

Relations of Computer Mediated Communications and Escalation of Organizational Conflict

Dr.Uzma Mukhtar⁵

Abstract: *The commercial revolution in Technology has reconfigured communication modes into computer mediated communications (CMC). Research studies have been discussing the positive aspects of computer mediated communications socially. However, few studies have discussed the ‘dark side’ in the commercial revolution of technology. As a result of this gap identification, the aim of this study is to see the relationship of CMC with special focus on the emails, chat, groups and Instant text messages with escalation of conflict within the organizations specifically in context of a developing country where historically, the CMC is an emerging field and talk of this decade. This study is experimental in nature and finds positive relationship between escalation of organizational conflict and CMC. Results also show that likeness or dis-likeness, personality dimensions, moods, situation and time of receiving the messages through CMCs also has an impact on escalation of conflict in Organizations*

INTRODUCTION

Communication is relentless among human activities. Organizations place considerable time and effort on the communication strategy and techniques within and outside the organizations. One of the core values of Information Systems (IS) is the utilization of technologies to facilitate communication in the workplace (Quan-Haase et al. 2005). Accordingly, various computer-mediated-communication (CMC) technologies have been proposed and designed to enhance performance through improvements in communication. Romiszowki (1997) coined the term CMC and stated it as “as any form of organized interaction between people, utilizing computers or the computer network as mediums of communication”. Genedron (2011) elaborates electronic communication as “any non-face to-face communication including but not limited to telephone conversations, email, instant text messages through mobile, web-based applications, and video or voice calls. Ou, C.X.J. et al (2013) in their study tested three CMC modes that were IM, email and social network at forum/groups. They found that email & instant messages used at workplace to communicate with each other have significant impact at work, while on other hand forum/groups at social media have insignificant relations, and the reason they identified is that social network focus on one to one relationship instead mass communication. They identified that social media provides forum to articulate their thoughts, emotions, feelings, rumors and unauthenticated information, publicly as a results conflict generate more frequently compared to old communication medias.

Hence, the continuous development and growth in CMCs have filled the communication gaps and provided the fastest modes to communicate with each other. As a result during literature searches, this study finds that the most of the research studies have been discussing the

⁵Associate Professor, Department of Commerce, University of Balochistan, Email: mukhtaruzma@gmail.com

positive aspect of computer based communication such as fastest mode of communication, inexpensive, facilitating global perspective, social networking etc. Conversely, sparse studies have discussed negative aspects of this mode of communication such as a source of escalation of conflict. As a result of this gap identification, the aim of this study is to see the relationship of CMC with special focus on the emails, chat, groups and instant text messages with escalation of conflict within organizations.

In order to meet the above stated aim, this paper is organized in such a way that first section will discuss the introduction followed by literature and research studies about organizational conflict and relationship of organizational conflict and emails, chats and groups. Third section will discuss the research methodology followed by the results, conclusion and recommendations.

CONFLICT ESCALATION AND COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATIONS

Organizational conflict has been a central field of analysis for conflict research (Edward 1999). Unlike conflict, the term organizational conflict has been not been given much attention and discussion in the literature. Hence, few researchers have defined this concept. It has been defined as “a state of discord caused by the actual or perceived opposition of needs, values and interests between people working together”. Coser (1956) defines conflict as “a struggle over values and claims to the scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals.”

Mukhtar (2011) states that “conflict has been seen as a destructive force and harmful that keeps an organization from being optimally productive, despite this phenomenon is uncontrollable and occasionally it has been viewed as most frequent. Rahim (2001) highlights the contribution of classical organization theorists (e.g., Fayol, 1949; Gulick and Urwick, 1937; Taylor, 1911; Weber, 1947) and identifies that these theorist did not seem to appreciate different impacts that conflicts have on the organization.

Pruitt.et al. (1997) in their experimental study found that “the participants in a simulation with associated stored supplies initially started request for the materials. When that did not work, they moved to demands and then complaints and angry statements. A few participants then moved to threats and harassment and so on. Thus, Pruitt et al. (1997) conclude their study that if a dispute continues and not addressed properly then more quarrelsome tactics may be used which escalates conflict. Plunkett and Raymond (1989) identify that the poor communication has been found a major escalators of conflict”. Gray and Strake (1984) also identifies Communication as among the major escalator. Later on, Rahim (2001) classifies conflict in detail into five basic classes. He added different sources under each head, amongst them he identifies communication as major source of organizational conflict, Alabi (1999) in his study identifies communication gap as major escalator of conflict. Mukhtar (2011) in her dissertation identifies significant negative relationship between organizational conflict and lack of communication. An informal survey identifies that the lack of facial cues from both the sender and receiver. Ou, C.X.J. et al., (2013) in their study state that “conflict initially escalates if a change of perceptions occurs, and the counterpart becomes disliked, then more aggressive behavior is likely to occur for several reasons”.

Marti Olsen (2002) states that personality dimensions also help escalate the conflict .For example, some people who are usually extroverts trigger the sparks, on other hand introverts are conflict-hostile. They'll do anything rather than face a fight”. Olsen. L.,(2002) also state

that in face to face communication , some conflict negotiated strategy may be adopted but in CMCs it is not possible so chances of conflict escalation are higher through CMCs than face to face communication especially Chats, emails and Social media. In face to face communications mostly issues may be discussed directly but in CMCs, it's impossible rather cannot judge the moods or situation for example, if a person is depressed and receive email or texts then his /her response may be different compared to he/she may be communicated in relax mode. Friedman and Currall (2003) presented the “dispute-exacerbating model of e-mail (DEME) in which they argued there are four differences in the method of communication through email that can increase the likelihood of a conflict escalating that are length of email, content of message, minimal social cues and mood or time to send”. Based on Friedman and Currall (2003) the propositions of this study are:

Proposition 1: Mode of communication has direct relation with escalation of conflict

Proposition 2: Content or understanding of message& length of message also escalates conflict

Proposition 3: Minimal social cues has direct relation with escalation of organizational conflict

Proposition 4: Mood or Timing of sending message also may escalate conflict in the organizations

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Experimental study has been conducted to identify that email and social groups or forum as CMC have relations with conflict escalation.

Data Collection and Demographic Profile

This study conducted experiments on two groups in an engineering company in Lahore, Pakistan. The groups were (1) comprised of 20 employees of different departments; (2) unknown about the observation on them; (3) Duration of experiment was two and half months. In this period groups were indulged in different situations and then their behavior and electronic responses (e.g., emails, chats, posts and group discussion on social media) were observed. The demographic profile of this study shows that about 20% of the respondents were female and 80% were Male. All had their graduate level degrees i.e., Master level. Age-wise data depict that 50% of the sample lies in 25-35 years, 40% between 35-45 years and 10 % above 45 years.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

First of all, it was tried to identify the modes of CMC that are linked directly to escalation of Conflict. Two modes are most common with advent of technological advancements in Asian Context that are SMS and Email. Two groups were indulged to test the relation of computer mediated communications with escalation of conflict. Two mode of communication were used in this situation. We analyzed which mode is most related to escalation of conflict:

1. Internet (Emails and social media messages)
2. Text messages

Emails were sent to both groups separately about Project completion. Same wording was used for both in Message I, however different contents were used for both group. In second message through email, Group I received clear contents and Group II received unclear contents. Messages were sent using social media to both groups. In response to messages sent through emails , About 40% of Members of Group I interpreted the message differently , 40% understood partial message of their own interest and ignored the others, 20% of the members understood the message correctly. Similarly about 60% of the members of the

Group II interpreted message relevant to their own interest and 40% did not took any initiative and ignore the message.

Conversely, messages sent through social media were observed to escalate the conflict. Members of both groups reacted on the messages sent to them, started discussions unofficially as a result conflict escalates between the group members and as well with administration. Thus this result is in line with earlier study of Ou, C.X.J. et al (2013) that showed social media escalates the conflict more frequently than the other source of messaging Two groups were indulged in 4 different situations to test the above stated propositions to analyze the relations of computer mediated communications with escalation of conflict; these situations are discussed below:

Situation I (related to Proposition 1): Purpose of this situation was to analyze whether lengthy of communication mode has direct relation with the organizational conflict. Two groups were assigned tasks related to work. Duration of task to be completed assigned was 4 days. Mode of communication we preferably used emails and groups.

In light of Proposition 1 Following were situations have been observed:

- Day 1: An email consisting of 30-50 words were sent to both group and same tried to send through SMS on the mobiles
- Day 2: Task were assigned through short messages
- Day 3: A very long email of 1000 words sent to both groups

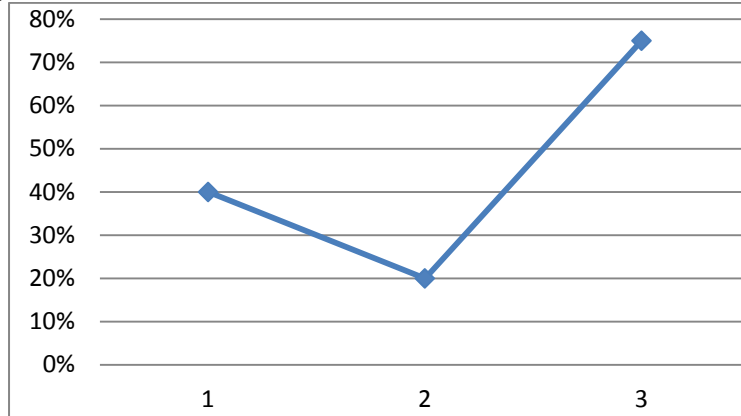
Group Response & Situation Analysis:

Both groups responded positively through SMS, while Group members in first group responded quickly through email. The reason we observed was that Group I had more technology equipped persons with availability of internet connection all time while Group II members had less access to internet so understandings about the content vary among the group. Short messages sent on Day 1 were well understood. However, percentage rate of understanding the lengthy email (DAY 3) was 50 % among the Group I and Group II each respectively. We observed that both group members read the message again and again to find the main points or task assigned. Some irrelevant discussion in the email and SMS raised questions among the group and they started online conversations resulted escalation of conflict among both groups. Direction of escalation of conflict was towards the manager who sent this message and later it was observed that direction of escalation of conflict was horizontal among the group members and they start blaming each other. Table 1 and Figure 1 below shows that larger the length of emails or text, higher is the probability of escalation of conflict:

Table 1: Mode of Communication and Escalation of Conflict

Days	Situation	Reaction	Conflict Escalation %
1	email consisting of 30-50 words were sent to both group	Positive	Moderate with 40% probability
2	Task were assigned through short messages (SMS)	Positive	Minimum with 20% probability
3	long email of 1000 words sent to Group 1&2	Negative	Maximum with 75% probability

Figure 1: Mode of Communication and escalation of Conflict



So this study in light of Proposition 1 analyzed that mode of communication and the way it is used has direct relationship with organizational conflict.

Group Response and Situation Analysis: (Proposition 2) Content or understanding of message also escalates conflict. To analyze this proposition 2, messages were sent using CMC modes to both groups.

1. Short content messages of 30-40 words length were sent using CMC
2. Short content messages of 40-50 words length were sent using CMC
3. Long content messages consisted of 50-100 words were sent using CMC
4. Long content messages 100-200 words were sent using CMC
5. Long content messages of 200- 500 words were sent using CMC
6. Extra-long content messages of 500 to unlimited length were sent using CMC

It was observed that each group member responded against the above stated six messages. About 75% members were unclear about the content of messages of 30-40 words of length and what the sender wanted to say in the message. The content of short messages of 40-50 words length was understood by about 50% of the members of the group. Long message with 100-200 was quite clear to the members of the group. Approximately 76% were observed to understand the message. On the other hand, long messages with 200-500 and unlimited words were again misunderstood and provoked the conflict among the members. Following Table 2 and Figure 2 depict that larger the content and length of CMCs, larger is the chance of escalation of conflict among the organization members:

Table 2: Level of Understanding and Escalation of Conflict

Words	Level of Misunderstanding and escalation of Conflict
20-40 Words	20%
50-100 Words	40%
100-200 Words	80%
200-500 Words	100%
500-1000 Words	100%

Hence we identified in this situation that length and content are interrelated , increase in length of the messages through CMC are misunderstood and people don't focus on the actual context of message resulting escalation of the conflict in the organizations

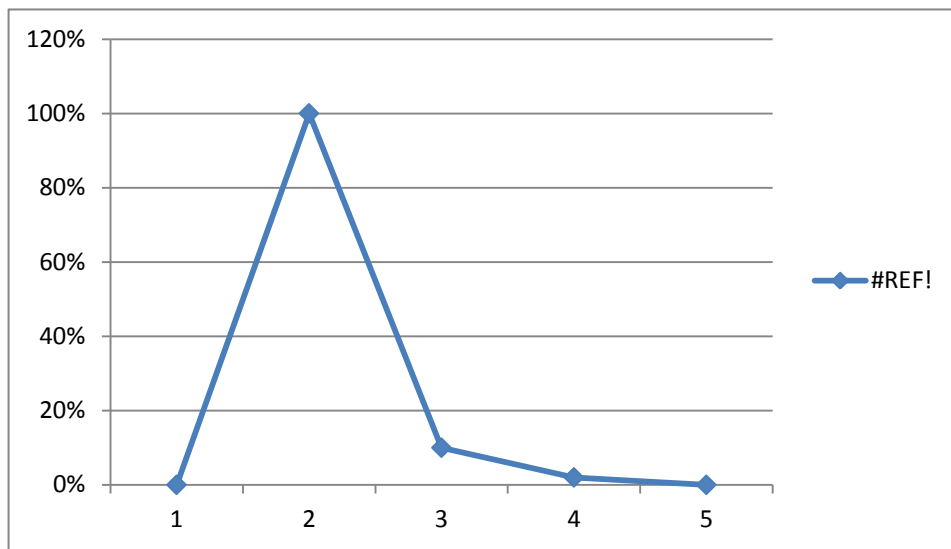


Figure 2: Level of Understanding and Escalation of Conflict

Situation III: Minimal social cues have direct relations with escalation of organizational conflict. To analyze this situation this study sent multiple messages with social cues and without social cue. About 50% messages were sent without social cues and 50% with social cues.

Situation Analysis :

We observed that social cue play important role in escalation/de-escalation of conflict .The hard messages with social cues didn't escalate any conflict among the members; conversely, soft messages without social cue even escalate the conflict.

Table 3: Use of Social Cues and Escalation of Conflict

Messages	Escalation of conflict
with social clues	30%
without social clues	85%

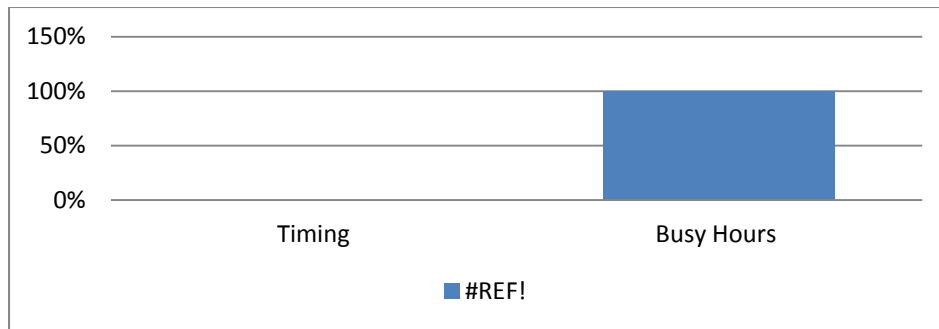


Figure 3: Use of Social Cues and Escalation of Conflict

Situation IV: Mood and Timings of sending message also may escalate conflict in the organizations. To analyze the situation, Messages through email were sent in morning, afternoon, evening and night, similarly social media was used to send messages in same timings.

Situation Analysis:

In this situation it was observed that email messages created less conflict and did not indicate the mood while messages sent on social media escalated the conflict more frequently. This study finds after situation analysis that social media messages have been geared up by the mood, understanding and interpretation of the messages. The messages sent at busy hours and at night resulted in responses in bad mood while relaxed hours and mood escalate less conflict. In depth analysis indicated that about 70% messages sent through email didn't escalate the conflict while 40% messages sent in morning through social media didn't escalate conflict, 55% sent in afternoon escalate the conflict among members and administration. While 70% messages in night escalated the conflict among the group members.

Table 4 (a): Mood and Escalation of Conflict

Moods	Escalation of Conflict
Bad	100%
Relaxed	10%

Following Figure 4(a) depict that relaxed the mood of sender and receiver, less is the escalation of conflicts.

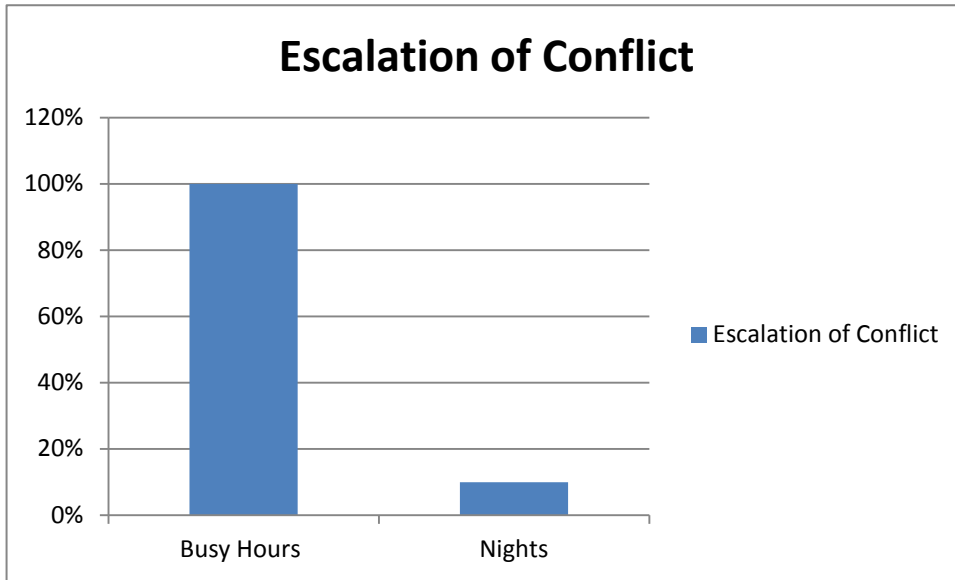


Figure 4(a): Moods and Escalation of Conflict

Following Table 4 (b) and Figure 4(b) clearly depict that Timing of sending the message also has direct relationship with escalation of conflict among the members of the organization.

Table 4 (b): Timing of CMC and Escalation of Conflict

Timing of CMC	Escalation of Conflict
Busy Hours	100%
Nights	10%
Relaxed	2%

Following Figure 4(b) depict the interesting facts that messages related to task in night after working hours generate more conflicts.

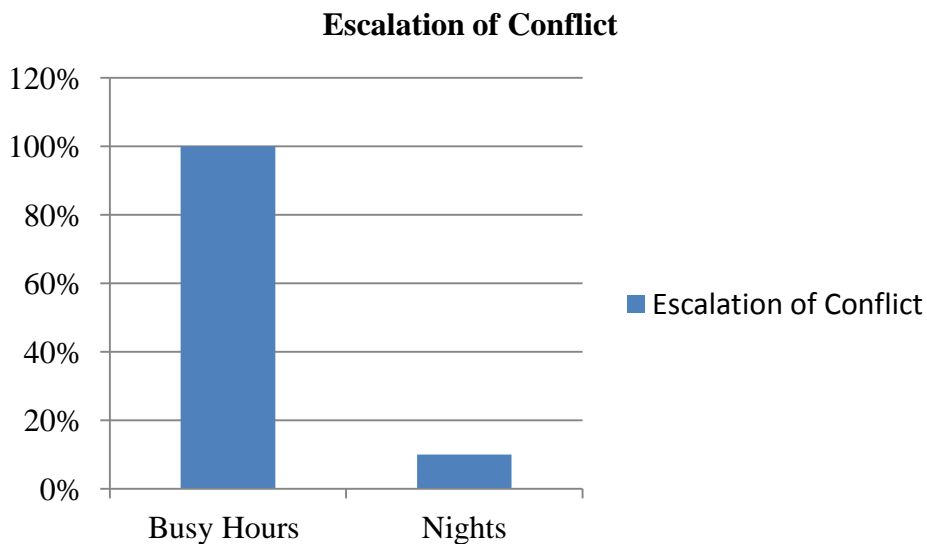


Figure 4(b): Timing of CMC and Escalation of Conflict

Hence, based on the above created situations and their analysis this study finds many interesting results. This study finds that emails, SMS, chats and discussion on groups are the fastest mode of communication but also fastest mode of escalation of conflict due to misinterpretation of the messages, self-translated messages and meanings compared to face to face communication, meetings and talks. In addition, likeness and dis-likeness about some person also because CMC escalation of the conflict; however likes and dislikes is our next future discussion topic. It was also observed in all above stated situation that CMC escalated conflict also has an impact on the task completion and performance of the employees. Absence of social cue, nature of mood and timing of sending message has direct link with escalation and de-escalation of conflict in CMC. Thus, we find that computer mediated technologies escalates conflict faster than face to face communication techniques and there is positive relationship between escalation of conflict and CMCs.

CONCLUSION

This study conducts experiments in an engineering company and floats messages through emails, chats and group discussions to observe the frequency of conflict escalation. This Study finds positive relationship between escalation of organizational conflict and computer mediated communication techniques compared to face to face communication methods. This study also finds that CMC is the fastest mode of communication but people see and perceive messages differently, length of messages has been observed to be related to conflict escalation Also this study find moods, situation and time of receiving the messages through CMCs also escalate conflict. Further, among the CMCs we find email as official mode compared to other emerged social media mode of communications. This study recommends that CMC is an effective and fastest mode but at organizational and administrative level, other communication mode is better like calling, talking, meetings etc. Hence, this study may help organizations in defining the communication mode effectively within and outside the organizations. Also this study recommends the limited use of CMCs within organization to be more professional rather than personal to de-escalate the conflicts generated through CMCs in the organizations, else training must be conducted.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

However, this study has some limitations that are : (1) study is experimental in nature, we analyzed situations , results may vary in surveys and CMC screenings methods of research ; and (2) Mare literature has been found to back up our study , most of the researchers take it as positive but we find it hard to build up any relevant theory of CMC and escalation of conflict (3) This study didn't consider the cultural influences/diversity, cultural settings of this study was south Asian , results may be more diversified in the technology Advanced countries. (3) Attention has been given on literature deliberately discussing the relationship between CMCs and escalation of conflict rather discussing the CMCs in detail in Section two of this study.

Future Work

This study has formulated propositions based on experimental nature of the study, these propositions later may be tested through other research methods like field survey etc. However, during the situation analysis, possibilities of many interesting future work arise, for example likeness of person and escalation of conflict and time series study.

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