Videoconferencing in Business Meetings: An Affordance Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates users’ perceptions of videoconferencing (VC) as a mode of communication in business meetings. The study demonstrates that affordance theory is a fruitful theoretical perspective for understanding what shapes users’ perceptions of how well VC works as a communication technology in business meetings. The article is based on observation and qualitative interviews with VC users in a multinational company. The findings suggest that multiple factors affect user perceptions of VC, including technical features, VC room setup, competence, culture, meeting norms, and organizational issues. The affordance perspective adopted in this study may provide practitioners with a theoretically based understanding that can improve their ability to guide VC implementation in organizations.

Keywords: Computer-Mediated Communication, Group Communication, Intercultural Communication, Management Communication, Videoconferencing

INTRODUCTION

Videoconferencing (VC) is increasingly being used for business meetings in companies around the globe (eWeek, 2013; Polycom, 2013). In a VC, participants are able to communicate in real time through the use of telemediated live pictures and sound; VC systems are also often used to enable documents and illustrations to be shared (Julsrud, Denstadli, & Hjorthol, 2014).

Although VC has become more widespread in modern organizations, our knowledge in this area is limited as few empirical studies have been conducted on its implementation and use in modern organizations (Denstadli, Gripsrud, Hjorthol, & Julsrud, 2013; Julsrud et al., 2014). Quantitative survey studies and experimental studies (e.g., Campbell, 2000; Denstadli et al., 2013; Denstadli, Julsrud, & Hjorthol, 2012; Han, Hiltz, Fjermestad, & Wang, 2011; Julsrud et al., 2014; Julsrud, Hjorthol, & Denstadli, 2012; Lowden & Hostetter, 2012; Standaert, Muylle, & Basu, 2013) constitute the majority of existing VC studies, whereas there are few qualitative studies (e.g., Arnfalk & Kogg, 2003; Olaniran, 2009; Olson, Grinnell, McAllister, Appunn, & Walters, 2012).

DOI: 10.4018/ijec.2015100104
Research has paid scant attention to how people perceive VC as a mode of communication in business meetings, or the factors influencing those perceptions. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how affordance theory can be a fruitful perspective for understanding what influences users’ perceptions of VC as a mode of communication in business meetings—that is, what users find contributes to VC working well, and what prevents VC from working well, as a mode of communication in business meetings. Affordance theory originated with the work of Gibson (1979), and has since developed in multiple directions within the fields of information systems (Faraj & Azad, 2012; Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013; Pozzi, Pigni, & Vitari, 2014) and human-computer interaction (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2012). Common to the different approaches to affordance theory within information systems and human-computer interaction is a focus on how people perceive the action possibilities that are afforded by various technologies. Thus an affordance lens directs attention to what users perceive themselves as being able to do with technology—the communication possibilities that they perceive through the use of VC as a mode of communication in business meetings. In this article I define VC affordances as follows: user perceptions of the communication possibilities afforded by VC.

Theoretically grounded in an affordance perspective, this article addresses the following research question: which factors influence how users perceive VC as a mode of communication in business meetings?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Previous Research on VC Use in Organizations

There are few empirical studies of VC implementation and use in modern organizations (Denstadli et al., 2012). The majority of existing studies are quantitative and experimental studies. In my literature survey I was able to identify only three qualitative studies of VC use in public and business organizations: Kydd and Ferry (1994), an interview study in a multinational company; Arnfalk and Kogg (2003), a mixed-method study in two companies involving both quantitative and qualitative methodology; Olaniran (2009), an interview study in a large government organization. In addition to these qualitative studies, there are a few quantitative studies of VC use in public and business organizations (e.g., Campbell, 2000; Campbell, 2006; Denstadli et al., 2012; Julsrud et al., 2014; Julsrud & Gjerđåker, 2013; Julsrud et al., 2012).

Despite the increased global use of VC, organizations often struggle with the implementation of this technology (Drennan, 2011; Frost & Sullivan, 2013). User perceptions of, or attitudes to, VC are central to organizational struggles to implement VC. For example, Campbell (2006) identified user aversion to VC as having a significant impact on user perceptions of task and media. Arnfalk and Kogg (2003) found that users’ perceptions of VC meetings as “second class” compared with face-to-face meetings were a barrier to VC implementation and use. However, the motives and attitudes affecting the use of VC in organizations is a neglected area of study in the existing literature, as pointed out by Julsrud et al. (2014).

Media Richness Theory and Social Presence Theory

Media richness theory and social presence theory have been used in multiple VC studies (e.g., Campbell, 2000, 2006; Han et al., 2011; Kydd & Ferry, 1994; Lowden & Hostetter, 2012; Standaert et al., 2013). The concept of media richness was first introduced by Daft and Lengel (1984, 1986). The literature on media richness claims that communication media differ in the extent to which they are able to transmit rich information. According to media richness theory, there are
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