

Social Leadership as a Driver of Digital Library Service Innovation: a Literature Case Study 2018–2024

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ABSTRACT

Technological developments in the digital era have forced libraries to transform through digital-based services; however, the success of this transformation depends heavily on leadership capable of driving social and cultural change. This study aims to systematically analyze the functional role of Social Leadership as a driver of innovation in digital library services through a literature review of scientific works published between 2018 and 2024. Using a Comprehensive Literature Review and Thematic Analysis of primary and secondary data, the results indicate that Social Leadership contributes through key dimensions Empathy, Collaboration, Participation, and Social Values which collectively drive innovation in three domains: technology, work processes, and user participation. Key findings confirm that Empathy and Collaboration are the most dominant dimensions in creating an Innovative Culture and reducing resistance to change. It is concluded that Social Leadership is a strategic factor that bridges the technological dimension with human values within an organization, making it key to the sustainability of responsive and user-centric library service innovation in the digital era.

Keywords: *Collaboration; Digital Library; Library Service Innovation; Social Leadership; Transformation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology (ICT) has fundamentally changed almost every aspect of human life, including the dynamics of searching, processing, and utilizing information (Bilan et al., 2023). The digital era presents significant challenges, demanding open access, rapid distribution, and efficiency in global knowledge management (Snyder, 2019). ICT has created massive disruption, altering the value chain from the creation to the consumption of information (Ngo et al., 2023). In this context, libraries as institutions managing and providing fundamental information sources face pressure to transform and maintain relevance (Onunka et al., 2023). Digital transformation is no longer just an option, but a strategic necessity to ensure that libraries remain competitive knowledge centers amidst the tide of information disruption, especially with the emergence of more

agile and integrated alternative information providers (Fazira, Y., 2019). The delay in responding to this disruption can result in the marginalization of the library's role in the academic and public ecosystem.

Various academic literatures indicate that university libraries in Indonesia have actively transitioned from conventional services to ICT-based services (Maknun et al., 2021). Technological innovations such as the development of digital repositories, e-libraries, and mobile library applications have been widely adopted to facilitate access to collections without spatial and temporal limitations (Mashud, 2024). The application of cloud computing and artificial intelligence (AI) in cataloging systems and user recommendation services accelerates the automation of information management (Okunlaya et al., 2022). However, the implementation of this digitalization still faces non-technical obstacles such as resistance to change, low staff participation, and weak internal communication (Lecic et al., 2023).

The gap between the need for technological innovation and the failure in change management demands a shift in leadership paradigms (Behie et al., 2023). In management and organization studies, the transformational leadership model is often considered a solution, but in community and knowledge-based library ecosystems, the Social Leadership model offers a more specific and adaptive framework (Moarefi & Janami, 2025). This model is theoretically rooted in the leader's ability to navigate complexity (wicked problems) thru the formation of collaborative networks rather than thru hierarchical commands (Utari & Hadi, 2020). Social leadership emphasizes empathy to deeply understand the needs of librarians and users, as well as collaboration to integrate various resources and ideas across divisions (Moarefi & Janami, 2025). Modern libraries cannot operate as silos; instead, they must function as nodes in a knowledge network, a role that is greatly supported by Social Leadership (Favarin et al., 2024).

In the context of library organization management, leadership becomes a crucial element that determines the direction and success of the innovation process (Samanta et al., 2023). To overcome these non-technical barriers, an adaptive and collaborative leadership model is needed. Social Leadership emerges as a relevant framework, different from traditional leadership that focuses on hierarchy and authority. This model emphasizes the ability to build interpersonal relationships, collaboration, networks, and empathy toward team members and user communities. Social leaders act as moral drivers and facilitators, capable of creating a collaborative work environment and encouraging active participation in innovation (Utari & Hadi, 2020). The main mechanism is building social capital among the staff, which in turn increases trust and the willingness to take innovative risks. This leadership is oriented toward creating a climate of trust and justice, which is crucial for promoting ethical values and positive change within the organization (Yukl, 2013).

The reality on the ground increasingly reinforces that innovation in digital library services is truly born from Social Leadership that can inspire and mobilize teams, not merely from technology policies alone (Pascual, 2021). The success of developing a one-stop digital service system or collaborative service often stems from leadership initiatives that encourage cross-division collaboration and active user engagement. Empirical examples show that successfully transformed libraries have leaders who can transform resistance conflicts into collaborative energy to achieve common goals (Harmoko, 2017). Leaders who prioritize participatory communication (such as open dialogs and town hall meetings) demonstrate a much higher level of acceptance of digital innovations compared to organizations with a vertical command structure (Majumdarr et al., 2025). This proves that Social Leadership is a catalyst that transforms technological potential into actual service innovations.

Meanwhile, other leadership models such as transactional leadership (based on rewards and punishments) or bureaucratic leadership (based on rules) are relevant for maintaining stability and operational efficiency, but both models have proven ineffective in meeting the demands for rapid

innovation in the digital era (Santarsiero et al., 2024). Transactional leadership fails to foster intrinsic motivation for innovation because its focus is on short-term results, not on creating a learning organization culture (Dukanac et al., 2025). Meanwhile, bureaucratic leadership actually reinforces silos and hinders cross-functional collaboration, which is an absolute prerequisite for integrating e-resources and unified digital services (Ahmad et al., 2026). Social Leadership fills this gap by focusing on psychological capital (empathy) and social capital (collaboration) as the main resources for innovation, making it the most suitable model for a fast-paced and knowledge-based library ecosystem (Cantafio & Munna, 2024).

Although there has been research stating that participatory leadership can enhance librarian motivation and librarian-user synergy (Kumala & Agustina, 2018), the literature on Social Leadership in libraries often remains fragmentary or focused on single cases. There is still a significant gap in the literature that specifically and systematically examines the role of Social Leadership as a key catalyst for library service innovation in the digital era. Studies that explicitly map the dimensions of Social Leadership (Empathy, Collaboration, Participation) and connect them with various types of digital library service innovations (technology, process, participatory) within the relevant time period (2018-2024) have not been clearly delineated. This gap becomes very important because the post-2018 literature reflects the library's response to the acceleration of technological disruption and changes in user behavior triggered by global events.

The limitation of the study to recent scientific literature, specifically publications from 2018 to 2024, holds strong methodological and contextual significance. This time period critically encompasses an era where cloud computing technology, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and big data have reached substantial levels of maturity and adoption in the public sector. In addition, this period includes the post-COVID-19 pandemic years, during which there was a forced acceleration of the digitalization of library services. Therefore, the literature case study within this time frame provides the most relevant and up-to-date overview of successful Social Leadership practices in situations of extreme pressure and change. This study serves as a synthesis mapping to identify best leadership practices in digital libraries.

Based on the background and research gap, the Research Problem is to explicitly identify how the principles of Social Leadership are translated into real innovation strategies in digital library services and how the scientific literature reflects this causal relationship. Therefore, the aim of this study is to analyze and map the role of Social Leadership as a key driver of library service innovation in the digital era thru a systematic analysis of scientific literature published from 2018 to 2024. This study will identify leadership practices, implementation strategies, and the impact of Social Leadership on the development of sustainable information services.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with the Comprehensive Literature Review method. This method was chosen to systematically identify, analyze, and synthesize findings from existing scholarly works, particularly those discussing the relationship between Social Leadership and digital library service innovation (Snyder, 2019). The descriptive qualitative approach aims to deeply interpret the concepts and practices of leadership found in the reviewed literature.

The data collection strategy was carried out thru a Systematic Literature Review (Library Research) with a publication date range limitation between the years 2018 to 2024. Literature searches were conducted on reputable indexed scientific databases such as Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), Google Scholar, and DOAJ to ensure the quality and coverage of relevant articles. The main keywords

used in the search were combined using Boolean operators, including: Social Leadership, Library Innovation, and Digital Services. Scientific journal articles that serve as Primary Data must meet the inclusion criteria, namely focusing on the role of leadership in driving library digital service innovation and published within the period of 2018–2024. Meanwhile, Secondary Data in the form of textbooks, review papers, theses, or reports are used as supporting data to strengthen the theoretical framework and background of the research.

The collected data is then analyzed thru the stages of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process includes three main stages. First, Data Reduction, which involves sorting and extracting key data (types of leadership, forms of innovation, impact) from relevant articles. Second, Data Categorization, where data is grouped into thematic categories such as Dimensions of Social Leadership (Collaboration, Networks, Empathy) and Forms of Digital Service Innovation (Technology, Process, Service Model). Finally, Interpretation and Synthesis, which aims to interpret the causal relationship between Social Leadership and Library Service Innovation, to be used in answering the research questions.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Literature Study Results

This research was conducted thru a literature study approach by reviewing scientific articles, proceedings, and research reports published between 2018–2024. The range of this publication period was chosen based on two strong scientific and contextual justifications as follows: First, the Acceleration of Digital Disruption and Technological Maturity: The year 2018 marks a period when key technologies driving the disruption of library services, such as cloud computing, Artificial Intelligence (AI) in cataloging, and Big Data analysis, have reached levels of maturity and substantial adoption. The literature published since this year reflects the strategic responses of libraries to these technologies, making it a relevant period to observe case studies of innovation.

Second, the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Forced Transition: This period encompasses the years when the COVID-19 pandemic (starting in 2020) forced libraries worldwide to undergo massive and rapid digital acceleration. This event serves as an empirical catalyst that tests the effectiveness of leadership in driving remote and collaborative service innovations. Therefore, post-2020 literature specifically provides strong evidence regarding the role of Social Leadership in facing extreme change pressures. Thus, the limitation to the period 2018–2024 ensures that this literature analysis is relevant, contextual, and up-to-date regarding the challenges and solutions of Social Leadership in the modern digital library ecosystem, and not just on transitional innovations. Furthermore, the primary sources come from reputable international and national journals. The focus of the review is directed toward the relationship between social leadership and library service innovation in the context of digital transformation. The primary and secondary sources are as follows:

Table 1. Primary Data Sources and Secondary Data Sources

Analysis Category	Dimension / Type of Innovation	Focus on Findings/Implementation in the Literature	Specific Role of Social Leadership
A. Dimensions of Social Leadership	Empathy and Open Communication	Leaders who actively listen to the ideas of librarians and users create an innovative climate	Motivating librarians, creating a collaborative work environment, and

(Primary Source)		(Lecic et al., 2023).	encouraging bottom-up ideas.
	Cross-Functional Team Collaboration	Social leadership encourages networking and collaboration between divisions, as well as between organizations (North-Samardzic et al., 2024).	Facilitating cross-border collaboration to create integrated service solutions.
	Participation in Decision-Making	Active involvement of librarians, including in the design and processing of electronic collections (Nurhayati, 2023).	Fostering a sense of ownership and collective responsibility for the success of innovation.
	Social Values and Work Ethics	Leaders instill values of public service, social responsibility, and openness (Kamariah, 2025).	Encouraging technology adaptation thru the provision of training and social mentoring, as well as resource allocation.
B. Type of Service Innovation (Secondary Source)	Technological Innovation	The implementation of a mobile library app, AI-based cataloging, and the development of digital infrastructure (Okunlaya et al., 2022).	Encouraging technology adaptation thru the provision of training and social mentoring, as well as resource allocation.
	Work Process Innovation	Development of a knowledge-sharing platform among librarians or implementation of agile management (Corrall & Jolly, 2019).	Facilitating cross-functional collaboration and communication to streamline digital service workflows.
	Participatory Innovation	User involvement in co-design service and crowdsourcing digital collections (Scharf & Dera, 2021a).	Opening spaces for public participation and building community networks, making services responsive.

The results of the analysis from the above data mapping show that social leadership plays an important role in driving library service innovation, not only thru strategic policies but also thru the formation of a collaborative, empathetic, and user-centered organizational culture. In the majority of the reviewed literature, the social aspect of leadership has proven to be a catalyst in fostering

creativity, participation, and librarian engagement in technology-based service innovations.

Literature Review Results

a. Relevant Dimensions of Social Leadership in the Digital Era

A comprehensive literature study shows that the success of library service innovations in the digital era heavily relies on the adoption of four main dimensions of social leadership. These dimensions, which serve as triggers for an innovative culture, include: (1) Empathy-based leadership, (2) Collaborative leadership, (3) Participative decision-making, and (4) Value-driven motivation. Details of the main findings supporting each dimension are presented in the table below:

Table 2. Dimensions of Social Leadership and Main Findings from the Literature Review

No	Dimensions of Social Leadership	Literature Findings Focus	Impact on Service Innovation
1	Empathy and open communication	Leaders who actively listen to the ideas of librarians and users create an innovative climate (Lecic et al., 2023).	Enhancing the creativity of new service ideas and staff job satisfaction
2	Cross-functional team collaboration	Social leadership encourages collaboration between divisions (North-Samardzic et al., 2024).	Improving the efficiency and integration of digital services
3	Participation in decision-making	The involvement of librarians in the processing of electronic collections (Nurhayati, 2023).	Fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility for innovation outcomes
4	Social values and work ethics	Leaders instill the values of public service and social responsibility (Kamariah, 2025).	Strengthening user-oriented service and innovation sustainability

From the table above, it can be specifically understood that the dimensions of Empathy and Open Communication (as a representation of Empathy-based leadership) and Cross-Functional Team Collaboration (as a representation of Collaborative leadership) are the two most dominant aspects in strengthening digital library service innovation. The dominance of Empathy and Collaboration, these two dimensions become dominant because they are supported by the fundamental needs of digital transformation itself. Collaboration (No. 2) is crucial because digital innovation, such as mobile app development or integrated repository systems, requires the integration of knowledge and skills from various divisions (IT, procurement, user services) that can only be realized thru networking-oriented leadership. Meanwhile, Empathy (No. 1) becomes the main pillar because in the digital era, successful services are user-centric services. Leaders who apply Empathy and Open Communication can actively capture the needs of users and ideas from frontline librarians (Lecic et al., 2023), so that the new service ideas that emerge are relevant, creative,

and have high adoption potential, compared to transactional or bureaucratic leadership styles that tend to be rigid and slow to adapt. The dimension of Participation in Decision-Making and Social Values and Work Ethics then serves as a foundation to foster a sense of ownership and sustainability of the innovation.

b. The Relationship Between Social Leadership and Service Innovation

The literature consistently reviewed shows that social leadership has a strong functional and causal relationship with library service innovation, where leadership not only functions as a director but also as a facilitator and inspirator. This relationship manifests in three main domains of innovation, namely: (1) technology-based innovation, (2) process-based innovation, and (3) user participation-based innovation. The details of this functional relationship are summarized in Table 3 below:

Table 3. The Relationship Between Social Leadership and Forms of Library Service Innovation

No.	Type of Service Innovation	Example of Implementation in Literature	Social Leadership Role
1.	Technological innovation	Implementation of a mobile library app, AI-based cataloging (Okunlaya et al., 2022).	Encouraging technology adaptation thru training and social mentoring
2.	Work process innovation	Development of a knowledge-sharing platform among librarians (Corrall & Jolly, 2019)	Facilitating cross-functional collaboration and communication
3.	Participatory innovation	User involvement in co-designing services (Scharf & Dera, 2021b).	Opening public participation spaces in service development

In the realm of Technological Innovation (such as the implementation of a mobile library app or AI-based cataloging), the role of social leadership is to facilitate adoption and reduce resistance. Theoretically, social leadership addresses the technology adaptation curve by providing training, social mentoring, and an environment that supports experimentation. When leaders demonstrate empathy (empathy-based leadership), staff will feel safe to try new technologies despite the potential for failure, which ultimately encourages faster and more effective adaptation (Okunlaya et al., 2022). Thus, social leadership ensures that technology investments are translated into real services thru enhanced capacity and collective motivation.

Process-Based Innovation focuses on internal efficiency, such as the development of knowledge-sharing platforms among librarians or the adoption of agile management. Theoretically, social leadership uses the dimension of cross-functional team collaboration to break thru bureaucratic structures and organizational silos that are the main barriers to efficiency (Corrall & Jolly, 2019). Social leaders function as connectors, creating networks and cross-division communication that enable rapid and effective knowledge flow, which is an absolute prerequisite for creating integrated digital work processes.

For User Participation-Based Innovation (such as co-design service and

crowdsourcing), these relationships are external and value-driven. Social leadership, through the dimensions of social values and work ethics, theorizes that library innovation must be community-centered and needs-driven. Leaders who prioritize openness create spaces for public participation and establish active partnerships with users (Scharf & Dera, 2021a). This ensures that the services developed (for example, the joint development of digital content curation) have a high level of social relevance and sustainability, making the library a center of knowledge collaboration rather than just a passive provider.

Overall, the review results show that social leadership plays a role not only as a policy director but also as a facilitator, connector, and inspirator in driving innovation across all layers of the library organization, ensuring a user-centric and adaptive service transition in the digital era.

c. Supporting Factors and Challenges

Some literature highlights that social leadership requires supportive organizational conditions, such as an open work culture and an innovative performance-based reward system. However, there are still common obstacles, such as the limited technological competencies of librarians, resistance to change, and the lack of institutional policy support.

Table 4. Supporting Factors and Challenges in the Implementation of Social Leadership in Service Innovation

No.	Factor	Description	Impact on Innovation
1.	Organizational support	The existence of policies that encourage collaboration and innovation training	Improving the sustainability of innovation
2.	Librarians' digital competencies	Skills in technology adaptation and digital communication	Accelerating the implementation of new services
3.	Resistance to change	A defensive attitude toward digital systems	Hindering the transformation process
4.	Leadership communication style	Open and participatory interactions	Strengthening staff motivation and creative ideas

The influence of the supporting factors identified in Table 4 directly supports the steps in your Social Leadership conceptual model. For example, Organizational Support (collaboration and training policies) provides the structural legitimacy needed for social leaders to foster Collaboration and Empathy among members. Meanwhile, the open Communication Style of Leadership is the main manifestation of social leadership aimed at enhancing the Active Participation of the team in the decision-making process, thereby accelerating the emergence of original new service ideas. Thus, this supporting factor ensures that the social foundation created by leadership can develop into a strong Innovative Culture.

On the other hand, major challenges such as Resistance to Change and the Limited Digital Competence of Librarians require social leaders to balance between social and technical aspects. Most literature agrees that the success of social leadership is determined by the balance between technical skills and social skills. Leaders who focus solely on technological innovation without considering social aspects tend to fail in building member engagement within the organization because they overlook staff resistance. Therefore, social leaders function as strategic agents of change, capable of bridging the gap between the demands of digital technology and the values and humanitarian needs (social aspects) within the organization.

Most literature agrees that the success of social leadership is determined by the balance between technical skills and social skills. Leaders who focus solely on technological innovation without considering social aspects tend to fail in building member engagement within the organization. The results of the literature review reinforce the view that social leadership is a strategic factor in driving library service innovation in the digital era. Unlike traditional leadership approaches that emphasize control and structure, social leadership fosters creativity and collaboration thru strong interpersonal relationships. The studies reviewed also show that innovation in modern libraries cannot be separated from the humanitarian aspect. Social leaders function as agents of change who can connect the technological dimension with the social values of the organization. By creating a culture of mutual trust and open communication, social leadership helps libraries adapt to the increasingly complex and dynamic needs of digital users.

The overall conceptual model summarized from the findings of this literature study is a gradual relationship between the dimensions of social leadership and adaptive digital services in libraries. Social leadership is the foundation that encourages collaboration and empathy among organizational members. Collaboration and empathy will create a more open and trusting work atmosphere, thereby encouraging the active participation of the entire team in the decision-making process and service development. Strong team participation will build an innovative culture within the library environment, where each member is encouraged to develop new ideas and creative solutions to service challenges. This innovative culture ultimately becomes the main determinant in the emergence of adaptive digital services, which are services capable of quickly and effectively adjusting to user needs and technological developments.

Systematically, this model emphasizes that the transformation of library services, especially in the digital era, cannot be separated from the quality of social leadership that fosters collaboration, empathy, participation, and ultimately sustainable innovation. Each stage reinforces each other until the creation of responsive and relevant digital services in the present. The model shows that innovation does not arise solely from digitalization policies, but from social processes nurtured by inclusive leadership oriented toward human values.

4. CONCLUSION

This research concludes that Social Leadership is a key strategic factor driving library service innovation in the digital era, operating thru the dimensions of Empathy, Collaboration, Participation, and Social Value. Functionally, this leadership triggers innovation in three areas: technology, work processes,

and user participation. The strongest evidence found indicates that the success of service innovation does not solely depend on digital infrastructure, but rather on a gradual social process nurtured by leaders, where Collaboration and Empathy serve as the foundation for building an Innovative Culture and producing Adaptive Digital Services. Thus, Social Leadership functions as an agent of change capable of bridging the technological dimension with human values within the organization.

Although these findings provide a strong perspective on the role of Social Leadership, this study has limitations that need to be acknowledged. This research is a literature review study that limits the analysis to scholarly works available in indexed databases, thus the depth of analysis regarding the direct empirical practices of Social Leadership in the field cannot be achieved. Additionally, the limitation of the publication time frame (2018–2024) restricts the comparison of findings with the context of library leadership in the pre-digital disruption era.

Based on the identified limitations and key findings in the discussion, several areas for further research are recommended. First, it is recommended to conduct a quantitative empirical study to statistically measure the correlation between the dimensions of Social Leadership (Empathy and Collaboration) and the performance indicators of digital service innovation. Second, an in-depth case study (ethnography) on innovative libraries is needed to describe in detail the daily mechanisms of social leadership in addressing challenges such as Resistance to Change and limited Human Resources. Finally, action research on the development and testing of a social-based leadership training model specifically for librarians is also very necessary to ensure the sustainability of digital service innovation.

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