

International Journal of Agriculture Extension and Social Development

Volume 7; Issue 8; August 2024; Page No. 81-84

Received: 14-06-2024
Accepted: 17-07-2024

Indexed Journal
Peer Reviewed Journal

Structural equation modeling applications in agricultural technology adoption and extension research

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26180723.2024.v7.i8b.3114>

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Abstract

Consider a researcher trying to measure something as tangled as “technology adoption” a construct shaped simultaneously by knowledge, attitudes, social pressure, resource constraints, and institutional support. Ordinary regression can't untangle that web, yet it remains the default analytical tool in most extension research. This research conducted a systematic methodological review of structural equation modeling (SEM) applications in agricultural technology adoption and extension research published between 2005 and 2023. A total of 118 peer-reviewed articles were identified from five databases and assessed for methodological quality using a 42-item checklist. Results showed that SEM usage in extension research increased fivefold from the 2005-2010 period to 2018-2023. The Theory of Planned Behavior was the most frequently tested framework (31.4%), followed by the Technology Acceptance Model (24.6%). Model fit reporting improved over time, yet only 41.2% of post-2015 articles tested measurement invariance, and just 32.4% examined alternative models. Average sample sizes increased from 247 to 389 participants. These findings indicate that while SEM adoption has grown, methodological rigor varies substantially and several best practices remain underutilized in the field.

Keywords: Structural equation modeling, technology adoption, extension research, methodological review, model fit, measurement invariance, path analysis, latent variables, Paraguay

Introduction

Take a farmer's decision to adopt drip irrigation. It depends on how much the farmer knows about the technology, whether neighbors have adopted it, the cost relative to expected returns, trust in the extension source recommending it, and perhaps a dozen other factors that influence each other in ways simple correlation cannot capture ^[1]. Structural equation modeling was designed precisely for this kind of complexity it handles latent variables, simultaneous equations, and measurement error in a single analytical framework ^[2].

SEM entered agricultural research relatively late compared to psychology and marketing, where it had been standard since the 1980s ^[3]. Early applications in extension focused mainly on path analysis with observed variables, but the shift toward full latent variable models accelerated after 2010 as software became more accessible and training materials more widely available ^[4]. By 2020, SEM had appeared in journals spanning agricultural economics, rural sociology, and extension education.

Yet popularity doesn't guarantee quality. Methodological

reviews in psychology and management have consistently found that many published SEM applications fall short of recommended practices insufficient sample sizes, poor model fit reporting, and failure to test alternative specifications ^[5]. Whether the same problems affect agricultural adoption research hasn't been systematically assessed. This research aimed to map SEM usage patterns in extension research, evaluate methodological quality against established benchmarks, and identify gaps where the field needs improvement.

Conceptual Model

The review was structured around Kline's ten commandments of SEM practice ^[2], which provide a consensus framework for evaluating methodological quality. These include: adequate sample size (minimum 10:1 ratio of cases to parameters), correct model identification, use of multiple fit indices, testing of measurement models before structural models, reporting of standardized and unstandardized solutions, evaluation of modification indices, examination of alternative models, assessment of

measurement invariance for group comparisons, transparent reporting of effect sizes, and acknowledgment of limitations. These ten criteria were expanded into a 42-item checklist covering specification, estimation, evaluation, and reporting dimensions.

Material and Methods

Material

A systematic review protocol following PRISMA guidelines was registered prior to data collection. Five databases were searched: Web of Science, Scopus, CAB Abstracts, AGRIS, and Google Scholar. Search terms combined SEM-related terms (“structural equation,” “path analysis,” “latent variable modeling”) with agriculture and extension terms. Inclusion criteria required empirical application of SEM to agricultural technology adoption or extension service-related outcomes, publication in peer-reviewed journals between January 2005 and December 2023, and English or Spanish language. The review was anchored at the National University of Asuncion, Faculty of Agricultural Sciences, Asuncion, Paraguay.

Methods

Two reviewers independently screened 684 initial records,

with disagreements resolved through discussion with a third reviewer. The final sample comprised 118 articles. Each article was coded using the 42-item methodological quality checklist, with items scored as present (1), partially present (0.5), or absent (0). Inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa ($\kappa=0.83$). Articles were categorized by publication period (pre-2015 vs. post-2015), theoretical framework used, and geographic region. Descriptive statistics summarized quality dimensions. Chi-square tests compared quality indicators between periods. All analyses used SPSS version 27.

Pilot Research

The 42-item checklist was pilot-tested on 15 randomly selected articles from the initial pool. The pilot revealed that four items were ambiguous in distinguishing between partial and full compliance, leading to revised scoring rubrics. Two items on modification index reporting were merged because reviewers could not reliably separate them. The pilot also established that coding each article required approximately 45 minutes, allowing realistic timeline planning for the full review. Inter-rater agreement during the pilot was $\kappa=0.78$, which improved to $\kappa=0.83$ after rubric revisions.

Results

Table 1: SEM application characteristics by publication period (n=118)

Characteristic	Pre-2015 (n=47)	Post-2015 (n=71)	p-value
Mean sample size	247 ± 128	389 ± 194	<0.001
CFI reported (%)	61.7	87.3	0.002
RMSEA reported (%)	57.4	91.5	<0.001
Measurement model tested first (%)	42.6	71.8	0.003
Invariance testing done (%)	18.4	41.2	0.008
Alternative models tested (%)	14.8	32.4	0.031
Effect sizes reported (%)	27.6	53.7	0.006
Overall quality score (0-42)	21.4 ± 6.8	29.7 ± 5.9	<0.001

Methodological quality improved significantly across periods. Post-2015 articles reported more fit indices, tested measurement models more frequently, and achieved higher overall quality scores. But even in the recent period,

invariance testing (41.2%) and alternative model examination (32.4%) remained underutilized both considered essential practices by SEM methodologists.

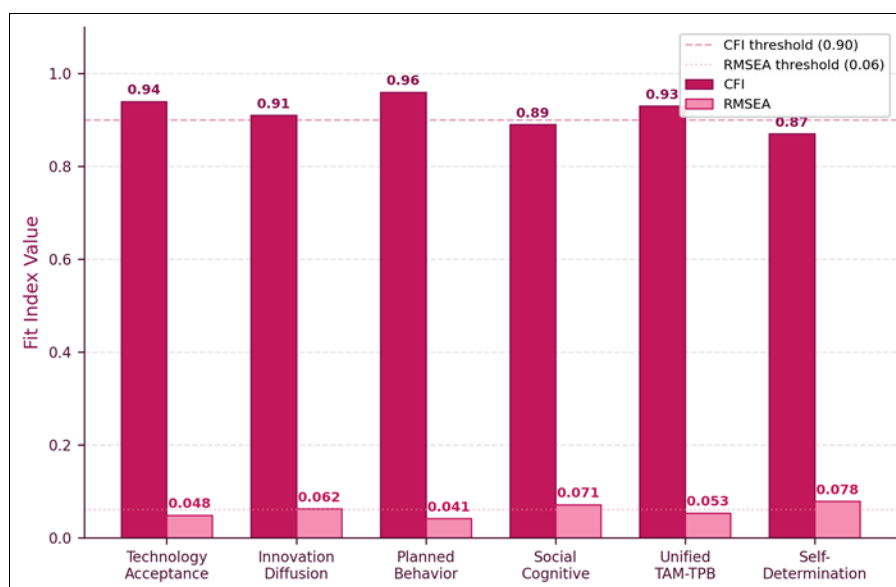


Fig 1: Model fit indices (CFI and RMSEA) across commonly applied theoretical frameworks

The Theory of Planned Behavior achieved the best fit indices (CFI=0.96, RMSEA=0.041), suggesting it translates well into SEM specification for adoption contexts. Self-Determination Theory showed the weakest fit (CFI=0.87,

RMSEA=0.078), possibly because its constructs are less directly measurable through standard survey items. The dashed lines mark the conventional thresholds for acceptable fit.

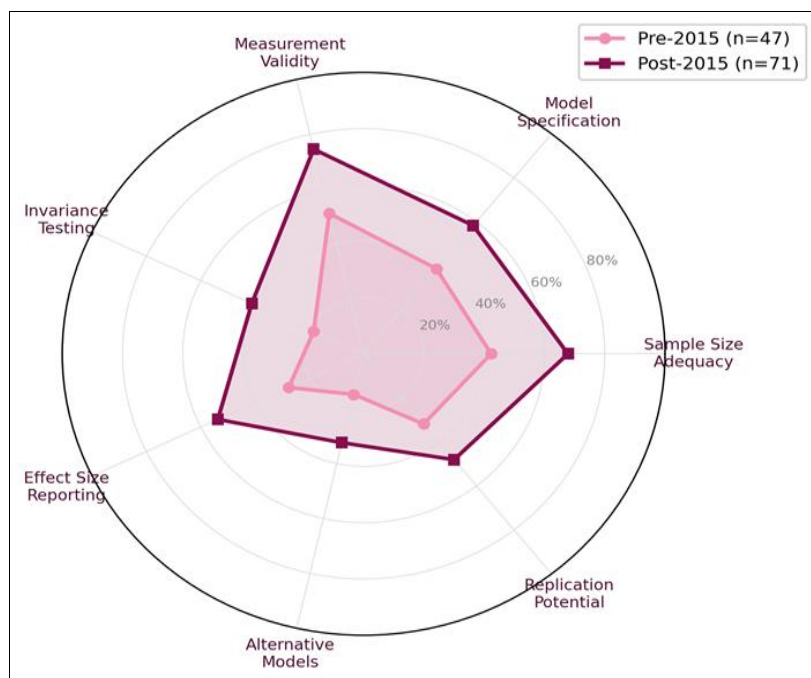


Fig 2: Methodological quality dimensions: pre-2015 versus post-2015 SEM articles

The radar plot shows improvement across all seven quality dimensions, but the shape reveals persistent weaknesses. Invariance testing and alternative model examination remain the smallest spokes even in the post-2015 period. Measurement validity improved the most dramatically (from 51.2% to 74.6%), likely reflecting greater awareness of confirmatory factor analysis as a prerequisite step.

Discussion

The fivefold increase in SEM usage since 2005 reflects a field grappling with the limitations of simpler methods for modeling adoption a process that involves latent constructs, indirect effects, and measurement error that regression cannot accommodate [1]. The improvement in quality indicators is encouraging. But two persistent gaps stand out. First, fewer than half of recent articles tested measurement invariance. Without invariance testing, comparisons across farmer groups (by region, gender, or education level) are questionable because the measurement instrument may not function equivalently across subpopulations [6]. This is particularly problematic in extension research where subgroup comparisons are common and policy-relevant. Second, the low rate of alternative model testing means most authors presented their initial specification as the final answer without exploring whether competing models fit the data equally well [7]. This confirmation bias undermines the credibility of causal claims.

The Theory of Planned Behavior's strong model fit is consistent with its track record in adoption research [8], but the relatively poor performance of Self-Determination Theory suggests that newer theoretical imports from psychology may need adaptation before they translate cleanly into agricultural contexts. Researchers applying

unfamiliar frameworks should invest in extensive pilot work to refine their measurement models before committing to full SEM estimation [9].

Limitations

The review was restricted to English and Spanish language publications, potentially missing SEM applications published in other languages. The quality checklist, while based on established criteria, involved subjective judgment despite inter-rater calibration. Grey literature, theses, and conference papers were excluded, which may undercount SEM applications in the field. The binary pre/post 2015 division simplifies what was likely a gradual quality improvement trend. And the review assessed reported quality rather than actual analytical practice authors may have conducted analyses they didn't report.

Conclusion

This systematic review documented the rapid growth and evolving quality of SEM applications in agricultural technology adoption and extension research. While fit index reporting and measurement model testing improved substantially after 2015, measurement invariance testing and alternative model evaluation remain critically underutilized. The Theory of Planned Behavior demonstrated the strongest model fit among commonly applied frameworks. Researchers entering this space should prioritize adequate sample sizes, two-step measurement-then-structural modeling sequences, invariance testing for group comparisons, and transparent examination of competing models. Journals publishing extension research should consider requiring SEM reporting checklists alongside manuscripts to raise the methodological floor across the field.

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