The Role of Purpose in the For-Profit Firm in Digital Platforms and Ecosystems' Success

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Abstract: Digital platforms and ecosystems (DPEs) have become central forces of economic transformation, yet most platform-based firms fail. While success is commonly attributed to network effects and stakeholder management, these factors alone do not fully explain DPE success. This study investigates the role of purpose in the for-profit firm as a strategic factor in DPEs' success through a systematic literature review of 83 publications (2000–2025). The findings suggest that purpose influences DPEs' value creation, delivery, and capture by shaping the firm's value proposition, stakeholder engagement, decision-making, leadership, and governance. A conceptual model is proposed, identifying purpose as a mechanism operating across these dimensions, moderated by contextual, regulatory, and authenticity-related factors.

Keywords: Purpose, Digital Platforms and Ecosystems, Success, For-Profit Firms, Systematic Literature Review

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital platforms and ecosystems (DPEs) have fundamentally transformed how firms create, deliver, and capture value, reshaping competitive dynamics across industries (Acs et al., 2021, p. 1635; Cennamo, 2021, p. 288). DPEs leverage digital technologies and network effects to achieve unprecedented economies of scale (Gawer, 2022, p. 111; Hein et al., 2020, p. 95). Yet the majority of platform-based firms do not survive in the long run (Özcan et al., 2022, p. 1; Steffen et al., 2023, p. 1). The success of firms such as Apple, Microsoft, and Amazon is primarily attributed to the mechanisms through which they create, deliver, and capture value (Rohn et al., 2021, p. 2; Steffen et al., 2023, p. 7). However, commonly cited success factors – network effects, value co-creation, stakeholder management, and dynamic capabilities – do not fully explain the gap between successful and failing platforms (Özcan et al., 2022, p. 7; Rohn et al., 2021, p. 13).

Simultaneously, purpose in the for-profit firm has gained increased scholarly attention as organizations seek to navigate social, economic, and environmental challenges (Chua et al., 2024, p. 755; George et al., 2016, p. 1880). Research indicates that pursuing a purpose beyond profit maximization may influence firm success by guiding strategic decision-making and strengthening stakeholder relationships (Bunderson & Thakor, 2022, p. 10; Henderson & Steen, 2015, p. 327). However, the role of purpose in DPEs' success has yet to receive systematic attention. This gap is salient given that DPEs have redefined value creation, delivery, and capture, making it critical to understand whether and how purpose affects their success.

1.1. Conceptual Demarcation of Purpose

Purpose in the for-profit firm refers to the fundamental reason for a firm's existence beyond profit maximization, representing the essence of what value the firm strives to create for its stakeholders (Bunderson & Thakor, 2022, p. 1; George et al., 2023, p. 1847). This definition situates purpose as an overarching strategic orientation that shapes the firm's mission, values, and vision. While purpose overlaps with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) frameworks, stakeholder orientation, and corporate identity, it differs in important respects.

CSR and ESG represent specific programs and reporting standards through which firms address social concerns and are often adopted instrumentally by individual business units without fundamentally reshaping the firm's strategic orientation, whereas purpose provides a deeper strategic rationale guiding all activities across an organization (Bhattacharya et al., 2023, p. 966; George & Schillebeeckx, 2022, p. 2). Stakeholder orientation describes the degree to which firms prioritize stakeholder interests (Henisz, 2023, p. 159), whereas purpose provides the normative foundation that frames that orientation. Corporate identity pertains to external presentation, while purpose constitutes the internal strategic core from which identity emerges (Bhattacharya et al., 2023, p. 966; Chua et al., 2024, p. 761). In summary, purpose operates at a more foundational level and is the strategic orienting principle that gives rise to, and provides coherence across, CSR, ESG, stakeholder management, and corporate identity. Given that DPE success is largely attributed to the ability to create, deliver, and capture value (Hein et al., 2020, p. 88; Rohn et al., 2021, p. 7; Steffen et al., 2023, p. 7), and that purpose appears to influence these same mechanisms, this connection warrants systematic investigation. This study addresses the following research question: What role does purpose in the for-profit firm play in digital platforms and ecosystems' success?

2. METHODOLOGY

A systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted following established methodological guidelines. The review analyzed the intersection of purpose in the for-profit firm and DPE success factors by drawing on two complementary bodies of literature. Google Scholar and EBSCOhost were selected for their extensive coverage. Two search strings were employed: the first targeted

DPE success factors, the second addressed the implications of purpose in for-profit firms. Boolean operators and synonyms ensured comprehensive coverage.

The sample was limited to peer-reviewed, English-language publications from 2000 to 2025 in business, management, and organizational research. An initial pool of 1213 contributions was screened for relevance and quality, yielding a final dataset of n = 83 papers (50 on DPE success factors, 33 on purpose in the for-profit firm). An inductive, iterative coding approach was applied: first-order concepts were identified through open coding, which were then grouped into second-order themes and subsequently aggregated into overarching constructs. The coding process was guided by continuous comparison between the two literature streams to identify conceptual overlaps. Quality was ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability criteria, including systematic documentation of coding decisions and iterative refinement.

3. RESULTS

The analysis reveals significant overlap between the implications of purpose in the for-profit firm and the factors influencing DPEs' success. While purpose has yet to be directly linked to DPE success in empirical research, the findings indicate that it appears to shape the key success factors of value creation, delivery, and capture.

3.1. Purpose and Value Creation

Value creation in DPEs hinges on a compelling value proposition, the cultivation of complementor and user networks, and dynamic capabilities (Rohn et al., 2021, p. 11; Steffen et al., 2023, p. 6). The literature suggests that purpose influences these mechanisms in several ways. First, purpose appears to define the value a firm strives to create for its stakeholders, thereby shaping its value proposition (George et al., 2023, p. 1847). A purpose-informed value proposition may serve as a differentiator that attracts users and complementors whose values align with the platform's mission, potentially fostering stronger network effects (Engert et al., 2023, p. 1159; Reshef, 2025, p. 6). Second, purpose may positively influence stakeholder engagement by building relational contracts based on shared beliefs (Ceraulo, 2023, p. 44; Henisz, 2023, p. 166). Third, purpose has been linked to enhanced decision-making and leadership, providing direction for strategic choices (Clarke, 2022, p. 50; C. M. Gartenberg, 2021, p. 17).

3.2. Purpose and Value Delivery

Value delivery in DPEs depends on the coordination of digitized activities, efficient distribution, and the maintenance of positive network effects (Madanaguli et al., 2023, p. 9; Rohn et al., 2021, p. 11). The analysis suggests that purpose may facilitate value delivery through its function as an informal governance mechanism. A deeply embedded purpose can guide organizational behavior without rigid control structures, encouraging autonomous yet aligned conduct across the firm and its network (Bhattacharya et al., 2023, p. 977; Chua et al., 2024, p. 761; George et al., 2023, p. 1853). This appears particularly relevant for DPEs, where governance must balance openness for innovation with quality control across diverse complementors (Floetgen et al., 2023, p. 11; McIntyre et al., 2021, p. 9).

3.3. Purpose and Value Capture

Value capture in DPEs requires appropriate pricing structures and revenue models aligned with value-creating and value-delivering mechanisms (Özcan et al., 2022, p. 6; Rohn et al., 2021, p. 11). The findings suggest that purpose may inform these decisions by orienting value capture toward the long-term interests of all stakeholders rather than short-term profit extraction. Purpose has been shown to influence market efficiency and economic performance (Mayer, 2021, p. 898), financial performance (Von Ahsen & Gauch, 2022, p. 204), and overall organizational performance (C. Gartenberg et al., 2019, p. 37; Henderson & Steen, 2015, p. 327). In the DPE context, a purpose-aligned revenue model considering the fair distribution of value among complementors, users, and the platform owner may enhance long-term sustainability by reducing winner-take-all tendencies (Cennamo, 2021, p. 267; Mosca & Greco, 2024, p. 64).

3.4. Moderating Factors

The relationship between purpose and DPE success does not operate in a vacuum. The analysis identifies three categories of moderating factors, each operating through distinct mechanisms.

Contextual and cultural factors.

A firm's capacity to pursue purpose beyond profit maximization is contingent upon the societal, political, economic, and institutional systems in which it operates (Chua et al., 2024, p. 761; George et al., 2023, p. 1862). Cultural norms determine how deeply stakeholders internalize purpose and integrate it into their decision-making (Aguilera, 2023, p. 8). In contexts where societal expectations for responsible business are high, purpose-driven DPEs may find it easier to attract aligned complementors and users. Conversely, where purpose is perceived as instrumentally motivated, its effects on trust and engagement are likely to be diminished, as stakeholders may dismiss the communicated purpose as a marketing tactic (Durand & Huynh, 2024, p. 229).

Regulatory and competitive factors.

The legislative environment in which DPEs operate shapes how they create, deliver, and capture value (Mosca & Greco, 2024, p. 64; Özcan et al., 2022, p. 6). Data protection laws, antitrust regulations, and transparency requirements influence DPE strategy (Nobrega et al., 2024, p. 261). Regulations may both constrain and enable purpose realization—for instance, mandating sustainability reporting that aligns with purpose-driven governance or creating compliance burdens. Competition, characterized by winner-take-all dynamics (Cennamo, 2021, p. 267), may either incentivize differentiation through purpose or push firms toward short-term value extraction.

Authenticity and implementation factors.

Purpose must be clearly defined, deeply integrated into structures and processes, and consistently realized through value creation, delivery, and capture (Bhattacharya et al., 2023, p. 966; George et al., 2023, p. 1851; Giarratana & Pasquini, 2023, p. 17). The risk of "purpose-washing"—the misalignment between communicated purpose and actual firm behavior—represents a critical moderator (Aguilera, 2023, p. 6; Dahlmann & Stubbs, 2023, p. 3). In the DPE context, where digital technologies amplify transparency, stakeholders can readily evaluate whether a platform's actions genuinely reflect its stated purpose (Chua et al., 2024, p. 761). Inauthenticity may lead to reputational damage and loss of stakeholder trust. Employees further moderate this relationship through their engagement, motivation, and behavior, as they are both shaped by and shapers of the firm's purpose realization (Jasinenko & Steuber, 2023, p. 1438).

3.5. Conceptual Model

Based on the synthesis of both literature streams, a conceptual model is proposed (Figure 1). This model synthesizes eight propositions developed in the underlying master's thesis (Pfleger, 2025), which formally articulate the relationships between purpose, the identified mechanisms, and DPE success – further details can be found in Appendix A. The model posits that purpose in the for-profit firm, shaped by contextual factors and the quality of its implementation, influences value creation, delivery, and capture through the firm's value proposition, stakeholder engagement, decision-making, leadership, and governance. These processes are moderated by the DPE's architecture, design, and governance, by the competitive, legislative, and regulatory environment, and by employees' engagement, motivation, and behavior. DPE success is assessed in terms of the platform's survival, viability, and long-term sustainability.

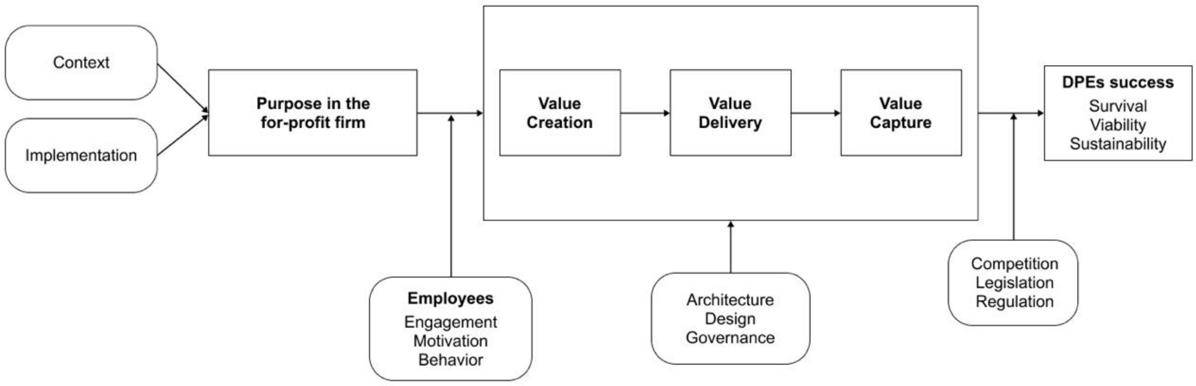

Figure 1: Conceptual model of the role of purpose in the for-profit firm in DPEs' success Source: Own illustration

4. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study contributes to the theoretical discourse in three ways. First, it bridges two largely disconnected research streams, purpose in the for-profit firm and DPE success, by demonstrating their conceptual intersection through the mechanisms of value creation, delivery, and capture. While DPE success has traditionally been explained through architectural and economic lenses (Acs et al., 2021, p. 1635; Gawer, 2022, p. 120; Hein et al., 2020, p. 89), and purpose research has focused on traditional organizational outcomes (Chua et al., 2024, p. 762; George et al., 2023, p. 1860), the synthesis suggests that these perspectives may be productively integrated. Second, the study proposes a conceptual model that positions purpose not as a supplementary "nice to have," but as a mechanism that potentially operates across multiple phases of value creation, delivery, and capture. Third, by systematically differentiating the moderating factors into contextual, regulatory, and authenticity-related categories, the model provides a nuanced understanding of the boundary conditions under which purpose may or may not contribute to DPE success.

For practitioners, the results suggest that articulating and embedding a clear organizational purpose may serve as a strategic lever for differentiation and long-term sustainability in competitive digital markets. Purpose-driven governance may reduce the need for rigid control mechanisms while fostering value-aligned behavior among complementors and users (Bhattacharya et al., 2023, p. 977; Floetgen et al., 2023, p. 11). However, purpose must be implemented authentically: superficial purpose statements without genuine organizational embedding risk reputational damage. For regulators, the study points toward purpose as a complementary governance mechanism. As DPEs face increasing scrutiny regarding data privacy and market power (Mosca & Greco, 2024, p. 64; Nobrega et al., 2024, p. 261), purpose-driven platforms may be better positioned to align with emerging regulatory expectations. From a broader societal perspective, purpose-driven DPEs could contribute to more equitable value distribution, potentially mitigating winner-take-all dynamics (Cennamo, 2021, p. 267; George et al., 2023, p. 1862).

5. CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

This study investigates the role of purpose in the for-profit firm in DPEs' success through a systematic literature review of 83 publications. The findings suggest that purpose influences the mechanisms of value creation, delivery, and capture that are central to DPE success, operating through the firm's value proposition, stakeholder engagement, decision-making, leadership, and governance. The proposed conceptual model identifies purpose as a cross-cutting mechanism moderated by contextual, regulatory, and authenticity-related factors. As an SLR-based conceptual study, the proposed relationships are synthesized from existing literature rather than empirically validated and represent theoretically grounded propositions requiring empirical testing. The reliance on two databases may not capture all relevant contributions, and the nascent state of research at this intersection means that many proposed linkages remain tentative. Future research should empirically test the model through case studies, comparative analyses between purpose-driven and non-purpose-driven platforms, and quantitative studies. Particular attention should be given to the moderating role of authenticity and the cultural and regulatory contingencies shaping how purpose translates into platform outcomes.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Overview of Propositions

Proposition	*Statement*
P1a	The pursuit of purpose in the for-profit firm is influenced by the context in which the for-profit firm operates.
P1b	The pursuit of purpose in the for-profit firm depends upon the thorough implementation of the purpose throughout the firm.
P2	The employees of the for-profit firm moderate the implications of the pursuit of purpose in the for-profit firm (value proposition, decision-making, leadership, stakeholders, governance) through their engagement, motivation, and behavior.
P3	Purpose affects the success of for-profit firms by influencing value creation, delivery, capture, and underlying mechanisms (value proposition, decision-making, leadership, stakeholders, governance).
P4	The success of DPEs is determined by their value creation, delivery, capture, and underlying mechanisms (value proposition, complementor and user network, stakeholder management, leadership, decision-making, revenue model).
P5	The DPEs' architecture, design, and governance mechanisms moderate DPEs' value creation, delivery, and capture.
P6	The extent to which DPEs' value creation, delivery, and capture leads to success, is moderated by legislation, regulation, and the competitive environment in which the firm operates.
P7	The implications of the pursuit of purpose in the for-profit firm overlap with the critical success factors for DPEs, demonstrating that the purpose in the for-profit firm plays a role in the success of DPEs.
P8	The success of DPEs is assessed based on their survival, viability, and long-term sustainability.

Source: Pfleger (2025)