Parallel chat in video meetings for work

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Our study

- Diary study of remote work with Microsoft employees (n=849), during Apr-Aug 2020
- Augmented with one-off poll (n=149) on use of parallel chat in remote meetings

Parallel chat in Zoom (left) and Microsoft Teams (right) allows text, images, URLs, etc. during video meetings.

Findings: benefits and drawbacks of parallel chat in video meetings

Most respondents reported an increase in parallel chat use after shift to remote work, by themselves (72%) and by others (76%).

Types of chat message in meetings include:
- Questions for speaker or other attendee(s)
- Links to resources, documents, webpages
- Unrelated conversation held in same chat
- Voicing agreement, sending messages of praise
- Adding information to what is being said or starting new conversation about related topic
- Responses to previous messages
- Humour and casual conversation

Positive effects of parallel chat in video meetings for work include:
- **Inclusion** and participation without interrupting the flow of the primary (video) conversation
- **Coordination** of action and collaboration, sharing resources and enabling post-meeting discussion instead of separate follow-up tasks
- Casual conversation and humour can give meetings a greater sense of **social support and connection**

Negative aspects of using parallel chat in video meetings for work include:
- **Distraction** for meeting participants who wish to focus on the meeting topic and difficulty with division of attention
- **Differing expectations** on informality, side conversations, and how chat should be used
- Limitations of platform's interface, attentional effort, and A/V issues can lead to **information asymmetries**

Design opportunities and guidelines

Since people use parallel chat in such different ways, we recommend sharing guidelines for intentionally balancing utility and distraction:

- Establish **expectations about chat usage** before meeting starts
- Consider chat-related **accessibility challenges** (e.g., processing parallel multi-modal sources, understanding text sentiment, providing text descriptions of images) and ensure accessibility requests are met
- Encourage chat that engages with different aspects of meeting's topic or **makes meeting more inclusive**; discourage overly off-topic, exclusionary, inaccessible chat
- **Monitor chat for questions** and relay them to current speaker
- **Synthesize chat highlights** and incorporate into meeting recaps to share with attendees

Opportunities for tools:
- Differentiate and **annotate the content of chat** for different kinds of chat messages (e.g., questions, clarifications, comments, kudos, on- and off-topic talk)
- **Integrate chat with A/V**, for example:
  - Indicators for presenters about busy/quiet chat
  - Highlighting messages with terms that match discussion
  - Aggregate kudos for end of presentation
  - Show/hide questions automatically
  - Integrate images, websites shared in chat with main A/V
- Connect **timestamped textual material** (chat, transcript, and meeting notes) into bundle
- Special **moderator** view to effectively manage parallel chat

Age	Men	Women
25-34	20%	59%
35-44	8%	29%
45-64	24%	26%

Increased chat use was most reported by women aged 25-34. The figure shows the proportion responding 'strongly agree' that their own chat use has increased.

Further reading

Advait Sarkar, Sean Rintel, Damian Borowiec, Rachel Bergmann, Sharon Gillett, Danielle Bragg, Nancy Baym, and Abigail Sellen. 2021. **The promise and peril of parallel chat in video meetings for work**. In CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems Extended Abstracts (CHI '21 Extended Abstracts), May 8–13, 2021, Yokohama, Japan. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 8 pages
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More on meetings during COVID-19:
https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/research/project/meetings-during-covid-19/

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