

Chapter 15

Understanding Graduate Students' Intended Use of Distance Education Platforms

María del Carmen Jiménez-Munguía
Universidad de las Américas Puebla, México

Luis Felipe Luna-Reyes
Universidad de las Américas Puebla, México

ABSTRACT

The objective of this chapter is to use the Unified Theory of the Acceptance and Use of Technology to better understand graduate students' intended use of distance education platforms, using as a case a distance education platform of a Mexican University, the SERUDLAP system. Four constructs are hypothesized to play a significant role: performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and attitude toward using technology; the moderating factors were gender and voluntariness of use. Data for the study was gathered through an online survey with a response rate of about 41%. Results suggested that the performance expectancy and attitude towards technology are factors that help us understand graduate students' intended use of a distance education platform. Future research must consider the impact of some factors, such as previous experiences, age, and facilitating conditions in order to better understand the students' behavior.

INTRODUCTION

The global economy emerges as a *technocognitive* stage of Capitalism development (Boisier, 2005). That is to say, globalization is not only an economic phenomenon, but also informational (Castells, 2002). This economy is informational because productivity and competitiveness of

economic units or agents depend on their ability of effectively generating, processing and using information and knowledge; and it is global given that production, distribution and consumption of goods and services are organized on a global scale, fundamentally through networks supported by new interactive technologies (Castells, 2002).

In an attempt to recruit and educate qualified people, universities and colleges have joined the globalization process by offering on-line

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-615-2.ch015

courses and programs. In the last years, on-line education has had a territorial as well as technological expansion, mainly due to advances in telecommunications and the increasing demand for continuing education. Administrative and instructional technologies are being developed in the context of distance and online education, creating opportunities for students and professionals to gain competitive advantage by exploiting the benefits of technology (Robinson, 2006). The landscape of distance education is being driven by the growing acceptance and popularity of online course offerings and online degree programs at universities (Eom, Wen, & Ashill, 2006).

Kathawala, Abdou and Elmuti (2002) contended that, at the present time, people are looking for online graduate courses through Internet, because they require less individual commitment, or do not generate problems relocating their family. In addition, online education is a way to obtain professional development without leaving their work in a flexible way because the information is available at any time and it is conducive to *a just in time* and *just for me* learning (Cabero, 2006; Herrera-Corona, Mendoza-Zaragoza, & Buenabad-Arias, 2009). In other words, professionals are now choosing distance education to better meet their andragogical needs such as experimental learning and active engagement in their learning process (Lewis & Price, 2007).

Professionals who often seek graduate degrees in order to obtain better job opportunities have started to adopt online education in Mexico. They are exploring alternative education formats that better adjust to their learning styles, job needs and temporary geographic location (Barrón, 2004). They looked for a solution to satisfy their necessities and demands to diversify and to make flexible the opportunities to learn, from any place and at any time, in this changing society (Herrera-Corona, et al., 2009).

Notable advancements in e-learning technology have included the introduction of learning

management systems (Isodynamic, 2001). Higher education institutions are making more investments in technology tools but their influence on students' usage must be considered. The attitude toward acceptance and use of technology must be included in planning and implementing new technologies at higher education institutions (Robinson, 2006).

Although there is important literature on technology acceptance, its application in distance education platforms is scarce. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) has had an important influence in the investigation on acceptance and use of technology; it has been complemented by a number of behavioral investigations. In an effort to integrate all the investigation on technology acceptance, Venkatesh, Morris, Davis & Davis (2003) conceived the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), compiling and synthesizing studies on technology and human behavior. Moreover, constructs included in the UTAUT model such as Performance Expectancy, Effort Expectancy or Facilitating Conditions are closely related to student satisfaction.

The objective of this work is to use the UTAUT model to better understand Graduate Students' Intended Use of Distance Education Platforms, using as a case a distance education platform of a Mexican University, the SERUDLAP system.

The chapter is organized in eight sections including this introduction. The second section includes an overview of distance education in Mexico as well as a conceptual presentation of technology acceptance models with a focus on the UTAUT model. The third section presents the research model and the hypotheses that guide this study. The fourth section constitutes a description of the methods used in the research reported in the chapter. The fifth and sixth sections present the main results, as well as a discussion of the main results and some practical recommendations. The last two sections in the chapter point to future research directions and concluding remarks.

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