The Role of Context, Media Richness and Uncertainty Avoidance in Media Choice
An explorative experimental study in Morocco, Spain and the Netherlands

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The Context theory of Edward T. Hall

Cultures differ in the extent to which they use context and situation for the interpretation of a message.

In **high-context cultures**, most of the meaning of a message is deduced from the context in which the words occur, for example non-verbal communication, and the setting of the communication.

In **low-context cultures**, the meaning of a message is primarily deduced from the words.
### Rough classification of high and low context cultures

(From Victor 1992:160)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High context</th>
<th>Low context</th>
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Information Richness Theory

• Daft and Lengel (1984)
Communication Media and Information Richness

![Diagram showing communication media and information richness.](Diagram)

*Figure 1. Communication Media and Information Richness.*

Factors that play a part in the medium choice of managers

- **Complexity of message.**
  - Complex: information rich media; simple: information poor media

- **Distance between sender and receiver**
  - Close: information rich media; far away information: poor media

- **Number of receivers**
  - A few: information rich media; a lot: information poor media

- **Negative versus positive message**
  - Negative: information rich media; positive: information poor media

- The communication media that are generally used in an organization

- The symbolic cues of communication media
Problems with the Information Richness Theory

- Based only on the perspective of the sender of the message
- Based only on research in the United States, a rather low context culture
### Rough classification of high and low context cultures

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Explorative research in progress on cultural differences in appreciation of media that differ in information richness

- Cultures that differ in context
- Perspective of the receiver of the message
General expectations based on the Context and the Information Richness Theory

1. Receivers in high context cultures appreciate and prefer information rich media more than receivers in low context cultures

2. Receivers in low context cultures appreciate and prefer information poor media more than receivers in high context cultures
Countries in the study

Rather high context
Morocco (Rabat)
Spain (Madrid)

Rather low context
The Netherlands (Nijmegen)
Expectations for the countries of the study: Appreciation

1. In order to receive a message from their manager.
   1a. Receivers from Morocco regard information-rich media as more appropriate than receivers from Spain and the Netherlands.
   1b. Receivers from Spain regard information-rich media as more appropriate than receivers from the Netherlands.
   1c. Receivers from the Netherlands regard information-poor media as more appropriate than receivers from Spain and Morocco.
   1d. Receivers from Spain regard information-poor media as more appropriate than receivers from Morocco.
Expectations for the countries of the study: Preference

2. In order to receive a message from their manager
   2a. Receivers from Morocco prefer information-rich media more than receivers from Spain and the Netherlands.
   2b. Receivers from Spain prefer information-rich media more than receivers from the Netherlands.
   2c. Receivers from the Netherlands prefer information-poor media more than receivers from Spain and Morocco.
   2d. Receivers from Spain prefer information-poor media more than receivers from Morocco.
# Method: Respondents and design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Age: $M=20.5$

Sex: 64% female, 36% male

Studies: Business Administration, Management

Between-subject design: Each respondent answered the questions for one case only
Method: Four testitems (cases)

(1) Simple positive message
Your superior has to inform you that you have been promoted. Your superior is located five hundred metres away in a different building, however at the same premises.

(2) Simple negative message
Your superior has to inform you that your contract will not be extended due to a reorganisation. Your superior is located five hundred metres away in a different building, however at the same premises.

(3) Complex positive message
Your superior has to inform you that you can have a promotion, provided that you work one extra day per week and provided that the project you are currently working on will be finished within the next four months. Your superior is located five hundred metres away in a different building at the same premises.

(4) Complex negative message
Your superior has to inform you that your project will not continue over the next six months, but that after those six months it can continue, provided that you can obtain a subsidy and that you do not need any extra secretarial help. You have already put a lot of hard work into the project. Your superior is located in a different building five hundred metres away.
Method: Measuring instruments - appreciation of a communication medium for a case

Indicate for each communication medium the extent to which you find it appropriate to communicate to you this message:

Email
Personal conversation
Telephone
Letter
Fax
Videophone
Text message (SMS)

5 point scale: 1= absolutely not appropriate, 5=absolutely appropriate
Method: Information Richness of the media in the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Richness</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Feedback</th>
<th>Cues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Face-to-face (personal conversation)</td>
<td>Immediate</td>
<td>Visual, audio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Videophone</td>
<td>Nearly immediate</td>
<td>Visual, audio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>Fast</td>
<td>Audio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>Rather fast</td>
<td>Limited visual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fax</td>
<td>Rather fast</td>
<td>Limited visual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Text message</td>
<td>Rather fast</td>
<td>Limited visual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>Letter</td>
<td>Very slow</td>
<td>Limited visual</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Methods: Results of reliability analyses of scale data

The communication media could be divided into two categories,

- High Information richness: Personal conversation, videophone, telephone (.71)

- Low information richness: E-mail, letter, fax, text message (.74)
Method: Measuring instruments- preference for a communication medium for a case

Circle which communication medium you prefer.

Email
Personal conversation
Telephone
Letter
Fax
Text message (SMS)
Videophone
Other .................................................................

Please, can you give a reason for your choice?

..........................................................................................................................
Method: Procedure

- Written questionnaires
- Completed in face-to-face communication with the researchers

  Morocco        Jacqueline van Woerkom
  Spain          Astrid van Zutven
  The Netherlands Renee Henckes, Charlotte Heeres, Lisette van Engelen

- Level of significance .01
## Results appreciation (1= absolutely not appropriate, 5=absolutely appropriate)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Richness Medium</th>
<th>Netherlands</th>
<th>Spain</th>
<th>Marocco</th>
<th>Significant differences between countries according to one way anova</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low context N=94 Mean</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Personal conversation Telephone, Video-phone</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>NI-S .009**&lt;br&gt;Ni-M .01*&lt;br&gt;S-M NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Email, letter, fax, text message</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>NI-S .000***&lt;br&gt;Ni-M .000***&lt;br&gt;S-M NS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Expectation appreciation**

1. In order to receive a message from their manager.
   
   1a. Receivers from Morocco regard information-rich media as more appropriate than receivers from Spain (No) and the Netherlands (Yes).
   
   1b. Receivers from Spain regard information-rich media as more appropriate than receivers from the Netherlands (No).
   
   1c. Receivers from the Netherlands regard information-poor media as more appropriate than receivers from Spain (No) and Morocco (No).
   
   1d. Receivers from Spain regard information-poor media as more appropriate than receivers from Morocco (No).
## Results preference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Richness Medium</th>
<th>Netherlands Low context N=94</th>
<th>Spain Middle context N=144</th>
<th>Marocco High context N=116</th>
<th>Significant differences between countries according Chi-squares</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Personal conversation Telephone, Video-phone</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>NI-S .005** NI-M .005* S-M NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Email, letter, fax, text message</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Expectations preference

2. In order to receive a message from their manager
   2a. Receivers from Morocco prefer information-rich media more than receivers from Spain (No) and the Netherlands (No).
   2b. Receivers from Spain prefer information-rich media more than receivers from the Netherlands (No).
   2c. Receivers from the Netherlands prefer information-poor media more than receivers from Spain (No) and Morocco (No).
   2d. Receivers from Spain (No) prefer information-poor media more than receivers from Morocco (No).
Summary of unexpected results

• The medium-context culture of Spain and the high-context culture of Morocco find communication media low in richness more appropriate compared to the low context culture of the Netherlands.

• The medium-context culture of Spain and the high-context culture of Morocco have a higher preference for communication media low in richness compared to the low context culture of the Netherlands.

• The medium-context culture of Spain and the high-context culture of Morocco have a lower preference for communication media high in richness compared to the low-context culture of the Netherlands.

• There are not any differences between the high-context culture of Morocco and the medium-context culture of Spain in either appropriateness rating or preference for both communication media high in richness and communication media low in richness.
What can be wrong?

- Theories
- Design
- Respondents
- Test items
- Measuring instruments?
No: Uncertainty Avoidance as interfering factor

The Netherlands 51
Spain 86
Marocco 68
High Uncertainty Avoidance: piece of paper is important for the receiver of the message

It is important to have a written piece of evidence of the message
(Morrocan respondent 836)

It is important to be able to read and reread the message
(Morrocan respondent 828)

It is more formal and you have the possibility to preserve the message
(Spanish respondent 408)
Conclusion

Culture indeed plays a role in the appreciation of and the preference for communication media in cases where employees receive a message from their manager. Numerous aspects call for further research. We select two:

- Culture
- Receiver-sender perspective
Directions for further research

Culture

- Study in cultures with a low context and a high uncertainty avoidance (e.g. Belgium, Germany, Austria) and in cultures with a high context and a low uncertainty avoidance (e.g. Hong Kong, Philippines, Singapore)
- Do cultures differ in the social and symbolic meanings that they ascribe to communication media?
- Do other cultural values play a part in medium appreciation? Power distance, collectivism, universalism-particularism?
- Real life studies: do cultures differ in the media they use?
- Inventory of communication break downs due to communication media

Receiver-sender perspective
Some references


Some references


