Reception or Deception?- Participants' Disengagement during Teleconferencing in the Gambia Context

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Abstract

Purpose: Teleconferencing, a mode of organizational and informal group communication, has become so dominant in the epidemic era that it impacts highly on organizational functions. This descriptive study carried out among teleconferencing users in Kanifing Municipal Council of The Gambia sought to investigate the respondents' perceptions of the prevalence of the practice of disengaging during teleconferencing, the reasons why people disengage during teleconferencing, the gender dimension to disengaging during teleconferencing and how participants can be kept actively engaged during teleconferencing.

Methodology: Both the quantitative and qualitative survey methods were adopted. 77 people responded to the questionnaire. In-depth interviews were also conducted with 5 frequent users of teleconferencing platforms.

Findings: The results show that the practice of disengagement during teleconferencing is highly prevalent. 52 percent of the respondents admitted that they don't listen all through the teleconferencing events; 76.1 percent have got up at one time or the other to attend to other issues; 19.7 percent have got up more than 20 times to attend to other issues; and 81.3 percent of the participants have experienced situations where participants stayed signed in even though they were no longer in the meeting. Major reasons given for participants' disengagement include internet accessibility, cited by 40.5 percent of the respondents; distraction, cited by 40.4 percent. 14.4 percent of the respondents cited the fact that participants have the confidence that others in the meeting will be unaware of their disengagement. This claim was also buttressed by 4 of the key informants during the in-depth interview. Most of the respondents, 87 percent, were of the view that females disengage more often than males. 60 percent of those who express this view gave engagement with domestic chores as the reason for this. Ways suggested to keep participants engaged include ensuring meeting adopt the participatory mode, suggested by 24.3 percent of the respondents; solving internet issues of instability, suggested by 24.3percent; demanding that participants keep on their videos, suggested by 17.1 percent; ensuring meeting schedules and timing are favourable, suggested by 15.7 percent and lowering internet data costs, suggested by 7.1 percent.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The study concludes that disengagement during teleconferencing is highly prevalent, distractions and internet problems of connectivity and affordability are major reasons for disengagement and organisers of teleconferencing must control for these factors. It is recommended that organisations offer their staff gadgets for internet access; the government on its own part should explore all means possible to ensure internet stability in the Gambia.

Keywords: *Teleconferencing, Participants, Disengagement, Distraction, Internet Connectivity, Internet Affordability*

INTRODUCTION

Teleconferencing, in the face of the pandemic, has become an indispensable communication mode for workplaces, schools, families and other groups. When most of the world were compelled to adopt the mode of working from home, Zoom, Skype and other teleconferencing platforms facilitated online video meetings for hundreds of millions of people worldwide. The global video conferencing market size has grown exponentially; it was estimated at USD 6.28 billion in 2021 and is expected to reach USD 7.71 billion in 2022 (Grandview Research, 2021). Since 2005, those working remotely have increased by 140% ; this undoubtedly has driven the growth in the use of teleconferencing.

According to Woodward (2022), Zoom signed up over 400,000 people in the first month of its being launched. The popularity has continued to grow more since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Zoom's 2022 user statistics show that it has over 470,000 paying business customers and it facilitates over 3.3 trillion meeting minutes every year. By April 2020, Zoom had an average of 300 million daily meeting participants and its total revenue for the fiscal year of 2021 grew 326% year over year to become $2.7 billion. (Woodward, 2022).

In the case of Google Meet, at the heart of the pandemic in 2020, it recorded a daily users figure of 100 million and was adding 3 million users daily. Google's parent company, Alphabet, reported earning $6.8 billion in profit on a revenue of $41.2 billion in the first fiscal quarter of 2020. For Microsoft Teams, It had 250 million active daily users in 2021, in January 2022, it recorded 270 million monthly active users, representing a 20 million rise as compared to the figure for July 2021(Grandview Research 2022) Cisco WebEx currently has over 324 million users. The Asia Pacific market for video conferencing is expected to witness a CAGR of over 14.0% through 2030 with the adoption of new work styles across the regional businesses.

Effective participation and engagement is pivotal to the achievement of the goal of any teleconferencing event. Many facilitators of such events would at one point or the other have experienced some degree of frustration at the low level of engagement on the part of the participants. Moving from the level of anecdotal evidence, this study set out to ascertain the prevalence of disengagement during teleconferencing, the factors responsible for the disengagement and how organisers of teleconferencing events can overcome the challenge.

Precisely, the study sought answers to the following research questions:

The research questions to which answers were sought are;

How prevalent is the practice of disengaging during teleconferencing?

What are the reasons why people disengage during teleconferencing?

Is there any gender dimension to disengaging during teleconferencing?

How can participants be kept actively engaged during teleconferencing?

The study is very significant in the sense that though there have been studies on these issues in other parts of the world, there is the need to understand the problems in relation to the Gambian context.

Justification for the Study

The high dependence on teleconferencing as a mode of organisational and other group communication has necessitated investigating its limitations within The Gambia context with a view to proposing solutions recommended by the users themselves

Literature Review

The Evolution of Teleconferencing

Video conferencing (VC) is the process through which people in different locations interact and communicate through live, audio-visual multimedia platforms (Maimaiti, Jia, & Hew, 2021). The development of teleconferencing mechanisms began with Bell Labs in the 1920s, of which this basic product was improved upon in the 70's and until date to allow for a more sophisticated dynamic and group utilization (Maimaiti, Jia, & Hew, 2021). The use of VC became more prominent during the COVID-19 global pandemic (Oeppen et al., 2020). With the need for social distancing to curb the deleterious effects of the virus, institutions had to move their official proceedings to virtual platforms such as Zoom and Teams (Oeppen et al., 2020). Between December 2019 and April 2020, the daily users of zoom increased exponentially from 10 to 300 million (Karl, Peluchette, & Aghakhani, 2021). While many institutions may have returned to their in-person proceedings, the use of VC continues across varied contexts (Bennett et al., 2022).

Factors Driving the Video Conferencing Growth

There are a number of factors driving the teleconferencing growth.These include the globalization of businesses, geographically scattered business operations, and the need to adopt the work from home mode resulting in remote workforce management and the new features like breakout rooms which facilitate small teams collaboration, convenience and affordability for small business startups. Moreover, the increasing need for video conferencing solutions in the education and healthcare sectors is driving market growth.(Curry 2022, Grandview Research 2022). The mounting demand for video conferencing solutions in the education and healthcare sectors is also stimulating the market expansion.

Users' Engagement

Research has been ongoing for over 25 years, on strategies for improving user experience and engagement in the use of VC (videoconferencing) mechanisms (Oeppen et al., 2020). Moreover, challenges persist regarding the long-term use of VC and continued engagement of participants (Döring et al., 2022). VC fatigue is a term that captures the mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion that derives from the prolonged utilization of multi-media platforms for meetings (Döring et al. 2022; Karl et al., 2022). Döring et al. (2022) categorized the phenomenon of video conferencing fatigue into four causal dimensions including personal, organizational, technological, and environmental factors.

At the individual level, factors that contributed to VC fatigue include being female, young, and introverted (Döring et al. 2022). The social factors that are associated with VC fatigue are conceptualized into proximal (operational within the background e.g. previous interaction with VC platforms) and distal (playing a more immediate role such as the presence or lack of conflict during the VC) (Döring et al. 2022). Specifically, research has shown that VC hinders group social dynamics (Karl et al., 2022). The organizational factors include the frequency and duration of VC sessions; evidence has linked multitasking during a meeting with its length, and time at which the session is held (Döring et al. 2022; Karl et al., 2022). Short breaks during VC

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meetings may help increase participants' engagement (Döring et al. 2022; Maimaiti, Chengyuan, & Hew, 2021).

The context factors that determine VC fatigue include a lack of alignment between the anticipated outcome of the VC session and those of the participants, as well as the activity being completed during the VC session (Döring et al., 2022). Regarding the technological determinants of VC factors, the prolonged use of audio-visual media can cause increased chemical activities in brain functioning, and induce a state of fight or flight (Karl et al., 2022). More so, there is a lack of or delay in transmission of non-verbal cues; challenges in turn-taking; inability to fully bond socially and comprehensively assess first impressions; discomfort with being on camera; intensified use of communication signals that fatigues the user; and techno-exhaustion that comes from not knowing how to use the features of a VC platform (Döring et al., 2022; Karl et al., 2022; Bennett et al., 2021). The environmental factors that contribute to VC fatigue include the physical (climate, distractions) and psychological micro-environment such as balancing work-home demands; and macro-environmental factors including the psychological and mental health wellness of the VC session participants (Döring et al., 2022; Bennett et al., 2021).

Projections on the Use of Teleconferencing

There are projections that the use of video conferencing will continue long after the pandemic.The value of the global video conferencing market size was placed at USD 6.28 billion in 2021 and is projected to expand at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 12.5% from 2022 to 2030. (Grandview Research, 2022). According to a study by Upwork Inc (2021), one-in-four Americans worked from home in 2021; by 2025, it is projected that 36.2 million Americans will work remotely, representing an 87% increase from pre-pandemic levels.

Forbes & HubSpot cited by Beauford (2022), 55% of companies allow for remote work, 30% of A report by Owl labs in 2021 found that 55% of respondents ,say they work more hours remotely than at the physical office. This same report found that only 36% of people believe the office is best suited for the individual worker, employees are full-time remote workers, 62% of employees work from home occasionally, 79% of workers think video conferencing is at the same level or more productive than in-person meetings. (Owl Labs 2020) 82% of company leaders intend to permit remote working some of the time as employees return to the workplace (Gartner 2020). According to Forbes cited by Beauford(2022), 66% of employees reported that they have experienced a rise in virtual teams and 72% of companies reported an increase in client collaboration.

No studies have been done to better understand the challenges of video-conferencing in The Gambia. This study explores the determinants of video conferencing disengagement and the challenges experienced by VC meeting participants within the Gambian context.

Internet Use in the Gambia

The Gambia is the smallest country in mainland Africa with a population of 2.4 million. Most of the population (57%) is concentrated around urban and peri-urban centres. The poverty rate in 2021 was put at 8.9% by the World Bank. Inflation started increasing in January 2021with increase in food price undermining household food security, by February 2022, the inflation had reached 8.3 %. (World Bank, April 2022). In this context food availability will be prioritized above other needs. There has been an exponential growth in internet use in The Gambia in the last one decade as many users can access the internet with their cell phones.

However the cost of internet access remains prohibitive to many internet users in The Gambia.(Finn Partners, 2020)

According to a Chronicle (2019) publication, 'In a country where many people live on a hand-to-mouth system, average monthly income spent to purchase mobile data or broadband packages cost more than the entire salaries of a lot of full-time employees. Even those running successful businesses are complaining.' The publication documented the complaints of an online media outlet owner, students and workers about the cost of the internet in The Gambia.

The Africa Coast to Europe (ACE) project launched in 2012 to bring fiber optic cable to connect hundreds of millions of people was expected to make the internet more affordable and accessible to all Gambians across various geographical locations has brought limited improvement in terms of the cost or quality of the internet. Student's online classes were disrupted during the pandemic due to poor internet access (Finn Partners, 2020)

A case study of two massive internet-using nations in Africa- Kenya and Nigeria by the Internet Society shows that the adoption of Internet Exchange Point (IXP) by these two nations has greatly reduced internet cost and increased quality as it helps create shorter, more direct routes for Internet traffic. According to the internet Society (2020:1), 'Many of the people and organisations involved in setting up an IXP are traditionally competitors. By deciding to work together, they contribute to a better, more resilient local Internet infrastructure. This happens when there are people on the ground, championing Internet access for everyone and building a community to support this cause.' It is on the basis of this assertion that the IXP is recommended for The Gambia to aid internet affordability (Finn Partners, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

The Concept of Noise in Communication

"External noises are sights, sounds and other stimuli that draw people's attention away from the message. For instance, a pop-up advertisement may draw your attention away from a web page or blog. Likewise, static or service interruptions can play havoc in cell phone conversations, the sound of a fire engine may distract you from a professor's lecture or the smell of donuts may interfere with your train of thought during a conversation with a friend." (From "Communicate!" by Kathleen Verderber, Rudolph Verderber, and Deanna Sellnows)

Communication noise refers to influences on effective communication that influence the interpretation of conversations. While often looked over, communication noise can have a profound impact both on our perception of interactions with others and our analysis of our own communication proficiency. Forms of communication noise include psychological noise, physical noise, physiological and semantic noise. All these forms of noise subtly, yet greatly influence our communication with others and are vitally important to anyone's skills as a competent communicator. Rothwell, Dan J., In the Company of Others: An Introduction to Communication. New York: McGraw Hill, 2004

Social Presence Theory

Social Presence refers to the degree of one's awareness of the presence of other participants in the communication. Different media differ in the way they convey a feeling of the presence of others according to the degree in which they transmit audio and visual cues as expressed in voice quality, facial expressions and other forms of body language. Audio- visual media are higher in social presence than audio media while the idiots media are higher in social presence than written texts.

Media Richness Theory

This theory was first proposed by R. L. Daft and R.H. Lengel(19. Richness is defined as the potential of the medium to carry information in a communication context. Lengel's doctoral dissertation, he proposed that media varied in richness depending on how much information is provided through the communication. For example, in print media as opposed to face to face communication, the non-verbal cues of the writer that can enhance further understanding of the communication content are absent. Lengel argued that the richness of a medium is determined by the degree to which both verbal and non-verbal cues can be engaged for which face to face communication is ranked the highest in richness. Presence theory argues that media differ in the ability to convey the psychological perception that other people are physically present, due to transmit visual and verbal cues (e.g., physical distance, gaze, postures, facial expressions, voice intonation, and so on) [8].

In the light of these two theories, teleconferencing will be rated as a rich form of communication but the enhancing feature of videos need to be engaged when there are no tenable technical reasons to switch the video off. So, where does this leave us with CMC? Well, from the basic premise of media richness theory, we can ascertain that the richer the media, the less ambiguous a message is for a receiver.66

The media naturalness proposition states that the higher the degree of "naturalness" of a CMC medium, the lower the "cognitive effort" required to use it for communication. Underlying the media naturalness proposition are two key theoretical constructs, namely "medium naturalness" and "cognitive effort." The for- mer construct refers to the similarity between a given CMC medium and face-to-face interaction. The latter construct refers to the degree of schema use, reconstruc- tion, and development required to accomplish a certain task (Piaget 1971; Salomon 1979, 1981; Salomon et al. 1991).

Medium Naturalness. It is proposed here that the degree of naturalness of a CMC medium can be assessed based on the degree to which it incorporates five key elements of face-to-face communication: (a) colocation, which would allow individuals engaged in a communi- cation interaction to share the same context, as well as see and hear each other; (b) synchronicity, which would allow the individuals to quickly exchange communica- tive stimuli; (c) the ability to convey and observe facial expressions; (d) the ability to convey and observe body language; and (e) the ability to convey and listen to speech.

What is being argued here is that, other things being equal, among several different CMC media that can be used to perform a collaborative task, the medium that incorporates to the largest degree as many of these five elements as possible is the one that possesses the high- est degree of naturalness, other things being equal. Thus, if we compare two CMC tools such as an e-mail sys- tem and a video-conferencing system, we can say that the video-conferencing system provides a CMC com- munication medium that presents a higher degree of naturalness than the e-mail system, because it incorpo- rates more of the naturalness elements found in face- to-face interaction (e.g., synchronicity, limited support for the use of facial expressions, support for the use of speech) than the e-mail system does.

METHODOLOGY

The quantitative research method and the qualitative in-depth interview methods were adopted

85 survey questionnaires were distributed out of which 77 completed ones were retrieved and analysed.

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RESULTS

Demographic Details of Respondents

Gender: 55 percent of the respondents are females while 44.2 percent are males

Age: More than 80 percent of the respondents were within the age range of 20-30. Age range 31-40 constitutes
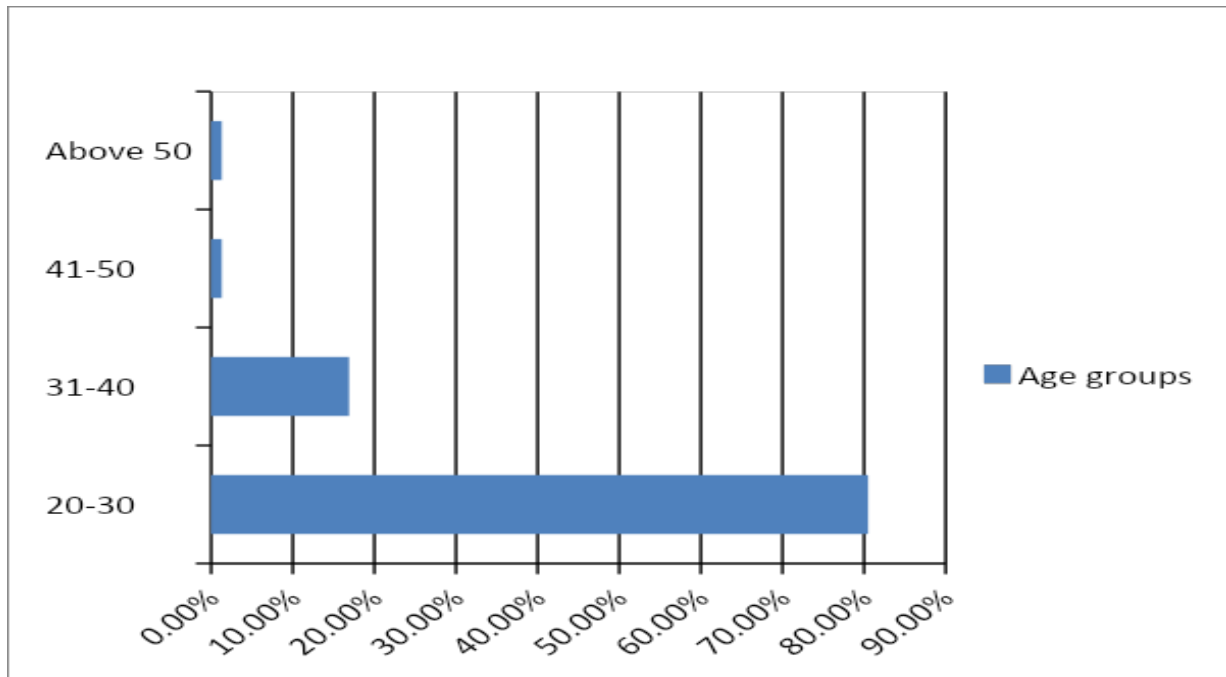

Figure 1: Age of Respondents

Educational Qualifications

Senior school graduates constituted 37.5 percent of the respondents, university first degree graduates constituted 43.8 percent and post graduate degree holders 8.7percent.

Number of times respondents have participated in teleconferencing:

Figure 2 shows that 30.5 % of the respondents have participated in teleconferencing above 20 times; 30.5% have participated at least 5 times while 38% have participated at least once.
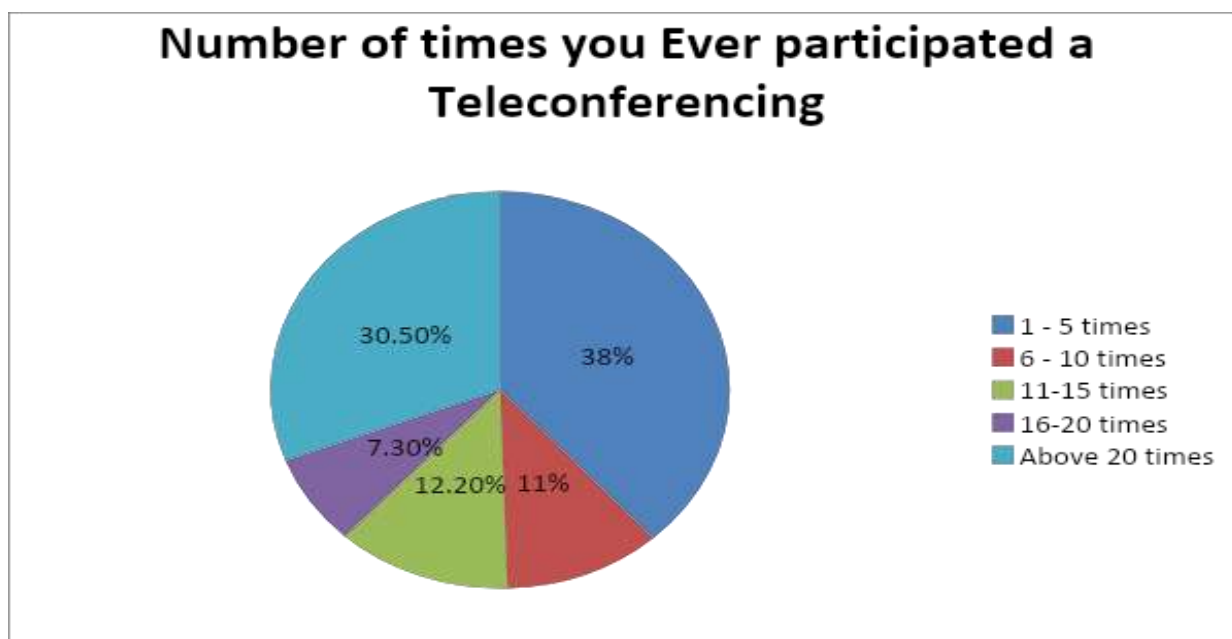
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Figure 2: Number of Times Respondents ever Participated in Teleconferencing

Prevalence of the Practice of Disengaging during Teleconferencing

Since there is a connection, to a great extent, between not turning on one's video and disengagement during VC, respondents were asked how often they and other participants in the VC turn on the video to show their faces. 68.8 percent indicated that they did not often,19.5 percent indicated that they often did and only 11.7 percent said they did very often.

As Table 1 shows, 53.2 percent of the respondents indicated that their co-participants did not often turn on their video, 33.8 percent indicated that their co-participants often did and only 13 percent indicated that they did very often. It can be deduced that respondents and their co-participants in VC largely would not want to show their faces during VC and this would undoubtedly impact negatively on their level of engagement. This conclusion is informed by the reasons given for not turning on their video as shown in Table 2, 41.1 percent wanted to have liberty, 22.4 percent cited being engaged in the background, 18.9 cited the need to avoid high internet data consumption, 12.2 percent, the rules of the meeting and 5.6 percent having limited idea of the meeting.

Table 1: How often others Turn on Their Video

S/n	How frequently others turn on video to show their faces	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Very often	10	13
2	Often	26	33.8
3	Not Often	41	53.2

Table 2: Reasons for not Turning on Video

S/n	Reasons for not turning on your video	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	To be at liberty	37	41.1
2	Engaged in the background	20	22.4
3	Avoid too much consumption of data (bytes)	17	18.9
4	Rules of the meeting	11	12.2
5	Having limited idea of the meeting	5	5.6

Table 3: Listening/Participating All through Meetings

S/n	Do you **listen** all through the meeting	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Yes	36	48
2	No	39	52

Table 3 shows that only 52 percent of the respondents listen all through the meetings, 48 percent claimed that they do not listen all through the meetings. In relation to the percentage of the time that they listen, Figure 6 shows that only 9.4 percent of the respondents listen for 91 percent and above of the time and only 64.3 percent listen for at least 61 percent of the time, and 18.9 percent listen for only 50 percent or less of the time.
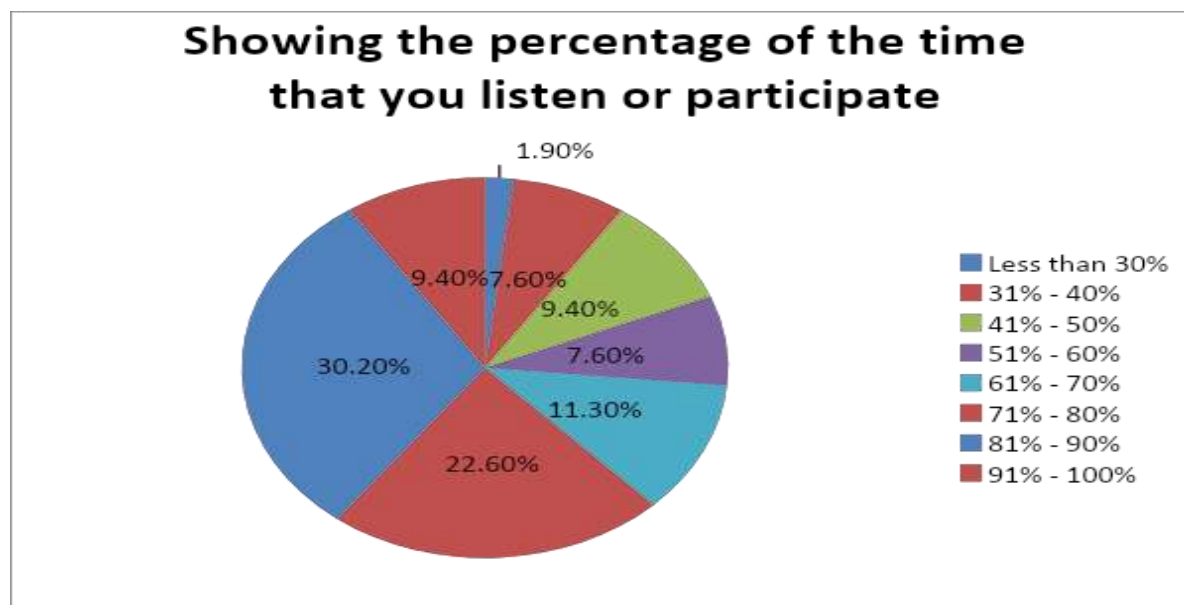
Figure 3: Percentage of the Time that Respondents Listen

Getting Up from the Teleconferencing to Attend to Other Domestic or Official Issues

76.1 percent of the respondents claimed that they have got up from teleconferencing at one time or the other to attend to other domestic or official issues. 19.7 percent have got up more than 29 times, 48.7 percent of the respondents have got up at least 10 times and only 6.6 percent claimed they never got up.

Experiencing People Who Stay Signed in When They are No Longer in Zoom or Other Teleconferencing Meeting

81.3 percent of the respondents have experienced teleconferencing participants staying signed in when they were no longer in the meeting.

Table 4: Frequency of Experience with People Who Stay Signed in When They Were No Longer in the Teleconferencing Meetings

S/n	How often do you experience people who stay signed in when they are no longer in zoom or other teleconferencing meetings	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Very often	20	33.3
2	Often	26	43.3
3	Not often	14	23.3

As shown in Table 4, 33.3 percent of the respondents have very often experienced people who stayed signed in when they are no longer in the meeting, 43.3 percent have often experienced such while 23.3 percent have not often experienced such. Staying signed in when participants are no longer around seems to be a prominent occurrence,

Reasons Why People Disengage during Teleconferencing

Figure 4 shows that 88.20 percent of the respondents have experienced people giving network connection as a reason for disengagement during teleconferencing, 11.80 percent have not. As depicted in Figure 9, 4.7 percent have experienced this more than 50 times, 34.1 percent have at least 21 times and 51.8 percent have experienced it at least 11 times. Network connection is a frequently given reason for disengagement during teleconferencing
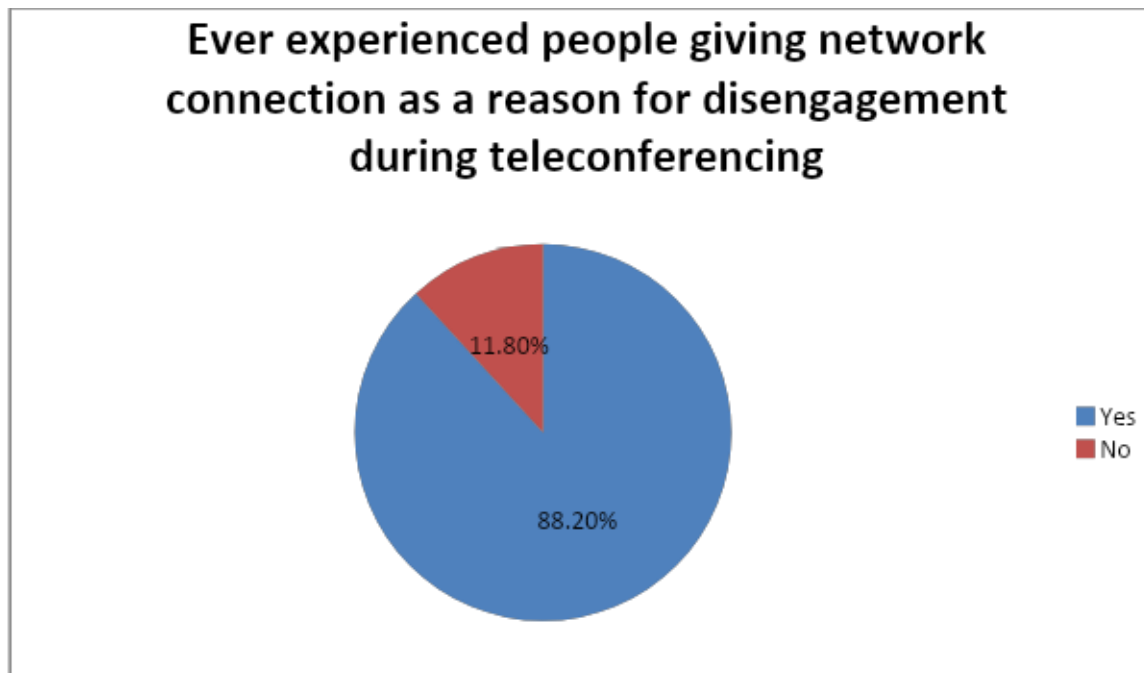

Figure 4: Network Connection as a Reason for Disengagement during Teleconferencing

Table 5: Number of Times Respondents Have Experienced Teleconferencing Participants Giving Network as Reason for Disengagement

S/n	Number of times you have Experience it	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	(1-5)	25	29.4
2	(6-10)	16	18.8
3	(11-15)	10	11.8
4	(16-20)	5	5.9
5	(21-30)	10	11.8
6	(31-40)	15	17.6
7	More than 50	5	4.7

In the bid to triangulate, respondents were asked their views on why people disengage during teleconferencing. As Table 6 shows, 40.5 percent of the respondents gave internet connectivity as a reason, 40.4percent cited distractions, 14.4 percent mentioned lack of proper monitoring and 4.8 cited inadequate knowledge of the subject under discussion.

Table 6: Reason for People's Disengagement during Teleconferencing

S/n	Reason for people's disengagement during teleconferencing	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Network issues	42	40.5
2	No proper monitoring	15	14.4
3	Distractions	42	40.4
4	Inadequate knowledge of the subject under discussion at start	5	4.8

Problems That People Have with Teleconferencing

Respondents were asked about their views on the problems people have with teleconferencing. 46.3 percent cited internet connectivity issues, 7.5 person mentioned boredom with seating for long, 9.0 percent indicated too frequent teleconferencing meetings,10.4 percent mentioned electricity failure and 10.4 percent cited unfavourable times chosen for meetings. The issue of internet connectivity was recurrent in respondents answers as well as the problem of distractions.

Gender Dimension to Disengaging during Teleconferencing

87 percent of the respondents were of the view that females disengage more during teleconferencing while 13 percent said males disengage more. Reasons given for disengagement by females were engagement with domestic chores cited by 60 percent, unspecified distractions cited by 30 percent, disinterest indicated by 10 percent.
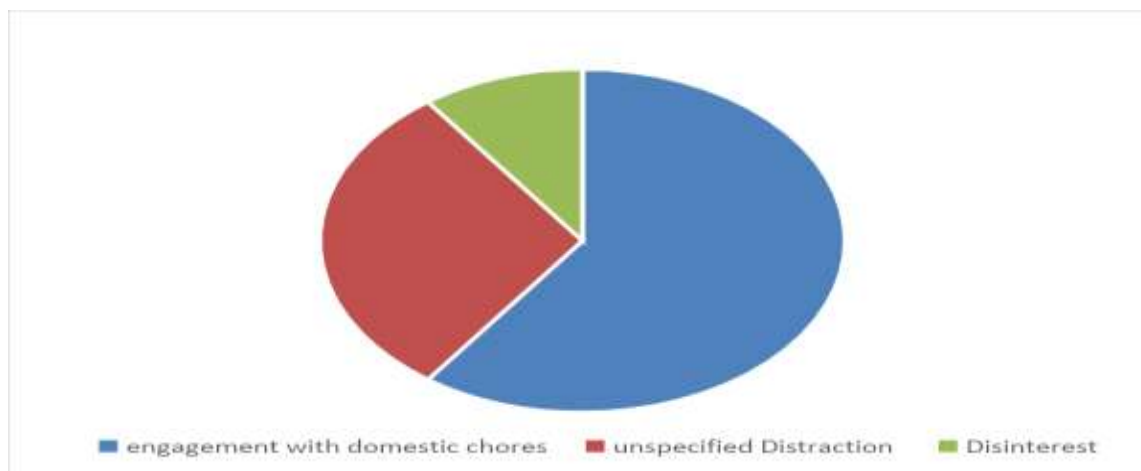
Figure 5: Reasons Suggested for Disengagement by Females

Respondents Views on How to Keep Participants Actively Engaged during Teleconferencing

Respondents gave their views on how to keep participants actively engaged during teleconferencing. These are making meetings participatory (suggested by 24.3 percent of the respondents), Ensuring stable internet network (suggested by 24.3 percent), requesting participants to turn their videos on (suggested by 17.1 percent), giving teleconferencing participants feed forward on what to expect in the course of the meeting (suggested by11.4 percent), keeping meeting schedule inspiring (suggested by 8.6 percent), ensuring that meeting is not too long (suggested by 7.1 percent) and making internet costs affordable suggested by 7.1 percent,

Table 7: How to Keep Participants Actively Engaged during Teleconferencing

S/n	Ensuring that people participate in a teleconference meeting	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Asking participants to have their videos on	12	17.1
2	Making meetings participatory	17	24.3
3	To ensures stable network	17	24.3
5	Meeting should not be too long	5	7.1
6	Affordable internet costs	5	7.1
7	Orientation	8	11.4
8	Having a favorable schedule	6	8.6

Discussion

Disengagement during teleconferencing is very prevalent. 52 percent of the respondents admitted that they don't listen all through the teleconferencing events; 76.1 percent have got up at one time or the other to attend to other issues; 19.7 percent have got up more than 20 times to attend to other issues; and 81.3 percent of the participants have experienced situations where participants stayed signed in even though they were no longer in the meeting. Disengagement limits inputs from participants and has the tendency to lessen team cohesion, hence the need to eliminate the phenomenon to the barest possible extent.

Major reasons given for participants' disengagement include internet accessibility, cited by 40.5 percent of the respondents; distraction, cited by 40.4 percent. 14.4 percent of the respondents cited the fact that participants have the confidence that others in the meeting will be unaware of their disengagement. This claim was also buttressed by 4 of the key informants during the in-depth interview. One key informant opined, 'People zoom in and out of meetings to save internet cost. The meetings burn a lot of data.' Another said, ' Internet cost is very expensive in The Gambia, one cannot afford to stay connected for too long.'

Internet connectivity issues significantly affect teleconferencing participants within the Gambian context. Distraction by other issues demanding participants' attention is very prominent among reasons given for disengagement, in the light of this, participants in teleconferencing may be encouraged to create a secluded area where they can have their meeting. This is particularly very relevant to women who may be pressured by domestic demands

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