stocking (Kolade *et al.*, 2022a).

As the buzz around Industry 4.0 reaches a fever pitch, a paradigm shift is already afoot. Stakeholders are questioning the prevailing logic of Industry 4.0 and the focus on the use of digital technologies to enhance growth, improve efficiency and maximise profit (Kolade and Owoseni, 2022). Technology, it is argued, should be harnessed with due consideration and respect for the boundaries of the planet and its limited resources and capacity (Xu *et al.*, 2021). In addition, production processes should prioritise human needs and workers' welfare above maximisation of production as an end. This challenges the traditional notion of human labour as a tool for creating surplus value, replacing it instead with a model in which human workers are positioned as co-creators and innovators in collaboration with machines (Johri *et al.*, 2021). With the new approach, human contribution is measured not only in terms of productivity but also in terms of quality of life and creativity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also focused minds on the imperative of resilient supply chains and production systems that are more adaptable and responsive to sudden disasters and unpredictable disruption. Thus, stakeholders have proposed a shift in thinking to Industry 5.0, which is not conceived as a linear progression of Industry 4.0 in terms of new technologies, but a discontinuous trajectory underpinned by new priorities and values to guide the use of Industry 4.0 technologies (Xu *et al.*, 2021). In other words, Industry 5.0 does not seek to inhibit or limit the reach of technologies by imposing artificial barriers. Instead, it sets new direction and new heights for technological ambitions. For example, new technologies being deployed to promote the circular economy are more ambitious in their target to upend societal lock-in to traditional, linear models of production and consumption that have been found to be wasteful and unsustainable (Kolade *et al.*, 2022). Frontier technologies are at the heart of this drive to promote circular products and habits using cleaner and leaner methods and processes.

Given the preceding, the three pillars of Industry 5.0 have been presented as: humancentricity, resilience and sustainability (Breque *et al.*, 2021). The humancentricity imperative underlines the need to prioritise human needs in the use of technology, and so mitigate fears of humans being enslaved by technologies. This concept lends itself to nuanced

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operationalisation across domains, with varying emphases on related constructs such as user experience, customer experience and patient centricity. The overarching principle can be summed up in the maxim that technology should serve the needs of humans, and not humans serving the needs of technology (Padovano *et al.*, 2024). The sustainability pillar complements the human-centric dimension by focussing attention on the limits and capacities of the planet. In effect, the deployment of technology to meet human needs is not an open check at the expense of the planet. In effect, while technological innovations should be oriented towards human needs, their deployment must also account for planetary and environmental impacts. In this positive sum game, in which human needs and planetary health are entwined, technology can and should simultaneously serve both purposes. The corollary is that human needs are inevitably compromised and jeopardised if the planet is endangered and the ecosystem is depleted, and a zero-sum approach to deployment of technology is detrimental to both planet and humans. Finally, the resilience dimension focuses on creative re-imagining and ambitious deployment of technology to mitigate disruption. This, again, challenges and expands the traditional notion of technological progress, which has historically focused on production efficiency and profit maximisation. Instead, the resilience pillar of Industry 5.0 emphasises the need for adaptive, flexible and resilient systems that can withstand disruptions and can cope well with uncertainty and complexity-beyond the linear pursuit of increased efficiencies.

This new vision of DT, beyond Industry 4.0, is still in its early stages of development. There are significant knowledge gaps regarding its operational challenges, opportunities and nuances across a whole spectrum of public and private sector organisations. Questions have been raised about terminological ambiguities and operational peculiarities of Industry 5.0 principles across domains (Padovano *et al.*, 2024). Other researchers have grappled with the questions around the co-existence of the two industrial revolutions and the new age of augmentation, underpinned by human-machine collaboration and symbiosis (Johri *et al.*, 2021; Xu *et al.*, 2021). New questions about the future of work have also come to the fore, including debates about job polarisation, technological unemployment, precarious work and the gig economy (Kolade and Owoseni, 2022). Recent developments in frontier Industry 4.0 technologies, such as artificial intelligence, have heightened public interest and scholarly engagement in these debates.

2. Overview of the papers in this special issue

To address this lacuna, this Special Issue invited contributions that illuminate the processes and strategies by which organisations can foster humancentricity, sustainability and resilience through novel applications of digital technologies.

The first paper examined the impact of blockchain technology on sustainable supply chains in the garment industry. Shah *et al.* (2023) adopted an ecological modernisation theory, along with the triple bottom line perspectives, to investigate the relationship between blockchain-enabled supply chain practices and the social, environmental and economic performance of firms. The authors highlight the merits of a circular supply chain, which enables firms to optimise material consumption and re-use worn garments, thereby reducing waste generation and capacity impacts on landfills. However, while the study reports the positive impacts of blockchain on sustainable supply chain practices, the uptake of this technology is currently not at a sufficient scale to generate an ecosystem effect. In order to achieve this, the authors argued for greater connectivity and synergy among key stakeholders across the supply chain, from input suppliers to production, warehousing, distribution and retailing.

In the next paper, Nazemi *et al.* (2024) present a bibliometric study of service ecosystems. The paper highlights how frontier digital technologies such as virtual reality, augmented reality and the expanding metaverse are transforming traditional service ecosystems. Aligning with the imperatives of Industry 5.0, the metaverse seamlessly integrates real and virtual environments through digital twins, creating immersive, interactive service experiences. This evolution can redefine service ecosystems by enhancing customer engagement, satisfaction

and loyalty through advanced, intelligent technologies. By merging virtual collaboration, avatars and synchronised features, the metaverse service ecosystem introduces a new paradigm for service delivery – spanning retail, hospitality and entertainment – ushering in a future where human interaction with technology becomes increasingly immersive. The authors also raise significant questions for future exploration: how will the metaverse influence the fundamental structure, materials and objectives of the service ecosystem? Moreover, what innovations in service design will emerge as this virtual world becomes more integral to business and customer experiences?

Bringing attention to the humancentricity pillar of Industry 5.0, Mendy and AlGhanem (2024) examined the role of human-oriented strategies in firms' implementation of DT in the non-Western, Arabic context. The authors explored the imbalance between financial and non-financial approaches to DT within Bahrain's oil and gas sector, particularly regarding climate change and sustainability goals. Drawing on 26 interviews and energy case studies, they introduced a new People-centric, Sustaining Network Leadership Model, thereby challenging the dominant financialisation strategies in DT and focussing attention on leadership's socio-cultural and organisational impacts. The model integrates leaders' experiences and socio-political awareness, offering insights into how and why DT initiatives are deployed. The paper fills a gap in DT scholarship and expands Network Leadership literature, especially within the Arabic context.

Still on the non-Western contexts, Tran *et al.* (2024) examined the impact of DT within the context of corporate governance in Vietnam. Taking a knowledge-based view, with particular emphasis on dynamic capabilities, the authors seek to unpack the process through which organisations seek to adjust and reconfigure their resources and competences in response to digital disruption of the business landscape. They found that, taken alone, both DT and corporate governance each has a negative impact on corporate restructuring. However, when combined, corporate governance and DT are an effective driver of corporate restructuring. Their findings underline the importance of non-technological components, including organisational processes and human decision-making, that underline how technology is deployed and what benefits are realised. The paper therefore highlights the importance of effective board supervision over DT initiatives, and the importance of company ethos and employee re-skilling for successful implementation of DT strategies.

The convergence of Industry 4.0 and Industry 5.0 is concomitant with the integration of human and machine intelligence for deep multi-level cooperation within the intelligence system. To explicate this, Nair *et al.* (2024) conducted a bibliometric review of 296 papers to analyse trends in organisations' DT strategies and practices. They identified a gradual shift towards human-centric practices, with organisations prioritising investment in employee re-skilling and up-skilling and ensuring data privacy and security are at the heart of their DT strategies. These human-centric priorities, the authors note, are critical for Industry 5.0's success, requiring value-driven ethical frameworks to foster human-machine collaboration. They highlight frontiers of active research in these areas, where scholars are interrogating challenges and opportunities for aligning technological progress with societal values, in order to promote sustainable development through people-centric practices in the Factory of the Future.

From humancentricity in DT practices, Narkhede and colleagues turned attention to sustainability in the manufacturing sector-against the backdrop of environmental degradation and the imperative of planetary health. They found that, through the integration of frontier technologies such as artificial intelligence and big data analytics, manufacturers are able to enhance process efficiency, reduce wastage and implement other proactive sustainability measures. They also highlighted the contributions of human elements, such as creativity, in the process through which digital technologies are harnessed to drive the sustainability agenda. This, once again, underscores the synergistic essence of the three pillars of Industry 5.0. It also contributes to the fundamental argument that Industry 5.0 is not merely a technological shift but a transformative revolution in the manufacturing landscape.

The remaining collection of papers digs deeper into sectoral applications of Industry 5.0 principles, offering nuanced insights into how diverse domains integrate humancentricity, sustainability and resilience. By examining creative economies, digital workplace well-being, digital inclusion in agriculture and circular economy transitions, these contributions illuminate cross-sectoral opportunities and challenges in leveraging Industry 5.0 for transformative impacts.

Sneha's exploration of the creative economy situates human creativity within the broader Industry 5.0 paradigm. Her work emphasises the potential of the creative economy to drive economic and social value when aligned with sustainability principles, particularly in emerging economies. This complements Nair *et al*.'s findings on the rising prioritisation of human-centric digital practices, underscoring the critical role of human agency in the future of DT.

Saini's research shifts the focus to workplace dynamics, investigating technostress among IT employees caused by excessive social media usage. The study highlights the dual-edged nature of digital tools, pointing to the necessity of organisational resilience to mitigate negative impacts. This resonates with Tran *et al*. (2024)'s analysis of corporate governance in Vietnam, which demonstrates how governance frameworks, combined with DT, drive effective corporate restructuring. Together, these studies call for robust organisational strategies to enhance workplace well-being amidst rapid digital disruptions.

Abioye's investigation into smallholder farmers in Nigeria explores barriers and enablers of digital tool adoption, emphasising the importance of equitable technological deployment. This aligns with Shah *et al.*'s (2023) call for multi-stakeholder engagement to foster inclusive and sustainable practices. Abioye's work provides a grounded perspective on how digital inclusion can promote socio-economic equity, particularly in agriculture, a critical sector for developing economies.

Oyinlola *et al*.'s study on the circular plastics economy in Africa underscores the systemic barriers to achieving sustainability. Their call for regime-level changes mirrors Mendy's leadership framework, which advocates people-centric approaches to drive transitions. Both studies stress the necessity of aligning technological initiatives with structural and policy-level interventions to ensure sustainable outcomes.

These contributions reveal commonalities in advocating interdisciplinary approaches and the integration of human and ecological priorities in technological practices. However, sectoral differences highlight varying challenges – from scalability in the creative economy to workplace governance and agricultural inclusion. While the studies align on the importance of human-centric strategies, they underscore the need for cross-sectoral collaboration to bridge operational and strategic gaps.

3. Emergent insights

3.1 Digital technologies: value free or value laden?

The papers in this Special Issue contribute to decades-old debates around the idea that digital technologies are value-free or value-laden. In many ways, the two sides of the argument help illuminate some of the differences between the underlying principles of Industry 4.0 vs Industry 5.0. Broadly, Industry 4.0 aligns with the value-free position: that technologies are neutral instruments designed to optimise processes and solve specific technical or operational challenges. In effect, the primary focus of Industry 4.0 is technological utility and the assumption that technology would benefit society as long as they are used effectively. Conversely, the focus of Industry 5.0 is on human agency, rather than technological utility. Thus, Industry 5.0 takes a more sceptical view of the inherent character of technology. It assumes that technology can have intrinsic negative or positive qualities, and human agents are required to shape it in order to optimise the positive qualities and mitigate the negative attributes. From this latter perspective, Industry 5.0 pillars of humancentricity, resilience and sustainability are the values that guide, not only how technology is deployed, but also how it is

designed. For example, AI algorithms, trained with biased or incomplete data, are inherently flawed and lead to negative outcomes. This is a matter of intrinsic quality, and not simply of specific, human-led applications.

This Special Issue therefore draws attention to the critical importance of non-technological factors, including organisational structures and processes, and employee training, that guide and guard the applications of digital technologies. These non-technological factors also influence the choices of technologies. Thus, Oyinlola *et al*. (2024) highlight the importance of regime-level changes and socio-technical factors in accelerating the transition from linear technologies and models of production to circular innovations. In effect, Oyinlola and colleagues begin with the assumption that linear technologies are inherently flawed, independent of how they are used,because they work at cross purposes with the global sustainability agenda. Even so, they argue, it is not enough that circular technologies are deemed to be clean, "good" technologies. There is a need for a multi-stakeholder network of human agents to make the right decisions and create structures and processes that can drive system-level changes underpinned by circular values.

However, it must also be acknowledged that the Value Free Vs Value debate does not reduce to a clean dichotomy of "clean" vs "dirty" technologies. Instead of a rigid binary, digital technologies occupy a spectrum in which some are "cleaner" or "dirtier" than others in terms of their ecological impacts. Thus, the essential argument of Industry 5.0 is that, wherever a technology is on the spectrum, human agents and non-technological factors play a role in determining the benefits or hazards that emanate from their deployment. Furthermore, Industry 5.0 is not, in itself, a linear progression from Industry 4.0, in terms of next-generation technologies emerging in the wake of Industry 4.0 technologies. It is rather a discontinuous trajectory underpinned by a new emphasis on human-centric values for sustainable use and resilient deployment of technological tools; rather than a drive towards the creation of more advanced technologies.

3.2 Does Industry 5.0 slow technological advance and human progress?

A related argument focuses on the potential impacts of Industry 5.0 on technological progress. It is sometimes suggested that Industry 5.0 principles are tantamount to the imposition of restrictions on the sort of free experimentation and creativity that drive technological progress, therefore striking at the very foundation of endeavours that have helped human address the most pressing problems and challenges in history. Others have also suggested that the concept of Industry 5.0 is frivolous and confusing, because it unnecessarily draws attention away from the evolution and progress of Industry 4.0, which, they argue, is far from complete.

As previously mentioned, the central argument of Industry 5.0 proponents is that it is not a linear progression from Industry 4.0 in terms of the emergence of new technologies, but rather a new way of looking at, and deploying, Industry 4.0 technologies. In this respect, it is possible for Industry 4.0 and Industry 5.0 to develop concurrently in mutual complementarity. It is possible to consolidate the development of Industry 4.0 technologies, while at the same time promote and entrench new values and principles to guide their deployment. Crucially, Industry 5.0 aims to raise, rather than lower, the bar of ambition for technological progress. It does this by simply expanding, harmonising and deepening the scope of technological ambition based on human needs and ecological sustainability.

Therefore, Industry 5.0 raises the bar of technological ambition by anchoring its principles on the pillars of humancentricity, resilience and sustainability. Humancentricity prioritises technologies that enhance human well-being, focussing on accessibility, inclusivity and ethical considerations. This entails not only designing user-friendly tools but ensuring that AI and automation do not displace human agency. Resilience, as a pillar, challenges technologies to withstand and adapt to disruptions, from economic shocks to climate challenges, ensuring continuity and robustness in systems. Sustainability extends the ambition further by demanding that technologies align with ecological goals, including carbon neutrality, resource

conservation and waste minimisation. These ambitions elevate the objectives for Industry 4.0 technologies, requiring them to integrate seamlessly into sustainable practices while fostering equitable human progress. By embedding these principles into the innovation process, Industry 5.0 fosters the evolution of Industry 4.0 technologies, driving their iterative improvement and adaptation to meet complex societal and ecological challenges.

3.3 Convergence of resilience and humancentricity

The double-edged potentials of digital technologies to at once instigate and mitigate disruptions align closely with the centrality of human needs at the heart of Industry 5.0. This Special Issue highlights some of the key areas in which resilience and humancentricity converge in a mutually reinforcing dynamic. As Saini *et al*. noted, the rise of digital technologies and social media in the workplace, especially in high-pressure sectors like IT, has precipitated "technostress"- a phenomenon that affects employee mental health, productivity and overall well-being. This challenge underlines the need for resilient systems and governance structures to mitigate the negative effects of technostress. By fostering environments where technology is designed and deployed to prioritise human needs, organisations can create supportive ecosystems that enhance employee well-being while maintaining productivity.

Similarly, as Abioye and co-authors observed, limited access to digital tools can exacerbate economic inequities, slow agricultural productivity and instigate social disruptions, particularly in regions with significant socio-economic vulnerabilities like Nigeria. By promoting inclusive technological adoption, digital tools can bridge gaps in agricultural knowledge, supply chain efficiency and market access. Equipping farmers with digital platforms enhances their resilience to economic shocks and climate disruptions. Thus, the Industry 5.0 focus on The focus on digital equity ensures that technological advancements benefit marginalised communities, fostering resilience in vulnerable populations while prioritising human welfare.

Furthermore, Oyinlola *et al*. identify systemic barriers to the transition from linear production models to circular economies, particularly in addressing the environmental impacts and associated economic disruptions of waste generation and resource depletion. In response, technologies such as blockchain, AI and big data analytics enable sustainable practices, such as waste reduction and material reuse, supporting ecological and economic stability. The shift to a circular economy exemplifies how resilience is intertwined with human-centric design-ensuring technological solutions not only address environmental challenges but also improve quality of life by creating and supporting sustainable living conditions.

These areas underline how technological innovations can simultaneously enhance resilience and prioritise human well-being. By addressing workplace challenges, promoting digital inclusion and advancing sustainability, Industry 5.0 aligns technological progress with human-centric values to create systems that adapt to and overcome disruption

4. Conclusion

The papers in this Special Issue collectively illustrate the transformative potential of Industry 5.0, particularly its pillars of humancentricity, resilience and sustainability, in addressing the complexities of DT. These contributions reflect a shared understanding that technological advancement, when aligned with human and ecological priorities, can drive inclusive and sustainable progress across diverse sectors.

A key cross-cutting theme is the critical interplay between resilience and humancentricity. The insights that, while digital tools offer immense opportunities, they also present challenges such as workplace stress and inequities in access. Thus, in line with the humancentric imperative, organisations are urged to adopt adaptive systems that prioritise employee

well-being, foster inclusivity and provide pathways for skill development. By embedding these principles, organisations can ensure that technology serves human needs, rather than amplifying vulnerabilities.

Another significant insight is the necessity of systemic approaches to sustainability. The papers highlight the transition from linear to circular economic models as a vital imperative for ensuring resource efficiency and environmental protection. Technology is positioned not merely as a solution but as part of a broader ecosystem that requires structural reforms, stakeholder collaboration and long-term commitment to sustainable practices.

Finally, the papers collectively emphasise the importance of equity in technological deployment. From creative economies to agriculture, ensuring that marginalised communities are included in DT processes emerges as a recurring priority. Inclusive governance and equitable access to technology are essential to bridging socio-economic divides and realising the full potential of Industry 5.0.

In conclusion, the Special Issue provides theoretical insights and empirical contributions to explicate the synergy of technological innovations with social and ecological imperatives. Thus, dynamic synergy is presented as the linchpin of resilient, human-centric and sustainable systems, fostering a future where technology supports holistic progress.

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Further reading

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