

Legitimacy Through Symbolism: Strategic Institutional Work Behind Mobile Technology Adoption in Universities

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Abstract

Drawing on institutional theory, this study explores how universities strategically respond to institutional pressures while implementing mobile technology (MT) in higher education. It addresses a gap in the literature concerning how organizational actors manage institutional demands through adaptation strategies that preserve legitimacy while navigating internal constraints. An exploratory qualitative study was conducted at two French engineering universities. Data collection included semi-structured interviews and field observations, allowing for an in-depth analysis of organizational practices, leadership decisions, and the adaptation behaviors of institutional actors. Mobile technology adoption in higher education is not a straightforward implementation of digital tools but rather a negotiated process shaped by institutional pressures, leadership interpretation, and strategic responses. Three dominant strategic responses were identified: ceremonial conformity, selective coupling, and disguise. These strategies help universities symbolically comply with external demands while protecting their core practices. Legitimacy concerns and institutional work play a critical role in shaping both the discourse and actions around MT initiatives. This paper contributes to the institutional theory literature by extending Oliver's typology of strategic responses and introducing "disguise" as a distinct response to institutionalized digital expectations. It offers practical insights for university leaders managing digital transformation, highlighting the importance of aligning strategy with perceived legitimacy and stakeholder expectations.

Keywords: strategic responses; digital transformation; higher education; institutional theory