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Digitally Speaking: Human Touch Re-imagined Through Business Email

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Digitally Speaking: Human Touch Re-imagined Through Business Email

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School of Education

University of St. Thomas

St. Paul, Minnesota

2020

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minnesota

Digitally Speaking: Human Touch Re-imagined Through Business Email

We certify that we have read this dissertation and approved it as adequate in scope and quality. We have found that it is complete and satisfactory in all respects, and that any and all revisions required by the final examining committee have been made.

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Abstract

This study examines the cultural impacts experienced through the exchange of emails in workplace. The impetus of my inquiry was to search beyond the structure and meaning of emails shared in workplace. This study aims to unpack and examine the efforts, intentions, and strategies present amongst senders and receivers of emails in a variety of workplace environments. The framework of this study was largely driven by a qualitative approach with case studies. This research investigates the phenomenological experiences revealed through interviews. The diverse group of interviewees comprised of seven participants, five males and two females, span multiple professional backgrounds including public and private schools, regional businesses, and for-profit national and international enterprises. This study reveals the complexities often inherent in interpersonal communications, and several themes across the interview participants created new levels of awareness to benefit people as they navigate their own communications within the constructs of the email experience. The amount of effort people invest in various email activities, primarily as senders, serves as the beacon for this project. The results of the project indicate that within the construct of email exchanges between people that go beyond the content of the email, there are considerations and intentions such as emotions, alliances, politics, and taxonomies that are not always evident within the content of the email. The data from this study also indicates that the energy and time people devote to writing and reading emails may be grossly misunderstood today.

Acknowledgments

Like for so many before me, this doctoral journey was nothing short of transformational. The paths that culminated in this dissertation included classroom experiences, thousands of pages of reading, and what seemed to be a journey of personal introspection that, in my case, broke several prevailing assumptions. Throughout, much of my preexisting knowledge was pressure tested, which, in some cases, was subsequently replaced with new insights grounded in newly constructed, well-informed viewpoints and facts that were accompanied by new levels of confidence. This, in all, may have never been realized without this doctoral program. Such growth and evolution offered to me were both surreal and rich.

This accomplishment could not have been achieved without the help and support of many. My parents, Pete and Mary, have always prioritized education throughout my upbringing, most importantly during the periods of time when I was uninterested in learning. I am grateful to my wife, Deb, a lifelong educator, and our children, Garrett, Marie, and Carter, to whom I am forever indebted for the grace as well as the unwavering support and patience they have shown me during the countless hours consumed over seven years when I was either physically absent or mentally pulled, torn, or seemingly defeated by the intellectual and physical requirements throughout the doctoral program.

I am eternally grateful for each of the instructors I was able to study under during the program. That said, three stand out: Dr. Artika Tyner, who was a beacon of support for me in 2013 during my first coursework in the program; Dr. Don LaMagdeleine, who, for the better part of four years, was my advisor and a compass, never allowing me to feel comfortable in being challenged until I was grown to a stage where uncomfortable became comfortable; and Dr. Eleni Roulis, my chair who guided me through the practices of reflection and navigating narratives,

resulting in my growth and confidence and, most importantly, always allowing me to work on my time in keeping with the fluid nature of my life's schedule.

My acknowledgments would be incomplete if they ended without any mention of my Cohort 27 colleagues. The journey together over the first three years of the program was, without a doubt, one of the most significant hallmarks of my life's educational experiences. Through our countless weekends together, I developed perspectives that created fire, drive, and curiosity while simultaneously providing me with humility and comfort along this journey. While, for the most part, our paths have now diverged, each of them has left me with indelible impressions. For all that you have bestowed upon me, I pray that you know I am eternally grateful to each one of you for your authentic and genuine contributions to our countless discussions, assignments, and growth opportunities.

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Digitally Speaking: Human Touch Re-imagined Through Business Email

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction and Background

In this chapter, I will provide an overview of the project and the several factors that gravitated me toward this topic. My approach to the subject and the overall framework of this paper will also be addressed in this first chapter.

I graduated college in May 1992 and entered the workforce shortly thereafter. My work tools as provisioned to me by my employer for purposes of communication at that time consisted of a typewriter, a phone without a direct-dial number, and access to a shared fax machine. On a typical workday, my colleagues and I picked up our messages from the receptionist which were written on small, pink-colored message pads. In these early years, I worked without the benefit of voicemail, and email was not even an idea discussed at the company. Twenty-five years later, it seems that the facsimile has been almost completely retired, and most now in my professional circles, answer their own phones, specifically often conducting work on mobile phones rather than landlines with cords no longer than three feet in length. Along this continuum of evolving communication capabilities, I found myself, in 2018, routinely swarmed by emails daily that either provide me with information or prompt me to provide information or act. Leading up to modern day, as I moved through the coursework and dissertation process of my doctoral program, I was also on a parallel path that involved my professional career.

As the months and years of my professional life unfolded in parallel with my academic work, these comingled experiences created a unique lens in terms of communications as they pertain to interpersonal experiences. I will freely admit that it had become commonplace to see

people be what I will refer to as overly occupied with their technologies, often fueled with what seemed to be an overt intention of staying connected to their email. I entered this study partly interested in understanding the individual drive and outcomes of these motivations of people to stay connected. As I concluded this project, I recognized that there were numerous approaches to the way people addressed their practices as they pertained to email communications. Moreover, the variances between people in terms of how they viewed and practiced their individual engagement with email communications often introduced more nuances between individuals than a commonality of clarity, not only in terms of their rationales behind implementing tactics but also in terms of their expectations as they related to certain desired outcomes.

The idea of capturing the sentiment of email intent and its outcomes was of a high interest to me as I contemplated this dissertation. However, there were certain constraints related to having to coordinate data collection with willing participants which included both senders and receivers of email communications.

My original desired path proved to be both risky and problematic in terms of cooperation, vulnerability, and transparency on the part of the participants. In short, there was significant risk with participants sharing the body of their emails both on personal and employer levels. Typically, the content of an email in a workplace is considered the property of the employer regardless of who creates or receives the email. Several people I discussed this project with shared reservations related to the general idea of sharing soft or hard copies of their emails. Following serious consideration, I opted for an alternative path. This study incorporates data collected through surveys and interviews. The participants in the interviews represented diverse professional experiences that include academic institutions and roles in technology, legal, retail, and sourcing sectors.

A potential benefit of this study was illuminated by Derks and Bakker (2010). Their point was that email in practice is easily laced with egocentrism. Specifically, the author of an email by nature often assumes their intended meaning will be received and understood by the recipient(s) with only one possible interpretation. Such assumptions of the sender are often proven untrue.

This project endeavors to use a phenomenological lens to explore a variety of those experiences, including people's intersections with the technology of email in workplace environments. While email capabilities have seeped into the norms of daily work life over the last 25 + years, not much research has been focused on examining the degree to which workplace email behaviors may have changed the way people interact in their professional relationships and environments. Dimensions of prevailing themes both apparent and embedded in email discourse will be identified and examined in later chapters.

Problem Statement

This study is not intended to create a buttoned-up package of rules for email communications. Rather, it aims to provide helpful perspectives that allow an end-user to navigate the foundational frameworks of the comprehensive digital landscape as it is embedded within the ethos of email with some degree of increased awareness. Previous research indicates that further study may unveil generally unseen power dynamics, politics, and pillars of influence that are embedded sometimes deeply within the bowels of digital constructs.

Researchers have suggested that digital technologies have influenced life to the point where digital technologies are re-imagining the way we interact as humans. Pietrucha (2014) emphasizes that digital mediums have dynamically changed not only the way information is

presented to the end user but, perhaps more significantly, the way information is consumed and experienced when compared to more traditional mediums such as pen and paper (letters). Recent research has indicated that the current digital age marks a monumental point in time. “Our communications system is at a crossroads, one way leading to an increasingly corporatized and commercialized world where we are treated as targeted consumers, the other to a true cultural common where we are nurtured as citizens and creators” (Hirach, 2015, p. 2). These two possibilities promise very different, if not opposing, experiences. Power often becomes a topic of material relevance within the spheres influenced by digital anthropology.

There is a current predominant theme that pervades those professional and personal circles with which I am most frequently engaged: People, in general, often seem to be heavily reliant on interacting with their mobile devices as they are seemingly continuously pulled into human interactions that are conducted through email messages, seemingly developing preferences to interact through them rather than engaging with individuals sharing their physical space. I have witnessed this phenomenon in graduate-level classrooms, high-stakes business meetings, and even family dinners at restaurants. It raises the question of the degree to which people are willing to disassociate themselves from their physical space and the people with whom they share it to instead engage through a screen in the palm of their hands. The ethos of the intercommunication options that currently exist against the backdrop of the ever-growing plethora of digital platforms and mediums is immense and complicated. While the scope of this study will be focused on email communications in the workplace, one can easily deduce that there may be similarities between the dynamics of email exchanges and other digital communication experiences.

There is also research that examines the value proposition of email:

There's just so much information out there. It feels like we're making progress because there's all this information flying around, but I don't think we're really getting anywhere. We spend a lot of time answering email and trading information, but I don't know that that translates to real results. (Zemke et al., 2013, p. 238).

As our professional worlds evolve into the ever-changing and dynamic intersections that come about in a globalizing world, we are commonly experiencing professional instances in which such intersections of communications are constructed through real-time experiences infused across multiple cultures which include a variety of distinct nuances. Such variables may not always result in the desired outcomes with commonly shared interpretations and even result in disconnects that may not materialize in different forms of communication besides email: "Textual email may appear to communicate successfully across cultures, but the non-textual cues conveyed through the body, thus lost in such a communicative exchange, might tell a very different story indeed" (Ess, 2011, p. 216). On the topic of culture, the idea of communicating between people involves functions of both coding and decoding; according to Nolan (1999): "Each person encodes and sends messages and receives and decodes messages in turn. The coding and decoding devices are primarily cultural, and involve a diverse set of elements, including words, gestures, and symbols, whose meanings are essentially arbitrary" (p. 34). Within many digital communication vessels, there is a huge void as it pertains to considering and interpreting cultural dynamics. I will posit that there exist sub-cultures within cultures which also help create splintered nuances between those engaged in communications.

The desired and potential speed of information immediacy in the workplace environment has produced multiple formats, venues, and mediums that enable communication interactions between individuals and groups, one of which is email. Many of these mediums vary in design

and intent; however, in general, the workplace has perhaps subconsciously and collectively engineered itself toward a single focus on the benefits of these different mediums holding them to collective, universal expectations without paying proper attention to either their original intent or distinct fundamental capabilities. Thus, there is a need to examine the tension that exists within the very nature of people in terms of their differences in wanting what you want without proper examination of understanding what you have. Such a phenomenon may exist more commonly in technology than in other areas of study, and a common example is an individual always wanting to upgrade their mobile device, not always for the sake of improved function but simply because there is newer model available in the market.

Purpose of the Study

This project focuses on the phenomenon that links the human self with and through interpersonal professional email interactions that take place using modern digital capabilities from business cultural perspectives. Such business-based email interactions define the scope of this project. The load bearing question of this study is: How are relationships constructed between people impacted by email interactions in the workplace?

The relative newness of digital anthropology logically implies that the field of study is still developing and thus lacks substantial breadth and depth. This is predicated upon the assumption that, in general, the majority of people would agree that workplace email communications filter realities to some degree (not solely but perhaps most evident in the case of professional networks, dynamics, and hierarchies). I will posit that there is case to differentiate between the terms “filter” and “mediate”. The purpose of this project is to prompt additional inquiry and contribute to a richer, more evolved level of awareness of the field of sociology. At first glance, “filtering” and “mediating” can easily be viewed as interchangeable terms. This

project refers to “mediating” in its technical sense which includes physiological impacts that result through email interpretations. In short, “filtering” defines reactions that occur at both conscious and subconscious levels. At the outset of this project, I recognize one of my largest responsibilities is to maintain a separation between these two concepts, considered together or separately. Constructs that include these terms commonly surround dynamics of power, politics, and capitalism. It is important to note that the focus of this project will be centered on filtering aspects of workplace emailing rather than the mediating elements of such digital communications.

While unpacking scenarios of human interaction enabled through email technology, such elements of power, politics, and capitalism may be uncovered revealing splintered strategies and interpretations that can become inherent in the examination of studying email practices and outcomes. This process of discovery and reflection is where I anticipate unearthing phenomenological, and possibly ethnographic, data that, once analyzed, will deliver a sizeable portion of the value of my dissertation.

Still in its infancy (less than thirty years), the field of digital anthropology corresponds with preexisting related theories, including Plato, Marx, and, more recently, Goffman, Piketty, and Foucault. These theorists reinforce that, while the history of digital anthropology is limited, many of its core elements date back hundreds or thousands of years.

Digital anthropology is a bit unlike the field of cyborg anthropology which, while not coined as a term until the late 20th century, has a rich and diverse historical point of view from which to launch various research and academic inquiries. While they are different, I posit that digital anthropology is an extension of cyborg anthropology and that the two areas of study may share related attributes. Cyborg anthropology is a discipline that studies the connections between

humanity and technology through an anthropological lens, while digital anthropology is specific to people's interactions with digital technologies. As such, digital anthropology is a subcategory of cyborg anthropology.

Research Question

As the Global North matures further into the information age, communication options, and expectations, most notably email, within the workplace is a predominantly employer-selected tool. It is also worth noting that many workplace constructs are largely predicated on interpersonal communication in both planning and execution type of activities.

The main question of this dissertation, then, is:

Within the workplace, to what degree, if any, is human connectedness affected or reconstructed using workplace email communication?

Reflective Statement

Cultural paradigms have fascinated me since I was in high school. Traditions, rituals, organizational structures, power dynamics, politics, communication channels, and expectations represent an abbreviated list of the influences embedded within most studied cultures. Cultural paradigms also seem to permeate most constructs that bring people together in personal and professional experiences. While not exhaustive, these examples represent conduits that have been central in human interactions for centuries.

I approach this project not as a technologist but as a sociologist armed with over 25 years of practical and diverse business experiences. The professional path I have followed includes seven years of negotiating complex technology contracts featuring negotiations with global

organizations such as Google, Amazon, SAP, IBM, and AT&T. I also have extensive experience negotiating with mid-size vendors as well as start-ups including firms made up of less than 10 employees. In many complex projects, contract negotiations can consume weeks if not months of actual strategic sourcing. In this negotiation role, I have seen technical solutions in both design and implementation phases, in addition to many pre go-live events. These often occur with known issues or timeline changes. Eventually, they are followed by product launches that include reactions across the population of end-users in relation to the product/solution, some negative and others positive. An example of this is Facebook's entrance into the marketplace followed by its unprecedented growth across public spheres. This includes user adoption trends and, more specifically, reactions to the actual performance of a software or overall product platform. In my experience, the general public's perceptions of a technological tool often lack an informed perspective regarding the functionality of the technologies. Rather, people seem to be polarized regarding capabilities. With this premise, a very specific narrative develops in the public ethos which is an ambiguity and/or ignorance in differentiating features from functionality. In the end, this narrative can focus on the function of a technology while discounting or marginalizing the way in which a technology could function. This is the tension I consider to be the threshold of my entire inquiry. More specifically stated, this refers to a threshold with a gravitational pull through which one is blinded by the outcome of a digital experience (i.e., an outcome with little to no regard for the process or means). In the example of Facebook, often the users are enthralled with sharing information with their friends with little regard to what they are sharing or how, when, or by whom it will be reviewed.

Sourcing projects that I have been involved in creating or maintaining examples of digital experiences often including some type of email functionality include Target.com, Northwest

Airline's early generation of a paperless ticketing platform, a store mode version of an e-commerce site, various mainframe and data center solutions, the implementation of multiple cyber security and fraud products, and an online ad server experience.

While negotiating contracts with vendors, I have been compelled to meld different methodologies into the art of my negotiations. Both face-to-face and phone conversations are common for me in my profession. Over the last 20 years, the phenomenon of negotiating through email correspondence has become a generally accepted practice. Moreover, software solutions have been thrust into the forefront of many negotiations. Such e-procurement tools often remove the personal elements out of a negotiation as much of the discourse occurs via system delivery while not always being system-generated. Perhaps these systems are now the precursors that will one day replace email. This section does not exhaust the options for handling negotiations by any means and those are listed here are not completely exclusive of one another. Often, different methodologies are used together. In short, a contract negotiator often needs to draw from both their physical and digital selves throughout the course of a negotiation.

Expanding on a point that was introduced previously and propelled my interest into a study of digital anthropology is the fact that digital technologies seem to be subject to no significant or thematic constraints pertaining to age, race, or class. Some of this can be attributed to the sheer mass of digital technology options which encompasses a wide range of scopes, interests, and mediums. Economic status does seem to neither create barriers nor, in turn, influence technology adoption rates (i.e., devices and software-enabled solutions). This factor may be most noticeable in the Global North, but, in varying degrees, the use of digital communications, including email in the workplace, can be understood as a universal phenomenon.

I will suggest that the data end-users provide through email experiences can often be converted into a currency of sorts. From a capitalist perspective the idea of monetization can include questions including How valuable is the ability of a marketer to possess insights into a consumer's buying tendencies? Where is such data collected and scrubbed? Who is willing to pay for actionable data and what is it worth to them? In many applications, there are user rights that must be agreed upon by each end-user, and, in many of such policies, the software licensor must go through painstaking extremes to define what is meant by the term "data" as well as who owns it.

There is a relative newness about digital experiences, especially those that are universally accessible, including email. This accessibility largely ties to the advent of the World Wide Web (not to be confused with the Internet) coupled with the ever-expanding list of options of Internet-enabled devices. There are various studies that purport that the Internet of Things will encompass over 20 billion devices within the next decade. While many of these devices offer conveniences unimagined earlier in the 21st century, they also provide glimpses into individual behavioral patterns and real-time awareness (McKinsey,n.d.).

The combination of the newness of digital technologies, their evolving capabilities, and the degree of human adoption make for a very dynamic setting for my dissertation. While the impact of digital communications on the human fabric of culture is not yet measurable, it is undeniable and worthy of examination.

Summary

In this first chapter, I have shared a value proposition in terms of devoting time to the area of study of workplace email dynamics while providing the framework specific to the way the data will be collected in this study.

This project is intended to explore the underpinnings of the cultural fabric of the workplace environment as it evolves through the influence of human interaction taking place via the medium of email. In this chapter, I have introduced various innovations and technologies, such as email, that seemingly arrived without the advantage of much public knowledge, and, in a short period of time, we find the common workplace participant diving headfirst each day into the digital era that includes a daily routine of workplace related intersections that are often driven by the functionality and capabilities of email.

The benefits realized through this study include the analysis and applicability of relevant literature illuminating the field of cyborg anthropology and its subcategory of digital anthropology. Digital anthropology, as part of a continuum of human advancement, coupled with my problem statement, research question, and reflective statement, helps understand the significance of this project. This study explores different people in various professions with a focus on the ways in which they navigate through the email experience in their professional roles. The project specifically hinges on the interviews I conducted, providing a space for the participants to respond to questions that center on their individual experiences in their respective workplace email communications.

I will now transition into Chapter two, the literature review, which provides the foundation for this project.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Digital innovations are a relatively new phenomenon. However, technological human advancements have been woven into our lives throughout the evolutions of civilizations. This chapter intends to provide a framework that offers examples of research examples of digital technology that relates to email usage. It will also highlight research that is to a greater degree anchored in different technological innovations that predominantly predate the instances of email. The purposeful intent provides a lens for the reader to juxtapose examples of digital innovations against various examples of non-digital types of innovations. With this approach, desired outcomes include the ability to identify elements of commonality in viewing digital and non-digital technological-type of innovations and more so to offer an appreciation regarding the human resilience in the face of adversity that is often encompassed in the introduction and adoption of new technological advancements.

Email Systems

Email systems (e.g. Microsoft Outlook) are generally brought into organizations as enterprise-wide tools. The phenomenological approach allows for the exploration of individual experiences that include human interactions with email. Email communications have ushered in a few new challenges for communication practices as suggested by Barron:

What may be a significant difference for the digital word over previous ill-conceived utterances, and those simply not ready for prime time, is a combination of its staying power and the ability of even the most private expressions to persist in public space. (2009, p. 223)

Email stands alone as perhaps the most predominant online tool utilized in the professional environment over the last few decades. Even the most committed cyberspace advocates acknowledge that there are significant interactional problems surrounding online discussions, problems which tend to hinge on a lack of visual and aural cues that serve to narrow the indexical range of speech and reduce the probability of misunderstandings (Cavanagh, 2007, p. 87). This lack of in-person interaction is one of the most compelling points that have drawn me to this topic.

Email permeates the workplace both in terms of its frequency and as measured in its aggregated volumes. There are multiple dimensions of email that are worthy of exploration, not the least of which is the phenomenon of the physical absence of self. This is in terms of both the sender and/or receiver(s) involved in an email correspondence. The optics of time and space in the ethos of interpersonal communications as it relates to expectation introduces complicated dynamics in terms of the intentions and the mediums of the communications. “In networked communication systems, one can talk directly with others located in distant places. This communication can be asynchronous as in email, bulletin boards and conferencing systems” (Dicks, 2003, p. 179). In this sense, email communication is conducted in isolation. Essentially, emails are one-way communications or, at least in several cases, are constructed in a way that subjects the sender to a variety of potential responses that they may receive from the original recipients that could be based on many variables. Conversely, quite different than email communications are synchronous interactions and that for real-time communication between at least two people, examples of which include face-to-face conversations or phone calls. The scenario of interpersonal communications in the form of emails leaves a certain element of uncertainty for both the sender and receiver alike. For centuries, people commonly exchanged

letters in order to communicate amongst themselves; in the example of writing letters, it is a fair assumption that it is commonly understood that the sender has little control over the recipient's mindset or even on the timing as they each relate to timing of when a letter is received. In recent times, technology has been introduced that, while not solving some of this uncertainty, has attempted to help influence what could be deemed as predictability.

Assumptions regarding an individual's real-time availability for email communications can be predicated upon false pretenses. "Presence is a feature of session initiation protocol (SIP) that allows an organization to know the 'state' of its employees, regardless of their locations; the state provides information about someone's availability and willingness to communicate" (Fluss, 2009, p. 10). In terms of this type of capability, the concept of a person being ready is rather complicated and easily misinterpreted. Perhaps their Outlook calendar shows the person as busy or perhaps the key strokes on their device are silent indicating they are not available (or they are away), but many assumptions are made, by an email sender, that may not be true, including the recipient's mental readiness for a sender's note or a potential recipient multitasking while showing they are "ready". Simply put, "willing" and "ready" are not synonymous terms.

A Continuum of Human Innovations

Email is by no means the first channel to provide opportunities to study human resiliencies in the face of change. The trajectory of innovation and technological advancement has been pervasive throughout the evolution of humankind. One can, with little effort, piece together a rather historically anchored continuum of human-driven innovations. Even with written communications, we have evolved as a species over time, going from writing on cave walls to inventing the printing press and, today, exchanging barbs on digital platforms with

minimal reservations and concerns. Technological innovations have been dominant drivers of industrial and cultural shifts throughout history. With respect to digital communication capabilities, as noted by Cortada (2012), these inventions were first introduced in the 1950s and subsequently evolved. The systems dating back to the 1950s involved the use of digital methods to convert information and instructions into electronic pulses that a computer could understand; this explains the frequent use of the word “digital” over another term such as information. Starting from the 1960s, with a massive expansion by the 1980s, computers were connected to telephones and other forms of communication technologies to enable computers to send information from one machine to another; this included inventions such as the Internet, or, earlier in the 1960s and 1980s, dial-up telephone lines and private networks (Cortada, 2012, p. 15). Work, social, and family life constantly adapt to new technological advancements.

These advancements can all be traced back to the invention of the wheel—a simple innovation that transformed the way society worked and lived (McKnight et al., 2019). This persistence of development has touched multiple facets of the human experience, including agriculture, industrialism, warfare, and academia. Such advancements have also influenced the technologies that we use for communication. Thus, humankind did not evolve overnight and begin using digital communications. Rather, it is better defined as part of an ongoing evolution of human advancements that are, now more than ever, bridging the complex and complicated areas of culture that intersect with digital communications. Even in the 20th century, innovations such as the assembly line and technological advancements in transportation, agriculture, telecommunication, and medicine have produced a persistent state of change. Many of these newer capabilities have offered new experiences and efficiencies to the human lifestyle that would have been unimaginable not long ago. For instance, the lens of cyborg anthropology,

while a newer field of study (circa 1980s), has been applied to many innovations that have contributed to technological advancements until and through the 21st century. In some cases, there are visible patterns that demonstrate that advancements create other advancements; in the current times, information technologies constitute a broad example for the same.

The Birth of a Digital World

The world's digital capabilities, which are largely fueled by how people make use of computers and the Internet, create the need for a more evocative lens that's intended to examine human interactions via email exchanges. The emerging field of digital anthropology, while a subset of cyborg anthropology, can be broadly defined as having a focus on human interactions using digital-era technologies. Digital anthropology involves studying the phenomenon of digital interactions with respect to human realities. The ever-expanding landscape of these digital realities is both broad and dense. It infiltrates a myriad of environments, including schools, workplaces, and social frameworks in both public and private ways. Digital capabilities can neither be ignored nor avoided: they extend to a range of classes, generations, and geographies. This collage of human diversity that makes up the collective digital population brings together a complicated spectrum of varying backgrounds, experiences, and realities, which do not always co-exist in a harmonious fashion. Another complicating factor is that digital tools and applications are subject to few rigid rules or boundaries. Mantilla and Edwards (2019) have posited that digital technologies are different from other technologies and can be used and/or reused by adults and children alike:

Digital technology is not the same as mechanical and analogue technology. Digital technology uses microprocessors to process information in digital form. Digitized

information can be stored, re-used, and communicated by adults and children for multiple purposes (e.g. entertainment, social interaction, and sharing knowledge) (p.1)

The plethora of digital devices and platforms available, coupled with the relative newness of the field of digital anthropology, justifies an inquiry into the impact of digital technologies on the social fabric of human connectedness. This line of inquiry, which faces marginalization against the waves of convenience, efficiency, and other benefits afforded to the general public, might be welcomed as enlightening in the collective field of research. Computers and other mobile devices have fueled what now has become an expansive model of digital life. The journey from the invention and early use of office appliances in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including facsimile and answering machines to the development and deployment of computers, telecommunications, and today's social media software, has been a long one, involving billions of people and costing trillions of dollars (Cortada, 2012, p. 571).

In general, people across multiple generations and classes seem to embrace digital technologies with varying degrees of dependency and integration into their lives. That said, such nuanced variations are not universally shared and can be viewed and experienced at a highly individualized level. Among the general population that's adopting digital technologies to a high degree, there are smaller pockets of people who possess fully informed perspectives on the designs and capabilities of digital technologies and also appreciate the psychological influences of the core software and/or devices that support such software. While these small groups are actively aware of their "digitally grounded surroundings", most others are only passively or partially aware and, therefore, limited in the ways by which they mentally grasp and navigate digital experiences. Cortada (2012) also posited that the ways in which humans engage in using digital technologies has a significant and complex impact on the human experience.

Furthermore, this debate is relevant because it provides mounting evidence that humankind inputs a vast amount of information into computers at a rapid rate, which indicates a rapidly increasing dependence on digitized information to go about their daily lives.

In many aspects of modern first-world activities, people generally prioritize instant self-gratification without weighing any ramifications in advance. The housing bubble crisis and rampant epidemic of credit card debt in the early 21st century are both examples of U.S. decision makers either discounting or ignoring associated risks when opting for an interaction or transaction that offers immediate mental, physical or financial gain. Many scenarios in the banking industry allowed people to secure home loans without having an income level sufficient to maintain their payments while also fulfilling other financial obligations in their lives, such as obtaining food and utilities. Many people did not thoroughly consider certain choices when seeking homes, so, when the housing bubble hit, many financially overextended individuals lost their homes or even ended up owing much more than their home's depressed market value due to a shift in the market dynamics. Similarly, through the late 90s and early 2000s, our national economy witnessed unbridled credit card debt that grew at an exponential rate. Might digital anthropology pose a similar decision-making pattern that is often navigated at an individual level without considering the formula for the risk-versus-reward dichotomy? Perhaps any level of risk is commonly subjugated by the typical individual for no other reasons than the sheer convenience and instantaneous gratification that digital platforms appear to offer. Could individual investments in technology and our connectedness to its communication capabilities lead to a situation of concern?

The widespread use of email in the workplace, in terms of its sheer volume and prevalence, piqued my interest in this topic over time. The following literature review explores

the research within the broader context of technology-enabled human experiences and, more precisely, experiences at the intersections between people and digital technologies. The following references have direct relevance to the workplace email phenomenon in the context of digital anthropology.

As this study is focused on examining organizational workplace culture, it is important to have a baseline understanding of the term “culture.” Dawson (2010) explained the nuances and complexities in defining organizational culture and further identified certain frameworks for this task. These include patterns of behavior and practices for sharing information as well as day-to-day practices and interactions. Each of these factors can be identified within email exchanges. As such, this study primarily contemplates culture through a lens that analyzes the ways in which email communications influence practices with respect to daily responsibilities, communication forums, and information-sharing expectations in addition to people’s reactions to various types of workplace environments.

Serving largely as precursors to email capabilities, parts of this research include examples of studies that, while predating digital devices and Internet-driven and digitalized communication platforms, offer perspectives on human behaviors that transcend physical and digital interactions. Within this chapter, the historical context that links the industrial age of the 1900s to the digitally fueled 21st century is illuminated. This review is an exploration of global, national, and micro perspectives, and the references included in this chapter expose the dimensions of power and nuances of specific labor markets. Additionally, the research includes examples that span various classes, social statuses, and races. These aforementioned factors feed into the collective construction of the organizational culture and can ultimately contribute to the different uses and

interpretations of emails. Through a culturally defined digital lens, this project was aimed at examining different realities that include marginalization, elitism, power, and isolation.

In the recent times, dating back to the onset of the 20th century, generations have consistently adapted to new innovations albeit, in certain cases, with a slow adoption rate. Previous generations experienced the evolution of both innovations and technological platforms, and the digital age has ushered in various capabilities with extraordinarily strong and persistent adoption rates and without prejudice. Moreover, the depth, breadth, and sheer rate of speed at which many digital capabilities have been integrated into the human ethos are unprecedented when compared to other historical examples of innovations and technological advancements. Within today's workforce, there is a pervasive disconnect between a hiring employer and younger job seeker. As noted by Welker and Berardino (2009), employers tend to seek new employees with strong written and verbal skills, whereas new entrants in the job market discount the importance for written communication and, conversely, focus only on developing their verbal communications. This produces a gap between employer expectations and individual capabilities, thereby creating a disconnect between an employer and employee.

The use of email grew from research projects during the height of the Cold War and was aimed at developing a decentralized network of computers to transmit information across the United States in case of a nuclear attack. The idea was to ensure that a strike on one target wouldn't cripple the nation's ability to distribute its defense data elsewhere in the country (Baron, 2001). The following few decades saw a maturation process take place in terms of email functionality, and "it wasn't until the explosion of networked computing in the 1990s that the range of uses and users of email took off" (Baron, 2001, p. 226). In this context, since the phenomenon of email has only been prevalent in the workplace for the past thirty years, although

it has become pervasively utilized due to the introduction of mobile technologies, most notably smartphones, it is still relatively new. Hence, this literature review includes references related to cyborg anthropology, which preceded digital anthropology.

The foundational frameworks of digital anthropology influenced the organization of this literature review. My research began with searching for literature on multiple databases, including ERIC, ResearchGate, and Questia, using the following key phrases: i) digital ethnography, ii) Internet of Things, and iii) mobile technologies. The resulting pieces of literature were analyzed, and then specific themes and keywords were identified and subsequently consolidated into groupings, which largely informed the subsections of this literature review: cultural dimensions; digital anthropology; humanities and digitization; digitalized culture in the workplace; and games, economics, hyperreality, and humanism. The review also involved identifying certain theoretical frameworks, which have been incorporated into this paper.

The reviewed literature covers a variety of perspectives across multiple interrelated tenants of anthropology. Specifically, these examples investigate societal, cultural, and technological aspects of life. By design, this literature review includes examples of human interactions both with and through various digital technologies and platforms. They also point to the infiltration and adoption of digital technologies throughout the mainstream lifestyle. Moreover, the analytical literature examples included in this chapter demonstrate concepts relevant to the focus of this study and enabled the generation of new concepts as a result of the data collected.

Cultural Dimensions of Technologies

When viewed in isolation, many individuals' thoughts specific to technological advancements immediately gravitate and focus on a technological tool's capabilities and efficiencies. Upon deeper reflection, however, proven technologies, including email, generally seem to possess a strong history of weaving themselves into the fabric of society; in the case of email, the appeal of its features may far outweigh its capabilities. There are examples of certain innovations throughout human existence that predate the advent of email and evidence the human experiences of navigating cultural and social paradigms, often with the spirit and intent of facilitating time and/or energy efficiency. Early in the 20th century, Raymond Duchamps (as cited in Barfield & Caudell, 2001) recognized the human reliance on machines such as the steam engine, tractors, and cars and noted the following:

The power of the machine imposes itself upon us, and we can scarcely conceive of living bodies anymore without it. ... we are strangely moved by the rapid friction of beings and things and we accustom ourselves, without knowing it, to perceive the forces of the former in terms of the forces dominating the latter. (p. xi)

As Duchamps shared this sentiment over a century ago, one might be challenged to find an equally insightful description of the digital age in the current 21st century. It is important to note that Duchamps' perspective is that not long after a tool or machine is viewed as an idea or option, it can quickly become viewed as a necessity of life and no longer an option or item of convenience.

Over time, humankind has regularly developed new inventions that have made life easier, more efficient, and, in many cases, more capitalistic. "Cyborg anthropology calls attention ... to the cultural production of human distinctiveness by examining ethnographically the boundaries between people and machines and our visions of the differences that constitute these boundaries"

(Downey et al., 1995, p. 264). Cyborg anthropology cases have been pervasive throughout the past 500 years and are easily identifiable in many industries, including agriculture, wherein the original version of a shovel evolved into the hydraulic version, backhoes, and excavators; the same kind of evolution can be seen with plows and other agricultural tools. As Duchamps noted, advancements borne in the context of cyborg anthropology quickly and quietly shut the door on ways of thinking that had previously been in vogue, whether a shovel, cotton gin, or assembly line, and perhaps this was the case with the advent of email in the workplace, too. This raises questions about the use of email replacing interactions that might be more effectively coordinated through other forums such as meetings. Another example of developments in the form of a continuum can be seen through a simple review of the advancements in human transportation. Over the last 500 years, society has evolved from a predominantly pedestrian system to one with a heavy dependence on trains, automobiles, and aviation in most developed countries. Travel over water has also greatly advanced in the last 1,000 years. Before these innovations, there was a significant period in which animals were necessary for transporting people and/or goods from a point of origin to a destination, and most travels were landlocked ventures. Seaworthy vessels have become dominant in world trade over time. The combination of various tools and technological advancements also created gaps between developed countries and the rest of the world, and, in many instances, brought us to the threshold of globalization. This study was pivoted from historical contexts of cyborg anthropology and intentionally anchored to a more recent framework of cyborg anthropology, one that has been invoked by Case (2014). In her text, Case posited that cyborg anthropology has morphed to include inquiries and analyses focused on how people are connected to and through digital experiences not only in terms of the PC or laptop but also at the software and functionality level. Case (2014) argued that

PCs, laptops, and mobile phones, from the perspective of cyborg anthropology, have become extensions of ourselves, including the functionality and capabilities.

With the onset of the digital era, the broad phenomenon of cyborg anthropology has seeped into mainstream first-world life. The strength of digitalization is evident in the growth and adoption of computers, mobile devices, and a seemingly endless array of accompanying software programs. The rapid expansion of digital technologies in the information age has fueled a collective shift toward a global paradigm anchored to high levels of connectedness. Only a generation ago, this digital reliance would have been largely unimaginable. Since 1996 and until 2011, according to Thrlow and Mroczek (2011), there have been limited published works on the ways in which people engage in discourse through computer-mediated exchanges.

Specifically, since 1996, there have only been three edited volumes in English dedicated to, at least in part, providing an orchestrated perspective on new media language. Following Herring's (1996) groundbreaking *Computer Mediated Communication: Linguistic, Social and Cross-Cultural Perspectives* were Danet and Herring's (2007) *The Multilingual Internet: Language, Culture, and Communication Online* and Rowe and Wyss' (2009) *Language and New Media: Linguistic, Cultural, and Technological Evolutions* (Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011, p. xix). These literary works shed light on the communication and cultural challenges embedded in today's workplace environments. It is ironic that, within this same timeframe, people began to use, as demonstrated through overwhelming engagement levels, email as one of the forms of digital discourse. In short people in the workplace are often drawn into the use of email without being fully informed of the depth and breadth of interpersonal dependencies, void of consistent expectations of "engagement" and are often pulled into the use of email without full awareness of consequences and long-term impacts related to relationships, reputations and outcomes. To

some degree people are compelled to use email and are put at ease because of its prevalence in the workplace. I posit that it is not like the economic choices people made leading up to the burst of the housing bubble in the early part of the 20th century. Whereas the idea of liquidating by leveraging over valued properties and refinancing home loans became so widespread people often chose to buy or refinance based on factors of convenience and not economic realities. Much of the housing market crash was a result of whims rather than well thought out decisions.

In terms of hierarchies and taxonomies, email created almost an obsolescence of spatial distances. People were no longer out of reach or had an assistant who performed the role of a gatekeeper. Along these lines LaFrance (2016) stated the following:

Email is neutral, meaning that anyone can email anyone else with an email address. If you have a person's email address, your message will be delivered no matter who you are—whether the recipient is your oldest friend, your granddaughter, your boss's boss, or Beyoncé. The year the web was born, this flattening effect was astonishing.

Digital Anthropology in Everyday Life

Haraway (1985) argued that the billions of people who live on the planet and are surrounded and affected by technology have been “interpellated, whether we like it or not” into what she calls “technoscience” (p. 49). Essentially, digital technology has embedded itself in the fabric of who we are with regard to the ways in which we communicate. Within this new paradigm, Haraway (1985) identified several major forces at play, and the shift toward this new cultural model has been both polarizing and dramatic. “We have been thrust into human animal–technological relations—as vast as they are dense—that condition our being” (MacDonald, 2014, p. 2). According to both Haraway and MacDonald, digital experiences, including the use of email, are not primarily elective. Rather, people get thrust into new realities regardless of their

willingness. This means that dynamic changes take place whether we like it or not. For some, though, there may be certain degrees of the level in terms of one's level of engagement, in terms of breadth and depth. This is seen in terms of an individual's levels of comfort, mental investment, and trust. Further, from the viewpoint of cyborg anthropology, Haraway (1985) was firmly opposed to the belief that there are defined and rigid boundaries that separate people from machines (which I infer to include computing devices). This is a load-bearing theme that I refer to throughout this dissertation.

There is a central question within the topic of digital anthropology about how and when digital technologies are integrated into individual lives. There is also the question of the degree to which people allow digital technologies into their lives. "Our stomachs can tell us when we're full, but our brains can't tell us when we've consumed too much information," said Amber Case, a keynote speaker at SXSW (Coyle, 2012, p. 1). Sentiments like this warrant inquiry into the potential for information overload and/or desensitization.

In the context of the workplace, the idea of using email and the expectations in place that are specific to an employee's availability compels people to engage in a model that they themselves may not be comfortable with. It is as though multiple generations have created, within the general workplace culture, a model in which email participation is not optional. Rather, it has resulted in mandatory involvement to some degree and can also involve unintended consequences linked to a specific title, role, or level of compensation. While this project did not focus on the younger generations, there are indicators of these generations' minimal inclination toward email. To this point, Lafrance (2016) stated the following:

If there's any clue from the behavior of teenagers as to the direction of a given technology, email appears, well, doomed. Teens barely use it (or Facebook for that

matter), opting instead for text messaging and chatting on platforms like Snapchat and Instagram. Three-quarters of teens regularly text one another, according to a 2012 Pew study, while just 6 percent of them exchange emails routinely.

This construct may also exist within social paradigms, but it's important to recognize that, within the workplace, email communications can be considered as part of a bundled package that makes up the overall workplace experience, thereby influencing, if not creating, inherent mindsets and dependencies. Case (2014) connected two areas of anthropology—cyborg and digital—and her argument, in part, posited that humans are becoming part cyborg because of their ongoing connectivity and reliance on computing devices (machines). The idea of being cyborg is a result in having the technological tool or device becomes an extension of the human body. Whereas digital anthropology explores the impacts on the human experience that result from exchanges of digital communications in which the devices or tools are conduits.

Humanity and Digitalization

The reliance on digital connectedness in developed and developing countries is increasingly becoming a necessity of life rather than a luxury. Commenting on this trend of dependency, Humphreys (2012) noted that, while not equally distributed, there are approximately two Internet-connected devices per person around the world. By 2025, the number of Internet-connected devices is expected to multiply by six, resulting in almost 50 billion such devices around the world.

Regarding the embeddedness of technologies in daily life, Streeter (2010) posited that a technology must offer a valuable proposition: “To be integrated into society, however, especially when much of its activity is invisible, [a technology] has to be given meanings that can relate it to dominant social values, to everyday life, and to bodily experience” (p.18). Such values may be

evaluated from a variety of perspectives. One positive benefit may be the potential for greater efficiency in time management. While digital technologies do have their proponents, other critics remain undecided or unconcerned about cost–benefit comparisons with digital technologies. Bamber (2011) recognized that a personal investment in the digital workplace time (e.g., email) has many negative effects, including feelings of isolation and stress that can lead to health and productivity issues in the workplace. In her book on cyberfeminism, Hawthorne (1999) identified the need to be disconnected from one’s digital self at times: “Turning off the mobile phone so that one can enjoy social activities with friends without work intruding is worth doing; holidaying without the laptop and email access ensures having a holiday in the real world” (p. 131).

Fatigue in the workplace is also a real issue for the collective psyche of the workforce. Davis (2014) collected data from an interview that pointed to an example of over-engagement with email: “‘I’m checking email almost 24/7,’ said a psychiatrist and interim dean at the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa School of Community Medicine. ‘If you’re not pretty much asleep, you’re checking email’” (p.1). Perhaps most notable is the idea posited by Pasmore (2018) that 2018 did not represent a steady state for the digital age and, from the perspective of organizational development, a generally acceptable assumption was that the long-term impacts would be more significant than the industrial revolution. Concerned about losing a perspective specific to people and objects/experiences being different and separate, Edwards (2012) offered a shift in perception:

Here, the focus on ontology is not human- or subject-centric, with an interest in the practices of human learning, but points to experimenting as a condition of the

entanglement of the human and non-human, as, without the non-human, humans would neither exist nor be able to act as part of the world. (p. 334)

This premise, merit aside, introduces the potential for a transformational evolution of the human experience.

Digitalized Culture in the Workplace

The general expectations for how people should engage in digital access is daunting at the local level. Lisa Fleming, an oil industry veteran stated, “Our position is 24/7/365. That’s very challenging. In our business, we don’t shut down Christmas Day. We’re always drilling wells. Our guys are out in the field 24/7 and my team supports them” (Davis, 2014, p.1). There are also virtual teams who can work together while in different locations and easily traverse across differing traditional cultural boundaries. People from different places and organizations can expect having to communicate across different cultures, customs, and languages. According to Derven (2016), virtual teams are inherently important because we have collectively produced and now live within a global economy framework, which faces labor shortages in fulfilling the amount of available work. Derven (2016) additionally shared his thoughts on the importance of addressing cultural nuances and ensuring that organizations consider diversity and inclusion, stating “When teams represent a diverse mix of geographies, nationalities, ethnicities, genders, and functions, being successful requires best practices in diversity and inclusion (D&I)” (p.2). The potential language differences that virtual teams have to contend with do not exclusively involve verbal language and national culture variabilities. For example, two people who have different educational and professional backgrounds but share a common language can have as many communication problems as two individuals who grew up speaking English and Japanese, respectively (Lipnack & Stamps, 2000). Due to this, digitally mediated communications can

become ripe with tension from language differences as well as any existing intercultural nuances. The absence of nonverbal cues creates an uneasiness that is often not relevant in face-to-face verbal discourse.

Till date, there is minimal research available on the influence of digital technologies on personal stress levels (Galluch et al., 2015), specifically the ways in which workplace emails can recreate interpersonal tensions within the workplace environment. Part of the reason for this deficiency in available data is that digital technologies have only been prevalent in workplaces for a limited period of time, as demonstrated in this paper. An increased focus on this area in the future can lead to informed perspectives on topics such as workplace behaviors, personal stress levels, and work–life balance, which can lead to greater clarity and efficiency within and across organizations.

Game Theory

Game theory is the practice of analyzing mathematical models that predict human behaviors in scenarios involving tension and cooperation among decision makers. Game theory has legitimized analyzing economic choice situations not as individual cognitive decisions but as a forms of social interaction. It is an achievement for game theory research to be so widely accepted, since it began as a framework that, at one point, was alien to neoclassical economics (Zelizer, 2011). While game theory is rooted in mathematical science, researchers have applied it to multiple disciplines, including psychology and computer science. Game theory has entered the ethos of digital anthropology through multiple points, including coding languages, the competitive mobile device market, and social networks designs. For example, on a global scale, competing device manufactures bring to the marketplace products such as phones, laptops, and desktops that are physically designed to have more favorable appeal to the customer than their

competitors' lines of similar products. Such designs may include a focus on color, texture, or screen size. In addition, these manufactures will often bundle their products with a variety of apps and/or software programs to entice people to purchase their products and platforms over their competition's options. One of the outcomes is that the manufacturer of choice will then potentially have the ability to own the data on the device, providing them with valuable consumer insights. Cortado (2006) elaborated on the premise that game theory, as it applies to computers, has always been centered on the idea of learning how the end user's brain works instead of merely creating a product or experience that's pleasing for the end user. Thus, considering the example of e-commerce consumer insights, the concept of game theory is not only utilized to entice the consumer to spend their money at the point of a transaction but is also embedded at the point at which someone picks up a mobile device or intends to shop online.

Humanism Theory

The philosophical premise of humanism is based on the idea that part of what defines human nature is the urge to seek purpose and meaning in the multiple aspects of life. Lamont expands on this line of thinking:

Humanism as a philosophy has ever competed with other philosophic viewpoints for the allegiance of men. But however far-reaching its disagreements with rival philosophies of the past and present, Humanism at least agrees with them on the importance of philosophy as such. That importance stems from the perennial need of human beings to find significance in their lives, to integrate their personalities around some dear, consistent and compelling view of existence, and to seek definite and reliable methods in the solution of their problems. Philosophy brings clarity and meaning into the careers of individuals, nations and civilizations. (Lamont, 1949, p. 1)

The focus on humanism faded in the latter part of the 20th century, largely because the topic of humanism did not remain whole. As recognized by Mathas, “Humanism, have lost significance during the last three decades. In response to a number of pressures, the humanities have splintered into ever more specialized subdisciplines” (Mathas, 2013). However, certain theorists refused to let humanism be forgotten, some of them blaming the advent of technology as the reason behind the decline of this concept: “Some post humanist thinkers, such as Francis Fukuyama and Jurgen Habermas, present the dehumanizing aspect of technology in a critical light” (p. 2). There are many technical products and services that allow the mind to relax, if not in some stronger sense become partially disengaged. Feenberg (2001) explains how technological tools are juxtaposed to create an almost hierarchical human experience that can be easily wrought with entitlement and power, as experienced amongst different people from different backgrounds, technical expertise and privilege. In some respects, the power dynamics embedded in the use of digital technologies leads to the marginalization of certain groups and individuals. What it means to be human is thus decided, in large, by the shape of our tools. Based on the extent to which we are able to plan and control technical development through various public processes and private choices, we have some control over our own humanity (Mathas 2001, p. 19). Tabbi (2002) also sheds light on the premise that digital communication lacks the experiences that are often sought by the individual:

For a humanism that wishes to read signs of community in a multivoiced and multicultural past, the implications remain disturbing: when consciousness, like corporate power, is itself composed of a collection of partially connected modules or media, what resistance is possible? And when all information is archived for eternity, as if spoken words were never allowed to fade, what communication is possible? (p. 52).

Social Construct: Self and Identity Theory

Social construct, in terms of the self and identity, is a theory originating from the field of social psychology. It has multiple facets, one of which is anchored in the idea of a person's ability to create and control their self-image. Parker explains the principle of deconstructing moments in life rather than viewing them as part of a whole. "The advantage of using social constructionism in psychology is precisely that it homes in on that point, rather than accepting psychological phenomena as they appear directly and immediately to us. We need some theoretical understanding of how they are structured, what role they play in culture and what role psychology plays in forming those accounts" (Parker, 1999, p. 26). Research implies that this control can be eroded through the way in which one presents themselves through textual mediums. Hillis (1999) comments on the idea of one's identity and how it is filtered through virtual spaces: "However, the fracture of self-identity implicit in the relationship 'I see myself' is seemingly multiplied in 'I see *me* seeing myself seeing myself'" (p. 107). This premise is anchored in the idea of creating multiple interpretations of one's self in the context of a single interaction or a sequence of multiple interactions. The point is that whether through in-person experiences or textual exchanges, or throughout a sequence of various human interactions, results are yielded in variations, if not in new versions of an individual's self-identity, in so much as one's self-identity is in a constant state of flux.

It seems that, as far as textual identity is concerned, we return to the minimal definition of a language structure, a meaning that encompasses non-verbals inclusive of body language. Yet, this syntactic definition may not be enough for individuals to gauge how difficult it may be to verify a common interpretation—whether that be the sameness or difference of a text (type or spoken). In the text exchange, many inputs are lost, including tone expectations and often any

degree of urgency. “Does a typed fax document that preserves the lineation and physical appearance differ in terms of context or interpretation when communicated in a digital format? What about the more common diplomatic transcript, which preserves not the appearance but only the textual content?” (Swirski, 2010, p. 61). This separation of the body from the inter-personal communication experience can create ambiguity. As an example, in email communications, various assumptions can be made by either a sender or receiver that are not based on anything more than individual bias or historical context. This may be an issue of greater significance when there is little to no pre-existing familiarity or trust between the parties.

We as a people are moving toward digital interactive experiences by choice, yet this is not without exposure to new and fluid social paradigms. There is also little consideration of the wider social structure in which people conduct their lives as well as the potential influence this has on the individual’s preferences and ultimate choices. How limiting is the lack of attention to distal factors? Should these be left to other disciplines? If macro social structures are to be included in the discussion about self and identity, how should such structures be conceptualized? Will their inclusion lead to major changes in the social cognitive model of the self? Similar questions may be asked about how cultural variation exerts both a deep and superficial influence on the structure and content of the self. To this end, how the potential influence of social structures created through the Internet has experienced a steady incline in terms of prevalence and prominence has gained much attention over the last decade. These social structures include remote and global workforces as well as social networks, including Facebook. If social structures form and reform the self, and if new global structures emerge through information technology, will we see “new selves” emerge? (Foddy & Kashima, 2002, p. 17). With these new selves, a stigma may emerge, if seen through the lens of Goffman’s social identity theory, specifically, the

differences that manifest as one's digital self (appearance) is contrasted and compared with the actual physical self. This is how you create yourself in a social construct in terms of the way you present or at least attempt to present yourself in email communications. Goffman (1959) established a point of view that was anchored to the idea that within the context of interpersonal interactions, an individual attempts to control how they are perceived by the other person. They attempt to assert this influence by controlling the setting, their appearance and even the manner in terms of the interaction that plays out. While at the same time the other person in the communication works to interpret and understand the other person. It is reasonable to assume that this type of propensity for control persists in digital communications. Another theoretical lens raised by Goffman in the 1959 text was born from a dramaturgical lens. The premise is anchored to the idea that many scenes in life are played out against the backdrop of three theatrical settings: off stage, front stage, and backstage. A load bearing theme here is that the setting in which we find ourselves through various life experiences influences the way in which we behave or function. This leads to the idea of time and place being a significant influence in terms of our actions. Goffman's theory also recognizes that the nuances between the "stages" can be demonstrated through either or both conscious and subconscious urges.

John L. Locke argued that we as humans are dynamically changing the ways in which we present ourselves while communicating with one another. By using the telephone, voice mail, and especially email, we're progressively decreasing the informational signals we choose to project in the act of communicating with each other (Baron, 2001, p. 10).

In January 1989, when Arpanet (the predecessor to the Internet) was being phased out, the NSF backbone (the core of the Internet) was carrying 39 million packets of information monthly; in January 1995, Internet traffic had increased to more than 165 million packets *daily*

(Merit). Most importantly for literacy theory, most of the information suddenly flying back and forth was not just data; it was electronic discourse: digitized written words (Taylor & Ward, 1998, p. xv)

Studies related to email became and have remained prevalent since the 1980s. However, these studies often focused on email as a tool and not its effects. Mediated communication in business (MCB) has been widely investigated since the late 1980s. Research in this area can be grouped into what we can term the “medium turn” and the “discourse turn.” Studies in the “medium turn” concentrated on the communication medium itself (e.g. email, fax) (Gimenez, 2009, p. 132).

In the present day, people from all walks of life carry mobile devices in their hands. Such devices have become extensions of our physical selves. Likely, this dependency is not on the device itself but rather the access it gives to interpersonal communications, enabled via the Internet. The following description of the current reliance on digital technologies offers a stark contrast to daily life even into the first few years of the 21st century.

There was a time, within the evolution of the Web, in which communication stopped being “about the message” and started being “about the people.” Scholars pinpoint this stage at the time in which messages stopped being anonymous and started requiring the choice of a username in environments such as chat-rooms and interest communities (Bechar-Israeli, 1996, pp. 1–4; Manago et al., 2008, pp. 452–54). This can be considered, in many ways, the first example of a digital self. (Ranzini, 2014)

Typically, human interaction with digital applications occurs at a very superficial level, with the core focus being immediate satisfaction or ready access. However, there are certain dynamics below the surface. This interaction is not solely restricted to the devices and the capabilities of any tool on the devices. By way of example, for any technology platform, its code is its lifeblood. For the purposes of this paper, the code is a set of instructions that enable the programming and functionality of the software. The code is typically invisible to the end user, but its power and influence are measurable: “Codes now make possible increasingly perfect control over how culture is spread. Regulations have been relatively consistent... on the side of expanding the power of the owners to control the use of their products” (Lessig, 2006, p. 203). Code—which can be any number of varieties of computer languages, including JavaScript or Structured Query Language—when constructed, essentially creates the underlying logic of a computer program. One example is software, which is developed as an operating system on a laptop or mobile phone. Code can be written in a way that allows the software to dictate the way in which the user navigates through a given technologically constructed experience, be it email, an ecommerce website, or a robust monitoring tool used in a corporate data center.

There remain various aspects of digital anthropology research that are uninvestigated, despite a significant number of studies on computer-mediated collaborative communication (Dillenbourg, 1999). Specifically, not much is known about the specific relationships between the nature of interaction and communication on the one hand and performance (learning, problem-solving, and decision-making) on the other. This, by way of example, provides the framework for tensions that are introduced when digital communication experiences, particularly those that call for interpretation and action, are shared between multiple people.

One school of thought posits that the lines between the different roles that one plays simultaneously in life are blurred. Put simply, in the workplace context, when an individual with one specific project holds the role of decision-maker, the way in which they present themselves in person or email may be dynamically different than that in a second project in which the same person is only a minor contributor. Digital technologies have introduced an ethos of multiple realities with sheer volumes of data and information that are typically characterized by constant access. Some researchers have argued that information technologies contain elements of power and influence (Bullinger & Ziegler, 1999; Janlert & Stolterman, 1997; Reeves & Nass, 1996). Of note is the idea of separating the content from the medium, for instance, distinguishing a specific email from the platform that enables the transmission of the email. Both have their own sets of power and influence.

To date, these theories have been useful in forming a body of research that explores information technology as a tool to be examined, utilized, improved, and applied within various organizational and social contexts, with the main idea being to enhance the way people engage with one another apart from physical experiences in a shared location. In contrast to the device perspective, users and researchers have increasingly conceptualized computer-mediated communication itself as constituting the organizing process. Most researchers with this perspective have argued that information technologies are critical mediators and moderators of human experiences. Konjin et al., (2008) convey a paradigm shift towards computer-mediated communications replacing the physical in person experiences: “A great deal of interpersonal communication is now mediated by technology, but computer-mediated technologies (e.g., SMS, chat rooms, MSN, email, virtual group work, weblogs, mobile social software) can sometimes facilitate or impede communication and can alter interpersonal interactions” (p. 3). Ethical

improprieties are also hard to consider without the use of computer-mediated communications. For example, the intention behind the act of forwarding an email you received to another person for the purposes of creating leverage—political, career driven or otherwise—is not uncommon.

One example that introduces an ethical dilemma within the construct of digitally enabled communications is offered by Baird et al. (2000):

John enters an Internet chat room and introduces himself to Sue. Their relationship develops over time and includes intimate conversations. In fact, Sue is really Bill, who has assumed a female persona for purposes of interacting with others at the Web site. Is Bill's behavior morally acceptable? (p. 9)

This example is intended to offer the perspective of technology being used as blanket of deceit. This is perhaps an extreme but, nevertheless, reveals the path that is created using technology-mediated communications. This path creates conduits for devices and different software products to draw information from and about end-users that can be analyzed and even in some cases monetized, such as through consumer-based analytics and insights.

Summary

In Chapter 2, I provided a comprehensive literature review that highlighted illuminating human communication factors, involving computer-mediated technologies and tools. This literature review also demonstrated communication behaviors that are influenced through the digital experience, many of which we have consciously or subconsciously assimilated into our daily lives. The setting of email discourse is influenced by a number of factors, including desired outcomes, external influences as well as conscious and subconscious brain activities. This

chapter also examined game theory, humanism, and self-identity as academic approaches to this project.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter provides an overview of this study through a qualitative approach that incorporates case study techniques with phenomenology. The framework of this study is based upon the process of interviews with seven participants. These interview participants spanned both diverse industries and multiple roles. Also, within this chapter, I outline the various processes and stages that together contributed to the continuum of the project, throughout its lifecycle—including both the data collection and analysis processes.

Phenomenology is a research approach that involves the observation of human experiences or phenomena. It is a much-debated topic. In terms of its validity and applicability, opposing critics predominantly chose to one of two schools of thought. Husserl, who is largely recognized as the primary thought leader regarding this theory, assumed a different approach.

Husserl's desire to master both ends of the intentional chain—the noetic and the noematic—as well as to return to the doxical and proto-doxical layers of knowledge, and his preoccupation with upholding the study of the objectifying lived experiences through those of their subjective, perceptive, and even anti-predicative roots (Janicaud, 2005, p. 20)

Within the constructs of this study, phenomenology is related to an individual's experiences and navigation of email communications in the workplace and the outcomes tied to various approaches and intentions that result from a person's email communication and that occur against the backdrop of the constructs of broader workplace experiences, i.e. culture.

Another theorist, Merleau-Ponty, who was quite prevalent in the early 20th century, found that in case of human interactions, the form of any interaction can be important but not necessarily representative of the whole. “But even while describing existence—physical, vital, and human—in terms of structure, Merleau-Ponty attempts to show here that this notion of Form, however essential it might be, is not enough by itself” (Madison, 1981, p. 146). This very premise, as applied to this study, points to the idea that the content of email communications, as viewed in a phenomenological sense, should not be studied or measured in isolation. Furthermore, along this same line of thought, it can be stated that the form of an email should not be fully disconnected from other factors, such as the thoughts, preparations, interpretations, and reflections.

Qualitative research is not new and, while met with varying degrees of resistance for much of the 20th century—during which it was defined as a less-than-worthy alternative to quantitative research—it is an approach that has proven benefits in the fields of both sociology and anthropology, two significant fields relevant to this project. Additionally, the practice of qualitative research has, over time, manifested in much knowledge gained through interviews. Darlington and Scott (2002, p. 2) expand on these points:

Anthropology, from its conception as a discipline in the mid-19th century, used qualitative methods such as field observation and informant interviewing to understand cultural patterns and social relationships. Sociology has always drawn upon both quantitative and qualitative methods, such as in the influential Chicago school of urban research in the 1920s and has often utilized both approaches.

Organizational theory has been based largely on case studies created from an amalgam of observation, documentary material and interviews

Viability of the Inquiry and Personal Interest

My interest in intercommunications date back to my undergraduate coursework in the field of sociology. Subsequently, during the early years of my professional career in the 90s and early years of the 21st century, I was motivated to seek pieces of value in small-format group interactions as they occurred in the workplace, typically through face-to-face meetings. In these meetings, I frequently found myself observing and trying to interpret tones of speech, facial expressions, and other nonverbal cues, specific to emails I received in the context of my professional career. In the early 2000s, before video-enabled conference calls were prevalent as a cost-effective meeting option, I participated in “voice only” conference calls. These interactions were void of any facial expressions and many other non-verbal cues. These calls did include voice with tone with an occasional background noise. I constantly found myself second-guessing others’ tones, at times even searching and anticipating them or assuming they existed in exchanges where they may not have necessarily been present. Only with time did I realize that the absence of non-verbal cues left me subject to “partially muted” discussions. It became quite clear to me that the void created by the lack of human interaction was largely due to the void created by the lack of nonverbals. This belief persisted as I became an active participant in workplace email exchanges.

In the early 2000s, my use of business emails became increasingly more common. I, along with the masses across industries, was using a communication tool that not only lacked non-verbal cues and tone but the speaking voice and tone as well.

Harmon (2013) identified both issues with the use of email in the workplace, recognizing the issue with removing nonverbals from interpersonal communications:

Email, thought by many to be the first cousin to text messages, is equally impersonal. Although email often is longer in length by comparison, both methods have led to decreased civility, compromised interpersonal relationships, and even aggression. It is ironic that email has the potential to be more thoughtful, yet it often provokes the opposite tendency to be immediately reactive. Up to 93 percent of communication is conveyed in tone of voice and body language, while only 7 percent is conveyed in words. With those statistics, it is no wonder that digital communication can be misinterpreted or inadvertently offensive (p. 1).

In today's workforce, there are a couple of ways to segment the masses in terms of orientation to email use. For purposes of framing this study, I initially divided the workforce into two distinct groups: those who entered the workforce without email making up their duties and those who entered the workforce with email as a core competency and activity from day one. I intentionally decided that my focus would be on the former group in the belief that these participants would have richer frames of contexts in which they could compare their function in the workplace during two different eras—with email and without email.

Effective email communications require the commitment of at least two people who take on the roles of sender and receiver. The willingness to be an active recipient is key in terms of

email being a persistent and commonly used tool for communication. In this context, Natale and Lubniewski (2018) provided results from a survey designed to understand parents' attitude toward receiving emails from their children's teachers within an educational institution setting. In the survey, it was revealed that over three-quarters of the participants preferred emails over alternative forms of communication.

Project Precursors

The underpinnings of this project date back to 2018, and it was influenced by findings of a sample study I had conducted via an online tool called Survey Monkey. This survey was intended to explore the potential existence of general tendencies, themes, and practices in terms of how people view and utilize email. The survey included a short list of questions in which the anonymity of the 44 participants was ensured through the design and architecture of the Survey Monkey framework. Earlier research indicated that a persistent engagement with email has existed for at least five years: "We spend an average of two-and-a half hours a day reading, writing, and sending emails. That is about 75 hours or three whole days in a month" (Time Well Spent, 2014).

The survey consisted of eight questions aimed at a range of demographics, including age ranges, gender identification, education levels, and then the ways in which email is utilized and prioritized in the individuals' lives.

The answers unearthed by two of the questions, as illustrated below, piqued my interest the most and essentially led me toward the premise of this current project. The responses to Question 1 indicate a specific pattern, with participants indicating more than just casual attachment to their email accounts.

Coupled with this ongoing reliance on emails, as indicated in Question 1, the responses to Question 2 revealed that participants in the 2018 survey were investing significant time and mental energy in crafting their emails.

Question 1: How long can you wait during waking hours between checking your most used email account(s)?

Answered: 44

Answer Choices	Responses
One hour or less	38.64% 17
Two to four hours	40.91% 18
Four to six hours	15.91% 7
Six to twenty-four hours	4.55% 2
Over twenty-four hours	0.00% 0
TOTAL	44

Question 2: How often do you materially change email drafts (language) before pressing “send”?

Answered: 17 (38.64%)

Answer Choices	Responses
Always	9.09% 4
20% of the time or less	38.64% 17
Between 21% and 50% of the time	20.45% 9
Between 51% and 74% of the time	18.18% 8
At least 75% of the time, but not always	13.64% 6
TOTAL	44

Research Components

The inquiries made by this project were driven by a curiosity to reveal both the common and disparate approaches, mindsets, practices, and reflections of a very small group of people active in the U.S. workforce in varied roles and careers. Existing literature points to the idea of email communications being a worthwhile area of study. The prevalence of email communication is also important, as noted by Preece (2000): “From New York to London, Singapore, and beyond, trillions of email messages bounce from screen to screen, every second of every day” (p. 6).

Noteworthy to the validation of this topic’s value is that while its prevalence is growing, email is also replacing other forms of communication. This is much different than purely complimenting existing communication practices. “For a growing number of us, the most useful telecommunications is email, which conveys messages written at a computer keyboard, again, in near-real time. In some settings, email has all but replaced more traditional means of communication” (Baron, 2001, p. 9)

IRB Processes and Policies

This project intentionally upholds all criteria as predicated by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Vulnerable people were not included within the scope of this dissertation. Each of my participants was guaranteed anonymity, was required to complete a consent form, and was fully aware of my intent to both record and transcribe their interview. I received approval for this effort from the IRB prior to recruiting any interview candidates.

Recruitment of Participants

This section provides an overview of the recruitment process, which involved the identification and subsequent agreement of this study's interviewees to participate in this study. Given that email is a fairly modern phenomenon in terms of its predominance in the workplace, I intended to approach people who had been out of college for no less than fifteen years. I deliberately sought recruits from diverse backgrounds, working in multiple fields and a variety of organizations. It was also important that this project represent multiple genders.

For my recruitment strategy, I relied on my professional network, which includes colleagues from previous places of employment, relationships formed through community associations, and people I have encountered through my formal educational experiences.

I intentionally sought people who were not close to me in terms of social or professional circles. This is not to say that I chose random sampling specifically but that I did not want to include people with whom I interacted on a regular basis. Additionally, I purposely sought people with whom I did not exchange emails on a regular basis. The varying careers of the participating

interviewees in this project included education, retail, technology shops, distribution, and manufacturing.

For each interviewee, my initial contact was via a phone call, during which, typically in the course of ten minutes or less, I was able to frame the intent of my study and request their participation. Of all the people with whom I spoke on the phone, only two declined to participate. In all cases, as part of the recruitment process, I took great care in explaining how I would ensure participant anonymity.

Safe Spaces

I was quite aware of the vulnerability that I was seeking from the interviewees. This assumption became more pertinent as I examined both the trends in responses to my survey and the questions I had prepared for the interviews. Recent surveys indicate a pattern of over-investment in technology. “A survey released Monday by Microsoft Corp., the largest workplace software maker, acknowledged that new digital technology can make businesses less productive” (Apple Executives, Facebook Billionaires, 2018). As an individual reflecting on the frequency of emails and the amount of time spent on them, one may have questions about the topics related to its value proposition. Specifically, is the amount of time spent writing, rewriting, and clarifying emails easily validated? Another study also reported that email controls and/or occupies people’s attention to a dangerous degree, essentially feeding into a state of vulnerability:

A Health Canada study looked at the more far-reaching effects of the use and abuse of email. If nothing else scares the pants off managers, this should. Email, says the study, plays a major role in workplace stress. Instead of making life easier, there was a

widespread sense of loss of control of (individual's) lives and of having become slaves of the keyboard (Vandersyp, 2002, p. 15).

To this end, my questions aimed to grasp an understanding of not only the volume of emails they worked with on a daily basis but also the granularity in terms of the energy and time put into email communications in the workplace. Part of my strategy to help participants feel most comfortable was allowing them to choose the place and time for their respective interviews. Some chose their homes, others chose outdoor patios, coffee shops, or office and school buildings. During the recruitment process, I assured each participant that I would not be including direct references to the names of their employers within my dissertation. Early on, I noticed this to be a highly sensitive topic for the people I was recruiting. With more than a couple of people, this assurance proved a meaningful clarification, even more than the assurances of individual anonymity. Months after their respective interviews, two of my interviewees shared, without being prompted, that they felt some embarrassment as they came to grips with the reality of the amount of time and effort they were dedicating to email activity. In retrospect, they did not believe they were optimizing or properly prioritizing their time and, as a result of their interviews, realized that email had become an impediment toward enhancing their productivity.

Data Collection

While developing a lens that was partly influenced by the outcomes of the 2018 survey, I believed the best way to continue with this project would be through interviews that aimed at not only testing the assumptions that were evident in the 2018 survey but also at exploring the individual tendencies and behaviors that drive the way in which individuals approach email as a communication tool within the construct of their workplace domains. I also believed that, in the

context of personal interviews, I would be able to collect data at an individual level, thus creating a clear baseline before identifying any themes.

Admittedly, while certain limitations may exist from using a limited pool of participants, this finite set of data also afforded the opportunity to ensure each of my participants had their perspectives represented in a stand-alone context without being lumped initially with any other participants' data. This was owed to both them and the project, specifically to make the study conducive for the readers to relate to any specific participant.

Interview Design and the Data

In this section, I provide a summary of the interview model and framework tied to the data collection process. Each of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. I also made it a point to spend some time with each participant and engage them in some informal conversations, be it on topics that were social in nature or, in some cases, on questions they had prior to beginning the interview. In hindsight, I found this most often put the participants at ease prior to recording and commencing the interviews. I included a set of common questions that were used at the onset of each interview (provided below). Subsequently, the follow-up questions varied from person to person and were typically tied to a participant's answer to one of the initial questions.

Participants

I intentionally sought out interviewees comprising people who represented a diverse set of professions, industries, and backgrounds. The table below provides an overview of the participants and their professions and roles.

Alias Name	Profession or Industry	Role	Age Range
Sedona	Lawyer	Intellectual Property Attorney	40–45
Reggie	Management - Distribution Company	Vendor Management	40–50
Mack	Education	High School Teacher	50–60
Devon	International Retailer	Vendor Management	40–50
Casey	Medical Device Manufacturer	Quality Control	50–60
Selby	National Retailer	Program Administration	35–45
Bert	Education	Private High School Administrator	45–55

Interview Questions

Each interview started with a common list of questions; based on the responses, I added follow-up questions to explore certain topics further. The initial list of questions is provided below:

- i. How many emails do you receive on a typical workday?
- ii. How often do you think you check your inbox each day?
- iii. What are the most common reasons you use email?
- iv. For what, if anything, would you refuse to use email?
- v. How common is it for you to re-write an email before you send it?
- vi. What is the biggest regret or mistake you made with an email?
- vii. How vital is email to your job?
- viii. What are your best practices when it comes to drafting group emails?
- ix. Describe how you differentiate between the use of emails to manage versus communicate.
- x. Do you struggle with separating email from your interpersonal, face-to-face interactions?

Segmenting the Data

It was critical that I employ different interpretation approaches for collecting and analyzing through multiple theoretical lenses while specifically looking for data that might have gone unnoticed. Recording provided some benefits: It allowed me to both take note and observe the participants' non-verbal actions while not being preoccupied with recording their responses by hand. In hindsight, I also think the recorder offered them some peace of mind since they knew they could ask to have the interview paused if they had a concern or just wanted a minute to

think; in short, they did not feel rushed. In each interview, I noted the person's demeanor, body language, and facial expressions throughout. With the recorder, I was able to stay invested in each participant and their responses throughout our time together.

The next step was transcribing the interviews. Once that was done, I began the multi-step effort of data mining. In my first full review of each written transcript, I used simple markings in the left margin to note content areas I thought to be rich ("R") or interesting ("I") in terms of the participant's response. In the context of this project, "R" meant content areas that I believed had significant meaning or multiple themes, whereas "I" meant the content was intriguing, but I was unsure where it fit exactly. I used the framework by Robert Yin to code my work via a case study inquiry approach. McGoldrick, Steward, and Watson described the ideas central to the Yin case study approach: "Essentially, the case study provides an adaptable framework for application in a number of research contexts and environments that may be conducted through a range of sub-strategies that seek to explore, describe or explain the phenomena under scrutiny" (Yin, 2002, p. 130). The benefit of using Yin's approach was that it matched my desire to study the email practices and mindsets of individuals with diverse backgrounds and professional paths. For the purposes of this research, I conducted manual coding while pulling out themes.

Typically, a day to two later, I would revisit the transcript and work through the body, identifying various themes. At the end of the transcript, I would tally the totals of each theme for that participant. After I was done with these first three steps of data collection, my final coding step was to revisit each section I had marked earlier and then to review the data collectively across all the transcripts. Here, I made use of the right-hand margin and either changed or confirmed my judgement on it during my initial reading of each transcript.

Summary

Chapter 3 discussed the theoretical approaches I applied to this project. I shared the details of the steps and processes that were maintained throughout in terms of the expectations of the IRB. I explained my rationale behind using the interview form as a method to collect the data, and I shared the parameters and process I implemented for identifying and recruiting the interview participants. This chapter also included the questions that asked the interviews. I revealed the way in which I consumed and analyzed the data. Finally, I provided a framework of the theories related to the project: humanism theory, self and identity theory, and game theory.

Chapter 4: Results

Chapter Four establishes the way I collected, coded, and filtered the data throughout the course of the interview process. This began by first analyzing each interview based on its own merit to allow each of the participants' voices to be heard. As this chapter draws to a close, I provide a table illustrating a comparison across the interviews. Every interview participant is given an alias, and their workplaces and roles are generalized to ensure their anonymity.

I believed it was critical to use a different angle to interpret the data and find both the data that was apparent while also working to find the data that might have gone unseen in the first pass or through the use of a single method of data analysis.

I approached each interview as an individual case study with the intention of learning more about each of the participants, including their energy investments in and rationale behind their engagement in workplace emails. Yin (1981) posited that case studies are empirical examinations of current phenomenon within real-life examples often buoyed by multiple methods of research. Within the scope of this project, the email phenomenon is examined through a survey, interviews, and observations as well as with the literature, which helps to position this approach as viable and valid.

In the following section, I sequentially share the key takeaways and observations from each of the interviewees, which are reinforced by excerpts taken from the interviews. The conclusion of this chapter includes a table identifying the unique and common elements of data identified through the coding of the interviews.

Following each interview, I took time to listen to the recording as I wanted to ensure it was clearly audible. This step allowed me to take down notes on anything I needed to

double-check in those instances, for example, if some of the words were muffled or if there was some degree of ambiguity in what they had said on a particular topic or theme.

Listening to the interviews also allowed me to reflect on the responses while noting the tone and any momentary pauses.

For most part of this chapter, I review each of the interviews and share themes and various data points I extracted from the process.

Participant #1: Sedona

Sedona is a lawyer between the age of 40 and 45 years. She works in technology hardware for a firm in the Midwest and has used email in the workplace for 18 years, relying on it to do her job. In her role, she utilizes email to communicate with people within her company as well as with external parties she is dependent upon to meet the expectations of her job. During our interview, she was very relaxed and seemed to reflect on most of the questions. She was quite succinct. As I studied her interview, there were definitive themes that surfaced, the first of which was a heavy **reliance on her workplace email activity**. When asked how often she checks her email account at work, she replied “between 50 and 100” times per day. This same theme was reinforced when she was asked how many emails she wrote in a typical workday. Sedona stated, “on an average day, probably between 200 and 300 hundred emails.”

The next theme was **revisions to her email content**. While creating hundreds of emails each week, she estimated that about “70% of the time,” she edited the original draft of her email before sending it to the recipient(s). This theme may be due to an influence from a non-traditional, soft definition of game theory, as described by Dodge below, which suggests a major

need to consider and significantly anticipate one's and the other party's mindset and intention during communication.

There are two definitions of game theory, a “soft” one and “hard” one. The soft one depicts game theory as the study of situations in which two or more entities—persons, organizations, governments, businesses, teams, couples—might rationally reach decisions in situations in which the outcome for both parties depends on the decisions both make. Nobody can choose what to do without considering what the other will choose to do. This means anticipating what the other anticipates what oneself will do, or what the other anticipates oneself to anticipate, and so forth. (Dodge, 2012, p. xi)

Not long ago, game theory was premised on the use of mathematical calculations and predictabilities. More recently, game theory expanded to include a sociological lens. One must consider how challenging it often is to anticipate someone's reaction in real-time. I can only imagine trying to do it through a screen (email) while being blinded from many of the possible clues one could derive from an in-person experience. I also will note that one's imagination can become an unpredictable type of input in terms of anticipating another's reaction.

Sedona's commonly used email for **communication** and stated, “It's easier to get a hold of someone than trying to locate them via phone or in person. You have a record of what is said, where it last stood and with whom.”

The fourth theme evident in Sedona's interview was **isolation**, which is a result of using emails within a company. Simply put, Sedona's sentiment was that you lose the ability to create strong bonds when you are primarily dealing with individuals through a screen (via email

correspondences). Based on her non-verbal cues, she seemed as if she noticed the effects of a lack of face-to face interactions.

Sedona's interview responses stressed four dominant themes:

- i) reliance on her workplace email activity
- ii) revisions to her email content
- iii) communication
- iv) isolation

In the construct of Sedona's workplace, the themes that surfaced in her interview were not so unique when compared to the other participants. However, the volume of emails she encounters each day distinguishes her in this study, easily doubling the mean volume of the group. She spends most of her day immersed in email activity – receiving, reading, drafting, redrafting, and transmitting. She, not unlike the others, is vigilant about the email traffic she encounters. The complexity of her situation, driven by the volume of emails she receives, is likely compounded by the methodology she builds around her attitude toward email. Through my observations, I posit that, within her themes, there is a linking phenomenon of causation. Specifically, the first three themes are contributing factors, if not the root causes, that result in the fourth theme – isolation.

It is interesting that she did not offer the idea or behave (non-verbally) in ways that would indicate she believed her situation was unique or that it caused any type of overall negative workplace experience. She portrayed her situation as though part of a state of normalcy.

Participant #2: Reggie

Reggie works at a distribution company in a metropolitan area of a mid-sized Midwest city. Excluding emails to which he sends short responses (i.e., one sentence or less), he creates about 20–30 emails each workday. His major theme was **communication**. The most common reasons he writes emails are “to provide a status report on a project that I’m working on to either stakeholders or to leadership” and “to give direction to vendors...on what I want them to do or need them to do.” A second theme of his was **caution**. Reggie believes that he edits or re-writes a vast majority of the emails he creates. He posits, “you have second chances in terms of your emails, seconds and thirds.” His audience also dictates the level of investment he puts into the construction of an email. Reggie indicated that, when he sends emails to people in authority with whom he does not associate on a regular basis, he probably spends a lot more time reviewing, tweaking, or redrafting before he sends the email. When I asked Reggie about the biggest mistake he had ever made with a workplace email, he shared that he had unintentionally included an external party in an email whose content was not meant to be shared outside of his organization. Reggie eyes communicated his remorse while answering this question. When I asked him about his attitude toward email, the theme of **reliance** surfaced. He believed that 60–70% of all the business communications he is a party to occur via email and not face-to-face or via phone calls. He shared that this was consistent for him with both internal and external contacts. Reggie reinforced the theme of **documentation**, stating that “there’s obviously a benefit of having something on paper, something that you can print out and take with you and/or memorialize, rather than a conversation that is just going to be in passing”. That said, Reggie perceived great value in commingling both email and face-to face interactions between people:

Email takes on a different type of ... how do I want today it. If I don’t really know you as well. We just go back and forth in email there’s not that personal interaction. All I see is

letters that you type, and I try to read into what is that you wrote and try to understand it that way (the way you meant) and really then I am just reading words in English without understanding the feeling. Obviously, with the use of punctuation and things like that and just humor and the way we use the English language, you can try to get that. But I think the combination of email and the interpersonal discussions that you have with a person or I guess increase the effectiveness of the communications overall.

Non-verbal cues are absent in emails, and Reggie addressed that void:

I think with any type of communication you have you can always miscommunicate and it does not matter if you are on the phone, face-to-face, writing an email or letter, or whatever you are doing. There is always that opportunity. But I think with such importance and so much clarity so much extra communication that comes with the non-verbal, there is really so much lost with the heavy use of emails over what we used to do before email.

Within the scope of human interconnectedness, Reggie developed a penchant for combining email with face-to-face communications when feasible. Aside from the clarity he mentioned above, he believes that in-person experiences allow for communication to foster deeper and more meaningful dialogue and relationships.

With Reggie, the themes that surfaced were as follows:

- i) communication
- ii) caution
- iii) reliance
- iv) documentation.

Again, three of the themes seem to be harmonious or at least share a meaningful connection with one another. As with Sedona, there is one theme that runs in contrast to Reggie's interview – caution. In several areas of his interview, he mentioned finding room to take extra steps to safeguard himself from hardships that may result from misinformation being published from his email account and affecting both the internal and external recipients. While some may consider concern over email messages being distributed with less than desirable outcomes to be overplayed, such concerns are not without some level of legitimacy, as described by Baron.

But despite constant reminders that email, with its risks of exposing us to ridicule or legal action, is anything but private, the rest of us treat our electronic communications—even business-related email—as intensely personal, private correspondence, to the point where we are frequently annoyed or embarrassed when a recipient forwards one of our emails to a third party or posts it to a public list without first getting our permission. (2009, p. 224)

It cannot go unnoticed that the sheer volume of that experience by Reggie on a typical day is dwarfed by Sedona's experience. Regardless, there are some common themes shared between these two participants.

Participant #3: Mack

My third participant, Mack, is over 50 years of age and was a high school teacher for over 20 years. He works on the fringes of an upper Midwest metropolitan area in what could easily be referred to as a “semi-rural area.” In the actual interview, and then during my initial

playback of the interview, I was struck by the unique variables in terms of the ways in which Mack approached his email activity. Specifically, he writes very few emails each day, (15) but the attention he devotes to these emails, coupled with his time and energy investments, might suggest that he was handling dozens of emails each day.

Mack's desire to utilize email to **communicate** revealed the first theme. It was evident through Mack's level of energy while speaking that he took pride in utilizing email to pass on timely and useful information. Mack views his timeliness as a demonstration of his professionalism. Furthermore, it was evident that Mack found his approach, which pertains to disseminating valuable information, contributes to maintaining a positive self-brand in the workplace environment. This is further exemplified through his second theme – **tracking**. To avoid any doubts, I will clarify that the act of tracking is different from documenting. Mack does not only or primarily track email exchanges to potentially catch someone else but rather to be accountable to his personal expectations. Mack offered, "I don't want to forget, and emailing is a quick and simple way of getting information across to someone else in a traceable manner." He also likes to revisit what he writes to have full confidence while communicating via email. Mack consciously works to achieve this by taking time to look and reflect on what he had sent previously before sending another email. Mack's interview also revealed a theme I will refer to as **content throttling** as a self-preservation strategy. This is a mindset of Mack's in which, in certain circumstances, he minimizes what he shares in his email in terms of both breadth and depth.

A third theme I identified with Mack was **documentation**, but he put a rather different spin on this theme when compared with the other participants. In speaking about the emails he sends to parents on certain matters, Mack stated, "Sometimes, I'm even copying an administrator

on it. So that is another reason to keep my administrator or bosses in the loop on a sensitive subject and make sure that there isn't any misremembering of facts." Mack's intention here is not to manage the dialogue but rather to identify and anchor facts as they are established.

The theme of being **reflective** came to light as Mack shared his personal standards when it comes to drafting an email of a sensitive nature, "I will write it. Standard practices. I walk away, find something else to do, leave it on the computer and I have to read it two more times before I send it, because I will modify it because a lot of times (the) initial reaction is not the message you want to send." Mack explains his standard practice succinctly, "Sometimes a little time to rethink things or maybe put things in a little better context is needed." At another point in the interview, Mack offered the premise, without being prompted, that he himself is sometimes biased and becomes very judgmental based on the form and content of the various emails he receives.

Mack's career has spanned almost thirty years. When he was teaching in the early 90s, there was no email communication with parents in his district. Any communication that did take place with parents was carried out over the phone or in face-to-face interactions. Parent letters were also not unheard of. Today, these other communication methods have largely been supplanted by email.

During our interview, Mack shared that he consciously adapts his writing style to the group size and specific person/people to whom he is sending an email. For example, if he is drafting an email to one person with whom he is very comfortable, he believes he has a general understanding of how that individual will interpret the message; so, he will tend to be more direct. However, as he creates group emails, he considers the diverse personalities involved. He also brings a lens to group emails, as an author entrenched in political correctness. This is

interesting because, across my interview group, approaching group emails in a different way than one-to-one email communication was not so far raised as a thematic practice.

A final theme revealed with Mack was his **reliance** on email. Given the fact that he is, in terms of the volume of emails produced per day, a minimal user, it surprised me to learn that he checks his email about 20 times every day. Mack also believed he could not imagine his workplace environment without email capabilities. As the interview moved forward, I learned that his district recently migrated from Microsoft to the Google platform for email. The Google platform is a bundled program that offers email and a comprehensive package of applications which allow for advanced collaboration. These bundled applications include Google Docs.

The two final points that I cover from Mack's interview are not anchored to themes specifically, but rather are topics that I found to be of interest. The first is a perspective on email interpretation as it relates to a recipient. Mack shared, from a detrimental point of view, that considering the impossibility of reading non-verbal cues, tone, or engagement levels from email, he "thinks it goes, the way the email is received totally dependent on the receiver's mood, and their frame of mind." When Mack said this, I immediately thought back to his standards in terms of the mental investment he pours into the emails he produces.

The last item I touch upon in this section is the workplace culture of his school environment. Specifically, his district is unionized, and so there are many political processes ingrained in its labor model. The reallocation of money seems to take place almost on a biennial basis. When this reallocation is based on forced reductions, many factors are put on the table for consideration at the board and district office levels. Financial cuts can have a devastating impact on school buildings, specific programs, and individual resources. Adversarial attitudes become common when it comes to deciding on such reallocation, and Mack has seen such dialogues spill

over into email barbs circulated among district employees. These negative emails can create major divides across the district, causing irreparable harm.

I found Mack to be very polarizing. As a user, he generates low volumes of email on a typical day, which I believe is largely attributable to the fact that he is a classroom teacher. Mack expressed a high degree of complexity in his approach to email, and in the process his interview also yielded the largest number of themes when compared to the other participants, including:

- i) Communicate
- ii) Tracking
- iii) Content throttling
- iv) Documentation
- v) Reflective
- vi) Reliance

For Mack, I took mental note of the amount of thought, energy, and interest he invests in his email communications, not based on his job, but purely on the limited volume of emails he deals with on a typical day. His themes were reinforced throughout his interview, and the six themes within this interview were largely harmonious with the examples and reflections he presented.

Participant #4: Devon

Participant Four, Devon, was aged between 40 and 50 years. Devon works for an international retailer. His role is centered around a team that maintains vendor relationships. The company is in a heavily populated urban area of the Midwest. One of the first themes identified in reviewing our interview was his **reliance** on email access. When asked how often during the day he checks his email, he replied: “constantly. I have multiple monitors in front of me and one

of my monitors always has my Outlook open and visible.” Devon maintains three monitors at his workstation, of which one is exclusively used for emails. In an effort to be efficient, he has adopted a practice of organizing his emails as they are received. The theme I uncovered here is **organization**. Devon shared a thorough summary describing the way he prioritizes email messages:

I used to dig into emails as soon as I saw them pop up and react to them. But I started a color coding situation where emails that come into my inbox that are from my direct leaders, my directors or my VPs, people in leadership, they're marked as red, red in color, so then I know visually right away that those are important that I address those.

Ones that are marked blue are ones that are sent to me only, so I know that they're directed specifically at me and I should address those. So those would be secondary ones I would focus on, and then everything else is just black, whether I'm copied or multiple people on the to line, the subject line.

This unique way of dealing with received emails helps Devon maintain awareness in terms of understanding the volume of emails addressed to him as the sole recipient. Additionally, he also demonstrates some sensitivity to the hierarchy present within the organization, as he has an alert/notification strategy to identify emails he receives from people who are essentially above him in decision-making authority. The organization theme is one that involves the email user consciously exerting an influence on the way he categorizes the importance of the emails he receives. This is done without the direct knowledge of the intent of the individual who sent the message. What drew me to this was that perceived value was predicated on the person who sends the email, without considering the content of the email. There is research that indicates value in taking steps toward managing how one approaches email. Results from a survey conducted at an

Australian university that included 471 of their academic staff presented that “survey respondents complained that although they spent significant time dealing with emails, the activity was not considered to be part of their typical workload” (How to Master, 2015). These findings may reflect the idea that people feel lost with or inept at the way in which they manage email.

The theme of **control gates** was revealed during Devon’s interview, which in this case referred to the area of editing. He also drafts emails prior to sending them to the intended recipients. Of interest here is that, beyond the reflection and review, Devon also inserts one final stage gate in his processes. Here, he describes his methods leading up to the transmission of an email:

I would say it's fairly common. More times than not I create a draft and either I'll save it and come back to it, or I will just leave it up on my screen for a little bit and come back to it. Not only that, I also in many instances have a time delay on my emails so they don't automatically send. They'll wait about two minutes before it gets sent, that way if I have something that I want to add to it or if I forget to attach something, I've got that timeframe to go back and do so. But it's common that I draft emails and sit on them for a little bit instead of just drafting and clicking send.

Devon also summarized why he often finds himself refining emails that are in draft form: Because a lot of times I will start jotting down the first things that come to mind in my emails, and then I'll go back and instead of it being a novel, I'll scale it back, I'll shorten it up, I'll create maybe a bullet list instead of a paragraph just to make it quicker and easier for the reader to digest.

My observation in the moment was that perhaps Devon initially views email as a canvas to shape his message on before he eventually utilizes it as a vessel for outgoing communication. Devon also utilized control measures to manage both incoming and outgoing messages.

In comparing the different ways in which he approaches communication, email or in-person communications, Devon identified clear lines of separation:

If you're in face to face dialogue with someone, a lot of times it gives you the platform to get immediate feedback or to retailor your questions or messages or to elaborate on them. Whereas when you're doing it through email, a lot of times you think you may be hitting upon something, but then it leads to multiple follow-up responses back and forth.

There was also a theme evident in Devon's interview that falls into the category of reliance; however, in the case of this interviewee this reliance is qualified, as Devon discusses email as a vital tool in his workplace.

It's pretty critical. In today's business world, especially where I work, everybody's connected. Just about everybody has a laptop, they use multiple ways to communicate and so you're always on the go, whether it's a personal device in your hand in the elevator or a laptop that you're taking with you from meeting to meeting. Email is probably the most critical way. Not always the most effective, but the most critical way to communicate.

Further into the interview, Devon articulated why email may lack effectiveness as it relates to communication lacking nonverbal cues:

I think that there's a big piece of that nonverbal, that interpersonal communication that is lacking in today's usage of emails. You see it a lot through relationships that are built

through social media and texting and things of that nature. And you don't develop those true human relationships and those connections and those interactions. So, I kind of touched on it earlier, but you don't get the context and you don't get the understanding of where somebody is coming from. What you read in email may be the same thing that you hear in person, but based on visibly seeing that person's body language, it gives you a better feeling of where they're coming from. Maybe the message is exactly the same, but when it's delivered in person you can tell that something else is bothering them or they feel great about something. You can just kind of get the basis of where that's coming from and then you can dig a little bit deeper or understand the meaning and the context behind where people are coming from.

Devon also exhibited the theme of **erosion**, which refers to how he has been experiencing a transition in which other platforms are beginning to invade the space once largely monopolized by email. While not anticipating a complete transition away from email, he mentioned different programs for communicating and collaborating that are growing.

I feel like email is always going to be there. It's going to be one of those baseline platforms for communication, but there's a lot of great bolt-on options or like an a la carte menu of options, if you will, whether it's using Jabber or it's using Microsoft Teams, Skype, things of that nature, to share information and to communicate. We're getting more and more into those situations, especially with Microsoft Teams now where you can upload, amend, adjust, modify different attachments and spreadsheets and forms and things of that nature. You can create groups to chat. I think that we're getting more and

more into those types of offerings and technologies, but email's always going to have a place for the foreseeable future.

With Devon, the themes that surfaced during his interview included:

- i) Reliance on emails
- ii) Control gates
- iii) Organization (e.g., communication)
- iv) Erosion of email (other options becoming more available)

Devon seemed comfortable and confident with his approach to email. He demonstrated a pattern in which he seems to put forth a concerted effort in some cases to intentionally disconnect from his use of email through other ways to engage people in methods outside of email interactions.

Participant #5: Casey

Casey is a 50 to 60-year-old professional working in the medical device industry. His role is in the area of quality control on the manufacturing side of the business. The firm he helps lead is based in a large suburb of a Midwest City. He has a bachelor's along with an MBA in International Business. A typical day for Casey includes writing about 20 emails to either internal or external contacts.

One of the themes identified in his interview was **international dynamics** as seen from a cultural perspective. Casey regularly experiences interactions with foreign based colleagues. When asked about cultural impacts realized through email, Casey readily recognized his ongoing issues that are a byproduct of speaking different languages. As Casey shared, "All the time to be honest with you because I don't know how much detail you want, but our main supplier, our most critical supplier's a Korean supplier and their English is limited." Casey went on to share that there are often other complications that arise when he is speaking with someone at the supplier's offshore facilities. These concerns are likely tied to different cultural language traditions:

You really need to re-ask questions quite often to make sure you got the right answer.

They tend to always agree, always say yes. If they're offended or if they don't understand you, they don't tell you they don't understand you. So it's a lot of times you do have to continue to re-ask questions and be absolutely specific in your communication style and reiterate. Yeah, it's very challenging, I got to tell you. A lot more challenging than people might think.

Apart from the verbal language gaps that are inevitable between languages, the theme of **absent non-verbals** in email communication was observed with Casey.

People just need to be more careful, don't make many assumptions. Even though you may have some assumptions... to a certain extent, you got to believe that emails are probably the least efficient modes of... Or it probably leads to the most miscommunication because it's easy to misinterpret a word. Whereas if you're face to face and you got that body language to give you a little more insight on to what they really mean.

The theme of **desire for face-face interaction**, even when separated by thousands of miles in the context of international business, is both meaningful and somewhat ironic, in that it is not uncommon for people sitting only feet apart to often choose to communicate via email rather than walk a few paces. These opposing realities seem all too familiar, in that we tend to want what we do not have, as shared by Casey:

I think I do work with a considerable amount of international suppliers and there are certain cultural differences they're inevitable and they're challenging and it helps immensely when you get a chance to actually sit down with them and get to know them on a more personal level. It makes the interactions that much better. Communication even within your business, your company, it can be challenging, right?

The final theme presented in Casey's interview is the energy focused on **draft emails**. Largely due to the criticality of his work and the significant amount of regulations (in the medical device industry), Casey often feels the need to rewrite an email before sending it to its recipient(s): "Yeah, actually most of them because it's critical. Communication is actually very critical in our business and I always review."

Casey's prevailing themes included:

- i) International dynamics
- ii) Absent non-verbals

iii) Desire for face-to-face interaction

iv) Draft emails

Casey's unique position among the participants in this project is that his job is primarily based on working within an international model, which results in many factors that are unique to him, most notably linguistic differences and cultural nuances.

Participant #6: Selby

Selby is a program administrator for a national retailer and holds a bachelor's degree. He is between 35 and 45 years old and is based in a large metropolitan area in the Midwest. For context, he receives about 50 emails and creates about 35 emails per day in his role at the company.

The theme of being **task-oriented** became clear in terms of Selby's primary intentions when creating emails: "I would say that the most common use of email is to engage with other people on tasks that I'm trying to accomplish. So, trying to get more information or well trying to solve problems, that kind of thing. So, engaging with other relevant parties." This in itself is rather interesting, as he uses email more for task mastering than as a communication vehicle. While his intent does involve providing communication, it heavily leans toward reaching completion of a task or project and is not necessarily focused on the overall impact of the email content.

Coding the interview revealed an **efficiency** theme. Selby gave an example of a scenario, when instead of responding to an email in like fashion he instead opted to respond through face-to-face contact.

Yeah, actually it just happened this afternoon. We were updating some project items over email, working to have a project plan done. While I enjoy having social time. This was

not social but rather physical in-person interactions with people where I'm speaking with them directly. Instead of sending the updates that I wanted done via email, I intentionally went over to that person's desk and sat down and had a conversation with them about what I wanted updated. So, we sat down for probably 15 minutes and went over the stuff that I had wanted her to do.

In this way, Selby's coworkers, as you will read below, benefitted from not having to make incorrect assumptions or handling unnecessary back-and-forth emailing. In this scenario, Selby had both the intent and opportunity to work around email communication. He then reinforced the theme of **physical connectedness** with this follow-up comment:

When we were having the interaction there were a couple of things that came up or questions, clarifying questions that she had that we were able to resolve right then and there. But then a lot of what we do I think has to do with having a good solid relationship and being able to interact in person with people gives you the ability to maintain those relationships.

A **confidence** theme surfaced when I asked Selby if he revises or rewrites any of his emails in a day before sending them to the recipient. He responded with hesitation: "That happens fairly infrequently. It does happen, but out of the 40 or so that I do a day it is maybe once or twice".

When asked about his reliance on email, Selby's take was that he did not believe it was vital to his job. This perspective introduced a new theme: **lack of reliance**. From Selby's perspective:

Yeah. I think it would be okay (to go without email). There are other tools that we have available that I would probably instantly start leveraging more in order to collaborate and get work done. And then we're likely just to derive a little less efficiency but probably not significantly. Like I said there are other tools that are highly collaborative that we have the ability to use.

As for how Selby presents in email versus in-person scenarios, he has noticed very little difference, due in part to the way in which he prepares. The theme of **self-image** was pulled out of the following response:

I would say that for the most part, all of those communication relationships are the same. And are influences through the various modes of communication whether you're on the phone or using Skype or IMing, I would say that those all kind of create a little bit less formal in general relationship across those platforms that spills over into email. And so even thinking if I was going to be... when I'm interacting with senior leaders that I'm very controlled about how I'm emailing them, that interpersonal relationship or that meeting with them in person, I put that same rigor around that communication, if that makes sense.

Selby stayed true to his position, reiterating again the theme of **self-image**, while simultaneously recognizing the significance of non-verbal cues and tones.

I would say that it spills into email and other electronic type of communications that you do where you're not seeing someone physically. I would say it spills over into that. You're always inferring tone and the language usage to I think develop what you would have perceived as the nonverbal physical cues. I don't know that I allow that to affect me too much, but in certain situations I would say that the tone of an email sometimes affects

your feelings about that person just based on what they maybe didn't intend to develop in the tone the way they wrote it.

The final theme related to Selby was a **non-effect**. Here, instead of explaining how email impacts his workplace, he posits that his workplace finds email complementary to its culture:

I would say at my work we have a fairly laid back, inclusive, try to give people the benefit of a doubt culture. And I think that that spills over into all the communication methods that we use. I think for the most part that that laid-back environment takes a little bit of the edge off of trying... i.e. needing to be too formal or too polished, especially in email. They can be a little bit less formal. Especially in my job I would say that we spend a lot more time polishing our verbal communication or what we're going to be presenting for example the leader, both visually and verbally, than we do, being concerned about how an email is going to come across. So, I would say that it doesn't have a lot of effect. Email does not have a lot of effect on how our... Well, I should say that's how it affects our culture. It lends itself more to a laid-back mindset.

The themes that came to light through Selby's interview responses and my subsequent analysis were as follows:

- i) Task-oriented
- ii) Efficiency
- iii) Desire for physical connectedness
- iv) Confidence
- v) Lack of reliance
- vi) Self-image
- vii) Non-effect

During his interview, Selby demonstrated a matter-of-fact disposition with many of his answers. He openly shared examples, as described above, in terms of his working around using email, whether it was driven by his preference or just the convenience of a certain situation.

Participant #7: Bert

Bert is aged between 45–55 and works in administration at a coeducational parochial school located within an above average-sized urban area in the Midwest. He writes an average of 15 to 20 emails a day in the course of his job. These 15 to 20 emails, which constitute the scope of this study, specifically consist of those written to parents and/or staff members at his school.

During our interview, the first theme that was observed was **urgency**. Bert considered himself driven in addressing emails requiring his attention:

I'm very, very, maybe anal is the word; I just believe if somebody asks me a question, I respond right away. Some of the emails I get are to all the staff; so, it doesn't need an email. Sometimes, I just shake my head like, why did I need to get an email on this? But anything that comes directly and needs my personal response, I respond immediately.

The theme **hyper attentive** also became clear in his describing his perpetual connection with email. Even when walking around the school building, Bert remains attentive to his workplace email via his mobile device: "I'm moving around. So, on my cell phone I have my work email account. So, I check my email, I would say, every 10 minutes." This same theme was also evident when Bert refers with excitement to the technical design of his smartphone that keeps him connected to his email:

So, my phone is set up very well so I can just check my phone and there's an indication if I have email through my work email. So, whenever I see a number by my envelope (on the smartphone), I know it's a work email. I like to communicate by way of email. So

being an administrator, I believe it's very important that you respond to a teacher's request. So, teachers don't have phone calls in our schools, in our classroom, I should say. So, if they had to contact me via email, I'm not going to be at my desk a lot of time checking my laptop. So I got to have some sort of mode of communication.

The theme of **taxonomy-induced pressures** presented itself in this interview as well. Apart from his own motivations, there was added pressure, as based on his perception there was a tension based dichotomy that existed between administration and the school's teachers, with regard to priorities and expectations, creating a narrative that permeated the establishment:

A big critique of the staff in our schools is that teachers do not believe admin responds in a timely fashion. I know they're not talking about me; they're talking about others. So, I do not want to be that admin who does not respond in a timely fashion.

Bert also explained his approach to receiving emails from parents, an approach I thought might have a different prioritization compared to emails he received from his colleagues. However, Bert does not filter parent emails any differently than staff emails. I classified this as a **headfirst** theme, describing his mental approach and prioritization of email communications as being one approach for all.

Parents love it too. Even if they ask a question that I need to reflect on it, I let them know I received your email and I'll get back to you. But it's very important that you respond. I know that there's certain rules, unwritten rules, you have 24 hours. I don't think so. I think if somebody wants to know about their daughter or something, I'm going to respond immediately if I can.

The final theme I will highlight in this section is that of **convenience**. In this excerpt, Bert is supporting the idea of replacing most staff meetings with email communications:

I would say you could eliminate probably 60% or 70% of all staff meetings via email. I don't know why we still have staff meetings because what's said at staff meetings you could do in an email. However, if you're working in and as a team, I still think you need to talk. I think email has taken away the more one-on-one talking with other teachers. Sometimes people will just send an email when they could just walk next door. It's just using technology for the use of technology.

The themes that surfaced from Bert's interviews included:

- i) Urgency
- ii) Hyper-attentiveness
- iii) Taxonomy-induced pressures
- iv) Convenience

In summary, Bert was very rigid in terms of his position as it pertains to his email practices. I gained the strict parameters that he placed on himself to serve as a compass; he considers his way of working as helping him prioritize his core job responsibilities.

Emerging Themes

Up until now, I have provided individual context specific to each of the seven interview participants, including identifying their specific themes. The table below provides a consolidated summary of the interviews, the intent of which is to visually reframe their themes into category groupings. Additionally, it also highlights the themes specific to one individual or a small subset of the participants.

Table 1: Themes

Groupings of Themes	Sedona	Reggie	Mack	Devon	Casey	Selby	Bert
Organization's Reliance on Email/Convenience	X	X	X	X			X
Communication & Content Organization	X	X	X	X		X	X
Isolation/Absence of non-verbal cues	X				X	X	
Revision of email drafts/Caution	X	X			X		
Documentation/Tracking/Erosion		X	X	X		X	X
Content throttling/Control Gates/Reflective and Self-Image			X	X		X	X

Notes:

- i) Four of the six groupings of themes in Table 1 are common across 50% of the participants.
- ii) Three of the groupings of themes in Table 1 are common amongst at least 5 of the participants.
- iii) Two of the theme groupings are common amongst 3 of the participants.

Conclusion

Chapter four highlighted the case study approach that I used to collect and conduct data analysis. It also provided details from each of the interviews, which were often encapsulated in excerpts from which I collected prevailing themes. For simplicity, I introduced a table at the end of this chapter intended to show the similarities, nuances, and outliers in the data collected from the diverse group of interview participants. The above themes presented in six groupings illustrate the overlap between the seven interviewees as being strongly represented in two of the groupings: Organization's reliance on email/convenience and Communication and Content Organization; representing five and six of the interviewees respectively.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Reflecting, and Looking Forward

The changes taking place over the last quarter of a century have included the introduction to and integration of email communications into most workplace environments, industries, and roles. This, coupled with my ongoing awareness regarding the frequency and prevalence of email communication in the workplace, sparked a personal interest for me regarding this topic. Email communications in the workplace, in many cases, have evolved to a point of saturation. Emails are, in general, now becoming part of the lifeblood of various organizations, including both private and public entities. As this study has indicated, there are numerous intentions that come into play and drive email communication. With this dissertation, I navigated down a path to understand thematic behaviors across multiple email users in the workplace. The core research question of this study was: “To what degree, if any, is human connectedness affected or reconstructed within the workplace?” Before moving on, noteworthy is the idea posited by Coyle (2018) suggesting that culture is really defined by what we do; and not who we are. I will offer that separating these two tenants is often an exercise that is avoided or ignored rather than being addressed and executed properly.

This chapter is offered through the lens of phenomenology approach with case studies approach and includes my interpretations of the data that was identified throughout the course of the study. I have created an analysis of multiple theoretical frameworks and insights taken from both the survey and interview responses. The make-up of my participants, which included representation from a diverse set of industries, backgrounds, and career paths, led me to choose a case study approach. Somewhat echoing my sentiment regarding the applicability of a case study approach, Feagin and Sjoberg stated, “It permits the grounding of observations and concepts about social action and social structures in natural settings studied at close hand” (1991, p. 6).

In this chapter, I will share both the limitations of the study as well as offer suggested opportunities for future studies. In Chapter four, I illuminated the categories themes that resulted out of the interviews. The data collection and analysis initially took place on an individual level with an intent to create a set of more direct and individual correlations. Later, in the chapter, I offered a collective view of the themes, across all interviews, in an effort to compare and contrast the interviews. For purposes here, I will now examine categories of themes that were most often shared across the different interview participants. The idea of self-image as it surfaced in this study will also be covered in this chapter.

This project sought to explore the work environment in terms of the degree to which human connectedness is affected or reconstructed using workplace email communication.

In this study, definitive observations were made that indicate that there are certain elements of workplace human connectedness that are reshaped or reformed using email. Most notably, the themes that seemed to be the most pervasive were consistent regardless of the proximity of people. Behaviors and themes were consistent when proximities were immediate and also when they involved distances, which especially included international email exchanges. These changes are physical in terms of our interactions with others, orchestrated through screens rather than in person; and those manifested in a digital sense as well as certain cultural factors that I will categorize as having an element of “stickiness” to them. Documented email content is not necessarily left as historical memory, as often the case with in-person conversations is. Phone calls and even written letters often have a limited period in which they can be easily referenced. Rather they are often retrievable and can be circulated beyond the original set of intended recipients. Themes and insights related to the interpretations will be introduced throughout this chapter.

Prevailing Themes

Within this section, I present select themes that surfaced throughout the collective interviews. They will be presented in groupings as in this framework they emphasize their interdependencies and tie together the load bearing themes that were demonstrated via the interviews.

Themes Grouping #1: Organization's Reliance on Email/Convenience

First, regardless of a person's professional role or industry, this study indicated that it is quite common for people to be heavily reliant upon email. Even when email may not be one's first choice for exchanging information, most often people utilize email because of their employer's expectations and often because the organization makes email convenient and easily accessible.

It was quite evident through the interviews that while the use of email is largely dictated by the employer, there seems to also be an overt desire by some to configure, direct and contemplate their work through email communications over the course of a day, as they have become likely conditioned to this method of working. I viewed this as their tactic to develop an alternative to working through face-to-face interactions, group meetings, or over the phone. All these options used to dominate how people worked in the last half of the twentieth century. In part, these behaviors people adapt to may be because of the convenience factor in terms of the use of email and the need to communicate.

In this instance, I've identified a conflict with the idea of Humanism: specifically, an erosion of human connectedness which is inherently one of our basic human needs. The example of email and I will posit other digital conduits of communication impeding human connectedness that arise out of spoken words, nonverbal cues and even the intimacy that humans

need in order to feel whole as contributing integral part of the community. Technology is enabling speed and convenience and this is being juxtaposed against human nature, much of which is often fueled in one way or the other by economics and power. As covered in the Chapter 2 the theory of humanish in the lens of Lamont (1949) is very applicable to this section in that people look to derive value and significance in the way they engage with others. Email has become a primary medium for intercommunications in the workplace.

Themes Grouping #2: Communication & Content Organization

People are socially equipped to interpret communications exchanged through non-verbal cues. Digital communications, including email, distinctly remove this attribute that has been so common in historical communication practices that predate the digital age. Through a lens of real-time (or close to real-time) communications, I will suggest that the real-time effect in digital communications creates a dynamic variable. This variance where latency has a meaningful role prevents a meaningful comparison between written letters and email communications. Staying within the context of this variable, in addition to non-verbal cues being absent, no standard substitutes are replacing the non-verbal exchanges in the case of digital email communications. I will posit that the absence of non-verbal cues introduces challenges in the developing ones' identity in the digital space, specifically within the framework of the theory of self and identity. Moreover, in the context of email communications, on a digital platform, an individual has to artificially create a self-identity which is more seamless in physical communication. This is dynamically different than the way we intend to create identity and image in person or even, in some cases, during phone calls.

Regarding the theory of identity and self and based on my analysis of the data, I propose that there is an opportunity to pair a second concept to create a comprehensive point of view.

Goffman (1959) as illuminated in Chapter 2 anchored to the premise that people in the construct of interpersonal interactions strive to influence if not control how they are perceived by others.

The data of this project indicated that was true in terms of email exchanges,

These tensions, healthy or otherwise, contribute to how one develops their communication styles and strategies and organizes of their content within the context of email exchanges, with some consideration given to how the sender of an email believes they are perceived by the way they present themselves in an email. This includes style, format, and timeliness, with the overarching element of our email communications being documentable and retrievable in permanent ways. It is commonplace that most email systems are configured with embedded capabilities to capture and retain messages to make them easily retrievable. Not mentioned by any of my participants was the fact that most organizations with subscription-based email services (contractual email providers; i.e. Microsoft) at an enterprise level have the ability to recall emails that their employees have sent or received, which happens without the knowledge of the employee. I raise this point because it is important to acknowledge at an individual level, as expressed by the participants in this project, that their primary concerns about how their messages are created, interpreted, and saved are largely experienced at an individual level. More specifically, most are concerned with interactions and impressions that manifest between two people or a group of people exchanging emails. Nothing throughout the course of the interviews demonstrated an overt concern or attention to risks, issues, or benefits that could be realized at an organization-wide level as it pertains to email repositories or the ability of an employer to retrieve emails that have been sent or received by its employees. On this point, it is reasonable to assume that an email may be retrievable even after it is deleted, at least for some period. The concept of ownership is also subject to change in that once an email has been

transmitted, its ownership, to some extent, becomes shared. In short, any decisions made over the future dissemination of an email communication no longer reside within the sole control or determination of the sender. My intent here is to raise awareness of the fact that the sender's message may be referenced in the future, by themselves, recipients, or the employer with or without the proper context: with legal or career impacting outcomes. Perhaps, all without the original sender's knowledge that the message is being reviewed.

- i) A sender's internal struggle between what he writes and how he believes it will be perceived.
- ii) Once one transmits an email, it may exist in a retrievable format (soft or hard copies) in perpetuity without his or her meaningful control over who may end up with the email's content in part or whole.
- iii) As a sender, how, if at all, can one differentiate between one's digital self in email and one's in-person self-identity (Goffman, 1959)?

Themes Grouping #3: The Remaining Four Categories

In the workplaces represented in the interviews of this study, the prevalence of email, both in terms of it being an integral part of the interviewees' workday experience and their self-described reliance on email to perform and/or stay in touch with their job, was consistent.

Through a single consolidated lens with each of the four categories of themes not already addressed in this section, there is a common thread that while sometimes subtle and other times demonstrative and even strategic ties each of them in parts to whole to Goffman (1959): Specifically, his theory of Backstage, frontstage and offstage. The amount of energy and focus dedicated to these four categories: i) isolation/absence of non-verbal cues, ii) revision of email drafts/caution, iii) documentation/tracking/erosion and iv) content throttling/control

gates/reflective and self-image suggests that people are keenly aware of implications that come into play based on the setting including context, environment and intended audience.

Limitations of Research

With this project, the limited number of participants created a finite data set, which inherently translated into limitations, such as preventing one from generalizing the themes across broader populations. Within the constructs of a phenomenological study, focus was placed on observations regarding people, their actions, and their thoughts. It is not always easy to distinctly separate people and their social behaviors from the influences of technologies, which, in this particular case, was email activities. In hindsight, I do believe there were limitations in terms of not having an international presentation of participants, as we continue to evolve and further define a deeper and broader landscape of globalization. Finally, this study examined more peoples' interactions with and approaches to email rather than the actual content of such email communications. This limitation was not because most organizations consider their employees' work email accounts to be the property of the employer and the contents of their emails as confidential.

Future Recommendations for Research

This project revealed a few different opportunities for subsequent research. A deeper inquiry into the psychological byproducts of email usage would be beneficial. For example, specifically in terms of human connectedness, power dynamics, and the relative absence of non-verbal communication. I also believe that this project demonstrated an opportunity for future work to quantify the amount of time people spend in the construction and transmission of emails compared to other work activities. Aside from email and other current digital technologies, I believe many future innovations will be ripe for study.

I also must stress the need for identifying protocols to be initiated and implemented regarding email usage in the workplace, not in terms of dictating what people use email for but more so under the construct of guide rails to be established and well clarified in the workplace. However, this proposed model is both complex and complicated and, even as an ideal, heavily nuanced. The thought is that email expectations established for people entering the workplace would be a strong positive step toward employee retention and enhancing workplace output efficiency. All too often, very little training or guidance is provided in terms of the art of email protocol. This lack of direction can create unclear expectations and frustration. From my own experience, the effort on behalf of the employer is typically limited to provisioning a new employee, a device that includes an email account.

One benefit of this study is the potential of developing efficiencies over time specific to how people engage with email. A second potential benefit is in the idea of providing a significant amount of shared opportunities that would be meaningful in understanding the desired etiquette framework for the use of email in the workplace. An email should effectively drive results and outcomes, and not be a tool latent with ambiguity or frustrations. It should be anchored in what someone wants to communicate rather than the person being consumed with how their message will be perceived.

Another area worthy of future study is the topic of the next generation of corporate communications, one that is perhaps dynamically different than email. Such a tool would likely still have imperfections if developed, in part, from an ethnographic lens; but it should consider both the benefits and opportunities provided by current email programs. I would also strongly recommend efforts to proactively address non-verbal gaps and develop ways to cut across

generations. I will also posit that it is critical that any future projects should attempt to examine tone along with non-verbal cues.

As I reflect on this study, I was surprised by the inefficiencies that resulted due to the evidence that points to personal tensions that endure as one commonly grapples with their personal investment in time and energy with some level of regularity regarding either or both: i) working through the processes that track the creation of an email from its first key stroke through when the creator sends the email and also ii) examining variables such as the context, emotions, and other reactions one may experience as the recipient of an email.

The topic of fatigue as experienced due to the pervasive connection to one's digital self; not limited to email communications is likely worthy of substantive inquiry. Arianna Huffington (2017) posits that the overload of technology in our lives results in fatigue and can be detrimental to our mental health.

Leadership dimensions offer an opportunity to be overlaid on top of the initial findings of this project. Leaders need to be able to navigate the discourse, taxonomy, and tensions that exist within the vacuum under the broad umbrella of email communications, including techniques and communication strategies.

Another area of the data worthy of its distinct study is the use of a blind copy. A wide range of thoughts and cases introduced by this study's participants surfaced during the interviews and were perhaps further emphasized by the limited number of interview participants, and the varied and significant swings that existed in regards to their attitudes in regards to the use of the blind copy in email communication. The notable themes in their responses included frequency of use, ethical dimensions and pre-conceived intentions by either the email transmitter or receiver (when utilized).

The richness of the data on this topic is of interest due to the varied attitudes introduced in the interviews. My interest in this topic was only marred by the small sample size of this dissertation. To be clear, through the course of the interviews, no sense of a common theme emerged. It implied a varied if not inconsistent rationale of email users who use the blind copy function. This could indicate that, if there are any considerations that occur in terms of one's intent, he should use the blind copy function. The one common outcome when implementing the use of the blind copy function is that all recipients are unaware who a specific email has been sent to in its original transmission. Moreover, when a blind copy is used as a result of premeditation, an element of game theory is introduced. Specifically, in terms of the idea of predictive elements in terms of the recipient's interpretation or actions.

The dynamic between the writer (sender) of the email and the blind copied recipient(s) is an important theme. It is in this exchange that Goffman's (1959) idea of the presentation of self can be noted, in which the sender may be trying to shape or meet the expectations of the recipient. I believe this to be true whether there is a political motivation behind the use of the blind copy function or even it is being exercised with the intent of ensuring awareness or visibility to a party in power or with control.

Altogether, the data that has been presented in the last chapter raised various points worthy of additional consideration, often highlighting opportunities for subjects to be studied in relation to one another. This mindset could offer a theoretical lens fueled by pragmatism, as defined by Prus and Grills, "Although their emphases were somewhat diverse (e.g., as in education, child development, and art) and their approaches were interdisciplinary in many respects, the pragmatists focused on the ways (*actualities* and *practices*) that people do things" (2003, p. 16). This is especially true if future studies include participants from diverse professional backgrounds.

Conclusions

None of the people I recruited in this process had ever given much thought, prior to our interview, to their individual approach to email use. The majority had not previously consciously contemplated any calculations regarding the amount of time they spent devoted to email activities. This shared point of view, coupled with the fact that email use, at least in developed economies, is quite pervasive, indicated that email communications and the associated thought processes of its users warrant academic inquiry on a much broader scale than this project.

I began this project through a sociologically infused curiosity that has evolved throughout the last 15 years of my career, sparked by periodic glimpses of instances that included polarizing, conflicted, or concentrated reliance on a single email exchange. especially in retrospect. In my mind, I see the irony in the fact that, generally, one's spoken words receive much less attention than the words typed and exchanged in an email. Spending time uncovering interpretations of tone illustrating the perceptions of others present within (or absent in) an email message can be both problematic and unresolved within the workplace environment. This aspect can affect any one in the workplace. One certain example is found through the measurement of time, energies and intent that users invest in the email platform. We found even less than ideal findings that many individuals were seemingly willing to endure significant daily email investments despite their discomfort.

The effort to fully understand the context, meaning, and intent of an email exchange in terms of calculating what real-time experience is all too often futile when done as an individual in a vacuum. Over the course of several years, I arrived at the conclusion that the absence of non-verbal expression often creates splintered and sometimes conflicting interpretations with email communications.

The interviews that created the foundation for this project revealed themes that demonstrated people from various professional domains develop and evolve in terms of what they consider necessary navigational skills for emailing. As there were people from similar professions in my study, I assumed that the way each person expressed themselves in an email was influenced greatly by personal factors.

Another takeaway commonly found across those I interviewed, aside from a steady reliance on email communications, was the fact that it was quite common for them to spend significant time and mental energy in creating and sending emails. As a researcher, one can find oneself lost in the depths of inquiry and data, but, as you recover your bearings, you can develop an appreciation for the experience you are going through.

As I engaged in different interviews, I was overcome with hesitations. The fact that the different participants showed significant differences in the number of emails they either sent or received gave me great pause as I initially believed that quality and richness could only be found with high volume of email users. This feeling persisted for a few days, even after all of the interviews were concluded. In time, I realized that I was frustrated because they were not fitting the mold of an area, I had preconceived notions about. During the recruiting conversations, I was sure judging by their roles that all participants, for the most part, would be sending dozens of emails a day. As I went through the interviews that reflected low volumes of emails, I felt as if the answers were not fitting into my study. Over time, I began to see the value in the experiences, mindsets, and strategies people used to engage in email exchanges. Email volume became a consideration but not a dominating factor of this study. The value of this project was not about numbers but in understanding the nuance of the strategies and mindsets people have in terms of their approaches to using email. Also noteworthy in this study was the data regarding

outliers in terms of volume (small amount of daily emails created) had some of the richest data in the project as compared across all interviewees. I realized that the time and even the intent behind an email can far outweigh its content (words). From my personal experiences, I believe these assumptions are often lost on the email recipient(s).

In terms of the human connectedness embedded in email correspondences, an undeniable ripple effect is observed, in that personal attitudes toward the email function affect not only an individual's email experiences but also the people with whom they exchange the emails.

In all, the extremely high number of emails circulating globally every day is increasingly becoming difficult to conceive, as reported as recently as 2017: "Every second, an estimated 2.4 million emails are sent. The number of email users worldwide is 3.7 billion, and the amount of emails sent per day is around 269 billion" (Allende & Fontana, 2017). This evidence should be compelling enough to generate interest for additional research.

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Appendix A: Glossary of Terms

Application, “app” for short, is software that is designed to enable multiple tasks or functions.

Android is an open-source operating system that is commonly used with smartphones and tablets.

Coding is the operation of creating a code for a computer program.

Data is information that is stored on a computer or other operating devices or infrastructures.

Data center solutions constitute a set of linked computers used to hold and/or generate data or instructions.

Decoding is the essential translation of code into a language.

Digital innovations constitute the idea of optimizing the performance of digital tools.

Digital landscape is a system of manmade spaces in a digital world.

Digital technologies constitute a data transfer that produces binary code.

Digitized information is data that is translated from analog to digital readable content.

Email systems are a tool that facilitate communication between devices such as computers, smartphones, etc.

E-procurement tools are Internet-based tools that enable the purchasing of goods and/or services

Global North the concept is based upon the division of countries based on socioeconomic difference and is that subset of countries that are generally considered developed or first world countries.

Information age is the period in time when access to and use of information technology is a defining feature of the human experience. It commences in the 1970s.

Internet is the network of hardware that can be connected to one another in the transferring and access to various data.

iOS is the operating system only used for Apple products.

Mainframe constitutes large computers that are utilized by corporations to run critical parts of their businesses.

Mediums are the object or system allowing for transmission between two or more participants.

Mobile devices are portable equipment that can connect to the Internet.

Network is a grouping of connected devices or environments.

Outlook calendar is a single component of Microsoft Outlook.

Pre-go-live events are instances of a software solution that are available in non-production environments.

Product platform constitutes the technological parts or elements that are shared by a group of end-users.

Product/solution is the software package that is made available to the end-user.

Session initiation protocols constitute parameters that enable two parties to communicate over infrastructure.

Software constitutes programs that allow a computing device or system to operate.

