AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT HOW THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF RELATIONSHIPS INFLUENCES COMMUNICATION MEDIA CHOICE FOR YOUNG ADULTS

A Thesis

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We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the impact of relational influence on communication media choice in young adults in the United States. It applies the media richness and uses and gratification theories to identify the purpose of communication media in varying interpersonal relationships using face-to-face communication (FtF), phone, text messaging, instant messenger and email. It utilizes survey software to yield quantitative results in an anonymous environment to measure the perceived closeness of the most common relationships for young adults and what specific media is utilized for those relationships. This research design echoes the design of researchers in 2007 in Korea, who sought to explore the configurations of relationships in communication media for Korean society (Kim, et al), which surmises relational influence is a pre-dominating factor in communication. The hypothesis was not supported by the research and a statistically significant correlation between relationships and influence on communication media was not found; however, patterns of closeness in interpersonal relationships for the five different communication media did surface, demonstrating a need for more extensive future research and more in-depth, personal study on the participants and motives for communication.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

*Importance of the Study*

Communication media consumers have many choices in this day and age. Copious amounts of technology allow for communication to ensue in almost any environment at anytime, anywhere. Given these many options, members of society are faced with decisions. Individuals must determine which communication medium best suits their conversational goals. Many factors influence these decisions including proximity, urgency, message content, etc. As technology continues to develop, individuals have the opportunity to cater their interpersonal goals towards communication media.

The purpose of this thesis is to understand the relational influence on communication media choice in young adults. The study is expected to show that varying degrees of closeness in the interpersonal relationships for young American adults will have an influence on communication media choice. It is also expected to shed light on which communication media young adults prefer the most in today’s society. It is understood that most young adults have access to these technologies and use them on a regular basis.

*Statement of the Problem*

Young adults in America today are heavy media consumers. Ninety-five percent of young adults use the Internet and the majority of them are motivated by mobility (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2011). This group of adults in American society adopts and engages with different forms of technology more than any other demographic. The earnest interest of young adults in communication media is interesting because of the dynamic of the exposure to both the traditional and ultramodern forms of communication. Many young adults are in
transitional periods and find themselves needing to communicate for many different reasons, such as homesickness, loneliness, organizational obligations and relationship maintenance. With so many choices, how does one choose which medium fits the conversation and the relationship the best?

The media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) and uses and gratification theory (Blumler & Katz, 1973) help explain the determination in media choice for young adult relationships. Research applying the media richness theory has been performed on the relational influence on communication media choice in Korea (Kim, et al., 2007) but no research has been performed in America. Understanding the application of these theories as they relate to media choice, for both the perceived richness of media and the presumed uses and gratification of said media, can help foster greater communication in relationships for young adults in both personal and professional environments.

**Definition of Terms**

**Computer mediated communication:** Communication which takes place using a computer or facilitated through a computer.

**Face-to-face communication:** Communication in which body language and voice tonality play an important role.

**Media Richness Model:** use of a certain medium in a communicative activity is influenced by the fit or match between the medium capacity and the nature of the task (Daft & Lengel, 1986).
Uses and Gratification Theory: explains the way in which individuals use communications, among other resources in their environment, to satisfy their needs and to achieve their goals (Blumler & Katz, 1973).

Young adult: Any individual between the ages of 18 and 35 years old (Erickson, 1950).

Organization of Remaining Chapters

This thesis is presented in five chapters. Chapter two presents a review of the existing research in the field of study and introduces the hypothesis. Chapter three explains the scope and methodology for the research design. Chapter four presents the data obtained from the study and discusses the results and findings in comparison to the original hypothesis. Chapter five summarizes the thesis and discusses limitations and further implications for future research.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This study seeks to discover how interpersonal relationships influence communication media choice in today’s American young adults. It evaluates the influence of the configurations of various relationships on young adults’ communication choices through the Media Richness Model and the Uses and Gratification Theory. The beginning of the chapter discusses the theoretical basis for understanding media choice. The second part of the chapter gives an examination of the benefits of computer-mediated communication in society. The third part of the chapter examines the relational influence on media choice and the final component identifies media use in young adults. The chapter concludes with a summary of the literature and the proposed hypothesis.

Theoretical Basis

*Media Richness Model*

With the creation of computer-mediated communication, studies have shifted the focus from the technical to the more social aspects of media usage. “Researchers began focusing on the social influences, network contexts, and processes of media uses and perceptions” (Kim et al., 2007, p. 1185). First introduced by Richard Daft and Richard Lengel (1986), the Media Richness Model proposed that use of a certain medium in a communicative activity is influenced by the fit or match between the medium capacity and the nature of the task (Kim et al., 2007, p. 1185). *Media richness* is how much a medium can handle information and provide cues to reduce message ambiguity. This model suggests individuals choose communication channels based on various reasons, including ease of use, cost, proximity and enjoyment. Researchers point out specific conditions of communication-aspects of the medium, purposes and the participants-influence how one chooses, uses, and perceives different media (Kim et al., 2007, p.
Computer-mediated communication is much more complex than face-to-face communication and more factors now influence the use of various communication practices. The way a keyboard is displayed, the size of the device, the speed at which messages transmit and also, the ability to shorten messages in CMC, all has a pronounced impact on the ways in which people communicate.

In addition to technical aspects of media, new and popular communication mediums exude certain degrees of emotional valence, defined by Riordan and Kreuze (2010) as the “negativity and positivity of one’s mood or temperament” (p.1667). The positive and negative feelings associated with certain media influence communication choices. For example, a study of college students’ instant messaging behavior found that time spent chatting via the Internet correlated significantly with affective intimacy and “feelings of closeness and emotional bonding” (Hu et al., 2004, p. 3). Email is valued as an important resource between romantically linked pairs (Hovick, et al., 2003). Individuals communicating via text or instant messaging tend to know the other person on a more personal level and most likely, exist in the same social group and make clear decision points to text rather than talk (Reid, 2007, p 424). Those mediums with the ability to transmit lengthier, more detailed information can be reserved for those individuals not familiar with one another on a personal level, like email. “Face-to-face meetings will be perceived as most rich, followed by telephone, e-mail, fax, and letters; but, in addition to the objective properties of media, individuals have perceptions of a medium's capabilities which may be socially influenced” (Trevino et al., 2000, p. 168). These social influences affect a medium’s richness. If a certain technology or media channel is widely adopted through a person’s social network, it will be perceived as the medium with the most cues available for handling
information, regardless of the other aspects offered by the media like price, complexity and mobility.

It is important to understand the link between media richness and interpersonal communication because the more a channel is adopted for its media richness, the more effective communication can ensue. The basis of the media richness theory proposes when a person matches the richness of the medium with the equivocality of the message, it should lead to more effective communication (Trevino et al., 2000, p 166.). Identifying which mediums can create the most harmony between the sender and receiver could be beneficial to any form of communication.

*Uses and Gratification Theory*

The uses and gratification theory, developed by Jay Blumler and Elihu Katz (1973), offers an explanation for understanding the goals and communicative uses in interpersonal relationships for young adults. “From this point of view, the approach simply represents an attempt to explain something of the way in which individuals use communications, among other resources in their environment, to satisfy their needs and to achieve their goals, and to do so by simply asking them” (Blumler and Katz, 1973, p. 510). Gratification, in the context of this topic, is what an individual receives from communicating with another party. Individuals seek out the following types of motivation from media channels: social escapism, transactional security and privacy, information, interactive control, socialization, non-transactional privacy, and economic motivation (Siraj, 2007, p. 403). Some media might achieve certain gratification, like security and privacy but fail to achieve other modes of gratification, like social escapism.

These categories of motivation are based on interpersonal needs. Individuals use communication channels based on the following: interpersonal needs (inclusion, affection,
relaxation and control); traditional needs associated with media (social interaction, passing time, information, habit, entertainment); new media needs (time shifting, meeting other individuals (Siraj, 2007, p. 403). Media channels that meet interpersonal needs the best are sought out most often. Individuals will embrace and adopt different forms of communication if they know and understand what proposed gratification will be delivered.

Communicating with others helps to satisfy the previously discussed interpersonal needs. This uses and gratification theory identifies the importance of the receiver’s role in helping senders achieve gratification and in the context of this study, the relationship of the audience to the sender plays a role in media choice. According to this theory, the audience is not merely a group of passive media senders, but are active participants in selecting different media to meet their needs (Siraj, 2007, p. 399). This belief offers an important component to the study of media choice in young adults because it attempts to identify the relationship of the particular audience and the role relationship plays in communication media choice for young adults seeking gratification in a social situation. Senders have the power to marry the motivation of a communicative task with the media most appropriate to accomplish conversational goals in interpersonal contexts.

Understanding how the uses and gratification theory applies to this study will uncover the underlying reasons why individuals choose different media for different gratification purposes. Knowing what specific medium can propose personal gratification in a specific relationship can lead to more effective communication practices for young adults. Those who embrace the social aspects of a particular medium tend to have a higher appreciation for its conversational benefits. The innovation of new social media technology allows individuals to meet their conversational goals through unique, purposeful and interpersonal behaviors.
The constant churn of technological innovation garners new ways to communicate and broadens the spectrum of interpersonal communication. American society has become a faction of communication media users. With the rapid diffusion and the continuing development of mobile phone and Internet services, these technologies play an important role as media for everyday interpersonal communication in contemporary societies (Petric, Petrovcic & Vehovar, 2011, p.117). With computer-mediated communication gaining momentum, people have more options for satisfying interpersonal communication needs: instant messenger, email, SMS or text messaging, and cell phone use, in addition to face-to-face (FtF) communication. The advancement of computer-mediated communication has garnered diverse channels of communication that create a large spectrum of functional purposes and interpersonal preferences (Stritzke, Nguyen, & Durkin, 2004, p.1). The landscape of interpersonal communication continues to change as technology develops and usage for these mediums continues to climb in the United States. “Approximately 86% of adults ages 18 to 25 in the United States use the Internet, and interpersonal communication is the leading use of the Internet” (Schiffrin et al., 2010, p. 300). Communicating has transformed from voice-to-voice conversations to short, computerized messages. The proposed richness of new channels has become surprising to industry leaders and may be influenced by users’ social activities. “Although voice calls account at present for about 80% of cell phone revenue, the extraordinary success of the short message service (SMS), particularly among younger cell phone users, continues to surprise network operators” (Reid, 2007, p. 424). These new ways of communicating leads users to adopt new media for unique gratifications. Researchers proposed that the characteristics of a medium are defined and appropriated through the social activities for which the medium is used (Kim, Kim,
Park & Rice, 2007, p. 1185). Each medium offers unique benefits. For example, instant messaging allows for real-time responses while multi-tasking. Email allows for delayed responses and lengthier, more detailed messages. Cellular phones allow for immediate responses and unlimited accessibility for the sender. From a uses and gratification approach, consumers can best benefit from using the various media available by matching the social task with the media.

Newer technologies also allow individuals to be selective when communicating with a certain party without the concern of logistics. There are several variables that add to a medium’s richness when communicating via technology: skill, the proximity, the goals of the conversation and the information being sent. Proximity is no longer a major roadblock in communication because now, technology allows individuals to converse across the globe at the touch of a button. Some research argues that people can maintain a sense of interconnectedness, even an intimate community, through media, even if the network members are geographically dispersed (as, e.g., Katz & Rice [2002] and Wellman & Gulia [1999] argue for the Internet). Along with proximity, synchronicity or asynchronicity, is also a contributing benefit to communication.

Responding instantaneously is an admirable quality of many media forms but so is the delayed reaction offered by CMC. “Asynchronicity allows the sender to mitigate or delay the sending of negative news” (Riordan & Kreuze, 2010, p.1671). The beauty of having both FtF and CMC to communicate allows for individuals to attempt to make prompt and efficient choices when it comes to matching the audience with the medium. If a user wants to send an email and wait for a response, technology allows them to do so and they are utilizing the uses and gratification approach. Individuals are not obligated to conform to specific social context expectations using CMC, a benefit afforded by technology.
Although the most natural communication practice, face-to-face communication (FtF) is the richest method of communicating if the individual is seeking the prevalence of emotional cues not afforded by CMC. For example, FtF has often been thought to be a superior form of communication in comparison to CMC because of the existence of more cues for the interpretation of a message (Archer & Akert, 1977; Depaulo & Friedman, 1998). With the progression of computer mediated communication, different media create diverse conversational needs and also, offer new ways to gratify those needs with unique functions.

*Relational Influence on Communication Choice*

Communication creates connection between two parties and regardless of the weight of emotion, media helps create social purpose. The emotional meaning behind the sent message can determine which medium is utilized between parties, according to Riordan and Kreuze (2010). “The most prominent reason for choosing FtF over email or IM was the presence of more cues for emotion encoding and interpretation” (p. 1671). CMC eliminates the nonverbal cues most closely associated with FtF communication. Some find this appealing. Researchers such as Walther, Tidwell, Riordan and Kreuze (2010) have found that people adapt to the lack of emotional cues in CMC to make the channel just effective for building and maintaining relationships at FtF” (p. 1667). The amount of disclosure a person wants to convey may have an effect on which medium they choose to utilize. Riordan and Kreuze (2010) suggest people should seek FtF communication over CMC whenever possible to convey socio-emotional communication (p. 1667). For more conversational and free-flowing communication, researchers like McCormick and McCormick (2002) suggest people use CMC. More emotional cues are available through FtF, which lends benefits to highly emotional conversations but CMC offers convenience and less emotional vulnerability.
The emotional brevity of interpersonal relationships influences communication media choice. The only comprehensive study performed on relational influence took place in 2007 in Korea by researchers Kim, Kim, Park and Rice. Their study investigated the configurations of relationships in different media. Instead of focusing on age, the study focused on the employment status of participants. Adults who worked had the most relationships in their social network. Children and teenagers reported the least amount of relationships.

Kim et al.’s (2007) study found the channels most often used were mobile phones and FtF. Participants reported the lowest usage with instant messenger. Mobile phones were utilized for the participants’ closest personal relationships, while instant messenger was used in the most emotionally distant relationships, like co-workers and acquaintances. According to Kim et al., (2007) mobile phones serve as a medium which narrows-down relationships (communication occurs between only those with whom an individual is close) while instant messenger is an “expanding medium” (p.1202). Channels were also utilized differently depending on employment status. While instant messenger was not the most popular channel, it could be used successfully in office work environments.

Participants reported similar results for mobile phone and FtF communication, which proves individuals prefer these two channels over the other most popular mediums (instant messenger, email, and short message service). Essentially, the study shows Koreans prefer these two methods, regardless of employment status, over any other for maintaining close relationships. Mobile phones are used across all relationships. Email is used primarily for communication with relatives and co-workers. Instant messenger is also used for family relations and some organization communication. FtF is used primarily for communication with spouses and children.
CMC is not conducive just in creating relationships but also in maintaining them. Users of CMC can maintain multiple media channels simultaneously, thus nurturing their social networks. CMC also allows for the sender of a message to incorporate personalization under no strict time restrictions, unlike FtF. “Computer-mediated communication has the ability, unlike network television where the programming is for a mass audience, to only reach an audience of selective tastes since computer-mediated communication has the ability to be personalized” (Siraj, 2007, p. 404). Users have the ability to craft the content of the message at their own time and even develop completely different personalities using Internet.

Reid (2007) states:

It is now understood that online contact can at times surpass direct face-to-face interaction in both intimacy and intensity, and support the development of enduring online and offline relationships. Also, evidence is mounting that online interaction may become the preferred mode of social contact for key groups of Internet users (p. 425).

For those individuals who fear social situations and traditional conversational methods, CMC proves beneficial to those who feel more comfortable in modest and secluded environments. Thanks to technology, interpersonal communication has now taken on many new life forms in society and the perceived richness of the media offers users more options for meeting conversational goals.

Communication in Young Adults

This study focuses on one specific demographic in the United States: young adults or “millenials.” The term “young adult” is a vague term used to describe a complex group of people. “Young adults” comprise of subgroups of individuals who emulate both adolescents and established adults. According to Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development (as cited in
a young adult is any person between the ages of 18 and 35. Young adults comprise 26% of the total population and 30% of the nation’s internet users. “Clearly it is important to recognize that young people are not a single uniform body who develop in a strictly chronological fashion but rather as a number of subgroups composed of individuals at diverse stages of development” (Fortman, 2006, p. 6). Young adults are an important demographic to consider in a study on media choice because they are the largest group of media consumers in society today and their practices and preferences continue to evolve (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2011).

Various generations in America embrace communication technology differently. “The young adult population born between 1977 and 2007 is considered technologically savvy, and constantly connected to the Internet via computers, cell phones, and other devices (Rogers, Griffin, Wykle, & Fitzpatrick, 2009, p.1).” Because they are the heaviest consumers, they are more likely to be skilled and informed about new communication technologies.

Young adults in America seek out communication media for various functional purposes, such as social presence, work and entertainment. In the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2011), 95% of young adults between the ages of 18 to 29 reported using the Internet for school research, blogging, social networking, instant messaging, and gaming. Different technologies offer different emotional attachments for young adults. For example, college-aged adults away from home for the first time might choose to use communication technologies which decrease feelings of loneliness (Gentzler et al., 2007, p. 71). Researchers Aoki and Downes (2003) identified nine purposes for cell phone use among college students: personal safety, financial incentive, information access, social interaction, parental contacts, time management/coordination, dependency, image, and privacy management (p. 353). Through a
uses and gratification approach, young adults will develop attitudes based on the technology’s ability to meet these specific needs. Since these needs could be related to interpersonal relationships, this study seeks to find how relational influence affects media choice for this technologically savvy generation.

Summary and Hypothesis

The literature presents bodies of work supporting relational influence on media choice and the media behaviors of young adults in the United States. The study performed by Kim, Kim, Park and Rice (2007) is the most comprehensive study completed thus far on the measure of relational influence on communication choice. Although the study does focus on relational influence, it does not address how different age groups embrace computer-mediated communication and use it for interpersonal practices. Researchers such as Rogers, Griffin, Wylke, and Fitzpatrick (2009) have found young adults and adolescents are the demographic most likely to adopt computer-mediated communication. Understanding how young adults choose the mediums they do for specific relationships in their interpersonal networks can lead to more effective communication between young adults and their audience because of the richness of the media and its ability to meet conversational affordances.

To contribute to the body of work presently laid out, the following hypothesis is posited:

Interpersonal relationships influence communication media choice and usage in young adults in the United States and the richness of a particular medium coincides with its ability to meet the personal gratification of the user.
CHAPTER III: SCOPE & METHODOLOGY

Scope

There is limited research available specifically focused on the configurations of relationships on media choice. The one comprehensive study performed by Kim et al. (2007) focused on quantitative data recorded from participants in Korean society and their method of employment. This present study is more narrowly focused. The scope of this study is on the configuration of relationships and media choice in young American adults. The context of relationships is determined by the participants in the study. Because of this, the data was collected by a quantitative method, using descriptive statistics to interpret and analyze results.

Sample

The study employed a randomized, purposive sample of young American adults aged 18 to 35. Participants were invited to take the survey based on age. Participants received invitations through email and social networking sites, a total of 505 individuals, and were encouraged to share the link with others. This sample did not discriminate based on domestic geographic location, demographics and educational status. The only limitation was the participant must be in the defined age group and also, a United States citizen or visitor.

Methodology

Employment inferences aside, this study emulated the methodology used in the 2007 research design (Kim, et al, 2007). The methodology was selected because it proved successful in identifying a significant number of interpersonal relationships and assigning value to those
relationships in Korean society and can be helpful in identifying the relational influence on media choice in young American adults.

According to the suggested body of knowledge, the most effective way of measuring relational influence is by grouping the most communal relationships in society in different sub-groups, based on a particular variable (the 2007 study surveyed employment status, which the present study does not include). In the study performed by Kim et al. (2007), participants completed an online survey, first providing demographic information and then reporting media ownership and use. A third party company created a proportional stratified sampling frame for the specific survey topic. Participants were solicited by email and participants were chosen until each category was filled. Responses were discarded if all answers were not completed. This study utilized 1,507 participants who were offered small gifts for their involvement. Korean society can significantly differ from that of American society and therefore, the current study will contribute to this literature, culturally.

Age and gender were only recorded for descriptive purposes. Information was collected on the participants’ employment status, what media they use, five people in up to fifteen social roles they communicate with using said media, and the closeness of those various relationships to measure the social contexts that influence media use (Kim et al., 2007). Respondents were queried to list the five people they communicate with most, labeling them with numbers (i.e. “person 3”) and identified that person across all media. “This approach is midway between an ego network (respondents list the others with whom they have contacts, with no attempt or ability to assess links among those contacts) and a system network (respondents indicate contacts on a roster of a bounded system of actors)” (Kim et al., 2007, p. 1189). For each person listed, the participants identified a specific relationship (mother, father, co-worker, etc.).
eliminated bias by asking participants to name the relationships themselves, using questions such as “who do you most frequently communicate with?” and then separately asking them the closeness of the named person (1-not close, 5-extremely close) (Kim, et al, 2007).

The current study polled random individuals with the aid of Survey Pirate, a free online survey tool. First, participants were asked two questions regarding their age and gender. This is just for general information purposes and to assure only the answers from those in the selected age group will be measured. Individuals were then asked 10 questions pertaining to their media use. Five of the most popular communication channels (FtF, text messaging/SMS, email, instant messenger and phone) were included. Participants named the five most common people they communicate with via these channels. Participants were asked to rate the closeness of the relationship using a Likert scale (1=not close, 5=extremely close). Respondents were not shown the point value of each answer. Individuals did this for all five channels. Participants were required to name at least five people for each technology and were not allowed to move on until they did so. Participants were also asked two additional questions for their age and gender. This is just for general information purposes and to assure only the answers from those in the selected age group were measured. (See all questions asked in this survey in Appendix A).

Data Collection

The study by Kim et al. (2007) was designed to investigate the configuration of relationships on media choice, specifically citing employment status as a variable.

Using a brief analysis of the existing body of knowledge, including a complete research design performed in Korea, it was believed prior to the pre-test the established majority opinion is that relationship closeness does influence media choice in young adults and the established minority opinion is the configuration of relationships are not an influencing factor in media
choice for young adults. It is projected that the comparison of the context of relationships and the media used in those relationships will be helpful in contriving a correlation between media use and contextual relationships in young adults. Descriptive statistics will be used to analyze the data collected for this study.

Validity

The researcher will need to investigate three different types of validity: construct validity, internal validity, and external validity. In relation to the research performed determining how decision-making plays a role in communication channel preference in young adults, the aforementioned types of validity will be discussed in the subsequent sections.

Construct Validity

The researcher seeks to find construct validity in this study. Construct validity refers to the capability of a study to capture the crux of the research question it is supposed to measure (Vacha, 2007, p. 4). Fortunately, the researcher can use the 2007 Korean study by Kim et al. to compare methodology and results. The methodology used in this study emulates the one performed by Kim et al. (2007); therefore, the methodology has a proven record of producing valuable results. The nexus of media choice and relationship can be directly measured. The survey and data analysis can be used to comparably test the proposed research question. To keep data consistent and centralized, the study only seeks to determine why individuals seek certain communication channels based on age and the relationship of the other party in the conversation. The goal is to understand why young adults choose the communication channels they do and for what relationship.
Internal Validity

The participants in this randomized study are volunteers. The survey is constructed so as any bias on the part of the participant is eliminated as much as possible. The concern lies with the answering of questions and amount of honesty offered by the participant. Some participants may offer to skew their age or even what kind of relationships warrant certain types of communication. If individuals feel their relationships are presumably better than what they are, their answers may become clouded by emotion.

The emotional factor can contribute to the validity of this design. Although all questions are straightforward and do not ask specifically about the nature of relationships, the questions probe the individuals to determine what communication is relevant to relationships with best friends, parents/guardians, co-workers, etc. If the participants have any overwhelming positive or negative feelings towards those relationships or do not currently have those in their personal life, their answers may not be useful towards this study.

Vacha states the best way to maximize internal validity is to perform an experimental study (2007). This study is not experimental, however. The researcher wants individuals to maintain comfort levels. Allowing individuals to participate in a study where their actions are recorded or even monitored could possibly lead to insufficient data. Allowing individuals to voluntarily assess their own communication patterns and rituals can lead to more honest and valuable research. It is impossible to find a large group of individuals presented with the same circumstances when it comes to communication: income, exposure, market, workplace resources and even as specific as mobile provider.
External Validity

This study allows the researcher to see the impact of communication channel preference and the influence of relationships because of the participants engaged in the research. The extent to which the findings of a study can be generalized is the topic of external validity (Vacha, 2007, p.10). The focus of this study is based on one particular age group in American society and their communication usage patterns in relationships.

Of course, the researcher is not interested in the physiological behavior of the participants but rather the understanding of why young adults communicate the way they do and by what method. The hypothesis in this study is useful because it is restricted to one particular demographic.

The study is performed on the person’s own time, in their own setting. A simple online survey allows the participant to complete the questions outside of a controlled environment. The survey itself is the controlled component of the study. This will diminish the possible complications with human behavior and reacting differently in certain environments. The only downfall to the online survey method is technological problems and availability of an internet connection.

Ethics

Any study performed for research should maintain the following ethical concerns: participants should be voluntary, deception is not present, and privacy should be protected. The voluntary participants will not be coerced to participate. By completing the survey online, their participation serves as consent for the study. Their information will not be publicly shared with any other source.
All participants will also maintain anonymity in this survey. There are no questions requesting identification or any personal information. A brief explanation at the beginning of the survey outlines the survey for the participants. The survey is not deceptive. All questions asked in the survey are straight-forward.
CHAPTER IV: THE STUDY

Introduction

The data was collected using an online survey administration and reporting site, Survey Pirate. A total of 247 voluntary participants completed the anonymous survey. This chapter explains how the participants answered the questions and what the results mean in terms of comparing the significance of relationships and media choice in young adults.

Data Analysis

The design was mirrored after the 2007 study performed by Kim et al. in Korea. The research questions were created to explore the relationships of young adults and their communication media choice for those specific relationships. Examining these choices can exemplify whether relationships influence young adults’ media choices. Participants were asked to identify five individuals with whom they communicate with in five different forms of communication media (FtF, phone, text messaging, instant messaging and email). Then, participants were encouraged to report how close their relationships are with those individuals they identified for each specific communication media choice. Data was gathered over a two-week period for individuals all across the country. Participants were solicited via social networking sites, email and through the Gonzaga University Communication and Leadership student community. The only significant demographic information recorded in this study was the age of the participants and gender. The following results were interpreted using descriptive statistics.
Results

The questions posed in this study were completely objective and were not created to sway the participants’ answers. The survey began with two demographic questions, asking participants their age and gender. Individuals between the ages of 18 and 35 were encouraged to participate and out of 247 participants, only one was over the age of 35. This individual did not continue the survey. All other participants fell in this age group, which qualified them as a young adult, by Erik Erickson’s definition (1950). Table 1 displays the breakdown of participation in young adults aged 18 to 35, with over half falling between 24 and 29. The survey asked participants of their gender just for possible cross-tabulation purposes. Females accounted for 71% of the participants and males made up the other 29% who completed the survey.

Table 1

*Young Adult Age Representation in Survey Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Percentage of Participation in Overall Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-23</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7.69%</td>
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<tr>
<td>24-29</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>54.25%</td>
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<td>30-35</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>37.65%</td>
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<td>35 and older</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Each form of communication had two correlating questions. Participants identified up to five individuals they communicate with most through a role relation name generator in the five communication methods offered by the survey (Marsden, 1990). This includes fields such as mother, father, co-worker, boss, etc. Then, the participants were prompted to rate the closeness of those relationships on a scale of 1 (not close) to 5 (extremely close). The average rating was then taken to determine how close individuals are to those with whom they communicate using the media in question. Participants were not revealed the point value of the ratings they reported.

*Face-to-face communication*

The first question after the demographic information was collected asked participants to list five individuals with whom they most frequently communicate with using face-to-face conversation. One-hundred percent of the participants answered this question. The most common relationships identified were co-worker, boss, mother, friend and husband (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

![Participants' Relationships Using FtF Communication](image_url)
When prompted to answer in Question 5 how close the participants are with the people they identified in the previous question, 95% (235) of the participants responded. Table 2 shows the percentages of responses rating the closeness of the individuals identified in Question 4.

The average rating of closeness with people in which the participants use FtF conversation with is 3.94 on a scale of 5. Table 2 shows that the individuals identified as first or second generally had closer relationships than those individuals listed third, fourth or fifth.

Table 2

*Average Degree of Closeness Reported in FtF Communication in Young Adults*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Average rating/Number of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.62 (N=235)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.84 (N=230)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.76 (N=227)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.73 (N=226)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.76 (N=217)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Mean Rating: 3.94 (N=227)

The percentage of responses for the individuals identified seems to decrease in closeness as one goes down the list. For example, the mean reported closeness for the first person listed was 4.62. The mean reported closeness for the fifth person listed was 3.76. The mode rating was for FtF communication was 5. The median rating was 5.
Landline/mobile phone

Question 6 in this study asked participants to identify five individuals with whom they communicate with most frequently via phone, either mobile or landline and 99% of the participants attempted to answer this question. The most common relationships identified were friend, mother, best friend, sister and father (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

![Bar chart showing participants' relationships in phone communication](chart)

When prompted in Question 7 to report how close the participants are with the individuals they identified, the level of closeness was very high. Ninety-eight percent of the individuals reported the closeness of the relationships and the highest percentage of answers reported for the first four individuals listed in the previous question were rated “extremely close.” Table 3 shows the amount of responses each level of closeness received in the survey.
Table 3

*Average Degree of Closeness Reported in Phone Communication in Young Adults*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Average rating/Number of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.72 (N=243)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.5 (N=238)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.33 (N=238)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.11 (N=230)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>4 (N=219)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Mean Rating 4.33 (N=233)

The mode response for phone communication was 5 and the media was 5. The average response for each person listed by the participants was given a “close” rating of 4 or above.

*Text messaging*

Question 8 asked participants to identify the top five individuals with whom they communicate with most frequently via text messaging. Among the 247 individuals who started the survey, 241 (98%) answered both questions on text messaging. The most common relationship identified was friend, best friend, co-worker, mother and sister (see Figure 3).
Table 4 displays high average ratings of closeness for corresponding individuals, with an overall mean rating of 4.23, a high rating of closeness.

Table 4

*Average Degree of Closeness Reported in Text Messaging in Young Adults*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Average rating/Number of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.73 (N=241)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.39 (N=233)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.21 (N=227)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.05 (N=212)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.76 (N=204)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Mean Rating: 4.23 (N=223.4)
Four out of five individuals are reported as having a close relationship with the participants. The mode and median responses were both 5.

*Instant messenger*

Question 10 asked individuals to identify the top five individuals with whom they communicate with most frequently through instant messenger, either work-based or personal software. Only 178 out of 247 participants answered this survey (72%). Family members, a popular answer in the first three set of questions, were not identified as a top choice in this question and “not applicable” was a leading response in this question (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship to Participant</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-worker</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Friend</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boss</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cousin</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleague</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aunt</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boyfriend</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girlfriend</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even less participants reported a level of closeness in Question 11 for the relationships identified in Question 10 (167 of 247/ 68%). This is the first question where participants reported a mean level of closeness as “comfortable” more than “extremely close,” with the median and mode response being a 4. Table 5 displays the average rating for each individual participant identified.
Table 5

*Average Degree of Closeness Reported in Instant Messenger in Young Adults*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Average Rating/# of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.82 (N=167)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.81 (N=148)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.52 (N=135)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.63 (N=116)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.25 (N=126)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Mean Rating: 3.61 (N=138.4)

*Email*

The last two questions in the study were concerned with email communication behavior. The most common relationships reported utilizing email for communication are for co-workers, friends and bosses (see Figure 5).
Figure 5

Participants' Relationships Using Email Communication

Questions 12 and 13 had 234 out of 247 responses (95%). Table 6 shows the number of responses offered by the participants rating the closeness of their relationships using email communication.

Table 6

Average Degree of Closeness Reported in Email in Young Adults

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Average Rating/# of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.68 (N=234)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.75 (N=221)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.65 (N=212)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.49 (N=194)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.42 (N=180)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Mean Rating: 3.56 (N=208.2)
The average rating of closeness in email communication among the participants was 3.56, which constitutes a comfortable rating for the media. The mode response was 5 and the median response was 4.

Discussion

In order fully interpret the data, it is important to refer back to the original hypothesis: relationship affects media choice in young adults. Based off of the answers provided by the participants of this survey, the data is somewhat telling of the impact of relationships on media choice; however, the results are not definitive. The study is attempting to explain why young adults choose the communication media they do through explanatory research. Although the responses begin to paint a picture of how relationships might influence the decision-making process for communication, it is not so clear cut that it leads to a determination.

Since FtF communication was questioned first in the survey, this had the most response from the participants. The amount of responses also decreased with the number of identified individuals which presents the case that some of the participants might not physically interact with a maximum of five individuals. It is evident from the data in Table 2 the young adult participants in this survey use FtF communication with individuals with whom they possess a close relationship.

The data in Tables 3 and 4 show the participants are closer with those individuals with whom they communicate with most frequently through phone communication and text messaging. This is not indicative of the 2007 study performed by Kim et al. “Mobile phone and FtF communication seem to support and reinforce the same network of relationships” (Kim et al., 2007). Face-to-face and the other two communication avenues (instant messenger and email)
were clustered together with similar ratings, all reporting lower levels of “closeness” than phone and text messaging communication. The differing ratings could be the result of social differences between Korean and American culture. It also shows that young adults communicate more frequently with those closest to them through media and not conventional FtF behavior, which Trevino et al. (2000) determines is the richest media channel (p. 168). This data supports Reid’s (2007) claim that people tend to communicate through text with those they have close, personal relationships with because they are generally in the same social circles.

Based on the responses of this survey, individuals chose to communicate more with family and friends through phone and text messaging (Figures 2 and 3). The other technologies helped communication occur for those with whom the participant was not as close (instant messenger, FtF and email). “Co-workers” and “boss” were listed often for the five communication choices, which indicate individuals spend a large portion of their day with those in the organizational setting, rather than with family, friends and those with whom they maintain closer ties (see Figure 1). If the organization adopts a particular medium, the individual will most likely perceive the richness of that medium based on social influence, which could be the case for these communication channels (Trevino et al., 2000). Also, the amount of responses dropped with more individuals listed throughout the survey, which may indicate the participants do not communicate with a maximum of five individuals in each medium or it may indicate the participants’ preference for communication media choice.

Participants communicate with individuals slightly less close with instant messenger than face-to-face, phone and text messaging. Instant messaging communication received the lowest rating for participants’ degree of closeness more than any other form in this survey. The strong deficit might indicate a lack of instant-messenger use or software in the participants’ current
communication practices. More people responded to questions relating to email than instant messenger, which supports the claim that most people in this survey have computer access but do not use instant messenger software. Results show the reported closeness in email is generally lower than that of phone and text messaging communication. Based on this information, email is used for those with whom participants have a “comfortable” relationship.

The hypothesis proposes young adults choose the communication channels they do based on the relationship with the other parties involved. This data does not fully answer the hypothesis. It does show which media is used for closer relationships but it does not take into account the day-to-day activities that influence these media choices. If a young adult does not have access to certain media throughout their day, the channels they choose for certain relationships will be affected. This element, identified through employment status, was recorded in the 2007 Korean study (Kim, et al.) but was originally excluded in the present study. For future research, it will be important to add this element back into the explanatory research process.
Chapter V: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Limitations of the Study

As with any study, there will be limitations to concluding results and interpreting data. Although this study shed some light on the media preferences for young adults, it did not find a significant correlation between media use and relationship configuration. The limitations presented in this quantitative study were produced because of the survey software, and the lack of intensive personal study on the participants’ behaviors and communication patterns.

The online survey software allowed users to identify specific relationships and report the perceived closeness of those relationships in accordance to a specific communication medium. The unforeseen limitation is the participants reported wide varieties of relationships. In the 2007 study performed by Kim et al., participants identified relationships from a list offered to them through the survey. The study should have incorporated a shortened list of potential relationships to avoid such a wide spectrum of answers which may have, in fact, affected the results. One cannot guess if a specific list would have changed the answers of the participants but the reporting would have been more succinct and relationship-centered. This would have allowed more focus on the reported closeness of the specific relationship. When participants listed outlier relationships, or even specific names, those answers were thrown out and were not included in the cross-tabulation of the relationships because they were not prevalent.

The second limitation is the lack of intense focus on the specific interpersonal relationships of the participants. Although all participants were given an equal opportunity to report the interpersonal relationships in their lives associated with specific communication technology, many factors were not recognized in the process. Questioning the motives of
communication for these specific relationships is also important. Knowing why participants were reaching out to the specific individuals, and possibly how they originally met in their interpersonal relationships would also have been helpful.

**Implications for Future Research**

In order to fully grasp the influence of relationships on media choice in young adults, the study will have to be performed on an individual level and qualitative data could complement the results of this study, as well. An anonymous survey questioning the communication media choices of these young adult participants is ideal for keeping the identity disclosed and for asking broad questions about a particular group; however, to fully understand the intensity, all participants and their relationships should be looked at from a more personal level. Interviews of the participants, their communication choices and lifestyle influences could help in completely identifying the intensive correlation between communication media choices for young adults and their interpersonal relationships. This survey helped identify, on the surface, the degrees of closeness relevant to certain media. It just lacked the ability to translate the information into key media preferences for specific relationship configurations.

Many factors can influence the communication between two individuals and one major finding left out was occupational status. It is important to understand how a participant spends a significant portion of their day because that affects the way they communicate. Different technologies reported different results in this study and those results could be more conclusive if there was data to support those activities. For example, one can assume that the participants who use instant messenger most likely work all day because the reported relationships involving that technology the most were co-workers and bosses; however, that is not a definitive statement.
without the knowledge of occupational status. Knowing the ins and outs of the participants’ day-to-day activities would have been extremely beneficial to this study. This can be achieved through personal interviews with participants and additional survey questions where participants can provide that information on their own.

The uses and gratification theory would support this study more had there been more in-depth information regarding the participants and their motives to communicate. In future research, it will be beneficial to seek out more information from participants regarding their communication motives along with behaviors and reported closeness of relationships. It would be beneficial to understand what participants hoped to achieve out of conversations within their preferred relationships for specific media. This will help identify whether the participants are satisfied with the outcomes the media affords them.

Conclusion

This study found slight differences in relationship configurations for young adults using five types of media. Based on the media richness theory, the study found the telephone to provide the most perceived media richness for young adults and instant messenger to be the media with the least perceived media richness.

Most individuals prefer to use text messaging and phone conversation to communicate within their interpersonal relationships. These findings varied from the original study performed in Korea (Kim, et al., 2007). This study shows young American adults prefer communicating through technology rather than traditional methods of face-to-face. The present study failed to demonstrate a significant influence of relationships on media choice for young adults but more in-depth discussion and research could lead to conclusive evidence in the future.
Understanding the motivations for young adult communication is beneficial to society. Knowing which communication media is preferred for specific relationships will lead to more effective communication in both organizational and personal environments. Not only will society learn from the communication practices of young adults but innovators can use this to develop even more effective communication media in the future.
References


    Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.


APPENDIX A

Question 1: What is your age?

Question 2: What is your gender?

Question 3: If you are under the age of 18, please do not continue.

Question 4: Name by relationship five people you communicate with most frequently through face-to-face conversation. (i.e. best friend, co-worker, boss, mother, etc.) Please, list in order of most frequent to least-frequent.

Question 5: For the corresponding individual you chose in Question 4, please report how close you are with that person.

Question 6: Name by relationship five people you communicate most frequently with by phone, landline or cell. (i.e. best friend, co-worker, boss, mother, etc.)

Question 7: For the corresponding individual you chose in Question 6, please report how close you with that person.

Question 8: Name five people you communicate with most frequently through text messaging/SMS (i.e. best friend, co-worker, boss, mother, etc.)

Question 9: For the corresponding individual you chose in Question 8, please report how close you are with that person.

Question 10: Name five people you communicate with most frequently through instant messenger (either personal or a work-based chatting mechanism). (i.e. best friend, co-worker, boss, mother, etc.)

Question 11: For the corresponding individual you chose in Question 10, please report how close you are with that person.
Question 12: Name five people you communicate with most frequently through email. (i.e. best friend, co-worker, boss, mother, etc.)

Question 13: For the corresponding individual you chose in Question 12, please report how close you are with that person.