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Normative Social Influence and Communication Media Perception and Choice: an exploration in an individualistic and a collectivistic culture

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Abstract

This study is motivated by the need to examine normative social influence on media choice and by the greater concerns regarding the influence of national culture on management practices. This paper proposes that the strength of attraction to the group can influence group members' similarity in media perception and choice. Further, this paper proposes that the degree of similarity may differ across cultures. One cultural dimension, individualism-collectivism, is used to account for the moderating impact of culture on normative social influence. Australia and People's Republic of China (PRC) have been selected to represent two distinct cultures. Several propositions for empirical examination are proposed. Finally a research plan is presented.

Keywords

Social influence, national culture, comparative study, media choice

INTRODUCTION

More than a decade ago, Fulk and her colleagues (Fulk *et al.*, 1987; Fulk *et al.*, 1990) developed "The Social Influence Model of Technology Use" to explain the accumulating body of anomalous findings in media richness theory, especially for the new communication technologies. Drawing on premises from Social Information Processing (SIP) Theory (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978), Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1986), and Symbolic Interactionism (Mead, 1934), the social influence model posits that social forces such as work group norms, and co-workers' and supervisors' attitudes and behaviours will influence individuals' perceptions and choices of new media. It focuses on the role of social information in order to explain media usage patterns. For example, others' media use behaviour can provide an employee with social cues through vicarious learning (Fulk *et al.*, 1987). Social influence, such as management's and co-workers' attitudes and behaviour, can positively or negatively influence individuals' media attitudes and choice. Even media richness, which is considered to be an objective variable in media richness theory, is viewed as a perception that can vary and be influenced by social factors.

While the social influence model of technology use has found empirical support, with perceptions and use of email being influenced by variables such as co-workers' perceptions of and use of the medium (Fulk, 1993; Fulk and Boyd, 1991; Schmitz and Fulk, 1991; Soe and Markus, 1993; Webster and Trevino, 1995), there are some issues arising from this model. Four types of characteristics of social influence on both media perceptions and media uses have been considered in this model: (1) direct statements by co-workers in the workplace; (2) vicarious learning; (3) norms for how media should be evaluated and used; and (4) social definitions of rationality. Their reasoning implies that the social environment has two general effects: first, the context may make certain information or aspects of the situation salient, thereby influencing perception and interpretation (Taylor and Fiske, 1978); second, there may be a direct construction of meaning through exposure to the expressed attitudes of others (Festinger, 1954). Both of these contextual effects are likely to occur when informational cues act to make particular features of the task salient and when there is consistency among the cues received (O'Reilly III and Caldwell, 1985). Under these circumstances, that are saliency and consistency of cues, there are actually two different mechanisms, informational social influence and normative social influence, accounting for

effects of context or the environment on individual behaviour (Moscovici, 1976; Pfeffer, 1982). However, previous investigations of the social influence on media choice have concentrated almost exclusively on informational social influence and ignored the impacts of normative social influence. Although Fulk (1993) and Yoo and Alavi (2001) argue that members' attraction to the group, called group cohesion, influences work group technology attitudes, social presence, task participation, and group consensus, overall this premise, as articulated in relation to normative social influence, has not been discussed explicitly. This creates a void in the literature. There is, therefore, a need to examine the impacts of normative social influence on media perception and choice.

In addition, since media choice research is substantially based on North American organisations and subjects, theories arising from such work may not apply in other cultures (Boyacigiller and Adler, 1991). Each culture has a unique way of doing business and a unique set of values to guide human behaviour (Triandis, 1995). Thus, national culture strongly affects individual behaviour, including media choice (Guo *et al.*, 2001; Rice *et al.*, 1998; Straub, 1994; Webster and Trevino, 1995). The social influence on media choice may differ across cultures (Webster and Trevino, 1995). This issue becomes more notable with the globalisation of the world market and multinationalism. A cross-cultural study is needed to investigate whether culture will be a critical factor moderating the impact of normative social influence on media choice.

In order to understand whether there is an impact of normative social influence on media choice, and whether such impact is moderated by national culture, researchers from two different cultures, Australia and People's Republic of China (PRC), have established a joint research project. Interest in understanding how communication practices in the Australia, compared with that in the PRC, is motivated by the development in the relations between these two different cultures in recent years. More and more Western-based multinationals have increased their business in the PRC and are struggling with the problems of how to implement and effectively use information systems in different cultural environments. Multinationals are trying to become global organisations in the sense of having a seamless or borderless universal corporate culture across cultures (Ralston *et al.*, 1997), which includes adopting and using similar information technology. Comparative research between Australia and PRC can provide indications as to whether such similar corporate culture implementation could have similar effects in different cultures. The key objective of this project is to test a framework of the impact of normative social influence, which incorporates the key moderator factor of national culture, on media perceptions and choices in Australia and PRC. As a first step towards this goal, this paper will lay the foundation for this research project.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. First, we discuss the potential impact of normative social influence on media perception and choice. Next, normative social influence impact moderated by national culture is outlined. Several propositions for empirically investigation have been proposed in this paper. It then closes by discussing the research program underway.

NORMATIVE SOCIAL INFLUENCE IMPACT ON MEDIA PERCEPTION AND CHOICE

Deutsch and Gerard offer the following definition of normative and informational social influence:

We shall define a normative social influence as an influence to conform with the positive expectations of another. An informational social influence may be defined as an influence to accept information obtained from another as evidence of reality.

(1955:303)

The former effect proceeds from a mechanism of social exchange, in which behaviour complies with group norms and role expectations with the acceptance of members. The latter effect posits a mechanism of informational influence through uncertainty reduction, in which ambiguity is resolved through reliance on shared judgment and perceptions of salient

others. It should be clear that these effects are not mutually exclusive and that both can, and do, operate in the same situations with different processes (O'Reilly III and Caldwell, 1985; Pfeffer, 1982).

As Deutsch and Gerard (1955) noted, conceptually one can distinguish between normative and informational social influence. The former is based on the pressure or sanctions applied by group members to produce conformity in terms of attitude and behaviour. By conformity, it means the change in behaviour or beliefs toward a group as result of real or imaged group pressure. By group, it is typically constituted through more dense communication within the group than across its boundaries, and a similarity in orientation that distinguishes the group from other social actors in its environment (Pfeffer, 1982). An individual complies with group norms, and in turn, he or she achieves membership and the social support that such membership affords, as well as goal attainment that can occur only through group actions or group membership. So, normative social influence is also called "group-central" influence, referring to the necessity of convergence towards identical opinions. This is determined by the relations between individuals, not by the properties of the object. It can be strengthened by cohesion that serves to attract group members. Festinger *et al.* (1952) found that highly cohesive groups exerted more pressure on members towards compliance with group norms than did less cohesive groups. Hackman (1976) reviews a number of studies also showing that conformity and consensus is higher in more cohesive groups. Fulk (1993) found that the social influences of a work group are stronger predictors for individuals with high attraction to their work groups. Yoo and Alavi (2001) found that group cohesion has significantly greater influences on social presence and task participation than media condition (audio conferencing vs. desktop video-conferencing).

Translating these conclusions to the concept of normative social influence of media choice, there is no reason to doubt that similar processes may operate in media choice behaviour within organisations. Because normative social influence will affect individual beliefs about the nature of jobs and work, about what attitudes are appropriate, and indeed, about how people ought to behave (Pfeffer, 1982), we would expect that media perceptions and choice patterns would be constrained by each individual's existing socially constructed "how to's" for interaction with other individuals in the group. Within work groups, there may emerge a consensus about what are the important features of the work environment regarding media use; in this manner, group members may act to make salient certain aspects of media use and downplay others (O'Reilly III and Caldwell, 1985). Newcomers to a group are quickly made aware of what is important, how one should feel about certain aspects of the job, and what are acceptable standards of behaviour. This may lead to identical communication tasks and media being perceived and preferred similarly within groups and differently across groups. Such similarities may be stronger in highly cohesive groups. In the social influence of technology use model, Fulk and Boyd (1991) predict that, because work groups are important sources of social support and regular interaction, there will be similar patterns of media use within groups (regardless of task ambiguity) and different patterns of media use across groups. Thus, in addition to the effects of informational social influence on group members' media choice, groups may also develop a normative framework for interpreting and responding to facets of the work environment resulting in a stabilising social construction of reality that may vary across work groups faced with objectively similar circumstances (O'Reilly III and Caldwell, 1985). While Fulk (1993) and Yoo and Alavi (2001) make important contributions to the literature, they have yet to conduct a direct examination of normative social influence on group media perception and choice. In this study, we argue that normative social influence, which is manifested by group cohesion, has an impact on group members' media perceptions and choice. Accordingly,

Proposition One: There is a positive association between group cohesion and the similarity of perceptions of communication media.

Proposition Two: There is a positive association between group cohesion and the similarity of choice of communication media.

NORMATIVE SOCIAL INFLUENCE MODERATED BY NATIONAL CULTURE

Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another (Hofstede, 1980). Cultural differences between people of different nations and societies have existed for many centuries and are stable over the long term (Tan *et al.*, 1998b). Since each culture has unique values to guide human behaviour (Triandis, 1995), national culture strongly affects management practices, including communication (e.g. Earley, 1993; 1994; Gudykunst *et al.*, 1996; Gudykunst and Kim, 1997; Guo *et al.*, 2001; Hofstede, 1980; Rice *et al.*, 1998; Straub, 1994). Based on surveys involving more than 120,000 respondents from more than 50 countries, Hofstede offers a mode of national culture with five dimensions: individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity-femininity, and time orientation (1991). Other studies have lent support to the stability of these dimensions (e.g. Ronen and Shenkar, 1985). Scholars in the field of information systems have also successfully used Hofstede's model to account for empirical observations (Guo *et al.*, 2001; Rice *et al.*, 1998; Straub, 1994; Tan *et al.*, 1998a; Tan *et al.*, 1998b; Watson *et al.*, 1994). Thus, Hofstede's model is adopted as a theoretical framework for this study.

Individualism-collectivism, the most important dimension of cross-cultural psychology to date (Smith *et al.*, 1996; Triandis, 1995), has been well researched both in communication literature and in other disciplines (e.g. Erez and Early, 1993; Gudykunst *et al.*, 1996; Gudykunst and Kim, 1997; Hofstede 1991; Guo *et al.* 2001; Rice *et al.*, 1998; Singelis *et al.*, 1995; Triandis, 1995). According to Hofstede (1980), individualism-collectivism dimension is a conglomeration of values concerning the relation of an individual to his or her collectivity in society. Individualism stands for a preference for a loosely knit social framework in society wherein individuals are supposed to take care of themselves and their immediate families only. Its opposite, collectivism, represents a preference for a tightly knit social framework in which individuals can expect their relatives, clan, or other in-group to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. The relationship between the individual and the collectivist in human society has been described by Hofstede as "not only a matter of ways of living together, but intimately linked with societal norms (in the sense of value systems of major groups of the population). It therefore affects both people's mental programming and the structure and functioning of many other types of institutions besides the family: educational, religious, political, and utilitarian" (1980:214). In an individualistic culture, people base their self-understanding on their own actions, which are usually taken independently of what others think (Earley, 1994). In collectivistic countries, people are integrated into strong cohesive groups (Bond and Leung, 1982) so that they base their self-understanding on the reactions of others around them (Earley, 1994).

Australia and PRC belong to different cultural groups. The culture of the Australian is characterized by high individualism (Hofstede, 1980). Although Hofstede's (1980) classic study did not include the PRC, he identified other Chinese samples such as HK, Singapore, and Taiwan as high on collectivism. Cragin (1986) used Hofstede's questions with a PRC sample and also reported high collectivism. A group of researchers from the Chinese Culture Connection (1987) surveyed endorsement of values derived from traditional Chinese sayings, but did not collect PRC data. A distinctive dimension named Confucian work dynamism was found, as well as others parallel to some of those identified by Hofstede. Therefore, the comparison between the Australian and Chinese is meaningful because Australians and Chinese are characterised as individualists and collectivists respectively. Of course, we acknowledge the limitation of drawing upon results from overseas Chinese cultures and special attention should be given to the many differences in socio-economic conditions between them.

Australian culture favours individual rights and Chinese tradition promotes collective goals. In individualistic Australian culture, people are self-oriented and self-centred. They are more likely to follow personal desires (Wheeler *et al.*, 1989). In contrast, the Chinese are socially-oriented and situation-oriented (Yang, 1981). They are able to protect their social selves and function as an integral part of the social network. As a result, they are more likely to pursue group activities. Social and structure harmony is created and preserved by complex

networks. These in turn are sustained by status hierarchies, loyalty to people, and norms of conformance, mutual obligation and reciprocity (Martinsons and Westwood, 1997).

These differences between Australian and Chinese cultures assist in anticipating the moderating effects of culture on media choice behaviour through normative social influence mechanism both in Australia and PRC. In PRC, group members act in accordance with external expectations or social norms. The needs of in-groups supersede individual aspirations and their fulfilment (Martinsons and Westwood, 1997). Therefore, people are more likely to conform to group norms about communication media perceptions and choice. Group cohesion in PRC will have a greater influence on group member media perceptions and choice than those in Australia. The similarity in media perceptions and choice are likely to be higher than in Australia. Accordingly,

Proposition Three: Chinese group members will exhibit greater similarity in media perceptions than those in Australia.

Proposition Four: Chinese group members will exhibit greater similarity in media choice than those in Australia.

RESEARCH PLAN

Research Model

Figure 1 illustrates the relationships of interesting variables discussed above. The two independent variables of interest are (a) group cohesion, and (b) national culture. Other independent variables of interest, such as individual differences, media experience, communication task characteristics, group size, and group composition, are controlled in this study. The research model suggests that, as the independent variables interact with each other, members of the group will develop perceptions about the medium with which they are working. Such interaction will also influence the way group members communicate with each other. The dependent variables of interest include media perception and media choice.

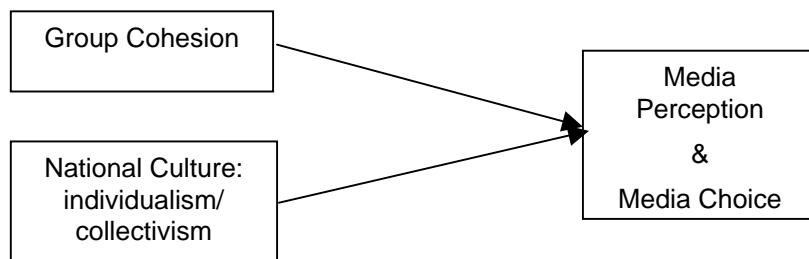


Figure 1: Research Model

Research Methodology

The key objective of this research is to test a theory of the impact of normative social influence, which incorporates the key moderator factor, on media perceptions and choices. Since internal validity is a critical concern when testing theories, laboratory experiments are used to attain precision of measurement and control over extraneous variables (Bailey, 1987).

Matching laboratory experiments will be carried out in two universities in Australia and PRC respectively. Universities and students will be matched as closely as possible. Therefore, the differences identified could be attributed to group cohesion and national cultures. Twenty five-person groups will be randomly formed in each university. Participants, drawn from information systems undergraduate students course, will perform a group assignment and have an option of writing a team paper or participating in an experiment to fulfil a course requirement over four weeks. This requirement helps reduce absenteeism and mortality. The groups will be informed that the objective of this assignment is to examine how people could effectively communicate with each other to improve group work performance. These subjects will use different media (face-to-face, email, or telephone) to communicate with their tutors and with each other, to work on a team assignment. They will be told that the amount of course credit awarded to them would depend upon how well their answer is to the

task. Most of the subjects from both universities know each other beforehand as they are in the same study program, and in many cases had worked together on other projects. Therefore, a pre-session questionnaire will be filled in to measure their pre-session group cohesion. At the end of week four, a post-session questionnaire will be filled in again to capture all dependent and independent variables. A pilot study will be performed before the formal experiments for modifying and fine-tuning the formal experimental settings, procedures, and questionnaires.

An English version of questionnaire will be translated into Chinese, and then translated back to ensure that the Chinese version of the questionnaire represents the intent and spirit of each item in the questionnaire and is not merely a literal translation.

Task, Independent/ Dependent Variables and Measures

An intellectual task is adapted from Zigurs *et al.* (1988). This task asks subjects to work together to choose, from an applicant pool, a given number of individuals to be admitted to an international studies program. There is a correct answer for this task. Therefore, group performance can be measured in terms of group answer to the task.

The independent variable, group cohesion, will be measured from Seashore's (1954) work. Another independent variable, cultural individualism/ collectivism dimension, will be measured using Hofstede's (2001) scale. Dependent variable, media perception and media choice, will be measured by adopting D'Ambra's scales (D'Ambra and Rice, 1994). Available media for communication include face-to-face, telephone, and email. Pearson correlation, ANCOVA, and regression are three main methods that are used to analyse collected data.

CONCLUSION

This study is concerned with the issues of normative social influence on media choice, as well as cultural moderating impact on normative social influence. We have discussed each of the components and proposed several propositions for empirical examination. This paper is the first step of this cross-cultural project. We need to do more work on developing instruments, selecting study sites, identifying matched samples, as well as exploring data analysis methods.

The recognition that media perception and choice occurs within a web of social relationships has important implications for both IS researchers and organisational managers. The expected results of this study suggest that, in addition to consider information social influence, researchers need to investigate the effect of normative social influence on media perceptions and choices. In other words, there is a need to expand the current theories of social influence model of technology use to systematically investigate the joint effects of information social influence and normative social influence. Further, this study suggests that the strength of normative social influence on media perceptions and choices appears to vary from one culture to another. In other words, theories applied in one culture do not necessarily apply in another. Researchers must consider cultural impact when applying theories in different cultural contexts. From an organisational perspective, the expected results of this study suggest a way to align communication uses to the strategy of the organisations. By applying organisational norms, organisations can make *a priori* different interests between departments and individuals into a consistent behaviour. It also provides a preliminary guideline on how to develop effective organisational culture to encourage the use of new technologies, which in turn may affect employees' perceptions of the new technologies. Organisational culture can be an important source of social influence. This echoes the recent findings of Guo (2002) that the impact of organisational culture greatly influences email use. But on the other hand, social influence is not always under the control of an individual or an organisation (Rowe and Struck, 1999). Because of the diversity of cultural values people can be difficult to manage and also influence their behaviour. It is crucial for multinational organisational managers to recognize such difficulties and influences. In particular, managers need to be aware of the national cultural differences when stimulating some organisational norms across cultures. It is especially important for implementing similar information technologies across cultures. Different cultures have different frames of reference to guide their behaviour (Lytle *et al.*, 1995). Teams from collectivistic cultures may be more likely to conform organisational norms than those from

individualistic cultures. Within today's global market environment, understanding cultural influence on employees' behaviour will provide managers a guideline for effectively improving organisational performance. Organisations which take into account their cultural diversity might be performing better (Watson *et al.*, 1993).

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