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Bridging Policy and Performance: A Strategic Alignment Perspective on Digital Transformation in Malaysian SMEs

Mingzhuo Han*
Tianjin university , Tianjin, CHINA
***Correspondence: hmz1797499801@qq.com**

Abstract:
With the progress of national strategies such as the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint, the Malaysian government is actively guiding Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) to carry out Digital Transformation. To enhance National Economic Resilience. However, Most SMEs still face weak Digital Leadership, a lack of Digital Culture, insufficient Financial Literacy, and Cybersecurity standardisation and other challenges. This paper is based on official economic and industrial data, combined with four recent international SSCI/SCI journals, and adopts Strategic Alignment Theory (SAT) as the analysis framework. This paper discusses the structural dilemma and organisational mechanism of SMES' digital transformation from three dimensions: Policy, Organisation and Technology. The study found a synergy between Service-Level Alignment (SLA), a key bridge between IT resources and business goals, and Organisational Culture Maturity. It has a significant positive effect on Performance. In addition, the study pointed out that although the Malaysian government has introduced several supportive policies (such as My Digital Grant, MDEC training program), the transformation effectiveness is hindered by low policy reach rate, high implementation complexity, and the lack of enterprise capacity. To promote the sustainable transformation of SMEs, this paper suggests that policy design should pay more attention to the Capability adaptation and process guidance mechanism, and promote the Internal Capability Building of cognition, process and culture. Achieve efficient Coordinated Alignment between policy resources and enterprise performance.

Keywords:
Malaysian SMEs, Digital Transformation, Digital Leadership, Digital Culture, Strategic Alignment Theory

1.Introduction

In the context of the rapid development of the global digital economy, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), as an important support for national economic growth and innovation vitality, are facing unprecedented transformation pressure. In line with the policy directions set out in Malaysia Economic Outlook [1] and Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint [2], the Malaysian government has identified Digital Transformation as one of the key strategies to promote the high-quality development of small and medium-sized enterprises. The construction of digital infrastructure, the improvement of digital capabilities of enterprises and the deepening of ecological cooperation have become the core path of "moving to high-income countries".

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Despite the clear policy direction, most Malaysian SMEs are currently still in the early stages of digital transformation. According to the survey data of SME Corporation Malaysia[3], only 57% of SMEs have completed basic Digital construction, and even fewer of them have truly mastered data-driven strategy and organisational Digital Culture. Real-world challenges include weak Digital infrastructure, lagging employee skills, lack of Digital Leadership among managers, lack of awareness of Cybersecurity and data governance, and difficulty in effectively aligning organisational structure and technology pathways at the strategic level.

Therefore, exploring how SMEs can effectively complete the transition from traditional operations to digital models becomes the core topic of this study. Especially under the superposition of multiple policies (such as RMK-12, My DIGITAL) and the change of geo-economic pattern, it is of great theoretical and practical value to understand the strategic adaptation path of SMEs.

This study is based on Strategic Alignment Theory, combined with the literature on Service-Level Alignment (SLA) and organizational change in recent years, This paper tries to systematically sort out the factors affecting the digital transformation of Malaysian SMEs from three aspects: 1) the effectiveness of policy environment and institutional support; the digital culture and leadership mechanism within the enterprise; the matching degree of digital finance, network security and technical infrastructure. The research methods will combine official policy documents, industry research data and international journal literature, and take the form of inductive analysis and cross-literature comparison.

This study aims to respond to the following two key questions: (1) What are the structural challenges of SMEs in Malaysia under the current digital economy policy framework? (2) What strategic mechanisms (such as digital leadership, culture building and service alignment) can effectively promote the digital transformation and sustainable development of SMEs? Through the above discussion, this paper not only hopes to provide a theoretical supplement for the academic community on the evolution path of SMEs in the digital economy but also provides a practical and feasible transformation strategy reference for policymakers and SME managers.

2.Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Basis and background of digital transformation

Digital Transformation (DT) is not a simple technology replacement, but a systemic change involving organizational culture, strategic alignment, and leadership reconstruction [4]. Veeraya et al. [5] pointed out that DT not only includes the deployment of Digital applications at the tool level but also emphasizes that enterprises should form systematic support in Digital Culture and organizational learning mechanisms, to realize the dual adaptation to external technology and internal structure. Especially in the environment of small and medium-sized enterprises, the cognitive mode and execution of the leader have a significant impact on the transformation process.

2.2. The role of digital leadership and cultural construction in SMEs

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The phenomenon of "external promotion of technology and lagging of internal organisation" is common in SMEs in Malaysia, which is closely related to the lack of Digital Leadership. Sawy et al. [6] define digital leadership as "leadership behaviour that promotes the transformation of technology strategy, integrates resources, and promotes the digital adaptation and cultural reconstruction of employees within an enterprise". Veeraya et al. [5] further proposes four Alignment paths based on the framework of Strategic Alignment Theory (SAT): Strategy Execution (SEA), Technology transformation (TTA), competitive potential (CPA) and Service Layer alignment (SLA), among which SLA is the most effective in promoting the digital transformation of Malaysian SMEs.

At the same time, Digital Culture, as the foundation of the transformation atmosphere within an organisation, is also considered to be a key factor to promote employees' active learning, adoption of innovation and tolerance for failure [7]. According to Cameron and Quinn [8], the core of digital culture lies in "openness, cooperation, adaptation and continuous learning". However, most Malaysian SMEs are still stuck in the "tool-driven" stage, lacking cultural incentives and strategic guidance at the organisational level.

2.3. Maturity and standardisation of network security

In the process of digitalisation, information security is a common weakness faced by small and medium-sized enterprises. Yigit Ozkan and Spruit (2023) proposed the Adaptable Security Maturity Assessment and Standardisation (ASMAS) framework, which pointed out that SMEs in Malaysia and other low - and middle-income countries have problems such as poor adaptability, lack of resources, and weak implementation in Cybersecurity Standardisation.

Although several standards are currently available for large enterprises (e.g. ISO 27001, NIST CSF), in the SMEs scenario, these systems are often difficult to implement due to the organisational capability gap and short-term vision. Therefore, the promotion of localised, hierarchical, and adaptable security maturity assessment mechanisms has become one of the current research hotspots. The SME Corp Malaysia [3] survey similarly pointed out that less than 30% of the surveyed SMEs have a basic information security system in place.

2.4. Financial literacy, digital financial accessibility and enterprise resilience

Financial Literacy and Digital Financial Access have a profound impact on SMEs' transformation resilience. Under the BRICS research framework, M.V. et al. [10] emphasised that the improvement of financial literacy can effectively improve the capital operation ability of enterprises, resilience to external shocks and the adoption rate of emerging technologies. Its research uses Random Forest regression and principal component analysis (PCA) and other methods to confirm that SMEs with a high financial cognition level and digital finance use ability are more likely to achieve performance growth in the transformation path.

In the context of Malaysia, SMEs generally face difficulties in financing, a weak credit system, and an insufficient understanding of digital financial products. World Bank Group [11] also pointed out that the lack of financial awareness will further limit the ability of enterprises to access emerging technologies and e-commerce platforms, thus falling into the triple dilemma of "resources-capacity-market".

2.5. Policy environment and digital transformation trend of SMEs in Malaysia

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The policy environment is an important external variable affecting SMEs' transformation. The Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint [2] proposes to achieve digital penetration of more than 80% of SMEs by 2030 and build a national-level digital economy ecosystem around five pillars - infrastructure, talent, innovation, governance and security. However, according to the Malaysia SME Digitalisation Survey [3], only 57% of SMEs have carried out basic digitalisation activities by 2023, much lower than neighbouring countries such as Singapore and Vietnam.

In addition, Malaysia Economic Monitor [11] and International Monetary Fund (IMF) [2] both pointed out that despite the government's support policies such as My Digital Grant and MDEC technology training, However, at the level of SMEs, there are still obstacles such as "information asymmetry", "high threshold for declaration" and "policy fragmentation". This indicates that the digital transformation of SMEs not only needs technical and cultural preparation, but also urgently needs the coordinated support of governance mechanisms and policy implementation.

3.Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Densign

Using multi-source comparative analysis, this study focuses on the organisational transformation path of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Malaysia in the context of the national digitalisation strategy. The research framework is based on Strategic Alignment Theory (SAT), and the Service-Level Alignment (SLA) path is the core. Two organisational variables, Digital Leadership and Digital Culture, were added to construct the influencing mechanism model of SMEs' digital performance.

Considering that there are many authoritative public data and policy literature available, this paper does not carry out a field questionnaire survey or in-depth interview but adopts the secondary data analysis method to conduct a structural assessment and comparative analysis of the digital capabilities of Malaysian SMEs through the existing data and theoretical resources.

3.2. Date Source

All data and materials used in this study were obtained from publicly available and authoritative sources, which are of verifiable and policy reference value. Data types include the following three categories: (1) Official Economic and Industry Reports, Data from Malaysia Economic Outlook 2024 [1], Quarterly GDP Report Q4 [12], Malaysia SME Digitalisation Survey[3], etc. These reports, which cover core indicators such as GDP structure, industry development, SMEs' digital penetration rate, and financing difficulty, are publicly available through the official website. (2) The National Policy Documents and Strategic Plans include Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint [2] and Twelfth National strategic texts, such as Malaysia Plan and My Digital Grant Policy Guide, show the institutional design and key measures of Malaysia in promoting the digitalisation of SMEs. This literature is used to analyse the degree of alignment between national policy objectives and corporate organisational mechanisms. (3) Author-Processed Secondary Data

Based on the above literature and data, the author extracted the core variables related to the digital transformation of SMEs, constructed the structural analysis logic, and formed the secondary dataset for the research.

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At the same time, four international SSCI/SCI journals in the past three years were combined to carry out variable logic verification and localisation adaptation and improve the theoretical thickness and contextual relevance of the research.

3.3. Analytical Approach

This study uses the following three complementary analysis methods: (1) Structured Literature Synthesis - The selected international journal literature was systematically disassembled, and the variables and mechanism models related to SLA, Digital Leadership, and Digital Culture were extracted. The organisational influence framework of this study was constructed based on the SAT theory. (2) Policy-variable Mapping analyses - the logical association between Policy texts and organisational variables. Examine whether there is an "alignment gap" or "translation gap" between national policy orientation and enterprise internal capabilities. (3) Trend Extraction and Visualization - Data on SMEs' digital penetration rate, industry participation rate and financing capacity from 2019 to 2023 are extracted from official reports, and key structural features are presented with trend charts and comparison charts (see Figure 1 and Figure 2) to provide data support for the result analysis in Chapter 4.

4.Results

4.1. Analysis of the digital transformation status of SMEs in Malaysia

According to the data of Malaysia SME Digitalization Survey [3], the overall Digital Adoption Rate of Malaysian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is about 57% by 2023, Only 6.3% of them use Advanced Digital Tools such as data analytics, ERP or AI, indicating that most SMEs are still in the "basic access" stage. This compares with 76% in Singapore and 64% in Vietnam over the same period [11].

Specifically, the manufacturing and professional services industries have relatively high levels of digitalisation, at 65% and 60%, respectively. In agriculture, retail and construction, digital penetration is less than 50%. This indicates that the degree of digitalisation of SMEs shows obvious sectoral disparity, which is closely related to the capital intensity and technology orientation of the industry in which the enterprises are located.

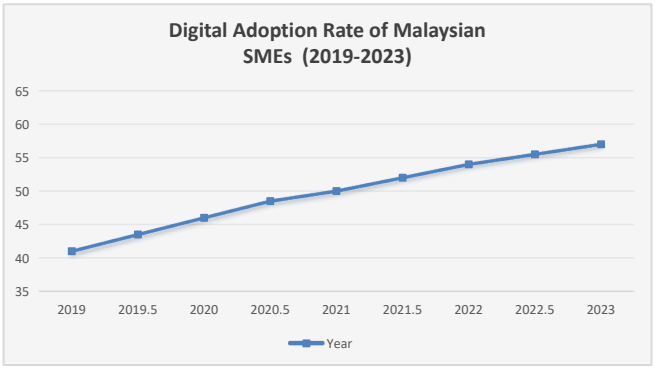


Figure 1. Digital Adoption Rate of Malaysian SMEs (2019–2023), based on semiannual observation points. Data source: DOSM, 2024.

Data source: SME Corporation Malaysia[3], the figure shows that the digitalisation rate of SMEs in Malay-

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sia has increased from 41% to 57% in the past five years, but the growth rate has slowed year by year, indicating that there is still a gap between policy promotion and enterprise capabilities.

4.2. Organisational mechanism dilemma: Lack of alignment of leadership, culture and service

At the organisational level, SMEs generally face three bottlenecks in the process of promoting Digital transformation: (1) Lack of Digital Leadership Gap: most SMEs are still dominated by traditional managers and lack strategic cognition of digital technology and resource integration ability. Veeraya et al. [5] pointed out that the lack of digital cognition of leaders will directly affect the formation and execution of transformation strategies. (2) Low Digital Culture Maturity: Many employees are resistant to technology adoption and lack mechanisms for collaboration, learning, and risk tolerance, making it difficult to sustain a continuous transformation process [7]. (3) Lack of service-level Alignment (SLA): According to the strategic alignment theory (SAT), service-level alignment refers to the response mechanism between internal IT Service capabilities and user requirements. However, the survey shows that SMEs in Malaysia generally do not establish a systematic SLA process, resulting in a mismatch between resource input and organisational objectives. For example, more than half of enterprises do not have an IT position or digital lead, and many transformation projects are carried out by non-specialist staff, affecting effectiveness and efficiency[3].

4.3. Interaction trends between policy effectiveness and variables

Although the Malaysian government has successively launched the "My DIGITAL", "Twelfth Malaysia Plan" and several SME support policies (such as digital transformation matching fund, technical training subsidy, tax reduction, etc.), there are structural bottlenecks in the policy effectiveness, mainly as follows: Low Policy Reachability Gap: according to the 2023 data, only about 22% of SMEs have applied for relevant digital incentive programs, especially micro enterprises and rural enterprises are difficult to obtain policy support due to information asymmetry and operation complexity [3]. Policy-capability Mismatch: Some incentive policies emphasise software tools or platform access, but do not fully consider whether the enterprise has human resources, systems, and cultural foundations, resulting in "excessive tool access and insufficient organisational collaboration". Unbalanced trend of variable interaction: This study integrates literature and reports and finds that in the multi-factor model of driving digital transformation performance, SLA mechanism has a significant positive relationship with digital culture variables, but its role in promoting the adoption of high-level technologies (such as AI and data analytics) is much weaker than policy subsidies and tax incentives. This suggests that "organisational mechanisms" are effective for "fundamental transformation" but have a limited role in driving "technological leap", which still needs external resources [10], [13].

The figure shows the differences in the penetration and approval rates of three types of SMEs (micro, small and medium) in the government's digital support policies. Data show that although the policy compliance rate has gradually increased (18% to 34%), the actual success rate of application is still low, especially for micro enterprises, which is only 6%. It shows that there is a clear disconnect between the policy dissemination mechanism and the execution ability of enterprises.

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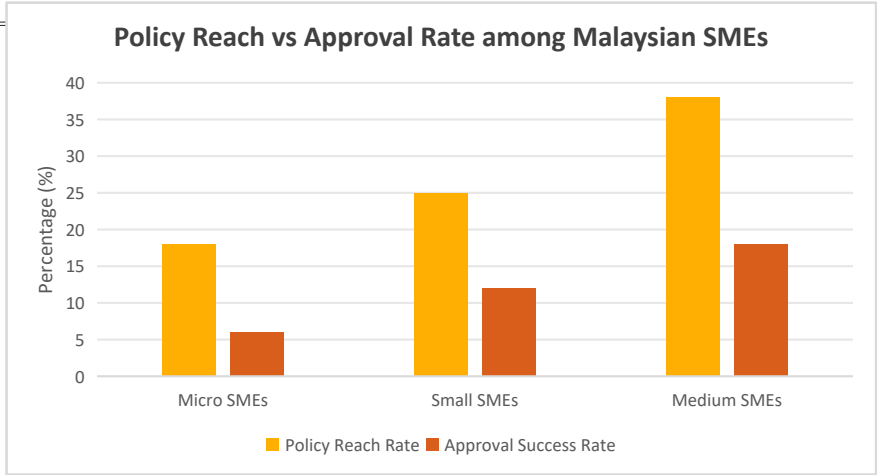


Figure 2. Comparison chart of SMEs policy reach rate and application success rate in Malaysia.

Comprehensive analysis shows that Malaysian SMEs present three dilemmas of "structural imbalance, insufficient organisational preparation and policy implementation differentiation" in the digital path. Despite the clear government planning and strong industry trend, the Capability Foundation and Cultural Alignment at the enterprise level still do not effectively connect with policy goals, forming a transformation bottleneck.

5.Discussion

5.1. National comparison and analysis of the causes of structural dilemma

Although the Malaysian government has made significant progress in digital strategic layout in recent years, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) still face the tension of "structural progression-organisational lag" in the actual transformation process. Compared with Singapore and Vietnam, Malaysian SMEs show a large gap in terms of digital penetration, technology adoption speed and organisational synergy. Singapore, for example, has strengthened the synergy between national infrastructure, tax policy and training systems through its "Smart Nation" initiative and established the "Digital Leaders Programme". Directly support enterprises to build internal Digital Leadership and technology cognition structures [14].

In Malaysia, despite the funding and platform support promoted by My DIGITAL and MDEC, there is still a lack of a sustained mechanism for SMEs' internal governance, cultural reshaping and organisational adaptation. This lack makes it difficult for companies to establish a transformation path that matches their capabilities, even if they have access to the tools and platforms. Chapter 4 points out that only 22% of SMEs have applied for relevant digital incentive programs, reflecting problems in both Reachability and Operability of the policies.

5.2. Theoretical level: Core roles and limitations of the SLA mechanism

According to Strategic Alignment Theory (SAT), Service-Level Alignment (SLA) in an organisation is the key bridge to achieve policy landing and effective resource allocation. The study found that SLAS not only affect the alignment between IT resources and business requirements, but also largely determine a company's system capabilities in terms of cultural adaptation, employee engagement, and performance evaluation.

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In the Malaysian context, the lack of an SLA mechanism leads to a significant "Translation Gap" between policies and enterprises. On the one hand, government policies mostly emphasise instrumental goals (such as digital platform deployment and e-commerce channel expansion), but the lack of clear process managers or digital principals within enterprises makes it difficult to implement policy resources. On the other hand, some enterprise managers rely too much on external solution providers and ignore their internalisation capability, forming a false transformation of "external access - internal hollow".

In addition, according to the results of this paper, there is a positive synergy between the SLA mechanism and Digital Culture, indicating that the openness, learning and collaboration of organisational culture are the basis for building an effective alignment mechanism. These finding echoes Leal-Rodríguez et al. [7] 's culture-driven transformation model, which also emphasises that culture is not a background variable, but an active element of digital transformation. The theoretical framework constructed in this paper is shown in Figure 3, which emphasises the transmission of strategic goals to enterprise performance through the service layer mechanism.

This figure shows how the Strategic Goals of national Digital policies can be achieved through Organisational Mechanisms - in particular, service layer alignment (SLA), Digital Leadership, digital culture (Digital Culture) and Cybersecurity Readiness - jointly drive the path of SMEs to achieve Digital Outcomes. This framework is the basis for constructing the analytical model in this paper.

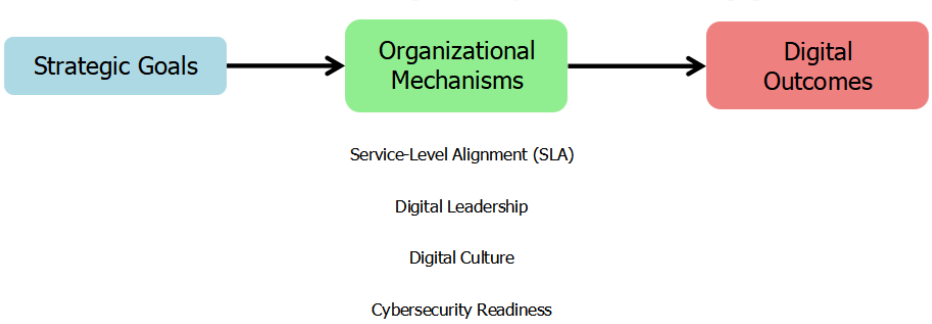


Figure 3. Conceptual model linking strategic goals, organisational mechanisms, and digital outcomes among Malaysian SMEs.

5.3. Multi-dimensional action path of digital leadership

The findings support the centrality of Digital Leadership in SME transformation. Veeraya et al. [5] pointed out that leaders with vision, integration and change management ability can guide enterprises to shift from tool procurement to process reengineering and culture reshaping, to achieve true structural transformation. At present, there are many "traditional management" leaders in Malaysian SMEs. Their understanding of technology adoption is still limited to the level of cost control or marketing means, which makes it difficult to form a strategic deployment.

Notably, Tiwasing et al.[13] proposed that the construction of Digital Social Capital can also compensate for the lack of resources for leaders. Small and medium-sized enterprises can obtain external knowledge, financing and customer resources by joining social media business networks and industrial alliances and indirectly enhance their technology acceptance ability and cultural renewal speed. This point provides a feasible

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transition path for Malaysian SMEs in the context of insufficient leadership. As shown in the Figure 4 simulation, the synergy of service layer alignment and digital cultural maturity can significantly improve digital performance, with a nonlinear additive effect.

The figure simulates the improvement trend of overall Performance by the synergistic relationship between Service-Level Alignment and Digital Culture maturity of an enterprise. As the levels of the two variables increase at the same time, the performance shows a significant accelerating upward trend, indicating that the nonlinear interaction between them plays a key role in the success of enterprise digitalisation.

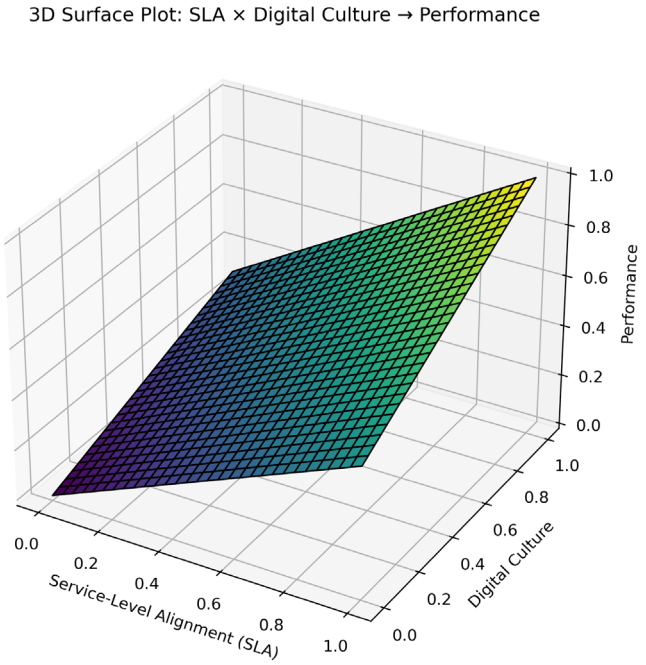


Figure 3. Interaction effect of SLA and Digital Culture on Performance (3d surface plot).

Through transnational experience comparison and theoretical review, this chapter points out that the structural dilemma of Malaysian SMEs' digital transformation comes from the "mismatch between internal and external mechanisms". Among them, the weak SLA mechanism, the lack of digital culture maturity and the traditional leadership structure are the key reasons for the bottleneck of transformation. To achieve policy implementation and performance improvement, it is necessary to start from "organisational capacity building" and strengthen the synergy of internal cognition, process and culture.

6.Conclusions

As Malaysia promotes the implementation of national strategies such as the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint and the Twelfth Malaysia Plan, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play an increasingly important role in the digital economy system. However, this study found that despite increasing policy support, most SMEs still face significant obstacles in the digital transformation process, including a lack of digital leadership, a lagging organisational culture, and weak service layer alignment mechanisms. Together, these factors constitute the core bottleneck in the current digital development of SMEs in Malaysia.

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By integrating policy literature, industry reports, and international academic research, this paper constructs an analysis framework based on Strategic Alignment Theory (SAT) with Service-Level Alignment (SLA) as the core. Combined with the two variables of Digital Leadership and Digital Culture, this paper systematically analyses the structural difficulties and policy implementation difficulties of SMEs in the transformation process. The results show that organisational mechanism variables have a positive synergistic effect on enterprise digital performance, but their influence is still limited by the basic level of enterprise internal capabilities and system construction.

The theoretical significance of this study lies in deepening the exploration of the local applicability of SAT theory in SMEs' digitalisation background, emphasising the three-dimensional mechanism of "culture-ability-institution" linkage. In practice, this paper suggests that in future policy design, the government should not only pay attention to platform tools and financial support but also strengthen the support for internal capacity building of enterprises. These include setting up a dedicated Digital Transformation Coaching mechanism, promoting SMEs to establish SLA process management standards, and promoting knowledge sharing and digital social capital networks among enterprises through industry associations.

The main limitation of this study is that a field questionnaire survey and interview were not carried out, and data analysis was mainly based on secondary data and trend induction. Future studies can conduct longitudinal studies on the organisational evolution process of SMEs at different stages of digital maturity to further verify the applicability and universality of the variable mechanism model proposed in this study.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Author Contributions

All work was conducted solely by the author.

Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data Curation, Writing – original draft preparation, Writing – review and editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration, and Funding acquisition: Mingzhuo Han.

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Securities for offering access to practical data and industry insights relevant to this study.

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