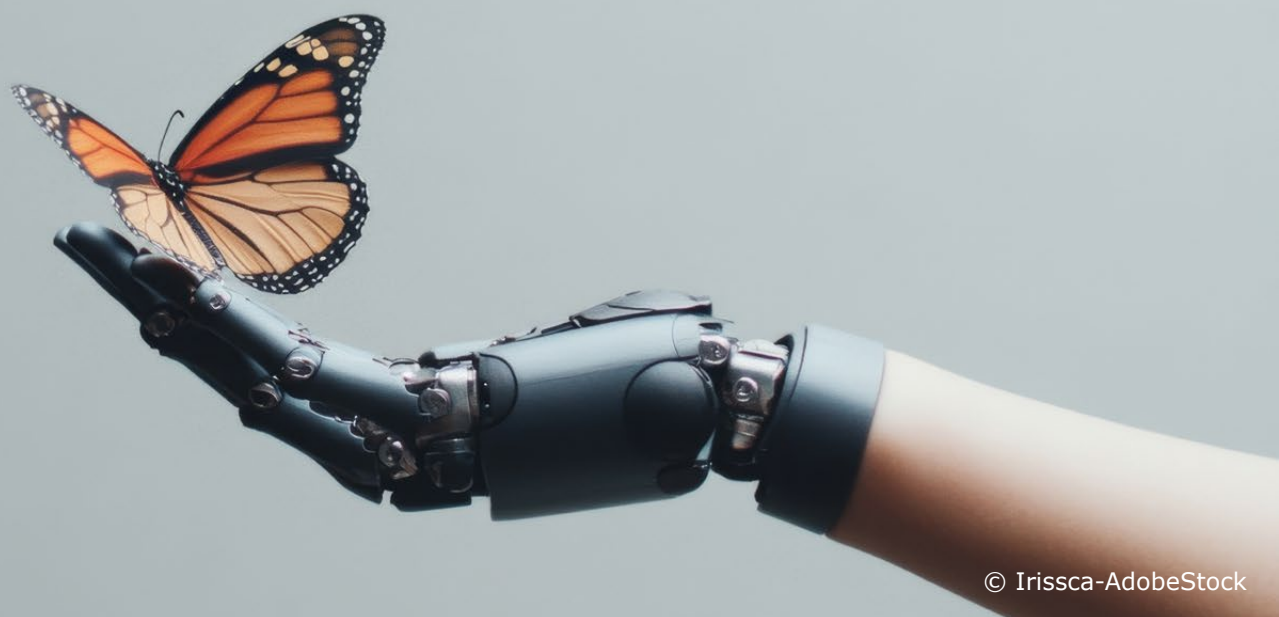




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LIGHTS - Human/Well being

Beyond rational models : exploring emotional dimensionsof AI acceptance in the workplace

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Abstract

AI is becoming central to organizational strategy, yet its adoption remains uneven, notably due to human barriers. This impact paper explores how employees experience AI not just cognitively, but emotionally and symbolically. Drawing on a field study using the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique, we show how the study of emotions through image and sensory metaphors can enlighten the mechanisms, as well as role dynamics at play as part of AI acceptance. Our findings call for greater attention to emotional dynamics in AI implementation and highlight the value of interdisciplinary approaches in management research.

Keywords: artificial intelligence ; acceptance ; emotions

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Introduction

In just a few years, artificial intelligence has gone from a distant technological prospect to a tangible, pervasive force shaping the way organizations operate, innovate, and make decisions (Rahlmeier & Hopf, 2024). From generative models to predictive tools, AI technologies are rapidly becoming embedded in corporate discourse, policymaking, and everyday work routines.

Yet beneath the appearance of inevitability, AI adoption within organizations remains uneven and fraught with complexity. While technical challenges persist, human issues, such as resistance to change, lack of trust, and misaligned expectations, stand as critical factors hindering implementation (Maestro & Rana, 2024). Thus, employee acceptance emerges not simply as a variable to measure, but as a strategic condition for success.

The idea that we defend in this paper is that we cannot fully understand or foster this acceptance without paying closer attention to the emotional and symbolic dimensions of how employees experience AI. While dominant models of technology adoption emphasize rational judgments such as usefulness or ease of use, they can downplay the uncertainty, anxiety, hope, or disillusionment that come with the arrival of AI in the workplace (Magni *et al.*, 2023). This emotional layer appears as more than a side effect: it is a notable key to understanding how AI is interpreted, integrated, or resisted.

In what follows, we explore this issue through a field-based research project conducted in a large French company. By using the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET), we sought to bring to the surface the deep affective logics that shape AI acceptance, both among non-experts and experts. Our approach brings to light the hidden dynamics at play in AI implementation: not only questions of understanding and acceptance, but also of identity, power, and symbolic positioning.

The strategic centrality yet limited adoption of AI

Artificial intelligence has become ubiquitous : in the media, academic discourse, political rhetoric, business strategies, and increasingly in everyday life (Rahlmeier & Hopf, 2024). Once the realm of science fiction, AI, especially generative AI, is now reshaping automation, creativity, and problem-solving.

Despite its strategic promise, AI integration remains limited : beyond technical hurdles such as data quality, system complexity, and infrastructure needs, human barriers are critical (e.g. Maestro & Rana, 2024). These include resistance to change, mistrust in AI, poor collaboration between technical and business teams, and misconceptions about the technology

Successful AI adoption depends on more than feasibility : it notably relies on cultural, relational, and human dynamics. In this context, employee acceptance not only shapes deployment success but long-term integration into organizational routines (Bérubé, 2021).

Understanding how it develops, and the levers and barriers involved, is therefore key to guiding this technological shift.

The unique uncertainty surrounding AI

AI is not just another technological innovation ; it embodies a distinct form of uncertainty (Magni et al., 2023) that challenges traditional frameworks of understanding and decision-making, and manifests across several interconnected dimensions:

- **Definitional:** AI remains a fluid and contested concept, the meaning of which shifts depending on disciplinary lens, context of application, and the state of technological progress (e.g. Lagerkvist & Reimer, 2023).
- **Technical:** AI is marked by opacity. Many systems, particularly those based on deep learning, operate as “black boxes,” whose inner workings are difficult to interpret, even for their creators. For non-technical users, especially in business functions, this technical complexity creates a major barrier to understanding and trust (e.g. Jarrahi et al., 2023).
- **Interpretative:** AI generates ambiguity in the assessment of its outputs. Users, torn between fascination and skepticism, struggle to gauge the relevance and reliability of recommendations . Magni et al. (2024) distinguish between uncertainty of use (what AI can do), process (how it works), and outcome (what results it produces). This cognitive disruption makes it difficult for individuals to rationally evaluate the value or risks of AI.
- **Professional and organizational:** some professions fear marginalization, devaluation, or automation, while others face a loss of control over decisions. These shifts can create anxiety, resistance, and power struggles, especially when the role assigned to AI in decision chains is unclear (Capellaro, 2023).
- **Societal:** AI raises concerns about systemic risks, such as algorithmic bias, mass surveillance, and erosion of personal agency. These broader, sociotropic perceptions reflect not only individual interests but collective anxieties about the societal models AI might engender (Borwein et al., 2023).
- **Paradoxical form of uncertainty:** Rather than eliminating uncertainty, AI displaces it, introducing new, opaque, and hard-to-regulate forms of uncertainty (e.g. Holton, 2023).

As individuals largely struggle to understand what AI truly is, and given the opacity and complexity of the technology, we believe it is essential to consider alternative and complementary acceptance evaluation criteria, particularly those accounting for emotional responses.

The overlooked role of emotions in AI acceptance

While traditional, dominant technology acceptance models such as TAM (Technology Adoption Model), UTAUT (Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology), and AIDUA (Artificially Intelligent Device Use Acceptance) have provided valuable insights into users' rational evaluations of usefulness, ease of use, or performance expectancy (Cursoy et al., 2019), they largely overlook an essential aspect of human experience: emotion. Most of these models are rooted in cognitive, instrumental perspectives, and tend to treat emotion either as a background variable or as a consequence of technology use, rather than as a determinant of initial acceptance.

Yet, emotions play a pivotal role in how individuals relate to technologies, especially in uncertain, complex, and opaque contexts such as AI adoption in the workplace (Magni et al., 2024). The early stages of AI implementation are often marked by uncertainty, ambiguity,

and cognitive dissonance, which generate a wide range of emotional responses such as fear, frustration, hope, curiosity, or enthusiasm, that can shape long-term attitudes and behaviors.

Despite this, emotional dimensions remain underexplored in Information Systems research (a field focused on the study of information technology and its impact on individuals, organizations and society)) on AI, particularly in organizational settings where use is often mandatory and closely tied to identity, task redefinition, and power dynamics. Studies usually rely on standardized, quantitative approaches that tend to capture emotion superficially, if at all, leaving aside the complexity, dynamism, and subjectivity of lived experiences (Bobillier Chaumon, 2016).

Understanding how employees feel about AI, rather than only what they think, may therefore be key to designing systems and organizational processes that foster not only use, but also meaningful acceptance.

ZMET as a tool to explore emotions surrounding AI acceptance in the workplace

As part of a broader ethnographic study conducted in a large French company, we integrated the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). Originating from the marketing field, the ZMET is a qualitative research method developed to uncover implicit beliefs, emotions, and cognitive schemas using metaphor and visual imagery. Participants are asked to collect images that represent their thoughts and feelings about a given subject, which are then explored during in-depth interviews using sensory and emotional probing. In our context, ZMET is particularly suited to investigate AI, a topic often perceived as abstract or technical, by revealing subconscious associations and emotional logics that standard interviews may fail to elicit. The method's originality lies in its ability to make symbolic and affective dimensions explicit, using images, metaphors, and collages that go beyond verbal articulation. Compared to more traditional qualitative techniques (e.g., semi-structured interviews or focus groups), ZMET enabled participants to express ambiguity, tensions, and implicit reactions in a non-linear, embodied, and often seemingly more authentic way, particularly important in dealing with an opaque and fast-evolving topic like AI.

Among non-expert employees, ZMET revealed profound beliefs and emotional reactions, frequently articulated through imagery evoking spiritual transcendence, revelation, or liberation. These symbolic associations, marked by both fascination and fear, seem to reflect how non-specialists struggle to evaluate or relate to such a complex and intangible technology. Emotional metaphors, particularly those involving touch, sound, and vision, illuminated tensions between comfort, awe, anxiety, and cognitive dissonance. For example, AI was sometimes depicted as a source of light or warmth, something compelling and full of promise, but also potentially intense or overwhelming if not approached with care. Similarly, it was likened to a protective envelope, offering reassurance and safety, yet also carrying the risk of entrapment or loss of control. Such enthusiasm and fear generate effects on their acceptance of the technology, fueling respectively an eagerness to dive into the use of AI and benefit from it, as well as reluctance to its extensive implementation in the organization.

Conversely, among AI experts (notably data scientists), the ZMET approach surfaced a different emotional landscape : less focused on the technology itself and more on the organizational and political dynamics surrounding its implementation. The selected images

often expressed frustration, fatigue, and skepticism toward the strategic overuse or instrumentalization of AI within the company. Strong metaphors, sometimes even violent or dissonant, were used to criticize unrealistic expectations, performative managerial enthusiasm, and the burden placed on experts to develop AI use cases, often without the structural means to support its effective use. Furthermore, the sensory metaphors chosen by experts (e.g., smells of decay, sensations of imbalance or suffocation) reflected a growing disillusionment and an acute awareness of the power asymmetries and symbolic expectations tied to their role. Rather than mere resistance, these emotional responses seem to indicate a critical and reflexive stance on the deployment of AI in the organization.

Overall, the use of ZMET on this project proved instrumental in uncovering emotional logics and latent tensions that shape not only the acceptance of AI, but also the power dynamics embedded in its organizational diffusion. In that sense, it seems to offer a compelling and promising complement to rationalist models by anchoring analysis in lived, affective, and symbolic experience ; a perspective which we believe deserves deeper investigation in future research.

Conclusion

The aim of this Impact Paper is to shift the focus from the dominant, rationalist interpretations of AI acceptance in the workplace to the emotional and symbolic dimension of employees experience. While the diffusion of AI is often discussed in strategic or technological terms, our research highlights how its organizational implementation generates uncertainty, power shifts, and affective reactions which, in turn, can contribute to shaping its acceptance.

Such findings point to important implications for management. First, we believe organizations need to recognize that AI is not a neutral tool but a charged object, embedded in broader meaning systems and professional identities. Ignoring this may fuel disengagement, role conflict, or quiet resistance. Second, efforts to foster AI acceptance should move beyond rational arguments and notably consider how to create emotional comfort, symbolic alignment, and trust. In that sense, managers should be trained not only in technical aspects, but also in listening to employees' concerns, decoding implicit tensions, and addressing the organizational dynamics shaping their reactions. While this study focused on a banking institution, we believe such insights should also be valuable to other sectors facing similar and important challenges with AI integration, such as healthcare, public administration, or education, for instance, where non-expert users are expected to increasingly adopt and interact with complex technologies.

More broadly, this research project highlights the value of interdisciplinary perspectives, particularly those that bridge psychology, semiotics, and narrative theory, to enrich management research on technological change.

Our central argument is that ultimately, AI acceptance in organizations should be understood not only as a rational decision-making process, but as a symbolic and emotional journey shaped by uncertainty, identity, and power dynamics, dimensions that can notably be uncovered through metaphor-based exploration.

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