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COMMUNICATION CHANNEL PREFERENCES BY FACULTY MEMBERS FOR FACULTY-STUDENT INTERACTION

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ABSTRACT

The most basic elements found within any educational settings are teachers and students (Dobransky and Frymier, 2004). Many scholars have argued the importance of positive teacher-student relationships (Frymier and House, 2000; Morganett, 1995; West, 1994), as well as the relationship between teacher-student relationships and learning (Chory and McCroskey, 1999; Dobransky and Frymier, 2004; Ellis, 2000). The impact of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in business and organizational communication has been the target of intense research, particularly since the 1990s (Keil and Johnson, 2002). The theoretical orientation builds on the assumption that face-to-face (FtF) communication possesses inherent characteristics that make it more appropriate than other channels, particularly channels that suppress too many of the FtF communication elements. However, Barnes (2003) proposed that the need to understand the impact of CMC on education is growing as technological advances offer more communication options. Therefore, this study focused on the faculty members' communication channel preferences in faculty-student interaction. The study employed the Social Presence Theory and Media Richness Theory as the theoretical framework. A survey method was used with the questionnaires distributed to 50 faculty members at the University of Tunku Abdul Rahman. It was found that FtF communication, which leads to higher level of social presence and richness of information, was the most frequent used and preferred communication channel by the faculty members in

faculty-student interaction.

Keywords: *Social Presence Theory; communication; channel preferences; teacher-student relationship; communication behaviour.*

PILIHAN MEDIUM KOMUNIKASI FAKULTI UNTUK INTERAKSI FAKULTI-PELAJAR

ABSTRAK

Antara elemen asas yang sentiasa dikenalpasti dalam aspek penetapan pendidikan ialah guru dan pelajar (Dobransky and Frymier, 2004). Ramai sarjana menegaskan bahawa pentingnya hubungan guru-pelajar yang positif (Frymier and House, 2000; Morganett, 1995; West, 1994), sepertimana hubungan guru-pelajar dan pembelajaran (Chory and McCroskey, 1999; Dobransky and Frymier, 2004; Ellis, 2000). Impak komunikasi berteraskan komputer (CMC) dalam bidang perniagaan dan komunikasi keorganisasian menjadi tumpuan kajian dan penyelidikan, sejak awal 90-an (Keil and Johnson, 2002). Kerangka teoretikal kajian ini berasaskan kepada andaian bahawa komunikasi bersemuka (FtF communication) memiliki karakteristik tersirat yang lebih menonjol daripada medium komunikasi yang lain. Walau bagaimanapun, Barnes (2003) mengemukakan pandangan bahawa perlunya kajian ke atas impak CMC dalam bidang pendidikan kerana CMC menawarkan lebih banyak pilihan medium komunikasi. Kajian ini memfokuskan kepada pilihan medium komunikasi fakulti untuk interaksi antara pihak fakulti dengan pelajar dan mengenengahkan dua teori utama sebagai kerangka teoretikal kajian iaitu *Social Presence Theory* dan *Media Richness Theory*. Dalam kajian ini, kaedah survei yang merangkumi 50 orang responden ahli fakulti di Universiti Tunku Abduh Rahman, Kuala Lumpur telah dikenalpasti. Hasil kajian mendapati bahawa komunikasi bersemuka menjadi medium pilihan utama ahli-ahli fakulti dalam konteks interaksi guru-pelajar, ketrampilan dan lambakan informasi.

Keywords: *Teori Kehadiran Sosial; komunikasi; keutamaan saluran; hubungan guru-pelajar; tingkah laku komunikasi.*

Introduction

Chory and McCroskey (1999) recognized that teaching is a communication practice. Because a teacher-student relationship may be defined as an interpersonal relationship (Frymier and House, 2000), it may be assumed that both parties depend on each other to maintain the relationship. Rawlins (2000) further defined teaching as a mode of friendship. The relationship is not only meaningful in the classroom but also impacts on teachers' and students' lives. Educational friendship emphasizes positive and edifying communicative stances and relationships of teachers with individual students and toward classes as collectives. Meanwhile, Saodah (2002) believed that education is mainly sharing of knowledge and transforming students into productive and responsible citizen.

In addition, McCollough and Gremler (1999) pointed out that there are no universally effective teaching methods. Student learning takes place in a variety of situation (both inside and outside the classroom) involving multiple faculty-student interactions. Over the past twenty years, computer-mediated communication (CMC) is being widely integrated into teaching and learning (Barnes, 2003). These modern communication technologies broaden the scope of effective communication and open up communication possibilities not otherwise possible. Oluga (2010) suggested that effective communication is not just about the transmission of ideas. Rather it is about the dissemination of properly worded meaningful ideas that are comprehensible to both parties (sender and receiver) and which ultimately can attract the desired response or feedback. Among some of these possibilities is efficiency and speed of communication, coordination with and control of multiple persons, ability to sort, send and retrieve messages at any time and place.

E-mail provides a new method for students and teachers to correspond with each other; it also allows electronic distribution of course material. Discussion lists can be used to support in-class conversation or provide distance education. Students around the world can come to talk about academic materials and assignments. It can also be used as a virtual classroom to bring together students both locally and globally. The Web has also emerged as a popular research tool for both teachers and students.

Theoretical framework

According to Tanis and Postmes (2003), some of the most significant turning points in human civilization have been marked by technological innovations that have increased our ability to store, transport and communicate information and knowledge. Modern communication technologies that rely on the processing power of computers challenge conventional notions of media and its use. It is estimated that there are hundreds of millions of Internet users creating entirely new social situations and communication behaviours. Meanwhile Kenix (2006) claimed that the technology of the internet has allowed for horizontal and vertical flow of communications, physical connectivity, data communality and

interactivity. Researchers found that electronic communication media usually do not incorporate all of the elements present in the face-to-face (FtF) communication. This often leads to decreased quality of outcomes of collaborative tasks. Previous research on media appropriateness/choice and communication effectiveness has been dominated by two theories: social presence theory (Short, Williams and Christie, 1976) and media richness theory (Daft and Lengel, 1984, Daft and Lengel, 1987; Lengel and Daft, 1988; Trevino, Lengel and Daft, 1987).

Social Presence Theory

Short, Williams and Christie (1976) proposed the Social Presence Theory at a time when the Internet as we know it today was yet to be conceptualized, let alone implemented. In spite of that, the theory has influenced much CMC research over the years. Social presence refers to the degree to which a medium allows communicators to experience others as being psychologically present, or the degree to which a medium is perceived to convey the actual presence of the communicators. Social presence can be a function of both verbal cues (e.g., tone of voice) and nonverbal cues (e.g., facial expression, direction of gaze, posture, and dress).

Short, Williams and Christie (1976) surveyed the literature on mediated communication and concluded that communication media differ in their ability to provide a sense of social presence. They also concluded that most new media are lacking in social presence. In other word, communicating by media is rather different than communicating in person. This has the implication that understanding may be distorted due to a lack of social cues and users tended to misinterpret messages. In addition, reduced social presence may lead to less emotionality in exchanges, weakening the interpersonal function of communication.

The theory classifies different communication media along a one-dimensional continuum of "social presence." Media that are capable of providing a greater sense of intimacy and immediacy will be perceived as having a higher social presence. On a continuum of social presence, communication media such as FtF meetings, which are capable of conveying nonverbal and social context cues, is considered to have the most social presence, whereas CMC, written, text-based communication have less because they lack nonverbal feedback cues.

According to the Social Presence Theory, communication tasks differ in their requirements for social presence. The appropriateness of a medium for performing certain communication tasks is determined by the degree to which the medium's characteristics of social presence fit the requirements of the tasks. Tasks that require interpersonal skills, such as resolving conflicts or negotiation, demand high social presence, whereas tasks such as exchanging routine information are low in their social presence requirements. Media like FtF and group meetings are more appropriate for performing tasks with high social presence requirements, whereas media such as e-mail, letters and memos are fit for low social presence tasks.

Media Richness Theory

The Media Richness Theory is suggested by Daft and Lengel in 1986, it is viewed as a refinement and extension of the Social Presence Theory. The Media Richness Theory classifies communication media along a continuum of "richness," where richness is based on the ability of media to carry nonverbal cues, provide rapid feedback, convey personality traits and support the use of natural language. These criteria impact upon human understanding and frame of reference. According to Dennis and Kinney (1998), media richness refers to the ability of the media to change human understanding, overcome different conceptual frames of reference or clarify ambiguous issues in a timely manner. Consequently, communication media possessing more features of the criteria would rank higher on the richness scale compared to one possessing less.

The social presence and media richness approaches propose that FtF communication is the richest medium, followed in order by telephone, written personal, CMC, written formal and then numerical formal media. Oral media, such as FtF and telephone, are believed to be richer than written media because they provide opportunities for immediate feedback and can have multiple cues including kinesics, facial expression and tone of voice and uses natural language that is high in variety (Wright, 2000).

In general, e-mail is classified as a relatively lean medium according to the four characteristics of richness. In using e-mail, one is not able to communicate through multiple cues; immediate feedback may or may not be possible depending on the availability and inclination of the communication partner. Besides that, e-mail is based on the required use of a computer and the written word; hence it is not generally viewed as a personal mode of communication. Use of much language variety is also limited in e-mail. Media richness theory differentiates between lean and rich media by the number of cue systems within each medium. This approach suggests that because CMC is a lean channel, it is useful for simple or clear messages. CMC is also more efficient for communication that does not require coordinated interaction efforts. On the other hand, a richer medium should be used for information that is ambiguous, emphatic or emotional (Wright, 2000).

Ambiguous also refers to equivocal, whereby the communicators face the problem of confusion because there are too many possible meanings in the message. When words or events are ambiguous or equivocal, people don't need more information but they need a context or framework to help them sort through the data. They need a filter to help them to screen out interpretations that would turn out to be counterproductive. Therefore, FtF meeting is best for ambiguous messages as it provides rapid feedback.

Complex messages refer to the unpredictable human dimensions and emotional aspects of interactions. It includes those messages that require further explanation, elaboration or clarification. Complex messages are neither objective nor computational procedures that clearly instruct people what to do. According to Keil and Johnson, (2002), complexity is more subjective or perception-dependent

than ambiguity.

Keil and Johnson (2002) noticed that CMC and written media can oversimplify complex problems because they do not provide a means to convey feedback or information concerning personal feelings. In addition, Kock (2004) found that the lack of nonverbal and social cues in CMC interaction reduces social regulation, leading to more relaxing feeling and occasional overly emotional interactions.

Methodology

A survey method using self-administered questionnaire was used in this study. The questionnaires were distributed to 50 faculty members at the University of Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), Kuala Lumpur. Respondents were from the Department of Multimedia and Communication; Chinese Studies; Modern Language; Psychology, Sociology and Political Science.

The questionnaire was organized in three sections. Section A required the respondents to report their personal information such as sex, age, race, experience of lecturing and department that they come from. However, only three items were being discussed in the findings, e.g. sex, age and years of teaching. This is followed by section B that required the respondents to estimate how often they use the five channels (FtF meeting, telephone, written note, e-mail and MSN) to communicate with students during a week. Then, the respondents were asked to indicate their preferred choice of channel with five choices offered in the questionnaire. They were required to rank from 1 to 5 with 1 for most preferred and 5 for least preferred.

In order to determine the relationship between communication channel used by faculty members and their perception of richness of information provided by the channel, section C contained five statements that required the respondents to indicate their level of agreement. They were measured using Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Questions in section C were used to measure the relationship between communication channel used by faculty members and their perception of characteristic of message.

Finally, some questions were used to measure the relationship between types of interaction and communication channel preferences. Again, the respondents were asked to indicate their first choice of communication channel that they will use for different types of interaction. The data were analysed using SPSS and descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentage were used to summarize the data.

Findings and analysis

Personal Information of Respondents

Table 1 shows the demographics information of the respondents. Among the 50 respondents of this study, 40% were male and 60% were female faculty members. Majority (36%) of the respondents were between 31-35 years old. This is followed

by the age group of 26-30, which occupied 22% and 36-40, which occupied 12%. The mean for respondents' age is 36.54; the youngest respondent is 24 years old and the oldest is 64 years old.

Table 1 : Demographic of Respondents

Sex	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	20	40
Female	30	60
Total	**50**	**100**

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage (%)
< 26	4	8
26 – 30	11	22
31 – 35	18	36
36 – 40	6	12
41 – 45	3	6
46 – 50	1	2
51 - 55	0	0
> 55	7	14
Total	**50**	**100**
Mean	**36.54**	
Std Dev.	**10.12**	

Table 2 : Years of Teaching

Year Group	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1 – 5	25	50
6 – 10	13	26
11 – 15	5	10
16 – 20	4	8
21 – 25	1	2
26 – 30	1	2
31 – 35	1	2
Total	**50**	**100**
Mean	**7.46**	
Std Dev.	**6.97**	

The most frequently used communication channel

Table 3 summarizes the overall usage of communication channel during a week. Generally, the respondents have almost six FtF meetings with students in a week, thus FtF interaction become the most dominant communication channel for faculty members. This is followed in order by e-mail (mean = 3.31), written note (mean

= 2.06), telephone (mean = 2.02) and MSN (mean = 1.12).

Table 3 : Mean Frequency of Channel Use in a Week

Channel	Mean
Face-to-Face Meeting	5.57
E-mail	3.31
Written Note	2.06
Telephone	2.02
MSN	1.12

The high usage of FtF meetings by faculty members also reflects their preferences for communication channel. Table 5 demonstrates that 56% of the respondents preferred most to use FtF meetings to communicate with students. This finding is consistent with the Social Presence and Media Richness Theory, which claim that FtF has the highest level of social presence and richess of information because it allows the simultaneous observation of multiple cues, including kinesics, facial expression and tone of voice. FtF also provides immediate feedback, personal interaction and uses of natural language that is high in variety.

Table 4 : The Most Preferred Channel

Channel	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Face-to-Face Meeting	28	56
E-mail	14	28
Written Message	4	8
Telephone	2	4
MSN	2	4
Total	**50**	**100**

According to the Social Presence and Media Richness Theory, e-mail has lower level of social presence and richness of information comparing to telephone. However, this study found that e-mail is preferred more (28%) by the faculty members than telephone (4%). The preferences of faculty members in using e-mail as a communication channel could be explained by some characteristics of e-mail suggested by Sproull (1991). He pointed out that e-mail technologies share the following five characteristics that differentiate them socially from other communication technologies:

i. E-mail is asynchronous. Senders and receivers are not required to attend to the same communication at the same time. Asynchrony is not only a matter of personal convenience; it means communication across time and space.

ii. E-mail is fast. Messages can be transmitted in only seconds across a continent, or even around the world. Speed makes possible long-distance conversations.
iii. E-mail is text based. Messages convey typographic characters and the text in electronic communication makes it useful for exchanging documents as well as messages.
iv. E-mail has multiple-receiver addressability. The sender can transmit the message to more than one person. This attribute means that without respect to physical, temporal or social location, people can delegate work, collaborate, form new groups and make collective decisions.
v. E-mail has built-in external memory, which is important for social memory. The contents of electronic messages can be stored and retrieved later by other group members who wish to trace the history of the project and learn about the group's act.

An interesting finding of this study is that telephone, a channel that possesses high level of social presence and richness of information is ranked as the least preferred (4%) channel by faculty members. Faculty members may not like to attend to students' call after office hour or during weekend as they feel that it is their time to rest. MSN is another least preferred (4%) communication channel by faculty members. This might due to the characteristics of MSN that requires synchronous communication that appears to be less convenient for the faculty members.

Communication channel used and perception of richness of information

There were 56% of respondents that chose FtF meetings as their most preferred communication channel, they were then asked to provide reasons of why they chose the medium. As can be seen from Table 5, the respondents strongly agreed that FtF meetings provide them with immediate feedback (mean = 4.62), carry sufficient nonverbal cues (mean = 4.57), convey personality traits (mean = 4.52), carry sufficient verbal cues (mean = 4.50) and enable them to use natural language (mean = 4.36). In other words, faculty members preferred FtF meetings due to the high level of social presence and richness of information provided by the medium.

Table 5 : Mean Factors for Choosing Face-to-Face Meeting

Elements in Richness of Information	Mean
Provide immediate feedback	4.62
Carry sufficient nonverbal cues	4.57
Convey personality traits	4.52
Carry sufficient verbal cues	4.50
Use of natural language	4.36

Communication channel used and perception of characteristic of message
As shown in Table 6, most of the faculty members (76%) preferred to see students FtF even to communicate straightforward and clear messages. E-mail was ranked as the second preferred medium (12%), followed by telephone (4%), written message (4%) and MSN (4%). This finding is however contradicted with the notion of Social Presence and Media Richness Theory, which propose that communicators would use a lean channel for straightforward and clear messages. To convey simple messages, faculty members preferred to use e-mail (34%), followed in order by written message (28%), telephone (18%), FtF meeting (12%) and MSN (8%).

To communicate ambiguous messages, 90% of the faculty members preferred to use FtF meeting, only 4% chose to use written message, another 4% chose to use telephone and 2% chose to use MSN. This finding is consistent with the social presence and media richness theory, which suggested that a rich medium would be useful for ambiguous messages. There were 94% of faculty members that chose FtF as the preferred channel to communicate complex messages. It was followed by written message (4%) and e-mail (2%). These finding is consistent with the notion of social presence and media richness theory.

Table 6 : Communication Channel Used and Perception of Richness of Information

Characteristic of Message	Communication Channel	Frequency	Percentage
Straightforward/ clear	Face-to-Face Meeting	38	76
	Telephone	2	4
	Written Message	2	4
	E-mail	6	12
	MSN	2	4
Simple	Face-to-Face Meeting	6	12
	Telephone	9	18
	Written Message	14	28
	E-mail	17	34
	MSN	4	8
Ambiguous	Face-to-Face Meeting	45	90
	Telephone	0	0
	Written Message	2	4
	E-mail	2	4
	MSN	1	2
Complex	Face-to-Face Meeting	47	94
	Telephone	0	0
	Written Message	2	4
	E-mail	1	2
	MSN	0	0

Communication channel used and types of interaction

For task-focused type of interactions, most of the faculty members preferred to use e-mail (40%), followed in order by FtF (36%), written message (20%), telephone (2%) and MSN (2%). On the hand, faculty members preferred to see students FtF for relational-focused type of interactions. This is followed in order by e-mail (6%), telephone (4%) and written message (2%).

Table 7 : Choice of Communication Channel in Relation to the Types of Interaction

Type of Interaction	Communication Channel	Frequency	Percentage
Task-focused	Face-to-Face Meeting	18	36
	Telephone	1	2
	Written Message	10	20
	E-mail	20	40
	MSN	1	2
Relational-focused	Face-to-Face Meeting	44	88
	Telephone	2	4
	Written Message	1	2
	E-mail	3	6
	MSN	0	0

Conclusion

The major conclusion of this research is that FtF communication, which leads to higher level of social presence and richness of information, was the most frequent used and preferred communication channel by faculty members in faculty-student interaction.

While FtF remains highly appropriate and popular in most situations, modern communication channels can also provide a preferable solution in other contexts. Despite the lower usage of e-mail for ambiguous and complex messages, e-mail is found to be the second widely adopted and preferred communication medium among faculty members in faculty-student interaction. Faculty members preferred to use a lean medium for simple and task-focused messages and a rich medium for ambiguous, complex and relational-focused messages. These finding is consistent with the notion of social presence and media richness theory.

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