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Le manager et la transformation digitale : une approche via la poétique de la Relation

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Résumé :

La transformation digitale est considérée comme l'un des plus grands défis managériaux des dernières et prochaines décennies (Nadkarni et Prügl, 2021). Dans un contexte insulaire, où l'histoire et la culture s'entremêlent avec les représentations des managers sur les enjeux des technologies de l'information (TI), comment le manager s'adapte-t-il ou réinvente-t-il les TI dans l'organisation ? Cet article examine les pratiques managériales et le rôle du temps, du lieu et du contexte culturel dans leur formation. Il soutient que ces pratiques sont non seulement inscrites dans un contexte local mais aussi dans une communauté globale, au sein de laquelle la relation du manager au monde et à la transformation digitale se manifeste, ce qui le conduit à développer des réponses singulières. La mobilisation de la Poétique de la Relation d'Edouard Glissant et des travaux de Nevo et al. (2016) nous donne des clés pour comprendre les constructions individuelles du manager.

Mots clés :

IT Adaptation ; IT Réinvention ; culture ; temps ; lieu.

The Manager and Digital Transformation: an Approach via the Poetics of Relation

Abstract :

Digital transformation is considered one of the greatest managerial challenges of the last and next decades (Nadkarni and Prügl, 2021). In an insular context, where history and culture are intertwined with managers' representations of information technology (IT) issues, how does the manager adapt to or reinvent IT in the organisation? This article examines managerial practices and the role of time, place, and cultural context in shaping them. It argues that these practices are not only embedded in a local context but also in a global community, within which the manager's relationship to the world and to digital transformation is expressed, enabling her/him to develop singular responses. The use of Edouard Glissant's Poetics of Relation and Nevo et al.'s theory of IT reinvention gives us keys to understanding the individual constructions of the manager in a world that is itself under construction.

Keywords:

IT Adaptation; IT Reinvention; Culture; Time; Place.

The Manager and Digital Transformation: an Approach via the Poetics of Relation

1. Introduction

“Organizations are sedimented structures that reflect not only the past actions of their users but also those social constructions remembered, repressed or otherwise forgotten.” (de Vaujany et al., 2020). Clegg (1981) and de Vaujany et al (2020) remind us of the sedimented structure of organisations over time, which will shape the understanding and actions of organisational actors. The case of French overseas territories, which have experienced singular histories, face unique constraints, and which cultures emerge from multiple influences rooted in history is particularly interesting to examine to this respect. Indeed, we may expect a greater understanding of how social actor’s dynamics are embedded and develop in those contexts in relation to the digital transitions stakes and challenges the organisations face. What role does time play in how those actors make operational decisions about how they may integrate IT in organisational processes? How does it relate to culture and space in digital transformation contexts?

Research in information systems (IS) does examine how middle managers promote change (Rouleau, 2005) and digital transformation and innovation (Nevo et al., 2016), adapt to (Beaudry & Pinsonneault, 2005), use and reinvent IT to transform organisations and create value (Nevo et al., 2016). However, it hardly does so taking into consideration the societal and historical context in which they are temporally inscribed and construct their identities. Research in IS further addresses mostly the case of large, Western or Asian organisations and contexts, so doing letting aside organisations from less visible territories and with singular trajectories such as the Caribbean Islands (Masiero, 2023; Myers et al., 2020). This is detrimental because it creates knowledge gaps, especially about the perception and use of digital technologies in small territories with a history and culture that strongly impregnate social constructions, built up layer after layer of events. Further, it contributes to a fragmented vision of the needs, benefits, and conception requirements of digital technologies. Accordingly, this research examines the role of time, space, and culture in how middle managers use, adapt to, or reinvent digital technologies in organisations. It particularly addresses the case of middle managers in Martinique, a French overseas region.

Time and space have for example been studied by de Vaujany and Vaast (2014) and de Vaujany et al. (2020). These authors examine spatial legacies, temporal layers of space and place that organisations inhabit and inherit. Social organisations construct such spatial legacies from temporalities to situate and frame core contemporary values (Shipp & Jansen, 2011; de Vaujany et al., 2020): *“Spatial legacies are both collected and constructed materials. Through the flow of on-going spatial practices, the historical space is continuously appropriated, re-appropriated or de-appropriated by the organization.”* (de Vaujany et al., 2020, p. 90). Time has also been studied through social actors’ temporal orientations. For example, Boudreau and Robey (2005) how social actors’ temporal orientations relate to human agency during the integration of a new enterprise requirement planning technology. Later, Nevo et al. (2016)

proposed a temporally self-situated agency theory of information technology (IT) Reinvention. As for Boudreau and Robey (2005), their work is based on the temporal dimensions of the human agency theory developed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) that situates the actors in the flow of time (Nevo et al., 2016, p. 157). Nevo et al. further distinguish IT Adaptation from IT Reinvention. IT Adaptation users are reactive actors responding to external triggers to adapt to existing goals, to address present needs or past practices. IT Reinvention users, in a context of post-adoption behaviours, are actors who change an implemented IT and/or its use to pursue new goals, projecting themselves forward into a future inventing new possibilities (Nevo et al., 2016, pp. 159-160).

Culture plays a role in managerial practices that may influence information technologies, directly or indirectly (Leidner & Kayworth, 2006). Leidner and Kayworth, for example, developed the theory of IT-culture conflict, in which they analyse how national or organisational culture impacts IT, and conversely how IT impacts culture, or even so an IT culture itself: “*we believe that culture is a critical variable in explaining how social groups interact with IT.*” (Leidner and Kayworth, 2006, p. 360).

To this extent, it becomes essential to understand how managers adapt to or reinvent IT in the process of digital transformation, in contexts where time, space, and culture have the potential to shape their vision of the world and the way they perceive the use of digital technologies in the specific environment of their organisation. Arguably, in these contexts, managers' use of digital technologies is constructed not only in a local, cultural context, but also, to a larger extent, within a more global community, in which their relationship to the world is expressed. Furthermore, we argue that those contextual parameters have implications for how managers respond to digital transformation, how they develop singular responses in using digital technologies. All in all, managers develop their own interpretation and construction of situations, in their relationship to the world and to technologies. To better understand these research issues, we leverage Edouard Glissant's Poetics of Relation, which gives us the keys to a better understanding of the manager's relationship to the world and to their individual construction when adapting or reinventing the use of IT.

From our point of view, with the rapid evolution of IT, particularly with artificial intelligence, the manager is likely to be confronted with new situations that previous communities had not foreseen. The ability to anticipate and understand the implications from the original cultural environment may usefully be part of the “toolbox” of the manager, rooted in spatial legacies described by Shipp and Jansen (2011) and de Vaujany et al. (2020), while remaining consistent with the world through thoughts, culture, and time, entering into Glissant's Relation. More fundamentally, knowledge building should highlight the forces at play in middle managers' relationships with their environment and the ways in which they seize and use of digital opportunities, depending on their context, their thinking, and their personal relationship to the world. The research question we address in this paper are as follows:

- How do middle managers adapt to or reinvent IT in digital transformation processes? What roles do time, space, and culture play in the construction of their vision of the world and the way they use, manage, or transform digital technologies?

To respond to those questions, we rely on Glissant's (1990) poetics of Relation and "Tout-Monde" approach, and on the theory of IT Reinvention from Nevo et al. (2016). A qualitative research is designed.

The remainder of this research-in-progress paper is as follows. We first review the relevant literature on Glissant's Relation, followed by insights on the theory of IT Reinvention by Nevo et al. (2016). Follows the presentation of the research design and expected contributions for research and practice. We then conclude the paper.

2.Review of the literature

2.1 The Poetics of Relation according to Edouard Glissant

Edouard Glissant was a poet, novelist, and philosopher, born in Martinique, in 1928. He is mostly renowned for his concept of "Tout-Monde", which can translate in English *as Whole-World*, in which flows the *Relation*. Edouard Glissant, but also Aimé Césaire (1950) and Frantz Fanon (1952, 1961), deplore what they call the economic neantisation resulting from the global relationship of postcolonial alienation. It is said to be, among other things, the effect of the absence of a pre-existing cultural hinterland and the absence of an extensive physical hinterland that allows for accumulation and rootedness (Glissant, 1997, p. 325).

Glissant portrays the actors in these contexts as having to open up to the world and to enter into Relation with the world in order to fill the void left by postcolonial alienation. For Glissant, a poetics expresses what is capable of sensing and expressing the beauty of things, in this case, of Relation. Glissant's concept of Relation occupies an essential place in his thinking. It can be defined as the key to a conceptual universe where the individual remains anchored in her/his own history, culture, and worldview, while remaining permeable to other cultures of the world which s/he can also appropriate, wherever s/he is located in the world, and reinvents her/his perception of the world and construction of an issue: "*The Whole-World in its physical diversity and in the representations it inspires in us: that we would no longer know how to sing, say or work to suffer from our place alone, without plunging into the imaginary of this totality*" (Glissant, 1990). The Whole-World designates the state of globality in which the Relation reigns.

We believe that Glissant offers a relevant approach in these contexts, as he is one of the best placed, as a direct witness, to observe and interpret the evolution and reactions of French Caribbean people. As Masiero (2023, p. 300) put it: "*Exercises mapping the theories used in the IS field reveal that such theories are generated, in overwhelming majority, by authors based in high-income countries classifiable as Western nations.*". This profusion of Western theories creates biases and maintains a form of alienation that makes it impossible to truly understand the Other, and the arrival of new, more appropriate theories would be welcome (Klein & Myers, 2011; Masiero, 2023; Myers et al., 2020).

This relational approach to culture contrasts with some more common conceptualisations of culture, for example, which is often presented through relatively stable characteristics,

transferable from one country to another. According to some of them, culture can be represented by dimensions and measured by indices (e.g., approaches based on the work of Hofstede (1984, 2001), Trompenaars (1996) and others). Glissant considers the individual has to enter into Relation, that means, to exchange and to change with the other or other cultures, make the entire world and its richness accessible, in order to open up the field of possibilities and nourish her/his creativity: “[Relation] is the determination to find other solutions, unbridled if necessary, often unexpected, when the frameworks and shackles of old models have continued to try to impose themselves in a fixed and sterile manner.” (Glissant & Chamoiseau, 2021, p. 97). The richness of this creativity will be expressed all the better if the individual is in Relation with the rest of the world, drawing opportunities and solutions from it: “Yet peoples, beyond the tragedies of domination, have no other vocation than that of entering into Relation, of being enriched by sharing and of building themselves only through exchange.”. Or again: “The power of a man or a nation can only be measured in its capacity to be in relation with the Places of the world, to mobilise their wealth and diversity to constitute the best of sharing.” (Glissant & Chamoiseau, 2021, pp. 117 and 118).

Glissant’s concept of Relation suggests the actor, in nowadays contexts, has to embrace the Whole-World, the totality of the world in its physical diversity and in the representations it inspires. It also relates to the state of Mondiality in which Relation reigns. The actor has also to let her/his imagination and innovation run free. In the context of an organisation, the Relation would allow the manager to reinvent his organisational roles and “embrace” digital transformation, by abolishing boundaries, both physical and mental: “Just as there have been borders that separate and distinguish, there will be borders that distinguish and connect, and that will only distinguish in order to connect.” (Glissant & Chamoiseau, 2021, p. 134).

2.2 Relation versus Globalisation

The subtlety of the concept of Relation should not be confused with the concept of globalisation. Globalisation is the levelling down, according to Glissant, with a common language, common thoughts, and common culture. Relation means going towards the other, without losing oneself and denaturing oneself: “We live in the same dimension, which I call Mondiality. Mondiality is a poetics that allows exchange, that allows the ‘change’! To go to the other and to change with the other is not to lose oneself and to denature oneself.” (Glissant, in Adler, 2004). Similarly, although Glissant draws some of his inspiration from Marcus's World-System and Deleuze and Guattari's Rhizome, he differs from them particularly on the question of origin, which he claims Creole cultures lack (Dorismond, 2013). Glissant thus approaches Relation as the essential principle immanent to the constitution of Mondiality, where Mondiality is the ability of individuals and cultures to create a space for themselves while respecting diversity. It also represents intellectual and spiritual enrichment.

2.3 Key dimensions of Space, Culture, and Time

This research will leverage Glissant’s Poetics of Relation (1990) and Nevo et al. (2016) on temporal dimensions of human agency, the later based on Emirbayer and Misce (1998). It will also consider the dimensions of space and culture that are already included in the Poetics of

Relation. This study will make it possible to conceive the relationship to time in terms of the relationship to history, but also the practical responses to emerging constraints, and even future responses by opening up to new possibilities. Space, culture, and time are key dimensions presented in Table 1 below, that form an imaginary, which is for Glissant, all the ways a culture has of perceiving and conceiving of the world (Glissant, 1990, XXII). We are going to analyse these dimensions through the prism of Relation to interpret the consequences for the manager.

Dimension – Link	Characteristics	Our interpretation for managers
Thought and Space	<p><i>“Thinking thought usually amounts to withdrawing into a dimensionless place in which the idea of thought alone persists. But thought in reality spaces itself out into the world. It informs the imaginary of peoples, their varied poetics, which it then transforms, meaning, in them its risk becomes realized.”</i> (Glissant, 1990, p. 1).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managers’ thinking about technology relates to the space in which they are living and practicing their realities. • There is not one immanent thinking about technologies. Thinking about technologies relates to space and how managers are connected to others. • Examining the thinking of managers allows us to understand how they construct their representation of reality.
Thought and Culture	<p><i>“Culture is the precaution of those who claim to think thought but who steer clear of its chaotic journey. Evolving cultures infer Relation, the overstepping that grounds their unity-diversity.”</i> (Glissant, 1990, p. 1)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture is an evolving construction, and a movement of thought, that is made possible through Relation. • Our humanity is a plurality. Managers are made by the world they work with and develop a specific IT culture that must risk exchange in order to innovate. • Technology-embedded culture provides a simplification of thought. Managers must think about its evolution through the Relation.
Thought and Time	<p><i>“Thought draws the imaginary of the past: a knowledge becoming. One cannot stop it to assess it nor isolate it to transmit it. It is sharing one can never not retain, nor ever, in standing still, boast about.”</i> (Glissant, 1990, p.1)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thought is rooted in the past and the imaginary. Managers' thinking and constructs are oriented by their past representations, which themselves relate to future-oriented constructs. • Understanding those past representations may help understand current constructions and representations.

Table 1. Summary of important dimensions in Glissant’s Poetics of Relation.

2.4 IT Adaptation and IT Reinvention

Nevo et al. (2016) examined IT Adaptation and IT Reinvention and developed the theory of IT Reinvention. They grounded their research on the human agency theory from Emirbayer and Mische (1998): “[Emirbayer and Mische] identify three forms of temporally oriented agency: iterative (past-oriented), practical-evaluative (present-oriented), and projective (future-oriented)” (Nevo et al., 2016, p. 160). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) posit that one temporal dimension is dominant and that the other two provide sub-tones.

Nevo et al. argue that: “Because adaptation is a reactive behavior, users are primarily adapting an IT to existing goals to address present needs or past practices” (Nevo et al., 2016, p. 160), IT Adaptation is thus rather related to iterative agency and practical-evaluative agency. On the contrary, in the projective agency, actors project themselves into a future: “Actors distance themselves from past and present constraints and visualize and contemplate different means–ends relations and construct forward-looking narratives that help them realize their goals” (Nevo et al., 2016, p. 160). The authors then focused on the projective agency which is more relevant for their theory of IT Reinvention. Nevo et al.’s temporal dimensions are presented in Figure 1 below.

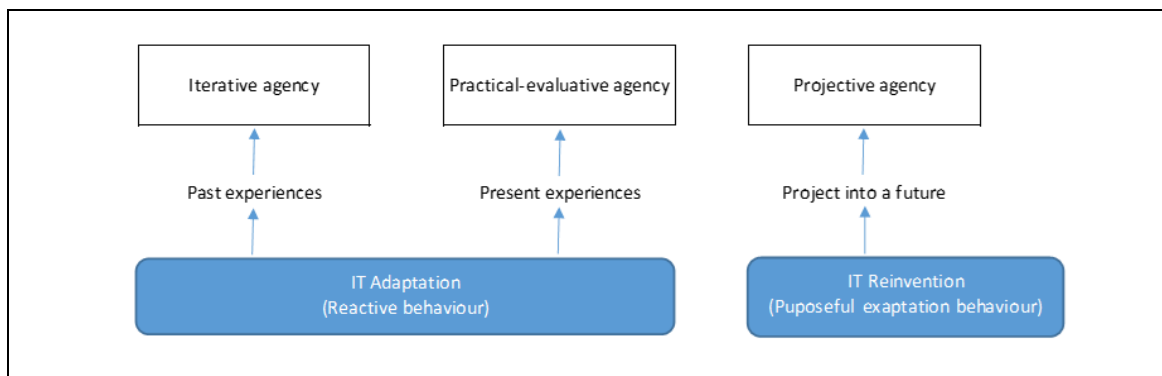


Figure 1. IT Adaptation and IT Reinvention based on Nevo et al. (2016)

Researchers examine the relation between culture and IT (Gallivan & Srite, 2005; Leidner & Kayworth, 2006). As Leidner and Kayworth state: “Culture is a challenging variable to research, in part because of the multiple divergent definitions and measures of culture.” (Leidner and Kayworth, 2006, p. 357). One question is the level of analysis. However, the authors conclude that their results are very similar, whether we analyse at the national level or at the organisational level: “... regardless of level (organizational or national), values play a common role in determining patterns of IT development, adoption, use, and outcomes. Cultural values thus serve as a common basis for the study of culture's impacts regardless of the level of analysis.” (Leidner and Kayworth, 2006, p. 381).

In addition, research has been made on how history and space play a most important role on organisations (Shipp & Jansen, 2011; Petani & Mengis, 2016; de Vaujany & Vaast, 2014; de Vaujany et al., 2020). De Vaujany et al. (2020) worked in particular on spatial legacies and the relationship between organisational space and legitimacy management. Suddaby et al. view history as a competitive advantage: “History is a social and rhetorical construction that can be

shaped and manipulated to motivate, persuade, and frame action, both within and outside an organization.” (Suddaby et al., 2010: 14). Accordingly, this study will leverage the temporal dimensions of Nevo et al. (2016), which will be bathed in Glissant’s Relation, as depicted in the research design.

3. Research design

Our research takes place in Martinique, a 368,783 inhabitants Caribbean Island and a French overseas department, and therefore an integral part of the French Republic. Martinique is also a specific territory and one of the nine outermost regions (OMRs) of the European Union. Martinique is an interesting context of study for several reasons. It has a singular history, characterised among others by colonisation and slavery, and which still has influences on social and organisational relationships. This context is often related with the rejection of authority and political independence or autonomy aspirations. It has a singular spatial configuration with its insularity and strong dependence to mainland France. This may be related with decentralisation aspirations and the willingness to promote local responses to local issues. It finally has a singular culture made of the encounter of African, European, Asian, and Caribbean cultures, and which may have implications within organisations, concerning the way in which individuals react to communication, learning, adaptation or, in general, to issues arising in the workplace. All these contextual elements are expected to contribute to how middle managers use or respond to issues related with IT in organisations, whether it be IT governance issues, change management, the choices of technology and processes during IT innovation initiatives.

To answer the research question, a qualitative, interpretive study (Klein & Myers, 1999) with managers engaged in digital transformation initiatives will be performed. La Poste, French postal services operator, has been approached to carry out this study among managers using new digital tools. The aim will be to understand the expression and role of time, culture, and space in how these managers use digital technologies, adapt to it, or make decisions about it. It will also examine how they respond to the opportunities and constraints of digital transformation and integrate them into their work practices. Preliminary interviews will be conducted with managers along with observations of their actions as they adapt to a new AI-based IT tool. Individual interviews will be conducted for the core study with at least 20 operational middle managers. Middle managers are indeed the most impacted in their work practices and they show a great influence to participate in the change in the organisations (Balogun & Johnson, 2004).

Drawing on Glissant's Relation and Nevo et al.'s (2016) temporal dimensions, this study will show whether digital tools are instead used to improve productivity, producing better and faster deliverables (IT Adaptation), or whether they are used for new goals, new streams of revenue or more creativity (IT Reinvention)? This research will also examine how middle managers interact with top managers in decentralised headquarters, or their colleagues in other regions of France or abroad, draw on their relationship to the Whole-World (Poetics of Relation) and how they construct their sense of digital transformation and use of digital technologies.

Figure 2 below highlights the key concepts of Glissant’s Relation approach that we will examine preliminarily in this study. Culture, time, and space will be examined as interrelated entities from the discourses of managers. Those concepts will also be related to the concept of “Whole-World” of Glissant.

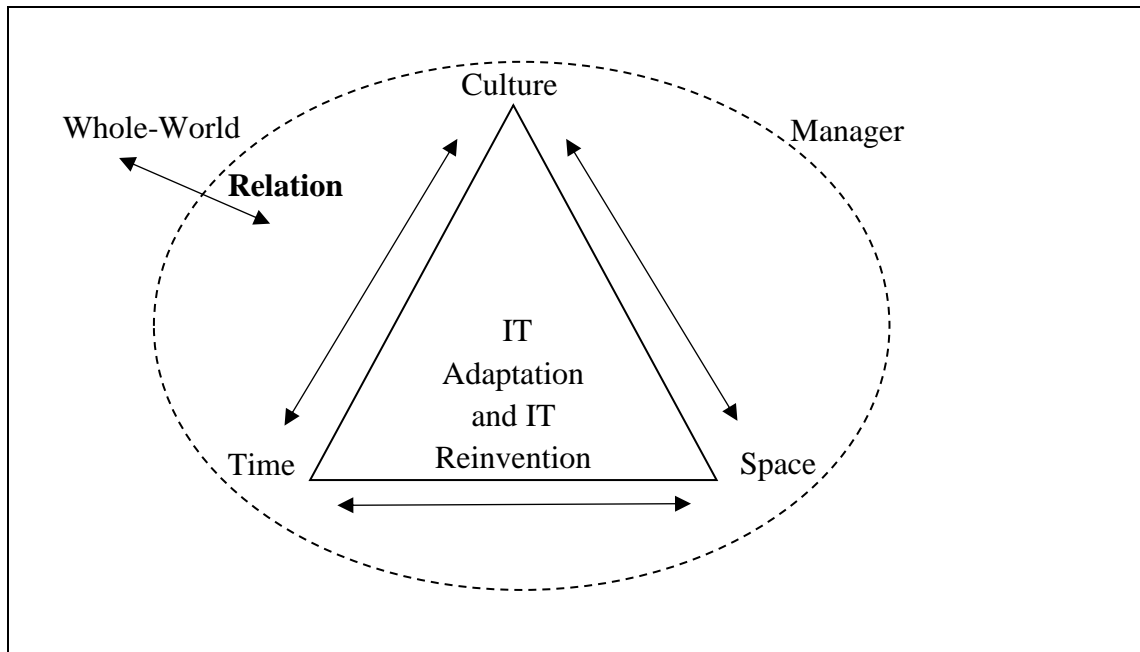


Figure 2. Overview of the Analytical Approach.

The coding and the analyses will be carried out according to the standards of research in management and organisation (Miles & Huberman, 2003; Yin, 2011) with a constant back and forth process between the literature and the field. Our analyses of Glissant’s thought are still ongoing in this respect.

4.Expected contributions

The research will hopefully contribute to a better understanding of managers' representations and expectations regarding the implementation of digital transformation. The knowledge created will allow us to analyse and understand managers' constructions of digital transformation and change and their actions in relation to IS implementation, particularly regarding the processes of IT Adaptation and IT Reinvention.

First, while we still have a lot to learn about digital transformation processes overall (Vial, 2019), this paper offers an innovative way of approaching digital transformation. In doing so, it leverages the Relation theory in understudied postcolonial contexts, characterised by economic rents, where innovation is idling. We believe this study will therefore be a step towards a better understanding of not only how contemporary managers integrate digital transformation into their work practices, adapt to or even reinvent new IT tools, and the role of culture, time, and space in this process, but also how they embrace the Whole-World from within their organisation.

Second, this study is conducted in the specific and insular context of Martinique, a small Caribbean Island. While most research on digital transformation focuses on traditional, large, Western or Asian organisations, we believe that there is still much to be known and learned from extreme contexts in terms of geographical, economic, and managerial constraints as well as specific culture and history. All these constraints contribute to a great deal of uncertainty and ambiguity that can hamper decision-making.

The present work expects to shed light on middle managers' actions and responses to digital initiatives. It plans to do so with contextualised approach, taking into consideration parameters that are not usually examined in IS research, such as history and its role in the construction of mental schemes in societies. It may therefore help to better understand, in a more contextualised manner, the dynamics of digital transformation, and to better understand managers' needs and social construction while tackling digital initiatives and innovations.

5. Conclusion

This research aims to arrive at a better understanding of the working practices of managers in contexts of digital transformation and of the forces that hinder or promote the digital transformation in their organisation. To do this, it relies on Glissant's theory of Relation to conduct a qualitative study with middle managers in Martinique. The study aims to analyse how the dimensions of culture, time, and space are reflected in managers' discourses in response to IT Adaptation and IT Reinvention, and to identify their relationship to the world in the context of organisational development.

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