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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL INFLUENCE THEORIES ON THE ADOPTION OF AGILE METHODOLOGIES: A CASE STUDY IN AN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

***Dr. Imane BAALI**

Hassan 2 University Casablanca Morocco

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***Corresponding author:**
Dr. Imane BAALI

ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of social influence theories—normative, informative, and persuasive—in the adoption of agile methodologies in educational settings. While agility is commonly studied in technological and organisational environments, little research has focused on its adoption in the field of higher education. Through an in-depth case study conducted at a university during the development of a project management learning platform, we analyse how social dynamics shape the acceptance or rejection of new organisational practices. The results reveal a three-phase sequence: initial persuasion by leadership, temporary normative conformity, and finally authentic adoption through informative influence and collective experimentation. The study highlights that the effectiveness of agility in education does not rely solely on its technical principles, but on the ability to orchestrate and channel the forces of social influence within teams. Theoretical and managerial implications are proposed, as well as avenues for future comparative research.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, agile methodologies have spread far beyond their original home—software development—to become established in various fields such as project management, organisational innovation and university pedagogy. Agility is presented as a response to complex environments characterised by uncertainty, accelerating innovation cycles and hybridisation of working methods (Beck *et al*., 2001; Rigby, Sutherland & Takeuchi, 2016). In the education sector, the adoption of agility is part of a context of rapid digitisation, diversification of learner profiles and growing demand for institutional flexibility. However, while the expected benefits of agility are numerous (increased responsiveness, better collaboration, short cycles promoting feedback), its implementation is neither uniform nor linear. Several studies highlight the resistance, misunderstandings and cultural tensions that hinder its adoption (Denning, 2018; Smolira, 2018). Moreover, in the educational context, where hierarchical structures, well-established academic routines and strong disciplinary cultures prevail, the adoption of agility poses specific challenges (Schwaber & Sutherland, 2020). While the literature on agility has placed great emphasis on technical, procedural and organisational dimensions, it has relatively neglected a key variable: social influence. As Cialdini (2007) and Deutsch & Gerard (1955) have shown, collective behaviour is largely shaped by social forces that push individuals to conform, be persuaded, or adjust their beliefs in light of new information. However, the implementation of an agile methodology cannot be understood independently of these social dynamics.

The issue addressed in this article is therefore as follows: How do theories of social influence (normative, informative and persuasive) manifest themselves and impact the process of adopting agile methodologies by project teams in an educational environment?.

To answer this question, we draw on an in-depth qualitative case study conducted as part of a university project to design a digital learning platform. This approach allows us to explore the interactions, perceptions and resistance that accompany the implementation of an agile methodology in an academic environment.

The article is structured as follows:

- A literature review detailing the contributions of research on agility and social influence;
- The conceptual framework used;
- The study methodology;
- A presentation and analysis of the results;
- A theoretical and managerial discussion;
- The limitations and prospects for further research.

Literature review and conceptual framework

Agile methodologies: origins and dissemination

Agile methodologies originate from the Agile Manifesto published in 2001 (Beck *et al*., 2001), which sets out four fundamental values:

- Prioritising individuals and their interactions over processes and tools;
- Favouring working software over comprehensive documentation;
- Collaborate with the customer rather than negotiate a contract;
- Responding to change rather than following a fixed plan.

Since then, numerous agile frameworks (Scrum, Kanban, Extreme Programming) have been developed and applied far beyond software engineering. Scrum, in particular, has become the most popular thanks to its apparent simplicity and its ability to structure work into short cycles ("sprints") accompanied by regular rituals (daily scrum, review, retrospective). In the business world, agility is associated with organisational adaptability (Doz & Kosonen, 2010). It is supposed to enable better management of uncertainty, reduce the costs associated with late errors, and improve customer satisfaction through the continuous integration of customer feedback. In education, the application of agility is still in its infancy. Recent work explores its use in course design (Hidalgo, 2020), the development of digital platforms (Smolira, 2018) and the management of teaching teams (Przybilla *et al*., 2021). The results show interesting potential for promoting educational innovation and strengthening interdisciplinary collaboration. However, adoption is not without its tensions. Academic culture, based on the individual autonomy of teachers, can conflict with the values of cooperation, transparency and shared responsibility that are characteristic of agility (Denning, 2018).

Theories of social influence: Social influence is defined as "the process by which an individual's thoughts, feelings and behaviours are affected by those of others" (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). It is a central driver of organisational dynamics, whether in terms of technological adoption, managerial change or pedagogical innovation.

Three main forms of influence are generally distinguished:

Normative influence: Described by Deutsch & Gerard (1955), this leads individuals to conform to group expectations in order to maintain their social belonging and avoid rejection. Even without deep conviction, individuals outwardly adopt the behaviours of the majority.

Informative influence: This occurs when individuals accept the opinions or information of others as proof of reality. When faced with uncertainty, actors turn to sources they perceive as credible to guide their decisions (Festinger, 1954).

Persuasive influence: This aims to change attitudes or beliefs through structured, rational or emotional communication (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The effectiveness of persuasion often depends on the credibility and authority of the source (Hovland & Weiss, 1951).

These three forms of influence are not mutually exclusive, but combine over time and depending on the context. In project environments, they determine how a new method is perceived, tested, accepted or rejected.

Theoretical additions: In addition to these three approaches, several theories enrich our understanding of the phenomenon under study:

- **Theory of diffusion of innovations** (Rogers, 2003): adoption depends on factors such as relative advantage, compatibility with existing values, perceived complexity, opportunity for experimentation and observability of results.
- **Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)** (Davis, 1989): two main determinants guide the adoption of a technology: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use.
- **Legitimacy Theory** (Suchman, 1995): a practice becomes established in the long term if it is perceived as socially desirable, appropriate and consistent with the values of the institution.

By combining these perspectives with those of social influence, we propose a sequential conceptual framework for the adoption of agility in education:

- Initial persuasion by leaders (persuasive influence);
- Temporary social conformity (normative influence);
- Authentic adoption through tangible evidence and experiential learning (informative influence).

METHODOLOGY

Choice of method and relevance of the case study: In order to explore in depth the role of social influence in the adoption of agility in an educational context, we opted for a qualitative case study (Yin, 2018). This method is particularly suitable for analysing a contemporary phenomenon in its real-world setting, where the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly established. The Alpha Project, studied in this article, is a relevant case. It is an initiative launched at a Moroccan university to design and deploy a digital platform dedicated to project management learning. The project team was composed of researchers, teachers, educational engineers and master's students. The Scrum methodology was chosen to structure the project, under the leadership of an academic manager convinced of the benefits of agility.

Data collection: We used three main sources of data to ensure triangulation and interpretative richness:

- **Semi-structured interviews** (n=24): conducted with team members (teachers, students, educational engineers). The questions focused on their perceptions of agility, their experiences within the project, and the social dynamics observed.
- **Participant observations**: the researcher attended 14 Scrum meetings (daily, sprint review, retrospectives). Detailed ethnographic notes were taken on interactions, resistance, moments of persuasion and conformity.
- **Internal documents**: project charters, emails, presentation materials, sprint reports. This secondary data makes it

possible to trace the formalisation of the process and its evolution.

Data analysis: The analysis followed a **Gioia** approach (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013), which favours theoretical abstraction based on empirical data. Three stages were carried out:

- **Open coding** (1st order): identification of verbatim text reflecting the dynamics of persuasion, normative conformity and informative influence.
- **Intermediate categorisation** (2nd order): grouping into themes such as "role of the leader", "implicit group pressure" and "tangible evidence of effectiveness".
- **Theoretical aggregation**: development of a three-phase sequential model linking social dynamics to the gradual adoption of agility.
- A summary table was constructed (presented in the results section).

RESULTS

Phase 1: Initial persuasion by leadership: From the launch of Project Alpha, the introduction of Scrum was driven by the academic manager, who used persuasive arguments. The verbatim quotes collected show how he mobilised his authority and credibility:

"The professor often repeated that agility was not just a method, but a philosophy that would prepare us for the future of work." (Student interview 3)

This initial persuasion was based not only on rational arguments, but also on emotional appeals (enthusiasm, vision of the future). However, at this stage, support remained superficial: members agreed to try it without real conviction.

Phase 2: Normative compliance and resistance: During the first sprints, normative influence came into play. The students, anxious not to contradict academic authority and to maintain group cohesion, conformed to agile rituals.

"We did the daily meetings mainly because we saw that the others were there, not because we really believed in them." (Student interview 7)

This compliance allowed for the appearance of adoption to be maintained, but it also generated tensions. Some teachers expressed weariness with the "ritualisation":

"These daily meetings seemed artificial to us, as if we were copying a recipe without making it our own." (Teacher interview 2)

Phase 3: Informative influence and genuine adoption: The shift towards more sincere adoption came when members empirically observed the benefits of Scrum: better coordination, reduced duplication of work, and increased visibility on progress.

"When I saw that the platform was really moving faster thanks to sprints, I started to believe in agility." (Interview with educational engineer)

This tangible evidence played an informative role: it provided objective proof that transformed initial attitudes. The team gradually developed a hybrid culture, integrating both academic routines and agile practices.

Sequential model

The following table summarises the results:

Phase	Form of influence	Observed manifestations	Effects
1	Persuasive	Leader's speech, inspiring vision	Superficial acceptance
2	Normative	Conformity to the group, rituals followed	Superficial adoption, latent resistance
3	Informative	Tangible evidence, successful experimentation	Genuine adoption, cultural hybridisation

DISCUSSION

Theoretical contributions: The study confirms that the adoption of agile methodologies cannot be understood solely in terms of their technical merits. Social influence dynamics shape the trajectory of this adoption. By identifying a persuasive-normative-informative sequence, we propose a dynamic model that enriches the literature on agility and the diffusion of innovations. This model also complements the work of Rogers (2003) by specifying how initial perceptions (often vague) are transformed into convictions through social mechanisms.

Managerial implications

For academic and educational leaders, our findings suggest several recommendations:

- Mobilise credible leaders to initiate persuasion;
- Tolerate a phase of normative conformity without interpreting it as rejection;
- Accelerate teams' exposure to tangible evidence in order to trigger informative influence;
- Promote cultural hybridisation rather than forced adoption of rituals.

Limitations and research perspectives: This study is based on a single case, which limits its generalizability. Future research could compare several projects in different academic or cultural contexts. A longitudinal approach would also make it possible to track the evolution of adoption over a longer period. Finally, quantitative studies could test the proposed sequential model on larger samples.

CONCLUSION

The adoption of agile methodologies in an educational context is not a linear process. It occurs at the intersection of technical and social dynamics. Social influence theories offer a valuable lens for understanding this trajectory. By highlighting the persuasive-normative-informative sequence, this research emphasises that the effectiveness of agility depends as much on social mechanisms as on organisational practices.

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