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Abstract: This study explores the perspective of information communication technologies, in the form of digital community platforms: Discord and Zoom. It aims to understand how platform perspectives impact their approach to managing the negative impacts of the COVID 19 pandemic following initial lockdowns. This paper employs a grounded theory based textual analysis of emerging communication platforms official blog posts. The study highlights a few distinct themes emerging within the documents assessed; the role of user growth as a pandemic problem frame, the perception of the pandemic as transformative and perpetual, and the initial understanding of their platforms value.

Subject Headings:

Blog

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CAPITALIZING ON AFFORDANCES: STUDYING HOW ORGANIZATIONS
PERCEIVE THEMSELVES AS SOLUTIONS DURING PERIODS OF CRISIS

by
Ayotade Gbade-Alabi

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Approved by

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Francesca Tripodi

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has shifted the way millions socially interact across various spheres of their lives. Traditional means of education, work and socialization became inadvisable due to the risk of transmission. This has created an incentive to change the settings in which we establish community from an in-person to an increasingly online environment. Before the pandemic, several dominant community discourse platforms were in use such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Despite this, many digital communication platforms managed to gained traction as the need for connection was exacerbated. The growth these platforms experienced is partially due to their opportune positioning and technical infrastructure. Their use of video technology and their incorporation of digital community-based features provided them the means to scale their service to meet the growing needs of people socially impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. As we increasingly look to these platforms as solutions to our lost means of connection, understanding how these platforms view themselves as solutions is increasingly relevant. The way emerging platforms manage our new social, educational and workplace restrictions during the pandemic is a topic that has little research.

There is however research adjacent to this. Several studies address the role of digital communication platforms in handling disruptive events such as natural disasters, wars, social unrest and more (Tufekci, 2018; Velev, 2012). These studies often address social media platforms and their mixed impacts; either in galvanizing or informing/misinforming a populace. Other studies address the role platforms play in handling localized impacts on a specific organization (Henningson, 2021). These studies have platforms taking an active role shaping region wide events like the Arab Spring or responding to Natural Disasters. Some researchers have employed

an affordance perspective to document the unique behaviors made possible. that characterize these platforms (Bucher and Helmond, 2017).

Affordances are multi-dimensional in that they are being shaped by multiple parties to generate a particular behavior. Research covering these platforms shift the weight of their focus across these dimensions to better understand the value associated with changes made in their platforms (Bucher and Helmond, 2017). To understand the value of a platform's features, these studies often highlight how the technology buttressing them responds to the cultural complexities and the shift in needs of those who use them. Despite the variety of angles taken by researchers exploring the range of communication platform impacts, few studies attempt to understand how the organizations behind these platforms conceptualize and understand their unique set of affordances. This is even rarer in the context of slow, less abrupt disruptive events where the changes are extended.

This study fills this gap by exploring the public facing communications from two emerging community platforms experiencing record growth during the pandemic, Discord and Zoom. Through a thematic text analysis of corporate blog posts from March 2020 – Oct, 2021 (the beginning of statewide lockdowns in the US to now), this study sheds insights into how Discord and Zoom understand the value of their new and current features as a response to a global pandemic. By centering the platform's perspective on how the functionality of their technology helps facilitate connections during the pandemic, this study hopes to offer a nuanced perspective informing others on how platforms can effectively generate solutions during disruptive moments in history.

The ability for companies to respond and adapt their services during periods of change and instability is important. Understanding the variety of ways platforms can influence user-platform interactions will give organizations a stronger understanding regarding how they can mitigate the negative impacts caused by major global social disruptions. In addition to mitigation, social platform-based organizations can also explore how to take advantage of socially disruptive

events by leveraging their competitive advantages. A rich affordance perspective provides a nuanced understanding of what factors shape the mobilization of a platform's resources to generate solutions to the global community disruption experienced during COVID. I draw on the voices behind these organizations, a factor shaping the realization of affordances during this pandemic context, to support my analysis. How these organizations communicate, not only shapes the affordances they offer, but also reflects their views and perspectives on what their platforms afford their clients/partners/users.

LITERATURE REVIEW

PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS: THE VALUE OF PUBLIC BLOGS

The value and impact of organizational public discourse is reaffirmed by Streeter, a global media policy scholar. While Streeter focuses on how discourse serves to manage power, they prove how organizational public discourse can be employed to "set expectations" (2013). These expectations are direct components in how users understand the affordances available to them (Bucher and Helmond, 2017). Streeter (2013) suggests that organizations can use policies, a public facing statement, to shape the direction of discourse in their environments or domains. Gillespie (2010) affirms a similar concept more grounded in the digital platform context when he asserts that platforms are generated via the "cultural vocabulary [used] by stakeholders with specific aims." The technology that makes up these platforms are not the sole determinants of their perceived value to users. The value to a particular audience, according to Gillespie, is "carefully" employed to help them understand what should be expected of the technologies available via their platforms. Organizational voices may "sell, convince, persuade, protect, triumph, or condemn" various uses to realize their platform's purpose amongst their target audience (Gillespie, 2010).

I suggest this phenomenon parallels the impact blog posts can have in shaping the social affordances available to be perceived and realized by platform users. These blogs offer rich information regarding the sentiments/perceptions of corporate organizations with rapidly growing digital platforms. These documents offer great insight regarding how they understand their user base and the pandemic specific affordances they aimed to engender among their users. The value of an affordance lens in this context is made better by the context specific iterations developed by scholars from different disciplines.

AFFORDANCE ORIGINS: BLUEPRINT FOR AFFORDANCE EVOLUTION

The term affordance is typically used to refer to a unique relational property identified between an individual and a particular object/feature within its environment. Gibson (1977) originally coined the term to describe "what the environment affords animals". In simpler terms Gibson used the term to distinguish the unique actions/behaviors enabled when a particular animal engages with a particular component within their environment. According to Gibson, the affordances identified are not simply dependent on the physical components of the environment but the idiosyncratic perceptions of animals that engage with it. Despite having a broader ecological use for his affordance conceptualization, many of the components that form Gibson's affordance conceptualization persist in contemporary affordance conceptualizations. For example, Gibson highlights the diversity with which an environment might present itself to an organism. In his theory of affordances, he identifies multiple "surfaces" including objects, other organisms, and places. To add further nuance to his theory of affordances, he even addresses the ways in which humans generate artificial environments to afford them actions that fit their needs (Gibson, 1977). Gibson was thorough in articulating the complexities and nuance built into his theorization, however even those do not account for the variability present in digital environments.

Affordance conceptualizations have expanded to better capture human specific affordances but stay true to capturing the phenomenon present in the interaction between an individual and their environment. Norman's evolution of the affordance concept took root within the design discipline as it offered rhetoric informing practical design choices. The focus was more on "what the user perceives than what is actually true" (Norman, 2004). This shift is accompanied by a focus on the role designers have in shaping whether an affordance is recognized and made use of by users. Gaver (1996) introduces a specialized application of the concept of affordances as well. He uses it to understand how social interactions are mediated by various material technology developments from paper to the internet. This development gives way to the concept of affordances that primarily relate to the advent of new social technologies, termed technology affordances (Bucher and Helmond, 2017). Hutchby (2001) adjacently builds out the concept of an affordance to capture the role of technology in shaping our communication via what they enable and what they constrain through their material apparatus.

AFFORDANCE EVOLUTION: A PLATFORM SENSITIVE APPROACH

Bucher and Helmond (2017) document how various conceptualizations of affordance have evolved to capture digital and social phenomena that don't fit neatly within Gibson's conceptualization. From utilization in a design context to capturing the multi-layered nature of digital affordances, affordance conceptualizations vary based on the utility pursued by the one proposing the conceptualization. While various disciplines have drawn on Gibson's theory of affordances, some conceptualizations have gained more traction in certain spaces than Gibson's. Norman's conceptualization of affordances is a prime example that has "been adapted in design studies and the field of Human Computer Interaction" (Bucher and Helmond, 2017).

Like Norman several scholars have offered expanded conceptualizations of the term affordance to capture nuanced behavior unique to their disciplinary spaces (Nagy and Neff, 2014;

Schrock, 2015; Norman, 2004). As humans have engaged more frequently with digital surfaces, an abundance of affordance concepts have emerged to capture the interaction between people and their digital environments. Bucher and Helmond (2017) briefly reviewed various prefixed affordance conceptualizations that capture the different ways affordances are mediated. They are differentiated by the role our minds, algorithms, software, hardware, and more are emphasized within each conceptualization. While some conceptualizations share a lot in common, they all offer key shifts in thinking to serve a particular purpose. In Bucher and Helmond's (2017) platform sensitive use of affordances as an "analytical tool", they propose a shift in understanding the diversity of users and the malleable multidimensional nature of digital platform environments. This shift, much like Normans in the design space, offers Bucher and Helmond the flexibility necessary to process the increasingly complex affordance context that platforms facilitate.

In this study I try to dive into a particular user/interest group in the platform space; the organization itself. As Bucher and Helmond rightly point out, the end user of a platform is not the only active party on a digital platform, despite being the focus of many affordance assessments. Asa parallel to the "organisms" identified in the Gibsonian environment, Bucher and Helmond includes end-users, developers, advertisers, and inorganic actors in the social media space. These are the main users assessed when exploring the behaviors afforded them when new features are introduced to a platform. In this study I focus on another group that factors into what the platform affords its different users. For the sake of this study, I consider the corporations behind a platform as an individual entity that manages end user behavior with their platforms through their public-facing communications.

While end users regularly explore the bounds of the technologies they are exposed to, the initial use and purpose behind the platform is predefined by the corporations that own them. These initial purposes may be broad or narrow but can be understood as a primary influence on the imagined affordances Nagy and Neff (2015) highlight in digital spaces. The perception of users shifts the way they understand affordances specific to them. Nagy and Neff summarize this

phenomenon when they introduce the term "Imagined Affordances". I would argue that corporate statements via their blogs act as explicit mediums for influencing user perceptions regarding what their platform affords them. Just as Norman attributes more agency to designers crafting features, corporations share a similar ability to direct platform users' behavior despite not being as artful. Corporate blogs interact with perceptions to manage affordance realization. As Nagy and Neff (2015) rightly identify, this is outside of the material traits affordance conceptualizations are traditionally grounded in. Nagy and Neff's proposed imagined affordances acknowledge that there is an influence on user perceptions beyond what is encoded in the platform's design. While not fully elaborated, Nagy and Neff (2015) suggest that there exists a space where affordances emerge between "users' perceptions, attitudes, and expectations; between the materiality and functionality of technologies; and between the intentions and perceptions of designers".

Bucher (2016) and Nagy & Neff (2015) address the role designers and developers have in shaping user perceptions of what they can do on digital platforms. Both point out that how users understand the design and algorithms presented to them, via end user features, shape user approaches to the platform. Nagy and Neff (2015) draw on communication and psychology discipline's emphasis on perception to support their claims regarding the need for greater emphasis on how perception is accounted for in affordance conceptualizations. While this paper does not center on user perceptions, it does seek to explore how corporate perceptions during the pandemic intersect with traditional affordance dimensions to create affordances for users that mitigate the negative impacts of COVID 19.

DISRUPTIVE EVENTS: THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN TIMES OF TURMOIL

Some scholars cite the role of technology, specifically social media platforms, in generating and sustaining disruptive events (Tufekci, 2018). Social media was critical to the networked nature of the Arab Spring. It was used not only as a vehicle for the event

but also as a response. The role of platforms in that event setting is well documented, both in its support for collective action and overcoming or enabling constraints on protesting parties depending on whether you were the Government or the Protesters. Similarly, during the COVID-19 Pandemic we see diversified impacts of communication platforms depending on where you were situated during the pandemic. For the working professional the pandemic exposed you to remote work. If you were a student or a teacher, you may have embraced zoom or some other remote learning platform. If you were retired, you had more incentive than ever to explore how technology could support important connections with your family. A whole host of existing technologies were employed and embraced to manage social distancing constraints.

Across various disciplines and age ranges scholars have already documented and researched the range of impacts the pandemic has had on the world. Several studies dive into how technology managed our remote work environments, our mental health, the learning needs of our youth, and information regarding how best to protect ourselves during the pandemic for better or worse. Platforms have had mixed results in terms of their impact on particular populations. In the business setting, Henningson (2021) captures the value to customers telecommunication technology has brought to a specific organization undergoing transition to meet stakeholder pandemic needs. Yeshua Katz et al (2021) explores the opportunity for information communication technologies to support isolated seniors during the pandemic. While they identify and affirm various positive mental health affordances for seniors, the same cannot be said for every demographic. Mora et al (2021) similarly assesses the capacity for ICTs to act as solutions to COVID but has found that a lack of awareness of the non-technology factors

at play severely limited the effectiveness of solutions aimed at managing the spread of Covid. The role of ICTs as a solution often point to a need for nuanced application of technology to support positive outcomes in distinct social spheres.

The role of technology as a solution to problems created by the pandemic are gradually being explored. Few take the perspective of the organizations behind the technology and their agency in supporting the solutions being generated. The value of the organization's perspective exists beyond the material use of the technology itself. This study may not account for the mixed impacts of the technologies employed as solutions to remote work, at home learning, and social distanced induced negative effects, but it may, in combination with other affordance components, move the net impact of ICT solutions towards a more positive outcome.

Ultimately, it is clear that whatever affordance conceptualization is employed to understand a digital platform's value, it should address the platforms as more than simply environments perceived by users, but an amalgam of malleable components shaped by the vision of the organizations upholding them. These organizations' perceptions and accompanying discourse offer a meaningful affordance component that has been demonstrated to actively shape their user's behavior. Existing affordance literature often prioritizes the impact on users and the role of designers in shaping that impact. However, as illustrated earlier, the power organizations have in shaping their user's platform experience is not to be neglected. Norman's (2004) affordance conceptualization emphasized not only the content of the platform available to the user but also the perceptions of users as they determine how to embrace the platform. Gillespie (2010) offers some insight on the power of popular platform organization voices such as those behind YouTube. He addresses their ability to determine what platforms "are and are not" to the public hinting at that interaction between user and corporate perceptions.

Recognizing contemporary "expansions" of affordance conceptualization's ability to account for organizational voices to shape user behavior opens the door for more research on corporate perception beyond the confines of the platform itself. This may help further balance the emphasis on technology determining the outcome or use associated with a particular platform.

At the core this study is improving our understanding of how the use of technology during challenging times is managed by corporate perceptions. Using an affordance lens to understand powerful actors shaping the adoption of specific technologies in successful contexts should offer greater agency to platforms aiming to produce a positive outcome. An affordance perspective helps capture the value of novel features introduced. It also reveals the challenges associated with getting existing users to adopt unfamiliar features/uses. Affordance theory has been used to explore the introduction of new features, perspectives, users and more. Bucher and Helmond (2017) help extract the inherent tradeoffs in manipulating familiar user experience defining features. An affordance lens brings to the fore the components impacting user behavior that a business builds their platform on. It offers insight into how these affordance behaviors take root. In some cases, the competitive advantage of the platform is highlighted, explaining the value to actors on the platform including users and managers (Bucher and Helmond, 2017). This study hopes to offer novel insights by highlighting corporate communication behavior that effectively shapes the way current and new users choose to employ their platform to meet pandemic specific needs. I suggest explicit corporate communication can be understood as an active dimension in the shaping of imagined affordances. Corporate blogs from Discord and Zoom are taken as sources of data for the perceptions of corporate entities. I employ them to explore how they might intersect with user needs to generate pandemic specific affordances for their rapidly expanding user base.

METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on how Discord and Zoom conceptualize their technology platforms as a solution to the social challenges that arose from the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study grounded theory is employed to extract how their blog discourse 'manages' pandemic specific behavior and challenges for their respective user bases. Manage in this context refers to how Discord and Zoom understand and respond to these pandemic phenomenon. Drawing on Charmaz (2006) as a resource, I gathered data, coded for emerging themes, and generated salient categories to act as evidence for my interpretation of the connections between identified categories. While the order was not strictly enforced, I made use of various writing and coding frameworks available within the Grounded Theory framework to better formulate my analysis. This involved free writes, loose memos and more to support "spontaneous" and "free flowing" idea formation (Charmaz, 2006). The data consisted of extant texts generated by Zoom and Discord's internal staff. These texts were seen as suitable sources of data due to their inherently biased origins. As Charmaz (2006) points out, these texts have limitations and are subject to the definitions personally held by the creators. These texts do not necessarily "mirror reality" even in the most quantitative oriented documents. Nevertheless, a variety of questions are offered by Charmaz to extract ambiguous information embedded in their origin and structure (Charmaz, 2006, 39-40).

This initial collection of blog data was selected to offer a starting set of data with "rich" and "full" data supporting pandemic related category extraction (Charmaz, 2006). With that in mind, manually extracted blog posts from March 2020 to October 2021 were assessed for pandemic specific communication pertaining to actors within their platform.

This period covers the initial WHO declaration that COVID-19 is a pandemic, the onset of statewide government restrictions implemented and the consequent reduction and scaling of restrictions as fear of the pandemic fluctuated. Data was initially selected for analysis by examining explicit mentions of the pandemic and/or its primary impacts across the total set of blogs. After which, I selected explicit sentiments regarding the pandemic and the platform's role in alleviating the pandemic's negative impact. This also included selecting blog posts highlighting new features being introduced by Discord and Zoom during this period. Following that initial collection of data, the context of the mention of covid within each blog was captured in a chronological order.

Open coding was performed on the initial selection, capturing themes illustrating how Zoom and Discord perceived the pandemic. Blogs existed in various forms and were initially divided according to their format. The 34 Discord blogs existed in the form of:

- Community Stories,
- Corporate Reports,
- Resources,
- Discord HQ statements and
- Product and Feature updates.

The 151 Zoom Blogs were formatted in the following ways:

- Client/Partner Stories
- Corporate Reports
- Resources
- How To's
- Leadership Highlights
- Product rollouts

- Company News

While further explicit divisions were made via the blog hosting sites tag mechanism. The above capture the broader categories elicited. Following the first round of coding, title based in vivo coding was performed to assist in extracting broader themes, many of which reflected built in tags. This iteration of coding involved the use of blog titles as a guide to recurring sentiments within the blogs. These preexisting categories that sorted the corporate blog organization were also used to support the coding process as more nuanced information was extracted for blog specific sentiments. In vivo coding of these sentiments then followed. As larger patterns became evident through repeat feature introductions, particular themes regarding platform perspectives were generated. A final round of line-by-line coding of explicit themes within categorically representative blog posts also occurred. All coding was performed manually via Google Docs and Sheets.

Following the coding process capturing how the pandemic was framed by Discord and Zoom, the differences were explored by comparing the relative approaches of these somewhat similar platforms in addressing the pandemic. The similarities and differences between the organizations communications as supported by the grounded theory coding methods were then used in conjunction with general platform insights to support my final analysis.

Findings

The approaches taken by Discord and Zoom indicate that they share similar perceptions of their value to users at a technical level. They share similar considerations when situating themselves as solutions within their pandemic blog post narratives. Their style of presenting solutions, their accelerated rate of growth and their transforming appeal to current and future users reflect a common set of concerns within their corporate space.

While sharing similar considerations, a comparative analysis of the public blogs issued by Discord and Zoom indicate variable understandings of what they afforded communities during the pandemic. Despite having very similar technologies, Zoom and Discord's approach to mitigating and managing the disruption from the pandemic differed in significant ways. The differences observed regarding how they communicated their solutions during the pandemic seem to be shaped by reoccurring perceptions in their pandemic narratives. These perceptions include their perception of who is being impacted by COVID and how their technology was originally intended to meet user needs.

- Perceived demographics impacted by COVID
    - (Who did these organizations specify as being impacted most by the pandemic? How specific were they? How conscious were they of their transforming userbase?
    - Targeted Audiences
    - Range of User Stories
- Original technology solution conceptualization
    - What was their platform originally built to solve? Who did they originally have in mind when developing their platform? What technology did they see as key for their solutions?
    - Material technologies built into their platform

These differences appear to shape the perceptions of platforms on the pandemic and their perceived value as a solution to users impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. A comparison of their blog post indicated responses to the questions above seemed to detail some common and divergent communication platform appeals. Zoom's impact in particular social spheres relative to Discord's can be seen as partially influenced by their respective blog post "responses" to the

above topics. While Zoom and Discord share immense overlap in what they are able to offer users during the pandemic, differences in their messaging

USER GROWTH AND INNOVATION

Across multiple blog posts in multiple formats including reports, user stories, and community highlights by Executives and dedicated blog writers alike, growth is regularly highlighted as a concern by the respective company personas. Both platforms acknowledge their surge in users as a call to reassure their current and new users that the quality and personality behind their services will hold up. Even as Discord's CEO reflects on the core values of Discord as a place for everyone to talk and belong, he recognizes the challenge associated with building "online spaces where they[people] can find real humanity and belonging" (Citron, 2020 JUN). Citron (2020 JUN) makes pointed attempts at assuring users that Discord has value beyond gaming in his *Your Place to Talk* blog piece when he speaks to reports from Discord users who think there is a prevalent misconception of Discord as being "'only for gaming'". Discord writers continually aim to reaffirm the platforms value to new users via reports on new user utilization of Discord in the classroom or as a club platform (Sanchez, 2021). For Discord the surge in growth of monthly active users and record-breaking server sizes rattled their vision for what the platform could be used for. Discord's CEO comments on the platform's growth nearly 9 months into the pandemic, both highlighting and welcoming the general influx of new organizations, events, and groups. Creatively taking advantage of discords server space (Citron, 2020 DEC). Often this growth is presented as unexpected and beyond Jason's original vision for connecting people over their favorite games.

Zoom similarly processes its expanded client base as reflected in their CEO's message to their users in the April following the WHO pandemic announcing their 90-day plan to respond and address issues emerging in their solutions offerings. Eric Yuan sends a personal message to users detailing the "tremendous undertaking" that is supporting their influx of users during the

early months of the pandemic (Yuan, 2020). Zoom's corporate response as many of their codes implied reflect an air of preparedness and confidence through the sheer volume of detailed user resources, they offered following the onset of the pandemic. Roughly 90 of the blog posts extracted from zoom are dedicated to webinars, events and guides detailing how to manage covid specific challenges. This confidence however was not always there. In Zoom's CEO's initial address of the pandemic to Zoom user's all around he states the following:

"we did not design the product with the foresight that, in a matter of weeks, every person in the world would suddenly be working, studying, and socializing from home. We now have a much broader set of users who are utilizing our product in a myriad of unexpected ways, presenting us with challenges we did not anticipate when the platform was conceived. " - Eric Yuan (2020 APR)

Despite the seeming unpreparedness to handle the user influx and other pandemic challenges that arose, Yuan maps out a detailed plan of action in the same *A Message to our Users* blog post (Yuan, 2020 APR). Most notably he envisions the large volume of user resources and successful use cases to be produced over the next year and a half. Discord also documents the success its new users have had but with much less frequency only boasting 9 blog posts. The lack of prescience regarding the value of blog posts may be reflected in twitter relying on other outlets for user success stories as the CEO directly solicits user stories and feedback from Twitter (Citron, 2020 DEC).

USER REASSURANCE AND SAFETY

Both organizations had to wrestle with the concept of "safety" and "transparency". While Discord wrestled with the safety in the form of individual user reports, Zoom faced a slightly different safety dilemma regarding the security of the communications made via its platform. This even spurred a personal address by the CEO in May of 2020 where he directly highlights features dedicated to managing "zoom disrupters" and public concerns around international interest

groups and the potential for data to be misappropriated (Yuan, 2020 MAY). Depending on how they experienced pressure from the public, their approach to developing and publicly reassuring their userbase of their platforms safety and security while operating on their platform differed. Whereas Discord mainly generated reassurance for its users via its biannual reports, Zoom's CEO felt compelled to personally address security concerns from the public. In his *Navigating a new Chapter for Zoom* piece Yuan references existing security blog post resources as well as his identity (nationality, citizenship) and its implications for the "American" "global" company (Yuan, 2020 MAY). This coincides with media circulation regarding concerns about China's ability to access Zoom data (Brewster, 2020). Yuan actively distances himself from any idea of conflicts of interest being responsible for the companies' data mishaps. Zoom and Discord's growth, while welcomed, brought increased scrutiny on this topic during the pandemic prompting direct shifts in how Discord shaped the discourse in its transparency reports and the emphasis placed on security. For Discord transparency reports prior to the onset of the pandemic contained much of the same information but with limited citation of external influences on trends observed. Discord blog regular, Nelly (2020 AUG), opens their findings by stating "the biggest change since our last transparency report has been COVID-19 and the growth it has created for our service" (Nelly, 2020 MAR). The sheer increase of user reports of spam, exploitative content, cyber crime and more is presumed to be due to the pandemic. Discord appears to be comfortable scaling its safety measures to "keep everyone safe on Discord" (Nelly, 2020 AUG). Beyond this Discord offered a significant number of resources for moderator guidance to better support their stated "top priority" for user safety; a sentiment that was absent in their previous report (Nelly, 2020 MAR).

TEMPORAL SHIFT IN AUDIENCE AND PERCEPTION

The Beginning

Both Zoom and Discord began at different starting points in terms of what they hoped to offer their userbase. On Zoom's inception, it was designed to be a global networking/collaboration platform for any mid to high level enterprise seeking to take advantage of video communication technology (Yuan, 2020 APR). For Discord its inception was centered around being a chat app for user's playing Final Fantasy in 2015 (Sanchez, 2020). A place for everyone to talk (Zoom) as opposed to a place for "large institutions with full IT support" (Yuan 2020 APR). Both platforms have expanded their offerings to meet the needs of users during the pandemic.

The beginning of the pandemic and the blog codes derived from that period mark a distinct vision for the Discord and Zoom platforms that has already mutated considerably beyond their original inceptions. Building on the growth they experienced during the onset pandemic both introduced a wave of new users to the value of their services. Discord embraced the casual/personal use of their platform at the onset gradually bridging itself over to professional applications as Discord became a school mainstay. Discord despite having a smaller amount of blog posts to draw from also actively engaged with their user conversing with their shifting sentiments as the need for Discord's technology became more pressing. Discord while lacking the same sense of vision and opportunism present in Zoom was confident about its core values at the onset of the pandemic and the continued need for a "place to talk" even during this disruptive time (Citron, 2020 JUN).

Zoom, despite having a much broader origin providing use applications across multiple industries, also introduced a variety of features and services to support its consumer-oriented newcomers. Zoom migrated little by little from medium - enterprise level applications of their video communications service to a service at the tip of everyone's tongue. This is partially due to Zoom taking steps to remove barriers to entry in the education space. Yuan (2020 MAY) recounts zoom taking a leap in the education space offering "Zoom for free to over 100,000 K-12 schools around the world". These beginning steps and the flexible vision/sentiments guiding them helped

cement Zoom as a "hero" during the pandemic. Zoom appears to scale back in some ways making renewed efforts to meet the needs of smaller consumer-oriented settings highlighting personal use cases such as weddings, plays and more (Montgomery, 2020). This can also be observed in their release of their OnZoom social webinar platform which they report as being positively employed by small businesses (Reed 2020).

Figure 1

Zoom Wedding Image
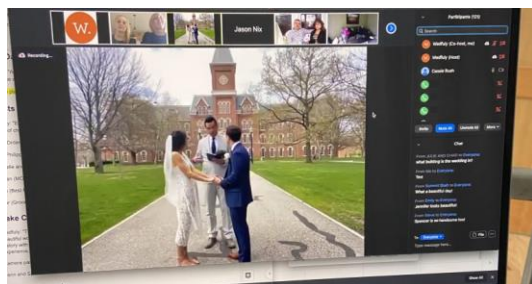
Note: Image extracted from John Montgomery, 2020, **Q&A with Wedfuly: Zoom Weddings During COVID-19 & the Future of Virtual Ceremonies**

YEAR REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE VISION

The onset of the pandemic forced Zoom and Discord to reassess their vision for supporting communication for its userbase. Relative to Zoom Discord appears to be slightly lacking in its broader vision for video-based technologies. As Zoom CEO remarks and as is consistently communicated in Zoom's blogs, Zoom looks for how it can innovate and operate as a communications platform that "powers every type of organization, from a single entrepreneur's vision to small and medium-sized businesses to multinational enterprises with hundreds of thousands of employees" (Yuan, 2021). However, their communications also cemented a concern for the post pandemic application of their services. As the concern for the sustained growth of the Zoom Platform amidst fluctuating pandemic concerns persist, Zoom looks to stabilize its value in newly expanded contexts of use. While zoom continues to explore how its platform can serve all

people and not just enterprises it spends considerable portions of its voice highlighting the persistence of a hybrid workplace.

Discord appears to be slower on the uptake despite offering classroom applications as early as March. Discord doesn't appear to engender its role as both a current and future means to manage the pandemic's transformation of how we socialize, work, and learn. This reflects Citron's (2020 DEC) statements at the close of 2020 in his *Building on our Momentum* blog piece where he states, "We're just glad we've been able to be helpful in any way possible." Discord produced blog post resources guiding users on how to make use of Discord in the classroom setting. However, this blog post did little to indicate Discord was looking to the persistent pandemic impacts that would shape the value of the platform. This is reflected in Discord's slower uptake on highlighting classroom specific features during the first 6 months of the pandemic and offering little to no predictions on the future user landscape.

CONCLUSIONS: How do they see the pandemic?

Zoom's quickness to perceive the pandemic as a persistent transformative setting in its blog posts reflects its long-term vision for digital face to face communications and its continued integration into Global work settings. Zoom starts by seeing the pandemic as proof for the need of its services, then transitions to seeing the pandemic as a permanent shift in the needs of its users. Zoom ultimately seeks to prove and indicate its value beyond the pandemic.

Discord on the other hand appears to take a more laid-back approach focusing on maintaining its existing community first ethos and scaling features that support that. These different visions can be seen reflected in the distribution and frequency of blog accounts of how their platform is being employed across various settings. Discord only adopts an industry specific approach to detailing its pandemic value during the delayed return to school. It is during that period that there is an influx of user stories of how Discord supports school communities. A volume that is not reflected in any other distinct use case.

Both platforms experience similar growth, diversity of clients, and influx of new user applications however their vision of the pandemic's impact transforms the speed and certainty of their reaction. Their high-level vision of the pandemic as a problem that will persist and transform their business setting appears to impact how proactive they are regarding the introduction and development of solutions to meet pandemic needs.

The purpose of this study was to explore the sentiments of growing ICT platforms and observe how these sentiments give way to different user affordances. While this study doesn't dive into the specific features introduced following the onset of the pandemic, it offers insights regarding the visions and perspectives guiding the development and design of affordances employed during the pandemic. The information within Discord and Zoom's corporate blog posts has not been exhausted by any means and has an abundance of information that can be employed for further nuanced study. While I draw conclusions based on corporate sentiments as a single component of their platform affordances, it is important to remember these sentiments and perceptions interact with an abundance of other components to create a realized affordance an end user experiences. Much of these other components are not taken into consideration as they may not be publicly accessible. The views espoused in the blog post data are simply what corporations feel comfortable expressing and may not capture the full gamut of perceptions driving the business behind the platforms. Despite these shortcomings I hope this study offers perspective on the value their communications to the public may have in directing what platforms operating on similar technology have to offer and afford their users.

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