

Employee perceptions on distinct leader behaviours in *video conferencing systems*

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Abstract

The last decade has seen an unprecedented progress in advanced information technology (AIT), such as emails and/ or videoconferencing systems (VCS). The technological progression trend and especially the COVID-19 pandemic shaped the current organizational culture into adopting these technologies. The present research aims to understand the ramifications of such technologies, specifically employee attitudes towards VCS. The current study suggests analysing said attitudes through the lens of two types of meetings: one-way low engagement and dynamic high engagement. Additional emphasis is placed on hierarchical leadership within these online environments and employee perceptions towards them. The study is guided by a constructivist approach. 15 interviews were carried out throughout the whole research team, 5 of which were analysed in this paper. Thematic analysis was employed to establish overarching themes within the interviews. The main research themes encompass convenience and comfort of VCS, decline in engagement, chaotic online environment, elimination of social aspects and shifting leadership position.

Keywords: videoconferencing systems, one-way meetings, dynamic meetings, e-leadership, hierarchical leadership

Employee attitudes towards VCS and e-leadership

Introduction

A fundamental human characteristic is the ability to adapt to changing circumstances and environments, be they sociological, cultural, biological or economic. The paradox, however, is the fact that society collectively induces and adjusts to changes, through novel theory paradigms, social models and/or new technological innovations. Considering briefly a multidisciplinary theoretical framework for cultural-cognitive human evolution, introduced by Merlin Donald (1990), the most recent evolutionary transition encompassed the shift from Mythic to Theoretic cultures. This transformation, according to Donald, is characterized by novel technological innovation, an aspect relevant to human existence as never before. The internet, social media platforms and telecommunication systems generated an unprecedented employee dynamic within the contemporary organisation (Rice & Leonardi; 2012). The latter being an influential tool in connecting people across great distances and making communication – the innate and essential human mechanism for survival and prosperity – function remarkably, when considering our biological limits. It is rather reasonable then, that new technologies have been of wide scrutiny by the academic community as well as the broader population.

The aforementioned human ability to adapt comes with a price, which is to comprehend the ramifications of these new technologies as well as find a pragmatic solution for healthy social synergy with them. Video conferencing systems (VCS) have persisted as the most advanced variation of telecommunication systems for a few decades now and have been beneficial in bridging the geographical divide in social and corporate settings. While it has many advantages, in order to make our organisational structures as efficient as possible, we must consider and address all possible effects of VCS on corporate dynamics, particularly that of the leader follower relationship. This research will focus on distinct leader behaviours when contrasting online and in-person meetings, as well as the modern employees' perception towards those behaviours. Our goal is to determine those employee attitudes towards online environments as well as uncover hierarchical leadership patterns within different mediums

Leadership

Leadership, as a natural phenomenon, is arguably one of the most consequential facets of organisational development and daily group effectiveness. It has deep roots within our cultural and evolutionary context – the general structure of status hierarchy within a given

collective has always been evident (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005). Accordingly, leader-follower relations and their dynamics should be considered as a crucial aspect of group-related outcomes. In a contemporary organisational framework, we classify these outcomes as productivity and efficiency (Harter et al, 2002).

The academic literature on leadership suggests a variety of interacting elements that offer some insight into how leaders are formed and perceived in the workplace (Hudson, 2013; Otara, 2011). Regarding the perception of leaders, the last few decades have seen an increase in social psychology's influence, specifically the utilisation of social identity theory, that posits the relationalism of leadership (Lührmann & Eberl, 2007), emphasising the social environment, rather than the individual. The present study will also consider leadership as a dynamic process, that just like humans, tends to change and adapt over time and over different contextual situations: types of meetings (explained in more detailed later) and the medium that these meetings take place in (online vs offline).

E-leadership

Considering the current organizational culture, represented by an extended use of telecommunications, a new form of leadership has emerged in both, practice and the academic environment, e-leadership (Avolio & Kahai, 2003). E-leadership is a relatively recent concept, that first and foremost hinges on the past theoretical vestiges of leadership. Namely, on the idea that it is more suitable to think of (e-) leadership as a dynamic process – a process of energy, rather than of rigid structure (Barker, 2001). As Barker notes, leadership encompasses transformative change within a given social context and encompasses the whole social circle. In other words, (e-) leadership without change as well as without the interconnected dynamics of a group cannot exist. While the two concepts are rather similar, the distinction lies in the addition 'e', referring to electronic leadership or leadership, which takes place within an environment, mediated by advanced information technology (AIT), such as e-mail, virtual teams or VCS (Avolio et al. 2014). In short, the scholarly literature characterizes e-leadership as a dynamic decision-making and behavioural process within a group, utilized for a common goal and mediated by virtual environments (Avolio et al. 2014; Kydd & Ferry, 1994; Schmidt 2014).

Management versus Leadership

An issue emerges with the introduction of e-leadership, however. There is a somewhat ambiguous distinction between leadership and management, that needs to be addressed. No clear academic agreement has been reached on how similar or different these two concepts are (Algahtani, 2014). Most of the scholarly field agrees that management and leadership are

partially interrelated, however the extent of their interconnectedness have been of wide debate and controversy (Bass, 2010). When analysing the two individually, however, some differences emerge. According to Liphadzi et al (2017), management “deals with planning, budgeting, controlling, and structuring” (p. 481) while leadership encompasses “a process of directing, visioning, and motivating including coordinating and the development of individuals” (p. 479). In other words, there are two different mindsets underneath.

Management represents the administrative portion of a company, while leadership represents the ‘spirit’ of a company – its’ values and purpose. This distinction is further emphasized by Zaleznik (2004) when comparing leader and manager attitudes. He proposes that leaders are active, instead of reactive and that they shape ideas, rather than respond to them. In short, no matter the controversy, the academic literature suggests some difference between the two, particularly in regards to philosophical-organizational perspective. To emphasize the aforementioned issue, consider Weathersby (1999) remarks on leadership and management. He notes that both are required for a well-functioning organization and that leaders should know how to manage and vice versa. Unfortunately, however, not a lot of managers know how to lead and not a lot of leaders know how to manage (Weathersby, 1999). In fact, considering the differences, two separate people should be responsible for organizational leadership/ management. Because the present studies participants work for medium sized, well-established companies and not start-ups or major corporations, the distinction between leadership and management is an essential one. For the rest of the study, the term ‘leadership’ ‘management’ will be used interchangeably, as a result of the novel definition of ‘e-leadership’, which also includes management skills.

Types of Meetings

In an endeavour to investigate how effective workplace meetings truly are, Mroz et al. (2018) identified four different purposes of a given meeting: (1) information sharing, (2) problem solving, (3) strategy developing and (4) debriefing. Considering these four types of meetings in regard to information-flow, an evident pattern of hierarchy appears. (1) Information sharing and (4) debriefing can be clustered into a single category of one-way (low engagement) meetings, where the receiver, in a sender-receiver relationship, has little input and/or influence. On the contrary, (2) problem solving and (3) strategy developing can form a different category of dynamic (high engagement) meetings, where information bounces off of everyone involved and a feedback loop between the sender(s) and the receiver(s) emerges. Consequently, these two standardized types of meetings correspond with distinct leader behaviours: hierarchical (low engagement) as opposed to participative/

democratic (high engagement) behaviours. Such categorizations have not been coined in the academic literature before, thus for the sake of clarification, this research will utilize the novel approach of associating hierarchical leadership behaviours with hierarchical one-way meetings and participatory/ democratic behaviours with dynamic meetings.

Originality of VCS

It is also important to briefly note, that an argument, regarding the newness of VCS could be made. After all, it has been a part of the modern workplace for at least a decade now, why should we consider this specific technology as novel? Indeed, it has been used in practice for quite some time now, however video conferencing has significantly evolved over the last few years, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which gave the world no other choice but to make the technology much more accessible, as well as convenient to navigate and use (Patrizio, 2021). New technological infrastructure was quickly implemented on various video conferencing platforms, such as Zoom Phone, Zoom Chat, Zoom Rooms Smart in Zoom (Silver, n.d.) and numerous others. Ultimately, the 21st century has seen an unprecedented technological-progression trend. We argue that even though the term e-leadership has been here since the beginning of this century, this technological-progression trend, combined with COVID-19, shaped the technology of VCS into a novel tool.

What role does hierarchical leadership play in an online organizational context?

The main aim of this research is to investigate employee perceptions on distinct leadership behaviours when faced with online meetings, requiring different levels of engagement. Nyquist et al. (2018) reports on hierarchy within workplace meetings by stating that “power dynamics exist between those leading and attending due to the varying levels of authority inherent with their job positions. The role of power in meetings can be described in terms of hierarchical distance, which plays a unique role in them.” (p. 209) The researchers chose to define ‘hierarchical distance’ as “the number of status levels among one participant and all other participants in a meeting, taking into consideration the number of participants.” (Nyquist et al, 2018, p. 209). We suggest considering hierarchical distance through the lens of meeting types. In other words, we propose that one-way (low engagement) versus dynamic (high engagement) meetings correspond with particular leader behaviours, which in turn affects employee perceptions.

The current academic accord is that hierarchical leadership has much less power and influence in an online environment, when compared to face-to-face group interactions and thus will occur less (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2012). That might be the case, because online conferencing accentuates the whole group, rather than one individual (the medium in which

online meetings take place – VCS software – focus on everyone equally), as well as magnifies the transparency of said individual (Avolio et al. 2003). However, the past scholarly literature on e-leadership focuses on individual assertions and suggests some latitude for leaders, when confronted with online environments. In other words, it does not take into account the inevitability (in some cases) of structural leadership behaviour coinciding with the purpose or type of a given meeting. This study sought to gather perceptions on online environments as well organizational leaders and cluster particular types of meetings (one-way versus dynamic) with distinct leadership behaviours.

Methods

Research paradigm

The subjects of the investigation were individuals, interacting with and within the social context of an organizational workplace. This context should be considered to be complex, as it contains personal motives, feelings and subjective experiences. All of which inevitably influence employee attitudes and their recollections of these attitudes. The researchers determined that to recognize any objectivity or draw generalized conclusions from the results would be unwarranted. As a result, the study was guided by the constructivist paradigm. As Guba and Lincoln (1994) note, “the aim of inquiry [in constructivist approach] is understanding and reconstruction of the constructions that people (including the inquirer) initially hold, aiming toward consensus but still open to new interpretations as information and sophistication improve.” (p. 113) This description fits perfectly within the bounds of the current research. Keeping in mind the initial expectations of the study findings, researchers were open to expand and reconstruct these assumptions as the study progressed.

Study design

Following the qualitative approach of the study, it was decided to employ semi-structured interviews. This decision allowed for an open discussion with the participants, as it opened some space for real time follow-up questions, as well as personal judgment calls during the interviews. Moreover, the semi-structure enabled the participants to express their perceptions and attitudes more freely, as the open-ended questions offered flexibility for answers (“A Quick Guide to Semi-Structured Interviews”, n.d.) However, the chosen structure produced some drawbacks too. After conducting the interviews, in the transcription phase of the study, some of the follow-up questions appeared to be quite leading. The excitement of expected answers from the participants may have led to instinctive fishing of more desired findings. The subjects did however appear to be resistant to the suggested narrative and more often than not, continued with their own accounts. Nonetheless, following

the transparent procedure of the study, it is crucial to note that a few leading questions did emerge in the process of data collection.

Furthermore, a general questionnaire was constructed from the overall bank of the desired questions of five research members. The questions varied slightly among the involved researchers, yet the unified theme of office worker perceptions on video conferencing remained (Appendix A).

Procedure

The research members utilized convenience/ purposive sampling within their own personal networks. Convenience sampling is “a type of nonprobability or nonrandom sampling where members of the target population that meet certain practical criteria, such as easy accessibility, geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or the willingness to participate are included for the purpose of the study” (p. 2), whereas purposive sampling is “the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses.” (Etikan et al, 2015, p. 2). Both of these sampling techniques were used as the participants were conveniently accessible (personal friends or acquaintances) and were defined by characteristics relevant to the study (moderate English-speaking proficiency, experience with VCS, etc.). Drafted invitation letters (Appendix B) were sent out by e-mail to potential participants, who met the inclusion criteria. After a positive response, specific date for the interviews were set. The interviews lasted from 45 to 60 minutes each and were recorded with the participants’ consent. The conversations were then transcribed using Otter.ai transcription software and sent back to the participants in order to give them a chance to either clarify themselves or hide sensitive data. A total of 15 interviews were collected this way, 5 of which were analysed in this paper.

Participants

As mentioned beforehand, convenience and purposive sampling techniques were used to recruit the participants. Hence, the sample was primarily compiled of adult (over the age of 18) Lithuanian full-time workers that have experienced videoconferencing as well as onsite meetings in the last three years. Three of the participants held managerial positions, two of which were responsible for their own teams, however also had a given number of supervisors above in the chain of command. This provided a unique opportunity to interview them as both employees and as superiors. All of the participants displayed a sufficient proficiency in English and did not have major issues articulating themselves. Moreover, every recruit initially demonstrated aptitude for videoconferencing as most of the interviews took place online.

Analysis of data

Considering the level of subjectivity and individuality within the present research, it was decided to employ thematic analysis when dealing with the collected data. Thematic analysis, originally developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), refers to “a range of qualitative research methods that are used for exploring and interpreting patterned meaning across datasets”. In this case, the transcribed interviews were carefully re-read, specific interviewee phrases, words and sentences were highlighted to fit a given code that the research members deemed acceptable and practical. Out of all the codes, research-relevant themes were generated and analysed, according to the TA guidelines set by the academic pioneers Braun and Clarke (2006).

Quality assurance

Qualitative design methodology has had a long history of academic division and controversy (Reynolds et al, 2011), especially relating to quality assurance and data analysis. On the other end of the scientific spectrum, where quantitative analysis lies, statistical methodology based on mathematic rigor and numbers takes place as the pinnacle of objectivity. Human beings, however, are innately subjective and not at all bound by the same laws as numbers. Because of the complex human phenomena and the choice to not limit one’s investigation to cause and effect relationships, interpretations become much more sophisticated. It makes perfect sense then that no academic consensus has been reached and no universal framework has been developed to analyse the shortcomings of qualitative research (Curtin & Fossey, 2007). Regardless of the controversy, many contemporary scholars agree that the two different methodologies should be considered “as distinct choices of what one needs to inquire and not a contest of which is better or more credible” (Njie & Asimiran, 2014). Both have their advantages and disadvantages, especially in regards to quality assurance. That being said, the main ways of assuring quality in the current research will now be reported.

The trustworthiness of the study was chosen to be reported in accordance to S. Elo et. Al. (2014) literature review of quality assurance in qualitative methodology. Elo and colleagues outlined *dependability* (“the stability of data over time and under different conditions”), *conformability* (“the potential for congruence between two or more independent people about the data’s accuracy, relevance, or meaning”), *transferability* (“relies on the reasoning that findings can be generalized or transferred to other settings or groups”), and *authenticity* (“the extent to which researchers, fairly and faithfully, show a range of realities”).

Following the suggested model, dependability was assured through comprehensive descriptions of the research rationale, mentioned earlier. The sampling technique, questionnaire (Appendix A), participant inclusion criteria (Appendix B), and the central recruit characteristics have all been reported to pertain transparency. Regarding thematic analysis, figures of initial quotes from the interviews, codes and different research themes have all been displayed. In other words, the analysis process is clear and can be easily deconstructed. Concerning conformability, the primary step in thematic analysis was to focus on explicit words and phrases, rather than latent details, such as silences or laughter. Keywords, such as ‘distractions’, ‘multitasking’, ‘body language’ or ‘flexibility’ are all palpable in terms of interpretation. A clear development of these keywords into study themes are depicted in the same figures mentioned above (in the discussion section). The same applies for transferability of the results. From the present studies researcher’s perspective, authenticity of the research lies within the simplicity of interpretation. Again, by looking at the initial quotes, codes and themes, the readers can themselves decide whether or not the process of analysis as well as the findings are probable. We believe that they are.

Lastly, the research team comprised of 5 individual Bachelor Thesis research members and a supervisor (primary investigator). According to Guest and his colleagues (2012), “team-based instrument development” is one of the ways to ensure trustworthiness and overall validity of a qualitative study. Having a total of 6 members continuously interacting, discussing the overall research objective as well as the means to reach it, could have potentially decreased personal biases and preferences, making the process as well as the end result much less susceptible to false information.

Findings

Overarching themes were established after coding the 5 interviews: *Convenience and Comfort of Online Environments*, *Elimination of the Human Factor (Social Aspect)*, *Decline in Engagement*, *Chaotic Online Environment* and *Shifting Leadership Status*. *Hierarchical Leadership* was chosen to be analyzed by means of individual codes, rather than within an all-encompassing theme. To generate more structure for the findings and the discussion, overall themes of the analysis will now be explained in more detail. Figures depicting quotes and codes (from left to right) will be used to establish the theoretical frameworks of each theme.

Convenience and Comfort of Online Environments

One of the most recurrent patterns across the dataset concerns the convenience and comfort of VCS (Figure 1). Flexibility, quickness of discussions and connections, low

expenses, straightforwardness and reach have all been mentioned by participants as a tremendous advantage of the modern workplace. These assets inevitably lead to positive reactions. One participant, a general manager of a medium sized company said “*it [online environment] gives the possibility to make more money*” (Participant 1, Male, 45) implying the capitalistic value of VCS in the current organizational climate. This is especially true for managerial roles, responsible for the cashflow of a company. From an employee perspective, the convenience of online work spaces is attributed to flexibility and quickness of online meetings. One participant said: “*so easy, you know, just gather all and have an hour talk instead of two weeks of emails that we used to do before because we were so used to having a meeting twice a year*” (Participant 3, Female, 40); meaning VCS facilitates ease for staff members by saving them time and energy. It is critical to note here, however, that the vast majority of positive reviews towards online spaces, including the comfort and convenience, regarded one-way low engagement meetings. “I really don't like these meetings online, when you're highly involved. I prefer also live meetings” (Participant 4, Female, 40). Dynamic high engagement sessions were considered not as useful and occasionally even as a burden. Most of the mentioned perks were overshadowed by elimination of social aspects, declining engagement and overall disorder within the online environment, when dynamic high engagement meetings were involved: “When you have important issues to solve, you usually have a lot of different positions, perspectives from the people. And if you have really different understanding of issues, it is a lot easier to communicate, when you have all the social senses around you, meaning you see the person live, you can see his body language, you can see if he is comfortable or not comfortable, saying one or another thing. You can see his emotions, you can see if he is anxious, he is angry, or he's happy” (Participant 1, Male, 45). Thus, the further three themes of the study will focus on the dark side of VCS.

Elimination of the Human Factor

Another theme within the research regards the lack of social aspects (Figure 2). Employees described negative feelings towards not being able to sense and see their co-workers' body language, not getting any feedback and reactions as well as not sensing the team spirit. One interviewee expressed this lack of social cues as a result of “*simulated reality*”, yet the underlying reason, mentioned by all the participants, was the absence of reactions and feedback as well as an inherent ability to hide one's personality behind technologies. For the most part, the one-dimensional perception of a computer's screen was a clear indicator of unfavorable opinions towards videoconferencing, regardless of the authority status. However, a crucial change between supervisors and employees' negative

attitudes towards VCS, stemming from the lack of social cues is depicted in a lengthy response from a general manager:

“As a as a team leader, as a leader, if you're not reacting to people's feelings and deeper understanding of the façade of what he's saying then it's really difficult to move forward. Because that means that you do not understand the motives off your environment. And understanding motivation is very important. So the real meetings, offline meetings, they give you a better possibility to understand motivation of people around you, it doesn't matter that you will have 100% of understanding but conference calling does not really give you good instruments to understand motivation, it gives you only prime primary facade information. That's why conference call is very convenient for technical issues, because you don't need motivation, that motivation is clear. But once you have collision of few different interpretations or motivations, then it's very important to understand that motivation behind it.” (Participant 1, Male, 45)

This reply can be deconstructed into two discoveries: (1) authority figures within organizational context perceive more value in online one-way low engagement meetings, than online dynamic high engagement ones. In essence, there is a difference between the two in regards to social cues for leaders, compared to employees. The second finding concerns understanding motivation of one's employees. Conflict within the workplace is unavoidable and one of leaderships' tasks is to handle it when it arises. As communication becomes more difficult and social cues diminish, understanding each side becomes problematic. Hence, (2) motive comprehension declines within the online work environment.

Figure 1
Convenience and Comfort of VCS

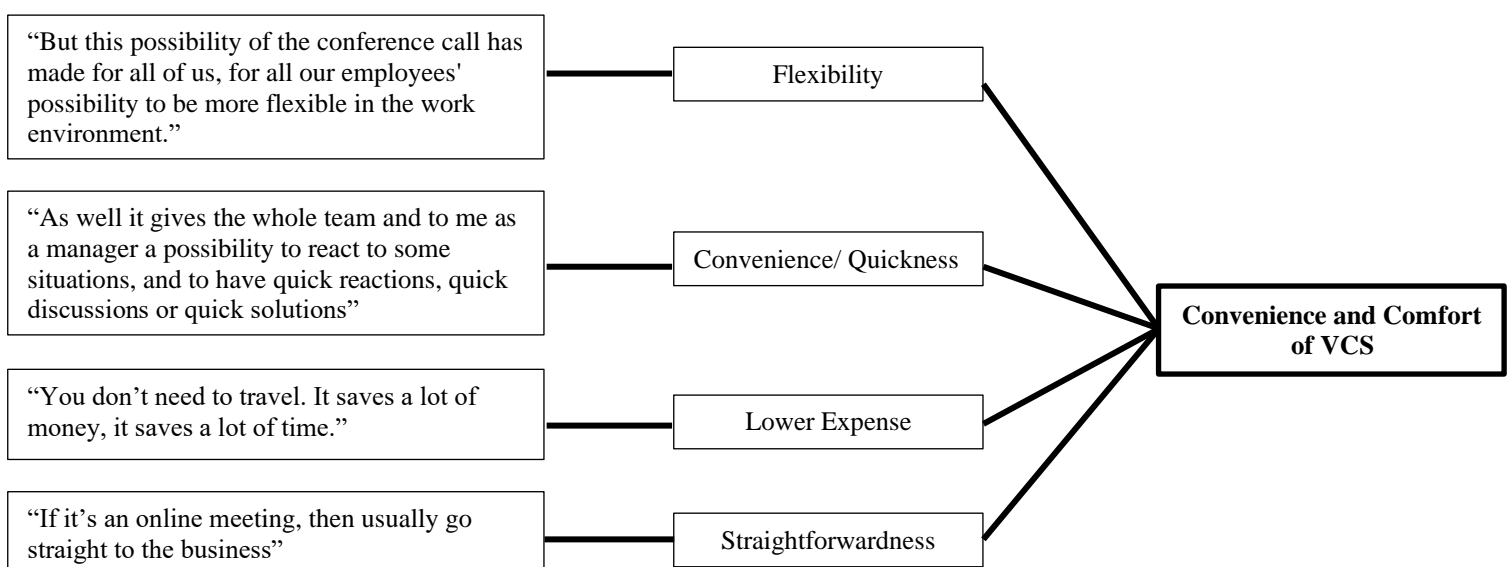
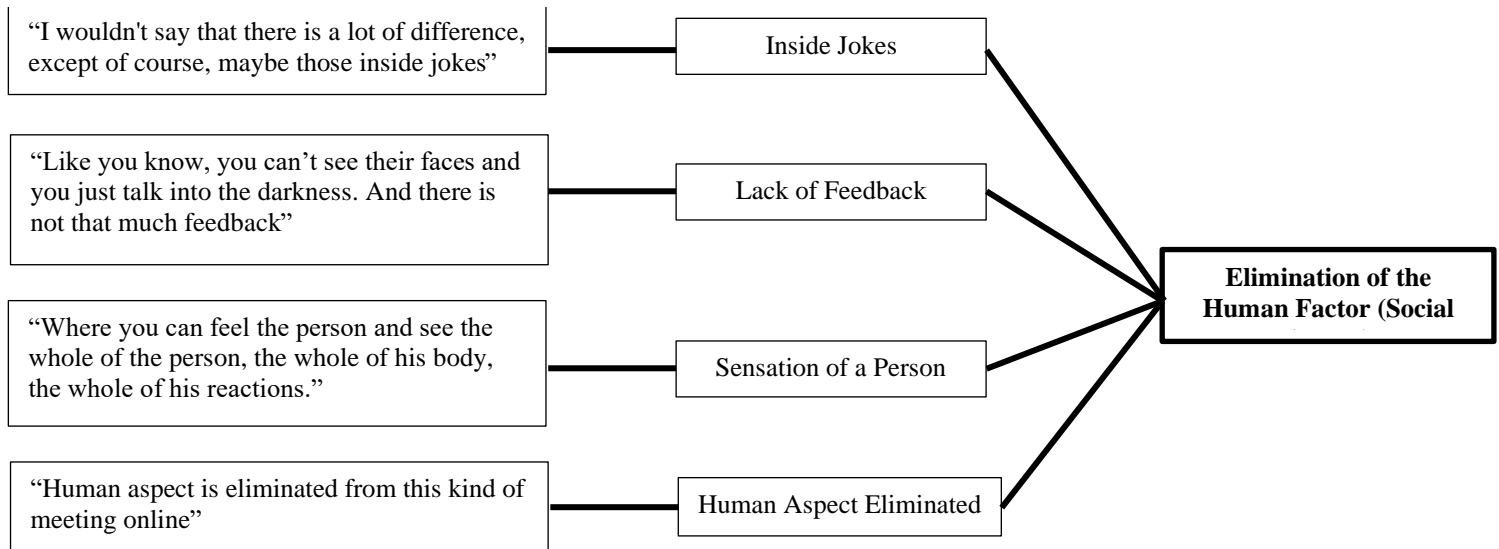


Figure 2.

Elimination of the Human Factor



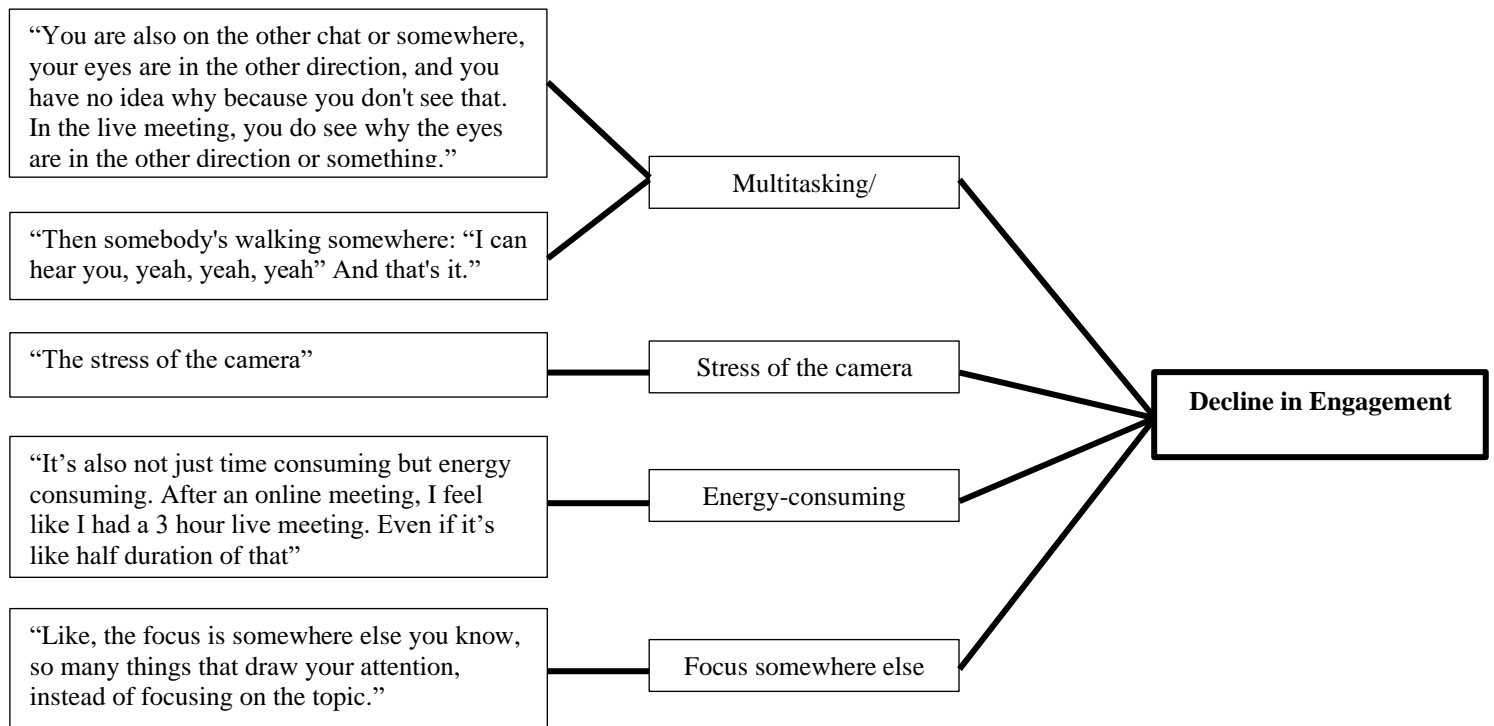
Decline in Engagement

Additional negative perceptions towards VCS were found to be linked to declining engagement (Figure 3). Various factors were named as an influence of this decrease, such as stress of the camera and loss of energy, yet the most frequent reason for it was distractions within the online space. Answering emails and sometimes even phone calls during an online meeting is a common practice for most employees. Interestingly, the distractions arise as a consequence of boredom or exhaust (initial low engagement) and forms a vicious cycle of continuously declining engagement. Farther, loss of meaning in one's work also influenced engagement levels. As one participant recalled:

"You don't really feel engaged into everything, you know? Through the sense of the computer and everything. So sometimes you just lose the meaning, like you are not prepared to fight for your opinion that strongly." (Participant 3, Female, 40)

The reply encompasses participants decrease in engagement as a result of meaning loss. In other words, the purpose of a given VCS meeting occasionally becomes obscure and furthers the decline in engagement.

Figure 3.
Decline in Engagement



Chaotic Online Environment

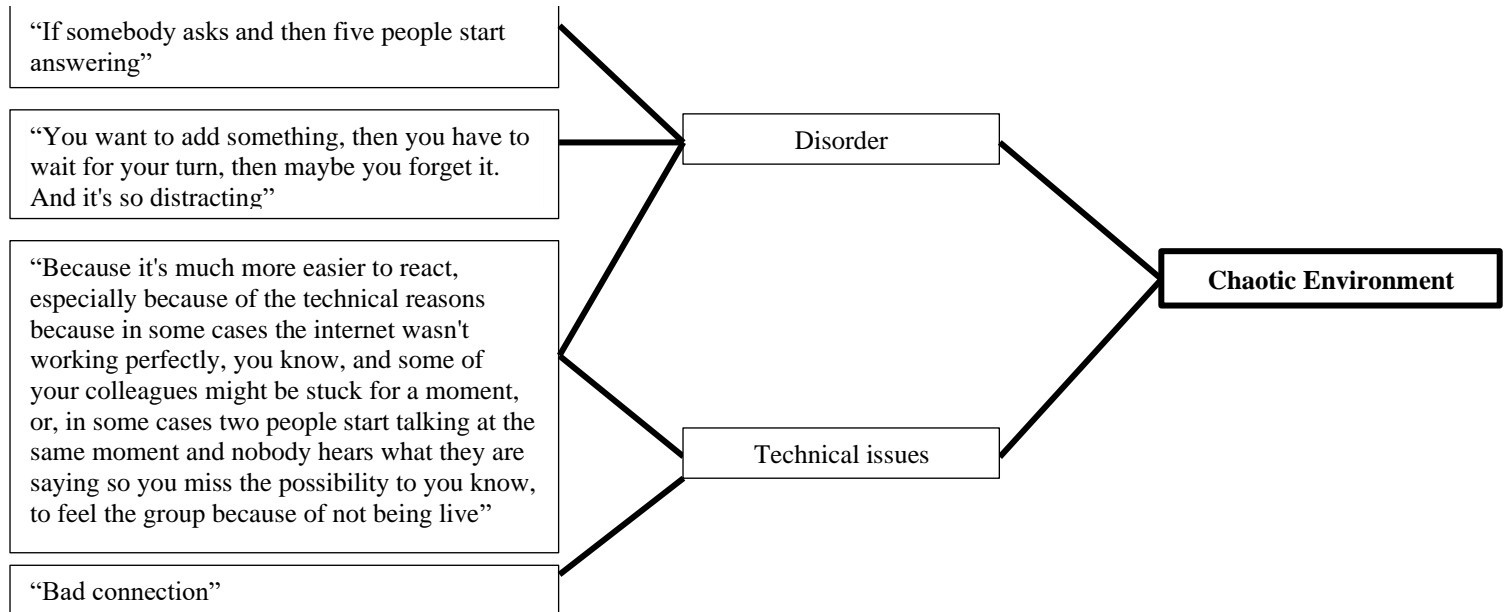
This theme represents the overall trend of disorder within the online space (Figure 4), somewhat overlapping with the previous topics. Distractions and multitasking, stress of the camera and loss of focus could be included in this category as potential catalysts for a chaotic environment. However, it was chosen to include technical issues, such as bad internet connection or turned off cameras as well as disorder of for instance having more than one person start speaking at the same time. One participant attributed chaos to themes of declining engagement and elimination of the social factor by saying:

“Because it's much more easier to react, especially because of the technical reasons because in some cases the internet wasn't working perfectly, you know, and some of your colleagues might be stuck for a moment, or, in some cases two people start talking at the same moment and nobody hears what they are saying so you miss the possibility to you know, to feel the group because of not being live” (Participant 3, Female, 40)

Even though the current research reduces the interviews into underlying themes of employee perceptions, this sole excerpt encompasses the crucial interconnectedness between chaos, elimination of the human factor and declining engagement. In addition, it can be utilized for further investigation into shifting authority status and hierarchical leadership

behaviors, which will be addressed later in the paper. Overall, feelings of chaos and disorder of the online workplace were reported being felt by the interviewees. Essentially, this fits the anticipated findings category. The aforementioned disorder is a synthesized experience of disorganization that part of the global workforce has encountered at least to some extent in the last three years because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 4.
Chaotic Online Environment



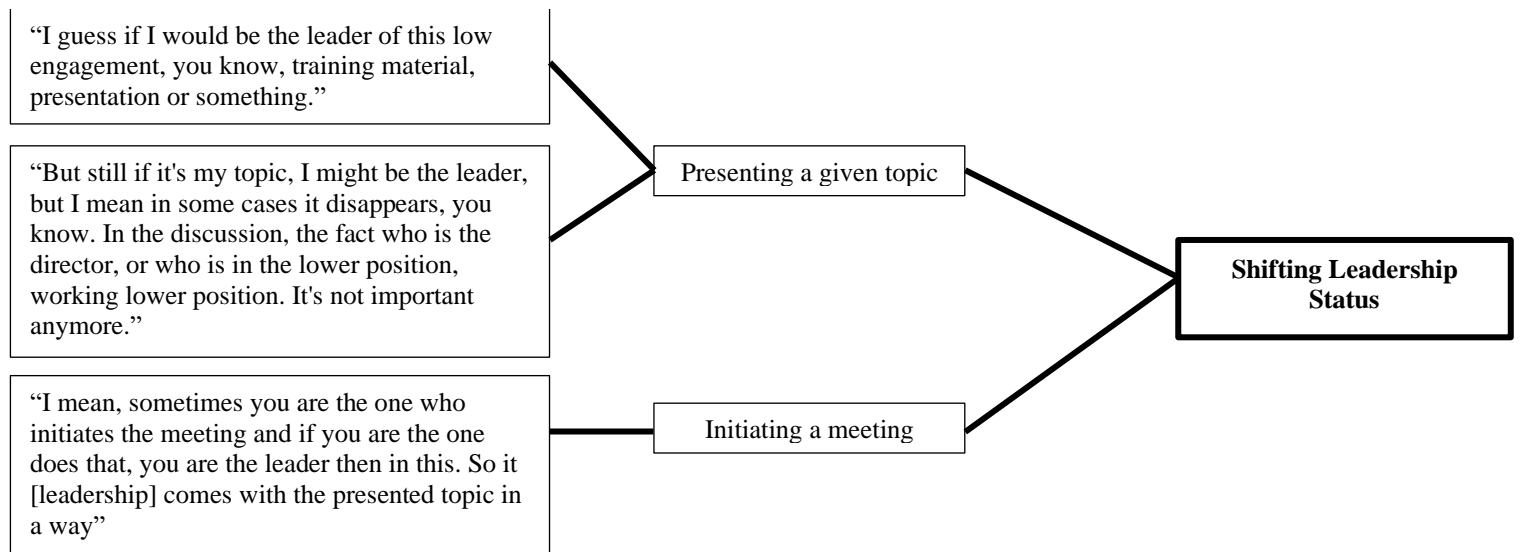
Shifting Leadership Status

The last two findings concern organizational leadership. The identified themes, however, are more abstract than the expected ones. Namely, the codes of the interviews regarding leadership were more vague and required extra interpretation. The interviewees did not explicitly name their experience as shifting leadership status. Rather stating that the role of the moderator is contingent on who is presenting and who is initiating the meeting (Figure 5). Essentially, the moderator becomes the leader, as the main tasks and goals of the two conceptual positions become the same in an online environment. One straightforward reply that did not involve the aforementioned deeper interpretation encompasses the whole theme:

“I mean, sometimes you are the one who initiates the meeting and if you are the one who does that, you are the leader then in this. So it [leadership] comes with the presented topic in a way” (Participant 4, Female, 40)

In short, leadership – as a dynamic process that can shift from person to person – fluctuates between employees within the online space (specifically one-way low engagement meetings) more than onsite.

Figure 5.
Shifting Leadership Status



Hierarchical Leadership Behaviors

One of the goals of the study was to investigate hierarchical leadership tendencies within online spaces as well as employee perceptions towards them. This research aim generated the most ambivalent findings and thus establishing an overall theme was not possible. Instead, initial codes were analyzed and designated specific keywords. For instance, one participant recalled that “*sometimes you feel like you’re in school, and you know, you’re just giving a report*” (Participant 4, Female, 40) as well as feeling that “*you are more supervised in this online space*” (Participant 4, Female, 40). More supervision, high levels of micromanagement in some instances and a teacher-type relationship with a superior all indicate perceived hierarchical behaviors from the manager. However, other interviewees, especially the managers of the bunch, noted to not have noticed their behavior change, neither their employees’ perceptions:

“I don’t think my colleagues are perceiving me differently as a leader in different online environments versus real environments.” (Participant 2, Female, 28)

The answers to the questions directed at understanding leadership behavior change when using VCS were varied. Implications, possible explanations for this variation and potential theoretical framework will all be discussed subsequently.

Personal Reflection

Reflexivity within qualitative research is an important part of demonstrating validity (Mortari, 2015). As the researchers of qualitative design interact with the studies participants, personal biases and heuristics should be taken into consideration to increase the reliability

(Jootun et al, 2009). For these reasons, the following paragraph will contain the researchers of the present paper reflection on the research.

In order to reflect on my work, it is crucial for me to reflect on myself. As a fourth year Psychology undergraduate, I see myself as slowly becoming a part of the academic world. To call myself an academic, however, would be foolish at best and harmful at worst. From my perspective, it is a journey of perseverance and ethical conduct. Both of which take time and experience. Writing this research paper was a big part of it. For one, qualitative design has never been a part of my academic experience, neither in the form of practice, nor theory. I would like to briefly point out the irony here of a research university making it rather difficult to exercise one's skills in the qualitative methodology. Certainly, there are given courses that one may choose to boost their competence in it. Compared to the level of proficiency taught in regards to quantitative design, however, qualitative design fades into the academic abyss. Ultimately, undertaking qualitative research was a challenge in and off itself. Having to re-learn ways of assuring quality, conducting the study and interpreting results seemed odd (and quite enjoyable) at times. Even writing this paragraph seems unusual. In my mind, having done this type of research for the first time, there ought to be some oversight in terms of content and conduct. The most infuriating part is the fact that I, myself am not sure which parts of the paper are unwarranted (perhaps this one right here). Regardless, my belief is that this is exactly what learning is and I ask the reader to take that into account as well.

Discussion

The findings highlighted the bright and dark sides of videoconferencing in the workplace. A substantial difference between one-way low engagement and dynamic high engagement meetings was discovered. Participants had essentially no complaints and only positive reviews towards one-way technical meetings, where the information flow is one-sided. Convenience, flexibility and cost efficiency were recorded as the main reasons for this positive outlook. As a secondary rationale, modern software also played a role in comfort-creation. Real-time online chats, presentation programs and virtual white boards were reported to facilitate the one-way meeting experience. Dynamic high engagement meetings, on the other hand, were preferred by all participants to be executed face-to-face. Much of the reported negative attitudes towards online environments were related to these problem-solving, discussion-type sessions. Elimination of the human factor (e.g., absence of inside jokes, reactions from co-workers and sensations of other employees); declining engagement as a result of multitasking and distractions, stress of the camera and loss of focus/ meaning;

as well as chaotic environment due to technical issues, were all named as unpleasant byproducts of high-engagement sessions when employing VCS.

The leadership aspect of the current study yielded arguably the most ambivalent and intriguing findings. Firstly, it was found that the authority status fluctuates more within the online environment, especially in one-way low engagement meetings. These meetings are usually constructed as classroom-type sessions, with one presenter (moderator) and a number of listeners. It is plausible that because of the presentation-like dynamics, the presenter (any employee) assumes a temporary leadership position. Findings, regarding hierarchical leadership behaviors within the space of VCS were found to be inconsistent. Thus, no overarching conclusion can be drawn. However, there is still value in investigating individual cases. One participant recalled feeling “more supervised” and feeling like she was in school as well as recalling more chaos within the online environment.

The findings of the research can be divided into two main segments: anticipated (consistent with previous research) and unanticipated (inconsistent with/ absent from the existing literature). The first category includes usefulness of videoconferencing systems and the overall convenience and efficiency of new technologies within the workplace. In addition to researchers' own positive experience with VCS (and a reasonable assumption of comfort), the finding corresponds with past research. Gray and colleagues (2020) note that VCS are typically utilized for cost and time efficiency. The logistical consideration is a considerable source of positive reviews towards online environments, as Gray et al remark “participants using video conferencing enjoy the flexibility and convenience of participating online” (2020, p. 1293). The first category of anticipated results also incorporates the preliminary expectation of lower engagement levels within the online environment, elimination of the social cues and senses (human factor) as well as feelings of chaos in an occasionally disorganized space of VCS. All of these findings coincide with the current academic accord. Okabe-Miyamoto et al (2021) carried out three studies during the COVID-19 pandemic to investigate employee subjective productivity within predominantly online organizational spaces. They found that “these [online] environments, <...> led to negative downstream consequences for workers' anxiety and subjective productivity.” (p. 1081) Okabe-Miyamoto et al (2021) research took place at the peak of the pandemic. The one-year difference between it and the current research could be argued as significant, taking into account the change in how the world oversees and ‘regulates’ the virus. Nevertheless, our interviewees recalled the previous period and described their present feelings towards VCS. The variable of subjective productivity in Okabe-Miyamoto paper complements the declining engagement in this

research. It is rational then to assume consistency between the two. Furthermore, Koudenburg (2017) investigated micro-dynamics within computer-mediated communication context. Her findings best coincide with that of human factor elimination. In her experiments, participants were asked to communicate by using VCS. The researchers then purposefully delayed video and audio stimulation by 1s. They found that: "... the delay seriously disrupted the flow of the conversation and consequently obstructed the emergence of social relationships and shared reality. Even when we made explicit that disruptions of flow occurred due to a bad connection, conversation partners still experienced a reduced sense of social unity" (2017, pp. 48, 49). These are consequential findings, accompanying the current study and its' discoveries. Obstruction of social relationships and shared reality is exactly what the present research found. Elimination of inside jokes, lack of feedback and sensations of a person all played a big role in the increase of negative attitudes towards VCS.

It is also necessary to note that the researchers identified and incorporated two distinct types of workplace meetings: one-way low engagement and dynamic high engagement. Both, the anticipated and unanticipated results hinge on the distinction between these meetings. The unanticipated results displayed more fluctuation of the leadership status within the online environment, especially regarding one-way meetings. Participants perpetually noted that the moderator (e-leader) within these online spaces becomes any one of the employees, rather than the managers or supervisors above in the chain of command. This finding conveys leadership as a more dynamic concept when faced with VCS and online presentations. It is noteworthy to acknowledge here that as mentioned in the introductory passage, the current academic accord does suggest leadership to be a dynamic process, changing and adapting over time and context (Hudson, 2013; Lührmann & Eberl, 2007). Thus, it was expected to observe some form of change in (e-)leadership in terms of behavioral fashion of authority figures or cognitive (re)actions of workplace stakeholders. However, the fact that e-leadership shifts between employees all together displays an unexpected level of supervisory dynamics within the online organization. Since the fluctuation was also found to be contingent not only on the type of meeting but the medium of it (VCS versus onsite), a question arises: what makes leadership so transferable within the online environment? One potential explanation lies within the technology – the moderator of a videoconference has the power to mute other participants and make use of visual stimuli to a higher degree than offline. Moreover, the presenter is pretty much the entirety of the screen, while other participants are hidden, so to say. For these reasons, it is perhaps easier to assign a leadership role or give one up. However, whether the process of leadership status change is a part of a

conscious decision within the authority figures; and whether the rest of the employees perceive this change as a consequence of technology will remain speculative until further research on it is conducted.

Lastly, it was found that hierarchical leadership is occasionally more evident within VCS. These findings, however, oscillated more from participant to participant, suggesting that the overall influence on whether or not an authority figure is hierarchical depends on other factors, rather than on online spaces and types of meetings. This finding somewhat coincides with the past literature. Hoch and Kozlowski (2012) found that “the influence of hierarchical leadership on team performance is weakened when teams are more virtual in nature”. Naturally, one would assume that as a result, hierarchical leadership behaviors would be much less appropriate and thus applied less within the online space. This might not necessarily be the case, as some of the current researches’ participants recalled feeling “more supervised” when using VCS. Contrary to the existing literature, an argument could be made about hierarchical leadership. Because of the more chaotic online environment, perhaps some leaders feel the need to be more hierarchical in order to maintain power or keep control. This is rather speculative and in no way a legitimate theoretical framework. However, it could foster intriguing future research.

Study Limitations and Future Research

First and foremost, the sample size of the research could be broadened to incorporate more people from different organizational and perhaps even cultural backgrounds. The current research was conducted from a constructivist paradigm employing qualitative methodology. Different approaches may be utilized in future research to strengthen the generalizability and perhaps explain the speculative propositions that were presented.

Considering briefly the established themes, it could be said that the negative themes are interrelated and fuel each other. The one-dimensional perception interacts with technical issues to obstruct the social cues, in turn impacting engagement levels. This relationship is what potentially leads to chaotic environment and even less engagement. It is possible that because of these reasons a vicious cycle of declining engagement appears during online dynamic sessions. Further research could extend the present study by investigating the theoretical synergy between these byproducts.

Conclusions

The advancement of novel technologies is an inevitable part of modern organizations. It is crucial to investigate theoretical and practical implications of these new technological breakthroughs. In our case, videoconferencing systems were chosen as the investigations’

aim. No doubt the convenience of VCS has impacted organizational life for the better, yet the occasionally undetected consequences of lower engagement and elimination of the human factor can be counterproductive. As one interviewee notes: “I think <...> the goal of the whole team and especially the team leaders is to find the right balance of using the technology in working environment.” The goal of any organization must be to understand how and implement the human-technology balance.

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Appendix A

General questionnaire for participants

1. How have you experienced video conferencing?
 - a. How would you compare it to offline meetings?
 - b. Can you identify some pros and cons?
 - c. How would you compare the supervisors' behaviours in both, offline and video meetings?*
2. What kind of work-meetings have you experienced in the last few years, regarding whether they're more dynamic/ democratic/ sharing-information type or more one-way/ hierarchical?
 - a. Which ones do you react better to when contrasting offline meetings and online ones?*
3. What do you think of online meetings for the purpose of one-way (low engagement) meetings?
 - a. How would you compare them to offline meetings?
 - b. Can you identify some pros and cons?
 - c. How do you react to the leaders' behaviour in these types of meetings?*
4. What do you think of online meetings for the purpose of dynamic (high engagement) meetings?
 - a. How would you compare them to offline meetings?
 - b. Can you identify some pros and cons?
 - c. How do you react to the leaders' behaviour in these types of meetings?*
5. What would you change about video conferencing? What would you keep the same?

The specified questions, regarding perceptions towards leadership styles have been signified by italics.

Appendix B

Invitation letter to potential participants

Greetings,

My name is _____, I am one of the group members for an Organizational-Psychology Bachelor Thesis research group from University of Groningen. We are conducting interviews as part of a Bachelor Thesis study that aims to understand how office workers experience online video conferencing. We seek to examine the bright and dark side of new technologies in the workplace. We are specifically focusing on online video conferencing, to understand employees' subjective experiences in these virtual environments and uncover the factors that play a role in engagement, group, and power dynamics within a given organizational context.

1. We are currently searching for people to participate in this study and we were hoping that the employees of _____ would be willing to participate.
2. We are currently searching for people to participate in this study. We got your contact information from the HR offices of _____, and we were hoping that you would be interested in participating.
3. We would like to invite you to participate in this study as we believe your experiences may contribute to our study.

The study consists of individual interviews, lasting from 45 to 60 minutes each, about the subjective experiences of online conferencing; either done face-to-face (if feasible and preferred) or virtually (e.g. in Google meets). In our research, we will make a distinction between two types of meetings, one-way vs dynamic meetings.

We are searching for office workers who;

- Have been working at the same company for the past three years (at least)
- Have used online video conferencing (e.g. teams, Zoom, Google meets etc.) for work over the last two years
- Have a moderate proficiency in English
- Have participated in both one-way and dynamic online conferences. One-way meetings are conferences in which one person shares information or knowledge with

the intention that others listen and have little input. Dynamic meetings are meetings in which everyone shares information and discusses, bouncing information off one another.

The confidentiality of your data will be maintained and securely stored on a platform using multiple factor authentication access. The data will be pseudonymised and all personal identifiers will be removed and deleted. Further information about this is provided in the consent form.

If you match the criteria and would be available for an interview, please let me or the primary researcher (Dr Samantha Adams - s.p.adams@rug.nl) know and we will schedule a meeting, according to your preferred time.

Kind regards,
