On- and Off-Screen: Self-Presentation in Video Meetings

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ABSTRACT

Video meetings have become a ubiquitous part of daily life since the COVID-19 pandemic, part of a broader turn to digital media that has profoundly altered the way friends, families, and colleagues communicate with one another. Video meetings are a new professional space, one to which individuals transfer their self-presentations and visual representations, but one in which the strategies for doing so remain fluid. This qualitative study aims to provide insight into video meetings as multi-dimensional social practice. The methodological approach of this study involves qualitative analysis, employing unobtrusive observation and semi-structured interviews to gather rich data on participants' experiences. Eight participants were involved in this pilot research, providing valuable insights into their experiences around video meeting practice. Through this investigation, the study aims to contribute to our understanding of how individuals make sense of this newly adopted communication practice, shedding light on the evolving role of video meetings as a fundamental method of interpersonal interaction. By examining the interaction between users and objects within the video meeting environment, this research offers new perspectives on the meaning-making processes inherent in this contemporary mode of communication. Building on Goffman's dramaturgical approach, which claims that people present their selves as a performance via stages surround themselves with, this study explores video-meeting participants' self-presentation strategies and the intentions behind them at the intersection of two scenes, in the physical space they actually occupy and in the camera images reflected on screen— that is, their "backstage," where the webcam cannot reach, and the stage itself, the screen. Adopting these two concepts, the study also leads a discussion on potentials of dramaturgical approach as a way to understand the intricate nature of video meetings as an interaction network.

Keywords: video meetings, presentation of self, Goffman

1 Introduction

During the pandemic, people turned to video meeting practice as an effective way to maintain interpersonal connections amidst the restrictions. Video meetings, which can be defined as an alternative communication space before the COVID-19 pandemic, have been updated as a substitute for everyday life practices in the post era of pandemic restriction. It is embedded in education, work life, personal relations and almost every interaction that individuals need to maintain. Despite its resemblance to face-to-face interaction, interactions in video meetings differ due to the fact that individuals do not physically share the same space, which affects vision [1] and non-verbal elements of interaction, such as body language, are constrained [2]. This study focuses on video meetings as an alternative social setting and, within the framework of Goffman's dramaturgical approach, [3] offers a perspective to reveal the interaction in video meetings. Goffman as a symbolic interactionist [4] clearly limited his sociological examination to in-person interactions. However, the potential of the dramaturgical approach in explaining social interactions was later utilised in other studies, particularly in the context of mediated interactions [5-7]. Video meetings differ from face-to-face interactions due to their distinct nature, which shares similarities in dimensions and spontaneity but also imposes limitations, similar to other mediated forms of communication. Considering Goffman's dramaturgical approach, what makes video meetings unique is that participants find themselves

simultaneously in two different phases of social interaction – front and backstage. The division between these two concepts, separated solely by camera angle and microphone, is not only dynamic but also sharp due to the nature of interactions in video meetings. Moreover, tools for video mediated communication are not only separator for front stage and backstage but also consolidative for intricate stages on to each other. With the aim of creating a compound understanding of video meetings as a social environment, a dramaturgical approach [3] is applied on narratives to explore how video meeting practices are perceived by participants in relation to face-to-face interaction. As this paper is a part of on-going thesis, given findings of the research reflect the stage where the thesis stands. Hereby, the research process is the focus of the paper as the findings are not finalised yet. However, this paper provides a perspective to explore video meetings through the structure of dramaturgical approach.

2 Theoretical Framework: An Overview of Goffman's Dramaturgical Perspective

This study aims to provide an insight into interpersonal interactions in the context of video meeting practices. With this objective, it seeks to develop a perspective on the transformation of interpersonal interaction through the nature of video meetings. To achieve this, it applies Goffman's [3] dramaturgical approach to the practice of video meetings. Goffman's dramaturgical approach offers a compelling perspective for analysing the dynamics of social interactions and identity construction in everyday life. This framework draws an analogy between social interactions and theatrical performances, where individuals assume various roles and manage their 'self-presentation' to create specific impressions. It explores how individuals present themselves in diverse social settings, encompassing both physical and social contexts.

Goffman's approach encourages us to view any interaction as a form of play, with actors and an audience. It highlights that individuals adapt their personas and behaviour based on the social context and perceived audience expectations. Social interactions, in this perspective, are "performances" where individuals enact their roles in front of an audience. This approach serves as a crucial tool for our study, facilitating an understanding of the meaning-making process in video meetings through the exploration of 'self-presentation' as perceived by the actors in their performances. Within each interaction, these performances are continually reenacted, encompassing two interrelated concepts: "manner" and "appearance". **Manner** involves how individuals behave, encompassing their speech, body language, and demeanour, all carefully adapted to align with the particular expectations of the given setting. On the other hand, **appearance** pertains to physical attributes and presentation, including clothing and grooming choices, which collectively contribute to the impression that individuals convey. These elements collectively constitute what Erving Goffman [3] referred to as the "personal front" which carries the structure of a performance. These elements collectively form what Erving Goffman [3] termed the 'personal front,' embodying the structure of a performance. Another crucial aspect of the front is the setting, adopted to describe the arrangement of the space where the interaction unfolds and the objects that constitute the environment. The configuration of this space and the nature of the objects within it works as decisive for the context of the interaction. The success of a performance is intricately tied not only to the personal front but also to the setting. The setting plays a fundamental role in framing the performance within the context of socially accepted meanings. In the context of this research, the storefront represents the public persona that individuals consciously construct and display to others during video meetings, serving as the image projected onto the screen. It serves as a reflection of the image individuals wish to project in a given setting, invariably influenced by societal norms and expectations.

Performances occur on the "stage" which Goffman [3] also describes as the "front," where interpersonal interactions take place, and where individuals craft their "self-presentation." In the context of video meetings, the **screen** serves as the backdrop for this **front stage**. Interactions occur through the

applications or platforms used. The transition to this digital medium necessitates the adaptation and updating of existing concepts such as manner and appearance. In line with the dramaturgical approach, actors strive to arrange their performances in the most convincing manner possible, considering the expectations of the setting.

Similar to actors preparing for a theatrical role, individuals utilise impression management techniques to convey particular images, identities, or characteristics to their audience, whether consciously or subconsciously. These techniques encompass elements such as physical appearance, verbal and non-verbal communication, and behaviour within a specific social context. Impressions are crafted through choices of clothing, hairstyle, tone of voice, words, gestures, and adherence to social norms. The concept of **impression management** gains particular relevance in today's interconnected world, where digital communication and social media amplify the opportunities and challenges of shaping and maintaining desired social personas. It is a dynamic process that adapts to different settings and audiences, reflecting the complexity of social interactions. Goffman's approach posits that this is not a unilateral effort but the foundation of mutual interaction. Beyond the "front stage," where individuals actively perform and present themselves, lies the "backstage" – a space where they can shed their public persona. The backstage represents a personal, less visible realm where individuals can be authentic without the need to conform to the impressions they maintain in their front stage roles. Here, individuals engage in activities that are personal, spontaneous, and unscripted. They can share personal anecdotes, express frustrations, reveal vulnerabilities, and engage in unfiltered self-expression. It's a place where individuals can recharge, reflect, and prepare for their next front stage performance.

In face-to-face interactions, the concept of the backstage can be simply defined as the space where there is no audience. However, in the context of video meetings, it may not be as straightforward to discuss the presence of an audience. Video meeting tools and practices introduce a new perspective to the concept of "dramatic realisation" in interpersonal interactions. Individuals who interact through these tools construct their performances and self-presentations within the possibilities and limitations offered by the tools. Since interactions in video meetings occur through screens and audio devices, everything that the tools do not convey about individuals to other participants will be considered within the scope of the backstage in this study.

3 Methodology

The research was designed in line with Goffman's dramaturgical approach, and as a result, the structure of the data collection process was carried out within this framework. Given the emphasis on societal norms and behavioural patterns in this approach, the first step involved using the unobtrusive observation [8] to observe and understand the reflection of these norms and patterns in video meetings. The data collected through this method served as a foundation for the semi-structured interviews, rather than directly forming the output of the research, thus providing valuable insights and preparation for the in-depth interviews conducted with the participants.

3.1 Unobtrusive Observation

With the intention of exploring the video meeting culture and its process since the beginning of pandemic, unobtrusive observation [8] became the first step of the research process. The posts on social media that contained statements about video interviews were scanned. Visual and/or linguistic content produced about video meetings on the internet was defined as data and analysed. The time period chosen for the production of the scanned content was the period after March 2020, when the pandemic was officially declared, and the end of the pandemic restrictions, referred to in the study as post-pandemic. The data obtained from the

first step of research was used to understand the behaviours and habits in video meetings. But it must be stated that the data obtained provide a perspective of users who preferred to share their thoughts and emotions. Capturing images on the web can give us a partial representation of the culture, not a whole view for it [9]. Thus, it was observed that video meetings maintained their place in people's lives in different dimensions in the post-pandemic period. Video meetings, which continue to be widely used for work, education, and leisure activities, have given rise to their own culture and have become associated with specific behaviours and customs in people's lives, even as physical interactions have resumed.

3.2   Semi-Structured Interviews

In order to gain in-depth insights into how individuals make sense of video calls, a qualitative research method, semi-structured interviews, was conducted. As a selection criterion for participation in the study, the 8 participants were required to use video calls for at least four days a week, with a minimum of half of these calls having their cameras turned on, regardless of the purpose. The eight participants came from diverse professional backgrounds, such as law, education, and NGOs, with ages ranging from 21 to 49. The study's focus was not on the participants' demographics but rather on their active involvement in two distinct fields with weekly meetings, aimed at diversifying their experiences with video meetings. Considering the context of the research, the interviews were conducted via video meeting applications. Qualitative research through video meetings had emerged as a viable option, complete with its potentials and limitations, even before the pandemic [9,10]. However, in this study, the primary reliance on video meetings stems from distinct reasons. The purpose of conducting interviews via video meetings was twofold: firstly, to ensure participants were in their familiar contexts, conveniently aligning with the research, where they could provide instant information and intensively facilitate their thinking processes. Secondly, it aimed to enhance the efficacy in aiding participants with the recall of their experiences.

All participants engaged in the interviews from their daily life locations and shared insights into their choices regarding their surroundings. At the outset of each interview, they willingly consented to the use and sharing of all visual data and voluntarily introduced areas not visible through the camera, to the extent allowed by the tools. The objective was to bolster participants' narratives and provide a space where they could describe their experiences in full detail. Each participant brought photos of various interview locations, which had been previously requested. By sharing these photos, they enriched the interviews as a means of communication, enabling them to provide insights into the dynamics of video interviews as comprehensively as possible. After completing the interviews, the recordings were transcribed, and participant identities were anonymized. The transcribed texts underwent qualitative content analysis [11], and the results were interpreted using a dramaturgical approach.

4   Findings: Stages in Video Meetings

4.1   Frontstage of a Video Meeting

Essentially, a video meeting is established by individuals being able to access each other's **images** and **voices**, although these two channels may not be continuously used throughout every video meeting. Unlike face-to-face interactions, video meetings often bring people from different locations together, allowing performances to occur through various tools. The image displayed on the **screen** and the sound transmitted through the **microphone** are mostly controlled by the participants, but they also depend on the tools used and the structure of the meeting applications. Ceylan's (participant/law student) narrative about her video meeting experience is based on how her camera, located at the keyboard level, created an *awkwardness* in the image it projected on the screen. While most participants convey their images using the camera positioned

on the upper axis of the screen, Ceylan's camera, which looked from bottom to top, caused her image to stand out in meetings, even leading to a negative reaction from an instructor during a formal meeting session. In this case, it can be said that Ceylan lost control of the setting during her performance. Moreover, she faced challenges related to **impression management** concerning her attire for a meeting with a specific dress code. To address this issue, she opted to use her phone's camera during official meetings that required the camera to be on.

The transition processes related to developing appearance and manner can be traced in the narratives of the participants as they mention their experiences since the beginning of the pandemic. It is possible to say that the concept of manner has undergone a collective transformation in society and, with some exceptions, have revealed established **behavioural patterns** specific to video meeting practices. Selma, who works in the human resources department of an established company, details how her behaviour patterns have been built through the training provided by the company on *ideal* behaviours in video meetings. These trainings cover details ranging from effective communication in practice to small talk that supports socialisation, and even the use of emojis to depict emotions on camera. Although participants may not have received such training, their narratives confirm the development of similar behavioural patterns with Selma's. For example, if raising one's hand is the normal way to request a turn to speak in a meeting, in video meetings, participants often click on the hand emoji to indicate their request or open the mic to take themselves to the upper part of the participant list.

Appearance, on the other hand, has reached another level for actors in video meetings. The area that is reflected by the camera's view on the screen can be described as a major element of appearance in video meetings. However, appearance is not only shown to the viewers but also to the actors themselves in the same way. As supported by the narratives, individuals clearly adjust their appearances according to the selves they want to present during meetings. Some participants make changes in their appearances based on their current position - "I dress comfortably because they know I'm at home," while others adjust their positioning in the space to fit the meeting setting. In the context of shaping appearance, **objects**, integral to both the setting and roles, play a significant role. Nehir (participant/academician) mentions that she wears earrings for non-family meetings because she doesn't normally go outside without putting them on. The images displayed on the screen during video meetings constitute a facet of the actors' performance settings. Each person's image serves as a snapshot of the setting portrayed in the performance. Despite the individual being situated within a broader setting beyond the visible screen, the audience can only perceive the setting captured by the camera. In the case of Eylem (participant/PhD student), as the blanket has moved out from the camera angle because it is "too personal" can transform into an object that got included to performance by the online pilates instructor in the case of Nehir. In other words, objects that are introduced, desired, or unwanted in video meetings are included in the performance according to the setting or pushed out of the camera's frame. In video meetings, the front stage remains the main structure of face-to-face interactions, but it finds its place with the structure of the new medium and the expanding perspective of the users. In this process, participants attempt to construct their roles in the new front stage, in line with their individual thought structures, in a convincing manner while maintaining the unchanged core structure of face-to-face interactions.

4.2 Backstage of a Video Meeting

According to Goffman's approach, all situations without an audience are defined as backstage. In this context, there is no interaction between the actor and other individuals. Due to the structure of video meetings, actors and the audience exist in a somehow *common* but also *personal* environment. The presence and absence of the audience are no longer defined by clear boundaries but are dependent on interactions

within the world built through the screen and microphone. Areas outside the *camera's view* and *sounds* that do not reach the microphone cannot be part of the performance. The story of someone who concealed her pregnancy during video meetings serves as an example of how a physical change that is difficult to hide in face-to-face interactions can be pushed to the backstage. Relatedly, the concept of "Zoom mullet" [12] emerged during the pandemic and has been added to new generation dictionaries. In this scenario, individuals wear clothing suitable for their role from the waist up, while the lower part of their attire remains hidden from view, allowing for performances that may not necessarily match what is worn below the camera angle. All participants in the study shared experiences in line with this concept. These narratives include instances of individuals wearing pyjamas underneath their shirts and the instinct to *turn off the camera* when suddenly getting up, all to *avoid disrupting the performance*. This reflexive behaviour aligns with Goffman's perspective, wherein individuals develop automatic responses to uphold the credibility of their performances. Video meeting tools provide actors the ability to create a deliberate distance from the audience. For instance, Esra (participant/architect) strategically positions her camera at a 10-degree angle, concealing her wet clothes that fill the entire room. Notably, the setting Esra occupies extends beyond the visible image, yet only a specific, context-appropriate portion becomes a two-dimensional visual on the screen. Elements like laundry, deemed inappropriate for the performance context, are discreetly pushed backstage. As another example, Mehmet (participant/UX designer) and his open wardrobe door becoming the subject of ridicule during a regular work meeting is also the result of the audience unplanned accessing an area and objects belonging to the backstage, leading to a disruption in the audience's expectations regarding the performance. When we assess this scene with a dramaturgical approach, it can be explained with the reason that this scene is actually a section of backstage interactions in video meetings because of the intricate quality of them. During face-to-face interaction, an individual, initially present in a single setting, concurrently exists in two settings with the creation of a virtual environment through the screen and camera. The virtual setting is crafted by projecting a chosen segment from the backstage to the audience, transforming this segment into the stage for the interaction. On video meetings, frontstage and backstage are not only separate but also *intertwined*. They are determined by the boundaries set by the participants rather than situational differences. This becomes possible through the participants' engagement with their reflections on the screen, transcending their physical presence. The concept of setting, transformed into visuals on the screen, and the notion of stage, redefined through the blend of images in the online structure, reveal the fundamental distinctions in interaction between video meetings and face-to-face communication.

5   Discussion

Goffman's approach remains relevant, but the same descriptions belonging to this approach can expand or even introduce new definitions for different social interaction settings. Over the years, with the diversification of forms of social interaction, individuals are recreating their performances under various influences. According to Goffman, being a part of social structure, performances are based on social norms and learned behaviours. The study suggests that this hasn't changed in video meetings; it has simply transformed in accordance with the opportunities and limitations of emerging social settings while adopting a new medium. In this context, Goffman's approach offers the potential to construct a meaningful structure of the qualities of the new form of interaction by evaluating the interactions in video meetings in terms of a long-accepted basis.

Instead of being an abstraction of all the qualities inherent in face-to-face communication, mediated communication is better understood through a dramaturgical approach. Its structure, developed as an alternative to face-to-face communication and built upon it, forms the basis for this understanding. When

examining the visualization of an individual on the screen from a performance perspective, it becomes possible to define the process that generates this visual reflection. As the study progressed, it became apparent that the concepts of **front stage** and **backstage** needed to be extended in the context of video meeting practices. Furthermore, the primary findings of the study prompted the exploration of a novel concept: a scenario where individuals spontaneously occupy both the front stage and backstage simultaneously.

6   Conclusion

This study, conducted within the framework of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach, focuses on video meetings, which are increasingly becoming a fundamental aspect of our social interactions. We aim to explore this practice as it emerges as a permanent fixture in our lives. In approaching video meetings in this context, we analyse participants' actions through newly developed behavioural patterns and accepted norms for this evolving medium. Guided by the idea that performances are shaped by societal understanding, our research began with unobtrusive observation to gain insights into the dynamics of video meetings. The data collected during this phase laid the groundwork for the subsequent semi-structured interview stage. Interviews were conducted with experienced video meeting participants from various fields, and these interviews were analysed using Goffman's dramaturgical approach. The data from the interviews were examined within the framework of this approach to understand how participants described the front stage and backstage aspects in the context of video meetings. This study demonstrates the adaptation of Goffman's concepts, originally designed for in-person interactions, to the findings related to video meetings. In this context, Goffman's dramaturgical approach offers a perspective to define the relationship between the physical setting of the person and the virtual setting in video meetings. As this study represents the initial phase of ongoing research for a thesis, subsequent stages will involve expanding the participant pool and conducting a more comprehensive narrative analysis. Employing an interpretive approach, the goal of this study was to provide a perspective on video meetings as a social context, interpreting them through the lens of Goffman's framework.

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