



Powerlessness in Post-Merger Integration

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the role of powerlessness as a manifestation of alienation in employees in the post-merger digital retail sector. Using qualitative methods, data were collected through in-depth interviews with eight informants. The results show that powerlessness manifests through three domains: 1. top-down decision-making without employee negotiation space; 2. dependence on technology that imposes boundaries between professional and private spaces; and 3. bureaucracy that hinders work effectiveness and professional autonomy. The accumulation of this powerlessness encourages the emergence of a survival strategy in the form of withdrawal where employees remain present but are not emotionally connected. This study highlights the importance of a post-merger integration process that pays attention to employees' emotional and mental well-being to mitigate alienation.

Keywords: Post-Merger Integration, Alienation, Powerlessness, Digital Retail

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, technological developments have penetrated various sectors of life (Essi Laura Amanda et al., 2025). Companies that fail to adapt to market dynamics risk being left behind or even losing out to competitors. Therefore, corporate survival strategies are shifting from efficiency to collaboration, one of which can be achieved through mergers (Thomas & Louisgrand, 2022). By merging, companies can expand their market reach, maximize profits and obtain new resources instantly (Thomas & Louisgrand, 2022). This step is a strategic step for the organization to respond to rapidly changing market dynamics and rapidly developing technology when compared to organic growth (Thomas et al., 2023). Through mergers, companies not only seek to achieve financial goals, but also seek to enhance their reputation and capabilities to strengthen their position in their industry sector (Dao & Bauer, 2021). Meanwhile, M&A in the digital industry has its own uniqueness because the goal is not only to expand market share, but also to combine technology, data and user networks (Parker et al., 2021).

However, in actual implementation, mergers are often viewed solely as legal and financial activities, with little attention paid to human resources. This HR aspect is crucial, as the success of a merger is also determined by human resources. Mergers also involve complex

human integration, as they unite two distinct entities. Organizations that prioritize mergers without considering human resources often fail (Dao & Bauer, 2021).

The consequence of inadequate human resource management during this transition period is emotional turmoil among employees. This emotional turmoil also impacts how they respond to change and their decisions about whether to stay or leave the company (Klok et al., 2023). In addition, uncertainty, especially in new organizational structures, also creates a sense of loss of control among employees, which, if not managed well, can trigger alienation (Zainab Fatima & Mohd Abdul Moid Siddiqui, 2020).

In the digital industry, change occurs more rapidly as companies seek to maintain their edge through technological innovation (Haga, 2022). These changes in the digital industry also trigger alienation because the challenges faced are not only adaptation, but also those who are governed by technology and their limited space for movement (Hassan, 2020). One dimension that is greatly impacted by alienation is powerlessness. In the past, Seeman (1959) defines alienation as a situation in which individuals lose control over decisions and operations that impact their professional activities. Meanwhile, in the digital world, Haga (2022) argues that powerlessness in the world is defined as a feeling of helplessness due to the existence of rigid system standardization and algorithms Hassan (2020). He also argues that technology is a force that reduces the individual's role as a data input officer through repetitive processes. This results in a loss of individual control over their own space.

The phenomenon of alienation in organizations engaged in digital retail that rely on third-party platforms (such as meta-ads and marketplaces) creates challenges for organizations in the form of technological adaptation and efficiency Haga (2022). Operational dependency on third-party platforms creates conditions where organizations must respond to change quickly Jiang (2024).

In the post-merger context, alienation emerges through the dimension of powerlessness in the form of alienated subjects who lose control in changing the results of strategic policies and the results of their work due to the standardization of the system (Seeman, 1959). This powerlessness is exacerbated when mergers create increasingly complex bureaucracies. This is compounded by the tight control of operations through KPIs, which leads to individuals losing their autonomy in completing their work. There is a fundamental contradiction between the demands of flexibility in the digital industry and bureaucratic rigidity that forces absolute compliance to achieve specific targets (Thomas et al., 2023).

This feeling of helplessness is exacerbated by the increasingly structured bureaucracy that is part of the formalization and integration process of the organization Thomas & Louisgrand (2022). As a result, employees feel that their work is more controlled through key personal indicators (KPIs), which results in the loss of employee sovereignty in determining how to complete their work (Hassan, 2020). There is a fundamental contradiction between the demands of flexibility in the digital industry and bureaucratic rigidity that forces absolute compliance to achieve certain targets (Thomas et al., 2023).

Various obstacles that arise during the integration period trigger negative emotions based on individuals who are not involved in decision making (Nkemakolam et al., 2021). The feeling of helplessness and emotions felt by employees can reduce employee motivation, and trigger withdrawal behavior that threatens the long-term stability of the organization (Vanderstukken & Caniels, 2021). Based on the description above, this study will further explore the dynamics of powerlessness experienced by alienated employees during the post-merger integration period in digital businesses.

METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative research method to obtain a description or explanation of a phenomenon that is answered through research questions (Cooper &

Schindler, 2001:21). The use of qualitative methods is used to explore what individuals consider important and how they interpret the environment in which they work through investigations into the background of each individual (Bryman, 2003).

This research was conducted using in-depth interview techniques and direct interviews with research subjects who were company employees (Budhiraja, 2021). The object of the research is the dynamics of powerlessness in employees facing organizational transitions (Seeman, 1959). The determination of informants was carried out by eight informants using the theoretical saturation principle, where data collection was stopped when it reached a repetition of similar information related to the experience of alienation and no new data categories were found (Saunders et al., 2018)

These eight informants consist of staff to supervisor levels who are categorized into three categories, namely key informants, main informants and additional informants (Ade Heryana, 2018). The majority of informants had a vocational school (SMK) education when they first joined the company. However, at the time of data collection, several of them were actively pursuing undergraduate degrees for professional development. This phenomenon demonstrates how, even when employees experience alienation, they still strive to develop themselves through the support provided by the company (Budhiraja et al., 2024). These employee development efforts emerged as a form of employee resilience in facing the pressures of post-merger integration (Khan et al., 2020). In addition, support from the organization through training or other competency development facilities is also a strategy to prevent alienation from becoming employee withdrawal from the organization (Thakur & Yadav, 2025).

Table 1. Characteristics of research informants

Type of Informant	Informant Criteria	Informant Profile
Key Informant	Informants who are able to explain the strategic reasons for the merger, the context of powerlessness, and changes in job roles.	Male; Vocational High School or Bachelor's Degree; Staff Position - Middle Manager.
Key Informant	Employees are directly affected by alienation. Provides information on changes after the merger and reasons for staying.	Male & Female; Diploma 3/Bachelor's Degree; Positions from Staff to Team Leader.
Additional Informant	Strengthening data saturation related to alienation and powerlessness	Male & Female; High School/Vocational High School Education; Staff & Team Leader Position.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Post merger integration

PMI is the phase after the legal process is complete. The PMI stage is marked by two organizations beginning to integrate systems and resources to synergize and create new value (Budhiraja et al., 2024). At the PMI stage, a complex organizational transformation occurs and its success depends on the duration so that the organization can experience the benefits of the merger without causing cost overruns (Cheng, 2019).

PMI is a crucial stage in a merger because in PMI, emotional factors play an important role because each individual affected by the merger must search for new meaning to understand their position in the new structure (Klok et al., 2023).

Because, PMI's success is determined by the individual's emotional resilience to the system in the new company (Khan et al., 2020). Apart from being emotional, PMI also demands adaptation through the formation of new routines that previously differed between entities (Cheng, 2019). Therefore, organizations have an obligation to facilitate the transition process so that employees can feel that they are part of a new organization that can support the implementation of change (Thakur & Yadav, 2025).

On the other hand, the formation of repetitive and overly technical routines, as well as their top-down implementation, encourages the emergence of powerlessness or helplessness in employees, especially in individuals who feel that their professional space for movement is limited by bureaucracy (Hassan, 2020). Therefore, the organization's ability to balance the technical, mental, and emotional aspects of individuals during PMI is one of the strategies for PMI's success in the future (Zainab Fatima & Mohd Abdul Moid Siddiqui, 2020).

Alienation

Alienation originally came from Marx's sociological theory which focused on the loss of workers' control over the means of production during industrialization (Seeman, 1959). Later, this theory developed into a psychosocial theory of alienation in modern organizations which is conceptualized through four main dimensions, namely: powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation and self-estrangement (Melvin Seeman, 1975). In the context of mergers, the phenomenon of alienation is often triggered by the dynamics of organizational change that create pressure on employees' responsibilities, identity and job uncertainty (Cunha et al. 2019; Arunachalam. 2021). Furthermore, now that we have entered the era of the digital ecosystem, alienation is getting worse due to the existence of "digital survival" which forces individuals to comply with standardized algorithms and centralized information systems (Haga. 2022; Jiang 2024).

In digital ecosystem, the use of technology not only alienates employees from the results of their work, but also alienates employees from the decision-making process which is dominated by system logic (Haga, 2022). Examples of this digital ecosystem are the implementation of work-from-home (WFH) and the digitalization of public services which provide a new direction to the theory of alienation through digital systems that continuously monitor and systems that blur the boundaries between private and professional spaces (Ardi et al. 2025; Schutzbach. 2021). As a result, there has been a shift in interactions from collaborative interactions to technical and transactional interactions among employees working within the digital ecosystem Krüger & Johanssen (2014). Alienation, triggered by control that dominates algorithms and limits individual movement.

Powerlessness

Powerlessness is the basis of the theory of alienation according to Seeman (1959). It is defined as a condition in which an individual lacks influence or control over their own actions within an organizational system. In the context of a merger, powerlessness is reflected in top-down decision-making, which ignores employee opinions and limits employee participation during the integration phase. As a result, the perception arises that employees are not fully engaged and have limited room for maneuver (Cunha et al., 2018; Thomas & Louis grand., 2022).

In the digital era, powerlessness has been adapted to become a condition where individuals have no control over their work due to the existence of algorithms set by the system (Jiang., 2024; Haga., 2022). One example is a system or dashboard that increases employee oversight. Consequently, they are unable to fully restrict the system from invading their private space (Schutzbach, 2021). Employees are often forced to adhere to the rhythm and performance standards set rigidly by digital systems or work monitoring applications without any room for negotiation (Jiang, 2024). The result of a centrally managed and algorithmically determined system creates the perception among employees that they are completely controlled by the system's logic (Haga, 2022). A situation like this reduces the room for employees to move as objects that comply with procedures (Hassan, 2020). Ultimately, powerlessness causes employees to lose their freedom of movement because their activities are regulated by stricter systems and supervision (Liu et al., 2025).

After conducting interviews and processing data, research findings revealed that powerlessness in digital retail organizations directly impacts the merger process. The findings revealed that powerlessness is strongly reflected in top-down merger decisions. This results in merger decisions being enforced without any room for negotiation (Seeman, 1959). In this finding, the low level of employee involvement in the decision-making process that impacts them creates a significant distance between management and staff (Cunha et al., 2019). Informants confirmed this phenomenon by calling the merger a “coercive order,” while the alienation socialization process itself was considered an administrative matter (Thomas & Louisgrand, 2022). The lack of active employee participation in the merger decision-making process was the initial trigger for alienation, where affected employees began to feel they were losing control of their professional future (Klok et al., 2023).

This low level of decision making then leads to control that enters the employee's private space.(Jiang, 2024)As an organization whose daily activities are heavily reliant on a digital ecosystem, the powerlessness felt by employees is reflected in the use of technology as a tool to monitor employees and blur the boundaries between work time and personal time (Haga, 2022). This finding is supported by field data which shows that the role of technology has shifted from being a tool to help achieve productivity, to a tool that controls and forces individuals to remain responsive in carrying out work even on holidays. This situation is reflected in the informant's statement (Schutzbach, 2021), "It was Eid last year, we still had to report and present." This statement indicates a lack of boundaries between professional work time and personal time for employees. This situation is one in which employees lose control over their personal time due to digital systems that require them to comply with operational work processes (Hassan, 2020).

This state of helplessness reaches its peak in the company when the control emerges with bureaucracy that regulates the steps of employees post-merger (Thomas et al., 2023). Before the integration, employees had their own right to make technical decisions. However, the new structure after the merger resulted in the loss of these rights, which were replaced by a time-consuming approval system (Liu et al., 2025). The existence of this approval system causes employee work effectiveness to be hampered and has the potential to cause operational losses that cannot be mitigated by employees (Haga, 2022). When employees' professionalism and expertise collide with bureaucracy that hinders their activities, employees experience a decline in autonomy that deepens their alienation from the results and processes of their work in the company (Vanderstukken & Caniels, 2021).From these findings, the combination of decision-making direction, control and bureaucracy creates powerlessness that can shift employee motivation within the organization (Zainab Fatima & Mohd Abdul Moid Siddiqui, 2020).

Discussion

In this study, the merger agreed upon by both organizations was carried out by the organizations to increase operational effectiveness, gain control and access to competent human resources (Thomas et al., 2023;Klok et al., 2023). During the transition period, research findings confirmed research from Thomas & Louisgrand (2022) regarding the merger policy which triggered emotional turmoil as a result of the uncertainty brought by the merger (Klok et al., 2023). In its implementation, the integration process is perceived as a forced process and reflects low employee participation which strengthens the theory (Seeman, 1959) about powerlessness. In his study, Seeman (1959) explains that powerlessness is a situation in which an individual no longer has control over decisions that impact their professional activities and future. This results in employees acting as mere objects that are easily controlled and must follow existing rules, resulting in a loss of control, which is a major driver of alienation (Zainab Fatima & Mohd Abdul Moid Siddiqui, 2020).

Furthermore, looking at the company's background as an online retail distributor, where operational activities are highly dependent on technology and third-party technology, this dependence causes employees to be trapped in the digital survival phenomenon. (Jiang, 2024). Study from Jiang defines digital survival as a situation where individuals are forced to comply with and adapt to systems and algorithms in order to maintain their jobs. This digital survival creates stress by blurring the boundaries between professional work and employee personal identity. Consequently, in this situation, technology shifts in meaning from a work-assisting tool to a tool that constantly monitors employees. Consequently, employees are forced to comply with the system with minimal room for negotiation, which can erode their roles into technical implementers with repetitive activities (Hassan, 2020). This dependence on technology is a major trigger for powerlessness because individuals lose their right to control space, time, and decisions related to their lives, both personal and professional.

Apart from technology, powerlessness is also caused by organizational structures that are transforming into more formal and complex ones, followed by a more structured bureaucracy (Vanderstukken & Caniels (2021); Thomas & Louisgrand (2022); Vafeas et al. (2024)). Although the industry demands companies to continue to innovate, Haga (2022). This corporate transformation also presents real obstacles, such as lengthy approval processes. This situation suggests that employees are beginning to lose control over the effectiveness of their own work processes. A study by Thomas et al (2023) states that bureaucracy has a compelled compliance nature that can hinder individuals from achieving their professional goals. Employees who were previously able to act quickly are now hampered by bureaucracy, which limits their freedom of movement (Hassan, 2020). This inability of employees to control the pace of their work makes powerlessness even worse because employees lose control over their own work, according to the definition Seeman (1959) about powerlessness. Through this discussion, post-merger organizational formalization can be confirmed as a trigger for powerlessness. (Thomas & Louisgrand, 2022).

A further impact of the findings in this paper is that employees respond to powerlessness with emotional and physical withdrawal. This response arises because employees no longer have the negotiating space to influence the system that invades their personal space, leading them to prefer passive or withdrawn behavior as a coping mechanism (Seeman, 1959). In this study, withdrawal is a way for employees to protect themselves from uncertainty in the new environment, through employees who are physically present but disconnected from their work. This form of withdrawal is the end of unresolved powerlessness (Vanderstukken & Caniels, 2021). The inability of employees to adapt to a new, more formal environment encourages the emergence of negative emotions that can cause employees to become resistant to change (Klok et al., 2023) (Nkemakolam et al., 2021). This also causes employees to stay with the organization solely for financial stability. Withdrawal is one manifestation of alienation in which professional interactions between employees turn into transactional interactions (Krüger & Johansen, 2014). This phenomenon is also in line with research Klok et al. (2023) using an exit-voice model, employees whose voices are not heard become economically dependent and tend to allow the work environment to deteriorate. Ultimately, this leaves employees feeling trapped, and withdrawal becomes the only way for them to survive amidst post-merger corporate integration, which triggers powerlessness (Schutzbach (2021); Liu et al. (2025).

Results

Through this study, the success of post-merger integration (PMI) is highly dependent on the organization's ability to align operational activities with the emotional needs of employees (Zainab Fatima & Mohd Abdul Moid Siddiqui, 2020). In the context of digital retail organizations, where organizations have a high dependence on technology accompanied by more structured formalization and bureaucracy, this triggers the emergence of powerlessness

among employees (Haga, 2022). Based on the findings, this powerlessness was triggered by employees not being involved in strategic merger decision-making, which then caused them to be trapped in a state of digital survival (Jiang, 2024). This condition is exacerbated by bureaucratic inflexibility which hinders employee flexibility and causes employees to lose autonomy over their own work processes (Thomas, et al., 2023).

Without organizational efforts to mitigate employee emotions and restore employee authority, powerlessness risks emotional withdrawal (Vanderstukken & Caniels, 2021). In addition, organizations need to realize that in a digital ecosystem, employees must be maintained so that they are not seen as complements to the system, but rather as employees who have sovereignty over the results of their work (Schutzbach, 2021). The organization's inability to provide more space for employees and restore their autonomy will trigger resistance and reduce their commitment to the company after the merger (Khan et al., 2020). Therefore, in the post-merger integration process, work process recovery is carried out to mitigate the impact of alienation caused by system dependencies and administrative barriers (Klok et al., 2023). The inability of an organization to manage the balance between operations and human resources not only damages the psychological well-being of employees, but also threatens the long-term operational stability of the organization (Nkemakolam et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that post-merger integration in organizations tends to prioritize efficiency and organizational structure over employee psychology. The phenomenon of powerlessness is not simply a consequence of integration, but rather the result of top-down merger decisions, excessive oversight, and bureaucratic obstacles. The ultimate impact of powerlessness is employee emotional withdrawal. Without efforts to restore employee autonomy, organizations risk losing their employees. Therefore, the success of a long-term merger should not only be seen from an operational perspective, but also from the organization's ability to mitigate alienation amidst its dependence on technology.

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