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Crisis Communication in the Age of Covid-19

Zoom and black screens in the education system in Israel

PHD THESIS SUMMARY

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List of published works on the research topic:

1. Pal Bracha, M. (2020). Symbolic Goods in Israeli Posters. *Studia UBB Ephemerides*, Issue 2, pp. 93-120. DOI:10.24193/subbeph.2020.2.05.
Published Online and Print: December 30, 2020.
2. Pal Bracha, M. (2020). Avatar Films Analysis. Israel. Available at: [Academia](#) and PDF.
3. Pal Bracha, M. (2021). Communication in the age of black screens: "Whoever looks at me in black does not know who I am." *Studia UBB Ephemerides*, 66(1), 111-127. <https://doi.org/10.24193/subbeph.2021.1.04>
4. Pal Bracha, M. (2022). Communication in the Age of Black Screens. *Bima of Discussion: Information and Digital Media Literacy in a New Reality*, Bitaton, Mofet Institute, Issue 68, March 2022. Available at: [Mofet Institute](#)

Keywords: New media, Zoom, Black screen, Virtual communication, Visual communication, Covid-19, Crisis communication, Visual culture, Digital self-representation, Hybrid learning, Camera off, Camera on, Zoom fatigue, Social communication, Augmented reality, Visual codes, Non-verbal communication, Visual research, Constructivism, Voyeurism and exposure in the virtual world, Psychological- Communication impact, Online behavior, Participant engagement, Gender and virtual communication, Ethics in Zoom, Selfie-Zoom, social -digital imitation model, Panopticon in New Media.

Introduction. Argument

My interest in this doctoral thesis has developed from passion to exploring the use of Zoom. It started from a place of frustration in front of black screens. Behind the off cameras and the black screens were hiding, perhaps, my students. I felt a trend of closure from the outside and 'closure' from the inside. Like a laboratory of macro and micro. I noticed an overlap between the a priori external state that surrounds us in the circumstances of Covid-19 and the mental internal state made by choosing, consciously or unconsciously, crisis communication (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007), (Chapter One). According to Beilenson (2022), the use of Zoom has become one of the most prominent aspects of new media and visual communication, especially during the current crisis. The study examines the consequences of closed cameras (black screens) during Zoom meetings, focusing on their impact on communication dynamics (Manovich, 2021) and Digital political decisions (Erllich & Gindi, 2023), (Chapter two). self-representation (Fiske & Taylor, 2017), (Chapter three), and ethical considerations (Rushkoff, 2010) (Chapter four). The goal is to understand why users choose to leave their cameras off and how this phenomenon shapes virtual interactions. Understanding the reasons for the closure of the cameras is essential as it sheds light on how virtual communication affects interpersonal and social interactions in a digital age dominated by video conferencing tool.

The methodological part of the thesis was researched in Israel during the Covid-19 period. The transition to distance learning and virtual communication brought about by the epidemic, (2020-22) was examined, emphasizing the widespread

adoption of platforms such as Zoom. The purpose of the study is to understand the new codes (visual communication) that emerged due to this change to Zoom communication and black screen, and how the lack of visual cues affects the interpersonal interactions and the quality of communication. Along with the understanding of what are the reasons for the closed cameras during the Zoom. It should be noted that while non-verbal communication is well studied in face-to-face interactions, the effect of closed cameras in virtual settings is a relatively unexplored area. The research is novel in this particular aspect of Zoom, offering new insights into how digital self-representation and the choice to prevent cameras from opening affect virtual interactions. All this is happening in a digital age where a significant part of our lives is on the screen and we present our visual-digital representation all day long on social networks (inclusive). Self-image should mimic dominant images on the web. Accordingly, most of the time, the image is busy in accordance with network standards, we double the popular shape (Abrudan, 2012). The key elements of the research lie in examining the psychological and cultural factors behind closed cameras, the impact on the user experience and the wider implications for communication practices in a digital age dominated by virtual meetings. While the transition was mentally difficult and complex, it also generated new opportunities for communication and education in a global way (Serhan, 2020, pp.336-340). The research prepares the stage for an in-depth analysis of these challenges/opportunities, and contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of Zoom communication and black screens.

The central argument of the research posits that the phenomenon of black screens during Zoom meetings represents a significant shift in communication dynamics, highlighting the complexity and multiplicity of the self in digital interactions (Ben Gal-Herzog, 2022). This is contrasted with traditional views of a continuous, singular self. Drawing from psychoanalytic theories, the research suggests that the decision to turn off cameras during virtual meetings is influenced by various psychological, cultural, and social factors, which in turn affect the quality of communication and self-representation. The research argues that the absence of visual cues due to closed cameras creates a fragmented and multifaceted digital self. This aligns with the referential approach, which views the self as comprising multiple, sometimes conflicting, self-states. The black screen phenomenon is seen as a

manifestation of this multiplicity, where individuals manage their self-presentation in a mediated, often disjointed, virtual environment. The study explores how this impacts the interaction between individuals and the digital group (Ziegenhein & Stauffer, 2020).

The development of trust, and the sense of presence in virtual meeting is different in its perception when the screen is black. By examining the underlying reasons for participants' choices to keep their cameras off, the research aims to uncover deeper insights into digital communication practices and the evolving nature of self-perception in the age of Zoom. The reasons found for closing the camera are varied and include: multitasking, Zoom exhaustion, unclear ethics - lack of rules and regulations, body image, psychological concerns, a sense of power and control, socioeconomic status, security problems, lack of connection to the group/facilitator and technological problems.

According to the arguments, the study describes the new visual codes. Codes created following the use of Zoom. Some of the codes are new and some are appropriated from the virtual digital world. It is important to note that the Zoom application was chosen as a representative sample due to the frequency of its use. But the thesis results can also be applied to other video calls during this period. On the other hand, each video calling application has different operating mechanisms even though their general idea is the same. The Zoom app is the only one that allows to turn off the digital self-representation by closing the camera, thus enabling a dramatic political-media choice that affects the virtual modes of communication.

We need to know how the visual representations work, how to use them and how to develop visual interpretations of personal ideas. Visual culture becomes part of everyday human production and develops by multiplying the forms in which it is expressed and increasing the impact it has on social interaction (Abrudan, 2012). The codes are created following the closing of the Zoom camera, which include several key elements: *Illusion of reality*: The visual technologies such as virtual reality and augmented reality create a convincing illusion of reality, making it difficult for participants to distinguish between what is real and what is artificial. *Technical and social codes*: visual representations use technical codes that enable the creation of visual production, and ideology supports this by encoding the preferred meanings in a

certain cultural context. *Social media and entertaining content*: Social media platforms have been flooded with humorous content such as memes and viral videos related to Zoom meetings, creating a unique space for comic expression and online community building. *Postmodern cultural representations*: the visual media in the period of postmodernism emphasizes the rejection of traditional values and the emphasis of personal experience and expression. By closing the camera, participants can use these technologies to create a tailored yet interactive presence, while maintaining their privacy and personal comfort.

The results of the study show that there are 6 new codes following the Zoom, but only one is new with the Zoom use:

- Black screen code. (New- Created in Zoom)– *Ethics, self-representation, security and use of the camera.*
- Augmented reality code. (Before the Zoom- But a code that characterizes the zoom)*
- A code of multiple flickering visual images. (Before the Zoom- A code that characterizes the zoom)*
- A code of self-representation in an interactive and synchronous social network. (Before the Zoom- A code that characterizes the zoom) *
- Code of image and text in a virtual community. (Before the Zoom- A code that characterizes the zoom) *
- Body language codes. (Before Zoom- A code that characterizes the zoom) *

In the thesis, the conclusion chapter shows the explanation of how these codes were created from the research data by organizing them into categories: *Self-representation* - By opening/closing a camera. The two configurations testify to different intentions and deconstruct the representation both in its production and in its absence. *Voyeur and control* - There is a choice to be: viewer, watched, both, recording, listening, changing the screen configuration, disappearing and coming back, opening the camera sometimes, writing a note to one of the participants and more. The proximity of the participant to the camera and the close look in the eyes convey a feeling of invasion of privacy/intimacy. *The shadow* - Since a representation decides the extent of the exposure, he/she can remain in the shadows and do as much as it pleases without anyone knowing. Part of the actions that happen as a result of the research in this code is multiple actions while zooming. *Zoom dress code* - Or according to this study, the

lack of such a code. So, anyone can wear whatever they want (There were also cases of partial nudity, especially in boys). Beyond that, my representation can put on virtual reality and even change the environment in which the participant is. The blur can be partial by light augmented reality or full by an avatar. *True on Zoom* - Beyond hacking and trolls on the network and leaking information that may be prevented by network security, the inability to verify that the person who is on Zoom is really the person who was invited to it because of a black screen/augmented reality, gives Zoom an ambiguity of the concept of truth. The black screens make it difficult for Zoom participants to feel a safe. Experience in which they know beyond any doubt that the person who is with them on Zoom is the person who was invited there.

Importance of Research Topic

The research delves into the transformative effects of virtual communication during the Covid-19 pandemic in Israel, with a particular focus on the phenomenon of black screens—participants choosing to keep their cameras off. This behavior became widespread as isolation forced people into their homes, making virtual platforms like Zoom indispensable for maintaining educational, professional, and social connections. Understanding the reasons behind camera-off behavior and its multifaceted impact is crucial for improving virtual communication, enhancing engagement, and addressing broader social, psychological, and artistic implication .Research on Zoom communication during the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of black screens is crucial due to its multifaceted effects including: *Societal and Cultural Impact*- Increased Zoom usage during COVID-19 has altered interpersonal and organizational communication dynamics. The prevalence of black screens affects virtual communication dynamics, potentially reshaping norms and cultural codes in virtual environments. *Psychological Effects*- Lockdowns and restrictions during COVID-19 have reduced face-to-face interactions, impacting social activity. Black screens may exacerbate feelings of insecurity and boundaries in virtual communication. *Communication Implications*- The research aims to uncover reasons behind camera closures on Zoom and understand their implications on virtual communication. It seeks to provide a detailed description and analysis of the challenges and opportunities they present. The study innovates by examining the understudied area of

closed cameras in virtual communication, contributing new insights into digital self-representation and communication ethics. Original contributions include shedding light on how closed cameras redefine norms and communication practices in virtual environments, distinct from traditional face-to-face interactions. The research distinguishes itself by exploring new dimensions in digital communication, aiming to understand coping mechanisms in new situations such as camera closures. It provides profound insights for consultants and offers policy recommendations for managing and improving digital communication practices. This research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of virtual communication dynamics in the Zoom era. It seeks to advance policies and interventions related to digital self-disclosure, ethics in digital communication, and psychological implications of virtual activities. By understanding our digital behaviors in video calls, we can contribute to society and the industry with communication approaches adapted to the needs of the users.

Part of the innovation and originality of the research deals with the term 'Selfie- Zoom' which describes a situation of a virtual selfie that is not done by the free will of the Zoom participant and is apparently forced to be in a selfie position. Throughout the study, the 'Selfie- Zoom' mode changed, so that the Zoom participant could choose whether to hide their selfie or not. Even if the participant chose to hide his visual image from self-viewing, others could still see his 'Selfie- Zoom'. Following the knowledge that you are being watched and your level of control over your digital visual representation is limited, artificial situations of virtual behavior were created designed to imitate digital situations taken by free choice in a different medium.

The importance of research into the transformative value of virtual communication during a crisis stems from the fact that once in while communication crises afflict humanity in general and Israel in particular. Unfortunately, crisis communication has become common in the State of Israel in recent times and since 2020 the use of Zoom has become more and more common as a means of communication. Understanding the reasons for closing the cameras along with understanding the visual codes makes it possible to identify similar and different trends in the use of the camera when Zooming. From a study I conducted with my students, it was found that the amount of closed Zoom cameras in 2023 with the outbreak of the war in Israel was significantly smaller than during the Covid-19

period. Some of my basic assumptions for the differences in the phenomenon are related to the slogan of the masses "Together we will win" and the sense of unity of destiny of the residents of Israel. So that at once, from the era of the Covid-19 where everyone has to look after themselves and be isolated from others in order to survive, during the war the trend was the opposite and the feeling of collective survival made it possible to lower self defense mechanisms and a different order of communication priorities. It is possible that our experience studies with Zoom also taught us to use it in a more controlled manner and perhaps the theory of imitation is the one that worked in favor of open Zoom cameras. In any case, without delving into the Zoom user experience of the Covid-19 era, it was difficult to identify the changing trends in Zoom's virtual communication. In conclusion, the importance of research lies in the future tools it can give humanity in deciphering transformative virtual communication situations that may occur in crisis communication in the future.

Methodology

The methodology in this doctoral study developed and progressed within the research itself. In the first step, I tried to investigate the research questions and hypothesis quantitatively by questionnaires in a docs file. The goal was to gather data on the extent of the phenomenon and its significance in Israel during the Covid-19 period. After collecting the data, I felt that filling out the questionnaires was not enough to understand the reasons for closing the camera, understanding the social codes and the effect on the modes of communication, but only the scope of the phenomenon in Israeli society by statistically segmenting the data according to their variables.

Factor Analysis of the data revealed 4 variables

Factor 1- *Age* - An important variable in the study is the age of the respondents. Children up to the age of 10, usually under parental supervision, tend to open the camera using Zoom. From the age of 10-18, preference for closed camera and from the age of 18 and up the division is much more complex regarding the use of the camera.

Factor 2- *Status of participants in Zoom interactions* - The speaker is almost always with an open camera like: Teachers, employer and Zoom organizer. While in Zoom participants the status changes.

Factor 3- *Gender* - Women prefer the camera to be closed compared to men.

Factor 4- *Socioeconomic Status* - The lower the socioeconomic status, the more likely it is to turn off the camera when using Zoom.

These data led me moved to the second stage in the methodological chapter, with the aim of deeply understanding the circumstances of the phenomena. I continued with qualitative research and interviewed 66 participants. I made sure to conduct all the interviews on Zoom. The same tool I'm researching on. In the personal interviews, the camera was open most of the time and was closed according to the connotative and denotative questions and according to the needs of the interviewee. At this stage of the research, I had quantitative and qualitative data. On the other hand, I still felt that the investigated medium was hiding secrets that I had not yet been able to decipher. I was looking for another research tool that would complete the methodological picture for holistically. Therefore, I turned to visual research, which is the heart of this thesis. With the help of the visual research, I was able to decipher hidden layers that lead us, the decision makers, to not using the camera and digital visual concepts that affect the results of the research (Barthes, 2003). Finally, I understood that the study was chosen as exploratory research. This approach allows for a detailed investigation of the specific cultural and social context of the use of Zoom in Israel during the Covid-19 period, and provides insights into the unique adjustments and challenges faced by users in this context. The exploratory research method allows a deep dive into the nuances of changes in communication created by the widespread adoption of Zoom. The research methodology combines quantitative, qualitative and visual research methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The last step in the methodological research was artificial intelligence. The idea to make a comparison between the results of the research and AI, stemmed from the idea that artificial intelligence collects its data from information that exists on the web and crowd wisdom. Thus, despite the generous time I had during the Covid-19 isolations to study a large group of participants and a diverse research population, AI has a data collection ability that is hard to compete with (on an international scale) . Despite the correlation between the research findings

(AI and Mine), it is still possible to identify a gap in the emotional-visual aspect between AI and the interviewees and respondents of the study.

This mixed methods in exploratory research approach provided a comprehensive look at Zoom camera use, combining broad quantitative data with deep qualitative insights and contextual visual analysis. In my Case study, I used Visual – genealogical research method, using a semiotic analysis tool. I visually explored the connection between Zoom and other contemporary medium tools in order to find existing analogies in the media.

This methodology was essential in uncovering the multifaceted reasons behind camera use behaviors and their impact on media during the pandemic in Israel. In addition to symbols and simulations, graphic design, advertisements, illustrations, video and photography, as well as digital art and other forms of visual media, these areas of study change all the time, added to them now is another visual form of a Black Screen. Visual communication also includes the use of body language and facial expressions in communication. It also examines how people interpret and respond to visual information (Berger, 2014).

Research Questions

Attribution of the research question to the research method in each question separately.

What are the reasons for opening or closing the camera when using Zoom ?

(Visual, Quantitative and Qualitative).

What is the impact of black screen on interpersonal and social communication?

(Qualitative).

What are the pros versus cons of using the camera when using Zoom?

(Qualitative).

When is the best time to use a black screen when Zooming, if at all?

(Qualitative).

Hypothesis

Using the camera during Zoom creates new codes of visual culture. (The same as closed camera creates codes).

(Qualitatively, Visual research)

Expected Results

The study is expected to shed light on the dynamics of virtual communication and provide deep insights into the challenges and opportunities they present. Anticipated findings include insights into the reasons behind camera closures, their impact on communication effectiveness, and the emergence of new cultural norms in virtual settings.

- The obvious reasons for closing the camera.
- Proof that a closed camera affects the way the message is understood. Whether the camera of the self-representation is closed or whether in general only sense of hearing is activated on Zoom.
- Changing virtual communication codes following the introduction of Zoom.
- Effect on virtual social communication following the closing of the camera.
- No advantages in a closed camera in Zoom.

Conclusions

The Zoom technology has become an integral part of our daily lives, particularly during times of crisis when we are disconnected, anxious, worried, and sometimes depressed. It has required us to open our homes and intimate places to others, and to watch others while being watched ourselves. As we transition to a hybrid format, the black screens that dominate our lives have become a new visual culture that tells us various stories. Sometimes about our self. The study finds that a significant number of participants turn off their cameras simply because it is possible. It highlighting a complex ethical landscape. This behavior, although seemingly simple, raises questions about privacy, control and the nature of the virtual interaction. Ethical considerations are paramount when users navigate the balance between visibility and privacy in digital spaces.

Zoom, which relies on digital representations, allows participants to be cataloged according to their on-screen digital representation and political choices when participating in Zoom. Each screen display has a clear message and affects the self-user experience as well as the additional participants in the Zoom. The stratified load of so many self-displays plus a long look at personal self-representation, leads to an emerging phenomenon born with Zoom and called 'Zoom exhaustion' (Shockley,2021). Self-representation in Zoom proving to be a critical factor, with many users expressing discomfort with being seen all the time. This discomfort stems from self-consciousness about one's appearance and the pressure to maintain a certain image. The research suggests that, sometimes, turning off the camera allows people to better focus on the content and reduces anxiety related to self-presentation. On the other hand, sometimes the opposite leads to a recommendation to close the camera. There are participants who really like to observe themselves, (The narcissism motif) during the Zoom. This phenomenon also makes it difficult to concentrate on the Zoom content.

Zoom Safety concerns especially among adults, are significant. The presence of black screens can evoke feelings of vulnerability and fear, highlighting the need for supportive environments that address these anxieties. The black screen phenomenon also metaphorically represents a retreat to privacy within the monitoring of virtual meetings. In cyberspace, we don't trust each other. We need the control mechanism of Foucault (1975) - to know all the time what is happening, to whom and when. Want proof they are there, want to see it live. The research reveals that camera-eliminating behavior disrupts traditional group dynamics, creating a sense of virtual impotence and mistrust. Participants equate the visibility of cameras with presence and engagement, and the lack of visual cues can lead to a breakdown in trust in the media. This finding emphasizes the need for new norms and procedures in virtual group settings.

The study identifies new visual cultural codes arising from the use of Zoom, including the black screen code, the augmented reality code, and codes related to self-representation and interactive social networks. Other cultural digital codes in Zoom are related to the exaggerated body language (the one that eventually causes Zoom exhaustion as well) forced smiles, direct gaze, open eyes, vigorous head nodding, thumbs up, upright/bent torso and more. Postural changes and experience as little movement as possible. With the camera open there is an attempt to get a successful

Zoom selfie and then try to freeze it in the picture mode. A very problematic desire of the users, because they try to force a 2D image configuration to become a 3D video configuration. Every movement takes the user out of concentration, whether it is his movement, or whether it is the movement of his friends. So, it seems that another non-verbal code set by Zoom is the moment of freezing people who are obviously in a live shot. It feels very unnatural and it really isn't (Beilenson, 2022). These codes reflect the evolving nature of visual communication in digital spaces and emphasize the role of visual culture in shaping interpersonal interactions.

Implications for communication and society indicate that the increased reliance on virtual communication tools such as Zoom has profound implications for the way we understand and engage in interpersonal communication. The black screen phenomenon reflects broader social trends toward privacy and controlled self-presentation, and challenges traditional notions of visibility and interaction.

Some recommendations To deal with these challenges: Development of guidelines for ethical and effective use of Zoom, emphasizing the importance of the balance between privacy and visibility, Encouraging practices that foster trust and involvement in virtual settings, such as establishing clear norms for camera use, Conducting more research on the long-term effects of virtual communication on social interaction and psychological well-being.

Originality and innovation of the research lies in the comprehensive investigation of the black screen phenomenon, while integrating theoretical perspectives from visual culture, crisis communication and digital ethics. It offers innovative insights into the ethical, social and psychological dimensions of virtual communication, contributing to the broader field of digital media studies. The study emphasizes the need for a nuanced understanding of camera behavior in virtual communication. By examining the interplay between ethical considerations, self-representation, and group dynamics, the study provides important insights into the evolving landscape of digital interaction. These findings have important implications both for the design of virtual communication tools and for the development of best practices for their use in professional and educational contexts. Research into the phenomenon of black screens during Zoom meetings, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, has significant implications for the communications industry. As video conferencing has become a

staple of professional, educational and social interactions, understanding why participants turn off their cameras and how this behavior affects communication is important. This study aims to provide insights that can improve virtual communication tools and practices. the research offers a new theoretical framework and empirical analysis of virtual communication in the Zoom era, providing actionable insights for consultants and proposing policies for managing and enhancing digital communication practices in the future.

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