Waiting for change: a case study on the social construction of digital transformation in the public sector

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Abstract

Purpose – The study aims to understand digital transformation as a socially constructed process with multiple stakeholders, influenced by internal and external forces. This perspective stresses the importance of context, human interaction and narratives in the digital transformation within public sector.

Design/methodology/approach – The author uses a case study at a Swedish university undergoing digital transformation. Through first and secondary data, the author thematically analyzes the interaction between change agents, organizational realities and the digital transformation process.

Findings – The study finds that conflicts in pace and scope in the digital transformation drive self-defense mechanisms and the formation of a feedback loop of pending action. Contrary to previous studies, technological and external forces do not make digital transformation inevitable.

Research limitations/implications – Limitations stem from the empirical selection of a Swedish university, affecting the international and intersectoral transferability of the study. The impact of digital transformation differs from previous IT changes, which has implications for the design of the digital transformation process.

Practical implications – Stakeholders should, instead of considering structural and cultural barriers as facts, pay attention to the narratives within the organization as potential excuses to avoid action.

Originality/value – This research contributes to original insights into digital transformation. It uncovers how change agents, despite longing for change, can inadvertently foster inaction in digital transformation. This finding enriches the literature by highlighting the complex dynamics between the desire for change and the social constructs that contribute to stagnation, offering an understanding of barriers to digital transformation.

Keywords Digital transformation, Social construction, Conflicts, Self-defense mechanisms, Public sector

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Digital transformation in the public sector holds the promise of improved public service delivery, increased transparency and greater citizen participation (Mergel *et al.*, 2019).

However, the public sector is at the beginning of this journey (Tangi *et al.*, 2021). Slow to take advantage of new ways of organizing (Meijer, 2015; Norling *et al.*, 2022). As digital technologies become increasingly integrated into all aspects of society, public organizations face the challenging task of navigating extensive digital transformation. However, this transformation is not simply a technical phenomenon. There is an ongoing discussion about whether to understand digital transformation as a contemporary term for the already recognized concept of IT-enabled change or whether it represents a novel phenomenon (Baiyere *et al.*, 2023; Wessel *et al.*, 2021). This study joins the latter view, regarding digital transformation in the public sector as processes of change in social structures rather than technology adoption (Dunleavy and Margetts, 2023), challenging the deterministic belief where digital technologies are forcing organizations to change (Vial, 2019; Wessel *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, this study questions the view of an organization as a stable "being" only disrupted by external chock and suggests an alternative ontology for understanding an organization as something unstable and constantly "becoming" (Orlikowski, 1996; Putnam *et al.*, 2016).

Digital transformation is not an outcome (Tangi *et al.*, 2021) but a holistic organizing process (Langley *et al.*, 2013) of deep change in business models, structures, processes and relationships (Vial, 2019). This highlights the mutual formation between digital technology and society, following the view of Orlikowski (1996), Orlikowski and Scott (2008) and others (Nadkarni and Prügl, 2021) where technology enables organizational transformation instead of causing it. Recognizing digital transformation as a process (enabled by digital technologies) sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how perceptions and interactions within this frame influence the actualization of the digital transformation. By viewing digital transformation through a social constructionist lens (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Bijker, 2009), we can better understand how human interactions and social contexts shape this process. For instance, social constructionism suggests that the meanings and impacts of digital technologies are co-created by people within the organization. Taking this perspective offers the potential for a nuanced analysis of how collective interpretations and actions contribute to, and are in turn shaped by, the ongoing processes of digital transformation, revealing the dynamics at play between technology, organizational change and human agency (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015).

The study is based on curiosity that arose from insights from a previous study on affordances and constraints in digital transformation. Where emotional responses of frustration, resignation and anger occurred in the data set. To gain more insight, this study aims to explore digital transformation through a lens of social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) by answering the following question:

Q1. How does the social construction of digital transformation impact public sector digital transformation?

The research question is answered by exploring the relationship between the experience and the enactment of digital transformation in the public sector in the light of a case study from a higher education institution. This study contributes to research by responding to the call on how to cope with the contradictions of digital transformation from Volberda *et al.* (2021), the call to explore the narratives and sensemaking of managers and co-workers during digital transformation from Nielsen *et al.* (2023) and the call to explore the role of emotion in digital transformation from Liu *et al.* (2023) as well as general calls for more research on digital transformation in the public sector from Mergel *et al.* (2019) and Nadkarni and Prügl (2021).

The paper has the following structure. After the introduction, previous research on public sector challenges in digital transformation is presented as is the theoretical framework of

social constructionism. The method and the accompanying analysis of the findings are then described. Next, is a section on results, presenting the case study and the findings. Thereafter is the discussion that synthesizes a theoretical model on how conflicts drive self-defense mechanisms that constrain digital transformation through a feedback loop of pending action accompanied with the limitations of the study. Last is the conclusion.

Precursory findings and theoretical framing
Public sector challenges in digital transformation
Public sector organizations face a general challenge to improve their efficiency and quality, as well as a specific challenge to become more digital and offer more online services (Janowski, 2015). They also need to change their policies, legislation and internal structures (Janssen and van der Voort, 2016). Studies have shown that digital transformation involves, among other things, the creation of a new organizational identity, a complex and paradoxical endeavor (Wessel *et al.*, 2021) that includes complicated intra-group power dynamics and introspection (Jarvenpaa and Selander, 2023).

Digital transformation unfolds on multiple levels simultaneously, highlighting a persistent lag within the public sector compared to societal advancements (Appio *et al.*, 2021; Dunleavy and Margetts, 2023). This discrepancy, between the rapid digital transformation of society and the efforts taken by public sector organizations to meet these challenges, forms a knowing–doing gap, characterized by organizations knowing that there is a problem but not doing enough about it (Kane, 2019; Tripsas and Gavetti, 2000). Such inactivity generates inertia (Holopainen *et al.*, 2023), making public organizations their own worst enemies (Kane, 2019).

In response to these challenges, scholars have explored the success factors to facilitate change, highlighting the crucial role of leadership and organizational capabilities. Key to this discourse are the concepts of dynamic and digital capabilities, alongside tactic knowledge on transformation know-how, that is the skill to coordinate and use resources and capabilities in new ways (Warner and Wäger, 2019). Additionally, to succeed, the literature emphasizes transformative and digital leadership (Ehlers, 2020) and the strategies of digital champions (Wilson and Mergel, 2022). Despite these insights, public sector organizations still suffer from inertia (Fernández *et al.*, 2023).

The roots of inertia are explained by research through the complexity of digital transformation or external constraints. Burke and Wolf (2020) suggested that grand challenges, such as digital transformation, can amplify tensions, resulting in inaction and indecisiveness. Similarly, others argue that digital transformation is slow-moving in public sector organizations as consequences of bureaucracies and institutionalism (Janssen and van der Voort, 2016; Lindquist, 2022).

Social construction of digital transformation
Digital transformation substantially affects organizational identity, closely intertwining with concepts of social reality and construction (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Besharov and Sharma, 2017; Wessel *et al.*, 2021). This study adopts the perspective of social construction, viewing organizational identity and (re)construction within the context of digital transformation as shaped by change agents, that is those individuals who enact the change (Gerwing, 2016; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). These change agents, as carriers of knowledge, shape the transformation process through their interactions, embodying the core of social construction (Barnes, 2016; Leonardi and Barley, 2010). Berger and Luckmann (1966) argued that social structures and systems of meaning influence individuals' choices and actions, while social interactions of sensemaking and sense-giving processes among individuals lead

to a collective representation and construction of a social reality (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). As change agents construct their reality, their subjective understanding evolves into an objective entity detached from the constructor, thus becoming social facts (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Dreher, 2016). From this point of view, the digital transformation process is shaped.

Furthermore, tensions and contradictions are inherent in construction and organizing (Putnam *et al.*, 2016; Seo *et al.*, 2004; Smith *et al.*, 2017), making them pivotal to understand organizational becoming (Graetz and Smith, 2008). As digital transformation paradoxes can drive feedback loops that promote or hinder change (Czarniawska, 2006; Tsoukas and Cunha, 2017), a few scholars have started to explore contradictions in digital transformation, but studies of the public sector are still lacking.

Method
Research setting
This study explores digital transformation in the public sector through a case study of a university. Case studies are suitable for exploring digital transformation, as they allow for different perspectives to be analyzed and different voices to be heard (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stebbins, 2001). Universities represent a critical context due to their unique position as traditional institutions, yet highly affected by the digital transformation in society (Bisri *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, the selection of a university, with its long-standing pre-digital legacy, provides a vivid backdrop to explore the digital transformation challenges (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Tømte *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, this study benefits from the dual role of the author being a researcher in faculty and a practitioner in university administration working with digital transformation. This strong position offers an insider–outsider perspective of the second-level observer, enabling a comprehensive analysis of the transformation processes within the context of universities (Czarniawska, 2006; Pradies *et al.*, 2021).

Data collection
The study synthesizes data from multiple sources: interviews, the intranet and documents related to strategic and operational planning from 2020 onward. The selection of the respondents involved purposively selection and snowball sampling to conduct expert interviews (Bogner and Menz, 2009; Naderifar *et al.*, 2017). The selection aimed to capture perspectives on digital transformation from both management and co-workers at various hierarchical levels. The respondents were from both IT and core operations. A total of 23 interviews (12 managers and 11 co-workers) were conducted by two members of the research team (December 2022 to February 2023), using a semi-structured format with issues such as digital transformation, governance, prioritization and the interplay between core operations and IT (Kallio *et al.*, 2016). The interviews were in Swedish through video calls (lasting between 43 and 64 min), and the quotes were translated into English (prioritizing semantic integrity over literal accuracy). Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews.

Data analysis
The analysis followed a processual strategy and adopted a reflexive thematic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Langley, 1999), informed by literature on digital transformation and organizational change. The use of reflexive thematic analysis and the participation in reflexive practices was deliberate to moderate the possible bias of the author. Members of the research team who are not affiliated with the university assisted during the conduct of the analysis. This collaboration brought more perspectives. The process began with a

review of interviews and secondary data, followed by a thematic analysis of different lines of logic using separation and similarities to highlight emerging patterns, emotions and tensions related to digital transformation. Example of lines of logic were co-worker/manager, macro-/meso-/microlevel and digitization/digital transformation. The focus was on how the respondents perceive digital transformation through language, interactions and narratives. The analysis progressed from individual responses to group dynamics and broader societal and sectoral implications, using inductive and interpretive coding strategies to uncover underlying concepts and themes of shared meaning (not shared topic) (Langley, 1999). This multilevel analytical process facilitated a dynamic exploration of digital transformation, drawing from mechanism-based explanations (Hedström and Ylikoski, 2010), allowing for the continual refinement of the research question and themes in response to new insights (Bygstad and Munkvold, 2011). The findings were ultimately organized into four overarching dimensions, see Table 1 (Gioia *et al.*, 2013).

Results

This study explores a Swedish university (hereafter called the University) at the beginning of its digital transformation. The University is a newer higher education institution, formed late of the 1970s and in the current configuration since the end of the 1900s. It has 16,000 students and 1,700 staff members and is a comprehensive university that covers research and education in medicine, science and technology, social sciences, arts and humanities and educational sciences. The annual turnaround is around €140m.

The University has made some changes to use their digital transformation, such as adopting a *digital first* strategy in 2022, the creation of a digital transformation unit along with some new job titles such as AI Educational Developer. No deep changes have taken place. The respondents' anticipation of the digital transformation is packed with the expectation of change, and they are longing for change and increased speed. They are not resistant to change but think of it as necessary. At the same time, they experience it to be too slow, filled with conflicts and different points of view. These circumstances, where anticipation and experience of digital transformation collide, create emotions of frustration, anger and sadness. These emotions are both directly spoken and implicitly exposed during the interviews through the manners of the respondents. Some examples are the respondents who almost cried; others, while communicating how angry and sad they are about the situation at hand, simultaneously laugh.

External conflicts in digital transformation

The external conflicts arise from a speed discrepancy between the high pressure from society and the low pressure from the higher education sector. Respondents experience digital transformation as something that cannot be resisted and admit digital transformation as an unstoppable force with its target group being students, emphasizing the importance of undergoing a digital transformation:

> "To request the students to submit papers with applications, it is unimaginable" (co-worker).

Most of the respondents describe their encounter with digital transformation as positive and integral to their daily operations, as a matter of fact, and as taken for granted:

> "Because this is going to happen, no matter where you are, digitalization is the future" (manger).

However, turning to the experience of the digital transformation in the sector of higher education and university performance, the respondents reveal a widespread pessimism. One respondent remarked:

First-order categories	Second-order themes	Aggregated dimensions	Illustrative quoting
Sector inertia Lack of cooperation in the sector Lack of sector standardization	Sector acts as a constrainer	External conflicts in pace	"The academic world and higher education institutions are far behind industry when it comes to digital transformation"
Skills supply and market competition Unstoppable innovation in technology Global student mobility	The pressure is high		"But I understand that it [digital transformation] is a development that we cannot ignore"
Transition to digital format Restore after COVID-19 University as a physical place	Mostly technologies/business as usual	Internal conflicts in scope	"You take a book and put it in a scanner and then you have the same book but as a PDF file"
We need to transform Digital transformation strategy Digitalization is an organizational change	More than technology/business renewal		"– What am I producing and how can I streamline and improve it so that I can start a greater value for my customers?"
Path dependencies in systems and skills Technical and supplier lock-in effects Lack of systems and digital skills lack of (IT) resources and funding	Lock in effects	Structural defense mechanism	"The faculty does not have digitization resources, we can make requests, but we cannot plan and carry out digital transformation"
Organizational inertia Lack of digital leadership Lack of digital transformation governance Lack of management decision-making Lack of change pressure	Laissez-faire governance		"Today, no one is in charge. No, I would say that no one dares to decide"
High level of person dependence Lack of user representation/participation Lack of group-company thinking Lack of process thinking and vertical collaboration Faculty-administration distancing	Lack of collaboration	Cultural defense mechanism	"We are the same, we are basically the same organization, we are working toward the same thing really. Still, it is not being done, and I think that's . . . It is bad for our students"
Lack of sponsorship for digitalization Resistance Symbolic actions of change Lack of change management Lack of enacted digitalization	Lack of motivation		"We are free researchers who like to have as much freedom as possible, and now we are going to have a system here that will standardize how we should work, so there is resistance there as well"

Source: Created by author

"When I joined the University. It was probably seven and a half years ago, then it felt like you went back 25 years in time. So, there was a lot that was incredibly old-fashioned" (manager).

The University is a smaller university in the sector, and due to a lack of resources and IT solutions developed for higher education institutions, they join consortiums or collaborate in other ways to develop technical software, resulting in the slowest setting the pace for the rest, generating hinderance for digital transformation:

"It is the big universities that have more to say than less, that is how it is. That is what it is, and that is [. . .] That is what it often looks like. Mm. For better or worse" (co-worker).

This underscores a sector-specific challenge where higher education institutions fall behind in digital transformation:

"I can feel that the university world and higher education institutions are lagging a lot behind industry when it comes to digital transformation" (manager).

Internal conflicts in digital transformation
Unlike external conflicts resulting from mismatched speed and pressure, internal conflicts arise from divergent perceptions of the scope and impact of digital transformation on organizational identity. The University faces contradictions in the pursuit of a new organizational identity and, at the same time, remaining the same. Digital transformation is stated in the digital strategy as aiming at *digital first,* but simultaneously operations continue with the mindset of *business as usual,* and there are attempts to restore the University to its normal self and undo the changes from COVID-19:

"Yes, but we are not a digital university. Absolutely not. And we don't want to be either because learning is best done physically" (manager).

It is simply said that when the world is going digital, the University stays on campus. This creates a mixed message on the importance of digital transformation, and the digital strategy is found to be a shelf warmer that is displayed only for the look of it:

"And in my experience, no great efforts have been made to make it [the Digital strategy] a part of my everyday life either" (co-worker).

Digital transformation is frequently portrayed as technology adoption, and most of the respondents defined it as a shift from using paper to using a device or a system, with little impact on the organizational identity. Management communication varies on the impact on organizational identity, leaving co-workers wondering about the scale of organizational change. The center of digital transformation is understood by managers as to work with computers, something they already do daily, as the University is highly engaged in replacing analogue work with digital work. But, a hierarchical separation shows that co-workers and managers differ on the meaning of digital transformation and the impact on organizational processes, where co-workers find the need for deep changes. Co-workers view digital transformation as more than just technology but as something that involves new ways of thinking to enhance organizational processes:

"Digitalization is something other than computerization or automation, I think. Then you also have a new way of thinking involved" (co-worker).

Only one manager describes digital transformation as something new and different from current the operation of turning analogue objects to digital but lacks ways to express it.

"/.../tasks disappear with the help of digitization, but they are there and are carried out somewhere in some background somehow, that is what I think. But I find it very difficult to imagine, like this, how [...] what services will exist in the future. I have no concept of that, like how/.../" (manager).

Structural and cultural defense mechanisms

The conflicts in digital transformation related to pace, pressure, scope and identity contribute to ambiguity about what to do, how to do it and who is responsible for doing something, as well as conflicting ideas on the degree of agency. The respondents experience that there is little one can do about the situation; it is as if digital transformation and agency is "out of hands," with external forces in control, supplemented by mixed internal sense giving on digital transformation. Structural and cultural defense mechanisms among managers and co-workers are developed as coping mechanisms to mitigate tensions.

Structural defense mechanism:

I am not to blame for the slow progress of digital transformation.

Respondents create narratives to describe how there are structural constraints to acting. Managers find that their co-workers lack skills to be successful contributors of the digital transformation, but at the same time, they find it impossible to recruit sufficient resources due to market conditions, that is there is no one with capabilities available to employ. This position manager concludes co-workers not having sufficient abilities to support the digital transformation, yet there is no one to recruit leaving them passively to hope for a better future:

> "Then you can hope that the future workforce, i.e. those who are young today, may acquire more of that knowledge during their education so that you kind of get more qualified staff who can work with digital transformation, but here and now, I lack it. It does not exist in my department" (manager).

At the same time, co-workers are concerned about the lack of digital capability in management:

> "I know that the management has an objective that it should be digitized, but I am not so sure that they know what digital transformation is and how it could manifest in our business" (co-worker).

Co-workers have also observed that management has appointed new digital work titles but has not altered the content or responsibility of the work itself, and co-workers with new work titles are bound to their old operations due to the lack of reconstruction:

> "The fact that you have been given the title of business developer, I don't think it is a hundred thought through what it really stands for, [laughs,] but it was probably a good title to give to a few people. Yes, but then really, you might fumble a bit in that role, what it means in that sense" (co-worker).

Cultural defense mechanism: digital transformation is irrelevant to others

Cultural narratives for not participating in the digital transformation are flourishing as everyone tries to escape the undertaking. Multiple reasons for avoiding involvement in digital transformation initiatives transpire; either the efforts do not fit the time, or it is not the right thing to do. The University has a *laissez-faire* governance of digital transformation where there is a lack of prioritization and decision-making influencing the motivation to join in digital transformation:

> "I don't think we really have a development culture, it's very like, 'No, but this is how we have always done it, and this is what we have to continue to do, because we are so unique" (co-worker).

The fallout of this view leaves it to each manager to find his or her ways and resources for digital transformation initiatives. This is paired with the lack of collaboration as managers refuse their co-workers to participate in digital transformation initiatives, lowering morale in the initiatives:

> "But then you get a few people who are enthusiastic and want and then those who don't want to and don't have the energy and are not interested, and then you get a fragmented organization, causing duplication of work, and then it's just a hassle" (manager).

Another reason for avoiding too much involvement is the experience of diversity of people who work in higher education and the gap between faculty and administration. Faculty members are seen as people craving freedom from standards and rules, and even if policies and rules are designed in collaboration, they are later rejected and work is done at your own discretion:

> "Compared to the business world, we are lagging behind, but we have a very special composition of individuals with whom we have to deal with as well, which means that we cannot take the same steps at the same time. But we should be able to move faster" (manager).

It is a shared understanding that digital transformation will have to be resolved without having to engage. Management abandons the digital transformation to someone else to decide on, creating a wild west:

> "But it feels a bit messy, like no one really knows what to do, how to do it, and maybe that's also the case. And a little bit you think that [. . .] Yes, but managers kind of think that it's someone else who is going to solve it" (co-worker).

A feedback loop of pending action

Excuses act as coping mechanisms to reduce the tensions that arise from the conflicts. By creating narratives, organizational stories are built around obstacles and barriers to change. Respondents are highly engaged in the creation of justifications, placing the explanation for the slow progress outside of themselves and their agency. Stories are used to explain the mindset and behavior of "others" such as faculty members, members of administration, other departments, others in management, etc:

> "My co-workers, they are very willing to change, but it's more about the fact that we don't have time with us anyway, but beyond that, I don't know. But I think it is a little more difficult to push through changes in the other departments. It's a bit of a rut" (manager).

These organizational stories of a collective anticipation of nonaction of others generate a feedback loop of pending action, where managers and co-workers are waiting for the other party to do something. The respondents even see this waiting game stated as an unofficial rule:

> "The University's strategy is to never be the first" (manager).

Discussion

This case study explores how the social construction of digital transformation influences the enactment of digital transformation in the public sector. The findings illustrate that digital transformation challenges the organizational identity and traditional bureaucratic ethos (Plesner *et al.*, 2018). As noted, the conflicts in the pace and scope in digital transformation lead to tensions when the University tries to

balance rapid student-driven demands with the sector's slower pace and the need to adapt organizationally without losing its identity. This shows how digital transformation poses more challenges for organizations than past IT adoption strategies. The dynamics in organizational (re)construction reflect the University's struggle to align with societal and technological shifts, depicting the tug of war between the extent of necessary transformation and maintaining its core attributes. These strains are particularly evident as the University navigates opposing strategies of *"Digital first"* versus *"Campus first,"* leading to dilemmas about what to prioritize and what to overlook. The differences in the experience of digital transformation among the change agents places them torn between the task of maintaining and reconstructing the University (Lawrence *et al.*, 2011) creating tensions. Drawing on the work of Putnam *et al.* (2016), such dilemmas induce emotions such as frustration, obstacles and uncertainty, which become vital for decision-making, navigating and progress in the organization, as they can foster dysfunctional outcomes, as detailed by Farjoun and Fiss (2022). This is in line with the notions of Neumann *et al.* (2019) where collective emotional work is an integral part of the contradictions in the processes in maintaining and disrupting organizations. Respondents experience disappointment and resignation when comparing how up-to-date universities are with the industry when pondering the slowness of the sector. In other words, there is an anticipation of slowness that shapes the motivation for change.

As the University's experience of digital transformation triggers negative emotions, passive coping behaviors are activated (Liu and Perrewé, 2005), leading to the development of self-defense myths as a defense mechanism routine (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Zilber, 2006). Brown *et al.* (2008) suggested that organizations are prone to develop defense mechanisms (cognitive operations that occur outside of awareness) such as denial, ignorance, rationalization, fantasy, etc. to cope with occurring treats on organizational identity. Here, the change agents interpret their environment in and through interactions with each other, constructing explanations that allow them to comprehend the world and act in unison (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). These self-defense myths are socially constructed through collective sensemaking and narratives and become an organizational phenomenon, distributed similarly to organizational knowledge (Plesner and Justesen, 2023). This can be explained by the idea that individuals or groups, overwhelmed by ambiguous or insufficient information, craft plausible narratives to maintain a positive self-image (Degn, 2015). This phenomenon of narratives or portraying stories of "the others" is evident in how the respondents experience their realities, shaping their actions and crafting shared myths that frame barriers as established social facts (Dreher, 2016). The identified process reveals how the increasing dilemmas, deciding what actions to take or avoid and the sense of being constrained by the social context led to a state of paralysis or stuckness. Consequently, the university collectively rationalizes inaction by attributing it to something outside itself, i.e. in structural and cultural factors, thus creating the excuses that form the vicious circle of pending action, leading to organizational inertia instead of progress (Volberda *et al.*, 2021). These findings are in line with the theoretical ideas of Haskamp *et al.* (2021), confirming the strength of inertial forces on the organizational level, making it difficult to move faster than its ecosystem. But, as Kaganer *et al.* (2023) state, to overcome digital transformation inertia, there is a need to first overcome negative psychology inertia at individual and social collective level to tackle other types of organizational inertia. This suggests that slowness is the result of the collective construction of inertia as a social fact rather than the slow pace in the sector.

Based on the findings, the following a model is proposed to explain how an initial construction of the digital transformation where experiences of conflicts on pace and scope contribute to a practice for dealing with these conflicts (self-defense myths), and the consequences of this practice (pending action) at two hierarchical levels (Figure 1).
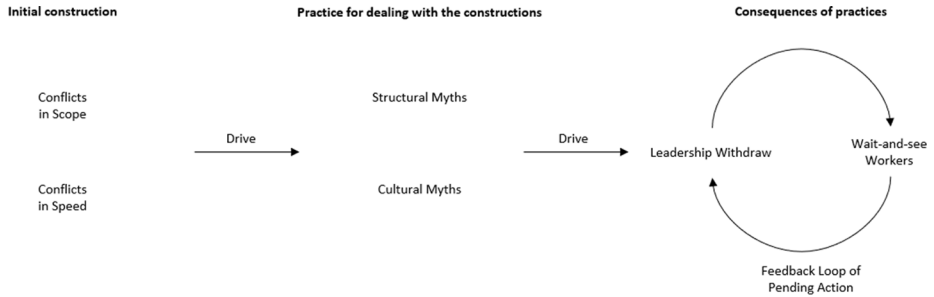

Figure 1.
A process on the social construction and enactment of digital transformation

Source: Created by author

Contribution to research and practice

This study contributes to research by providing empirical insights into organizational experiences and the enactment of digital transformation. It addresses the unique dynamics of digital transformation in the public sector, highlighting how it diverges from traditional IT changes and occurs at a different scale, scope and speed aligning the notions from Piccoli *et al.* (2024) and Wessel *et al.* (2021). The rationale for digital transformation in the public sector often arguments for external technological changes or increased citizen value, highlighting the importance of skills and mindset for successful transformation (Edelmann *et al.*, 2023; Mergel *et al.*, 2019). By avoiding specific projects, technologies or planned change actions and instead exploring the phenomenon of organizational digital transformation through the lens of social construction, this study challenges existing perspectives that view technological change as the primary driver of digital transformation. Instead, the findings resonate more with the idea that "Environmental forces are likely to initiate the change, but the way the environment is interpreted by organizational members affects the type of change that takes place" (Bartunek, 1984; p. 355). Additionally, the results counter Tangi *et al.* (2020) claim that structural and cultural barriers do not hinder digital transformation, suggesting that contradictory external pressures can shape these barriers and slow the transformation process.

For practitioners, these findings underscore the importance of management facilitating digital transformation by effectively balancing diverse viewpoints and prioritizing actions to maximize the use of available resources (Soh *et al.*, 2019). Public sector leaders need to focus on developing soft skills, with a heightened emphasis on communication and handling potential disagreements or conflicts (Adie *et al.*, 2024; Bisri *et al.*, 2023). Given that digital transformation alters organizational identities, the way organizations present themselves to external audiences is critical, and public organizations must meet citizen demands to ensure credibility (Gioia *et al.*, 2010). This study also highlights the construction of inertia in digital transformation, challenging what is seen as a factual condition by those within the organization. Practitioners should find out whether inertial narratives are present within their organizations, as

these often recognize the need for change but perceive overwhelming barriers, unintentionally continuing a story of impossibility.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The selection of a case study of a Swedish university makes it problematic to compare and transfer insights across organizations (Bannister, 2007). Adding to this is the choice to use organizational boundaries as the primary analytical framework, which positions contradictions as either internal or external. Employing a power lens (Dreher, 2016) and a cross-level analysis (Ashforth *et al.*, 2011) could enrich understanding by exploring how digital transformation dynamics interact across various levels of the public sector. Such an approach might reveal how individual organizations, influenced by societal and sectoral forces of change and inertia, navigate their paths of organizational becoming within this context.

Conclusion

This study explores the social construction of digital transformation at a Swedish university, revealing it as a complex interplay of social interactions, organizational identities and contextual narratives. The findings show that conflicts in pace and scope, along with structural and cultural defense mechanisms, create a feedback loop of pending action, leading to organizational inertia. Despite a strong desire for change, internal and external tensions hinder progress. Understanding digital transformation through a social constructionist lens highlights the importance of human agency and collective sensemaking. This research provides new insights into the barriers and facilitators of digital transformation in the public sector, emphasizing the need for nuanced approaches.

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