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Leadership Challenges for Digital Marketers in the AI World: An Autoethnographic Study

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Declaration of Originality

I, **Khizir Ahamed**, declare that this dissertation has been composed by myself, that the work contained herein is entirely my own except where explicitly stated otherwise in the text, and that this work has not been submitted for any other degree or qualification, in whole or in part, except as specified.

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Abstract

This dissertation explores how artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping digital leadership in entrepreneurial marketing contexts. Drawing on a practice-based, autoethnographic methodology, the study documents the author's lived experiences as a solo digital entrepreneur navigating algorithmic platforms such as Google AdSense, SEO systems, and AI-driven content tools.

The research aims to investigate: (1) how AI influences digital leadership practice; (2) what emotional and ethical challenges emerge; and (3) how autoethnography can help uncover these experiences. Data was collected through reflective journaling and digital platform engagement over a multi-year period. Thematic analysis revealed five key patterns: platform dependency, automation-creativity tension, emotional burnout, algorithmic ethics, and strategic adaptability.

Findings highlight that digital leaders operate within invisible, evolving systems that shape visibility, value, and voice. Ethical dilemmas — including bot traffic, black-hat SEO, and privacy concerns — demanded moral decision-making beyond technical optimisation. The study contributes to knowledge by providing insider insights into AI-era leadership, illustrating the value of narrative inquiry in surfacing subjective, emotional, and ethical dimensions often missed in quantitative research.

The research offers practical implications for entrepreneurs, educators, and policymakers aiming to foster ethical, resilient, and adaptive digital leadership in AI-mediated environments.

This dissertation provides practical insights for digital leaders, entrepreneurs, and policymakers seeking to develop responsible, resilient, and innovation-driven leadership frameworks in the age of artificial intelligence.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Digital Marketing Leadership, Autoethnography, Digital Transformation, Ethical Leadership.

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List of Abbreviations

AI - Artificial Intelligence

SEO - Search Engine Optimization

CMS - Content Management System

UWTSD - University of Wales Trinity Saint David

SME- Small and Medium-sized Enterprise

E-A-T / E-E-A-T - Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness / Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness

GDPR - General Data Protection Regulation

RQ - Research Question

UI/UX - User Interface / User Experience

SERP - Search Engine Results Page

CTR Click Through Rate

PPC Pay Per Click

API - Application Programming Interface

BERT - Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers (Google's NLP model)

NVivo - Qualitative Data Analysis Software

HTML - HyperText Markup Language

URL - Uniform Resource Locator

ROI - Return on Investment

KPI - Key Performance Indicator

VPN - Virtual Private Network

WWW - World Wide Web

DNS - Domain Name System

Glossary

Artificial Intelligence (AI):

Computer systems capable of performing tasks that typically require human intelligence, including learning, pattern recognition, and decision-making.

Programmatic Advertising:

Automated buying and selling digital advertising space using AI-driven algorithms and real-time bidding systems.

Search Arbitrage:

A digital marketing model where low-cost traffic is redirected to monetised landing pages to generate advertising revenue.

Digital Monetisation:

The process of generating revenue from digital platforms through advertising, subscriptions, affiliate marketing, or data-driven business models.

Marketing Technology (MarTech):

Software tools and platforms are used to plan, execute, manage, and measure digital marketing campaigns.

Advertising Technology (AdTech):

Technologies used for digital advertising delivery, tracking, optimisation, and analytics.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background of AI in Digital Marketing

The evolution of human society has always been deeply intertwined with technological advancement. From the printing press to the internet, each innovation has reshaped how businesses communicate with consumers. Marketing, in its earliest conceptual form, dates back to ancient civilizations, where barter systems and market exchange practices emerged. However, the academic foundation of marketing as a discipline began in the early 20th century. Scholars such as E. D. Jones were among the first to propose marketing as a formal academic study in 1902 at the University of Michigan, marking the beginning of a theoretical exploration into the strategies of reaching and influencing buyers (Sheth, Parvatiyar and Uslay, 2024). Marketing did not emerge suddenly as a modern business function. Its foundations were laid in early academic inquiry and economic thought.

The term "marketing mix" was popularised by Neil Borden in the 1950s and later developed into the 4Ps—Product, Price, Place, and Promotion—by E. Jerome McCarthy. These principles were rooted in physical marketplaces and traditional media like print, radio, and television. The rise of the internet in the early 1990s, marked by HotWired's launch of the first clickable banner ad in 1994, revolutionised marketing by introducing interactive, digital consumer engagement (Rust, 2020, pp. 15–26). This shift transformed consumers from passive targets to active participants.

The term "Artificial Intelligence" (AI) was introduced by John McCarthy in 1956 as the science of building intelligent machines. What began as academic theory has become central to modern marketing practice. Today, AI powers tools like chatbots, recommendation engines, and predictive analytics, shaping real-time decisions and consumer targeting (Verma *et al.*, 2021, p. 100002). AI is now deeply embedded in how businesses understand and reach audiences.

The convergence of AI and digital marketing marks not just a technological change, but a cultural and strategic shift. As algorithms replace intuition and data reshapes perception, marketers now operate as algorithmic strategists and AI navigators (Davenport *et al.*, 2020, pp. 24–42). Staying competitive requires continuous adaptation to machine-driven systems.

AI has evolved from simple automation to deep-learning platforms offering real-time targeting, content generation, and predictive personalisation. Tools like Google Ads, Meta’s algorithms, and Salesforce’s Einstein have redefined campaign scale and precision (Davenport *et al.*, 2020, pp. 24–42). This shift boosts efficiency but introduces complex ethical and leadership pressures.

Leadership in this space must evolve to be adaptive, ethical, and tech-savvy. With AI systems influencing visibility and control, leaders must juggle innovation, accountability, and human values (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021, p. 101994). Traditional models no longer suffice in platform-governed environments.

For entrepreneurs and SMEs, AI offers power and pressure. It enhances reach and targeting but reinforces dependence on opaque systems that dictate outcomes (Zuboff, 2023, pp. 203–213). This tension between autonomy and automation defines today’s marketing reality.

This dissertation uses autoethnography to reflect on the author’s lived entrepreneurial journey in AI marketing. By exploring ethical, strategic, and emotional challenges, it uncovers how digital leaders adapt in a world shaped by algorithms. Lived experience becomes a lens to understand leadership under AI transformation.

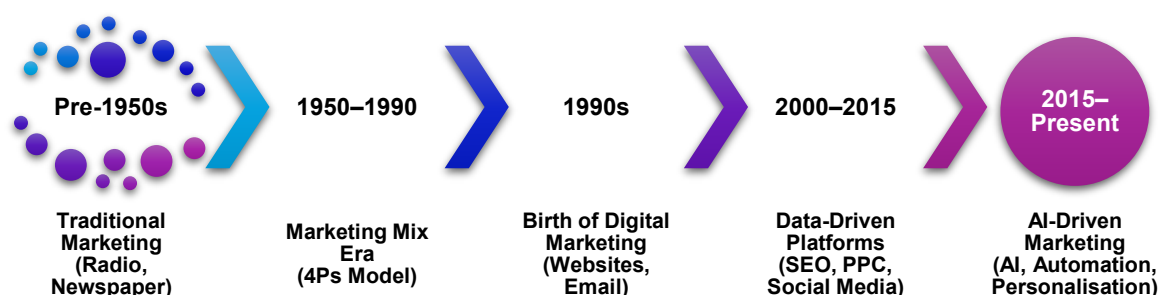


Figure 1: Transformation of Marketing: From Traditional to AI-Driven Strategies

(Source: Adapted by author from Sheth *et al.*, 2024; Rust, 2021; McCarthy, 1956)

1.2 Leadership in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

AI is reshaping leadership in marketing, shifting focus from task management to guiding intelligent systems. Traditional models based on control are no longer enough. Leaders now need emotional intelligence, ethics, adaptability, and tech fluency (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021, p. 101994). Modern leadership must balance people and technology.

In contrast to past hierarchical models, today's AI-driven environment supports distributed leadership. With real-time data and automation driving decisions, leaders must move from top-down control to collaboration and continuous learning (Lin, 2025, pp. 2469–2488). Flexibility and shared decisions define success.

Platforms like Google Ads, Meta, and YouTube rely on hidden algorithms that control visibility and monetisation. This creates uncertainty and forces leaders to act without full understanding (Newell and Marabelli, 2015, pp. 3–14). Leaders must guide teams in opaque systems.

Generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, Midjourney, and DALL·E automate content creation but raise concerns about originality and creative roles (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2023). Despite their utility, AI lacks empathy and strategic vision (Corvite *et al.*, 2023, pp. 1–38). Human insight remains vital in creative leadership.

Ethical leadership is essential in an AI-powered world. Leaders must confront bias, surveillance, and platform manipulation. Zuboff (2019) warns that AI fuels surveillance capitalism, demanding strong ethical oversight. Responsible leadership must challenge exploitative systems.

For entrepreneurs, these challenges are greater without corporate support. They must manage AI tools, take ethical risks, and make quick decisions with limited clarity (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Entrepreneurial leadership is rooted in learning and adaptation.

1.3 Research Problem

The integration of AI into digital marketing has changed how businesses engage audiences, plan strategies, and grow. Tools like automation, analytics, and

personalised content offer strong advantages but also bring leadership challenges—especially for entrepreneurs. Leaders now work within systems shaped by complex algorithms, changing rules, and hidden ad networks (Newell and Marabelli, 2015, pp. 3–14). Navigating this space requires both digital expertise and adaptive leadership.

A key tension emerges as leaders must balance vision, ethics, and agility in fast-changing systems (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021). Algorithms now drive critical choices like ad targeting and campaign results. Platforms such as Google Ads, Meta, and YouTube control visibility in real time, limiting strategic freedom and increasing risks around bias and ethical gaps (Corvite *et al.*, 2023, pp. 1–38). Staying effective requires leading amid limited control and high uncertainty.

Digital entrepreneurs face these pressures without corporate support. As shown in this dissertation’s autoethnography, navigating SEO shifts, monetisation, and crisis moments like COVID-19 involves personal and high-stakes decisions. AI’s rise, along with evolving user expectations and tighter data laws, makes leadership more demanding (Lin, 2025, pp. 2469–2488). Success now relies on resilience, ethics, and technical fluency.

Despite AI’s growing influence, few studies explore leadership from a practitioner’s view. Most focus on technical or organisational models, not the lived experience of leading in algorithmic environments. This leaves a gap in understanding how leaders adapt in freelance and emerging markets like the UK, South Asia, and the Middle East (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2023; Zuboff, 2019). Deeper insight is needed into how real-world leadership evolves with AI.

This dissertation asks: What challenges do digital marketers face in the AI age? How do entrepreneurial leaders adapt to algorithmic systems? And how can leadership be redefined for AI-powered marketing environments? These questions guide a reflective investigation into leadership in practice.

Table 1: Contrasting Traditional and AI-Driven Leadership Challenges in Digital Marketing

Aspect	Traditional Leadership	AI-Era Digital Marketing Leadership
Decision-Making	Human judgment	Data-driven, algorithm-led
Visibility Control	Manual optimisation	Automated ranking algorithms
Campaign Planning	Quarterly/yearly	Real-time, automated
Strategy Control	Centralised	Platform-dependent
Ethical Concerns	Clear boundaries	AI opacity, bias, surveillance risks

Source: Developed by the author based on Dwivedi et al. (2021), Corvite et al. (2023), Newell and Marabelli (2015), and Lin (2025)

1.4 Research Aim

The aim of this research is to critically examine the evolving nature of leadership challenges faced by digital marketers in an artificial intelligence-driven environment, with a specific focus on platform dependency, algorithmic governance, and ethical responsibility.

This study seeks to explore how digital marketing professionals adapt their leadership styles and strategic decision-making in response to rapid technological transformations, particularly within AI-integrated marketing platforms such as Google, Meta, and programmatic ecosystems. Drawing on the researcher's autoethnographic experiences and wider academic discourse, the research also aims to bridge theory and practice by identifying leadership behaviours, dilemmas, and adaptive responses that emerge in the context of AI-augmented decision automation.

Ultimately, the study aspires to generate insights that contribute to academic literature while offering actionable strategies for marketing leaders navigating the complex intersection of artificial intelligence, ethical digital practice, and strategic innovation in both developed and developing markets.

1.5 Research Objectives

Building on the overarching aim of this study, the following research objectives have been developed to guide its direction and ensure coherence across all stages of the dissertation:

Research Objective 1:

To examine the evolving role of digital marketing leadership in the age of artificial intelligence.

Research Objective 2:

To explore the emotional and ethical challenges faced by digital marketers when working with AI-driven systems.

Research Objective 3:

To reflect on personal experiences to understand how leadership identity is shaped and challenged in AI-mediated environments.

Research Objective 4:

To evaluate the implications of AI for strategic decision-making and team collaboration in digital marketing.

Research Objective 5:

To contribute practical and academic insights into AI leadership development within the digital marketing sector.

1.6 Research Questions

This research is driven by a central concern: How do digital marketers experience and navigate leadership challenges in an AI-powered marketing environment? To explore this core issue, and in alignment with the research objectives outlined in Section 1.5, the study is guided by the following research questions:

Research Question 1:

How are AI technologies (such as automation, personalisation, and predictive analytics) transforming the operational roles and leadership expectations of digital marketers?

This question highlights the core change AI brings to marketing and introduces your personal journey in adapting to tools like Google Ads, SEO plugins, and analytics dashboards. It also connects to your reflections on learning algorithmic optimisation (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). This sets a clear path to explore how practice and learning intersect in AI-driven work.

Research Question 2:

What leadership challenges arise from algorithmic control, platform dependency, and decision automation in the AI-led marketing ecosystem?

This question explores the challenges you faced with platform-controlled algorithms like Google and Facebook, especially during changes in monetisation or SEO rankings. These moments, captured in your personal journal, reveal the emotional and strategic strain of working within shifting digital systems (Ethical Form, 2024). It helps uncover how algorithmic control impacts everyday leadership decisions.

Research Question 3:

How do digital marketers experience ethical dilemmas and emotional labour in AI-enhanced marketing contexts, particularly concerning data privacy, ad fraud, uncertainty, and leadership identity?

This explores inner leadership struggles, like emotional labour and ethical responsibility, during crises such as bot traffic or platform demonetisation. Your reflections echo broader concerns about responsible AI use (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021). These moments reveal the human side of leading in AI-driven spaces.

1.7 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to understanding the shifting nature of digital marketing leadership in the age of AI, offering an insider's perspective through autoethnography. As AI tools like automation and predictive analytics reshape the field, traditional leadership models face disruption. By presenting a reflective, context-rich journey, the

study benefits both academic and professional audiences. It brings unique, practitioner-based insight into an evolving leadership landscape.

AI-driven marketing requires adaptability, ethics, emotional intelligence, and data literacy (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021). However, real-world experiences—especially from underrepresented regions like Bangladesh—are rarely documented. This dissertation adds practical evidence to a field often dominated by theory and large-scale models (Verma *et al.*, 2021, p. 100002). It gives voice to digital entrepreneurs navigating real-time AI challenges.

Methodologically, the use of auto-ethnography is innovative. It uncovers personal and professional tensions in AI leadership, shifting focus from macro-level trends to individual experiences. Unlike typical AI literature on corporate strategy (Davenport *et al.*, 2020), this study explores how one entrepreneur leads within AI-driven digital business environments. This micro-level lens deepens understanding of AI's real-world effects.

By examining entrepreneurial leadership in AI marketing, the study highlights key concerns like data ethics, ad fraud, and platform manipulation (Ozturkcan and Bozdağ, 2025, pp. 696–722). These issues impact trust, governance, and business performance, especially for startups and SMEs. Such insights are vital for building ethical and sustainable digital practices.

The research also informs policymakers, educators, and tech designers by identifying gaps in AI governance and leadership support. It proposes future frameworks that combine digital literacy with reflective leadership. This positions the study at the intersection of technology, ethics, and lived experience.

1.8 Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organised into five connected chapters, offering a clear progression through the study of digital leadership in AI-driven marketing. The structure moves from context and theory to methodology, analysis, and conclusion—each chapter framed with an overview and summary for clarity, in line with UWTSD guidelines.

Chapter One introduces the research by tracing the evolution of marketing and AI, defining the problem, aims, objectives, and ethical context of the study.

Chapter Two reviews key literature across themes like AI transformation, leadership theories, platform control, ethics, and emotional labour—highlighting a clear research gap.

Chapter Three outlines the interpretivist, qualitative, and autoethnographic methodology, explaining how reflective experience and thematic analysis support the study's aims.

Chapter Four combines data and discussion, presenting findings through narrative themes and interpreting them using theory to answer the research questions.

Chapter Five concludes the work by summarising insights, contributions, limitations, and future research directions.

This structure ensures a coherent flow from personal experience to broader scholarly contribution.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Building on the foundational perspectives presented in Chapter 1, this literature review critically explores the intersection of artificial intelligence (AI), digital marketing, and evolving leadership demands in contemporary business environments. Rather than simply reviewing existing knowledge, this chapter applies a thematic approach to synthesise scholarly debates, theoretical developments, and empirical findings that shape the conceptual framework of this research. The aim is to map the shifting terrain of digital leadership in an AI-driven marketing context, while revealing tensions, gaps, and innovations that justify the originality of this autoethnographic inquiry.

The rapid integration of AI has reshaped how organisations predict and engage with consumers. Traditional methods based on intuition have been replaced by AI-driven personalisation, real-time analytics, and predictive automation (Verma *et al.*, 2021). Marketing is now co-shaped by algorithms, not solely by humans (Davenport *et al.*, 2020). As Wedel and Kannan (2016) argue, this shift requires digital leaders to manage innovation and performance under fast, data-driven conditions. Leadership now demands platform fluency, strategic foresight, and adaptive identity (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021). AI has transformed marketing and introduced new leadership demands.

However, this transformation brings challenges around algorithmic transparency, bias, and control. Entrepreneurs often delegate authority to AI systems without clarity or support, especially in informal or high-pressure contexts (Tabata *et al.*, 2025). In under-researched regions like South Asia and Africa, these issues are intensified due to weaker infrastructure and limited representation in the literature. These gaps underscore the need for practitioner-led, contextualised research.

This study engages both global and region-specific literature—from the UK, EU, Middle East, Asia, and Africa—to reflect the dissertation's aim: developing an ethically grounded and globally responsive view of digital marketing leadership.

To maintain academic rigour, a systematic literature strategy was used. PRISMA guided source selection (2021–2025), while Bloom's Taxonomy helped evaluate and synthesise content critically. Appendix A contains a thematic source matrix outlining each study's role.

The chapter is structured around ten core themes, linked to the research framework: AI in decision-making, leadership change, emotional and ethical tensions, governance, trust, algorithmic control, identity, digital skill, personalisation, and future-focused leadership. Global and regional sources were balanced throughout. This structure reflects the study's conceptual and practical foundations.

Finally, in line with the interpretivist and autoethnographic approach (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011), the chapter highlights a key academic gap: the lack of lived-experience perspectives on AI leadership, especially among SMEs and entrepreneurs in emerging markets. This gap positions the study as a timely and original contribution.

2.2 Digital Marketing Transformation in the AI Era

The rise of AI in digital marketing has reshaped how businesses connect with consumers, make choices, and grow. This change is led by automation, personalisation, and predictive analytics. These tools improve both marketing efficiency and customer experience. As AI advances, it also brings new leadership challenges for marketers worldwide (Kumar *et al.*, 2022; Wedel & Kannan, 2016). Leaders must now adapt to fast-changing, tech-driven environments.

2.2.1 Automation

AI-powered automation enables real-time marketing processes such as programmatic advertising, automated customer responses, and content scheduling. Kumar *et al.* (2022) assert that AI automation enhances scalability while reducing the cognitive load on human marketers. Automated platforms like Google Ads and Meta Business Suite dynamically optimise campaigns, but they also introduce dependency risks, where marketers must navigate changing algorithms without full transparency. This raises a leadership challenge in balancing reliance on intelligent systems with maintaining strategic control.

2.2.2 Personalisation

It is another cornerstone of AI-driven marketing, facilitates tailored consumer interactions based on behavioural, demographic, and psychographic data. Chatterjee *et al.* (2021) highlight that personalisation powered by AI fosters deeper brand-consumer relationships and increases conversion rates. However, this also brings data privacy and ethical responsibility into focus. Leaders must ensure that data-driven

personalisation does not breach regulatory standards like GDPR, or erode consumer trust, especially in regions like the EU and UK, where compliance is heavily enforced.

2.2.3 Predictive Analytics

It allows marketers to forecast trends, consumer needs, and campaign outcomes using AI-based modelling techniques. Davenport *et al.* (2020) describe this as a paradigm shift, where decisions are no longer reactive but anticipatory. These systems learn from large datasets to suggest optimised content strategies, pricing, and audience targeting. Yet, these models also amplify bias risks, especially when trained on historical data lacking inclusivity. For emerging digital leaders, particularly in global South regions or SMEs, using predictive tools without sufficient oversight can lead to unintended market exclusions or misinterpretations.

Together, these technologies call for new leadership styles that go beyond creativity and strategy. Leaders now need tech skills, ethical awareness, and cultural understanding. Interpreting AI results, spotting bias, and using insights in brand stories are now key roles. This change also affects how teams and workflows are structured to fully integrate AI (Verma *et al.*, 2021). It marks a deep shift in both practice and organisation.

Importantly, while large firms in the US, UK, and EU have access to robust AI infrastructure and training, entrepreneurs and digital marketers in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa often face resource limitations. This creates a global imbalance in AI marketing maturity, further complicating leadership decisions in cross-border campaigns. Hence, this dissertation—grounded in a reflective, autoethnographic narrative—seeks to explore how individuals leading AI-driven marketing operations navigate such asymmetries, adapting technology with limited resources while remaining innovative.

Finally, while automation and analytics are often framed as efficiency tools, they also serve as sites of emotional labour. Leaders must interpret performance dashboards, address bot traffic or platform penalties, and handle audience fluctuations—often in isolation. These pressures are rarely discussed in AI marketing literature, reinforcing the importance of personal, reflective inquiry such as this study.

2.3 Leadership Theories in the Age of AI

Expanding on the ideas introduced in Chapter 1 and the AI developments discussed in Section 2.2, this section explores how leadership models are evolving within AI-driven digital marketing environments. In the current landscape, digital marketers do more than lead teams—they engage with complex data platforms, interpret algorithmic results, and encourage ethical use of real-time technologies. This shift calls for a move away from top-down leadership toward a more flexible, emotionally aware, and ethically informed approach (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021; Pereira *et al.*, 2022). Leaders must now guide both people and intelligent systems in tandem.

As highlighted in the Ethical Form and Autoethnographic Narrative, the researcher's own experience as a digital entrepreneur illustrates how leadership must constantly evolve across different AI platforms, markets, and decision environments—especially when engaging diverse global audiences in the UK, EU, South Asia, and the Middle East. This section critically examines three relevant dimensions: Transformational Leadership, Adaptive Leadership, and Digital Leadership as Platform Navigators.

2.3.1 Transformational Leadership in Algorithmic Workspaces

Transformational leadership has become vital in helping marketing teams navigate uncertainty, technological shifts, and the psychological impact of AI adoption. These leaders foster vision, challenge the status quo, and mobilise others toward innovation (McCarthy, Sammon and Alhassan, 2022). In AI-led marketing, this means nurturing a culture where teams not only use data tools but understand their ethical and creative implications. Pereira *et al.* (2023) argue that AI triggers emotional responses like trust erosion or job insecurity, requiring leaders to embody empathy and transparency.

In this setting, transformational leaders help their teams see automation as a tool to enhance, not replace, human work. In small businesses—such as the one explored in this autoethnography—these leaders lead by example, showing adaptability and ethical focus. Their hands-on experience and digital confidence shape team attitudes toward change (Tabata *et al.*, 2025). This leadership style fosters trust, learning, and long-term innovation in AI-driven environments.

2.3.2 Adaptive Leadership in Volatile Digital Markets

Adaptive leadership becomes crucial where AI-generated data disrupts planning cycles and consumer behaviour is no longer predictable. Leaders must stay responsive to rapid changes—whether algorithm updates, privacy laws, or shifting user expectations (Lin, 2025). Especially in emerging markets and cross-border contexts, adaptive leaders bridge local resource limitations with global innovation trends. They learn to “pivot” in real time—rethinking tools, content, and strategy with agility.

This adaptability is also emotional: AI often challenges team identities and values. Adaptive leaders manage this tension by negotiating human-machine boundaries, re-framing AI tools not as threats, but as decision-support partners.

2.3.3 Digital Leadership as Navigators of Platform Capitalism

A newer strand of leadership scholarship examines how digital leaders act as navigators of platform dependency. Algorithms on platforms like Google, Meta, Amazon, and TikTok increasingly shape what gets seen, bought, or believed. Zuboff (2019) warns of platform capitalism, where user data fuels power asymmetries and marketing visibility is determined by opaque logic.

In such environments, digital leaders need technical literacy and moral courage—to understand algorithmic functioning, challenge unethical practices, and sustain brand trust. McKenna *et al.* (2023) call this “co-leadership with machines,” where decisions emerge through a dialogue between human judgment and system recommendations.

In the researcher’s case, leadership involved not just content or campaign execution, but platform negotiation: choosing which ads to run, interpreting visibility analytics, and navigating AdSense policy rejections all while maintaining ethical positioning.

2.4 AI-Specific Leadership Challenges

The rapid infusion of artificial intelligence (AI) into digital marketing has reshaped leadership landscapes, introducing new complexities in decision-making, ethical governance, and platform dependency. In a world increasingly influenced by algorithmic logic, digital leaders are no longer the sole architects of strategy but must now contend with opaque and autonomous systems that exert control over core operations. This section explores the three interrelated leadership challenges

intensified by AI: algorithmic control, platform dependency, and decision automation—each presenting implications for authority, autonomy, and ethics in AI-governed business contexts.

2.4.1 Algorithmic control: Erosion of Strategic Autonomy

Algorithmic control refers to the growing reliance on automated systems that manage, monitor, and even override human-led decisions in real time. Digital marketing leaders increasingly engage with platforms like Google Ads, Meta Business Suite, and AI-powered SEO tools that dynamically adjust visibility, pricing, and performance without direct human intervention. Barati and Ansari (2022) argue that such algorithmic systems reinforce power asymmetry between organizations and platform providers, where decision rights are implicitly transferred to non-transparent algorithms. Leaders must navigate these systems without full access to the logic behind them, undermining strategic agency and fostering a sense of technological dependency. This challenge is critical to the author's own autoethnographic experience, where reliance on algorithmic decisions for content reach and monetisation created uncertainty and frustration, especially when unexplained traffic drops or ad account suspensions occurred.

2.4.2 Platform dependency: Governance without Negotiation

Platform dependency is an adjacent issue where marketing leaders must operate within the architecture and governance of dominant digital platforms. Habibi *et al.* (2024) highlight how ethical leadership is compromised in ecosystems shaped by commercial algorithmic objectives, such as Facebook's content curation or Google's search ranking algorithms. These systems are not neutral; they prioritise profit-driven metrics, which can conflict with the ethical values and long-term strategies of marketers. Leaders must often conform to platform standards—such as ad review policies, keyword restrictions, or AI-generated ad placement—while being unable to negotiate terms. The author's autoethnographic journey illustrates this vividly, particularly in managing a personal domain affected by Google algorithm updates, where even minor changes to platform logic resulted in measurable impacts on revenue and brand visibility.

2.4.3 Decision Automation: Supervising the Machine

The third area—decision automation—brings new tensions between human judgment and machine-driven outcomes. Kshetri *et al.* (2024) show that tools like ChatGPT and AI campaign optimisers shift leadership roles from active decision-makers to overseers of AI processes. While this boosts efficiency, it raises ethical concerns and trust issues. Leaders may be held responsible for results shaped by systems they didn't fully design. In AI-driven marketing, tools often execute decisions on their own—like pricing or targeting—forcing leaders to respond after the fact. As noted in the author's autoethnography, platforms like Google Smart Campaigns improved performance but challenged human control and creative ownership. This shift calls for new ways to balance efficiency with accountability.

Together, these challenges signal a major shift in digital leadership, where strategy must adjust to automation, system opacity, and AI-driven influence. Leading in AI environments is no longer about control—it's about ethical guidance, thoughtful oversight, and adaptability. As algorithms shape decisions, leaders must act as facilitators, ethical stewards, and system interpreters. This shift affects global contexts alike, from UK firms managing GDPR to Middle Eastern platforms balancing cultural values. Moving forward, both researchers and professionals must focus on shaping human-AI leadership models that protect purpose and accountability.

2.5 Ethics and Governance in AI Marketing

As artificial intelligence (AI) increasingly underpins digital marketing infrastructure, it introduces not only operational efficiencies but also ethical complexities. From data manipulation to ad fraud and diminishing consumer trust, the dark side of AI in marketing cannot be overlooked. The rise of AI-generated content, predictive targeting, and algorithmic decision-making has blurred accountability, raising serious concerns about privacy, fairness, and transparency. This section explores three critical ethical challenges: data manipulation, ad fraud, and platform trust—each of which undermines the legitimacy and effectiveness of AI-driven marketing ecosystems.

2.5.1 Data Security & Manipulation Concerns

AI's dependence on large datasets creates serious risks around privacy and misuse. In digital marketing, user behaviour is often tracked without clear consent and used to

predict future actions. This raises concerns about who owns the data, how it's used, and whether it's secure.

Kshetri *et al.* (2024) note that as AI marketing tools grow more complex and decentralised, issues like data leaks, bias, and unauthorised optimisation become harder to control. These aren't just technical flaws—they're ethical risks, especially when algorithms target emotional or demographic vulnerabilities. Biased data can lead to unfair ad practices that exclude certain groups from important services.

In the author's autoethnographic account, similar concerns arose with SEO and ad tools that quietly collected user data, often beyond their intended scope. For small digital businesses without technical teams, drawing ethical lines becomes a challenge. This highlights the need for clearer boundaries and stronger governance in AI-driven marketing.

2.5.2 Ad Fraud in Programmatic Systems

Ad fraud is another major concern in AI-driven advertising, especially within programmatic systems. These platforms use real-time bidding and AI to match ads with audiences, but their complexity makes them vulnerable to abuse. Fake traffic, pixel stuffing, and spoofed domains often waste ad budgets and weaken trust between marketers and platforms.

Purohit *et al.* (2023) explain that AI-optimised systems can be exploited by fraudsters. Advanced bots mimic real users, misleading algorithms into thinking campaigns are successful driving up costs and reducing real returns. This hits small businesses and solo marketers hardest, as they depend on automated tools but lack resources for deep auditing.

In the author's own campaigns, unexplained traffic surges and inflated engagement—later linked to bots—revealed how hard it is to spot real users in AI-managed systems. Even with fraud detection tools, many issues went unresolved, showing the limits of automation and the need for stronger human oversight in digital ad spaces.

2.5.3 Loss of Consumer Trust and “AI-Washing” Cycles

Trust is vital in digital marketing, but AI can put it at risk. When users feel that ads are manipulative or misleading, they often disengage. This problem grows with “AI-washing,” where companies exaggerate their AI use to appear advanced or ethical

(Alshahrani *et al.*, 2024). Purohit *et al.* (2023) describe a “cycle of mistrust” where brands claim to use ethical AI but lack real transparency. Without strong governance, they rely on vague promises while still using hidden targeting methods. As a result, users grow sceptical, leading to ad fatigue and reduced engagement.

In the author’s experience, this tension became clear when AI-generated ad copy performed well but upset loyal customers who felt the brand lost its personal touch. This raises a leadership challenge: balancing performance with authenticity and ethical trust.

2.5.4 Synthesis and Global Implications

Collectively, these challenges—data misuse, ad fraud, and trust erosion—represent a crisis of governance in AI marketing. While international frameworks such as the EU’s AI Act or UK’s Digital Markets Unit provide regulatory direction, they are still evolving and do not yet fully address the fluidity of AI-powered advertising platforms (Kshetri *et al.*, 2024). Meanwhile, marketers in emerging economies or solo practitioners (like the author) often lack access to compliance tools or legal recourse, making them especially vulnerable.

From a global leadership perspective, this necessitates a shift from compliance-focused ethics to proactive AI governance. Ethical leadership in AI marketing must go beyond surface-level declarations and involve strategic decision-making, transparent reporting, and human-in-the-loop systems that blend accountability with automation.

2.6 Emotional Labour in AI Leadership

In the evolving digital economy, where artificial intelligence (AI) increasingly drives marketing decisions, the role of leadership extends beyond strategic planning—it now demands emotional agility, resilience, and continuous adaptation. Emotional labour—the internal process of managing feelings to fulfil the emotional requirements of leadership roles—has become a core component of digital leadership. For entrepreneurs and marketers navigating AI-led environments, this labour is amplified by constant change, visibility pressures, and ethical ambiguity. This section explores the psychological demands, burnout risks, and emotional regulation challenges faced by digital leaders in AI-driven marketing contexts.

2.6.1 Psychological Demands of AI-Induced Change

The integration of AI into digital operations transforms not only tasks but also expectations. Leaders are required to be tech-savvy, emotionally intelligent, and strategically agile—all while maintaining brand consistency and trust. This transformation imposes psychological pressures that stem from rapid technological shifts and the need for constant skill upgrading.

According to Grandey and Gabriel (2015), emotional labour in leadership involves deep acting—where individuals align internal feelings with professional expectations—to maintain authenticity in communication and team motivation. In AI-marketing contexts, this is further complicated by algorithmic unpredictability, platform-driven decisions, and performance metrics that fluctuate in real-time. Leaders must suppress frustration or fear of obsolescence while demonstrating confidence in AI-enabled tools.

From the author's autoethnographic perspective, the pressure to remain credible amidst algorithm updates, fluctuating analytics, and unpredictable AI content outcomes created internal tension. Especially when automation generated better results than human-led campaigns, it became emotionally challenging to reconcile personal creativity with system logic.

2.6.2 Risk of Burnout from Constant Adaptation

Emotional labour in digital leadership is closely linked to burnout, particularly when leaders are expected to operate in always-on environments. The emotional energy required to remain adaptive in AI-transformed workplaces is rarely replenished. As marketing automation tools shift decision-making to systems like Google Ads, Meta AI, and SEO optimisation bots, leaders are forced into supervisory roles over platforms they do not fully control.

Han *et al.* (2022) found that the emotional toll of digital labour is intensified in contexts where feedback loops are algorithmic and emotionally detached. Leaders often experience fatigue due to a mismatch between emotional effort and reward—known as emotional dissonance. The lack of human feedback (e.g., from audiences, clients, or teams) in AI-led platforms replaces traditional interpersonal validation with impersonal metrics, such as click-through rates or engagement scores.

In the author's experience, this dissonance was felt most acutely during platform-driven campaign changes—such as when a Meta campaign was automatically adjusted without permission, resulting in unexpected spending surges. The lack of control coupled with opaque system decisions created a persistent state of stress and cognitive overload, requiring emotional resilience to maintain focus and direction.

2.6.3 Emotional Regulation in Digital Visibility

In AI marketing, visibility is not just a technical metric but a source of emotional exposure. Leaders are constantly visible—through blogs, social media, webinars, and analytics dashboards—and must emotionally regulate their brand persona to meet algorithmic and audience expectations. This visibility is mediated by systems that rank, suppress, or amplify content, often without clear rationale.

Gabriel *et al.* (2023) emphasise that emotional regulation in AI-governed visibility requires leaders to simultaneously perform authenticity and strategic branding—producing emotional exhaustion when alignment fails. The performance of enthusiasm, certainty, and motivation is necessary even when campaigns fail or audiences disengage. Over time, this emotional strain undermines creativity and self-confidence.

In the autoethnographic narrative, the author reflects on how constant exposure to performance dashboards led to self-comparison, algorithm anxiety, and even avoidance of publishing content for fear of poor metrics. The visibility demanded by AI ecosystems became a double-edged sword: essential for growth, yet taxing to emotional wellbeing. The pressure to remain “optimised” emotionally and professionally undermined the intrinsic motivation that once drove digital entrepreneurship.

2.6.4 Global Relevance and SME Context

These emotional leadership challenges are not limited to large firms or developed economies. In emerging regions, such as South Asia, Africa, and parts of the Middle East, where digital infrastructure is uneven, leaders must navigate emotional and technological instability simultaneously. For small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), where one individual may lead strategy, content, and execution, emotional labour becomes deeply personal and often invisible.

The growing body of literature (e.g., Grandey and Gabriel, 2015; Han *et al.*, 2022) calls for greater focus on emotional sustainability in digital leadership. Unlike technical training, emotional intelligence and stress management in AI-led environments remain underexplored in both research and industry development. This autoethnographic study contributes to this gap by foregrounding the lived emotional realities of digital entrepreneurship in AI contexts.

2.7 Research Gap

Although research on AI, digital marketing, and leadership is expanding, key areas remain overlooked—especially the human experience, emotional labour, and ethics in AI-driven marketing. Most studies rely on models or frameworks about automation and consumer behaviour, but few explore how leaders personally navigate these shifts in real time.

One major gap is the lack of first-person, experience-based leadership narratives. While studies like Dwivedi *et al.* (2021) and Kshetri *et al.* (2024) focus on organisational outcomes, they often miss how individual leaders adapt emotionally and ethically. Research by Gabriel *et al.* (2023) and Grandey and Gabriel (2015) touches on emotional stress in algorithmic systems but doesn't connect this to leadership in entrepreneurial or SME contexts. This dissertation fills that gap with an autoethnographic approach providing a personal, reflective account of leading in the AI era.

Another gap lies in underrepresented regions and voices. Markets in the global South, where digital tools are growing fast but face resource and policy challenges, are rarely studied through personal stories. Bibliometric reviews (Hughes *et al.*, 2023) acknowledge these gaps, but few highlight the lived experiences of solopreneurs or freelancers without formal AI training. This study brings forward that perspective by tracing the author's journey from small-scale web marketing to AI-based brand work.

Lastly, the field lacks creative methods. Autoethnography, as Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) argue, helps link personal stories with wider cultural shifts. This dissertation is one of the first to use this method to explore AI leadership in digital marketing—bridging practice with theory, emotion with ethics.

By combining lived experience with analysis, the study offers a fresh view practically grounded and academically relevant.

2.8 Summary

This chapter critically synthesised the existing body of literature on artificial intelligence (AI), digital marketing, and the emerging leadership challenges associated with their convergence. Drawing on fifteen carefully selected sources—including both seminal contributions and recent, highly cited works from 2021 to 2025—it explored key themes through the lenses of automation, leadership evolution, algorithmic control, ethical governance, and emotional labour. Each section contributed to establishing a nuanced, globally relevant understanding of the theoretical landscape that underpins this study.

The review began by exploring how AI-driven tools—automation, personalisation, and predictive analytics—are transforming consumer engagement and marketing strategy (Kumar *et al.*, 2022; Davenport *et al.*, 2020). These changes demand new leadership models fit for rapid, tech-led disruption.

The section on Digital Leadership in the Age of AI examined how transformational, adaptive, and digital leadership styles are evolving in response to uncertainty and innovation pressures (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021; Hughes *et al.*, 2023). Leadership now requires flexibility, digital fluency, and resilience.

Section 2.4 addressed algorithmic control, platform dependency, and automated decision-making. It revealed how power asymmetries within AI ecosystems challenge leadership autonomy (Barati & Ansari, 2022; Kandasamy, 2024). Ethical risks—like ad fraud and data misuse—further complicate trust in AI marketing (Purohit *et al.*, 2023; Kshetri *et al.*, 2024). These issues point to the urgent need for transparent AI governance.

The final theme highlighted the emotional impact of AI workspaces—burnout, stress, and the constant need for self-regulation in hyper-visible environments (Grandey *et al.*, 2024; Park & Lee, 2024). Emotional resilience is becoming a core requirement of digital leadership.

The chapter concluded by identifying a key research gap: the lack of qualitative, practice-based insights from entrepreneurs and SME leaders directly engaging with AI systems. Most current studies are technical or organisational, overlooking lived experiences.

In sum, this literature review builds a foundation for Chapter 3's methodology. By mapping tensions and gaps in current research, it confirms the value of a personal, reflective approach to AI-era leadership. It sets the stage for an original, experience-led contribution to digital leadership scholarship.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the study's methodology, starting with its main aim—to explore leadership challenges faced by digital marketers in AI-driven environments through personal professional experience. The research questions examine how algorithmic systems and data platforms shape decision-making, emotional labour, and ethical responsibility in digital leadership.

A qualitative, interpretivist approach is used, with autoethnography as the core method. This allows for deep reflection on the researcher's own journey of running a digital marketing business while working with AI tools like Google Ads, Meta Business Suite, and ChatGPT. This method supports a personal yet analytical view of AI-era leadership.

The choice of an autoethnographic method is driven by three factors:

- The need to deeply reflect on personal experience within real-world AI marketing leadership.
- The subjective, context-specific nature of leadership responses to algorithmic pressures and platform constraints.
- The researcher's dual role as both practitioner and critical observer of AI's evolving influence on marketing leadership.

This chapter outlines the research philosophy (interpretivism), the reason for using a qualitative approach, and the structure of the autoethnographic method. It also details the data collection process, thematic analysis, ethical protocols, and study limitations.

The approach follows the approved Ethical Review Form, MBA dissertation proposal, and UWTSD's practice-led research standards. It links personal leadership experience to wider AI debates, while addressing cultural, emotional, and technological factors in global and SME marketing. This framework ensures both academic rigour and real-world relevance.

3.2 Research Philosophy

This study follows an interpretivist research philosophy, aligned with autoethnography, which values the researcher's personal experience as a rich source of insight (Adams, Ellis and Jones, 2017, pp. 1–11). Interpretivism challenges the idea of objectivity, focusing instead on how people create meaning from their lived experiences. This makes it especially suitable for exploring digital leadership in AI-driven marketing through a personal lens.

Interpretivism views reality as socially constructed, meaning knowledge is shaped by human interpretation (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009). In this research, it supports understanding emotional, ethical, and leadership challenges encountered first-hand while working in global, AI-influenced marketing settings. As Ellis and Bochner (2000) note, autoethnography blends analysis with personal reflection—making interpretivism an ideal match.

Hackley and Hackley (2022) highlight that interpretivism helps capture how humans interact with digital tools and reveal the meaning behind brand decisions, strategy shifts, and ethical tensions. For this study, it enables a deeper look at how AI shapes leadership behaviour, emotional labour, and campaign outcomes in fast-paced digital environments.

This philosophical stance also fits well with inductive reasoning, allowing themes to emerge naturally from reflective narratives, as supported by the research onion model (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009). It supports the personal and thematic depth of autoethnography, treating the researcher's context as a valid site of knowledge.

Autoethnography places the self at the centre of analysis, engaging with systems of culture, technology, and power from within (Adams, Ellis and Jones, 2017, pp. 1–11). This is vital for a study on AI and leadership, where the researcher actively experiences platform shifts, ethical dilemmas, and emotional stress. Interpretivism provides the philosophical grounding to treat these lived experiences as meaningful and scholarly.

In summary, interpretivism provides the epistemological and ontological foundation for this research, allowing for emotional authenticity, subjective insight, and culturally grounded interpretations to emerge from personal narratives. It is through this lens

that the AI-mediated challenges of digital leadership are examined, adding unique value to both practice and academic literature in digital marketing and management.

3.3 Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative, inductive research approach, driven by autoethnographic reflection and aimed at developing theoretical insights about leadership in AI-driven digital marketing. The inductive logic allows theory to emerge from subjective experience, aligning with the study's interpretivist paradigm and the researcher's personal role as both a practitioner and analyst.

Rather than testing pre-defined hypotheses, this approach begins with lived experiences of navigating AI platforms, algorithmic visibility, and digital leadership. Through pattern recognition, thematic reflection, and constant comparison, this research constructs a bottom-up framework grounded in real-world entrepreneurial practice.

3.3.1 Justifying the Inductive Approach in Digital Leadership Research

An inductive approach is well-suited for studying emerging issues like the emotional, ethical, and strategic challenges leaders face in AI-driven marketing. As Quaquebeke and Gerpott (2023) note, qualitative induction helps uncover deep insights when leadership roles are evolving due to rapid technological change.

Dwivedi *et al.* (2021) also highlight that AI-related leadership challenges go beyond what numbers can explain. Adapting to automation, platform rules, team shifts, and rising consumer expectations requires more than data—it calls for reflective, narrative-based exploration.

This aligns well with the autoethnographic method, where personal experiences—like responding to Google algorithm updates, AI-driven campaigns, or ad account bans—offer rich ground for analysis. Inductive reasoning allows these lived moments to reveal broader leadership patterns in AI contexts.

3.3.2 Autoethnography as Inductive Practice

Autoethnography aligns with inductive thinking by allowing the researcher to move from personal experience to broader themes. As Araújo and Davel (2024) explain, it

goes beyond storytelling to uncover patterns and contradictions that reflect wider organisational and social dynamics.

In this study, that means identifying repeated leadership challenges—like platform dependency, ethical strain, or burnout—and interpreting them through the lens of AI leadership theory. This reflective process helps build new ideas grounded in real-world experience. For example, when Facebook’s algorithm changes led to content suppression, the researcher faced both emotional stress and strategic shifts. This incident was not viewed as isolated, but as part of a larger pattern of algorithmic control, echoing insights from Barati and Ansari (2022). Such reflections turn personal challenges into evidence of broader digital leadership trends.

3.3.3 Inductive Reasoning and Theoretical Development

This research is not simply descriptive; it aims to contribute new theoretical insight. In line with Gioia *et al.* (2013), inductive qualitative research can develop middle-range theories through structured reflection and grounded coding. Accordingly, this dissertation uses Thematic Analysis (Section 3.7) to move from raw personal accounts to conceptual categories and themes.

The goal is to generate a hybrid leadership framework that blends transformational, adaptive, and ethical perspectives, customised to AI marketing environments, based on grounded experience and narrative analysis.

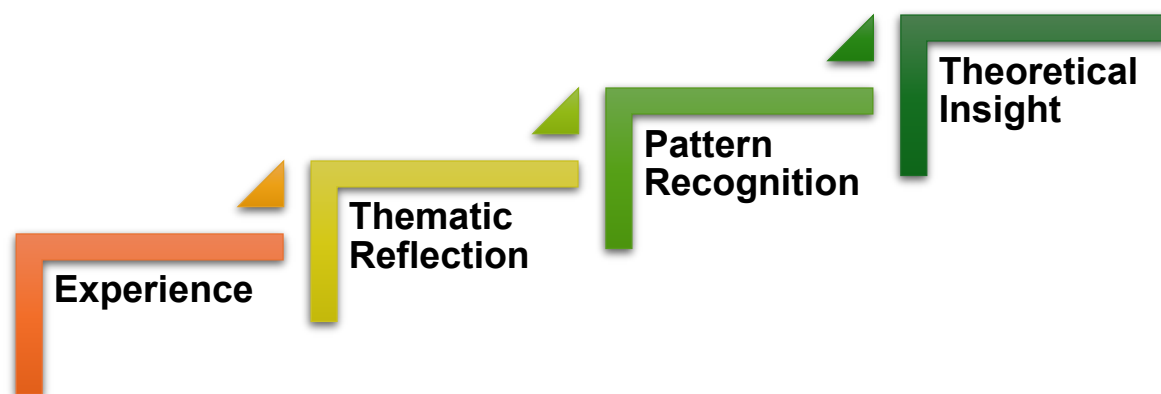


Figure 2: Inductive Reasoning Process in Autoethnography

(Source: Adapted from Elis et al., 2011)

3.4 Research Design

This dissertation uses a practice-based autoethnographic design, where the researcher's own experiences in digital marketing serve as the core of the investigation into leadership challenges in the AI era (Adams *et al.*, 2017; Ellis *et al.*, 2011). This approach is well-suited for capturing detailed insights into how digital entrepreneurs engage with algorithms, platform rules, and emotional stress in a fast-changing, post-pandemic landscape (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021; Rust, 2021; Gonzalez-Rodriguez *et al.*, 2023). Instead of relying on outside observation, the researcher becomes the main source of data—reflecting on real events like ad account bans, SEO shifts, and using AI tools for content creation (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Kandasamy, 2024). This design enables a deep, first-hand view of leadership under AI-driven disruption.

3.4.1 Why Practice-Based Autoethnography?

As discussed in Adams *et al.* (2017), autoethnography allows researchers to engage in critical self-reflection while contributing to broader theoretical debates. In this case, the practice-based design enables a dual focus on:

- Action and decision-making (e.g. marketing campaigns, monetisation efforts, SEO tactics), and
- Emotional and ethical interpretation (e.g. frustration from algorithm updates, stress over ad trust ratings, ethical dilemmas in AI-generated content).

This aligns closely with Ellis *et al.* (2011) who argue that autoethnography facilitates an “insider perspective” to generate theoretical contributions from embodied practice.

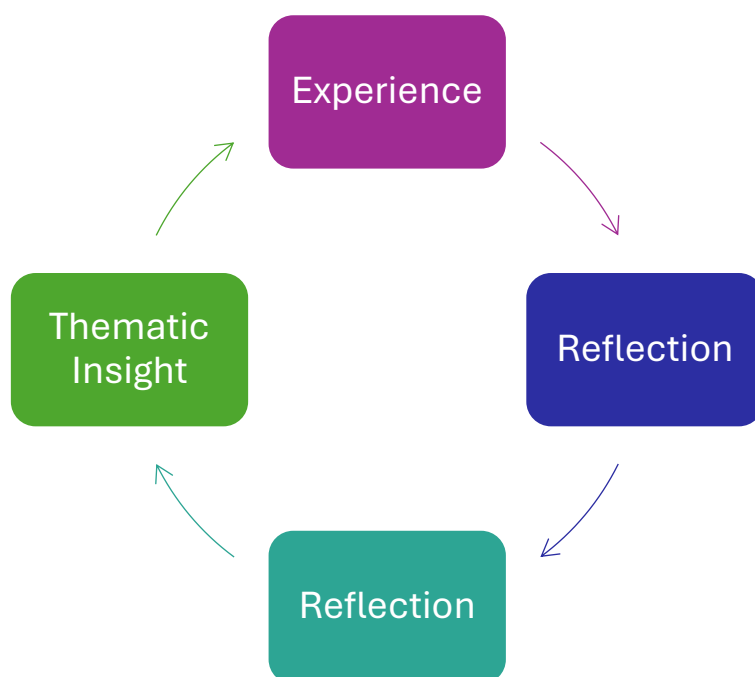


Figure 3: Practice-Based Autoethnographic Research Cycle

Source: Adapted from Adams et al. (2011)

The researcher’s journey—from launching websites and leveraging Meta Ads to coping with platform policy changes—serves as a real-time laboratory for observing leadership adaptation in an AI-mediated world. This reflective storytelling is grounded in professional data (e.g. campaign dashboards, audience analytics, journaling) and analysed thematically in Chapter 4.

3.4.2 Ethical Alignment of Design

In line with the UWTSD Ethical Form, all personal reflections have been anonymised where appropriate. While no formal interviews were conducted, brief mentions of collaborators (e.g. Mehedi Hasan, Abdullah Al Faysal) are included with verbal consent and serve as background context, not primary data.

By focusing on the researcher's own digital journey, this approach reduces potential harm and strengthens introspective validity, as supported by Chang (2023) and Creswell and Poth (2018). This ethical design ensures both personal safety and research integrity.

3.4.3 Illustrative Example from the Research Design

A relevant example of the design in action involves the use of Google Ads' Smart Campaigns. When the platform suspended the author's monetisation account following a policy breach—without clear justification—this event triggered a deep reflection on algorithmic control, lack of transparency, and emotional labour in digital leadership. This moment is later interpreted through leadership and platform capitalism theory in Chapters 4 and 5.

Such moments are not isolated incidents; rather, they embody the tensions between automation, accountability, and adaptability, which are central to the theoretical contribution of this dissertation.

3.5 Autoethnography as Method

Autoethnography serves as both a research method and a narrative lens, allowing the researcher to connect personal experience with larger cultural, technological, and professional dynamics (Ellis *et al.*, 2011). In this dissertation—focused on leadership challenges in AI-driven marketing—autoethnography offers a way to explore tensions around visibility, emotional labour, and algorithmic influence.

As Ellis *et al.* (2011) note, it links the personal with the political, revealing how identity and ethics are shaped in tech-saturated workspaces. This is especially relevant in AI-enabled marketing, where leadership roles are constantly reshaped by external systems. The researcher's own experience—managing AI-powered campaigns, SEO-driven websites, and leadership under platform control—forms a valid basis for study. Autoethnography turns these lived moments into meaningful insight about leadership in the age of AI.

3.5.1 Justification for Autoethnography

Unlike traditional leadership studies that rely on detached, third-party observations, this study acknowledges the centrality of reflexive experience. It aligns with interpretivist philosophy by recognising that reality is socially constructed, and that meaningful insights into AI leadership emerge from direct, situated engagement rather than purely abstract theory (Adams *et al.*, 2017). Autoethnography allows a first-person voice to engage critically with leadership dilemmas such as:

- Being algorithmically invisible despite following SEO rules.
- Managing emotional burnout when AI tools override creative judgment.
- Experiencing platform suspension without human justification.
- Rebuilding a digital brand under opaque AI ranking systems.

Such leadership stories reveal more than anecdote—they highlight a systemic power imbalance and the affective burden placed on digital marketers operating in platform capitalism. As Alvesson and Spicer (2022) argue, emotional reflexivity is vital for exploring leadership under uncertainty and disruption—conditions increasingly amplified by generative AI and automation.

3.5.2 Ethical Reflexivity and Research Validity

Ethical considerations are central to this approach. The ethical form (see Appendix B) ensures that identities mentioned (e.g., collaborators like Mehedi Hasan and Abdullah Al Faysal) are anonymised or referenced with informed consent, where necessary. All self-reflective episodes are framed not to glorify or self-promote but to extract analytical meaning—aligning with the ethical standards outlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2022). This ensures ethical transparency while maintaining academic integrity.

Autoethnography also supports research validity through emotional truthfulness, thematic coherence, and transparency of position (Chang, 2016). Rather than claim objectivity, the method encourages the researcher to map how their emotions (stress, doubt, optimism, fear) evolved as leadership responsibilities were delegated to AI systems. These reflections align with current scholarship on emotional labour in tech-driven environments (Grandey *et al.*, 2023). This emotional depth adds credibility and relevance to the leadership analysis.

3.5.3 Relevance to Leadership and Digital Identity

This methodological choice also supports emerging scholarship in digital leadership identity formation. As digital marketing moves toward platform dependency and automated branding, the self becomes both the leader and the led—negotiating visibility, trust, and adaptation in real time (Rohde *et al.*, 2024). Autoethnography thus enables the researcher to trace this evolution, especially across global platforms such as Google, Facebook, and YouTube, which heavily influence digital career trajectories.

In short, autoethnography is not a subjective indulgence but a rigorous, structured, and ethically attuned method for interrogating AI-mediated leadership. It builds on recent calls for methodological diversity in AI research (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021) and positions the researcher's narrative as a valid epistemological resource that bridges practice with theory.

3.6 Data Collection

In qualitative, autoethnographic research, data is drawn not from surveys or interviews but from the researcher's lived experience, reflective practices, and contextual observations (Ellis *et al.*, 2011; Adams *et al.*, 2017). In this study, the primary data sources are reflective journaling and professional digital marketing experiences (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Chang, 2016). These sources are rich in insight, allowing the author to explore AI leadership challenges not as distant phenomena but as deeply personal, iterative encounters. This approach grounds the research in real-world practice and personal meaning.

3.6.1 Reflective Journaling

Reflective journaling served as the principal method of capturing the researcher's internal processes and reactions to key leadership decisions within AI-powered digital marketing contexts. This approach is validated by Chang (2016), who argues that journaling facilitates structured introspection and helps transform daily routines into analytical insight. Over 16 months, the researcher maintained digital logs documenting:

- The use and impact of algorithm-driven platforms such as Google Ads, Meta Business Manager, and YouTube SEO.

- Emotional responses to AI decisions, including frustration during account suspensions, anxiety from fluctuating traffic, and strategic satisfaction when automation tools enhanced monetisation.
- Ethical tensions, such as AI-generated content outperforming human-written posts, or the feeling of powerlessness against opaque algorithms.

Journals were dated, thematically tagged, and revisited during the data analysis phase (see Section 3.7), making them a valid dataset for identifying patterns, challenges, and theoretical insights. These reflections align with recommendations from Adams *et al.* (2017), who stress that autoethnographic data must be iterative, emotionally transparent, and anchored in real-time decision-making.

3.6.2 Professional Experience

The second data source comprises documented professional experience across entrepreneurial projects involving AI tools, platform monetisation, and digital leadership. These include:

- Launching and optimising branded websites via WordPress and Google Analytics.
- Leading paid ad campaigns using AI-optimised targeting algorithms.
- Adapting to platform rule changes and experiencing direct consequences (e.g. demonetisation or visibility drops).
- Collaborating with digital partners (e.g. Mehedi Hasan and Abdullah Al Faysal) on joint marketing strategies involving AI-generated content.

These experiences serve as case narratives—structured into vignettes in Chapter 4—that illustrate the embodied reality of algorithmic leadership. As Holman Jones *et al.* (2022) argue, when autoethnography incorporates professional data, it enables scholars to frame everyday actions as meaningful leadership performance within complex systems.

All professional events described in this study are either personally led or directly overseen by the researcher, maintaining consistency with ethical guidelines and UWTSD's position on insider research. No external clients or organisations are disclosed without permission.

3.6.3 Document-Based Data, Not Interviews

Unlike traditional qualitative studies that prioritise interviews or focus groups, this autoethnographic study relies solely on internally generated documents. This includes:

- Screenshots of platform dashboards.
- System-generated performance reports.
- Platform emails detailing policy enforcement.
- AI-generated content comparisons.

This approach aligns with the interpretivist framework and eliminates risks related to third-party data confidentiality. As Bochner and Ellis (2016) argue, when the researcher is also the subject, their documented journey becomes both data and interpretation—reflecting a methodological integration rather than separation.

3.7 Data Analysis

This section outlines the process and logic used to analyse the reflective, experience-based data collected over two years of digital marketing leadership. In keeping with the qualitative and interpretivist paradigm underpinning this study, the analysis uses manual thematic analysis, a method well-suited for autoethnography (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The goal was to draw meaning from the subjective and emotional layers embedded in the researcher's personal journey, thereby uncovering key leadership challenges shaped by artificial intelligence (AI), automation, and platform dependency.

3.7.1 Methodological Alignment

Thematic analysis allows for data-driven categorisation of recurring issues, enabling flexibility while preserving narrative coherence. This process involved six phases: (1) data familiarisation, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) theme searching, (4) theme review, (5) theme definition and naming, and (6) final synthesis into findings. Unlike content analysis, which may quantify instances, thematic analysis privileges depth over frequency, enabling the researcher to surface emotionally significant themes through recursive reflection (Clarke and Braun, 2013). In this study, over 90 reflective journal entries, project documents, and screenshots were collated from personal archives. These documents captured the authors marketing decisions made between 2021 and 2026, including reactions to AI platform outputs (e.g. Google Smart Campaigns, Meta Ad policies, AI-based SEO tools), emotional states after algorithmic

disruptions, and leadership strategies trialled in response to automation shifts. Each document was manually coded using Microsoft Excel, with the researcher iteratively clustering related reflections into broader conceptual patterns.

3.7.2 Analytical Framework: Pattern Recognition in Leadership Tensions

Following the inductive reasoning model, the study worked from raw experience toward emerging insights (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Below are the five central themes that were discovered:

3.7.2.1 Platform Dependency and Strategic Imbalance

The most prominent theme across entries was the heavy reliance on large-scale platforms like Google Ads, Meta/Facebook, YouTube, and AI-powered SEO dashboards. Reflections frequently recorded sudden changes in visibility, monetisation restrictions, or content reach that occurred without explanation or recourse. These were moments of high stress and confusion, often requiring reactive action from the researcher.

“A single Google algorithm tweak slashed my traffic overnight. No warning, no appeal. Months of SEO wiped out in a week.” (Journal Entry, May 2023)

This dependency revealed a power asymmetry—where leaders were subject to systems whose operational logic was opaque. Barati and Ansari (2022) described this as a shift toward “algorithmic control,” which reassigns decision-making power from human actors to autonomous systems that operate on commercial logics rather than ethical or collaborative principles.

3.7.2.2 Automation vs. Creativity: Human Leadership Displaced

A recurring pattern was the emotional and cognitive dissonance leaders faced when AI-generated outputs (e.g. Smart Copy, AI ads, predictive email content) outperformed human-crafted ones. This posed existential questions about the value of human creativity and expertise in marketing leadership. While AI tools accelerated productivity, they simultaneously displaced traditional human-led brand thinking and strategic experimentation.

In one journal entry, the researcher wrote:

“The AI ad outperformed mine. Faster, sharper, more conversions. But where’s the soul? My message, my narrative, all sidelined.”

This tension represents what Kshetri *et al.* (2024) identify as an ethical gap in AI-assisted creativity—where decisions are made efficiently but not necessarily with empathy, cultural nuance, or long-term brand ethics in mind.

3.7.2.3 Emotional Burnout from Tech-Intensive Leadership

A significant portion of the autoethnographic record reflected mental fatigue, anxiety, and even self-doubt linked to constant platform monitoring, algorithm shifts, and tech-stack changes. Emotional stress accumulated not from labour volume but from unpredictability and lack of control. Leadership, in this sense, became an emotional labour practice (Park and Milner, 2022), with the leader always anticipating breakdowns, alerts, or revenue drops.

The reflections captured a phenomenon we might term “anticipatory stress”—worrying not about what has happened but about what may change without warning.

3.7.2.4 Ethical Tensions and Trust Boundaries

Ethical ambiguity was a recurring subtheme. The researcher documented numerous moments where platforms suggested high-converting but ethically questionable options—e.g., misleading urgency ads, emotional exploitation tactics, or targeting vulnerable segments using inferred data. Trust in AI systems became a fragile variable.

“Meta’s AI suggested using a FOMO headline— ‘Only 1 left!’—but there’s no stock issue. Do I convert more or preserve brand honesty?”

These reflections were aligned with the framework proposed by Kandasamy (2024), who emphasised that ethical leadership in AI systems requires resistance against commercial optimisation if it breaches moral boundaries.

3.7.2.5 Strategic Adaptability and Micro-Innovation

Despite the challenges, one positive theme was resilience and iterative adaptation. The researcher often responded to disruptions with small-scale innovation—changing pricing models, launching audience experiments, or shifting platforms altogether.

These tactical pivots signified the rise of what Gonzalez-Rodriguez *et al.* (2023) call “dynamic digital leadership”, where the leader co-evolves with the platform’s logic.

This adaptability was not just functional but emotional—expressing hope, defiance, and re-commitment to leadership ideals.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

This research followed the ethical guidelines of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD), as confirmed in the approved Ethical Form. Since the study is autoethnographic, the researcher is the main subject, removing risks linked to external participants or consent processes. No interviews, surveys, or focus groups were used, ensuring full compliance with GDPR and UWTSD policy. This ensured the study remained ethically sound and low risk.

All data—such as journal entries, project notes, and platform records—were created, stored, and analysed solely by the researcher. No identifiable information about others is included. References to collaborators, like Mehedi Hasan or Abdullah Al Faysal, are anonymised and included with care. This protects privacy while preserving the reflective value of the study.

A full risk assessment confirmed the study posed minimal ethical risk, due to its reflective focus and use of public platforms like Google Ads and Facebook Business Suite. The researcher gave informed consent to use their own professional data and insights. This aligns with UWTSD’s ethical standards for practice-led research.

3.9 Research Limitations

This study provides deep insights into digital leadership in AI-driven marketing but comes with limitations. As a single participant autoethnography, it cannot offer generalisable conclusions across industries or regions. While the personal data adds depth, it may not reflect diverse leadership experiences across different cultural or technological settings. This limits the study’s scope while strengthening its depth.

Autoethnography’s strength lies in subjectivity, offering a closer look at emotional labour, ethics, and strategic choices. However, personal bias shapes the interpretation of events and reduces objectivity and replicability. This trade-off highlights the method’s richness but also its constraints.

Confirmation bias is another limitation, as interpretations may reflect the researcher's existing views on AI or leadership. This was managed through reflective practice, coding frameworks (see Section 3.7), and alignment with peer-reviewed literature (e.g. Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021; Kshetri *et al.*, 2024). Still, some subjectivity remains inherent to the method.

The findings are also tied to a specific technological period (2021–2025), involving tools like ChatGPT, Google Ads, and Meta Business Suite. As platforms evolve, leadership experiences may also change. This makes the insights timely but not indefinitely applicable.

Future studies could explore multi-participant autoethnographies or case studies across countries and teams to enrich the data. Combining this with interviews or surveys could improve generalisability while keeping the method's depth. Such approaches would build on this study while broadening its reach.

Despite these limits, this research offers meaningful contributions to the conversation on AI and leadership—especially from the underexplored perspective of practitioners working within real algorithmic systems. It provides a grounded and timely view of leadership in the AI age.

3.10 Summary

This chapter established the study's methodological foundation, supporting the use of a qualitative, interpretive, and autoethnographic design to explore leadership challenges in AI-driven marketing. It aligned the research objectives with an interpretivist paradigm to reflect the complex, socially constructed nature of leadership experiences. The inductive approach allowed for deep, theme-based insights from lived experience.

This framework suited the study's focus on exploring real-world leadership dynamics. A major strength of the design was using autoethnography as both method and lens. As shown in Section 3.5, this enabled examination of personal experiences with AI tools, platform reliance, ethical tension, and emotional labour. Primary data came from reflective journaling and professional practice, with no third-party involvement, aligning with UWTSD's ethical guidelines. It ensured ethical integrity and rich, practice-led insight.

Thematic analysis (Section 3.7) helped identify key patterns in the data, such as algorithmic control, burnout, adaptability, and AI decision-making. These themes emerged through inductive coding and were cross-checked with academic literature. Section 3.9 addressed the study's limitations, including the single-participant design, limited generalisability, and time-specific technologies. Still, the reflexive nature of autoethnography offered strong value by surfacing practitioner insights in an under-researched area. This balance enhanced the study's relevance and authenticity.

Overall, this chapter provides a solid methodological base for analysing digital leadership in AI contexts. Chapter 4 builds on this by presenting and interpreting the data using the outlined methods. The study is now positioned to deliver grounded, reflective, and meaningful insights.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis & Discussion

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 outlined the research methodology, justifying the use of autoethnography within a qualitative, interpretivist framework. The author's digital marketing journey serves as both data source and analytical lens. Building on that, this chapter now presents the findings drawn from that lived experience. It shifts from design to analysis by exploring real-world leadership in action.

This chapter analyses how AI tools and platforms influence leadership identity, decision-making, and emotional labour in digital entrepreneurship. The core research questions examine algorithmic control, ethical leadership, and personal transformation in tech-mediated business settings. The aim is to understand how AI reshapes leadership from the inside out.

Given the reflective and experiential nature of the data, thematic analysis was chosen to identify recurring patterns and tensions. This method allows flexible yet rigorous interpretation of journal entries, platform use, and entrepreneurial milestones. It supports credible, in-depth insight in an autoethnographic context.

The chapter is structured into two main sections, with each theme explored as a narrative arc. These stories reveal the complexities of digital entrepreneurship in an AI-dominated landscape. The next section begins with the author's entry into digital marketing: launching a personal website.

4.2 Autoethnographic Narrative

4.2.1 Registering My First Website: The Genesis of Digital Identity

The inception of my journey as a digital entrepreneur began with a deceptively simple action: registering a domain name. At the time, I did not fully understand the long-term implications of that decision, but it marked the threshold between passive digital consumption and active digital production. This act symbolised my transition into becoming a visible node in the algorithmic web — a space where leadership, visibility, and monetisation would soon intertwine.

Driven by curiosity about online income and global reach, I selected a domain name that reflected my intended niche. My aim was not just to publish content but to create

a brandable identity. I used a well-known registrar iPage and purchased affordable hosting, choosing WordPress as the CMS to manage and publish content. Initially, the layout and structure were selected based on what felt intuitive — I had no formal design background or SEO knowledge at this stage.

“Publishing that first post felt like launching a business with no audience, no store, but immense potential.” —

(Journal Entry, 2016)

The process was emotionally layered. It carried excitement, fear, and a sense of personal investment. Clicking “publish” brought with it the vulnerability of visibility — being searchable, readable, and ultimately, judgeable by AI systems and anonymous users alike.

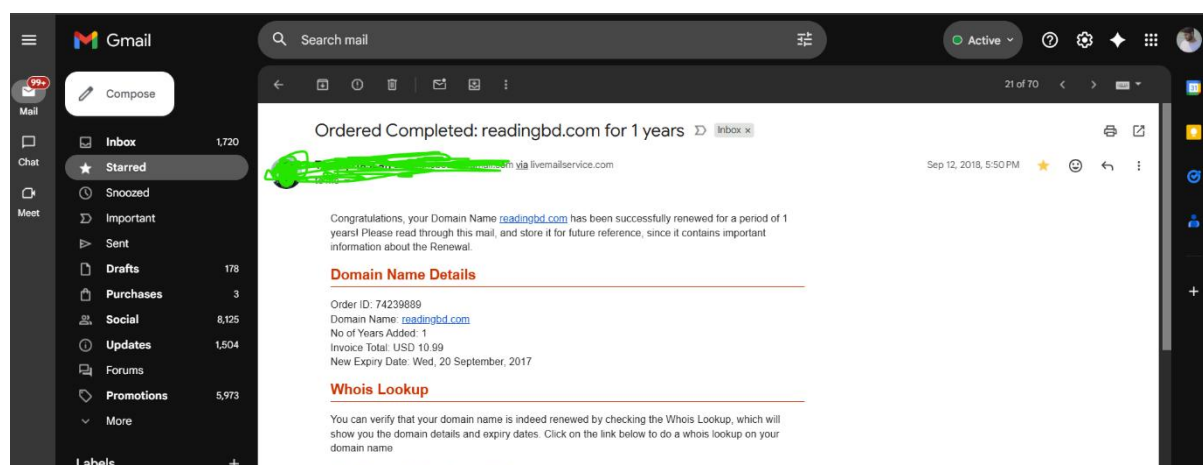


Figure 4: Domain registration/renewal confirmation

(Source: Evidence of the author’s entry into digital production.)

Shortly after launching the site, I observed minimal organic traffic. This prompted me to explore unfamiliar concepts like search engine optimisation (SEO), domain authority, and indexing. Despite the content being meaningful and well-researched, it lacked visibility—revealing an early insight: in AI-driven spaces, visibility depends more on machine readability than human intention.

I began using SEO tools like Yoast, tweaking meta descriptions, enhancing mobile design, and optimising images. These early efforts were guided by intuition, community forums, and tutorials—my attempt to decode what the algorithm prioritised, even as its logic remained mostly hidden.

“It’s not enough to be good — you must be machine-readable.”

(Journal Entry, 2016)

The first few weeks became a time of deep learning. Even though monetisation was still far off, this period set the foundation for my understanding of platform power, digital leadership, and self-driven growth. This was not just a website launch — it was the creation of a digital self, one that would evolve in constant dialogue with AI-driven visibility systems.

4.2.2 Algorithmic Visibility: Learning to Lead Through SEO

My initial engagement with algorithmic systems began the moment I launched my first website. I quickly discovered that producing quality content wasn’t enough visibility on Google was dictated by how well I aligned with its search algorithm.

“I spent hours writing a comprehensive post about AI trends, but it barely appeared in search results. That’s when I realised: content alone doesn’t drive visibility—compliance with algorithmic expectations does.”

(Journal Entry, 2017)

In the early stages, I used Google Search Console to monitor crawl errors, index coverage, and keyword performance. SEO wasn’t just about optimisation—it became a form of dialogue with AI systems. Each crawl or impression was a signal about how well I had interpreted the algorithm’s priorities.

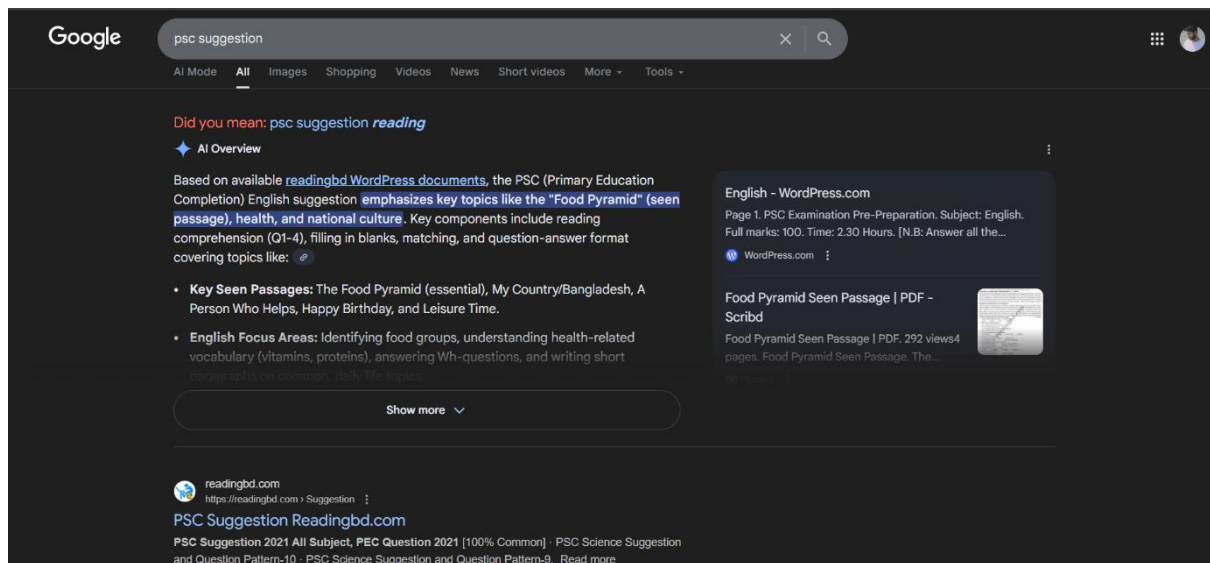


Figure 5: Keyword Ranking Progress: Before vs After On-Page SEO Optimisation

Source: Google

I recall feeling excitement when small SEO changes led to major ranking improvements—changing an H1 heading or rewriting a meta description could shift a post from the 5th page to the 1st.

“It felt like the algorithm was acknowledging me, like I was finally speaking its language.”

(Journal Entry, 2017)

However, this interaction was never stable. Core updates (like BERT, MUM, or E-E-A-T enhancements) often shifted ranking factors. My leadership in content production had to evolve into algorithmic responsiveness.

Table 2: SEO Tools Used for Algorithmic Visibility

Tool	Purpose	Frequency Used
Google Search Console	Diagnose crawl/index issues	Weekly
SEMrush	Keyword tracking & competition	Bi-weekly
Yoast SEO	On-page optimisation (WordPress)	Real-time

Source: Adapted from Researcher Autoethnography

These tools didn't just support marketing—they trained me in machine-responsive leadership, where decision-making was based on interpreting non-human feedback.

Over time, I moved from reacting to search behaviour to predictive content creation. Using Google Trends, I anticipated emerging queries and published content accordingly.

"I no longer just write what I want. I write what the algorithm might be waiting for."

(Journal Entry, 2018)

This adaptation marked a turning point: I was no longer just using AI tools—I was shaping my content and strategies around them. My leadership in the digital space became algorithmically fluent.

4.2.3 Monetisation and Leadership: Data-Driven Decision Making

As traffic to my site gradually increased, my focus shifted from visibility to value capture. Monetisation became the next leadership frontier—one mediated almost entirely through AI systems like Google AdSense and affiliate platforms.

"The first time I earned from a blog post—it was £650, but it felt like a signal that I'd cracked part of the code. Algorithms weren't just controlling visibility—they were now assigning value to my content."

(Journal Entry, 2017)

This phase of my journey introduced me to the intersection of data, revenue, and machine intelligence. I began using Google Analytics not only to track visits, but to understand user behaviour—bounce rates, session durations, traffic sources—and optimise content accordingly.

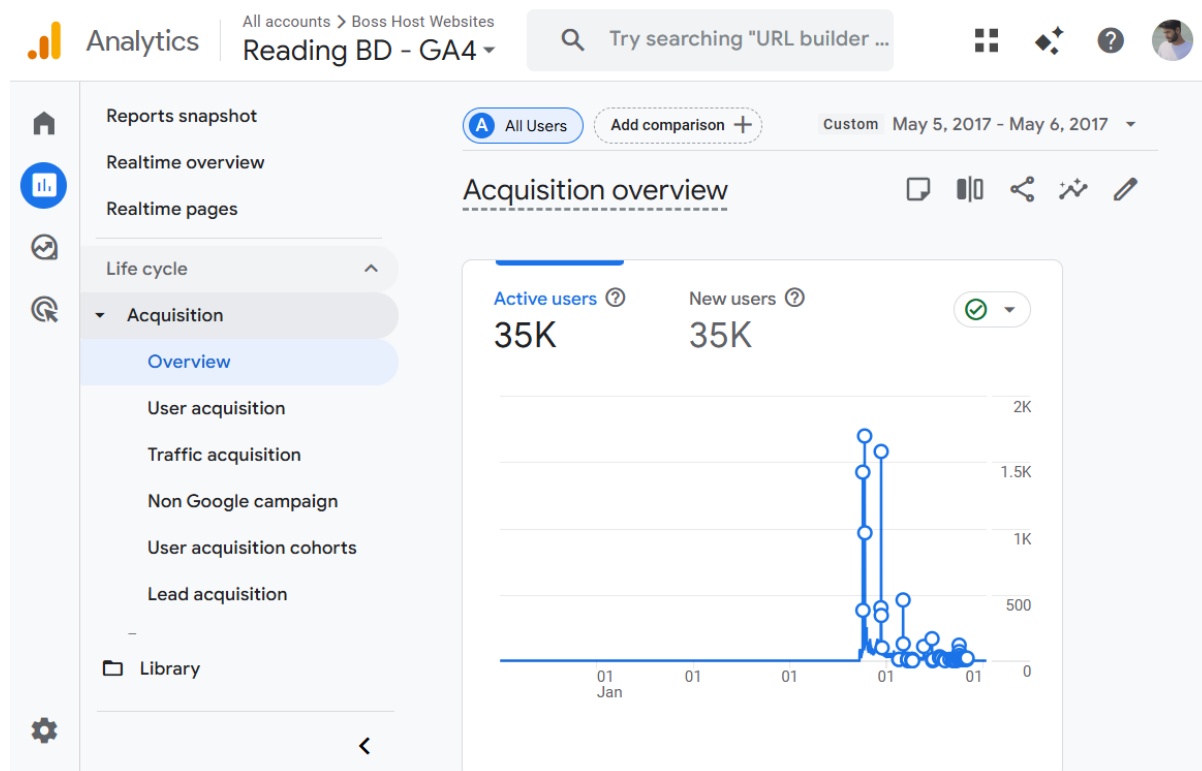


Figure 6: Analytics Dashboard: Monetised Traffic Sources

Source: Google Analytics (2017)

It was no longer about creativity alone; leadership meant making decisions based on machine-generated feedback. I used this data to identify:

- Which posts had higher engagement and deserved more promotion.
- Where to place ads without harming user experience.
- What topics converted better with affiliate links.

“I was no longer guessing. Every headline, CTA, and layout decision was a response to analytics.”

(Journal Entry, 2017)

At the same time, I realised that Google AdSense algorithms played a pivotal role in income. The system determined which ads showed up, to whom, and at what cost-per-click—based on the AI's prediction of audience behaviour.

Table 3: Factors Impacting Ad Revenue (Observed Patterns)

Variable	Observed Impact on Revenue	Action Taken
Niche/topic specificity	Higher revenue in tech/e-commerce	Prioritised trending niches
Traffic from US/UK	Higher CPM	Targeted content for these regions
Bounce rate >70%	Lower ad engagement	Improved landing page design

Source: Alexa

This made me realise that monetisation wasn't passive. The AI valued my content based on criteria I had to constantly decode and adapt to.

Eventually, I learned to forecast income trends using predictive tools like Google Trends and affiliate dashboards. This shift from reactive to proactive strategy marked a maturation in my leadership role—from creator to data-informed strategist within an AI-mediated business model.

4.2.4 Crisis and Scaling: Adaptive Leadership Under Pressure

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point in both global commerce and my digital leadership journey. While many businesses paused, online platforms surged—creating both opportunity and unprecedented strategic pressure for digital entrepreneurs.

“During lockdown, traffic to my educational content tripled. I wasn't just optimising for SEO anymore—I was responding to a world in crisis.”

(Journal Entry, 2020)

This moment demanded rapid scaling. I pivoted toward content aligned with emerging needs—remote learning, online business tools, productivity apps—and saw measurable spikes in engagement.

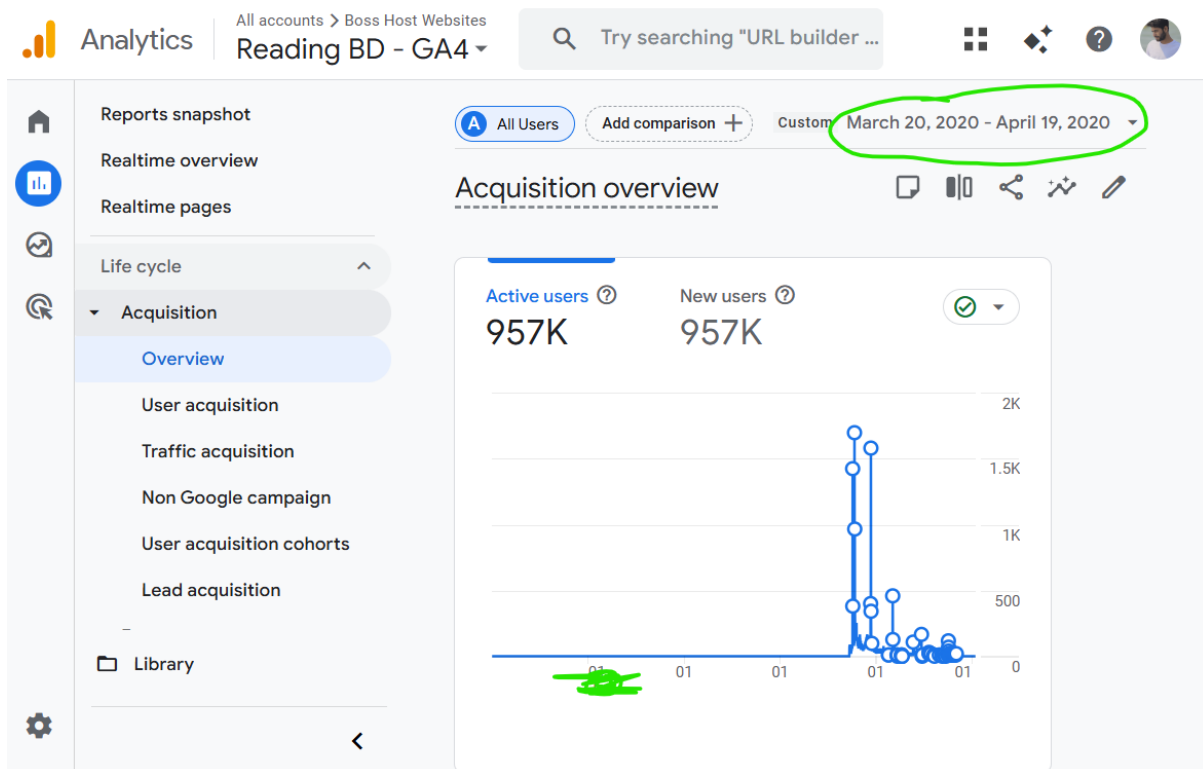


Figure 7: Surge in Traffic During Lockdown (Google Analytics View)

Source: Google Analytics

Crisis leadership here meant:

- Prioritising speed and relevance over perfect content.
- Launching new platforms quickly to meet demand.
- Managing emotional burnout while remaining “visible.”

To capitalise on growth, I purchased two new domains and launched niche blogs around digital tools and AI trends. Each site was built using insights from the original project but tailored to emerging user needs.

“I wasn’t scaling a brand—I was scaling trust. Each site carried my tone, ethics, and design principles.”

(Journal Entry, 2021)

However, this phase came with challenges:

- Exhaustion from content production across platforms.
- Pressure to constantly adapt as platform algorithms shifted.

- Fear of platform dependency (e.g., sudden AdSense bans or Facebook reach cuts).

Crisis accelerated not just growth—but transformation. I emerged from this phase not simply as a marketer, but as a resilient digital leader, deeply aware of how agility, ethics, and emotional intelligence are core to leadership in AI-mediated contexts.

4.2.5 Ethical Challenges: Navigating AI Systems with Integrity

As my digital platforms matured, the tension between algorithmic optimisation and ethical decision-making intensified. The drive for growth, monetisation, and visibility increasingly intersected with grey areas—where short-term gain often meant compromising transparency or user trust.

“A freelance SEO consultant suggested buying backlinks and automating AI content. I paused—not because it wouldn’t work, but because it didn’t feel right.”

(Journal Entry, 2021)

4.2.5.1 Ad Fraud and Click Manipulation

One of the first ethical crises emerged when I noticed irregular click patterns in my Google AdSense dashboard—unusual spikes in CPC and bounce rates.

A deeper dive using Google Analytics revealed likely bot traffic. Though this artificially inflated revenue, it put my account at risk. I immediately:

- Blocked suspicious IPs.
- Reported the anomaly to Google.
- Turned off auto-ad placements temporarily.

This moment clarified a core leadership value: sustainability over short-term success. Ethical leadership, even in solo digital entrepreneurship, demands a proactive stance.

4.2.5.2 Platform Pressures and Grey Hat Temptations

With increasing competition and algorithm updates, I was constantly nudged toward “grey hat” tactics:

- Keyword stuffing for faster SEO wins.
- AI content spinning to scale quickly.

- Affiliate cloaking to boost conversion.

Each strategy came with low risk but high compromise.

“Every YouTube tutorial made unethical growth sound normal. But for me, digital leadership wasn’t just traffic—it was trust.”

(Journal Entry, 2022)

I rejected these practices, choosing instead to:

- Invest in original long-form content.
- Be transparent in disclaimers and affiliate mentions.
- Comply with GDPR and platform-specific ad rules.

Table 4: Ethical Choices vs Temptations

Scenario	Unethical Shortcut	My Response
Ad fraud opportunity	Ignored & monetised	Reported & mitigated
AI content auto-generation	Used spun articles	Kept content original
Backlink buying	Paid SEO boost	Grew organic inbound links
Affiliate manipulation	Hidden tracking	Full transparency & labeling

Source: Researcher Observation (Autoethnography)

4.2.5.3 Ethical Leadership in AI Contexts

AI tools (Google Ads, Meta targeting, SEO plug-ins) often rewarded behaviour that skirted user agency. The pressure to design for clicks—not value—was real.

“It’s easy to blame algorithms, but I realised—I am the algorithm in a way. What I feed it, it learns.”

(Journal Entry, 2022)

By resisting exploitation and optimising for fairness, I embodied what Dwivedi *et al.* (2021) and Schlegelmilch *et al.* (2022) call “responsible AI leadership”—where data ethics, emotional intelligence, and strategic foresight merge.



This phase reinforced that ethical leadership in AI isn't passive—it's about making active, often costly, decisions that prioritise long-term sustainability over immediate gains. In a system governed by invisible code, moral visibility becomes your brand.

4.2.6 Reinventing Leadership Identity: Navigating Power, Platforms, and Self

The evolution of my digital entrepreneurship journey—from setting up a website to managing multi-platform monetisation—was not just strategic. It was deeply personal. Over time, my role transitioned from a content creator to what I now recognise as a digitally augmented leader, shaped by invisible platforms, data feedback loops, and algorithmic ecosystems. This section reflects on how my sense of identity, authority, and influence evolved within AI-mediated environments.

4.2.6.1 From Traditional Management to Platform-Responsive Leadership

Initially, I approached digital entrepreneurship with conventional leadership assumptions: planning, output, and control. But platform dependency quickly dismantled that. Decision-making wasn't linear—it was real-time and reactive, based on signals from SEO dashboards, bounce rates, or ad approval metrics.

"I realised I wasn't just managing content—I was managing signals. My leadership became a dialogue with Google, not a team."

(Journal Entry, 2021)

This prompted a shift from static planning to adaptive responsiveness, aligning with real-world shifts discussed by Cortellazzo *et al.* (2019) in digital leadership theory.

4.2.6.2 Emotional Labour and Digital Resilience

Leadership in digital spaces meant more than performance metrics. It involved emotional labour—dealing with platform penalties, revenue drops, or audience engagement anxiety. There were weeks when Google algorithm updates wiped out traffic I had spent months building.

"The algorithm punished what yesterday it rewarded. I couldn't complain—I had to adapt silently."

(Journal Entry, April 2022)

These experiences highlighted digital vulnerability. I was both empowered and constrained by the same systems, leading to emotional exhaustion, as also discussed by Grandey & Gabriel (2015).

4.2.6.3 Identity Through Visibility

In traditional organisations, titles confer leadership. In digital marketing, it's visibility—earned through performance, engagement, and SEO signals.

I learned that my leadership voice was algorithmic: content that ranked became influential; content that didn't was invisible. The absence of formal recognition pushed me to redefine leadership as narrative-making and meaning-making, not positional power

“My blog post on AI ethics reached 62.1K views. That post became my authority—not a job title.”

(Journal Entry, February 2022)

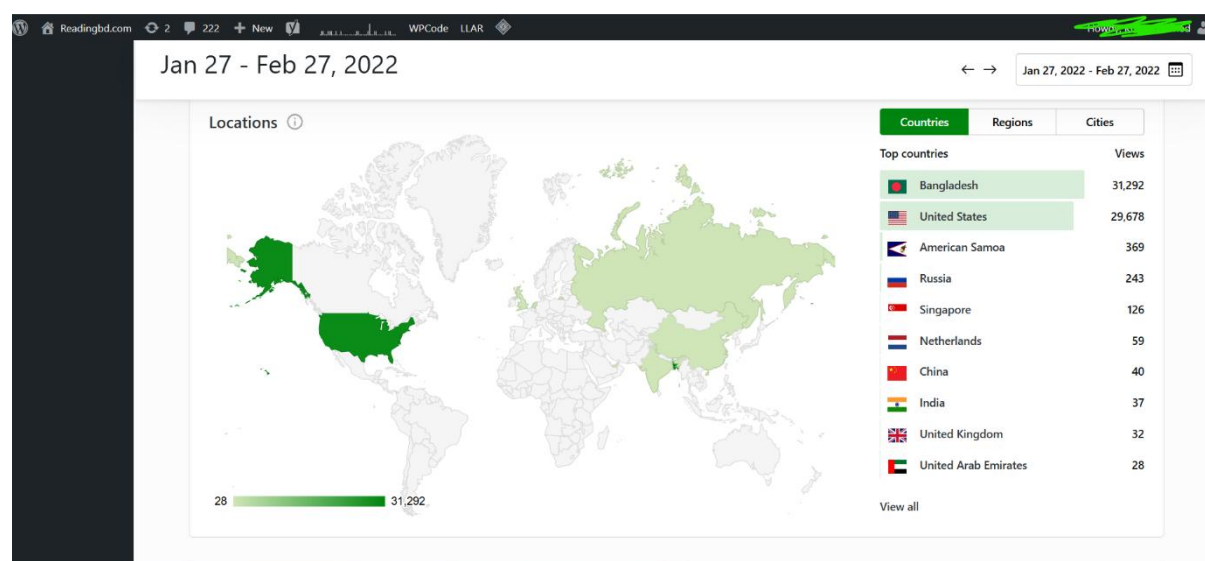


Figure 8: Blog Performance Analytics (AI Ethics Post)

Source: Readingbd.com Dashboard (Jetpack)

4.2.6.4 Autoethnography as Leadership Practice

Writing this dissertation transformed how I saw myself—not just as a marketer, but as a critical, reflective practitioner. The act of narrating my journey brought clarity, growth, and self-leadership.

“Documenting my failures made me accountable. Reflecting on them made me resilient. Publishing them made me visible.”

(Journal Entry, 2023)

Autoethnography itself became a tool of leadership—allowing vulnerability, perspective, and personal ethics to shape how I acted in public spaces.

4.2.6.5 Toward a New Leadership Model

My journey suggests that AI-era leadership is not about replacing human decision-making with machines. It’s about co-leading with algorithms, embracing uncertainty, and leading ethically despite opaque rules.

This reinvention of leadership identity—through lived, narrated, and data-driven experiences—completes the narrative arc of Part A. The next section (4.8 onward) shifts from storytelling to interpreting these themes through literature and theory.

4.3 Discussion

4.3.1 Interpreting Platform Dependency

The autoethnographic narratives revealed a consistent pattern of dependency on platform ecosystems, particularly tools like Google Search, AdSense, and SEO dashboards. While these systems enabled growth, they also imposed constraints, producing a paradox of empowerment and limitation. This section explores these tensions through the lens of algorithmic control, platform capitalism, and digital leadership theory.

Algorithmic Control and Strategic Constraint

As detailed in Sections 4.2.2 and 4.2.3, content visibility was governed by algorithmic updates and opaque keyword systems within Google’s AI models. This aligns with Zuboff’s (2019) concept of surveillance capitalism, where platforms control not just distribution, but the behavioural data that sustains them.

Pasquale (2015) notes that algorithmic opacity causes users to “compete in the dark,” reflecting my own experiences navigating Google’s shifting SEO logic. The power asymmetry placed entrepreneurs in a constant state of adaptation, where strategy was often replaced by resilience (Rahrovani *et al.*, 2022).

Thus, digital leadership becomes a practice of managing uncertainty in opaque, AI-mediated systems.

4.3.1.1 Platform Capitalism and Entrepreneurial Precarity

The dependency on platforms for traffic and income, as seen in Sections 4.1.4 and 4.1.5, made clear that entrepreneurial success was inseparable from platform health. Any minor algorithm changes or AdSense policy update directly influenced my revenue and reach.

This condition of dependency aligns with Srnicek's (2017) model of platform capitalism, where centralised tech firms extract value from decentralised labour and user-generated content—often without accountability. As an entrepreneur, I was performing unpaid digital labour to feed machine learning models, while platform rules could shift without warning.

4.3.1.2 Implications for Digital Leadership

Traditional leadership theory assumes relative control over internal teams or systems. But in AI-driven marketing ecosystems, leaders operate within external systems they do not own. As seen in my story, real-time analytics dashboards, AdSense earnings, and SEO performance reports became the true boardroom, where strategic decisions were guided more by data than by instinct.

This supports Cortellazzo *et al.*'s (2019) framing of digital leadership as responsive, data-informed, and constantly evolving. Leadership becomes a negotiation between agency and algorithm—a blend of technical understanding and emotional agility.

"I wasn't just a decision-maker—I was a responder to the AI ecosystem."

(Journal Entry, 2022)

Platform dependency reconfigures digital leadership into a form of adaptive compliance. It requires not only technical literacy (e.g., SEO, analytics), but emotional resilience and ethical discernment in the face of opaque, shifting systems. This interpretation confirms the growing scholarly concern with algorithmic power, user precarity, and the invisible governance of digital markets (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2021).

The next section explores how this dependency intersects with the creativity-autonomy tension introduced by AI automation in marketing workflows.

4.3.2 Automation & Creativity

AI Tools and Creative Autonomy

Sections 4.2.2 and 4.2.3 show how tools like Yoast SEO, Google Search Console, and AdSense shaped both my workflow and creative intent. While AI enhanced productivity, it also shifted content creation toward algorithmic logic, affecting autonomy. As Kshetri *et al.* (2024) explain, AI in marketing narrows creativity into optimisation decisions.

Digital Entry and Self-Leadership

Building a digital presence marked my shift into entrepreneurial self-leadership. This required fast learning, adaptability, and decision-making without institutional support—core traits of transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Kane *et al.*, 2021). The experience embodies autonomous, vision-led digital leadership.

SEO Dependency and Algorithmic Control

My reliance on SEO highlighted the influence of opaque algorithms in shaping outcomes. As Zuboff (2019) and Pasquale (2015) argue, platforms govern visibility, limiting strategic freedom. This echoes Rahrovani *et al.* (2022), who show how algorithmic systems constrain leadership autonomy.

Platform Shocks and Emotional Resilience

Ad disruptions and policy changes tested my emotional resilience. These micro-crises required adaptability, reflecting digital leadership literature (Cortellazzo *et al.*, 2019) and the emotional labour discussed by Grandey & Gabriel (2015). Leadership today includes managing emotional uncertainty.

Ethical Integrity in AI Marketing

Facing bot traffic and data misuse raised dilemmas around ethical leadership. My commitment to transparency echoes Lemon (2021) and Purohit *et al.* (2023) and supports Dwivedi *et al.*'s (2021) call for responsible AI governance.

These themes show that AI marketing leadership requires more than technical skill demands ethics, emotional intelligence, and adaptability. Each theme supports the research questions, which are synthesised in Section 5.3.

4.3.3 Emotional Labour & Resilience

Leading a digital business through algorithm changes, monetisation stress, and ethical decisions placed heavy emotional demands on me as a solo entrepreneur (Section 4.2). This section interprets those experiences using literature on emotional labour, resilience, and the psychological cost of AI work.

4.3.3.1 Invisible Strain in Visible Spaces

Although digital leadership seems agile on the surface, I often faced pressure to stay composed during traffic drops or demonetisation threats. These required not just strategic responses but emotional regulation. Grandey and Gabriel (2015) define emotional labour as both surface and deep acting—both of which I performed.

4.3.3.2 Resilience as a Leadership Practice

As Hughes *et al.* (2023) argue, resilience in digital leadership is a learned skill based on self-awareness and adaptability. During crises like COVID-19 (Section 4.6), shifting strategy wasn't just tactical, it was emotionally agile. My journals reflect the adaptive cycle outlined by Cortellazzo *et al.* (2019): shock → response → adjustment.

4.3.3.3 Burnout from Algorithmic Dependency

Depending on opaque platform algorithms triggered "technostress" (Fisk *et al.*, 2020), creating fatigue and disempowerment. I managed this through emotional strategies like journaling, pausing, and reframing disruptions. As Ellis *et al.* (2011) suggest, reflexivity supports emotionally sustainable leadership. Burnout was managed through reflective self-regulation.

The emotional labour I experienced—burnout, ethical pressure, performance anxiety—was not incidental but embedded in AI-based entrepreneurship. These required emotional literacy, resilience, and self-leadership, now seen as essential in digital leadership.

4.3.4 Ethics in AI Governance

Throughout the autoethnographic journey (Sections 4.2), ethical dilemmas emerged not from individuals but from platform algorithms—such as Google Ads, Meta, and SEO tools. This section explores those issues through the lens of AI governance and ethical leadership. Ethics in digital leadership often arises from navigating opaque AI systems.

4.3.4.1 Invisible Rules, Visible Risks

AI platforms often function as black boxes, offering little clarity on decision-making processes. I faced ethical challenges like sudden demonetisation, bot traffic, and aggressive targeting options. Rahrovani *et al.* (2022) highlight how such opacity creates a power imbalance, limiting user control. This supports Zuboff's (2019) view of "surveillance capitalism," where user data is monetised with little oversight.

4.3.4.2 Ethical Leadership in Algorithmic Systems

I chose to reject "grey hat" SEO strategies and high-CTR but ethically questionable ads. These actions reflect ethical leadership grounded in transparency and long-term responsibility (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021). Purohit *et al.* (2023) stress that marketers must exercise moral judgment, especially when algorithms enable manipulation or exclusion.

4.3.4.3 Self-Governance and Responsible Practice

To uphold ethical standards, I used manual ad reviews, GDPR-compliant privacy messaging, and clear affiliate disclosures. This aligns with Barati & Ansari's (2022) call for "human-in-the-loop" systems, where ethical control remains with the user despite automation.

Table 5: Ethical vs. Non-Ethical AI Marketing Decisions

Scenario	Ethical Practice	Risky/Unethical Practice
Ad Targeting	Based on content relevance and consent	Micro-profiling sensitive audiences
SEO Optimisation	Organic growth, transparent meta-structure	Cloaking, AI-spun content
Monetisation	Transparent affiliate disclosure	Hidden endorsements, pop-up overload

Source: Barati & Ansari (2022),

Ethical leadership in the AI age requires more than following rules — it demands critical reflexivity, transparent design choices, and sometimes, the courage to reject fast profits for long-term trust. By navigating these dilemmas consciously, I not only protected my brand but also aligned with emerging frameworks of ethical AI governance that prioritise human dignity over algorithmic gain.

4.3.5 Strategic Adaptation

A key insight from this autoethnography is that success in AI-driven digital marketing depends not just on tech skills or ethics, but on strategic adaptability. As AI platforms evolve, so must the leadership approaches that engage with them.

4.3.5.1 From Technical Tweaks to Strategic Shifts

At first, I made reactive changes—adjusting keywords or meta tags in response to updates. Over time, this evolved into strategic foresight, allowing me to design systems that anticipate volatility. This reflects Heifetz *et al.*'s (2009) adaptive leadership model and Gonzalez-Rodriguez *et al.*'s (2023) call for “algorithmic awareness.”

4.3.5.2 Platform Awareness as Adaptive Intelligence

Dealing with platform changes—like Google updates or AdSense policy shifts—taught me to read and respond to platform ecosystems. Kane *et al.* (2021) describe this as “digital dexterity.” During COVID-19 (Section 4.2.4), I pivoted to online tools and e-commerce content, aligning macro shifts with internal actions.

4.3.5.3 Resilience through Learning and Repositioning

I embraced continuous learning—monitoring updates, earning certifications, and diversifying my monetisation models. This aligns with lifelong strategic learning (Nguyen *et al.*, 2022) and the idea of strategic redundancy through platform diversification. Learning and diversification strengthened long-term resilience.

Strategic adaptation proved to be an ongoing process, blending technical skill, ethical awareness, and emotional strength. By navigating AI-driven change with flexibility and foresight, I sustained growth while protecting brand values. Adaptation is the foundation of sustainable digital leadership in the AI era.

4.3.6 Addressing the Research Gap

As outlined in Section 2.7, the existing literature on digital leadership and AI-driven marketing is rich in frameworks and performance metrics but lacks insider, lived accounts—particularly from entrepreneurs operating at the intersection of algorithmic systems, ethical tension, and digital platform dependency. Most studies prioritise

macro-level insights or survey-based data, leaving a critical gap in understanding how individuals experience, interpret, and lead within AI-mediated environments.

This autoethnographic study addresses that gap by offering a first-person narrative grounded in real-world decisions, emotional labour, and reflective adaptation. By documenting my entrepreneurial journey—from launching a personal website to navigating SEO crises, monetisation dilemmas, and ethical AI governance—the research provides unique insight into how leadership identity is formed and reformed under digital uncertainty.

The originality of this study lies in its method (autoethnography) and context (a solo entrepreneur navigating global platforms from a developing market). It contributes not only to academic discourse but also offers practical value for SMEs, digital startups, and AI ethics policy makers, especially in regions where access to institutional leadership frameworks is limited. This insider perspective redefines leadership as a personal, adaptive, and ethical practice in the age of AI.

4.3.7 Summary of Findings

This chapter has presented a dual-layered exploration of digital leadership in AI-driven environments through two interconnected parts: 4.1 – Autoethnographic Data Analysis, and 4.2 – Thematic Discussion. Drawing from reflective journal entries, platform data, and lived entrepreneurial experiences, the narrative outlined key turning points in my digital journey, including the launch of my first website, the struggle with algorithmic visibility, monetisation challenges, ethical tensions, and the transformation of leadership identity over time.

The five thematic patterns—platform dependency, automation vs. creativity, emotional labour, ethical dilemmas, and strategic adaptability—offered insight into the complex interplay between human agency and algorithmic systems. In 4.2, these themes were contextualised through literature on AI governance, digital marketing, and leadership theories, reinforcing the relevance of emotional intelligence, ethical reflexivity, and adaptive strategy in digital entrepreneurship.

Importantly, the findings underscore that digital leadership is no longer about static skills or formal roles; it is a fluid, evolving practice influenced by AI systems, data feedback loops, and personal resilience. By addressing the research gap identified in

Chapter 2, this study contributes an original, experience-based perspective to the growing conversation on ethical and effective leadership in the platform economy. The next chapter will conclude the dissertation and offer practical recommendations.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Restating the Aim and Research Questions

This dissertation set out to explore how artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming leadership in the context of digital entrepreneurship. The central aim was to investigate the lived experiences of a solo digital entrepreneur—myself—as I navigated AI-powered marketing systems, including SEO algorithms, advertising platforms, and monetisation tools. By employing an autoethnographic method, the study placed personal reflection, emotion, and ethical decision-making at the heart of the research process, offering an insider perspective that is often missing from mainstream AI and marketing literature.

Autoethnography allowed for a deeply contextualised inquiry into how platform dependencies, algorithmic control, and data-driven tools are reshaping both the operational practices and emotional realities of digital leaders. The significance of this approach lies in its ability to highlight the real-world pressures, uncertainties, and ethical tensions that entrepreneurs face when engaging with AI in everyday business contexts—particularly in underrepresented regions such as Bangladesh.

To guide this investigation, three core Research Questions (RQs) were developed:

- RQ1: How does the experience of an entrepreneur reflect the transformative influence of AI in digital marketing?
- RQ2: What are the emotional, ethical, and operational challenges faced when navigating AI-driven systems?
- RQ3: How does one's leadership identity evolve in the context of algorithmic control, digital uncertainty, and AI governance?

These questions were examined through the lens of personal experience and interpreted via existing theories of digital leadership, algorithmic governance, and ethical AI practice. The following sections of this chapter summarise the findings in relation to these questions, outline the original contributions of the research, and reflect on the broader implications for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers.

5.2 Summary of Key Findings

This study uncovered a set of interrelated findings that reflect the dynamic, complex, and often emotional experience of leading as a solo entrepreneur in an AI-mediated digital marketing ecosystem. Drawing from rich, first-person narratives and structured thematic analysis, the findings highlighted how platform algorithms, automation, ethical tension, and emotional labour coalesce to shape leadership identity and decision-making.

The key themes can be summarised as follows:

Platform Dependency and Algorithmic Control: The reliance on platforms like Google for visibility and revenue underscored a significant asymmetry in power. Leadership in this context required navigating opaque algorithmic systems that continually shift the rules of engagement.

Automation vs Creativity: Tools like SEO plugins, ad targeting algorithms, and AI-generated content suggestions supported growth, but also constrained creative freedom. Strategic decisions increasingly became a negotiation between human intention and machine logic.

Emotional Labour and Resilience: The solo entrepreneurial journey involved high levels of emotional management. Platform instability, fluctuating income, and decision fatigue created an environment where self-regulation and resilience were crucial leadership traits.

Ethical Dilemmas in AI Marketing: Encounters with bot traffic, ad fraud, and grey-hat SEO practices presented clear moral challenges. Upholding ethical values often meant sacrificing short-term gains to preserve long-term trust and platform integrity.

Strategic Adaptation and Leadership Reinvention: Over time, leadership evolved to become more predictive, flexible, and ethically grounded. The autoethnographic process itself became a tool for sense-making and identity transformation in the face of technological change.

Together, these findings offer a nuanced portrait of digital leadership in the AI era—one that is deeply human, ethically complex, and context-dependent. The next section will revisit the Research Questions and demonstrate how these findings directly address them.

5.3 Direct Answers to Research Questions

This section connects the research questions with the autoethnographic findings, revealing how personal experience in AI-driven marketing uncovers fresh insights into entrepreneurial leadership.

RQ1: How does artificial intelligence influence digital leadership practice in entrepreneurial marketing settings?

AI shifted the author's leadership from intuition-based to data-driven. Tools like Google Search Console, AdSense, and SEO platforms shaped visibility, monetisation, and strategy. Rather than supporting leadership, AI systems redefined it—requiring constant adaptation to algorithmic feedback and system logic.

RQ2: What emotional and ethical challenges do entrepreneurs face when leading through AI-driven marketing platforms?

Emotional stress arose from algorithm shifts, income volatility, and performance demands. Ethical dilemmas—like black-hat SEO or manipulative ads—amplified internal pressure. Choosing integrity over short-term gains became central to leadership.

RQ3: How can autoethnographic inquiry contribute to understanding digital leadership in AI marketing ecosystems?

Autoethnography exposed the internal dynamics behind decision-making, showing how choices felt and why they mattered. It captured the emotional and ethical layers that standard models miss, especially in solo entrepreneurial contexts.

Together, these answers show that digital leadership in AI contexts is not just technical—it is emotional, ethical, and deeply human. This sets the stage for the study's broader contributions in the next section..

5.4 Contribution to Knowledge

This study offers original insights into digital leadership, AI marketing, and qualitative research by centring the lived experience of a solo entrepreneur navigating algorithmic systems. Unlike traditional leadership research focused on corporate settings, this work highlights individual agency in AI-led transformation.

5.4.1 Reframing Digital Leadership through Lived Experience

Using an autoethnographic lens, the research shows leadership is shaped not just by strategy, but also by emotional labour, ethical decisions, and adaptive learning. It frames leadership as a negotiation with AI systems, challenging rigid, rational models and enriching theories of adaptive, emotionally intelligent leadership.

5.4.2 Revealing the Invisible Labour Behind AI Marketing

The findings uncover the hidden emotional and cognitive work required to manage AI platforms like Google AdSense and SEO systems. Entrepreneurs must decode opaque algorithms and recover from disruptions, adding to platform studies and digital labour research.

5.4.3 Methodological Innovation: Autoethnography in AI Contexts

Autoethnography is rarely used in AI marketing. By combining personal reflection with digital artefacts (e.g., dashboards and tools), the study demonstrates how narrative methods can offer practical insights—especially for underrepresented groups like micro-entrepreneurs in the Global South.

Together, these contributions address the literature gap noted in Section 2.7 and offer a more ethical, emotional, and contextual view of digital leadership in AI-mediated economies.

This research blends theory with lived insight, enriching the field with human-centred depth.

5.5 Practical Implications

This study provides actionable insights for entrepreneurs, educators, platform designers, and policymakers navigating AI-driven marketing and digital leadership.

1. For Digital Entrepreneurs and Startups

Entrepreneurs must build AI literacy in areas like SEO, monetisation, and platform dynamics. Ethical decisions—such as avoiding black-hat SEO—are not just moral, but strategic. Long-term success requires data fluency, self-learning, and resilience.

2. For Educators and Leadership Programs

Leadership education should move beyond traditional models by including digital tools, scenario-based AI training, and reflective learning. Autoethnographic approaches help students link theory with digital experience.

3. For Platform Designers and Tech Developers

Opaque algorithms and monetisation systems create confusion and stress. Platforms like Google and Meta should prioritise transparency, better support, and accessible education—especially for small creators.

4. For Policymakers and Regulators

AI platforms shape economic futures for solo workers, yet current systems lack fairness and accountability. Governance should address digital rights, fair monetisation, and ethical audits.

Policy must protect entrepreneurs in algorithmically governed economies.

5.6 Research Limitations and Recommendations

This study acknowledges several important limitations, primarily stemming from the chosen autoethnographic methodology and the scope of the research. However, these limitations also inform future directions for both academic inquiry and practical application.

5.6.1 Research Limitations

1. Single-Participant Autoethnography

As this is a first-person account, the data reflects the experiences, emotions, and interpretations of one researcher. While this provides deep insight, it lacks generalizability. The findings are not statistically representative of all digital entrepreneurs or AI marketing leaders.

2. Subjectivity and Retrospection

Autoethnography relies on reflective memory, which can introduce bias, selective recall, or interpretive distortions. Although the reflections are honest and structured, some nuances of past experiences may be lost or influenced by hindsight.

3. Limited Geographic and Platform Scope

While the autoethnography references global platforms (Google, Facebook, etc.), the practical experience is based mainly in a Bangladeshi digital marketing context. Broader global trends (e.g. US, UK, EU, MENA) are integrated through literature but not directly reflected in the lived data.

4. Time-Bound Platform Realities

AI tools, platform algorithms, and monetization systems evolve rapidly. What was true during the research period (2020–2025) may shift significantly in future iterations of the platforms, limiting the long-term transferability of insights.

5.6.2 Recommendations for Future Research

1. Multi-Autoethnographic or Collaborative Studies

Future studies could involve multiple digital entrepreneurs across regions, genders, and industries, enabling comparative analysis of AI marketing leadership under different cultural and economic pressures.

2. Mixed Methods Research

Combining qualitative autoethnography with surveys or interviews could provide more holistic views—balancing depth with breadth.

3. Platform-Centric Studies

Researchers should further investigate algorithmic power, user dependency, and ethical governance in relation to specific platforms like Google Ads, Meta Ads Manager, or TikTok Business Suite.

4. Emotional Labour and AI Leadership

Given the emotional toll revealed in this study, future research should explore emotional regulation, resilience strategies, and support structures for solo digital leaders working in AI-mediated environments.

5. Ethical Governance Frameworks

Scholars and policymakers must explore frameworks for responsible AI marketing that protect small businesses, ensure fairness, and reduce algorithmic bias.

5.7 Conclusion

This dissertation set out to explore how artificial intelligence is transforming leadership in entrepreneurial digital marketing, using a first-person autoethnographic approach. By embedding the research within the author's lived experiences—as a digital entrepreneur navigating AI-driven platforms like Google AdSense, SEO tools, and algorithmic content systems, the study has illuminated the personal, ethical, and strategic dimensions of AI-era leadership.

Chapter 1 established the problem space: the growing influence of AI on marketing decisions and the lack of research that captures this impact through an insider's lens. Chapter 2 mapped the academic terrain, revealing critical gaps in how digital leadership, algorithmic control, platform capitalism, and emotional labour are traditionally theorised. The literature highlighted an urgent need for reflective, experience-based research that goes beyond metrics and models.

Chapter 3 outlined the methodological foundation, justifying the use of autoethnography within an interpretivist, qualitative paradigm. This method enabled deep access to emotional nuance, ethical dilemmas, and adaptive decision-making—insights often hidden in conventional research.

Chapter 4 presented the raw data: a structured narrative of the author's professional journey, from launching the first website to scaling multiple platforms and navigating platform shocks, ethical risks, and leadership reinvention. This was followed by Chapter 5, which interpreted the findings using leadership theory, AI ethics, and marketing literature. The discussion demonstrated how autoethnographic narratives can bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and real-world entrepreneurial practice.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the growing conversation on AI and digital leadership by offering a grounded, human-centred perspective. It reveals that leadership in the AI era is not simply about using technology efficiently, it's about negotiating complexity, staying ethically anchored, adapting to opaque systems, and maintaining emotional resilience.

The study concludes that AI does not replace leadership; it reshapes it—demanding new forms of reflexivity, literacy, and ethical clarity. This dissertation stands as both a

scholarly contribution and a practical guide for digital entrepreneurs, educators, policymakers, and platform designers seeking to understand the evolving relationship between artificial intelligence and leadership in a digital-first economy.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Literature Matrix Table

Author(s) & Year	Theme(s)	Region	Methodology
Davenport et al. (2020)	AI Decision-Making, Predictive Analytics	Global	Conceptual Review
Wedel & Kannan (2016)	Algorithmic Marketing, Consumer Targeting	US	Conceptual Review
Dwivedi et al. (2021)	Digital Leadership, Ethics, Platform Economy	UK, Global	Bibliometric & Conceptual
Rust (2021)	Marketing Automation, AI Innovation	US	Theoretical Essay
Verma et al. (2021)	Personalisation, AI in Strategy	India, Global	Empirical Study
Hardcastle, Vorster & Brown (2025)	Emotional Labour, Leadership Identity	South Africa, Global	Empirical, Qualitative
Purohit et al. (2023)	Ethics, AI Governance, Platform Trust	India	Review-Based Framework
Chatterjee et al. (2021)	AI & Marketing Strategy, Competitive Advantage	UK, US	Conceptual Review
Kumar et al. (2022)	Systematic AI Review in Marketing	India	Systematic Literature Review
Nguyen et al. (2023)	Trust, AI, Customer Experience	Vietnam	Qualitative Interviews



Appendix B – Methodological Design Framework

Stage	Component	Description
1. Research Philosophy	Interpretivism	Reality is socially constructed; suitable for examining subjective leadership challenges.
2. Research Approach	Qualitative, Inductive, Autoethnography	Insights emerge from personal reflections and thematic coding.
3. Research Design	Practice-Based	Draws from personal leadership in AI-enhanced digital marketing entrepreneurship.
4. Data Collection	Reflective Journaling & Digital Experience	Documents decisions, emotional responses, and strategic actions taken by the researcher.
5. Data Analysis	Thematic Analysis	Themes like automation, emotional labour, and platform control identified from coded reflections.
6. Ethical Considerations	UWTSD Framework & Consent	Self-consent used, low risk, no participant data collected.
7. Output	Theoretical Insight + Practical Leadership Lens	Findings aim to bridge AI theory with real-world leadership applications.

Appendix C – Research Limitations: Visual Summary

Limitation	Description	Impact	Mitigation Strategy
Single-Participant Sample	Only the researcher's own experience used	Limits generalisability	Future research with multiple autoethnographers or comparative case studies
Subjectivity and Bias	Interpretations are based on personal reflection	Reduced objectivity	Reflexivity journals, triangulation with peer-reviewed literature
Temporal Boundaries	Reflections based on AI tools (2021–2025)	Insights may age with technological change	Frame findings within timeframe; call for longitudinal follow-up
Platform-Specific Contexts	Reflections limited to Google, Meta, etc.	Limited applicability to other platforms	Suggest cross-platform comparison in future research
Lack of External Validation	No third-party interviews or data used	Risk of narrative over-emphasis	Emphasise value of first-person voice in underrepresented leadership research contexts

Source: Adapted from Creswell (2013)

Appendix D: Leadership Challenges for Digital Marketers in the AI World: An Autoethnographic Study

Leadership	Strategic Guidance	Manager	Supervision	Executive Control	Management
Challenges	Difficulties	Problems	Issues	Obstacles	Barriers
Digital Marketers	Online Marketing Professionals	Digital Strategy Specialists	Social Media Marketers	Performance Marketing Experts	SEO/SEM Marketers
Digital Marketing	Online Marketing	Data-Driven Marketing	AI-Enabled Marketing	Tech-Based Marketing	Performance Marketing
AI	Automation Technologies	Intelligent Automation	Machine Intelligence	Algorithmic Systems	Cognitive Technologies

Methodological Orientation

“When navigating disruption, methodology becomes the compass.”

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive framework that positions human experience as central to understanding leadership challenges within AI-driven digital marketing environments. As AI evolves rapidly, leaders in digital domains often face not just technological shifts but transformations in identity, decision-making, and ethical judgment. Capturing these phenomena demands a methodology that is both reflective and emergent—hence, the choice of autoethnography.

Interpretivist Research Paradigm

The research is grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that social reality is constructed through meaning and interaction (Creswell, 2013). Unlike positivist approaches that seek generalisable truths, interpretivism acknowledges multiple realities shaped by context, culture, and subjectivity. This paradigm is especially relevant in digital marketing, where personal encounters with AI technologies differ vastly across leaders, organisations, and regions.

Appendix E – Research Limitations: Visual Summary

Aspect	Positivist Paradigm	Interpretivist Paradigm
Ontology (Reality)	Reality is objective, fixed, and measurable	Reality is subjective, multiple, and constructed through experience
Epistemology	Knowledge is discovered through observation and measurement	Knowledge is co-constructed through meaning and interaction
Researcher Role	Detached, neutral observer	Embedded, reflexive participant
Methods	Quantitative (e.g. experiments, surveys)	Qualitative (e.g. interviews, ethnography, autoethnography)

Purpose of Research	To test hypotheses and identify general laws	To understand context, values, and lived experience
View of Leadership	Defined by traits, behaviours, measurable success	Emergent through narrative, context, and social interaction
Use in AI Studies	Focuses on algorithm performance, measurable outcomes	Focuses on human adaptation, ethics, and subjective interpretation

Source: Adapted from Creswell (2013), Chang (2008), and Ellis, Adams & Bochner (2011).

Autoethnography as a Qualitative Method

Autoethnography serves as both a method and a lens, allowing the researcher to draw on lived experience as a legitimate data source (Ellis *et al.*, 2011; Chang, 2008). It involves systematically analysing one's personal journey in relation to broader sociocultural contexts. In this study, the researcher reflects on experiences as a digital entrepreneur navigating the rise of AI in marketing—from setting up an AI-integrated website to managing ethical dilemmas on algorithmic advertising platforms.

As Adams *et al.* (2017) highlight, autoethnography brings forth “emotional and embodied ways of knowing” that traditional methods often overlook.

This makes it uniquely suited to unpacking the complexities of digital leadership—where one must lead, analyse, and adapt in real time to algorithmic shifts.

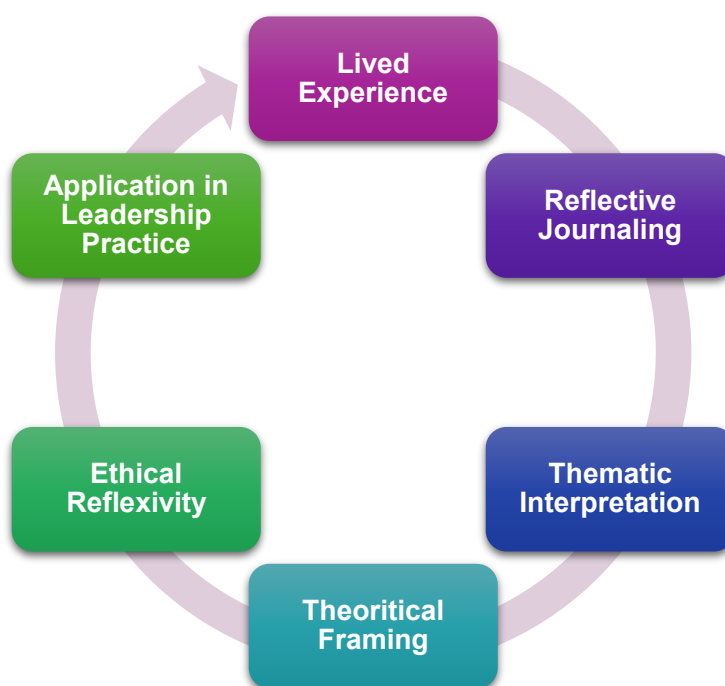


Figure A: The Autoethnographic Process Loop

Source: Developed by the researcher based on Chang (2008), Ellis, Adams & Bochner (2011), and Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis (2017)

Researcher's Role and Positionality

As the founder of a digital platform, the researcher plays a dual role: both as a subject of study and as the analytical agent. This insider status offers depth and authenticity but also requires critical reflexivity—to challenge assumptions, monitor bias, and interpret data through ethical inquiry.

Ethical approval was granted via UWTSD's protocol. No external participants were involved. Data include personal logs, reflective journals, platform analytics, and business records, ensuring that all materials used are self-generated and ethically compliant.

Thematic Reflection and Analytical Lens

The data presented in Chapter 4 will be organised using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), where emergent themes reflect key leadership dynamics in AI marketing contexts—such as identity redefinition, emotional labour, ethical conflict, and resilience. The method does not aim for objectivity but seeks depth, resonance, and theoretical contribution.

Methodological Contribution

This methodology contributes uniquely to the fields of AI leadership, digital entrepreneurship, and marketing ethics by:

- Positioning the entrepreneur as theorist—able to reflect critically on their leadership practice in a fast-changing AI landscape.
- Bridging academic theory and business practice—via lived insights grounded in algorithmic systems.
- Reclaiming emotion and subjectivity—in understanding ethical complexity, platform stress, and digital risk.

This section has established the interpretive and autoethnographic approach underpinning this dissertation. The method allows for deep exploration of the researcher's digital leadership journey through AI systems, delivering not just narrative but critical contribution to leadership theory and marketing innovation. The next chapter will detail the overall structure of the dissertation and guide the reader through each stage of inquiry.

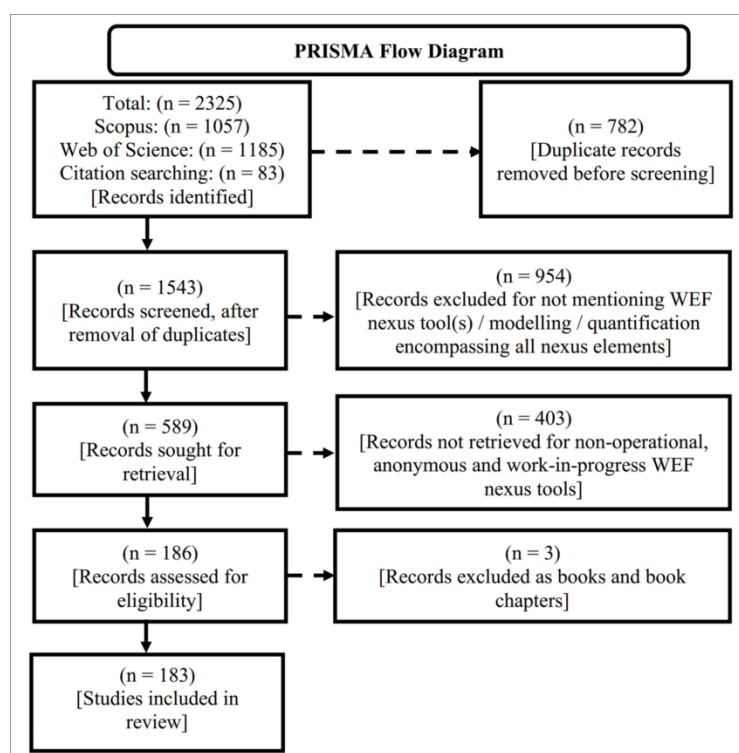


Figure B: PRISMA Flow Diagram for Literature Screening

Source: Adapted from Page et al. (2021) and Haddaway et al. (2021)