

The Sociological Determinants of Internet Use in Tunisian Exporting Companies

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the potential of Internet technology, we observe that its impact is not uniform on the performance of Tunisian exporting companies. It mainly depends on its use that differs from one company to another. The limited use of this technology by some Tunisian exporting companies led us to examine the factors that influence this use.

Some researchers in information systems are focused on the characteristics of technology and its potential on organizational performance (Davis, 1989; Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Others are concentrated on the study of individual determinants that impact the acceptance of new technologies (Davis, 1989). From a sociological point of view, the use of a technology varies depending on the social relations and the symbolic structures of social system, such as the corporate culture. Thus, new forms of uses can substitute those recommended by designers and managers. In fact, users can show a variety of behaviors when faced with a new technology. They can reject or embrace this technology and the potential it offers (Agarwal, 2000).

The contribution of our research is to study the effect of social factors on Internet use in Tunisian exporting firms. The theoretical framework of our research is the sociological approach of uses. It focuses on the impact of social practices and individual and collective subjectivity on the use of technology (Millerand, 1998, 1999; Jouet, 2000; Mallet, 2004, 2006; Proulx, 2001; Bachelet & Tournier, 2004).

Pragmatically, our research can be highly useful for practitioners, as it enables to understand the importance of social factors on Internet technology use in Tunisian exporting companies. Our aim is to test the effect of corporate culture and interpersonal trust on Internet use in these companies. Thus, the fundamental question of this research can be formulated as follows:

To what extent the corporate culture and interpersonal trust affect the Internet use in Tunisian exporting companies?

BACKGROUND

Internet Use

The study of Internet use by companies has generated the interest of many researchers in information systems. This interest is explained by differences in the adoption of this technology from one company to another. Following this interest, we try to study this concept in our research as a dependent variable.

The concept of use is complex and ambiguous. It has been the subject of several conceptualizations, which leads to confusion between the terms: adoption, usage, and appropriation (Millerand, 1998). Docq and Daele define use as “*a set of practices, a special way to use something, a set of rules socially shared by a group of reference and constructed in times*” (Bachelet & Tournier, 2004). According to Breton and Proulx, the use is a continuum from simple adoption and usage to appropriation (Bachelet & Tournier, 2004). This conception is very relevant because it focuses on the dynamic and evolving aspect of the use and reflects its complexity.

Generally two streams of research have studied the concept of use. The first stream is characterized by a technological determinism. Many researchers are interested in the analysis of the diffusion of a technology in terms of adoption and acceptability by users. The models aim to identify some determinants of intentions such as attitudes, social influences and other conditions that facilitate the use of new technologies (Davis, 1989; Ajzen 1991; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Their conceptualization of the concept of use is lim-

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ited to determine how the technological investments contribute to the performance of the company.

In contrast to this stream of research, the conceptualization of use based on the social dimension proposes not to think in terms of impact or effect (Mallet, 2004). This perspective of research emphasizes the role of users in use process. Technology is used differently from one user to another and from one context to another, depending on the meanings of use. In our research, we agree with the second stream of research. This choice is based on the fact that any technology can be well implemented in a given organizational context and may fail in another. The technical factor can't alone determine the success of use of a given technology. Certainly, the new technologies of information and communication are carries of many hopes, but the human, cultural and social factors are major determinant of their use (Bachelet & Tournier, 2004).

MAIN FOCUS OF THE ARTICLE

1. The Sociological Determinants of Internet Use in Tunisian Exporting Companies

1.1. Corporate Culture

Corporate culture is a concept that focuses on what is common to the members of the company. In the literature of the organization, there exist two streams of research that deal with corporate culture. According to the first stream of research, the shared values are the foundations of corporate culture. For Ouchi, the notion of culture involves values (Bosche, 1984). Vachette (1984) defined corporate culture as a “*coherent set of common attitudes in a work context. The culture is the sum of invariants accepted by all; these invariants can be values, beliefs, etc.*”

The second stream of research considers the organizational practices constituted by the myths, symbols, rituals, and heroes, as the core of corporate culture (exp. Verbeke, 2000; Hofstede et al., 1990). Currently, researchers in organizational behavior have become aware of the importance of organizational practices on the behavior of organization's members (Verbeke, 2000). The term ‘organizational practices’ is used to refer to “*the usual and important activities*

for the organization or its members” (Verbeke, 2000). In their study that aim to measure corporate culture and explore the variations in organizational cultures, Hofstede et al., (1990) show that the distinctive elements of the organizational culture do not reside in the values, but rather in organizational practices. The study empirically shows that the values of managers shape organizational culture through shared practices. Following a process of socialization, the values become organizational practices that are learned by all members of the organization. Organizational practices are more flexible and changeable since they are affected by the pressure of the environment. Hence, they need to be updated in order to adjust to changes in organization and his environment (Verbeke, 2000). In our study, we agree with the statements of the second stream of research to define corporate culture. Indeed, in a context characterized by rapid environmental change, the shared practices enable the company to interact with markets and easily adapt to changes through a learning process. Because they are shared by all members of the organization, organizational practices offer practical knowledge to adapt to environment, and to be competitive in a continuously changing market.

To define corporate culture, we adopt the definition proposed by Schein: “*organizational culture is a set of assumptions invented, discovered and developed by a given group via a process of learning, to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, and that have worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore to be taught to new members as the right way to think, perceive and feel vis-à-vis these problems*” (Thévenet, 1984). According to Schein, corporate culture is built by a collective learning process in response to problems faced by the company throughout his history (Delavallée, 1996).

Through shared organizational practices, corporate culture allows the company to adapt to internal and external changes (technological changes, competition, new markets, changing consumer requirements, etc.). In this sense, it can help to achieve common objectives of the organization, such as the implementation of a new technology.

According to Lemaitre, (1984), if corporate culture protects staff loyalty, it can strengthen its capacity to accept change. Thus, technological innovation will be better accepted if the staff believes that their managers will protect their employment; that measures will be taken to ensure the updating of skills, and the power

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