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Studying Memes During Covid Lockdown as a Lens Through Which to Understand Video-Mediated Communication Interactions

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STUDYING MEMES DURING COVID LOCKDOWN AS A LENS THROUGH WHICH TO UNDERSTAND
VIDEO-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION INTERACTIONS

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to analyze image macros about video-mediated communication (VMC) created during the time frame of 2020-2021 when people all over the world started using Zoom and VMC for work and school. It is a unique opportunity to study how users' interactions with themselves and with others were affected at a time when a lot of people started using the technology at the same time. Because the focus is on interactions, I narrowed it down to three topics to analyze the memes: presence, self, and space and place to analyze the memes. I chose memes relating to these topics that were found on three popular meme databases: *KnowYourMeme, Memedroid*, and *Memes.Com*. Utilizing visual analysis tools and Shifman's format for analyzing memes, each meme was placed in a group and analyzed. The research revealed that users experienced some stressful situations regarding elements of presence, such as feeling isolated and embarrassed at times. Users were also distracted by seeing their image, were overly focused on their appearance (particularly when on camera) and utilized virtual backgrounds for self-expression. Finally, users demonstrated that the collision of private and public space happened when family members or pets interrupted meetings. They also noted that privacy was often intruded upon when other users gained personal information not normally available in face-to-face gatherings. Finally, some took advantage of the changed format to assert power. Most research concerning Zoom and other VMC focuses on how to use it effectively. There is very little research about creative reactions to the usage of this technology and this research fills that gap.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In December of 2019, the Chinese government alerted the World Health Organization (WHO) of a new, mysterious illness dubbed COVID-19 (*COVID-19 — a Timeline of the Coronavirus Outbreak | Devex*). Epidemics aren't a new phenomenon in modern times—there have been previous outbreaks such as the Avian Flu Threat of 1997 and 1999 and the Swine Flu (H1N1) of 2009 ("Timeline"; *Pandemics and Pandemic Threats since 1900*). However, in previous recent pandemics, vaccines were made available quite quickly and, while the viruses did travel all over the world, the infectious rates for these specific viruses were not debilitating. In these scenarios, there were some cancellations of events, but it was nothing compared to the worldwide lockdowns that occurred in the beginning months of 2020. The entire world was in varying stages and degrees of lockdown with only those who offered essential services allowed to continue working. Though each community's experience of COVID restrictions was different, I will use the term "lockdown" to encompass the wide range of variations which might include everything from social distancing recommendations to the more strictly enforced policies. People all over the world were dealing with the pandemic even if the particulars of the lockdown were different. This worldwide experience created for many a sense of unity which is reflected in the single term lockdown making it a common reference. In a brief window of time, the world and how its people interacted with one another was changed dramatically. Many of those who were in lockdown did not stop working but modified their work to be done from home. Students and teachers were largely called to resume classes via Zoom and other video-mediated communication (VMC). Zoom became the most used technology all over the world

practically overnight (Molla). In most scenarios, new forms of technology gain popularity and wide usage slowly over time. Due to the unprecedented nature of these varied lockdowns, VMC was launched onto a worldwide stage creating a unique opportunity to evaluate people's interactions with this technology and with each other.

Throughout history, there is much documentation of the process of culture adopting and adapting to technology similar to what we experienced with VMC. One notable, historic shift is outlined in Elizabeth Eisenstein's book *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*. Eisenstein notes that "the shift from script to print entailed a large ensemble of changes" (Eisenstein 41). The process of shifting from script to printing press for publishing seems a simple concept; however, the steps leading up to it and the consequences of this shift "are too complicated to be encapsulated in any single formula" (Eisenstein 41). It launched new fields for workers to organize the many texts being printed, created a new class of "men of letters," and caused a growth in the shared database of knowledge that allowed readers to verify and check information against more than one source (51, 95, 215). Our world is a different place because of the advent of the printing press. This change did not happen all at once, instead, as Eisenstein notes, it was a series of accepted changes over time. Misa explains that the assimilation of new technologies is a process of acceptance. For example, he states that "societies with distinct goals and aspirations have chosen and sustained certain technologies, and these technologies powerfully molded the economic, social, and cultural capabilities of the societies that have adopted them" (Misa xx). For example, the printing press was a technology that was accepted because it was wanted. Technologies that survive to enact these changes do

so because the culture is both ready for it and willing to sustain it, causing a great change in the culture in this circular movement of change and acceptance.

These changes in technology impact how we consider our humanity. As technologies become more and more enmeshed in our daily lives, it changes what we believe it means to be human. Hayles argues that we have become posthuman: we have changed as humans because of our interaction with technology. Our dependence on technologies such as VMC makes a large part of our existence about the sharing of information in a virtual format. Hayles notes that "it is a small step to perceiving information as more mobile, more important, more essential than material forms. When this impression becomes part of your cultural mindset, you have entered the condition of virtuality" (Hayles 19). During the lockdown, this virtual existence became the real world, the one in which we interacted with others in work or school. While some look at these changes with "terror" or "pleasure" (depending on how they feel towards technology), Hayles remains cautiously optimistic about our interaction with technology, seeing it as an opportunity to rethink what it means to be a human while remaining convinced that our consciousness can never be fully removed from our physical embodiment (Hayles 283). Rosi Braidotti explains that:

> posthuman theory is a generative tool to help us re-think the basic unit of reference for the human in the bio-genetic age known as 'anthropocene', the historical moment when the Human has become a geological force capable of affecting all life on this planet. By extension, it can also help us re-think the basic tenets of our interaction with both human and non-human agents on a planetary scale. (Braidotti)5

Her definition differs from Hayles in that she emphasizes an anti-humanism foundation and focuses on how humans are impacting the world instead of how humans are being impacted y technology. Braidotti's perspective is helpful to consider the agency humans have in computer interaction.

The texts (or artifacts) from the time of the lockdown demonstrate how people interacted during this changing environment. One of these texts that inspired this research is the horror film *Host,* directed by Rob Savage. During the lockdown, Savage created a film solely using Zoom, leveraging its format so the audience experiences a connection implying that they are part of the call and watching their own friends experience terrifying events. Watching helplessly erases the line between virtual and real in a way that is frightening and invasive for the audience. Other artifacts, however, play upon the humor of interacting online such as videos of Zoom conferences where someone has unintentionally used the filter that alters their appearance. In these situations, the format creates a sense of connection that is funny and stress relieving. These creative expressions reveal how people were interacting with this technology and with each other. It is important to research this time because it is beneficialto understanding the future. Hayles states "the feedback loops that run between technologies and perceptions, artifacts and ideas, have important implications for how historical change occurs" (Hayles 14). COVID-19 created a historical change in how we interact with technology, notably VMC. The study of our cultural response via memes adds to our understanding how we can navigate a future where more and more interaction will be virtual. By utilizing the critical lens of semiotics and visual analysis, we can glean important commonalities found in the various artifacts that will help us understand the impact VMC had on interactions within school and

work meetings. Studying memes, specifically image macros, reveals how users adapted to the usage of VMC. Memes, as cultural units, were shared and remixed revealing an agreement with the ideas being presented.

<u>Research Questions</u>

Rob Savage's film *Host* was popular because it was able to encapsulate people's interaction with Zoom in a creative way. He first created a short video filming a Zoom call with his friends where he explores his attic. At the end of the video, as he descends the ladder, a scary head is triggered and pops up resulting in Savage "falling" off the ladder. His friends do not know how to respond and appear to think the event really occurred (Rob Savage). This video went viral and inspired him to create *Host* which is a film about friends in England doing a virtual séance over Zoom. This film starts just like a normal Zoom meeting might, with the scene being set up as though the audience members are participants in an actual Zoom meeting. As expected for a horror film, the séance goes terribly wrong leading to the horrific demise of each character, one by one, before the meeting is "ended." Savage states:

> We were very adamant that it was not a pandemic movie. It was a lockdown movie. It was more about isolation. We wanted to play on was this idea that video conferencing gives you the impression that you're with people, but actually you get these stark reminders that you're not, that you never are. You're very separate. And you're very isolated. When the characters start to see their friends in trouble, they're basically just passengers along for the ride and having to watch at a distance. That was more the thing we were interested in. (Ehrlich and Ehrlich)

Savage explains that the purpose of his film was to capture the experience of life with only

Zoom for interaction with the outside world. Its ability to connect with the audience is apparent

in its ranking as one of the "scariest films of all time" in 2021 by Broadband Choices (Adamska).

Broadband's study utilized heart rate monitoring 250 participants to determine the scariest

movie out of 30 movies which were recommended by online communities and personal lists.

With *Host*, the average heart rate was 88 BPM, which was the highest of all the films in the

experiment ("Scariest Movies of All Time - Based on Science! 2022 Update | The Science Of

Scare | Broadbandchoices"). While the other films were traditional horror films such as *Sinister*,

Insidious, and *The Conjuring* , users responded physically to the unusual format of *Host*

suggesting that they connected with the creative expression being shared.

As an online teacher who has utilized Zoom for student and teacher interaction prior to

lockdowns, I was fascinated with the cultural information that creative expressions using VMC

can reveal. Savage's work resonated with many people, but a more prolific creative cultural

expression can be found in memes. During the lockdown, people all over the world created and

shared memes about Zoom and other VMC. Many of these memes focused on the experience

of using VMC for work and school meetings as a replacement for the face-to-face interaction

with which they were familiar. The research at the time focused on how to use these

technologies more effectively but did not consider how creative expressions might

communicate how these interactions have changed. Instead, my research is focused on how

this new medium impacted users utilizing VMC for work and school. The goal was to learn how

it changed the way they interacted with others and with themselves. My research questions

are:

1. *How do memes (specifically image macros), as an example of participatory culture, reflect the user's interaction with video-mediated communication, themselves, and with other users in the areas of presence as experienced in work and school meetings?*

2. *How do memes (specifically image macros), as an example of participatory culture, reflect the user's interaction with video-mediated communication, themselves, and with other users in the areas of self as experienced in work and school meetings?*

3. *How do memes (specifically image macros), as an example of participatory culture, reflect the user's interaction with video-mediated communication, themselves, and with other users in the areas of space and place as experienced in work and school meetings?*

Definition of Terms

The area of focus for this study is on how user's interactions with others and with themselves was impacted by VMC. The concepts of presence, self, space and place all impact how users relate to others and how they perceive themselves. Because VMC imitates, to some extent, face-to-face interaction, whether the users feel like they are in the presence of others is important. In addition, the format of VMC provides an opportunity for users to watch themselves interacting with others in real time which affects how users will perceive themselves. Finally, students and workers who previously went to work and school places switched to working and doing school from home creating a clash of private and public spaces.

Presence: Overview

During lockdown, people were forced to utilize VMC as their sole connection with the outside world. VMC was forced to emulate face-to-face contact both for social interaction and

work meetings. Interaction in VMC is different from face-to-face—sometimes not as effective and sometimes more effective. One of the greatest areas of weakness focuses on the sense of presence, or telepresence. Telepresence is simply defined as the "illusion where the partners who are actually in geographically separated places feel as if they were meeting face-to-face with each other" (Onishi et al. 171). Presence is often tied to the sense of embodiment or the feeling of physical interaction with a participant (171). Nakaneshi et al. completed experiments testing the effect of a Zooming screen to increase an embodied telepresence called "augmented positional movement" (63). The researchers based their experiment on a recent study that demonstrated a correlation between "a moving point of view" and "strengthened social presence" (Nakanashi et al. 64). In this study, they focused on using movement toward the camera to create a sense of presence. They compared having the remote person move towards the camera, using the zoom feature on the camera, and having the camera physically move closer to the remote person with the most success being found when the remote presenter physically moved towards the camera. A second study applies a more sophisticated method of enhancing presence where robotic elements are introduced to create a simulation of a body. In the experiment, participants interacted with three modes: video only, video with robotic arm, and robotic body (with a blank face). The participants interacted by playing a finger number game with these various forms and then completed a questionnaire about their experience. The feeling of being in the same room with the person was most effective in the video and partial embodiment (video with robotic arm) with the robotic body having the least amount of presence attributed.

In essence, the effectiveness of telepresence or embodiment is dependent on how effective simulation is. Simulation can be understood as how "real" a mediated encounter feels. Baudrillard argues in *Simulacra and Simulation,* originally published in 1981, that there is no longer a distinction between the simulation and the item being simulated. He explains that the "era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials…it is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real" (Baudrillard2). Instead, we are in a time of the hyperreal which is "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (1). An example of this hyperreal he gives is someone simulating illness. If a person is pretending to be ill, they simply need to convince others they are sick. If they are simulating being sick, they must exhibit some symptoms. The question becomes if they can exhibit symptoms of being sick, are they not sick? Here the line between simulation and reality is blurred. Rob Shields in his book *The Virtual* explains that "the virtual is real but not concrete" and 'liminoid' in that they are participated in on a temporary basis, and distinguished from some notion of commonplace 'everyday life'"(Shields 2, 13). This definition corroborates Bruce Janz's definition of virtual reality as a "reflection of 'real' reality, or material existence" (60). So virtual is real in the sense that it imitates everyday life, but it doesn't include the concrete/material existence that we participate in.

In online meetings, the line between real and simulation is blurred also, particularly when virtual becomes the dominant mode of interaction such as during the lockdown. It is interesting to note that Baudrillard's work was published many years before online interaction as we know it was available. The line between simulated interaction (online) and offline has changed dramatically yet his points still ring true today.

Self: Overview

In this dissertation, the sense of self concerns how using VMC affects the user's interaction with themselves and others. As noted in "Identity and Masks in Virtual Reality," "to participate in a shared virtual environment, the individual must become an actor, must assume a virtual identity which others recognize and with which they interact" act" (Lasko-Harvill 222). This virtual environment includes the use of VMC such as Zoom where the use of filters, backgrounds, and other mask-like features can serve to reveal identity or hide it. These options include adding a blurring element to the image to diminish wrinkles and blemishes, apply lipstick, add facial hair, or add items such as hats or jewelry. Other options include photographs of immaculate office spaces, beautiful views, or funny images that reference pop culture. Lists of free downloadable Zoom backgrounds can be found on various blogs and sites such as *Rigorous Themes* and *Zoom Virtual Backgrounds* ("50 Best Backgrounds For Zoom In 2022"; "Virtual Backgrounds"). Alteration adds a unique dimension to VMC interactions in that the users have some control of how they are represented in the medium. In addition, users have to learn how to interact with seeing their faces while they are interacting with others.

Space and Place: Overview

In VMC, the users are introduced to an unusual combination of personal and impersonal spaces and places. Though space and place are often used interchangeably they have slightly different connotations, where "space refers to a location somewhere and place to the occupation of that location. Space is about having an address and place is about living at that address" (Cloke et al. 82). Tim Cresswell defines place as "spaces which people have made meaningful" and utilizes John Agnew's elements of meaningful to include "location, locale,

sense of place" (132). Cresswell further explains the connection between space and place. Space is something abstract, "a realm without meaning;" however, "when humans invest meaning in a portion of space and then become attached to it in some way…it becomes a place" (134-135). These concepts will be addressed as we consider the space utilized during an online conversation and the attempts of users to turn these video-mediated spaces into meaningful places. In addition, the collision of public spaces and private places that occurs while using the Zoom technology in the home for work or school purposes will be discussed. In the context of VMC, space can refer to the virtual location of the meeting where place can refer to the more intimate locations that the user may be. During the lockdown, there was a collision of formal and informal spaces and places. Many were doing work or school (more public) but were in intimate places (their homes). The disparity creates both humorous and uncomfortable situations.

The virtual space we interact in is one that we can control to some extent, but it is still a foreign medium. We cannot completely create an atmosphere in our online rooms like we can create in a physical environment such as aesthetics or even refreshments. Instead, Nadler, a counselor who moved online to do sessions notes that she had to do counseling in "spaces that degrade user expectations…[highlighting] the loss of administrative agency in designing the consultation space" (Nadler 8). The disparity places additional burdens on the communication experience—creating a tension that might not be there in a controlled space. The lockdown also created a sense of forced intimacy where meetings included such things as images of people's homes or interruptions from family members or pets, blurring the line between private and public personas. Some instances include scenes where the participants forget to

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mute or turn off their camera allowing unexpected or embarrassing encounters to occur. For some, these encounters were humiliating, while for others, they created a camaraderie that was missing when work/school and home lives were more separated. In either scenario, it introduced new feelings of space and place as impersonal and personal spaces and places merged.

<u>Literature Review</u>

The phenomena of world-wide VMC usage creates an opportunity to study technology acquisition in real-time. With many technologies like the printing press or even the internet, the process of adoption was gradual and complicated. In this case, our use of Zoom was a direct response to an urgent need. Many studies have been conducted to consider how to use this technology effectively, but very little has been concerned with the creative uses of this technology as a response to the lockdown. These artifacts can reveal subtleties within the adoption of a new technology that are lost when focused only on effectiveness. Instead, artifacts like memes, help us to understand the particular affordances and drawbacks to VMC usage while exposing notions such as presence, self, and space and place.

Memes

COVID-19 created a phenomenon where Zoom (and other forms of video mediated communication) became ubiquitous nearly overnight. Popular culture responded to this change in the way it responds to many topics in life from politics to current events—people made memes. The concept of memes was coined by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1979). Dawkins compares the easily transmittable technology of information to genes. The

word itself comes from the "Greek *mimema* which Dawkins shortened to rhyme with gene; a nod to the similarities between the survival of certain memes through the evolution of culture, and the survival of certain genes through the process of natural selection" (Aslan). The study of memes, called memetics, was born though its premises are under scrutiny. In the *Journal of Memetics*, Edmonds argues that memetics as a study has failed because "it has not provided any extra explanatory or predictive power beyond that available without the gene-meme analogy" (Edmonds 1). Scholars have argued that memes are more than just an information transmission system and can instead be an important form of communication. I would agree that memes are forms of communication, but in this paper, I extend this to specify that memes are primarily forms of *responsive* communication that are in the form of still images, gifs, or videos. They are responsive because the memes are generally shared, imitated and updated, or even remixed. Henry Jenkins refers to the "various ways for audiences to imitate" as remixing (Jenkins et al. 178). This occurs when memes are changed in some way. The image could be reused but the wording can change, or the language stays the same with a new image, or even elements of the original image can be changed or removed.

In "Memes as Genres," Wiggins and Bowers explain that while the original understanding of memes has evolved from their original focus of any body of knowledge that is repeated and shared, "internet memes exist as artifacts of participatory digital culture" (Wiggins and Bowers 1891). What makes memes so special is that they are made by the public who are participating in public discourse, in contrast to other types of media that are commercially produced for public consumption. Shifman notes "digital culture seems to represent a new amalgamation between top-down mass-mediated genres and bottom-up

mundane types of rhetorical actions" (Shifman, "The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme

Genres"). These works represent what the average person is experiencing; it is important to

note that not every user has the same level of access to digital technologies which impacts how

users interact with memes; however, more in-depth discussion of this topic is outside the scope

of this research. Shifman introduces a new method of analysis by building upon Dawkins'

elements of imitation. She narrows down three areas that are imitated and repeated in memes:

content, form, and stance. Content refers to the ideas being communicated; form is the

visual/audio elements of the meme; stance is the message being communicated (Shifman 367).

Since memes are consistently imitated in one or more of these elements in digital culture, a

unique avenue of research is made available (Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong 289).

Memes are a common part of everyday internet life. They show up on social media

platforms, are shared via text or other electronic platforms, and are remixed to adapt to

different topics. There are different types of memes. The most well-known—and the focus of

this dissertation--is the image macro which is a single image with text overlayed (Prasad et al.).

Other types of memes include the 'Rage Comic' depicting a drawn face increasingly getting

angrier; a remixed image which is also referred to as a 'shop' since it employs skills from

Photoshop by transposing images on different backgrounds; and a comic made from "stacking

and annotating still images" (Milner 12). Memes are created and even remixed often without

recognizing an author or credit for the image. Memes as a whole have more in common with

fables than traditional commodified texts due to memes not always having a clear author and

being circulated and modified by those who consume the media (Ejaz). This attribute makes

them unique as their continued existence depends on their popularity. If the audience

resonates with a certain meme, they are more likely to share it or even adapt it. In this way, memes are uniquely poised to represent a popular cultural expression even better than a published work. Their weakness is how short-lived they can be as memes ebb and flow with current events. However, this characteristic doesn't diminish their effectiveness as they can act as a snapshot of public opinion at any given moment and can be understood as cultural expressions or a unit of culture (Handayani et al.; Brown; Wang and Wang).

Memes are individual responses to cultural events. Once a meme is shared, the receivers can respond to the memetic message. They can reject the message (by *not* sharing), they can continue the message (by sharing), or they can contribute to the message by further remixing the meme. This give and take is actually a more natural way to communicate as "a meme provides a more complex yet concise and flexible expression of verbal and visual sentiment…that more closely resembles the way in which we communicate in person" (Brown 3). In a conversation, both parties participate in the conversation. Jenkins defines participatory culture one that has evolved as a result of "new media technologies which enable average citizens to participate in the archiving, annotation, appropriation, transformation, and recirculation of media content" (Jenkins 456). The audience now can modify and create their own media as their own participation in cultural discourse. Memes are an effective and common part of internet culture. The fact that they are also a popular method of communication makes them worthy of study. Milner notes that "popular culture artifacts like memes are worth assessing as pieces of public discourse" (Milner 17). Memes contribute to the public discourse about events in ways many can relate to.

While VMC as a technology has enabled the world to keep running during a global pandemic, it is clear that there are considerations that are linked to how we communicate, interacting with technology and its users.

Video-Mediated Communication: Overview

The basic difficulties with Zoom and its counterparts are easy to observe. There are clear concerns regarding privacy. The infamous Zoom bombings where meetings were hacked and taken over displayed the initial weaknesses in the Zoom algorithm (Mahr et al. 1). In addition, internet inconsistencies create stress. When the internet cuts out, or when screens freeze, it hinders effective communication. Wiederhold explains that stress can be caused even without overly obvious internet inconsistencies. These disruptions come in the form of not completely synchronous interactions (even a micro-delay is interpreted by our brains), missing nonverbal body cues, and the distraction of the chat function to the conversation (Wiederhold 437). Judith Hall et al. defines nonverbal cues as the "behavior of the face, body, or voice minus the linguistic content, in other words, everything but the words" (Judith Hall et al. 272). When speaking in person, people are used to reading a wide range of nonverbal body cues that includes a person's stance, how they interact with their environment, and how they physically interact with the speaker (standing close or far, etc). Wiederhold explains that "technology can disrupt our normal intricate human communication methods that have been finely tuned over centuries to help humans survive" (Wiederhold 437). The VMC format removes this important information and instead places the focus on the disembodied head of the participants.

It's not just what is missing that has an impact, it's also the exaggeration of what is seen that impacts the viewer. Wiederhold comments that "it can be unnerving to have a person's

enlarged face in your space, something that our brains can register as threatening. Even though

we know we are safe, subconsciously, this large appearance and prolonged eye contact can

register as intimidation, flooding our bodies with stress hormones" (Wiederhold 437). In VMC,

the body is reacting to a stressor that our minds are not actively processing, revealing that

many of our responses to VMC may be happening at a subconscious level. While we may

believe that all the major components for successful communication are available, we are made

aware that elements that are not typical in face-to-face communication have an impact on the

emotional state of the participants.

Crano observes that it's not just other's faces that can be so disconcerting. For the first

time in history, we are forced to observe our own faces while we are speaking (4). An

inundation of our own faces has noticeable repercussions. For one, the number of cosmetic

surgeries has increased and, in an appearance-obsessed culture, a desire to hide. In an article

in *New York Times* about this topic, Richtel noted that "At a time when many medical fields are

reeling from lockdowns when lucrative electives work was postponed, cosmetic surgery

procedures are surging, practitioners say, driven by unexpected demand from patients who

have found the coronavirus pandemic a perfect moment for corporeal upgrades" (Richtel). The

article goes on to document several plastic surgeons explaining that they can't keep up with the

demand (Richtel). Since these procedures are not covered by insurance and are often costly,

those not able to afford work being done instead often choose to hide themselves. For

example, Crano discusses how many students beg to not be forced to go on screen.

Undoubtedly, some students use it as a ruse to cover a desire to avoid actively engaging in the

class activities, but Crano argues that some of it must be seen as a response to the "increasing

anxieties around being seen—and seeing ourselves speaking and seeing—in this way" (Crano 4). In typical communication, your focus is on the face of the person with whom you are communicating. VMC disrupts the interaction with the temptation to observe themselves, causing participants to hyper-focus on their imperfections or desire to remain off-screen in order to avoid observing themselves.

While we miss the nonverbal cues that we are used to, we are also forced into a false sense of connection. We are easily distracted by the iconized faces—either as a threat as Wiederhold suggests —or as a magnet of our attention when viewing our own faces. To alleviate a disconnect, we are often encouraged to make the appearance of eye contact. In fact, one of the solutions offered by Wiederhold is to look at the camera so the participant feels you are making direct eye contact with them (Wiederhold 438). The problem is that both parties know that, despite the illusion, neither one is looking at them otherdirectly. Crano notes that "the alternative is for me to look directly at the other's face, but without looking like I am making eye contact…either way the contact is only ever indirect and asymmetrical" (Crano 5). In this case, it is a connection that is misaligned that causes stress. Even with the attempt to make connection, VMC does not allow for natural eye contact between speakers. Either the speaker gives the illusion of eye contact by staring at the camera or they look at the other participants but appear as though they are looking elsewhere. Since eye contact is a large part of typical interaction, it is easy to surmise that a disruption can affect feelings of connection.

Finally, Bobby Nadler posits that it's not just the adjustments to interaction with people that cause difficulties, but it is the interaction with the technology itself. Nadler considers Actor Network Theory (ANT) to discuss how we interact with actants (whether human or nonhuman).

When a person interacts with a medium, whatever it is, the interaction changes the person. He explains that "ANT treats all agents as equal. This does not mean that a book is more important than a person, but in terms of a network, a book can hold more prominence than a person" (Nadler 5). In the case of VMC, we must consider the impact created by using the medium of the computer. He argues that although we want to act like we are interacting with the person we are speaking with, but, in actualityity, we are interacting with the tool (the computer or other device). He notes that "this switch in audience is the most critical in generating our exhaustion because it triggers a disconnect between how our minds desire to interact with our party and how our bodies engage CMC [computer mediated communication]" (Nadler 13).

The rapid adoption of VMC software like Zoom during the 2020 lockdown provides an opportunity for us to consider weighty topics such as presence, self, and space and place as important elements of social interaction (Argyle 91, 127, 267, 356). These topics are not limited to VMC, but, with the increase in virtual interaction, bring into sharp focus how these concepts affect our day to day lives. For this research, studying the cultural response via memes allows us to consider this conversation in an entirely virtual arena.

<u>Research Design</u>

Data

Most research on Zoom focuses on its practical usages and how to make it more effective. Very little research is done on the creative expressions concerning Zoom. The creative expressions reflect the deeper issues of how we interact in this medium, highlighting concepts of presence, self, and space that are at the heart of all digital interactions. My research helps us

navigate future uses of this technology, and other virtual technologies, by identifying similarities in VMC experiences particularly as they intersect with our understanding of ourselves in these spaces.

To be included in my study, I sought memes that were shared between 2020 and 2021, specifically reference VMC, and refer to three topics that related to online meetings—sense of presence, self, and space/place. They were selected from three popular meme databases: *Memedroid*, *KnowYourMeme*, and *Memes.Com*. This strategy is similar to the one modeled in "Memes and Affinities: Cultural Replication and Literacy Education" where Knobel chose memes that were mentioned in regional or national newspapers in order to identify traits of successful memes (Knobel 200). I selected three memes from each variable (presence, self, and place and space) with a total of nine memes being discussed in each chapter. I found these memes by using the keywords "Zoom Meeting 2020." I used the word "Zoom" specifically as this was the most common program for VMC. Though not all the memes necessarily focused on Zoom. Because VMC is not a common term, I had to focus on what was more popular. The *Memedroid* search results consisted of two meme lists: one had seven memes and the other had two memes. Of the nine memes, one referred to elements concerning presence, four referred to elements concerning self, and one referred to elements concerning space and place. The remaining memes referenced other topics. The *KnowYourMeme.com* search revealed two lists of fifteen memes each. Of those memes eight referenced elements related to presence, four referenced elements related to self, and four referenced elements related to space and place. The remaining memes referenced other topics.   The *Memes.com* search revealed two compiled lists of memes using the keywords. There were fifteen memes in each list. Of those

memes eight referenced elements related to presence, ten referenced elements related to self, and five referenced elements related to space and place. The remaining memes referenced other topics.

The type of meme being studied is the image macro which is an image overlaid with text. For the rest of the paper, memes will mean image macros. The data I collected are image macros that reflect on VMC during or about the lockdown time (April-July 2020). These visual artifacts show the users' interactions with VMC. Constance Iloh notes that it is useful to study these forms because "memes are especially important forms of speech…in that they reflect regular everyday communication…In this way, memes have an expressive and explanatory power" (Iloh 7). Memes that have value as cultural units are those that have been shared and have been remixed. For the image macros, the remix can be in the areas defined earlier by Shifman—content, form, or stance. The important element is that it demonstrates cultural assimilation: this can be found in image macros. Image macros are often imitated by utilizing the same image with different text or by communicating a similar message with a different image.

Procedures

The Handbook of Visual Analysis provides a basic structure for visual analysis by considering three areas: context of viewing, context of production, and semiotics and codes (Leeuwen and Jewitt 6).

Context of Viewing

To study the artifacts from the spring of 2020, it is important to take into consideration the events surrounding its creation. Leeuwen and Jewitt state that "we need to ask where the

image is…[as] the context influences how we look at the image through constructing certain expectations" (6). The context for the artifacts that I will be studying is extremely important as it shapes the content. The lockdown created a unique psychological experience. Cities shut down, social events stopped, and work and social life transitioned online. And this event happened on a global scale—something that is completely unprecedented. There was, of course, a widespread cultural reaction to a radical change in life that is reflected in the memes created during this time.

Context of Production

The second area to consider is "how did the image get there?" (9). In the case of image macros which are usually made up of images with text added, the origin story of the images themselves must be taken into consideration. Many times, the images are popular reaction images or clips from films that many people might recognize. The choice of the image affects how the users will interact with the meme depending on their knowledge of the original images. However, users can still glean the message of the meme even without insider knowledge of popular images. In some cases, the original context of the image might actually have no relevance to the meme's meaning and prior knowledge is unnecessary.

Semiotics and Codes

The studying of semiotics asks "the question of representation (what do images represent and how)?" (2). To successfully utilize semiotics, I consider both denotation and connotation focusing on what is exactly represented and how it is meant to be interpreted (4). Barthes identifies three messages of an image: linguistic message, the literal message (or denoted image), and the symbolic message (or connoted image) (Barthes 33-35). The linguistic

message is tied up in the words used in the image, whether they are captions or just words that appear in the scene. For memes, this includes the caption inserted over the image as well as any words within the image itself. The literal message or denoted image are the actual elements of the image being as objectively described as possible, including the original context from which a meme's image was extracted. Finally, the symbolic message or understanding of the connoted image is pulled from the relationship between the signified and the signifier. The literal elements of the image is the signifier and the meaning of these elements is the signified. The viewer's own knowledge and experiences also influence how they will interpret images. In this dissertation, these elements of visual analysis will be utilized to study the memes. For example, the visual, literal elements of the meme will be listed and described as well as the intended symbolic message of the meme.

Shifman author of *Memes in Digital Culture* draws on these concepts from semiotics as well as memetics to identify three areas of study: content, form, and stance. This perspective includes both visual and written content. She compares iterations of the same meme as demonstrated in "Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker." In this research, Shifman uses these "memetic dimensions" to analyze "Leave Britney Alone" (1). Her focus is on how this original video meme was copied or changed by users in one or more of these three areas. Starting with the video meme, she analyzes each iteration based on these three elements. Content refers to the signifier or denoted image being presented. Here the actual details of the meme are unpacked. The form refers to the actual structure of the meme. Memes can be videos, gifs, or images. My focus is on the form of an image macro which includes an image with text. However, even in this narrow form, there is room for variation

depending on the choice of images and the set-up of the meme (text location, etc.). Finally, the

stance refers to the symbolic message of the meme and what the meme is trying to

communicate about the topic.

      I used this format for analysis while sorting them according to the variables listed below.

For each variable, the analysis utilizes an open-ended qualitative approach using the following

coding.

<u>Presence</u>

Table 1 Coding for Presence

Variable	Selection Criteria
Embarrassing situations	Do the memes reference moments where the participants experience uncomfortable or embarrassing situations?
Feeling of connection/isolation	Is VMC portrayed as creating or ruining a sense of intimacy? How?
Distortion due to technology	Are there references to glitches or connectivity problems?

<div align="center"><u>Self</u></div>

Table 2 Coding for Self

Variable	Selection Criteria
Focus	What effect does seeing their image cause the user? Are they focused on their appearance? Are they distracted from the meeting?
Appearance	How is the appearance of the user portrayed?
Discussion of virtual backgrounds	How is the user's choice of backgrounds referred to?

<div align="center"><u>Space and Place</u></div>

Table 3 coding for Space and Place

Variable	Selection Criteria
Interruptions	How are the user's personal lives referenced in the meme particularly as interrupters?
Sharing private space	Is a reference made to a collision of private and public space? Sharing personal details of location?
Power	How is the power dynamic addressed in a Zoom meeting?

Significance of Study

The purpose of VMC is the ability to have social interaction. Berlo's communication model of source—message—channel—receiver (SMCR) and Hall's encoding and decoding sequence emphasize shared understanding or frameworks of knowledge (Berlo; Hall). In these scenarios, the source or sender encodes the message and delivers it through a channel or program, it is then decoded by the receiver and interpreted according to frameworks of knowledge. Hall adds the added dimension of interpretation that is missing from Berlo's model. For communication to be effective, we must consider the sender and receiver and their interaction. In this same vein, the concepts of presence, self, and space and place delve further into how these impact social interaction. Social interaction is impossible without any sense of presence. Presence can simply be defined as "the existence of someone or something in a particular place" (*PRESENCE (Noun) American English Definition and Synonyms | Macmillan Dictionary*). Furthermore, Kendon notes that "in every social transaction, selves must be established, defined, and accepted by the parties" (356). The understanding that the user has of themselves and of the other participants is hashed out in communication. Finally, in sociological vocabulary, space and place would be referred to as setting which can refer both to "*locale,* or time and place, and that of *situation*" (Ervin-Tripp 65). This definition allows for setting to be more than just a physical location, but the purpose that is also being executed. Goffman's analogy compared social interaction to a theater, which he calls the dramaturgical perspective (128). In this perspective, there is a "front stage," "back stage," and "off stage." Each of these changes in setting affects how a person acts. The front stage represents how we present ourselves to the world. The back stage is how we act when we are in familial or close

friendship groups. Off stage is how we act when we are alone (128). In other words, setting (or space and place) has an impact on how people behave and interact.

Chapter Summaries

The chapters are organized in the following way:

Chapter 2: This chapter focuses on memes that demonstrate references to presence. The concept of presence and telepresence is discussed in detail. There is some discussion of virtual simulation as the concept of presence is enmeshed in a person's understanding of reality. Baudrillard's definition of simulation and how it connects to VMC is explored. There are three groups of memes. The first group focuses on memes referencing embarrassing situations that occur as a result of using VMC. The second group reflects on the feelings of isolation and attempts of connection that occur when using this technology. The final group showcases situations in which glitches in the connection affect the ability to communicate in the video call. All of these topics affect a user's sense of presence.

Chapter 3: This chapter focuses on the topic of the self. First, the visual self as pertains to online communication is discussed. Then, because we are focusing on communication via technology, the posthuman self is defined and connected to VMC. The memes for this chapter were broken into three groups. The first group refers to the distracting element of the user watching themselves during VMC. The second group conveys how users will have two drastically different appearances depending on whether they have to be on the camera. The final group refers to how users utilize virtual backgrounds for self-expression. The memes highlight how a user views themselves and others during online calls.

Chapter 4: This chapter defines the terms space and place. It also delves into how public and private spaces were intertwined during the lockdown creating a unique work and school environment. In addition, the concept of virtual space is discussed and how this is different for physical spaces. Finally, relating in virtual spaces particularly as it concerns the dynamics of power is discussed. The first group of memes shows how users were interrupted by pets and family members during meetings and also shows how they reacted to this intrusion. The second set of memes reveals how certain private elements of home life are exposed during virtual meetings that would not happen during face-to-face meetings. The last group of memes identifies situations where the power dynamic of a meeting is altered either because of technological issues or because of intentional mischievousness on the part of the users. The purpose of this chapter is to explain how VMC alters these spaces and interactions.

Conclusion: The final chapter summarizes how each chapter answers the research questions that have been posed. The findings are then interpreted with suggestions for how to utilize these findings to improve interaction in VMC. The limitations for the research and suggestions for future research, especially now that lockdowns are predominantly over, are also discussed.

CHAPTER 2: EXPERIENCING PRESENCE IN VIDEO-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

Introduction

For those who had to stay home during the lockdown, online interactions were not

limited to social purposes but included work and school. While working virtually was not

unheard of previously, it was still considered out of the norm compared to face-to-face work or

instruction. When people traded in classrooms and offices for their own homes, a new way of

relating to classmates/colleagues and instructors/bosses emerged. Instead of the typical

interaction that occurs in face-to-face contexts, people were forced to interact with one

another virtually. This change led to experiences that were amusing, embarrassing, stressful,

and confusing which fueled discussions about what it means to be present with others and how

we define what is real. In reaction to these encounters, many VMC (VMC) users turned to

memes. Often, the memes were about funny interactions that occurred when they thought the

microphone was off and something embarrassing was heard. For others, the users joked about

the awkwardness of waiting rooms or being a teacher with a class full of blank screens. Included

in this discussion are times when the technology itself failed, creating distortions that limited

the interaction. While these memes highlight the isolation felt during these experiences, they

also create a community of those who understood the experience and, as a result, became part

of a new way of understanding presence.

Using the methodology outlined earlier, memes were collected using searches focused

on presence. Elements relating to presence were identified in memes and were categorized as

memes referring to the microphone being on or unmuted and scenarios where people felt

lonely or awkward (in the waiting room, etc.) as they reflect an awareness of the artificial

connection being presented in VMC. These memes were analyzed using Shifman's example in

"Memes in a Digital World" concerning content, form, and stance (Shifman). In addition, visual

analysis tools such as analyzing the context of viewing, the context of production, and semiotics

and codes were considered in order to provide context.

Video Mediated Communication

VMC as a technology has different challenges and affordances in interaction compared

to face-to-face interaction. The obvious challenges are the lack of many nonverbal

communication indicators that we are used to such as body position and movements. When

two people are conversing, they communicate using a variety of methods that include body

language such as leaning forward to indicate interest, crossing arms and legs to communicate a

closed-off demeanor. However, compared to audio communication, VMC has the availability of

at least seeing the facial expressions of the person with whom they are communicating if the

camera is on. Seeing facial expressions is a huge affordance in VMC compared to other

communication such as texting, phone calls, or emails. The ability to make eye contact and read

facial expressions provides an opportunity for building rapport (Shin et al. 2).

In the typical interactions of work and school, the increase in social distance can affect

the ability to focus (Baker et al. 1969). In fact, a survey of grant reviewers meeting online noted

that "compared with in-person grant-review meetings, 46% of respondents said that they paid

less attention during the video meetings, and 51% said that their engagement was worse"

(Singh Chawla). Interviewees noted that they were distracted by things around them and got

bored with staring at all the faces in VMC meetings. Sometimes, this distance from physical

bodily presence isn't a negative factor. Shin et al. note in their research that utilizing VMC

during conflict resolution places much-needed space between participants discussing heavily

emotional topics. When a person's emotional response is communicated intensely through

bodily indicators, the recipient can experience "emotional flooding" (Shin et al. 4). VMC

provides a distance that can allow processing without the overwhelming presence of another

person. In highly emotive situations, this space can be beneficial. Another difficulty with VMC

interaction is the asynchronous format: "though it appears that things are happening in real-

time, the truth is there is a slight delay between when a person performs an action and when

the other participants are able to observe it" (Wiederhold 437). This very subtle delay isn't

clearly obvious to us, but our brains do interpret it. It causes the conversation to slow down and

affects the fluidity of the interaction. In some situations, especially if there are connectivity

issues, this asynchronicity can be extremely distracting (Baker et al. 1969). These glitches

remind the participants that their interaction is being mediated and disrupts the illusion of

presence.

One feature of VMC that creates a challenge is the fact that the participants cannot

engage in true eye contact. Because of the placement of the camera at the top of the screen, if

you are staring at your screen (and their actual eyes) it looks like you are looking below their

eyes. To give the illusion of eye contact, you have to stare at the camera hole, usually located at

the top of the computer monitor. This lack of eye contact causes a feeling of disconnect

because the participants cannot naturally look at each other's faces. To solve this problem,

there are numerous articles and videos with hacks aimed to imitate the appearance of eye

contact which include using a teleprompter, using a movable camera and placing it in the middle of the screen, or even foregoing the use of the camera altogether in an attempt to imitate physical presence in a virtual environment (Krueger).

While many would agree that utilizing VMC provides affordances that make work and school possible, it does not come without its challenges. In fact, the distracting format disembodied heads, asynchronous format, and lack of true eye contact highlight how the usage of VMC can undermine the usual feeling of presence that occurs when communication is taking place.

Presence

The concept of presence is one that has multiple definitions and variations. There is physical presence, telepresence, virtual presence, and even mediated presence. Telepresence is the concept I will focus on as it relates most directly to VMC interaction. Telepresence as a term was created by Marvin Minksy in 1980 to refer to interaction using teleoperating systems. He postulates that "the biggest challenge to developing telepresence is achieving that sense of 'being there.' Can telepresence be a true substitute for the real thing?" (Minsky). Sheridan came up with the term virtual presence to designate a different type of technological interaction—one using virtual reality technologies (Sheridan). Finally, mediated presence is explained by Lee, "telepresence is the mediated perception of an environment in which users are being transported via technologies, whereas presence refers to the natural perception of an environment" (Lee 29). Lee argues that all of these terms are confusing and unnecessary, putting the emphasis on the mode of technology instead of accepting that it is "a psychological

construct dealing with the perceptual process of technology-generated stimuli" (30). Instead,

we should consider presence as itself without designating the difference between physical and

technologically connected encounters.

Lombard and Ditton wrote a literature review on the topic of presence and identified

six conceptualizations: presence as social richness, presence as realism, presence as

transportation, presence as immersion, presence as a social actor within a medium, and

presence as a medium as a social actor (Lombard and Ditton). Social richness refers to the

intimacy experienced in social settings. Realism concerns the accuracy of real-world

experiences. Transportation focuses on being in the location. Immersion is dependent on how

focused the participant is in their environment. The last two mention the use of a medium that

allows the presence to occur by using technology. The difference between physical presence

and virtual presence/telepresence is not signified because it could be argued that utilizing the

physical senses also includes a mediated experience. Lee's definition of presence encompasses

the complexity of the concept when she states that presence can be defined as "a psychological

state in which virtual (para-authentic or artificial) objects are experienced in either sensory or

nonsensory ways" (Lee 37). In this way, presence is about the perception of presence.

During the lockdown, professor and author T. Nikki Cesare Schotzko contemplated the

changes that occur in interaction with students while using VMC. After teaching online and then

virtually attending a theatrical performance called *Passing Notes* that considers the seven

stages of grief, Schotzko observed an intimacy that was afforded in a virtual performance as

opposed to an in-person performance. She states,

Throughout *Passing Notes*, Anthony and Ellis invited audience members to comment in Zoom chat, reading aloud a few responses at a time; to turn video on or off, so that we might, for a moment, be with each other in a more fully multisensory way (without ever prioritizing one sense over another – both artists incorporated visual description throughout the performance and demonstrated how audience members could turn captions on in Zoom); and to use Zoom's tools for naming ourselves in our little individual boxes. (Cesare Schotzko 276)

The performance, originally intended to be in-person, was able to allow a sense of presence that might not have been possible in a different format causing Shotzko to conclude "maybe, by taking a new look at ourselves, we might reimagine a new way of looking, and hearing, and sensing, beyond our own image" (286). Instead of allowing the inconsistencies of VMC to be a hindrance to communication, it was an opportunity for vulnerability. For example, Jerome, one of the performers, notes that he has a stutter which was not to be confused with internet glitches (273). The acknowledgment of the challenges of VMC and personal challenges invites the viewer into a shared experience. Instead of allowing these impediments to be a hindrance, they instead become a means of creating a new sense of presence.

In a basic sense, presence is understood to be the feeling of being in the company of others. In our normal experience, presence is most experienced through physical interaction (Witmer and Singer 225). Witner and Singer note that according to their research on presence in virtual environments that "how sharply users focus their attention on virtual environments partially determines the extent to which they will become involved in that environment and how much presence they will report" (226). The idea of recreating this feeling of presence in a

virtual format is known as telepresence. In fact, research has gone into creating accouterments

intended to increase the sense of telepresence. These include studies utilizing a VMC camera

feature to imitate a person leaning in, including robotic elements to give the illusion of a

physical presence, and even utilizing shared tasks to create a sense of unified purpose. The

goal of these studies is to make our VMC interaction feel more real and more like a physical

presence.

Many studies have been created to understand how presence works in virtual formats.

In a study focused on the usage of cameras, Nakanishi et al. note that "the presentation of

augmented positional movement enhances social telepresence, that is the degree of

resembling face-to-face interaction" (Nakanishi et al. 63). Their research concludes that several

modifications, which are quite small, help diminish the feeling of distance. For example, in the

study, they had a presenter holding a book. They tried three different methods of zooming in—

the person moving in, the camera zooming only, and the person moving while the camera

zooms in. They found the last option demonstrates the most social telepresence as evidenced

by a survey of the viewers. Their study demonstrates how movement and visual effects can

greatly impact a user's sense of presence (71). Other studies employed props such as robotic

arms to increase the sense of presence. One study tested the sense of presence by comparing

social interaction playing a finger number game with just a screen, with just a robotic arm, and

with a screen and a robotic arm. The greatest sense of presence was experienced with the

combination of video and the robotic arm (Onishi et al. 171). Paulos and Canny, the

researchers, even invented a robot referred to as a PRoP, which is a "simple, inexpensive,

internet-controlled, untethered, mobile tele-robot…to provide the sensation of tele-

embodiment in a remote real space (Paulos and Canny 87). Their idea is the opposite of an avatar which is projecting our physical presence in a virtual space, PRoP projects a physical presence utilizing a robot.

In the article "Mobile Video Conferencing for Sharing Outdoor Leisure Activities Over Distance," researchers conducted an experiment utilizing voice and visual devices to participate virtually with a partner in geocaching or a bike ride. This endeavor was quite successful in creating a sense of presence. In this case, it was not a prop or tool that created this feeling, but, instead, it was the shared purpose and goal that brought a sense of comradery. In the experiment, they were linked with another person via video phone doing the same activity in another location or watching passively from home. They explain that "our research explores leisure activities between family members that might be performed over a mobile video conferencing system…[as] outdoor recreation [helps] maintain and increase family cohesiveness" (Neustaedter et al. 110). The results were very positive with all groups feeling they had a "highly intimate connection between partners" (Neustaedter et al. 117). The combination of video and sound enabled partners to feel as though they were completing the activities together. In their communication, they often talked about what they were seeing and doing as well as making general conversation. Even though they were alone in public places, they felt they were not by themselves. There were some downfalls to the increased connection. For one, "the level of connection and focus on one's partner was sometimes so strong that participants became overly focused on their partner rather than their own location and experience" (Neustaedter et al. 118). Having a shared task and being able to see and hear one another created a strong sense of presence.

These studies focus on the imitation or replication of physical interaction in order to generate a sense of presence or embodiment. These are dependent on a limited understanding of presence. Researchers Mantovani and Riva speculate that there are different types of presences. The one being represented would be an example of subjective presence based on Schloerb's writings which believes "the perception of being located in the same physical space in which a certain event occurs, a certain process takes place, or a certain person stands" (Mantovani and Riva 540). They go on to explain that presence is defined by our concept of reality. This emphasis on the physicality of presence leads to research concerning telepresence. For example, the goal in the previous experiments was to increase the feeling of physical proximity by a robot or by illusive techniques such as zooming cameras and imitating eye contact. This concept of presence directly impacts the way we interact in VMC and helps explain the difficulties that people have with it. There are at least three viewpoints that consider the concept of presence: ingenious realism, the ecological approach, and cultural perspective.

As we learn about how we define reality, we uncover why we interact with VMC the way we do. The first viewpoint, ingenious realism, defines reality by focusing on the physicality of an object, "reality is a set of objects located outside the mind…and has a set of well-defined characteristics" (Mantovani and Riva 542). This dualistic mindset allows for a physical manifestation but acknowledges "a dualism between objects and ideas" (542). Subjective presence would be a facet of this concept of reality. Because there is no physical counterpart to what is experienced virtually, there is no space in this philosophy for a virtual presence. The cyperphilosophy adherents would explain the gap by claiming that virtual experiences are a

"socially shared (or at least shareable) hallucination" (543). The theory does not allow for a

"real" virtual world. This mindset explains why those using VMC can feel disconnected. The

ecological approach, credited to Gibson, defines reality by the environment and the affordances

it provides. It is "relational in conception of both reality and knowledge" (544). True presence is

demonstrated through interaction with the environment as "presence is tantamount to

successful supported action in the environment" (544). This reality does not need a duplication

of a physical environment but rather needs to include an environment that contains

affordances that can be used. This concept fits in easily with a virtual environment and provides

a framework for presence that is not dependent on physical counterparts and is supported by

Neustaedter et al.'s study where the shared task of riding a bike created a sense of intimacy.

When using VMC, the focus can be on what affordances the technology offers instead of how it

differs from physical presence. This mindset provides a framework that can be modified to

make VMC usage less fatiguing. The final viewpoint is called the cultural perspective which

builds on the relational aspect of the ecological approach but postulates that reality is

experienced through "interpretative grids that are generated by the preexisting social

structures that have presided over their socialization processes" (545). The environmental

affordances mentioned in the ecological approach are in reality defined by the social

experiences that a person has. In this way, reality is not defined by one person's perception of

their environment but by the socially constructed concept of reality.

Mantovani and Riva come to the following conclusions:

1. Presence is mediated by both physical and conceptual tools that belong to a given

   culture…

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2. The criterion for presence does not consist of simply reproducing the conditions of physical presence but in constructing environments in which actors may function in an ecologically valid way…

3. Action is essentially social (as knowledge in everyday situations is often distributed among various actors and various artifacts)…(547)

This perspective is also helpful for VMC usage. The focus is still on how technology can be useful but also includes the social dynamic that is needed to interact in ways that can become natural. Expanding the perspective to redefine both presence and reality can improve how VMC is used. These alternate concepts of reality influence how presence is defined, removing the emphasis on a physical environment or connection. Instead, these views challenge the ways we define what is real.

Virtual Simulation

As noted, the concept of presence is tied to our understanding of reality. The virtual environment will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4 with its focus on space and place. Here, I will focus on the idea of real vs. simulation where it connects to the concept of presence. The goal of VMC is to suspend this disbelief of proximity to accomplish the goals at hand. Despite the best intentions, however, there are reminders that we are interacting via a technological medium, one that affects the way we interpret our interactions. To understand why this reminder is so disconcerting, we must consider the role our concept of reality has on our interactions in the virtual environment.

Any discussion of the concept of reality must address Baudrillard's thoughts on the *Simulacra*. In his discussion of reality, he describes a melding of what is perceived as real and its simulation so that there is no longer a difference between the two. Barthes also utilizes a distinction between the simulated and the simulation when he analyzes the image. Barthes identifies three meanings: linguistic, the denoted one, and the connoted one (Barthes 33-34). In a Panzani advertisement for some food items, Barthes explores the various meanings being communicated. The linguistic meaning is encapsulated in captions and labels communicating an "authentic" Italian product. The denoted meaning is the actual objects being represented in the image. In this case, it includes some vegetables and packets of pasta displayed in a pleasing manner. The connoted, or symbolic, meaning is what is communicated with these images. The images make connections to an understanding of Italian culture and cuisine. While the images are of items like tomatoes and pasta, the message they convey is one of wholesome Italian food. The denoted message can also be considered the signified with the symbolic meaning referring to the signifier (49).

In Baudrillard's understanding, the distinction between signified and signifier is no longer there. In fact, he defines the term "hyperreal" to refer to "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (Baudrillard 1557). He states that to "dissimulate is to feign not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one hasn't. One implies a presence, the other an absence…simulation threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false', between 'real' and 'imaginary' (1558). His view of reality ends with the conclusion that nothing is real. In a world of simulations that no longer have referentials, "real" is an illusion. This concept can readily be applied to virtual experience which, according to a cultural perspective of reality, can

be considered the simulation that redefines reality not in physical terms but in social affordances. Much of what is experienced virtually has no physical counterpart anymore. The simulation has transcended the physical.

While Baudrillard concludes that nothing is real, Rob Shields takes a different approach to reevaluate the concept of real. Similar to the concepts of reality outlined by Mantovani and Riva (particularly the ecological approach and cultural perspective), Shields understands the virtual as a different form from the concrete (or actual). In order to understand the difference, we need to "develop a more sophisticated theory of the real and the ways in which the virtual and the concrete are different…existing forms" (Shields 21). He argues the concept of the virtual has been a part of human history before computer-mediated virtualities. He defines virtual to "that which is so in essence but not actually so…virtual is ideal but not abstract, real but not abstract" (43). This concept has been seen in man-made rituals that invoke "virtualities, integrating them into life as carnivals, sacred times and places, and mysteries" (44). The rituals attempt to replicate the essence even if not the fullness of different concepts and concrete elements. Despite their imitative purposes, often these rituals could be considered concrete. He notes an example in the Catholic tradition of transubstantiation (5-6) where the sacraments of bread and wine are considered the physical presence of Christ.

When considering what work looks like in a virtual format, Shields states "work with the virtual imposes a distance from the actual" (131). In his summary, he notes that virtual workers deal with "abstractly coded elements" separated from the material labor of others (158). For example, a person working remotely who is checking an inventory is at a distance from the worker who physically counts it. These can create a disconnect between the worker and the

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work being accomplished. He goes on to note that in these environments, it is less conducive to

chitchat. The loss of small talk removed some "redundancy," but it also removed conversations

that "allowed misunderstandings to be corrected before anyone started to work" (133). The

idea of the loss of interaction is reiterated in an article focusing on virtual business meetings

where they note the "most notable drawback" is the "lack of informal and social interactions"

(Standaert et al.). Not being able to converse in informal ways is a definite drawback to VMC

since people seem to prefer to have face-to-face interaction. This observation highlights the

preference for in-person interactions as opposed to virtual, reflecting a bias Heidegger outlines

"towards understanding 'being' as presence or as being present, an understanding of both

ourselves and our surroundings as fixed entities and events structured in space and time"

(Johannessen et al). The viewpoint "creat[es] a hierarchy of existence in which what is being

presented is seen as more real than the representation" (Johannessen et al.). The disconnect

between what is perceived as real and virtual creates tension in VMC.

Memes: Presence

Memes were chosen for analysis using the methods described earlier for the themes of

mic not off/unmuted, feeling lonely/awkward, and technology glitches. These topics focus on

how the usage of VMC technology affects the user's interaction and comfort.

Meme Group A–Embarrassing Presence

The first group of memes focuses on awkward situations where the participant's mic is

not off and the other participants in the VMC call could hear something that they didn't intend

to be heard.

The moment you realize that your mic wasn't off.

Figure 1: "That Moment". *Memedroid,* 2020, https://www.memedroid.com/memes/detail/3173284/that-moment. Accessed 24 Aug 2022.

Figure 1 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 1 used an image called "Awkward Look Monkey Puppet" that comes from a Japanese children's show called *Ōkiku Naru Ko* ("Awkward Look Monkey Puppet"). The image was photoshopped by Facebook user Daniel Flores to make it look like the monkey is looking at the camera. From there, it became a popular image on multiple platforms focusing on situations where the participant feels foolish. For example, the original meme used the caption "When you're staring at your crush like an idiot, and she noticed" ("Awkward Look Monkey Puppet"). The image captures the embarrassment that arises in certain situations. In the case of this specific meme, the situation is realizing that the mic is on, and people have been hearing whatever is going on in the environment. The caption along the top states "the moment you realize that your mic wasn't off." While the specific situation isn't listed, the viewer can imagine similar scenarios where they have been overheard or could imagine the embarrassment. This meme is an image macro that utilizes two images on a white background. The text appears above the image with black writing on a white background. The stance of this

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meme is recognizing how embarrassing it can be when the user realizes the mic is on. The

monkey's side glance suggests discomfort. Virtual meetings can create embarrassing moments

when the technology is used incorrectly. For example, making noises or saying things that the

user did not plan to share.

Figure 2:"This is why online is trash l/r/dankmemes". *Know Your Meme*, 2022,
https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1989948. Accessed 24 Aug 2022.

Figure 2 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 2 contains multiple images. The overall image is meant to depict a VMC

conference call with many participants. The majority of the images are from a popular meme

titled "Leonardo DiCaprio Laughing." The screenshot comes from the film *Django Unchained*

which shows DiCaprio laughing in a condescending manner with a drink in his hand. The first

reaction image was remixed to display DiCaprio holding a Monster energy drink in a *Tumblr*

chat about French as the main language of America. Further remixes included changing the

beverage while keeping the original image and including captions about different topics where

DiCaprio is laughing at the punchline of a joke ("Leonardo DiCaprio Laughing"). The image is

meant to convey a humorous reaction to a situation. This image is then used in Figure 2 to

represent classmates laughing at the user. The image of the man with his eyes open wide is

taken from a gif depicting a man driving going from normal to worried called "Worried Hiroshi

Uchiyamada GTO Gif" which comes from the anime *Great Teacher Onizuka* (*Worried Hiroshi*

Uchiyamada GTO GIF | Know Your Meme). The earliest known use of the gif was published on

Imgur with the caption "When I remember something embarrassing from 10 years

ago" (*Worried Hiroshi Uchiyamada GTO GIF | Know Your Meme*). This image, although only a

portion of the meme, would be recognizable enough to connote feelings of shame which is

consistent with a person realizing they had been overheard saying or doing something they

thought was private. Finally, the last image is an older black man with his hand over his mouth

looking like he isn't sure what to say which represents a teacher who isn't sure how to handle

the situation. This meme is an image macro that utilizes several images stacked to appear like

an online call. They are on a white background. The text appears above the image with black

writing on a white background. The stance of this meme contrasts the different reactions of the

other users to the user's comment. The comment was made thinking the mic was muted, so it

was not meant to be shared. The user looks shocked, the leader of the meeting looks angry,

and the other users are laughing at the situation. The meme communicates that embarrassing

moments can occur when the user is not aware of whether they have the features of the virtual

meeting correctly set.

Figure 3: "Vladimir_Poutine On Memes: " #Athomelearning"". *Memes,* 2022, https://memes.com/m/when-you-fart-on-a-zoom-call-and-your-name-lights-X6BGoOKmABx. Accessed 24 Aug 2022.

Figure 3 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 3 uses a reaction image titled "Big Ed" from the show *90 Day Fiancé: Before the 90 Days*. The memes that use his likeness mostly mock his unusual appearance (he has Klippel Feil syndrome) (*Big Ed | Know Your Meme*). Those utilizing this image use this image to designate a disconcerting or surprising moment similar in content to this meme where a person farts in front of others (*Big Ed Memes & GIFs - Imgflip*). No one hears the sound made by them farting. Instead, the embarrassing moment is that their name lights up indicating that a sound has been made while muted and it is clear they aren't talking. This meme is an image macro with a white background. The text appears on the image at the top and the bottom, white

writing on a black background. In this meme, the mic was not unmuted. However, Zoom will light up a user's box when a person speaks, even if their microphone is not on. In this case, because it was clear he wasn't talking, his box lighting up suggested that he made a noise, and everyone on the call heard a fart sound. In addition, the image chosen looks embarrassed, suggesting that the person depicted did something unexpected.

Embarrassing Presence Meme Group A Summary

In Figures 1-3, the stance is the same in that they are discussing the embarrassment that occurs when conversations or sounds are heard in a video-mediated conversation that was not intended to be shared. The use of reaction images is consistent with their original uses. The concept of presence in these memes is a presence that is not controlled. In face-to-face interactions, there is no expectation of muting oneself, so a person is careful what they say or do. In video-mediated conversations, there is the option to mute oneself. However, sometimes the user will be unmuted without realizing it, and end up embarrassing themselves. In addition, because their box will be highlighted when there is a sound, regardless of whether they are speaking, it also creates potentially embarrassing situations. This scenario adds an element of stress to video-mediated conversations because of the possibility of exposure. These memes highlight a sense of contact with other users but not a positive one. The sense of presence experienced is conveyed as exposure rather than connectedness. Telepresence is shared but, ironically, it makes the user feel alienated from their peers.

Meme Group B–Isolated Presence

The second group of memes communicates the uncomfortable feelings of participants

in the VMC meetings. Figures 4-5 focus on the teacher's feelings, and Figure 6 focuses on the

feelings of those who are in the waiting room.

Figure 4:"The Best Early Morning Memes :) Memedroid". *Memedroid.Com*, 2020,
https://www.memedroid.com/memes/tag/early+morning. Accessed 24 Aug 2022.

Figure 4 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 4 shows a young black man talking to a brick wall with the text "the teacher

talking to the 9:00am Zoom class." The original image comes from a YouTube video made in

November 2010 demonstrating how it feels to talk to people about politics. From there, it

became a popular reaction image meant to communicate futility and frustration (*Talking To

Brick Wall | Know Your Meme*). This meme is an image macro that utilizes one image. The text

appears above the image with black writing on a white background. This meme suggests that a

teacher teaching in a Zoom meeting is akin to the feeling of talking to a brick wall referring to

the idiom "talk to a brick wall" which means "to be completely ignored or disregarded by

someone; to be useless or ineffectual as talking to an inanimate object" ("Talk to a Brick Wall").

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In a face-to-face classroom, the teacher can see all their students' faces and reactions as they

conduct class. In virtual meetings where students may or may not have cameras on (and that

are further challenged by connectivity issues), the teacher does not feel as connected to their

students and can, in fact, feel like they are talking to a brick wall.

turning on your zoom camera so
your professor won't be lonely in class

(b)

Figure 5: "Supporting your teachers so they aren't talking into the void ☺ I /r/wholesomemes".
Know Your Meme, 2020, https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/2021778-wholesome-memes.
Accessed 24 Aug 2022.

Figure 5 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 5 shows a smiling dog looking into the camera with the text "turning on your

zoom camera so your professor won't be lonely in class." The image of the dog's face takes up

most of the screen. The dog looks happy suggesting that they are trying to be encouraging

which aligns with the text of the meme. This meme is an image macro that utilizes one image

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with a white border. The text appears above the image with black writing on a white

background. Figure 5 highlights how a teacher might feel when their students do not turn on

their cameras. In this meme, a student (represented by the image of the happy dog) has turned

on their camera just to ensure that the teacher doesn't feel like they are alone in the meeting

and shows an empathy on the part of the student who realizes that it might be hard to teach

when there are no faces to see. This scenario aligns with Figure 5 that shows that a teacher

might feel isolated when teaching in a virtual meeting.

Figure 6: Zoom-Waiting Room". *Know Your Meme*, 2022,
https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1898497-zoom. Accessed 24 Aug 2022

Figure 6 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 6 contains a series of three-panel images from the Netflix series *Narcos*. In the top image, a man is sitting on a swing. On the bottom left, the same man is sitting alone at a table looking down. The last image shows the same man standing outside with his arms behind his back staring off into the distance. These images are titled "Pablo Escobar Waiting" and are meant to represent someone waiting and plagued with boredom ("Pablo Escobar Waiting"). Figure 6 is an image macro with three images separated by a white border. The top image is the largest and is the length of both other images below it. The text overlays the image in each box as white capital letters. This meme highlights another form of isolation—the waiting room for Zoom. The waiting room is the place the user waits until they are admitted into the Zoom meeting. The images suggest that being in the waiting room is not a pleasant experience but feels isolating and boring. This experience is also unique to virtual meetings in that in face-to-face meetings, the time before a meeting starts is usually when people sit around and talk and get to know each other. In a virtual meeting, the user is isolated before entering the meeting room and there is less opportunity to talk and feel a part of the group.

Isolated Presence Meme Group B Summary

Each of these memes uses an image macro format though the images are found in different locations. Figures 4 and 5 come from photos on the internet where Figure 6's images come from a television show. Figure 4 and figure 5 both address the awkwardness and emotional discomfort felt by teachers who are leading classes using VMC. Figure 4 focuses on how the teacher experiences teaching in a context where they can't physically see their students—either because no one has their camera on or because of the unnatural setting of

teaching to a screen. Figure 5 represents a student's response to the awkward situation by

making sure to have the camera on and to have a happy face. The enlargement of the dog's

face and suggested happiness as well as connecting to the generally positive connotation

attached to dog photos creates a humorous element connoting that the student is trying extra

hard to be present and positive in the classroom to help the teacher feel connected.   Figure 6

focuses on how awkward participants in a VMC meeting feel when they are waiting for others

to show up or for the meeting to start. Though the perspectives are different in each meme,

they each communicate how isolating it can feel in a virtual meeting. This feeling of isolation

confirms Standaert's postulation that virtual meetings miss out on the small talk that occurs

before face-to-face meetings. Instead of talking with other participants, users are often sitting

in virtual waiting rooms alone.

Meme Group C- Distorted Presence

Figure 7:"Kkkkkkk". *Memedroid,* 2020,
https://www.memedroid.com/memes/detail/3106001/Kkkkkkk. Accessed 13 Oct 2022.

Figure 7 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 7 contains two images. The first image is of actor Ben Barnes who is known for his part in the Netflix series *The Punisher*. The image is a professional headshot that appears on the Marvel Movies fandom page ("Ben Barnes"). The image is clear with no distortion. The second image is a screenshot from the Glitch Screaming Dwight Schrute gif ("Glitch Screaming Dwight Schrute GIF"). The gif features Dwight Schrute from the popular show *The Office* screaming while the image begins to distort as though there was a bad connection. The screenshot captures a moment of this distortion. This scene is taken from the episode called "The Meeting" where Jim becomes a co-manager and the gif is a distortion of Dwight's reaction to this news (*"The Office" The Meeting (TV Episode 2009) - IMDb*). At the bottom of both images is the red hang up icon meant to show these take place during video calls. Above the first image are the words "Video calls in movies" and above the second image are the words "Video calls in real life" demonstrating that movies portray an unrealistically good connection. In actual Zoom calls, there are often many distortions. The meme is in the form of an image macro. There are two images with a white border around both. At the top, the text is in black on a white background. The stance of this meme is contrasting the quality of video calls that are had in actual life interactions versus those shown in films. In films, the connection and resolution are crystal clear. In daily usage, however, there are many technological issues that occur during calls that affect the quality of the call. These distortions create a reminder of the distance between participants, interrupting the flow of conversation.

When that one teacher has a malfunctioning mic

"The hydrogen of an organic molecule | CAN BE (jcoeb vhjvbb ebh) | substituted by a number of other atoms..."

Figure 8:"Malfunctioning Microphone | Zoom." *Know Your Meme*, 2020, https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1898503-zoom. Accessed 13 Oct 2022.

Figure 8 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 8 contains three images. They are all the same image though the middle image has been edited by adding a red tint and laser eyes. The images all come from a popular reaction gif called "Blinking White Guy" or "Drew Scanion Reaction." It is a screenshot of a gif of Drew Scanion blinking in order to express surprise or incredulity (*Blinking White Guy | Know Your Meme*). This screenshot does not include the closed eyes image usually associated with this reaction gif. Instead, all three images are showing the face looking forward with the middle image being a variation from the original gif. The text above states "when that one teacher has a malfunctioning mic." There is text underneath each image meant to be a part of one thought. It reads "the hydrogen of an organic molecule...CAN BE (jcoebvhjvbbebh)...a number of other atoms..." This meme is structured with three images on a white background. There is black text above and below each image. The stance of this meme is a remix of the original reaction gif and

image. The original image was meant to express incredulity. This meme, however, both edits

the image and changes the message of the image. For one, the images do not contain the

closed eye image which represents the blink. Instead, all images show him looking straight

forward. The middle image has been edited with a red tint and red laser pinpoints on the eyes.

This iteration highlights a common phenomenon when participating in an online call—the times

when the connection is distorted, and the user sounds like a robot. In this case, the teacher is

explaining complex scientific information when their voice changes making it indecipherable

which is a common problem when utilizing the online format because connectivity issues can

interfere with the flow of conversation. This experience can be particularly frustrating in classes

and work meetings where the information might be important for future work. While the image

itself does not express the emotions behind the context, it presents a scenario which would

elicit frustration for those who have experienced it.

in virtual school we all know
that one kid with bad internet

Tap to remove watermark.
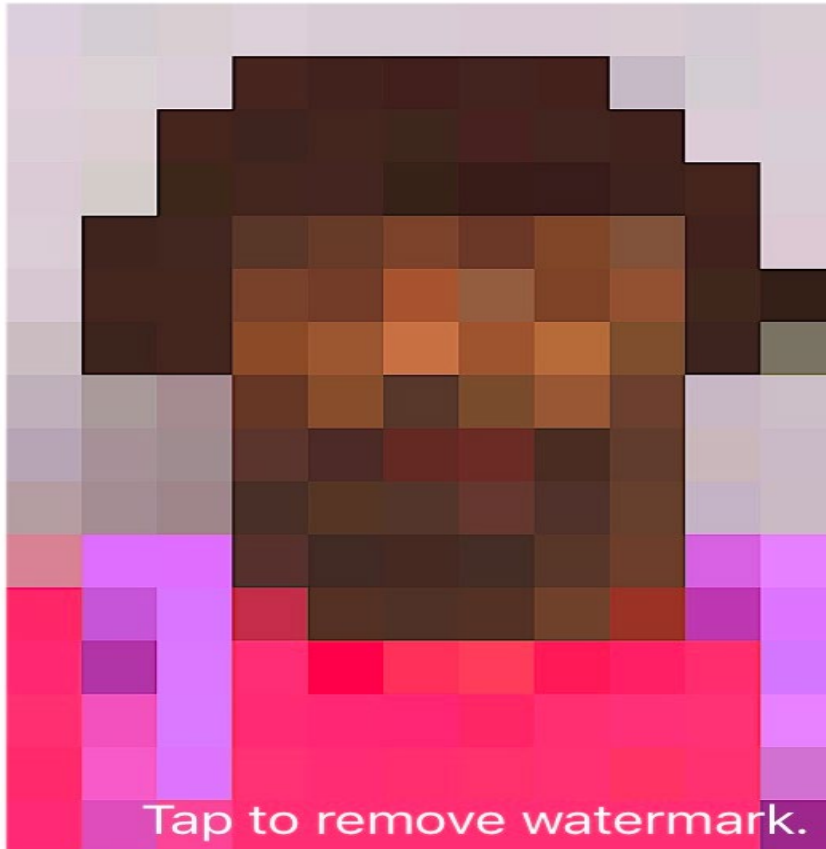
Figure 9: "Horse35 On Memes". *Memes*, 2023, https://memes.com/m/in-virtual-school-we-all-know-that-one-kid-with-NZBVwxk6qWM. Accessed 13 Oct 2022.

Figure 9 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 9 is a remixed image of an edited image of Tyler the Creator. Tyler the Creator is a Grammy-winning rap artist (Caramanica). A picture of him was edited by reddit user u/habsuahaj by taking his face and adding Dora the Explorer's hair and clothes (Natandriii). This image was further remixed for the meme by pixelating the image. The text above read "in virtual school we all know that one kid with bad internet." At the bottom overlaying the image are the words "tap to remove watermark" which are not part of the meme's message. While

the clear message is related to distortions that occur in online meetings, it also utilizes the

format of excessive pixelation that is used when creators do not want their work copied. The

remixing of this meme has several layers and utilizes elements that users are familiar with but

uses them in a new way to communicate a new message. This meme has a white background

and border. The text is black on a white background. This meme suggests that a bad internet

connection renders the user almost indecipherable in appearance. They use an image that

many would recognize without being able to see it clearly. Despite being able to recognize the

person, it highlights the challenges that occur when there are connectivity issues. In a situation

with connectivity issues, the affordances of utilizing online video communication are mitigated

by the fact that they cannot see facial expressions or possibly even hear what they are saying.

Distorted Presence Meme Group C Summary

Each of the memes share a similar form in that they are images on a white background

with text above and below. Figures 7 and 8 contain more than one image taken from shows,

however, while figure 9 only has the one image which is an edited remix of a photo. Figures 7,

8, and 9 highlight the challenges of VMC when there are connectivity issues. Figure 7 shows a

distorted, almost frightening, depiction of the person. Figure 8 reveals how important

information can be lost during internet lapses. Figure 9 conveys how there are times when the

person's appearance is unrecognizable, removing the opportunity to view their facial

expressions. The meme introduces an element not possible in face-to-face meetings, the

possibility of distortion. Because of connectivity issues, there are times when users are

impossible to interact with since they cannot be viewed or heard properly. These distortions

are a reminder that they are not in fact in each other's presence and take away from the

meeting and interrupt communication. These distortions thwart a sense of presence by

reminding the users that they are separated and are interacting via a technological medium as

well as impacting effective communication. As Witner and Singer explained, presence is felt

when the users feel engaged which is impossible when distortions disrupt communication.

Meme Analysis for Meme Groups A, B, and C Concerning Presence

As discussed previously, this meme group was analyzed using the analytical tools

outlined in *The Handbook of Visual Analysis*. Each meme group was analyzed using the

following concepts: the context of viewing, the context of production, and semiotics and codes.

The purpose of the additional research method is to include the background for the viewing

which impacts its relevance and to include possible semiotic and coding importance.

Context of Viewing: Presence

The memes in this study were all produced during an unprecedented historical event.

During 2020, there were lockdowns all over the world keeping people from going into physical

locations for jobs and school. Communication for work and classes moved into Zoom and other

VMC. As such, situations like those found in this meme group were experienced by many

people at the same time. The perplexing situation of having something overheard (or assumed)

in an online meeting or distorted beyond comprehension is something that many people can

relate to. As a result, memes were created and disseminated around the world with the

assumption that those that were shared or remixed contained some cultural value. It's

impossible to tell where these memes originally were shared; however, they were added to the

databases on *KnowYourMeme, Memes.com*, and *Memedroid* by users who felt they had some

cultural relevance. Users will encounter these memes mostly through social media sites like Reddit, Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter, and more. In addition, blogs and sites compile lists of their favorite memes.

Context of Production: Presence

The memes were produced utilizing software that allows the user to take images and add text. Most of the images chosen in this meme group were well-known reaction images meant to communicate specific emotions such as embarrassment. Their purpose appears to convey different interactions that occur during VMC meetings that aroused negative feelings such as loneliness, embarrassment/awkwardness, and the corresponding amusement of those viewing the interaction.

Semiotics and Codes: Presence

These images were chosen because they made references that pertained to a sense of presence. In these situations, presence was mitigated by feelings of embarrassment or feelings of connection/isolation.

Table 4 Coding for Presence

Variable	Selection Criteria
Embarrassing situations	Do the memes reference moments where the participants experience uncomfortable or embarrassing situations?
Feeling of connection/isolation	Is VMC portrayed as creating or ruining a sense of intimacy? How?
Distortion due to technology	Are there references to glitches or connectivity problems?

To imitate the emotional interactions that people experienced while utilizing VMC in group meetings, the creators of these memes chose well-known reaction images that those familiar with memes would understand easily. These reaction images become their own semiotic sign because they represent a specific emotional reaction. Though there are many who might recognize the actual origin of the reaction image (such as the Wise Teacher), it isn't necessary in order to understand the message being portrayed.

Findings: Presence

The memes focus on some of the uncomfortable interactions that can happen in VMC. These scenarios are connected to our concepts of presence and virtuality. In figures 1, 2, and 3, the discomfort was created by the inability to control how they were being perceived either through an actual event or a perceived event. In figures 4, 5, and 6, the feeling of isolation and disconnection was depicted particularly as a teacher. In figures 7, 8, and 9, the distortions created by issues with connectivity interrupt their interactions making them indecipherable. Utilizing a format like VMC produces a sense of distance between participants. Though VMC is one of the most inclusive forms of communication (when compared to email, text, or voice calls) there are still limitations to the sense of presence. The lack of connection is experienced when we attempt to experience telepresence in the same form as we would experience physical presence.

The feeling of presence is tied to our understanding of what is real. Concrete experiences have been defined as the epitome of real, creating tension between our virtual and physical experiences. However, as noted earlier, this perspective is being challenged allowing

real to be defined more broadly including our abstract and virtual realities. In the same way, perhaps the concept of presence will be broadened to include the online experiences that are had in formats such as Zoom. Perhaps as we make space for this type of presence, the conversation will move from the awkwardness of interaction to a sense of comradery.

In fact, it is even as we create, share, remix, and laugh at memes about these awkward encounters, we are invited into a community of common experience. The moment when we do or say something embarrassing online becomes an invitation to connect with one another as we share similar situations. And even more so as we identify the challenges in VMC and then work to overcome them. Just as in figures 4-5, the participants express sympathy for the teacher who must talk to a screen with no faces. To alleviate this difficulty, they reference turning on their cameras and making a connection to their teacher. In this case, the meme not only diagnoses the problem but provides the solution and a means of creating presence in an environment that feels so foreign. Communicating about online experiences creates a new connection with others. In "Performances of Circulation," Hunter notes, "participatory diffusion involved in performances of circulation might be the act of making-present on a massive but radically undependable scale" (Hunter 18). Presence is being experienced through meme sharing. Though it is not a typical presence, it is a sense of presence nonetheless. VMC usage has initiated a discursive environment where the concept of presence is being reevaluated. With the focus changing from how VMC is not like physical presence, users are learning how to interact within different parameters considering the affordances that are allowed in VMC that are not in physical interactions.

For this study, memes that referred to elements of presence such as references to awkward situations, ones that concern a sense of intimacy, or highlighted possible distortions of interaction were studied. The memes focused on scenarios where participants felt embarrassed and/or alone. In figures 1 through 3, the situation focused on times when the microphone was not turned off and something was heard that they did not intend to be heard. In figures 4 through 6, the memes focused on feeling alone while waiting for others to show up. In figures 7 through 9, the memes highlighted times when technological limitations distorted the interactions. The memes used well-known reaction images in order to communicate their emotional reactions to these situations. The fact that this content is addressed in different forms suggests that this experience is shared by many users. The creating and sharing of these memes starts a conversation about these experiences while also creating a sense of community. It is this conversation that can help redefine the sense of presence that participants are hoping for in VMC usage, hopefully paving a way for a new understanding of online presence.

VMC usage became ubiquitous during the lockdown of 2020. As a result, the challenges and affordances of this type of format became readily apparent. The benefits were that it was superior to written and verbal (phone) communication with the ability to see facial expressions. However, its weaknesses came from the asynchronous format and the inability to make actual eye contact. This disconnect affected the sense of presence, or telepresence, experienced in the interaction. Because presence is anchored in in-person interactions, most attempts to alleviate this problem include the usage of elements intended to imitate physical interaction such as using zooming features, robotic arms, or shared physical experiences. However, if

presence is re-defined allowing room for virtual elements, it could change the way we approach

VMC. This same re-defining is being seen in the concept of virtual vs. real. Instead of seeing

physical experiences as the only real experiences, a broader definition makes space for people's

daily virtual experiences and interactions.

CHAPTER 3: UNDERSTANDING THE SELF IN VIDEO-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

Introduction

When the COVID lockdowns occurred in 2020, schools and businesses turned to Zoom

and other VMC to continue to function. Communication, which had previously been mostly

face-to-face, switched to this online format. The format commonly used in VMC with the

squares of disembodied heads forces users to interact as a "talking head" (Crano 3).

Throughout the history of mankind, there has not been a time when we have seen our own

faces so closely and so often while interacting with others. Crano notes that "Zoom crystallises

the iconicity of the face…never before has *the* face---not the face of a queen or a tyrant or a

god, but *my* face and *your* face and *any face whatsoever*—been exposed up close so often to so

many people" (Crano 4). People are used to seeing others in face-to-face formats or even

interacting in social media. However, talking with others in video format with their own image

enlarged on the screen is a new experience. Users of VMC find themselves staring at their own

reflections while attending meetings and classes which creates opportunities for the users to

consider themselves in new ways.

For many, this new focus on their own faces highlighted their own ambivalence towards

their own appearance. In "Video Chatting and Appearance Satisfaction during Covid-19",

researchers note that "participants who engaged in more video chatting appearance

comparisons reported lower face and body satisfaction" (Pfund et al. 1). This dissatisfaction was

revealed in actions such as hiding their self-view or using features like "touch up" (8). In

anticipation of being seen in these formats, there is discussion on the difference in preparation

for meetings where it is not expected for the camera to be on (Robinson; "Artefact London"; Shepherd). There is even advice on what to wear to appear authentic such as wearing neutral colors and wearing business casual attire ("What to Wear to Look More 'Trustworthy' and 'Authentic' in Zoom Meetings"). Not only is viewing ourselves at times somewhat discouraging, but it can also be distracting. Unable to make true eye contact because of the placement of the cameras, it is harder to focus on the conversation at hand and easier to get focused on what we ourselves look like. Since it's not common for us to observe ourselves in this way, we can be distracted, and it causes us to miss out on what is happening.

Another potential distraction appeared with the use of virtual backgrounds. While some opted just to allow their regular home spaces to be shown, some chose more privacy and creativity in utilizing backgrounds to express their individuality (Rayome). These backgrounds range from scenes from popular television shows to beautiful nature scenes to professional or blurred backgrounds. There are numerous articles that explain how to choose the best background. In one article, the author, who specializes in communication states "we need to decide how we want our audience to see us at first glance" ("How to Choose the Best Virtual Backgrounds on Zoom Meetings"). Some choose the background as a means to ensure privacy, while others utilize popular culture references. In a survey conducted by Harvard Business Review, Zandan and Lynch concluded that while backgrounds were fun, there was an obvious preference for no virtual backgrounds in business meetings as virtual backgrounds diminished the sense of authenticity (Zandan and Lynch). In professional settings, the users may want to focus on communicating trustworthiness and seriousness but that isn't the case in all

interactions. In any scenario, however, the use of a background or the choice not to use a background reflects much about the user.

In this chapter, I will explain the concepts of self as they apply to Zoom and other VMC interactions. This includes the use of backgrounds and other mask-like tools. Because I am focusing on the use of technology, the discussion on the posthuman self will include a part of this discussion. Using this framework, I will analyze memes that focus on topics related to appearance (how it can distract or be altered) and the use of backgrounds. VMC is different from our typical online interactions via platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. In these social media platforms, there are more opportunities to select the most desirable images and/or edit them. In VMC, this is not as easy to do as the editing features are limited in comparison. As a result, VMC usage has caused users to understand their online selves in a new way, where authenticity is more valuable than perfection.

<div align="center">Authentic Visual Self</div>

VMC technology created a new historical development in our understanding of ourselves. Reflective surfaces date back as far as 4000 BCE yet were not common to all but the wealthiest well into the 17th and 18th centuries (*The Rise of the Mirror as Commonplace*). Once mirrors were commonplace, they provided a view of oneself that was previously impossible. Much like this phenomenon, VMC communication has allowed us to not only view our faces but to view ourselves *while interacting with others*, complete with facial expressions and mannerisms we were previously unable to view in real-time. While the technology of video

<div align="center">66</div>

interaction is not new, utilizing it in real-time for social encounters, as well as work and school interactions, is.

The sense of oneself, or at least the online self, has been in the arena of social media for decades while the concept of self-representation has been around for as long as man has existed (Walker Rettberg 2). Rettberg notes that "we have drawn, carved, sculpted and painted images of ourselves for millennia" (2). In social media, however, users utilize digital technologies instead of concrete technologies to build up their own personas, or brand, and communicate an image of themselves that they want others to see with carefully curated photos and videos, often that are heavily edited. VMC interaction is not the same. While there are avenues for self-representation (masks, filters, backgrounds, and touch-ups), they do not translate into the VMC conversation quite as naturally. For example, for work or school, they are not deemed appropriate. In social situations, they are often not deemed necessary, as noted earlier, people tend to feel more comfortable being their authentic selves with friends and family. The use of VMC creates a new posthuman dynamic where we are confronted with a less edited, digitized self and use it for many aspects of relationships, both professional and personal.

One of the areas of concern that emerged with various technological advances is the ability for subterfuge in online representation. In online forums and chat rooms, it is difficult to know who is on the other end of the terminal. As early as the 1970s, group chat was available. Email discussion lists, MUDs (multi-user dungeons), bulletin board systems, and other web-based communities were not far behind (Lake 1). These all led to our modern social networks like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and more. Authenticity can be ephemeral in the world of

images that are found on social media sites. Much of this subterfuge is found in heavily edited

photos—something which is often called out by viewers. For instance, "Celebrity Photo Editing

Callouts" is an account devoted to publicly identifying edited photos of celebrities. In a study on

online authenticity in the microblogging environment, the researchers concluded that a

defining characteristic was "the relationship between online authenticity and one particular

social goal—the need for popularity" (Lim et al.). The desire for acclaim is stronger than the

desire for authenticity. For example, a survey was sent out by dermatologists to 550 social

media users in Nepal concerning their editing of photos. They noted that the majority of people

editing their images did so to improve the look of their skin. Instead of going to the

dermatologist to fix any issues with their skin, they preferred to virtually correct their skin

(Agrawal and Agrawal). In fact, the conclusion states that a "higher investment in social media

and photo-editing practices might be associated with increased non-dermatologist seeking

behavior" (Agrawal and Agrawal). This study suggests that many users were more interested in

the illusion of perfect skin than in seeking treatment which calls back to the concept of

authenticity. There is much more scholarship on this topic which is outside the scope of this

research but which delves into the varied ways the concept of self is represented in social

media (McGovern et al.; Guest, Ella; Agrawal and Agrawal; Chae; Lee and Lee).

Kernis and Goldman take the extensive philosophical discussions on the concept of

authenticity from Aristotle to Hume and summarize it. Authenticity is defined as a reflection of

"self-understanding." Actions are performed based on this understanding while a person

"objectively acknowledge[s]and accept[s] their core self-aspects." This perspective, in turn,

affects their "particular orientation towards others" (Kernis and Goldman 292). A person who

understands and accepts themselves at their core is able to authentically interact with others.

Authenticity is accomplished by a set of processes "that account for how individuals discover, develop, and construct a core sense of self" (293). Authenticity is at heart about how a person understands themselves. Gergen posits that self-knowledge is not acquired through "in-depth probing of the inner recesses of the psyche" or "acute sensitivity to nuances of emotion…and the like" but is rather the result of meaningful discourse with oneself that occurs in daily life (Gergen 75). He goes on to explain that it isn't a person who has a poor view of themselves that struggles with identity—as these misconceptions can lead to breakthroughs. Instead, the one who struggles is the "inarticulate or linguistically undifferentiated individual" (76). Those who struggle in these ways lack the words to articulate their identity in a meaningful way.

Authenticity is when a person's perception of themselves in that moment in time is shared coherently. Since our understanding of ourselves is constantly changing, authenticity can look different as time passes (Burke; Rocque et al.).
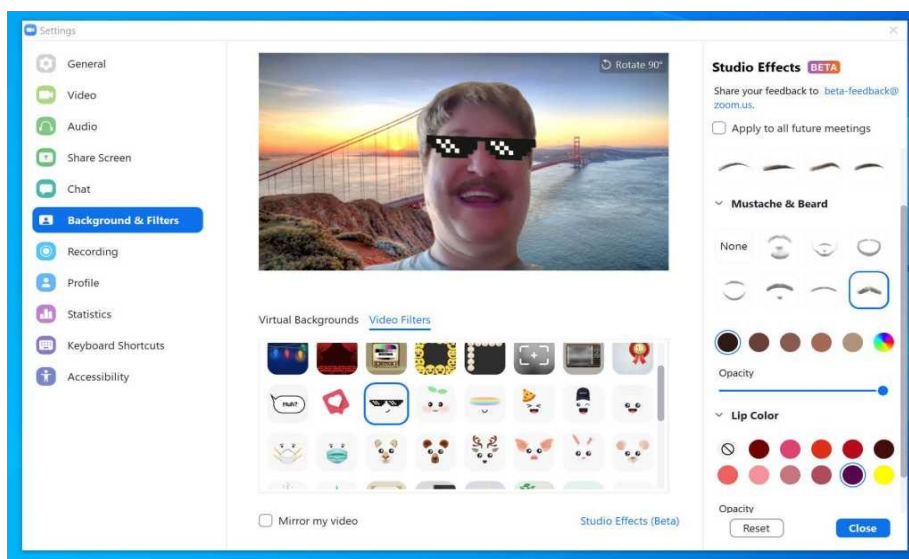
Figure 10:"How To Use Zoom's Video Filters To Spice Up Your Next Zoom Call". *Pcworld,* 2023, https://www.pcworld.com/article/394129/how-to-use-zooms-video-filters-to-spice-up-your-next-zoom-call.html. Accessed 31 Mar 2023.

In online formats such as VMC, users can don various forms of masks (Fig 10). These masks can include virtual representations or avatars (such as the blank outline of a head in Zoom), a photo of the participant (often an edited one), or the use of filters to alter the appearance of the user. Pollock notes that "the general relationship between masks and this sense of identity or personhood has long been recognized; the mask is normally considered a technique for transforming identity, either through the modification of the representation of identity, or through the temporary and representational extinction of identity" (Pollock 582). Users can control what is displayed to represent themselves and therefore have the power to modify their representation of identity or hide it altogether. In most situations, people are not interacting in VMC with people who are total strangers. However, many use VMC for business and school situations where the users may not be close. For example, students in a classroom or colleagues at work may be familiar with one another but are not close outside of the school or work environments. In VMC, the user has more control over how they are perceived than in other interactions, but less control when they are using images in platforms such as Instagram which contain more editing tools. They may be able to use some features to edit their appearance, but they still do not have the full editing capabilities that they would have utilizing social media.

For those using the cameras during the lockdowns, there was an immediate reaction to the "talking head" format of most interactions. The focus on faces, as noted earlier, becomes paramount in each interaction. For the most part, the whole body is not in the frame leading users to prioritize what is in the camera view which is generally the upper torso and head. The visible portion is usually attired in appropriate clothing. Often, it has been found that many are

wearing pajama bottoms for the parts unseen. In fact, according to a YouGov poll surveying over two thousand remote workers, it was observed that almost a third of remote workers wore pajamas with 1 in 10 not wearing pants at all ("One Third of People Working from Home Have Worn Pyjamas during Virtual Meetings"). In addition to a more relaxed online wardrobe, users began to learn how to improve their online appearance. For example, Zoom added a feature called "touch-up appearance" that blurs facial blemishes. *Business Insider* notes that "the Zoom effect…is essentially a built-in skin-smoothing filter favored by beauty vloggers that makes your face look more polished and unblemished" (Leskin). The increased attention given to the face exacerbated insecurities. In fact, one study notes that "participants who engaged in more video chatting appearance comparisons reported lower face and body satisfaction" (Pfund et al.). Pfund et al. found that those speaking with family members did not experience this same self-scrutiny of their appearance. Bond et al. supports this finding, suggesting that "relationally authentic individuals tend to prefer that close others see the 'real them'" (Bond et al.) Safe relationships provide an environment for authenticity and self-acceptance. When authenticity is present, it both supports and reflects a sense of trust among the participants.

Researchers Pan and Steed completed a study where they compared the trustworthiness of different modes of sharing information. In one, they had a video of a person sharing information. In another, they used a human-looking avatar. They also used a robot as well. The results showed that the video was considered the most trustworthy. One of the participants stated that "Katy (non-expert video) revealed her identity, so I trust her more" (Pan and Steed 10). Although the robot and avatar gave more factual information, the participants found the video of the human more trustworthy because they saw the person. The revealing of

identity is tied to the concept of authenticity. Authenticity is achieved in VMC when a person

reveals themselves as they are without embellishments at that moment. For example, while

backgrounds can be a fun way to show some personality, a survey conducted by Quantified

Communications found that 60% of the respondents prefer to see the actual background

instead of scenic backdrops (Zandan and Lynch). This desire for a actual background could

partly be curiosity of the person's home, but it could also reflect that people prefer an accurate,

authentic representation to interact with.

Authenticity is about a person being comfortable enough to reveal their true self as they

perceive themselves. Actions perceived to show authenticity are most likely to occur in

interactions with people that are trusted. VMC was used for work and school which created an

environment where people did not feel they could be as authentic since they are not always

interacting with people that they feel close to which can lead to over-emphasizing their

appearance when on camera. As noted with social media, people generally like to control how

they are perceived in the public arena. The authentic self is further complicated by what it

means to be a human interacting with technology. While technology has certainly changed the

way we interact with others, it also impacts the way we interact with ourselves.

The Posthuman Self

Authenticity and the posthuman self are closely linked. In "Authenticity in the Age of

Digital Companions," Turkle explains how the creation of Eliza, a computer program meant to

imitate a counselor evoked a strange reaction in the students who interacted with her. Though

they knew it to be a computer program with set responses, they felt an affinity towards the

program, even requesting to be alone with Eliza to share privately. Turkle posits that humankind "developed in an environment that did not require them to distinguish between authentic and simulated relationships…and for many people the very idea of developing these criteria does not seem essential" (Turkle 65). The tendency to be trusting with these kinds of interactions continues even today. For example, online bots fool people every day revealing that we need to develop a clear understanding of who we are in relation to technological advances that affect social interactions. We cannot rely on an antiquated view of personhood or authenticity to navigate the path ahead. We must be willing to change to adapt to the changing times.

Hayles, in a ten year follow up interview about her book *How We Became Posthuman*, defines posthuman as

> a historical phenomenon, something that occurred in ideas about the human from
> roughly the 1930s to the present…referring to twentieth-century developments in which
> an Enlightenment inheritance that emphasized autonomy, rationality, individuality, and
> so forth, was being systematically challenged and disassembled—in a whole variety of
> fields, among them cybernetics. (Hayles 321)

She explains posthuman as more of a human response to change—in this case, the change that we are responding to is the development of computers. Braidotti defines posthuman more specifically as a movement that "marks the end of the opposition between Humanism and anti-humanism and traces a different discursive framework" (37). She argues that it is humankind's obsession with human exceptionalism that is based on a narrow view of what it means to be a human has caused the problem of adjusting to the posthuman concept (37). Her view

encourages a perspective that respects all forms of life and decentralizes humanity as the most

important species (37).

Mazlish argues that the center of humankind's hubris is the desire to be special or set

apart. This hubris has been challenged over the centuries and is now being challenged in the

concept of the posthuman which Mazlish addresses in *The Fourth Discontinuity*. In it, he

explains that man has had his understanding of his place in the world rearranged: the first

challenge was when Copernicus showed man that he is not the center of the universe, the

second challenge was when Darwin posited that man is an evolved animal, and the third

challenge was when Freud attempted to prove that "[man] is not even master in his own

house" and that a person's subconscious has the most control over a person's behavior(2). The

fourth challenge to humankind's understanding of self is the separation between humankind

and machine. Mazlish posits that the last discontinuity needs to be removed, but it is "deeply

imbedded in man's pride of place" (7). Man's place of power in the world would be challenged

if they allowed humanity to be redefined. However, Mazlish believes that once we no longer

see the separation between humankind and machine, we will be able to live in "harmonious

acceptance of an industrialized world" (15). While this progression is damaging to the concept

of humanity, Mazlish believes it will ultimately bring happiness.

While Mazlish imagines a utopian result to our acceptance of our posthuman selves,

Dinerstein argues that even the concept of posthuman has been hijacked by humankind's

Western hubris. He argues that posthuman discussion is motivated by "an unmarked white

tradition of technological utopianism that functions as a form of social evasion" (570). The

attempt to modify or integrate humankind and machines is an attempt to force assimilation

into a new mindset of Western white ideology. Where Braidotti acknowledges humanity's obsession with themselves as the superior life form as part of the struggle of the posthuman discourse, Dinerstein argues that it is the Western, white view of humanity that is leading the posthuman conversation. He explains that "technological progress is the telos of American culture…the mythic proof in the nations self-righteous pudding" (572). The conversation about the concept of the posthuman is driven by the Western concept of self-improvement which has even changed how we view progress. Progress is no longer concerned with "society (social planning, good government, virtuous leadership)" but has moved "to the individual (quality-of-life, obtainable through constant consumption)" (573). In his understanding, the modern view of the posthuman is all about self-centeredness, but also specifically Western self-centeredness.

There are many other views of posthumanism. Braidotti sees more accountability in a view of humanity that has potential to break free from Western perspectives. She notes that "posthuman subjectivity expresses an embodied and embedded and hence partial form of accountability, based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality, and hence community building" (49). She hopes this new vision of self will embrace differences instead of comparing everyone to a single standard. Gane agrees in a way by stating that "the posthuman, however, is not about 'progress' per se, but is rather a new culture of transversalism in which the 'purity' of human nature gives way to new forms of creative evolution that refuse to keep different species, or even machines and humans, apart" (Gane 432). Gane embraces the idea of a new kind of human and acknowledges that what's most important is inclusion. When all forms of life are respected and included, communities can be built. In this scenario, what it means to be

human can be a fluid concept. How do these views of posthumanism affect identity and authenticity? Turkle summarizes well when she states that "technology catalyzes change not only in what we do but in how we think. It changes people's awareness of themselves, of one another, of their relationship with the world" (13). Whether the vision of humankind moves towards inclusivity or exclusivity, the interactions we have with technology change us. The posthuman concept is about what it means to be human and how humans respond to change. Every time a new technology that affects interaction is introduced, humans are forced to learn how to be human in this new context.

While VMC is not exactly the type of technology that clearly connects with the posthuman conversation, it clearly is a melding of humankind and machine. In many cases, it is a melding that is necessary for school and work perhaps even without the possibility of face-to-face interaction. In these scenarios, the VMC self is the only one that will be communicated between the two parties. The struggles and tensions of such nuanced communication comes through memes as people examine the various encounters they had with themselves and with others in VMC. As we adapt to this new technology, we are learning what it means to be human in this new context. The posthuman discussion that began with the advent of machines and computerized technology continues as we come to depend on new platforms for interaction. In addition, the utilization of technology challenges our human hubris that wants to control both a human's value and how they are viewed. Technology allows humans to make modifications impossible in face-to-face interactions and it also allows users to control the interaction.

Memes concerning the themes: references to images and interactions with the user's

image and use of virtual backgrounds were selected using the methods described above.

Following Shifman's procedure for analyzing memes, the groups of memes are discussed

concerning content, form, and stance below.

Meme Group D-Distracting Self Meme Group

The first meme group focuses on memes that refer to interactions with our own images,

particularly as a distraction. In these memes, the users are staring at their reflections instead of

interacting with the meeting.

Figure 11: "Hard Not to | Zoom." *Know Your Meme*,
https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1975402-zoom. Accessed 30 Aug. 2022

Figure 11 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 11 uses a still shot from the 2004 movie *Mean Girls* featuring the actress Lindsay

Lohan who is shown here. In the film, she is depicted as an innocent newcomer who is drafted

into the popular group called The Plastics. Being a part of this group completely changes her

persona from shy teen to self-absorbed snob (*Mean Girls (2004) - IMDb*). In this shot, she is

applying makeup and looking at her reflection in the compact mirror. The words above the

image read "Me constantly being distracted by my own reflection in the zoom meeting." Figure

11 utilizes a traditional image macro format with an image and text. In this case, the image

comes from a film and is a still shot from a scene. The text is placed above the image with a

white background. The message of figure 11 is a humorous depiction of the user being

distracted by their own image. In the meme, the user is looking at a mirror which corresponds

to the user seeing their own video projection during video mediated communication.

me looking at myself in the little zoom box while someone else is talking

Figure 12: "Looking Studious - Meme by Shaquille.Oatmeal :)." *Memedroid*.
https://www.memedroid.com/memes/detail/3281563/Lookingstudious?refGallery=tags&page
=2&tag=zoom. Accessed 30 Aug. 2022.

Figure 12 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 12 shows Jason Sudeikis in an image taken from the virtual Golden Globes. The

actor-comedian is famous for his role in the show *Ted Lasso*. Though it was a formal event, he is

shown wearing a tie-dyed hoodie. *Insider* commented that "keen observers pointed out that

Sudeikis's relaxed look matched how many people have suited up during the pandemic but also

fit the description of someone who is going through a public divorce" (Ntim). This image was

used in memes after this event. It is captioned with the phrase "me looking at myself in the

little zoom box while someone else is talking." Figure 12 is also a traditional image macro with

an image and text at the top. This image is also a still shot from a video. The text appears at the

top with a white background. While the original image was not meant to communicate

someone looking at their appearance, his facial expression coupled with the text at the top

communicates how seeing their appearance in VMC is distracting.

Figure 13: Gentile, Lindsey. "More Zoom Memes Because This Is Our Life Now." *Memes*, https://memes.com/more-zoom-memes-because-this-is-our-life-now. Accessed 30 Aug. 2022.

Figure 13 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 13 shows two images of the same koala bear with a smug-like expression on his

face. In the first image, his head is tilted to the side as though he is getting a look at himself.

The second image is up close with the same facial expression. Although the exact origin could

not be determined, these images are a popular reaction image used in many memes with different topics. In this meme, the text reads "me looking at myself in the video chat not hearing a word anyones saying." This meme has two images of a koala bear side by side. The text is above the two images with a white background. Surrounding the image is a dark peach border with an outer light peach border with white stars. In the meme, the koala is obviously not looking at a reflection; however, the expressions on the koala's face represent the expressions a user might make while viewing their own image in VMC. Because the expressions seem to connote distraction, like the other memes, it communicates a message of being distracted by the user's image.

Distracting Self Meme Group D Summary

All the memes use a dominant image with text at the top. The origin of the images differs, however. The first image uses a scene from a film. The second image pulls the image from the Golden Globes virtual program. The final image is of an unknown origin but is a popular reaction image. In all three memes, the message is about being distracted by their own image in a VMC meeting. The connotation does not appear to be negative, other than the implication that the subject of the meme is not paying attention to the meeting or class being conducted on Zoom. Because it isn't normal for us to see ourselves in real time interacting with others, VMC creates a new opportunity for users to learn more about themselves. As noted earlier, the dominant form of online interaction is via social media which has the affordance of being able to be highly edited. In virtual meetings utilizing VMC, editing is limited. It is interesting to note that these memes represent a more positive interaction with the user's image than might have been expected. Instead, it seems to represent a curiosity about

themselves and perhaps reflects a new way to view themselves. This curiosity can be connected to the definitions of posthuman that were considered earlier in an interesting way. In the previous discussion, it was noted how technology has been instrumental in dismantling human hubris. In these memes, however, it appears that VMC technologies have made humanity and their faces center stage. The user's interaction demonstrates a focus on themselves that has been heightened by their interaction with technology.

Meme Group E–The Best Version of Self

The second group of memes focuses on the difference in the user's appearance depending on whether they are on camera. For example, if they are attending a meeting with the camera on, they will make sure they look professional and properly attired. If they are not using the camera, their appearance is disheveled.

Figure 14: "Audio Only | Zoom." *Know Your Meme*, https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1898498-zoom. Accessed 30 Aug. 2022.

Figure 14 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 14 shows the actor Keanu Reeves. The first image shows him with hair brushed and styled off his face and his beard trimmed. He is wearing a suit and tie and looks serious and professional. The origin of the photo could not be determined. The second shot shows him sitting on a chair wearing baggy clothes without shoes, a red baseball cap, and smoking a cigarette. He looks unkempt and tired. The image comes from a photographer who caught him in Brooklyn while he was working on *John Wick: Chapter 3* (Ryan). The article where the background of this image was taken was titled, "Keanu Reeves Looks How We Feel." The text says, "Zoom meeting: with video audio only." The words "with video" are below the first image where he looks dressed up, while "audio only" is below the image of him looking disheveled. The contrast between the two images is dramatic, highlighting the differences between video on or off. Figure 14 has two images of Keanu Reeves. They are side by side with a black border. The text is both above and below each image. The message of figure 14 is clearly that there are two different appearances of the user depending on whether or not the user has to be on camera. If the user is on camera, they look neat and professional. If the meeting is audio only, they are dressed more comfortably and are possibly a bit disheveled which communicates the different approaches to video usage in virtual meetings.

Figure 15: "Bye Zoom…. We Will Miss You - Meme by Deesy70 :)*." Memedroid*. https://www.memedroid.com/memes/detail/3322577/Bye-bye-zoom-We-will-miss-you?refGallery=tags&page=1&tag=zoom+covid. Accessed 30 Aug. 2022.

Figure 15 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 15 depicts actor Mekhi Phifer in a similar way to Figure 4. In the first image, he is

wearing a black collared shirt and is leaning against a wall smiling. Though the origin of the

image is undetermined, it is clearly a staged shot. The second image shows Phifer with a

cigarette in his hand, looking down, and dressed more casually. The image is a reaction image

and is even a "popular choice" background in meme generators. The image comes from BET's

The Bobby Brown Story. The text reads "when I open zoom vs. when I turn the camera off." The

original image is a tweet from @BaebyHuey. At the time of writing, however, the account was

suspended, so it is difficult to tell how popular the original tweet was. The image of his tweet,

however, made its way to meme databases. This meme is structured as a screenshot of a post

on Twitter. It consists of two images side by side. There is a white border, and the text is above

the images with a white background. The stance of figure 15 is a contrast between the two

images. In the first image where the user is on camera, he is clearly happy and looking

professional. In the second image, he is smoking, and his head is in his hand signifying stress.

The text suggests this is how the user looks immediately after turning off the camera, and given

Phifer's tired, frustrated expression, it implies that the meeting was unnecessarily long or

stressful.

Figure 16: Gentile, Lindsey. "Zoom Memes | Meeting Memes." *Memes*,
https://memes.com/these-hilarious-zoom-memes-are-way-to-real. Accessed 30 Aug. 2022.

Figure 16 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 16 demonstrates the same idea, but this time the images are of dogs. The first image shows a long-haired dog with his wild hair. His tongue is sticking out, and there is a cup of coffee in front of him. The second image shows a different dog with tightly curled, groomed hair, wearing sunglasses and clothes with a pen and paper coffee cup photoshopped in. The dog looks stylish and cute. The text above the disheveled dog reads "Zoom meeting, audio only." Above the styled dog it reads "Zoom meeting with video." Figure 16 is comprised of two images side by side. The text is above the images with a white background. This meme contrasts an audio only image with a video meeting. The pictures show two dogs, presumably the same dog. In the audio only image, the dog is disheveled with its hair sticking out everywhere, the tongue sticking out, and a cup of coffee in front of them suggesting that the dog just woke up. In the second image, the dog's fur is neat, they are dressed, wearing sunglasses as they are outside, and have a pen (an image added) and a cup denoting they are ready to work. The message conveyed is that meeting attendees will put more effort into their appearance of being ready to work if the video is on.

The Best Version of Self Meme Group ESummary

Each meme has two dominant images meant to highlight a contrast between how one looks when they are on camera in a Zoom meeting versus when they are off camera. They all contain text above the image while one image contains text both above and below the text. Each of the texts references the camera in Zoom. In the meme group all the memes focus on the difference between how we look or attempt to look when we are on camera versus audio only. The memes employ popular reaction images and shots of celebrities either candidly or

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from scenes in a production. The images with audio only and camera off depict users in a

disordered state with hair unkempt, informal clothes (or in the case of the dog--no clothes), and

generally not ready for the meeting. The images meant to represent the user on camera show

the users with styled hair, looking attentive, and dressed appropriately. The gist of these

memes (and many more like them) demonstrates how users would be more relaxed when

meetings only used audio. When the camera is on, the user is more focused on how they

appear than when the camera is off.

This scenario calls back to the topic of identity and authenticity referenced earlier. In

this case, the user has adopted two personas that are dependent on whether they are on

camera. The suggestion is that the on-camera person is not the authentic self. Instead, the

disheveled or stressed version of themselves is the real person. This experience is similar to

how users might interact when they are at home versus out in public. However, the confusing

element introduced by VMC is that they are both at home and in public. And because of the

nature of meetings, it is possible they may have to switch between personas quickly especially

if they weren't expecting to be on camera.

Meme Group F–The Creative Self

This set of memes focus on the use of backgrounds in meetings. Users can use

backgrounds to conceal their actual surroundings. Backgrounds can be any image found on the

internet or created by the user. The choice of background can communicate much about the

user from their sense of humor to their preference for privacy.

Figure 17:"Zoom Class Backgrounds Starter Pack | /R/Starterpacks | Starter Packs*". Know Your Meme, 2022, https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1837838-starter-packs. Accessed 16 Sept 2022*.

Figure 17 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 17 shows six different possible backgrounds that people utilizing VMC might use. The title of the meme is "Zoom Backgrounds Starter Pack." The first image is a stock image of a beach scene. Above this image are the words "Basic Probably the teacher's." Going clockwise from this image is an image from the show *SpongeBob SquarePants* depicting SpongeBob and Squidward. The third image contains the image of a brown couch with the text "Kid who thinks he's the funniest person ever." The brown couch is often referred to as the "Casting Couch" which is commonly used as part of a film set for the pornography website *Backroom Casting Couch* ("Casting Couch"). The fourth image is from the popular TV show *Office*. This scene is the typical setting used when the characters are speaking to the camera as if a character is being interviewed by the documentary crew. The fifth image is a stock image of a city with the text above it displaying, "Picture of the city they visited for the cultured individuals of the class." This image represents an individual who likes to travel and is therefore considered cultured and

is perhaps bragging a bit. The final image is a picture from the show *The Tiger King* depicting Joe Exotic with a tiger overlayed on a background with lines. This is a show that was very popular during the pandemic and was a documentary depicting actual people who kept tigers and other exotic animals. This meme is a collection of six images on a white background. There is large text, "Zoom background starter pack," above the images signifying the connection between the images. In addition, three other images have text above the images to clarify their meaning. The overall stance of figure 17 is to suggest that a user's background suggests something about the person's personality. The fact that the meme is a starter pack suggests that there are a few basic representations seen as demonstrated by background selection. In other words, a user can tell what type of person another user is by their choice of background.

Figure 18: *"Nice". Memedroid, 2020,*
https://www.memedroid.com/memes/detail/3098863/Nice?refGallery=tags&page=3&tag=zoo
m. Accessed 16 Sept 2022.

Figure 18 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 18 shows a Fire Nation classroom from the series *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. The

original scene shows Aang, a main character, sitting in the classroom. The Reddit user

StormyFreckles notes that they "photoshopped Aang out of the firenation classroom scene if

others want to use it as a Zoom background!" (StormyFreckles). It is this image that shows up in

the meme with a blurred image of the user and the text above that reads "this girl in my class

always has the best Zoom backgrounds and this was hers today. The best one so far obviously."

The meme is originally a screenshot of a Zoom meeting which is clear because of the Zoom

control panel at the bottom of the image. It was then shared in a social media forum before

being added to a meme database. The top has a black background with white text above it.

Figure 8 suggests that the user is impressed with their classmate's choice of background. The

usage of a scene from *Avatar: The Last Airbender* in a classroom setting is considered a great

choice. This wording denotes that the classmate would be considered an interesting person.

Figure 19: Gentile, Lindsey. "More Zoom Memes Because This Is Our Life Now." *Memes*, https://memes.com/more-zoom-memes-because-this-is-our-life-now. Accessed 30 Aug. 2022.

Figure 19 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 19 is a melding of two images. The first is from a comic known as "The Pills Are

Working" or "On Fire" which shows a dog in a room that is on fire while he states that

everything is fine (*This Is Fine | Know Your Meme*). In the meme, instead of the dog, however,

the image of Pingu is seen with the dialogue bubble stating, "This is fine." Pingu is a penguin

that was created by Otmar Gutmann and Harald Muecke for Swiss TV ("'Pingu' English Site").

Snapshots from these episodes were turned into popular reaction images that have been used

in numerous memes (*Reaction Faces | Pingu | Know Your Meme*). The text above the image

shows a conversation. The text says, "therapist: i see that you've changed ur zoom background"

with the response of "me:" is the image with the penguin declaring, "this is fine." In addition,

the original image contains a coffee cup that has been edited to look like a roll of toilet paper.

This meme utilizes the basic format of an image with text above the image on a white

background. In addition to this, however, this image has been edited/remixed. The penguin, the

text bubble, and the toilet paper roll have been added to the image. The message of figure 19 is

how the usage of a background reveals the user's mental state. The text explains that the user

is meeting with their therapist who comments on their choice of background. The image reveals

a room on fire with a text bubble saying, "This is fine." The juxtaposition of the words "I am

fine" with the room on fire clearly denotes that the user is in fact not fine. In this case, the use

of background communicates the distress the user is experiencing.

The Creative Self Meme Group F Summary

Each meme is structured differently in the meme group. Figure 17 is a compilation of

different images that come from various sources. It requires previous knowledge of popular

culture references and shows to understand it fully. Figure 18 is someone celebrating a

student's choice of Zoom background and was originally a post on Reddit before it was shared

as a meme. Figure 19 is a great example of remixing as the person creating the meme not only

uses popular images but creates a new one. The similarity is that each meme makes use of text

at the top of the image(s) to provide context. The stance for these memes is to communicate

that Zoom backgrounds reveal aspects of the user's personality. Like choosing clothes and other

fashion choices, the choice of background reflects the interests and challenges of the individual

user. In Figure 17, the meme reveals several possibilities that could be reflected. Someone who

is "basic" is someone who is "unoriginal" or "mainstream" (*Basic Meaning & Origin | Slang by

Dictionary.Com*), often connected to the teacher. The image with the pornography reference

signifies a user who "thinks he's the funniest person ever." They would think they are funny

because only those who are aware of the significance of this brown couch would get the joke.

The other image is of a city that reflects a "cultured individual" who is highlighting their travels.

The other three images do not contain any wording but are references to popular shows.

Figure 18 also refers to a popular series *Avatar: The Airbender*. In the meme, another

user is highlighting a student's usage of the background and commenting that the classmate

with that background consistently has the "best Zoom backgrounds." The choice of

backgrounds makes the classmate appear exceptional and adept at expressing themselves

through various backgrounds. In contrast, figure 9's background reveals the difficulties of the

user's life and their attempt to humorously dismiss it. The fact that the user is talking with a

therapist suggests they are also trying to cope with some challenges. The presence of the roll of

toilet paper in the background hints that these struggles might be related to COVID and the

lockdowns as there was a toilet paper shortage during this time ("How the Coronavirus Created

a Toilet Paper Shortage"). Here the Zoom background is an expression of their difficulties even

while expressing it in a humorous context.

In these memes, it is observed the users utilized backgrounds to communicate aspects

about their identity. Whereas in face-to-face encounters, people would typically communicate

about their identity through fashion choices including clothes, hair, and makeup. Their clothes

could share entertainment, political, and stylistic preferences. Though clothing can still be seen

in VMC, it is much more limited as the user generally sees just the head and shoulders and

perhaps some of the torso. To continue to express their identities, users have utilized

backgrounds. This is an interesting example of the posthuman self where technology is being

utilized for self-expression and communicating nonverbally with other users.

<u>Meme Analysis for Meme Groups D, E, and F Concerning Self</u>

For the analysis, I followed the analytical tools outlined in *The Handbook of Visual*

Analysis. Each meme group was analyzed using the following concepts: the context of viewing,

the context of production, and semiotics and codes. The purpose of the additional research

method is to include the background for the viewing which impacts its relevance and to include

possible semiotic and coding importance.

Context of Viewing: Self

The memes from this chapter highlight how people felt about themselves in this change

from face-to-face to virtual. People created memes to reflect the experiences of being

distracted by the user's own appearance, changing their appearance depending on camera

usage, and utilizing or observing the backgrounds that were used. These memes were all found

on popular meme databases: *KnowYourMeme*, *Memes.com*, and *Memedroid*. Figures 15 and

18 were originally shared on platforms such as Twitter and Reddit, as surmised by handle

names, etc. in the images themselves. Wherever they were originally published, they were

shared until they were placed in the meme databases by users who enjoyed them. The focus of

this research are the memes that ended up in databases as partial evidence of their popularity and acceptance as a cultural unit.

Context of Production: Self

These memes have similar structures (image with text), but there are some differences between them, most specifically in the origins of the images. Two images were taken from films, one from a virtual awards ceremony, two contained generic reaction images of animals whose origins couldn't be placed, two contained reaction images of celebrities (both composed and candid), one was a screenshot of a Zoom meeting, one contained several stock photos along with images from shows whose origin is unknown, and one was a clearly remixed piece. In this case, the image of a room on fire from the comic "The Pills Are Working" or "On Fire" has been remixed (Figure 9). The dog and coffee cup were removed and an image of Pingu the penguin from a Swiss program and a roll of toilet paper were added in. The variety of origins and formats calls back to the creative and expressive elements of meme making which make them such useful cultural units. When discussing the concept of self, the fact that the artifacts themselves were not only created, but shared and, sometimes, further remixed, supports the idea that meme-making and meme-sharing is a fluid process of self-expression. The process and the final artifact both have value in communicating about the self.

Semiotics and Codes: Self

These memes were chosen because they made references that pertained to an interaction with oneself during a VMC meeting by addressing the following topics: focus, appearance, and virtual backgrounds.

Table 5 Coding for Self

Variable	Selection Criteria
Focus	What effect does seeing their image cause the user? Are they focused on their appearance? Are they distracted from the meeting?
Appearance	How is appearance of the user portrayed?
Discussion of virtual backgrounds	How is the user's choice of backgrounds referred to?

These memes utilize images from many different platforms to communicate how users expressed a sense of self in VMC. This includes how the users interact with themselves as they view their own image while interacting with others as reflected in the memes. The memes also include representation of the difference between how users portray themselves depending on whether the camera is on. Finally, depictions are shared of users utilizing the affordances of VMC to express their individuality using virtual backgrounds.

<div align="center">Findings: Self</div>

In figures 11-13, the users reflect on the distraction of their own image. The memes seem to reflect an amusement towards distraction, instead of frustration. The memes also reflect an important concept mentioned earlier—humanity's obsession with themselves. Much of this fixationlies in our continued efforts to understand ourselves. It is an unusual situation for a person to be able to watch themselves interacting with others. It provides a unique

opportunity for a person to observe themselves "in action." Users could perhaps imagine how they might look when talking face-to-face, but using VMC gave them much more input to consider themselves and how they might be perceived.

Figures 14-16 address the expectations we have for ourselves when interacting in VMC, particularly for school and work. While users may feel comfortable dressing down with personal relationships, there is an expectation of professionalism for work and school. The meme group focuses on the difference between video on or off highlighting changes in VMC attendee appearance. While the meme is meant to be humorous, it also speaks of the pressures that users experience to look a specific way which calls back to how a person wants to be perceived. Goffman notes that controlling this perception is done by utilizing self-expression to control others' behavior in order to get others "to act voluntarily in accordance with his own plan" (2-3). In this case, how a person dresses is connected to how they want to be perceived and how they want others to react to them.

Figures 17-19 highlight the use of backgrounds—an area for creativity in VMC usage. Depending on the environment, the use of backgrounds can be encouraged or discouraged. It is an option to create privacy from the personal space of the home, but it is also an option to express oneself digitally apart from their own appearance. The memes highlight backgrounds that reflect important information about the users—their interests, their pop-culture savviness, and even their mental health. While words are used to provide context for the memes, the images, and what they signify, are the main message. The user's appearance is the main way in which a user signifies identity and status; however, the use of virtual backgrounds is an additional means to accomplish self-expression.

Memes emerge as a means by which people reflect on these interactions. Owens notes

that "teenagers are using humor and irony—through the form of memes—to find ways to face

up and discuss deeper stresses and anxieties" (Owens 100). This coping method is

accomplished because memes are an "effective format for delivering an indirect payload of

empathy" (102). While many memes can be insulting and even vulgar, the popular memes that

end up on databases (like the ones used for this research) are memes that users find relatable.

Owens notes that "in consuming these memes the social media user is participating in a

moment of commonality" (103). This concept relates directly to the idea of authenticity. As

these different encounters that users have shared, there is less need to present an image of

perfection and more encouragement to relate to others based on common experiences.

Community can be created through shared experiences, as mentioned in chapter 2.

The VMC self is unlike the typical online self. The emphasis is on the mostly unedited

user's face in a way that users do not experience in social media and other online platforms.

There are still options for filtering skin to improve the texture of the user's skin in VMC, but

these are limited compared to the editing features available in social media apps. There is a

vulnerability that is both distracting and informative. Because of the limited scope of editing

allowed in VMCs compared with social media apps, this version of self is an interesting tie

between the physical self and the posthuman self. The VMC technology still works as a link

tying the two together, but the user has less control over how they are perceived. Backgrounds

(and other editing devices such as filters) are a way of gaining some control back, allowing a

choice in self-expression. VMC usage has created a new online self for the users to adapt to.

Like the advent of mirrors and social media, VMC usage has created a new possibility to interact

with the concept of self. The difference between typical online interaction and VMC usage is that there is less control over how one is viewed. While social media posts can be edited or curated to highlight their best features, VMC is real-time with limited editing options compared to social media. Users are forced to interact with their own images, watching themselves as they talk with the other users which can be distracting. The memes in this study highlight the user's interaction in VMC. The first group focuses on how seeing their image is distracting to the user. The second group of memes contrasts the difference between how the user looks when they are on camera vs when they are off camera. The final group of memes highlights the usage of virtual backgrounds.

Humans like to have a specific idea of themselves as noted by Mazlish, and it is often difficult when their concept is challenged. Much like the idea of the posthuman where the line between human and machine is blurred, VMC usage challenges our own perceptions of ourselves, particularly our online selves. Posthumanism chips away at human exceptionalism and VMC usage chips away at our online branding image. VMC usage has created the potential to rethink our online persona. Perhaps instead of highly curated displays which have become the norm, VMC usage can encourage a more authentic interaction. The use of virtual backgrounds is a way that users can express themselves beyond their clothing, hair, makeup, etc. Instead, it is about an image that they have specifically chosen that communicates something. The memes highlight this as a chance to both reveal and conceal information about oneself and to also reference popular cultural artifacts that can create a sense of community.

CHAPTER 4: INTERACTING IN NEW SPACES AND PLACES IN VIDEO-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

Introduction

An unusual event occurred during the lockdowns of 2020. Spaces that had previously been designated for private life were merged with the more public work and school spaces. Since physical locations could not be used, people turned to VMC (VMC) like Zoom in order to interact with co-workers and school personnel. During these serious meetings, pets would happily jump into the laps of users or family members would walk by or make noise. Personal home decorating styles were revealed as people peered into each other's homes. Pre-lockdown, most people from work or school would not be privy to such information unless formally invited into the home. The use of VMC made private spaces more available than they previously were.

In addition, it was revealed what an unusual space virtual space could be. VMC rooms were windows into user's personal lives but also a stand-in for the dynamic of a classroom or workplace. In physical workspaces, people understood the rules and hierarchy of power. In the virtual rooms, users—and their dwelling mates—had to learn how to operate in new relational dynamics. Some users tried to find ways to take control during online meetings. Taking control can be accomplished through deception, such as when users pretend to have connection issues that keep them from participating. Users can also control whether or not they turn on the camera or participate in the meeting. A shift in dynamics can also occur if the host, usually the teacher or work leader, is suddenly kicked out of the meeting (which happens when the host

experiences Internet connection issues) and a participant becomes the new host. The wrestling

for power is not just for participants in the meeting, either. Because of weaknesses in Zoom's

security in 2020, hackers were able to break into meetings and take control of the screen,

usually displaying offensive content or saying inappropriate words such as racial slurs. This act

was called "Zoom-bombing" and is defined as "the unwanted, disruptive intrusion, generally by

Internet trolls, into a video-conference call. Zoom raiders often employ shocking, imagery,

racial epithets and profanity to derail video conferences" ("How to Respond to a

'Zoombombing' In Real Time"). This possibility added a new element of fear to VMC because

the users knew that at any moment, their virtual space could be infiltrated.

These different elements created a space where privacy and power were changed. We

build our lives in the places of our lives, so it's important to consider them. Pulling from

Heiddeger and Foucault, I will discuss topics of space and place and the power in them

particularly as they relate to virtual spaces. Using these concepts as a background, I will

consider how these topics are reflected in the memes created about VMC.

Space and Place

In most settings, the terms space and place are used interchangeably. However, in the

arena of scholarly discussion these terms are laden with meaning and often not the same ones.

Gieryn, a sociologist, defines space as "what places become when the unique gathering of

things, meanings, and values are sucked out" (Gieryn 445). Place is where meaning is built, and

space is what allows place to be created. He goes on to explain that place requires a unique,

meaningful, geographic location (466). A home would register as a place because it has a

physical location and is imbued with meaning by those who live there. In contrast, space is the location in which place *can* be created; for example, it can be an empty lot before the home is built or even a home that no one lives in. However, even empty, a house could still hold a meaningful place in a community due to its past or even people's current perceptions. Because place requires physicality in his definition, Geiryn doesn't recognize virtual locations as place.

Heidegger also holds to a Cartesian split between place and space with a clear distinction between the mental and physical. Heidegger states that "being means the same as presencing" (Heidegger 3). When describing the lecture hall, he notes that it has a clear physical presence but hints that there is more to the lecture hall because "being is not a thing, is not in time" (3). Here we see his preference for the feeling or presence of a place over its physical structure. Malpas noted that "Heidegger…[believes in] the primacy of that must be accorded to place" (Malpas 3). Place is where we dwell and where our lives are carried out. Place is where we get to experience "being," which is similar to Heidegger's represents physical existence, but the lived body is not limited by the physical body. Space provides the opportunity for place to be built. Where space is empty, place is heavy with meaning, and one that changes from individual to individual. For some, it is the years of accumulated memories in a home that makes a place memorable. For others, it is a single important event that makes a place resonate with meaning. No matter whether it is a lengthy time or a short time, the concept of place is something universal and a part of everyday life. Geiryn states that:

> place...stabilizes and gives durability to social structural categories, differences and
>
> hierarchies; arranges patterns of face-to-face interaction that constitute network-

formation and collective action; embodies and secures otherwise intangible cultural

norms, identities, memories—and values like the American Dream. (473-474)

For the purpose of this research, I recognize that space and place are connected in that space

allows for us to create a place. The terms space and place will be used interchangeably

throughout with the understanding that it carries a dual meaning. What happens when

place/space, the convener of all that is valuable in our cultures, is disrupted? During the

lockdowns, people had less access to places outside of their home that were part of their daily

routines: school, workplaces, coffee shops, restaurants, etc. Instead, for many, their only

connection to these outside places was via the virtual space.

Virtual Space

The virtual space is like and unlike its physical counterparts. In physical space, people

interact with the environment directly via their senses. In the virtual space, this interaction is

mediated by the usage of some type of technological platform such as a phone, laptop, or even

virtual reality gear such as goggles or controllers. In most virtual experiences, the goal is to

imitate the user's physical reality as closely as possible. While Gieryn's definition does not allow

for the virtual world to be a place, Janz disagrees and argues that there is a difference between

virtualization and virtual places. Virtualization creates space that imitates life, but the virtual is

"a property of place" loaded with meaning and possibility (Janz 71). What makes a virtual place

meaningful is not how realistic it looks. Instead, it is the "fact that it accomplishes the task of

convincing the participant that meaningful action of some sort could happen" (63). In this

description, there are many virtual interactions that can create the same meaningfulness as a

physical place. It is not just tasks alone that make a place have meaning. It is our ability to relate to one another. Learning to relate in the virtual realm has been occurring since the virtual space was created.

Hayles in her more recent "Flesh and Metal: Reconfiguring the Mindbody in Virtual Environments" amends her own writing concerning embodiment. Instead of focusing on the transference of information as key, she would instead like to "focus on the idea of relation and posit it as the dynamic flux from which both the body and embodiment emerge" (Hayles 298). Though I discuss presence in chapter 2, it is worth revisiting as it relates to our sense of place. Her vision of embodiment, termed as mindbody, focuses on the connection that "gives us the feeling that we occupy our bodies rather than merely possess them" (299). She quotes Clark who explains that our interactions with technology have stretched the mindbody connection transforming us into "human-technology symbiots" who are geared towards further growth" (320). Our interaction with virtual places has created an environment that is increasingly more natural and relational. In the case of VMC, virtual spaces are where users interact with students, teachers, coworkers, friends, and family. The more it is used, the less strange it feels, and the more meaningful the interactions become. Hayles would argue that this change is normal and that it is the heart of human existence as "we do not exist in order to relate; rather, we relate in order that we may exist as fully realized human beings" (320). If users are able to find a way to feel connected to other users, they are able to feel more at home in a virtual environment.

If we think of virtual places as places where meaningful interaction can and does occur, it is easy to see that even these places, however different from physical places, can imbue the

same kind of meaning and connection. The interactions will not mirror physical interactions precisely; instead, users will learn new ways to make the virtual place meaningful and useful to them. They will also learn ways to make these virtual places work for them, transforming the dynamics of in-person power plays in an online format.

<center>Relating in Virtual Spaces</center>

When psychoanalyst Dr. Gillian Isaacs Russell started practicing online during the lockdowns of 2020, she encountered a totally new working environment. Instead of meeting patients in her office, she had to work with them remotely. This change of environment had an impact on how she had to approach her patients. Some were more emotionally forthcoming in the online environment, feeling less inhibited by the distance. For example, not being in physical proximity to the counselor made the patients feel more comfortable. Others, especially those who used VMC technologies for work, found the format limiting and were less willing to share (Isaacs Russell 7). The VMC created a more formal environment than typical counseling sessions making them feel less comfortable. In addition, Russell observed that another change occurs in these formats. When they had access to "patient private spaces and theirs to ours both reveals and hides" (19). Being in patient's homes and in the homes of the therapists caused them to view parts of each other's lives that had not been shared before, but it also enabled patients to "hide defenses and make it more difficult to access information about the private (internal) spaces patients do not want us to see" (20). This environment changes the nature of the relationship between therapist and the patient, and both had to learn to adapt in order to make it work. The dynamics of their relationship was altered by using VMC in this field

<center>105</center>

and in many others. Relationships that had been hashed out over time in classrooms and

workplaces suddenly had to evolve to be successful.

Social interaction is defined as "the process of reciprocal influence exercised by

individuals over one another during social encounters" (Little and Little). In its definition we can

see that power displays and power rejection are parts of social interaction. Foucault defines

power as "a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or

being capable of action. A set of actions upon other actions" (Foucault 789). Foucault observes

power in the context of action and how people utilize these to accomplish what they want. He

states that the best way to understand power is to "investigate the forms of resistance and

attempts made to dissociate these relations" (780). The power dynamic of a classroom or a

workplace is best understood by the actions of its members and how these actions affect them.

Power is often exerted by the person who controls the conversation in meetings. They will

often be the dominant voice and will call on others to participate. This type of dynamic also

continues in VMC. In these meetings, the host is the person of power. This power could be

disrupted in a few scenarios—if the host lost connection and someone else was appointed host

or if the participants worked to thwart the power of the host. For example, participants might

turn off their camera and microphone so the host cannot easily interact with the participants.

This type of power play can even be excused by technological difficulties so that it doesn't seem

that the participant is being disrespectful. These kinds of actions are like face-to-face

interactions where the participants don't pay attention in a meeting; however, in a virtual

meeting it is harder to tell if it is intentional. This dynamic makes it harder for the person in

power to address and can create a situation that many would find humorous. In fact, there were many memes focused on this very interplay of power in the virtual meetings.

In a conversation between Delueze and Foucualt, Delueze notes that "not only are prisoners treated like children, but children are treated like prisoners. Children are submitted to an infantilisation which is alien to them" (*Intellectuals and Power*). Though virtual classrooms were not available in 1972 when this conversation was recorded, it suggests that at the root of behavior struggles, particularly in classrooms or even authoritative workplaces, is a sense of being treated like a prisoner who has no rights. In response to this, students and workers will push back against the power in ways that make sense to them. The fact that this theme continues even in modern times suggests that Foucault's observation that "we have yet to fully comprehend the nature of power" is still true today *(Intellectuals and Power)*. This is clearly a discussion that continues even through creative meme-making.

Memes: Space and Place

Fo As mentioned earlier, memes concerning Zoom or VMC were chosen using the methods described earlier because they referred to private space and interrupters like family and pets. Following Shifman's procedure for analyzing memes, the groups of memes are discussed concerning content, form, and stance.

How to prepare for a Zoom meeting
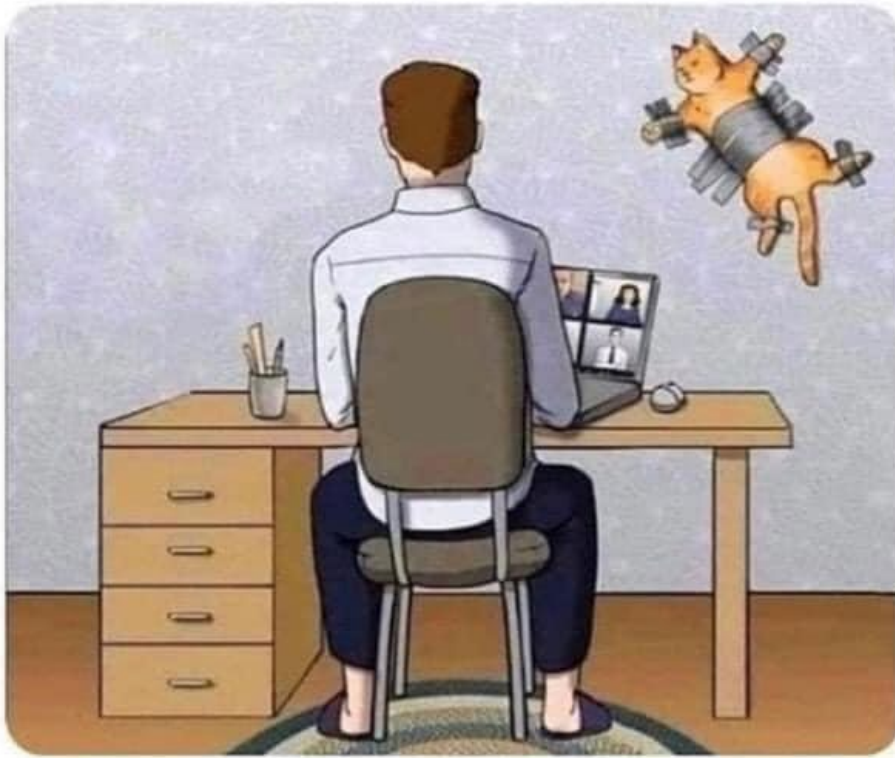
Figure 20: "Cats Love to Join | Zoom." *Know Your Meme*.
https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/2069411-zoom. Accessed 12 Jan. 2023.

Figure 20 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 20 features a cartoon drawing of a man sitting at his laptop with a partial that

depicts the traditional screen of a virtual meeting. While this is normal, we see his cat duct-

taped to the wall. The text at the top reads, "How to prepare for a Zoom meeting" insinuating

that restricting the cat's movement is part of that process. The origin of this meme is unclear as

it has been shared on several platforms before the database including Imgur, Reddit, and

Twitter. The meme is not a traditional image macro in that it is a cartoon drawing and not a

reaction image. The rest of the layout is more typical, however, with a white border and the

text at the top also with a white background. The message being communicated is that cats are

distracting during virtual meetings. Because of this, the only way to remove the distraction is to

make sure the cat cannot move around during the meeting. In this case, they humorously

suggest duct-taping the cat to the wall. Here we see that the virtual space creates a dilemma in

the physical space of the home. Because the cat cannot refrain from interrupting the virtual

meeting, the user is forced to adopt a surprising solution. In this situation, it is the user's

relationship with a household pet that is being affected by the virtual space.

Figure 21: Gentile, Lindsey. "Zoom Memes | Meeting Memes". *Memes*, 2023,
https://memes.com/blog/these-hilarious-zoom-memes-are-way-to-real. Accessed 12 Jan 2023

Figure 21 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 21 contains an image of Kristen Bell with an iguana on her head and a partial image of co-star Jameela Jamil. This image comes from a scene in the television show *The Good Place*. In the show, the character Eleanor whom Bell plays is meant to pick a pet to bond with. She chooses the iguana who then decides to climb onto her head. It is humorous because this wasn't supposed to happen in the original script and the trainers themselves were surprised (Ivie). Bell is smiling in the image though it looks a bit strained. Her co-star Jamil is only partially in the frame and has a sneaky expression. The lizard is labeled by the text "my toddler" and Jamil is labeled by the text "my 6 yo" while at the bottom it reads "Me in a zoom meeting." Figure 21 is an image macro in that it is an image with text at the top. Unlike most image macros, the image is a comic which has clearly been drawn as opposed to a screen capture or photo. Figure 21 is an image taken from a TV show with the text overlaying different parts of the image. The stance in figure 1 is a humorous depiction of what often happens during virtual meetings. In this case, the meme is suggesting that during meetings the toddler and six-year-old get into the camera frame. The toddler's interaction is also extremely distracting, represented by the iguana on her head while the six-year-old is just inside the frame, but looking in a judging way toward the camera/other Zoom participants. The idea is that during meetings the members of the household, particularly children, often interrupt and disrupt the virtual meetings. Like figure 21, the occupants of the physical space are interrupting the virtual meeting, in ways that would not happen in actual office spaces prior to the pandemic. While this meme paints the situation in a humorous light, it can easily be imagined how difficult it would be to manage small children while attempting to interact with co-workers.

my cat has become OBSESSED with sitting in on my zoom calls and has now perfected the art of glaring straight down the camera

Figure 22: "Zoom". *Memedroid*, 2021, https://www.memedroid.com/memes/detail/3374909/Zoom. Accessed 12 Jan 2023.

Figure 22 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 22 started as a Twitter post by Abby Tomlinson on January 22, 2021 (Abby Tomlinson [@twcuddleston]). Abby Tomlinson became internet famous in 2015 after starting the #Milifandom movement on social media. In support of the British labor party's candidate Ed Milliband, she photoshopped images of his face onto iconic characters such as Rambo and Superman (Bromwich and @kathryn42). This post launched a media frenzy which did not result in her party's success. However, it did make her a more famous internet persona. Her original tweet had over 800,00 likes and over 70,000 retweets. The screenshot of her tweet shows her and her cat both facing the screen with serious expressions on their faces. The text above the

image reads "my cat has become OBSESSED with sitting in on my zoom calls and has now perfected the art of glaring straight down the camera." This meme started off as a tweet on Twitter and was then later shared as a meme. As an image macro, it contains an image (in this case a selfie) with a white border and with the text above the image also with a white background. This meme communicates how doing virtual meetings from home is impacted by those living there, in this case her cat. Her cat started sitting in with her during her Zoom calls and even developed a specific expression for these meetings. This behavior is unusual because typically cats like to roam around which makes this meme amusing. Figure 22 shows that, unlike figures 20 and 21, the occupants of the physical home have learned to adapt to the virtual meetings and to participate in a way consistent with the user's behavior. This situation suggests that the interaction in virtual meetings has become a normalized part of the physical space at home.

Household Members Meme Group G Summary

The memes in this group have slightly different forms. One is a cartoon, one is a still image from a show, and another is a selfie. Two of them employ a white border with text above on a white background. One contains the text overlaid on the image identifying who is who with the main text appearing at the bottom of the image over the image. Each of the memes focuses on the unique interaction that happens when virtual meetings take place at home where our family members and pets reside. The tone is humorous in all of them, and they each depict different scenes. Figure 20 focuses on preparing for a meeting by securing the cat so that it does not interrupt the meeting. Figure 21 demonstrates what happens when children get involved in a meeting and how distracting they can be. Figure 22 shows how a cat has adapted

to the virtual meetings and participates in a humorous way. In all of the memes, the viewer

sees how the virtual meeting interactions clash with the typical interactions in a physical home.

In figures 20 and 21, the viewer sees that the inhabitants of the home can be a distraction as

they expect the users to behave in their typical at-home behavior. Figure 22 shows that the

household pet has somehow adapted to this new normal and found a way to participate in a

less interruptive manner.

Each of these memes highlights the adaptations required when the home place also

becomes the workplace. This changes the relational interactions that occur as family members

and pets are included in meetings via virtual meetings. Russell notes how this change affected

her interaction with her patients both increasing intimacy and distancing them. For those

working or doing school, they had to adapt to the challenges and affordances offered by VMC.

Some, like in figure 20, will work harder to limit the distractions caused by pets or others.

Where others, like in figure 22, will adapt to include them in the meetings.

somebody's dad in the back of every
homeschool zoom call

Figure 23: "Dads in the Background | Zoom." *Know Your Meme*.
https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1887761-zoom. Accessed 12 Jan. 2023.

Figure 23 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 23 is a screenshot from a popular kids' show called *SpongeBob SquarePants*. In

the image, SpongeBob is walking across the room in his underwear carrying a hamburger.

Another character, Patrick Star, is in the foreground and has an expression of distress on his

face suggesting he is embarrassed that SpongeBob is walking by in his underwear. The text

above the image states "somebody's dad in the back of every homeschool zoom call." The

meme is an image macro featuring a screenshot from a TV show. The text is above the image

with a white background. The meme states that this glimpse of a father walking around in their

undergarments is a frequent occurrence in homeschool Zoom calls. It hints at how there are

frequent episodes in which personal spaces are revealed during meetings. This meme is

relatable because it applies to more than just homeschool calls, but all video calls made during

the lockdown when family members might have accidentally interrupted meetings. The private

space of home has been made public to those participating in the virtual meeting creating a

false intimacy. Scenes like this and others where personal events from the physical home are

revealed during virtual meetings reveal how the virtual space becomes a portal through which

personal knowledge is shared, however unintentionally.

Figure 24:"Look At The Map". *Memedroid, 2021,*
https://www.memedroid.com/memes/detail/3219341/look-at-the-
map?refGallery=tags&page=3&tag=zoom. Accessed 12 Jan 2023.

Figure 24 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 24 is also a still shot from the show *SpongeBob SquarePants* in an episode titled "Aargh!" in which the two characters pictured, SpongeBob and Patrick, go on a treasure hunt ("Arrgh!"). The image above shows both characters wearing pirate hats with search beams emanating from their eyes staring down at the map, communicating that they are trying to look closely at the map. The text above the image reads "When the teacher starts sharing their screen and you can see their favorites bar." The form is a still shot of a scene from the cartoon *SpongeBob SquarePants*. There is a white border with text above the image with a white background. The image portrays the students' interest in seeing their teacher's favorites bar when the teacher shares their screen. This access allows students a peek into their teacher's personal life by getting to view the sites they like to visit on the internet. This kind of information would not typically be available to students in a face-to-face setting unless the students were behind the teacher's desk and looking at their laptop. This meme references the possibility of an invasion of privacy that can occur during these meetings. The virtual space becomes a less secure place for the user with information about the user made available to other users without their consent.

Figure 25: Gentile, Lindsey. "Zoom Memes | Meeting Memes". *Memes*, 2023, https://memes.com/blog/these-hilarious-zoom-memes-are-way-to-real. Accessed 12 Jan 2023.

Figure 25 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 25 contains a popular reaction image of RuPaul with opera glasses. It originated from the show *RuPaul's Drag Race* where she acts as a judge ("RuPaul's Drag Race"). In one scene, she comments on how she "can't wait to see how this turns out" and picks up some opera glasses (Gfycat). This scene was turned into a gif which in turn was turned into an image macro. In this image, the still shot with the opera glasses at RuPaul's face is being used with the text above "looking into people's houses during Zoom calls like…". The form is of an image macro with text above the image with a white background. This meme represents how users can judge other users' private spaces during VMC meetings. The person is using opera glasses

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emphasize that they are inspecting the background closely, suggesting they are very interested in the contents of the person's private spaces. Like figure 24, this meme conveys the invasion of a person's private home space that can occur during virtual meetings when cameras are being used which creates a sense of exposure in the virtual space that would not occur in typical face-to-face interactions.

<center>*Personal Space Meme Group H Summary*</center>

Figures *23-25* each have a similar form. They are images taken from shows with text above on a white background. The theme of peering into a user's private space is depicted. In some scenarios, this view is unintentional as the case of the father in his underpants. In others, this is intentional, for example, it is seen the memes depicting looking at the teacher's favorites bar or peering into someone's home. The memes focus on how information that was previously private becomes available to others during VMC. In face-to-face meetings, the exposure of private information is not usual unless the person decides to impart this information. In virtual meetings, however, this transference of information can be unintentionally shared, making the virtual space feel less secure. Gieryn highlights the importance of place and the stability it brings to our lives. This invasion of privacy can disrupt that security, making users feel exposed. On the flip side, this unintentional intimacy can also create humorous encounters that increase the sense of comradery in a group. As noted earlier, Hayles recognizes the power of relationship to transform our interactions with technology. Even this unintentional sharing of information can be used to increase intimacy. In either scenario, VMC creates a window through which personal information is shared.

Meme Group I—The Power Shift

This group of memes focuses on the power dynamic at play within a VMC meeting. In a virtual meeting, there are opportunities to shift the power because of technological issues. These include times when the user leading the meeting can lose their connection. It can also occur if participants do not participate in the intended way. Since these meetings are not occurring face-to-face, it is impossible to know what is happening if there are issues with technology.

Figure 26: "I Am the Host Now | Zoom." *Know Your Meme*, https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1898501-zoom. Accessed 12 Jan. 2023.

Figure 26 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 26 is a screenshot from the film *Captain Phillips*. The image shows actor Barkhad

Abdi who is reprising the role of real-life Somali pirate Abduwali Muse. The film covers the true

story of the 2009 hijacking of ship MV Maersk Alabama. In the film, Abdi is the leader of the

group of pirates and at one point says, "Look at me--I am the Captain now" (*Captain Phillips*

(2013) - Plot - IMDb). The meme transforms this quote by changing "captain" to "host,"

referring to the user who oversees the virtual meeting. The switch of host can occur if the

original host is disconnected from the meeting—an occurrence that was not uncommon due to

high demands placed on limited Internet bandwidth. The program will automatically choose a

new host who is able control how other users can participate. This is an image macro using a

screenshot from the film. The text is in white and is at the top and bottom of the image. This

meme uses the iconic scene from the film where the pirates assert their control over the ship.

The person the meme represents is now able to control who is in the meeting and how they can

participate. Since the way people interact face-to-face is different than how they interact in

virtual meetings, new ways of relating can be found. In this case, the focus is on who oversees

the virtual meeting.

Figure 27: "Ha". *Memedroid, 2022,*
https://www.memedroid.com/memes/detail/3656197/Ha?refGallery=tags&page=1&tag=zooA
Accessed 12 Jan 2023.

Figure 27 Content/Form/Stance

Figure 27 features a social media post by Samuel Grubbs. He is an Instagram star who

initially became famous for posting a video of a pastor insulting someone who was wearing

socks and sandals on a video sharing platform called Vine ("Learn about Samuel Grubbs"). The

post is a screenshot of his laptop with a Zoom meeting in progress. Instead of images of all the

participants, most screens say "reconnecting" with only three people with cameras on. One is

an older individual, most likely the teacher. One is a person who is lying down with blankets covering their body. The other is Samuel Grubbs who is clearly holding up his phone to take a picture and appears to be laughingce. There are several pieces of text on this image. There is the transcript from the meeting saying "N-N-N-No-No.." which is presumably the teacher. The teacher's expression is one of dismay which matches the audio transcript. There is a caption at the bottom stating, "We ALL cut our cameras off and changed our names to 'Reconnecting…' 😂." The top text comes from Grubbs's post on social media which says, "students turn their cameras off and change their names to 'Reconnecting…' during online class 😂😂." This image started as a social media post, though at some time, it was posted on meme databases and shared as a meme. This meme is a screenshot of a Zoom meeting that was shared on a social media platform. It acts as an image macro with the text appearing at the bottom of the image and at the top with a white background. Also seen is the user's name with a video camera clipart next to it signifying that he likes to make videos. The other text includes the names of the participants who are on camera as well as the audio transcript of the speaker. The other 22 participant boxes show the word "Reconnecting…" Samuel Grubbs is clearly amused in his post about the student's changing their screen name to reconnecting. This reaction is seen in his facial expression and the multiple emojis that accompany his post. It is a power move by the classmates who, without getting host control of the meeting, stop participating in a way that is hard for the teacher to discipline as she cannot prove they did not have technological issues. Figure 8 highlights how the users have more power in the virtual meeting than they would in a face-to-face classroom.

When the teacher gets disconnected and Zoom makes you the new meeting host

Well, I guess I'm in charge now.

Figure 28:"Qualitymemes_Daily On Memes". *Memes,* 2023, https://memes.com/m/xyEg7D2dRYq. Accessed 12 Jan 2023.

Figure 28 Content/Form/Stance

The image and text at the bottom come from an episode "Downfall of a Droid" from the animated series *The Clone Wars*. The image depicts a battle droid who was left behind once the general fled prompting the line "well, I guess I'm in charge now" right before his ship was destroyed (Miller). This quote overlays the image at the bottom. This image became a popular meme with various texts at the top. For example, on Imgflp, memes using this image were titled with texts such as "When you open a fortune cookie and you find the codes to the entire world's nuclear arsenal" and "my last brain cell after I watch videos instead of studying" (*Guess*

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I'm in Charge Now Memes - Imgflip). In this meme, the text reads at the top "When the teacher gets disconnected and Zoom makes you the new meeting host." Figure 28 uses the image macro format. It is a screenshot for an animated series with text overlaying the image at the bottom. At the top on a white background is the text for the meme. The original image humorously communicates a moment when a person gains power in a situation when they were not expecting it. Although understanding the original scene helps the reader understand the meme more easily, the fact that the robot is sitting in what appears to be a throne of some sort along with the comment at the bottom communicates a sense of misplaced power. Paired with the text at the top, the reader understands that the situation that has occurred is that the student has become the host after the teacher lost connection. The student now has control over the basic meeting functions, including who is able to participate.

The Power Shift Meme Group I Summary

Though the memes have a similar message, they use different formats. Figure 26 is a screenshot from a film with text over the image. Figure 27 is a screenshot which was posted as a social media post before becoming a meme. Figure 28 is a screenshot of an animated film with text above. In each scenario, the memes depict an event where there has been a shift in the power dynamics of a virtual meeting. In figures 26 and 28, the shift is unintentional where a student becomes host because of a glitch. In figure 27, however, the users participate in their own expression of power by changing their images to "reconnecting" so that they don't have to participate in the meeting. Because almost the whole class is doing it, and it is possible that they are having technology problems, it is hard for the teacher to discipline them making it an amusing power play. Virtual meetings can offer a unique way of interacting with others in that

it opens the opportunity to share personal information unintentionally and also creates unique situations where users can wrest power from the host in ways that would not happen in a face-to-face encounter.

<u>Meme Analysis for Memes Groups G, H, and I Concerning Space</u>

For the analysis, I followed the analytical tools outlined in *The Handbook of Visual Analysis*. Each meme was analyzed using the following concepts: the context of viewing, the context of production, and semiotics and codes. The purpose of the additional research method is to include the background for the viewing which impacts its relevance and to include possible semiotic and coding importance.

Context of Viewing: Space and Place

Because of the lockdowns due to COVID, people worldwide had to use VMC technology to do school and work. These memes highlight how people interact with the different dynamic of power in a virtual meeting versus in-person meetings. In virtual meetings, users can inadvertently get power if the host is disconnected, but the users can also find ways to change the power dynamic. These memes were all found on popular meme databases: *KnowYourMeme*, *Memes.com*, and *Memedroid*. However, two of the memes were originally shared on a social media platform. Wherever they were originally published, they were shared until they were placed in the meme databases by users who enjoyed them.

Context of Production: Space and Place

These memes have similar structures (image with text), but there are some differences between them, most specifically in the origins of the images. These memes focus on situations

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where the privacy of home clashes with the public nature of virtual meetings as well situations where the very structure of the virtual meeting changes the power dynamic of the meeting. In all these situations, there is a direct contrast between face-to-face interactions where the home life is not represented and where there are clearer designations of power and the virtual interactions that both reveals more about each user but leaves more freedom from face-to-face consequences. In face-to-face meetings, participants such as students or colleagues often will not actively try to take control of the meetings or will at least face consequences such as school or office discipline if they do. In a virtual meeting, it is harder to pinpoint whether a user is acting out or having issues with technology. Furthermore, technology itself can cause the problem if the host loses connection and leaves the meeting unattended. These various situations create the backdrop for these memes and inspired their creation. Most of the images come from still shots from different forms of media. For example, some are taken from TV shows like *Spongebob* or movies. Many of these still shots have been turned into templates for meme making. Figure 27 is different in that it is an image taken of a participant's computer screen.

Semiotics and Codes: Space and Place

These memes were chosen because they made references that pertained to interactions during a VMC meeting that addressed the following topics: interruptions, private space, and power.

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Table 6 Coding for Space and Place

Variable	Selection Criteria
Interruptions	How are the user's personal lives referenced in the meme particularly as interrupters?
Sharing private space	Is a reference made to a collision of private and public space? Sharing personal details of location?
Power	How is the power dynamic addressed in a Zoom meeting?

Memes referencing interruptions, sharing private spaces, and power highlight the change in interactions that occur when normally face-to-face meetings occur virtually instead. These humorous and surprising interactions are highlighted using a variety of sources: animation, screenshots from social media, or screenshots from films.

Findings: Space and Place

The switch to virtual meetings created a new way to interact in previously face-to-face meetings for school and work. In the workplace or classroom, the teacher or supervisor had control over the environment. Interruptions were limited so that everyone could focus on the tasks at hand. Students and workers were often limited in the personal items being brought into the physical space and mostly adhered to rules and regulations that were outlined. Those who did not follow them experienced whatever punitive consequences were already set in place. The very structured space for work and school was disrupted by the lockdowns when these activities were forced to go online. A new way of interacting both with classmates and

coworkers and those living in their own homes had to evolve. The highly structured

environment set up for productivity had to be transferred to a virtual space with less

regulation.

Figures 20 through 28 highlight the chaotic elements that meetings in virtual spaces

introduced. During meetings, family members and pets often intrude. Children and pets

especially do not understand or respect the boundaries of work and home and, therefore,

interact with the user in ways that can be disruptive. Figure 20 suggests that preparing for a

meeting meant securing the pet, so they couldn't intrude into meetings. Figure 21 employs an

analogy comparing the unruly iguana from the show *The Good Place* who climbs on the

actress's head with a user's children who may be physically intruding on the meeting. Figure 22

shows a pet who has adapted to the online format and wishes to participate. These

interruptions both represent a clash of the user's personal space with the more ordered space

of work or school. The chaotic elements of home where one is not expected to behave in

certain ways spills over into the work/school environment creating a convergence of worlds.

Users were forced to either control their environment or work around the possible

interruptions.

This interruption was not the only aspect of the clash of spaces that were experienced.

Another was the shift in how much information was made available because of the format of

the virtual meetings. In face-to-face meetings, the participants normally did not have many

personal effects on display. There was a clear delineation between home and work, personal

life, and work life. Figure 23 shows how the habits of family members can provide an

embarrassing backdrop. The home is usually a place where people can dress and act how they

please. In the meme, a family member is walking around in their undergarments and is then

spotted in the background. Figure 24 shows how students might attempt to view personal

information about their teacher's web interests when the teacher is sharing their desktop

screen. Figure 25 depicts the interest that users have in viewing the homes of other users when

their cameras are on. Finally, the dynamics of power in the virtual space can be challenged. In

figures 26 and 28, the user revels that they have become the host once the real host has been

disconnected. Figure 27 presents an opportunity taken by the users to gain control over the

virtual space by pretending to have technological issues.

The memes reveal that people learned to adapt to this new environment and its

relationships. Hayles notes that the heart of embodiment is the relational factor. These memes

reflect the way users adapt to the virtual space in order to control or modify relationships.

Some appreciate the affordances offered by the virtual format to gain more information about

those they work with. In accordance with Foucault's understanding of power, some users

attempt their own forms of resistance in order to push back against the power structures. This

resistance is seen even in the attempt to obtain information about other users as well as the

clear attempt to wrest power over the meetings. Two types of users seem to emerge: the one

who is looking to control and the one seeking to maintain privacy.

The users maintaining privacy had to find ways to protect it. Privacy was accomplished

by creating spaces within their home where they were less likely to be interrupted and also that

did not reveal personal details. In case this wasn't an option, they could opt to include

backgrounds that blurred or blocked out their backgrounds. For others, the divide was not

something they needed or wanted. The invasion into their personal space was not upsetting to

them because they were seeking information themselves. The push and pull of the exchange of information and power creates a new environment in which the users must adapt to.

The lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 created an environment where private and public spaces were merged. Instead of school and work meetings happening mostly in face-to-face locations, these meetings occurred utilizing VMC such as Zoom. The home is usually a place of privacy and security—filled with personal meaning. Space allows for places to be formed and act as a placeholder for meaning. The virtual space allowed for the physical place to be infiltrated, revealing private information about the users, often unintentionally. It also provided a place where the users were able to adapt and change the power dynamics of the group. The memes revealed instances where family members and pets interrupted the meetings displaying how their personal lives were intruding upon their work/school lives. They also showed how information about activities, or the physical space of home was revealed. Finally, the memes depicted the newfound power that users experienced when interacting in virtual meetings. In each of these scenarios, the virtual space instigated a new way of interaction with other users, different from face-to-face interactions.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to evaluate how work and school meeting interactions changed because of using VMC like Zoom. My research questions were:

1. *How do image macros, as an example of participatory culture, reflect the user's interaction with VMC, themselves, and with other users in the areas of presence as experienced in work and school meetings?*

2. *How do image macros, as an example of participatory culture, reflect the user's interaction with VMC, themselves, and with other users in the areas of self as experienced in work and school meetings?*

3. *How do image macros, as an example of participatory culture, reflect the user's interaction with VMC, themselves, and with other users in the areas of space and place as experienced in work and school meetings?*

Research Question 1

How do image macros, as an example of participatory culture, reflect the user's interaction with VMC, themselves, and with other users in the areas of presence as experienced in work and school meetings?

The memes were sorted concerning three variables: embarrassing situations, connection/isolation, and distortion due to technology as topics that pertain to a person's sense of presence. Embarrassing situations were identified by scenarios where the user suggests discomfort. Isolation and connection were revealed in memes referencing situations where the user felt alone or felt a sense of comradery with other users. References to distortions or glitches that inhibited interaction due to the technology were also identified.

These topics are all areas that concern or affect a user's sense of presence. One of the most obvious changes that occur in a video-mediated meeting versus a face-to-face meeting is thhe lack of physical presence. In face-to-face meetings, body language can be read to facilitate communication. There is also time before and after meetings for small talk that helps build comradery. Other options for meetings when face-to-face is not possible is the use of emails, calls, or VMC. Emails (or messaging) are the most limited form of interaction as there is delayed feedback, no option for reading tone, and no body language interaction at all. Phone calls are a bit better in that they allow for immediate feedback and include tone, but they also lack access to body language. VMC is often the preferred mode for meetings because it allows for nearly immediate feedback and the viewing of facial expressions (with the microseconds delay discussed earlier). There is some access to body language, though that is dependent on how much of the person's body is in the frame. The feeling of having connection in virtual meetings is called telepresence. Of the three options, VMC offers the most telepresence.However, VMC has some drawbacks as well. Though it allows for mostly immediate feedback, there is a slight delay which we might not notice but is still interpreted by our brains. In addition, this delay can be exacerbated if there are technological issues which can be distracting to the users and limit their ability to focus during meetings. Also, although users can see each other's faces, they cannot make eye contact. When a user stares at the eyes of another user, it appears to them to be looking down as the camera is usually located at the top of the screen.

Presence is tied to our understanding of what is real. The perception of reality is something that can change as noted by Lombard and Ditton. Baudrillard notes that change is something that has already happened culturally where what is real and what is simulated are

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no longer two different things. This view impacts virtual reality, and other online interactions, because it is a reminder that online interaction is not just a simulation of interaction, it is *real* interaction. Instead of comparing online interaction to face-to-face interaction, it is important to note that while online interaction has different affordances and drawbacks, it is interaction nonetheless and one that warrants further understanding. This is supported by Janz's research on the value of play in virtual environments.

The memes studied for this section focus on how users responded to the use of VMC for work and school regarding presence. In one group, the memes referred to embarrassing situations that arose when their microphone was on when they weren't expecting it or they flatulated and their name lit up implicating them inthe noise. These scenarios focus on the uncomfortable feeling of not being able to control their interactions with other users. In face-to-face encounters, people are usually more careful, but the distance created by using VMC lulls people into a sense of inhibition that would normally not occur and that could be uncomfortable. The second meme group highlights how isolating it can be for the person leading a meeting, particularly when no one has their cameras on or in the time leading up to the meeting when participants are stuck in the waiting room. In face-to-face meetings, people are used to reading people's faces to determine understanding and rapport. In VMC, this interaction is possible only if the users turn on their camera. Even then, it is not always easy to read faces, particularly if the leader is sharing a presentation. The final meme group focuses on how internet distortions can affect the clarity of the communication. When there are connectivity issues, it can be difficult to understand what someone is saying. These issues negatively impact communication while acting as a reminder of their separateness.

The areas covered in memes highlight some of the challenges that are experienced when utilizing this medium. It reveals that VMC can hinder the sense of presence. Even while communicating this message, however, the memes represent a community of thought and shared experiences that create its own sense of presence. While VMC is not exactly like face-to-face interaction, as something that almost everyone has now experienced, it has created its own sense of online presence. And as users share their experiences, they build a new understanding of this interaction.

<div align="center">Research Question 2</div>

How do image macros, as an example of participatory culture, reflect the user's interaction with VMC, themselves, and with other users in the areas of self as experienced in work and school meetings?

Concepts of self were identified by focusing on three variables in the memes: focus, appearance, and virtual backgrounds. Memes referencing the user's reaction to seeing their image and distractions were identified. Also studied were memes that discuss the user's interaction with appearance in VMC, and memes with discussion of virtual backgrounds. These topics all refer to a person's sense of self and how they interact with themselves and others. Authenticity is not something always attributed to a person's online visual self. The desire for popularity will often drive people to edit their photos and to curate how others perceive them online. The authentic self is connected to how a person views their core self and how they communicate their concept of self with others. People like to control how they are viewed both online and in person though there is more opportunity for this online. It has been noted that

people using VMC feel more comfortable when interacting with close friends and family which hints that relationships are directly tied to a person's comfort level with authenticity.

Technological advances also affect our concept of self. Most humans consistently interact with technology. As new advances have come that have modified humanity more and more, humanity's sense of self has been challenged. It is now recognized that we are in a state called posthuman, a term that reflects the many ways technological advances have changed humanity. There are those who hate technology and those who love it according to Hayles, but nearly everyone is affected by it. As it challenges humans to rethink what it means to be a human, humanity is forced to encounter their own hubris. Is being a human the highest form? If so, which form of human is the standard? Mazlish argues that humanity is being humbled by the idea that humans may not be as special as they'd like to think they are. Dinerstein and Braidotti see an opportunity to redefine how a human is judged, paving a way for a less judgmental and Western perspective.

How a person views and interacts with themselves is affected by utilizing VMC. There is no other medium in which users interact with their own faces as much as they do with VMC. It is unusual for a person to watch themselves as they talk which can be very distracting and unnerving. Users often lose focus and instead will watch themselves. In addition, users can be distracted by the format of the interaction. When interacting in face-to-face encounters, people observe the entire body. In VMC, the "talking head" is the only observable feature.

Traditional use of online programs like social media allow users to share photos and videos with appearance-altering filters. Though VMC allows for some modifications, it is not to the same extent. The version of the self being portrayed in VMC is both more authentic than

the possibly heavily edited social media posts and also inauthentic. It is more authentic where there is limited editing, but it can be inauthentic as users adopt an "on- camera" or public persona that is different from their "off-camera" or private persona. Users will often dress up only the areas of their body that might be on camera and from waist down be wearing pajamas. In addition, VMC offers a way for self-expression with the use of backgrounds. These backgrounds can highlight interests or be used for comic effect. Backgrounds in these formats act like clothing in face-to-face encounters where style communicates aspects of the user's identity.

Meme groups D-F focus on how people interact with and represent their online selves. The first group highlights how distracting it is for the user to see their own face while interacting with others. The second group of memes shows the difference between how polished users look when the camera is on versus how disheveled they look when the camera is off. The final group shows how users have used virtual backgrounds to communicate information about themselves. These memes suggest that the VMC self is different from the usual online self that users have known. Users are forced to interact with their own "talking heads." In addition, they must switch between a public persona and a private persona while in meetings depending on the use of cameras. Finally, they have learned to communicate aspects of their identity utilizing tools like backgrounds. This new online version of themselves that is experienced in the VMC format is often more polished than the in-person version but less flawless than the edited social media version of the user. This format creates a space for the user to interact with a more realistic version of themselves in a way impossible in face-to-face interactions. While research reveals that the initial interaction with this version of themselves

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has not been overly positive, the memes reveal that many people are fascinated, to the point of distraction, with their own image.

<center>Research Question 3</center>

How do image macros, as an example of participatory culture, reflect the user's interaction with VMC, themselves, and with other users in the areas of space and place as experienced in work and school meetings?

Meme groups G-I were sorted according to the following variables: interruption, sharing private space, and power. Memes that identified specific interrupters of meetings were studied. In addition, memes that referenced a collision of private and public space where personal details were shared were also analyzed. Finally, any reference to a change in power in VMC meetings were considered. All of these topics concern a sense of space and place that is utilized during meetings. Space and place are important concepts to consider when studying online communication. While the terms are rooted in sociological discussions, they are intertwined with the meaning created in all places, including virtual ones. Gieryn identifies that space provides the potential for place and place is where meaning is created. For example, the space could be an empty lot where a home, or place, could be built and lived in. In this research, I used both terms with the emphasis on potential for meaning that is inherent in both definitions.

Virtual space is an extension of our understanding of physical space. While we interact in our physical space utilizing our senses of physical things, virtual space is mediated by technological devices. Virtual space (or virtualization) can also be a place of meaning that is not

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solely connected to a realistic appearance. Janz recognizes that if it is a place where meaningful

action can take place then it can be a place of meaning. Hayles adds that the virtual world is

meaningful as it provides an opportunity to relate to others. Both attributes can be found in

VMC. Since it is often used for work and school, there are important tasks that are completed in

them. There is opportunity for relationship building even if it isn't exactly like face-to-face

interaction.

The interaction between users changes in an online format. Dr. Gillian Isaacs Russell, a

psychoanalyst, noted how switching to VMC affected her interaction with her patients. She

observed that having meetings introduced elements of distance and vulnerability that were not

seen face-to-face. For example, the interaction emphasized the distance between them

whenever there were glitches with the system or if the patient did not feel comfortable being

on camera. However, it created a sense of closeness when they interacted because they were

in their own homes, revealing aspects of themselves that are hidden in office meetings. Russell

notes that they would often be in relaxed positions and sometimes would share more than they

previously had. Their professional relationship changed because of meeting online. This change

can also be seen in classroom and work meetings. The power dynamic in the classroom and

work meeting changes because of being online. Foucault observes that power is about exerting

influence over others with their actions. In the face-to-face classroom or work meeting, the

power displayed by those in authority has been developed over time through repetition and

traditional expectations of behavior. The users had to learn how to manage the power dynamic

in this new online environment.

The memes in this chapter focus on how VMC changes the way users interact with their home, reveals private spaces, and challenges the power dynamics of the online meetings. The first group highlights how user's families and pets interact when the user is in an online meeting. For example, one meme states that preparing for a meeting means making sure the cat is secured as it is insinuated that the cat was a disturbance. Another meme shows this same problem with the user's children. The final meme shows the user's cat interacting in the meeting by staring at the camera as though they were part of the meeting. The second group of memes highlights how privacy is challenged by the ability of other participants to see personal things in their home including family members, décor, and even bookmarks when sharing their computer desktop. All of these are things that would not occur in face-to-face meetings. The final group highlights the power dynamic that occurs in these types of meetings. For example, if the host loses internet connection, Zoom will make another participant the host, giving them power over the meeting. Another aspect of the power dynamic is displayed in the meme where the students all changed their name to "reconnecting" to suggest they were all having technological issues and therefore could not participate in the class.

The online space created by VMC is different from face-to-face interaction. There is a clash of public and private space when users cannot always control what other participants may view in their homes. Because there is usually a separation of work/school space from home space, bringing these two together introduces chaotic elements not experienced in face-to-face interactions. In addition, technological issues create opportunities for a change to the power dynamics of meetings. The memes studied reveal that people have learned to adapt to the changes in the environment; for example, when users utilize the opportunity to gain

information about others or to take control of the meeting. They also took power by trying to

control interruptions. Just like the dynamics of face-to-face meetings were hashed out over

time, the new type of interactions created by online meetings will also be refined.

Interpretations of Findings

Observing how VMC altered interactions during school and work meetings concerning

elements of presence, self, and space/place has led to some useful conclusions that can be

compiled to improve future interactions. Technologies like Zoom will continue to be used for

school and workplace situations as well as social situations. Identifying areas to improve the

user's interactions with each other can be helpful.

Presence

The sense of presence, or telepresence, experienced while using VMC is important.

Because this medium serves to replace or supplement face-to-face interactions, it is helpful for

the users to feel connected. There are several actions that can be taken to accomplish a sense

of presence. Users can change the way they interact with the camera. For example, to imitate

looking in someone's eyes, they can look at the camera. If looking at the camera is too

unnatural, there are options to add a camera lens and lower it on the screen, so it is closer to

the other user's face. Before the meeting, the facilitator can encourage participants to chat by

asking questions and having participants share. This interaction can help to replace the missing

discussions that occur before and after face-to-face meetings. During meeting time, the

facilitator can encourage the usage of cameras when feedback is desired. Since camera usage

can also be distracting, it might be helpful to have cameras off during presentations and wait

until there is discussion to leave the camera on. Another important issue is ensuring there is adequate connectivity. Making sure the computer is near the hub or adding an extension can help alleviate this problem. These changes can be helpful, but it is also important to remember that the goal can't be to imitate face-to-face interactions. Instead, users can utilize the affordances offered by this technology that are not available face-to-face. For example, being able to be mobile while talking to a large group allows for users to complete tasks that would be impossible unless all the users were physically near each other. In addition, addressing the challenges of the shared experience can also create a sense of community, such as was created in the creation and sharing of memes. Letting participants discuss the medium allows them to feel closer to other users, especially if they express a similar experience.

Self

Because users see themselves while talking, it is important to consider how a sense of self affects the interactions in VMC. It is helpful to allow users to address their thoughts on the change of interaction. As noted earlier, a sense of community can be created when users discuss experiences. It has been noted that users feel less stress when communicating with friends and family, so allowing this dialogue can possibly increase a sense of comradery. Because seeing oneself can be distracting, it could be helpful to explain how to use the hide self-view during meetings. This way the user can focus on the other participants in the meeting. There should also be clear expectations for camera usage so that users are not surprised by having to go on camera. In addition, ways for users to express themselves can be included in meetings. In person, people utilize clothing styles to reveal their personality and preferences. This type of expression is limited in VMC, so other forms of self-expression should be

encouraged such as the use of backgrounds or other tools for editing that are available. When people feel comfortable, they are more likely to be their authentic self.

Space and Place

When the usage of VMC became ubiquitous, users had to adapt to a meshing of their work/school lives with their personal lives at home. They adapted by altering their environments to limit interruptions or including personal elements in their meetings. Some were clever enough to utilize the change to wrest power from the facilitator. It can be observed that there are ways to utilize this change for the user's benefit or at least attempt to minimize the interruptions. Some additional options can be blurring the background to limit visual distractions. Also using headphones with a microphone can control what sounds can be heard by other users. Having a designated spot for school/work meetings that is away from others in the house and has a more professional backdrop can also be helpful.

Limitations

This dissertation focused on memes created during a specific time when many people were utilizing VMC for work and school. Similarly, it does not focus on how this usage might have changed over the years since this first surge. Furthermore, the data was reliant on creative expressions of interactions reflected in memes that were shared on the internet and users themselves were not surveyed or interviewed to verify the conclusions.

 Suggestions for Future Research

The COVID-19 lockdowns and subsequent necessity for people to work from home has changed the way virtual work is perceived. It would be interesting to determine how much VMC

contributed to this shift. It is also important to consider further changes that can be made to

make VMC more accessible. Since VMC has become more mainstream, it would be helpful to

utilize surveys to more accurately pinpoint further adaptations that might be needed to make

this medium more user-friendly.

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