

Abstract

We are living in a media-rich society. The development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has led to their dramatic movement from work-oriented practices into people's everyday life during the last decade. Nowadays, while people are freed from the boundaries of time and place in communication, they have to constantly make choice decisions on which medium to use for a given task. However, scholarly research appears to always lie behind the development of technology. Proliferation of new media coincides with a new domain of research entitled mediated interpersonal communication where the puzzles toward individuals' media choice are suspended.

This study is a theoretical as well as empirical exploration of why and how individuals choose among various interpersonal media, old and new, for communication tasks within dyadic interactions. A theoretical framework is developed primarily based on the notion of task-media fit in media richness theory, and is sustained by the theoretical work from diverse but related areas such as social influence models of media choice, technology acceptance models, diffusion of innovation research, and decision making theories. The central claim of the theoretical framework is that media choice is a trading-off process as a matter of limited problem solving, directed to a satisfying choice rather than an optimal one, resulting from the match of media attributes, task requirements, and interpersonal relationships, and guided by communicators' perceptions of media characteristics and normative beliefs. There are six clusters of factors proposed to influence media choice: objective media attributes including media synchronicity and media modality; rational task characteristics including message ambiguity and task urgency; relationship formality

as a relational factor; subjective perceptions of media characteristics (i.e., weighted perceptions of media characteristics, WPC); social factors (i.e., subjective norm, SN); and individual factors including demographic characteristics and individual media adoption and use. Unlike those who consider media alternatives either in a ranking order such as from leanest to richest or in a black box, this study offers a new conceptual typology for comparisons between interpersonal media. The typology defines four types of media along two dimensions: media synchronicity (synchronous vs. asynchronous) and media modality (text vs. oral).

The research design incorporates a traditional survey and a factorial design that combines the advantages of multivariate experimental designs with a sample survey procedure. Meanwhile, a higher-order repeated measures design was adopted in data collection by combining a within-subjects design and a between-subjects design. Totally 609 respondents were randomly selected and interviewed through telephone in Shenzhen, with 208 in mobile phone group, 190 in email group, and 211 in instant messaging group.

Several conclusions have been drawn from this study. First of all, tasks characteristics, including relational context, and media attributes interact in determining media choices. Specifically, synchronous media are more likely to be used as message ambiguity increases. Message ambiguity has a negative impact on media choice for oral media and a positive impact on media choice for text media. Synchronous media are less likely to be used as task urgency increases when the message is ambiguous or relational context is informal. Formal relationship leads text media less likely to be used under the condition of high message ambiguity or low task urgency, whereas informal relationship leads oral media more likely to be used under the condition of high task urgency. Second, subjective perceptions of media

characteristics affect media choice. Specifically, the easier to use and the more compatible a medium is perceived to be, the more likely the medium will be used for interpersonal communications. Third, in terms of social influence, the more popular a media is perceived to be among peers, the more likely the medium will be chosen for interpersonal communication. Last, individual differences in terms of demographic characteristics and media adoption and use have a weak impact on media choice and a weak relationship with the psychological constructs (i.e., WPC and SN).

The findings indicate that individuals are less conscious of matching media and tasks than expected. The idea of task-media fit proposed by media richness theory has been largely challenged by multidimensional attributes of interpersonal media as well as the complex interactions between task characteristics. Media richness theory is suggested to be oversimplified for explaining media choice in the context of mediated interpersonal communication. Although the theoretical framework does not obtain strong empirical support, it has gained interesting and informative insights into the complex phenomenon of media choice in people's everyday life. Theoretical contributions, practical implications, limitations of the study, and directions for future research are discussed.