

Course: SKOM12
Term: Spring 2024
Supervisor: Jesper Falkheimer
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To Speak or not to Speak: A Study of Upward Critical Feedback from the Perspective of Employees in Non-Managerial Positions

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Master's thesis



Abstract

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The existence of critical feedback that flows from subordinates and is directed to first-order managers constitutes an insightful source of information about potential internal issues that affect an organization's overall outcome. Therefore, the presence of a two-way dialogue that occurs regularly and is open to managers and subordinates alike reduces the chances of an unwelcoming work environment and of high organizational turnover rates. Still, there are many reasons why employees in non-managerial positions might choose to remain silent when faced with negative emotions in the hybrid, post-pandemic era. The aim of this qualitative thesis is to gain more knowledge on this contemporary issue from a critical, bottom-up approach. The empirical data that this thesis builds upon constitutes of nine semi-structured interviews to Spanish lower-level employees that were explored through Stanley Deetz's notions of Systematic Distortion of Communication and Discursive Closure. Findings revealed that virtual communication platforms have led to an increase in managerial control that limits manager-subordinate spontaneous conversations and that makes interactions one-sided and unbalanced. They also highlighted the voluntary aspect of the feedback giving process and showcase the suitability of considering the presence of upward critical feedback as an indicator of workplace democracy, making the topic open to more qualitative and quantitative research from an ampler, less explored perspective that puts employees at the center of the debate.

Keywords: upward critical feedback, two-way communication, critical organizational theory, remote work, strategic communication, internal communication, employee voice.

Wordcount: 19 987

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1. Introduction

Unlimited tea or coffee, continuous shiftwork and remote work on Mondays and Fridays are three examples of strategies that are aimed towards increasing employee satisfaction and thus, that seek to reduce the percentages of those who voluntarily leave the company they work at. Still, high turnover rates are a problem of modern-day for-profit organizations that has been amply researched but that still is relevant today (Climet et al., 2024; Davidson et al., 2009). The interrelation of internal and external factors that lead to someone leaving their job make the topic a complex one to address (Climek et al., 2024), and include both not feeling at ease with how the relationship with one's supervisor is unfolding and wanting to grow but feeling unable to (Davidson et al., 2009). From an organizational perspective, there are substantial costs that result from an employee quitting their job. On the one hand, there are the financial ones, categorized as "cost of staff turnover" (Guilding et al., 2014, p.231). On the other, even if an employee finally chooses not to leave, once the option of leaving has come to them, their degree of engagement both with their job and their organization is likely to decrease (Tracey and Hinkin, 2008). Ultimately, it can thus be argued that even if there are reasons that exceed the limits of corporate action, maintaining a good organizational climate can significantly enhance employee engagement and, thus, reduce turnover rates and improve overall organizational performance (Dahlman and Heide, 2021).

One of the ways in which this can be achieved is through internal environmental scanning that helps to detect significant issues before they pose harm to organizations (Tourish, 2015). From a strategic communication perspective, feedback, specially one of critical nature constitutes a dialogic event (Mowbray et al., 2014) that generally is unplanned and hence is situated within the domain of informal communication (Morrison, 2014). Due to its voluntary nature (Beakley, 2016) its presence or lack thereof within an organization points towards potential issues that hinder certain employees' sense of belonging and

that ultimately can affect organizational outcome. Hence, this thesis sees upward critical feedback as communication processes that point towards workplace conflict that can ultimately result in organizational members willingly leaving their organization.

Still, as it has been previously mentioned, there are other factors that occur outside the organizational boundaries but still affect employee's willingness to stay. Currently, the workplace environment still is experiencing the after-effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, in which a sudden increase in the number of employees that work remotely led to different understandings of organizational life (International Labor Organization, 2020). In that sense, it can be said that working from home (WFH) resulted in the limits between private and public life to become more blurred. This premise constitutes the starting point of Stanley Deetz's critical organizational theory (1992), whose goal is to unravel the mechanisms through which people holding managerial positions systematically limit employee voice when addressing topics of sensitive nature. While available research has amply covered the topic of remote work, the focus has been mainly on the potential sources of conflict when switching to home-office. Therefore, it can be argued that organizational research has been scarcely applied to the remote environment, and much less from an employee-centered perspective.

Hence, this thesis aims to address this gap and to critically add to the discussion of strategic internal communication through the application of Deetz's critical organizational theory to the notion of feedback of negative nature, which is regarded as a communicative process that should be open and equal to all participants (Deetz, 1992). Still, the main contribution of this thesis resides in the fact that it focuses on the phenomenon of feedback from the perspective of employees in non-managerial positions.

1.1. Aim and Research Questions

For all the above, this thesis aims to gain more critical knowledge of the topic of upward critical feedback in the context of Strategic Communication from the

perspective of lower-level employees. With that in mind, this research will answer the following two research questions:

RQ1: What is the role of video conference platforms for internal communication between employees and their supervisors in for-profit organizations?

RQ2: Why do some organizational members choose not to provide critical feedback to higher-level employees on video conference platforms?

1.2. Research delimitations

There are some delimitations to this study. Firstly, the thesis discusses Spanish for-profit organizations only. Second, the terms “manager”, “boss” and “superior” have been used interchangeably to avoid repetition. Since the goal is to explore the concept of critical feedback from a non-managerial perspective, perceptions from employees holding leadership roles will not be accounted for. Similarly, no neutral or positive feedback will be considered. Due to time constraints, only communication between employees and their first-order managers is addressed. Concerning the research design, the study will focus on virtual communication platforms that comprise of audio and video, such as Zoom, Google Meet or Teams. The gathered data will consist of employee perceptions on communication processes after the pandemic within the established geographical area.

Even if Deetz’s conceptualization of systematically distorted communication and discursive knowledge is ample and is also used to explore democratic processes outside of the organizational environment, due to its aim, this thesis will focus only on the domain of private companies and will situate employee voice as an inherently democratic phenomena that can nonetheless be constrained through these processes, thus making it unequal and undemocratic.

1.3. The Covid-19 pandemic in Spain

Spain was put on a nationwide lockdown on March 15th, until June 21st, 2020 (Gobierno de España, n.d). During this time, only employees carrying out tasks that were deemed essential were allowed to continue working in-person, such as healthcare, any task related to the food system, and transportation of necessary goods and services (Eurofound, 2023). Hence, remote work emerged as the main alternative for for-profit organizations, and 48,8% of the country's registered businesses switched to fully remote during this period (INE, 2020), which constituted a dramatic change for the Spanish society: while remote work was on the rise in 2019, it accounted only for 5% of the nation's population (INE, 2019). Therefore, Spain has been a country that has been consistently below the European average when it comes to remote work (INE, 2019). Once the restrictions ended, remote work still prevailed in a significant portion of the workforce (36%), who saw it as a way of maintaining work-life balance (Curull and Maynou, 2024). As a result, official regulations that protect remote workers were implemented, which varied from sector to sector and were largely influenced by different sector's labor unions.

All in all, the journey towards remote work in Spain happened in a way that was rushed and sudden, and largely because of pressure from the workers themselves, which can constitute a source of tension between employees and their managers. This adds depth to the current research and helps geographically delimitating it.

2. Literature Review

The current section provides an overview of relevant research on the notion of upward critical feedback from articles and books from databases such as Lubsearch, EBSCO and ProQuest. All articles are peer-reviewed. The first chapter explores the concept from the perspectives of managerial communication and leadership communication, with a mention of the theories that have grounded the available studies. The second section frames the topic within the contextual framework of the sanitary pandemic. Lastly, the section finishes with a summary of the key elements of this chapter.

2.1. Theoretical research on critical upward communication

2.1.1. Upward critical feedback from a management communication perspective

Feedback of critical nature is one of the main concepts of this thesis. It has been studied from a range of perspectives, including leadership, human resource management and managerial communication. Hence, different ways of conceptualizing feedback from employees in non-managerial positions to their superiors have been found on available literature, such as symmetrical communication, upward dissent (Kassing, 2009) and critical upward communication (Tourish and Robson, 2004; Tourish, 2005; Tourish and Robson, 2006). The current thesis focuses on the latter and uses the term “critical” as opposed to negative due to the connotations generally associated to the latter term, which can lead to criticism being taken at a personal level (Angus et al., 2024).

However, there are some key points that are common between all three conceptualizations that are discussed for contextualization purposes. Critical upward communication can be regarded as a useful tool for internal environmental scanning that focuses on the perception of organizational members

in non-managerial positions (Tourish, 2005). It comprises information that can be related to subordinates themselves, their relationship with others (including their managers), potential organizational issues, and content of tactical nature regarding the tasks that need to be carried out (Glauser, 1984).

Briefly, critical upward communication is a form of performance appraisal that focuses on employee perception. Its starting point is the understanding of a lack of two-way dialogue between them and their supervisors (Tourish and Robson, 2006), mainly due to the topics being of sensitive nature (Scrimshire et al., 2021) as well as a source disruption of the work environment (Bisel et al., 2011) and the social dynamics that take place within it (Kaffka et al., 2021). Still, like any other type of feedback, it is completely voluntary, meaning that it is up to employees to decide if they want to communicate such messages to their managers (Beakley, 2016). It is linked to the concept of employee voice, which refers to the conditions that favor the existence of dialogic communication between managers and subordinates (Mowbray et al., 2014), among which feedback is situated. Morrison (2014) adds that employee voice is situated within the domain of informal internal communication and is constructive, as its goal is to identify and address workplace conflict. Kassing (2009) employed the term of “upward dissent” (p.314) to refer to upward critical communication as one of the manifestations of employee voice and adds that there is a direct relationship between a member’s work experience and their willingness to voice upward dissent, leading to newer employees to turn to non-managers or people from outside the organizational member for advice (p.314). Glauser (1984) proposed a framework based on six factors that affect the way that information flows upward, that are the following: the profile of the employee holding a non-managerial position (1), the relationship with their manager (2), the manager’s profile (3), the content (4), how it flows upward, its frequency and aim (5), the organization’s formal structure (6) (p. 630). The current thesis focuses on the first factor.

All in all, in an ideal scenario in which the relationship with one’s manager flows smoothly, employees feel empowered, listened to and more eager to participate in organizational life, even when the topics at hand are of challenging nature (Mowbray et al., 2014). In contrast, the context that arises when these conditions are not met can be defined as employee silence and can constitute a

source of internal struggle for people in non-managerial positions to engage in upward critical communication (Kassing, 2009).

To explore that, the concept of Hierarchical Mum Effect (HME) has been coined, through which the reasons why some employees choose to stay silent regarding potentially controversial topics have been studied (Ploeger et al., 2011; Bisel et al., 2011; Scrimshire et al., 2021). Research shows that one of these reasons includes fear of ruining existing relationships with people in managerial positions (Scrimshire et al., 2021). Ploeger et al., (2011) adopt a gendered approach and establish that male employees tend to voice discontent more freely. Also, the effects of providing feedback of such type from a relational approach have been found in available literature. For instance, criticizing one's boss can lead to their security at work being threatened (Bisel et al., 2011). It can also mean going against the established hierarchical order and risk being perceived as a sign of rebellion (Bisel et al., 2011). Still, studies applying the concept of HME usually come from the domain of psychology and employed the theories of sensemaking and social exchange theory (Bisel et al., 2011).

More recent contributions adapt the HME to include notions of morality through the concept of Moral Mum Effect (MME) and focus mainly on exploring saving face through the concept of "facework" (Bisel and Kramer, 2014, p.114). As a result, one of the main reasons for employees to remain silent when unethical behavior arises is a combination of excessive politeness and being afraid of going against the recipient's personal values (Bisel and Kramer, 2014). Available literature that covers the topic on employee feedback to their managers from the social exchange theory is critical and focuses on subordinate's willingness to speak up when faced with managers with inherently problematic personality traits, such as narcissism (Li and Lee, 2024).

Lastly, most recent research on the topic of critical upward communication reveals that it has taken a relational turn, to the extent that the initial term has developed into the more holistic concept of symmetrical communication that acknowledges the importance of two-way communication between employees and their managers (Men and Sung, 2022). These studies have extensively studied the pandemic and the organizational change that it led to, and thus have focused on crisis communication theories linked to specific issues such as diversity policies and hate speech (Li et al., 2023; Sun et al, 2023).

2.1.2. Upward critical feedback from a leadership communication perspective

These principles of two-way dialogue, preventability and cooperation between organization levels can also be found in the domain of leadership communication, which establishes communication as pivotal for effective and prolonged leadership (Omillion-Hodges and Ptacek, 2021). During the initial stages of research, the study of leadership was largely influenced by the domain of psychology (Bass, 1999; Putnam and Mumby, 2013). Classical management theories experienced a significant change in the 1960s, in which fear stopped being seen as the main motivational factor and researchers established that upward and downward communication was preferred (Mumby and Kuhn, 2018). This was the turning point for theories that emerged afterwards, which highlighted the suitability of a transformational leadership in favor of a transactional one, leading to hierarchical structures to become flatter and to teamwork to garner interest from practitioners (Bass, 1999). Thus, leaders needed to inspire, to motivate, as opposed to offer short-term gratification and to “go beyond self-actualization” (Bass, 1999, p.12). Ultimately, leadership is regarded through a sociocultural lens, defined as “an act of transmission and negotiated meaning” (Putnam and Mumby, 2013, p.401), and is seen as one of the determinants on employee’s willingness to provide feedback (Tourish and Robson, 2003). Or, in other words, leadership is seen as “a contextual factor on internal communication” (Men, 2014. p. 257) and as a process that comes to life through social interaction (Miller, 2014) and that, therefore, is participative. This approach can be understood as a critique of initial research that stated that upward flow was limited, mainly due to a high sensitivity towards negative performance assessment from subordinates (Tourish and Robson, 2003).

In contrast, theorists such as Deetz (1992) have explicitly stated that leaders initially were expected to centralize conflict and act as “mediums” (p.225) that obeyed no personal interests and simply aimed for the resolution of issues as efficiently as possible. However, they are at risk of becoming controlling, which can lead to a relationship of dominance and subordination (Deetz, 1992). This notion goes against Kang and Sung’s (2017) who argued that managerial staff should engage in “two-way, employee-centered symmetrical communication

system” (p. 82) to promote employee engagement. This focus on symmetrical communication and equal participation from employees of all levels in the discussion ties back to the previous chapter of the thesis and reveals the interconnectedness between managerial and leadership communication and the importance of coherence between them. The concept of symmetrical communication is also in line with the understanding of the discursive approach to leadership, which considers that employees holding leadership positions should strive to build relationships that are authentic (Men, 2015) and involve subordinates in all stages of the decision-taking processes (Rawlins, 2008)

The benefits of adopting this type of leadership cannot be discussed without mentioning employee retention, which is a topic of recurrence in academic literature, as it has constituted a solid topic of research for more than one hundred years (Hom et al., 2019). In the earliest stages of retention research, contributions also came from the domain of psychology, (Hom et al., 2019), even if it has also been studied from Human Resources Management (Fuchs, 2022) and has been a central topic of business management in the recent years, albeit from an organizational perspective. In other words, a significant portion of the debate has been given to the financial costs and the company’s survival prospects in the long term when faced with high retention rates (Cloutier, 2015; Hom et al., 2017;). From an employee perspective, it was soon established that employees who quit viewed their leaders in a negative light (Phillips and Connell, 2003; Choi et al., 2012) and a direct relationship was thus established between the leadership style and organizational retention rates.

Thus, it can be argued that studying leadership from a communication perspective involves adopting a stance that is introspective and centered on the use of language. Regarding this issue, existing research agrees on the fact that ideally, there is a negotiation process that occurs between leaders and non-leaders through a series of symbols (Blom and Alvesson, 2014), making the act of being persuaded conscious and voluntary. Accordingly, conflict and disagreement become an integral part of participatory leadership approaches (Cheney et al, 2011). It is in this process of negotiation that employee voice becomes key to reach consensus on both ends.

Still, researchers acknowledge that despite the benefits of promoting a holistic approach of leadership communication, it has instead been explored mainly

through a post positivistic approach that focuses on manager perception and in which a transmissional view of communication has primarily dominated, in which communication is regarded as a process of transmission of information (Putnam and Mumby, 2013). Consequently, the transformational style of leadership has been the dominant one. Regarding research, surveys have been one of the main data gathering procedures when conducting empirical research on the topic (Putnam and Mumby, 2013), rather than other forms of qualitative, in-depth methods, such as interviews or focus groups. Similarly, these studies have been largely conducted from the domain of Psychology and mainly had Leader-Member Exchange Theory, (LMX) as a theoretical framework, which contribution was to regard subordinates as active participants of the organizational relationship process along with managers (Nicotera, 2019). Still, despite acknowledging that communication is an integral part of relationship building between managers and their subordinates, research on this topic continues to be scarce (Nicotera, 2019).

2.2. Upward critical communication in remote work

Changes in the workplace environment after the Covid-19 pandemic have proven to have an impact on workplace relationships (Ansio et al., 2020). The rapid switch to a remote setting caused significant changes in workplace relationships among all levels, leading to the environment becoming unstable and “volatile” (Espersson et al., 2023, p. 80). As a result, remote workers’ tasks were regarded as increasingly individualistic, self-reliant and autonomous, with different supervision needs (Naswall et al., 2008; Kumar et al., 2021; Espersson et al., 2023) and overall, in need of leadership that broke from traditional paternalistic leadership styles (Love, 2006). Van Wart et al. proposed the term of e-leadership to incorporate the digitally mediated dimension to the conceptualization of traditional notions of leadership, primarily centered on direct, face-to-face communication (2016). This supports the idea that what employees expect or need from their superiors is dynamic, contextual, and negotiated through a two-way dialogue (Blom and Alvesson, 2013). Recent studies that explore the challenges that arose when managing remote teams have been published, most of

them addressing the hardships associated to a higher level of isolation (Kossen and Van der Berg, 2013). Still, these studies are primarily angled towards elements that exist outside of the organizational boundaries and follow a top-down approach, as the ultimate goal is overcoming these challenges so that organizational goals can still be met (Whiteside and Dixon, 2022). Similarly, available research on the impact on the pandemic on the workplace focuses largely on remote teams that work internationally, which reveals that the exploration of communication between coworkers happens mainly at a horizontal level (Rossette-Crake and Buckwalter, 2022.). From a communication perspective, contributions from the field of Crisis and Risk Communication have shed light on the global lessons learned from the pandemic (Stranzl et al., 2021; Tench, 2023).

Hence, the domain of vertical communication has been one-sided, and little research has been conducted that aims explore how switching to a remote environment has impacted employee's willingness to communicate to their superiors. With that in mind, it can thus be argued that these changes likely impacted employee's willingness to speak up as well.

2.3. Summary

To sum up, despite the consistent attention that feedback has garnered over the years from disciplines such as human resource management and psychology, available research from the fields of management and leadership communication has scarcely focused on the two-way process that emerges when employees voice their feedback to their superiors in a symmetrical manner. Similarly, its suitability as a tool for environmental scanning has not been acknowledged. Instead, focus has been mainly on top-down communication and on processes that occur at a horizontal level. Within Crisis Communication, the focus has been on topics such as cooperation within international teams that work remotely. Few studies have explored the impact that remote platforms such as Zoom have had in the symmetrical two-way communication process and how this symmetry can be compromised through managerial action, making it less open and democratic.

3. Theory

The current section explores Critical Theory of Communication in Organizations, which was coined by Deetz (1992) and will guide the analysis of empirical data further on in this study. More precisely, this chapter will start from the key premises from this theory, and then will delve into the notions of systematic distortion and discursive closure. Then, a justification of the choice of theory is addressed and its suitability to the topic of upward critical communication in a remote setting.

3.1. Critical Theory of Communication in Organizations

Deetz's critical theory of communication in organizations starts from the premise that the traditional division between the public and private sphere cannot be applied for companies anymore, as the limits have become so blurred that the corporate environment influences the personal domain even when employees are no longer at work (Deetz, 1992). Influenced by politics and the notion of democracy, the theorist conceptualized the term "corporate colonization" (Deetz, 1992, p.11) that has led to an unequal access of employees to decision-taking processes, mainly using language to consistently exclude those in lower positions (Griffin et al., 2019).

Thus, it can be said that it is through language that organizational imbalances exerted by those in managerial positions are created and recreated in all facets of life even if one is not aware of it (Griffin et al., 2019). Or, in other words, when employees make use of idioms and lingo belonging to corporate discourse outside the office (for example, when discussing household expenses), the centrality of organizational discourse is reinforced in an unconscious manner (Griffin et al., 2019, p.261). Despite this, the theory is optimistic in the sense that Deetz believes that through negotiation, stakeholders affected by the outcomes of organizational action can regain their ability of influencing decision-taking processes, which he referred to as stakeholder democracy (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 266). For Deetz, not

acknowledging that communication is a process that is not limited to the transmission of information is a sign of the domination of corporations beyond organizational boundaries too (Deetz, 1992; Griffin et al., 2019). Hence, organizations become meaning makers (Griffin et al., 2019). Based on this centrality of language, Deetz conceptualized a new model that was published by Griffin et al., (2019, p.260). The model puts communication at the center and rejects the notion of a transmissional view of communication (Deetz, 1992; Griffin et al., 2019, p.260).

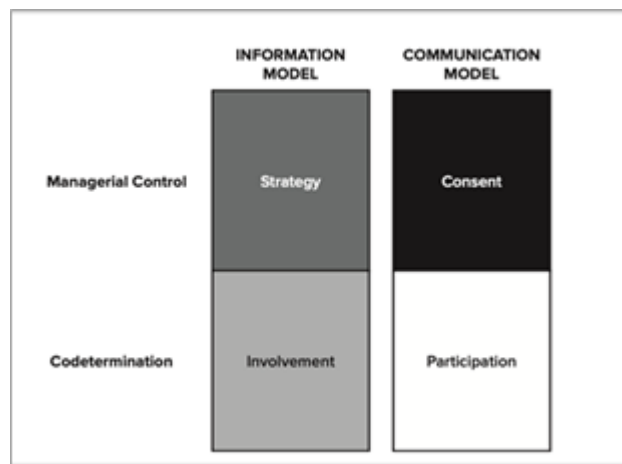


Figure 1: Information vs communication Model. Source: Griffin et al, *A first Look at communication Theory*. Chapter 21.

The model, as reflected in Figure 1 (Griffin et al., 2019, p.260), aligns with his understanding of communication as “the ongoing construction of meaning” (Griffin et al., p.261). Ideally, the communication model approach to organizational life should seek dialogue and participation of all organizational members. Managers can thus opt to engage in two different takes on organizational action, which are “managerial control”, which happen when employee voice is regularly silenced and ignored, and “codetermination”, in which participation of all organizational members is encouraged (Griffin et al., 2019, p.261). According to the model, decision processes can be based on four premises: *strategy, consent, involvement, and participation* (Griffin et al., 2019. p. 262). Firstly, the notion of strategy is tied to that of managerialism, which he defines as “a discourse based on a kind of systematic logic, a set of routine practices, an ideology” (Griffin et al., 2019 p. 262) and oftentimes take the form

of “Because I (the manager) say so” (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 262). It consists of a promotion of control measures that aim to divert attention from a system that is flawed, and that can become the goal of some managers in and of itself (Griffin et al., 2019). For Deetz, it constitutes a form of management with little benefits and large costs, and one that goes against the principles of democracy (Deetz, 1992).

On the other hand, “consent” is a process that occurs when organizational members subconsciously comply to their manager’s standards, even if they are getting little to nothing from them (Griffin et al., p.261). Thus, they become complacent “in her or his own victimization” (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 263). This can be reflected in, for example, long working hours that remain unpaid and unrecognized. Unwillingly, what employees can say becomes restricted, and one’s censorship is promoted too. Systematic distortion of communication can be seen as a conflict avoidance mechanism, which Deetz defines as discursive closure:

3.1.1. Discursive closure

One of the ways in which organizations can promote systematic distorted communication that is relevant to this thesis is by avoiding conflict, which is referred to usually as discursive closure (Deetz, 1992), to which the author has also referred to through the concept of “conversational blockage” (Deetz, 1990). There are eight ways in this can be exerted.

1. Disqualification: involves going against the basic principle of equality of access to a discussion by claiming that one’s opinion is less valid because of a series of socially produced reasons. For instance, a low-level employee’s opinion can be regarded as less or not valid due to the lack of experience in the company, their academic background (or lack thereof) or their age (Deetz, 1992, p.189).

2. Naturalization: when naturalization of discourse happens, differences that are due to social processes that have been historically sustained are treated as a natural or as a matter-of-fact issue. The process of naturalization in the organizational environment has been found for example, in the gendering of personality traits, such as aggressiveness most often associated to the male gender (Deetz, 1992, p.190).

3. Neutralization: in an organizational setting, neutralization happens when one group's perception based on a specific set of values becomes not only the norm, but the reality itself (Deetz, 1992, p.191).

4. Topical Avoidance: by choosing not to address some issues, it also means the prevention of the discussion of the values that guide those issues. In a corporate setting, Deetz argues that topical avoidance is often exerted by only seeking consensus on issues that are relatively safe, thus providing an external image of consensus that does not address the values that lay underneath and determine what can be argued upon (Deetz, 1992, p.192).

5. Subjectification of experience: tied to the notion of relativism, engaging in discursive closure by subjectifying someone's experience means ending an argument by stating that there is no further discussion simply because personal opinions cannot be rebated. Still, according to Deetz, it is precisely at this point of the discussion that the debate should strive to move forward (Deetz, 1992, p.193).

6. Meaning denial and plausible deniability: in the workplace environment, meaning denial and plausible deniability is manifested "when one possible interpretation of a statement is both placed in the interaction and denied as meant" (Deetz, 1992, p. 194). The theorist provides inappropriate insinuations as an example, in which when confronted, the sender denies having meant what was initially conveyed (Deetz, 1992, p.194).

7. Legitimation: legitimation occurs when high-level managers produce statements that allude to shared systems of values such as hard-work and motivation with the aim of making decisions rational and justified to those destined to follow them. By doing so, potential sources of organizational conflict such as questionable work ethics are left out of the discussion (Deetz, 1992, p.195).

8. Pacification: for Deetz, the concept of pacification involves going against the principles of democracy, as the basic premise of equal access to the discussion that permits conflict solving is compromised. Specifically, it is hindered by messages that aim to diminish the issue itself or the participants. The former can be by deeming it either unimportant or unsolvable, and the latter relates mainly to the discussant's ability to do anything about it. (Deetz, 1992, p.196).

Back to the model, involvement means that while employees are free to give their view on a given topic, such view may or may not be reflected in the decision-taking process. Hence, involvement can be summarized as freedom of speech that does not guarantee participation. Or, as Griffin et al., (2019) put it, as “free expression of ideas but no voice” (p. 265).

Lastly, the element of participation in Deetz’s communication model is more optimistic, as “stakeholder democracy” is possible (Deetz, 1992; Griffin et al., 2019), in which all stakeholder groups affected by an organization’s outcome have a say during the negotiation process. Hence, in an ideal scenario, consensus and participation should prime. Still, managerialism is often the dominant approach (Deetz, 1992), and private companies become environments that systematically impede communication to be symmetrical and equal.

It cannot be denied that Deetz draws on Jürgen Habermas’ theory of communicative action, which argues for an ideal speech situation in which everyone can participate equally. Briefly exploring the ways in which Habermas influenced Deetz’s critical theory can add depth to the research. Habermas saw communication as a process that was democratic, and that could and should enable consensus based on reason to replace any form of domination over others (Burkart, 2007). In other words, to Habermas, language was the way for people to understand each other (Burkart, 2007).

Ideally, anyone taking part in a communicative exchange should follow and be confident that the rest of the participants are following four criteria or validity claims: first, “intelligibility” or that grammar should be used accurately (Craig and Muller, 2007, p.447). Second, “validity”, that there has to be agreement on the fact that the participants are referring to something that is there, exists (“validity”, Craig and Muller, 2007, p. 447). Third, “sincerity”, or that one must not try to deceive others, nor perceive efforts to be deceived by others (Craig and Muller, 2007, p. 449). And four, “Normative rightness”, means the participants should share the same value system and adhere to the same norms (Craig and Muller, 2007, p.449).

Aligning with the premise of mutual understanding, there are questions that one to address specific issues that are lacking in the communication process. For example, if one does not manage to see the other person’s viewpoint, which compromises intelligibility, they will ask for guidance in that respect, asking

questions such as “How am I to understand that?” (Craig and Muller, 2007, p. 448) Similarly, if what is under suspicion is the reliability of one’s answer or, simply put, the truth, one would ask for “assertions” and “explanations”, (Craig and Muller, 2007, p. 448) which can take the form of the following question: “are things as you say? (Craig and Muller, 2007, p. 448).

And lastly, if the normative rightness is the claim that is doubted, one can ask something such as “For what reason did you not act differently?” (Burkart, 2007, p. 250). Therefore, while Habermas’s theory can be considered as idealistic, Deetz sees distortion as not only systematic and unavoidable, but also as a threat. In fact, the theorist defines it as pathological (Deetz, 1992), as systematically distorted communication promotes detrimental values such as resistance to change, going against established social norms of participation and equality and hindering the attainment of individual and collective goals (p.177). Consequently, while different personality types can clash and collide and noise constitute what Deetz refers to as inevitable distortions (Deetz, 1992, p.179) and go in line with Habermas’ theory of communicative action, there are unnecessary distortions (Deetz, 1992, p.179) whose roots can be found in internal organization structures and individual action. It is here where Deetz’s systematic distortion would be situated.

3.2. Summary

Deetz’s Critical Theory of Communication in Organizations constitutes a suitable theoretical approach for this thesis. Firstly, it emphasizes the idea that conflict is not only unavoidable, but a necessary element for organizational wellbeing. This goes in line with the current study. Secondly, Deetz believes that organizations are overly concerned with the idea of managerial control, which poses an interesting element to explore when studying the process of upward critical feedback. In addition, by studying the ways in which language contributes to this silencing of employee voice when discussing conflicting topics, Deetz places the focus on the mechanisms that are used to shape and re-shape organizational reality of employees in non-managerial positions. When applied to the communicative process of providing upward critical feedback in a remote

setting, the theory can shed light into the way that employee voice is silenced when communication takes place virtually.

4. Methodology

The current chapter explores the methodological aspects of the research in two different sections. First, organizational communication is explored through a critical approach to situate Deetz's theory within the tradition of critical organizational communication. Then, the study's research design is presented.

4.1. Critical Organizational Communication

There is a need of situating Deetz's conceptualization of systematically distorted communication and discursive closure within an interpretative tradition, as there is no consensus regarding this issue. On the one hand, it has been classified by Prasad (2017) as part of the critical theory's take on communication studies, whose starting point is the rejection of neutrality and the mediation of culturally produced power imbalances. Prasad (2017) distinguishes between a general and a specific use of the concept, in which the former refers to all traditions that engage in "cultural critique" (p.154) and the latter discusses the specific tradition influenced by Habermas. To this, Bronner (2017) adds that the theory as a tradition is subversive, flexible, and able to adapt to current contemporary challenges. Hence, for Prasad (2017) Deetz's theory falls under the more specific usage of the term, which is also the stance that this research follows. A reason for it is the influence of Habermas's theory of communicative action on Deetz, which was explained in the previous chapter.

On the other hand, Mumby and Kuhn (2018) explore discursive closure from a political stance, in which some interests always impose over others, and deem the critical tradition as elitist and overly concerned with mass media. Instead, they propose a more generic use of the term that is specifically centered on organizational communication. Further conceptualizations of Deetz's work that align with a more generic definition of the concept have also been found in available literature. Misoczky (2016) situates Deetz within the field of Critical Management Studies (CMS), in which the term critical refers to a methodological

approach and not to the philosophical tradition, meaning that the notions of skepticism and lack of compliance are not explicitly addressed.

4.2. Research Design

4.2.1. Sampling method

This thesis does not aim for general conclusions, but rather, for in-depth knowledge from different perspectives, which makes it qualitative (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The sampling of this paper is composed of a total of 9 employees with no managerial positions that engage in virtual communication with their supervisors at least twice per week. Employees of non-managerial positions of all ages were eligible, but interns were excluded. This was mainly because the researcher believed that they would not be as willing to speak up to their managers for fear of not getting hired after the internship period was over. According to Spanish standards, participant's companies qualified as small-sized companies, with less than 50 employees (BBVA, n.d). All these requirements consisted of a sampling criterion established by the researcher for validity purposes.

Briefly, out of the nine participants, Sergio, Paula, Julia, and Juan were working in-person and were forced to switch to home office due to the pandemic. Once the restrictions ended, three continued but followed a hybrid system, and the remaining one, Sergio, went fully remote after a performance assessment from his managers, which indicated that Sergio's outcome at work had significantly improved when working from home. Two participants, Elena and Joel, worked fully remote from the beginning, as their organization has never had a physical office. Alex specifically requested working full-time due to his availability and resources, which mainly consisted of an immobile home recording studio. Pablo was forced to go remote after the sector his area worked with went on an indefinite strike, and Laura's contract had a written agreement with their assigned labor union to offer their employees to work from home twice per week by the time she started working there, once the pandemic restrictions had already lessened.

Despite initially aiming for parity among the participants to preserve fairness and equality of the research, this constituted a challenge. Hence, since the current thesis does not aim for generalization, the probability sampling method has not been considered (Creswell and Poth, 2017). Two different sampling methods have been utilized to maximize efficiency and reach. To begin with, purposeful sampling was the first sampling method of choice, in which the researcher directly contacted eligible candidates that meet the criteria with the goal of gathering as much information as possible (Creswell and Poth, 2017). To do so, a search was conducted in LinkedIn, which was done in two phases. First, a post was made in which the research scope was explored, and potential candidates were encouraged to contact the researcher either through the post itself or through the university email. Including the official contact email had the goal of gaining credibility and posting on LinkedIn aimed at maximizing reach. Here, male employees proved to be more open to conversation.

The suitability of purposeful sampling resides mainly in its short timeframe and the increased likelihood of a positive answer (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016), which helped starting the empirical part of the thesis early in the process. Still, some requirements were established early on to ensure the suitability of the participants. Firstly, the selection criteria that has previously been mentioned was implemented, to avoid compromising the validity and the aim of the current study. Secondly, the scope and the intended audience of this thesis was made clear from the start to minimize misunderstandings or misconceptions. Lastly, it was made clear from the beginning that participation was completely voluntary, non-rewarded and that participants could refrain from it at any point. However, posting on LinkedIn did not achieve the expected results, which led the researcher to directly contact employees that had been vocal about remote work and met the criteria to secure interviews. The second sampling method that has been used in this research is network sampling.

Despite being aware of the fact that it is not considered the best type of sampling method (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016), the initial sample size that was gathered through purposeful sampling was too reduced, which led to the search of additional participants by asking those that had already been interviewed if they would be willing to ask their colleagues to take part in the current study. As a result, interviewees consisted largely of employees from two different companies,

which posed initial concerns regarding the validity of the results. Still, as interviews progressed, the researcher realized that the insightful information that was starting to emerge that showcased clear differences between employee-manager relationships that depended more on the participant's background and sector than on the company they were part of. This, along with the fact that the researcher did not want to leave out information obtained through participants from other companies was the reason not to adopt a comparative approach between the two major companies.

4.2.2. Data collection methods

Gathering of data has the goal of equipping the researcher with material that will be subjected to analysis (Flick, 2018), which ultimately results in the answering of the research aim and questions. The available information can thus be understood as the raw material that is then observed through a specific theory and methodological approach. Flick (2018) identifies three different approaches through which this can be done: directly talking to people, or in other words, interviewing them, observing their daily behavior as it unravels or evaluating the remnants of their practices. Even if an ethnographic approach could also be insightful for the task at hand, the time constraints made it unrealistic. Hence, due to the nature of this research and its limitations, the first option, is the most suitable. More particularly, interviews offer the researcher the chance of accessing first-hand experiences and accounts (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). That said, the goal was ultimately to gain as much access as possible to the participant's day-to-day events (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015) related to, in this case, their perceptions of critical feedback directed at their managers.

4.2.3. Interview proceedings

The interviews were conducted between March 15th and April 2nd, and its duration ranged between 18:51 minutes the shortest and 42:05 the longest. Eight out of nine interviews took place in Spanish, as it was the first language of both the participants and the researcher, and it was considered that this would lead to a smoother dialogue and access to more insightful pieces of information. The

resulting interview was conducted in English to an employee that worked fully remote for a company based in Madrid but mainly produced content in English. Ideally, interviews would have been conducted in-person to gain deeper insights regarding body language and facial expressions. In practice, six interviews were conducted remotely due to the participants being based in other areas of Spain and in one case, abroad. Of these six, four were conducted via Google Meet and the remaining two, through FaceTime, as requested by the participants themselves. The three interviews that were conducted in person took place in a meeting room at a co-working space that was previously booked to ensure privacy and to put participants at ease by minimizing disruptions and interruptions as much as possible. Similarly, and with the same goal in mind, hot drinks such as coffee and tea were offered before the interview started and water was at the disposal of the participants throughout the interview. Still, the structure that was maintained in both the in-person and the remote interviews was the same. First, the researcher thanked the participants, collected the signed consent forms (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016) (Appendix 1 for interview in English and 2 for the Spanish ones), and went over the anonymity, confidentiality and right to skip questions clauses again, this time with the participants. Before starting, the researcher asked for permission to audio record the interviews.

The interviews developed smoothly, and participants were open to discuss, providing mostly elaborate and consistent answers. Interviewer strived to follow Brinkmann and Kvale's (2015) interview principles during the discussion: questions were short and simple, interviewees had the time to express themselves clearly, and moments where hesitancy or emotions arose were picked upon and either questioned further or dropped, depending on the overall interview climate. Three types of questions were asked (See Appendix 3). First, there were Open Questions, such as their academic background or their current job position, which were designed to let participants express themselves freely and for the interviewer to gain access to new information (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Control questions aimed to get the conversation back to the main focus if the respondent went too much off-topic. Lastly, Clarification questions had the role of verifying the information (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Eight out of nine interviews concluded fully, and one participant requested to continue the interview without audio recording, as they were discussing health concerns of confidential nature.

4.2.4. Analysis

The current thesis considers transcription of the interview's audio recordings as the first step in the analytical process, and it was conducted with the help of NVIVO transcription function, which enabled the researcher to shorten the time destined to transcribe audio files with no length or language restrictions. Once the transcriptions were generated, the researcher went over them while listening to the recorded audio and added personal notes that were taken during the interview process.

This procedure enabled the author to note hesitancy, casual short utterances of speech that risked not being picked upon by the transcription software as well as changes in tone or instances where there was a shift in the participant's attitude were seen as potentially vital sources of data and worth noting down. By doing so, the goal was reducing the chances of validity and reliability being compromised, as what is written down corresponds with what has been said and how (Brinkmann and Kale, 2015). That done, then it was time for the coding process, which, simply put, consists of the assignation of categories or keywords to pieces of raw data collected through the interviews so that conclusions can be drawn (Brinkmann and Kale, 2015). In other words, coding permits researchers to organize data that is unstructured in a systematic way (Sybing, n.d.). Coding has the goal of ensuring transparency in the research, which in turn helps validity, as creating a codebook is advised, in which codes are developed along with their definition and examples that support the assignment of such codes (Sybing. n.d; Thomas, n.d).

This thesis constitutes one of the first experiences of the author when it comes to coding of qualitative data. With that in mind, the author followed the nine-step approach proposed by Thomas (n.d) that starts with the construction of a research question that guides the data collection method but that mainly focuses on the approach undertaken to familiarize oneself with the obtained data. As such, it covered the process that leads to the emergence of codes, categories, and themes with the aim of having the data answer the thesis's research questions. To do so, the researcher and color-coded key words and sentences depending on the research question it answered. Simultaneously, these quotes were added to the

codebook with an explanation of their meaning, and the code that was assigned was one that appeared in the data (Thomas, n.d). That done, the codebook was printed, and the codes were written by hand and then grouped in diagrams based on their similarities. These diagrams were then explored and assigned a category. The themes were then extracted in the same way: grouping categories together.

Ultimately, choosing this approach had the goal of conducting an analysis that is rigorous, exhaustive, and organized (Thomas, n.d). That said, given the nature of the research question, the thesis follows an approach that is thematic and inductive (Thomas, n.d). A deductive approach was not considered to be able to gather unexpected information.

4.2.5. Ethical considerations

Conducting qualitative research necessitates acknowledging its complex nature and the ongoing ethical issues that arise during the whole process (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Concerning the interview process, Creswell and Poth (2017) identify three fundamental premises that any researcher should abide by and that this research follows: protecting those affected by the aim of the thesis (i.e. participants), minimizing negative impact as much as possible and making the research inclusive and participatory. Deceiving was to be completely avoided. As a form of protection, and as mentioned in the previous section, the author tried to reduce the risk of involuntarily deceiving participants as much as possible by clearly stating the nature and the aim of the thesis both during the contacting process and through the consent form that was sent to confirmed participants prior to the interview process (Creswell and Poth, 2017). As a result, initial respondents conveyed hesitancy and fear to discuss a potentially sensitive topic, and two potential participants refused to take part in the research. This made the interview process more complex and resulted in the use of snowball sampling as a solution. Another measure that was taken to grant as much protection as possible was the use of pseudonyms. Before the interview started, participants were reminded again of their right to remain anonymous, and they were assured that they would be given another name during the analytical process, as well as their supervisors. Names were chosen at random and initial background questions did not ask for the respondent's organization's name. If given, it was removed in the transcripts

that were shared with fellow students and preserved in the original copies. Same happened when discussing the relationship with their managers, which had the aim both of protecting participants and reducing harm, especially if the comments were of harsh nature (Creswell and Poth, 2017). Lastly, to make the thesis as open and inclusive as possible, participants from a diverse range of backgrounds were contacted, such as engineering, marketing, and accounting. Similarly, their eligibility was made according to the predefined criteria, regardless of the participant's gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or religion.

5. Results and Analysis

The current section consists both of a presentation of the results that were obtained during the empirical phase of this study and of the application of Deetz's theory of systematically distorted communication to said results. Since the thesis follows a thematic approach, the chapter is organized accordingly. The first three give an answer to the first research question, and the remaining three respond to the second one.

5.1. RQ1: What is the role of virtual communication platforms for internal communication between employees and their supervisors in for-profit organizations?

5.1.1. Theme 1: Increased managerial control

The first theme refers to the interviewee's perception of an increase in control measures from their managers that started when their organizations had to switch to home office. Seen through the Critical Theory of Communication in Organizations, this theme corresponds to a "strategy" approach to decision making, where consent is lacking (Deetz, 1992; Griffin et al., 2019, p.262). Hence, Juan, Julia, and Paula's testimonies about their organizational experience, which fit into this theme, correspond to a transmissional view of communication, in which there is no room for participation via dialogue, much less upward comments of critical nature (Deetz, 1992; Griffin et al., 2019). The three participants were open to discussing it freely. For example, Juan was adamant on

the fact that his supervisor Oscar¹ started getting more insistent when he started working from home, and that, by the time that our interview took place, Oscar's behavior had significantly changed from the one that he had back in the office:

My manager is quite persistent, and if he tries to contact me and I do not respond, if we are at the office then there is no issue, because he can just pop by and see that I am busy or on a break or whatever and then come back later. And that is that in that case. But if that happens and I am at home, if I do not answer his Teams video call he will try my landline, because he has it. And if I still do not answer, then he will try my cell phone, and then repeat that sequence over and over until I respond (...). (Juan, 25/03/2024).

Hence, some parts of his daily routine had been significantly altered ever since going hybrid, which aligned with the tendency of managers becoming increasingly controlling and with the existence of an unequal relationship, where Oscar was being dominating (Deetz 1992). Juan mentioned as an example that he was finding it harder to take breaks, which he considered were part of what he referred to as part of his daily routine at the office too. As a smoker, he stated that he noticed a change of attitude when going out for a smoke, depending on when he was working in-person or from home:

For example, in the office I can go out to smoke and here, well, I smoke too. Since I don't smoke inside the house, my house has a garden, I go out to the garden. So, it's happened to me more than once that I'm smoking and suddenly, there it goes, you hear the birds, where are you? And you say, I'm working. I often take the opportunity when I go out to smoke to make work-related phone calls. But of course, (...) as you hear the birds, it seems I'm slacking. (Juan, 25/03/2024).

From this extract, the interviewer saw that Oscar's negative traits and managerial tendencies had heightened due to the distancing that was brought

¹ Fake name

along with the remote work arrangement. As a result, their interaction relied heavily on Juan always making himself both available and accountable to his manager. With Deetz's perspective as a lens, Juan's response can be classified as a form of managerialism that has worsened with the implementation of remote work (1992). In fact, it can be argued that Oscar's controlling nature can be seen as a fixation that now guides his manager's daily tasks, more so than ensuring that Juan got his job done or had an answer to his concerns (Deetz, 1992; Griffin et al., 2019). From Juan's perspective, it appeared that his manager's behavior had been naturalized by the time our interview took place, as his attitude conveyed resignation and willingness to comply with Oscar's demands in an organizational environment, even if he criticized them greatly (Deetz, 1992; p.190). This, along with the fact that he chose not to express his opposing views to his manager, showed that discursive closure had already occurred (Deetz, 1992). Specifically, he had assumed that there was nothing he could do about it, since now it constituted an essential part of his daily routine, similar to that of taking a break to smoke in his garden. In other words, he took it as another unexpected consequence of remote work.

Julia said that her company employed two different control mechanisms for those who worked remotely. Firstly, working from home was not an option available for everyone at her company, as her and her two colleagues that worked within the human resources department needed to prove that their workflow met a specific ratio, which mainly consisted of a positive relation between her assigned work hours, risk assessment tasks, prevention workshops, employee counseling sessions and number of written reports (Julia, 24/03/2024). And second, once she worked from home, Julia also needed to use an excel sheet to write every single task that she accomplished and send it back to her immediate supervisor before logging off work each day. Julia added that her manager could video call her through Teams whenever he felt like it. She also insisted on the fact that if her manager did not feel she was doing enough, she could be sent back to the office on a very short notice. It can thus be argued that in Julia's organization, remote work is treated either as a reward that must be earned or as a punishment that gets exerted when one's work performance is not as expected (Julia, 24/03/2024). Like Juan's situation, her having to fill excel sheets and be available for the unplanned Zoom calls are expressions of managerialism and show strong presence of an

information model of communication, which to Deetz is a sign of corporate dominance in and of itself (Deetz, 1992; Griffin et al., 2019). When asked how that made her feel, she responded that she felt frustrated, untrusted, and unvalued, given her seniority at the company. These were, what she perceived as contradictions between her supervisor's words and their actions:

Hey, I've been working at this company for 20 years and you still don't trust that I can do my job? Oh really? And no matter how much they tell you yes, that they trust you, that you work great... You see this and you don't believe it (...) (Julia, 24/03/2024).

Additionally, she mentioned feeling even more bothered by this lack of trust due to her special circumstances: she used to be head of department but after an internal restructuring, she did not agree with the measures that were undertaken and chose to step back from her supervisory position to become a technician:

For me it is lack of confidence. That is, as you know, I used to be head of department and now I am a technician. So, when I was a director, no one controlled my work, the work had to go out. And if I didn't do it, no one did it. Nobody in my office was going to do it, it was my job. So now I must do a job and I am as responsible for it. I don't need anyone to control me. What's more, if I have to stay longer because it is necessary, because there has been a labor meeting and they urgently need me or something, I have always stayed, oh yes, I have. So, it feels bad that you have that flexibility. Nobody rewards you for being good; on the contrary, you are still under scrutiny and so much supervision is not pleasant (Julia, 24/03/2024).

The two testimonies share some similarities, the main one being the main reason as to why the participants were under so much scrutiny during their time working from home, which was a perceived lack of trust when the employees were not at their manager's eyesight. Still, there is one nuance that is worth mentioning, which was present in Julia's testimony but not on Juan's: her willingness to stay longer than necessary for urgent matters, which showed commitment. Even if Julia's employee voice was limited, since she was not

present at most meetings anymore, she expressed a behavior that falls under Deetz's (Griffin et al, 2019) "consent" category, as her actions show loyalty and a sense of belonging that had been there and remained (p.261). This was probably due to her having stayed for more than two decades in the same company, which had resulted in Julia developing what could be defined as one-sided loyalty (Deetz, 1992; Griffin et al., 2019).

Lastly, there was Paula, who had a second unofficial supervisor assigned to her during performance assessment meetings ever since going hybrid. This event also constituted another manifestation of remote work worsening the logic of managerialism (Deetz, 1992) and making it clear that employees were under an authoritarian style of leadership that left little room for discussion. In fact, Paula constantly went back to statements that her manager made that expressed her explicit dislike towards home office: "Alicia does not like the idea, she has mentioned it more than once, the fact that she isn't a fan of those of us who work remotely" or "she is always making snarky comments about how we would reach an agreement sooner were we all working in-person" (Paula, 18/03/2024). The main reason for this, according to Paula, was her manager's understanding of hybrid systems as sources of loss of managerial control, as "she feels she cannot control us as much if each one of us is in a different location" (Paula, 18/03/2024). Her situation showed similarities with the previously mentioned two participants, but with one difference: she had initially argued back to try and get Alicia to change her mind, which indicated resistance. When trying to argue back, Alicia simply said that "Remote work harms teamwork, that's my opinion, you have your own and I have mine" and then changed the subject to discuss job related issues (Paula, 18/03/2024). Paula's testimony clearly was an example of her manager going against the principles of equal access to the discussion; by claiming that one's opinion can never be rebated, Paula was forced to stop the conversation, since it appeared that there was nothing she could do to change her manager's views (Deetz, 1992). Consequently, since disagreement appeared to be the root of the issue, she got the point that no consensus would ever be reached, which led her to ignore this topic from then on, as well as her manager's remarks. Applying Deetz's theory, their interactions became distorted in a way that was systematic: without Paula being aware, she had stopped pushing the topic, mainly to avoid conflict and a negative environment (Deetz, 1992, p.175). Specifically,

she has been led to believe that no dialogue can occur because opinions are just that, or simply, that “meaning is in people” (Deetz, 1992, p.193). Hence, through the process of subjectification of experience, Paula ultimately became unaware of the social processes that have taken place for the situation to be the way it is, and therefore could not challenge them, leading the interaction to become blocked or closed (Deetz, 1990; Deetz, 1992).

All in all, it can be argued that these testimonies, and especially the ones belonging to Juan, Julia, and Paula, show that in their organizational environment remote work has been conceptualized not as a right, but as something that must be earned, and consequently, as a privilege that can be taken away as soon as performance levels start declining. Consequently, it can be argued that the extent of managerial action to which the interviewees were subjected was largely dependent on the supervisor’s conceptualization of remote work. This is revealing, since Juan and Paula eagerly discussed the ethical nature of this approach, which was since work-from-home had been added as a worker’s right by their labor union.

5.1.2. Theme 2: Authority questioning behavior

Another significant finding of this research study is related to an employee response that can be defined as employee awareness of direct manager’s actions. Simply put, interviewees openly criticized their supervisor’s behaviors that had arisen since switching to a fully remote or hybrid work system and self-reflected on past actions to try and trace when exactly and why the situation started to worsen.

Juan felt his manager’s actions were “overwhelming” and tied them back to Oscar being stuck in his old ways, as “he works like that, he’s been working like that for many years...”, as well as to his manager’s impatient personality: “he is, for example, I want it today and at this moment, right now” (Juan, 25/03/2024). When asked if he had ever tried to change the situation or to imply in any way that he was not feeling comfortable with an increase in such measures, Juan’s immediate response was to shut down, to claim that “He (Oscar) is the boss, so you have to be careful when discussing those types of things”, which revealed the presence of a strong sense of authority that prevent further discussions from

happening. He then proceeded to defend him. “He’s someone who has a great ability to work, he is just very controlling, he controls everything, he just cannot delegate. But since he is the one in charge... It’s the way it is”. His final statement was particularly revealing for two reasons. First, because it pointed towards Oscar showing problematic behaviors, such as inflexibility (Li and Lee, 2024). Second, from Deetz’s perspective, it showcased that a process of naturalization had already taken place (Deetz, 1992, p.190). Taking a closer look at his last sentence was enlightening: “he is the one in charge... it’s the way it is” constituted a clear example of the process of naturalization: it was treated as a given that people with higher hierarchical status always strive to control those below them, as that is a core element of their responsibilities. In other words, the values behind them remain unchallenged and the statement becomes the truth. So, there is no awareness of the fact that managerialism is a result of decades of an authoritarian leadership style that prevents dialogue and promotes employee silence (Kassing, 2009).

However, it was Paula’s statement which was also noteworthy, since she directly mentioned that she perceived her manager was acting in a revengeful manner due to her willingness to maintain a hybrid work system despite her past efforts, even when Paula was at the office. This revenge-seeking behavior also fell into what Li and Lee defined as problematic traits (2024), which were heightened after switching to a hybrid structure. Similarly, Paula was visibly frustrated when discussing the different ways through which she felt her manager Alicia was punishing her, such as consistently denying her holiday requests and instead assigning her “random dates that no one ever wants” and even ignoring her suggestions during meetings:

I have sometimes proposed some ideas during meetings and Alicia has totally ignored me, she has said that she has already talked about that issue in the office when I was not there and that it the topic is already settled. And that I could have contributed with those ideas had I been at the office, just like she has (...) (Paula, 18/04/2024).

By considering a topic already settled and then proceeding to discuss other issues, Paula’s manager had prevented Paula from expressing her opinion through

the process of topical avoidance (Deetz, 1992, p.192). As such, she was also unable of addressing deeper issues, like, for example, Alicia's rather authoritarian leadership style or the values that guided them. As a result, and according to Deetz (1992), this issue became a personal one for Paula, rather than one that emerged because of organizational processes (p.192). If this were to become a constant in Paula's organization, she would be at risk of being overwhelmed by her emotions, which would very likely remain undiscussed, and thus, unresolved, due to the prevalence of a climate that promotes employee silence (Kassing, 2009). Ultimately, this might lead to Paula experiencing feelings of anger or a consideration of leaving the company (Phillips and Connell, 2003; Choi et al., 2012).

On the other hand, even if Pablo and Alex showed no willingness to engage in this topic during our conversation, the reasons they gave for these constitute units of analysis that are worth exploring. The former was embarrassed to admit that his manager was a good friend of his father, who offered to hire him once he had finished his studies. This previous relationship, along with the fact that he claimed this was his first job after college could partly explain why he took his boss's words and actions at face value (Pablo, 17/03/2024). He was also in what can be classified as a position of privilege, as he recounted that he did find his manager's attitude towards him more permissive than the one he manifested towards the rest of his peers. Alex bluntly said he did not "give a shit" about his job, which he mainly saw as the way to make ends meet until he finished his master's degree and landed his dream job in the film industry (Alex, 19/03/2024). Hence, overall results show that pre-existing good relationships (Scrimshire et al., 2021) and a lack of organizational commitment can also inhibit employee's willingness to be critical when communication becomes mediated. The fact that Alex was never at the office can also have had a negative impact in his sense of organizational belonging, which could have been reinforced otherwise.

Related to that, Joel was critical of his managers actions, largely because of his direct supervisor's handling of the situation during their video calls. According to his testimony, the turning point was the way his superiors, and particularly, his direct manager Leticia had reacted when the corporation's results started to falter. As a result, the interviewee felt a shift in the organizational environment, because

of which he had experienced what the author classified as a “loss of organizational belonging”:

We stay in that position that the fault is ours. The fault is yours because you are not finding the audience. You are not reaching the audience. But my numbers are good. But if the app is not good, how can I reach the audience that you want? I can make a hundred of memes, a hundred of posts that are going to have 5.000 views or 10.000 views. What is it going to mean if the app is not good? (Joel, 21/03/2024).

From this, and the feelings of anger and frustration that accompanied his testimony, it can be gathered that, according to Joel, the organizational environment experienced a significant change when key stakeholders from outside the organization environment did not feel that the results were holding up to their expectations. As a result, he felt Leticia became increasingly focused on financial data. Still, Joel felt she did not provide a solid structure, a set of guidelines for the whole team to follow, but instead directly blamed him for the lack of results. Despite this, he was proud of the outcome of his work. In consequence, he opted to reduce his speaking time to the bare minimum during meetings and chose to simply focus on the outcome of his own work:

“Oh wow, there’s numbers. So, what are we going to do with these numbers? You know, just like numbers, numbers, and numbers (..). It is very boring. So, I always, like, talk a little, just have my time to talk and never talk again. In the rest of the meeting, they are just talking about other numbers that I don’t really need to my job, you know? (Joel, 21/03/2024).

Nonetheless, even if Joel’s words point towards a disinterest that leads to organizational detachment, the emotions in his voice when he spoke about the organization being stuck gave the researcher the impression that the situation did not yet reach a critical point, as the participant still cared about the well-being of the company. As a result, the author believes his sense of belonging could be restored if the climate eventually experiences a significant switch. Joel did not choose to express his views on this topic likely due to his young age, which he

referred to regularly during our talk. If that were the case, it would be a case of discursive closure that has occurred mainly due to his young age, which falls into the category of disqualification, despite his relatively stable position at the company (Deetz, 1992, p. 189). It can also be attributed to other factors such as the other members experience in multinational companies and well-known agencies. In other words, Joel has been led to believe that his opinion is not as valid, and as a result, he is not deemed with equal access to the part of the discussion of financial topics.

Overall, participants had critical remarks that bothered them to the extent that their supervisor's ability to lead was questioned, which had surfaced when switching to home office. These can be classified as a combination of potentially toxic managerial personality traits (Li and Lee, 2024) overly polite behavior (Bisel and Kramer, 2014) and disinterest.

5.1.3. Theme 3: Loss of informal communication

Lastly, another way in which virtual communication platforms have impacted internal communication between employees and their direct managers is by hindering casual conversation about day-to-day topics, such as one's family, for example.

Most of the interviewees had no issues to discuss this openly, and the interviewee addressed the extent to which each participant felt this was happening in their own environment. Responses mainly fell into two different categories. On the one hand, some participants experienced a difference that was significant, and that was tied to other unintended consequences that have been mentioned previously in this chapter, such as more intense control measures or punitive behaviors. In other words, if the relationship with the participants manager was deteriorating in any way due to them switching to home office, their informal exchanges became limited as well. This was particularly the case of employees that had a work structure that was hybrid. Still, there was an exception to this, which was Alex: he was given the option to go to the office on occasions for team building activities and in-person meetings but chose not to. This reinforced the idea that he is actively against engaging in any type of informal communication due to his understanding of his job as something temporary.

Still, there are some participant's statements that delve into the topic of loss of informal communication that are worth exploring due to the heterogeneity of their causes. For example, Paula was saddened by the fact that she no longer felt the connection she had with her manager Alicia, which she believed was strongly tied to her superior's conceptualization of remote work as harmful (Paula, 18/03/2024). As a result, she felt that their already existent flow of communication had been cut in a way that was one sided, and no further discussion efforts to restore them had been made from Alicia's part. Paula was saddened when she recounted not seeing any improvement when Paula was at the office, to the extent that the past connection they had after working together for more than six years was no longer there:

Well, basically now we only and exclusively talk about work, while before she might be interested in me, about, I don't know, how's the family? You know, those kinds of questions you ask to show that you are interested in another person. But now she only focuses on work and only talks to me for what is essential. Whenever I have ever tried to be nice, she just changes the topic to just discuss my tasks or what I've done and things like that (Paula, 18/03/2024).

Alicia's consistent efforts to steer the conversation back to official matters is a clear example of her systematically closing the debate with Paula through the process of topical avoidance (Deetz, 1992, p.192). The fact that she has already made use of this form of discursive closure could be seen as a mechanism to prevent Paula from addressing not only the change in tone they experienced in their relationship but also, her role as a leader as well. Ultimately, this would also mean that Alicia's value system that guided her negative opinion on remote work was to be challenged. If that were the case, then there would be an ideal speech situation, but since one end of the two-way dialogue is systematically closed, it is likely that this situation will remain unresolved for the moment (Deetz, 1992).

Another interesting unit of analysis was offered by Pablo, an engineer whose department was forced to switch to fully remote after the sector they worked with went on an indefinite strike. The nature of his switch to remote work is unique within the sample selection and adds a new layer to the analysis. This participant,

who was hesitant at the beginning of the interview, became increasingly talkative when explaining to the interviewee the extent to which switching to remote work had made a negative impact on him (Pablo, 17/03/2024). This made going to the topic of this thesis easier. Aside from the negative impact on his productivity and sense of focus, he added that the relationship with his manager, which he already knew beforehand, had become what the interviewer classified as short-termed, results oriented and, in other words, a crisis response type of communication.

Despite somewhat sharing the unplanned nature of an informal exchange, their messages focused on grammatical errors on Pablo's part, job-related questions and mainly instructions on what to do next, as the participant expressed that his manager had instructed him to read on technical manuals and other forms of relevant literature for formation purposes (Pablo, 17/03/2024). As such, he claimed that they did not spend as much time talking about non-job-related issues in each other's lives as they did when they were at the office. In that sense, since the type of communication that appears to be present is situational, of tactical nature and as a crisis response, Deetz's theory of systematic distortion of communication is not applicable, as this behavior did not accurately depict their usual interaction. Still, it would be worth exploring how their dynamic is in a regular context, as there is evidence that supports the idea that Pablo's habitual supervisor's leadership style could be paternalistic (Love, 2006).

On the other hand, when the job was conducted solely in a remote form, participants found alternative ways to actively seek small talk about non-related issues. These were often planned efforts that were conducted through the official organizational channels, such as their professional email account, during non-working times. For example, Elena and Joel, who worked at the same company and had projects they worked on collaboratively, described what they referred to as their weekly "coffee break" (Joel, 21/03/2024; Elena, 02/04/2024). This break mainly consisted of an allocated time of usually thirty minutes before their official meeting was scheduled to start, where they could meet up without the rest of the team and catch up on each other's lives through a video call. Elena, when asked about these meetings, answered enthusiastically, and expressed how these had helped her placate her fears of remote work being isolating (Elena, 02/04/2024). It is worth mentioning that Joel and Elena had the same level of seniority. Still, Joel also mentioned how he would turn to another colleague with a higher degree of

seniority for his daily chats (Joel, 21/03/2024). This colleague had known him previously and had been responsible for bringing Joel to their current company, but was not his direct supervisor, but Elena's. The emergence of these alternative forms of unplanned interaction between colleagues corroborates past research that state the importance of informal communication has for the well-being of an organization, especially because they get the feeling they are being heard and that in sum, their feelings are of significance (Dahlman and Heide, 2021).

As always, there are exceptions to this, which the researcher classified as "increased oversharing with manager". In this case, these came from Laura and Sergio. For both participants, the fact that their communication was mediated by a screen made their casual communication with their manager less restricted. For Sergio, this was also due to his seniority. Being at the same company for more than ten years had enabled him to break down the walls that they initially had: "(the supervisors) they are very closed people. It is a character issue. They have a hard time building trust with other people" (Sergio, 16/03/2024), which he had by now managed to overcome, more so with one of his two supervisors, with whom he felt comfortable enough to joke around at times:

I talk to him constantly, yes, continuously, when necessary. In fact, sometimes I think that, look, I don't know if, that I exceed myself a little, that is, that's what I'm telling you, that sometimes I joke and say, damn, I don't know what, you're kind of exploiting me a little, right? (Sergio, 16/03/2024).

Hence, his statement aligned with the idea that feedback flows more freely when the employee feels that the relationship with their manager is not in danger (Scrimshire et al., 2021). Laura's testimony is along this line, but she mentioned a specific example that embarrassed her: on Friday, one out of the two days she worked from home, she had a meeting with her supervisor and the rest of the marketing department to discuss an ongoing campaign. Her and her supervisor were the first to arrive at the virtual meeting room and her supervisor made a comment about Laura looking a bit "worn down" (Laura, 15/03/2024). To this, Laura said that at the office she would simply state she had not slept well and then brush over the subject. But on that occasion, she admitted to her manager that the

night before she had gone out with her sister and some friends for a few drinks and things had “gotten a bit out of control” (Laura, 15/03/2024), which is normally something she would have kept to herself. This went against the current findings, and suggested the idea that virtual communication platforms can have the opposite effect than what was initially expected.

5.2. RQ2: Why do some organizational members choose not to provide critical feedback to higher level employees on video conference platforms?

5.2.1. Theme 4: Hierarchy culture

Significantly, Juan, Paula and Elena showed similar concerns about their manager’s hierarchical superiority, which made them hesitant to discuss topics of sensitive nature. In other words, despite having mentioned issues they would like to address or situations they were put in that made them uncomfortable, they stated that their superior’s higher degree of seniority prevented them from addressing them freely. The interviewer, however, felt this was a topic that was worth exploring further, as it was believed that further questions could help exposing underlying themes. Juan was the participant that went right into the topic: He spent a significant amount of time during our interview criticizing his own manager’s insistent and controlling behavior. Still, when the interviewer asked him about his previous attempts to for example, ask Oscar to formally schedule time for daily updates, Juan shut down. His response was one that had been short and one that invited no further discussion: “He does not agree with your criteria, he is the boss, he decides” (Juan). From Deetz’s perspective, such statement showed that the employee had already agreed to put his manager’s interests ahead his own because of managerialism logic (1992). “He is the boss, he decides” was an example of naturalization (Deetz, 1992, p.190), in which managers have historically been regarded as the sole decision-takers that do not ask for the opinion of their subordinates. It also indicated that the socially constructed notion of authoritarian leadership was the only style of leadership that Juan contemplated for his leader to engage in, which limit and constrain the

voluntary activity of upward critical feedback (Kaffka et al., 2021). In conclusion, it showcased an informational model of communication based on strategy and involvement, with no presence of a willingness to seek consensus or participation (Griffin et al., 2019, p.262).

Still, the researcher wanted to explore this statement further, to assess the degree up to which Juan would go to silence his own voice. When asked to provide an example of a time he would have wanted to say something but chose not to, he mentioned a report he wrote that was sent to his manager for revision, which we would have asked to get a second opinion on:

For example, something recently happened to me that, on an issue that I had sent a report two weeks ago, to be reviewed, and with less than 24 hours' notice, my boss made many very important changes to it, which I do not understand nor agree with. (...). Then you're left with a face like, well, what do I leave out? And for me I say, why don't we present both options and let someone else choose which of the two versions we present? (Juan, 25/03/2024).

The first example is “for me, I say...”, which showed willingness to argue back that was constrained. Still, the most significant piece of information was when he said that his workplace followed a “kingdom of taifas” type of structure, which is a Spanish idiom that refers to organizations that are highly constrained. In these organizations, every single action must be approved by the manager. As a result, organizations that are referred to in such terms are considered inefficient, as there generally no room for consensus and the work is at risk of becoming paralyzed. Despite this, the researcher was informed of the fact that Juan was no longer affected by this lack of two-way dialogue. In fact, he had found a way to cope with it that, to him, had led to the relationship he had with Oscar to improve, which mainly consisted of ranting to himself once the interaction with his manager had concluded:

Well, I almost think that (I get along) better (with my boss), because many times having to bite your tongue when you are in front of whoever, and having them tell you what they tell you, and not agree, is complicated. And

you also have to ensure you don't let it show on your face too. Which here, when those circumstances happen to you, you can curse by covering your phone, or once you've hung up your phone, or via Teams. (...). Of course, if it's at the office where he tells me, then I would have had to bite my tongue. Here I am teleworking, well I bit it too, but the moment he hung up the phone, well... (laughs). (Juan, 25/03/2024).

This mechanism, which was seen as unhealthy, hindered the two-way dialogue's main principle of ensuring mutual understanding, and makes the interactions between Juan and his manager one-sided and not genuine. Or, from a leadership communication perspective, Juan's account of his relationship with Oscar goes against the principles of authenticity (Men, 2015), is one sided and asymmetrical (Kang and Sung, 2017) and does not engage in negotiation (Blom and Alvesson, 2014). In sum, it is not participatory (Cheney et al., 2011), but instead aligns with the tendency to regard communication as purely transmissional (Putnam and Mumby, 2013).

As a result, by expressing his anger from the comfort of his own home, where no one can hear him, Juan has opted to systematically ignore a significant source of conflict that will remain unaddressed. In sum, it revealed that there is no existence of upward critical feedback, and that the environment does not promote any type of employee voice (Kassing, 2009). Hence, if the situation were to remain the same, communication between them would be very likely to remain one-sided, and Juan would most likely not engage in critical upward communication.

Similarly, Paula's response pointed towards a similar understanding of her organization as highly reliant on aspects such as seniority and hierarchy. In particular, she showed discontent and was against the perception that her manager had with regards to remote work. Still, Paula's "because he is my superior" (Paula, 18/03/2024) is similar to Juan's "he's the boss" (Juan, 25/03/2024). Through that statement, she showcased an attitude that could be classified as "it is what it is" and attributed her hesitancy to speak up to external forces. In her case, these were mainly her supervisor's negative perception of remote work, which initially felt she did not exteriorize for fear of contributing to a negative

environment, which consisted of one of the main reasons for a lack of critical feedback explored by Bisel et al. (2011).

On the other hand, Laura, Pablo, and Sergio offered arguments that contradicted these arguments, which pointed to the idea that the way that leaders communicate can vary from sector to sector and based on other factors such as experience or personal connections. First, Laura's statement was in direct contradiction to this, as she highlighted from the beginning that the organization, she was part of promoted two-way dialogue between her and her managers, mostly due to its flat nature, which she believed was characteristic of marketing agencies in general.

I mean, in the end in the agency world in general it's like there aren't that many hierarchies and such. So, I kind of feel that the bosses and my manager are more accessible (Laura, 15/03/2024).

And second, Pablo stated that he felt he could simply call his manager anytime he felt that the situation required it, as he was always confident about his availability but also, about his positive predisposition, which was exclusive to them due to the nature of their relationship: "it is true that he might be more lenient with me than with the rest of my colleagues" (Pablo, 17/03/2024).

Lastly, Sergio stated that his time at the company, as well as the years he spent in the service sector outweighed any concerns he might have with regards to his title. Even if, on paper, his role was that of an IT technician and had no people he was responsible for, he felt the rest of the team members that went to him for technical support and advice were his clients (Sergio, 16/03/2024). This led the interviewer to believe that his sense of belonging was strong and long-lasting. This reciprocity in his sense of belonging or compromise (Deetz, 1992; Griffin et al., 2019), can constitute another one of the reasons as to why he had no issues going against the views of people with opposing ideas to his own, even if those people held roles that were more senior than his:

And I get stubborn, stubborn. Hey, let's say everyone says "A", "A", five guys including bosses and everything. And I say "B". And four say "A" and I say "B." So, five say "A" and I keep saying "B." And things have gotten

heated in the past. Look, I don't have time for nonsense right now. Just send me an email, that's what I say in these cases. (Sergio, 16/03/2024).

Sergio's account was regarded by the researcher as one that encouraged participation, as his attempts to talk about any topic he considered fit were listened to and addressed. Similarly, since he was also listened to in situations in which he did not initially agree, the organization he belonged to also fulfilled the consent premise, making it one that did engage in a communication model of organizational practice (Deetz, 1992; Griffin et al., 2019). It can also be argued that in Sergio's case, there were many reasons that led him to feel comfortable enough to speak up to his managers. Firstly, he felt that he was no longer at risk of ruining the relationship with his manager (Scrimshire et al., 2021). Second, he felt his job was not only secure (Bisel and Kramer, 2014), but also appreciated. And third, him being male partly explains his willingness to voice discontent more freely (Ploeger et al., 2011). All in all, his situation can be considered ideal for the emergence of upward critical feedback, as the necessary conditions for employee voice were being met.

5.2.2. Theme 5: Strong feelings of unappreciation

Similarly, another major theme that was extracted from the empirical study was a generalized feeling of unappreciation of the employees by their direct managers, that on some occasions took the form of feelings of invisibility as well. Three main emotions were associated to this overall theme. First, employees such as Laura, Joel and Paula felt what the researcher has categorized as "despair", albeit for different reasons. Second, Juan, Julia and Elena expressed little to no emotion, and simply engaged in what the interviewer assigned the category of "resignation". Deviations came again from Sergio and Pablo, who either felt they had confidence to speak freely or that the previous connection that he shared with his manager gave the researcher the impression that he was taking the existence of a two-way dialogue for granted. All in all, the participants that felt unappreciated in some way, either in the online or the offline domain, had stopped voicing their concerns to their managers due to not feeling comfortable enough to share them, regardless of their work location.

Firstly, Laura, Joel and Paula all shared an emotion of despair that led them to question the reasons behind their managers reacting that way. Laura highlighted from the beginning that the organization she was part of promoted two-way dialogue between her and her managers, mostly due to its flat nature, which she believed was characteristic of marketing agencies in general.

I mean, in the end in the agency world in general it's like there aren't that many hierarchies and such. So, I kind of feel that the bosses and my manager are more accessible (Laura, 15/03/2024).

Hence, initially Laura's workplace engaged in what appeared to be an approach based on engagement and participation (Deetz, 1992; Griffin et al., 2019). However, when asked to provide examples of those aspects of daily life that she did not feel she was encouraged to talk about, she soon told the interviewer she felt that not only was she unable to grow in that specific setting, but also, that she had stopped bringing them up (Laura, 15/03/2024).

This was mainly due to her concerns being continuously unaddressed. More particularly, she felt her concerns about being stuck had remained ignored despite her attempts to discuss them with her manager. When asked to talk more about it, she provided two examples: she had not gotten a raise ever since starting in October 2020 and she still had not been assigned sole responsibility for a marketing campaign, which led her to believe she was not fully trusted. As a result, she felt unsure, both with regards to her position within the organization when the interview was conducted and in the near future. In fact, she confessed that the idea of quitting had already come to her:

Then another thing is that they (the managers) listen to you, to what you tell them right? in the end, what bothers me the most in the sector a little is, for example, the salary increases, it's like... You know? Like they tell you yes, but that all the salaries are frozen, that the economy is bad, and like, they never arrive, and in the end it's like... You drop it, eventually. I have the feeling that in this sector Like... Like, they don't focus on internal promotion, you know? Like, damn, in the end the only way to grow is to quit your job. That is, to go to a studio where they pay you more. That's

why I'm thinking about going abroad because things are different abroad. Maybe to Amsterdam, or to a multinational company still in Madrid. And I say, how do I do it now? Now? Or when? (Laura, 15/03/2024)

Explored through Deetz's theory of systematic distortion and discursive closure, Laura mentioning she had stopped trying to open a discussion about her job-related economic concerns constitutes one of the examples that Deetz (1992) provides to explore the notion of pacification as a process used to limit employee voice (p.196). Specifically, Laura's boss was bringing other relatable issues such as the fact that the entire country is on an economic recession to the discussion so that the issue appeared to be insurmountable. By alluding to a topic that is indisputable, easy to relate to and more importantly, unresolvable by the company or other parties soon, the attention is diverted and thus, the discussion is avoided (Deetz, 1992, p.197). Given that Laura had stated that this approach had been recurrent whenever she tried to discuss the topic with her manager, it can be considered as a form of distortion that had become systematic, and to which Laura saw no other alternative than to eventually leave the company, as she perceived these efforts to divert attention as signs of a lack of appreciation (Laura, 15/03/2024). Hence, her internal debate was not so much if she was willing to leave the company, but more so, when she was planning on doing it. Her internal struggle about feeling demotivated aligned with Tracey and Hinkin's (2008) findings, which established that her attitude and performance would be compromised once she considered quitting and show that employees feel internal struggle because of it. This finding also highlighted the fact that the topic of retention is still an ongoing issue (Climek et al., 2024), that will lead to higher costs if having to hire someone to replace Laura (Guilding et al., 2014), which she was also aware of and found deeply frustrating. It also led the researcher to the conclusion that, despite their best efforts to conceal their behavior as one based in participation, it merely constituted of a clear example of an "involvement but no voice" (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 265) approach, which is that of an informational model of organizational process.

Similarly, from Joel's interview, the researcher gathered that he, as an employee, placed high value on positive reinforcement from his direct managers, and performed at his best if his efforts were acknowledged. In fact, this lack of

recognition from Leticia constituted one of the two main reasons for him not voicing his organizational, job-related concerns. When asked to discuss this topic further, Joel attributed Leticia's attitude to her cold personality, and stated the following:

I think I've had this idea of her, that she was serious and she's not enjoying my job, you know? I always feel this, even now, that she...Because she rarely says, oh, you are making good job. You are doing good job. You are fantastic. She never said this to me (...). It feels she is not happy because you know, I have no degree. It's just my knowledge. But I did courses, just not official ones, you know. It's always Luz I ask, always her. So, I really don't, I really don't have this temperature about her (Leticia) (Joel, 16/03/2024).

Leticia's remarks about Joel lacking a graphic design degree were not explicit. In fact, they were rumors that had been going around the organization for some time and that one of his colleagues informed him of. No evidence was given other than other people's testimonies, which, even if these were not true, were taken by Joel at face value. Because of that, the author has chosen to include them in this thesis as if these had been spoken by the interviewee's boss. In addition, they constitute an accurate representation of the process of disqualification (Deetz, 1992, p.189), which is worth exploring: by considering an organizational member's official qualifications as a requirement to have access to and to contribute to an ongoing debate, Leticia was continuously going against the principles of equality of access to a discussion, and thus kept one side of the debate consistently hidden (Deetz, 1992). From an employee perspective, this was also another factor that could eventually lead to higher turnover. In fact, Joel had already quit once and mentioned other plans he had for a business he wanted to open on his own sometime in the future, which led the researcher to the idea that the notion of quitting was still there, at least in the back of his mind. This, along with the fact that he had already expressed he was no longer listening during meetings and felt disinterest also align with the idea that his performance had decreased due to the idea of quitting (Tracey and Hinkin, 2008).

To finish this section, Elena was also a participant who engaged in this topic, and she provided the example that she felt she was constantly being compared to

her colleague, Adriana, by the same manager Joel had. They had both started at around the same time, and Elena felt that her opinion was always regarded as more valid due to criteria she believed to be subjective, and not based on the outcome from previous work. Specifically, because Adriana had much more experience than she had, both at a professional and at a personal level. She believed her opinion was deemed less valuable for her age. She recounted a specific situation in which this had occurred that still crossed her mind, as it made Elena hesitant to disagree in front of her manager Leticia from then on:

It was the first or second time that I met with Leticia and Adriana. Adriana and I were in charge of an advertising campaign and Adriana made her copy(copywriting) proposal and I made mine, and we were supposed to compete among ourselves and then Leticia would choose one if we had not agreed to join our proposals together. Adriana is from Venezuela and has lived outside of Spain for a long time. And the campaign had to reason with our target audience, which was from here (from Spain). I have been a copywriter for a long time, and I know what works and what doesn't. And they (Spanish audience) don't usually like words from Latin American Spanish to be used. She had used *consultorio* instead of *consulta*, and I knew it was not going to work here. It's like that, it's wrong but it's like that. And I said it, I knew it and I said it, but Leticia chose Adriana's proposal anyway. And I told her, but it was like water off a duck's back to her.” (Elena, 02/04/2024).

Elena, who also had Leticia as a manager, expressed her concern over her young age being a disqualification factor (Deetz, 1992), even if her supervisor had not addressed them specifically (Elena, 02/04/2024). However, she was fully convinced that the situations she referred to were solely due to her young age and lack of life experiences. Hence, the researcher will explore them further as examples of systematic distortion through the process of disqualification (Deetz, 1992). The age factor provided an interesting angle to the topic, which was partly explored during Joel's testimony, but was not as significant as other factors such as academic knowledge. The fact that Elena felt a competitive element in the nature of the relationship with her manager also added a layer to the discussion, as

she felt she was constantly behind, or even losing a competition that was not officially there. All in all, Joel, and Elena both referred to feeling less valued due to two reasons that were socially produced (Joel, 21/03/2024; Elena, 02/04/2024), which highlighted the socially constructed nature of reality and the moral values that guided it, such as competitiveness and a correlation between academic qualifications and personal worth (Deetz, 1992).

5.2.3. Theme 6: Managers lacking leadership skills

Lastly, findings indicated that another significant reason behind employees holding their criticism back was the participant's perception of their direct managers as what can be classified as bad leaders, which shares some similarities with the theme titled "authority questioning behavior". This perception was grounded on past managerial actions that conveyed a series of reactions that ranged from disinterest to a strong aversion or dislike and included a discussion on the possibility of quitting. All in all, these reactions led to those experiencing them to opt for staying silent when confronted with uncomfortable situations.

For example, Joel stated that his relationship with his manager had reached to a point where he no longer felt comfortable voicing his concerns and was open to the idea of discussing it further. In fact, these issues had created a situation that had already caused him to quit his job once, despite his re-admittance some months later. Ever since, the situation with his supervisor had not improved, to the extent that he defined her as "just a person" (Joel, 21/03/2024) with whom he rarely speaks, other than to send work-related emails or messages through Slack or Teams. This indicated that there was not a fluid, two-way communication between them, and that it instead consisted of an exchange of information that does not promote employee participation (Kang and Sung, 2017).

Or, in Deetz's terms, Joel and Leticia's exchanges fell under the information model of communication, where Leticia has, due to her position, more power over Joel, who had limited access to question her choices and to actively engage. While Joel was encouraged to speak up during meetings and provide his opinion during the times allocated to that in their weekly updates, these could be regarded as digitalized suggestion boxes that discussed less significant topics, but still gave lower level-employees the sense of contributing to the outcome of organizational

decisions, which were taken during private board meetings. Hence, Joel's organization showcased initiatives to promote employee participation in issues that did not matter as much, which was defined by Griffin et al (2019) as "involvement, but not employee voice" (p. 265).

As mentioned previously, part of the reason for his perception was his manager's cold personality, which led her to not acknowledge Joel's work and skills as graphic designer (Joel, 21/03/2024). Still, on a deeper level, the participant believed that her manager simply lacked the necessary experience to lead her company, which had contributed to his manager's delegitimization. To start with, Joel believed that Leticia was not handling her role of CEO with the energy and mindset that was required: her pessimistic nature had caused her to give into the investor's pressure, which had reflected in what he felt was a work environment that was "dooming" (Joel, 21/03/2024). Additionally, he believed the organization he belonged to was flawed for two main reasons. Firstly, Joel felt Leticia was unaware of the cultural differences that were evident to him and that could have been acknowledged with environmental scanning at the beginning of the project:

It's very important when we work with some audience, you need to know what they are thinking, what they are doing and what they want to see, to know about the profession that they have. They were searching, they were making searching about the audience while they were working in the country of the audience. So, they didn't make a big search before to arrive in the country (Joel, 21/03/2024).

And secondly, he thought the company's main product was flawed and did not respond to the needs of its intended target audience. As a result, he adamantly claimed he did not see Leticia as her boss:

Leticia, in the paper that I signed is my leader. But I never felt this relationship about leader and employee with Leticia (...) So, I don't see that leadership that she has in (our company) for the other people. I have never felt the same (Joel, 21/03/2024).

Joel's statement also pointed towards one of the crucial elements of leadership being compromised, which is its voluntary nature (Blom and Alvesson, 2014). Taking this as a starting point, the professional relationship that existed between Joel and Leticia was lacking, because there was no negotiation process that took place between them, which meant that since he had manifested no willingness to engage in this negotiation process that is needed in all leadership processes, was not effectively being led by Leticia. Hence, there was no dialogue among them, aside from the occasional exchange that was of a tactical nature and consisted of Joel being told what to do by his supervisor.

Still, what was interesting about Joel was the fact that he had turned towards a colleague with a higher degree of seniority than he had for advice and guidance. As he claimed, he was "always looking for Luz to talk about uncomfortable things". Simply put, Luz had taken over this leadership role after Leticia was deemed incapable of filling it. With more things in common, Luz complimented Joel's work and "made this paper of leader" (Joel, 21/03/2024), which made Joel immune to the fact that there was no communication with his official manager. This added an interesting layer to the debate, as it suggested not only that employees need leadership to navigate their organizational environment, but also, that if they do not find it in the people that have been appointed officially, they will seek it elsewhere.

Julia was equally eager to talk about her supervisor in negative terms. In fact, the first description she gave of him was that of a "jerk" (Julia, 24/03/2024), and despite being slightly embarrassed, she insisted on this adjective. In her case, her relationship with her manager had started when he entered the company amid an internal restructuring in which employees were fired and she quit her job as manager to become a technician. After that, they appointed someone from the commercial department, a decision with which she did not agree, since she did not believe he had the necessary skills. According to Julia, her manager avoided her due to professional envy, since he assured the interviewer that he thought she wanted her managerial role back, which she was adamant she did not:

I have a director's salary. They couldn't lower my salary. Why am I going to assume your responsibility? I now live very well, I do my job, I can telework because my ratios are good, I organize my work, I get along well

with my colleagues, I don't have to fight with clients or with workers, because they haven't done their work (Julia, 24/03/2024).

Still, before she realized this, Julia made attempts to engage in conversation with the new boss, since she had been in that position until recently. But she said she soon realized that some of his boss's actions were questionable. On the one hand, he did not act as a manager, and still engaged in activities from the commercial department, "although his official position, his title, is another" (Julia, 24/03/2024). But on the other, Julia was the angriest about the fact that she felt Oscar had taken the easy way, both on the tasks he assigned himself and his conflict management skills:

Look at what my boss is like, that with the restructuring, when he became director, they appointed him an office director (...). And as a boss, he chose to stay with the technical and administrative staff, who are the ones who have autonomous tasks, us who give no problems. And you say, if I had been the director, I would have done the opposite. (..). To begin with, because I, as manager, earn more than you, therefore, I have to assume more responsibility, you know? In this case, no. It seems...bad to me. Despicable. (Julia, 24/03/2024).

Regarding his conflict management skills, Julia felt that her past as member of the commercial department had influenced him greatly, mainly because he opted to ignore her communication efforts to share knowledge and simply ignored her. Ever since, communication between them is non-existent, and her depiction of her manager's actions align with her conceptualization of the relationship as a power struggle, filled with negative emotions such as professional envy or competitiveness. Similar to what happened in Joel's case, Julia was confident to state that she has other people she can turn to for advice, that she basically "does not need her manager, like, at all". When asked if she would be at risk of getting fired, she showed confidence when she stated the following: "I am expensive. I am expensive when it comes to firing me, so they won't" (Julia, 24/03/2024). This final statement constituted an example of Deetz's corporate colonization, in which words and expressions from the organizational environment had permeated Julia's

personal domain (Deetz, 1992). Adjectives such as the one she used to refer to herself pertained more to the organizational environment, even if she had used it outside organizational boundaries. However, in her case, it had led to her engaging in a behavior that can be classified as reckless: since she was sure that her position was safe, she had no issues ignoring her manager and even going above him whenever she needed help with a specific topic. Hence, the outcome of this was that their relationship seemed destined to be one of competitiveness and tension.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to gain more critical knowledge of the topic of upward critical feedback in the context of Strategic Communication from the perspective of lower-level employees. By doing so, it has also broken away from mainstream research that has mainly been conducted from an organizational standpoint. This chapter constitutes the final one and it is divided in three sections. First, it will address the implications of the findings from the previous chapter. Second, it will also discuss the way that these fit within the theoretical and practical domain of upward critical feedback. Finally, the author will conclude by suggesting directions in which research can be broadened in the future. Hence, the research questions that have been answered in this thesis had the goal of providing an answer to the overarching aim of the thesis. To do so, a critical organizational communication approach has been adopted, which has enabled the research to explore the way in which virtual communication platforms have impacted employee voice, and more specifically, their willingness to engage in topics of sensitive nature with their manager.

Research findings revealed that virtual communication platforms such as Google Meet or Zoom had impacted the communicative relationship between employees and their direct managers in three different albeit interrelated ways. To start with, employees perceived an increase in control measures that were exerted by their direct managers after they switched to home office, to the extent that daily communication became transactional and centered on employee accountability. Such conceptualization was more present in companies that saw remote work as a reward for good organizational outcome. This increase in control measures showed that the managerialism logic or thirst for control from those in charge became accentuated in mediated communication. As a result, participants recalled feeling pressured to be always available, which they saw as a lack of trust from their superiors.

Secondly, employees started becoming increasingly aware of what they believed were their manager's questionable actions and attitudes. Impatience,

insistency, and even managerial leadership abilities were discussed, which highlighted the active role of subordinates in the ongoing negotiation that is required for effective leadership. All in all, the outcome of the discussion revealed that this questioning was more prevalent in organizations that did not promote active participation and consensus from their internal stakeholders. Or, in Deetz's words, in organizations with an information organizational process instead of a communication one (Deetz, 1992; Griffin et al., 2019).

Thirdly, hybridity has also resulted in a loss of spontaneous, informal communication between employees and their direct managers in companies that traditionally only worked in-person until the pandemic. In this setting, participants recalled the loss of small talk that accompanied office breaks and added that their interactions were now strictly of official nature. Efforts to move the discussion forward were met with topical avoidance (Deetz, 1992) from the superiors, which eventually resulted in subordinates dropping the subject. Still, something interesting emerged in those companies that never had a physical office: participants scheduled time to discuss non-job-related issues, usually before official meetings among themselves when their relationship with their manager was non-existent. Thus, this revealed to the understanding that employee engagement can be strengthened horizontally too and contradicts the idea that remote workers are more at-ease with individualistic work (Naswall et al., 2008, Kumar et al., 2021).

Similarly, even if employees did feel their direct managers had acted in ways that made them uncomfortable, angered or saddened, most of them chose not to voice those concerns openly, for two motives: first, a high sense of authority from their managers that had been already naturalized by lower-level managers and that was met by an "it is what it is" type of attitude and that could be attributed both to a fear of being fired (Bisel et al., 2011) and to a lesser extent, to not wanting to get on the manager's wrong side (Bisel et al., 2011). Results also matched with Ploeger et al.,'s (2011) conclusive remarks that established that male participants are generally more open to the idea of voicing negative remarks to their managers.

Secondly, some employees chose to remain silent because they either felt their efforts went unappreciated by their supervisors due to their lack of official qualifications or life experiences or because they felt their concerns about getting a raise and growing at the company were unaddressed. These, when prolonged in

time, had led to participants to drop the subject after the processes of disqualification and pacification had taken place. These organizational settings promoted a false sense of participation that led to no real involvement, as participants were encouraged to speak up but then, had their concerns ignored systematically. One exception to this case was one participant who experienced a more lenient attitude from his manager due to their previous lifelong relationship, which pointed towards a more paternalistic leadership style.

Finally, a negative perception of the participant's leadership qualities in virtually mediated communication led to a delegitimization of their role as leaders, to the extent that subordinates turned to other people they had more affinity with and that had higher seniority for advice and assistance, which constituted an interesting and unexpected finding. As a result, employees engaged in a behavior of avoidance of those in power, which contradicts the inherently problem-solving mindset that managers historically ought to have (Deetz, 1992). The possibility of quitting had been considered due to this negative perception.

Considering upward critical feedback as a phenomenon that is placed within the domain of internal informal communication, the findings constitute a source of concern for various reasons. To start, from an organizational perspective, it leads to workplace conflict to remain hidden, which in turn makes it difficult to address and thus, resolve. Seen from the viewpoint of the employees, a loss of unplanned informal communication can promote feelings of detachment that lead to potentially problematic issues such as lack of participation and can ultimately result in turnover, which was an option that participants either had already considered or were planning on doing. This finding also reveals the suitability of critical feedback as an environmental scanning tool.

6.1. Theoretical and practical contributions

Findings highlight the suitability of adopting a critical organizational communication approach when exploring the topic of upward critical feedback and showcased the importance of putting employee's perspectives at the center of the debate. While leadership has been amply studied, this research has emphasized the importance of acknowledging this phenomenon as a completely

voluntary act that requires participation from subordinates and that is largely influenced by other organizational factors such as centralization and the relationship with one's direct supervisor. Adopting a critical organizational perspective has offered a line of enquiry that helped to explore the extent of workplace democracy and the ways in which it can be systematically constrained by managerial action in the current, post-covid workplace. All in all, this approach has helped establish that employee engagement is partly determined by the degree of consensus and participation that is promoted at all levels. In the practical domain, the results showcase the need of considering the existence or lack thereof of two-way feedback as an indicator of employee satisfaction that can be used to predict turnover intention and constitute a good starting point for strategies aimed at strengthening upward internal dialogue.

6.2. Research limitations and suggestions

This thesis has contributed to the body of knowledge of upward critical feedback from an employee perspective. But there have been some limitations. First, Deetz's critical theory of organizational communication aims towards workplace democracy of all stakeholders, which seems idealistic in today's world. Still, it has provided valuable insights regarding key communicative issues that affect lower-level employees. Acknowledging and addressing them will lead to a more fluid internal two-way dialogue at all levels, which will ultimately lead to a richer and more welcoming organizational environment.

Second, this study is of qualitative nature and a larger sample size is needed to make generalizations. Additionally, it has been made obvious that different conceptualizations of critical feedback have arisen depending on the degree of hybridity that is promoted by the interviewee's organizations. Hence, research that distinguishes between fully remote and hybrid systems should be considered. Also, further research would benefit from exploring the unexpected effects of a lack of upward critical feedback, such as delegitimization of superiors and the emergence of unofficial leadership that can occur when employee's communicative expectations are not met. Specifically on the digital domain and linked to the topic of workplace democracy, more research should be conducted

on the outcome of systematic distortion and discursive closure on a qualitative but also quantitative level, to properly establish if there is a relationship between the limitation of two-way critical feedback, turnover intention and turnover rates.

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Appendix 1: Interview consent form in English

INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

1. I have been informed about the purpose of this interview, as well as about its estimated duration, around 40 minutes.
2. I agree to take part in this study and have been informed that I will not receive any compensation for this.
3. I have been informed that this study is for academic purposes only and will not be shared with people outside Lund University.
4. I agree to be recorded during the interview and understand that said content will later be transcribed by the researcher in charge of this investigation. The recordings will be deleted upon conclusion of the investigation.
5. I understand that my statements may appear wholly or partly in the analysis section of the work, and I have been informed of my right to appear under a pseudonym.
6. I have been informed of my right not to answer any question if I wish and to stop the interview if I deem it appropriate.
7. I have been informed of my right to contact the researcher at any time to find out more about the processing of my data or any questions related to the research.

Researcher name: Marta Carnicero

Student at the Strategic Communication department in Lund University.

Contact details: ma3848ca-s@student.lu.se

Participant's signature

Researcher's signature

Date

Date

Appendix 2: Interview consent form in Spanish

CONSENTIMIENTO INFORMADO PARA ENTREVISTA

1. He sido informado/a sobre el propósito de esta entrevista, así como de su duración estimada, en torno a los 40 minutos.
2. Acepto formar parte de este estudio y se me ha informado de que no recibiré compensación ninguna por ello.
3. Se me ha informado de que este estudio tiene una finalidad exclusivamente académica y de que no será compartido con personas de fuera de la Universidad de Lund.
4. Acepto ser grabado/a durante la entrevista y entiendo que después dicho contenido será transcrito por la investigadora a cargo de esta investigación. Las grabaciones serán eliminadas al concluir la investigación.
5. Entiendo que mis declaraciones pueden aparecer total o parcialmente en la sección de análisis del trabajo y he sido informado/a de mi derecho a aparecer bajo pseudónimo.
6. Se me ha informado de mi derecho a no responder alguna pregunta si así lo deseo y a parar la entrevista si así lo creo conveniente.
7. Se me ha informado de mi derecho a contactar a la investigadora en cualquier momento para saber más sobre el tratamiento de mis datos o de cualquier pregunta relacionada con la investigación.

Nombre de la investigadora: Marta Carnicero

Estudiante del departamento de Comunicación Estratégica en la Universidad de Lund. Teléfono: 697868644 / correo: ma3848ca-s@student.lu.se

_____ Firma del participante

_____ Firma de la investigadora

_____ Fecha

_____ Fecha

Appendix 3: Interview guide

- Open Questions

- Hi! Could you tell me something about yourself? What type of work do you do?
- How often do you work from home?
- What would a normal day working from home be like for you?
- How often do you meet with your supervisor? How are sessions scheduled?
- What would you do if you wanted to discuss something with your direct manager?
- And would that change if you had any problem with your supervisor?
- How do you feel within your organization?
- Did you experience any change in your routine/relationship with your manager since working from home?

- Control Questions

- Oh, wow, that's really insightful. But I would like to explore (this) topic even more, as it's so interesting!
- Thank you for being honest with me. If it's okay, I would like to talk more about it, as it would be really helpful for my research.

- Confirmation questions

- So, you said you have been working remotely ever since the pandemic, is that right?
- And you mentioned that you have felt better now that you work from home than when you were at the office?
- You said (include statement here). Did you mean that... (include assertion here).