

Examining the role of Emotional Intelligence as a mediator for the impact of Virtual Communication on decision making effectiveness during the covid-19 crisis

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Abstract

Across the world global pandemic Covid-19 has opened a new approach towards life. It has carved a novel arena of working where organizations have re-structured their operations through Virtual Communication. Assuming the current situation as perennial, it has opened both opportunities and challenges to the organizations. We have witnessed a paradigm shift in the organization culture and working dynamics where the new normal is working via virtual mode. The present study assumes that Emotional Intelligence plays a key role in understanding relationship of Virtual communication and Decision-Making Effectiveness. Task technology fit theory lays the foundation of this study. Implications of this study is applicable to academicians, trainers, coaches, consultants, policy makers and all professionals who relied on virtual communication as an important platform during covid.

Keywords- Covid-19, Emotional Intelligence, Virtual communication, Decision making ability.

1. Introduction

As we say, “The measure of intelligence is ability to change” The world is still lurching with an exceptional crisis, coronavirus, which hit hard not only on the health aspect but also economic issues, country wise. There can be seen a transitory phase of working, learning and earning. As this situation is considered to be enduring, henceforth need arose for a permanent solution so that it does not hampers growth of our economy (Queiroz et al.,2020; Dubey et al.,2020). Global pandemic has led to perplexed situation where business houses tried to convert threat into opportunity for the betterment of society as well (Sikich 2008., Martin et al.,2020; Ivanov 2021). This unprecedented situation has dwindled our ecological system too (Gunasekaran et.al., 2018; Dubey et al.,2019). The everlasting damage of pandemic has inflicted slackness to all the sectors which can cured to some extent with constant upskilling of the workforce. And digitization is indispensable to our growth. Advancing through 4.0 revolutionary age, even lockdown imposed by government of various countries could not succeed impose obstacle in the growth path as we survived through technological upgradation.

Automation, Robotisation, Machine learning, e-learning gave plain sailing learning. Every organization has set different protocols for controlling, channelising and managing virtual platform. Though earlier, team members were apprehensive about its usage but gradually people have embraced graciously new technology to combat physical presence with virtual (Cole et al.2015, Wollschlaeger,2017., Alward &Phelps 2019). During the initial phase of lockdown, with an atmosphere of precariousness, strong government led initiatives promoted to pump up the economy and relieved much agitated stress in the form of self-sustenance through virtual mode. All the sectors reignited and became resurgent during pandemic. The purpose of present study is to underline the relationship of Emotional Intelligence on the effectiveness of Virtual Communication and Decision-making ability.

The significance of Emotional Intelligence Over virtual communication can be supported from various literatures, (Cole et.al.,2015; Barbara 2018; Alward &Phelps 2019). Prevalence of work stations have been replaced by virtual infrastructure as Artificial Intelligence has gained momentum (Gupta et.al;2021). As we say Change is the only constant, therefore organisations were left with no option but to work upon measures to overcome the turmoil. This contingency led to a trajectory shift from having physical team to virtual team. Being novel coronavirus, there was no patterned or systematic way of doing things and so supported innovation led growth. The biggest challenge encountered by employees and employers was on fostering mutual trust, productivity, job satisfaction, communication and performance. Countries across the globe have ramped up measures to manage with limited resources and framed policies through online meetings rather offline. Employee motivation also imposed challenge over learning new technology as compared to manageable office settings. Embracing this new normal life, we have resorted to work from home to boost up the work spirit and revive emotionally, physically and economically (Akala;2020). HR departments have taken a call and accepted challenge through work from home. Tech Giants like TCS, Tata Steel, Gartner, Mahindra and many more companies have opted to work from home for 75% of employees till 2022 whereas companies like ITC, Mercedes Benz have adopted hybrid mode Virtual communication has given an added advantage of reducing office costs for many organisations. Technological innovations like Machine Learning, Cloud Computing, Robotics, Mechanization, Artificial Intelligence has given turbo speed to learn and grow. Researchers' worldwide fathom those human beings would make better decisions when emotions are removed. As emotional Intelligence is worldwide acknowledged construct supplementing decision making. Though virtual platform-imposed restrictions but in vain as human intelligence suppressed all barriers to overcome the threat of closed physical interface. Organisations have struggled in developing and implementing latest technological systems in contrast to social and behavioral consequences of such technology (Straus &Mcgrath (1994). As it is rightly said to live a successful life one must skill, reskill and upskill, so with covid-19, various asynchronous learning platforms, edtech companies like Cousera emerged which added to the learning and growth parameter of employees (Shah,2020). Across the globe, mode of communication has changed drastically. Vast studies show that EI is considered an important parameter not only for organizational, entrepreneurial but human success in all (Karia,2021). Only Qualitative research to explore the effectiveness of virtual team using major themes EI, communication and leadership competencies have been done (Alward &Phelps,2019), this

further supports our empirical study. There lies a pool of studies conducted on advantages and disadvantages of E- learning over VC (Xu & Jagers, 2016; Lu et al. 2003; Zhang & Nunamaker, 2003) (Atchley et al., 2013; Xu & Jagers, 2016). There arises a gap perception of team members over effective decision making through VC (Alge et al., 2003) Also there is dearth of study done on VC and DME to gauge their overall performance with moderation effect of EI, building a vacuum for knowledge, theoretical and population (Miles, 2017). This promoted researchers like Schillers and Mandviwalla (2007) to advocate for more theory-based research on virtual teams.

2. Theoretical Foundation and Hypothesis Formulation

Previous study done by authors (Straus & Mcgrath 1994), on ‘Can medium matter?’, postulated the effect of communication media on group performance. Their study provided the conceptual framework saying that as the interdependence of group on task increases, role of communication media too increases with benefits of group performance and satisfaction. Tasks where group interdependence is low, the effect of communication media will also be low. The present study confirms moderating role under the influence of EI (high or low), keeping in view the variables like group size and their attributes. Hence, the designed model confirms adaptability by organizations during unprecedented times.

3. Emotional Intelligence (EI)

Emotional Intelligence refers to the ability to analyse one’s feelings, emotions as well as those of others and use that emotional information as a guide to differentiate between different thinking and behaviour and adjust according to the environment (Goleman, 1995). EI helps to showcase exemplary leadership skills. To survive within social environment, EI helps an individual to process the emotions and focus on individual characteristic (Salovey & Mayer, 2004). Past literature shows that individuals who possess high EI are strong mentally, with excellent leadership skills thereby leading to good performance.

3.1 Emotional Intelligence and Face to Face Communication

Organization is build-up of People, Process and channel, whether Face to Face or virtual (Lipnack & Stamps, 1997). Virtual communication is not readily acceptable within team members as the channel is virtual which disturbs the personal space of employees due to which they experienced psychological fear, stress and anxiety. Working in close, compact work stations are always favourable to employees as compared to distant virtual stations. Location of the meeting changes with circumstances and people, but in VC team meetings remain virtual, which reduces zeal and enthusiasm (Rugero, 2002). Unlike face-to-face interaction, virtual meetings end up in social loafing- where individual contribution of team members become ineffective. (Lepsinger & DeRosa, 2010). VC is the most conventional & preferred medium in Consultancy as the clients are distributed across national and international borders (Boh et al., 2007). Face to Face group meetings is highly effective as compared to VC, no matter technology improvises (Hambley et al., 2007). Previous studies depict that virtual team performance descends as the members lack social cues (Grundy, 1998; Parker 2000; Kelly, 2001 & Barner, 2001). Past studies highlight the importance of VC but nonetheless, the barrier

of emotional, social and cognitive challenges cannot be ruled out. VC is less popular with context to team acceptance, performance and DM as compared to Face-to-Face communication (O'Neil, 2016)

3.2 Emotional Intelligence and Virtual Communication

Surviving this age of uncertainty, requires one to be Emotionally intelligent. Irrespective of any particular domain, EI helps to analyse one's abilities, skill, competencies and use them to complement their personal and professional growth. Past study depicts the inefficiency of virtual teams' due communication, cross cultural difference and lack of mutual trust (Gazor,2012). Global pandemic has forced companies to operate through virtual mode as it reduced operational cost. Office work station has converted to virtual work station. This relates to past studies when developed nations focussed on cross cultural teams over VC (Ivancevich et.al.,1990). Out of IQ and EQ, EQ is considered more optimum with respect to employee performance as it helps to build strong emotional relationship with peer group. And is a significant factor for high performances (Goleman,2013; Batool,2013). Adopting EI as an assessment tool can help to verify the employee fitness to a particular virtual team (Quisenberry,2018). People with high EI outperform in groups, they possess requisite characteristics for team cohesion like, self-awareness, motivation, empathy and relationship management (Prati et.al., 2003). Computer aided teams can be successful only if there is good relationship and bonding within team members (Guo et. al.,2009). Blended learning makes use of VC where EI of tutor increases learners' competency, high the EI of tutor, high would be his social competence, which is one of the EI dimension and results in high performance of learners (Bawane &Spector,2009; Guasch et. al., 2010; Youde,2016).

3.3 Emotional Intelligence and Decision Making

Emotional Intelligence is a strong component in taking day to day decisions in life. For successful accomplishment of any task, effective decision making required which includes emotional and cognitive aspects. (Dahling & Perez,2010) Emotions play a major role in shaping up the past, current and future decision-making process. Decision making is an important aspect at workplace, and it includes elements of cognitive and emotional ability (Zaki et.al.,2018) Emotions shape up the cognitive ability thereby making it a strong catalyst for decision making and performance of employees. (Goleman, 2005). According to Peter Drucker, (2005), "Whatever a man does, he does through decision making." Effect of EI on DME is also complimented with study, "What makes a leader"? discussing the difference between a good leader and average leader with decision making skills (Goleman,1998). Literature reveals some interesting facts about dichotomy in thought in relation to sound decision making, emotions and rationality (Hess &Bacigalupo,2013) In varying contrast, IBM has designed processor which can imitate human cognitive skills. Human emotions are injected over microprocessors for effective decision making. Artificial Intelligent machines are designed to exhibit human emotions like anger, joy, sorrow, fear, anxiety and surprise which depicts the superiority of man over machine: EI over VC. DME is highly dependent on emotions and cognitive ability (Frasson &Chalfoun, 2010), and this further promotes our study of EI on DM. Ability to reThere lies a fascinating interest in studying relationship of emotions

on DM as emotions generate relationship between objects of study thereby improving DM. As it is evident there is research lacuna in the field of EI as a moderator between VC and DM.

Virtual Communication Versus Face-to-Face communication

Covid 19 has modelled a new design for communication across borders, nations and remote area. Though a replacement for face to face communication, yet has furnished barriers due to psychological, cultural and intellectual, verbal and nonverbal cues. Apart from technical issues related to settings and internet availability, it lacks emotional and inter personal touch making the platform unpopular. Effective decisions making can land up in negative results if an eloquent style not adopted for communication. Emotional and Intution driven cues die out if not supported with effective face to face communication. (Hess and Bacigalupo,2013). No doubt technological advancement has lit up virtual team settings across different time space, yet it requires effective internet connection, audio/ video conferencing, skype or other platforms which occupies a second position if compared with face to face interaction. (Alge et. al.,2003). Virtual team members have to assume compatibility with reference to technology usage, interpretation, task execution, knowledge and skills required for a particular task (Mathieu et.al., 2000). Virtual teams are not devoid of social loafing, where individual team members intentionally decline in their efforts. Face to face communication helps to manage knowledge gained across various team members in specific area, which if managed through effective electronic channel can pacify communication hindrances (Zack, 1994).

Virtual Communication and Decision Making

Various theories related to media selection for effective decision making have been highlighted over a period of time. One of the important components is task interdependence, which stimulates and guides further media selection for communication (Wageman 1995; Gibson, 1999). Further theories support that for a decision making to be effective, proper coordination between communication channel and task interdependence need to be set (Daft and Lengel, 1984). Insights from Media richness theory suggests that for a team to function effectively, inter personal skills, social bonding between the group is crucial, which stands missing in virtual communication, (Daft and Lengel,1986). Strong correlation of verbal and non-verbal cues stimulates team coordination which gives positive outcomes, (Chidambaram,1996; Martins et.al., 2004).

Face to Face Communication and Decision Making

Crisis based situations get coupled with uncertainty, proper acumen which leads impediment to stable decision making (James and Wooten, 2005). Past studies suggest that effective decision making requires attributes of sensing, feeling, thinking, intuition, perceiving (Jung, 1971). Nevertheless, importance of critical decision-making skills generates with human interaction, (Weinstein, 2005, p,214). Also, communication skills develops when employees openly share their views and ideas leading to thinking and judging, (Cabrera and Ortega, 2003). Researchers have adopted team effectiveness model of, Input Process and Output, which encompasses key attributes and skills of team members, inclusive of demographics, skill set, training, qualification, attitude, personality traits task interdependence, all this accelerates the process, open communication across all the channels, shared vision, thoughts, feelings,

coordination and cooperation to ultimately drive out collective team objectives i.e. decision making (Gladstein, 1984; Hackman 1987; McGrath 1991; Marks, Mathieu, & Zaccaro, 2001, Mathieu et.al., 2008).

3.4 Hypothesis

The following hypothesis were set forth for the study:

H1: VC has a positive impact on DM.

H2: VC has a positive impact on EI.

H3: EI mediates the relation between VC and DM.

4. Methodology

Data for the study was collected from 120 employees associated with IT industry Delhi and NCR region to provide a wide coverage to the study. The questionnaire for the constructs were adapted from 16 item Warrier et al Scale for VC (Podsakoff et al., 2003)., 16 item Scale for EI, and 6 item (Warrier et al 2021 scale for DM. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to assess the composite reliability (CR) and validity of the proposed construct using AMOS 21.0. The validity, CR and Fit Indices for the measurement model are given in Table no. 1 and Table 2.

5. Finding

The result of Hypotheses 1 and 2 are indicated in Table 3. As it was hypothesised, a strong and positive association was found between VC and DM (standardised beta = 0.57, $t = 11.16$, $p < 0.001$), hence, Hypothesis 1 was validated. Also a significant positive association (standardised beta = 0.61, $t = 13.12$, $p < 0.001$) between VC and EI was observed, which validated Hypothesis 2.

The result of Hypotheses 3 is indicated in Table 4. As it was hypothesised, a significant indirect effect was found, confirming the mediating effect of EI. Further, the presence of significant direct effect confirms the presence of partial mediation (standardised beta = 0.57, $t = 11.16$, $p < 0.001$), hence,

Table no. 1 Model Validity Measures

	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	EI	VC	DM
EI	0.973	0.695	0.378	0.974	0.833		
VC	0.962	0.611	0.252	0.962	0.502***	0.781	
DM	0.915	0.643	0.378	0.917	0.615***	0.390***	0.802

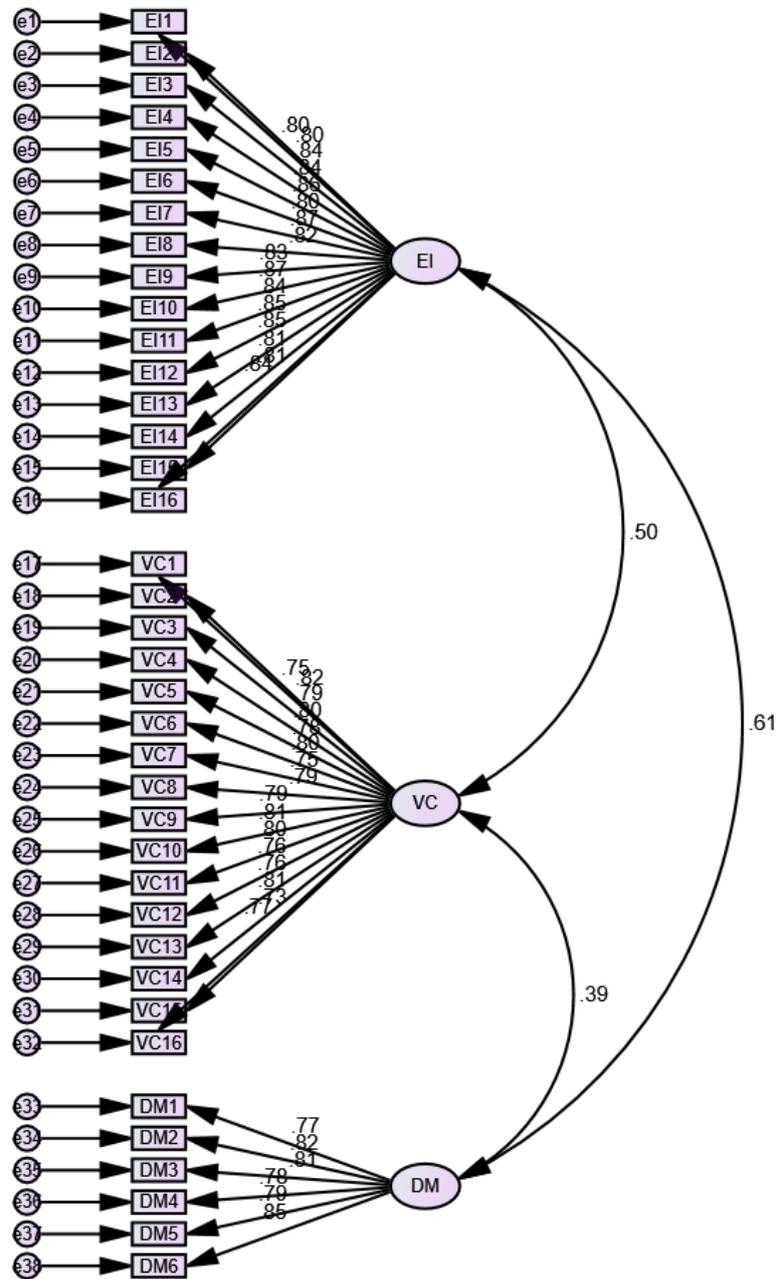


Figure :1 Measurement Model

Table No. 2 Model Fit Measures

Measure	Estimate	Threshold	Interpretation
CMIN	828.932	--	--
DF	662	--	--
CMIN/DF	1.252	Between 1 and 3	Excellent
CFI	0.957	>0.95	Excellent
SRMR	0.074	<0.08	Excellent
RMSEA	0.046	<0.06	Excellent
PClose	0.740	>0.05	Excellent

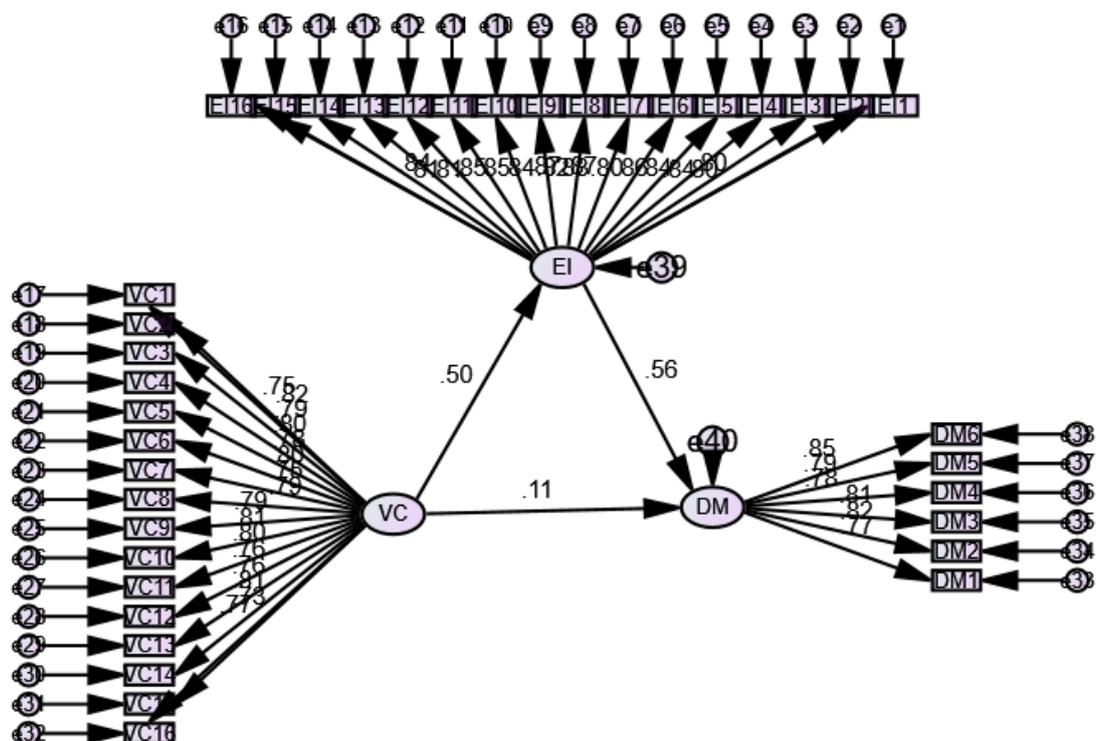


Figure 2: Structural Model

Table No. 3 Regression analysis of structural model

Hypothesis	path	Estimates	t value
H1	VC-DM	0.589***	5.109
H2	VC-EI	0.505***	5.156

Table No. 4 Regression analysis for mediation effect of EI

Hypothesis	path	Direct	Indirect	Total	Conclusion
H3	VC-EI-DM	0.351***	0.183***	0.543***	Partial Mediation

The present study was designed to examine the role of EI in the relationship between VC and DM. Research investigated about the relation between VC and DM, EI and VC in IT industry, Delhi & NCR region and found the relation to be. Moreover, it also showed that EI mediates the relation between VC and DM, albeit partially in IT Industry in Delhi & NCR region in India.

6. Managerial Implications

Results from this study add to the previous literatures that EI is considered to be a vital factor for improved VC and DME. Findings are conversant with all those working professionals who want to incorporate VC as a medium of communication. VC with its versatility can be widely accepted by the Educators, Consultants, Trainers, Managers & Corporates. This model underpins trainers, who can with proper EI gain an added advantage if the EI module properly planned with specified training need analysis. As the world is reeling for upskilling, hybrid/blended mode of learning will become our saviour. Organisations can opt for tailor made design with reference to financial aspects and diminishing dependency on technology. Suitable training modules on EI can be designed like Empathy, social skills, Self-awareness, Positive outlook, stress control, self-control and adaptability. Chalking out training program on EI over VC can prepare and guide group members having cross cultural, time zone differences, socio-economic, demographic and techno fear differences. Members across the country working on similar projects can be trained with easy-to-use software thereby soothing there learning speed and enhancing DME.

This give arises to chalk out interaction and coordination between VC participants. People give due recognition to emotions as a result of decision making. They foresee the correlation of emotions out of decision taken. (Sevdalis, Petrides &Harvey2006). Previous studies prove that emotions coming out of past decision making as well as in future suggests the behavioural outcome too and communication over virtual platform via emoticons is gaining popularity during group meetings leading too effective decision making. Group coordination can be increased with clear and structured guidelines, in lieu with autonomous work environment for making optimum utilisation of VC. Organisations should trust employees and give them freedom while decision making process. Another dimension added to EI is techno stress,

forcing employees with pressure to meet out challenges. To overcome this, team comprising IT personals can be utilised to minimise inter communication challenges as well issues with learning and usage of new technology. Furthermore, Employee Wellness is another domain which can never be overlooked. Since, employees are the biggest asset to any organisation, hence, HR departments are chalking out plans to mitigate anxiety, stress and depression related issues for a ready acceptability of working, communicating, coordinating over VC for DME.

7. Limitations and Future Scope

Despite, all the endeavours poured by the researcher, there are certain limitations which value attention, our findings cannot suffice effectively due to cross sectional in nature, in future Longitudinal research design could be used.

8. Conclusion

Being novel in study, the moderating effect of EI on VC and DME, we can nevertheless, contradict importance of human capital to an organisation. This era of ‘New Normal’ is highlighted with communication through virtual platform still, giving best people management practices need to be explored. Onus of our empirical study in addition to previous available literatures lies in confirming the moderating role of individual characteristic (EI) on VC and effective DM. Technology can never over power us rather human driven technology can be blended for great results. Study concludes that EI bridges the gap between emotions and rationality.

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