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# Understanding the Role of National Culture on Communication Media Choice Behavior: A Cross-Cultural Comparison within a Multinational Organizational Setting

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## Abstract:

*Motivated by the growing significance of media choice theories, the accelerating development of information technology, the rapid pace of globalization and multinationalism, and the paucity of empirical studies of cross-cultural media choice, this paper investigates the role of culture in media choice behavior within multinational organizational (MNO) contexts. Specifically, it focuses on investigating cultural influence on perceived media richness and media preference in MNO contexts. Data were collected from an American-based Asian-Pacific area headquarters in Australia and its three subsidiaries in Asia of Thailand, Malaysia, and Korea. Significant differences were found in perceptions of media richness across all media, as well as media preference for telephone and written document between headquarters and subsidiaries. However, no significant differences were found in face-to-face and email preferences between these two different groups. Further analysis showed that within this particular MNO, face-to-face communication or email communication was always employees' first preference for communication, regardless of communication task type and irrespective of employee's national culture. Universal organizational culture implemented within MNO was argued to be the possible factor to drive such similarity between headquarters and the subsidiaries. Implications of findings are discussed and future research considered.*

## Keywords

Media richness, media choice, comparative study, globalization, information technology, computer-mediated communication, multinational organization, national culture, organizational culture.

## Introduction

The increasing dominance of multinational organizations (MNOs) and globalization of world markets have exposed the staff of organisations to working with people from different cultural contexts. As a result, cultural differences have become a focus of attention, and their effect on work behavior is becoming more evident (Erez & Early 1993). This has suggested the need for more cross-cultural research. This need is perhaps even more important for the emerging and quickly changing information systems (IS) field as information technologies

have made organizations expand beyond the confines of national boundaries to support the global operations of their parent organizations.

The present paper will focus specifically on one aspect of IS research: a study of communication media choice, examining cross-cultural differences on how media are chosen by employees within MNOs. With the advent of computer-mediated communication (CMC) systems, understanding how people choose different media for communication has been a very popular research area. MNOs are under increasing pressure to adopt and use CMC systems globally in order to survive in this rapidly competitive world. However, most media choice theories have been developed and examined in Western cultural contexts. Theories developed in Western cultural contexts do not necessarily apply in other cultures (Boyacigiller & Adler 1991). Although prior research has shown that culture indeed affects individuals' perceptions and choices for communication media (e.g. Rice, D'Ambra & More 1998; Rowe & Struck 1999; Straub 1994), no attempt has thus far been made to investigate the role of culture as an explanatory variable in accounting for the differences on individuals' media choice behavior within MNOs. A MNO is a single organization that operates in a global environment, with a need to coordinate its globally distributed operations. At the same time, a MNO is comprised of a set of subsidiaries that operate in distinct national environments. There are more and more Western multinational organizations operating their businesses in Asian countries (Adler 1986). Advanced information technology (IT) has been used widely to improve organizational performance within MNOs. However, people from different cultures have different frames of reference to guide their values, attitudes, and behaviors (Lytle, Brett, Barsness, Tinsley & Janssens 1995). Thus, employees from different cultures may have different perceptions of and preferences for media for communication. Implementation of CMC systems across cultures within one MNO encounters problems that can be attributed to the differences between the national culture of the headquarters (home culture) and local cultures of subsidiaries (host culture) (Deans & Ricks 1993; Roche 1992). Unfortunately, no guidelines have been provided to MNO managers as to whether they need to adapt to the local environment in communication media choice or to implement a similar communication management strategy across cultures. With the accelerated developments in the field of information and communication technologies, the increasing dominance of multinationals, and the globalization of labor markets, this shortcoming is clearly of concern.

To inform and equip MNO managers regarding the effects of national culture upon employees' communication behavior, this study investigated employees' communication media choice behavior in a multinational organizational setting. In particular, this study examined cultural level differences on perceived media richness and media preference, two commonly discussed variables in media choice research, in an American based company with its Asian-Pacific headquarters in Australia and three Asian subsidiaries in Thailand, Malaysia and Korea. Comparing cultural influence within one MNO allows for the control of the organizational cultural effect and examination of the difference in organizational behavior that reflects cultural-level differences. Because the subsidiaries of the MNO share similar objectives with the regional headquarters, any resulting differences could be attributed to cultural/national values (Harpaz 1995). Nevertheless, this study is somewhat exploratory because, to date, there has been no empirical work on cultural differences between Australians and Thais, Malaysians, and Korean, regarding their media choice behavior within one MNO.

The concept of culture, and the cultural components and characteristics which distinguish the regional headquarters (located in Australia) as Western and the three subsidiaries (located in

Thailand, Malaysia and Korea) as Asian are discussed in the next section of the paper. Following that, hypotheses addressing differences in perceived media richness and media preference across the two cultures developed, based on the cultural components and characteristics. The method is then presented, followed by a discussion of the results and conclusion of the study.

## The Concept and Components of Culture

National culture has a strong influence on the institutional and organizational levels of human endeavor (Shore & Venkatachalam 1995). According to Hofstede (1980), national culture shapes the type of organizations and the nature of social structures. National culture refers to the core values and beliefs of individuals within a society that are formed in complex knowledge systems during childhood and reinforced throughout life (Lachman, Nedd & Hinings 1994; Triandis 1995). Whereas a great deal of management research has been directed toward understanding organizational culture, this refers to the peripheral or more easily influenced values and beliefs that an individual holds. National culture is a fundamental force that forms, controls, and reinforces attitudes and behaviors on a continuous basis throughout the life of the individual, regardless of shifting organizational or group affiliations. Accordingly, while acknowledging that organizational culture may play an intervening role in national cultural value influence on communication behavior within a MNO, national cultural role in influencing individuals' communication behavior will be the focus of this study.

Culture is defined as a collective phenomenon, because it is at least partly shared with people who live or lived within the same social environment, which is where it was learnt (Hofstede, 1980). It is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another. After analyzing data collected from 116,000 IBM employees working in 40 different countries, Hofstede (1980) identified four dimensions with which to assess national culture. They were uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, power distance, and masculinity versus femininity.

In the field of information systems, a number of cross-cultural media choice studies have been conducted by adopting Hofstede's results (e.g. Rice et al. 1998; Straub 1994; Tan, Watson & Wei 1995; Tan, Wei, Watson, Clapper & McKean 1998a; Tan, Wei, Watson & Walczuch 1998b; Watson, Ho & Raman 1994). Collectively, these studies suggest that dimensions of culture can affect how people choose media for communication. In addition, Hofstede's model has been shown to be useful with explanatory powers in several disciplines (Tan et al. 1998b). Thus it is adopted as a theoretical framework for this study.

Although all of Hofstede's dimensions of national culture may be important to media choice research, individualism/collectivism (I/C) should be most related to explain how individuals perceive and choose different media for communication (Rice et al. 1998). This is the dimension which has been researched extensively in communication (e.g. Gudykunst 1997; Gudykunst, Matsumoto & Ting-Toomey 1996; Guo, D'Ambra & Edmundson 2001; Rice et al. 1998; Singelis 1994; Singelis & Brown 1995). This dimension is a basic distinction among cultures (Singelis et al. 1995). This is the dimension which reflects the fundamental contrast in cultural orientations between Western and Asian groups (Ho 1979). Although power distance is included in several cross-cultural media choice studies (e.g. Mejias, Shepherd, Vogel & Lazaneo 1996-97; Tan et al. 1998a; Tan et al. 1998b; Watson et al.

1994), power distance plays a significant moderating role to influence individuals' behavior in group decision making through CMC or GSS since power distance influences individuals' behavior during group work. This paper treats cultural I/C dimension as an explanatory mechanism for particular media choice behavior within organizations. The moderating role of culture is not the focus of this paper. In addition, cultural I/C is the dimension on which Australia and the three Asian countries are maximally differentiated in Hofstede's empirical study of fifty countries. Of the fifty countries studied by Hofstede (1980), Australia ranked the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest in the individualism dimension with a score of 90 (U.S. is the first), whereas Malaysia, Thailand, and Korea had a ranking of 36<sup>th</sup>, 39<sup>th</sup>–41<sup>st</sup>, and 43<sup>rd</sup> respectively, indicating that these three countries are more collectivistic and that Australia is more individualistic. In the Power distance dimension, where there are differences between the two cultural groups with Australia ranked at 41<sup>st</sup> and the other three ranked at 1<sup>st</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>–23<sup>rd</sup>, and 27<sup>th</sup>–28<sup>th</sup>, the contrast is most striking on the I/C dimension. This study grouped three Asian countries as an Asian group to compare with the Australian group in each construct. If cultural groups do not have significantly different ranks on the dimension, there will be no cultural variance in the independent variables, and therefore it would not be possible to test whether culture is a causal explanation for differences in media choice behavior (Tinsley 1994). Hence, as a starting point, it will be useful to explore the impact of this important empirically established cultural dimension of I/C on any differential media choice behavior between Australia and three Asian countries with regard to media perceptions and preferences discussed below.

The cultural dimension of I/C “describes the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups” (Hofstede & Bond 1988, p.10). The cultural I/C dimension is described by Hofstede (1980) as a conglomeration of values concerning the relation of an individual to his or her collectivity in society. An individualistic society is one in which self-concept is defined in individual or trait terms, whereas a collectivistic society is one in which an individual is defined with reference to a societal and cultural context (Erez et al. 1993). In individualistic societies, people are more self-reliant and are expected to look after mostly themselves and their immediate families, competitive rather than cooperative, having low loyalty for the organizations they work for, pursuing their own goals, and being calculative. In contrast, members in collectivistic societies, have a “we,” rather than an “I” orientation, have high loyalty for the organization working towards its goals, interact with each other in an interdependent mode, and take action jointly as a group in a cooperative fashion rather than on an individual competitive basis. Collectivistic societies strive to maintain harmony and avoid confrontation or disagreement among group members (Watson et al. 1994).

The need to preserve group harmony in a collectivistic society can be seen in the communication style. People in a collectivistic society favor high-context communication style (Gudykunst et al. 1996; Singelis et al. 1995), in which most of the contents of messages is either in the physical context or internalized in the person; very little is in the coded, explicit part of the message (Hall 1976). In contrast, low-context communication style is predominant in an individualistic society (Singelis et al. 1995). It occurs when the greatest amount of information is vested in the explicit communication code (Hall 1976). People with high-context communication styles have been demonstrated to perceive external environment, the situation and non-verbal behavior to be highly significant for the creation and interpretation of communication, whereas people characterized with low-context communication style believe that these factors are less important (Hall 1976).

## Theory Development and Hypotheses Formulation

In this section, hypotheses are developed for expected differences in perceived media richness and media preference in Australia compared with Asian respondents within one MNO. The hypotheses are based on differences in the cultures of Australia and Asian consistent with the I/C dimension identified and described in the previous section.

### Perceived Media Richness

Media richness refers to a medium's material capability to convey certain types of information. Communication media can be arrayed along a continuum of media "richness" based on each medium's capacity for immediate feedback, multiple cues, language variety, and personal focus of sources (Daft & Lengel 1984). Each of these criteria contributes to a medium's ability to transmit rich information (i.e., facilitate shared meaning and consensual understanding). Along these dimensions, face-to-face communication is considered to be the richest communication medium, followed by telephone, email, and written documents (Daft, Lengel & Trevino 1987; Schmitz & Fulk 1991; Steinfield & Fulk 1986; Trevino, Lengel, Gerloff & Muir 1990).

Perceptions of media richness are influenced by the objective characteristics of the medium (Trevino, Webster & Stein 2000). Thus, they will follow normative richness predictions with face-to-face meetings to be perceived as most rich, followed by telephone, email, and written documents. Prior research has demonstrated that perceived media richness is associated with more positive media attitudes and increased use (Fulk 1993; Trevino et al. 2000). But, in addition to the objective properties of media, individuals have perceptions of a medium's capabilities which may be influenced by their social context, such as national culture. In this paper, we argue that the I/C dimension of national culture will influence respondents from two different cultural backgrounds, Australian and Asian, in their perceptions of media richness.

The differences between individualism and collectivism assist in anticipating different perceptions of media richness between Australian and Asian respondents. Australian culture is a typical Western culture featured with high individualistic value and low-context communication style. People in such a society prefer an explicit communication style, more rational than emotional, with an emphasis on individual decision-making, less meetings, and being less reliant on social cues in ambiguous situations. They favor precision, directness, and certainty in conversations (Gudykunst et al. 1996). Thus, they perceive explicit, direct, and clear communication styles, such as email and paper documents, as the most effective (Kim & Wilson 1994). In contrast, Thailand, Malaysia, and Korea belong to Asian cultures characterized by high collectivistic value and high-context communication style. People in such societies have a "we," rather than an "I" orientation, and strive for in-group harmony and interdependence. "Face" is an important psychological construct that is closely tied to "honor", "shame", and "obligation" (Erez et al. 1993). They are sensitive to contextual factors such as the facial expressions, body language, and social cues during communication. The implicit, ambiguous, and indirect communication style, such as face-to-face talking and telephone, is perceived as the most effective (Kim et al. 1994). This thinking is consistent with arguments made by Rice et al. (1998). Because of the importance of the external environment, face-to-face communication is more highly valued in countries with a high-context culture (Steinwachs 1999). In a study comparing Japanese and American workers'

different media perceptions, Straub (1994) found that Japanese workers, characterized by a more collectivistic culture, have a lesser evaluation for a less rich medium (email), than did American workers, characterized by a more individualistic culture.

Thus, it is argued that, although respondents from the Australian headquarters and the Asian subsidiaries work for the same organization, their national cultural differences would have a strong influence on the institutional and organizational levels of human endeavor. National culture is the fundamental force that forms, controls, and reinforces attitudes and behaviors on a continuous basis throughout the life of the individual.

To summarize, given the arguments presented, it can be hypothesized that:

H1a: Respondents from Asian subsidiaries will perceive face-to-face communication to be higher in media richness than those of Australian headquarters within one MNO.

H2a: Respondents from Asian subsidiaries will perceive telephone communication to be higher in media richness than those of Australian headquarters within one MNO.

H3a: Respondents from Asian subsidiaries will perceive email communication to be lower in media richness than those of Australian headquarters within one MNO.

H4a: Respondents from Asian subsidiaries will perceive written document communication to be lower in media richness than those of Australian headquarters within one MNO.

## Media Preference

Given the importance of communication in organizations (Mintzberg 1973) and the communication media that are now available to facilitate that communication (such as the telephone, letters, email, voice-mail, and face-to-face meeting), it is important to understand employees' communication media choice behavior within the context of these media. The media choice literature suggests that a combination of factors drawn from multiple perspectives affect media choice, including task and media characteristics (Daft et al. 1987), contextual influences (Markus 1987; Steinfield et al. 1986; Trevino, Lengel & Daft 1987; Trevino et al. 1990; Trevino et al. 2000; Webster & Trevino 1995), individual differences (Carlson & Zmud 1992; Fulk 1993; Jones, Saunders & Mcleod 1988-1989; Rice & Case 1983; Rice & Shook 1988; Rice & Shook 1990; Russ, Daft & Lengel 1990; Schmitz 1987; Schmitz et al. 1991; Steinfield 1986; Webster et al. 1995), social factors (Fulk 1993; Fulk, Schmitz & Steinfield 1990; Fulk, Steinfield, Schmitz & Power 1987; Trevino et al. 1987), and organizational influences (Shin, Liu-Sheng, Higa & Figueredo 1998; Wijayanayake & K. 1999; Zack & McKenney 1995). According to the task and media characteristics perspective, individuals select and use a medium based on its suitability to the task. The contextual influences perspective emphasizes that the benefits an individual can derive from using a medium depend on the availability of other users of the medium, as well as time pressure and distance between communicators. The individual differences perspective relates to a person's demographic characteristics and technology-related skills, such as age, educational level, organizational level, and medium experience. The social factors perspective reflects influences from the social environment and social norms such as peer or superiors' attitudes and symbolic cues. Finally, the organizational influences perspective focuses on such factors as organizational policy, communication climate, management support and organizational culture. Figure 1 presents a comprehensive framework of factors influencing the media choice in organizational settings. These factors could be grouped into two categories based upon whether they emphasize rational (objective) or social (subjective) explanations: task

and media characteristics, contextual influences and individual differences perspective favor the rational explanation, and media symbolism, social influence and organizational influence provide a social explanation model. This paper argues, however, employees' national culture also influences their preference of media for communication, even though they work in the same MNO. Their national cultural values, such as I/C dimension, play an important role in their media preference when they communicate with their colleagues.

(Figure 1 inserts here)

In comparing the respondents' communication media preferences between those two different cultural groups, it is expected that since Asian group employees are stronger in high-context communication style, as well as more collectivist, they would prefer direct channels, such as face-to-face or telephone, for access to other forms of information over written documents. They prefer to interact extensively, and messages that appear to be simple on the surface can carry great symbolic or embedded meaning. They are expected to communicate in ways that camouflage and conceal the speakers' true intentions (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988) to maintain harmony in their in-groups. They may try to avoid conflict through increased vagueness, rather than by increased explicit communication (Rice et al. 1998). They may see email as a threat to group harmony because email allows loyalty and obligation to be challenged (Tan et al. 1998a). In contrast, people from Australian society that possess low-context communication style and emphasize individual rights may incline to choose less rich media, such as email or written document. They see email as an opportunity to share opinions frankly (Tan et al. 1998a) and seek technology as a means for self-betterment (Umanath & Campbell 1994). Speaking one's mind and telling the truth are "characteristics of a sincere and honest person" (Hofstede 1991). They are expected to communicate in ways that are consistent with their feelings (Hall 1976) and prefer to be precise in communication (Grice 1975). Thus, the following hypotheses are presented:

H1b: Respondents from Asian subsidiaries will prefer more use of face-to-face communication than those of Australian headquarters within one MNO.

H2b: Respondents from Asian subsidiaries will prefer more use of telephone communication than those of Australian headquarters within one MNO.

H3b: Respondents from Asian subsidiaries will prefer less use of email communication than those of Australian headquarters within one MNO.

H4b: Respondents from Asian subsidiaries will prefer less use of written document communication than those of Australian headquarters within one MNO.

## **Research Methods**

### **Samples and Data Collection**

An American-based MNO with its headquarters based in Australia and three Asian subsidiaries in Thailand, Malaysia and South Korea formed the population for this study. The data for this study were collected through a mailed questionnaire survey. Since English is the work language throughout the organization, an English version of the questionnaire was used throughout. Doing so can also minimize problems related to cross-cultural survey language translation. The questionnaire was pre-tested on a small sample of Australian subjects to



determine the clarity and relevance of the instrument. After minor clarifications following the pre-test, the instruments were then administered to employees in each of the participating countries. After two follow-up letters, a total of 49 (33 per cent response rate) and 72 (73 per cent response rate) usable questionnaires were returned from the Australian office and Asian group respectively. Before the hypotheses testing, these two groups were compared on a number of non-cultural variables, including age, gender, educational level, organizational level, work tenure, computer experience, telephone and email availability, the year email use, email received and sent per week to ensure "matched" sample assumption of cross-cultural study (Adler 1984; Sekaran 1983). When samples are not matched in these non-cultural variables, the "non-matched", "non-cultural" variables should be under control in comparison between two samples if they are also "correlated" with dependent variables to rule out possible alternative explanations or the presence of spurious relationships as a result of these variables. Consequently, significant differences were found in work tenure, telephone availability, email availability and email sent per week between two groups. A further correlation analysis was conducted between these non-matched, non-cultural variables and all dependent variables. Telephone preference was significantly correlated with work tenure ( $\gamma=0.19$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and email sent per week ( $\gamma=0.28$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Email availability was significantly correlated with email preference ( $\gamma=0.19$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Finally Written Document preference was correlated with email sent per week ( $\gamma=-0.28$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and telephone availability ( $\gamma=-0.27$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Thus, these non-matched and correlated non-cultural variables were considered as controls in corresponding hypotheses testing.

## Measures

The questionnaire developed measured respondents' personal and work-related variables, cultural I/C variables, perceived media richness and media preferences. The Cultural I/C variable was measured at the individual level using a 9-item scale derived from Earley's (1993) work. Two items were eliminated from subsequent analysis since they loaded on two factors. The reliability (Cronbach alpha) of the resulting scale was 0.71. Perceived media richness was measured with a 4-item scale developed by D'Ambra (1995) across four available media: face-to-face communication, the telephone, email, and written document, which are the common media used within this organization across cultures. The respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the items on a 7-point scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree, where higher values indicated greater media richness. The reliabilities of these scales also were generally satisfactory, ranging from 0.54 to 0.79. Media preference was measured by directly asking the respondents to specify their first three preferences of media when they perform an intracultural communication task with their colleagues for each of twelve communication tasks, which were originally developed by D'Ambra (1995). The available media are face-to-face communication, telephone, email, and written document. For each task, for each medium, these rankings were scaled as 0=not chosen, 1=chosen 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2=chosen 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3=chosen 1<sup>st</sup>.

## Results

### Group Differences on Cultural Dimension

Cultural groups must indicate a significant difference on the cultural dimension, that is, the dimension must prove capable of distinguishing between cultural groups. Otherwise, it would not be possible to test whether culture is a causal explanation for differences in media choice behavior. A t-test analysis revealed the significant difference in cultural Individualism/collectivism dimension between Australian and Asian respondents ( $t=-5.36$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). The Asian sample was more collectivistic ( $M=4.92$ ) than the Australian sample ( $M=4.31$ ). Therefore, the planned comparison could be made.

### Hypotheses Testing

Table 1 presents the regression analysis results for all hypotheses. Hierarchical regression analysis, rather than standard regression analysis was adopted for those dependent variables which require to take control variables into consideration, in which control variables were added into the first block and cultural group, dummy coded with Australia as the base line (Australia=0, Asian=1), as the second block.

Column A reports the result of a direct comparison of face-to-face richness between Asian group and Australian respondents. The standardized coefficient of Asian was 0.28 and significant at the 99% level. It implies that the Asian respondents had a significantly higher ranking perception of the richness of face-to-face than Australian respondents, supporting H1a. However, the comparison of face-to-face preference between Asian and Australian respondents (column B of Table 1) shows no significant difference between headquarters and subsidiaries in face-to-face preference. In other words, both headquarters and subsidiaries have similar preference for face-to-face within this MNO, leading to the rejection of hypothesis 1b. The coefficient of Asian respondents in phone richness was  $-0.18$  and significant at 95% level (See column C of Table 1). However it was in the opposite direction predicted. In other words, respondents from Australia would perceive telephone higher than the Asian respondents in richness. Thus, hypothesis 2a was rejected. Column D presents a comparison result between Asian and Australian respondents on telephone preferences. Although the coefficient was significant, it was in the opposite direction predicted ( $-0.34$ ). Thus, hypothesis 2b was not supported. This result, however, is consistent with Trevino et al. (2000) argument that the higher the individual perceives a medium, the more likely (s)he will use that medium (here is telephone for Australian respondents). Column E of Table 1 reports the result of a direct comparison between Asian and Australian respondents in perceived email richness. The coefficient of Asian respondents was 0.28 and significant at the 99% level. Again, it was in the opposite direction predicted, resulting in the rejection of H3a. Similar as face-to-face preference, no difference was found in email preference between Asian and Australian respondents (see column F in Table 1). Thus, hypothesis 3b was also rejected. Hypothesis 4a was not supported since the coefficient of Asian respondents on written document richness was 0.2 and significant at 95% level. Finally, column H provides a comparison result between Asian and Australian respondents in written document preference. The coefficient of Asian was 0.20 and significant at 95% level. However, it is in the opposite direction predicted. Thus, hypothesis 4b was not supported.

Table 1 also shows that email messages sent per week was a significant determinant for telephone and written document preferences. The more email sent per week, the less the telephone and written documents are used. Email availability was positively associated with email preference. And written documents were more likely used if telephone was not ready available or email was not used extensively.

Independent Variables	(A) Face R	(B) Face P	(C) Phone R	(D) Phone P	(E) Email R	(F) Email P	(G) WD R	(H) WD P
Work Tenure				0.09				
Telephone Availability								-0.20*
Email Availability						0.19*		
Email Sent Per Week				0.22*				-0.24**
Asian*	0.28**	-0.04	-0.18*	-0.34***	0.28**	-0.001	0.20*	0.20*

N=121, \* $\rho < .05$ , \*\* $\rho < .01$ , \*\*\* $\rho < .001$

Note: All numbers are standardized coefficients (Beta)

Asian: This dummy variable is coded for respondents in three Asian nations, leaving those in the Australia as the default case.

Table 1: Regression Results of Testing Hypotheses between Australian and Asian Respondents

## Discussion and conclusion

This study attempts to investigate the existence of cultural effects upon media choice behavior within one MNO. We propose that national cultural role is fundamental and important to the study of information systems, and that individuals from different cultures will have different perceptions of and preferences for communication media even though they are working in the same MNO. The results of this study suggest that there are significant cultural level differences in perceived media richness and telephone and written document preference; whereas no significant differences were found in face-to-face and email preferences between the Australian headquarters and the Asian subsidiaries' respondents.

The initial central question driving this research was whether employees working in the subsidiary that has a different national cultural from its headquarters' national culture have different perceptions of and preferences for communication media due to national cultural influence. As examination of sample attributes showed no significant differences on two major media used within organizations between the subsidiaries and headquarters samples, further investigation was performed to explore the possible explanations for such similarities. Table 2 shows, for each communication task, the mean media preferences across two cultural groups.

Media Preference across Communication Tasks					
Communication Task	Cultural Group	Face_P	Phone_P	Email_P	WD_P
Organizing a department meeting	Asian	1.23	1.07	2.46	0.91
	Australia	0.89	1.55	2.91	0.48
Request funding for sundry expenses.	Asian	1.51	0.99	1.82	1.42
	Australia	2.00	1.21	1.64	0.95
Need approval for allocation of funding	Asian	1.49	0.87	1.74	1.51
	Australia	1.84	1.05	1.86	0.93
Respond to a colleague's inquiry.	Asian	1.40	1.11	2.5	.088
	Australia	1.49	1.56	2.42	0.37
Discuss a problem with your manager.	Asian	2.99	1.06	1.15	.44
	Australia	2.92	1.71	1.08	0.12
Respond to a colleague's urgent request.	Asian	2.26	1.89	1.44	0.22
	Australia	2.27	2.42	1.17	0.04
Need some important figures from another department.	Asian	1.41	1.42	2.07	0.76
	Australia	1.50	2.26	1.89	0.20
Respond to an urgent request by your manager.	Asian	2.14	1.42	1.58	0.58
	Australia	2.16	2.08	1.49	0.12
Clarify a procedural matter with your colleagues.	Asian	2.18	1.47	1.50	0.54
	Australia	1.94	1.59	1.98	0.29
Clarify with your manager on a critical issue.	Asian	2.61	1.11	1.49	0.52
	Australia	2.59	1.78	1.35	0.16
Respond to a formal memo from your manager.	Asian	1.04	0.44	2.13	1.75
	Australia	1.13	0.67	2.29	1.60
Discuss a departmental performance issue with your colleague.	Asian	2.69	0.96	1.27	0.54
	Australia	2.89	1.41	1.22	0.30

Table 2: Media Preferences across Communication Tasks and Across Cultures

Although, in the foregoing analyses of hypotheses, no significant differences were found in the preferences for face-to-face communication and email communication between the Australian headquarters and three Asian subsidiaries respondents, it is still surprising to find from Table 2 that, for each task, for both headquarters in Australia and the Asian subsidiaries, this particular MNO's respondents always choose either face-to-face or email as the first preference for communication, with the exception of the telephone as the first preference for Task 6 and 7 by Australian respondents. In other words, respondents within this MNO always choose either face-to-face or email communication first, irrespective of the task type and regardless of the respondents' national cultures. These findings explicitly conflict with the framework of Figure 1 concerning media choice and contradict what this paper proposed concerning cultural influence on media preferences.

For the multinational subsidiary with an organizational cultural influence from a headquarters located in a country with a different national culture, the issue of conflicting cultures is most relevant. As such it would be useful to examine the relative strength of each national culture at the organizational level in terms of their influence on management practice (Soeters and Schreuder 1988; Pratt and Beaulieu 1992). This interaction between national culture and organizational culture is possible if the actual interaction structure (organizational culture) shows the effects of the national culture of the "mother" organization (Soeters and Schreuder

1988). However, until now, there is no evidence to support this hypothesis. To help shed some light on this issue, following-up face-to-face interviews were conducted in Australian and Malaysian offices to explore the possible interaction qualitatively.

The interview results reveal that there is an internal communication culture within this particular MNO, in that email is used widely for daily communication and face-to-face will be chosen when communication task becomes more complex. Such interesting finding indicates that organizational members' perceptions and use patterns of communication media could be changed toward those of organizations through socialization processes. In other words, through learning, organizational members adjust themselves to adapt some of organizational values to guide their behaviors as required in their work environment (Gordon 1991). As a result, people may learn to accept some organizational values that may be not congruent with their own value systems. Even though people may not really change themselves inside much, they are still going to adopt something different from their personal beliefs. In other words, at this point, there is an interaction between individuals' organizational culture and their own national culture. At the end, organizational socialization indeed can effectively override the influence of members' previously internalized values, and change them to conform to those required by the organization (Lachman et al. 1994). If individuals want to survive, they have to readjust themselves to suit the organizational culture.

The results of this study are also consistent with the convergence approach of the organization, in that non-Western countries would be expected to assimilate ideologically-driven values common to industrialized Western countries and multinational subsidiaries located in non-Western countries would change their values to be consistent with their Western headquarters' culture (Ralston et al. 1997). Specifically, in this study, subsidiaries from three Asian (i.e., non-Western) cultural countries of Thailand, Malaysia, and Korea have been found to have similar preferences in email and face-to-face media as their counterparts in Western cultural headquarters of Australia. In other words, from the analysis results obtained so far, the influence of a Western culture upon Asian cultures within a MNO was detected, and further, it appeared that organizational culture might be dominant in influencing employees' communication behavior within a MNO, at least for the respondents of this study. Western management techniques, behavior and business systems would constitute the force for this change. Therefore, with organizational globalization, an organization is mostly characterized with the same universal corporate culture. The incongruence between organizational culture and the individual's own national culture will be minimized by employing the processes of selection and/or socialization within MNOs (Soeters & Schreuder 1988). Many managers and researchers believe that national differences are only important in working with foreign clients, not in working with international colleagues from the same organization. The finding of this study appears to support this argument. Organizational culture (in the current study Western culture) may permeate a MNO and may set a counterpoint against national cultural influence (Mueller 1994). Similar media choice behavior might be the reality between headquarters and subsidiaries within one MNO.

The results of this study have implications for management practice and research. There is a practical relevance to managers in Western cultural multinational organizations interested in understanding the differences they see in approaches to communication media perceptions and choice behavior in Asian countries. Although national culture has been recognized to influence individual's norms and behavior, the development of a common set of norms and

values across all subsidiaries in line with those of the headquarters, can be obtained through the process of selection and/or socialization. Employees' work value can be influenced by the organizational culture of the MNO headquarters. In other words, engaging a universal culture within one MNO can be achieved when MNO managers can minimize the incongruence between the national culture of subsidiaries and the national culture of the "parent" organization, which can be achieved through employing socialization or self-selection process (Soeters et al. 1988). Although these findings have been obtained in one MNO, they provide a clearer insight into the possibility of a global form of organization where a seamless/borderless corporate culture can be achieved. These research findings provide encouragement for the practice of integrating multi-location operations, whose employees may hold diametrically opposed values, into a single corporate culture. As a result, the similar information technology strategy could be implemented throughout the organization.

Several limitations in this study need to be recognized. First, the sampling design of this study restricts generalizability inasmuch as one cannot be sure that samples obtained were representative of the culture. Second, sample size for each cultural group is relatively small and questions remain concerning the generalizability of the results to a larger population. Further, It is possible that a courtesy or hospitality bias occurs when respondents systematically adjust their responses to conform to the general notion of social desirability or perceptions of the researcher's expectation. "Undecided" or "neutral" responses may be used more frequently. This study did not anticipate this type of bias and therefore did not correct it.

Based on the experience with this study, some of the directions for future research are proposed. Although organizational cultural influence was a possible explanation for similar media preference within this MNO, this evidence was obtained within only one MNO. Further research is required in at least two MNO settings to empirically examine the interaction between national cultures and organizational cultures. Do organizations need to modify their management strategy and practice to suit the national cultural dictates of their overseas host countries, where the national culture of the host country differs from that of the home country? The answer to this question could be achieved through examining the interaction between national cultures and organizational cultures within MNO settings.

In addition, this study provides a knowledge base for a future research area, which has yet to be explored: how intercultural communication differs from intracultural communication within MNO settings. The cross-cultural communication and psychology literature suggests that people behave differently with members of their own culture than they do with members of foreign cultures (Adler 1986). In addition, intercultural communication, not merely intracultural, is the essence of most international business managerial activity (Adler 1986). By knowing how a particular cultural group communicates with its own cultural members, an organization is ready to confront the next step: to explore the generalizability of these intracultural behaviors and outcomes to the intercultural context.

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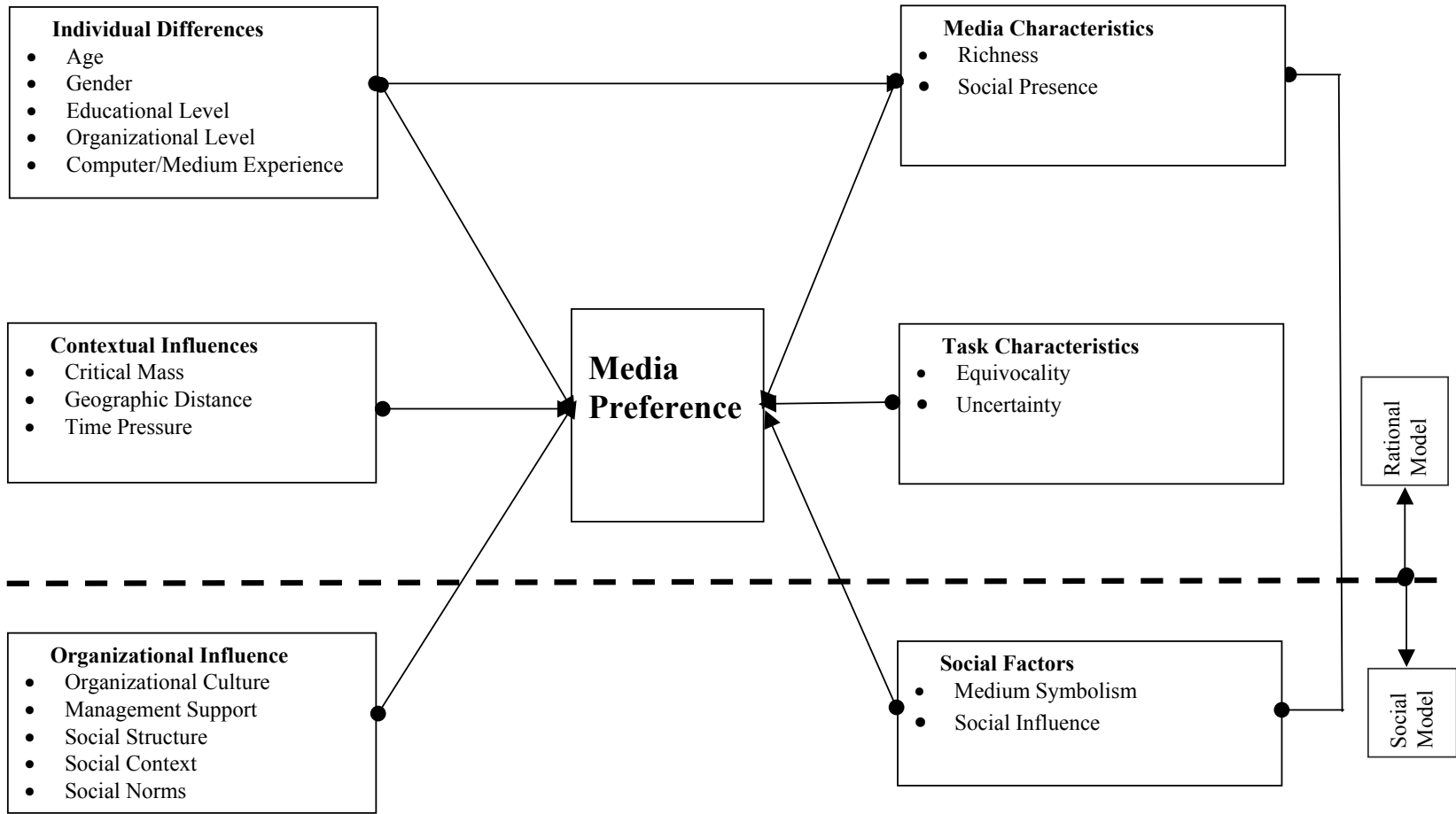
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**Figure 1. General Framework of Media Preference**