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MANAGEMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Virtual meetings experience in sports management organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic: A phenomenological inquiry

Sid Terason¹, Jing Yang² and Anuchit Kulwanich^{3*}

Abstract: This study seeks to understand how virtual meetings disrupt or propel the functioning of sports management organizations in Thailand during the COVID-19 pandemic, what is critical to executives meetings held during the time, and the impact on meeting attendees amid the public health crisis. A phenomenological approach was applied to this qualitative enquiry. We conducted a study on a group of the executives in various sports entities in the country to achieve an understanding of their virtual meeting experiences. We gleaned new insights about this phenomenon through the experiences narrated by these individuals. The in-depth interview data were collected from nine executives selected using a purposeful sampling method. The codes relative to their virtual meetings experience were analyzed thematically on the basis of the media compensation theory. Six categories (resource use, communication, logistics, social etiquette, well-being, and interpersonal rapport) were grouped into three themes (organizational function, meeting operation, and personal impact). Future studies could incorporate other dimensions of virtual communication in these settings.

Subjects: Sports Management; Organizational Communication; Group Communication

Keywords: virtual meeting; COVID-19; sports management organization

Thirty years ago, if someone had said that you might be communicating regularly with other people via online platforms half-way around the world, many people would have expressed disbelief. Today, specifically since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, communicating

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The COVID-19 pandemic causes us to comply with the stay-at-home orders which in turn have contributed to a significant change in our lifestyle and work habits. How to meet the organizational goal by way of the novel communication method is our present challenge. Sports management organizations are no exception and have to rely on digital technology to arrange digital communications. This so-called virtual meeting has its characteristics in terms of organizational communication and interpersonal rapport under the sport management context. This study describes this new work phenomenon in today's plague-ridden society from the perspective of managerial staff.

virtually among organizational members has become the norm (Karl et al., 2021). As of September 2021, World Health Organization. (2021, September) had confirmed 2.48 million cases of the coronavirus illness and 22,250 deaths in Thailand. Therefore, the Thai government has imposed social distancing and limited human-to-human contact to restrict the spread of the spread and to avert the wide range of symptoms ranging from mild headaches to fatal respiratory malfunctioning.

In Thailand, the government have instituted a nation-wide lockdown policy for most of 2021, causing sports events to be postponed or canceled. The Ministry of Sports and Tourism announced a revised sports policy and associated practices for sports events on 1 July 2020, including no-spectators football matches and specific protocols for the Football Association of Thailand, football clubs, football athletes, coaches, referees, staff, and related officials. Specifically, the Football Association of Thailand circulated a COVID-19 prevention manual that allowed no more than 50% spectators at an event and applied social distancing measures in all stadiums.

The pandemic has had a devastating effect on the global economy, health care, human resources, and economic entities in all sectors and at all levels of professionalism, including the sports industry. There has been substantial disruption to the operation and transactions of day-to-day activities in sports organizations in the country, requiring restructuring of the way most organizations are managed and how employees behave at work. On account of the COVID-19 pandemic, physical offices have been closed and work activities have been shifted to remote locations (Kelly et al., 2020; Lachance, 2020). To keep connecting and interacting, employees are using technologies such as video conferencing applications to stay in touch with each other (Adams, 2021). There are many online communication platforms such as Skype, Zoom, WebEx, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet. Thus, we have resorted to virtual meetings to protect participants' health and to accommodate mandated public health measures while still maintaining productivity and strengthening bonds and team spirit within the workforce (Sadeqi-Arani & Ghahfarokhi, 2022).

Many problems have derived from virtual meetings. Much as we favor virtual meetings for the sake of convenience and resource conservation (e.g., reducing the carbon footprint), this method of organizational communication has deprived us of the richness of face-to-face interactions (Sadeqi-Arani & Ghahfarokhi, 2022). Some nonverbal cues are not properly delivered or understood (Standaert et al., 2016). Since we need to find ways to maintain good relationships with either colleagues, or clients, or other stakeholders, virtual meetings have proven to be an indispensable substitute for physical interaction during the pandemic. Numerous virtual meetings tools are available in Thailand. Zoom has grown to become one of the most popular video conferencing applications in 2020 in Thailand (Tillman, 2021). It is a popular virtual tool that enables people to communicate—almost as they would in person (McWhirter, 2020). Though not perfect, online platforms have become important tools in overcoming the social distancing problems associated with the COVID-19 outbreak (Long & Khoi, 2020).

1. Literature review

1.1. Media compensation theory

Although the first form of written language appeared in human history over 5,000 years ago, face-to-face communication had been used long before that since it is easier, as it takes less effort than media-based communication (Hantula et al., 2011). Thus, face-to-face media are prone to be considered a natural channel of communication. As humans communicate through diverse platforms, they tend to compensate or modify their communication actions, expectations, or style to such new media (Hantula et al., 2011).

Hantula et al. (2011) propose the media compensation theory, built on the theory of media naturalness (Kock et al., 2007). The theory of media compensation sought to explain how most

people in organizations can work effectively in an environment whose spatial boundaries are blurred by modern media-based communication technology and where close-range communication is not the normal practice any longer. It contended that users of current electronic tools need to change their communication behavior as humans were not biologically created to make use of those devices (Hantula et al., 2011). The media compensation theory emphasizes eight main principles: media naturalness, innate schema similarity, learned schema diversity, evolutionary task relevance, compensatory adaptation, media humanness, cue removal, and speech imperative.

Media naturalness exists when particular media integrate characteristics of personal interaction in their use. Innate schema similarity contends all humans are born with an ability to communicate and to learn languages irrespective of their cultural and social settings. Learned schema diversity refers to the fact that individuals learn to communicate differently through interaction with the environment. Evolutionary task relevance involves the functional similarity between different tasks that is directly correlated with the degree to which a behavior is induced, and the degree of perceived naturalness of the task. Compensatory adaptation occurs when people using media in communicating wish to overcome the obstacles posed by those media and compensate by adjusting their communication behavior. Media humanness refers to how humans, as social creatures, will automatically and socially respond to cues linked with another human being or social interaction. People will behave in a social manner when human-like communication media are present. Cue removal denotes media that provide stimuli or cues but block people from seeing those cues, so those media require greater efforts and adaptation than media that do not provide such cues at all. Speech imperative is based on the observation that the more costly adaptations are, the more important they are for the underlying tasks they support. The ability of communication media to communicate speech-related cues may be considerably more important than their ability to convey information associated with facial expressions and body language.

Media compensation theory differs from existing communication theories in the area of e-laboration. The media naturalness principle advocates media richness theory and the compensatory adaptation principle that favor face-to-face communication. The learned schema diversity principle and the compensatory adaptation principle explain temporal predictions of social theories such as adaptive structuration theory, channel expansion theory, and social information processing theory. The principle also allows various social and media richness theories to be compatible. The cue removal principle accounts for videoconferencing as a less preferred mode of meeting. The media humanness principle explains the human-oriented nature of modern computer technology that emphasizes the interaction between humans (the users) and computers. Media compensation theory draws attention to new directions in potential research on the virtual workplace.

1.2. Virtual meetings

A meeting is an activity set up to serve a work group's purposes (Tracy & Dimock, 2004). A meeting is basically talk-based activities by which we accomplish much of the business of organizations (Karl et al., 2021). Organizations need to attempt to ascertain employees have the chance to keep their work routine smooth, productive, and gainful. To realize this ideal goal in times of crisis, you must organize face-to-face meetings or scheduling specific times for social calls.

Nowadays, most organizations depend on interactions and communications among employees and customers from separate locations. Virtual meetings are important tools for decreasing business travel, protecting employees from the pandemic, and helping to make the operations more efficient. Online meetings provide several benefits for organizations, including streamlined procedures, reduced travel costs, saved time, and decreased environmental effects (Hiselius & Arnfalk, 2021). Ways to service customers are conceived in online environments in order to be more flexible, such as offering online education for products, greater product variety, and easy access for customers in other locations (Szelwach & Mathews, 2021). Zoom platforms even allow the user to load information onto the screen for group viewing (documents, music, PowerPoint

slides and even captions to go along with the speaking or text) while the presentation is occurring, along with a separate chat board for person-to-person communications or group communications on the side. The increased prospects for national and international collaboration can increase productivity, opening up countless prospects for organizations (Hiselius & Arnfalk, 2021).

1.3. Pros and cons of virtual meetings

Online conferences offer many advantages. They can help to eliminate the need for travel, can be held at any time, lower the conference's environmental impact, and reduce the need for food and accommodation. The shift in conference planning via online tools applies to not only the COVID-19 pandemic period, but also with the many global changes occurring continually nowadays (Pedaste & Kasemets, 2021). However, technological solutions come with problems. Sometimes these tools are rejected by certain members of society. Some see online meetings as being very stilted, with associates feeling like they are in "baseball card boxes." In addition, the nonverbal communication signals between people can be missing and often responses can be complex and difficult to interpret in video conferences, leading to cognitive overload and confusion (Bailenson, 2021). This may be particularly true when the camera is "revolving or rotating across people." On the one hand, if the employees turn off their cameras to become less distracted, they lose even more of the nonverbal responses (Szelwach & Mathews, 2021). This issue can increase the level of conflict between teammates (Dyer et al., 2013).

Spending too many hours in front of this software might lead to users exhaustion—known as Zoom fatigue. We might experience fatigue when we suddenly adopt new communication technology en masse that disrupts the normal finely-tuned way of communicating (Rizzo, 2021). Bailenson (2021) proposed that "Zoom fatigue" is the psychological consequence of using the Zoom application that results in many health issues. During a virtual meeting, attendees have movement constraints as they are supposed to stay in the camera view to be seen by others. Long periods of intense eye gazing and focusing on close-up views of faces on screen has become common for interacting with friends and colleagues; however, eye contact with numerous people at once while trying to make sense of people's facial expressions can be stressful (McWhirter, 2020). Some speakers online even lose their places in their text when using notes on-screen, or even on paper. In addition, spending too much time staring at a digital screen can lead to eye strain, headaches, and blurred vision (Szelwach & Mathews, 2021).

Technological problems can occur during the course of a meeting, and this complicates the human interaction even more, particularly, when the problem is beyond our control. Signal quality is really unpredictable and varies across regions and from one time to another. Sometimes the audio can sound like you are "talking through a tin can," or the visual suddenly fades or appears as a flash of light on the side of someone's face, or both. The rush to implement Zoom and other online platforms during the pandemic has resulted in an imperfect rollout. As mentioned above, Zoom fatigue can occur. In addition, some people find the Zoom experience less than satisfying, as often the presenters are friends or family members who have had little or no speaking experiences, and even less speaking online time.

As a result of the technical difficulties that can occur, coupled with the poor speaking skills by participants, online meetings can come across as stilted and boring. Yuan lists several ideas for overcoming the loss of body language signs online. For example, making constant eye contact by positioning your eyes level with the camera not looking away, sitting back so people can see your complete gestures and make sure they are on screen, smiling and nodding frequently to express focused attention, sitting straight and leaning toward the screen, avoiding touching your face, mirroring another person can be helpful and increase liking (if you want to establish a connection with the other party, try to mirror their talking pace, posture, gestures and tone of voice, etc., use an uncluttered background (a sloppy background can make you come across as disorganized and careless), and trying to avoid the "cyber feeling" of the experience by making it authentic. Ramachandran (2021) also suggests allowing people to take a break from the camera and even

making it a formal rule that it is advisable to do so. This can give people a break from the pressure of being on screen all the time. As Yuan reminds us, that often it is how we say things that matters, sometimes even more than what is said.

Similarly, technological problems can arise with virtual tools—echoes and reverberations occur, people often forget to turn on (or off) their microphones, and how do you recognizing people who want to speak—so, do you appoint someone to monitor these requests, or do you monitor them yourself? Likewise, as was mentioned, some people do not practice speaking on telecommunication devices, or know where to look while trying to communicate. Reading too much from their scripts and losing contact with the audience, can cause real-life presentation problems, along with the lighting and sound difficulties particular to the medium. Some have even suggested, as was noted above, that more eye contact is better, along with smiling more and encouraging participation from the group to achieve more successful Zoom meetings. Common sense would suggest that the speaker should verify often that the group is receiving the messages as intended.

We believed that human beings share some commonality to the perception and interpretation of our experiences. This common perception is considered the essence or the quintessential characteristic(s) of the experience. As such, this phenomenological research aimed to discover the essence of the virtual meeting experience. Specifically, we attempted to identify and describe the essential structure of the virtual meetings phenomenon in sports organization settings by investigating and analyzing numerous perceptions of this phenomenon as narrated by distinct sports executives, and, on that point, by determining what their perceptions had in common. We sought to answer the following research questions below:

RQ1: In what ways does a virtual meeting disrupt or propel the functioning of sports organizations during the pandemic?

RQ2: What factors are critical to virtual meetings in sports organizations during the pandemic?

RQ3: What are the positive and negative impact of virtual meetings on attendees?

2. Method

Qualitative research is concerned with how we experience, interpret, and understand the world and its complexities in a specific setting and at a specific point in time. It was our intent to explore a social situation or interaction via the perspective of others so that we could gain a holistic understanding (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Maxwell, 2013). Qualitative methodology focuses on discovery and description, and the central focus is on bringing out and understanding what an experience means (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2013).

We undertook a phenomenological approach to this study (Moustakas, 1994), aiming to investigate reactions, perceptions, experience of managerial executives in sports organizations in Thailand with regard to virtual meetings. We hoped to provide some insights about the world of these selected individuals and to portray their perceptions and responses. From the phenomenological perspective, it is generally assumed that there are some common characteristics in how we observe and explain shared experiences. As noted by Fraenkel et al. (2018), phenomenological research is characterized by searching for the essence of an experience. Thus, this study thus sought to understand the essence or the essential characteristics of the virtual meetings phenomenon.

Table 1. Demographics of the participants

	Participant	Gender	Age	Years of Service	Role
1.	Shane	male	70	12	board secretary
2.	Vic	male	45	2	chairperson
3.	Nina	female	50	8	board member
4.	Marko	male	57	7	board secretary
5.	Chuck	male	66	8	deputy chairperson
6.	Pat	female	54	11	board member
7.	Lars	male	56	10	board member
8.	Sam	male	66	7	board member
9.	Rob	male	60	6	board member

Note. Fictitious names are used to protect the participants' identity.

2.1. Participants

A purposeful sampling method was applied to selecting participants. The procedure was intended to give the most accurate description about the virtual meetings phenomenon (Fraenkel et al., 2018). We located individuals at several sports organizations through personal contacts. Leveraging our personal relationship with staff and executives in various sports organizations in Thailand, we took the role of interviewer. These few participants were considered a typical sample, since they were considered typical of sports management executives whose responsibilities were to develop and lead the strategic and operational activities of the sports leagues, member clubs, and competitions across the nation. The selection criteria were based on a minimum of three years of managerial service in a particular organization, and a good knowledge of their sports organization's business, and current first-hand experience in attending virtual meetings.

The participants were non-salaried senior management staff serving in a variety of management positions, ranging from committee members to the chairperson of the board of executives. Their management contributions to their organization spanned from two to over ten years. Thus, they possessed good knowledge of the policy, operational day-to-day transactions, organizational culture, and norms typical of a sports organization. Furthermore, they agreed to provide detailed, accurate, and extensive data for analysis. Table 1 shows the profiles of the participants.

The recruitment and selection process occurred during the time when Thailand was afflicted with the COVID-19 pandemic which spanned most of 2021. The data sources were members of the board of committee in some selected sports organizations in Thailand; these sports entities included public, private, voluntary, and non-governmental organizations, such as the Paralympics Association of Thailand, the Taekwondo Association of Thailand, the Basketball Association of Thailand, Soccer Pro Bangkok, the Thailand Bodybuilding and Physique Sports Association, among others.

2.2. Instrument

Interviewing was designated as the main strategy for data collection because this method enables us to elicit rich, thick descriptions and to capture an interviewee's perspective of an experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Moreover, it gave us an opportunity to seek explanations about statements and investigate intensively for additional information. As Patton (2015) claims qualitative interviewers assume that the perception of others is full of meaning, capable of being understood, and able to be fully expressed. This method of generating data allowed us to communicate with targeted informants, thereby understanding the meaning of their experience through their own words.

Guided by our literature review, the study's research questions were applied to building a framework for making the interview questions. We created matrices to illuminate the

relationship between the research questions and the open-ended questions during the development process. We then asked some colleagues to review them and to provide feedback. The finalized questions were expected to enable themes to emerge during the interview.

Some of the semi-structured questions are: What is the nature and content of your virtual meeting? How do online meetings affect you physically and mentally? What do you think are the advantage and disadvantage of online meetings compared to physical gatherings? How do online meetings help your organization achieve its goals? and How do online meetings help run the organization and its affairs?

2.3. Data analysis

We applied an ordered series of steps during the analysis of the phenomenological data in this study. The procedure started with transcribing, then understanding the text hermeneutically, and finally verifying thematic structures. Thematic analysis was utilized to distinguish, identify, and analyze patterns or themes within the interview data that were collected and recorded online. Data analysis in qualitative research utilizes the repetition of a sequence of procedures, and is characterized by systematic comparisons of likenesses and dissimilarities (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). It involves reducing and retrieving large quantities of interview information. Data were investigated thematically using qualitative coding techniques. Coding in qualitative analyses occurs when we break down data, interpret them conceptually, and integrate them to formulate a theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

We faced the challenges of finding meaning or coherence in a multitude of collected data, reducing the amount of information, and identifying meaningful patterns. Our approach was to generate clusters, patterns, or themes that were interlinked and that together described or analyzed the subject matter. We did not only compare threads and patterns within categories, but also across categories, as well as with those found in the broader literature. Each chunk of the interview data was coded succinctly by using a label or tag that was assigned with certain meanings. In doing this, we sought to capture tersely the major idea hidden in the text. Some codes were descriptive; others were interpretive. Codes and subcodes were refined iteratively as we assessed the data through categorization and content analysis.

A back-translation procedure was taken to ensure that researcher bias was averted in the transcription process (Chen & Boore, 2010). We translated all relevant interview narratives verbatim from Thai into English, and then back-translated them into Thai using an independent professional translator. The two Thai versions were then compared to check for lexical and syntactic discrepancies. Then, we modified the English text in the report accordingly.

2.4. Ethical considerations

We informed and protected respondents. We secured ethical approval from the institutional review board before proceeding with the data collection. When approached, a participant were briefed about the benefits of the study and presented with the consent form. The participants gave interviews voluntarily and without any incentives. We assured them data would be treated with discretion and reported for research purposes. Actually, most of them did not express concern about confidentiality or anonymity in terms of their identification and affiliation.

The research process concerned enlisting unpaid participation, and informants were verbally notified of the study's purpose and interviewing details. We protected the anonymity of the participants and treated the data confidentially. Although we perceived no serious ethical threats would be imminent to any of those volunteers, we employed various measures to safeguard their well-being and rights.

2.5. Issues of trustworthiness

We strove to achieve trustworthiness in this project. Lincoln and Guba (1985) sort this subject into four concepts: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, and we secured trustworthiness to preclude possible biases that might emerge throughout the design, implementation, and analysis of the study.

Credibility involves the degree to which the findings are accurate and credible from the viewpoint of the researcher, the participants, and the reader of the report. To enhance the credibility of this study, we triangulated data sources to obtain a fuller and richer picture of the phenomenon by interviewing multiple participants selected from sports associations within a single time interval. We specifically looked into the interrelation among the research design elements including the study objective, conceptual framework, research questions, and techniques. We clarified our assumptions up front, and kept a journal charting the steps through which interpretations were made. We used peer review to look for variation or discrepant evidence and instances that might contradict our expectation.

Dependability concerns the degree to which the findings are congruent with the data collected. We documented the procedures and demonstrated that coding schemes and categories have been used consistently. Besides, interrater reliability was affirmed by asking colleagues to code all interview texts, most of which were found to be consistent (Cohen's kappa coefficient (κ) > 0.7). Some discrepancies, when found, were corrected by mutual consent and reconciliation. In addition, we kept an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) that documented the progress of their thinking and the basis for all choices made during the research process.

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the findings come from a participant's response rather than the investigator's biases and preconception. We identified and uncovered the decision trail for public judgment. We sought to be reflexive by demonstrating how data can be traced back to their origins by showing examples of coding, describing how individual codes become themes, and justifying why certain codes were clustered together to form the basis of a theme. To clarify the rationale for the decisions and to show that we analyzed logically the participants' narratives.

Transferability is the degree to which a particular phenomenon in a particular context can transfer to another particular context. To allow applicability of the findings to other similar situations or conditions, we emphasized the importance of detailed description of the participants about their experience in virtual meetings and the context in which the meetings took place. This involves describing what we have heard in great detail, and frequently using extensive quotations from the participants in the study.

3. Results

The results were grounded in the participants' testimony and we analyzed the transcripts and made inferences in accordance with Strauss and Corbin (1994). The findings were based on three interwoven themes incorporating organizational function, meeting operation, and personal impact. Specifically, six categories were deduced from our interpretation of the participants' narratives as summarized in Table 2 which also exhibits some sample codes.

Theme 1: Organizational Function

Two themes emerged and were grouped under this first theme. They involved resource use and communication.

(1) Resource Use

A sports organization, as a nonprofit organization, relies solely on private contributions and government funding. Thus, it must function with efficiency in terms of resources. We examined the codes from the time and monetary perspectives. A board meeting member (Shane) asserted

Table 2. Themes, categories and subcategories

Theme	Category	Subcategory	Open Code
Organizational Function	Resource Use	Cost	reduced costs, no need for room setup, spare a trip, take control of daily routine,
		Time	accomplish more, not wasting precious hours, make the best of time, productive in the shortest amount of time
	Communication	Publicity	increased web page access, more web audience
		Internal Communication	more email, chat program, conversion rate
Meeting Operation	Logistics	Equipment	camera, cell phone, laptop, voice, microphone
		Signal	Internet connection, wifi, weather
	Social Etiquette	walking, lurking, professional outfit, quiet place, right timing, attention	
Personal Impact	Well-being	Physical Health	seated for too long, muscle weak, neck pain, eye fatigue, blurred
		Mental Health	harder to concentrate, can't stay focused, feel sleepy, germs in the air, breathing in, lung ruined, scared, cramped
	Interpersonal Rapport	small talk, shared feelings, two-way communication, couldn't talk out load	

that despite the lockdown he performed his duties “in the best possible manner with the least waste of time and effort.” Another participant (Vic) confirmed this by stating, “Early after the outbreak, we were still able to come to the office for meetings. But when it got worse, the government enforced a lockdown, our office situated in the same premises as the Department of Physical Education, was ordered to be closed. So, since then, we have switched to working from a distance. This is good because it reduced costs payable by the Association”

Cost was a critical concern for organizational operation. Cost efficiency decreases overhead costs and at the same time, makes processes more efficient (Reinsch & Beswick, 2017). Regarding international tournaments, Vic revealed, “Normally we would give each guy in the team a calling card. The London Olympics was the first time we had taken advantage of the Internet. When the head coach needed to talk to us about some urgent matter that we used LINE as an alternative to international calls. That helped us economize tremendously on phone charges.”

Time management is also considered a factor in propelling the affairs of the organization toward an organizational goal. A participant (Vic) argued that the Association’s committee could “accomplish more in less time.” Another sports executive (Nina) stated, “Our monthly regular meeting could drag on for 3–4 hours. When you add travel time, it takes almost a day.” Though online meetings are restricted by time, some participants were able to make the best of it as Vic stated,

“Though we hold a meeting every two months, each time we can make the best of our time. We are so productive in the shortest amount of time.”

(2) Communication

All registered sports associations in Thailand are regulated by the Sport Authority of Thailand who mandates those organizations to hold a monthly board-of-committee meeting. A virtual meeting unarguably was recognized as the primary channel of communication amid the pandemic in the country. A participant (Marko) asserted, “This is pretty much how we run our meeting during the COVID. Virtual communication is the name of the game now.”

It is not only for meetings that sports organizations apply virtual communication techniques, but also athlete/coach training and sports competitions. A participant (Chuck) revealed, “Since last year, we have held a few contests and got to broadcast them on the internet. We even had judges score [bodybuilding] competitions on live transmission.” Another board member (Nina) remarked about improved access to the Association’s web page, “We got more visitors to our web page and Facebook page. They click on the link to get to social media to watch our posted clips.”

Theme 2: Meeting Operation

Two themes emerged and were grouped under this second Theme. They involve logistics and social etiquette.

(1) Logistics

Internet technology plays a critical role in the handling of the details of a virtual meeting with internet connectivity as the cornerstone. A meeting in a sports organization in times of the health crisis operated with the aid of technology as is the case for other organizations, especially during overseas competitions. Technology literacy must be mastered as an indispensable ability for the staff as well as the management to master in order to function in their organization effectively toward a common goal of sports excellence (Jones, 2002; Weinberg & McDermott, 2002). This involves appropriate use of digital media, information distribution, and media-based communication.

The management staff in a typical sports organization in Thailand are older and, as such, are not as conversant with modern technology as younger staff. In the beginning, they requisitioned help from surrounding people or staff, but as times passed, they became accustomed to the application of this technology. An excerpt from a veteran sports executive (Pat) serves as an example, “You really need to hone a technology skill to be able to do this. At first, I didn’t learn how to do it myself, instead relying on my son to set it up and flip the slides for me every time. But I am used to it now—far from well-versed, just getting the hang of it.”

Furthermore, a participant (Shane) who is the secretary of a sports association revealed he would come to the office to prepare for a virtual meeting, to assemble meeting documents, and to arrange the equipment and internet connection. He stated, “An IT [information technology] guy and I would come to the office for every meeting to set things up—like PowerPoint slides, television, reports. It is easier to do these things at the office.”

(2) Social Etiquette

A physical meeting allows the fellow attendees to see each other and to be in the same place, but in a virtual meeting, we can still observe facial expression over a distance. Some meeting attendees feel slighted when someone keeps the camera off while the virtual meeting is in session

(Towner et al., 2019). For example, a board member (Lars) said, “If you have the camera off for an extended period of time, the other seven or nine people might be wondering what’s happening to you. It makes them divert attention away from the meeting.” Though keeping the camera on while in a virtual meeting is not required from attendees, failure to do so exhibits poor etiquette from the Thai cultural perspective. In fact, the host might request for facial presence on the screen on certain occasions such as when an attendance record is to be kept, or when you need to attend to some unforeseen matters, as a participant (Nara) stated, “I don’t mind leaving the camera on, but I will switch it off to answer a ringing phone.”

For the attendees who need to deliver an online presentation, it is advisable to plan ahead and rehearse (Frisch & Greene, 2020). An association’s secretary who was by default the meeting secretary with the role to guard the process of a meeting—either online or offline—indicated, “During the COVID, I would allow more time for arrangements than in normal times to make sure it would run without a hitch or rough edges.” (Sam)

The other issues concerning virtual meeting etiquette involve choosing the right place, avoiding distractions, and having proper timing. For example, a participant complained, “It bugs me when someone speaks without ‘raising hands’ or happens to be in motion such as sitting in a moving vehicle or walking around. If you have to be on the go, just take a leave. It is distracting.”

Proper personal conduct has traditionally been fundamental to ideas of Thai national identity. Thailand has an especially large body of instructive works on appropriate protocols about personal conduct (Jory, 2018). Another participant (Vic) commented on Thai culture in the context of meetings, “It is good manners to not stand up in a [physical] meeting unless you are presenting. Because it is like you are hovering over another person’s head and that is disrespect.” However, it is argued that, for a virtual meeting, standing up or freely using hand movements actually helps to better get your points across (Goyder, 2020).

Theme 3: Personal Impact

Two themes emerged and were grouped under the last Theme. They involved personal well-being and rapport building.

(1) Well-being

Participants are concerned about health and safety. A virtual meeting tends to be able to assuage this fear to a certain extent. We can sense such concerns are manifest in an observation made by a female board member (Nina) about the face-to-face meeting, “Physical meetings confine you to a cramped room which could be a breeding ground for germs. We are a sports entity. We should be promoting health and well-being, not health hazards.”

The length of a virtual meeting can translate into exhaustion on the part of the attendees. A participant (Shane) observed, “Our monthly meeting lasts a couple of hours on average. Once, after a four-hour meeting, I was pooped. It didn’t usually go on that long, but frequently it may. This occurs regardless of whether it is on-site or online meetings.”

Symptoms include muscle weakness, with diagnosis perhaps involving a strength test. Even in face-to-face meetings, a gathering of employees is thought to be a source of employees’ mental exhaustion such as job-related stress (Lehmann-Willenbrock & Allen, 2018) and well-being (Rogelberg et al., 2006).

When people are confined in a virtual meeting room, their mental state tends to be adversely affected, as a participant (Rob) noted, “When it goes on too long, I start getting blurred and can’t

concentrate.” With mental fatigue, a person may find it harder to concentrate on things and stay focused. They may even feel sleepy or have difficulty “staying awake” while a meeting is ongoing.

(2) Interpersonal Rapport

Rapport is a relationship characterized by mutual trust, understanding, or empathy that makes communication between people easier (Miles et al., 2009). A virtual meeting makes it harder to establish or strengthen rapport with fellow attendees as a participant (Rob) said, “You are not in physical proximity to conduct a private small talk or exchange pleasantries. Everything you say will also be heard by the others in the meeting.” During the course of a meeting, direct messaging is possible but has limited features as a participant (Sam) remarked, “When in a meeting, we speak on the main screen. We can do direct-chat but you have to type.”

Two-way communication is not impossible but not very private (Men, 2014). That might be an obstacle for extensive, meaningful dialogs with fellow attendees that can translate into improved rapport. Any spoken interaction between two people will be exhibited on a public area where everyone else can also hear. In other words, strengthening rapport is limited in the context of virtual meetings.

Apart from privacy issues, using virtual conferencing can also be conducive to major consequential problems such as hacking (Moyce, 2020), “Zoombombing” that invades a meeting (Lee, 2021), and in some cases insensitive content exhibited on the screen (Young, 2020). Thus, security mechanisms must be adequately maintained and operated.

3.1. Theoretical implications

The study corroborates the theory of media compensation (Hantula et al., 2011) that evolves from media naturalness theory (Kock et al., 2007). Kock proposed media naturalness theory, as a framework that combines evolutionary theory with social and technological theories to account for behavior in electronic communication. This study found that management in sports organizations resorted to virtual meetings to meet legal requirements initially and later for efficiency and health reasons. The media naturalness principle favors face-to-face communication over internet-based meetings; however, under an unusual health crisis, we strive to communicate “naturally” through nontraditional media.

We identified cultural traits relative to meeting etiquette among selected Thai sports executives who were from different cultural norms. These individuals possessed different levels of technological expertise due to their prior experience. Learning made people different from one another. The findings validate the learned schema diversity principle in that individuals learn and acquire communication schemas as they interact with other meeting members in the same organization.

The cue removal principle (Hantula et al., 2011) holds that media used for a virtual meeting provide the stimuli but when the information associated with cues is not provided in visual or written form, mediated communication becomes a less preferable platform. The proper medium to use should promote the face-to-face interaction as in physical meetings. In fact, in the event that a virtual meeting offers no visual cue, it might be a distinct advantage according to the learned schemas diversity principle (Hantula et al., 2011) in that it minimizes the risk of damage caused by the cultural differences.

3.2. Practical implications

The consequences of having poor virtual meetings can be very profound. Some people even expressed displeasure, finding they are too stilted and artificial (Karl et al., 2021). For a sports organization’s leadership, this raises some important issues. If the team does not agree with the new norm, they might lose the benefits of their shared ideas. Then, the leader often needs to go above and beyond the norm to build trust from a distance and to help employees feel a part of the team for maximum performance (Gigi & Pavithra, 2020; Karl et al., 2021). Accordingly,

organizations must provide information, training, support and guidance on when and how these tools can be used effectively (Hiselius & Arnfalk, 2021).

Clearly, mass virtual conferencing, whether good or bad, is here to stay. The issue is how to improve the virtual experience. Oftentimes, we need more than just the words we speak to communicate our message—we also must improve your body language to boost the effectiveness of the message (Standaert et al., 2016) by planning ahead and rehearsing. There are still issues with the technology that need to be resolved as we learned in this study.

If we continue to use online virtual tools, we must learn more about how to use these systems more effectively and efficiently. The pandemic has pushed organizational policy quickly in this direction to exploit the potential of the virtual communication tool (Sharma et al., 2020). Now is the time to back up, to learn what we can do about the power of these systems, and to study the dynamics of their proper use—so that we are ready for the future. Some specific issues to examine are: the personal characteristics that seem to result in better acceptance of the message (some are mentioned above—what speaking volume is necessary, where to look, how best to prepare for a speaking role, how to organize material for better acceptance and satisfaction, what level of participation from the audience generates a better response, how does one mix music or separate videos in for maximum effect, and what meeting format should be followed for better understanding and acceptance of the content. The programming for regular television interviewing or news shows may provide some initial guidance here for researchers. And finally, one has to wonder how various cultural nuances affect the specifics of using virtual communication tools.

3.3. Limitations and implications for future research

There were some notable limitations to our study. For example, transferability is the quality of the qualitative study whose the findings are applicable in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Among the techniques to attain that quality are prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, and member-checking. Typically, a constructivist study like this cannot guarantee transferability given that the phenomenon under study is specific in terms of time and area settings (Misco, 2007; Polit & Beck, 2010). In this case, the study focused on the public health crisis times in some sports organizations in Thailand. Consequently, context generalization is not warranted and as qualitative constructivists believe “there is no generalization” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The findings emerging from the narratives by the participants reflect the subjective experience of some selected sports executives in Thai organizations. From a practical perspective, virtual meeting patterns may vary across organization and industries. Hence, generalizing the findings of this study to different contexts should be approached with caution. Therefore, a quantitative approach might be an option for obtaining broader applicability. To investigate this subject quantitatively, a larger sample size needs to be addressed and to generalize across nations and cultures, future researchers might consider the sports organizations grounded in different values and culture to see if patterns exist. We could identify the broad constructs critical for success in a virtual meeting in the context of sports organizations and develop a scale for this purpose. Some suggested constructs are leadership (Terason, 2018a), conflict (Terason, 2018b), trust (Dearmona & Grierb, 2009), team formation, goal and role clarity, etc.

Our intent was not to assess prevailing theory, but instead to tie our findings to relevant theory. We provided new insight into many of the specific challenges derived from this virtual mode of organizational communication. Yet, given the common goal of a sports organization, much remains unknown, for example, how to maximize athlete performance, how to be recognized for sports excellence, how to manage athletes' life and career, etc. Since this communication mode is

expected to be adopted for a long time from now, it might be beneficial to address the issue of online training and coaching in future research.

The study used overwhelmingly more male participants as in the composition of a typical organization of this ilk. In other words, most sports executives either in public or private organizations are males. Thus, future projects might interview males and females in an equal proportion so that we can adequately explore and reflect on the disparity between male and female executives.

3.4. Conclusion

It was the essential structure of the virtual meetings phenomenon that we attempted to discover and describe. We did this by examining multiple perceptions by different people, and by then determining what was common to these perceptions and reactions. Specifically, we sought to understand how virtual meetings disrupt or propel the function of sports organizations during the pandemic, how a virtual meeting can be improved, and its various impacts on the meeting attendees.

Virtual communication, or precisely virtual meetings, in sports organizations are warmly embraced. Despite conventional wisdom about media naturalness and the abrupt change in communication behavior of executives in the organizations, virtual meetings proved to be widely adopted and largely successful.

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