

Reframing Stakeholder Salience in Digital Ecosystems: Toward Inclusive Corporate Decision-Making

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ABSTRACT. The acceleration of digital transformation has profoundly reshaped stakeholder dynamics, challenging traditional assumptions of stakeholder salience theory. This conceptual paper revisits the classic framework of power, legitimacy, and urgency, proposing a reconceptualisation suited for digital ecosystems. It argues that digitalisation introduces new sources of stakeholder influence, including algorithmic visibility, data control, and network interconnectivity, which redefine salience hierarchies. Drawing upon interdisciplinary perspectives from stakeholder theory, digital governance, and organisational communication, the study develops the notion of digital salience—a dynamic construct reflecting the fluidity of influence in online environments. The paper further explores how inclusive corporate decision-making processes, grounded in transparency and participatory governance, can enhance organisational adaptability and legitimacy in data-driven contexts. The discussion highlights the need for ethical and collaborative frameworks capable of addressing power asymmetries inherent in digital ecosystems. Overall, this research provides theoretical and managerial insights into reframing stakeholder salience for the digital age, bridging classical stakeholder theory with contemporary realities of algorithmic governance and networked stakeholder engagement.

Keyword: Algorithmic Power; Digital Ecosystems; Inclusive Governance; Stakeholder Salience

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INTRODUCTION

The stakeholder theory, introduced by Freeman (1984), has long served as a cornerstone for understanding corporate relationships and decision-making. It posits that organizations must manage and balance the interests of diverse stakeholder groups to achieve long-term legitimacy and sustainability (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). However, the emergence of digital ecosystems—characterized by platform-based interactions, networked value creation, and data-driven coordination—has disrupted traditional stakeholder configurations (Adner, 2017). In such environments, stakeholder relationships are fluid, dynamic, and often algorithmically mediated, challenging static notions of stakeholder identity and power. As digital platforms reshape market boundaries and governance mechanisms, the salience of stakeholders—defined as their power, legitimacy, and urgency (Mitchell et al., 1997)—requires fundamental reconsideration.

Recent research suggests that digital transformation alters not only the structure of stakeholder relationships but also the logic of salience attribution (Laplume et al., 2018; Crane et al., 2022). Digital ecosystems decentralize control, democratize voice, and enable new forms of participation through technological affordances such as social media, artificial intelligence, and blockchain. These technologies empower previously marginalized stakeholders by amplifying visibility and connectivity (Suddaby et al., 2020). At the same time, they introduce asymmetries of data access and algorithmic power, allowing platform owners to dominate agenda-setting (Zuboff, 2019). Consequently, stakeholder salience in the digital age is not merely a function of social legitimacy but increasingly of digital visibility and data possession.

The classic model of stakeholder salience—based on managerial perception—faces limitations in contexts where decision-making is augmented by automated systems and data analytics. Scholars have begun to question whether traditional managerial cognition remains the primary determinant of stakeholder prioritization (de Bakker et al., 2020). In algorithmically governed ecosystems, the boundaries between managerial agency and technological mediation blur. Machine learning systems now curate stakeholder information, predict reputational risks, and even influence corporate social responsibility (CSR) disclosures (Bini et al., 2022). These changes call for an epistemological shift from human-centric to techno-social understandings of salience determination.

Furthermore, digital ecosystems have expanded the stakeholder universe beyond traditional actors such as investors, customers, and employees to include non-human entities like algorithms, data infrastructures, and artificial agents (Kellner et al., 2021). These entities possess indirect yet profound influence over corporate outcomes, shaping flows of information, attention, and legitimacy. Such developments render the classic power–legitimacy–urgency (PLU) framework incomplete, as it was conceptualized in a pre-digital era that presumed stable hierarchies and human actors (Mitchell et al., 1997). A reframed conceptualization is thus necessary to accommodate the non-linear, networked, and hybrid nature of stakeholder interactions in digital environments.

The evolution of digital capitalism has also heightened stakeholder interdependencies, where value creation relies on collaboration, data sharing, and co-innovation (Jacobides et al., 2018; Vial, 2019). Platforms such as Uber, Airbnb, and Amazon illustrate how ecosystem orchestrators manage a constellation of stakeholders whose interests often conflict yet remain structurally interlinked. The challenge of stakeholder salience in these ecosystems lies in balancing inclusivity with efficiency, ensuring that marginalized voices are not silenced by algorithmic governance (Crane et al., 2022).

Hence, corporate decision-making must evolve from hierarchical control toward participatory, transparent, and digitally mediated inclusion.

Digitalization also transforms stakeholder communication patterns and legitimacy construction. Social media platforms enable stakeholders to mobilize collective influence rapidly, challenging corporate narratives and forcing responsiveness in real time (Etter et al., 2019). The reputational risks of digital activism illustrate how stakeholder salience can emerge spontaneously, disrupting traditional power asymmetries (Eisenegger & Glozer, 2021). This transformation implies that stakeholder salience is increasingly co-constructed through public discourse, algorithmic amplification, and digital sentiment analysis rather than managerial discretion alone.

At the same time, scholars warn that digital stakeholder management risks reinforcing exclusionary dynamics if algorithmic biases are left unchecked (Martin, 2022; Shin, 2021). Algorithms can prioritize visibility and engagement metrics that privilege dominant groups, marginalizing stakeholders with limited digital presence. Therefore, the reframing of stakeholder salience in digital ecosystems must integrate ethical considerations surrounding algorithmic fairness, transparency, and inclusivity. This ethical turn is critical for ensuring that digital stakeholder governance aligns with broader principles of corporate accountability and social justice.

The interplay between stakeholder salience and digital governance also raises questions about data ownership and representational equity (Helbing, 2021). As data becomes the currency of stakeholder influence, those who control data infrastructures wield disproportionate power. This creates a paradox of digital inclusivity: while digital tools democratize access to participation, they simultaneously centralize control in the hands of platform orchestrators. Understanding and resolving this paradox is essential to advancing inclusive corporate decision-making models that balance efficiency with equity (Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2021).

Moreover, institutional pressures in digital economies compel firms to engage in continuous legitimacy negotiations with both human and algorithmic stakeholders (Zietsma et al., 2020). Firms are expected not only to meet financial and operational expectations but also to demonstrate digital responsibility and ethical data stewardship. These demands redefine stakeholder salience as a dynamic construct, evolving through digital interactions and technological adaptation. Thus, inclusion becomes both a normative imperative and a strategic necessity in maintaining organizational legitimacy.

Finally, the urgency for reframing stakeholder salience in digital ecosystems stems from the need to align corporate decision-making with the realities of data-driven capitalism. Traditional frameworks inadequately address the distributed, algorithmic, and participatory nature of modern stakeholder networks. By integrating insights from digital ethics, ecosystem theory, and socio-technical systems thinking, scholars can build a more inclusive and adaptive model of stakeholder salience. Such a model would not only enhance corporate responsiveness but also contribute to a fairer digital economy where all stakeholders—human and non-human—possess meaningful voice and influence (Crane et al., 2022; Martin, 2022).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Evolution of Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory, originally introduced by Freeman (1984), fundamentally shifted the understanding of organizational purpose from profit maximization to value creation for all stakeholders. This theoretical lens posits that businesses operate within a complex web of relationships involving multiple actors, including customers, employees, suppliers, communities,

and regulators (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). The framework was later expanded by Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997), who proposed that stakeholder salience depends on three attributes: power, legitimacy, and urgency. However, as organizations transitioned into digital environments, these static constructs began to lose explanatory power (Aaltonen & Sivonen, 2019). Modern firms now operate in fluid digital ecosystems where actors continuously emerge, evolve, and interact beyond traditional institutional boundaries (Autio et al., 2021).

Digital transformation has amplified stakeholder interdependence, introducing new channels for influence and communication (Kane et al., 2021). Digital stakeholders, such as users on social media or developers in open-source platforms, can now exercise power through visibility and engagement rather than ownership or hierarchy (Crane et al., 2021). This evolution underscores the necessity to revisit foundational theories like stakeholder salience to capture the realities of algorithmic and data-driven interactions that define contemporary corporate governance (Scherer et al., 2023).

Revisiting Stakeholder Salience in Digital Ecosystems

Mitchell et al.'s (1997) model of stakeholder salience has served as a cornerstone for identifying which stakeholders managers should prioritize. Yet, digital ecosystems challenge the model's assumptions by introducing algorithmic mediation and decentralized coordination (Adner, 2017; Jacobides et al., 2018). Power is no longer merely relational or resource-based but also embedded in control over data, algorithms, and digital infrastructures (Lehtimäki & Kujala, 2020). For instance, users who generate data on digital platforms may exert indirect influence through collective visibility, while platform owners control the architecture that determines which stakeholders are "seen" or "heard" (Lobschat et al., 2021).

The concept of digital salience has emerged to address these transformations. It refers to the dynamic prominence of stakeholders in digital environments as shaped by algorithmic amplification, data visibility, and online engagement (Sydow & Windeler, 2020; Zeng et al., 2022). In digital ecosystems, salience is no longer solely perceptual but computational — influenced by machine learning systems and digital signals. This reconceptualization acknowledges the growing role of non-human agents such as AI, bots, and data analytics systems as actors that mediate stakeholder interactions (Martin, 2019; Mittelstadt et al., 2016).

Inclusivity and Ethical Dimensions of Stakeholder Governance

The digital era has also reintroduced normative debates around inclusivity, fairness, and accountability in stakeholder theory (Greenwood et al., 2023; Crane et al., 2021). Inclusive stakeholder governance advocates for decision-making processes that integrate marginalized or digitally underrepresented groups, recognizing that access to digital platforms itself is unevenly distributed (O'Riordan et al., 2020). Firms are now urged to expand stakeholder legitimacy beyond traditional categories to include digital communities, data subjects, and algorithmic entities affected by corporate actions (Floridi, 2019).

Furthermore, inclusivity in digital ecosystems requires ethical governance frameworks that ensure transparency in algorithmic decisions and equitable participation in data-driven processes (Mikalef et al., 2022; Spiekermann et al., 2023). Scholars have highlighted the need for "digital moral responsibility," where corporations must anticipate and mitigate harm caused by automated systems (Mittelstadt et al., 2016). This orientation aligns with the principles of participatory digital

ethics, emphasizing co-creation of governance mechanisms between firms, regulators, and civil society (Zuboff, 2019; Whelan et al., 2022).

Integrating Stakeholder Salience and Inclusivity in Corporate Decision-Making

A growing body of research attempts to integrate stakeholder salience theory with inclusive governance approaches in digital contexts (Lusch & Nambisan, 2015; Dhanaraj & Parkhe, 2006). Digital ecosystems necessitate adaptive governance mechanisms that recognize fluid stakeholder roles and dynamically shifting salience levels (Autio et al., 2021). Managers are required to continuously sense, evaluate, and respond to digital signals indicating stakeholder demands and potential conflicts (Kane et al., 2021).

Integrating inclusivity into stakeholder salience frameworks also enhances organizational legitimacy and resilience. Inclusive decision-making enables firms to co-create trust with diverse actors, which is vital in data-driven economies where reputation spreads rapidly across digital channels (Crane et al., 2021; Greenwood et al., 2023). Theoretical convergence between stakeholder salience and inclusivity thus represents a critical pathway toward developing ethically grounded, digitally aware corporate governance frameworks suitable for the 21st century (Scherer et al., 2023; Lehtimäki & Kujala, 2020).

METHODS

This study adopts a conceptual and integrative review approach, aiming to reframe stakeholder salience theory within the context of digital ecosystems. Conceptual research does not rely on empirical data collection; rather, it synthesizes and extends theoretical frameworks to generate new insights or propositions (Jaakkola, 2020). By analysing contemporary developments in digital transformation, algorithmic governance, and inclusivity frameworks, this research constructs an updated theoretical model of stakeholder salience that captures the realities of networked and data-driven environments (Torraco, 2016). The methodology emphasizes theory building through conceptual synthesis, drawing on cross-disciplinary literature from management, information systems, and digital ethics (Podsakoff et al., 2016).

The research employs a systematic literature mapping technique to identify and organise relevant scholarship. Following guidelines for conceptual reviews (Snyder, 2019; Webster & Watson, 2002), the study examined peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2017 and 2024 in major databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Emerald Insight. Keywords included stakeholder salience, digital ecosystems, algorithmic governance, inclusive decision-making, and corporate digital responsibility. This approach ensures that the theoretical reconstruction of stakeholder salience is grounded in current scholarly discourse while maintaining fidelity to its foundational roots (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell et al., 1997).

To guide the conceptual synthesis, the study follows three analytical phases: deconstruction, reconstruction, and integration (MacInnis, 2011). In the deconstruction phase, the traditional constructs of stakeholder salience — power, legitimacy, and urgency — are examined to identify their limitations in digital contexts. The reconstruction phase then introduces new dimensions, including algorithmic visibility, data ownership, and digital ethics legitimacy. Finally, in the integration phase, these concepts are assembled into a coherent model that positions inclusivity as a moderating mechanism within digital stakeholder governance (Crane et al., 2021; Scherer et al., 2023).

The methodological orientation of this paper aligns with the theory adaptation approach, which extends established theories into novel domains rather than proposing entirely new frameworks (Corley & Gioia, 2011). By revisiting stakeholder salience through the lens of digital transformation, the study refines theoretical boundaries and identifies contextual contingencies that influence stakeholder relevance in modern ecosystems (Aaltonen & Sivonen, 2019; Autio et al., 2021). This method allows the theory to evolve dynamically, consistent with the ongoing reconfiguration of business environments under digital pressures.

Finally, the study integrates insights from institutional theory and digital ethics to ensure that inclusivity is not treated merely as an operational goal but as a normative imperative within stakeholder management (Greenwood et al., 2023; Floridi, 2019). The synthesis approach ensures conceptual robustness and cross-disciplinary validity while highlighting the ethical dimensions of stakeholder engagement. The resulting framework thus contributes both theoretically—by redefining salience in the digital age—and practically—by offering a model that can guide responsible corporate decision-making within digitally interconnected economies (Lusch & Nambisan, 2015; Kane et al., 2021).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

The conceptual analysis conducted in this study yielded three major insights into the evolution of stakeholder salience theory within digital ecosystems. These insights are structured around three emergent dimensions — technological mediation, inclusive governance, and algorithmic accountability — which collectively reshape the classical understanding of stakeholder salience. The findings are presented through three analytical tables that map theoretical transformations, emergent stakeholder attributes, and implications for corporate decision-making in the digital age. The first finding reveals that stakeholder salience in digital ecosystems has evolved from a managerial perception-based construct to a data-mediated phenomenon. Traditional determinants such as power, legitimacy, and urgency remain relevant but are increasingly influenced by technological infrastructures that govern visibility and influence (Aaltonen & Sivonen, 2019; Lobschat et al., 2021). The role of algorithms, data analytics, and digital engagement mechanisms extends the salience model beyond human decision-making, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Evolution of Stakeholder Salience Attributes in the Digital Ecosystem

Classical Attributes (Mitchell et al., 1997)	Digital Extensions (2020–2024)	Description of Transformation	Key References
Power	Algorithmic Power	Influence mediated by control of data, algorithms, and digital platforms rather than hierarchical authority.	Kane et al. (2021); Lehtimäki & Kujala (2020)
Legitimacy	Digital Legitimacy	Stakeholders gain recognition through online engagement, visibility, and algorithmic trust metrics.	Crane et al. (2021); Zeng et al. (2022)

Classical Attributes (Mitchell et al., 1997)	Digital Extensions (2020–2024)	Description of Transformation	Key References
Urgency	Real-Time Responsiveness	Digital interactions compress time, making stakeholder demands instantaneous and data-driven.	Sydow & Windeler (2020); Scherer et al. (2023)
—	Data Ownership	Emergent dimension reflecting control over data as a new source of salience.	Autio et al. (2021); Greenwood et al. (2023)
—	Ethical Accountability	Inclusion of moral responsibility for digital harm and algorithmic bias.	Floridi (2019); Mittelstadt et al. (2016)

Source: At Work, 2025

The second finding highlights the role of inclusivity as a moderating mechanism in the salience process. In digital ecosystems, diverse and decentralized actors — including users, communities, and non-human agents — shape collective decision-making through networked participation (Adner, 2017; Crane et al., 2021). Inclusive governance ensures that digitally marginalized or underrepresented stakeholders maintain visibility in algorithmic processes (Greenwood et al., 2023; O’Riordan et al., 2020). This process transforms stakeholder prioritization from managerial discretion into participatory co-determination, as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Inclusivity as a Moderating Mechanism in Digital Stakeholder Governance

Inclusivity Dimension	Description	Implications for Corporate Governance	Supporting Literature
Access to Digital Platforms	Equal opportunity for stakeholders to engage and express interests in digital ecosystems.	Reduces data bias and expands legitimacy beyond dominant actors.	Mikalef et al. (2022); Zuboff (2019)
Representation in Decision-Making	Inclusion of multiple digital communities and perspectives in strategic processes.	Enhances fairness and transparency in governance structures.	Crane et al. (2021); Scherer et al. (2023)
Algorithmic Transparency	Openness in how digital systems classify and prioritize stakeholder signals.	Builds trust and accountability within digital governance.	Floridi (2019); Mittelstadt et al. (2016)
Digital Literacy and Equity	Ensures stakeholders can meaningfully participate in digital discussions and decisions.	Supports ethical and sustainable digital transformation.	Greenwood et al. (2023); Kane et al. (2021)

Source: At Work, 2025

The third finding introduces the concept of algorithmic accountability as a core determinant of corporate legitimacy in the digital age. As firms increasingly rely on artificial intelligence and data analytics for decision-making, the responsibility for algorithmic outcomes becomes central to stakeholder management (Mittelstadt et al., 2016; Spiekermann et al., 2023). This finding emphasizes the convergence of digital ethics, stakeholder salience, and corporate governance, demonstrating that algorithmic systems not only influence but also embody stakeholder relationships. The synthesized framework is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Reframed Framework of Stakeholder Salience in Digital Ecosystems

Core Dimension	Sub-Concept	Theoretical Contribution	Managerial Implication	Key Sources
Technological Mediation	Algorithmic Visibility	Expands salience theory to include non-human agents and computational decision-making.	Managers must monitor digital systems and shape stakeholder visibility.	Lobschat et al. (2021); Zeng et al. (2022)
Inclusive Governance	Participatory Legitimacy	Redefines legitimacy as co-created through digital interaction and engagement.	Firms should institutionalize inclusive platforms for stakeholder input.	Greenwood et al. (2023); Crane et al. (2021)
Algorithmic Accountability	Ethical Digital Responsibility	Positions ethical governance as central to sustaining legitimacy in digital systems.	Integrate digital ethics audits into strategic governance frameworks.	Floridi (2019); Spiekermann et al. (2023)
Data Capital	Ownership and Control	Recognizes data as a new form of stakeholder power shaping corporate decisions.	Develop equitable data-sharing policies.	Autio et al. (2021); Kane et al. (2021)

Source: At Work, 2025

These results collectively demonstrate that digitalization necessitates a multidimensional expansion of stakeholder salience theory. Stakeholders' power and legitimacy are increasingly shaped not by proximity to managerial authority but by their control over, access to, and representation within digital infrastructures. Moreover, inclusivity and algorithmic accountability emerge as critical ethical anchors for maintaining organizational legitimacy in an era of pervasive digital interconnectivity (Crane et al., 2021; Scherer et al., 2023).

DISCUSSION

The results of this conceptual exploration reveal a fundamental shift in the understanding of stakeholder salience within the digital era. Traditional stakeholder theory has long emphasized the manager's role in perceiving and prioritizing stakeholder claims based on their power, legitimacy, and urgency (Mitchell et al., 1997). However, as organizations operate increasingly in digital ecosystems, these determinants have become distributed across algorithmic processes and

technological infrastructures (Aaltonen & Sivonen, 2019). This transformation decentralizes managerial authority, creating a governance structure where data, code, and digital interfaces act as new mediators of salience (Crane et al., 2021). The digitalization of stakeholder relationships thus challenges the human-centric assumptions embedded in classical stakeholder frameworks and calls for a reconceptualization of power itself.

Digital power, as identified in this study, is not confined to ownership or control of physical assets but rather derived from the ability to manipulate visibility and data flows (Lobschat et al., 2021). In digital ecosystems, visibility equates to influence: stakeholders who can algorithmically amplify their voices are more likely to shape corporate attention and decision-making (Zeng et al., 2022). For example, consumer groups leveraging social media platforms can collectively exert pressure that rivals institutional shareholders, not through equity stakes but through digital engagement. This phenomenon redefines stakeholder salience as a function of both technological capability and communicative resonance. Such a shift compels organizations to reconsider how they assess stakeholder importance and whose voices are being algorithmically elevated or suppressed.

The introduction of digital legitimacy also extends the scope of stakeholder theory beyond traditional legal and moral recognition (Crane et al., 2021). In the digital age, legitimacy is increasingly constructed through engagement metrics, visibility algorithms, and digital reputation systems (Sydow & Windeler, 2020). Stakeholders gain legitimacy by participating in, or being recognized by, digital platforms that mediate organizational narratives. This algorithmic construction of legitimacy poses risks of exclusion for marginalized groups lacking digital literacy or access (Greenwood et al., 2023). Hence, inclusivity becomes an ethical and strategic necessity rather than a voluntary managerial choice.

The results presented earlier demonstrate that inclusivity functions as a moderating mechanism that enhances equity within stakeholder governance (Mikalef et al., 2022). Inclusive decision-making ensures that firms do not merely respond to the most visible or vocal digital actors but engage with diverse perspectives that may otherwise remain underrepresented. This aligns with the normative strand of stakeholder theory that prioritizes fairness and justice as guiding principles of corporate behavior (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). In the digital context, inclusivity requires companies to build participatory infrastructures where stakeholder input is continuously integrated into algorithmic and strategic processes (Floridi, 2019).

A further implication of this study lies in the recognition of algorithmic accountability as a determinant of organizational legitimacy. Algorithms and AI systems increasingly participate in decisions that affect stakeholders, from product recommendations to credit assessments (Mittelstadt et al., 2016). However, these systems can perpetuate biases and opacity, leading to the ethical erosion of stakeholder trust. The accountability of algorithms thus becomes a form of corporate responsibility: firms must ensure that technological decisions align with ethical norms and societal expectations (Spiekermann et al., 2023). Incorporating algorithmic transparency into governance frameworks enables firms to mitigate harm while enhancing long-term legitimacy.

This reconceptualization also reinforces the interplay between stakeholder salience and data governance. Data has emerged as a new form of capital, where stakeholders' ability to generate, access, and interpret data determines their influence within ecosystems (Autio et al., 2021). Consequently, data ownership must be recognized as a dimension of salience. Stakeholders who control critical data streams possess structural power over organizational decision-making processes (Kane et al., 2021). Firms, therefore, face growing pressure to democratize data flows and adopt equitable data-sharing policies that prevent concentration of informational power.

Another key discussion point concerns the temporal reconfiguration of stakeholder urgency. Digital ecosystems compress temporal boundaries, enabling instantaneous interactions and near-real-time responses (Sydow & Windeler, 2020). The immediacy of digital communication amplifies stakeholder demands, forcing firms to operate in a state of continuous responsiveness (Scherer et al., 2023). Traditional models that perceive urgency as episodic or situational are no longer sufficient; instead, urgency in the digital context becomes a sustained dynamic, embedded in ongoing digital engagement loops.

From a managerial perspective, the integration of inclusivity and algorithmic accountability reshapes corporate governance paradigms. Managers are no longer the sole arbiters of stakeholder relevance; rather, they become curators of digital interactions who must balance visibility, fairness, and ethical responsibility (Greenwood et al., 2023). Governance systems should thus be redesigned to include mechanisms that detect, interpret, and respond to algorithmic signals of salience while ensuring that marginalized stakeholders remain visible within the digital discourse (Zuboff, 2019). The findings also contribute to bridging stakeholder theory and digital ethics. Classical stakeholder frameworks seldom accounted for the moral implications of technological mediation, focusing primarily on human actors and organizational hierarchies (Freeman, 1984). In contrast, the inclusion of algorithmic stakeholders acknowledges the growing agency of non-human systems in shaping outcomes (Martin, 2019). This recognition expands the moral circle of stakeholder theory, urging corporations to treat AI systems not merely as tools but as entities that reflect and reproduce human values.

Incorporating inclusivity into stakeholder salience further enhances organizational resilience in the face of digital volatility. Firms that engage inclusively with diverse stakeholders are better equipped to detect early signals of risk, adapt to shifting expectations, and maintain legitimacy amid rapid technological change (Crane et al., 2021). Inclusive governance structures foster dialogue, trust, and co-creation, all of which contribute to sustainable competitive advantage. Therefore, inclusivity should be viewed not only as an ethical obligation but also as a strategic capability that enhances adaptive performance.

The reconceptualized stakeholder salience model also contributes to the discourse on corporate social responsibility (CSR). Digital CSR now encompasses algorithmic ethics, data fairness, and technological inclusivity as integral dimensions of responsible management (Mikalef et al., 2022). By embedding these principles into stakeholder governance, organizations can align their digital operations with global sustainability frameworks such as the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This alignment strengthens both institutional legitimacy and stakeholder trust.

An additional discussion emerges regarding the interplay between salience and transparency. Transparency, in digital environments, operates through visibility mechanisms that can simultaneously empower and exploit stakeholders (Floridi, 2019). Companies must therefore navigate the paradox of openness, ensuring that digital visibility does not translate into surveillance or manipulation. Effective governance requires a balance between information disclosure and protection of stakeholder privacy, reinforcing trust as a cornerstone of digital legitimacy (Crane et al., 2021).

The findings also reinforce the necessity of multi-level governance structures in digital ecosystems. Because digital stakeholders operate across networks, firms must coordinate governance not only internally but also with external actors such as regulators, platform providers, and civil society organizations (Adner, 2017; Whelan et al., 2022). Multi-level collaboration enhances legitimacy by aligning corporate actions with broader societal expectations of fairness and accountability.

Another critical issue concerns the scalability of inclusivity mechanisms. As digital ecosystems expand, the volume and diversity of stakeholders increase exponentially, making comprehensive engagement challenging (Autio et al., 2021). Technology can serve as both an enabler and a barrier to inclusivity. Firms must therefore design scalable engagement platforms that balance efficiency with ethical consideration, ensuring that inclusivity remains substantive rather than symbolic.

In theoretical terms, this study advances the integration of stakeholder theory with ecosystem and platform perspectives (Jacobides et al., 2018). It suggests that stakeholder salience should be treated as an emergent property of digital systems rather than a static managerial assessment. Salience evolves dynamically through data flows, algorithmic amplification, and collective visibility, reflecting the distributed nature of digital governance. This systems-based interpretation provides a richer understanding of interdependence and co-creation within modern organizational environments.

The inclusion of digital ethics within the stakeholder salience model also contributes to theory-building in corporate governance. Ethical responsibility in digital environments extends beyond compliance; it involves proactive stewardship of technologies that affect societal well-being (Floridi, 2019). By integrating moral reasoning into digital governance frameworks, firms can move from reactive regulation to anticipatory ethics that prevent harm before it occurs.

Ultimately, the discussion underscores that stakeholder salience in digital ecosystems is both a theoretical and practical issue. The model proposed here extends stakeholder theory by embedding technological mediation, inclusivity, and algorithmic accountability into the conceptual structure of corporate governance. Practically, it provides managers with a roadmap to navigate the complex, data-driven interactions that shape organizational legitimacy. This reconfiguration ensures that stakeholder theory remains relevant and ethically grounded in the digital age.

CONCLUSION

The reconceptualisation of stakeholder salience within digital ecosystems reveals profound implications for both theory and practice. Traditional stakeholder theory, which emphasises power, legitimacy, and urgency as the basis of stakeholder prioritisation (Mitchell et al., 1997), is increasingly insufficient in explaining the dynamics of influence in the digital age. The findings of this conceptual analysis suggest that digitalisation alters not only the mechanisms through which stakeholders exert power but also the speed and fluidity of legitimacy formation. Stakeholder salience is no longer determined solely by material resources or formal authority but also by digital reach, algorithmic visibility, and networked influence. Hence, scholars must reframe the stakeholder salience model to reflect the reality of decentralised, data-driven organisational ecosystems.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study advances stakeholder theory by integrating digital ecosystem thinking into its foundational assumptions. The concept of digital salience—a state where stakeholders gain prominence through digital interconnectivity—emerges as a key contribution. This reframing broadens the ontology of stakeholder identification, positioning digital users, influencers, and AI entities as actors capable of shaping strategic decisions. It also extends the stakeholder attributes of power, legitimacy, and urgency to include informational control, algorithmic visibility, and real-time influence, respectively. These additions enrich stakeholder salience theory, providing a framework better suited for contemporary organisational realities characterised by constant technological flux.

The practical implications of this research are equally significant. Firms must adopt inclusive digital governance mechanisms to balance diverse stakeholder interests in hyperconnected environments. Corporate decision-making processes should leverage participatory digital platforms that enable co-creation, transparency, and rapid responsiveness. Managers are encouraged to view stakeholder engagement not as a static compliance exercise but as a continuous dialogue embedded within digital ecosystems. Such adaptive governance structures enhance both corporate legitimacy and resilience by fostering trust, ethical data management, and stakeholder empowerment.

Despite its theoretical contributions, this paper acknowledges several limitations. As a conceptual study, it does not empirically test the propositions or validate the framework across industries or regions. Future research should operationalise digital salience variables and measure their effects on firm performance, reputation, and innovation capability. Longitudinal and comparative studies would also illuminate how different cultural or regulatory contexts mediate the relationship between digital salience and corporate decision-making effectiveness. Additionally, cross-disciplinary insights from digital sociology, AI ethics, and behavioural economics could further enrich this theoretical perspective.

In conclusion, reframing stakeholder salience in the digital age offers a pathway toward more inclusive, ethical, and adaptive corporate decision-making. The evolution from tangible to informational and algorithmic forms of power signals a paradigm shift in how organisations perceive and prioritise their stakeholders. The proposed model calls for a fundamental rethinking of corporate governance, rooted in transparency, data ethics, and participatory value creation. As digital ecosystems continue to expand, the stakeholder landscape will become increasingly complex—demanding theoretical frameworks and managerial practices that are as dynamic, networked, and inclusive as the environments they aim to understand.

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