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Is Communication Still the Key?

A study of how nonverbal communication, or lack thereof, influences leaders and organizations in the age of digitalization

Kristian Leik Woie

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Department of Sociology and Human Geography

The Faculty of Social Sciences

The University of Oslo



Abstract

This thesis is a qualitative study that examines nonverbal communication, which is the act of conveying information without text or language, and what happens to this type of communication when organizations digitalize. While often associated with body language and facial expressions, nonverbals also include clothing, avatars, pictures, and more. Theories suggest that nonverbals can influence us tremendously. Based on the experiences and information provided in seven interviews with leaders, I explore the relationship between nonverbal communication and digitalization and try to answer this thesis' research question:

What happens to nonverbal communication when we digitalize, and how does it affect leadership and organizations?

Through a thematic analysis of the data, I identified four main themes: The Mixture of Missing Elements, The Efficiency of Digitalization, The Process of Building a Culture, and In Search of Alternatives. Each category builds on the other and helps address the research question. The findings reveal that with digitalization, the effect of nonverbals appears to weaken. However, because there are fewer nonverbals to observe, affirmative nodding and facial expressions that are noticeable online, such as smiles, became even more potent. Efficiency increased but could be experienced as 'cold' because of the lack of interpersonal communication. Leaders seem to be important figures in being the initial first-movers in using digital technology and in being agents in making sense of what nonverbals mean digitally and understanding online interactions.

The thesis discusses these findings and wonders if how we communicate fundamentally changes with digitalization and work from home. Being digital is a new type of environment and, like any environment, will therefore alter the way individuals use nonverbal communication. I discuss if the characteristics of digital communication open new ways to think about leadership; for example, the nonverbal expression of gender was not experienced as prominent when online. A less biased and contaminated view of leadership could create positive opportunities. An understanding of procedure or "script" online is also lacking, further supporting opportunities with digital communication. The leaders noted that nonverbal communication is very individualized, something I discuss, and the thesis asks if efficiency might not always be desirable.



Acknowledgments

Sports have been a large part of my life from a young age. Whether I had hit a golf ball out of bounds or let in a goal as a football goalie, my reaction would be similar: head down and shoulders high. Did it affect me? Certainly. Did I know it affected me? No, not until now, fifteen years later, when I have had the opportunity to learn about nonverbal communication and the remarkable impact it has on everyone. My academic background reflects an interest in psychology and human behavior, but it was *Prosjektforum*, a course during my graduate studies, that really opened my eyes to how (nonverbal) communication affects relationships and organizations and how digitalization might alter that. This master's thesis is a cumulation of my interests and experiences over the years. Through ups and downs, I have had a tremendous joy this semester writing and learning about nonverbal communication, leadership, and organizations in the age of digitalization.

I look forward to using and applying these lessons for the rest of my life.

This thesis would not have been possible without the contributions and support of several individuals. I want to take a moment to express gratitude and thanks to a few individuals who have had an indispensable role in the project.

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- Kristian Leik Woie, May 2022

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1. Introduction

"*Fie, fie upon her!*

There's language in her eye, her cheek, her lip,

Nay, her foot speaks; her wanton spirits look out

At every joint and motive of her body."

–Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*, Act 4, Scene 5. Play by William Shakespeare. (Est. 1609).

The quote by William Shakespeare from *Troilus and Cressida* captures some of the essence of nonverbal communication: without speaking a single word, humans can project enough information to convey a whole language. *Every joint and motive of her body* speaks to this language, yet most people have seen fewer bodies and significantly fewer feet mentioned in the quote for the last few years. Why? Because of digitalization, which has been extraordinarily high for the last two years with restrictions and work from home. With the Covid-19 pandemic as a prime driver, digitalization has forced us behind screens and into home offices. However, sitting in a living room and staring into one's web camera, one can see colleagues, friends or leaders project smiling or serious faces, the occasional hand, and other behaviors.

Whether we are aware of it or not, we humans constantly display nonverbal information that reflects how we feel, think, act, and other cues that reveal our intentions. Stop for a moment and think about how you use nonverbal signals. You use it constantly. Your attire, body language, tone of voice, and the cues you send all project information continuously. Nonverbal communication, *the act of conveying information without language*, can be an unspoken universal language, as evidence shows that some human emotions, articulated through facial expressions, are understood across cultures (Ekman & Frisen, 1971). Use of nonverbal communication is something we humans do inherently, and it is often an unconscious process. Squinting of eyes when in doubt, a defensive hand gesture when nervous, or a smile at the sight of a loved one usually comes automatically. Yet these signals influence human behavior strongly. It affects actions like who we want to cooperate with, who we can trust, who we dare to be vulnerable with, and more (Hall & Knapp, 2013).



However, do nonverbal behaviors influence us the same way when observed through a screen? One way to investigate this question was to ask people who have used digital media more continuously over the last few years due to the Covid-19 pandemic. By directly asking individuals at the management level, one can grasp some of the experiences of a leader in organizations, as to what occurs when communication happens digitally. This thesis does that by interviewing seven leaders who have experienced the digital transition. Furthermore, explicitly asking leaders offers an insightful view because leaders are often the ones who first have to adapt to the changing environment of how organizations with their team members interact and communicate. Leaders need to understand how to be best suited to modify or tweak their practice so that their institutions or organizations may alter how they operate and understand how to approach the digital age.

1.1 Research Question

By interviewing and examining the experiences of different leaders from private and public companies and institutions, this thesis hopes to better understand nonverbal communication and leadership in the context of digitalization. In an attempt to do so, this thesis will seek to answer the following research question:

What happens to nonverbal communication when we digitalize, and how does it affect leadership and organizations?

The research question is broad, but I will attempt to answer it in the following manner: The theoretical framework will present research on nonverbal communication, digitalization, and a few organizational theories. In the analysis section, I will examine the experiences of the leaders interviewed, and I will use the theoretical framework to see if it can help explain the experiences. However, this master's thesis also has an exploratory approach. Nonverbal communication in digitalization is a phenomenon without many pre-existing theories nor much research. For example, some of the research I present does not consider that parts of the nonverbal behavior happen on a screen. This shortcoming means a few of the responses from the interviews might be about experiences or events that are unexpected or new. In this case, I will present the finding and then apply research to look for similarities or contradicting conclusions to see what happens with digitalization.



Furthermore, I hope to yield some fruitful insights into both organizations and leadership related to nonverbal communication, specifically with a nod toward the changes due to the pandemic and a look towards post-pandemic life.

Nonverbal communication is a complex and interconnected field and is a large piece of the communication puzzle. Effective communication is essential to well-functioning organizations (Kudesia & Elfenbein, 2013, p. 818). It serves as the organizational oil that helps leaders and team members alike make sense of what is happening around a company or institution and correspondingly is a critical factor in creating cultures that align with the goals and values of said organizations. Communication is key for collaboration, productivity, relationships, and workplace satisfaction and is stressed as a desirable leadership trait (Norlyk, 2012). Understanding nonverbal communication is therefore highly desirable to better understand communication. The Covid-19 pandemic that started in the spring of 2020 heavily altered how many organizations were forced to operate. Home offices became a regularity, and many everyday operations started happening online instead of in a physical work environment. With changes there is a possibility that the way in which individuals communicate is altered.

1.2 Roadmap

In total, this master's thesis has five main chapters with sub-chapters. The structure of the master's thesis is as follows. First, chapter two will present some previous research and then look at some research on nonverbal communication, digitalization, and a few organizational theories. Secondly, chapter three, the methodological approach, will highlight the data collection, participants, interviews, and a few other considerations of this study. Chapter four is the analysis section consisting of four main categories that emerged from a thematic analysis of the data. These were:

1 A mixture of missing elements will look at the specifics of gender, clothing, eyes, and smiles. Moreover, it will examine the lack of impressions from nonverbals when organizations digitalize, and look at the informal chat and how certain types of interactions felt challenging to recreate online.



2 *The Efficiency of Digitalization* section examines the positive and negative sides of digital efficiency and how it relates to nonverbal communication. It will also look at the effective learning opportunities, which are not directly related to nonverbal communication but looks at possibilities that might emerge from digitalization.

3 *The Process of Building a Culture* includes a look into relationships and the leaders' role in understanding nonverbal communication and digitalization.

4 *In Search for Alternatives* explores some of the digital alternatives to nonverbal communication and how the interviewees felt about different ones.

The categories build on each other and should be seen as a compounding unit with correlating topics rather than individual, stand-alone chapters.

The final chapter five is the discussion part of the master's thesis, including a concluding remark. This last part aims to discuss the implications of the findings in light of existing theories, while also examining the impact that changes in nonverbal communication has in a broader sense. It will specifically look at how roles change when we digitalize and how it might relate to new opportunities in leadership. It will also discuss whether what we wear might mean more than what is suggested in the findings. Included is also a discussion of hybrid work solutions, sensemaking, and the importance of individual context in nonverbal communication. Weaknesses and future study possibilities is also assessed.



2. Previous Research and Theoretical Framework

This chapter will present previous research and the theoretical framework, which will lay out the foundation for the master's thesis. Nonverbal communication and digitalization are still research fields that are unfolding. Especially the connection between these two fields lacks a significant amount of literature. Nonetheless, some research has examined the relationship between the two, and I will assess this. The focus will be on the power of nonverbal communication. The chapter is structured in the following way: First I will present some previous research where I mostly look at nonverbal communication. This is followed by the theoretical framework. The framework is structured such that I will first provide definitions, if needed, to avoid some of the ambiguity related to core concepts. Following that are the theories and the research behind them. The theoretical framework has three central categories: Nonverbal communication, digitalization, and organizational theories.

2.1 Previous Research

The research field of nonverbal communication is extensive and is often seen in conjunction with other academic fields such as anthropology, psychology, or behavioral sciences. Even the arts such as theater and acting can teach valuable lessons in the silent language of nonverbals. The variety in topics means there is a considerable variety of opinions, research, and uses of nonverbal communication. As a distinct and independent field, the study of nonverbal communication is relatively new, but work related to nonverbal communication goes back centuries. A starting point for the academic study of nonverbal communication is often considered Charles Darwin's "*The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*" (1872), examining how both humans and animals communicate through nonverbal signals. The field, however, has interested people back to Confucius a few thousand years ago (Buck & Knapp, 2006). The wide range of interests are important to show because it highlights how nonverbal communication is a field in constant development.

This master's thesis revolves around nonverbal communication in the age of digitalization, meaning that some nonverbal behaviors may be more prominent than others. For example,



facial expressions are often important in both physical interactions and behind a screen. When speaking about facial expressions, it is unavoidable not to mention the works of psychologist Paul Ekman. Starting in 1954, Dr. Ekman was a pioneer in the study of nonverbal communication and focused particularly on facial expressions and body movements. Some of his most famous work was on the connection between emotion and facial expressions, showing how some emotions with their corresponding facial expression are universal (Ekman, 1972; Ekman & Friesen, 1971). In other words, regardless of culture, context, and company or institutions, some expressions are primarily inherent in humans - an important finding to highlight as the world moves towards digitalization.

The 20th century saw more systematic studies of nonverbal communication emerge. David Efron is another crucial figure to mention who, in fact, inspired Dr. Ekman. Efron's work was primarily on gestures, and it highlights the influence of environment and cultural context on nonverbal behavior (Efron, 1941). In the context of a world that is changing due to digital and technological innovations, it poses the question: How does the environment of digitalization impact nonverbal behavior, such as the use of gestures?

In the 1970s, more discussions and literature appeared within the field (Patterson, 2014). Additionally, in 1976 the first journal on nonverbal communication appeared, titled *Journal of Environmental Psychology and Nonverbal Behavior* (Buck & Knapp, 2006). Only four years later, it was renamed *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*. As of March 2022, the journal has 46 volumes. The 1980s and onwards was when the study and research on nonverbal communication 'exploded,' meaning researchers conducted a large number of studies. Much like in other academic fields, what is considered trendy and what is considered unfashionable also varies within the study of nonverbal communication. For instance, about 60 years ago, the study of how space and territory influence nonverbal behavior was widespread, while at the start of the 21st century, the study of gestures was more popular (Buck & Knapp, 2006). Perhaps the period we live in now will look at space and environment again and explore how digital space influences nonverbal communication, much like this thesis does.

In the last few years, we have seen an emergence of nonverbal communication and the impact of digitalization. For instance, in 2014, the *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* had a special issue titled *Nonverbal Behavior in the Digital Age: Explorations in Internet Social Communication*, which contained research that took elements such as Facebook posting into

consideration (Fleuriet et al., 2014). Studies such as Saunderson and Nejat (2019) have looked into nonverbal communication in interactions between humans and robots. Their findings showed that robots that use nonverbal communication modeled after humans could lead to desirable results: for example, how arm gestures led to improvements in likeability and social engagement.

For the last few decades, digitalization has influenced the way in which people communicate. However, especially within the previous two years, many individuals have been forced to adopt new ways of thinking and communicating. Some early reports regarding work from home and the Covid-19 pandemic indicate that working from home will become more common and that the flexibility from home offices often has positive sides to it (Ingelsrud & Bernstrøm, 2021; Ingelsrud et al., 2020). However, it may not be a straightforward task from a leadership perspective. Challenges regarding follow-ups on colleagues and working on certain tasks such as creativity may become harder. The authors point this out: “*Digital meetings give little room for social spontaneity and ‘physical’ communication with laughter and facial expressions*” (Ingelsrud et al., 2020, p. 76).

The challenge begs the question: How does the reduced ability to communicate nonverbally influence interactions, which is a central element in this thesis? A study by Frankfeldt (2020) poses the question of whether digital communication is impossible, or an oxymoron, in psychoanalysis. Therapy is outside the scope of this master’s thesis. Still, the research is interesting because it highlights the impulsivity that digital communication creates, meaning that interactions happen faster than conventional communication (Frankfeldt, 2020). Digitalization can create miscommunication and a sense of depersonalizing effects, which in therapy is undesired.

Highlighted in research is also how nonverbal communication can fit into two categories. One is the “intentional, propositional, learned, culturally patterned” while the other is more without intention and innate, often an unconscious process (Buck & Powers, 2013, p. 423). The differentiation is related to growth and neural activity. It is essential to note that parts of nonverbal communication often are unconscious, as I will later discuss in my findings in light of how individuals process information. Note, I will not be going into detail about



neuroscience and brain processes related to nonverbal communication because that in itself is a large topic.

One of the reasons why there is a lack of research and evidence is because most of the studies on nonverbal communication are conducted in a physical environment. This is supported by Darics (2020), who highlights a lack of empirical research on what happens when individuals communicate online. Darics notes that nonverbal communication does not always “*distinguish neatly into well-defined categories because of complexity*” (Darics, 2020, p. 10). For example, there is a varying degree of voluntary and involuntary use, dependent on internal and external factors, and so forth.

This master’s thesis attempts to understand some of what happens with nonverbal communication when we digitalize, and how it affects organizations and leadership. The thesis tries to position itself in the research that will unfold as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, addressing the connection between digital communication and what happens to the nonverbal part of communication.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Because leadership is such a central piece to this thesis, I will first define this term. This is followed by a clarification of nonverbal communication, and the definition that I use for this master’s thesis. After that I will investigate the power of nonverbal communication, particularly looking at the nature of how humans form impressions. More specifically, I will look at gender, attire, the face and posture. This is followed by visiting some theories on digital communication, and a look at alternatives to nonverbal communication in digital form. The final part will be organizational theories with a focus on the organizational context and sensemaking.

The theoretical framework is limited, which means that I am excluding parts of research and theories on nonverbal communication. I had to make excluding choices because of the scope of the thesis. Before the interviews, I read about some of the theories, such as gender and



posture, because I thought they might be meaningful and prominent in a digital environment, while other literature I read after I learned about the interviewed leaders' experiences.

2.2.1 Defining Leadership

I wish to draw attention to the definition of *Leadership*. I choose to use House and colleagues' (1999) definition of leadership as it aligns the most with what I believe the role that nonverbal communication would play for leaders. They define leadership as:

“The ability of an individual to influence, motivate and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organization” (House et al., 1999).

However, defining leadership is also not a simple task. As Janda (1960) states, many parts revolving around leadership creates an ambiguity of meaning. For example, power, authority, management, administration, control, and supervision are all terms that can be imprecise but are related to leadership (Yukl & Gardner, 2020). In that sense, Houses' definition of leadership may not be best suited to other studies or even this study. Yet, I believed it was necessary to narrow the term so that the participant selection and focus of the study were more nuanced.

Leaders are crucial for the effectiveness and changes in organizations. As the introduction mentioned, this master's thesis looks at leaders because they are often a frontrunner in using and adapting to organizational changes. With Weick and Quinn (1999) and their organizational change and development, I will later also assess the position of the leader in change.

2.3 Nonverbal Communication

The definition of nonverbal communication used in this master's thesis is:

“Any information that is conveyed without the use of words through facial expressions, gestures, body language, tone of voice, and other physical indications of mood, attitude, approbation” (VandenBos, G. R., 2015).

This is borrowed from American Psychology Association's (APA) definition and other definitions are usually similar. The extent to which this type of communication is used varies. In some instances, it may contribute enormously to the interaction between individuals; think,



for example, how intimacy requires a lot of nonverbal communication. On the other hand, speaking online without a camera will limit the amount of nonverbal signals one can observe. Note on **Body Language** - Not to be confused with nonverbal communication, but rather a part of it. Body language is the use of your body to express emotions or thoughts; examples of body language include physical gestures, movement, and posture. Your body can communicate a lot because of the many parts involved. Thus body language is a large part of nonverbal communication.

Nonverbal communication is a field of complexity and interconnectedness and is often based on culture and situation. Eye contact illustrates this nicely. In Eastern-Asian cultures, eye contact is often related to hierarchy, respect, norms, and traditions, whereas in Western cultures, it is used more often to portray confidence, as highlighted by, for example, Uono & Hietanen (2015). In personal networks there will be differences too. For example, one might avoid touch with colleagues at the office, while at a dinner party with the same people, hugs are more widespread. I spotlight the existence of differences because one needs to evaluate the complete picture of a situation and environment before making conclusions about nonverbal communication.

2.3.1 The power of nonverbal communication

There are theories and popular sayings about what percentage of total communication are nonverbal, and I will not speculate on the number. However, the power that nonverbals have on communication is massive (Pease & Pease, 2004). Many studies highlight how impactful nonverbal communication can be, and I will present some in this theoretical framework. More specifically, there will be an examination of gender, clothing or attire, eyes, smile, and posture in that order.

Information and Impressions

Humans are masters at creating simplified models for their brains. As Kahneman (2012) teaches in his book *Thinking, fast and slow*, humans utilize two systems. System one is fast, instinctive, and emotional, while system two uses logic and is slow and deliberate (Kahneman, 2012). Despite system two being slow, it can still make errors, moreover,



Kahneman points out that the two ways of thinking work together, rather than as separate entities. Through different mechanisms, people will create meaning to the environment around them. The processed impressions often stem from information that individuals access through nonverbal communication and behaviors. When someone sees a person, be it a friend or foe, their brains will start creating an impression of how they believe that person should react or behave and what might happen next. One example of this mechanism that influences behavior and decision-making is the halo effect. The halo-effect states that a positive impression will affect how others think about them in distinct areas (Kahneman, 2012). Leaders, which are core to this master's thesis, can fall victim to this. A person may be tall, have a symmetrical face, or be considered beautiful, but it does not necessarily mean that they are a good leader.

Gender differences

There are certain nonverbal signs and cues that provide information instantaneously to the people around us. One example is gender. Gender is something everyone portrays to the world around them that impacts the impressions made of somebody¹. One of the leading researchers in the field of gender and nonverbal communication is Judith A. Hall. Through several studies, she has highlighted differences in how males and females express nonverbal behavior. A meta-analysis from 1984 that excluded infants found several differences in nonverbal communication between the genders (Hall, 1984). Women tended to smile more in observations and posed photographs (Hall, 1984; Dodd, Russell & Jenkins, 1999). Evidence suggests that if women know they are observed or are told to interact with others, they will smile more relative to men (Hall, 1984; LaFrance, Hecht, & Levy Paluck, 2003). Women also tend to gaze more and are more expressive in facial expressions and hand-arm gestures than men (Hall, 1984; 2006). Men are commonly more restless than women, using expansive body posture more often. Finally, studies also highlighted how women generally are better at sending and understanding (decoding) nonverbal communication (Hall, 2006; Briton & Hall, 1995). In other words, women will send more nonverbal signals and understand nonverbal behavior better than men, generally speaking. I want to underline that these findings are not my opinions, but rather findings by Hall and other researchers.

¹ Gender is a term that holds complexity in terms of how people identify themselves and how the term is used. I therefore follow Hall's footsteps of referring to gender in this thesis to people who self-identify or are identified based on appearance as dichotomously male or female (Hall, 2006, p. 214).



This master's thesis will not detail the societal influence on gender differences in nonverbal communication. However, I wish to point out that gender differences often come from self-fulfilling prophecies and cultures (Hall, 2006). That is to say that society and the people around us have certain norms and traditions that shape how everybody uses nonverbal communication. Nonetheless, I will use this overall understanding of gender differences in nonverbal communication to assess if the leaders in my thesis experienced gender differences in the person they were talking with when they interacted online.

Clothes

Other nonverbal cues that aid in forming impressions are clothing or attire. Some research indicates that what people wear can influence their behavior and cognition. For example, Adam and Galinsky (2012) introduced the term “enclothed cognition,” in which their studies showed that the symbolic meaning of attire and the physical experience of wearing something (they used lab and doctors' coats) positively influenced performance on cognitive tasks. Similarly, what an individual wears can affect how they describe themselves (Hannover & Kühnen, 2002). However, how does clothing influence others? Clothing plays a vital role in the way individuals portray themselves and is often connected to norms and culture. Some research supports the notion that clothing can influence impressions, particularly first impressions. In a 2012 study, Howlett and colleagues found that a well-fitted suit positively influenced others' perceptions of confidence, success, and salary (Howlett et al., 2013). Therefore, the research suggests that clothing can also impact impressions on others, not only self-image or cognition.

Nonverbals of the face

Nonverbal communication on the face is prominent in physical and online interactions. I will be looking at a few facial features to see if they are changed when digitalization happens. The eye itself and eye contact warrant special attention because of their incredible power to portray social and emotional behavior (Adams et al., 2013). Since infancy, humans have drawn attention to the eyes. There exists an enormous amount of research and theories on eye behavior, but what is highlighted is the capability of the eyes to portray human social and emotional perceptions (Adams et al., 2013). Essentially, this translates into the eyes being a core nonverbal behavior in the communication and interaction between individuals. Both



smiles and eye contact have been associated with traits such as intelligence, good leadership, and caring in impression formations (Kilgo et al., 2018).

Like the eyes, smiles are another potent nonverbal behavior of the face. Humans can use smiles to mask their negative emotions, such as distress (Ansfield, 2007). These types of smiles are conscious and unconscious. For example, someone might consciously fake a smile to portray trustworthiness and confidence.

Nonetheless, in a study by Krumhuber and colleagues (2007), they found that even small differences in smiles and facial dynamics indicated who participants wanted to cooperate with and who were perceived as trustworthy. Authentic smiles were detectable even in short video clips and altered the interaction between research participants (Krumhuber et al., 2007). Even in a virtual setting, the nonverbals of the face influence us. For example, one study suggests that virtual characters based on humans who use nodding based on natural movement were positively rated in terms of being liked and trust (Aburumman, 2022).

Posture

Posture refers to the body's position and how individuals present themselves. Commonly, posture is often referred to as either dominant, which is spacious and hands to the side, or submissive, which is more tucked in and smaller. The posture that a person has in accordance with others has immense influence over others. According to Huang et al. (2011), the posture of individuals, dominant or submissive, affected individuals more than the title of their position.

People also tend to adapt their posture according to whomever they talk to (Tiedens & Fragale, 2003). For instance, if someone has a dominant posture the opposing person would generally make themselves a little smaller. Individuals who adapt and do the opposite achieve a higher level of liking and comfort for the other person compared to both having a dominant or submissive stance (Tiedens & Fragale, 2003).



2.4 Digitalization

How does digital communication differ from physical interaction? In the following section, I will explore some of the different theories and literature that can help to explain what happens with digitalization.

2.4.1 In the age of digitalization and virtual work

This master's thesis focuses on communication being converted to digital form. When we communicate digitally, we often use technology to assist us, for example cell phones or computers. The age of digitalization refers to this period of technology, with digital devices to aid us and where people use tools to communicate quicker and more efficiently. During the last two years, the Covid-19 pandemic has thoroughly sped up this process, forcing organizations to convert more and more to the use of a digital form. For example, large businesses and schools now use digital platforms such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom to present their conferences and lectures. This process is still ongoing, with not just companies and institutions converting to digital format, but also with everyday life becoming more digital. For clarity, working online and working digitally are used interchangeably in this master's thesis.

In their work, Bell and Kozlowski (2002) try to pinpoint what virtual teams are and how different types of virtual teams exist. As they write, there is no single trait or characteristic that determines one type of virtual team. Rather, different elements may give diverse types of virtual teams. For example, differences in the life cycle of the virtual teams - are they a temporary fix or a long-term solution? I will not examine the differences between virtual teams other than noticing there are dissimilarities. Instead, I will focus on the difference between physical/conventional and virtual teams. Bell and Kozlowski (2002) emphasize two main differences between the two types, which are A) spatial distance and B) information, data, and communication. There are positive sides to virtual teams relative to physical ones. Highlighted is the focus on how virtual teams are more flexible, adaptive, and responsive because they are no longer bound to distance between team members (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002). Team members with different types of expertise or positions within an organization can now be connected much faster without worrying about travel costs or other expenses.



What digitalization often does in terms of communication, however, is create an asynchronous form of interaction, which means information is not processed simultaneously. For example, email interactions may take hours to complete, while face-to-face interaction happens instantaneously. Research indicates that asynchronous communication used on computers is well suited for completing less complex tasks (Dennis & Valacich, 1993). This means that “easy” tasks, such as brainstorming or clarifications, are well fitted for digital communication. Complex tasks require more information sharing and collaborative decision-making (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002). When the complexity of a task increases, the need for synchronous communication increases. This need is created because feedback, reciprocal communication, and the need for a well-oiled machine are desirable for complex tasks, especially as team members’ roles become highly interdependent, meaning that it can be hard for a single member to sit and work on a task (Bell and Kozlowski, 2002, p. 25).

Digitalization impacts not only how communication is used but also the surrounding environment of how we interact. For instance, some studies indicate that technologies change role relations. One of those is Barley (2015), who examined how ‘The Internet makes buying a car less loathsome.’ The study used data over two years to show how the relationship between car sellers and their customers has changed due to technology. Cars themselves are not relevant to this master’s thesis; the interesting notion is how technology can alter interaction order. What happened is that an interaction that typically would occur in face-to-face interaction was now moved to the internet. The framework of a physical and social stage was gone, and the ‘script’ of the salesperson was changed (Barley, 2015). In other words, with technology implemented, an understanding of interaction, procedure, and the environment surrounding something was changed. In Barley’s example, that technology was the internet. These changes are vital to highlight because they directly influence how we communicate, thus the understanding and use of nonverbal communication.

Digital communication through technology may open up an array of new possibilities, such as eliminating certain aspects of role relations. For instance, in the case of Barley’s study, the element of ethnicity was eliminated because of technology (Barley, 2015). Usually, white people would pay less, but the effect weakened when the internet was added to the equation. In that sense, digital communication seems to add another layer over interactions and collaboration which might have a positive effect. Other studies have also proven that virtually



may contribute to a “less contaminated view of leader behaviors” (Shollen & Brunner, 2016, p. 218.). Shollen and Brunner’s (2016) study focused on the perception of leadership behavior in a virtual environment. Their work found that biases from social cues such as age, gender, and education level were absent in an anonymous virtual context.

I highlight these changes because, in the discussion section of the thesis, I wish to debate if the removed biases and the changes in technology might also influence how people use and understand nonverbal communication.

2.4.2 An examination of alternatives

Can ‘conventional’ communication be recreated in a digital form? Many alternatives supplement or alter interactions, especially focusing on recreating physical gestures and other nonverbal behavior and cues online. Examples include avatars and emoticons. What does the research say about the use of such options? Darics (2020), for example, emphasizes the importance of online nonverbal communication for leaders. Although Darics (2020) looks at written text through instant messages, Darics affirms the value of finding options to recreate nonverbal communication digitally due to its influence on leadership. The following section will examine some of the theories and research that has been conducted.

Power of pictures

A study by Ambady and Rosenthal (1993) found that photos and short videos (down to a few seconds) of individuals, in their case teachers, influenced the end of the year evaluation of the said teacher. Moreover, people who did not know the teachers rated them similarly to individuals who interacted with the educator (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993). The differences in the ratings were dependent on differences in nonverbal behavior, such as smiling, gaze, and hands. Previously I mentioned the work of Kahneman (2011), and this falls along the same lines. Kahneman (2011) noted that people's perception of pictures is highly intuitive. Chapter 1 of his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* starts with the underpinning that humans process pictures at high speed. There is a picture and this text:

“Your experience as you look at the woman's face seamlessly combines what we normally call seeing and intuitive thinking. As surely and quickly as you saw that the young woman's hair is dark, you knew she is angry. Furthermore, what you saw extended into the future.”

(Kahneman, 2011, p. 25) The statement speaks to the power that picture has and how it influences individuals even without much conscious thought. One will start to make thoughts not just about them in the moment but also for the future. In the thesis, I later look at pictures to see if they can be a form of replacement for nonverbals when we digitalize.

Avatars

Used to represent an individual in a virtual form, avatars are potent tools that can bridge the connection between physical and digital reality. Avatars can hold similarities to the person they represent, but that is not a prerequisite. For example, someone may use a picture of a dog as their avatar. However, a distinction is often made whether the avatar is self-animated or static. Self-animated avatars map a person's behavior and recreate it in real-time, while static is simple visual presentations of something, often humans (Dodds et al., 2011). In a study by Taylor (2011), the researchers asked the participants a series of questions related to empathy. Those questions that were also accompanied by an avatar, in their case, a static one, received more answers (Taylor, 2011). Moreover, in some cases, questions that were accompanied by the avatars received more empathic responses across different question types. This implies that avatars can be a powerful tool for communication and influence. The wisdom that avatars can be strong nonverbal cues is something I will later use to evaluate the participants' answers in this thesis.

Furthermore, avatars may be influential because they are able to recreate some of the nonverbal cues lost in online communication. Morrison and colleagues' study (2012) discusses this and found that static avatars, in their case symbols used as avatars, positively affected trust in online communication. They also speculate whether avatars should be considered nonverbal communication themselves, in the same line as body language or facial expressions (Morrison et al., 2012). Avatars that are animated self-avatars that mimic a person's nonverbal communication were found to improve communication in experiments conducted by Dodds et al. (2011). The animated avatars improved the ability to guess correct words in their studies. The research also noted that nonverbal feedback was important for communication, meaning that both the sender and receiver of information would send nonverbal information (Dodds et al., 2011).

Emoticons



The use of emoticons, commonly called simply emojis or smileys, warrants some attention as they are commonly used to replace nonverbal communication in computer-mediated communication. Tang and Hew (2019) examined a total of fifty-one studies on emoticons to spotlight commonalities in research. Twenty-nine of the studies demonstrated that nonverbal cues, in this case, emoticons, could influence expressions and interpersonal relationships (Tang & Hew, 2019). Moreover, other studies they examined showed how emotions influenced people's perceptions of each other. However, the use of such emoticons seems not to be a straightforward, positive process. For example, Marder et al. (2020) showed how the use of emoticons could increase perceptions of an individual's warmth and decrease the perception of competence. Noteworthy was that the perception of warmth was more significant than the perception of competence.

Hybrid solutions

When home office and physical office are combined, they form a hybrid solution. Hybrid means two different sides that become one to form a unity. Many individuals experienced home offices during the pandemic outbreak in 2020, and others have experienced working in a physical environment. Although not a direct alternative to compensate for lack of body language and nonverbal communication online, a combination of work from home and in-office is certainly set to become *an alternative* as organizations approach the future.

Working from home, which is an integral part of a hybrid solution, has some proven benefits. In a study by Bloom et al. (2015), the results showed that working from home improved performance, characterized by employees who worked more minutes and had fewer sick days. The companies saw a boost too, as workers' work satisfaction and psychological attitude scores rose (Bloom et al., 2015).

However, a hybrid solution is not always uncomplicated, with immediate increases in work satisfaction and employee performance. Control and trust from an employer perspective are important factors to consider, and whether home-office is an option or enforced, for example, as it has been "forced" in many countries during the Covid-19 pandemic. Platts et al. (2022) showed how many such factors influenced employee wellbeing. Factors included age, gender, number of dependents, mental health status, and work status. For example, for both women and men, the quality of leadership as measured by the participants played a significant role in wellbeing in work from home (Platts et al., 2022).



2.5 Organizational theories

I review a few theories that I will later use to view the findings in this master's thesis in a bigger picture, meaning at an organizational level. In the following section, I examine the organizational centaur (Ahrne, 2009) and the process of sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005). I will also touch briefly on the leaders' role in organizational change and development (Weick & Quinn, 1999).

Sensemaking

What is sensemaking? Borrowed from Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005), sensemaking is turning situations into something that is collectively/commonly understood. In this master's thesis, sensemaking will be connected to the leaders' role of making sense of situations that are not yet (to varying degrees) commonly understood, such as communication online. The sensemaking mechanism is often a subconscious process that helps us manage daily scenarios (Weick et al., 2005). Sensemaking can be organized through communication, in which nonverbal behavior plays an important role. By using sensemaking, organizations continue to draft the story of what is going on, which in turn is used to tackle uncertainty. Digital communication holds many uncertainties, which is why I draw attention to the sensemaking mechanism. Because by talking a situation through, a collective of individuals, such as an organization, can better draw the full picture, creating learning and a deeper understanding, something all-important for cooperation (Weick et al., 2005). Situations and environments are talked into existence, including digital environments (Weick et al., 2015, p. 409).

Organizational Centaur

People will try to make sense of their environment based on individual experiences and expertise, where background plays an important role. I previously used Kahneman's (2012) two systems to illustrate this. Ahrne (2009) also offers a particularly interesting build-up to understanding sensemaking with the organizational centaur. The centaur is as a metaphor, where one half is human, and the other half is an organization. Actions people do are done on behalf of both organizations and the individual human. Acting on part of the organization, humans get enhanced abilities and resources, but their behavior "becomes less human" (Ahrne, 2009, p. 36). That is to say, one has access to new opportunities through organizing, but an organization may try to limit the personal or human influence on the organization.



If one examines the organizational centaur in the light of this thesis and nonverbal communication, it becomes exciting. Use of nonverbal communication will be highly dependent on what sort of people and situation a person is interacting with. Consider for a moment how behavior will largely depend on what sort of organization one represents, be it a company, institution, or a family, plus the individual's personal experience and knowledge. For example, a person would most likely act differently at a dinner table compared to a board meeting.

Organizational Change

In simple terms, organizational change is often divided into two: either episodic or continuous change (Weick & Quinn, 1999). Episodic change views the organization as a slow-moving unit, where changes happen when they are planned and initiated. Continuous change views the organization as “*emergent and self-organizing, and change is constant, evolving, cumulative*” (Weick & Quinn, 1999, p. 366). The leader also has a different role in these two types of changes. Weick and Quinn (1999) notice how the leader is either the “first mover,” the episodic agent of change who identifies movements and triggers and sets them in motion, leading to an episodic change. Or the leader is the “sensemaker,” who redirects change, expressed through continuous change, by spotlighting developments and making adjustments and changes consciously known to co-workers and the organization (Weick & Quinn, 1999). For the latter, the sensemaking mechanism becomes an essential tool.



3. Methodological Approach

This chapter explains the choices for data collection in this qualitative research. First, it will explain why I chose a qualitative research design. Moreover, this part will clarify how the informants were selected, how the interview guide was constructed, how the interviews were conducted, the data analysis plan, the ethical aspects of the project, and some considerations towards validity and generalizability of the study.

3.1 Why qualitative research?

To reiterate from the introduction, the research question for this master's thesis was:

What happens to nonverbal communication when we digitalize, and how does it affect leadership and organizations?

There would be two main ways in which it would be possible to answer this question.

One way would be to observe leaders and organizations or conduct a quantitative study in a similar fashion. Having a baseline of what is “normal” use of nonverbal language for each participant would be important. A baseline would allow a researcher to understand and notice deviations from the baseline. A major strength of such a study is how objective such a study would be. For example, one could check the amount of times a participant would smile online relative to a physical environment.

The other way, which I opted to pursue, would be to ask participants who have experienced work both in a physical and digital environment to describe what they experienced with the changes. It was important for this thesis to have an explorative research question. As a researcher, I could not assume all the experiences the different informants had before speaking with them. This type of research question then allowed me to start with general or broad ideas and then narrow my research as I learned more about the processes and experiences of the informants. Still, there is much research on nonverbal communication that potentially may help to explain why different individuals experience nonverbal communication in a digitalized world differently. There are large differences between individuals when it comes to communication (verbal and nonverbal), leadership and organizational practices, and the approach to the digital process. Therefore I could not set out



to seek conclusive answers but rather try to extend the depth of knowledge around the phenomena of digitalization and some of the existing theories on nonverbal communication.

3.1.1 Interviews

To help answer this explorative research question, I utilized semi-structured interviews. Research indicates that this form of data collection is particularly useful when obtaining information about how informants experience and describe their worldviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). These types of interviews allowed the informants to speak about their own experiences and events that had impacted them in a manner that suited them. Though I asked them questions from a premade interview guide (see appendix 1), the topics were largely open to interpretation for the interviewee. Because the informants were from different institutions and companies, their circumstances and knowledge were different, and doing interviews, let me thoroughly hear about their unique understandings and experiences.

I did not use structured interviews, as they could have dismissed some of the leaders' fruitful points while speaking freely to a question or point I had asked them. Moreover, unstructured interviews would have been too extensive because of the broadness of the topics that I was exploring, and would require a high level of knowledge on my part as an interviewer; thus I did not opt for unstructured interviews either (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 35).

3.1.2 Other Methods

Observations are a common method of studying nonverbal communication (Gray & Ambady, 2006), but there were a few reasons I chose interviews and a qualitative approach instead. First and foremost, this master's thesis is a one-semester study, which limits the amount of time I have available, making the time to complete observations challenging. Additionally, I would not have access to any prior observations of the organizations and leaders that participated. Many of the informants only started returning to their offices this year in a limited fashion. This meant that I would have little idea how their nonverbal communication would be in a physical environment. In other words, '*what happens when we digitalize*' would be challenging to answer if I do not know what happens in a physical environment. I

was also curious about some future aspects of the organizations and digitalization. Lastly, I wanted to hear more about hypothetical situations and asked a few questions about alternatives, some of which informants might not have had prior experience with. Such thought experiments are better suited for a qualitative study. Therefore, I opted to conduct semi-structured interviews in this qualitative study.

Another alternative was focus groups. Such group conversations could have been interesting, particularly if the informant groups had different backgrounds. Focus group interviews often spotlight experiences and phenomena that everyone involved knows about (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Everyone uses nonverbal communication and thus could have something to say about it. However, I wanted to avoid group answers and hear each voice independently from the influence of others, and also some questions were potentially about colleagues and the organization. Therefore I wanted to avoid a conflict that could have emerged from a focus group that consisted of several members of the same or similar organization. Another concern was hierarchical issues. The asymmetric relation between myself as a moderator and the informants could have created unfavorable group dynamics or influenced the power relations within the focus group (Grønkjær et al., 2011). A negative group dynamic could further be fueled by the different levels of knowledge about nonverbals and informants' opinions about it.

Both focus groups and observational studies also posed a challenge because the data collection for this master's study was conducted digitally. Only speaking and seeing one person at a time made the technical side of this study a more accessible barrier to overcome, as I believe other methods would have been tough to do in a digital environment.

3.2 Informant Selection

Because of the focus of this master's thesis on the leadership aspect, a potential informant had to be a leader. The definition presented in chapter two was used and is rephrased here: *“The ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organization”* (House et al., 1999).



Using this definition meant that the informant did not necessarily have to have a “*chief*” or leader in their job title, though many did. Instead, the focus was on how individuals worked towards effectiveness and success in their organizations through influence, motivation, and enabling others.

However, some additional criteria had to be met. For example, it was important that the leader interacted commonly with other individuals, internally in the organization and/or externally. I emphasized this because of the focus on organizational culture and sensemaking in this master’s thesis and because nonverbal communication often occurs in interactions. For instance, you might *enable* someone without interactions, but I wanted to narrow in on those nonverbal cues and conversations. Furthermore, it was important that an informant commonly used digital tools or worked online, as a comparison between physical and digital work was one of the main points I wanted to explore in this master's thesis.

The theories on nonverbal communication also pivoted my informant selection in specific directions. For example, there exists scientific evidence of differences in how males and females observe and use nonverbal communication (Hall, 1984; 2006). As mentioned in the theoretical framework, I wanted to test a few of those theories; and consequently, it was important for my informants to allow for such an examination. That is how I applied some nonverbal theories in my informant selection as guidance. These theories could potentially explain the experiences of my informants. Moreover, I wanted to see if organizational differences could influence the answers that informants provided. Therefore, I recruited leaders from both the private and public sectors.

3.4 Recruitment

I initially wanted to conduct eight interviews, four from each sector (public vs. private) and four from each gender (male vs. female). Through snowball sampling and my personal network, I was able to find potential informants that fit the criteria. This meant that my strategy for recruitment was a criteria-based selection (Jacobsen, 2015). My contacts asked potential candidates if I could contact them personally through email or I would reach out to them personally to ask if they would be willing to share some of their experiences with me in

an interview. In my emails or private messages to informants, I explained the purpose of my study and supplied general information about the process.

The informants I ended with all fit the criteria that I had set, plus I felt they could provide the best information with the most relevant details to my project (Johannessen et al., 2016).

In total, I conducted seven interviews with the same number of informants.

- Two males from the private sector.
- One female from the private sector
- One male from the public sector.
- Three females from the public sector.

All informants were between the age of 40 and 60 years old. The time each informant had spent with their institution varied. The most one individual had worked in an organization was 18 years, while someone else had only been in their position for a few months but had years of experience from a similar workplace. Two of the informants had recently started their new job, one even changing from a private to a public organization. I did not intentionally seek out these individuals who had shifted positions; however, their experience of a job shift through the Covid-19 pandemic helped enhance some of their points.

3.5 Digital Interviews

The interviews were conducted digitally through the digital platform Zoom. The main advantage of conducting the interviews digitally was the effectiveness of scheduling and conducting the actual interviews. Due to the informants being located in different places in Norway, a digital meeting allowed me to save resources and an enormous amount of time on travel. Moreover, as the covid numbers were still high during the interview period, online interviewing was a measure to protect the informants and me from unwanted close contact. Lastly, although I was not conducting observational studies, completing the interviews online helped enrich the experience and impressions that I made when the informants spoke about how they had been experiencing the transition to a digital workday while we were talking digitally.



The covid pandemic has propelled new ways to think about research and data collection (Howlett, 2021). In many cases, physical interviews are the preferred option when it comes to data collection. This is attributed to the tested qualities and proven results that face-to-face interviewing has, being coined the “golden standard” (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Digital media, on the other hand, “undermine traditional understandings of participation and immersion” (Howlett, 2021). I combatted this by establishing a setting where the informants felt respected and that the interviews were conducted in a professional manner yet ebbing towards a light-flowing conversation. Such an atmosphere also helped me create a climate of mutual disclosure (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003), which means an environment in which the informants were inspired to speak freely about their experiences and thoughts. One small step that I took was to spend additional time at the start of an interview to create this setting by talking about common interests or generally about myself and the research. This step enhanced my experience as an interviewer and the interview itself. To avoid technical difficulties from my side, I had backup cameras and microphones plugged into my computer, ready to go. I also ensured that the setting was adequately set up with background, light, and sound. All interviews were conducted in Norwegian.

3.6 Interview guide

As mentioned, the topics I was interested in hearing more about are broad categories. Therefore, I needed to construct an interview guide that would help guide both my informants and myself. It also assisted in making sure that the points informants made were relevant to my overall themes; and if topics got too off-topic, I would re-focus on the correct subject again. The interview guide can be seen in the appendix section (appendix 1). The interview guide and the questions within it were inspired by the work of Jiménez and Orozco (2021). Like my research, the authors focus on the experiences of individuals and “how they make sense of those experiences” (Jiménez & Orozco, 2021). In their work, Jiménez and Orozco describe what they call ‘prompts’ to be the main driving force of the interview, rather than questions. Building on existing theories within qualitative research, the authors guide researchers on how to obtain even stronger and better data using different techniques; a guided “grand tour,” counterfactual, comparison, and no-limits.



The “grand tour” tries to steer informants away from giving brief responses (Jiménez & Orozco, 2021). The prompt is to ask informants to describe something to someone unfamiliar. Although I would ask some “simple” questions at the beginning of the research, I also tried to hone in on informants' responsibilities and leadership roles by utilizing “the ground tour.” Example from the interview guide:

How would you describe your work tasks to someone who is not familiar with them?

Counterfactual prompt works away from the mundane side of everyday life by asking respondents to think counterfactually. For instance, early on in the interview, I wanted to learn more about the informants' workday, and my prompt looked like this:

Think hypothetically with me for a moment - what would your everyday life be like if the covid pandemic had not happened?

A common response was: “We probably wouldn't be sitting here talking to each other through a screen.” It is the “life as usual” (control - pre covid/digitalization) versus “life under different conditions” (treatment - during covid/digitalization) (Jiménez & Orozco, 2021). This type of questioning gave fruitful and meaningful insights, as it gave me more information about what type of environment, interactions, and communication my informants would have under normal circumstances.

Comparison was particularly useful, as it allowed me to contrast informants' experiences (or at least perceived experiences) before and during covid. My research question looks at digitalization, and I am curious if there is a difference. Comparison made it possible for informants to highlight some of these changes. For instance, I would ask the question:

How would you compare the period before the covid pandemic to the period during the pandemic, in relation to use of nonverbal communication?

This gave my research insight into experiences that I, at this point, would have had no other way to observe or otherwise learn about.

No-limits was probably the prompt I used the least, as this technique narrows in on more sensitive topics. My interviews were not particularly charged, yet I did use the no-limit questioning when I asked:

What do you think of when talking about nonverbal communication - what do you think it is and what sort of experiences do you have with it?



There is no negative aspect to my no-limits prompt. Yet, I wanted interviewees to give candid views on nonverbal communication and their experience with it before I dug into some of the details they provided me.

As shown, I used all these techniques to construct my interview guide. By utilizing the techniques, I believe that I managed to create authentic and good answers and exciting conversations for both the informants and me. However, before I used the guide in my actual interviews, my supervisor went over the initial guide and gave feedback. Based on the feedback, I would edit parts of the guide. The edited version was tested twice in mock interviews with close family members, in which I wrote down my notes regarding the guide and the answers I received, and feedback from the interviewee. I made slight alterations accordingly. Practicing the guide and interviewing in this fashion also helped me familiarize myself with the guide and interview process. Although I learned most of the questions by heart, I still had the guide in front of me for guidance throughout the interviews.

The guide consisted of an introduction, digitalization and changes, nonverbal communication, and a conclusion. Having four parts allowed me to keep track of the progress and tempo of each interview. If I noticed that I received short answers on a part, I would ask more follow-up questions or ask the interviewees for elaboration. Likewise, if a section were dragging on, I would check to see if the content was still relevant. The conclusion part of the interview guide also had a point set where I would ask my informants for a moment to go over my notes and the guide to see if I had missed any questions or wanted to follow up on some of the points they had made through the interview.

3.7 Data analysis

Throughout the interviews, I wrote down notes and some personal reflections regarding the interviews and the experiences they were talking about. Taking notes helped me keep track of interesting remarks that I wanted to follow up on and helped me space and pace the interview process. Johannessen and colleagues' (2018) also explains that personal notes may help promote a better understanding of the interview and data, plus they can help promote creativity. The notes were also useful when I later transcribed the data. I transcribed all the

interviews with the help of f4transkript and the Microsoft Word transcription application, both of which I accessed through my University of Oslo (UiO) profile. The translations used in this master's thesis were also done by myself. I believe they offer fidelity to the original statement of the informants' quotes and my interview guide. The translations were also double-checked by someone externally. Moreover, in some of the quotes used to support some findings in the analysis, I have removed filler words and tightened up the phrasing. The essence is still kept, and this is done simply for readability and tidiness.

Once all the interviews had been conducted and transcribed, I proceeded with the data analysis. The approach was that of a thematic analysis, with the goal of creating categories or themes that can describe the informants' experiences. The steps to go from quotes to categories followed the four-step process of preparation, coding, categorization, and report presented in Johannessen et al. (2018). Additionally, I found inspiration for data analysis through the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013). The Gioia methodology is an inductive, grounded theory approach to data analysis that generally applies an interpretive lens. The methodology focuses on how the informants perceive a situation (Gioia et al., 2013).

Using this approach was based on a few considerations. Both Johannessen et al. (2018) and Gioia et al. (2013) follow steps that form flow and consistency. From the raw data material to the finalized categories, neither of the approaches vandalizes the authenticity of the initial data. Thematic analysis is a flexible approach (Johannessen et al., 2018); thus, it allowed me to use the Gioia methodology as inspiration and additional source without interfering with the process presented in Johannessen et al. (2018). Finally, both approaches highlight the importance of thoroughness, rigorousness, and a systematic approach to handling qualitative research, which is important to the overall quality and legitimacy of the research.

Here is a quick overview of the more practical steps I followed through my data analysis. First, I would read over the transcribed interviews and check the personal notes that I had written for each interview. This helped me form an overview of the data. Then I would go over each interview and mark interesting points by adding comments in the margin of the transcription. I also made a mind map to help me better understand connections in the data and made a separate document to write down some emerging themes. For example, there was an abundance of comments regarding digitalization. Gioia et al. (2013) call this part of the analysis the 1st-order analysis. The number of interesting findings or smaller categories exploded; however, at this point, I still made little effort to categorize the findings fully. After

all the interviews were read and commented on, I would go over each of the transcriptions an additional time, read the text plus comments for quality insurance and see if I had missed any relevant points.

For the categorization process of the data analysis, I referred to the themes that emerged during the coding process. From these, I would identify larger, overarching categories. The initial categories were plentiful, and I had to determine how each one was useful or relevant to the master's thesis (Johannessen et al., 2018). By reading over the different categories, I distilled the data down and eventually merged certain categories, such as how 'challenging topics' would fit into the culture category. Gioia et al. (2013) also highlight this, going from the categories or 2nd-order themes to 2nd-order aggregate dimensions. I ended up with four main themes: The Mixture of Missing Elements, The Efficiency of Digitalization, The Process of Building a Culture, and In Search of Alternatives.

3.8 Ethics

Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD) approved the research before the interviews were conducted. All names, company/institutional names, locations, and personal data were anonymized. Each participant was given an informant code. The informant code was stored in a file location separated from the informant's personal and contact information or anything related to the interviews. I did this to protect the identity of the informants in case my data would go astray (Fangen, 2010).

All storage of data, transcripts, and any other information was done in accordance with the guidelines given by UiO. The data gathered in the interviews was not particularly about sensitive subjects on personal matters, people of interest, or the organizations. Still, according to guidelines at The Faculty of Social Sciences (ISS) at UiO, voices themselves are red data, meaning that the recordings had to be stored confidentially. To do this, I utilized a "storage hotel" service that the university offers and that I had prior experience with. The recordings themselves were done in the built-in function on the Zoom application. After updates, the Zoom application has received end-to-end encryption and fixed security issues which stopped potential leakage of the data collected (Burke & Patching, 2021).



During the scheduling of interviews, each informant was given an information sheet and informed consent in a written format (see appendix 2). However, I would reiterate the rights of the informant and my study purpose during the interview. Moreover, I received vocal consent to record participation in every interview. The Zoom conference room would also have a password-protected waiting room, meaning restrictions on the meeting itself were in place. All individuals involved in the project were informed about their rights, the handling of their personal data, and the voluntary nature of the research. It was also highlighted that the purpose of this research was purely scientific and that I, as a researcher, was not paid by a (privately held) company or institution. Other ethical considerations for the participants were also carefully considered, for example, risks towards their position in an organization or the institution or company itself. My conclusion was that participation entailed very little risk from the side of the informants.

In accordance with the NSD guidelines, all information gathered through this research is deleted on 30.05.2022. I will also send NSD written information that my project is finished.

3.9 Validity, reliability, and generalizability

This section will, in a short manner, discuss some of the steps that I have taken to ensure quality in the research that I have conducted.

3.9.1 Validity and Reliability

Validity assesses whether the study and the methods properly measure what it intends to. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) put it: did the results of the study align with what the intentions of the study were? This method section has assessed some of the strengths and weaknesses of alternative methods of obtaining data and results. However, emphasis has been put on why certain methods and choices have been made in this master's thesis to ensure that the validity of this study is of high quality. Taking into consideration the Covid-19 restrictions, the time allocated to this study, and the purpose of the study, I believe that the qualitative study completed offers validity.



Reliability indicates if a study and its methods are consistent and reliable (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 276). Throughout this master's thesis, it has been highlighted those findings that are connected to nonverbal communication and personal experiences often are dependent on contextual factors. This might jeopardize the study's reliability because the findings are contextualized; however, I have tried to combat this by being transparent with the choices that I have made, clearly indicating alternatives that I have had, circumstances surrounding this study, and to the degree possible, the conditions/environment of the informants. The methods themselves are scholarly reviewed and thorough.

3.9.2 Generalizability

Generalizability is a term that is used to demonstrate if the results of a study are applicable in other situations, contexts, or with other informants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Nonverbal communication is largely a human characteristic, and the findings in this study can apply to anyone that has used a digital form of communication. The results are, however, not directly generalizable as the informant group in this research were individuals with specific demographic characteristics being part of the management, as listed in the recruitment section of this master's thesis. Similarly, the organizations that informants worked in were all Norwegian, which in terms of cultural relations might hinder some generalizability or transferability in organizations that do not have the same cultures or access to the same resources. However, the attempts to take the findings from specific missing nonverbal cues into a larger organizational and leadership picture can make it applicable to any organization or leader who uses online tools for interaction, and really anyone who has experienced or will experience interaction and communication online.

It should also be noted that although my informants have had experiences and made statements about the different fields, they are highly contextualized and need to be seen in a broader view of an organization and the surrounding environment. Even though many of the interviewed informants expressed, for example, how clothing did not matter much when online, it does not necessarily mean that other leaders or organizations find clothing less important. Factors such as age, time, and background influence nonverbal language in any scenario.



4. Results

The goal of this master's thesis was to examine what exactly happens when organizations, and people digitalize, especially in relation to nonverbal communication. The data from interviews contained many different themes and topics that would have been interesting to explore. Yet, a few core concepts thoroughly propelled answers to the research question. The following four categories served as “umbrella categories.” They managed to encapsulate a host of elements rather than just a single specific theme.

The four categories were:

- The Mixture of Missing Elements

Which were the expressions from the informants that with digitalization, one can lose parts of the communication, especially concerning reactions in the form of nonverbal communication. This missing element is then viewed in a larger picture of how individuals obtained information.

- The Efficiency of Digitalization

With digitalization, there is a form of efficiency that happens. This category explores the warm and cold sides of efficiency and looks at what lessons the learning process can teach.

- The Process of Building a Culture

This category will present organizational culture and sensemaking in a digitalized world. It establishes how hard it is to build and maintain relations with a lack of nonverbal communication.

- In Search of Alternatives

The final category attempts to navigate the field of tools available that helps us recreate nonverbal communication online and how the leaders in this master's thesis felt about the different tools.

4.1 The Mixture of Missing Elements

The first theme I will present is the leaders' experience that several elements were missing when workdays were moved online. The interviews echoed that moving to a digitalized workspace made it much harder to observe reactions and cues from nonverbal communication. Furthermore, working online severely hampered the ability for informal chats, which were stated as being an important arena for certain types of information. The following section will present these missing elements.

4.1.1 The specifics that are missing

One of the steps to obtain different impressions from the informants was to ask them during the interviews what nonverbal communication was to them and what experiences they had with it. Rarely are people taught to use and understand nonverbals. Instead, it is somewhat learned through norms and observation of others or from specific classes in different academic fields. Like Kahneman (2011) states, sometimes a person's perception is intuitive and can be based on unconscious processes. This helps explain the wide range of experiences when talking about this type of communication. Nevertheless, a few specific nonverbals were more mentioned than others, either as missing or more prevalent in digitized communication. Summarized in a quote from one of the interviews:

«You see all kinds of different things. To read the people in a large meeting or assembly is possible in an analog setting, but to do this digitally... Well, that is of course a lot worse since you only see a lot of faces. Some individuals have even turned off their cameras, right? In other words, you do not get the same nonverbal contact with the people.»

As they state, you can see everything, implying there is a considerable variation in how people use digital media. However, as is noted, it is much tougher to read an audience when it happens in an online environment. What did the leaders see then?

4.1.2 Gender

The theoretical framework highlighted how traditional research emphasizes gender differences in nonverbal communication (Hall, 1984). This difference was one of the specifics that I wanted to test. From the interviews only two out of the seven informants

noticed a significant difference in digital communication depending on the gender of the person they were interacting with. A common response was similar to the one below:

“I do not notice a big difference in gender really. The difference between genders does not appear any larger digitally at least, I don’t think.”

In other words, gender did not appear to be a prominent nonverbal cue when it came to digital communication, and as this particular informant hinted towards the digital side of the interaction may influence that.

The two individuals who noticed differences were represented by each gender. The female leader explained the differences in terms of culture and norms. Here is one example that she used during the interview:

“We are different, but at the same time there are rules for what is ok to do as a woman relative to a man. If a man is clear and strong he might be seen as outgoing. And then we assume he is competent, and that is a dangerous connection. If a woman is overconfident, then she is often characterized as a bitch.”

Such standards are similar to how Hall (2006) emphasized that gender differences often occur because of the culture and norms that society attributes. Notice the connection between a positive trait in one area, and how the leader believed that could transfer to other, unrelated competencies too. Similar to the previous used example of halo effect (Kahneman, 2012).

4.1.3 Clothing & Attire

Similarly, there seemed to be less effect from clothing or attire. If anything, being digital has made the impact of clothing less significant. As one informant put it:

“I think things like attire, what you wear and such are not very important. People have probably actually “dressed down” a little during the pandemic, and that fits me well. In my opinion, it plays a very small role overall.”

Or, as another leader said, once you are in the comfort of your own home with the screen as a barrier between you and the people you interact with, you become less “exposed.”

“In the physical world you are a lot more exposed in relation to feelings and appearance, in other words, someone’s look and behavior is far more important than when you are online.”

As both quotes hint, what appears to happen with digitalization is that the impact of clothing seems to be softened. The focus on attire and what to wear has become less critical.



4.1.4 Eyes & Eye-contact

The eyes and eye contact were mentioned frequently. Being on a camera, or even a photo, the eyes will provide a lot of information to other individuals, as expressed by the informants. For example, the importance of eye contact when online to understand how others feel was exemplified by this quote:

“It’s all about establishing a connection with the person you are talking to and to understand them fully. A person can sit here and look at me and roll their eyes. I understand that they are reacting to something, and in that case, I can follow up and ask them directly back what was meant by the reaction. One might not want to answer, but we can at least establish that a signal has been sent and I can interpret and understand the feelings and reaction.”

Many of the interviews echoed this statement in using the eyes to understand behavior or reaction. Eyes are already in conventional interaction, a powerful nonverbal communicator (Adams et al., 2013). Still, when communication was moved online, the eyes became an even more important indication of emotional state or understanding of a situation. This is likely due to the lack of other nonverbal signals to process, with the eyes being a prominent feature even in digital interactions. What was “missing” then was the effect of eye contact. Although the eyes were good at recreating a physical conversation, it still was not as powerful as in physical interactions. Nonetheless, the absolute value of eye contact appeared to have increased in digital communication.

4.1.5 Smiles

Smiles are another prominent facial feature that displays many motives and information. As with the eyes, smiles were important but fell a little flat on a digital platform. If one does not know the person one is working with, smiles can almost appear manipulative on a digital tool as one informant put it:

“But then there are other people that I work with that I don’t trust yet, right? And then when they present something with big smiles plastered on their faces, then I assume that it all seems rather fake and not very trustworthy.”

At times, this informant felt that a smile could be a negative nonverbal cue because the relationship to another individual determined if they knew if a behavior was real or fake.



Smiling can mask negative emotions (Ansfield, 2007), and it appeared that deciphering the authenticity of smiles was harder online.

Not all remarks towards smiles digitally were negative. Another informant had a more positive view and spoke about how their organization had increased the focus on smiles and a “happy face” in a digital environment. The smile became important in creating a friendly and cooperative environment because of the missing elements of not seeing the entire body (language) online. The significance of smiles is congruent with research, indicating that smiles are associated with similar traits such as good leadership and caring (Kilgo et al., 2018).

4.1.6 Reactions and Nods

The final nonverbal specific reflected through the interviews was people's small affirmations and reactions, such as nods. This was important for leaders to capture when giving instructions on tasks. It is also easily observed over a video camera. Reactions can also affirm that a team member is following instructions and is paying attention to what is being said, as expressed by one of the leaders who explained why it is was important:

“Because I can see in your eyes that you approve and understand by showing me a smile or nodding approvingly. Then I assume that someone has understood what I have been saying.”

As this quote hints at, nods, smiles and eyes became even more important when using a digital tool at large due to the inability to observe the full body and other nonverbal cues.

4.1.7 Lack of impressions

The video camera is a common replacement for the physical person in face-to-face interaction. When organizations moved offices to a digitized platform and meetings were held online, it was common for all the informants to utilize a camera. Additionally, every one of the interviewees expressed that a camera was important and provided invaluable information when working online. This meant that cameras were an important tool regardless of gender, time spent with a company or institution, and type of organization, public or private. Cameras were helpful because of the reactions that one was able to observe. The

following quote from an interview emphasizes some of the nonverbal cues that the camera was able to provide:

“But you see it in a little twitch in the eyebrow or that people cannot sit still, they move around, or become eager and lean forward.”

The face sends many messages and gives indications. From the eyes to smiles to micro-expressions, the face sends information to the people we interact with (Adams et al., 2013; Krumhuber et al., 2007). This connection appears to carry over to digital communication.

The lack of impressions then seems to appear from the body parts or parts of interactions that informants could no longer observe. Although the camera was better than nothing and showed some signals, it did not offer the same impressions and reactions as a physical interaction. In a view that shows both the torso and the head, half a person - including the hips and feet - would still be missing and thus not be able to influence the full range of impression of a person. One informant characterized being digital as far easier as it did not require the same physical aspect. As they state:

“I think many prefer meeting on Teams because it is not so physically demanding, right? You put up a camera and a screen, and then you can sit there in your pajamas pants while you are talking. While at physical meetings it requires a different attitude. Everything from politeness to the way in which you talk.”

As they mention, there is a different attitude in the way one uses posture in a digital environment. As pointed out in the theoretical framework, posture and the ability for postural adaptation impacts us tremendously (Tiedens & Fragale, 2003). Behind a screen, the effect of posture seems to have weakened or disappeared.

As noted in the theoretical framework, nonverbals can be used to mask negative emotions (Ansfield, 2007). Some informants felt that uncovering this masking behavior was harder to do online simply due to the lack of overall body language and nonverbal behavior. Consider the following quote:

“Sometimes you can see that people are stressed by the way they walk and act. Then it is easy to say ‘Hi, can I help you or get something for you?’ Typically, those days where you feel things are hard, or you have challenging tasks then it is easy to portray it in the way you behave.”



When you are sitting alone with the pc it is easier to dig a hole and put yourself down. But when you are in the office, and you see a colleague is working with a challenging task it is easier to give them some slack or be the one who lifts up their spirit.”

As the quote shows, leaders or team members could identify periods of stress or notice when people simply had a bad day. Observing the nonverbals of someone served a function on a more significant level. Like the above example, noticing the physical body language of a person would help determine how colleagues are doing on a given day. These cues are weakened or disappear entirely when the interactions are moved digitally. When situated in a physical work environment, one can observe throughout the day and notice if a person is busy, stressed, or going through the motions. This way, some leaders felt it was easier to adjust their behavior and communication toward an individual.

4.1.8 The Informal Chat

Something else that was missing when moving online was the informal chat. This is the type of interaction that often happens unscheduled. Examples given were at the coffee machine, walking by someone’s office, or outside of the office at a social event. According to some informants, the type of conversations in such an informal setting often holds a different kind of information than in more formalized meetings or settings and was influential for the relation to co-workers. With a home office and a digital workspace, these pockets of information or spaces to obtain the informal chats were somewhat missing. Here is an example from one of the interviews, which explains how important parts of communication happen “outside” of scheduled meetings:

“I miss those coffee breaks every now and then. Those informal meeting spots that are not planned and that do not have an agenda.”

When asked why the informant answered:

“Because it gives you an everyday inspiration. It gives me input on what others are working on, and it can be professional stuff, absolutely, but it can also be a little bit of this and that which helps you to focus on other things than just work related stuff.”

There was no clear answer as to why it is so hard to recreate the informal chat, but some of the interviewees shared some of their thoughts.

First, there is often a nonverbal element in physical interactions that helps to establish connections in different ways. For example, something mentioned by a few of the informants was how you no longer had a handshake. According to some of the interviewees, nonverbal behavior would influence the perception an individual would make of someone and set the tone accordingly. As one informant put it:

“You don’t get the same possibilities on a camera. You only get one shot to make a first impression, right? And you do not have all the surroundings. Either your tempo, the way you show your hands which you might do in (physical) meetings, or the way in which you put your body in a position to show that you are open for discussion.”

Without the chance to obtain information from physical cues, this impression was much weaker.

Secondly, there are elements with digital tools that hamper the ability for a more informal chat. During the interviews, something that was mentioned was how a digital interaction tool, such as Zoom or Teams, usually allows for “only” one person to speak at a time. See an example below:

“People will sit with their cameras off, and it just isn’t a meeting place. It is some sort of one-way communication. And I think, for example, new and young politicians do not properly meet people from corporations and get to learn about the Norwegian salmon industry, oil, gas or infrastructure from their home offices. Online they just sit and take in information which is a one-way communication. I don’t think that is good, because a lot of the informal learning and relation-building happens outside the actual meeting.”

This leader felt negative about not being able to create those informal chats. There might be many “smaller,” more intimate conversations in an informal setting. A digitized group conversation often allows for only one central speaker. Furthermore, informants said that technical difficulties happened, meaning that sometimes it is not as easy to hear what is being said. There might also be delays, and these elements make it harder for a conversation to flow naturally.

Lastly, some informants felt a surge of motivation from seeing their co-workers work on projects. Being in an environment where others are working, and you see colleagues' concentration, was felt as important. One leader put it like this:

“There is a lot of free motivation in sitting in an environment where people around you are working. Now there is no one sitting around me. No, but I still have a job to do...”



Home office and working digitally removed some of the ability to be motivated, and a few informants felt at times lonely. One of the leaders interviewed felt that physically observing someone was important for control, or in other words, the ability to see that employees or team members are doing what they were supposed to.

“There is something about showing support for my co-workers and to let them know that I see them. But there also is a part about control.”

However, most of the leaders in this study did emphasize their trust-based approach to leadership and often let employees control their own time and work. Observing others served as team motivation or a sense of belonging to a company or institution.

4.2 The Efficiency of Digitalization

Despite the many missing elements when organizations were digitized, something that had increased with digitalization was the efficiency of certain processes. In what follows, the thesis will present what the informants said about effectiveness. In doing so, these findings will examine how nonverbal communication plays a role in efficiency. For the most part, efficiency is correlated with a positive development, but is it always good? Consider the following quote from one of the interviews:

“Meetings you had physically might take an hour. An online meeting with the same agenda often takes 15 to 20 minutes less.”

This section tries to explain why this happens and the positive and negative aspects of this change.

Note that the degree to which the informants spoke positively about digitalization largely depended on how they described themselves and their surrounding organization. For example, one of the leaders who described himself as “relation driven” and who often worked in smaller teams had fewer positive comments about digitalization compared to a leader who worked in a larger, international setting. This difference again highlights the importance of contextualization in optimizing and understanding both nonverbal communication and digitalization.



4.2.1 Efficiency with various temperatures

Warm

The remoteness of digital work was praised as it allowed for more flexibility in the leaders' busy schedules. Flexibility received a warm welcome as it opened up a tremendous amount of time for some of the leaders. For instance, the ability to give instructions over a digital platform and not having to travel to a physical location would save informants both time and resources that would be freed up and spent on other important matters. When asked about the biggest change because of digitalization, one of the interviewees said the following:

"I think travel is the biggest change. And that is very positive. It frees up a lot of time for me that I would spend on travel that I would not have gotten back or could have spent on other activities or work related tasks."

The same was echoed by informants who worked in larger, international businesses. For them, a meeting would potentially take many hours, or even days, if they had to travel internationally.

Many processes were sped up by being online. Additionally, many of the procedures related to meetings or other daily tasks have been automated, making even more time available for other things. As one informant put it:

"We have a large and fantastic work environment that has access to digital information. One press at the keyboard and I can see production from every oil field, with statistics, environmental emissions, investments and so forth. So what has been done to facilitate the information for employees in the past two years has been superb."

The quotes hint toward efficiency with digital tools: many procedures related to information, messaging, finding a meeting room, statistics, and so forth were now being completed in a short period. In sum, the workdays become more efficient.

Cold

If efficiency had a warm impact, why was cold efficiency something informants spoke about?

"There is efficiency in the workplace, but it often is a cold efficiency, right? Because there is a whole lot of interpersonal stuff that has vanished."



This quote highlights adversity with digitalization and effectiveness: the interpersonal connection. When organizations digitalize, daily tasks like information gathering or messaging between people happen without human connection, without any form of nonverbal communication. In the case of Barley's study (2015), technologies changed the scripts so that buying cars became less loathsome. However, from a leadership perspective, the new scripts that digitalization brings about can topple and negatively affect interpersonal relationships.

For instance, here is one example that digs deeper into efficiency and how it might be 'cold.' What some leaders had experienced was that when meetings happen online, they are often perceived as more straightforward or planned. This means that compared to a physical meeting, where people spend more time on small talk, online meetings are more efficient in that they are precise when it comes to a schedule. Exemplified in the below quote:

"So when we have meetings online they are even more structured then before. You have a set agenda. You go through that agenda superfast and that is it. You lose the personal contact because you are effective and there is no room for small talk like there is in a physical space.

In other words, the structure of meetings is changed, as experienced by the leaders in this master's thesis. Effective? Absolutely, the informants noted. However, it often felt like a "cold efficiency." Meetings are cold because once you remove the ability to see physical reactions or to have that informal chat before or after the scheduled appointment, the meetings in a digital room are limited to doing only what they set out to do - go through an agenda. In a regular, physical meeting, some leaders would spend more time reading into reactions, or in other words, identify responses from people in the form of nonverbal cues, and then either adjust their tempo, go over a point again, or make a comment.

4.2.2 Learning opportunity

Despite the many shortcomings brought about by digitalization, efficiency could also be found in the learning opportunity from the changes that many organizations experienced. Although learning does not directly relate to nonverbal communication, it still provides a point of positivity and optimism in what has happened with digital communication. In that sense, it might also help offer insight into how leaders and organizations can tackle the missing elements from digitalization, especially concerning nonverbal communication.

Every leader in this study emphasized the enormous learning opportunity that the digitization process had brought. Before the Covid-19 pandemic that started in 2020, many organizations had already started moving much of their business or operations to a digital platform. Nevertheless, with the pandemic came even stricter restrictions on home offices, the number of people that could be together, and many other rules. In essence, organizations were “forced” to change and adapt, as experienced by some informants in this study. Although their organizations had to adapt quickly to new standards, many of the informants felt this was a great learning opportunity and an example of how swiftly their own and different organizations could change.

In general, the average level of user understanding has appeared to increase in the last two years. One informant described it as an external enemy, which causes this group effort to learn and change:

“We had a common, outside enemy that everyone had to adjust to. And we were all like: we are going to fix this. So there has been a crazy mutual drive to do this, and I don’t believe if the fear was not there, and the demand had been so big, then I don’t believe we would have managed to do it.”

Either their teams and organizations adapt fast to the new settings, or they would fall behind competitors or other institutions who were better at adapting against the external foe - the Covid-19 pandemic. Usually, many informants felt that a sizable organizational learning process would take time and resources. The slow change was not necessarily a negative thing. Instead, it was more that the adjustment process would be slow. With covid restrictions, this learning progression entered a new speed. Teams became familiar with digital tools. A common understanding of how meetings would happen online was established quickly. And how to recognize and influence colleagues' behavior and work were some of the processes of learning that were mentioned.

Although much of this learning process happens on an individual level, the leaders and the organization also played a pivotal role in the change and learning outcomes. As one leader put it, they had to be role models and first adapters of this change; see the following example:

“I have an IT-person in the house who told me, NN, you need to use this tool because then the others will follow you. So that leaders dare to show that ‘ugh, I don’t fully comprehend



this, but I try', that underlines this is important, and that we need to plan and set off time and resources for digitalization. And that is essential."

NN - no name

The leader would be the first mover and a person initiating organizational change (Weick & Quinn, 1999). Most of the larger institutions or companies had their own IT departments, which many informants described as very helpful. However, in some smaller organizations or with smaller teams, it was up to some leaders to offer expertise on digital tools and adaptation. One informant was also responsible for implementing Microsoft Teams into their workplace. The learning curve was steep for many, both for themselves and their workplace. However, the overall experience from the interviews was that learning had taken place, and the leaders had been vital in this transition. Furthermore, it was emphasized that the digitization process is still ongoing. The learning was not over, and there was still much for the leaders to learn and adapt to.

4.3 The Process of Building a Culture

The following section will examine organizational culture and how the informants spoke about relations when their institution or company had moved online. Previously, this master's thesis looked at the missing elements and efficiency of online work. This part will build on those themes and explore the common topic among informants on how tough it could be to create and maintain relations online and how that affects organizational culture. For instance, someone's prior relationship with a colleague proved meaningful to working together online. It was important for online collaboration because it established nonverbal baselines of other individuals or a basic understanding of how others react and behave in certain situations. A few of the informants spoke about the difficulties of doing talks with a "challenging" topic online or how closer to heart themes, such as family, were tougher to discuss digitally. In the end, there are no correct answers to how someone should establish an organizational culture. The emphasis thus must once again be made on the individual organizations and people involved.



The following is a quote by one of the informants and exemplifies the difficulties in leadership responsibilities online:

“The hardest part has been to have the responsibility of an organization and a culture, and not to have the ability to have physical, joint meetings. (...) In a meeting, where people are physically present, and especially if you are presenting challenging topics, then it is much easier to pick up signals and nonverbal parts from employees. That is hard to do on Zoom. So trying to build a culture through the use of Zoom, I believe that is the biggest challenge in this digital, Zoom, pandemic life.”

Notice the missing elements and how that affected the meeting culture. Organizational culture is tougher online because team members can no longer see many signals and nonverbal behaviors.

Culture was also frequently mentioned by informants as the main differentiator between organizations, at least based on their experience. As I mentioned in the method chapter, I interviewed leaders from both private and public organizations. Through the analysis, there appeared to be few differences between the two types of organizations regarding nonverbal communication. The focus was on differences in culture. What sort of norms are in place? What tools does the organization use? These questions were indicators of differences rather than a type of organization, which is why looking at culture is interesting.

4.3.1 Do I know you?

Echoed by all the informants was how prior acquaintance with an individual was important to how their (work) relationship would function online. As noted earlier, being digital limited the number of nonverbal cues that interviewees could observe, and therefore the few signals that are observable online becomes even more significant. Because of the changes, understanding each individual or colleague was necessary for the leaders.

This meant establishing a baseline of “normal” behavior for an individual. With online work, this becomes increasingly harder due to the lack of observable nonverbal cues. Therefore, the amount of time the different individuals had been with an organization influenced their understanding of a baseline level of nonverbal communication and how they worked together. In other words, the more a leader knew an individual, the more they would understand what their nonverbal behavior meant.



Similarly, the amount of time a leader had known their colleagues and the impressions they had made of someone influenced how they worked together online. For example, giving critique or compliments online could be uncomfortable if someone does not know another person well. If someone had worked with another person for a few years, the interaction would be entirely different. One informant said the following:

“If it is a challenging topic, or you are scared that your employer will give you some critique, or something? Or maybe you are getting positive feedback, and that is not at all unthinkable, right? But maybe both those things would actually feel a lot better if you are in the same room.”

As this leader indicates, just being in the same room changes the dynamic. Once someone is in the same room, that barrier to interaction is removed due to the ability to observe nonverbal behavior. As some of the informants explained, an important task for a leader is being able to talk about challenging topics with team members. This includes talks related to motivation, how the work is going, relationships with co-workers, etc. The interviewees all described these topics as challenging to do digitally because of the lack of ability to see reactions from the nonverbal communication and because the conversation online was often single-sided.

Another emphasis was made on how leaders had a role in motivating and helping their teams to do their best work. Support has proven more difficult when the unit is split at the home office with limited physical interactions.

Although a digital workspace was efficient, especially when working on something alone, the ability to directly influence a colleague was experienced as much more problematic when the interaction was online. The challenge was also closely related to the lack of the aforementioned informal arenas, which are an essential step to understanding and working with the people around you. Here is an example from one of the leaders:

“We had plenty of space to keep our distance and so forth, but it was also challenging, especially in the start, to be a leader and have to communicate with employees, and to not do that in meetings, over a lunch table or in the hallways. (...)

I tried to tell them we are going to get through this, trying to be a little inspiring and motivating. To do that alone, that was tough and challenging.”

As they highlight, just being around team members and other people was meaningful to establish that work relationship with others. Nonverbal behavior can help support and

motivate colleagues (Kudesia & Elfenbein, 2013). The effectiveness of many of these nonverbal affirmations was experienced as diminished or lacking on a digital platform.

4.3.2 Sensemaking and the leader

In any organization, the agents of that organization make sense of the world around them, the organizational structure, and how to behave in the said organization (Weick et al., 2005).

From the leader perspective given in this study, such a process of mutual understanding was much tougher to form in an online environment. The dynamics and structures that individuals are used to in physical space have been replaced by an environment that is still unfolding and organizations that are still trying to make sense of the process around them. This quote from one of the interviewees exemplifies how communication online creates uncertainty:

“So I asked her after some time. What does it mean when you frown your nose? Is that your thinking face, or are you skeptical now? I checked to see if I had understood her facial expressions correctly. (...) I think you have to ask and actually check. Have I read you correctly, have I understood your expressions correctly?”

The quote is based on an observation from a web camera. This leader expressed what other leaders did: sometimes you just have to ask team members what their behavior means. As indicated, the leader is active in the process as a sensemaker, trying to understand the use of nonverbal behaviors in a digital environment. Some of the leaders felt they had to be the ones who took charge to make sense of the process that their organizations were going through.

As mentioned in the method part of the paper, two female leaders recently changed their jobs and were new in their current leadership roles. Both those individuals emphasized the importance of getting to know their colleagues and everyone on their teams. For instance, they both underlined the importance of communicating if something was unclear, especially regarding nonverbal communication and reactions from their team members. Take a look at the quote below from one of the interviews:

“Yes, so I had to take a photo through a screenshot. I had just come in as a new leader of [retracted] and did not know these individuals very well. In that case you probably need a little more feedback. For example, what do you think about this posture, right? And there was nothing, no feedback. So we were in a meeting, and I took a screenshot of my coworkers, and I sent it to them. This is how I see you, I told them. And then I am wondering, what do you



think about what I am saying and you are sitting like this? [Indicates a slouched posture and position].”

This statement and the interviews showed that these leaders used active measurements to understand what sort of intentions and information their colleagues meant when they were doing certain behaviors digitally. As pointed out by (Weick et al., 2005), these leaders use communication to identify changes and make sense of them. The uncertainty around body language and posture becomes clearer by actively talking about the situation.

Sensemaking and this effort in trying to understand is also an example of how the ‘organizational centaur,’ the connection between individual and organization, can be connected to the field of nonverbal communication (Ahrne, 2009). Some actions might mean something in certain organizations, while an individual indicates something entirely different when they do a nonverbal action. The leader in this scenario must navigate the intersection between individuals' understanding of nonverbal communication and the organizational side. Individuals will bring their distinct backgrounds, experience, and knowledge into their organization. Only through this active re-drafting of what is going on can the company or institution fully understand what is going on (Weick et al., 2005). If I use the previous quote to illustrate this, think about how a slouched posture in a home would indicate calmness and relaxation, while in a professional environment it may be indicative of laziness or carelessness.

As indicated in the interviews, leaders are also the individuals who use nonverbal communication to show support or solidarity. Earlier in the analysis, it was highlighted how not being able to observe, for example, body language, was experienced as a missing element in a digital environment. By the same coin, the leaders could often be the ones that used stance or positioning to make sense of specific scenarios. Here are two examples of how some informants used active nonverbal behavior to indicate a sense of direction and support or not:

“In a leadership style, you can use body language consciously. That is, if you stand with your back to, or a little to the side of a person or group of people, and you don’t look at them then that can be experienced as quite negative in a powerful way, in a physical setting. Those types of behaviors disappear in a digital meeting.”

“If you are standing in a physical setting with several other people then it is easier to just take a step closer. That is a way of showing solidarity, right? You can also take a step in front of a person and then you almost ‘protect’ that person. Or you take a step behind them, and then you are showing them that you support them. Those small behaviors. They disappear entirely in a virtual setting?”

Notice how the statements do not necessarily specify that the digital impact is a negative change. People could experience a negative reaction in the physical world because of certain moves the leader would make. However, the quotes indicate that certain types of leadership behaviors are hard to maintain in a digital environment. How can one use open body language and position to show silent support for something if no one can observe the leader's body? These are some of the processes that made building culture digitally a challenging task.

4.4 In Search for Alternatives

The master's thesis has shown that when digitalization happens, the ability to observe nonverbal communication is lacking or severely hampered. In turn, this affects informal chats, organizational culture, and relations. We have also seen that some processes are more efficient with a digitalized workday. There is an ability, in some cases, to save time and resources. The following section will examine what the interviewees felt regarding alternatives. Looking at alternatives adds a future perspective to this thesis when trying to answer how nonverbal communication affects leadership and organizations and might serve to close some of the shortcomings previously mentioned in the analysis.

Alternatives are digital tools that recreate nonverbal communication and impressions in various forms. As expressed throughout this master's thesis, nonverbal communication is such a huge extension of communication, and it influences us in many ways, sometimes subconsciously. Thus, it is worthwhile to investigate what different leaders felt about various tools so that when we continue to approach the future, and online workdays become more apparent, there is a better understanding of the alternatives. Noteworthy also is that every informant in this study felt that their equipment at the time of the interviews was sufficient and satisfactory.

4.4.1 Picture

Not having a camera turned on was something that was explained as frustrating by leaders. No camera eliminated the ability to form impressions and experience reactions. Therefore, as leaders, they did their best to always have their cameras on. However, in some scenarios, it was intentional and practical that only a few people had a camera on, for example, if one of the leaders spoke to an audience in the hundreds or even thousands. In that case, only the leader/s would use a camera so that everyone else could see their reactions and nonverbal language. One of the interviewees explained those online sessions like this:

“At least it gives the employees access to us leaders so questions can be asked. And it is open for everyone. One can ask questions and see those questions being read, and I believe that helps towards transparency. (...) It is about that nonverbal part of communication, and I definitely believe that part is important.”

From a leader's perspective, showing their authentic nonverbal reactions and communication served a larger function in the organization, related to trust and openness. Of all the alternatives discussed in this study, none seemed to hold as much power as the camera. The emphasis was on the ability to see authentic reactions. These reactions influenced the leaders, and there was a feeling of a “real conversation.”

With a camera, leaders felt they could observe authentic reactions. Do pictures create the same form of impression? According to the leaders in this study, they do not. Some leaders said it helped to create an image of whom they are talking with, and it is nice to have a face to connect to a voice, as exemplified in the quote below:

“It helps when photos are being used if cameras are off, because then I can at least see who I am dealing with. But it says nothing about your mood, and what you think about what I am saying. But at least it is better than having no idea who you are.”

Even though it is only for a few moments, seeing someone aligns well with some of the theories that exist, which suggest that only a split second of seeing someone in a picture influence someone's opinion of a person (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993).

However, informants also noted that pictures are easily manipulated. For example, one can appear as extroverted and confident, while that is not true in reality. As one leader stated regarding seeing a picture of someone prior to meeting them:

“I got the impression of an outspoken or extroverted person. He had this sort of big smile on the photo, and energy radiated from him. But when I spoke with him, he was dry as the sole of a shoe. So in that way it was sort of... He becomes an example of the wrong impressions I made of him based on photos.”

This manipulation was emphasized by other leaders too, and highlighted how pictures could, in a sense, manipulate the impressions of someone. In a physical environment, this probably would not have happened, as the leader would see that the person was, for example, uninteresting or quiet. Digitalization opened up the ability to form wildly different opinions. The sense that pictures are not alive and can be years old could create a mismatch between the impressions of a person and who they are.

4.4.2 Animated alternatives

3D avatars would be animated characters that instead of being on a 2D print would come “alive” and somewhat recreate much of the body language and other nonverbal cues that a physical person would. During the interviews, the informants were asked what they thought about either an animated character, pictures, or a 3D avatar. Some interesting answers emerged. Three informants said that an animated character to resemble or represent a person would just be nonsense or not give them anything. The other interviewees expressed that, although it is not as powerful as a web camera or photo, it can still provide information about another person. For example, how are they choosing to represent themselves through an avatar? What features does the avatar have? As one informant expressed:

“It gives you something. It can be information about who the person is (...) Everything is clues to what sort of person you are. How are you choosing to present yourself? Are there features you highlight?”

This finding is congruent with some of the current research on avatars. In agreement with how some of the informants expressed that static avatars could provide information and aid communication, other studies have indicated that avatars can increase the number of answers to a question (Taylor, 2011) and affect trust in online communication (Morrison et al., 2012).

As with static avatars, a few leaders expressed that 3D avatars would also be nonsense and not give them anything. However, for most leaders, there was a recognition that simply because one does not have many experiences with a 3D avatar does not mean it would not be

a good alternative. As stated in one of the interviews:

“Based on the real person, it can be a good replacement. It can be a good thing for those individuals who do not want to show their face, because that is something we have struggled with.”

Similarly, Dodds et al. (2011) found that avatars based on a person’s behavior, self-animated, could improve communication. In that sense, most of the leaders in this study did not exclude 3D avatars as an alternative to recreating and aiding nonverbal communication. Still, the uncertainty around this animated alternative made it hard to judge.

The third animated alternative that all seven of the informants in this master's thesis felt positively about was the use of emoticons. A typical response was like the one below:

“It is nice. It is nice when you have these big meetings, and there are all these people with just a snapshot of themselves, or just a name and a black screen. And if you then say something nice about something, and you see people reacting with the clapping emoji or a heart, at least you know people are present and they are reacting.”

Emoticons are smiley faces or other emotes that come in written form. They are an attempt to recreate nonverbal cues such as facial expressions or gestures. It is digitized nonverbal communication. The leaders’ liking for emoticons aligns well with other studies, which Tang and Hew (2019) found could improve the relationship among co-workers.

The overall experience was how excellent emoticons are in emphasizing a point. As the quote shows, it also gives listeners a chance to show a reaction if other alternatives are inaccessible, for example, in larger audiences. From the leader's side, being able to underline a point in their communication was important; thus, emoticons were considered a powerful tool.

Marder et al. (2020) found that emoticons could increase the perception of warmth but decrease the perception of competence. Similarly, some leaders highlighted using emoticons in the correct scenario. One informant expressed the questions he would ask himself like this:

“I think they are cool. And I try to use different ones based on the context of who I am speaking to, who I am texting with, and what we are chatting about. (...)

Everyone who has been exposed to it, I have myself been exposed to it, those smiley faces when you are receiving negative feedback. Then you know it is bad communication. So yes, I try to use them a little bit based on the situation and where I am.”

Overall the experience was that emoticons were a good tool if used in the correct situations.

4.4.3 Hybrid Solutions

Hybrid solutions are also an important alternative when looking at digitalization and organizations. Although not a direct alternative to nonverbal communication because they do not attempt to recreate nonverbals, hybrid work solutions still influence communication. Many companies and institutions are examining hybrid solutions as a path to the future, with some days being flexible in terms of physical workspace locations and other days being in the office. Working from home and offering flexibility is often endorsed through employee wellness and satisfaction level. Such findings are supported by previous research (Bloom et al., 2015).

A hybrid solution may be when parts of a team are in the physical office while others work from home. Some of the leaders in this study wanted to continue with a mixture, while others favored regular work in the offices. However, the experience to highlight regarding hybrid solutions was when there is a mixture between a physical group and an online group, there can be severe deficiency in nonverbal communication. The following quote is from one of the interviews and highlights how a mixture may bring about shortcomings in communication:

“And the worst thing about working online are the hybrid solutions. When one group is back in the office and another group is sitting in their home offices. What often happens is you lose the dynamic in the conversation, and it feels awkward. When everyone is on Zoom it is different. Then you can see eyes and facial expression and pick up on reactions similar to a face-to-face interaction. Of course, you lose a lot, but you are able to somewhat recreate a conversation. With split groups, and I have seen this happen many times, the physical group will discuss and have a conversation. The people on the screen are left out cold. Because people in the office group are sitting away from each other, the digital group will miss out on facial expressions and other gestures. This limits communication, at least I think so.”

The reason for the shortcomings is revealed in the quote. When a group is in a physical environment, their dynamic is much different from those connected online. The ability to read and understand the silent language of nonverbal communication becomes much tougher for the online participants, creating a split between the groups. This finding can also be related to digital work, task complexity, and how well fitted digital communication is for a topic (Bell and Kozlowski, 2002). Many interviewees expressed that unless it was necessary or the message being given was relatively straightforward, avoid one group online and



another in-person group. The digital group will miss the nonverbals that the physical group sees, and information will be processed wildly differently.



5. Discussion and Concluding Remark

The objective of this master's thesis was to examine what happens with nonverbal communication when companies and institutions digitalize, and to see if it affects leadership and organizations. Specifically, this master's thesis tried to capture and understand the experience of the leaders in their organizations. There was a focus on leaders because communication is an integral part of thriving leadership. Leaders are uniquely positioned to influence organizations and other team members in a workplace.

The research question of this master's thesis asked:

What happens to nonverbal communication when we digitalize, and how does it affect leadership and organizations?

The roadmap that the thesis used in an attempt to answer this question is as follows:

First, I presented previous research, highlighting a lack of thorough empirical research and theories on nonverbal communication together with digitalization. Nonetheless, I pointed out how nonverbal communication has a long history and that some ways of using nonverbal communication, such as facial expressions to show emotion, are understood universally. I also noted that nonverbal behavior could be intentional and unintentional. In the theoretical framework, a few theories on nonverbal communication, digitalization, and organizational theory were presented. These were later used in the analysis to support or contradict the findings in this thesis. Some of the theories will also be used in this chapter. Following that, chapter three presented the methodological approach. Through a thematic analysis of data collected from interviews with seven different leaders, many findings emerged that I eventually condensed into four broad categories:

Category one, '*A Mixture of Missing Elements*,' first assessed some of the specific nonverbal behaviors and cues experienced as missing in an online environment. Particularly, it was noted that most informants did not give the effect of clothing and gender much thought. Eyes, smiles, and other facial expressions such as nods were important because they are some of the nonverbals interviewees could observe digitally. However, the nonverbal cues were missing some of their power compared to physical interaction. Along the same

lines, the ability to form impressions fell flat digitally. Informal chats were also missing elements, and the informants noted that this was due to the lack of impressions, but digital tools were also a factor. Overall it was harder for colleagues to observe how others were doing on any given day.

The second category, *'The Efficiency of Digitalization,'* examined how digitalization had been experienced as positive in some regards as well. Remoteness and flexibility were key features of digital work that enabled efficiency. However, because of the lack of nonverbal cues and informal chats, the psychosocial environment took a toll. And compared to a physical work environment, the efficiency of digitalization was described as a cold efficiency in some cases. The pandemic and a move to a digital environment have also enabled learning in organizations. Learning was experienced as quick and efficient in many cases.

Category three, *'The Process of Building a Culture,'* looked at how the missing elements from category one made it difficult to form relations, discuss challenging topics, and provide motivation and support in a digital environment. This part also evaluated how the leaders' role was essential to make sense of online work and to figure out what their team members' nonverbal behavior meant, particularly if a leader did not know a person that well.

The final category, *'In Search for Alternatives,'* reviewed some alternatives and looked at pictures and animated alternatives with avatars and emoticons. A glance at hybrid work solutions was also assessed, noticing in particular that interactions that were part physical and part online were poor.

These four findings, which are connected and build upon each other, highlight how nonverbal communication is affected by digitalization and, in turn, how it affects leadership and organizations. Like other physical environments, the digital environment alters how individuals use and understand the language of nonverbals. Although, on the one hand, the findings point out the consequences of nonverbal communication online, for instance, the weakened ability to form relations and imprints, it also spotlighted a few of the more positive possibilities that the age of digitalization brings about. Exemplified by efficiency, flexibility, and remoteness. But these changes pose another question: Does digitalization alter the way in which people interact and communicate?



With digitalization, a few nonverbal behaviors and cues become less significant, while others become more powerful. Handshakes, posture, attitude, and, to some degree, eye contact all become impossible or more challenging to do while in an online environment. Other forms of nonverbals, such as affirmative nodding and facial expressions like smiles, are still possible using video cameras. Nonverbals depend on the interconnectedness of different behaviors; therefore, nonverbal communication felt weaker digitally compared to physical interaction because there were so many elements missing. However, despite being “weaker” overall, the power of some of these nonverbals increased. Because of a digital environment, the focus shifts from some nonverbal communicators to other behaviors and cues becoming more potent. For example, body language might be very significant in a physical interaction, but facial expressions and nodding behavior become the center point in a digital environment. Digitalization comes with a change of emphasis between different forms of nonverbal communication, from those forms that are physically available but digitally unavailable to those that are digitally available.

In the theoretical framework and conventional communication, the nonverbal signaling of gender typically plays a significant role (Briton & Hall, 1995; Dodd, Russell & Jenkins, 1999; LaFrance, Hecht, & Levy Paluck, 2003). Nevertheless, in the analysis and based on the experiences of most of the leaders interviewed, this thesis showed that gender typically was not a factor that the informants consciously considered. With this in mind, perhaps a digital environment opens up for barrier-breaking developments within communication, leadership, and organizations. For example, in Norway, women in leadership positions are generally less represented (Gram, 2021). But if nonverbals such as gender are less of a factor online, maybe it opens up a path for better distributed and equal opportunities for potential leaders. Just as there was efficiency for the organizations in learning to adapt to digitalization, the digital process may open up new ways to think about conventional standards in leadership. Moreover, the change is supported by Shollen and Brunner (2016), who emphasized that people tend to have a less biased view of a leader when online.

Another valid reason that argues for a fundamental change might be the indication that technology changes the script of how things are “done” (Barley, 2015). That is to say, because work from home and online collaborations are new in the practice of leadership and organizations, there is no set order of how things should or ought to be done, especially when

it comes to the use of nonverbal communication and online interactions. It has become apparent in this thesis that a digital environment is a new “stage”, or put simply, that a digital environment influences the way in which individuals interact. While Barley (2015) showed how technology altered how people bought cars online, this thesis looks at the change in a broader picture and argues that the way people use nonverbal communication is altered because of technology which can affect life in organizations. But working in a virtual environment does not completely jeopardize the ability to use nonverbals, as supported by (Aburumman et al., 2022). Thus, if one can navigate the different environments and the available tools, there is room to create new ‘scripts’ and better understand how online interactions change how people work in relation to each other.

A leader's role is highly critical in this process, both as a first-mover and a sensemaker (Weick & Quinn, 1999). As highlighted in the analysis, once a leader starts doing something, colleagues and the rest of the organization will likely follow, making them an important figure as the first-mover of organizational change. Likewise, that continuous redrafting and understanding of a situation is vital to a leader. Weick and colleagues note that “situations, organizations, and environments are talked into existence” and that sensemaking is about tackling uncertainty (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). With procedures uncertain because of technology, this initiative from the leader becomes even more important. As informants hinted at during the interviews, this includes taking active measures to make sure one understands what someone’s (nonverbal) behavior means, even if that means understanding it on an individual level.

What someone wears are another nonverbal communicator, and both clothing and attire were noted as less apparent when interacting digitally. Remarks such as “dressed down” and “less exposed digitally” were highlighted in the analysis section of this thesis. In the theoretical framework, I used theories to point out that clothing can affect cognition, in that what you wear may influence performance on cognitive tasks (Adam & Galinsky, 2012). What someone wears can also affect how they describe themselves (Hannover & Kühnen, 2002). There might be a possibility that wearing less formal clothes impacts the work more than the informants consciously believed. Put another way, dressing down could create some sort of cognitive dissonance, meaning that although someone is working, their attire or clothes tricks their cognition into thinking they are not at work. Thus their (nonverbal) behavior could



respond accordingly, which might not be appropriate. This mismatch is something for leaders to consider the next time a meeting happens digitally, or one is working from home rather than in an office environment. Maybe the sweatpants under the camera affect an individual more than they believe. Nonetheless, from the leaders' perspective in this thesis, the nonverbals of what one wears mattered less in digital interactions.

Findings in this thesis should inform leaders and organizations that are considering or already using hybrid policies and solutions. The theoretical framework pointed out that work from home plus flexibility has benefits related to employees' wellbeing and productivity (Bloom et al., 2015; Platts et al., 2022). The issue exists in the use of both digital and physical interactions at the same time. The informants experienced that the ability to form impressions was more complicated online; however, if everyone is communicating digitally, everyone is on the same page. In other words, everyone will have the same hampered ability to read and react to nonverbal cues from others. But if a group is physically together, with another digitally, many nonverbal signals will only be noticed by the group in the physical environment. Thus, a split group may understand an interaction differently, which does not necessarily yield desired results.

Some of the interview findings highlight the individual nature of nonverbal communication. In a digital environment, the leaders in this study had a somewhat reduced capability to use the silent language of nonverbal communication to indicate directions and support. In the analysis, I drew attention to how the leaders who knew their colleagues well would better understand how they communicate and use nonverbal behavior. This points to an interesting conclusion about nonverbal behavior: even though nonverbal behavior is a universal phenomenon and many nonverbal cues may be very widely understood, a person's nonverbal behavior is, to some extent, nevertheless individual. People use nonverbal communication in their own subtly particular way - this is why leaders would feel it necessary to know a person in order to be able to interpret their nonverbal communication properly. For example, two engineers in a similar or same work environment, same age, and so forth, despite high similarities between individuals, how the two understand and use nonverbal communication will differ. Relations are an important factor in understanding and learning differences between individuals but appear harder to build and maintain digitally.



Why would someone want to learn how each individual communicates and uses nonverbal communication? Why is it worthwhile to study and examine how differences in interaction happen online? And in an age where people can reap the benefits of efficiency and resources saved from digital communication, why do people still want to have those face-to-face interactions? These questions might have appeared when reading through this thesis. The reason is that nonverbal communication gives us information that is hard to obtain digitally, but that serves an essential purpose. The information provides leaders and colleagues alike the ability to understand whether a person agrees with or understands what has been said previously in the conversation, to understand the wellbeing of team members, someone's state of mind, and so forth. Once a person begins to know someone, their relationship develops, and recognition of that individual's nonverbal expressions will be better understood. For example, once you know someone, maybe it becomes clear that when a particular person is pacing across the office, it means they are stressed, not focused, or in a hurry. As the findings showed, there is motivation in seeing colleagues work, but there is also the ability to motivate colleagues. A simple smile or a tap on the shoulder might mean a lot to team members, and this type of nonverbal behavior is not possible in a digital work environment or at least to a much smaller extent.

Efficiency was echoed throughout the interviews as the primary advantage of digitalization, but is it always desirable? Despite the lack of interpersonal connection, there is no denying that time and resources can be saved when using a digital tool. Bell and Kozlowski (2002) and Dennis and Valacich (1993) emphasized that the complexity of tasks determines heavily whether online communication should be used or not. To add to this point, what sort of efficiency is needed should also be considered. Because it is apparent that once colleagues (or other people who interact, students, for example) cannot be physically present to someone to see their nonverbal language and build those connections, relations will deteriorate. In the short term, efficiency might spike; however, in the long run, one may doubt whether any amount of efficiency from saved time and resources will outweigh the lack of efficiency that lonely, tired, and unmotivated team members have.

The organizational centaur offers a compelling way to look at nonverbal communication and digitalization at an organization level. As noted, actions are done on behalf of both an organization and a human, creating the centaur (Ahrne, 2009). By looking back at the



theoretical framework and the findings, digitalization has in many ways reinforced the ‘organizational part’ of an organizational centaur. Ahrne (2009) notes through organizing, individuals can acquire enhanced abilities and resources. The power of organizations is that it allows different individuals and different types of expertise to pool together to increase the overall abilities. Digitalization takes this a step further and will enable individuals and organizations to connect at an even more significant speed (Bell and Kozlowski, 2002). Furthermore, the findings presented how leaders said that technology and digital tools enabled them to see, reach, and facilitate information more efficiently and faster. Through the scope of an organizational centaur, digitalization has furthered the enhancement of abilities and resources through the tools of technology.

On the other hand, the thesis has demonstrated how nonverbal communication is experienced as very individualized and, as such, represents the more human side of the organizational centaur. What was emphasized by the leaders is how nonverbal communication felt weaker online and that one is unable to observe some nonverbal behaviors digitally. In other words, the ‘human part’ of a centaur may be fading once organizations are relying heavily on digital interactions. Or, to use Ahrne’s imagery: If the horse part of the centaur represents the organization, and the human parts represent the human, the image or metaphor after digitalization may look more like an entire horse rather than a mix of a horse and a human.

5.1 Weaknesses of the Study and Future Research

One of the weaknesses of this study is the reliance on self-reported experiences and answers on which the analysis is based. Self-reports are a common issue in methodology, but they can be particularly problematic in this thesis because of the nature of nonverbal communication. The use of nonverbal communication, both as a sender and receiver, is partly intuitive and unconscious (Buck & Powers, 2013). That could mean that the leaders interviewed for this thesis are not aware of the many nonverbal behaviors their colleagues and they themselves use. This would possibly mean that they are not fully aware of the many changes in nonverbal communication because of digitalization. For example, I narrowed in on a few particular nonverbal cues in this thesis, such as gender. Five of seven informants said they did not feel that gender mattered when they communicated. Would they notice gender if they

were talking to someone else, say in a private scenario? Do people in general consciously process the gender of their interaction partner in a professional setting? Do other external factors such as relationship status influence perceptions of nonverbal cues? Because of the many influences, the conscious and unconscious (nonverbal) communication process leaves potential pitfalls when assessing the results.

With the time and resources available for this master's thesis, the theoretical framework and the analysis offer a broad overview of some nonverbal behaviors and cues, plus a look into digitalization and organizational theories. In many ways, this thesis serves the purpose of a preliminary study. It offers insight into future possibilities by gauging different theories and research. By probing the landscapes of nonverbal communication and digitalization, the findings in the thesis could be a springboard for future research. Home offices are likely to become a more prominent feature of peoples' workdays as many individuals in Norway have indicated a wish for such a work structure (Ingelsrud & Bernstrøm, 2021). More specifically, future research would benefit from an even narrower approach. Really digging deeper into a few specific nonverbals would allow for an even more detailed understanding of how nonverbal communication has changed with digitalization and how changes influence leadership and organizations.

Moreover, based on the findings of this thesis, future research could also benefit from looking at the effects of the changes in nonverbal communication when digitalization happens. For instance, how are domination techniques (Norwegian: "*hersketeknikker*") altered in digitalization? How are recruitment processes altered because of changes to interaction? Because the effect of nonverbal communication is somewhat weaker online, maybe such techniques and procedures are also altered.

Another weakness that could be addressed in future research is understanding the side of employees rather than the leaders of an organization. This thesis asked leaders about their experiences and views. Different findings might have emerged by interviewing team members who do not, to the same degree, decide, lead, and influence institutions or companies. Leaders might find the responsibility related to their role in building culture and relations a stressful factor when it comes to the lack of nonverbal communication online. On the opposite side, employees without the same responsibilities might not care as much about



the lack of nonverbal communication. Thus, there is a possibility that the employees of an organization would have more positive reactions to digitalization of their organizations.

Quantitative research, with observations and other methods available, would likely also yield some fruitful results, in that they can pinpoint in an objective manner how nonverbals affect leadership and organizations in the age of digitalization. This would address the self-reported experiences that were used in this thesis. It would be especially interesting to complete some sort of longitudinal observational study to thoroughly examine the effects of nonverbal communication both in a physical and digital environment. In such studies it would also be fascinating to look at differences in private use of nonverbal communication versus public use or work behavior. Considering that home offices are sometimes in the comfort of private homes, it poses the question of how the intersection of work from home influences use of communication. Further research could also be based on observation and not interviews. What a leader perceives he or she is doing might not be the full truth when being observed in meetings online. This could also be a way to approach the subject but will require much more time than we have in a half-a-year master's thesis.

5.2 Concluding Remarks

The title of this master's thesis reads, *Is Communication Still the Key?* This is a question that builds on the common phrase that *communication is the key*, implied by the immense power that communication has in building relationships, maintaining trust, facilitating cooperation, and increasing coordination. Without communication, misunderstandings, errors, and frustration may build up. Nonverbal communication is a large extension of communication. This thesis has shown that communication still appears to be vital for well-functioning organizations with their leaders in front, despite the weakening effect that digitalization has on nonverbal behavior.

More specifically, the thesis has shown how the nonverbals of gender, clothing, eyes, and smiles have less effect because you can no longer see these cues along with other displays of nonverbal behavior. However, their relative power increased because some of these



nonverbals are the only cues and behaviors observable digitally. Combined with the lack of the ability to use and observe some nonverbal communicators, the ability to form impressions of others was something the informants noticed. The lack of nonverbals and impressions and the characteristics of digital communication made informal arenas harder to recreate digitally. These areas are important parts of organizational life, according to informants. Because of the scope and size of the thesis, there were limitations on the number of nonverbals examined. Nonetheless, referring to my interviewees, it became clear that when we digitalize, the power of nonverbal communication is weaker.

Weaker nonverbal communication affected leadership and organizations in a few ways. Efficiency was improved in many cases due to the digitalization process, but at a cost. Once someone cannot observe colleagues' behavior and nonverbal language, efficiency could be experienced as cold. Leadership also has to take on a role as first-movers in using digital technology and be transparent in making sense of digital interactions. Although both companies and institutions had learned immensely from the digitalization process, procedures became more scripted and straightforward. There was no wiggle room for other activities, which negatively influenced interpersonal interactions. As stated earlier, nonverbal communication plays a crucial role in relations, and the leaders in this study noticed how relations and culture are challenging digitally. Both those elements are vital for organizations. Alternatives highlighted how there are possibilities to adapt to the lack of nonverbal communication online. Still, caution needs to be taken as all users might not positively experience other options.

Research and studies are likely to emerge post-pandemic due to digitalization, especially concerning changes to how individuals interact and behave. This thesis tries to fit into this emerging and fascinating field. It has highlighted a few of the changes due to digitalization and further discussed some potential implications of the findings. I have repeatedly stressed the need for contextualization in understanding nonverbal communication. Nevertheless, nonverbal communication is a significant force in most people's lives. Despite digitalization possibly changing the way in which we communicate, the silent language of nonverbals will remain powerful, as it alters our interactions with other people and influences most people in one way or the other.



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All references used in this thesis has been included in the reference list.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview guide

Intervjuguide OLA Master

Informant kode: (eks. A-Z)

Kort introduksjon om meg selv + bakgrunn.

Om mitt prosjekt:

I min forskning og masteroppgave ønsker jeg å se på ledere sin opplevelse av digitalisering, der jeg skal spesielt undersøke bruk av ikke-verbal kommunikasjon og hva som skjer når dette digitaliseres. Jeg ønsker å høre om dine opplevelser og erfaringer rundt dette. Som sagt er dette for min master, og jeg har ikke noe agenda eller noe poeng jeg prøver å fremme. Jeg er ikke på noe bedrifts oppdrag og driver kun med samfunnsforskning i regi av UiO.

Er det noe du lurer på før vi begynner?

Jeg starter nå opptak. Er det greit? Det er for etterarbeid/transkribering.

Introduksjon (ca. 5-10 min)

1. Hvor lenge har du jobbet i/for/hos x?
2. Hva er din utdanningsbakgrunn?
3. Hvordan ville du beskrevet din rolle til noen utenfra x?
 - a. Hvordan ville du beskrevet dine arbeidsoppgaver til noen som ikke er kjent med dem?
4. Har du hatt lignende stillinger tidligere?
5. Hvordan ville du beskrevet din lederstil?

Digitalisering og endringer (ca. 10-15 min)

Først ønsker jeg og spør om noen få spørsmål om hva som angår digitalisering og endringer.

6. Tenk hypotetisk med meg et lite øyeblikk - hvordan ville din hverdag vært om covid pandemien ikke hadde skjedd?

7. Hva ville du beskrevet som den største endringen grunnet covid og restriksjoner?
8. Hva slags utstyr har du tilgang til, på jobb? Hjemmefra?
 - a. Andre ressurser, som videokamera, headset, tilgang til databaser, internett?
9. Føler du at du har den informasjonen og ressursene du trenger for å kunne gjøre samme jobb som før?
 - a. Hvorfor / Hvorfor ikke?
10. Hvordan har du som leder forsøkt å tilrettelegge for en best mulig arbeidshverdag for de ansatte med fysisk tilstedeværelse hindret?
 - a. Har du en spesiell måte for å sikre god oppfølging?
11. Hvilken erfaring sitter du igjen med etter endringene som har skjedd pga korona / digitalisering?
 - a. Hva har fungert og hva har ikke fungert?

Ikke-Verbal Kommunikasjon (ca. 15-20 min)

Jeg ønsker nå å følge opp med noen spørsmål som er mer rettet direkte mot ikke-verbal kommunikasjon.

12. Hva tenker du på når en snakker om ikke-verbal kommunikasjon - hva tenker du det er og hvilke opplevelser har du med det?
13. Er du bevisst på denne type kommunikasjon. Enten egen eller andres?
 - a. Hvorfor / hvorfor ikke?
14. Reflekter litt over de ulike ikke-verbale kommunikasjon kanalene (om de har nevnt noen eller gestikulering, øyekontakt, holdning, klær osv.) Tror du det er viktig for hva vi kommuniserer, spesielt som leder?
 - a. Hvorfor / hvorfor ikke?
15. Hvordan ville du sammenlignet perioden før covid pandemien til perioden under covid pandemien i henhold til bruk av ikke verbal kommunikasjon?
16. Tenk på de ulike kollegaene du arbeider med. Merker du forskjell på måten de kommuniserer på?
 - a. Med tanke på blick, kroppsholdning, tonefall, hender og kjønnsforskjeller.
17. Hvilken endringer tror du kommer til å bli værende når pandemien er over, spesielt med tanke på kommunikasjon?

18. Vi snakket litt om ressurser du har tilgjengelig. Jeg ønsker å spør litt om ulike verktøy, og ber deg om å reflektere og svare om du tror de påvirker informasjon en sender. Si ifra om du ikke vet hva virkemidlet er. Videokamera? Bilde? Visuell avatar? 3D avatar? Emoticons?
- Hvorfor / hvorfor ikke?
 - Organisasjons forskjeller - Individuelle forskjeller

Avslutningsspørsmål (ca 5-10 min)

19. Er det noen digitale funksjonaliteter du savner, som ville gjort en digital arbeidsdag lettere?
20. Tror du opplevelsen av ledelse og digitalisering har vært annerledes i ulike type organisasjoner? Offentlig vs privat vs bistands?
21. Forestill deg at pandemien og restriksjoner var vekke i morgen. Et 'mandags morgen mirakel' har skjedd. Hva er endret og hva ville du beholdt eller vedlikeholdt på ditt arbeidssted?
22. Oppfølging av tidligere spørsmål...
- Kan jeg få litt tid til å gå over intervjuguide/notater.

Appendix 2: Consent Form

Deltakelse i UiO forskningsprosjekt - Masteroppgave

Det er det formelle spørsmålet om din deltakelse i mitt forskningsprosjekt hvor formålet er å undersøke bruk av ikke-verbal kommunikasjon hos ledere og hvordan digitalisering påvirker dette. I dette skjemaet er det informasjon om prosjektets hensikt og hva deltakelsen innebærer for deg.

Prosjektets hensikt

Ikke-verbal kommunikasjon er en stor del av feltet kommunikasjon - måten informasjon sendes og avgis på. Denne type kommunikasjon er spesielt viktig hos ledere da vår ikke-verbale kommunikasjon, enten vi er klar over det eller ikke, har stor innflytelse på dem rundt oss. I dette prosjektet ønsker jeg å undersøke dine opplevelser av digitalisering og erfaringer rundt ikke-verbal kommunikasjon.

Covid-19 pandemien har fremmet digitaliseringsprosessen, og i store deler av samfunnet er det fysiske restriksjoner, som hjemmekontor og karantene.

Resultatene fra studiet vil kunne brukes til å bedre forstå en leders rolle i denne prosessen.

Hvordan kan ledere tilpasse mennesker, organisasjoner og bedrifter en digitalisert hverdag?

Hva skjer med den ikke-verbale kommunikasjonen når vi jobber via digitale løsninger? Hva er det som egentlig påvirkes?

Mitt mål og håp er at svarene kan hjelpe meg, din organisasjon og andre organisasjoner med å best tilpasse seg fremtiden, der digitale løsninger mest sannsynlig vil ha mer og mer innflytelse og påvirkning på kommunikasjon og i samfunnet generelt.

Hvem er ansvarlig for forskningsprosjektet?

Institutt for Sosiologi og Samfunnsgeografi ved Universitetet i Oslo er ansvarlig for prosjektet.

Hvorfor blir du bedt om å delta?



Din rolle og dine erfaringer er relevant for den informasjonen jeg ønsker å innhente og bruke i mitt arbeid. Ved din deltagelse og interesse vil dette forsterke og berike mitt prosjekt/masteroppgave.

Hva innebærer deltakelse?

- Deltakelse i prosjektet innebærer et 45-60 minutters digitalt intervju. Intervjuet vil inneholde spørsmål om deg, hvordan arbeidsdagen din har blitt påvirket av digitalisering og bruk av ikke-verbal kommunikasjon.
- Intervjuet vil bli tatt opp og transkribert. All personlig informasjon om deg blir anonymisert og lagret i henhold til lover og retningslinjer.
- Det kan være aktuelt med et oppfølgingsintervju på et senere tidspunkt. Det er valgfritt å delta i eventuelle oppfølgingsintervjuer, og du vil bli kontaktet med en forespørsel om det er tilfellet. I utgangspunktet vil kun ett intervju bli gjennomført. Eventuelle uklarheter kan også tas over e-post.

Det er valgfritt å delta

Det er valgfritt å delta i prosjektet. Hvis du velger å delta, kan du når som helst trekke samtykket ditt uten å oppgi grunn til hvorfor du ønsker å trekke deg. All informasjon fra deg vil da bli slettet. Det vil ikke ha noen negative konsekvenser for deg om du ikke ønsker å delta eller velger å trekke deg på et senere tidspunkt.

Ditt personvern – hvordan jeg lagrer og bruker informasjon.

Jeg vil kun bruke innhentet informasjon til de formålene som er forklart i dette skjemaet. Jeg behandler informasjonen med høy konfidensialitet og i henhold til personvern forskrifter.

- Tilgang til informasjon gis kun til meg
- Navn og kontaktinformasjon vil bli erstattet med en kodenøkkel, som deretter lagres trygt i et eget dokument unna andre data.
- Dataene jeg samler inn vil bli lagret på en sikker tjeneste godkjent av Universitetet i Oslo.

- Eventuelle personopplysninger vil bli lagret sikkert på en egen tjeneste levert av Universitetet i Oslo. Dette vil skje i henhold til regler og forskrifter.
- Deltakere i prosjektet vil bli anonymisert og det vil ikke være mulig for andre å gjenkjenne noen personer i den ferdigstilte masteroppgaven.
- Eventuelle personlige opplysninger vil bli slettet ved slutten av prosjektet. Informasjonen blir slettet senest 30.05.2022.

Hva skjer med dine personopplysninger når jeg avslutter forskningsprosjektet?

Informasjon som samles inn vil bli anonymisert. All personlig informasjon som trengs, som kontaktinformasjon, vil bli lagret sikkert i henhold til regler og forskrifter frem til 30.05.2022.

Dine rettigheter

Når jeg har innhentet informasjon fra deg har du rett til:

- Vite hvilken informasjon som finnes om deg og få en kopi av denne informasjonen.
- Endre personlig informasjon om og av deg.
- Slette personlig informasjon om og av deg.
- Sende en klage til Datatilsynet om behandlingen av din data.

Hva gir meg rettighet til å behandle din personlig informasjon

Jeg behandler personlig informasjon basert på dette samtykkeskjema.

På vegne av Institutt for sosilologi og samfunnsgeografi ved Universitet i Oslo og NSD (Norsk Senter for Forskningsdata) har det blitt vurdert at håndtering av personlig informasjon i dette prosjektet er samsvar med personvernregelverket.

Med andre ord er prosjektet godkjent av NSD (godkjenning bekreftet 10.01.2022).

Hvor kan jeg finne mer informasjon?

Ønsker du mer informasjon om prosjektet, eller mer om dine rettigheter, ta gjerne kontakt med:



- Institutt for sosiologi og samfunnsgeografi ved Universitetet i Oslo, ved stipendiat og min veileder Beatrice Johannessen (beatrice.johannessen@sosgeo.uio.no) eller Kristian Leik Woie (kristlw@student.sv.uio.no)
- UiO personvernombud: personvernombud@uio.no

Har du spørsmål angående NSD om vurdering av dette prosjektet, ta kontakt på:

- NSD - Norsk Senter for forskningsdata - Email (personverntjenester@nsd.no) eller telefon (55 58 21 17).

Med Vennlig Hilsen,

Kristian Leik Woie
(Student)

Beatrice Johannessen
(Veileder)

For å samtykke til å delta i prosjektet, vennligst svar på samme e-post som du mottok dette brevet. Du kan samtykke ved å svare «Jeg samtykker til å delta i et intervju knyttet til dette prosjektet.» ELLER du kan velge å gi ditt samtykke ved starten av intervjuet.