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ALOL (Actually Laughing Out Loud): A study of technology and face-to-face communication

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Organizational Communication Capstone

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Abstract

Technology and face-to-face communication used together were found to create stronger

interpersonal relationships as maintenance strategies helped strengthen those interpersonal

bonds. The research topic focused on for this study viewed how technology would affect college

students face-to-face encounters and their overall interpersonal relationships. The research

questions involved how does computer- mediated communication and face-to-face

communication affect college students' interpersonal relationship communication styles and how

are communication styles affected by computer-mediated communication. These questions

helped create a set for interview protocol where two college students from the Pacific Northwest

were interviewed. The methodology also included observing students in a dining hall

atmosphere. The results stemming from the interviews and observations found how non-verbal

communication and relational maintenance are key factors when using technology and face-to-

face communication when in an interpersonal relationship. The conclusions for this study

showed by using both computer-mediated communication and face-to-face communication have

greater relational maintenance and positivity for interpersonal relationships.

Introduction

A college campus is a technology wonderland as students are working on phones, laptops, tablets, IPads and the newest gadgets. Campuses are also a network of relationships between students. The scene of walking around a college campus can be one of heads looking towards the ground while going from class to class or dining hall to the library. Technology is present as most students have cell phones and computers which are used to communication. Both interactions are seen throughout a college campus.

Rationale

Interpersonal relationships are changing from the use of technology. The changes are between using computer mediated communication and face to face interactions as many college students use both in daily interactions. The growing use of technology by college students is seen across campuses in the United States. Technology is becoming a prevalent tool for communicating and interacting with others. By using technology as a communication medium, this can impact how face to face interpersonal communication is handled. The differences between using technology and talking face to face can also have an impact on the presence of being in the moment when face to face along with communication styles.

Being connected to technology when in groups, affects the presence of the member. More and more disconnectedness is being found in conversations where groups are together but not present. Kenneth Gergen was quoted in a recent NPR article, "We have been erased by an absent presence" (Weeks, 2014). He is referencing how people are connected yet remain absent in conversation by the presence of technology. Many have experienced walking down the street or campus, for the purpose of this study, where a young man or woman was looking at their phone

and almost walks into another person or an object. While this may seem normal in today's setting, how has using computer mediated communication devices affected our face to face communication?

The increase of new technology can have theoretical implications as communication apprehension, lack of presence, lack of non-verbal cues which can be influenced differently while using computer mediated communication or in a face to face communication setting. Individuals may treat interpersonal relationships with differing communication styles by using technology as a main communication source. The study views how different theories work together to further describe how interpersonal relationships and technology work together or against one another in conversations.

Theoretical Framework

Social presence theory is the theoretical foundation for this study. The theory was originally detailed by Short, Williams, and Christie in 1976. They suggested that, "Social presence is the user's perception of how well a communication medium handles nonverbal cues" (Cortese & Seo, 2012, p. 45). The focus is to view how communication is conducted through a medium. This view is used when nonverbal cues are not present such as in computer mediated communication. This study focuses on how communication styles differ from face to face interactions and computer mediated communication. Social presence theory can help explain why some people may feel more comfortable using computer mediated communication over face to face communication. Tu (2000) found, "people who experience anxiety about communicating in a text-based format will experience low levels of social presence" (Cited in Cortese & Seo,

p.47). Tu is presenting how those who use mediated communication have lower levels of social presence during interactions.

Next, displacement theory is another foundational theory for this study as participation in computer mediated communication can very as responses can be delayed. Displacement theory focuses on how using mediated based communication affects face to face communication. McCombs (1972) found that, "Displacement theory located mediated and community-based communication activities at two ends of a spectrum, arguing that participation in one communicative domain takes away from the time and financial resources allocated to the other" (Cited in Emanuel, Adams, Baker, Daufin, Ellington, Fitts, Okeowo, 2008, p.15). This study views how college students are influenced by the use of technology with their communication styles in interpersonal relationships. Displacement theory is used to create a grounded understanding into how technology and interpersonal relationships are entwined in college student's communication styles.

Following displacement theory, uses and gratifications theory was found as face to face and computer mediated communication varied in uses for the students. Uses and gratification theory focuses on, "the motives, needs, and gratifications associated with media use" (Hunt, Atkin, & Krishna, 2012, p.189). Uses and gratifications theory works well into the changing world of new media and technology. The theory is another foundational point to the study as this can shed light onto the reasons why some participants may choose computer mediated communication over face to face or vice versa. Using technology as a main form of communication may lead to positive interactions or attributions from participants in this study. The uses and gratifications of each participant will vary, but having insight into their preference can indicate how communication varies between a medium and a physical interaction.

The use of these three theories can create description on why technology is used and how communication styles differ. The differences of face to face communication and computer mediated communication can be seen in observations and interactions with students.

Literature Review

The literature review has an interest in using social presence theory to describe how non-verbal cues affect conversation in both face to face and computer mediated communication. Maintenance activities of relationships will be used to describe how face to face communication may have more positive results from conversation and how computer mediated communication maintenance is related. Interactivity also builds relationships by using computer mediated communication. Immediacy, sensitivity and displacement theories are also focused on in the review as these styles are included in communication interactions.

<u>Interpersonal relationships</u>

Interpersonal relationships are focused on the close connection of communication as the relationship is more connected than first time meetings or one with an acquaintance. The relationship has evolved where the individuals feel close to one another. Interpersonal relationships are held by many college students as they have daily interactions with friends and/or family. Social presence theory can be used to describe how nonverbal cues affect a user's perception when using computer mediated communication. Social presence as described by Lee (2004) is, "a psychological state in which virtual (Para-authentic or artificial) social actors are experienced as actual social actors in either sensory or non-sensory ways" (Cited in Cortese & Seo, 2012, p.45). Social presence according to Lee, is focused on how users stimulate others intelligence through using computer mediated communication. Social presence theory is a major

theme in this study as the ability to be "social present" is a factor towards communication style in interpersonal relationships.

The concept of relational maintenance is used throughout this study as there is a conscious behavior in order to maintain an interpersonal relationship with another. The relationship is improved and sustained through the use of face to face communication and computer mediated communication. Relational maintenance involves five aspects; positivity, openness, assurances, networks, and shared tasks. These five aspects are relative to both face to face and computer mediated communication. Positivity is used as a maintenance strategy as this, "is communicated most by those who use e-mail and social networking sites to maintain their relationships. Openness, on the other hand, is communicated more by individuals in their relationships through IM and texting" (Houser, Fleuriet, & Estrada, 2012, pp. 40-41). Relational maintenance is a reoccurring theme in this study as relationship maintenance is imperative to having an interpersonal relationship.

Along with relational maintenance, validation is present when interacting in an interpersonal relationship. Validation of a relationship is sought both in face to face interactions and in computer mediated communication. The theory of electronic propinquity describes how someone can be close to someone while not being in physical distance. The theory, "is a formal, axiomatic theory that originally focused on face to face communication, audio conferencing, and video conferencing" (Walther & Bazarova, 2008, p. 623). The theory of electronic propinquity was created before wide spread use of technology. Currently, the theory can be used to describe the feeling of closeness when using computer mediated communication. The theory directly relates to this study as interpersonal relationships have a certain level of closeness even when

using computer mediated communication. Communication styles can also differ by feelings of nearness or distance.

Technology

Many people use technology to achieve the maintenance of interpersonal relationships. One example is, "relatives use e-mails to communicated in their relationships more than do friends and significant others" (Houser et al., 2012, p. 40). Technology has the ability to be used to maintain relationships with those who are not in physical closeness. Technology also affects the way in which people talk to each other by not being present in a conversation or the communication styles that are used. E-mail was found to be a relational maintenance strategy in multiple relationships. This was seen to have larger social network ties. Technology can meet the needs of college students to feel close to one another throughout a busy day. As technology is constantly changing, the ways it is being used as a communication medium are too. Having the opportunity to be in contact with friends and family around the world, helps maintain interpersonal relationships. Without technology the interpersonal relationships would suffer as there would be a lack of communication because of distance.

Interactivity is another feature of technology which influences communication styles between interpersonal relationships. According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), "social networking sites have been defined as web based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections" (Cited in Hunt et al., 2012, p. 188). Technology has the option for multiple conversations to take place at one time or to interact with many others at once as to where face to face communication happens at a slower

pace. The uses and gratification theory can be related to using technology for communication as immediacy is an option depending on which source or site is used. Sharing information can be a motive or need met by the use of technology as a medium for communication.

Displacement theory is another that can be associated with the use of technology as a communication medium. This theory focuses on how using a communication domain may take time away from another activity. In a study conducted, "by a 2-to-1 margin, students reported that they perceive instant-messaging as having a conversation versus merely typing and reading. Perhaps the real-time immediacy and interactivity of instant-messaging renders the activity more like a conversation and less like typing" (Emanuel et al., 2008, p. 24). The use of technology is seen as a conversation according to the study mentioned. The study that is being per sued is focused on if college students view technology as a satisfying maintenance strategy to maintain their interpersonal relationships and to view how, if any, communication styles in their interpersonal relationships differ between having face to face conversations or computer mediated ones.

Sensitivity is factor when using technology to communicate. Communication styles change due to the nature of the medium such as e-mailing a professional or a friend will differ. It has been found, "communicators tend to use linguistic patterns to convey emotional state in computer mediated communication" (Boucher, Hancock, & Dunham, 2008, p. 247). The change in linguistic patterns is a suspected theme for this study as communication styles may also differ from a medium to face to face interactions. The linguistic patterns used in a communication style can help decipher the difference between communicating with computer mediated communication and face to face communication.

The literature and theories used to research this topic have molded the research questions for this study. The theories focus on relational maintenance skills where interpersonal relationships are used such as non-verbal communication, sensitivity, openness, etc. With this research in hand, this study uses two research questions in order to further the research on the topic.

Research Question(s)

RQ 1: How does computer-mediated communication and face-to-face communication affect college students' interpersonal relationship communication styles?

RQ 2: How are communication styles affected by computer mediated communication

Methodology

The scene of this study's methodology is everyday interactions among the Pacific Northwest students at a college in Oregon. The observations took place in the campus dining hall where students would gather. The observations were from the dinner hour over two days. The participant observations were used as the participants in this study did not know the researcher was in the environment. The public space for the observations created a candid atmosphere as students went about their day.

Interviews were done to further the insight from the observations, as "interviews enable researchers to gather information about things or processes that cannot be observed effectively by other means" (Lindof & Taylor, 2011, pp. 175). The interviews were used for this purpose to understand the underlying reasons why technology would be used in certain situations. The scene was accessed by using the resources available on the campus such as a reserved room on campus

in the library. The observations from the dialogue were recorded on an audio tape to have clear reference of participant's responses for later examination. Participates were contacted using personal social groups from the student body.

The methodology and interviews did not ask for names of participants. They are referred to as Participant 1, 2 etc… for the purpose of this study and for confidentiality reasons. The participants of this study signed a consent form to sign where the principal investigator was given permission to use their statements for the purpose of the study. The content of this study does not deal with sensitive issues or vulnerable groups. The groups being studied are students who use technology and face to face interactions to maintain their interpersonal relationships by using differing communication styles between the two communication methods.

Systematic emergent coding

The coding process involved using the categories of no technology or face to face methods used, computer mediated communication in physical presence of others, waiting periods, computer mediated communication and face to face communication used in an interaction, face to face only, computer mediated communication only, and non-verbal communication. These areas of coding were used on the observations and interviews. The data was selected out by reading each statement or encounter and filtering out if the main category of interaction was one of the above.

Thematic display of findings

The findings resulting from the coding process were computer mediated communication and face to face communication with underlying themes in each category. The coding process helped pull these themes from the data collected. The frames found in the data were focused on

face to face communication such as non-verbal with an overall theme of relational maintenance. The other frame found was computer mediated communication where waiting and being in the presence of another person for the underlying themes which emerged from this framework.

Computer mediated Communication

Computer mediated communication was found to be used by students during all parts of the day. For this study, computer mediated communication consisted of emails, texting, Facebook, and Google chat. These platforms emerged when observing and interviewing students as the most common forms of computer mediated communication. Technology can be seen as a way to achieve maintenance of interpersonal relationships as well as a method of communication.

During the observation periods, computer mediated communication using email to contact others. One observation was a female using email to be in contact with a sick classmate to work on a project. They found this method of communication to be most effective for the situation as they were not able to have the discussion in person. Another instance where computer mediated communication occurred was stated by a student as, "I am much more willing to email someone than I am to pick up the phone and call them, because with email it's almost like you know you can plan." The student was referring to interviewing for jobs with future employers as the interactions are with new people. Computer mediated communication was a comfortable way of communication for some. One student said "Texting is more personal" with regards to other computer mediated communication: Facebook, email, and Google chat.

The two underlying themes which emerged from computer mediated communication are being in physical presence of another person while using technology and times of waiting. The

two themes were seen when technology was in use. Both themes have interactions with others, but not the connection of a face to face conversation.

Being in physical presence

A theme which emerged in the computer mediated category was being in the physical presence of another person while using computer mediated communication only. By this, computer mediated communication is being used while in physical proximity of another person where a face to face interaction could happen, but did not. One instance found of this situation was stated in an interview where the students said, "I'll see people or go out with people and they'll go out to dinner and then the other person will just be texting the whole time… So I think that is one hindrance, that doesn't necessarily affect me all the time personally, but I see that a lot with other people." The immediacy of texting versus having a face to face interaction can be seen as a hindrance in situations where having face to face conversations create more immediacy and involvement in non-verbal communication. Another instance of this was observed where groups were engaged in computer mediated communication when in physical contact with others. The group members were talking on their phones or texting, but did not have a face to face conversation. In other instances, disconnect or awkwardness was observed when an individual in a face to face interaction was replaced by computer mediated communication. Awkwardness was downcast eyes, stopped talking, left the space, and use of their own technology when standing next to someone on their phone. When the physical presence of another person is available, using computer mediated communication instead can be seen as a lack of waiting connection to the person they are physically with.

Waiting

While being physically present with another person or not, many students would use computer mediated communication platforms when in waiting situations. These can be described as periods of time where a person is waiting for group members, another person, or waiting in a line. Computer mediated communication was seen in almost all instances of waiting where students would use their phones or laptops to communicate with others. One observation of waiting was a female waiting for her friend to pay for her items at the counter. While the student was waiting for the friend, they went off to the side and texted another person about how they, "Can't wait to see him later." Other instances of this were observed seven times throughout one observation session of individuals calling family members such as parents or siblings during times of waiting. Waiting had instances of "being bored" as students would wonder around the dining hall. Students also seemed agitated or impatient while having to wait.

 While waiting periods were observed as having a large amount of computer mediated communication time, times of being alone were found to have computer mediated communication as well. Times of being alone were found as periods of time where a student would be alone and not waiting for others. Computer mediated communication was observed either heavily or not at all during these times. An example of this was observed where a woman was not using a phone or laptop. She remained throughout the entire meal just looking around and eating. She did not engage with technology at all during her meal.

Leading into the second framework face to face communication was seen throughout the interviews and observations as well. The framework focuses on how face to face communication differed from instances where computer mediated communication was used.

Face to face communication

Face to face communication was seen throughout interactions in the observations and interviews. The immediacy of face to face communication was seen as conversations would flow effortlessly between two or more people. A few underlying themes which emerged during the coding process were nonverbal and computer mediated communication in face to face interactions. The nonverbal aspects of face to face communication were subtle, but important the study. Computer mediated communication in face to face interactions were repeatedly seen as both methods of communication were used in a dual interaction.

Nonverbal

In face to face communication, the nonverbal messages being sent between participants were an important part of the interaction. Nonverbal cues were seen as important as eye contact and being engaged in the conversation created immediacy and relational maintenance between those in the interaction. Positivity was also seen when face to face interactions had nonverbal cues present. One instance of this was stated in an interview, "It's easier to have a full conversation face to face and to get more detail because in a text you're trying to keep it short and sweet… It's definitely more personal when you're face to face." During face to face interactions eye contact was seen as strong nonverbal cue. An instance of face to face communication was a couple who were talking, laughing, and using eye contact to reassure the other they were listening. They did not have their phones out or even on the table. The couple was also leaning towards each other during the conversation. The couple was having a dynamic interaction as hand gestures were also used during their conversation. In contrast when computer mediated communication was used eye contact was limited as was laughing and leaning towards another person. Eye contact was replaced by a sometimes intense staring to the screen of the device being used.

Computer mediated communication in face to face interactions

The emergent theme of computer mediated communication in face to face interactions was found in this study as students would participate in both computer mediated communication and face to face communication in the same interaction. This theme was common as many students would be holding multiple conversations whether in physical proximity or not of the other person. An example of this type of situation was a female using Facebook on her laptop while texting her boyfriend. She was having a face to face conversation with another girl about how upset she was over the boyfriend not answering her messages. She blatantly expressed her frustration with the other girl near her. This type of situation was observed on multiple occasions as many students would have their phones or laptops open to computer mediated communication platforms while interacting face to face with others.

Discussion of findings

The findings of this study indicated that computer mediated communication and face to face communication affect college students' interpersonal relationships in both positive and negative ways. Social presence theory was seen throughout interactions as nonverbal cues were found to help enhance messages being sent from person to person. Relationship maintenance was found in both face to face communication and computer mediated communication as an overall theme with others. Non-verbal cues, positivity, and immediacy help create positive maintenance strategies for relationships. According to Houser et al. (2012) the "five dimensions: positivity, openness, assurances, networks, and shared tasks" are used to further relationship maintenance (pp. 35). The theory of electronic propinquity describes how people can be close to one another without having to be physically present. The conversations received validity when the other

person would respond to the email, text, Facebook message, or G-chat. The speed of the

interaction was a positive as well for those using computer mediated communication.

Immediacy was seen a valuable piece to computer mediated communication.

The negative aspects associated with computer mediated were the lack of nonverbal cues

in the conversations. Text language was seen as hindrance in the conversation when the words or

phrases could be taken as offensive or disrespectful. Sensitivity was present in computer

mediated conversations as the linguistic patterns used would convey an emotional state of the

user. The conversations had unintended effect on the user if messages were not answered right

away or had wording which could be offensive. By using computer mediated communication in

physical presence of another person is also seen as having a lack of intimacy between the

individuals present as well.

Face to face communication also presented positive and negative aspects when

interacting with others. When the conversation would use eye contact, leaning in, laughter, and

engagement with the other person, the conversation was positive and both parties were satisfied

with the interaction. Uses and gratification theory is in practice when a face to face conversation

happens with nonverbal cues. The parties feel satisfied when their needs are met from the other

person such as having physical closeness with another person. Face to face communication

involved a more personal relationship between the parties when compared to a computer

mediated interaction. Social presence theory can describe how discussion outcomes differ in face

to face and computer mediated situations. "When people experience higher social presence, they

are less likely to express their opinions, perhaps because they feel as though in doing so they will

be reject from the group with whom they feel connected through their perceived social presence.

Yet, if social presence is low, they do not feel so connected to others in the environment, so

opinion expression is easier" (Cortese & Seo, pp. 52). Social presence of the individuals could

have been factored into how interactions were handled by the participants.

A negative of having a face to face conversation would be when nonverbal cues were

lacking. The lack of eye contact, leaning in and laughter showed to affect the parties involved as

they did not receive satisfaction from the interaction. The parties would not have a flowing

conversation; usually the conversation would lull until someone left the conversation completely.

The validation of the conversation was lacking as the individuals did not feel their needs or

motives met by the conversation. The relational maintenance of the individuals is impaired by

situations where a negative interaction occurs. The parties leave feeling their needs are not met

by the other person which is a negative aspect to the relationship.

Although computer mediated communication and face to face communication had

positive interactions when used together in some cases. Using both methods created stronger

bonds in conversation. The face to face interaction with nonverbal cues present strengthened the

relationship between those physically present as the computer mediated communication provided

relational maintenance between those using this method. The immediacy of the conversation and

the physical presence provided relational maintenance between those involved in the interaction.

The use of both methods has positivity and openness between those involved in the conversation.

The time being used during a computer mediated and face to face interaction is positive for a

student as time can be a redistricted constraint in their life.

The overall finding from this study indicates that computer mediated communication and

face to face communication contribute to relational maintenance on different levels of intimacy

between individuals. Nonverbal cues and immediacy were seen as factors in both methods as the

wants and needs of the individuals were sought to have a positive interaction.

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