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Optimizing Legacy Digital Systems for Sustainability: Integrating Site Reliability Engineering with Industry 4.0 Practices

Aleksi Korhonen

University of Helsinki, Finland

ABSTRACT

Digital transformation has emerged as one of the most consequential socio-technical phenomena shaping contemporary economies, organizations, and everyday life. Across sectors such as retail, manufacturing, education, energy, and logistics, digital technologies are increasingly embedded in legacy infrastructures that were never designed to support the scale, velocity, and reliability demands of today's data-driven environments. At the same time, the environmental consequences of this transformation have become impossible to ignore, as data centers, semiconductor manufacturing, network infrastructures, and Internet of Things ecosystems place unprecedented pressure on energy systems, water resources, and material supply chains. Within this context, questions of reliability, resilience, and operational sustainability have moved from the margins to the center of both scholarly and managerial debates. Site Reliability Engineering has gained prominence as a framework for managing complex digital systems by integrating software engineering principles with operations, yet its broader implications for sustainability-oriented digital transformation remain underexplored.

This research article develops an integrative theoretical and interpretive analysis of how Site Reliability Engineering can function as a critical connective mechanism between digital transformation initiatives, legacy infrastructure modernization, and environmental sustainability goals. Drawing strictly on the provided body of literature, the article situates Site Reliability Engineering within the evolution of Industry 4.0, the expansion of data-intensive infrastructures, and the growing policy emphasis on sustainable development and climate mitigation. Particular attention is paid to the challenges faced by legacy retail and industrial systems, where reliability failures not only disrupt economic activity but also exacerbate energy inefficiencies and resource waste. By engaging deeply with existing research on digital transformation in education, manufacturing, supply chains, and environmental governance, this study demonstrates that reliability is not merely a technical attribute but a socio-technical condition with far-reaching ecological and social implications.

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative, theory-driven synthesis approach, combining critical literature analysis with conceptual integration. Rather than proposing new empirical data, the study interprets and recontextualizes existing findings to reveal overlooked connections between reliability engineering practices and sustainability outcomes. The results highlight how reliability-oriented practices such as error budgeting, automation, and observability can indirectly support environmental objectives by stabilizing system performance, reducing wasteful overprovisioning, and enabling more efficient use of digital infrastructure. The discussion advances a multi-layered theoretical framework that positions Site Reliability Engineering as an enabling capability for sustainable digital transformation, while also acknowledging its limitations, organizational barriers, and potential rebound effects.

By bridging research on digital transformation, environmental sustainability, and operational reliability, this article contributes to information management, engineering, and sustainability scholarship. It argues that future research and practice must move beyond siloed approaches and recognize reliability as a foundational element of sustainable digital systems. In doing so, the study responds to calls for more holistic analyses of technology, society, and the environment, and offers a conceptual pathway for aligning operational excellence with global sustainability imperatives.

KEYWORDS

Digital transformation; Site Reliability Engineering; sustainability; Industry 4.0; data infrastructure; legacy systems

INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has become a defining characteristic of economic and social change in the early twenty-first century, reshaping how organizations operate, how individuals learn and communicate, and how societies pursue development objectives. The diffusion of digital technologies into everyday life has accelerated rapidly, particularly in response to global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed both the transformative potential and the structural fragilities of existing digital infrastructures (Iivari et al., 2020). While early discourses on digital transformation often emphasized innovation, efficiency, and competitiveness, more recent scholarship has increasingly recognized that transformation processes are deeply entangled with questions of sustainability, equity, and long-term resilience (Huang, 2021). This shift reflects a growing awareness that digital systems are not immaterial abstractions but resource-intensive socio-technical assemblages with significant environmental and social footprints.

At the organizational level, digital transformation frequently unfolds within the constraints of legacy infrastructures that were designed for earlier technological paradigms. Retail organizations, manufacturing firms, and public institutions alike often rely on aging systems that are incrementally adapted rather than fundamentally redesigned, leading to complex hybrid environments characterized by technical debt, operational risk, and reliability challenges (Dasari, 2025). These challenges are not merely operational inconveniences; they have broader implications for energy consumption, resource efficiency, and the capacity of organizations to align with sustainability objectives. As digital services become more central to economic activity, system failures can cascade across supply chains, disrupt social services, and intensify environmental impacts through inefficient recovery processes and redundant resource use (Jones, 2018).

The environmental dimension of digital transformation has become increasingly prominent as data centers, networks, and connected devices proliferate at an unprecedented scale. Global data traffic continues to grow exponentially, driven by cloud computing, streaming services, artificial intelligence, and the Internet of Things, with projections indicating sustained expansion well into the next decade (IoT Connections Worldwide 2022–2033). This growth has direct consequences for energy demand, water use, and material extraction, particularly in sectors such as semiconductor manufacturing, which exhibit unexpectedly high levels of resource intensity (Wang et al., 2023). From a climate perspective, the expansion of digital infrastructure intersects with broader challenges identified by climate science, including the need to rapidly decarbonize energy systems and manage cumulative emissions in line with global temperature targets (Arias et al., 2021).

In response to these intertwined challenges, scholars and policymakers have increasingly called for more holistic approaches to digital transformation that integrate technological innovation with environmental sustainability and social responsibility. The concept of sustainable digital transformation has gained traction as a way of framing digitalization not merely as a driver of economic growth but as a potential lever for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals articulated by the United Nations (UN Environment, 2024; Digital Economy Report 2021 UNCTAD). Within this discourse, technologies associated with Industry 4.0, such as automation, data analytics, digital twins, and blockchain, are often portrayed as enabling tools for improving efficiency, transparency, and sustainability across value chains (Birkel and Müller, 2021; Chandan et al., 2023).

However, the sustainability benefits of digital technologies are neither automatic nor guaranteed. A growing body of research highlights the risk of rebound effects, where efficiency gains are offset by increased consumption, as well as the uneven distribution of benefits and burdens across social groups and regions (Feroz et al., 2021; Bai et al., 2023). Moreover, much of the existing literature focuses on the adoption and impacts of specific technologies, while paying relatively limited attention to the operational practices and governance frameworks that shape how these technologies function in practice. Reliability, in particular, has received insufficient attention as a mediating factor between digital transformation and sustainability outcomes, despite its central role in determining system efficiency, resilience, and resource use.

Site Reliability Engineering has emerged over the past decade as a distinctive approach to managing large-scale, complex digital systems. Originating in the context of cloud-native software development, Site Reliability Engineering seeks to balance the competing demands of innovation and stability by treating reliability as a quantifiable and manageable attribute of systems (Dasari, 2025). Through practices such as service level objectives, automation, and continuous monitoring, Site Reliability Engineering aims to reduce unplanned downtime, improve system performance, and enable organizations to scale digital services more effectively. While these practices are typically framed in terms of business continuity and user experience, their potential implications for sustainability have not been fully explored in academic research.

The relevance of Site Reliability Engineering becomes particularly evident in sectors characterized by legacy infrastructure and high operational complexity, such as retail and manufacturing. In these contexts, digital transformation often involves integrating modern digital platforms with existing physical assets, supply chains, and organizational routines, creating tightly coupled systems that are vulnerable to cascading failures (Dasari, 2025). Reliability failures in such systems can lead to significant waste, including spoiled goods, excess energy consumption, and inefficient logistics, thereby undermining sustainability objectives. Conversely, improved reliability may contribute to more stable operations, reduced resource volatility, and greater capacity for long-term planning.

At the same time, the broader digital ecosystem within which Site Reliability Engineering operates is itself subject to sustainability constraints. Data centers, which form the backbone of cloud-based services, have become major consumers of electricity, prompting concerns about their contribution to global energy demand and emissions (Jones, 2018; Data Centres and Networks, 2024). Efforts to improve the energy efficiency of data centers have achieved notable gains, yet absolute consumption continues to rise as demand for digital services grows. In this context, operational practices that influence system load, redundancy, and failure recovery take on environmental significance, even if they are not explicitly framed in sustainability terms.

From a theoretical perspective, the intersection of Site Reliability Engineering, digital transformation, and sustainability invites a rethinking of how technological systems are conceptualized and evaluated. Traditional approaches often treat reliability as a technical performance metric, while sustainability is addressed through separate environmental management systems or corporate social responsibility initiatives. This separation obscures the ways in which operational decisions shape environmental outcomes and limits the potential for integrated strategies that align reliability engineering with sustainability goals (Camilleri et al., 2023). Recent research on open innovation, ecosystem services, and social sustainability suggests that value creation in the digital economy increasingly depends on the ability to balance multiple, sometimes competing objectives across organizational and societal levels (Bitoun et al., 2023; Cricelli et al., 2024).

Despite these developments, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning the role of reliability-oriented operational frameworks in enabling sustainable digital transformation. While Industry 4.0 research has examined the sustainability implications of advanced manufacturing technologies and supply chain digitalization (Birkel and Müller, 2021; Billey and Wuest, 2024), it has rarely engaged with the specific practices of reliability engineering that govern day-to-day system behavior. Similarly, environmental sustainability research has tended to focus on the macro-level impacts of digitalization, such as energy use and emissions, without sufficiently considering how micro-level operational practices might mitigate or exacerbate these impacts (Feroz et al., 2021).

This article addresses this gap by developing a comprehensive, theory-driven analysis of Site Reliability Engineering as a bridging concept between digital transformation and sustainability. Building on the detailed examination of Site Reliability Engineering implementation in legacy retail infrastructure provided by Dasari (2025), the study situates reliability engineering within a broader socio-technical and environmental context. By synthesizing insights from information management, sustainability science, and Industry 4.0 scholarship, the article seeks to answer a central research question: how can Site Reliability Engineering practices contribute to more sustainable digital transformation outcomes in environments characterized by legacy infrastructure and growing environmental constraints?

To address this question, the article adopts a qualitative interpretive methodology that emphasizes conceptual integration and critical analysis rather than empirical generalization. The following sections elaborate the methodological approach, present a detailed interpretive analysis of findings derived from the literature, and engage in an extensive discussion of theoretical implications, limitations, and future research directions. Through this approach, the article aims to contribute to ongoing scholarly debates about the governance of digital transformation and to offer a nuanced perspective on the role of reliability in shaping the sustainability of digital systems (Huang, 2021; UN Environment, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative, theory-driven methodological approach designed to synthesize and critically interpret insights from the existing body of literature on digital transformation, sustainability, and operational reliability. Given the scope and nature of the research question—how Site Reliability Engineering (SRE) practices can facilitate sustainable digital transformation in legacy infrastructure contexts—a purely empirical study would face significant constraints, including heterogeneity of industry contexts, proprietary operational data, and variations in digital maturity. Consequently, a conceptual and interpretive methodology allows for rigorous theoretical elaboration while remaining grounded in evidence from prior scholarship (Iivari et al., 2020; Dasari, 2025).

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The methodology consists of four primary stages: comprehensive literature compilation, thematic categorization, critical synthesis, and conceptual integration. Each stage is designed to ensure systematic engagement with sources, traceable analytical logic, and theoretical depth.

Literature Compilation

The first stage involved assembling a corpus of scholarly and industry-focused literature directly relevant to the intersections of SRE, digital transformation, and sustainability. Priority was given to studies providing detailed insights into SRE implementation in operational environments (Dasari, 2025), the environmental implications of digital infrastructure (Jones, 2018; Wang et al., 2023), and the broader socio-technical dimensions of Industry 4.0 technologies (Birkel and Müller, 2021; Bai et al., 2023). Additional sources encompassed research on digital transformation in educational and social contexts (Iivari et al., 2020), supply chain sustainability (Chandan et al., 2023), and environmental management practices in digital ecosystems (UN Environment, 2024).

Special emphasis was placed on studies that bridge technological practices and sustainability outcomes, such as research on energy digital twins in smart manufacturing (Billey and Wuest, 2024) and strategic use of ecosystem services for sustainable development goals (Bitoun et al., 2023). By incorporating both sector-specific case studies and cross-sector analyses, the literature corpus reflects a multi-level understanding of reliability and sustainability in digital systems.

Thematic Categorization

Once the literature corpus was compiled, a thematic categorization process was applied to identify recurring conceptual patterns and critical points of intersection. The primary themes identified were: (1) operational reliability and Site Reliability Engineering practices; (2) sustainability challenges in digital transformation, including energy, water, and material resource impacts; (3) organizational and technical constraints associated with legacy infrastructures; (4) socio-technical implications of Industry 4.0 technologies; and (5) policy and governance frameworks influencing sustainable digital practices.

Each theme was further subdivided to capture nuances such as micro-level operational mechanisms (e.g., automation, error budgeting), meso-level organizational dynamics (e.g., cultural adoption of SRE practices), and macro-level environmental outcomes (e.g., energy consumption of data centers, rare earth element extraction) (Diao et al., 2024; Data Centres & Networks, 2024). This multi-layered approach ensures that analysis does not remain confined to technical performance metrics but considers broader socio-environmental implications (Feroz et al., 2021).

Critical Synthesis

The third stage involved synthesizing insights across themes, with an emphasis on identifying tensions, complementarities, and knowledge gaps. Critical synthesis required examining not only reported findings but also the methodological and conceptual assumptions underlying each study. For instance, while studies on digital twin technology highlight efficiency gains, they often do not account for energy trade-offs associated with maintaining high-fidelity simulations in real-time (Billey and Wuest, 2024). Similarly, research on SRE implementation in legacy retail infrastructure demonstrates significant operational improvements but provides limited discussion of environmental co-benefits (Dasari, 2025).

Counter-arguments were incorporated to ensure balance and theoretical robustness. These included debates over the limits of technology-driven sustainability, such as rebound effects where efficiency improvements lead to increased consumption (Feroz et al., 2021), and critiques of top-down SRE implementations that fail to account for organizational culture and human factors (Birkel and Müller, 2021). This reflexive approach situates the analysis within the broader scholarly discourse and highlights areas where SRE may both succeed and face constraints.

Conceptual Integration

The final stage involved integrating the synthesized findings into a cohesive conceptual framework. Here, the study positions SRE as an operational lens through which digital transformation and sustainability objectives can be aligned. Drawing on evidence from manufacturing, retail, and energy-intensive digital sectors, the framework conceptualizes reliability as a mediator between technological adoption and environmental outcomes. For example, by reducing unplanned downtime and stabilizing system performance, SRE practices can indirectly lower redundant energy use, mitigate waste in supply chains, and enhance predictability in material resource utilization (Dasari, 2025; Jones, 2018).

This integrative approach also incorporates multi-scale interactions. At the micro-level, operational practices such as automated error detection, load balancing, and system observability are analyzed. At the meso-level, organizational culture, governance structures, and workforce competencies are considered as determinants of SRE effectiveness. At the macro-level, systemic implications for energy consumption, digital infrastructure sustainability, and alignment with United Nations Sustainable Development Goals are examined (Bitoun et al., 2023; UN Environment, 2024).

Methodological Limitations

Despite its theoretical depth, the methodology has inherent limitations. The reliance on secondary literature precludes direct empirical validation of proposed causal linkages between SRE practices and environmental outcomes. Additionally, the heterogeneity of digital transformation initiatives, technological infrastructures, and sectoral contexts limits the generalizability of specific operational prescriptions. There is also potential for selection bias, as the study prioritizes literature explicitly addressing reliability, sustainability, or Industry 4.0 technologies, potentially overlooking relevant studies from adjacent disciplines.

Nevertheless, by explicitly acknowledging these limitations and focusing on conceptual rather than purely empirical contributions, the methodology enables a rigorous, evidence-informed exploration of complex, multi-dimensional phenomena. The next section presents the interpretive results derived from this literature-based analysis.

RESULTS

The interpretive analysis reveals several key findings regarding the integration of SRE practices, digital transformation, and sustainability objectives. First, SRE emerges as a critical mechanism for stabilizing digital infrastructures in legacy environments. In the retail sector, Dasari (2025) demonstrates that SRE implementation reduces service disruptions, enhances scalability, and enables more efficient resource allocation. These operational improvements extend beyond immediate performance gains, influencing energy consumption patterns, inventory management, and logistical efficiency.

Second, the analysis underscores the environmental significance of digital reliability. Data centers, which form the backbone of modern digital services, are major consumers of electricity and water (Jones, 2018; Wang et al., 2023). By minimizing system failures, optimizing load distribution, and improving capacity planning, SRE practices can indirectly reduce the environmental footprint of digital operations. This effect is amplified in high-density IoT ecosystems, where millions of connected devices continuously transmit and process data (IoT Connections Worldwide 2022–2033). Efficient management of these flows is essential for preventing energy wastage and network over-provisioning.

Third, SRE facilitates organizational learning and adaptive capacity, which are central to sustaining digital transformation initiatives. Through error budgeting, monitoring, and post-incident reviews, organizations develop feedback loops that enhance resilience and inform future investment decisions (Dasari, 2025; Birkel and Müller, 2021). These processes not only improve reliability but also create conditions for continuous environmental improvement, as organizations become more attuned to the trade-offs between operational performance and resource consumption.

Fourth, the results highlight the socio-technical nature of sustainable digital transformation. Technology alone cannot guarantee environmentally responsible outcomes. Organizational culture, governance, and skill development mediate the effectiveness of SRE practices. For instance, resistance to adopting automated monitoring or cultural undervaluation of error reporting can undermine both reliability and sustainability objectives (Camilleri et al., 2023; Cricelli et al., 2024). Conversely, environments that foster transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement enable SRE to generate compounded benefits across technical, environmental, and social domains.

Finally, the interpretive analysis indicates that SRE practices may also have limitations and unintended consequences. High degrees of automation, while improving reliability, can increase complexity, create hidden dependencies, and raise energy requirements for continuous monitoring and redundancy. Additionally, the rebound effect—where efficiency gains result in increased overall digital activity—may partially offset environmental benefits (Feroz et al., 2021). These findings underscore the necessity of situating SRE within a broader sustainability strategy rather than treating operational reliability as a self-contained solution.

DISCUSSION

The discussion situates these findings within the broader scholarly discourse on digital transformation, sustainability, and Industry 4.0 technologies, emphasizing theoretical implications, points of scholarly debate, and avenues for future research.

At a conceptual level, the integration of SRE into sustainability-oriented digital transformation challenges traditional separations between operational management and environmental strategy. Conventional approaches often treat reliability as a technical performance metric and sustainability as a policy or regulatory concern. The present analysis suggests that operational reliability should be reconceptualized as a foundational determinant of environmental and social outcomes. By stabilizing complex digital systems, SRE reduces resource waste, optimizes energy use, and indirectly supports the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (Bitoun et al., 2023; UN Environment, 2024).

The findings align with prior research on the potentials of Industry 4.0 for sustainable development. Birkel and Müller (2021) emphasize the triple bottom line benefits of digital manufacturing, highlighting improved efficiency, reduced emissions, and enhanced social performance. Billey and Wuest (2024) provide a case study of energy digital twins in smart manufacturing, demonstrating the potential for data-driven monitoring to optimize energy flows. SRE extends these principles into operational management by providing structured frameworks for maintaining system stability, facilitating continuous learning, and ensuring predictable performance. In legacy infrastructure contexts, these capabilities are especially critical, as older systems often lack built-in resilience and require careful coordination of digital and physical assets (Dasari, 2025).

From a socio-technical perspective, the analysis underscores the importance of cultural, organizational, and governance factors in realizing sustainability benefits. Camilleri et al. (2023) and Cricelli et al. (2024) highlight the role of shared value creation and social sustainability in technology adoption, noting that technical solutions alone cannot achieve systemic benefits. The SRE framework operationalizes this insight by embedding feedback loops, accountability mechanisms, and collaborative practices into daily operations. However, organizational resistance, skill deficits, and overreliance on automation can constrain these potential gains, highlighting the need for holistic change management approaches.

Environmental implications are multifaceted. On one hand, SRE practices reduce unplanned downtime, prevent over-provisioning, and allow more efficient energy management in data centers and network infrastructures (Jones, 2018; Data Centres & Networks, 2024). On the other hand, as Feroz et al. (2021) and Huang (2021) note, increased digital capacity can lead to higher absolute consumption, emphasizing the necessity of coupling SRE with explicit environmental governance measures. Similarly, the resource intensity of semiconductor manufacturing and rare earth element extraction (Diao et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023) underscores that sustainability strategies must extend beyond operational efficiency to include material sourcing, recycling, and supply chain design.

The discussion also engages with the limitations and potential unintended consequences of integrating SRE into sustainability frameworks. While reliability improvements reduce immediate waste and inefficiency, they can contribute to system complexity, hidden dependencies, and energy use associated with continuous monitoring. This observation resonates with critiques of Industry 4.0 technologies, which caution that efficiency gains may paradoxically increase overall environmental pressures if not accompanied by strategic oversight and systemic planning (Bai et al., 2023). Therefore, SRE should be considered a necessary but insufficient condition for sustainable digital transformation; it must be embedded within broader organizational, technological, and policy ecosystems.

The analysis further identifies research gaps. Empirical studies linking SRE practices to measurable environmental outcomes remain scarce. Longitudinal research could assess whether improvements in system reliability translate into reduced energy consumption, lower emissions, and more sustainable material use over time. Additionally, cross-sectoral comparisons would illuminate how contextual factors—such as industry, geography, and digital maturity—influence the effectiveness of SRE in promoting sustainability. Finally, research integrating human factors, cultural adoption, and governance mechanisms could provide richer insights into how SRE frameworks interact with organizational dynamics to generate socio-environmental outcomes.

In terms of practical implications, organizations pursuing digital transformation in legacy contexts should prioritize the integration of reliability-oriented operational practices. This entails not only adopting SRE principles but also investing in training, cultural alignment, and continuous monitoring of both performance and environmental metrics. Policymakers and sustainability professionals should recognize the indirect role of reliability management in reducing the environmental footprint of digital infrastructure and consider incentives or guidelines that support integrated approaches.

CONCLUSION

This study presents a comprehensive conceptual analysis of the interplay between Site Reliability Engineering, digital transformation, and environmental sustainability. By synthesizing insights from a diverse body of literature, the article demonstrates that reliability is not merely a technical attribute but a socio-technical mechanism with significant implications for sustainability outcomes. SRE practices stabilize complex digital systems, reduce operational waste, and support more efficient use of energy and material resources, thereby enabling more sustainable digital transformation, particularly in legacy infrastructure contexts.

At the same time, the analysis highlights limitations, including potential rebound effects, increased system complexity, and organizational barriers. To fully realize the sustainability potential of SRE, organizations must embed reliability practices within broader strategic frameworks encompassing governance, culture, technology, and environmental management. Future research should pursue empirical validation, cross-sectoral comparison, and integrated human-technology-environment analyses to deepen understanding of the mechanisms through which reliability supports sustainable digital transformation.

By bridging gaps between operational management, environmental sustainability, and digital innovation, this article contributes to a more holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities inherent in contemporary digital systems, offering both theoretical insights and practical guidance for organizations and policymakers seeking to align technological excellence with sustainability imperatives.

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