

Mediated Immediacy During Virtual Dinners Between Strangers

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Virtual meetings have become an essential part of everyday life, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Particularly in work life, remote teams use virtual platforms and video communication applications as shared workspaces. The usage has only increased during the pandemic. However, the pandemic has shifted also nonwork-related, informal social interactions to virtual platforms, such as video communication applications. Virtual gatherings are arranged to substitute for interactions that normally take place in bars, restaurants, and other social venues. For example, in Finland where the study was conducted, the national celebration of May Day normally includes a picnic with friends at a park. During the pandemic, May Day was collectively held through video communication applications as “balcony picnics”. At the balcony picnic, families set a picnic at their private balconies and opened a video connection to their friends and relatives. Indeed, the pandemic shifted social events which were commonly enjoyed with food and drinks into video communication applications, that were previously used mostly in work related occasions.

Little research has been done on informal interactions on virtual platforms, at least from the perspective of relational communication (Kohonen-Aho & Tiilikainen, 2017). Previous studies have focused mainly on goal-driven meetings – often in work- or school-related contexts (e.g., Satar, 2020; Sivunen & Nordbäck, 2016).

The communication of relationships also happens through the virtual medium. Technologies are used to communicate relational closeness, warmth, and friendliness toward others, a form of communication referred to as immediacy. Immediacy –the communication of relationships– operates inherently at the relationship level of human communication (see Watzlawick et al., 1967). According to Mehrabian (1969, p. 203), immediacy is “the extent to which communication behaviors enhance closeness to and nonverbal interaction with another.” Thus, in a situation in which one must maintain physical distance from others, immediacy acts enable the development and maintenance of relational closeness. Immediacy signals relationship initiation and development (Andersen et al., 1979). In virtual platforms, immediacy acts must be adjusted to accommodate the platform’s boundary conditions.

Immediacy per se has generated scant research in the context of virtual platforms. In contrast, social presence theory is used often to theorize on interactions

in virtual environments (see Cummings & Bailenson, 2016). Social presence has several definitions, but one of the most fundamental ones is Short et al.'s (1976, p. 65) view on social presence as "the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationship." However, social presence often is scrutinized in terms of perceptions of presence instead of actual communication acts which create those perceptions. Thus, social presence is more of a phenomenal concept (Biocca et al., 2003), whereas immediacy is a behavioral one. In other words, immediacy is created with behaviors that increase closeness. Social presence, on the other hand, refers to the perceived salience of the other in a specific interaction situation, *regardless* of whether the other communicates relational closeness. For instance, in an online class, a teacher's social presence is most likely salient to the students. Yet, the same teacher can behave in a non-immediate manner that signals relational distance.

In this study, we focused on immediacy in a commonplace communication situation – a dinner – but placed it in the context of virtuality and further, between strangers. In addition to not knowing each other, the strangers were of various demographics (e.g., ethnicity, age, geographic location, occupation, gender, religion, etc). Instead of an explicit goal as in work-related contexts, the dinners' "goal" is to learn about another person and potentially create an interpersonal relationship. In his fundamental contact theory, Pettigrew (1998) stated that the most important thing in initial intergroup interactions is to make judgments about others' "friendship potential." Studies have demonstrated that in initial intergroup interactions, people strive to decrease anxiety (Stephan, 2014), manage uncertainty (Gudykunst, 1998), and evaluate the degree of homophily and interpersonal attraction among others (Liu et al., 2017). These relational goals are a function of immediacy acts (Powell et al., 2001; Richmond & McCorskey, 2000).

Social Presence and Immediacy

The terms *social presence* and *immediacy* often have been used interchangeably (Lowenthal, 2012) or concurrently (Bartlett Ellis et al., 2016, p. 12). However, as noted by Short et al. (1976) and Järvelä (2020), social presence and immediacy are different concepts. Järvelä (2020) offers an example in the form of a heated argument in a virtual meeting. He states that it can include strong social presence among participants, yet lack immediacy because the interaction includes messages that *increase* relational distance. We view immediacy in technology as one dimension of social presence (see Biocca et al., 2003) and, therefore, address the conceptual differences between the concepts.

In previous studies, immediacy has been viewed as the affective or psychological side of social presence (Biocca et al., 2003). For instance, in their study about 3D virtual environments Sivunen and Nordbäck (2015) viewed psychological involvement as an element of social presence, which includes expressions of empathy, attention, and understanding. Rourke et al. (1999) focused on text-based computer conferencing and asserted that the affective expression of social presence includes emotions, humor, and self-disclosure. Recently Turner and Foss (2018) focused on digitally enhanced multi-communicative environments and spotlighted invitational social presence, which refers to communication that essentially invites the other into an equal relationship with the interlocutor. Invitational social

presence includes communication that aims to form an equal relationship with the other specifically in a multi-communicative environment.

We argue that the aforementioned perspectives are communicated essentially through immediacy acts that indicate relational closeness between interlocutors, including expressions of goodwill, empathy, interest, and willingness to interact. As an indicator of the communicator's involvement and pleasantness (Burgoon & LePoire, 1999), communication scholars have viewed immediacy as a precursor to liking (Richmond, et al., 2003), and an *immediate person* as someone who "is perceived as overtly friendly and warm" (Andersen et al., 1979, p. 172). In their review, Bartlett Ellis et al. (2016, p. 12) defined immediacy as an affect-based, multidimensional construct that is "reflected in the communicator's attitude toward the receiver and the message, conveys approachability, stimulates interest in the receiver, conveys connectedness between communicators, and promotes receiver engagement in communication; therefore, it is reciprocal in nature." This definition expands the previous ones by viewing immediacy as something produced reciprocally in interaction.

Immediacy has been studied in the context of teacher communication (e.g., Dixon et al., 2017; Zhu & Anagondahalli, 2018), in workplace communication (e.g., Lybarger et al., 2017; Richmond & McCroskey, 2000) and therapeutic processes (e.g., Kasper et al., 2008) among many. The theoretical concept of immediacy appears to be applied, moderately and rarely, to mediated contexts. This may be because immediacy is often understood as a form of nonverbal communication and thus less apparent in technologically mediated communication. At the same time, the fact that technology often alters or hinders the ability to use (nonverbal) immediacy messages makes virtual platforms an interesting context for the study of relational communication. An interesting question to pose is how relational distance or closeness is communicated without elements such as proxemics and touch and at least impaired ability to detect others' facial expressions and postures. To focus on these issues with technology, we use O'Sullivan et al.'s (2004) concept of mediated immediacy.

Mediated Immediacy

We focus on immediacy at virtual dinners through Zoom,TM a video communication application. We use O'Sullivan et al.'s (2004) concept of mediated immediacy, defined as "communicative cues in mediated channels that can shape perceptions of psychological closeness between interactants" (p. 471). They further conceptualized mediated immediacy to include two macro-categories: approachability ("You can approach me") and regard ("I am approaching you"). They also proposed a detailed list of dimensions that conceptualize these two macro-categories.

O'Sullivan et al.'s (2004) conceptualization of mediated immediacy was based on text-based, computer-mediated communication (e.g., websites and chats). Virtual dining through a video communication application, however, is an interesting context for studying immediacy as it also includes a live video connection. Applications like Zoom do often enable textual and pictorial communications as well, for example screen sharing, reaction pictures, chat, and background screens. Thus, video communication applications enable a *rich* (see e.g., Suh, 1999) way

of communicating and are commonly utilized to manage informal personal relationships (Cabalquinto, 2018). However, the video connection does not match the conditions of face-to-face meetings due to the impaired ability to detect others' nonverbal communication, such as proxemics, postures, and facial expressions. To our knowledge, mediated immediacy has not been developed further in the context of video communication applications.

Other relational examinations of online groups' relational development and communication have been done. For example, Dixson et al. (2017) studied nonverbal immediacy acts from the perspective of social presence theory in an online teaching environment. They found that nonverbal immediacy acts were connected to higher student engagement in textual communications such as chat forums. In another study, Hietanen et al. (2020) found that psychophysiological responses to eye contact in virtual meetings with a video connection were similar to face-to-face contacts. Eye contact and other nonverbal cues are an important element of immediacy communication (e.g., Richmond et al., 2003). In contrast to these findings, Holmes and Kozlowski (2015) found that in terms of therapeutic groups, online groups were significantly less successful in creating emotional connectedness and a sense of safety among group members compared with face-to-face groups. However, their examination did not focus on the exact communicational elements that created this deficiency.

In summary, previous research lacks focus on engaging in and managing relationships specifically in the context of informal mediated interactions. In addition, the studies on virtual meetings are often built on social presence theory, which does not provide a sufficient, analytical understanding of the meetings' communicational determinants. Our goal is to understand mediated immediacy's content, functions, and situational meaning in informal virtual meetings in the form of dinner. We ask the following research questions: (1) What kinds of verbal and nonverbal communication acts constitute immediacy during virtual dinners? (2) What functions do immediacy acts serve? (3) What are the acts' situational and contextual meanings?

The study adds a qualitative perspective to the predominantly quantitative literature on the immediacy concept. Accordingly, we do not distinguish between communicative acts in terms of whether they increase or decrease relational distance. Instead, we view immediacy acts as ways to interactionally balance between the two ends of the continuum, and the immediacy acts are given meaning in specific interaction situations. Hence, immediacy does not necessarily equal *more* approachability or regard, but rather, acts that communicate the two dimensions in a mutually accepted, appropriate way. For instance, if measured as polar opposites, hugging a stranger could be highly immediate. Yet, the act is likely to be perceived as violating norms. The approach enables us to look deep into immediacy interactions via technology, instead of evaluating single messages or individuals.

Method

Participants and data gathering

Two types of qualitative data were collected: 1) audiotaped recordings of four dinners via the Zoom video communication application in August 2020, each lasting around 90 minutes, and 2) individual interviews with 12 dinner participants,

each lasting around 30 minutes. The participants were recruited by placing a call for participants via social media, a university's electronic channels, and organizations working with immigrants. The call for participants included a request to take part in a study where one can meet new people and engage in multicultural communication.

The 12 participants ranged in age from 20 to 60 and represented various backgrounds, occupations, nationalities, and residential locations. However, they all lived in Finland, so in this study, "intergroup" and "strangers" refer to a wide variety of participants' group identification characteristics (distinguished or interpreted), such as ethnicity, age, gender, occupation, family situation, etc.

Before the dinners, all participants signed an informed consent form. They were promised two movie tickets as a reward for participation. In the consent form, the participants agreed to the recording of the dinners, and agreed to always keep their cameras and microphones on. Each dinner comprised three participants and a researcher. The participants were selected for each dinner to represent differing demographics. In addition, all except one dinner had both men and women present and all except one dinner had participants from varying age groups. All guests were strangers to each other. The dinners were conducted in English except one, in which all participants spoke Finnish. Actual dining was not required but most of the participants had food prepared. Although Zoom offers a possibility to use chat and reaction pictures (such as thumbs up) and those were not discouraged, none of the features were used at any of the dinners. The study's first and second authors both hosted two dinners each, and acted as engaged observers (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The authors let the interaction evolve naturally without attempting to control it. Occasional follow-up questions were asked to participate in the interaction, including motives to join the dinner; thoughts about the effects from remoteness vs. meeting face to face; thoughts about developing relationships; and outlooks on empathy experiences during the pandemic. The subjects were chosen to represent everyday interactional topics, dovetailing with the theoretical concept of immediacy and the virtual context of the dinners. All dinners were audio and visually recorded.

Within a week after the dinners, the researcher from each dinner interviewed each participant individually via Zoom or phone about their personal experiences on the dinner's interaction. The structured interview followed up on the themes discussed at the dinners. The interviews were recorded. The study procedures adhered to the Finnish National Board of Research Ethics (TENK).

Analysis

A professional transcriber transcribed all recordings verbatim, and the final data set included three types of materials: (1) dinner transcripts; (2) audiovisual recordings of the dinners, including observation notes (for coding nonverbal communications); and (3) interview transcripts. The analysis was conducted using qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti. To answer the first research question, we used O'Sullivan et al.'s (2004) coding scheme on mediated immediacy, which has two parts: approachability and regard. Approachability includes nine subcategories: self-disclosure; expressiveness; accessibility; informality; similarity; familiarity; humor; attractiveness; and expertise. Regard includes four subcatego-

ries: personalness; engagement; helpfulness; and politeness. The analysis began by creating O'Sullivan's sub-categories as the preliminary coding scheme without dividing them into the approachability and regard categories. We did not use the higher-level categories as we wanted to remain unbiased about the immediacy acts' functions in the specific technological context during the initial phase.

The analysis then moved to reading the dinner transcripts and coding them into the sub-categories. The categories were applicable to the dinner context, and only minor adjustments had to be made. For instance, "helpfulness" was adjusted to include supportive communication, such as expressions of empathy. Also, "familiarity" was specified to include expressions or self-stated announcements of an intention to further develop the relationships with the other participants after the dinner. Because of the low frequency in the data and close association with "self-disclosure," three original dimensions (i.e., expertise, expressiveness, and attractiveness) were merged with it in the final coding scheme.

After analyzing the dinner transcripts, the first author analyzed the audiovisual recordings of the dinners for nonverbal immediacy elements. The observation notes were entered into the analysis and coded like the dinner transcripts. Finally, the interview transcripts were coded using the same coding scheme. The possibility of creating new codes was maintained during the analysis, but the materials fit well with O'Sullivan's (2004) categorization.

To answer the second and third research questions about the functions and contextual meaning of immediacy during the virtual dinners, the aforementioned subcategories' contents were analyzed inductively. Based on the content analysis, immediacy categories were rearranged under three inductive higher-level categories representing their functions in the context: other orientation; self-presentation; and common ground. Thus, although the self-presentation and other-orientation categories resemble those of O'Sullivan et al.'s (2004) approachability and regard, the inductive analysis generated a third category regarding the construction of a common ground during the dinners. For example, in the analysis, politeness was coded to function as a safe way of communicating which essentially created a common ground for the interaction.

Results

The results revealed three functions for the immediacy acts at the virtual dinners: other orientation, self-presentation, and common ground. The three data sets – dinner transcripts, observation notes about the dinners' nonverbal communication, and the participants' interviews – are reported separately inside the sub-categories. The citations are entirely anonymous to ensure that participants in each dinner remain anonymous. When reporting direct quotes, the participants are referred to using pseudonyms.

Other Orientation

The dinner participants communicated interest toward others by indicating engagement and other orientation, as well as demonstrating accessibility in the interaction. The function was to express willingness to get to know others and begin forming communicative relationships.

Accessibility. Several participants expressed interest in the idea of accessibility to interaction and getting to know others in the beginning and end of their dinners: *"When I saw this announcement, I thought that's so super interesting, that it is so wonderful to meet some random people."* (Dinner) Nonverbal communication that indicated accessibility included smiling slightly while listening to others and leaning toward the camera in an intense manner.

During the interviews, all participants described others as open to communication. One participant said that smiling essentially conveyed accessibility: *"Well, this smile, it's a kind of a sign that this interaction with me is safe for real. (...) And of course, Leena told herself that she's the kind of person who talks with everybody, so that also lowers the threshold."* (Interview) Another participant expressed his interpretation of others' accessibility as follows: *"You know when you are having an interaction with a person, based on their responses, you'll know if this person really wants to chat with you or not. They have open-ended questions and 'How about you?' and all these kinds of follow-up questions, which really show that they are open and they're willing to chat and willing to also hear your story."* (Interview) Generally, the participants appeared to place great value on others' way of sharing the responsibility of creating a fruitful conversation.

Personalness. During the dinners, participants communicated personalness toward others by incorporating their own disclosures with those shared by others. The participants linked their experiences and opinions with those of others through statements such as, *"As Sanna just said..."* The function was to express orientation toward a specific participant and their features, such as place of residence, opinions, experiences, or expertise. Others were acknowledged when indicating agreement or disagreement, or similarities and differences. Personalness was used to link one's disclosure to someone else's. In this citation, a participant acknowledges another's unique circumstances by giving personal advice: *"Here I have to make a side remark that has nothing to do with the subject at hand. But I would like to encourage you, Elina, to spend a lot of time with your child because when they grow up, as mine have now, you will have a lot of time to do all those things."* (Dinner) We detected no nonverbal expressions of personalness.

The significance of personalness was stated during the interviews. One participant described her experience: *"Very easily, the other participants continued subjects that I had brought up. (...) It was very nice, or at least I felt that they genuinely wanted to know more about me."* (Interview) Personalness was interpreted as a message of interest.

Engagement. All the dinners included abundantly verbal and nonverbal expressions of engagement toward the communication situation and other participants. The verbal communication of engagement included questions directed toward others, being attentive, messages of listening through reacting verbally to others' disclosures, and encouraging others to talk. Although there were variations between individuals and dinners, all four dinners included verbal cues that communicated the person was listening – e.g., *"yeah," "right," "lovely,"* and *"of course"* – and confirmations such as finishing others' sentences or repeating others' words to confirm understanding and attentiveness.

Participants also communicated engagement with others by asking fellow diners about their experiences or opinions directly concerning what they had just

disclosed. Here, two participants had been discussing their fields of study, and another reacted to the previous speaker's disclosure, then invited the third participant, Leena, to share her thoughts: *"Yeah. How about Leena? Do you have some, some dream or something you would like to become?"* (Dinner)

Nonverbal engagement communication appeared to be one of the most prominent forms of bodily expression, particularly continuous nodding while another participant was talking. In addition, participants used smiling and both silent and audible laughter as reactions to disclosures. Also, facial expressions such as frowning and raising eyebrows were used to communicate listening. Giving a thumbs-up was used to communicate encouragement. For instance, a participant who had immigrated to Finland started talking about his difficulties in finding Finnish friends, but hesitated with his disclosure. However, another immigrant participant gave him a thumbs-up and smiled affirmingly to encourage him to continue. In between reactions, participants also communicated listening by holding their heads inclined, leaning forward, and gazing at the camera.

The participants regulated their engagement intensity by occasionally leaning backward or taking a sip of a drink or a bite of food, then communicating re-engagement clearly and intensely by leaning forward and putting the cup or fork aside. Engagement intensity appeared to drop easily while eating, muting the microphone while talking to someone else in the room, looking at oneself at the screen, like a mirror, to touch up one's hair or straighten a shirt, or trying to find a good place to support their mobile device/camera.

During the interviews, all participants felt that the other dinner participants had been engaged intensely in interaction. They also expressed genuine interest in the other participants. One participant pondered whether it might have been the fact that the others appeared similar and that she genuinely enjoyed the interaction. However, the virtual context and inability to know where others' gaze was directed toward were stated as challenges to communication engagement, as discussed by one participant: *"I think there was also this one moment. (...) George said something, and I said something, and Afonso followed it up by asking a question in which he did not necessarily say precisely who this question is addressed to. He just said 'you', and for a moment, I was, like, is it for me or is it for George? Those are maybe situations which are probably a little bit trickier with the communication technology medium."* (Interview) However, one participant felt that it was easier to tolerate silence during the virtual dinner because when using "speaker view," they saw only the speaker's face. They felt that they did not have to "keep up" the conversation, like with face-to-face settings.

In summary, other-oriented communication included acts that both communicated accessibility to communication and communicative relationship development, and intended to find out more about the other. In addition, especially through personalness, other-oriented communication included echoing others' expressions of themselves, that in a way, checked the impressions that they received from the other participants against the intentions of the other. Thus, in a way, other-oriented immediacy communication was about saying, "I want to know more about you; am I forming an accurate impression of you?"

Self-presentation

In addition to communicating orientation toward others, the participants engaged in self-presentation that functioned as a way of presenting oneself as a suitable candidate for developing a relationship. The emphasis was on presenting oneself as a trustworthy, genuine individual whose company is pleasant, or even advantageous.

Self-disclosure. The participants revealed personal information that ranged from family status, hobbies, and personality features to more in-depth subjects such as experiences with prejudice and religious views. A strong norm of reciprocity appeared to prevail during the dinners, and sharing often happened in sequences. There were variances in how differences of opinion, personality, and experiences were disclosed. For instance, during one dinner, the participants' disclosures included expressions of several differences, and there was very little explicit effort to find similarities. During this specific dinner, the interactional ethos appeared to lie in embracing uniqueness and differences among participants. They also shared information about their expertise in using virtual communication technology or engaging in multicultural interaction. However, during the other dinners, it was more common to disclose similarities, which we will elaborate on later.

Nonverbal self-disclosure included the information visible through the participants' video connections – in this case, homes, pets, and occasionally also family members. The background chosen (whether intentionally or otherwise) revealed cues about the person, such as furniture and tidiness. For instance, during one dinner, a conversation about “Finnishness” was prompted by a traditional Finnish design object that could be seen in one participant's background. During another dinner, one participant had a religious piece hung behind them. Also, the family members and pets that appeared during the dinners functioned as personal information.

During the interviews, the virtual context, as part of self-disclosure, was discussed. For instance, one participant paid attention to another's method of placing their phone in an egg carton to ensure proper positioning of the camera: *“I think the phone on the egg box was really interesting. (...) It told me a lot about the person itself, that this person can just take whatever they have at hand and make the best out of it.”* (Interview) Others' disclosure methods also were viewed as critical to the dinners' sense of comfort and smoothness. A sufficient amount of self-disclosure was stated to communicate equality and respect for others, and was viewed as an indication of the other's trustworthiness and genuineness.

Informality. The meeting's framing as dinner during which one can get to know new people was inherently informal, but the participants communicated informality actively. For example, one participant used swear words, emphasizing the occasion's informal nature: *“The lucky bastards have been on holiday ever since the COVID started, so I don't think they're coming back actually.”* (Dinner) Furthermore, showing others the foods that they were eating generated an informal atmosphere.

Nonverbally, the participants' homes in the background, including where they were sitting, also generated an informal tone. For example, lying on a bed or moving around one's apartment created a casual atmosphere. In addition, participants' informal postures, such as sitting with one's knees up, conveyed that the participants' composure was informal and relaxed.

During the interviews, all the participants described the occasion as relaxed, comfortable, and informal, noting that this atmosphere was generated by others' chattiness and warmth, allowing the interaction to flow naturally. Here, one participant describes the other dinner guests and her own striving to make others feel relaxed: *"I think they both appeared very down-to-earth, like persons that one does not have to play cool or anything with them. And I, myself, tried to bring forth a similar appearance."* (Interview)

In summary, the self-presentational communication included communicative acts that at the communication content level included factual information about the interlocutor's life circumstances and opinions. However, at the relationship level of communication, the level of informality revealed information about the interlocutor's relational positioning. Thus, self-presentational communication, in a way, communicated, *"This is where I come from, and this is the way I look at the world, myself, and others around me."*

Common ground

The participants constructed common ground that enabled safe and comfortable interaction at the dinners. That is, their communication individually, and the group's communication as an entity, included communication content and manners that created a shared space to frame the dinner interaction.

Similarity. The four dinners differed in participants' aspiration to find similarities as building blocks for common ground. At one dinner similarities were brought up often after sharing differences as a way to smooth things over and prevent tension between participants. For example, the participants expressed a difference in opinion about keeping the camera on during virtual meetings at work. In the example below, Leena asks Amir why he should not use a camera during his work meetings. However, the disagreement ended when they found consensus, which allowed the interaction to move on:

Amir: Yeah, but I don't, I mean, maybe the technical reasons would be my answer to your question.

Leena: Yeah, right, right.

Amir: (laughs) But I think it is, for many of us, pleasant that one can be in a way....

Leena: Yeah, and I also definitely think that you cannot say that you have to keep the camera on....(Dinner)

During other dinners, similarities were shared often along with differences. It was a way to negotiate a safe ratio of differences and similarities – a common ground in which the others' strangeness did not become too intimidating. Generally, although factual differences were brought up, a consensus of opinions, attitudes, and outlook on life was maintained at all the dinners. For instance, while talking about his nationality, one participant expressed how her personality matches the stereotypical Finnish personality; although she has another nationality, in her heart, she is similar to the Finnish guests:

"I think within Europe, the Nordic cultures are probably the most different ones from the Southern culture, and I always felt a little bit like an alien in outgoing Southern Europe, um, kind of culture. Although for the Finnish standard, I might

be perceived as an extrovert. In the Southern Europe standard, I'm a little bit more of an introvert, so I always felt a little bit like an alien, and here, I think I have more space." (Dinner)

At the other end of the continuum, there was a dinner in which ethnic backgrounds were ignored almost altogether, and the participants appeared to all identify themselves as "citizens of the world" who can put down roots on any soil. They shared experiences on living abroad as foreigners, which appeared as the "base," the common ground, for the interaction. In addition to factual similarities, others agreed through reaction expressions, such as "That's true," "I agree," etc.

Nonverbally, expressions of similarity consisted of elements in the backgrounds of the participants' homes, such as cultural objects that created a "Finnish home," or having a traditional cabin kitchen that others commented on.

During the interviews, the participants expressed how finding similarities was a prerequisite for a successful interaction. However, during some dinners, the differences were big, and it was important to find similarities in other areas, as a participant expressed here: *"I'm sure we think differently about many things, but then again, if we go there to our deepest most inner place, I believe that at the end, it is the same for all of us; we want to love and be loved."* (Interview) The similarities in values and views on life were shared during the interviews. The participants also felt they had similar personality features as they all decided to take part in the study.

Familiarity. Two guests from different dinners made explicit requests to make further contact with other participants. Another invited the other dinner guests to visit if they ever traveled to his hometown, and another asked others to look her up on Facebook or LinkedIn. Participants responded to these invitations politely. The social media request was reciprocated by other guests, but the invitation to pay a visit was not reciprocated by others. There were no nonverbal expressions of familiarity coded in the analysis.

During the interviews, the participants considered the possibility of developing a relationship with the others based on similarities. For example, one participant who felt that others were very different from her expressed interest in learning more about the others' lives, but firmly stated that she did not view them as potential friends. Indeed, although most of them had nothing against "seeing where it goes" with the others, they said that in practice, they did not see themselves making contact with others outside this study. The dinners' virtual context was stated to lack a sufficient level of contact that would have enabled the relationships to develop: *"I think that this kind of really deep trust anyway surfaces more rapidly in a physical meeting. I don't say that this kind of virtual meeting rules it out, but I think that it is slower."* (Interview)

Politeness. Politeness was used abundantly during all four dinners as a way to express goodwill and friendliness. Participants complimented each other and ensured that everyone's opinions were heard. Politeness was manifested in chosen words, for example, phrases like "May I ask..." or "Nice to hear," or apologies for being late, needing to step away from the dinner briefly, or having technical difficulties. The virtual context's technical quirks also led to participants occasionally speaking over each other, which also elicited apologies, *"Oh, sorry. Go ahead. I didn't mean to interrupt you."* Many compliments were paid, for example, the excel-

lence of others' language skills or children and pets' cuteness. Nonverbally, politeness was communicated by trying not to interrupt others and giving others time to respond.

During the interviews, an interesting point was brought up: Although personalness as part of communicating interest toward others was received positively, two participants stated that as a courtesy to the whole group, they specifically did not communicate personalness toward any specific participant during the dinner. For example, although one participant said she felt good about being acknowledged personally, she did not feel comfortable talking about personal subjects brought up by others because it would not have been *"good or appropriate"*. Another participant stated that he did not want *"to manipulate the interaction toward a topic that was specific to a person."* (Interview) Thus, they deliberately did not communicate personalness as a way of being polite to others.

The participants also stated that they avoided overly serious or potentially uncomfortable issues to maintain a safe and friendly atmosphere: *"For me, this kind of face saving, mine and others, is one of the basic principles. It is very important to me. I could not bring up a subject which I felt that the others might feel awkward. But of course, what is awkward for me is a different thing for the others, so I still might be talking about subjects that someone else feels awkward about."* (Interview)

The context of virtual meetings was mentioned several times during the interviews as something that hindered politeness. In particular, reading others' emotions and choosing the right kind of reaction while listening were described as being more difficult virtually compared with face-to-face. Also, taking turns as a way of communicating engagement and not interrupting others were described as difficult as well. One participant described virtual meetings' effects as follows: *"Pekka and I had a phase where we were talking a bit more and Afonso again did not talk. But it is much harder in Zoom (...) to pay attention to the one that is more quiet, for instance. In a normal face-to-face situation, it would be characteristic for me to ask, 'Hey, what do you think of this, by the way?'"* But here, the one talking dominates the interaction differently from face-to-face situation. Or that the one not talking kind of gets cut off from the interaction altogether. But if we are present in a physical place, the person continues to exist. He may nod, but now, we could not see whether Afonso nodded or not, or if I said nothing at all, so then in a way, they did not receive any kind of reaction from me." (Interview)

Helpfulness. At the dinners, helpfulness comprised supportive communication and expressions of empathy that created a respectful atmosphere. Several times, those participants who had immigrated to Finland shared difficulties in finding Finnish friends, which generated expressions of empathy from other participants: *"I feel so sad to hear these experiences, like, like [utters a laugh], it's the same as my husband has been saying. Like it's hard to (...) become friends with Finnish people."* (Dinner) In another example, a participant expressed difficulties living between two cultures and that she hopes her children will be more comfortable with two cultures. This generated an interaction in which a Finnish participant assured her that she has done a great job in transmitting her native country's culture to her children. Helpfulness also included communicational acts that maintained a smooth and comfortable atmosphere. For example, during one dinner, two participants disagreed about a subject, and the third participant helped the others move on from their disagreement. Nonverbal helpfulness as support also was expressed through empathetic expressions (e.g., frowning) and intense listening.

During the interviews, the participants said that although they had empathetic feelings, they did not feel like the dinner was a place to express pity. One participant said: *"When I think of Anna's life, the thing is that one might easily start to sigh, like, 'Oh no, she has it rough,' but somehow a thought came to me that 'Hey, she does have her family here; that's how wonderful it is that she is not alone and that it has to be the most important thing for her, almost.' That one should not feel pity toward the other because she surely feels thankful for being here."* (Interview) Another participant stated that in her opinion, compassion was expressed inherently through "being with" and listening to the one sharing.

Humor. Humor and playfulness were prevailing tones during all four dinners. Humorous methods of disclosure were used in particular, alongside sharing more personal issues, opinions, or differences with others to lighten up the mood around subjects that otherwise could violate the appropriate level or tone of sharing during the dinner. Humor appeared to help the participants maintain a safe distance and prevent more intimate or serious issues from threatening the dinners' atmosphere. For example, religion was brought up when one participant wanted to hear about others' faiths. The subject is axiomatically sensitive, and one participant disclosed his experiences humorously: *"I didn't go to temples unless my mom forced me to, and then I was, like, 'alright I'm coming.' Not in the mornings, though" [laughs].* (Dinner) Nonverbally, smiling and laughter generated a light and humorous atmosphere. Laughter was part of almost all disclosures to acknowledge the situation's informal nature, as well as the fact that everybody was a stranger to each other.

During the interviews, humor was described as an element that helped make the dinner interaction pleasant, but it also was noted that the dinners' humorous, light tone – together with the challenges of seeing others' facial expressions and, thus, emotions – sometimes made it difficult to know how to react to others. For example, one participant expressed that because the sharing generally was done humorously, she felt that she failed to interpret another participant's disclosure as more serious because the participant had a smile on her face at first: *"I smiled at something which I was, like, maybe I shouldn't have smiled (...) I could not perhaps clearly decipher exactly what she was thinking when she was talking. Initially, I thought it was, like, a funny thing, and then later on, I smiled about it and then it became a little bit more serious, and I was, like, 'OK, well, oh shit. I shouldn't have smiled.' This was an intense topic, so there was this moment I still recall."* (Interview)

In summary, the common ground for the dinners was constructed through immediacy acts and was also part of the negotiation of the "rules of immediacy" in the situation. It enabled participants to manage their relational closeness and express differences and disagreements during the interaction. Common ground was negotiated jointly, conveying the idea that "whether we will develop a friendship or not, this is an informal occasion in which everyone can feel safe and comfortable."

Discussion

This study sought to identify the contents, functions, and situational meanings of mediated immediacy during virtual dinners between strangers. The results indicate that in the technologically-mediated context, immediacy was (1) communication of "the friendship potential" (Pettigrew, 1998) and (2) communication to

create common ground in the lack of a shared environment. The results revealed the significance of a common ground in the technologically mediated environment, in determining appropriate ways of communicating immediacy. This element became visible in the study's technologically mediated setting which lacked a physically shared space. In a video communication application, which lacks the cues about the place of the meeting, the communication that embodies the manner, tone, and the nature of the meeting (common ground) may thus become more emphasized than in face-to-face meetings. The study also sheds light on the situated nature of immediacy that challenges the quantifying of the concept.

Our main conclusion is that immediacy is inherently situational because the shared environment, that is, the common ground, including the nature of the communication situation, essentially determines appropriate acts of immediacy. In other words, during the virtual dinners, the self-presentational and other-oriented immediacy messages were built upon the negotiated understanding of the common ground. We argue that the situated nature of immediacy is especially visible in mediated contexts that lack a physically shared environment or other visual cues to help establish the nature of the meeting. Our everyday social mediums for instance imply informality with the visuality attached to them. In contrast, video communication applications are often used merely as a "channel" for communication representing "talking heads" next to each other. Indeed, in addition to being an actual place, a common ground is an interactional space that conveys cues about the nature, formality, and purpose of the meeting. The results are visualized in Figure 1.

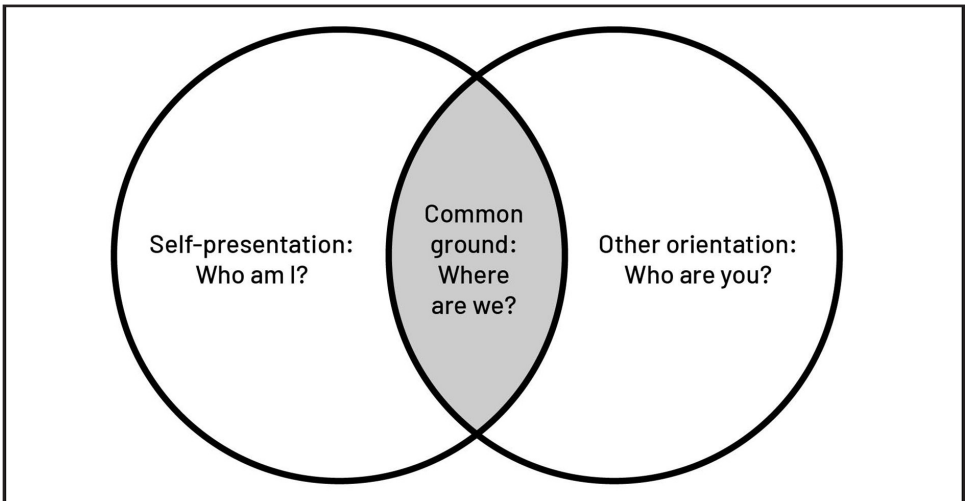


Figure 1. The situational nature of mediated immediacy at the virtual dinners.

Similarly, in their review, Stephenson et al. (2020) juxtapose (organizational) space to a process that includes "performances, flows, and changing routines" (p. 797). Moreover, Laitinen (2020) states that in technology-mediated interactions, the platform is experienced literally as a shared space. Indeed, Cabalquinto (2018) demonstrated how family members living in remote locations strive to create a sense of "at-homeness" through virtual platforms. Consequently, we can speculate that the applications such as the one used in this study, may require more "im-

mediacy-work" to establish the common ground as the basis for the meeting. As the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the possibilities of distant participation in social events, the results of our study emphasize the need to understand virtual platforms as interactional spaces. In future research it would be beneficial to focus on the verbal and nonverbal means to build common ground in order for us to understand the significance of the technological elements that are inherent in different communication applications.

Adding the situational understanding to the concept of immediacy reveals the concept's relational core: Immediacy does not exist in a continuum in which being warmer and friendlier equals being more immediate. Based on our results, we ponder whether immediacy is more about adjusting one's immediacy communication to fit the shared physical and interactional environment so that everyone can feel safe and comfortable. In fact, immediacy communication might essentially represent a paradox: By communicating relational distance, one can communicate situational acknowledgement. For example, politeness and humor can be viewed as ways to maintain safe relational distances and create an environment in which interaction is comfortable *despite* the distance. During the dinners, the participants did share highly intimate information which typically may not be shared in an initial contact situation. However, these intimate details were often accompanied with bursts of laughter that seemed to say "although I am telling you this, I do acknowledge that we just met and we want to keep the conversation light." Thus, the use of humor or laughter enabled the participants to share more about themselves but avoid changing the tone of the conversation. These observations call for further investigation.

We argue that studying virtual meetings without an element equivalent to a shared space reveals a side of immediacy that has not been understood properly when studying face-to-face interactions especially with dichotomous measures. Certainly, face-to-face settings can also vary in the degree of cues about the nature of the communication situation. Yet, even when the cues are scarce, the participants of the situation still share the surrounding objects, voices and smells. Based on our results and these reflections, we conclude that the situatedness of immediacy might be an element of particular significance in video communication situations as well as similar virtual meetings that lack an illusion of a shared space. It is probable that alike virtual environments require more immediacy acts that are directed to building the common ground to compensate for the lack of a shared space. However, we suspect that the situational acknowledgement is also an element of face-to-face immediacy communication, although it might not be as emphasized as in virtual "spaceless" platforms. Future studies should address whether the building of a common ground is something that is more relevant on virtual context (that lack a shared space) or whether the concept of (mediated) immediacy should be revised. In addition, whether the immediacy acts that build common ground do or do not enhance the sense of social presence calls for further scrutiny.

The meaning of or the absence of the surrounding environment has attracted surprisingly little attention in studies focusing on virtual meetings through video communication applications. Conversely, studies that have focused on virtual reality and 3D environments often demonstrate that it is essentially the immersion

into the virtual environment that creates a sense of presence (Cummings & Bailenson, 2016). There are numerous branches of industry focused in developing virtual reality environments in which one can meet others (persons in the documentary or avatars). However, video communication applications offer very few immersive elements, as the technology does not explicitly aim to create a shared environment for participants. Thus, it appears that these two technologies approach presence from two different perspectives as immersive platforms focus on shared environment whereas video communication applications focus on communication. Biocca et al. (2003) confirmed that presence is also often studied either from the perspective of being in a virtual space (spatial presence) or being with another, which essentially is social presence.

Based on the results of our study, we argue that immediacy acts operate in between the two elements: Immediacy communication constructs the shared space in the technologically mediated environment and the space shapes communication, creating an *interactional space* – common ground – as in this study. In such a way, spatial and social presence are not distinct but deeply intertwined calling for studies using a holistic perspective. Accordingly, future studies might benefit from developing a coding scheme that acknowledges the situatedness of immediacy, and which instead of quantity focuses on the quality of appropriateness of the immediacy acts in the chosen situations.

In conclusion, immediacy communication created common ground during the dinners, which lacked a shared physical environment to frame the meetings. The significance of creating common ground was emphasized further through the intergroup context and the fact that the participants were strangers to each other. In addition to the absence of a shared environment, the participants lacked a shared relational, or even cultural, history to use as a frame for interpersonal information at the dinner. Interestingly, Friedman (2014) juxtaposes the creation of a shared culture of a multicultural group with a negotiated social space. Thus, the creation of common ground during the dinners can also be viewed as a way to manage participants' multiple cultural and social identities (Hargie et al., 2008).

The study has limitations. Its setting was somewhat artificial, as the participants essentially joined one of four dinners as part of research. Accordingly, the study frame and the researcher's presence during the dinners undoubtedly affected the interactions. Also, the whole idea of having a "virtual dinner" was new to most of the participants although some of them stated having had virtual "bar nights" previously. Yet, the concept of a virtual dinner was considered understandable at the time of the COVID-19-pandemic. Moreover, the participants were open to multicultural communication, since they signed up for the study. A challenge for future research is to observe informal mediated interactions among individuals who are reluctant, prejudiced, or even hostile towards outgroups. In the world of remote communication, it would be important to learn how mediated immediacy can be utilized to find common ground.

Even in the cyberspace, people build interactional spaces together such as "homes", "offices" and "restaurants" for everyday interactions. At best, these spaces can ease and advance interactional processes as flexibly as they can disturb and derail them. Hence, communication research is of pivotal importance when developing information technology.

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