

“Shouting straight into space”: enablers and barriers of voicing in digital meetings

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Corporate
Communications:
An International
Journal

125

Received 1 December 2025
Revised 12 May 2026
Accepted 12 May 2026

Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this article is to develop new and deeper insights into coworker voicing in digital meetings by examining coworkers’ experiences and perceptions as well as digital dynamics, this research provides a deeper, contextual understanding of the communicative dynamics in digital organizational settings. From this aim, we have formulated the following research questions: “How is coworker voicing shaped in digital meetings?” and “How do they experience voicing in this context?”

Design/methodology/approach – This study employed a qualitative research approach grounded in social constructionist epistemology. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with coworkers from a single case organization to explore experiences within a shared context. The organization, a leading international company with over 200,000 employees worldwide, was selected as the case. Purposive sampling ensured the inclusion of participants relevant to the research focus. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent and safeguarding the confidentiality of both participants and the organization.

Findings – Our analysis shows that digital and hybrid meetings reshape not only how coworkers express their voice but also who speaks and to what extent. Platform affordances, such as camera functions regulating visibility and structured turn-taking via hand-raising tools, act simultaneously as enablers and barriers to participation. Furthermore, perceived psychological safety varies considerably in digital settings, influenced by practical constraints like larger group sizes.

Originality/value – Most existing research adopts a quantitative, functionalist perspective, emphasizing how coworker voice contributes to organizational efficiency and outcomes. In contrast, this qualitative study provides a nuanced, context-sensitive understanding of communication dynamics in digital environments, specifically examining who speaks up, how, when and under what conditions.

Keywords Psychological safety, Digital meetings, Voicing, Coworker communication, Affordance

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Organizational development has long been associated with coworkers who dare, want and can express their voice. Coworker voicing is a powerful drive for better decisions, stronger organizational performance and higher coworker engagement (Burris, 2012; Detert and Burris, 2007; Morrison, 2011, 2014; Wilkinson *et al.*, 2014). During the last decade or so, voicing has become a vital interest of strategic communication research (Kim and Leach, 2020). Lately, voicing has been affected by digitalization, globalization and a growing need for flexibility, leading to new communication challenges (Khan, 2021; Bernauer and Kornau, 2024). For example, the absence of body language, informal pauses and social cues changes the dynamics and with it the conditions for expressing one’s voice (Kim and Leach, 2020; Mao and DeAndrea, 2019; Ellmer and Reichels, 2020; Knoll *et al.*, 2022).

Previous research has identified psychological safety, power dynamics and social norms as having a clear impact on coworkers’ ability to express their voice (Morrison’s, 2011; Prouska *et al.*, 2025; Chamberlin *et al.*, 2017; Fatoki, 2024). As flexible working life expands, new questions are being raised about how voicing processes might be altered in digital settings due



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Corporate Communications: An
International Journal
Vol. 31 No. 7, 2026
pp. 125-141
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 1758-6046
p-ISSN: 1356-3289
DOI 10.1108/CCIJ-12-2025-0390

to the different nature of interaction. There is also growing interest in recent research on how digital work environments offer new possibilities and challenges for expressing voice (e.g. [Ellmer and Reichels, 2020](#); [Knoll et al., 2022](#)). Research confirms that digital tools not only impose technical changes but also change the communication climate, power relations and possibilities for participation. The bulk of this research adopts a quantitative, functionalist perspective, focusing on how coworker voice contributes to organizational efficiency and outcomes ([Barry et al., 2018](#); [Hosseini and Sabokro, 2022](#)). Thus, there is a need for more qualitative research that focuses on organizational members' perceptions and can thereby provide deeper insights into the complexity of coworker voicing. In this article, we focus on understanding the communicative and social processes of how coworker voice is shaped and made sense of in digital meetings (cf. [Heide and Svingstedt, 2024](#)). Further, we analyze the phenomenon of digital coworker voice as an interaction between technology, organizational culture and individual interpretations.

In this study, coworker voice in digital environments refers to how coworkers' voicing processes unfold in virtual settings, where digital tools and platform design, as well as remote work dynamics, shape how voice is enacted, negotiated and experienced within an organization. In that sense, digital voice is here viewed not only as a product of technology but also as an interaction between the medium and the individuals using it, drawing on media affordance theory ([Rice et al., 2017](#); [Ronzhyn et al., 2023](#); [Hedenmo, 2024](#)). Additionally, this study approaches voicing as a situated communicative process that emerges from the interplay among media affordances, meeting structures and perceived interpersonal risk, rather than as solely an individual behavior or an organizational outcome. Importantly, voice is distinguished from workplace communication in general, the focus is specifically on how digital meeting environments shape the conditions under which coworkers choose to speak up. Thus, this study offers qualitative insights into the ways digital and hybrid meeting formats shape visibility, acknowledgment, participation and inclusion in voice-related interactions.

In doing so, our ambition is to gain a deeper understanding of such complex, situated environments in digital meetings. In that sense, this focus goes beyond viewing coworker voice and communication as linear.

Our study focuses on coworkers within a single case organization, enabling a more focused exploration of how these contextual factors shape digital voicing in a specific cultural and technological setting. Moreover, this rich case study is particularly relevant because it involves an international company that dominates its market and is widely recognized for its workplace culture and open communication. The empirical material is based on qualitative interviews with coworkers representing diverse professional backgrounds, varying levels of seniority and different genders.

The aim of this article is to develop new, deeper insights into coworker voicing in digital meetings by examining coworkers' experiences and perceptions, as well as the digital dynamics at play. This research provides a deeper, contextual understanding of the communicative dynamics in digital organizational settings. From this aim, we have formulated the following research questions: "How is coworker voicing shaped in digital meetings?" and "How do they experience voicing in this context?"

We begin by exploring the landscape of coworker voice, setting the stage with key concepts and developments in the field. Building on this, we delve into research on psychological safety, highlighting its relevance for understanding voice in organizations. Next, we introduce the theoretical frameworks that guide our analysis of the empirical material. We then turn to the methodology, explaining our approach and its rationale. Finally, we present our analysis and conclude with a discussion of the findings and their broader implications.

On coworker voicing

Coworker voice is a means by which coworkers express opinions and influence their work and the organization's functioning ([Mazzei et al., 2024](#); [Morrison, 2014](#)). Voice is often described

as informal, voluntary communication among coworkers (Morrison, 2011, 2014), positioning it as a purpose-driven, reactive tool. Additionally, earlier research primarily conceptualizes voice as discretionary expressions intended to influence organizational functioning, raise concerns, challenge practices or offer suggestions (Morrison, 2011, 2014). However, this conceptualization has been critiqued for being overly management-centric and for reducing voice to individual, instrumental acts of speaking up (Andersson *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, this calls for a more nuanced understanding of coworker voice that moves beyond the notion of voice as a circumscribed, reactive response to specific situations and instead recognizes it as embedded in broader communicative and social processes (Andersson *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, the traditional conceptualization of voice was largely developed in the context of co-located work settings. As digital and hybrid meetings introduce new conditions for interaction, the ways coworkers express themselves and participate are being reshaped. A definition centered solely on organizational influence may therefore overlook the more subtle communicative acts through which voice manifests in digital meeting contexts. Thus, in this study, voice is understood as communicative participation related to speaking up, contributing perspectives, or expressing viewpoints in meeting interaction, distinguishing voice from workplace communication in general, which is a broader and less purpose-specific concept. Digital meetings constitute a primary arena for in-group communication in contemporary organizations. It is precisely within these interactional settings, characterized by participation dynamics, feedback mechanisms and inclusion, that coworker voice is enacted and negotiated. Examining voice in this context, therefore, captures how coworkers become visible, heard and acknowledged in their everyday organizational communication.

Research on organizational communication often highlights the importance of creating conditions for coworkers to share ideas and opinions (Botero and Van Dyne, 2009; Kim *et al.*, 2023), as well as the importance of daring to express dissenting opinions or question decisions (Kassing, 1998). Encouraging coworkers to share their input helps identify opportunities, address potential issues and lead to more informed decision-making. Moreover, Morrison (2011) notes that coworkers may hesitate to voice their opinions since there is a fear of negative consequences, such as criticism, being ignored or damaging their relationships with organizational members.

Furthermore, Chamberlin *et al.* (2017) distinguish between *promotional voice* (improvement suggestions) and *prohibitive voice* (criticism and warnings). Weiss and Morrison's (2018) research further shows that employers more often encourage promotional voice, while prohibitive voice can lead to negative consequences for coworkers.

Recently, there has been growing interest in research on digital channels and their impact on coworker voice. Among these are Fuchs and Reichel (2021), who note that coworkers are discouraged from speaking up when communicating through informal digital channels because there is a "missing spark" which refers to the decline in discussion, suggestions, and feedback, less computer experience and struggles with the novelty of digital tools, leading to uncertainty. Non-verbal cues, such as nodding and facial expressions, were also important factors that coworkers felt were missing digitally, which led to reduced feedback and motivation to speak up. Spontaneous contributions were also shown to be limited in digital meetings due to a structured turn-taking arrangement, rather than the informal side discussions that face-to-face meetings allow.

By applying the affordance perspective, Ellmer and Reichel (2020) found that the functionality of digital channels (their material agency) and management's response (social agency) determine whether coworkers speak up. They identified that anonymity, moderation and access restrictions are affordances that can increase psychological safety, which in turn can help coworkers speak up. However, these affordances may also limit privacy.

In recent years, due to increasing digitalization and globalization, we have seen a shift toward digital meetings, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic (Khan, 2021; Bernauer and Kornau, 2024). This shift has not only altered workplace communication but also presented new challenges regarding engagement, interaction and workplace dynamics

(Lim, 2024). These include reduced spontaneous interactions, diminished nonverbal cues, increased fatigue and distraction and reduced engagement. The lack of non-verbal communication in virtual meetings showed that misunderstandings and difficulties in leadership and inclusion are more evident in these settings.

Moreover, Bohacova and Heide (2024) argue that, despite a perception of an open and transparent workplace, meetings are largely dominated by silence, and coworkers' ability to engage in voicing is either postponed or transformed into a form of pseudo-communication. This means that even though an organization has an open climate and psychological safety, it does not automatically lead coworkers to voice their opinions. Their voice is often limited and occurs only when a manager or coworker asks for it, suggesting that their voice is more reactive than a fully voluntary action.

Additionally, Yang *et al.* (2024) underscore how digital leadership indirectly stimulates coworker voice by strengthening their sense of empowerment. They found that digital leadership increases prohibitive voice through increased engagement, rather than promotive voice.

On psychological safety

Psychological safety refers to the shared belief that coworkers are safe for interpersonal risk-taking within a team (Edmondson, 1999). Additionally, it includes the extent to which coworkers believe that their coworkers and supervisors will not punish or misunderstand them for taking these risks. These risks include speaking up with suggestions or concerns, admitting ignorance or uncertainty or simply being different (Liang *et al.*, 2012; Edmondson and Lei, 2014). When there is a lack of psychological safety, coworkers feel they cannot express themselves freely, leading them to avoid sharing opinions and concerns (Liang *et al.*, 2012). The team's history shapes psychological safety, as shared beliefs about how colleagues will react are established over time (Edmondson, 1999).

Research has shown that psychological safety can minimize the perceived risk of voicing (Edmondson and Lei, 2014). Additionally, psychological safety within the organization not only enables coworker voicing but also enhances the benefits of coworker voice and lends greater weight to the outcomes (Edmondson, 1999).

Virtual teams rely on collaboration technology to execute their tasks. However, the digital format presents new challenges that underscore the crucial need for high levels of psychological safety (Seeber *et al.*, 2024). Digital communication creates distance and may reduce social support, leading to feelings of irritation, uncertainty and disappointment among coworkers. The lack of nonverbal cues can reduce psychological safety, making coworkers more cautious in communication (Lee, 2021). Hence, researchers argue that teams must actively counteract isolation in virtual settings (Dzandu *et al.*, 2023).

Kreamer *et al.* (2024) found that coworkers, especially those with low status, tend to perceive chat functions as offering a reduced risk of being misunderstood, since contributions can be edited and refined, compared with verbal communication. Notably, the research also showed that coworkers who experience high psychological safety are more inclined to express themselves in the chat.

In this sense, psychological safety is directly related to coworker voicing, as coworkers who experience greater psychological safety are more likely to voice their opinions and concerns at work (Edmondson and Lei, 2014). Additionally, a lack of psychological safety tends to make coworkers less inclined to express themselves freely (Liang *et al.*, 2012). However, it remains unclear whether psychological safety is experienced more or less in digital environments compared to face-to-face settings. Additionally, it is uncertain whether the psychological safety established in in-person interactions is transferable into virtual formats. Additionally, it is important to note that psychological safety cannot fully explain difficulties in digital meetings, since reduced voicing can also stem from interactional constraints related to platform design, delayed feedback and structured turn-taking. Therefore,

in this study, psychological safety is understood as a single dimension that interacts with broader communicative and technological conditions.

Theory

We base our analysis on two theories that we find valuable for producing a better, deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study, namely media affordance theory and media richness theory. These two theories will be presented and discussed below.

Media affordance theory

The concept of affordances was originally introduced by [Gibson \(1977\)](#), who defined affordances as the perceived usefulness or functionality of a particular object ([Fox and McEwan, 2017](#)). Gibson's core idea is that affordances exist as a relation between the actor and the environment. Later, [Norman \(1990\)](#) developed a more human-centered perspective on affordances by focusing on perceived affordances grounded in the user's experience rather than the object's actual properties ([Rice et al., 2017](#)). Affordances depend on whether and how the agent perceives it, and consequently, how the agent applies it.

The concept of media affordances is not limited to the functions of media or technology alone but is grounded in the relationship between technology and its users ([Rice et al., 2017](#)). The technology offers action possibilities, and users perceive these possibilities based on potential features, capabilities or constraints in relation to their needs or purpose within a specific context. Consistently, media affordances are not only connected to technology but also situational, subjective and social ([Rice et al., 2017](#)). Therefore, the relationship between users and technology indicates social and communicative outcomes. The outcomes can have positive, negative, intended and unintended implications, long-term or short-term, and can both enable and constrain action.

[Rice et al. \(2017\)](#) suggest six organizational media affordances: visibility, editability, self-presentation, awareness, pervasiveness and searchability. Additionally, [Hedenmo \(2024\)](#) argues that the design of digital meetings specifically withholds certain affordances such as auditory, visual and interactive elements. In this study, media affordances are defined as the perceived technical functions, capabilities and constraints within digital meeting platforms. These include features such as chat, video/audio settings, reaction options, screen sharing and other interactive tools embedded in the digital meeting platform.

Media richness

Channels vary in their ability to promote social presence and the feeling of sharing an experience together ([Fox and McEwan, 2017](#)). The differences in media richness depend on the capacity for immediate feedback, the number of cues and channels utilized, personalization and language variety. Face-to-face interaction is the richest medium because it enables immediate feedback, including body language and tone of voice ([Daft and Lengel, 1986](#)). In contrast to face-to-face communication, mediated channels offer greater conversational control, such as the ability to end a conversation or regulate turn-taking. It also offers greater informational control over what participants express or withhold in interactions by allowing them to revise messages before sharing.

Since digital material is easier to capture, save and reproduce ([Fox and McEwan, 2017](#)), the spiral of silence may operate differently online as coworkers' expressions may be held against them in the future ([Stoycheff, 2016](#)). On the other hand, some digital functionalities might also reduce the risk of coworkers expressing themselves, as they are seen as more anonymous and safer. While media affordance theory and media richness theory have been applied broadly to organizational communication, this study applies them specifically to the meeting context, understood as a structured arena for in-group communication where participation, feedback

and inclusion are continuously negotiated. Meetings are not merely channels for information exchange, but social settings where voice is enacted, shaped and sometimes suppressed.

Psychological safety is directly related to coworker voicing, as coworkers who experience greater psychological safety are more likely to voice their opinions and concerns at work (Edmondson and Lei, 2014), whereas a lack of psychological safety makes coworkers less inclined to express themselves freely (Liang *et al.*, 2012). Research suggests that psychological safety has the same impact on coworker voice whether it occurs virtually or in person (Kreamer *et al.*, 2024). However, it remains unclear whether psychological safety established in in-person interactions is transferable into virtual formats.

Psychological safety will be applied in a virtual context where it is more difficult to read nonverbal cues (Lee, 2021), but where digital functions such as chat also allow for more editable and refinable communication (Kreamer *et al.*, 2024). Hence, media affordances can play a significant role in exploring how coworker voicing is shaped.

Methodology

In this study, a qualitative research approach was applied along with social constructionist epistemology (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). Since the study focuses on individual experiences and given that coworker voicing is a social process, social constructionism is a suitable lens (Bryman, 2017). Another central aspect of social constructionism is that knowledge is constantly shaped by human perspectives, cultural contexts and language rather than being an objective truth (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011). Additionally, an abductive approach was adopted, which allowed us to move between existing theories and empirical findings (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014). This enables us to act both as interpreters and as creators of new insights. Abduction offers a flexible and reflexive strategy well suited to deepening the understanding and analysis of the social constructions that emerge in complex interactional situations.

The interviews were conducted with coworkers from a single case organization, allowing us to understand experiences within the same context (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The chosen organization is a leading international company with over 200,000 coworkers worldwide, representing a wide range of professional backgrounds, nationalities, genders, ages and levels of experience. The case organization has a strong reputation for having a positive work culture, open communication and being recognized as one of the best employers in its industry. To ensure confidentiality and encourage unrestricted participation, the case organization in this study remains anonymous (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014).

Qualitative interviews were conducted to understand coworkers' experiences and perceptions. The interview questions were designed to facilitate an in-depth investigation of the research topic while remaining closely aligned with interviewees' lived experiences. In line with a reflexive thematic analysis approach, we developed a semi-structured interview guide to provide consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility to adapt to participants' accounts and the unfolding interaction (cf. Braun and Clarke, 2006). The interview guide covered the following themes: (1) introduction, (2) general experiences of digital vs physical meetings, (3) coworker voice in digital meetings, (4) perceptions of being heard and the impact of voicing, (6) psychological safety and (5) closing questions and wrap-up. Hence, interviews began with broad, contextual questions about general experiences of workplace meetings, following Jones' (1996) "grand tour" approach. This structure was maintained across themes to allow interviewees to introduce their own meanings and emphases (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014). When theoretical concepts such as psychological safety were introduced, interviewees' familiarity was first assessed, and accessible explanations were provided when needed, in line with Barbour's (2018) recommendation to translate theory into respondent-relevant language. To support reflexive depth, we invited participants to consider their experiences from multiple positional perspectives, for example,

interactions with colleagues vs managers, enabling insights into relational and power dynamics (Alvesson, 2023).

Purposive selection of interviewees was employed to select interviewees suited to the study. Criteria for selection included that coworkers should participate in digital meetings frequently and have experience with physical meetings, allowing for comparison. To capture a range of perspectives, coworkers from various professional backgrounds, seniority levels and genders were included. With 13 interviews in total, theoretical saturation was achieved as no new themes or dimensions emerged in the later interviews (cf. Schwandt, 2001). It should also be noted that better theories do not necessarily come from more data, but from better thought processes (Weick, 1989). We do not aim to generalize to a larger population through representativeness or statistical inference – our goal is analytical generalizability (Halkier, 2011). Rather, results are generalized at the level of theory and analytical categories. In this sense, generalizability resides in the analysis rather than in the empirical cases themselves.

The analysis of the empirical material followed a thematic approach. We began with repeated readings to familiarize ourselves with the material. An open, flexible coding approach was initially used to identify recurring themes without predefined categories (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014). Coding was conducted collaboratively to enhance quality (Boyle and Schmierbach, 2020) and guided by a reflexive–pragmatic stance that critically examined emerging interpretations while keeping the research aim in focus (Alvesson, 2023). The resulting themes were analyzed using media affordances theory and the concept of psychological safety. Additionally, we engaged in critical dialogue, examining the theories and materials simultaneously while questioning their potential limitations.

Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent from participants and ensuring that interviewees' identities and the case organization remained confidential. Additionally, since we are in control of the conversation, a power asymmetry was acknowledged as it can have a significant impact on the result of this study. As this is a qualitative study, we remain aware of our own interpretations of the empirical material throughout the entire process. We acknowledge that these are not objective facts. Rather, they are shaped by our personal values, perspectives and theoretical background. By regularly stepping back and critically evaluating our biases (Alvesson and Sköldbäck, 2018), we could remain reflexive.

Analysis

In this section, we will discuss the analysis of the empirical material. During the analysis, we could identify four recurring interactional patterns across the empirical material, which are discussed below: (1) shaping voices, (2) silenced by structure, (3) hybrid meetings as structural inequality and (4) compensatory strategies and emerging norms in digital meetings.

Shaping voice

Coworkers emphasize that communication depends not only on what is said but also on nonverbal cues. In that sense, camera use can be understood as a way to replicate this richness by helping coworkers convey nonverbal cues and body language in digital meetings. Our analysis shows that keeping the camera on during a digital meeting communicates attentiveness, professionalism and engagement. This underscores the symbolic and social weight of making oneself visible to other participants in the meeting. One interviewee reflects:

Let's say I'm presenting in a meeting, and everyone has their camera turned off. It feels like shouting straight into space. I need some nods and things like that, some indication that people understand or that you can see some sort of reaction. Communication is very much about body language. It's not just about what is said or what you hear.

The experience of “shouting straight into space” indicates that there is a tension between the affordances of camera use and the need for psychological safety in digital spaces. As discussed by Rice *et al.* (2017), visibility is a media affordance that shapes how organizational members

communicate and interact with one another. The reflection above demonstrates that nonverbal cues, such as nodding, are important in virtual settings, even though they do not fully replace the communication dynamics of physical interaction.

The chat functionality is seen as an important feature, particularly to avoid interruptions and to avoid completely taking over the stage. Additionally, coworkers reflect that using the chat helps spark engagement in digital meetings. One coworker told us:

And then the chat is actually pretty good for creating some engagement. Like, let's say we've been in a digital meeting and you're talking, and then maybe she jumps in and writes a comment like "What do you think about this"? Even though it might be a bit distracting, it still adds some engagement.

The chat and reactions are highlighted as key affordances for enabling voice in digital meetings, as they foster participation and quick feedback without interrupting the verbal flow. Furthermore, the enhanced control over information that comes with the ability to revise messages before sharing them tends to make coworkers less concerned about being misunderstood or misinterpreted. This results in coworkers feeling more comfortable voicing through the chat rather than vocally (Kreamer *et al.*, 2024).

However, as coworkers noted, there are instances where parallel discussions in the chat are overlooked because too much input is happening at the same time. This means that while the chat can help expand participation and voicing, its effectiveness is dependent on how it's managed and integrated into the conversation. From a psychological safety perspective, chat is a double-edged sword – safe for some, dismissive for others. Perceptions of other meeting participants, listening to what the individual is saying, have positive effects on psychological safety, as they indicate respect and interest in the contributions (Edmondsson, 1999). Chats and other distracting notifications can make coworkers anxious about being ignored or misheard, which may lead to hesitation or weaken their willingness to express their voice (Knoll, 2021).

The use of reactions such as emojis and GIFs was something coworkers frequently reflected on in digital meetings as a way to express their voices. A coworker shared a reflection regarding using GIFs in digital meetings:

You know that kind of sharing shows a little personality, but it also brings a little humor and playfulness to the meeting. [...] I think it helps the climate because, especially if it's your topic or one that's a little tough, it kind of diffuses the attention.

While some coworkers find certain aspects of the format limiting, such as the lack of social cues and body language, others state that using tools like GIFs can lower the social and emotional barriers to expressing one's voice. GIFs and reactions expand the ways voice is expressed. Additionally, this media affordance demonstrates how digital platforms can offer alternative channels for coworkers to express their voices in a lighter, safer and even more accessible way, especially for those who might otherwise hesitate to speak up.

Furthermore, this challenges the traditional idea that physical meetings are richer due to face-to-face communication (Daft and Lengel, 1986). Even though coworkers perceive a lack of visual cues and body language as reducing their willingness to speak up, the symbolic affordances of GIFs and reactions might support emotional communication. These affordances reduce the emotional intensity and perceived risk of voicing, creating a contextual nuance in how coworker voice is shaped in digital meetings. Digital meetings demonstrate that technical richness is not only an important factor in determining how effective a medium is, as discussed by Daft and Lengel (1986), but also in how comfortable and physically safe coworkers feel in expressing their voices.

Silenced by structure: practical meeting conditions that shape coworker voice

Coworkers frequently emphasized practical meeting conditions enabled and standardized by digital meetings. These conditions do not imply that coworker voicing is directly shaped by the

digital format, but rather that the digital format allows and normalizes certain conditions that seem to hinder coworker voicing.

Digital meetings allow for the invitation of many participants. The analysis of the empirical material indicates that the group dynamic is altered, and that participation and attention are reduced when meeting scalability is higher. When overwhelmed by the scale of a meeting, coworkers are less likely to share input due to increased competition to speak up, leading to disengagement or frustration.

The size of the group sometimes impacts. [...] The bigger the group, the quieter you are. You don't even come up on camera, or even if you have good thoughts to share, you hold back because 10 other people are speaking before you who just want to get there.

Another interesting point made is that the group size in a meeting influences which types of discussions and voices are accepted. This experience highlights how not only the frequency of coworker voice is shaped by group size but also its depth and content. Large meetings tend to focus on general conversations, in which detailed concerns and opinions are dismissed. This makes these meetings less effective at expressing the coworkers' voices. From a media-affordance perspective, the greater scalability enabled by digital platforms creates an environment that does not support dialogic richness. This means that as group size increases, communication shifts from exploratory to informational and coworkers' voices become more abstract, less specific and more aligned with perceived norms about what is "relevant" in a large-group setting.

Hybrid meetings as structural inequality

An unexpected theme that emerged in the empirical material is hybrid meetings. This theme provides deeper insights into how the coexistence of physical and digital meetings affects participation dynamics, inclusion and the conditions under which coworkers feel comfortable voicing their opinions. Coworkers express that they do not prefer the hybrid format, for example, one interviewee said:

The reason is that, let's say that I have five people in Amsterdam, five people in Sweden, and five people in India. And if some kind of internal discussion starts happening in that room, others listening digitally, for them, it's impossible to follow. If more than one person talks at the same time, it's impossible for them. And if you're writing something on the board, they cannot see it. So, for me, actually, a fully digital approach works better than a hybrid one.

From a media richness perspective, the different media of interaction are evidently contrasted in hybrid meetings. Although digital meeting platforms are perceived as rich media due to their visual and verbal affordances, they are considered inferior to face-to-face interactions (Daft and Lengel, 1986). Participants on site can hear each other perfectly, with no delay, making it easier to communicate with those attending in person and making in-person attendance the dominant mode of communication. We have observed that meeting participation often becomes unbalanced when most participants attend in person. In that case, the physical room dominates the conversation, while the few participants online become observers. One interviewee told us:

When you are the only one online, then it's a little bit different. [...] The rest of the gang is somehow in the room, and you don't manage to be there, which means the conversations are informal, and then you don't hear them well. And then, when you're on the other side, you actually need to make an effort to speak up, right? Yeah ... so that can be a little challenging, yeah.

Hybrid meetings might hinder coworkers from voicing their concerns, especially when coworkers from a minority group join virtually. Coworkers describe feeling insecure about voicing opinions in hybrid meetings, which may be linked to psychological safety, as they tend to feel exposed or excluded from the group, especially when a minority joins virtually. The

sense of isolation, distance and reduced social support can leave coworkers feeling uncertain, prompting them to be cautious when conveying messages (Dzandu *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, if a coworker's contributions are questioned by a coworker in a group of other people physically present, there is a risk of perceiving the critique as coming from the entire group because of their shared physical presence, even though that is not necessarily the case. Nonetheless, this dynamic may cause the coworker to feel outnumbered, which can hinder further participation due to a sense of low perceived psychological safety:

The person who is there never gets the chance to express themselves in the right way. Because we're sitting here, three people, looking at that person. Then they might feel a bit exposed.

Coworkers tend to stay silent when they believe that their position is not supported by others. Hence, the majority opinions become dominant, while the minority opinions weaken. Even though it is not always the case, location imbalance may drive this perception. Considering this, inclusion seems to be a big issue in hybrid meetings where differences in physical presence often led to unequal participation:

Digital or physical works. But when it becomes hybrid meetings ... I find that complicated. Then we're sitting here, and we're having a discussion, and we forget about the person who is there. We might even be sitting with our backs half turned to them. They're not involved at all. They can barely hear what we're saying. We talk over each other while that person has to raise their hand. I think those are the absolute hardest, especially when it comes to expressing opinions.

The statement connects the dynamics of the hybrid meeting to the technical aspects, noting the affordance of the hand-raising function. Participants who join in person can speak freely, while virtual participants are expected to use the hand-raising function, which makes it more inconvenient to voice concerns. Additionally, it describes a sense of being forgotten or overlooked. This might be since not being included, by participants turning their backs toward the screen or being "forgotten" signals that the contributions from the virtual participant are not valued or wanted. This is directly related to psychological safety, as inclusion is central to being respected and accepted in a group. There is a risk of developing a norm that there is no point in voicing opinions when joining virtually, which, in turn, leads to only some voices being heard. Hence, hybrid meetings might create an exclusionary culture in which some participants are consequently assigned a more passive role.

Compensatory strategies and emerging norms in digital meetings

In alignment with previous research on leadership and its effect on coworker voicing (e.g. Fatoki, 2024), participants in the study reflected on how power dynamics and role-taking shape coworker voice in digital meetings. The empirical material shows that coworkers expect the meeting leader or facilitator to use their structural power to make participants feel seen and heard, functioning as a voice-enabling mechanism. As noted, digital meetings have a limited ability to translate nonverbal cues and natural turn-taking, making it hard to rely on spontaneous participation as one would in physical meetings. Thus, leaders must actively compensate for the affordance gaps in digital meetings by taking steps that help include, prompt and encourage coworkers to speak up. Earlier research also shows that transformative and inclusive leadership can help create a psychologically safe work environment in which coworkers feel encouraged to speak up (Fatoki, 2024). Arguably, this becomes even more important in digital meetings, where communication is often more structured and social cues are somewhat absent. Leaders who consciously create a safe and supportive environment, for instance, by asking direct questions and offering affirmations, can thus overcome the communicative barriers that digital meetings often create.

Throughout the interviews, coworkers highlighted that direct questions, clear agendas and expectations, and actively inviting silent participants can help create conditions where coworker voice thrives in digital meetings:

In a digital meeting, you can both hide, and you may not need to have an opinion, or you may not care. And you get distracted. I think a different type of leadership is required for digital meetings. To create engagement and get people talking.

As [Yang et al. \(2024\)](#) showed, leaders' engagement can increase prohibitive voice, which is equally important as promotive voice. From this perspective, leaders have an important role in creating more opportunities or making it easier to engage in meetings by taking steps to make coworkers' voices feel safe and actionable. This further underscores that digital meetings are as much about the structure and social design as they are about the affordances that enable coworker voice.

Even though leaders have the power to increase engagement in meetings, aspects unique to digital meetings can pose challenges to this. One interviewee reflected:

Maybe, as a leader or meeting manager, you'll try to give everyone that up, but it gets harder once the group is bigger, especially online. It's the same challenge in physical, but what makes it easier in physical is that you kind of read the room a little bit, also. You get a chance to easily scan in ten seconds around to see who's there, who you want to throw the ball to, say, "hey, you guys in this group, do you have anything to say generally", right?

This coworker highlights a significant gap in the affordances of digital meetings. In a physical room, leaders can easily identify who is engaged, who is silent or who might be ready to speak through subtle micro-expressions and other social cues. This is further supported by [Lim's \(2024\)](#) reasoning that, in digital contexts, misunderstandings and leadership difficulties are exacerbated. Consequently, digital meetings pose additional challenges for meeting leaders seeking to naturally support inclusive facilitation. In digital meetings, leadership requires greater cognitive effort and social intuition to avoid uneven participation. Without the right affordances in digital meetings, voice thus risks being centered around a few speakers while others fade into passive participation. Furthermore, several participants point to the need for acknowledgment as even more important in digital settings, a point that touches on the concept of psychological safety. One example is:

So, it's incredibly important to have confirmation. For example, "that was a good idea, we'll take that with us". Or, "Oh my, how great it is that you were at this meeting". Or "how wonderful it will be to have meetings when we move forward together". What we're not so good at in Sweden, giving this positive feedback, becomes even more important in a digital meeting.

Because of the lack of verbal affirmations, it becomes even more crucial to actively compensate for it through acknowledgment and affirmation. Its importance, heightened in digital settings, can be explained by viewing it through the lens of physiological safety. For coworkers to feel safe or comfortable enough to engage in coworker voice, speakers need to understand how their message has been received ([Edmondson, 1999](#)). In the absence of clear affirmation and feedback in this digital context, coworkers don't know whether their voices are valued or noticed. This might create a sense of psychological discomfort, reducing willingness to speak up. In this sense, digital meetings shape voice in a way that makes it more dependent on affirmative feedback and acknowledgment as a compensatory mechanism for the loss of other non-verbal affirmations natural in physical settings.

Concluding discussion

This study offers a nuanced and contextual understanding of the unique communication dynamics that unfold in digital settings – specifically, who expresses their voice, how, when and under what conditions. A key result of the analysis is the identification of three main enablers and three barriers to coworker voice in digital meetings. These enablers and barriers do not operate in isolation; they are deeply interconnected with the sense of physiological safety in digital settings and the broader organizational culture. Therefore, some of these enablers are also shown to be barriers to coworker voice. We have demonstrated how digital

affordances not only create new ways of expressing voice but also shape new forms of silence, exclusion and self-regulation (cf. [Knoll et al., 2022](#)). This study also generates new insights, which are presented in the sections below. These include the complex interplay of factors shaping coworker voicing in digital meetings.

Using the camera in digital meetings presents a trade-off. On one hand, it enhances visibility, presence and engagement, helping create a psychologically safe space ([Lee, 2021](#)). However, some physical features are still lost in the camera's limited visual representation. Moreover, the camera creates a heightened sense of self-awareness, giving the feeling of constantly being on stage, which can lead to cognitive strain and distraction and can constitute a barrier to coworkers voicing their concerns. Moreover, the camera function can create the illusion that participants are present when they are not. Looking at the screen while engaging in unrelated tasks may still appear to the coworker as if the coworker is engaged in the conversation, thereby normalizing functional disengagement in digital meetings (cf. [Fuchs and Reichel, 2021](#)). This disengagement risks creating a negative spiral over time, fostering a climate in which coworker voicing is neither encouraged nor heard, leading coworkers to perceive voicing as pointless ([Knoll, 2021](#)). Thus, we have identified a *visibility paradox*. While camera use can serve as a bridge to presence and attentiveness, it can also become a barrier by amplifying feelings of exposure and social scrutiny. Hence, the camera's affordance for coworker voice becomes clear.

Technical features like chat, reactions and GIFs offer low-barrier ways to express emotions and reduce formal pressure, acting as digital body language. However, their limited range can constrain how the voice is conveyed and understood. Platform design thus plays a key role in shaping the quality of coworker voice. While reactions and chats add media richness, they can also be seen as distracting or unprofessional, potentially undermining verbal contributions. These tools require active facilitation to be effective. Structured features, such as hand-raising, help distribute voice more evenly, promoting inclusion. Yet, they may also limit spontaneity ([Fuchs and Reichel, 2021](#)). Hybrid meetings further complicate voice dynamics, often privileging physically present participants and isolating those who participate virtually. This division fosters exclusion and discourages dissent, making virtual voices riskier and less likely to be acknowledged.

Despite the case organization's reputation for openness and inclusivity, digital meetings introduce new challenges that both enable and constrain coworker voice. We highlight that media affordances in digital meetings do not operate in the background but actively shape the physiological conditions for participation and coworker voice. Leadership is crucial for shaping voice in these settings, as echoed by [Yang et al. \(2024\)](#). To foster psychological safety, meeting leaders must actively facilitate, set expectations and affirm contributions. Power dynamics persist but are reshaped in digital formats. Moreover, all participants share responsibility for conveying presence and attentiveness – key to enabling voice – especially given the ease of disengagement. Importantly, the findings suggest that challenges to coworker voice in digital meetings are not solely a matter of organizational culture or psychological safety. Even in organizations with an open communication climate, digital meeting formats introduce structural and technological constraints that can suppress voice regardless of individual willingness to speak up. This has important practical implications: organizations cannot rely solely on cultivating a psychologically safe culture to enable voice in digital meetings. Instead, meeting leaders and organizers must actively adapt their facilitation strategies to compensate for the affordance gaps inherent in digital formats, for instance, by directly inviting participation, using structured turn-taking, explicitly acknowledging contributions and designing meetings that account for the specific challenges of hybrid participation. Given that internal listening occurs far too seldom within organizations, organizations need to develop strategic listening functions ([Heide and Svingstedt, 2024](#)). It is essential to start with small steps forward in this strategic direction. [Heide and Svingstedt \(2024\)](#) argue that giving coworkers the chance to speak in meetings can be a good step in the right strategic direction. This study contributes to understanding this small step by identifying

the enablers and barriers to coworker voicing, with a specific focus on digital meetings, which have become increasingly central in the contemporary work environment.

We have identified both enablers and barriers to coworker voicing. The interplay between media affordances, organizational structure and perceived level of physiological safety yields a unique interactive dynamic inherent in digital and hybrid meetings, reshaping coworker voice. In digital meetings, coworker voice is not merely about expressing opinions but also about navigating the transformed forms of visibility, traditional social cues and informal interactions that all affect presence and the perceived risk of voicing. Nevertheless, our analysis shows that digital meetings provide new avenues for expressing and engaging with coworker voice. This depends on how the meeting is designed, facilitated and experienced by the meeting participants. Therefore, fostering an environment in these digital settings where coworker voice can thrive requires more than just access to technology. It *requires both cultural and structural sensitivity* to the specific limitations and possibilities that the medium's affordances offer for digital interaction. This interplay is illustrated in Figure 1.

Media affordances constitute the technical foundation, meaning they withhold the possibilities in the digital space. Notably, aligning with Gibson (1977), media affordances are the perceived usefulness or functionality of a digital function, emphasizing subjectivity. Psychological safety also reflects an individual experience, but a group-level conviction that one will not be punished for sharing input that challenges the status quo. Lastly, the organizational context in this framework encompasses situational and individual factors, including organizational norms, expectations, practical meeting conditions, power structures and culture. In this framework, all factors are interdependent. Rather, a factor categorized as an enabler can become a barrier, depending on the other interacting factors. Moreover, suppose the organizational norm frames the chat as a space for informal or social exchanges. In that case, coworkers may hesitate to raise critical or challenging points that risk disrupting the established conversational tone. Consequently, coworker voicing in digital meeting contexts is shaped in dynamic ways, influenced by both limitations and opportunities. It is important to recognize that the construct is highly situational and sensitive to both contextual and individual factors.

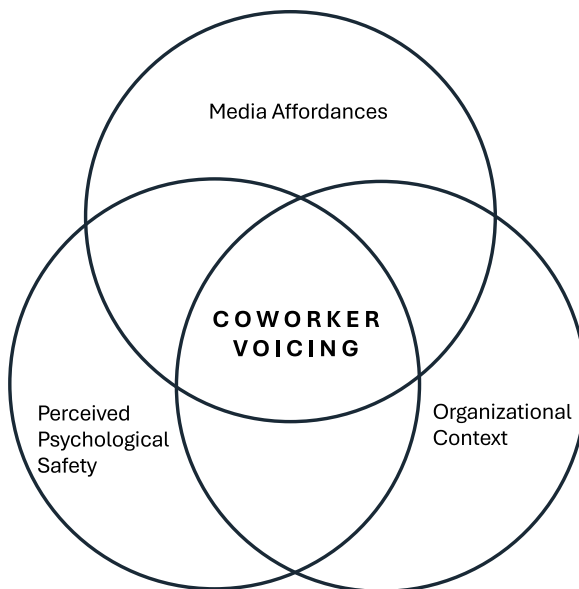


Figure 1. The interplay between key factors shaping voicing in digital meetings

Acknowledgments

An earlier version of this work was presented as a master's thesis at Lund University and is available through the Lund University Publications (LUP) Student Papers repository: <https://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/search/publication/9197201>. The present article is a substantially revised and extended version of that thesis, developed by the authors for publication in *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*.

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