

Chapter

22

Zooming in on Privacy

Nonverbal Communication during a Pandemic

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Introduction

In the spring of 2020, Marissa¹ attended a Zoom meeting with her coworkers, boss, and boss's boss (the regional manager). Marissa's university campus closed (moving post-spring break to entirely online instruction). Everyone in her workplace was now working remotely. Marissa was home a great deal more than usual, so her dog enjoyed her increased presence around the house. Springing into her lap during the Zoom, the dog made an appearance. Still, as Marissa went to put him down on the floor, he promptly urinated into the air and onto her keyboard, in full view of everyone at the meeting.

¹ All students' names have been changed to protect their identities.

Ally was babysitting her younger brothers and two cousins. She went to a more private part of the house where she could still hear the boys and logged in to attend a virtual meeting with one of her professors. She thought she partially closed the door to the room, but apparently forgot this step. Ally's charges started yelling and fighting, and then a loud crash came from the other room. Ally bolted from the room to see what was broken and to stop the shouting and fighting, not realizing that her professor could both see and hear the events in the house. Ally was mortified that her professor might deem her scatterbrained, as well as a lousy babysitter.

While finishing his degree, William became familiar with Zoom meetings by working on a political campaign in the fall of 2020. Almost everyone on the campaign worked remotely, not necessarily because of the pandemic. Most staffers attended from home offices, some positioned in front of bookshelves, but others preferred their kitchens as meeting settings. Some used custom backgrounds and some had occasional "intruders" (children, spouses, pets), but few attended via audio-only or by phone. All made serious attempts to be visible in their Zoom squares, although some had technical difficulties. Preferring his home office as a setting, William was acutely aware of how his background should look to communicate an appropriate image for both campaign and university meetings.

Some of us may follow the lead of media commentators when considering backgrounds. Cable news programs on MSNBC and CNN often feature guests like Laurie Garrett, Eddie Glaude, Jr., and Michael Eric Dyson, who consistently appear in front of bookshelves. It's hard to tell if the shelves are in workplaces or homes, but it isn't the people's placement in front of shelves that draws attention. Every few inches, certain books are turned out (facing forward), where the covers can easily be seen on air. Garrett prominently faces forward a biography of Malcolm X, while Glaude tends to turn forward books he has authored. Dyson published a book in December of 2020 and, during his interview with CNN's Don Lemon, five copies of his book were strategically positioned on shelves behind him: red covers facing forward. Lemon made a joke, saying he didn't need to read Dyson's book title, nor show the book on air, given how many copies appeared in Dyson's background. Providing books to stock bookshelves that appear behind "talking heads" is a booming business, as Chuck Roberts, owner of *Books by the Foot* in Washington, D.C., can attest. In fact, Roberts' orders for books, stored in his 3-acre warehouse, doubled in 2020 (Fetters, 2020).

One white male guest on MSNBC prominently displays a portrait of Frederick Douglass behind him during interviews, but the portrait is secured to the crossbar of the shelving unit, not positioned on a shelf. It obscures other items, so is its presence a nonverbal cue about the importance of black history and racial issues? Or is it a purposeful, strategic placement, made all the more timely because of its visibility right after George Floyd's death in May of 2020 and the ensuing uprising in the United States? What nonverbal messages are sent by such actions?

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how one's environment or surroundings, as a form of nonverbal communication in virtual classes and meetings, affect student and professor privacy, perception, and communication. For clarification, in this chapter, we do not examine privacy in terms of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, a federal law that protects student education records. We focus on privacy concerns about revealing work

and living spaces. While video chatting services have been around for nearly two decades, privacy takes on more significance, given instruction that is increasingly situated in private spaces, such as homes, apartments, and dorm rooms. Professors and students are now given glimpses into each other's living environments, so how has this change affected teaching and learning? What considerations need to be made regarding privacy, as online instruction and virtual meetings no doubt continue in 2021 and beyond?

To address these questions, we first discuss emergent issues surrounding surveillance and online exam security. Next, we explore Communication Privacy Management (CPM) Theory and apply it to virtual settings. We then present an examination of social styles research for its focus on nonverbal cues in office environments that reveal personality and management style. Throughout the chapter, we offer implications for future research, as well as for teaching and learning.

Surveillance, Online Exam Security, and the Power of Environmental Cues

A central issue that emerged as the COVID-19 pandemic raged in 2020 was surveillance, given that many students had to take classes, and, consequently, exams, fully online. Out of concern for cheating, some professors used strong measures and detailed procedures. One of our students, Mandy, had a science professor who made exam security a top priority. He required that students certify they would be alone for the exam, then use webcams or camera phones to take a 360-degree video of their surroundings, making sure to show their computer location and where they would stow their phones during the timed exam. Videos had to be submitted to the professor before the exam would open for students. If this process was not followed for each of the three remaining exams, students would receive exam grades of 0%.

Such an approach represents a homegrown version of procedures used by proctoring services such as Examity, HonorLock, Proctorio, ProctorU, and Respondus. While the particulars vary, these assessment tools use video analytics and students' webcams to deter cheating during nonproctored exams (Respondus, n.d.). These services are seeing enormous increases in usage since the pandemic began (Feathers & Rose, 2020). A representative for Proctorio reported to *The New York Times* a 900% increase in sales of their services in the first few months of the pandemic (Swauger, 2020). Although each company varies in approach, they can supply some or all of the following services: (a) tracking of head, eye, and body movements; (b) facial detection/recognition software; (c) use of algorithms that measure anomalies in metrics, like mouse clicks and scrolling rates that differ from class norms; (d) processes to block test-takers from opening new tabs on their computers through which they can seek answers to test items; and (e) detection of other people or animals in the presence of a test-taker (Feathers & Rose, 2020; Swauger, 2020). A few services

employing facial recognition technology advise students not to place themselves in front of photographs or posters of people or animals, which may trigger the software to report the presence of another person (Feathers & Rose, 2020).

Some students have protested on social media and through lawsuits, viewing proctoring measures as invasive, an overreach, and a breach of privacy boundaries (Hubler, 2020). Swauger (2020) reports that proctoring services may discriminate against students for a variety of identity factors. For example, students who are parents may be penalized or questioned because their children may be noisy, may enter the room even if instructed not to do so, and may necessitate that the test-taker leave the room to monitor the children. Students with medical conditions that require bathroom use or the taking of medications may be suspect during an online exam. The tracking of eye, head, and body movements may discriminate against people with disabilities, neuroatypical people who may be challenged to make eye contact and maintain focus, and breastfeeding parents (Ball, 2020). Students with darker skin tones may be asked to shine bright lights on their faces during exams to facilitate facial recognition software. Swauger (2020) views the proctoring services as forms of “modern surveillance” that can create civil rights violations (p. 1).

Students and scholars of nonverbal communication understand that the environment or setting within which communication takes place conveys powerful messages. One of the more consistent codes or categories of nonverbal communication explored in university textbooks is environment, meaning the area, items, and people surrounding a person (Ivy & Wahl, 2019). The choices we each make about the environments in which we work, study, and live reveal a great deal about us as people (Andrade et al., 2016; Gang et al., 2017; Hadavi, 2017; Wells & Thelen, 2002). For example, bookshelves in a student’s background while attending a class or office hours via Zoom or Webex might signal a seriousness about one’s studies. Simultaneously, a messy living room setting might indicate that someone lacks the financial means to have a dedicated study space or is less than an ideal housekeeper. Such perceptions can be faulty. A messy living room might be inhabited by a single parent with a drive to complete higher education. Environmental cues may reveal students’ socio-economic status or other factors, which typically professors aren’t privy to.

Queens College anthropology professor Karen Strassler (2020) wrote about her experiences of moving from “classroom to Zoom” during the spring semester of 2020, in terms of viewing students’ home environments. She described “work areas improvised out of cramped and awkward spaces” (p. 2). While believing that “enforced isolation” can create a new kind of closeness between teachers and students, Strassler (2020) also contended that these “glimpses into my students’ homes violate the implicit contract of the classroom, where students have some measure of control over what parts of their lives outside of school come into view” (p. 3).

In April of 2020, two writers for *New York Magazine* invited NYU students to submit self-portrait photographs from their home environments, once the university moved to online learning only (Schneider & Starr Drinkard, 2020). The lead photograph for the piece

was of a male student sitting on his bed at home. Prominently displayed behind him was a “Bernie: Solidarity Forever” poster. If a professor, classmate, or even a potential employer were to see that environment as a student’s background in a virtual class, a meeting, or a job interview, and held a negative view of then-presidential candidate Senator Bernie Sanders, might that environmental cue affect perceptions and communication?

Research shows that the environments within which we operate are not only revealing, but they substantially affect our perceptions, well-being, and communication (Perez-Lopez, 2017; Soriano et al., 2020; TenBrink et al., 2017). Landmark Maslow and Mintz (1956) and Mintz (1956) “beautiful room, ugly room” studies were among the first to reveal the impact of environment. In each study, two groups of students viewed the same set of photographs and rated the attractiveness of people in the photos. The first student group to rate the photos was placed in a “beautiful room,” complete with modern furnishings, pleasant colors, and good lighting. The second student group to rate the photos was placed in an “ugly room,” containing shabby, worn-out furniture, drab colors, and dim lighting. As for the results, students in the beautiful room rated the attractiveness of people in the photos significantly higher than students in the ugly room. We now turn our attention to CPM Theory for its insights into our subject.

Communication Privacy Management Theory

Communication scholar Sandra Petronio (1991, 2002, 2013) developed CPM Theory as a means for better understanding how people feel ownership over their private information. This sense of ownership causes us to establish rules about privacy, create boundaries, and manage our privacy using spatial metaphors. Such rules or expectations relate to who has access to us and our information, how we select people with whom to share or not share private information, and how we protect our privacy from intrusion by unwanted others or entities. Even people who consider themselves fairly open value privacy and take measures to protect it, else we lose control over who has access to us, who knows what about us, and how our information may be used. However, privacy rules can morph, as new people and circumstances cause us to change what we reveal and to whom.

Henningsen et al. (2019) examined college student privacy rules and contextual factors that caused students to share private academic information. Students’ general orientation to privacy significantly predicted the amount and means of communicating private information to professors. However, this study focused on *voluntary* and *verbal* student disclosure. Findings beg the question: What if disclosure is *involuntary* and *nonverbal*? Arguably, few college students open their home environments to professors and classmates, for example, to host a class gathering at the semester’s end. During a pandemic, the nature of online learning effectively requires students to open their home environments to professors and peers. When extreme circumstances challenge privacy boundaries, it becomes important to contemplate how people cope with new privacy rules or expectations.

Communication Privacy Management Theory Applied to Virtual Contexts

Professors' and students' privacy rules or expectations may need to shift to cope with new circumstances brought on by the pandemic. "Visual overshooting," meaning the inclusion of one's surroundings in virtual classes and meetings, can cause concern about nonverbal messages communicated by one's locale, whether it be a home or campus setting (Reed, 2020, p. 1). We suggest this be the subject of an opening semester class discussion: the discomfort students and professors, alike, may feel about online formats and privacy challenges. Such a discussion could begin with questions like: What decisions did you make in virtual classes or meetings about revealing part of your home environment to professors and classmates? Are you changing any of those decisions?

In an online teaching/learning context, what message is sent by a student's nonappearance on Zoom or Webex? What message is sent when a student joins with only his or her initials in a square, such that the instructor can't tell if the student is participating or not? Students may log in, mute their audio and disable their video, and then leave the environment. How does a professor know if this happens? Should the professor, as host for the meeting or class, unmute a student and see if the student speaks? Some students' technology is not to the level where they can attend visually and/or vocally. Some may not have the ability to join a chat area either, given aging equipment or technological challenges, like inadequate or fluctuating access to bandwidth. Ultimately, participation may be tied to everything from privacy concerns to socioeconomic status to the number of family members also attending virtual meetings or classes to cultural factors. Studies that examine the potential and real fallout from students' lack of virtual participation will be illuminating.

Some students report feeling too exposed to participate visually in virtual classes and meetings, uncomfortable with a camera being on them all the time (Reed, 2020). Students are used to focusing toward the front of a classroom, where the teacher is typically located, but when students' faces (and spaces) can be seen in their squares, such exposure may make some students feel scrutinized. To address this concern, perhaps professors should consider using the virtual mode chosen for meetings with large groups of participants, such as some university administrators have used when addressing an entire faculty audience. Only the professor (or meeting leader) is visible onscreen as the session proceeds in this mode. Students might be required to activate their audio and video outlets (if equipment and access allow) or register their attendance in the chat area, but not be required to stay "on camera" the whole session. The downside is that such an option may create attendance problems. One of our students told a story about her mother buying her a face shield, thinking it would work better once she returned to face-to-face instruction (socially distanced with desks separated by Plexiglas). The student tried the shield on at home, but felt "way too exposed" to wear it

in class, so accustomed had she become to wearing a facial covering. Research on the notion of literal and figurative masking versus unmasking, as nonverbal communication decisions, will inform future directions for teaching and learning.

We grant that some students may be strategic in what they reveal in virtual gatherings, while others may simply opt for what is fastest or most convenient, with no concern for privacy or how they are perceived. Some students, eager to make an impression, may pay special attention to their surroundings or show off their technological prowess. What nonverbal messages are conveyed by such attempts? It may also be the case that we become enured to environmental nonverbal cues, ignoring or discounting them, as virtual meetings and classes become more commonplace or are increasingly seen as “necessary evils” until the pandemic releases us from such constraints.

How much office environment, whether at home or in the workplace, does a professor choose to reveal when conducting a Zoom or Webex class, hosting or attending a meeting, or holding virtual office hours? For many professors, assigned office spaces may not involve much choice on their part. However, decorating or personalizing one’s office space is usually under the purview of the instructor (albeit restricted if the office is a shared space). Some professors choose to reveal very little of their surroundings, often with their faces so close to their webcams as to blot out background information.

Custom backgrounds may buffer the visual overshooting problem. However, custom background use is currently limited, with images often inconsistent and unreliable (Reed, 2020). Services providing background options will likely expand as the need for virtual gatherings persists. Early in 2020, Webex offered users a selection of photographs to download as virtual backgrounds. The photos were of foreign places and landmarks that travel writer Rick Steves visited. But an odd feature was that Steves, himself, appeared in most of the photos. Some virtual meeting services allow users to download their own photographic backgrounds. This practice will no doubt expand as well. Once again, people’s choices in this option will be revealing. In a strategic planning virtual meeting hosted by our university president from her campus office in early December of 2020, one microbiology professor’s background was a familiar photo of the bays and wetlands surrounding the campus. The professor made a joke of how he “just wanted to be outside on a nice day,” but his swiveling desk chair and blurry areas around his silhouette revealed his decision not to show his real locale. These are nonverbal communication cues, but a direct and accurate interpretation of their meaning is a challenge. One could assume a person wishes to protect privacy or is covering something up in his or her environment, but it could be just a vehicle for conveying humor or standing out. Future research on nonverbal messages communicated through professors’ choices and privacy concerns will inform our decisions about conducting Zoom classes and meetings, pandemic and post-pandemic. We now turn our attention to social styles research, for how it speaks to our inquiry.

Social styles

Social Styles research has been attributed to various sources. In 1964, Blake and Mouton published *The Managerial Grid: The Key to Leadership Excellence*, which some scholars describe as the “roots” of what later came to be known as social styles studies. Blake and Mouton’s grid contained quadrants that identified managers’ concern for people versus concern for results. Combinations of these two leadership attributes produced four categories: (a) Country Club Management, which was a combination of high concern for people and low concern for results; (b) Produce-or-Perish Management, which was a combination of low concern for people and high concern for results; (c) Team Management, which was a high concern for people coupled with high concern for results; and (d) Impoverished Management, which was a low concern for both people and results. Now utilized in training modules for consultants, this research was adapted by The Wilson Learning Group in 1976 and extended by the Tracom Corporation in 1991 (Blake & McCause, 1991; McCroskey & Richmond, 1995; The Wilson Learning Group, 1976; Tracom, 1991). The social styles framework has been applied across industrial, academic, and public speaking contexts (Antonioni & Park, 2001; Darling & McNutt, 1996; May & Gueldenzoph, 2006; Ortiz Valencia et al., 2012; Social Styles, 2019).

Manager/leader social styles represent two ends of a spectrum, with responsiveness at one end and assertiveness at the other. Again, a four-quadrant system presents combinations of styles that help us understand people’s approaches to leadership and management (Beebe et al., 2002; Bledsoe, 1976). The research also creates an effective system for analyzing a leader’s office (e.g., furnishings, decorations) as a means of better understanding how an organization and its people function. Some consultants request access to clients’ workspaces and use their knowledge of social styles to gain insight into their clients, tasks that need attention, and changes to suggest (Beebe, 2020).

The first social style category is *Amiables*, leaders high in responsiveness and low in assertiveness. Amiables are more concerned with relationships than tasks, so these managers often have offices with round tables, closer seating for associates and clients, and furnishings that pose few barriers between people. Their desks will typically contain family pictures and personal items, possibly with walls decorated with posters featuring encouraging slogans, inspirational quotations, and serene locations. In general, the Amiable’s decor is open, airy, bright, and informal, with features conducive to building relationships.

In contrast, *Drivers* are high in assertiveness but low in responsiveness. Thus, they are more task-oriented than people-oriented. Their workspaces appear very busy, often containing neat stacks of papers, materials, and projects that show productivity. Such “props” communicate boundaries to others who may enter the office. Walls may be replete with achievement awards, certificates, planning sheets, whiteboards, and calendars. Decor, in general, suggests status and control. Seating is typically closed, formal, designed for non-contact, and positioned to communicate power.

Expressive leaders are highly assertive, but also highly responsive to their teams. They value people and tasks equally and tend to have disorganized, cluttered workspaces and desks, with sticky notes everywhere as reminders and a means of tracking ideas. Their walls may also contain awards and posters/pictures with motivational or personal slogans or that show people in stimulating situations. The decor tends to be airy and warm, indications of the leader's openness and friendliness. Seating invites people in and includes them, but also encourages productivity, stressing teamwork toward goals.

Finally, *Analyticals* are low in assertiveness and low in responsiveness (akin to Blake and Mouton's Impoverished Management style). These leaders tend to have the neatest desks and office spaces of the four types. Work areas are highly structured by task and organized with decor designed to be functional, not for fostering relationships. Seating is formal and noncontact, and wall decorations relate to work projects, such as charts, graphs, manuals, exhibits, or pictures depicting professional settings and tasks.

In light of shifting privacy expectations and continuous decision making about background visibility during virtual classes and meetings, research applying social styles to professors' and students' choices may help us better understand the nonverbal messages conveyed by our choices. As colleagues at the same institution, we can vouch that, having studied the social styles research more closely for this chapter, we can easily connect personalities and leadership styles to our colleagues' office environments. Since many of us had to transition to online teaching once the pandemic caused many college and university campuses to temporarily close in the spring of 2020, we scrambled to cope with rapidly changing circumstances. Now, with a bit more perspective and some experience with adjustments our universities have made in order to reopen, we can use such theories as CPM and social styles research findings to inform our decision making about teaching and learning.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to examine how environment and surroundings, as forms of nonverbal communication, affect student and professor privacy, perception, and communication. We began by sharing student cases and examples from media that prompted our thinking about nonverbal cues conveyed in virtual settings. Next came a discussion of instructional surveillance and online exam security. We then overviewed CPM Theory, emphasizing the importance of privacy rules and expectations as they flex with changing circumstances. Social styles research was then examined with respect to nonverbal cues in office environments that reveal personalities and management styles. Throughout the chapter, we offered implications for future research, as well as for teaching and learning. It is an understatement to say that the pandemic has affected us all in myriad ways. We confronted new and frightening realities, subtly or dramatically changed our approach to teaching and learning, and anticipated having to adapt, again, as we learned more and responded to what

felt like a daily change. Grateful for research that informs our adaptation and encourages us to be creative and flexible, we look forward to learning more lessons about nonverbal communication as it pertains to our mission of providing excellent instruction.

questions

1. How does a choice of background while attending a virtual class session or a professor's virtual office hours nonverbally communicate messages about environment, personality, and/or professionalism?
2. In what ways might nonverbal environmental cues affect students' privacy, during a time when meeting face-to-face is discouraged or deemed unsafe? Has virtual learning affected your views about privacy?
3. How have student nonverbal cues changed as a result of technological changes that impact instruction? Have you experienced any of the surveillance techniques discussed in this chapter? If so, how did these techniques affect your ability to learn and demonstrate your learning on a quiz or exam?
4. Review the information on Communication Privacy Management Theory. Given the view that privacy concerns and boundaries are forms of proxemic nonverbal behavior, how has this code of nonverbal communication changed for you, as a student?
5. The research on Social Styles identified four categories of behavior that provide insight into people's approaches to leadership and management. Review these four categories, then analyze your working/learning environment for nonverbal cues related to your social style.

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