

Sorry to Interrupt: Asian Media Preferences in Cross-cultural Collaborations

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ABSTRACT

Laboratory studies of culture and computer-mediated communication have provided inconsistent results, in part due to differences in the tasks people were asked to do, the specific cultural backgrounds of participants, and the tools used for communication. We conducted an interview study in an effort to shed light on these inconsistent findings. The goal of the study was to understand when members of different cultures feel particular media (e.g., email, instant messaging, phone) are appropriate and to understand which medium they would choose for specific communication tasks. We discuss key themes from these interviews.

Author Keywords

Intercultural collaboration, computer-mediated communication, media preferences

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.3 Group and Organization Interfaces: Computer-supported cooperative work

INTRODUCTION

Collaborations between individuals from different national cultures are on the rise, both in terms of virtual organizations that span multiple countries and in terms of people who have moved from their countries of birth. Intercultural collaborations have many advantages, including the insights that arise when people from diverse perspectives are brought together to work on a problem.

At the same time, however, research suggests that international collaboration is difficult (e.g., [2]). Collaboration involves communication, and styles of communication vary considerably across nations and cultures (e.g., [5]). Members of different cultures may be more or less reliant on nonverbal aspects of communication. They may be more or less impacted by the status, age, gender or other traits of the individuals involved. They may even vary in their perceptions of the primary goal of communication, whether to interact with

and connect to others or to share information toward the achievement of a shared goal [5].

Issues of intercultural communication and collaboration are further complicated by the fact that the majority of these collaborations are found in virtual organizations. People are located around the globe, communicating primarily by means of computer mediated communication (CMC) tools such as email, instant messaging (IM), audio conferencing and video conferencing. Each of these media has specific affordances or properties (e.g., synchronous vs. asynchronous communication, a view of one's partners or not) that shape the form of remote interactions [1].

Affordances of media can be expected to interact with the cultural backgrounds of collaborations in terms of the media's ability to convey context, personal information, or guidance toward a result. For example, one might expect video conferencing to be more valuable for collaborators from cultures whose communication styles emphasize monitoring a partner's facial expressions, but less important to collaborators from cultures whose communication styles emphasize primarily the words exchanged. Furthermore, intercultural collaboration often takes place in a language that is not native to all participants, a factor that may also play a role in media preferences.

Culture and Computer Mediated Communication

Research has shown a complex relationship between national and/or regional culture and preferences and styles of CMC. The majority of studies have focused on testing existing media in a variety of contexts and combinations, with the goal of understanding where cross-cultural communication is most successful and also most vulnerable to confusion and cross-purposes.

These studies have found varying results. Depending on details of the study (the task, instructions, partners), Asian participants may talk more or less than their American counterparts, may reach conclusions faster or slower, and may find media more or less satisfying (e.g., [4], [8], [9], [10]). For example, in a study of negotiation practices, Setlock et al. found that Chinese pairs spoke longer and reached more lasting agreement than either American pairs or cross-cultural pairs, but only face-to-face [8]. Wang et al. [10], in contrast, found that Chinese participants talked

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less than Americans during a brainstorming task, but that this effect was lessened in intercultural groups.

Fluency and Media Use

Most, if not all, individuals who live, work or study, and function in a foreign country for any length of time have received some training in the language of that country. Fluency levels vary substantially across individuals, however, and confidence in the second language may be even more varied. One issue that comes into play in such a situation is second language anxiety, or uncertainty.

Several factors have been identified as contributing to second language anxiety and willingness to use that language [7], including the purpose of the communication, and the channel of communication. Both of these factors can be expected to vary culture-to-culture, depending on whether the culture is more task or relationship-focused and on the high or low level of context required for communication. Risk aversion may also play a role in individuals' willingness to engage in such scenarios, as this can vary among cultures [5].

The current study

The goal of the current study was to shed light on the puzzling pattern of results found in previous laboratory studies of culture and CMC. As we have noted, these studies differed along many dimensions, including what task participants performed (attribution, negotiation, decision-making, etc.) and what media they used (e.g., synchronous or asynchronous, anonymous or named, spoken or written). To make sense of these varied results, we are interviewing people about their media preferences, and the reasons for those preferences, in a variety of situations. This is an ongoing study, and the results presented here are preliminary. Still, they do begin to show how laboratory studies can have such variable results depending on the exact context and conditions involved.

METHOD

Participants

The interviewees for this study are being recruited from two American universities. All are students studying within the US, and all still interact regularly with friends and family in their native countries. All are fluent English speakers. Although this implies greater exposure to American culture, this requirement was established to ensure they were able to convey their preferences clearly. All foreign participants still have, and communicate regularly with, friends and family in their native countries.

By the end of our study, we expect to have interviewed 24 people from China, Korea, India and North America. In this paper, we present findings from the first eight interviewees: 4 Chinese, 2 Koreans, 1 Indian and 1 North American. Our focus is on the trends among the Asian participants, defined here as the Chinese and Korean participants.

Interview protocol

In order to better understand CMC preferences by people of different cultural backgrounds, we devised an interview

protocol which first systematically went through the most common media choices. The media discussed were the telephone (cell phone, land line or both), email and instant messaging. They were also asked about other communication tools such as Skype or Facebook.

Interviewees were asked whether they used the media for talking to family, friends, professional or academic communication, customer service or other business purposes, etc. They provided information on where they used the media (e.g., a laptop or campus computer cluster, landline at home or cell phone on the road). They were then asked in an open-ended question what they liked, and what they disliked, about the media.

After discussing each medium, interviewees were given a set of hypothetical scenarios such as calling off work, communicating an accident to friends, asking for help with class material, telling a colleague about a mistake, contacting customer service representatives, and catching up with friends. They were asked what media they would use in each scenario, and why. They were also asked whether their choices of media would change depending upon how often they saw the other person.

Following the interview, participants completed a brief demographic survey. In addition to the usual demographic information (age, gender), the survey also asked for the students' nationality, self-identifying cultural group (if any), native language and self-perceived English fluency. The goal of these questions was to establish a profile of how the individual identifies him or herself, culturally.

RESULTS

Cultural Uncertainty

“What warrants an imposition?”

One prominent theme from these interviews was concern with interrupting behavior. Interviewees were very hesitant to use any technology that demands instant response (e.g., cell phone, IM), particularly when contacting someone in authority. When asked how to best contact her professor, Interviewee 2 responded:

I would send an email, because I'm not so sure the professor has enough time for me, when the professor is free. (Interviewee 2)

Similarly, people expressed discomfort using interrupting technology with less-close friends or colleagues. A good deal of discussion involved clarifying exactly what situations warranted interruption.

[W]ith IM, I'm always hesitant when I want to call a friend who especially—like I'm not too- I'm not very intimate with a friend, like, you know, someone that just knows you from school or whatever, I would never call them on the phone. I will always IM or e-mail. And then if really I had to call [it] is because of, you know, this thing is happening right now.' (Interviewee 4)

Email was preferred in non-urgent situations, since the recipient retains control of how and when they respond.

If I make a telephone [call] I don't know whether he or she's convenient to check this message at that time. So I send email, and he can make his decision and think about and respond to me. And [he has] more freedom and the can have their own choice to respond. Just not worry, too aggressive to make my message. (Interviewee 7)

There was a definite relationship between the seriousness of the topic and the legitimacy of interruption. For instance, the interview protocol for the scenarios did not actually mention face-to-face, yet for the scenarios of injury/illness of a friend or leaving work, several interviewees asked if they could go face-to-face.

It is interesting to note that, for the Asian interviewees, the concern regarding telephone always emphasized the potential intrusion on the other person's time. For the current sole American interviewee, the phone was seen as convenient.

I don't have to- like if my computer is off or something, you know, phone's right here. It's- and I have it with me, like I can carry it with me all the time. And it's faster to have like direct conversations with someone like that, you know, over the phone-- like if you have a lot to say, the phone is best. (Interviewee 8)

This interviewee listed the main drawback to the phone as limiting her ability to do other things due to having to hold the phone.

Social and status uncertainty

“What to say to whom and why?”

The interviewees' selection of media often involved status issues as a factor, in addition to urgency and clarity of communication. For instance, Interviewee 2 who above disliked telephone for contact with a professor, decisively chose the telephone over email for dealing with a customer service issue.

I would call, because I don't expect them to actually read the email. I want things to get done right away, and make sure it is done. Email doesn't really give me enough feedback that things are done fast enough. I would use it—I use it more in like planning stuff and sharing ideas. (Interviewee 2)

In the customer service interaction, she feels assured that she is in the position to make time and immediacy demands, establishing that deference is not universally applied but is part of a social structure. As the customer, she has the authority and so may choose a more intrusive technique.

Although email is less intrusive and allows for greater planning, the contextual limitations can make it difficult to understand nuances.

With e-mail it's hard to tell what kind of tone people have. Sometimes people come across meaner than they are. Especially- sometimes there's – I mean, I've been here for so many years but sometimes still there's a cultural gap so sometimes I will read something more really meaner than they actually meant. (Interviewee 4)

Interviewees noted that, in instances where status was a factor and politeness was important, it was sometime unclear which approach was consider the more polite one. When asked how to communicate leaving a job,

I'm going to use email. I'm not sure. In Korea, I might use face to face communication, but here I might use email. Using the email only is kind of impolite in Korea. I'll just communicate in person. Here, email doesn't seem very impolite, so I think it's going to be okay in America. (Interviewee 1)

Interestingly, sometimes a behavior that seems overly casual in the US may arise from heightened politeness in Chinese customs. For instance, when asked how to begin an email, one interviewee said,

I just say 'Hi.' I don't like writing people's name in the email when I don't know the person. This is kind of cultural thing. You don't refer to somebody by their name when you don't know the person. (Interviewee 2)

Second language uncertainty

“Will I understand and be understood?”

One theme, which coincides, and often overlaps, with the issues of face management discussed so far, relates to second language use. As non-native speakers of English, the interviewees had concerns that certain media may make clear communication more difficult. The inability to be understood was seen as a loss of face, and a situation to be avoided.

There is some kind of shame factor. I feel—I don't want them to not understand me. (Interviewee 2)

Due to the revision and editing affordances available in written media, these do not correspond directly to high- and low-richness media. Face-to-face allows nonverbal and situational cues that may aid in understandability. Email, although lacking in those cues, offers the ability to choose words carefully and revise until the sender is satisfied, and removes performance-type anxiety. Telephone stood out as the least preferred media in terms of second-language anxiety. Being synchronous, it can be high-pressure and does not allow revision. Being remote, it does not provide any nonverbal support.

Fluency issues can be divided into both literal fluency and also cultural fluency. Many interviewees expressed concern with their accent or vocabulary (literal fluency) interfering with clear telephone use.

I didn't use the phone call often with my American friends. It might be because of my lack of fluency of

English. So I use phone call with my Korean friends a lot. (Interviewee 1)

In addition, interviewees mentioned needing the extra time and privacy in order to better compose their thoughts for a specific audience, suggesting concern with cultural fluency, or knowing how to respond or communicate in a given situation.

I can think what I want to say before sending a mail, so it is good for me to think what I want to talk [sic], so I prefer email when I talk with someone who is not familiar with me. (Interviewee 1)

Many responses bridged both issues, citing more general comfort levels.

Being English as a second language person, sometimes people do not feel that they can understand completely what I'm saying, so it sometimes is better for me to type in an IM and they would understand it much better. (Interviewee 2)

It is interesting to note here that the concern is with the other party, and the potential discomfort they may feel by not understanding the speaker.

DISCUSSION

The information gathered from these interviews, even at an early stage, suggest that Asians studying in the US are balancing a variety of concerns and issues which impact their use of CMC tools. Foremost among these are concerns about understandability, both in the literal and contextual sense of "understanding," and also ambivalence about breaching social norms by interrupting those in authority positions.

There are several implications of these findings. Individuals in cross-cultural collaborations, particularly the Western participants, may be able to assist by more directly establishing contact expectations. This puts the onus on a collaborator to attempt contact, and then be declined if the desired party is not available. While Americans may not be especially bothered by that interaction, it is contrary to the Asian students' expectations and will likely cause them to avoid that scenario in the future. An established meeting time or known office hours would reduce uncertainty. Americans, particularly in academia, tend to have very fluid boundaries regarding work hours and work location. In the event that a synchronous communication time is needed, email may be used to establish such a time.

These findings also illuminate potential spaces for technological interventions. Many of the interviewees noted that the availability indicators for such tools as IM are ambiguous and cannot really be trusted. Similarly, cell phones may not be silenced even at inconvenient times for a variety of reasons. Knowing this, Asian students are reluctant to call. More personalized or better controlled availability indicators could be useful in showing times that the receiver is not just reachable, but is actually agreeable to being reached.

Further research in this study will include continued interviewing of Asian and American students. Follow up studies may include similar interviews of higher status individuals (e.g., professors), since many of the points raised by the Asian students relate to status issues. In addition, we plan to conduct a broader internet survey to further explore the topics and concerns raised so far.

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