

EFFECTIVE COMPUTER-MEDIATED BUSINESS COMMUNICATION: FOSTERING IMMEDIACY

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Abstract

Purpose: This study analyzed subordinates' perceptions of supervisors' computer-mediated communication to determine whether supervisors who engaged in text messaging with subordinates, communicated with subordinates via social media, and used emoticons, would be perceived as more immediate than those who did not communicate through these means. **Research Method:** A quantitative research design was used. An online survey was disseminated via snowball sampling. The questionnaire assessed supervisors' computer-mediated communication practices and subordinates' perceptions of supervisor immediacy. **Results:** Consistent with expectations, supervisors who communicated via text messaging and social media as well as those who used emoticons were perceived to be more immediate than those who did not. This indicates that skillful use of these technologies may enhance computer-mediated immediacy behaviors in the business world.

In the constantly evolving communication landscape, technology continues to play a prominent role in business communication. For many employees, the amount of computer-mediated communication (CMC) exceeds the amount of face-to-face (F2F) communication. CMC is defined as any form of communication that takes place through a technological tool, including computers and cellular phones (Christen, 2013). It is imperative that business professionals learn to adapt effective F2F communicative practices, such as those immediate behaviors relied upon to develop perceived immediacy, to the CMC channel.

Communication techniques that work well through F2F communication do not transition seamlessly into the computer-mediated environment (Kelly & Fall, 2011; King, 2007). During F2F communication, supervisors traditionally have been able to rely on immediate behaviors, a set of nonverbal behaviors that instill motivation, increase enjoyment of work, and increase perceived closeness with employees (Hinkle, 2001; Richmond & McCroskey, 2000; Teven, 2007). Yet, the CMC channel does not transmit nonverbal behaviors. Therefore, computer-mediated immediacy cues must be identified for the workplace, and aspiring professionals should be trained to use such cues before entering the workforce.

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so that skillful, effective workplace communication can be facilitated. This manuscript considers the role of CMC in developing immediacy. Specifically, the roles of texting, social media connection, and the use of emoticons are explored.

Immediate Behaviors vs. Perceived Immediacy

In the 1960's, clinical psychiatrist Albert Mehrabian noted that some psychiatrists were habitually successful at getting patients to disclose while others consistently struggled to elicit disclosure (Mehrabian, 1966). Upon observing two sets of psychiatrists interacting with patients, Mehrabian noted that successful psychiatrists consistently displayed a set of nonverbal behaviors lacking in those who struggled with getting patients to disclose. Mehrabian named these behaviors *immediate behaviors* and identified them as a key variable for inducing disclosure and liking among communicators (Mehrabian, 1981).

Immediate behaviors have since been studied in the classroom and workplace, where they have been noted to result in a plethora of prosocial outcomes when displayed by the individual with legitimate power (Kelly, 2012). Immediate behaviors are defined as any communicative behavior that makes a message receiver feel psychologically closer to a message sender (Frymier, 2012). In the United States, smiling, eye contact, relaxed body posture, forward lean, and vocal inflection are all typically perceived to be immediate behaviors.

Perceived immediacy is the psychological response to a sender's communicative behaviors (Kelly & Westerman, 2014). When the behaviors are perceived to be immediate, perceived immediacy increases. However, the display of commonly perceived immediate behaviors (e.g., smiling, eye contact, vocal inflection, etc.) does not necessitate that perceived psychological closeness will increase because people respond to their perception, not reality. For example, if eye contact is mistaken for a stare, then perceived psychological closeness will decrease, despite a behavior commonly identified as immediate being displayed with intention to increase closeness (Kelly, Rice, Wyatt, Ducking, & Denton, 2015). Therefore, perceived immediacy is the actual change in psychological distance that results from observing all behaviors displayed simultaneously, both immediate and non-immediate. Although there is a high probability that displaying an identified immediate behavior will result in increased perceived immediacy, individual perception can negate this, resulting in no change or an increase in perceived psychological distance (Kelly, 2012).

Immediacy in the Workplace

The importance of immediacy displayed by an individual with legitimate power cannot be overemphasized. In addition to being one of the most influential of all instructional communicative behaviors (Zhang, Oetzel, Gao, Wilcox, & Takai, 2007), immediacy also is very powerful in the workplace. Richmond and McCroskey (2000) were the first to study supervisor immediate behaviors, finding

that not only did supervisor displays of immediacy improve subordinates' attitude and motivation at work, but that subordinates also were prone to reciprocating immediate behaviors so the workplace communication climate became more comfortable for all parties. Teven (2007) found that supervisor displays of immediate behaviors increased subordinates' job satisfaction, enjoyment of their work, and liking of the supervisor as confirmed by Hinkle (2001).

Kelly and Westerman (2014) next took a more nuanced look at supervisor immediacy, looking at both supervisors' immediate behaviors and subordinates' perceived immediacy. Findings indicated that both immediate behaviors and perceived immediacy were positively related to subordinates' motivation, job satisfaction, and sense of empowerment, while both were negatively related to subordinate burnout. MacDonald and Kelly (2014) further investigated supervisor immediate behaviors and subordinate perceived immediacy, finding both positively related to subordinates' organizational citizenship behaviors (i.e., loyalty, obedience, and participation).

Rationale

Although computer-mediated immediacy behaviors have not been studied previously in the business context, previous research in the classroom may inform hypotheses. Christen, Kelly, Fall, & Snyder (In Press) identified that in the online classroom, students considered the use of emoticons to be an immediate behavior when used by professors. Emoticon use by professors made the meaning of textual computer-mediated messages more readily apparent to students, thereby reducing cognitive dissonance. Following this logic, emoticon use may be an immediate behavior when displayed by supervisors as well. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Supervisors who use emoticons when communicating with subordinates will be perceived as more immediate by subordinates than those who do not use emoticons.

Kelly and Fall (2011) also found that timeliness and perceived interactivity of communication played a large role in students' perceptions of online instructor immediacy. Students felt that the faster and more frequently instructors engaged in communication with students, the more immediate was the behavior. Because text messaging is designed to illicit immediate responses, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Supervisors who use text messages to communicate with subordinates will be perceived as more immediate than those who do not use text messaging.

In an interpersonal communication study, Christen (2013) argued there is a connection between immediacy and social presence. In essence, the more a message receiver can detect of the message sender's personality through

computer-mediated messages (social presence), the psychologically closer the receiver will feel to the sender (increased perceived immediacy). Because social media employs the use of casual, personal communication projected on a public platform, it becomes a platform to develop social presence (Kelly, Christen, & Snyder, 2013). As such, the use of social media should increase perceived immediacy via social presence. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Supervisors who interact with subordinates via social media will be perceived as more immediate by subordinates than those who do not use social media.

Method

The following sections provide an overview of the participants, procedures, and instrumentation employed in the study. A quantitative methodology was utilized so that perceived immediacy could be measured for careful demarcation of groups.

Participants

An online survey was used to collect data through snowball sampling ($n = 318$). Participants were on average 29 ($SD = 10.05$) years old and had worked for their current organization for an average of 4.22 ($SD = 6.14$) years. Participant gender broke down as follows: 123 (38.7%) males and 195 (61.3%) females. Among participants, 99 (31.1 %) were connected to supervisors through social media, 161 (50.6%) had communicated with their bosses via text message, and 83 (26.1%) had supervisors who used emoticons when communicating via CMC.

Procedure

The researchers received approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the following procedure. Participants received a link to the online survey via social media or email. The link was accompanied by a message soliciting participation, which described the study as an attempt to understand supervisor-subordinate communication. As an incentive, participants were given an opportunity to provide a phone number in order to be eligible for the drawing of a \$20 gift card. No one was under obligation to participate in the study. Participants who provided a phone number were ensured that it would be downloaded into a data file separate from responses to the questionnaire and be secured. Participants needed an average of 10 minutes to participate in the study.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire consisted of two measures and demographics. Three closed-ended items were included, which asked participants if they communicated with their supervisor via text messaging and social media as well as whether their supervisor used emoticons.

Immediate behaviors were assessed through McCroskey, Richmond, Sallinen, Fayer, & Barraclough's (1995) Revised Nonverbal Immediacy measure. This measure was adapted to the supervisor-subordinate context, replacing the term "teacher" with "supervisor." The measure consisted of six Likert-type items. The reliability score was $\alpha = .74$. McCroskey et al. (1995) reported that the measure has strong concurrent and discriminant validity.

Perceived immediacy was assessed through Kelly's (2012) Perceived Immediacy measure. This measure consisted of 14 semantic differential items. The reliability score was $\alpha = .96$. Kelly (2012) reported that the measure has strong content validity.

Results

The first hypothesis predicted that supervisors who used text messaging would be perceived as more immediate than supervisors who did not text. An independent samples t-test was used to test this prediction. The data were consistent with the hypothesis [$t(316) = 3.00, p < .05$].

The second hypothesis predicted that supervisors who used emoticons when communicating with subordinates would be perceived as more immediate than supervisors who did not use emoticons. An independent samples t-test was used to test this prediction. The data were consistent with the hypothesis [$t(316) = 3.58, p < .05$].

The third hypothesis predicted that supervisors who used social media to communicate with subordinates would be perceived as more immediate than supervisors who did not use social media. An independent samples t-test was used to test this prediction. The data were consistent with the hypothesis [$t(316) = 3.13, p < .05$].

Supplemental Analysis

Because supervisors who engage in the communicative behaviors identified in the hypotheses were perceived to be more immediate than those who do not engage in such communication, it is reasonable to assume that these supervisors may display more immediate behaviors overall. Therefore, three more independent samples t-tests were run to identify whether supervisors who utilized these presumed computer-mediated immediate behaviors displayed other nonverbal immediacy behaviors at a higher rate than those who do not. Data were consistent with supervisors who used emoticons [$t(316) = 3.47, p < .05$], text messaging [$t(316) = 2.28, p < .05$], and social media [$t(316) = 3.40, p < .05$] displaying statistically significantly more immediate behaviors overall than supervisors who did not.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that supervisors who communicate with subordinates via text messages and social media, as well as those who use emoticons, are perceived to be more immediate than those who do not communicate through these methods. Further, supervisors who engaged in these CMC behaviors are among those supervisors who tend to use a high volume of immediate behaviors when interacting with subordinates F2F. As such, it is likely that texting, social media connection, and emoticon use are computer-mediated immediacy behaviors in the workplace context.

Therefore, the findings of this study have theoretical and practical applications. To further theory development, these three CMC behaviors can serve as the foundation from which to construct a computer-mediated immediacy measure that can be used in the workplace context. Pragmatically, supervisors can add these behaviors to their communication repertoire with subordinates in order to increase perceived immediacy, which has a variety of psychological benefits for subordinates in the workplace (Kelly & Westerman, 2014; Richmond & McCroksey, 2000; Teven, 2007).

Incorporating these CMC behaviors into a standard communication repertoire may not be initially comfortable for all supervisors. Again, the results of the supplemental analysis revealed that supervisors who engage in these computer-mediated immediacy behaviors also display more immediate behaviors overall. This indicates that these supervisors already are inclined to lower power distances with employees. As such, any training on the use of immediate behaviors in the workplace may need to incorporate not just lessons on how to skillfully display immediate behaviors, but also include a strong rationale for doing so, encouraging supervisors to step out of their communicative comfort zone.

Further, two of these computer-mediated behaviors, social media interaction and emoticon use, fall into a context of somewhat taboo communication for the business world, making their use difficult to navigate. Certainly, allowing colleagues to access social media would give them insight into a personal life, which can enhance perceived immediacy, but this also bleeds interpersonal into professional. Not all supervisors or subordinates may be willing to share social media profiles with colleagues because that blurs the lines of personal and professional relationships; others will feel that social media interaction with a colleague constitutes a forced invasion of Internet freedom (Erickson, 2012; Stutzman & Hartzog, 2012). Therefore, while interaction on social media may be an excellent tool for increasing perceived immediacy, it will only work if both supervisor and subordinate are comfortable with that level of disclosure and do not feel as though the additional interaction is forced.

Also, the use of emoticons is not universally considered to be professional communication. Although the use of emoticons in business correspondence has become increasingly more acceptable over the last decade, not all professionals

view emoticon use as acceptable (Emerson, 2011; Gacey & Richard, 2013; Koneru, 2008). While emoticon use can make the meaning of text-based messages more clear, it can also make messages appear less serious, which is a concern in non-routine messages (Park, Kim & Lee, 2014). Therefore, if emoticons are to be incorporated into regular business correspondence, it must be done with skill and deference to company expectations. A good rule of thumb for students to be taught prior to entering the workforce might be that emoticons should only be used in professional settings after either a supervisor has done so or it has been communicated by a supervisor that using emoticons is acceptable.

Given the professional concerns with emoticons and social media, text messaging might be the easiest of these computer-mediated immediacy behaviors to incorporate across supervisors. Although the more immediate behaviors are displayed, the higher perceived immediacy is likely to be, supervisors may be hesitant. Simply giving subordinates a cell phone number to text in case of emergencies may be a good place to begin for reluctant supervisors. The transition to becoming more immediate with supervisors will only work if subordinates are comfortable with the communicative tools, else they themselves will become dissatisfied with workplace communication (Mueller & Lee, 2002).

Implications for Educators

Most business education research provides a number of guidelines for teaching social media and other communication technologies (Hagler, 2013). As Davis (2013) stated, business professionals need students to be educated on proper social media and texting etiquette before starting a new job, both how and when to use these technologies. Current college students typically consider themselves to be CMC experts, when they actually are unaware of how to communicate professionally through mediated channels. Students need to know both how to skillfully use technology to enhance immediacy when in a supervisory role and how to honor the rules of business etiquette, particularly when in a subordinate role.

Effectively using CMC tools can increase perceived immediacy in the workplace. However, students must be careful not to assume that a supervisor is digitally savvy or will not view a “friend request” as an invasion of privacy. In short, business educators must ensure students’ preparation for properly using CMC tools. The following are suggested methods for such preparation:

1. Provide instructional routines that focus on actively engaging all students in using a wide variety of CMC tools (e.g., instant messaging, social networking, tweeting, etc.) for classroom and professional use. These practices should include not just physically using professional communication on these platforms, but also recognizing when it is appropriate to use these tools.

2. Develop interactive classroom blogs to facilitate professional communication etiquette. Students must be taught professional CMC expectations of tone, clarity, and timeliness.
3. Enhance students' understanding of when it is most appropriate to communicate via email, typically for short messages that require action.
4. Include netiquette lessons as many of today's college students learned to text before email. Netiquette rules such as including professional greetings and closings in email may feel more awkward than professional to students. Further, students often do not understand why CMC connections may feel like an invasion of privacy to individuals not raised in an internet-saturated, media-rich world. These lessons in perception are important for their development as future professionals.
5. Develop texting standards that allow students to practice relaying emergency messages regarding classroom absences or tardiness. Professors who are hesitant to give out their cell phone number to students may use a free service such as Remind, which will generate a phone number to give students which forwards texts to professors on a semester-to-semester basis.
6. Include CMC norms when discussing intercultural communication. As previously mentioned, the immediate behaviors of smiling, eye contact, relaxed posture, vocal inflection, etc. are only considered to be the typical set of nonverbal immediate behaviors in the United States (Kelly, 2012). Eye contact, for example, is a non-immediate behavior in most Asian countries, where it is used as a display of power to increase rather than decrease psychological distance. Therefore, just as the rules of professional communication vary by country in terms of F2F behavior, so, too, do these rules vary for CMC.

Limitations

This study had two limitations. First, those behaviors typically perceived to be immediate, constituting immediate behaviors, often vary across contexts (Kelly, 2012). Typically, immediate behaviors can be relied upon to be consistent across social contexts within the same country. Despite the prior validity portfolio of the Revised Nonverbal Immediacy Scale (McCroskey et al., 1995), the reliability score for the measure is often low (Kelly et al., 2015), as observed in this study. As such, the context-specific nature of immediate behaviors that have historically hampered theory development make measuring these inputs difficult (Kelly et al., 2015).

Second, this study did not control for friendships between supervisors and subordinates established prior to the working relationships. It is possible that some participants had pre-existing interpersonal relationships with their supervisors

before becoming their subordinate. Therefore, a certain level of perceived immediacy may be a carry-over effect from prior friendship and communicative norms. Although the potential influence of prior friendship does not impact the finding that texting, social media connection, and emoticon use inform perceived immediacy, it would be worthwhile to measure the influence of this potential covariate and to identify how many supervisors implemented these norms in a purely business context.

Future Research

Future applied research should look toward identifying how to best train supervisors and subordinates on the use of text messaging, social media, and emoticons in the workplace. Future research should also focus on identifying training techniques that establish a clear need for adopting these tools and train individuals to use them skillfully within the boundaries of professionalism.

Further, it is important to remember that simply because a behavior is typically perceived to be immediate, this does not mean it will always be perceived as immediate. A measure of computer-mediated immediacy behaviors in the workplace would greatly assist researchers in understanding not just the consistency of supervisors' texting, social media, and emoticon use as behaviors that influence perceived immediacy, but also would reveal whether one of these indicators is more influential or whether one has greater variability in influencing perceived immediacy. If one of these CMC behaviors is indeed significantly more influential consistently, then it should be the focus of any future workplace immediacy training research.

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