

HG2052 Language, Technology and the Internet

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Assignment 1: Analysis of a Medium of Communication

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1. Abstract

This paper will provide a brief description of Zoom and a summary of a study done on students' perceptions of online learning through Zoom and the application's effectiveness as a communication tool in the classroom. This is followed by an analysis of the properties of Zoom and its effects on communication in terms of its efficiency when used in meetings. A brief explanation of Zoom's general effects on society will also be included. Finally, Zoom will be compared as a medium of communication according to the seven features by David Crystal to determine if it is more speech-like or text-like.

2. Introduction

Zoom is a cloud-based video conferencing service that allows users to meet each other virtually through video and audio conferencing, webinars, live chats, screen-sharing and other collaborative capabilities. With its compatibility with the Mac, Windows, Linux, iOS and Android in addition to its free option, Zoom is accessible to almost everyone. Zoom's appeal comes largely from its simplicity: easy to get started, a lightweight application, and popular features like Gallery View all condensed together into one application (Antonelli, 2020).

While it is mostly thought that the Covid-19 pandemic contributed greatly to the rise in usage of Zoom, the platform has been growing rapidly long before the pandemic and had already surpassed larger competitors in preceding years as shown in Fig 1.

Most Popular Video Conferencing Apps

Okta's Business @ Work (2020)

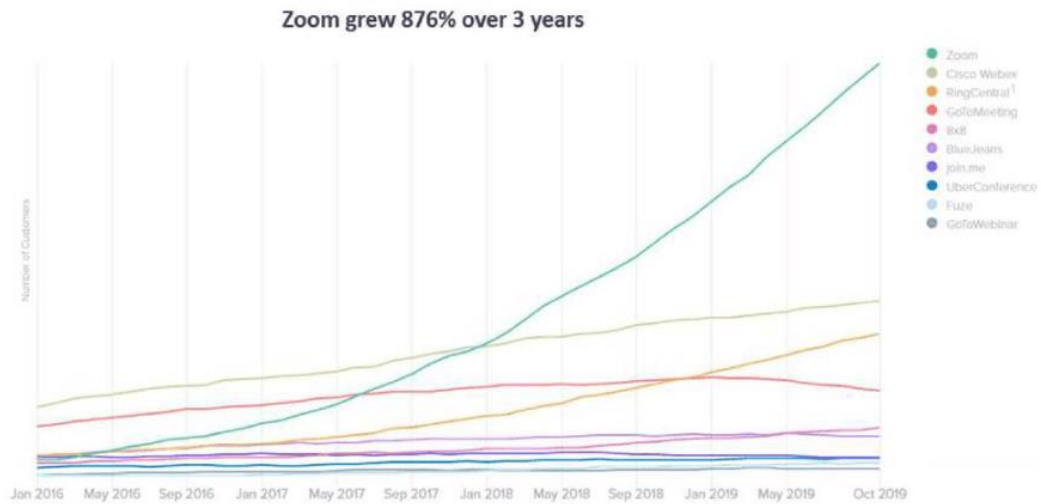


Fig 1. Growth rate of video conferencing platforms (De Silva, 2020)

Of course, the pandemic is a key player in increasing the number of people using Zoom. Zoom saw an increase in 1.99 million monthly active users in 2019, but added 2.22 million monthly active users in only the first 2 months of 2020 (Novet, 2020) when the pandemic became a bigger issue globally.

3. Summary of relevant literature

A recent study was done on the use of Zoom as a classroom communication tool during the Covid-19 pandemic when physical classroom sessions were suspended. This study was done to investigate the perceptions of students with regards to a flipped classroom model based on Zoom as well as to obtain suggestions for improving these such classes. It was found that 92% of participants preferred having the study material shared beforehand instead of concurrent sharing of texts, almost 93.5% found the study material to be of much help and 79% of students found the Zoom sessions useful for clearing any doubts regarding the study material.

However, it was interesting to note that 40% of students were unable to keep up with the progress of classes that were conducted daily, which resulted in students suggesting lessening the number of classes to help them cope with the study material. Most importantly, majority of students preferred moving back to the physical classroom setting rather than continue having the online mode of learning. (Hironmoy, Kuntala, Saha and Ghosal, 2020)

4. Properties of Zoom and its effect on communication

Zoom can help make communication more efficient. Zoom's feature of allowing individuals to mute their microphone makes things easier for the meeting facilitator, as unwanted background noise and distractions are omitted, allowing easier and clear delivery of information. The host may also use polls to get a gauge of participants' opinions and narrow down discussion to the main points. In addition, the 'reactions' feature as shown in Fig. 2

allows participants to give their feedback during the meeting without disrupting the meeting as the facilitator can adjust according to real time feedback. Hence, these features available in Zoom makes communication more effective as it lessens disruptions and allows a smoother flow in meetings.

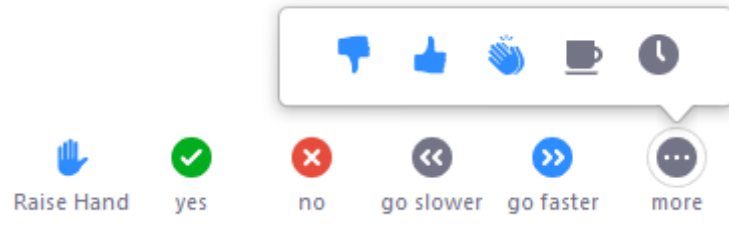


Fig 2. Zoom's 'reactions' feature (Aarnet, 2021)

However, Zoom may also make communication ineffective. The option of turning off one's camera during meetings may make communication awkward as the presenter is unable to get extralinguistic cues such as facial expressions from their audience. Also, turning the camera off means that it is impossible for others to see what an individual is doing. Even with their cameras on, one may choose to engage in other activities online, since it is impossible to ensure that everyone is paying attention. With freedom to do as they please, these individuals may become distracted, causing inattentiveness that can result in missing important messages during online discussions.

5. General effects of Zoom on society

Reducing social isolation

Zoom's virtual meetings help to reduce social isolation by helping to establish connections through collaboration (Maul, Berman and Ames, 2018). In a research done on dissertation chairs and students using Zoom, it was found that developing relationships between the dissertation chairs and students helped to build feelings of belonging to the community and university. Students felt that video communication through Zoom had helped in building their relationship with their dissertation chairs, which reduced their social isolation (Maul, Berman and Ames, 2018). Zoom's video communication helps to create and reinforce social bonds by enhancing a sense of belonging to a community through interactions between geographically dispersed individuals.

Cyber security risks

With the Covid-19 pandemic limiting reducing the possibility of physical interactions, Zoom has seen a large increase in usage for not only to maintain social relationships, but also for meetings in the business and classroom settings. However, this large increase comes with security concerns. 'Zoombombing', which refers to someone logging into a meeting they were not invited to and dropping disturbing images, had become a cause of concern for many users. Posting pornographic content and using racial slurs during video chats were some of the acts done by 'Zoombombers'. The fact that only a single access code and password is needed to log into a Zoom meeting room does not help with security measures when it falls into the wrong hands (Wylde, 2020). Simply searching 'Zoom.us' on Twitter will bring up multiple links to meetings that can be used by anyone (O'Flaherty, 2020). While features such as the 'Waiting Room' and the host mute controls have helped increase the level of

security on Zoom, users should still take precautions to make themselves less vulnerable to cyber risks.

6. Seven features introduced by Crystal (2006, Ch3-6)

Firstly, the Zoom application is both time-bound and space-bound, though it can be argued that it is more of the former. The audio and video chat features are time-bound as it allows users to interact directly with each other in real time. Similar to the characteristics of writing, the messages sent in the in-meeting Zoom chats are permanent once sent, making the application space-bound. However, this feature also has characteristics of speech as individual users can choose to send a private message to another participant of their choice (Zoom, 2020), forming a direct line of communication between a speaker and a known addressee.

Secondly, Zoom has more speech-like characteristics with regards to the aspect of spontaneity. The video and audio chat feature allows communication with no lag in production and reception, as users communicate in real time. Of course, this may be affected by connectivity issues with the Wifi, though technological advancements should have helped improve the issues greatly. Repetitions and rephrasing may also be common due to connectivity issues that cause unclear delivery of what was said. However, it is notable that the in-meeting chat feature has characteristics that make it more text-like. As the chat may not be constantly monitored throughout the meeting when users can speak freely to each other, there is a possible lag in production and reception when the message is only seen some time after it has been sent.

Thirdly, Zoom seems to lean more towards speech with it making face-to-face communication possible. When activated, the video chat feature allows users to see one another's extralinguistic cues such as facial expressions and gestures. Speakers can also get immediate feedback from their audience through back channelling. In addition, deictic expressions are common as speakers can use words such as 'you' and 'now' to refer to the situation that they are talking about.

Next, communication on Zoom is more similar to the characteristics of speech in terms of it being more loosely structured. Contractions such as 'doesn't' or 'she's', together with informal vocabulary, can be observed when users employ a more informal language style. However, even when employing a more formal style in situations such as presentations, such contractions are still used commonly. Obscenity can also be observed especially in less formal contexts, which makes it similar to speech. On the other hand, the in-meeting chat may be more elaborately structured, where some items are rarely pronounced. These items may include equations or links to pages and documents, thus making it text-like.

Also, Zoom's social interactivity makes it more similar to speech. It is well suited to social functions such as maintaining social relations and networks, as well as expressing attitudes and opinions (Bond, 2021). This has become particularly prevalent with the Covid-19 pandemic, where limitations on physical social events and classes have led to people turning to video conferencing services to maintain communication with one another. Prosody and non-verbal features like gestures can also be observed through the video chat feature.

In addition, Zoom is more speech-like in the sense that it is immediately revisable. Users are unable to take back what has been said, though they can rephrase their speech at once when given feedback by their audience. Interruptions and overlap between speakers are also

common (Bond, 2021). These characteristics make it obvious that Zoom is definitely more speech-like than text-like.

Lastly, Zoom is more prosodically rich like speech. The audio chat feature allows for elements of speech such as intonations, loudness, tempo and rhythm (Bond, 2020) among others. Messages sent in the in-meeting chat can also mimic prosodic features, such as capitalisation of letters representing loudness. These mimics can help the messages adopt speech-like characteristics.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, Zoom provides a convenient and mostly effective platform for communication while serving social purposes in reducing social isolation and strengthening relations between people. While not much research has been done on Zoom due to its rising popularity only in recent times, it seems that the application is becoming or has become the ‘new normal’ among people in terms of maintaining social relations. Comparing Zoom to speech-like and text-like characteristics using David Crystal’s seven features, it seems that Zoom has more speech-like characteristics, though it does possess some text-like characteristics as well.

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