

Systematic Literature Review

A Systematic Review of Affordance Theory in Digital Transformation Research: Evidence from 2020–2025

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A B S T R A C T

This study presents a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of research applying Affordance Theory in the context of digital technology from 2020 to 2025. A total of 49 peer-reviewed studies were analyzed to identify dominant constructs, mediating mechanisms, boundary conditions, and research gaps. The findings show that *perceived*, *actualized*, and *technological affordances* serve as core constructs explaining how digital features enable or constrain user behavior. Mediating factors such as trust, engagement, and learning orientation influence how affordances translate into digital outcomes, while contextual conditions such as organizational culture and technological complexity shape their effectiveness. Despite its growing application, the literature remains fragmented, with limited theoretical integration and methodological diversity. Future research should adopt process-oriented, longitudinal, and mixed-method approaches to enhance the explanatory power of Affordance Theory. This review contributes to a clearer theoretical understanding of how digital affordances drive behavioral and organizational transformation in the evolving digital era.

INTRODUCTION

Affordance Theory, originally conceptualized by James J. Gibson (1977) and later refined by Norman (1988) and Leonardi (2011), provides a robust analytical framework for understanding the dynamic interplay between humans and technology. The term *affordance* refers to the potential actions that an environment or artefact offers to an individual, depending on their abilities, intentions, and contextual constraints. Within digital environments, the theory elucidates how technological features enable or constrain user behaviour and how these possibilities are perceived and actualized through interaction. Recent research has extended this theoretical perspective across diverse digital domains such as social media (Wu et al., 2025; Xiao et al., 2025), artificial intelligence (Maragno et al., 2023), and organizational transformation (Sun et al., 2024) to explore how digital affordances influence cognition, communication, and collaboration. By situating human action within the technological context, Affordance Theory bridges the gap between *technological determinism* and *social constructivism*, highlighting that technology's influence is neither fixed nor neutral but emerges through processes of user interpretation, adaptation, and enactment.

Despite its growing prominence, scholarship on Affordance Theory remains fragmented and theoretically diffuse. Studies differ substantially in their conceptualization and operationalization of affordances. Some emphasize *perceived affordances* that shape user cognition and behaviour (Li et al., 2023; Khalil et al., 2023), while others highlight *actualized affordances* that depend on users' goals and contextual dynamics (Ajah, 2025; D'Ambra et al., 2022). Furthermore, empirical applications of Affordance Theory are often confined to isolated settings such as digital education, entrepreneurship, or online platforms without adequate integration of insights across domains. This fragmentation limits

cumulative theory-building, weakens empirical generalization, and creates inconsistencies in how key constructs and mechanisms are defined. The lack of conceptual clarity and theoretical integration hinders the consolidation of affordance-based research and its application to emerging digital phenomena.

Given these challenges, a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) is essential to consolidate, classify, and critically evaluate how Affordance Theory has been applied in empirical studies related to digital technology. Conducting such a review helps clarify conceptual definitions, identify recurring constructs and mediating mechanisms, and uncover unresolved methodological or theoretical gaps. This review is particularly timely considering the pervasive influence of digital technologies across human and organizational contexts. The proliferation of digital platforms, artificial intelligence, virtual and augmented reality, and social networking systems has introduced increasingly complex affordances that shape perception, learning, innovation, and social interaction. Recent studies such as those by Pavlyuchenko & Dion (2025), Singh et al. (2025), and Lu et al. (2025) underscore that while digital affordances empower individuals and organizations, they also introduce constraints and ethical challenges, including cognitive overload, privacy concerns, and social detachment. Therefore, synthesizing the fragmented empirical evidence surrounding Affordance Theory will enhance its theoretical integration and strengthen its relevance for understanding socio-technical systems in the digital age.

In studies of digital technology adoption and use, theoretical frameworks such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) have been widely employed to explain users' intentions and initial acceptance of technological systems. While these models offer valuable insights into factors influencing adoption decisions, they primarily emphasize pre-use perceptions and individual attitudes. In contrast, Affordance Theory focuses on the relational and dynamic interaction between users and technological features, highlighting how technological possibilities are perceived, enacted, and actualized within specific contexts of use. This perspective enables a deeper understanding of how digital technologies shape behaviour over time, making Affordance Theory particularly suitable for analysing complex and evolving digital environments beyond initial adoption.

The review focuses on studies published between 2020 and 2025, as this period marks a critical phase in the acceleration of digital transformation across various sectors. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly intensified the adoption of digital technologies, reshaping how individuals and organizations interact with technological systems. Consequently, this timeframe captures the most recent theoretical and empirical developments in the application of Affordance Theory within rapidly evolving digital contexts.

To address the aforementioned issues, this review is guided by the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What journals are relevant to the application of Affordance Theory?

RQ2: What are the dominant constructs, mediating mechanisms, and boundary conditions identified in the literature using the affordance perspective?

RQ3: What theoretical, contextual, and methodological gaps exist in current research, and how can future studies extend the explanatory power of Affordance Theory in the digital technology domain?

By systematically examining existing research through these questions, this review aims to deliver a comprehensive, evidence-based synthesis that enhances theoretical understanding, promotes conceptual clarity, and establishes a future research agenda for applying Affordance Theory in the context of digital transformation.

METHODS

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to collect, evaluate, and synthesise research related to the application of Affordance Theory within the domain of digital technology. The SLR method was selected to ensure that the review process follows a structured and transparent procedure, allowing the identification of existing trends, theoretical developments, and research gaps in a consistent and reproducible manner. The overall goal of this SLR is to summarise current knowledge on how Affordance Theory has been utilised in digital contexts, identify conceptual fragmentation, and provide insights that may guide future research directions.

The review process consists of three main stages: planning, conducting, and reporting. In the planning stage, the research focus and objectives were defined based on preliminary mapping results that indicated a growing use of Affordance Theory in studies related to digital transformation, artificial intelligence, information systems, and online interaction. The conducting stage involved identifying relevant databases, constructing the search strategy, screening potential studies,

and determining inclusion and exclusion criteria. The final stage, reporting, focused on organising and interpreting the selected studies in order to generate an integrated synthesis of findings.

The literature search was conducted using academic databases identified in the mapping process, namely Scopus, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, Emerald Insight, and MDPI. These databases were chosen because they contained the majority of affordance-related publications in digital research contexts. The search was carried out using a combination of keywords such as “Affordance Theory,” “Technological Affordance,” “Perceived Affordance,” “Actualized Affordance,” “Digital Technology,” “Digital Transformation,” “Artificial Intelligence,” and “Social Media Platforms.” Boolean operators were applied to refine the search results and ensure the inclusion of articles that directly addressed the theoretical and empirical application of affordance. Duplicate records were removed as part of the screening process, as illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram, and only studies published between 2020 and 2025 were considered to reflect recent developments.

To enhance transparency and replicability, the search strategy was explicitly defined using Boolean operators. The primary search string combined theoretical and contextual terms related to affordance and digital technology, as follows: (“Affordance Theory” OR “Technological Affordance” OR “Perceived Affordance” OR “Actualized Affordance”) AND (“Digital Technology” OR “Digital Transformation” OR “Artificial Intelligence” OR “Information Systems” OR “Social Media”). The search was applied to article titles, abstracts, and author keywords to ensure that only studies with a substantive engagement with affordance theory in digital contexts were retrieved. This strategy allowed for a systematic identification of relevant literature while minimizing the inclusion of conceptually unrelated studies.

To ensure consistency and quality, the selection process followed a clear set of inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were included if they explicitly applied or developed Affordance Theory as the main framework, examined perceived or actualized affordances, and were situated within digital or socio-technical contexts such as digital transformation, AI, social media, or information systems. Both empirical and conceptual studies published in peer-reviewed journals or conference proceedings were accepted, provided that the full text was available and written in English. In contrast, studies were excluded if they mentioned “affordance” without theoretical grounding, were focused on non-digital or physical contexts such as industrial design or environmental psychology, or were unpublished materials such as reports, theses, or editorials. Articles published prior to 2020 were also excluded unless cited as foundational references.

The study selection process was conducted systematically through four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. During identification, all potentially relevant articles were retrieved from the selected databases. The screening stage involved reviewing titles and abstracts to eliminate irrelevant studies. In the eligibility stage, full-text versions were examined based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Finally, in the inclusion stage, studies that fully met the eligibility requirements were selected for data extraction and analysis. The entire process was documented to maintain transparency and traceability.

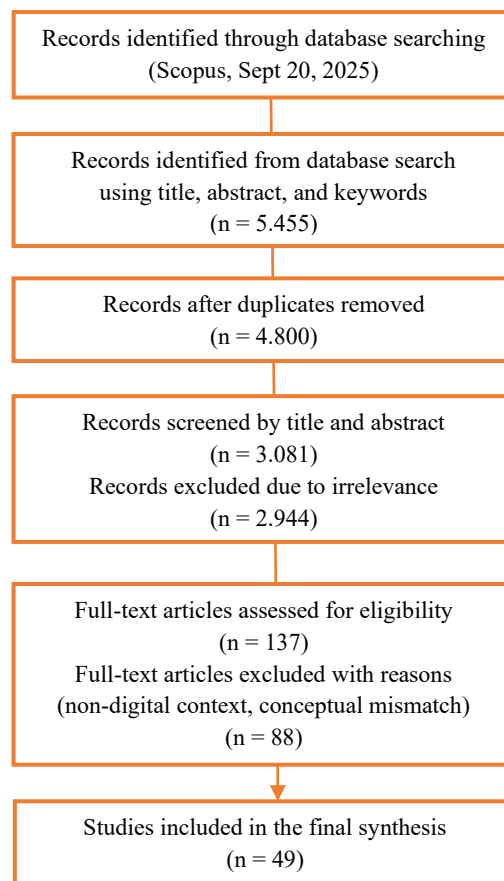


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Study Selection Process

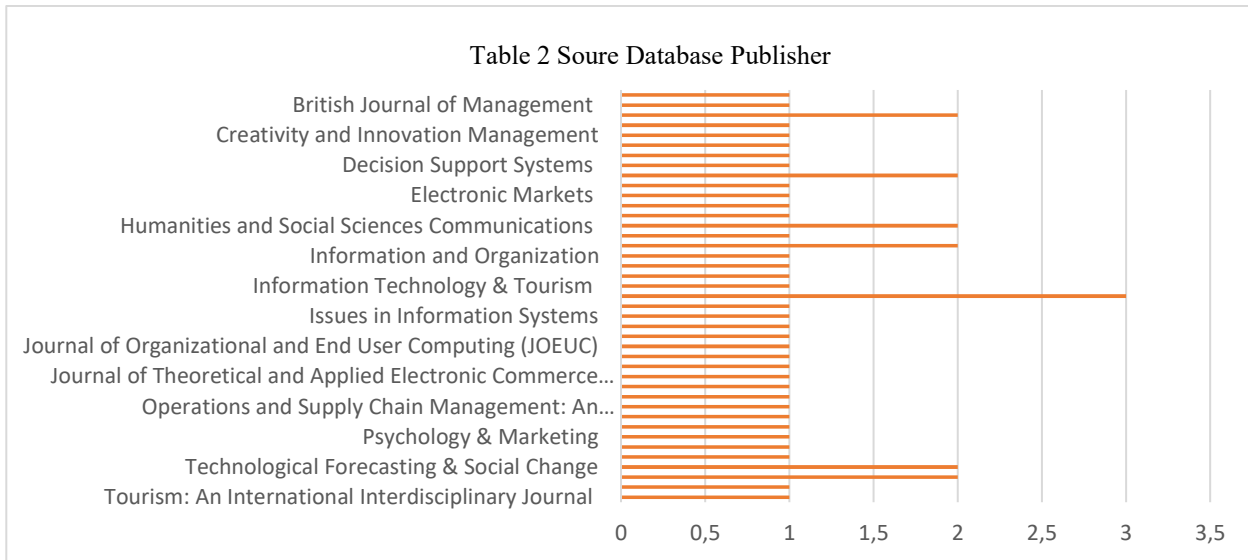
Data extraction was performed using a structured coding framework to capture essential information from each study, including the author, publication year, research context, methodological approach, theoretical focus, and main findings. This extracted data was then synthesised to identify major research themes, conceptual relationships, and methodological trends. The synthesis focused on mapping how Affordance Theory has been applied across different digital contexts, highlighting its role in explaining user interaction, technological adaptation, and organizational transformation. The integration of these findings provides a comprehensive understanding of how the theory continues to evolve within the rapidly changing landscape of digital technology research.

Overall, this methodological process ensured that the review was systematic, rigorous, and aligned with the research objectives. By combining structured selection, careful screening, and analytical synthesis, the present study provides an evidence-based understanding of the theoretical and practical development of Affordance Theory in digital environments between 2020 and 2025.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Category	Inclusion	Exclusion
Theoretical Relevance	Studies that explicitly apply or develop affordance theory	Studies that mention “affordance” without theoretical grounding
Type of Study	Empirical or conceptual studies	Non-scientific or unpublished works such as reports or theses
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles or conference papers	Grey literature and non-peer-reviewed publications
Publication Year	Article published between 2020 and 2025	Articles published before 2020
Language	Written in English	Written in non-English
Data Accessibility	Full text articles available for review	Articles without accessible full text

From the application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria described above, a total of 49 studies were identified as relevant to the objectives of this research. These studies met the defined requirements in terms of theoretical relevance, publication type, language, and data accessibility, ensuring that each article explicitly applied or developed Affordance Theory within digital contexts. The selected papers represent research published between 2020 and 2025, covering various domains such as digital transformation, information systems, artificial intelligence, and social media. All included studies were published in peer-reviewed journals or conference proceedings and written in English, with full-text versions accessible for analysis. The distribution of these 49 papers across publication years and journal sources is illustrated in the following figure, providing an overview of the academic landscape and publication trends related to Affordance Theory in digital technology research.



RESULTS & DISCUSSION

RQ1: Relevant Journals in The Application of Affordance Theory

The results of RQ1 show that research on the application of Affordance Theory in the digital era has been published across 28 journals from various disciplines. These journals highlight how affordances explain the interaction between humans and technology. The detailed list of journals, including their publishers, publication years, and total number of studies, is presented in the following figure and table.

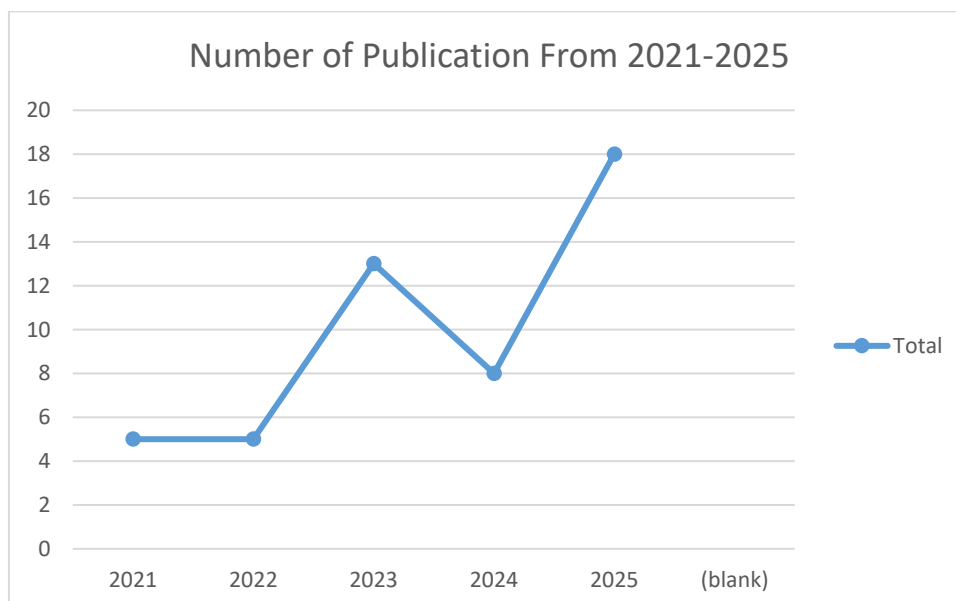


Table 3. Published Journals

2021	4
Technological Forecasting & Social Change	2
Technovation	1
Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal	1
2022	11
Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research	1
Marketing Theory	2
Operations and Supply Chain Management: An International Journal	1
Production and Operations Management	1
Production Planning & Control	1
Psychology & Marketing	2
Risks	1
Technological Forecasting & Social Change	2
2023	6
Issues in Information Systems	1
Journal of Business Research	1
Journal of Consumer Research	1
Journal of Organizational and End User Computing (JOEUC)	1
Journal of Strategic Information Systems	1
Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science	1
2024	8
Information and Organization	2
Information Technology & Tourism	2
International Journal of Information Management	4
2025	20
BAR – Brazilian Administration Review	1
British Journal of Management	1
Business Strategy and the Environment	2
Central European Management Journal	1
Creativity and Innovation Management	1
Data Science and Management	2
Decision Support Systems	1
Digital Business	2
Electronic Commerce Research and Applications	1
Electronic Markets	1
Group Decision and Negotiation	1
Humanities and Social Sciences Communications	3
i-com: Journal of Interactive Media	1
Information & Management	2
Total	49

The analysis of RQ1 indicates that research applying Affordance Theory has shown significant growth across various journals between 2021 and 2025, with a total of 49 publications identified. The distribution reveals a strong concentration of studies in 2025 (20 papers), suggesting a recent surge of interest in using Affordance Theory to explain digital transformation, technological adoption, and user interaction in socio-technical environments. Prominent journals such as the *International Journal of Information Management*, *Technological Forecasting & Social Change*, *Business Strategy and the Environment*, and *Information & Management* appear as major publication outlets, reflecting the integration of affordance perspectives into mainstream information systems and management research. Earlier studies in 2021–2023

were primarily exploratory, focusing on conceptual discussions within marketing, psychology, and organizational contexts, while publications from 2024–2025 demonstrate a shift toward more empirical investigations supported by digital innovation frameworks. Overall, this trend highlights the increasing recognition of Affordance Theory as a key analytical lens in understanding how digital technologies enable, constrain, and reshape human and organizational behavior.

Following the identification of key publication outlets in RQ1, the next stage of analysis addresses RQ2, which explores the conceptual structure of studies applying Affordance Theory. This part examines the dominant constructs, mediating mechanisms, and boundary conditions that have emerged from the literature, providing a deeper understanding of how the affordance perspective has been operationalized within digital technology research.

RQ2: Dominant Constructs, Mediating Mechanisms and Boundary Conditions

The review of the selected studies reveals several dominant constructs that frequently appear in the application of Affordance Theory within digital contexts. Across most publications between 2021 and 2025, the constructs of perceived affordances, actualized affordances, and technological affordances emerge as the core conceptual pillars. These constructs describe how users perceive potential actions offered by digital technologies and how these affordances are later actualized into meaningful practices. In particular, studies published in journals such as *Information & Management*, *Digital Business*, and *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* emphasize that affordances operate as a bridge between technological features and human intentions, influencing user behavior, innovation adoption, and organizational adaptation. Furthermore, complementary constructs such as digital capability, user engagement, and platform interactivity are often integrated to capture how affordances manifest in complex socio-technical systems.

In terms of mediating mechanisms, most studies highlight processes that explain how affordances translate into tangible digital outcomes. The mapping shows that variables such as user motivation, trust, technological competence, and organizational learning act as key mediators linking affordances with performance or behavioral effects. For instance, in research published in *Decision Support Systems* and *Group Decision and Negotiation*, digital affordances were shown to enhance collaboration and decision-making through increased perceived usefulness and knowledge sharing. Other studies found that perceived control and sense of empowerment mediate the relationship between digital affordances and technology utilization, particularly in social media, e-commerce, and AI-driven environments. These findings suggest that the realization of affordances is not automatic but shaped by psychological, social, and organizational processes that determine how technology is interpreted and enacted.

Regarding boundary conditions, the reviewed studies identify several contextual factors that moderate the strength and direction of affordance effects. These include technological complexity, organizational culture, user experience, and environmental uncertainty. For example, studies in *Business Strategy and the Environment* and *Technovation* demonstrate that high levels of digital turbulence or environmental change amplify the influence of affordances on innovation outcomes, whereas rigid organizational structures tend to weaken their effects. Similarly, contextual variations such as industry type, digital maturity, and task interdependence also shape how affordances are perceived and actualized. Together, these boundary conditions illustrate that the effectiveness of affordances depends not only on technology design but also on the dynamic alignment between user capabilities, organizational readiness, and environmental constraints.

Building on the analysis of dominant constructs, mediating mechanisms, and boundary conditions discussed in RQ2, this section addresses RQ3, which explores the theoretical, contextual, and methodological gaps that remain within current research on Affordance Theory and its application in digital technology studies.

Across the reviewed literature, clear methodological diversity can be observed. The majority of studies employed quantitative approaches, predominantly using survey-based designs and statistical modelling techniques to examine relationships between technological affordances and user behaviour. In addition, several qualitative studies adopted case studies, interviews, and ethnographic approaches to explore how affordances are enacted and actualized within specific organizational or social contexts. Conceptual and review-based studies were also identified, focusing on theoretical development and framework construction. This methodological variation enriches the understanding of Affordance Theory by capturing both measurable patterns and contextualized interpretations across different digital domains.

RQ3: Theoretical, Contextual and Methodological Gaps in Affordance Theory Research

The review of the mapped studies indicates that several theoretical gaps remain in how Affordance Theory is applied and developed within digital technology research. While most studies acknowledge the relational nature of affordances, many still conceptualize them at a descriptive level, emphasizing their existence without fully explaining the mechanisms through which they evolve and interact with social and technological systems. The author observes that a large portion of research treats affordances as isolated constructs rather than as components of a broader socio-technical process. This has limited the theory's explanatory power in capturing the dynamic interaction between users, technologies, and environments. Furthermore, inconsistencies in defining and differentiating between *perceived* and *actualized affordances* have led to conceptual fragmentation, making it difficult to accumulate coherent theoretical insights across studies. The author argues that future research should integrate Affordance Theory with complementary perspectives such as socio-materiality, activity theory, or dynamic capability theory to strengthen its theoretical depth and contextual adaptability.

Despite the rich insights offered by existing studies, several methodological limitations can be identified across the reviewed literature. A substantial proportion of empirical research relies on cross-sectional survey designs and self-reported data, which may limit causal inference and increase the risk of common method bias. In addition, longitudinal and experimental approaches remain relatively scarce, constraining the ability to capture how digital affordances evolve over time and across different stages of technology use. Many studies are also concentrated in specific organizational or geographic contexts, potentially limiting the generalizability of findings. These methodological constraints highlight the need for more diverse research designs to strengthen the robustness and explanatory power of affordance-based research in digital settings.

From a contextual perspective, the mapping shows that existing studies are concentrated primarily in organizational, information systems, and marketing domains, while other contexts remain underexplored. Most research focuses on affordances in digital transformation, e-commerce, and AI-enabled systems, yet relatively few studies examine how affordances operate in emerging contexts such as virtual reality, metaverse environments, human–AI collaboration, and digital sustainability ecosystems. The author notes that these newer contexts represent complex socio-technical spaces where affordances may evolve dynamically and interact with ethical, cultural, and institutional dimensions. Expanding research into these areas would help uncover how digital affordances influence not only user behavior and performance but also broader social values and organizational resilience in the era of rapid technological change. This contextual broadening is essential to ensure that Affordance Theory remains relevant in explaining technology's multifaceted impact beyond traditional organizational boundaries.

From a research design perspective, the mapping identifies a clear tendency toward cross-sectional and survey-based research designs, which, although valuable for identifying relationships, often fail to capture the evolving nature of affordances over time. The author notes that most studies employ quantitative approaches that measure affordances as static variables, without examining their formation, transformation, or actualization processes. As affordances are inherently dynamic and context-dependent, longitudinal and mixed-method approaches are more suitable to capture their emergence and evolution in real digital settings. Experimental, ethnographic, and simulation-based studies could also provide richer insights into how affordances are constructed through everyday interaction between humans and digital artifacts. The author suggests that employing such methodological diversity will allow researchers to better explain *how* and *why* certain affordances succeed or fail to be actualized in different technological contexts.

In reflection, the author concludes that extending the explanatory power of Affordance Theory requires a more integrative and process-oriented research agenda. Future studies should aim to bridge the gap between micro-level human–technology interaction and macro-level digital transformation outcomes by considering time, context, and complexity as central analytical dimensions. The author argues that Affordance Theory has significant potential to evolve from a descriptive framework into a predictive one capable of explaining not only what technologies afford, but also how and under what conditions those affordances lead to meaningful change. Strengthening theoretical integration, expanding contextual diversity, and adopting methodological pluralism are therefore essential steps to advance the maturity of affordance-based research and enhance its capacity to explain the social, behavioral, and organizational consequences of digital technology in the modern era.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review provides a comprehensive synthesis of how Affordance Theory has been applied, developed, and discussed within the domain of digital technology between 2020 and 2025. The review analyzed 49 peer-reviewed articles and revealed key patterns across three research questions (RQ1–RQ3) concerning the publication landscape, conceptual development, and existing gaps in the literature. Collectively, the findings indicate that Affordance Theory has become an increasingly influential framework for understanding the dynamic relationship between humans and digital artifacts, offering valuable insights into how technological features enable, constrain, and shape user and organizational behavior.

The findings of RQ1 highlight that research on Affordance Theory is dispersed across a wide range of academic journals, reflecting its growing interdisciplinary nature. The majority of publications appear in journals related to information systems, management, marketing, and digital innovation, indicating that the theory is being used to explain diverse digital phenomena such as technology adoption, social media interaction, and organizational transformation. The steady increase in publications over the past five years demonstrates a rising scholarly interest in affordances as a conceptual tool for bridging the gap between technological determinism and human agency in digital contexts.

In relation to RQ2, the synthesis identifies several dominant constructs—perceived affordances, actualized affordances, and technological affordances as the central elements of analysis. These constructs describe how users recognize, interpret, and actualize the potential actions offered by digital technologies. The review also reveals key mediating mechanisms such as user engagement, trust, learning orientation, and innovation capability, which explain how affordances are transformed into tangible digital outcomes. Furthermore, several boundary conditions including organizational culture, technological complexity, and digital maturity were found to moderate the effectiveness of affordances. Together, these findings suggest that Affordance Theory provides a flexible yet powerful framework for capturing the socio-technical processes underpinning digital interaction and transformation.

Finally, RQ3 exposes theoretical, contextual, and methodological gaps that remain in the existing body of research. Theoretically, the concept of affordances is often treated descriptively, with limited exploration of its dynamic and processual nature. Contextually, research remains concentrated in specific domains such as digital business and information systems, while emerging contexts like artificial intelligence, metaverse environments, and digital sustainability are still underrepresented. Methodologically, most studies rely on cross-sectional or survey-based approaches, which restrict the ability to capture how affordances evolve over time. To advance the field, future studies should adopt more integrative frameworks, explore diverse digital contexts, and employ longitudinal or mixed-method designs to enrich the explanatory and predictive potential of Affordance Theory.

In conclusion, this review underscores that Affordance Theory has matured into a central theoretical lens for understanding digital transformation, yet it continues to evolve as digital technologies become more complex and embedded in everyday life. Strengthening the theoretical integration of affordance constructs, expanding contextual diversity, and applying methodological innovation will be crucial for future research to fully realize the theory's potential. By doing so, scholars can move beyond identifying what technologies afford to explaining how and under what conditions these affordances drive meaningful behavioral, organizational, and societal change in the digital era.

From a practical perspective, these findings suggest that managers, system designers, and policymakers should move beyond a feature-centric view of digital technologies and instead focus on how technological affordances are perceived, enacted, and actualized by users within specific organizational and social contexts.

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