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## **THE FACE BEHIND THE ZOOM: WHAT MATTERS?**

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### **Abstract**

Since Covid-19 pandemic, Zoom has been adopted by many as an online platform to facilitate learning. This article addresses students' (dis)agreement to how they perceive their faces in Zoom; whether it is technically a matter of either on-or-off video mode; of insecurities, of any psychological impacts, and of the notion of face as good name or reputation. A survey by means of Google form was organized in the last two meetings of two courses in the odd semester of academic year 2021-2022 to elicit students' responses to any of Likert-based five scales of (dis)agreements to 16 statements concerning face in Zoom. 122 ELESP USD students of the third and fifth semester responded to this survey. Data were analyzed and interpreted by means of percentage of agreements. The findings reveal that the notion of face in Zoom is initially and in majority agreed as a matter of being in either on-or-off video mode which depends on the stability of internet connection. Next, being in on-or-off video mode is largely bound to whether there is any obligation to be so. The majority agree also that not showing face in Zoom allows them to do side work apart, and prevents matters of privacy from being exposed. The majority also agree that one's face in Zoom reflects psychological aspects such self-pride and honor, dignity, consideration, tact, poise, and perceptiveness. Preference to being on-or-off-video mode is also a matter of not exposing one's state of insecurities, and is concerned with the notion of face as a representation and approval of self-reputation or good name.

Keywords: face, face threatening acts (FTAs), on/off-video mode, Zoom

### **Introduction**

Covid-19 pandemic has drastically changed many aspects of how learning is to keep going. Learning is to be fundamentally redefined and reorganized in new ways and aspects, modes, methods, locus and locality, and modes, among others. Instead of physically attending classes at schools or campuses, during the pandemic students are to attend classes mostly or entirely at home. Even though condition has improved significantly recently, many are still cautious and worried about their well-being. In such a condition, Zoom as a platform for video conferencing provides a choice for mediation and facilitation to guarantee that learning keeps progressing. At the current

state pandemic lingering, the use of such a platform now is a matter of necessity (Bothra, 2011). Zoom is preferred over others by a good number schools, universities, and institutions because of its simplicity of installation, high quality of audio and video, and the absence of connection drop-out (Leung et al., 2021). It also gains widespread acceptance due, among other, to its relative ease of use, cost-effectiveness, data management features, and security options (Archibald et al., 2019). Therefore, Zoom-mediated online learning amidst the pandemic is intended to maintain good teaching and effective learning process to the students even in facing an emergency situation (Rameli et al., 2021). Zoom and other online platforms gain more ground as commonly agreed upon as readily available alternatives of organizing learning activities and of extending of students' presence and participation in the learning activities by way of video-audio mode. This is just one mentioning that annual Zoom meeting minutes have increased by 3,300% from 97 billion to 3.3 trillion in 2021 (Wiederhold, 2021). In Sanata Dharma University (SDU), Zoom platform has been adopted institution wide since 2019 as the official video conferencing platform in line with learning management system (LMS).

Despite its widespread welcome, however, there are a number of drawbacks or negative effects of Zoom on students' learning experience and their motivation (Serhan, 2020). Zoom fatigue (Bothra, 2011; Shoshan, 2021), principally caused by "digital eye strain" (Florell, 2020, p. 37 in Wong, 2020) becomes common phenomenon. In terms of interactivity, Zoom sessions turn to be more psychologically demanding than a face-to-face contact, reduce ability to interpret body language and cues, difficulties of detecting humor and irony, of relaxing into a natural to interpret body language and cues, of detecting humor and irony and of relaxing into a natural conversation and, of making some individuals becoming more dissatisfied with their appearance and a loss of self-esteem (Williams, 2021). Further study also finds that non-verbal mechanisms of mirror anxiety, feeling physically trapped, hyper gaze, and cognitive load in producing nonverbal cues were significantly positively related to Zoom fatigue (Moralista et al., 2022). Such fatigue is partly attributable to a number of conditions, such as looming heads, staring eyes, a silent audience, and millisecond delay (Morris, 2020). In addition to cognitive load, Zoom fatigue is also attributable to nonverbal factors, such as eye gaze at a close distance in front of computer screen, computer screen as an all-day mirror, and reduced mobility (Bailenson, 2021). Another study shows, however, that only very few technical factors were scientifically proven to contribute to fatigue or stress (Raake et al., 2021). Tips to combat Zoom fatigue have been suggested such as activity switching, online small groups, and asynchronous lectures (Toney et al., 2021). Aside from technological and technical factors, other questions may further be raised such as whether uses of online media contributes to social anxiety, self-concept and self-esteem (Kong et al., 2021), and enhance or displace communication (Stevic et al., 2021).

Zoom basically mediates how human or social encounter is to keep going face-to-face. Face, in this regard, is understood based on Goffman's concept of a positive social value claimed by oneself in a particular contact, or, one's good showing (Goffman, 1967; Thomas, 2013). Goffman's notion of face is operationalized as values

of face in terms of pride and honor, dignity, consideration, tact and poise, and perceptiveness (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2006). By definition, each of these values is, respectively, about formal reserve or seriousness of manner, continuous and careful thought on what is being the focus, a keen sense of what to do or say in order to maintain good relations and being drawn up into readiness, and responsiveness to sensory stimuli and feelings (Merriam Webster, 2022).

Based on Goffman's notion of face, Brown and Levinson propose the concept of face threatening act (FTA) in dealing with politeness. FTA is basically about individual's feeling of self-worth or self-image or polite behavior; self-esteem, the wants to be liked, admired, cared about, understood, listened to; face and FTAs are matters of freedom for self-approval and freedom from imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Face is also concerned with understanding of self-other relationships (Thomas, 2013; Bhatia, 2000 in Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003; Kedveš, 2013). As Zoom is an extended virtual form of a social encounter, where one's face represents his or her virtual and visual presence, the notion of face and FTA matter individually and socially. When one joins in Zoom, there is awareness of virtual-social context and an inherent awareness what and how to take part in the given Zoom-mediated communication. It is concerned with one's communicative and sociolinguistic competence concerning when to speak, when not and as to what to talk to about with whom, when, where, in what manner (Hymes, 1972). As Zoomed-encounter is an extension of physical face-to-face encounter, it bears, to a great extent, characteristics of social-physical encounter. Zoom platform-based classes are, therefore, never void of the very nature of social dimension in which matters of FTA also count. Studies of FTAs in Zoom show that students exercise positive politeness strategies (such as greeting, gratitude, address term) and negative politeness strategies (like apology and mixing language) (Sembiring et al., 2021). Another study finds that in video conferences, there is reduced richness of social cues compared with face-to-face meetings as a source of exhaustion; that talking blindly with silent others heads to super frustration, if they are even there (Shoshan et al., 2021). In Zoom, therefore, politeness clearly matters, and, apart from efficiency and other advantages, such an online-mediated social encounter cannot be as humanly and socially rich as a direct face-to-face one.

This article specifically addresses the concern of how, in Zoom platform-based classes, students perceive the very notion of face. It is principally about students' awareness of what face reveals in Zoomed online classes with reference to Goffman's concept of face and Brown and Levinson's notion of FTA.

## **Method**

The students' notion of face was investigated by means of Google form online survey posted on USD official LMS of two subjects, namely Introduction to Linguistics and Grammar 5, in the last two meetings (in November-December of 2021/2022 academic year). The survey consists of sixteen statements, the first five (1-5) statements of which address their (dis)agreement to the choice of being on/off video Zoom as a means of showing/representing their face. The second five (6-10) statements address the students' psychological viewpoint of themselves in the light of Goffman's

psychological concept of face, ‘face’ being in the ritual dynamics of a rule-governed moral order which is called ‘polite behavior’ (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003). Here, face is understood relative to Zoom-mediated social interaction.

Hence, a Zoom class is, by default, a forum of social interaction between the lecturers and students and among students themselves. The statement no. 11 to (dis)agree is of particular concern about the students’ feeling of whether they feel (in)secure when their faces are in Zoom. The remaining five statements (12-16) are concerned with what their face, in either on-or-off video mode, bears to their socio-relational dimension in the online class, particularly concerning Brown and Levinson’s notion of face as a signal of their reputation or good name. Students were asked to decide their choice of the degree of agreement to each of 16 survey statements. All the sixteen statements to respond is scaled and weighted, ranging from totally disagree, strongly disagree, agree, strongly agree to totally agree (TD, SD, A, SA, TA), respectively weighted from 1(the lowest) to 5 (the highest) (Johnson & Morgan, 2016). Data were analyzed and interpreted mainly on the basis of percentages of agreement by 5-point Likert-type.

### Finding and Discussion

There were 122 students who responded to the survey. Of these, 73 (59,8%) were third semester students taking the subject of Introduction to Linguistics), while 49 (40,2%) were of the fifth semester taking Grammar 5. Based on Likert scale and percentage calculation, the total number and the percentage of agreement ranges from the lowest, 320 (52,45%, to statement no. 13) to the highest, 511 (83,77%, to statement no. 2). Almost all the ranges of agreement were responded, except statement no. 7 and 8. To these two statements, there were no responses to the option of totally disagree (TD). Responses in general range between the two scale of Agree and Strongly Agree, the only exception being responses to the option of Totally Agree to statement no. 2 (54 responses, the highest among the other four scales of agreement to this statement).

Table 1. Responses, Scales, Weights and Percentage of Agreements

SN	Statements	Scale, weight, and number of agreement to each statement (N = 122)					Total score of agreement	Percentage of agreement
		TD	SD	A	SA	TA		
		1	2	3	4	5		
1	In the Zoomed classes, my concept of FACE is that it is a matter of being ON or OFF cam/video.	2	8	66	37	9	409	67,04%
2	In the Zoomed classes, my being ON or OFF cam/video depends on the internet connection stability.	2	3	19	44	54	511	83,77%
3	In the Zoomed classes, my being either ON or OFF	4	17	43	50	8	407	66,72%

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	cam/video depends on whether or not it is obliged to by the host (lecturer).							
4	In the Zoomed classes, my being OFF cam/video makes it possible to do side jobs or work apart from the currently ongoing class meeting.	6	29	38	27	22	396	64,91%
5	In the Zoomed classes, my being OFF cam/video is meant not to let the messy background visible on the screen.	6	20	27	44	25	428	70,16%
6	In the Zoomed classes, my being ON-cam/video expresses my pride and honor.	2	4	44	47	25	455	74,59%
7	In the Zoomed classes, my being ON-cam/video expresses my dignity (formal reserve or seriousness of manner).	0	6	35	60	21	470	77,05%
8	In the Zoomed classes, my being ON-cam/video expresses my consideration (continuous and careful thought on what is being the focus).	0	5	41	51	25	462	75,73%
9	On my being ON-cam/video in Zoom, my FACE expresses my tact and poise (a keen sense of what to do or say in order to maintain good relations and being drawn up into readiness).	2	5	46	51	18	444	72,78%
10	On my being ON-cam/video in Zoom, my FACE expresses my perceptiveness (responsiveness to sensory stimuli) and feelings.	1	7	43	54	17	445	72,95%
11	My being OFF cam/video in Zoomed classes is visually meant not to expose my insecurities (state or feeling of anxiety, fear, self-doubt, or lack of certainty or safety).	5	18	33	45	21	425	69,67%
12	My being ON-cam/video in Zoomed classes is a matter of saving my face (face = reputation, good name).	17	39	42	17	7	324	53,11%
13	My being ON-cam/video in Zoomed classes is meant not to damage my face (face = reputation, good name).	15	39	48	17	3	320	52,45%

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14	My being ON-cam/video in Zoomed classes is a matter of avoiding losing my face (face = reputation, good name).	11	37	55	15	4	330	54,09%
15	My being ON-cam/video in Zoomed classes is a matter of making my positive face to be liked or approved of by others.	12	26	48	29	7	359	58,85%
16	My being ON-cam/video in Zoomed classes is a matter of making my positive face appreciated by others.	9	25	43	35	10	378	61,96%

## Notes:

- 1) SN: Statement Number
- 2) N (number of respondents): 122
- 3) Scale and weight of agreement: TD: Totally Disagree; (1); SD: Strongly Disagree (2); A: Agree (3); SA: Strongly Agree (4); TA: Totally Agree (5)
- 4) Minimum-Maximum scores of Agreement:  $(122 \times 1 =) 122 - (122 \times 5 =) 610$
- 5) Interval  $(N/\text{highest score})$ :  $122/5$ : 24,4
- 6) Range of agreement by percentage:
  - Totally Disagree : 0%-24,3%
  - Strongly Disagree: 24,4%-48,6%
  - Agree : 48,7%-73,0%
  - Strongly Agree : 73,1%-97,4%
  - Totally Agree : 97,5%-100%

## a. Responses to statements 1-5

Almost two-thirds of the student respondents (67,04%) express their agreements that when one's face is to be on Zoom, it turns to be a technical optional matter of clicking and deciding to be either in on-or-off video mode. As such, it is a matter of technical-mechanical decision as Zoom provides such facilities to do so. Participating in a Zoom class is in either on-or-off video. Being present does not necessarily mean or entail that their faces are to be always on-video mode; off-video faces also give a sign of being present, albeit nonvisually.

When this finding is to be understood relative to statement no. 2, the decision to be on-or-off video depends very much on another indispensable precondition, namely, the internet connection stability (ICS). 83,77% student respondents agree that ICS really matters as it determines whether to be on-or-off-video mode. ICS is a decisive factor for one to be or not to be on-video mode. If the connection is unstable, the respondents' decision to be on video mode matters seriously, and this in turns implies that preference is given to join the class in the off-video mode.

Being in either on-off-off video is also bound to whether there is any imposed obligation to be so. Nearly one-third of the student respondents (66,72%) agree that to be in either on-or-off video mode is determined by whether there is any obligation imposed on them (statement 3). This implies that it is very likely for student

respondents to be optionally in the off-video mode on Zoom by the condition that there is no obligation imposed on them to be so.

Student respondents' agreements to the decision to be in the off- video mode also suggests that while attending a Zoom class, there is a chance for doing irrelevant side jobs or work apart of what is visually being on focus (64,91%). No further statements relative to this were given, but this may be attributed to, among others, release of tension and physical strain after spending too much attention, focus, and energy on the Zoomed class. Statement no. 5 was agreed upon by 70,16% (reasons of privacy; privacy is not to expose as it may trigger mental-psychological uneasiness and discomfort). Being off-video may also be attributed to whether the point-on-focus on Zoom is of no interest or relevance to the students at a given time. In brief, to be in either on-or-off video mode is bound to at least three factors, namely, the ICS, the absence (or presence) of imposition, and chances of doing irrelevant side work apart.

b. Responses to statements 6-10

Of the total 122 student respondents, above 70%, nearly two-third, admit, in their agreements that, in a Zoom-mediated class, face encounter, or being in the face of others', expresses fundamental human nature in relation to others. It is admitted therefore that, in the face of lecturers and other fellow students, individual student's face expresses his or her personal pride and honor, dignity, consideration, tact and poise, and perceptiveness. In other words, one's being in a Zoom class, be it in either on-or-off video mode, bears individual student's extent of seriousness, focus, and readiness, self-awareness, attentiveness, and a sense of being with and in the face and presence of others'. Everyone's self-worth is to be mutually acknowledged and credited in a balanced and proper manner.

c. Responses to statement 11

In Zoom on-video mode, the issue of insecurities needs special addressing. The survey result shows the percentage of agreement to this is 69,67%, indicating that being either in on-or-off-video, from emotional viewpoint, matters significantly. This partly reveals that, in addition to facilitating face to face encounter, being in the on-video mode for some time may entail emotional and psychological insecurities, such as the feeling of anxiety, fear, self-doubt, or lack of certainty or safety. On the one hand, being in the on-video mode, students virtually feel the sense of collectively being together in a given online classroom. On the other, however, they are also aware of being insecure in some respect, feeling isolated as in reality each is physically and practically apart from one another. The feeling of being insecure is partly attributable to this state and sense of isolatedness, not to mention the physical and facial strain in front of screen. Longer postural-facial strain related to Zoom fatigue may also contribute to this kind of feeling, heading to become distressed and less and less attentive on what is being in focus. To combat or not to disclose this feeling of insecurity, the choice of being in the off-video mode is ready at hand.

d. Responses to statements 12-16

To a great extent, an online zoomed class represents and mirrors a social encounter in which every individual student is fully aware of their presence. In such an encounter, they are also aware of how to behave properly in the face of others, in which keeping and saving one's own and others' good face or reputation matters substantially. Whenever and wherever one is present in a social encounter, be it physically or virtually, there is this socio-pragmatically inherent nature. Any Zoom encounter, therefore, is never void of this very notion of keeping and saving each other's face. As it is shown above, the percentage of agreement to the last five statements ranges around 50%-60%. This means that, as they join in a zoomed class, the concern of politeness regarding the inherent nature of FTA is knowledgeable and reasonable enough.

Responses to statements 12-16 are matters of confirming the extent of student respondents' agreement concerning the notion of face as an extension of their individual good name or reputation in the face of their fellow students and lecturers. In other words, showing their own faces on Zoom, by being in the on-video mode, is a matter of showing their own good reputation. The decision to or not to show one's own face on Zoom must therefore be based on this notion of keeping or saving one's own good name or reputation, for some particular reasons (partly attributed to statement no. 2, about ICS, no. 3 regarding the absence or presence of imposition, and 5, concerning prevention of not to expose messy background). In short, the socio-pragmatic basis of keeping and saving face or good name, or FTAs, in its literal sense and in terms of politeness, also underlies the respondents' decision to be in either on-or-off video mode. In the context of learning and life in general, a question worth questioning is, therefore: how can technology better enrich our lives? (Wiederhold 2021).

### **Conclusions**

In Zoomed classes, the notion of face is, in part, initially and technical-mechanically understood and agreed as being in either on-or-off-video mode, and the either choice depends considerably on a number of factors, such as the stability of internet connectivity, the absence or presence of imposed obligation, chances of doing side work/job, and prevention to unnecessarily expose messy background. The decision to be in either on-or-off video mode in Zoom is also partly based on the emotional factors such as the feeling of insecurities. Student respondents also considerably agree that the notion of face in Zoom bears psychological state such as individual student's extent of seriousness, focus, and readiness, self-awareness, and attentiveness in the face of others. They also admit that when joining in a Zoom class, they are aware of being present in the face of others in which sociolinguistic awareness of keeping or saving face or good name, or FTAs, in its literal sense, underlies their decision to be in either on-or-off video mode.

All above implies that in Zoom platform-based classes, students' decisions to be in either on-or-off video mode are to be rationalized in terms, among others, formal-technical, personal-social, and emotional-psychological aspects. In such a platform, a class is an encounter which is in and by nature, virtually mediated, a preferred

alternative in this lingering Covid-19 pandemic, and therefore cannot be fully identical to natural face-to-face one.

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