
Culture and Communication: Cultural Variations and Media Effectiveness

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Abstract

Advances in communication technologies have made great progress in bridging time and distance, but social and cultural differences are still formidable obstacles to effective communication. Communication processes occur in specific cultural contexts, with unique normative beliefs, assumptions, and shared symbols. Culture influences what people communicate, to whom they communicate, and how they communicate. There has been little systematic cross-cultural research to explicate the effects of communication media on communication effectiveness. This article proposes cultural effects on perceptions of media effectiveness. The authors advance conceptual knowledge by presenting new perspectives on the cultural effects on individuals' perception of media and their effectiveness.

Keywords

communication, culture, individualism, media, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, media richness theory

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Introduction

Foreign investments continue to increase dramatically (Flynn, 1997), fueled by a search for new markets, reductions in labor costs, outsourcing of operations, increasing quality, and other competitive advantages. One of the most critical problems organizations face when they expand their operations into new countries is learning how to communicate with the local workforce effectively. Although advances in communication technologies have made great progress in bridging time and distance and also offer more communication options (Watson-Manheim & Belanger, 2007), social and cultural differences can make the communication process puzzling and complicated (Adams, 1997). It is reasonable to suggest that the society in which the organization is embedded will influence the way the organization operates (Harris & Moran, 1991). Increasing globalization requires both managers and scholars to understand the complex consequences of different communication methods on the receiver's understanding and response, quite apart from the actual message being sent.

In many organizations, cross-cultural communication is a daily norm, but managers and researchers are only beginning to understand the problems that can occur because of the variations in interpersonal interactions. Research has shown that much of the failure or success of international ventures is linked to communication quality (Czinkota, Ronkainen, Moffett, & Moynihan, 1998; Kanter & Yatsuko, 1994; Moore & Spekman, 1994). Communication between two or more others is complex (Trevino, Webster, & Stein, 2000), that is, it occurs in specific social and cultural contexts with unique normative beliefs, assumptions, and shared symbols. Therefore, research approaches to communication must consider not only the goals of the process but also the social context. Therefore, there is a need to examine cultural variations and their impacts on communication effectiveness.

This crucial link between communication processes and the transfer of needed data, information, and knowledge has resulted in a need for strategies to deal with appropriate networking across global enterprises (Gronroos, 1994; Palmer, 1997). Companies that can mesh relationship maintenance with task accomplishments have a significant competitive advantage, as both are significant outcomes of communication (Griffith & Harvey, 2001; Mohr & Nevin, 1990). However, once again, despite some notable exceptions in the area of email and Internet use discussed in our sections on individualism and power distance (e.g., Huang, Lu, & Wong, 2003; Ross, 2001), the implicit nature of cultural effects on overall communication across borders and cultures is often overlooked (Weisinger & Trauth, 2003).

Media include all of those techniques we use for getting our message across—using the general categories of written, audio, video, and face-to-face. The question addressed in this article is, Are decisions about which media are effective affected by societal culture? Our primary objective is to understand how specific cultural variations are related to individual judgments of communication effectiveness.

Research indicates that both the type of media used in communication and cultural imperatives influence perceptions of communication effectiveness and media choice (Donabedian, McKinnon, & Bruns, 1998). Media richness theory suggests that individual perceptions of effectiveness depend on the match between communication requirements (i.e., sender's goals and the type and amount of data) and media capacities (e.g., Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987). However, cultural theories (e.g., Samovar, Porter, & Jain, 1981) suggest that communication effectiveness is, in part, socially determined. Media that possess the necessary capacities may not be culturally appropriate. Therefore, media deemed appropriate in one setting may not be appropriate in another.

We have chosen to examine the effects of societal culture and individual-level perceptions of media effectiveness. We recognize that other variables affect communication, particularly receiver characteristics, organizational and occupational culture, technology acceptance, and individual preferences. However, our focus is on the intricacies of cultural effects on perceptions of media effectiveness. A better definition is that communication effectiveness is measured in terms of the extent to which the communication episode achieved the sender's goals. Therefore, we seek to extend the literature in this area because we are looking at effectiveness, *not* as the match between richness and the message's equivocality but in terms of whether the receiver understands the message as the sender intended.

We first discuss communication and media richness theory. Then we give a brief overview of the cultural variations we consider to be crucial to communication effectiveness. Next, we present the relationship between culture and communication. Our multilevel model is discussed, and we outline the implications of the model and discuss possible techniques for investigating this phenomenon. We examine the interactions between culture and communication, using media richness theory as a lens.

Communication and Media Richness Theory

Katz and Kahn (1978) argued that communication is the essence of an organization. Organizations are designed to facilitate communication;

therefore, they must adapt to changing communication requirements. The choice of media for communication is important anywhere that effective transfer of data, information, or knowledge is critical. Understanding the effectiveness of media choices can help in designing information and communication technologies (Fulk & Boyd, 1991). As the knowledge economy expands globally (Drucker, 1993), organizations are becoming aware of the competitive advantage of effective communication.

Organizations are complex systems, dealing in detail with data, information, and knowledge (Galbraith, 1977; Tushman & Nadler, 1978). In terms of intraorganizational communication, the choice of one medium over another may convey many cues concerning the importance, urgency, and/or complexity of the message. For example, messages in written form may take priority over phone or face-to-face messages, for communicating "official" policy; however, in other organizations, email may be the media of choice. However, it is not clear if this choice spans cultures and borders or not.

There is considerable interest in improving organizational communication. Organizational research has focused primarily on explaining how people choose media for communication within the organization, given various objectives and circumstances. Communication goals also include changing the receiver's attitudes and getting the receiver to take a specific action. A partial list of communication theories include the following: Media Richness Theory (e.g., Daft & Lengel, 1984), Critical Mass Theory (e.g., M. L. Markus, 1987), Social Presence Theory (e.g., Rice, 1993; Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976), Symbolic Interactionism (e.g., Stryker & Statham, 1985), Dual Capacity Model (Sitkin, Sutcliffe, & Barrios-Choplin, 1992), and Social Influence Theory (e.g., Fulk, 1993; Steinfield, 1992). Many communication theories originate from the idea that communication media have different features associated with their capacities for transmitting information and the nature of information exchange that they facilitate between senders and receivers (Carlson & Zmud, 1999; Fulk & Boyd, 1991; King & Xia, 1997). Studies examining factors that influence a sender's choice of communication media provide relevant information, although they do not directly address the issue of effectiveness (Sitkin, Sutcliffe, & Barrios-Choplin, 1992).

There is evidence that (a) task demands influence the selection of media and (b) selection of media that is appropriate to the task is perceived as more effective by the receiver (Daft et al., 1987). However, we find that effectiveness (i.e., whether the receiver understands the message as the sender intended) is not tested in the various investigations of media richness theory. Instead, they test the match between richness and the message's equivocality,

which is not the same thing. Another criticism of media richness theory and other media choice theories is that *context* variation is rarely taken into account. Most view communication context as stable; however, Fulk, Schmitz, and Schwarz (1991) argued that it is evolving and reciprocates actions taken by sender and receiver. With this as a starting point, we consider media characteristics and cultural variations as contrasting forces affecting the perceptions of communication effectiveness that organizational members use when choosing media.

Communication theories are based on the idea that communication is purposeful. There is a sender, a receiver, content to be communicated, a medium for transmitting the information, and a social and cultural context. Media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1984, 1986) views each type of media as having particular characteristics influencing the amount of information or knowledge it is capable of carrying. Daft and Lengel (1984) termed this *media richness*. According to this theory, (a) the communication purpose, (b) type and amount of information or knowledge, and (c) characteristics of the receiver are determinants of media choice.

All communication media have a particular capacity to convey information or knowledge correctly and to be understood. Some media communicate data more effectively; others communicate symbols more effectively. For example, face-to-face communication is much better at carrying symbols than data; however, written media, such as letters, are better at carrying data and information. In media richness theory, the richer the media, the more symbols can be conveyed in a given period of time.

Messages conveying objective data or information often require less explanation than do messages conveying more subjective information and knowledge, for example, information about values, norms, and unique character. Communication quality and effectiveness is measured by the receiver, not the sender, and the receiver must be familiar with the context (or culture) to understand the symbolic content of messages, but not necessarily for data or information content (Sitkin et al., 1992).

The expectations that individuals have about the content and context of messages allow individuals to decide whether to pay attention to the message, for example, the language used for the message or even whether it reads from left to right or from right to left (Te'eni, 2001). For example, a formal memorandum regarding a trivial matter may seem unusual to an outsider but, to an organizational member, the communication will be accepted for its symbolism as well as its content, because it fits into the normal organizational communication pattern (Schein, 1992). If the communication was in a different format, it might not be recognized as legitimate, and it could possibly be

ignored. Over time, deciding the type of communication media to use for a specific task becomes institutionalized or expected (Watson-Manheim & Belanger, 2007). If the medium does not match the type of message expected, it may be ignored or considered illegitimate.

Daft and Macintosh (1981) defined communication effectiveness in terms of the ability of a message to change the receiver's level of understanding. The goals of communication also include changing the receiver's attitudes and getting the receiver to take a specific action. As discussed above, we define effectiveness as specifically whether the sender's message was received correctly by the receiver.

The discussion about whether media richness is the primary determinant in communication effectiveness continues in the literature (Dennis & Kinney, 1998; El-Shinnawy & Markus, 1997; Sheer & Chen, 2004; Sitkin et al., 1992). We believe that media richness is important in understanding effectiveness in cross-cultural communication. Media richness would seem to assist the communication of symbolism essential in some cultures, and the lack of richness is a key element to consider in explaining confusions in cross-cultural communication.

In the next section, we examine selected societal culture variations and discuss ways in which they are likely to affect media use within organizations, both at the societal level and the individual level.

Societal Culture Variations

Culture can be seen as an independent variable that influences behavior and communication and is, in turn, reinforced by them (Miller, 2002). Understanding cultural differences is crucial (Kagitcibasi & Berry, 1989). Oysterman, Kimmelmeier, and Coon (2002) argued that individual-level approaches view culture as a set of attitudes, internalized values, and beliefs influencing affect, cognition, and motivation. In essence, culture is the dynamic that tells members how to behave (Caprara & Cervone, 2000).

As individuals work and play within their society, they are guided by a group of behavioral rules and norms that are inherent within their specific society (Hofstede, 2001). Culture consists of a set of beliefs, values, attitudes, and patterns of behavior shared by members of a social unit (Hofstede, 1980, 1991, 2001). It tells us not only how to behave but also how to *interpret* the behavior of others and how to communicate with them (Miller, 2002). Therefore, culture influences interpersonal and group relationships strongly. One of the primary functions of culture is to define norms for interpersonal communication, as discussed by Samovar et al. (1981, p. 24):

Culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks with whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted. In fact, our entire repertory of communicative behaviors is dependent largely on the culture in which we have been raised. Culture, consequently, is the foundation of communication. And, when cultures vary, communication practices also vary.

This suggests that culture has a great deal more influence on messages about social units, people, behavior, relationships, and similar topics (symbolic communication) than on less culturally relevant messages (such as messages with data).

Over time, many variations of culture have been considered. In management sciences research, the most commonly used variation is individualism versus collectivism, because of its centrality to other variations (Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, & Gelfand, 1995). Hofstede's work has been considered useful because it is clear and easy to understand (Erez & Earley, 1993). The instrument that is used in determining cultural variation is also clear and practical for cross-cultural administration purposes. Therefore, we focus on the effects of three of Hofstede's cultural variations. First, we examine individualism versus collectivism, because we believe it is central to the other variations of Hofstede and other cross-cultural scholars. Extremes of behavior, as defined in the concept of individualism or collectivism, are infrequent; "people are always gray—never black or white" (Singelis et al., 1995, p. 243). For example, individualism, taken to its extreme, is selfishness; extreme collectivism is tyranny.

We also examine power distance and uncertainty avoidance because, as we discussed, examining multiple variations in a meso-model will allow us to look at the perceptions of media effectiveness and resulting media preferences in a more inclusive fashion. It is not possible to discuss all of the cultural variations identified by all of the research; therefore, we have chosen these three, which we believe are the most salient to the larger issue of organizational communication processes.

Therefore, we examine the cultural variations of individualism, power distance, and uncertainty orientation at the individual level as well as the societal level. In addition, we discuss their interaction with communication and outline propositions to explain the operationalization of communication, based on cultural variations. We recognize that other variables affect

communication, particularly receiver characteristics, organizational and occupational culture, technology acceptance, and individual preferences. However, our focus is on the intricacies of cultural effects on perceptions of communication effectiveness. We discuss each cultural variation and the propositions that result.

Individualism as a Variation of Culture

Individualism versus collectivism is a cultural variation, both as a societal- and an individual-level construct, to explain various organizationally relevant outcomes (Earley & Gibson, 1998; Erez & Earley, 1993; Gudykunst, 1997; Gudykunst & Matsumoto, 1996; Hofstede, 1980, 1991, 1994, 2001; Singelis & Brown, 1995; Triandis, 1989, 1990, 1994, 1995, 1998, 2002a). Individualism versus collectivism has been highly significant in the delineation of various individual and group behaviors, for example, goal achievement and relationship importance (Earley & Gibson, 1998; Triandis, 2002a, 2002b), and accounts for a significant amount of variance in the social behavior of individuals across cultures (Triandis, 1995). This variation is probably the most used in computer-mediated communication research (Rice, D'Ambra, & More, 1998). Others may use other terms (e.g., *communitarianism*; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998), but Hofstede's (1980, 1991, 2001) findings are the most commonly used, and cross-cultural researchers continue to prefer the terms *individualism* and *collectivism* (Earley, 1993; Peterson, Smith, & colleagues, 1995; Singelis et al., 1995; Spector et al., 2002; Thomas & Au, 2002).

The individualism-versus-collectivism variation is first discussed below as a societal-level construct and then as an individual-level construct.

Societal level. Hofstede (1980) proposed ranking countries on an individualism–collectivism continuum (the Individualism Index) and then grouped countries in terms of similar and dissimilar cultures. *Individualists* tend to prefer working alone, and personal goals are of primary importance; however, *collectivists* tend to prefer working in groups, and group goals are of primary importance. Hofstede (1991) defined individualism versus collectivism:

Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose; everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism . . . pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive ingroups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. (p. 51)

Hall (1959, 1976), U. Kim, Triandis, Kagitcibasi, and Yoon (1994), and H. Markus and Kitayama (1991) identified various aspects of individualism–collectivism. One primary identification point of this variation is the extent to which there is a preference for group membership. Also, in individualistic societies, task performance is emphasized more than role prescriptions—the pressure is for quick and efficient goal achievement (Van Scotter, Motowidlo, & Cross, 2000). Successful completion of a task or problem solving is seen as a credit to the individual group members. Without the problem to solve, groups are no longer needed (Oysterman et al., 2002), and there is little use to focus on relationships (Sanchez-Burks, 2002; Sanchez-Burks et al., 2003; Sanchez-Burks, Nisbett, & Ybarra, 2000).

On the other hand, collectivists tend to place more emphasis on similarities between group members than on differences and view others in terms of consistency with the group. Therefore, group structure is determined by a combination of role prescriptions, norms for communication, and patterns of interpersonal behavior from the social culture. Successful task completion or problem solving is seen as a credit to the group, and there is a focus on relationships whether problem solving is occurring (Oysterman et al., 2002; Sanchez-Burks, 2002; Sanchez-Burks et al., 2003, 2000).

Individual level. Cultures are not monolithic and, within each societal culture, people vary in the degree to which they are individualistic or collectivistic (Triandis, 1995). However, each society has members that range along a continuum from individualistic to collectivistic, no matter the overall country ranking (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995). This distinction helps us understand one of the challenges of communicating across cultures: People within different cultures may not fit the overall cultural profile completely. Individualistic individuals view (a) the *self* as independent of others, (b) individual goals as more significant than in-group goals, and (c) in-groups as relatively loose formations (H. Markus & Kitayama, 1991). On the other hand, collectivistic individuals (a) view the *self* as interdependent within specific in-groups, (b) group goals as more significant than individual goals, and (c) in-groups as tight formations (H. Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Individualism–collectivism and communication. Gudykunst (1997) and Gudykunst and Matsumoto (1996) argued that individualism explains major differences and similarities in the way individuals communicate. Research shows that individualists are more direct in their communication and place less emphasis on the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others (Singelis & Brown, 1995). Te’eni (2001) explains that some differences in communication result from the focus individualists place on finding their differences from

each other, making them more likely to seek information about themselves than others (H. Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

For example, Hall (1959, 1976) contends that U.S. individualism is low in context, that is, most information is codified and formalized to increase understanding in the multicultural context. In U.S. society in particular, creativity and efficiency by individuals is valued and rewarded, leading individuals to restrict their communication with other members of the organization and increasing the reliance on formal channels. Individualists seek acontextual information and emphasize the importance of codified information (Triandis, 1990, 1995, 1998).

Communicators from collectivist cultures place more emphasis on high-context communication and attribute meaning to both the context and the receiver's orientation (Hall, 1959, 1976), which can be confusing to those in lower context individualistic cultures. In collectivistic cultures, message content is often embedded in the context of the communication. Thus, the receiver needs contextual cues to interpret the message properly, and continually looks for cues in communication (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Hall, 1976; H. Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Ross, 2001; Triandis, 1995, 1998). Therefore, it is likely that collectivists will disregard information and knowledge sent using less rich media (Bhagat, Kedia, Harveston, & Triandis, 2002; Ross, 2001), because the communication is ambiguous to them—there are not enough cues to completely analyze the communication.

Rice (1998) suggested that

communicators . . . likely belonging to collectivistic cultures, should place greater emphasis on high context communication, attributes of meaning to the context, and receive orientation . . . [implying that collectivists] prefer richer media, and possibly interpret situations as being more equivocal, unless the situations would place the responsibility for interpretation on the receiver. (p. 7)

Therefore, it would follow that people from collectivist cultures would prefer synchronous media, because this would help them understand the other communication partner's reactions to the message and make necessary adjustments (Rice, 1998). Erez and Earley (1993) suggest that collectivists emphasize more two-way communication, more personal communication, and more frequent communication, especially to coordinate activities and help clarify decision processes. Another distinct difference in communication between individualistic and collectivistic cultures is the relative emphasis on task versus relationship orientation. Individualists emphasize task performance whereas collectivists emphasize relationships (Te'eni, 2001).

		Societal Preference	
		Individualism	Collectivism
Individual Preference	Individualism	Lean Media	Leaner Media
	Collectivistic	Richer Media	Rich Media

Figure 1. Postulated effect of the individualism dimension at the societal and individual levels

Therefore, in looking at the variation of individualism versus collectivism at the societal and individual levels, some propositions emerge concerning the interaction of this variation and perceptions of media effectiveness:

Proposition 1: In communicating the same information or knowledge, individuals in societies that are more collectivistic will view rich media as more effective for organizational communication than will individuals in societies that are more individualistic.

Proposition 2: Regardless of the society (collectivistic or individualistic orientation), in communicating the same information or knowledge, individuals who are more collectivistic in personal behavior will view richer media as more effective for organizational communication than will individuals who are more individualistic in personal behavior.

In other words, individualism, at the societal level, drives organizational members to consider less rich and less personal (lean) communication media more effective than rich media, whereas collectivism drives rich media to be considered more effective. In the same vein, individuals who are more individualistic are more likely to consider less rich and less personal (leaner) communication media more effective than do organizational members who are more collectivistic. We demonstrate Proposition 2 in Figure 1.

The Power-Distance Variation of Culture

Briefly, power is perception; it is the potential to control or influence others, often through control of resources (Dahl, 1957; Emerson, 1962; Pettigrew, 1973; Pfeffer, 1994). Power distance as a cultural variation is the

extent to which a society accepts unequal distributions of power in institutions and organizations (Hofstede, 1980, 1991, 2001). However, power distance at the individual level has not been explored. In this section, we will first discuss societal-level power distance and then suggest its operationalization at the individual level.

Societal level. Hofstede's (1980, 2001) work on power distance is relevant when discussing media use in various cultural contexts. In cultures where power distance is small, supervisors exhibit less power over subordinates, and interdependence develops instead. Workers do not necessarily expect to be told what to do. High-power-distance cultures are those that more readily accept inequalities, expect superiors to tell subordinates what to do, and regard hierarchy as a central principle (Hofstede, 2001). In these cultures, centralized organizations tend to facilitate strict obedience and concentration of power.

People in high-power-distance cultures are more likely to depend on superiors within their organization to make crucial decisions (Lim, 2004). We believe that power distance influences the extent to which communication flows freely, both upward and downward within an organization. For example, Asian cultures generally have higher power distances than does U.S. culture. We have seen that those in Asian cultures tend to email their U.S. counterparts with copies to everyone above them in the hierarchy. This has led to significant misunderstandings and confusions between the two groups, as those in the U.S. culture tend to email their superiors only in specific instances, not in every email. Ross (2001) found that uncertainty avoidance has a negative relationship between power distance and the extent of technological adoption and use.

Individual level. Little research has been attempted in the area of individual-level power-distance orientations. There is certainly individual variation within cultures on this variation, as there are in other variations. We believe that these distinctions help us explain when particular media will be more salient: Those who prefer to maintain existing inequalities between individuals will tend to communicate using symbols and cues that maintain a status distance between themselves and subordinates and also between themselves and their superiors in the hierarchy. However, those who do not wish to maintain inequalities between individuals will tend to communicate using symbols and cues that reduce status distances between themselves and others. Therefore, regardless of the society's power-distance orientation, their choices of media will differ, because the symbols and cues they wish to communicate will differ.

Power distance and communication. From the previous definitions of high-power-distance cultures, we propose that high-power-distance cultures are likely to communicate using different media than in lower-power-distance

cultures. In high-power-distance cultures, subordinates expect a clear distinction between themselves and their superiors, and the communication preferences are likely to reflect it. High interactivity is more effective for control, contextualization, affectivity, and perspective, which are required in cultures with higher power distance (Te'eni, 2001). In high-power-distance cultures, it would seem that managers waste a significant amount of time monitoring routine messages. Huang et al. (2003) found power distance had a great effect on whether email was an acceptable communication, because in high-power-distance cultures, email did not satisfy the requirements for symbols and cues showing status and respect. In low-power-distance cultures, however, the information was all that was required, so the lack of symbols and cues was not considered a negative effect on its use.

Low-power-distance cultures provide an environment that better supports multilevel distribution of data, information, and certain types of knowledge. Members of a low-power-distance culture tend to be independent workers and are likely to have more input into decisions about which media to use. Therefore, we propose:

Proposition 3: In communicating the same information or knowledge, individuals in societies that exhibit higher power distance will consider rich media as more effective for organizational communication than will individuals in societies that exhibit lower power distance.

Proposition 4: Regardless of societal power-distance orientation, in communicating the same information or knowledge, those who more readily accept inequalities in their societies will consider richer media as more effective for organizational communication than will those who less readily accept inequalities.

In other words, low power distance, at the societal level, drives organizational members to consider less rich (lean) communication media more effective whereas organizational members in higher-power-distance societies consider rich communication more effective. At the individual level, the need for less power distance allows individuals to use less rich (leaner) communication media than can organizational members who need more power distance. Proposition 4 is illustrated in Figure 2.

The Uncertainty Avoidance Variation of Culture

The amount of uncertainty and ambiguity that an individual can cope with varies among individuals and situations. Uncertainty avoidance as a cultural

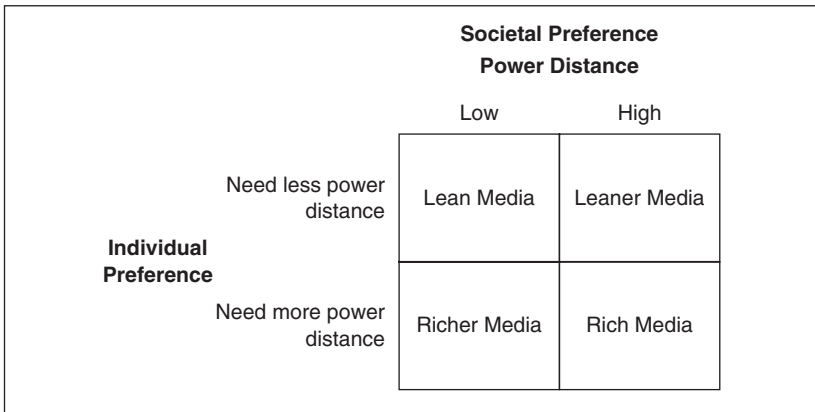


Figure 2. Postulated effect of the power-distance dimension at the societal and individual levels

variation was espoused by Hofstede (1980, 1991, 2001) to identify cultures where individuals prefer certainty over uncertainty or ambiguity. Uncertainty avoidance is “the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertainty or unknown situations” (Hofstede, 1991, p. 113).

Societal level. The importance of uncertainty avoidance at the societal level is reflected in specific cultural structures in each society, for example, school, governmental institutions, businesses, and the family (Hofstede, 1980). “Human societies at large use technology, law, and religion to cope with uncertainty; organizations use technology, rules, and rituals” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 147). High-uncertainty-avoidance cultures are unwilling to accept failure, risks, or ambiguity (Hofstede, 1980). In these cultures, ambition is not valued in and of itself, but only in terms of group goal achievement. Low-uncertainty-avoidance cultures accept conflict, competition, deviation, risk taking, and pioneering (Mueller & Thomas, 2000). Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance punish deviation from norms and encourage conformity with rules, whereas cultures with low uncertainty avoidance encourage creativity, change, and innovation (Triandis, 1989). As with power distance, Ross (2001) found that uncertainty avoidance has a negative relationship with the extent of technological adoption and use. Using technology seemed to reduce the uncertainty inherent in organizational tasks and relationships.

Individual level. Uncertainty orientation theory at the individual level was developed to explain this variance, using Hofstede’s and Triandis’s initial work. The theory proposed a continuum, with *uncertainty-oriented* individuals at

one end and *certainty-oriented* individuals at the other (Shuper, Sorrentino, Otsubo, Hodson, & Walker, 2004; Sorrentino & Roney, 2000; Sorrentino, Smithson, Hodson, Roney, & Walker, 2003). Those who are uncertainty oriented cope with uncertainty by seeking information to resolve the uncertainty, for example, "need-to-know types" (Shuper et al., 2004, p. 461), and they generally do not need much structure (Hodson & Sorrentino, 1997, 2001). They often find uncertainty motivating (Shuper & Sorrentino, 2004).

Those who are certainty oriented are less able to cope with uncertainty, preferring to deal with uncertainty indirectly, by relying on others or on logic devices (e.g., decision trees). They are happiest in environments that limit uncertainty (Hodson & Sorrentino, 2001; Mullin & Hogg, 1998; Shuper et al., 2004; Sorrentino, Bobocel, Gitta, Olson, & Hewitt, 1988). Certainty-oriented individuals rely more heavily on groups, because the group provides needed structure using defined norms and beliefs (Hodson & Sorrentino, 1997, 2001). Hodson and Sorrentino (2003) found that certainty orientation created a bias toward members of the in-group, particularly when there was high uncertainty in the environment.

Uncertainty Avoidance and Communication

Communication is needed to reduce uncertainty and equivocality, according to the media richness theory (Daft & Macintosh, 1981). Uncertainty avoidance, as a societal construct, drives organizational members in lower-uncertainty-avoidance societies to communicate in ways that are less rich than would be acceptable to organizational members in higher-uncertainty-avoidance societies. In the same vein, we proposed that individual uncertainty avoidance plays a role in choice of media. Therefore, we suggest that uncertainty versus certainty orientation, as a differentiating societal characteristic, is a determinant of media choice, specifically:

Proposition 5: In communicating the same information or knowledge, individuals in societies with higher uncertainty avoidance will consider rich media more effective for organizational communication than will individuals in societies with lower uncertainty avoidance.

Proposition 6: Regardless of the societal uncertainty avoidance orientation, in communicating the same information or knowledge, certainty-oriented individuals will consider richer media more effective for organizational communication than will uncertainty-oriented individuals.

		Societal Preference Uncertainty Avoidance	
		Low	High
Individual Preference	Uncertainty oriented (able to cope with uncertainty)	Lean Media	Leaner Media
	Certainty oriented (seeking more certainty and information)	Richer Media	Rich Media

Figure 3. Postulated effect of the uncertainty avoidance dimension at the societal and individual levels

In other words, individuals cope with uncertainty in two ways: (1) by seeking information directly, that is, uncertainty oriented; and (2) by looking to others for direction, that is, certainty oriented (Shuper et al., 2004; Sorrentino et al., 2003; Sorrentino & Roney, 2000). This has repercussions for acceptance of communication by the receiver. If the receiver is uncertainty oriented, information that might be ambiguous and require some work to identify such things as context or intent might be acceptable. However, if the receiver is certainty oriented, ambiguous messages and those without clear context or intent would be confusing and could be rejected entirely. Proposition 6 is illustrated in Figure 3.

Multilevel Model of Culture and Communication

Because of the distinct effects of culture, we have chosen to use a multi-level framework (e.g., Earley & Mosakowski, 2002) to illustrate cultural effects on perceptions of media effectiveness. In the model, shown in Figure 4, we show the interactions of the cultural variations of individualism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance at both the social and the individual levels on media effectiveness, as perceived by managers in a given culture.

In this figure, we also show moderating variables. We recognize that other variables affect communication, including task demands, receiver characteristics, organizational and occupational or professional culture, technology acceptance, and individual preferences. However, our focus is on the intricacies of cultural effects on perceptions of communication effectiveness.

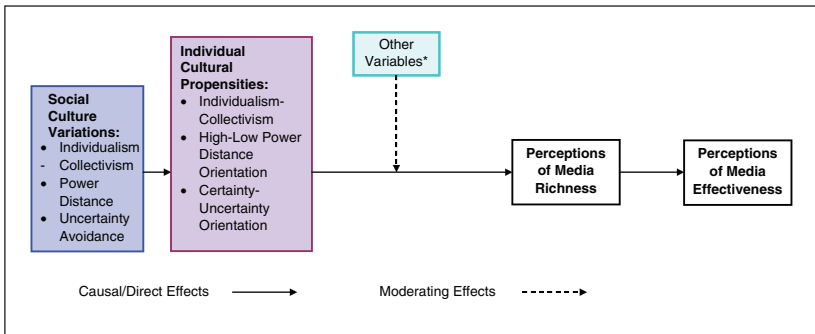


Figure 4. Model

Note: Other variables include such things as task demands, receiver characteristics, organizational and professional or occupational culture, technology acceptance, and individual preferences.

The model shows the posited direct effect of social culture (particularly individualism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance) on individual cultural propensities. These are not absolute, as individuals within a culture may not entirely fit into their culture as well as we might prefer to hypothesize. In turn, these individual propensities affect how individuals view media as rich or less rich, thus affecting their perceptions of a particular media's effectiveness. In other words, we believe there is enough evidence to show that cultural expectations and norms and their effect on individual perceptions would take precedence over perceptions of media richness when an individual identifies his or her views of media effectiveness. This would help explain the mixed results of various research streams, discussed in the Introduction section.

Because culture affects communication, understanding perceptions of media effectiveness and resulting media preferences requires the inclusion of cultural context at the societal and individual levels. Rice (1998) suggests that cultural norms may inhibit the use of particular types of media or the acceptance of new media. Ross (2001) expresses concern that as our workplaces become more virtual, the use of leaner media, such as email, can increase the problems in cross-cultural communication processes because of lack of cues, particularly when strong societal cultures filter these communications.

Discussion and Implications

Because of the increase in global communication, it is essential that we understand the repercussions of different methods of communicating and

what the use of those methods implies to the receiver, outside of the actual message being sent. Understanding the effectiveness of media choices is necessary to understanding effective organizational communication and can help in designing information and communication technologies (Fulk & Boyd, 1991). Individuals use various technologies (media) to draw on and reproduce their social contexts (Orlikowski, Yates, Okamura, & Fujimoto, 1995). Part of the social context of work is the societal culture and its effects on individual perceptions, such as effectiveness, and on behaviors, such as media choice. This article examines the effects of media characteristics and societal culture and individual culture on the perceptions of media effectiveness. The effect of cultural differences on the perception of media effectiveness has not been delineated in past research, despite numerous studies across cultures to try to determine the best means of communicating. By incorporating three cultural variations that influence communication, we attempt to highlight this significant outcome of media use.

Our propositions highlight the complex effects of culture on communication. The considerable differences between cultural patterns can have a dramatic effect on perceptions of media richness and media effectiveness. Culture requires a particular pattern of communication, which generally develops over time, based on geography, politics, and other influence; therefore, individuals within the culture are likely to ignore those communications that do not conform to the expected societal pattern.

Organizational success or failure often depends on the level of communication (Mintzberg, 1973), particularly in the transfer of knowledge across borders and cultures (Bhagat et al., 2002). Effective media use is critical to this transfer. This article advances conceptual knowledge by presenting new perspectives on the effects of cultural variations on the ways that individuals perceive media effectiveness and, as a result, choose media to use in organizations that span cultures.

Despite a great deal of research on media richness, clarity on the issue of media effectiveness remains a challenge. As discussed, there is evidence that task demands influence the selection of media, and that selection of media appropriate to the task is perceived to be more effective (Daft et al., 1987). Rarely has there been a test of whether the receiver understands the message (i.e., effectiveness) in studies investigating media richness theory. Therefore, with this as a starting point, we consider media characteristics and cultural variations as contrasting forces affecting the choices organizational members make when choosing methods of communication.

Although our model identifies multiple variables involved in communication processes, we realize it is limited. Cross-cultural scholars urge the use of

multilevel perspectives when studying organizational behavior variables that are essential in understanding global interactions (e.g., Bhagat, Baliga, Moustafa, & Krishnan, 2003; Bhagat, Kedia, Perez, & Moustafa, 2003; Bhagat & McQuaid, 1982; Boyacigiller & Adler, 1991; Chao & Moon, 2005; Earley & Mosakowski, 2002; Kagitcibasi, 1997; Kagitcibasi & Berry, 1989; U. Kim et al., 1994; Miller, 2002; Oysterman, Kimmelmeier, & Coon, 2002; Thomas & Au, 2002; Triandis, 1998). We realize that task demands, receiver characteristics, organizational and occupational culture, technology acceptance, and individual preferences also affect media choice. We realize that we ignore the contributions of these variables; however, this was beyond the scope and intent of this article. The strength of our approach is that by isolating the effect of culture on media effectiveness, future research will be better able to integrate other variables that are directly related to effectiveness, for example, task demands. Among variables that should be considered in future research as moderators are task demands, receiver characteristics, organizational and professional or occupational culture, technology acceptance, and individual preferences.

In addition, we open a further avenue for investigation into theoretical development of communication processes across cultures. For example, Watson-Manheim and Belanger (2007) developed a framework discussing the influence of organizational conditions, such as physical structure, trust, and incentives; situations, such as task characteristic and urgency; and routine on the way that individuals communicate within a firm. After much consideration, we selected media richness theory to examine this interface between culture and communication. We believe that the media richness theory is the best to help us explain the reasons for effectiveness perceptions, but we believe that a more comprehensive approach can also be useful (Trevino et al., 2000).

Another limitation is the lack of development of the interactions between the three cultural variations. As mentioned, for example, some authors (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995) believe that there is tremendous overlap between the individualism and power-distance variations. They believe that cultures rating high on individualism and low on the other variations will value communication based on the content, whereas those in other cultures will also want to know more about the speaker (Dustdar & Hofstede, 1999). We have been concerned mainly with the effect of each on perceptions of media effectiveness. We felt it was more salient to address this than to examine the interaction patterns of the cultural variables. However, we believe that further work on such interactions would be valuable.

We are intrigued by research that shows that individuals can be flexible in their reactions to cues about relationships (Sanchez-Burks et al., 2003). We wonder whether this can be true in general communication cues. In a report

of multiple studies, Sanchez-Burks et al. (2003) found that Chinese respondents given an instrument in English responded like Americans in the other studies; however, those given instruments in Chinese responded more like East Asians. We hope to incorporate some of this research in our own surveys. We are also interested in the research on email and instant messaging, which has been equivocal in different societies (El-Shinnawy & Markus, 1997; Guo, Tan, Turner, & Xu, 2008; Lee, 2000; M. L. Markus, 1994).

Further research would examine the *context* of the communication as well as the *content*, along with perceptions of media richness and the resulting media preferences, to highlight some of these points. If given a scenario, media choice could indicate the perceived effectiveness of a type of media within a particular culture. It might also be possible to consider whether individual cultural preferences are allowed flexibility within societies and organizations and, if so, in which cultures or organizational types. It would also be interesting to include receiver characteristics, organizational and occupational culture, technology acceptance, and individual preferences to determine their impact on media choice, although we realize that these variables need to be considered after we isolate the effect of societal and individual cultural effects.

In addition, we are becoming increasingly aware that culture tells scholars what behaviors to investigate (Caprara & Cervone, 2000), and we are also aware that our own biases affect our pursuit of knowledge (Gordon, Miller, & Rollock, 1990; M.-S. Kim, 2007). In the area of communication, the Western perspective has dominated the literature for many years (M.-S. Kim, 2002), although this is changing as we begin to understand more about other cultures and their members' experiences with different types of communication media.

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