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From Control to Credibility: How Digital Marketing and Strategic Project Management Expose or Mask Organizational Hierarchies

Usman Rehmat, Sumaira Rasheed

Usman Rehmat
Imperial College of Business Studies, Lahore, Pakistan
Email: usmanrehmat2016@gmail.com

Sumaira Rasheed
Imperial College of Business Studies, Lahore, Pakistan
Email: sumairasshafiq@gmail.com

Abstract

Organizational failure is mainly a human phenomenon as opposed to technological. This paper explores the structural processes by which dysfunctional internal hierarchies trigger organizational decay, especially how digital marketing behaviors mask, but do not fix, dysfunction, and how Strategic Project Management (SPM) is a tool of organizational visibility. Using a mixed-methods design, involving 35 organizations during 18 months (January 2025 March 2026), survey data of 102 professionals, and in-depth interviews of 45 organizational heads, this study proves that 68 per cent of project failures can be explained by internal political factors, namely, favoritism, resources hoarding, and talent suppression, with only 32 per cent Companies that had a high Hierarchy Transparency Index (HTI) score (more than 70) had a 78 percent project success rate, retained 89 percent of high performing talent in a three-year horizon, and had 12.4x digital marketing returns on investment. Low-HTI organizations (less than 50) on the other hand had a 41 percent project success rate, retained talent at only 34 percent and a paltry 3.2 times marketing ROI. To describe the four steps between improper leadership appointment and organizational degeneration, a theoretical model is proposed, which is called the Insecurity Cycle. The paper also suggests two practical tools as the Hierarchy Transparency Index (HTI) and Equity-Led Governance Model to assist in diagnostic and corrective action of the organization. The results of the exemplar organizations (Microsoft, Google, Nestle, and Unilever) validate that the transparent, fair hierarchical systems are the keystone to the credibility of the brand, the success of the project, and the long-term performance.

Keywords:

organizational hierarchy; strategic project management; digital marketing credibility; talent suppression; brand authenticity; insecurity cycle; hierarchy transparency index

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Human Architecture of Organizational Failure. The modern organizational literature has given significant focus to the technical determinants of institutional decline, the financial determinants as well as the environmental determinants of decline. Still, when the practitioner landscape is viewed systematically it can be seen that there is an exemplary pattern that is often underestimated in statistical analysis: organizational failure is essentially a human phenomenon that involves hierarchical dysfunction. This research paper is based on the assumption that the organizational structures that define how power is shared, resources are distributed and talent is acknowledged or not is the main factor that determines whether an organization survives or not. During an 18 months fieldwork that covered 35 organizations, the authors interacted with project managers, chief executives, as well as operational leaders who in every case explained the decline of the organizations not by market volatility, or technological disruption, or competitive pressure, but rather by internal politics of hierarchical mismanagement. The fact that these descriptions overlap among industries, organization sizes, and geography indicates that a phenomenon of significant generalizability exists, and has to be studied systematically. **1.2 The Phantom Brand Phenomenon**. One of the conceptual contributions to this research is the concept of the Phantom Brand Phenomenon- a situation where an external online presence defines vitality, coherence, and credibility whilst internal structures are those of attrition, political interests, and loss of competence. Digital marketing, with its willingness to be technologically flexible, allows an organization to create and maintain complex brand images regardless of the operational reality. The advancement of the digital marketing tools, such as search engine optimization, social media management, programmatic advertisement, and automated communication pipes, gives organizations the ability to present an edited organizational image. Nonetheless, such representational plasticity is associated with an epistemic threat: the disconnection between the appearance and the reality of the organization. This uncoupling is not just an ethical issue, it is a strategic drawback in that brand credibility will eventually be able to derive market value based on the consistency of the promise made and the experience delivered. **1.3 Strategic Project Management as Diagnostic of the organization**. This paper places Strategic Project Management (SPM) as not only a delivery model but a diagnostic tool that can be used to uncover the real structure of organizational power. The cross-functional nature of the project manager role and visibility of resources place skilled project managers in privileged positions of observation in organizational hierarchies. They observe the distribution of resources, the distribution of credit, the trends of promotion and exclusion, data points, which together make up an accurate reflection of hierarchical health. The project manager who narrows his or her practice to schedule and budget management lacks the organizational intelligence of these patterns. The project manager who creates what the authors call 360-degree organizational vision- the ability to see and read political process and technical advancement- turns into a pivotal force of organizational transparency. **1.4 Artificial Intelligence is Amplifier, Not Antidote**. Artificial intelligence has been enthusiastically absorbed into the existing body of discussion on organizational transformation. This paper does not refute the potential of AI-based predictive and resource optimization systems. But the collected amount of empirical evidence indicates that AI is an amplifier of the conditions existing in organizations rather than a corrective mechanism. With a high hierarchy transparency, AI supplements the quality of decisions and speed of insight in organizations. In companies where political favoritism and suppression of talents are the norm, AI results are systematically disregarded, overruled, or distorted to meet the interests of the existing power. According to industry data, 95 percent of AI implementation projects do not prove to be able to show measurable value in six months of deployment. This paper will claim that it is not technological inadequacy but rather cultural incompatibility that is the major experimental variable, and that has profound implications in terms of organization investment decisions. **1.5 Research Objectives** The three interdependent research aims of this study are (1) to determine and theorize the structural processes by which hierarchical dysfunction triggers organizational decline; (2) to test the role of digital marketing in concealing, and Strategic Project Management in exposing, hierarchical dysfunction; and (3) to create practical diagnostic and governance tools that organizational leaders can use to diagnose and remedy hierarchical health. The subsequent paragraphs include a literature review, outline the research methodology, provide a systematic description of the findings, theoretical and practical discussion, and conclusions and implications on research and practice.

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 Theoretical basis of organizational hierarchy. The scholarly history of organizational hierarchy is quite broad, but its incorporation into the digital marketing and project management practice is immature. Diefenbach (2013) presents a conceptualization of hierarchy as a systemic process which involves not only structural arrangements but also the cognitive schemas, behavioral dispositions, and institutional processes which reproduce hierarchical relations with time. More importantly, Diefenbach points to the fact that hierarchies do not exist only due to the fact that they are useful but because they provide different benefits to those who are placed in a better position in the hierarchy- a dynamic which causes structural resistance to change. This understanding is directly empirically relevant. The organizations that were viewed in the current study had a high level of hierarchical dysfunction that persisted despite the fact that leaders to the organization were aware of the costs involved but the key beneficiaries of this structure are the ones who have the power to change the structure and at the same time they are the main users of this structure. The redesign of organizational structure is not only a technical issue but a political one, and needs outside systems of accountability, and structural incentives of transparency. **2.2 Hierarchical Instability and Network Dynamics**. Liu and Moskvina (2015) offer a complementary viewpoint with their discussion on hierarchical networks in which mathematically they show that the hierarchical stability declines as the number of organizational layers increases. Deep hierarchies create distortions in communication, slow down the speed of information and create an environment where informal networks, founded on personal loyalty and affective ties as opposed to competence, are becoming more and more dominant in organizational performance. This result is particularly close to the field data presented in this paper where organizations where seven or more hierarchical layers were observed had the most inflexible dynamics of talent suppression and highest rates of project failure. **2.3 Organizational Learning**, Failure and Needs-Based hierarchies. Chiponde, Gledson, and Greenwood (2021) further generalize the concept of hierarchical dysfunction to the sphere of organizational learning, stating that organizations that operate through the project-based model deliberately structure their priorities around the operational needs at the lower rank (profitability, competitive positioning, etc.) at the cost of the higher-order developmental needs, such as the ability to learn through failure. In a managerial environment where insecurity is rife, failure punishment is politicized, stifling the honest post-mortem that organizations can turn adversity to capability. This dynamic itself suppresses the psychological safety which has been developed in research as fundamental requirement to innovation and long term performance. **2.4 Strategic Project Leadership** Shenhar (2015) expresses a vision of a strategic project leadership, which goes beyond the traditional delivery management. Within this model, the project head is not just an organizer of activities and resources but is a strategist who must be able to fit project implementation within organizational goals, stakeholder affiliations, and navigate the political environment of resource contention. This paper is based upon the framework of Shenhar, which defines strategic project leadership as a diagnostic practice involved in assessing and, where feasible, remediating organizational hierarchical health. **2.5 Digital Marketing:** Potential and Restriction. Veleva and Tsvetanova (2020) present a streamlined discussion of digital marketing benefits and limitations, referring to precision targeting, measuring real-time performance, and cost-effectiveness as the key benefits, and mentioning the risks of vulnerability of brand reputation in highly transparent digital settings. The current study builds on this analysis by adding another dimension which is not present in the current literature; that of using digital marketing capabilities to conceal dysfunction within the organization. When advanced digital marketing functions are implemented in the interest of an essentially fraudulent brand image, they fail not only to generate value, but hasten organizational deterioration by postponing the identification and correction of structural issues. **2.6 Gaps that were identified in the literature**. The literature analysis indicates that there are three gaps in substance. First, the literature covers the three areas of organizational hierarchy, digital marketing, and project management in a more disconnected manner, and very little of how the three areas relate to each other. Second, it has not been theorized or empirically studied how digital marketing facilitates the masking of hierarchical dysfunction, which is part of what this research paper calls the Phantom Brand Phenomenon. Third, there are no practical diagnostic tools in evaluating hierarchical health in an organizational level. This paper covers all three gaps.

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3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design. The research design used in this study is a mixed-methods research design, where quantitative survey data are used (to cover a large area) and qualitative interview data are used (to gain in depth). The mixed-methods approach is the right choice considering the two-fold goals of the study to record the prevalence of hierarchical dysfunction in a heterogeneous organizational sample and to gain a subtle insight into the mechanisms by which hierarchical dysfunction is perpetuated and maintained. The data collection was performed in the period between January 2025 and March 2026 among 35 organizations which comprised both of public corporations, nonprofits, and private enterprises. The sampling process was purposive, in search of variation by the scale of the organization, industry, and hierarchical health as initially determined by initial contact with organizational gatekeepers. **3.2 Data Collection** The structured online survey tool was used to collect quantitative information by surveying 102 project managers, team leaders, and senior executives. The questionnaire was sent through professional networks, such as Linked In and industry association groups. The items were structured in such a way that they provoked evaluations of promotion practices, transparency of resource allocation, and tolerance to failure norms, psychological safety states, and correctness of digital marketing portrayal in comparison with the reality within an organization. The qualitative data will be collected using 45 semi-structured interviews (via telephone or video conferencing). All interviews were conducted based on a confidentiality policy and the identities of participants and organization membership were kept secret. Close contemporaneous notes were made during and just after every interview. The participants were urged to tell definite organizational episodes, which would give contextual granularity needed in the analysis at the process level. The sample of the organization consisted of 12 publicly listed companies (such as Microsoft, Google, Nestle, and Unilever, cited with permission), 15 privately owned companies, and 8 nonprofits. Privacy was also accorded to all the secret organizations and to individual participants who demanded to have the privacy. **3.3 Index of Hierarchy Transparency (HTI)**. In order to facilitate a systematic comparison of hierarchical health among the organizational sample, the authors designed the Hierarchy Transparency Index (HTI), which is a composite diagnostic tool and scored on a 0-100 scale. The HTI includes four dimensions that are weighted equally with each having a maximum of 25 points:

HTI Dimension	Operational Definition	Scoring Criterion
Promotion Transparency	Degree to which advancement decisions are based on documented performance criteria	25 = performance-based; 0 = favoritism-based
Resource Allocation Transparency	Degree to which resource distribution follows merit and strategic priority	25 = merit-based; 0 = politically determined
Failure Tolerance	Organizational orientation toward failure as a learning opportunity versus a punishable event	25 = learning-oriented; 0 = punishment-oriented
Psychological Safety	Employee capacity to raise concerns, disagree with leadership, and admit error without fear of retaliation	25 = high safety; 0 = low safety

Table 1. Hierarchy Transparency Index (HTI) — Dimensional Structure and Scoring Protocol

The HTI scores were obtained in each of the 35 organizations by accumulating the survey responses and adding the assessment results obtained during the interview. Organizations with scores of greater than 70 were considered as high-HTI; those with a score of 50 or lower were considered low-HTI. **3.4 Analytical Approach** Descriptive statistical data analysis methods were used to analyze quantitative data, and between-group comparisons across HTI classification strata were performed. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze qualitative data, where codes were created inductively, based on interview transcripts, and then grouped into higher-order conceptual clusters. When about 35 interviews were conducted, theoretical saturation was accomplished, and the rest of the 10 interviews were used to validate and clarify the formed framework. Quantitative and qualitative findings were combined in an integration approach using a convergent parallel design whereby results were triangulated using data sources to strengthen validity.

4. RESULTS

4.1 The Primacy of Political Failure. The survey data show that there exist an alarming trend in the causes of project failure attributed to. In the entire sample of 102 respondents, 68 percent of the project failures were blamed on internal political factors, namely, favoritism in the allocation of resources, suppression of talent by the insecure managers and resource hoarding by the hierarchical managers. Technical difficulties such as skill shortages, technology constraints, or the complexity of the project only caused 32 percent of failures. This result is strong regardless of the size of the organization, industry, and geographical setting. The regularity of this trend is high. The answers of respondents having very different organizational positions, industries, and tenures narrow down to the same conclusion: it is internal politics rather than technical incompetence that is the main force behind project failures. In this convergence there is no idiosyncratic

perception but a real structural phenomenon. **4.2 Transparency of hierarchy and organizational performance**. Comparison between HTI classification groups demonstrates significant and uniform performance differentials. Key outcome measures by disaggregating by the HTI classification are shown in the following table:

Performance Metric	High-HTI Organizations (Score > 70)	Low-HTI Organizations (Score < 50)
Project Success Rate	78%	41%
3-Year Talent Retention (High Performers)	89%	34%
Digital Marketing ROI	12.4×	3.2×
AI Project Success Rate	68%	12%

Table 2. Comparative Organizational Performance Metrics by HTI Classification

The most practically significant result of the study is the 37-percentage-point difference between the project success rates in high-HTI and low-HTI organizations. On the same note, the near-complete absence of AI project success in low-HTI organizations (12%) supports the hypothesis that cultural conditions, as opposed to technological capability, is the constraining factor on realization of AI value. **4.3 Insecurity Cycle:** Grounded Theoretical Framework. The qualitative analysis of the 45 interview transcripts provided a unified four stages process model of the process that occurred between inappropriate leadership appointment and organizational collapse. As the main theoretical contribution of the study, this framework is called the Insecurity Cycle. Stage 1- The Wrong Appointment- A top executive uses his/her personal loyalty, social proximity, or affective preference to pick a successor or subordinate instead of basing the choice on professional ability. The meritorious candidates are disregarded. At some level, the appointee is aware that his/her appointment is not based on merit. Stage 2-The Purge: The newly hired manager, driven by the implied danger that good subordinates pose, proceeds to marginalize and finally eliminate those who perform well in the team in a systematic manner. The mechanisms of dismissal can be unfavorable performance review, strategic placement of the talented in projects that are designed to fail, and eventual social marginalization. Stage 3 -The Homogenization: After the elimination of skilled and possibly dangerous members, the team forms once again based on a value of loyalty and obedience, as opposed to aptness. Innovation diminishes. The execution of projects gets pegged towards risk avoidance and credit attribution instead of value delivery. The group is homogenized in its mediocrity. Stage 4 -The Collapse: Talent drain, innovation stifling and political project management have a cumulative impact on the measurable performance decline. The erosion of quality, customer dissatisfaction and reputational damage amass until they reach a critical level where organizational survival is at risk. This could be a period that digital marketing maintains the outward brand image at least until the crisis is realized but in fact exacerbates its effects. **4.4 Participant Accounts** The qualitative data involve a sequence of anonymized narratives that support the quantitative data. An experienced project manager, who has worked in the manufacturing industry (more than 25 years) explained a consistent trend where new directors were replacing skilled personnel with people who were loyal to them, and the quality of the project declined, and marketing messages still focused on innovation. A Technology Chief Marketing Officer described a campaign which had high digital performance metrics in one quarter, but then there were continuous product quality failures led to brand damage that the marketing investment could not undo. A Project Management Office Director in financial services explained the systematic rejection of AI forecasting performance by managers who believed in relational intuition instead of algorithmic prediction leading to the under use of a highly accurate forecasting tool in use. The testimonies of the staff in high-HTI companies, a project manager at Google and a senior HR Director at Unilever, depicted a stark difference in institutional cultures where empathy, psychological safety, and talent equity were quantified and operationally embedded into a promotion and performance management framework. Psychological safety was found to be the overall predictor of team performance in Google. At Unilever individual performance measures were disregarded and managers with high team turnover were automatically locked out of promotion.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Strategy as a Strength or Weakness. The results of this work call into question the traditional approach to the organizational hierarchy as a structural given - an administrative mechanism that is neutral in value, and the value of which is determined more by its design. This evidence shows that hierarchy is more effectively seen as a dynamic system whose results are dictated by the values, incentives, and practices of the people who work within it. When hierarchical systems are defined by transparency, equity and accountability, they are strategic assets which enhance organizational capability. Being opaque, favoritism as well as talent suppression, they act as strategic liabilities and systematically undermine organizational performance. This difference has direct implication to leadership practice. The organizational leader who regards hierarchy as an organizational structure to be optimized by redesign, flattening the hierarchy, broadening the span of control, redesigning reporting relationships, will only realize a short-term non-sustainable improvement. It is not enough to change the structure without the culture. **5.2 Phantom Brand as Strategic Risk.** The Phantom Brand Phenomenon discovered in this study is a unique type of strategic risk that has not been well addressed in the organizational and marketing literatures. The conceptualization of brand value in the literature that has survived elaborates brand value as a result of the experience of customers, employees, and other stakeholders with the products, services, and behavior of an organization. Digital marketing, with its ability to build brand images fast and in a complex way, opens the prospect of decoupling brand promise and organizational reality at a permanent basis. Phantom branding is not just a reputational risk. It is also diagnostic: the organizations that spend a lot of money on digital marketing to exude organizational health may systematically postpone the discovery of structural dysfunction, and in this way, extend and exacerbate the final results. The marketing award obtained in the quarter when a product quality crisis develops is not just ironical but it is a sign of a perilous lack of fit between organizational sensing and organizational communication. **5.3 SPM as Organization Governance**. The definition of Strategic Project Management as a diagnostic and governance tool presented in the study takes the existing body of literature on project leadership in fruitful directions. The empirical support of the Shenhar (2015) framework of strategic project leadership is provided by the experiences of project managers that were placed in a better position to identify hierarchical

dysfunction before it was reflected in project results due to their cross-functional visibility and control of resources. To enable a successful application of SPM as organizational governance, however, the political effects of the diagnostic observations of project managers must be guarded. Professional retaliation is common in low-HTI organizations where project managers who record hierarchical dysfunction and advance it via the right channels often experience professional retaliation. The organizational circumstances that render SPM the most needed are the same that render it the most dangerous to practice. This paradox is an indication of the value of external accountability processes, such as board-level accountability, independent project audit functions, and whistleblower protections, to encourage project managers to recognize and disclose hierarchical dysfunction. **5.4 Practical Tools:** HTI and Equity-Led Governance. The Hierarchy Transparency Index offers organizational executives with a systematic tool of evaluating hierarchical health in four paramount dimensions. Its usefulness lies in its specificity of operation: every dimension is characterized by observable organizational actions and performance, but not by abstract cultural qualities. The combination of survey tools, the analysis of HR data, and self-assessment of leadership enables the organization to evaluate its HTI score and monitor the change over time as the interventions are provided. The Equity-Led Governance Model deal with a particular weakness of multi-partner project and joint venture where hierarchical dysfunction is often a result of the feeling of unequal contribution recognition. The key principles of the model—equity adjustment which is dynamic, contribution metrics which are transparent, cadences of review, and a pre-determined dispute resolution mechanisms, all combine to form the conditions of hierarchically healthy inter-organizational collaboration. The focus of the model on dynamic as opposed to static equity distribution is especially an important aspect given that hierarchical structure of partnerships is dynamic and changes according to real contributions instead of bargaining leverage during the onset of the relationship. **5.5 The Boundaries of AI in Culturally Diminished Spaces**. The results that the success rate of AI projects varies by an almost six-fold difference between high-HTI and low-HTI organizations should be interpreted with caution. One is tempted to infer that this difference is attributable to the AI implementation strategy, and not organizational culture. Nevertheless, the data of the interview gives a consistent indication that in low-HTI companies, AI-produced insights are systematically discounted or even vetoed by managers whose positional safety lies in enforcing relational, as opposed to data-driven, decision norms. The AI tool predicting a project delay accurately is not used in a vacuum: a manager is used to review its findings, and he/she might have a strong personal incentive to challenge it. This result has direct implications on the investment choices of AI in organizations. Companies that are contemplating the use of AI would be better off administering HTI tests before implementing AI, as the payback on AI investment is largely determined by hierarchical health. Organizational culture and hierarchical transparency may have higher marginal returns to investment than an equivalent investment in AI capability in low-HTI settings.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper contributes to a theoretical and empirical argument in favor of the central place of hierarchical health to organizational performance, brand credibility, and the effectiveness of both digital marketing and Strategic Project Management. The gathered evidence consisting of 35 organizations, 102 survey respondents, and 45 participants to the interview frames into a coherent and practically implementable conclusions. To begin with, internal political dysfunction, which is operationalized as favoritism, talent suppression and hierarchical hoarding of resources, is the main cause of project failure as it explains 68% of project failures in this sample. The preponderation of organizational remediation investment has a mere 32 percent acknowledgement in technical difficulties. This allocation of diagnostic and curative activity in the wrong place is a great organizational wastage. Second, as an influential commercial tool, digital marketing operates under the conditions of hierarchical dysfunction as an institution concealment tool and not brand-making. The Phantom Brand, an organization with a plausible and essential digital presence but internal structures which is falling apart, is a unique and understudied strategic threat. This process of bringing external brand representation to the generally acknowledged internal reality of the organization is inevitable; the question is how this can be brought about by managed transparency or a crisis-induced disclosure. Third, Strategic Project Management, exercised in the full organizational perspective in which the cross-functional role offers, is an important critical mechanism of hierarchical accountability. Project managers who learn to see, record and multiply the occurrence of political dysfunction and who act in organizational settings that reinforce and reward the behaviour are critical agents of governance within the organizational system. Fourth, artificial intelligence cannot solve hierarchical dysfunction; it only increases the conditions in the organization. Companies aiming to use AI to gain a competitive edge need to understand that the key binding factor to value realization of AI is not technical but cultural. Fifth, the organizations, which exhibit long-term excellence in the delivery of their projects, the retention of talents, the effectiveness of digital marketing, and adoption of AI, have one structural feature in common: they have clear, fair, and accountable hierarchical governance. Microsoft, Google, Nestle, and Unilever are not special due to their size or capabilities. They are also unique in the fact that they have created institutional environments where talent is known, failure is taught and hierarchy is used to deliver organizational instead of personal safety. The Hierarchy Transparency Index and the Equity-Led Governance Model presented in the present work offers some useful tools according to which the organizational leaders could evaluate and enhance hierarchical health. Their introduction, along with the cultural promises they entail, is the initial investment made by organizations that want to give the appearance of self-congruity between their external brand name and their internal organizational fact. Further studies are to seek longitudinal confirmation of the HTI measure, cross-cultural examination of hierarchy processes in different countries, and experimental research of the most effective organizational interventions in breaking the Insecurity Cycle found in this empirical context. The current research provides the conceptual and empirical basis of this research agenda.

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