



## Exploring the role of social media in importing logics across social contexts: The case of IT SMEs in Iran



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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of social media in importing logics across social contexts. It is based on an in-depth study of new high-tech small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and more established IT companies in Iran. We explore the process by which social media affordances interplay with forces of institutional entrepreneurship to create conditions for social change. More specifically we study the adoption in Iran of new business practices and models more commonly seen in other contexts, and relate this to the features of the platforms and the characteristics of a new generation of Iranian entrepreneurs. Drawing on institutional logics theory we conceptualize this process as one of transposition of logics in which dominant religious logics are challenged by market logics enabled by the mutual constitutional effects of human and material agencies. We suggest that three main mechanisms underpin this process: the discovery of practices from different institutional contexts, the appropriation of foreign practices, and the objectification of these practices. The study further contributes to the debate on the paradox of embedded agency and adds to the literature by providing a more integrated view of the role of social media in social change.

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### 1. Introduction

There is a growing body of research on the role of social media in processes of political change in both developed (Anstead and Chadwick, 2012) and developing countries, in particular the Middle East (including Iran) (Shirky, 2011), Pakistan (Shaheen, 2008), China (Jones, 2011; Yang, 2009) and Malaysia (Smeltzer and Keddy, 2010). Most of this work has explored the role of social media as a platform for social, economic and political change (Patten and Keane, 2011), and the properties of social media that support the formation of social movements, including analysis of how social media supports the creation of extensive networks capable of organizing action at speed and scale (Howard and Hussain, 2011). The role of social

media in business and in the IT industry has also been the focus of much research, for example into new commercial trends and marketing strategies (Cachia et al., 2007), the changing relationship between businesses and marketplaces (Aral et al., 2013) and the reshaping of industries such as healthcare (Hawn, 2009), news and publishing (Hong, 2012), and education (Moran et al., 2011).

Despite this considerable interest in the effects of social media as a catalyst for change, we have limited understanding of the role of individuals as co-agents of change and the process by which localized practices and values travel across contexts through the use of social media, ultimately leading to social change at an aggregate level. In this study, we address this gap by examining the emergence of new practices in Iranian IT SMEs. We consider Iran an appropriate setting for the study due to its unique position of being both 1) a developing country with the fastest growth of internet and social media use in the Middle East, including by organized social movements, and 2) a country which has seen remarkable growth in the number of

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new small businesses in the past few years (Fathian et al., 2008), many based on social media platforms and demonstrating significant similarities with business models seen in Western countries. These SMEs (Karimi et al., 2010; Ghanatabadi, 2013) are mostly founded and run by a new generation of entrepreneurs (Hafezieh et al., 2011; Fereidouni et al., 2010) who seem to operate very differently from the leaders of established companies (Hafezieh et al., 2011; Guemuesay, 2014). In contrast to Iran's traditionalist culture, built on religious and family values, which has been unchallenged for most of the country's history (Illias, 2008; Gheissari, 2009), their approach to doing business is driven more by materialistic, market-oriented views and practices characteristic of modern Iranian youth (Goodarzi, 2008).

The literature on institutional entrepreneurship provides useful background for understanding the role of individuals in institutional change (Leca et al., 2008). In particular it explains how individuals or organizations discover and import practices across institutional contexts (Boxenbaum and Battilana, 2005). It recognizes that actors are capable of disengaging from their institutional contexts and of taking action to change these (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; Friedland and Alford, 1991). For example, Battilana and D'ahunno (2009) reflect on the paradox of embedded agency – the ability of actors to innovate when their actions are limited by the institutional context that they seek to change – and highlight this as an important area for further research (Battilana et al., 2009). However this focus on explaining the role of actors in institutional change pays less attention to the role of artifacts, platforms and material infrastructures in supporting, enabling and affording the discovery and transfer of new practices by these actors across contexts.

From this perspective, and based on the gap identified earlier, we believe that it is relevant to study how practices, values and symbols which are absent or considered unnatural in a particular environment can be imported from other contexts through the use of social media and adapted locally, leading to change at an aggregate level. We look specifically at the role of young entrepreneurs leading IT SMEs in Iran and the technology that they use to operate in that environment. We draw on concepts of logic importation (Boxenbaum and Battilana, 2005) and theory of affordance (Gibson, 1977) to show how the importation of logics across contexts is a result of the interplay of both individual and material agency, and to highlight the attributes and affordances of the tools used by these agents in effecting social change. Our study aims to contribute to the literature by emphasizing both the material and individual agency involved in social change. It also carefully analyzes the role of infrastructures and materiality in enabling and disabling certain practices and behaviors and contextualizes these practices within the specific environment in which individuals operate (Jarzabkowski et al., 2012). In order to pursue this research project we formulated the following research question: “*What is the role of social media in the importation of logics across contexts?*”

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: the next section reviews key literature on the use of social media in organizational settings, and the adoption strategies of entrepreneurs and SMEs. Section 3 presents the theoretical foundations of our research by summarizing the work on logics importation by Boxenbaum and Battilana (2005) and

the concept of affordances (Gibson, 1977). We then present the research methodology used in our study. Next, we present our findings. This is followed by the Discussion and implications section, and in the final section we provide an overview of the paper and our conclusion.

## 2. Literature review

Social media is now used widely around the world as a platform for communication, sharing and connecting individuals with their networks in unprecedented ways (Ellison, 2007; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). At one level, individuals use the internet and social media for mundane activities such as reading news, banking, shopping and so forth (Tan and Teo, 2000; Bourlakis et al., 2008). However, at a deeper level, social media gradually becomes the basis for social interactions and an intimate part of the social fabric of communities and organizations (Baptista, 2009), often reconfiguring established patterns of communication and interaction (Shirky, 2011; Jantunen, 2010; Hoffman and Fodor, 2010; Ellison, 2007; Kietzmann et al., 2011, 2012; Weber, 2007; Huang et al., 2012). The literature also suggests that the adoption of social media within organizations shifts processes and practices (Bughin, 2008; Subramaniam et al., 2013) as it becomes increasingly embedded in decision making and community building (Culnan et al., 2011). By providing a channel where collective action and communication is conducted in real time (Gallaughar and Ransbotham, 2010), social media has also been shown to facilitate collaboration (Candace Deans, 2011) and the transfer of both explicit and tacit knowledge (Begel et al., 2010). Overall, therefore, we have extensive insights into the features and effects of social media (Aral et al., 2013) as well as on the mutual interplay between its adoption and processes of social and organizational change (Phillips, 2011).

This view of social media as a stimulant for social change has sparked adoption in many regions, but is perceived as a barrier to adoption in others. The literature suggests that the open and participative nature of social media and its ability to spread new practices and behaviors clashes with established norms and traditions in certain parts of the world and is often perceived as a threat by governments, who see social media as a platform for social, economic and political change (Shirky, 2011; Howard and Parks, 2012). For example, tools such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and blogs have played a role in political mobilization in recent high-profile social movements (Howard and Hussain, 2011; Howard et al., 2011; Scott, 2012; Karagiannopoulos, 2012), enabling users to connect with each other, debate issues and subsequently devise actions (Howard et al., 2011). Also, within organizations, the use of social media (Candace Deans, 2011) such as microblogging (Zhang et al., 2010; Riemer et al., 2012), blogs (Cook, 2008; Lee et al., 2006), wikis (Lykourentzou et al., 2010; Yates et al., 2010) and social networking platforms (Richter and Riemer, 2009) has changed work processes, activities and patterns of communication (Huang et al., 2012; Candace Deans, 2011; Luo et al., 2013) where the open nature of these technologies clashed with the highly structured functioning of some organizations (Ramotar and Baptista, 2013). Leonardi (Leonardi et al., 2013) conceptualizes these effects by suggesting that the inherent properties of social media afford collective behavior and have the potential to reflect and embed shared meaning structures within social groups.

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