Nonverbal Communication At Crossroads Post Covid-19 And Consequent Effect On Media Literacy: A Study Report In India

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Abstract

The sudden advent of Covid-19 has certainly left its mark on multiple spheres of life and livelihood. Consequently the entire process and technology of Communication has witnessed colossal shifts with the internet becoming the lifeline even though expanding the physical distance and shrinking the virtual space among communicators. This ramified effect has led the digital mode of communication mainly the virtual platforms (Zoom, Google meet, Teams) becoming more robust with media literacy stepping into unimaginable and unexplored horizons ever.

This study is an attempt to understand the nature of impact caused on Nonverbal elements of Communication by the expansion of physical distance and shrinking of virtual space among communicators and its consequent effect on media literacy in the days to come. The study proceeds by carrying out separate group interviews of college-going age groups, teachers and professionals to understand the kind of impact the virtual platforms have created on nonverbal elements of communication and on media literacy. The analysis of the gathered data may give a clue to understand the type of Communication Model we may witness in the near future and the kind of Media literate people around us.

It is undeniable that the digital mode of communication has certainly helped to rely, fight, sustain and stay connected in this uncertain condition. But the matter of concern is, with the virtual communication technology becoming vigorous and sturdy the nonverbal elements of communication could be undergoing major transformation creating a huge impact on media literacy especially in gauging tone, language and biases.

Keywords: Nonverbal communication, physical distance, virtual platforms, media literacy, body language, digital body language, facial expressions, language, pitch, tone, biases.

Introduction

Communication amidst covid-19 pandemic

Covid-19 pandemic has certainly changed and created new perspectives, etiquettes and technologies of communication. It has started the era of online communication in its real sense and in the newest context. Face to face communication has been drastically replaced by online interactions through virtual platforms. In this period of transition, communication mode and process is undergoing transformation as well. It is important to know and understand that it is the digital mode of communication that has kept us connected during the covid-19 pandemic. Media Literacy has creeped into the syllabus of each class through virtual classrooms, meetings and virtual platforms making it the norm of this new normal. The virtual platforms viz. Zoom, Teams, Google Meet is frequently updating features to satisfy communicators and make communication more real, and effective. But no feature can actually reduce the physical distance between the communicators on virtual platforms. With the physical space, a constant element of concern on virtual platforms, would communication be real and effective? Is the subconscious communication and information exhibited through body language equally understood on virtual platforms?

"Needless to say, these virtual meetings often leave much to be desired and the limited parameters of the platform can set the stage for miscommunication and indeterminacy". (Adams. R.D., 2020)

Understanding the impact of facial expressions, eye contact and bodily movements, language, pitch, tone in a virtual platform of communication can help further our understanding of the significance of these elements in knowing and understanding the audience on a virtual platform. "Nonverbal communication is much more subconscious than verbal communication. While you *have* to think about language before using words, a smile, laugh, facial expression or hand movement can go largely unplanned." (Wolf, J., 2020)

Significance of nonverbal elements in communication

Communication is not merely sending messages; it is also receiving and delivering the desired response. Communication in its truest sense however is more dependent on nonverbal elements than verbal elements of communication. When we communicate, "Nonverbal is everything but the actual language itself," said Tricia Jones, a professor at the Klein College of Media and Communication who specializes in nonverbal communication. "Tone of voice, eye contact, facial expressions, body language—all of these are nonverbal signals" (Mheidley. N., Fares. Y.M., Zalzale. H., & Fares. J., 2020).

"Nonverbal cues not only influence impression formation, but also reflect one's attitude toward their communication partner(s) such as interpersonal attraction, bonding, and biased attitudes. In addition to nonverbal cues that are isolated to the individual, studies have shown that interactional synchrony is associated with more positive interpersonal outcomes."(Kruzic. O.C., Kruzic. D., Herrera. F. & Balenson. J., 2020).

Interpersonal communication, in whatever form is built upon by nonverbal elements of communications viz. tone, language, pitch, eye contact, facial expressions, gestures. "Facial expressions and gestures play a major role in facilitating interpersonal communication, comprehension, and the delivery of intended messages." (Mheidley. N., Fares. Y.M., Zalzale. H., & Fares. J., 2020). It won't be wrong to say that *trust in communication* is incredibly built upon more by nonverbal elements of communication than words.

Understanding the audience on virtual platforms

Knowing and understanding the audience is not only the first step towards effective communication but also minimizes the chances of miscommunication effectively. "To communicate effectively (that is, to achieve your purpose), you must adapt to your audience. Therefore, you must know your audience."(Gvozdika. A.S). On a virtual platform knowing the audience can be really challenging owing to the difficulties in deciphering body language because of physical distance. "In order to communicate effectively and build a level of connection and trust no matter the distance, Dhawan argued that we need to build a critical skill called digital body language. "Digital body language is the cues and signals we send in our digital communication that make up the subtext of our messages."(Dhawan. E., 2021)

Dhawan, in her new book titled as "Digital Body Language" talks about the concept and examples of digital body language-Like our in-person physical body language, digital body language concerns the

subtle cues that signal things like our mood or engagement, and change the meaning of the words we say – be it in text, on the phone or in a video call.

Literature review

Communication is a dynamic interactive process. It is fundamental to humans as social beings for their existence, interaction and functioning with society. "The root of the word 'communication' in Latin is communicare, which means to share, or to make common" (Weekley. E., (1967). "Communication is defined as the process of understanding and sharing meaning" (Pearson & Nelson, 2000). The keyword process in defining communication- "A process is a dynamic activity that is hard to describe because it changes "(Pearson & Nelson, 2000). Another keyword is understanding- "To understand is to perceive, to interpret, and to relate our perception and interpretation to what we already know." (McLean, 2003)

"The term communication is derived from the Latin word, (Communis), which means "to share" (Ezezue. B.O., 2008). Consequently it makes communication not just a sender's 'need' but also a receiver's 'expectation' and an effective connection between the two. It is not just transfer of information, in verbal or nonverbal whatever form. Miscommunication can still take place by transfer of information with a lack of proper understanding and sharing.

Nonverbal communication most generally refers to wordless communication, including gesture, body language, facial expression, intonation of speech, and clothing (Innocent. T., & Haines. S., 2007). Nonverbal aspects have always been an integral element of communication in face-to-face communication even when it is done on virtual platforms. "Nonverbal communication is a way to convey information "achieved through facial expressions, gestures, touching (haptics), physical movements (kinesics), posture, body adornment (clothes, jewelry, hairstyle, tattoos, etc.), and even the tone, timbre, and volume of an individual's voice (rather than spoken content)" (Navarro. J. & Karlins. M.P., 2008)

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"Good nonverbal communication means being willing to share something of yourself and paying attention to others-much as you might in real life. Developing these skills in the digital world can reap long-term rewards for teams and individuals". (York. J., 2022)

The sudden advent of COVID-19 has widened the horizons of the virtual platforms (Gmeet, Zoom,Teams,etc) of communication in everyday life like never before. From meetings, seminars, conferences, teaching & coaching classes to job interviews and even social meetings, everything has been conducted on virtual worlds or platforms. "Virtual worlds, which act as persistent, avatar-based social spaces, afford users with opportunities for intercultural communication and self-expression" (Thomas. D. & Brown. J.S., 2009)

Connecting with the audience on virtual worlds might not always be as pleasant as face-to- face connection because of the sense of lack of nonverbal aspects of communication involved. It is different and difficult to understand the facial expressions, gestures and posture of the speaker as well as the audience on the virtual platforms. Connecting with the audience on virtual platforms or worlds was always a matter of concern and was never a comfort zone for many. "The hardest part of a virtual presentation is the beginning, when it feels most like nobody is listening. 'Uh…is this working? 'or 'Can everyone hear me?' gets the presentation off to a weak start and reinforces the distance. Instead, begin with something that brings everyone in. The chat function is a great way to get immediate audience response" (Gershman. S., 2020). The pandemic has forced us to explore all the unexplored areas of virtual worlds in a positive light. The pandemic has made it indispensable for now and ever. The communicators of the virtual worlds being sure about its growing acceptance and longevity are inclined to develop skills and techniques to get a positive response. "Executives have for years feared the disconnect between teams operating virtually and those in the office. When remote working became the only option, people became more aware of its benefits and now insist that their companies embrace it. With a whopping 159% increase in flexible-work policies even before the pandemic, new trends show a higher commitment to lead in a virtual space"(Noureddin.L., September, 2022).

Deciphering intentions, motives, and biases are key aspects to media literacy. The term 'Media Literacy' is defined as the ability to access, comprehend and responsibly use media and information in our personal and professional spheres. Media literacy—indeed literacy more generally— "is the ability to

access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages in a variety of forms" (Aufderheide. P., 1993; Christ & Potter, 1998). Not just the content, even the communicators at times, are carriers of messages with their respective verbal, nonverbal and paraverbal medium of communication. Understanding the internal language which is largely dependent on nonverbal and paraverbal cues is an integral part of media literacy. "Mass media" is defined as "means or instruments serving as carriers of messages from a communicator to a mass audience" (Ceulemans. M. & Fauconnier. G., 1979). Nonverbal cues are an excellent source for deciphering perspectives, motives, agendas and intentions and play a crucial role in coding and decoding messages. Media has always been quite prompt in observing any change in the society in whatever form. The influence of media can be well understood by the changes it has brought in even speech and language. "Language has become more speech-like. The convergence and interdependence of the word and the picture is now a commonplace in most traditional media" (Dasgupta. B., 2018). The media today form, de-form, move and educate our behavior, attitude and skill. It influences our Thought Process. This has made it important to understand the nature of impact it is creating on its users. The technological advancements in the field of media as a result of the social distancing imposed by the terror of covid-19 has certainly set new grounds, patterns and etiquettes for media communication and consequently on media literacy.

Objective

The study specifically aims to understand the kind of transformation nonverbal communication might undergo in coming years as a result of massive exposure to communication on virtual platforms. Would certain aspects of media literacy dependent on nonverbal communication undergo slow but conspicuous transformation to understand and interact with the audience on virtual platforms effectively, in the post Covid-19 society?

Methodology

Respondents

A purposive sample consisting of **27** participants comprising college-goers, teachers and professionals who are highly dependent on virtual platforms namely Teams, Zoom, and Google Meet for their profession and occupation were interviewed in three separate groups. The data collection technique used is focus group interviews (**FGD**). The participants includes:

- FGD-1 (7 teachers from schools and colleges in the age group of 30 -58 years.)
- FGD-2 (11 college-going students in the age group of 18-25 years.)
- FGD-3 (9 corporate professionals in the age group of 26-52 years.)

Procedure

The respondents were told the purpose of the study. The respondents were interviewed on a semi structured questionnaire framed on a set of variables. The secondary data (referred materials and related papers) was used for framing the set of variables for the questionnaire used for the interview. The respondents were interviewed in three groups separately to have a better and detailed understanding about their experience, opinion and beliefs on the given set variables. The set of variables focused and probed on understanding the following:

- The importance of Facial expression and eye language in deciphering information and carrying out communication
- Gauging pitch, tone and intonations
- Understanding biases on virtual platforms
- Vocabulary used in message formation
- Speed of delivery of message
- Overall experience on virtual platforms in getting information and in communication

The data collection tool used is focus group interviews. "A focus group is a research method that brings together a small group of people to answer questions in a moderated setting. The group is chosen due to predefined demographic traits, and the questions are designed to shed light on a topic of interest."(George. T., 2022).

.Focus group interview fits here appropriately as the perception and experience of the respondents form the basis of the study. The research design of the study is based on both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the gathered data. The analysis of the gathered data from the questionnaire gave a quantitative analysis of the set of variables. The qualitative analysis is done by applying narrative and interpretative techniques on the interviews conducted. The study is a detailed analysis-narrative and interpretive of interviews with regard to nonverbal communication in virtual platforms in the present scenario.

A comparative analysis was drawn between nonverbal communication on virtual platforms and face to face communication. It was done mainly to understand the nature of transformation: the nonverbal communication (if any) is going through in the present condition with respect to the new communication pattern. The technique used here is inclusive of comparison and interpretation, for understanding patterns, attitudes, beliefs, opinions and feedback of respondents.

Findings from the interviews.

1. 100% respondents feel that facial expressions and eye language are difficult to understand completely owing to greater physical distance on virtual platforms. The interactions, at times take place even without activating the videos especially by the students who face internet data exhaustion problems. **100% (FGD-2)** students have responded that they cannot activate their video features in half of their online classes owing to limited internet data packages available to them. **FGD2** and **FGD3** respondents agreed that they sometimes keep their videos deactivated even without facing any technological issues.

2. 100% respondents depend largely on Tone of voice in place of facial expression and eye language to understand the audience's mood, emotion and intention. **FGD-1 and FGD-3** respondents emphasize on Voice Modulation to hold the audience and build trust in communication. They even can make out a difference between fake information and genuine information from the tone and language better than face to face interaction.

3. Surprisingly, a good percentage, **almost 50% of the sample** respondents are even working on their vocabulary to become better communicators on virtual platforms. These respondents are using more positive and inclusive words (We in place of I, Ours instead of my) to connect with their audience and build a rapport and trust.

4. FGD-2 respondents believe that keeping the rate of delivery of messages slower can be an effective technique to avoid miscommunication.

5. 100% respondents believe that communication through virtual platforms will continue even decades after Covid-19 as it is time and energy saving and cost effective.

6. FGD3 respondents even commented that it is easier for them to understand biases (if any) on virtual platforms as they are better auditory learners than visual learners.

Analysis

Tone and Voice modulation has taken a front seat in comparison to eye language and facial expressions when it comes to nonverbal communication through virtual platforms. Tone, pitch and intonations, choice of words are playing a more important role than ever. The hint of honesty, dishonesty, anger, disgust, exhaustion, interest, disinterest or even pleasure is being understood more by voice delivery. A speaker in a virtual platform is more focused on tone and voice modulation to keep the communication dynamic, non- monotonous and effective. Facial expression, eye language and gestures which were earlier more dominant in nonverbal communication are being compensated by tone, voice modulation and choice of words. A less confident speaker sees the physical distance on a virtual platform as an advantage as it provides him the comfort of not facing the audience directly and overcoming inhibitions of public speaking.

Apart from voice modulation another observable change is that the speed of words and message delivery has also slowed down on virtual platforms. A speaker on a virtual platform speaks at a slower rate than usual to avoid any miscommunication resulting out of haste. Moreover, genuine information is generally not passed in a hurry.

A communicator on a virtual platform is more sensitive and responsible in the selection of words for communication. Even more positive and inclusive words are being used for communication. It may be said that in the coming days a communicator is becoming more sensitive, empathetic and responsible towards the choice of words for communication. Many communicators are emphasizing on diction as well to improve the tonal quality.

The new pattern of communication emerging as a result of Covid-19 pandemic has a lot of potential aspects. It's just not the eyes that speak the truth. Even our vocal tone speaks as much truth as our eyes.

Conclusion

To assume and understand the nature and process of the communication model we might experience in the post covid-19 era, it is important to critically analyse and evaluate the process and nature of communication we are currently experiencing on virtual platforms. The technological advancement in the digital mode of communication has not only helped people remain safe, informed and connected but also made the medium user friendly and popular. It is possible that after the pandemic ends and the safety protocols are lifted, people will certainly adopt the old ways of face to face communication but not by discarding the new pattern of communication on virtual platforms. It is expected that a good majority of the population will continue with digital mode in addition to face to face communication.

The study shows a communicator now is even more concerned not just about communication but also about miscommunication and in the coming days we hope to witness a transformation in exhibiting certain elements of nonverbal communication as people might work more on voice modulation, tonal quality, tone, pitch, intonations, choice of words and even diction to develop a Vocal Signature. A powerful Vocal Signature might become one of the strongest symbols of authentic information, a new norm in the years to come.

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