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AN INITIAL FACE-TO-FACE MEETING IMPROVES PERSON PERCEPTIONS OF INTERVIEWEES ACROSS VMC.

This study investigated the effects of initial meeting context on future video-mediated impression formation. Participants met with an individual being interviewed for a bar staff position. This initial meeting either took place over a video link or face-to-face. After the initial meeting had taken place all participants then formed part of an interview panel for a video-mediated interview. Consequently, participants were asked to rate the interviewee on aspects of personality and employability. Participants who had met the interviewee face-to-face prior to the interview rated him significantly more favourably on a number of measures (friendliness, honesty, job suitability and employability) compared to when the initial meeting took place via a video link. Initial meeting context therefore impacted on person perceptions.

Introduction

Video-mediated communication (VMC) is increasingly used to support interviewing at a distance. Although on the one hand this means that individuals can be interviewed for jobs without travelling to the interview destination, research suggests that the presentation of an individual over a video link may result in less favourable impression formation. For instance, Chapman and Webster (2001) compared candidates in face-to-face and video-mediated interviews. Results showed that face-to-face candidates were perceived in a more favourable light compared to video-mediated candidates. For example, they were judged as being better at conveying verbal and nonverbal cues. Whilst it is possible to access nonverbal information over a videoconference, Chen (2003) proposes that VMC results in these behaviours being distorted. Heath *et al.* (1995) state that because of the use of 2D equipment (monitor), specific movement and expression are sometimes lost within the individual's general conduct. Essentially this suggests that the bodily activity generated by one person across a link may be different from what the person on the other side of the link actually sees on the monitor.

There is a wealth of evidence indicating that nonverbal communication plays a significant role in impression formation, therefore it is easy to see how the distortion of such cues could impact on an individual's perceptions of a person. The current study aims to test if negative perceptions of individuals across video links can be negated by the introduction of an initial face-to-face meeting. Therefore, highlighting whether an initial face-to-face meeting will impact significantly on impression formation in a subsequent video-mediated interview.

Method

Participants

An opportunity sample of 32 University students was used with 15 males and 17 females. Two interviewees also took part in the study; both were male and aged 21 and 24.

Materials

In room 1, a colour monitor was mounted in a wooden box, with a video camcorder placed directly above the monitor. A microphone was placed to the right of the monitor,

and video and audio quality were as high as was practically achievable. Room 1 was connected to an adjacent room (room 2), which had the same set-up. Each participant (and interviewee) was distanced approximately one metre from the monitor and the scope of the image included the face and upper body.

Participants completed a questionnaire assessing their perceptions of the interviewee. The questionnaire consisted of six questions and used a rating scale from 1 to 5 (ratings ranging from ‘not at all’ to ‘very’). The questions addressed perceptions of friendliness, communicative ability, intelligence, honesty, job suitability and employability.

Procedure

Participants took part in a pre-interview meeting with either one of two interviewees. Half of the participants took part in this meeting face-to-face and half via a video link. During the meeting participants quizzed the interviewee on their knowledge of drink prices. After the meeting all participants viewed the interview over a video link. Finally, participants were required to fill out a questionnaire rating the interviewee on their performance.

Results

Interviewees were scored on participant ratings (out of 5) of friendliness, communicative ability, level of intelligence, honesty, job suitability, and employability (table 1).

Table.1: Questionnaire data: video meeting and face-to-face meeting conditions, with mean scores and standard deviations in brackets.

Question	Mean (S.D)	Score	Question	Mean (S.D)	Score
1) Friendliness	Face 4.63 (.50) Video 4.07 (.93)		4) Honesty	Face 4.56 (.63) Video 3.88 (.72)	
2) Communicative ability	Face 3.88 (.62) Video 4.13 (.96)		5) Job suitability	Face 4.44 (.81) Video 3.56 (1.09)	
3) Level of intelligence	Face 4.31 (.60) Video 3.88 (.89)		6) Employability	Face 4.38 (.50) Video 3.75 (.68)	

Using two-tailed independent measures t-tests, results indicate that participants rated interviewees as being significantly friendlier ($t(30) = 2.13$; $p < 0.05$); significantly more honest ($t(30) = 2.88$; $p < 0.01$); significantly more suitable for the job ($t(30) = 2.57$; $p < 0.05$) and significantly more employable ($t(30) = 2.95$; $p < 0.01$) when they had met them face-to-face before the interview. No significant differences were found between conditions on measures of communicative ability and level of intelligence.

Conclusions and recommendations

The results from this study suggest that face-to-face communication has a significant influence on certain aspects of impression formation; namely friendliness, honesty, job suitability and employability. Previous research findings indicate that ‘trust needs touch’ (Handy, 1995). This might be because it is more difficult to ‘read’ someone when

nonverbal cues are missing or distorted. Indeed, there is a body of evidence indicating that nonverbal communication plays a crucial role in impression formation. The fact that 'trust needs touch' may explain why impressions of honesty were less favourable after a VMC meeting. Equilibrium theory (Argyle & Dean, 1965) also offers some explanation for the findings in this study. It is argued that in face-to-face communication intimacy is communicated using a number of cues, most of which are communicated nonverbally (e.g. proximity and eye gaze). In situations where these cues are diminished it is common for people to compensate by increasing other available cues. For example, when individuals stand far apart they increase gaze to maintain a comfortable level of intimacy. During video mediated interactions we are unable to express many of these intimacy cues, and therefore it is difficult to maintain a comfortable equilibrium. The consequence of this would be that people would appear 'cold' when presenting themselves over VMC. This is likely to result in negative impressions generally.

From the results of the present study and other related research (for example, Chapman & Webster, 2001) it is suggested that video-mediated interviewees would be disadvantaged if being compared directly to those who are interviewed face-to-face. However, even with this in mind it is still conceivable that VMC can actually be advantageous in certain situations. For example, when a child is presenting evidence in a courtroom, it has been shown to be beneficial if that individual remains distanced (Doherty-Sneddon & McCauley, 2000). To conclude, when it is not possible to attend an interview in person, from the research findings of this study, some level of face-to-face interaction prior to the video-mediated interview would be of benefit to the interviewee.

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