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The Utilization of Online Mediation in Japan —From the Perspective of Affordance—

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The purpose of this study is to elicit the features of online mediation through the affordance lens and discuss the utilization of online mediation for educational purpose. To obtain data, mediation role-plays were conducted with six participants, followed by focus group discussions and individual interviews. As a result, the affordance of Zoom and devices for the mediator and two participants were found to have two layers: first, individual devices and skills afforded differently among the participants; second, auditory sensory was afforded more than visual sensory. Figure 2 "Affordance of Zoom and devices for the mediator and two participants" presented the relationship between these two layers. Based on the findings, utilizing online mediation for educational purposes for university students and adults were discussed.

Keywords: *affordance, education, mediation, role play, Zoom*

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to elicit the features of online mediation through the affordance lens and discuss the utilization of online mediation for educational purposes. Mediation is used broadly in educational settings (Burrell, Zirbel & Allen, 2003; Malizial & Jameson, 2018), because mediation is intended to assist problem-solving between conflicting parties by a mediator who does not have a specific authority of decision-making. The goal of facilitative mediation is to reach win–win solutions. A mediator is responsible for managing the interaction process, as well as for being neutral and respecting each party's self-determination, thus providing a safe environment for negotiation, and ensuring confidentiality to facilitate open and honest communication. In addition, successful mediation requires trust and rapport among participants (Suzuki, 2017).

So far, mediation has been conducted mainly in face-to-face situations and has been used in elementary schools (Ikejima, 1997). At universities, mediation is taught as a subject called collaborative negotiation (Suzuki & Kubota, 2017). However, it is uncommon for it to be taught online.

The spread of COVID-19 in 2020 forced the use of online video conferencing, such as Zoom, not only among business people but also university students. However, these devices do not guarantee the same level of benefits to all users. Kubota and Suzuki (2021) found that utilizing devices such as a personal computer or tablet with the Zoom application depends on the individual's skills and knowledge of the devices and application.

Therefore, in this study, the concept of affordance was used to examine the relationship between devices and users. The word affordance means "something that refers to both the environment and the animal. The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill" (Gibson, 1979, p. 127, cited from Harwood & Hafezieh, 2017, p. 4). "Whereas the meaning of an object may change with the observer's changing needs, the affordances offered do not change, are invariant, and being always present. However, an affordance is not a property or quality residing in either the object or subject but relates to how objects are perceived with regard to their possibilities for use" (Harwood & Hafezieh, 2017, p. 4). Thus, the meaning of affordance varies depending on the perceivers. Therefore, it is important to collect

data from the parties in online mediation from the perspective of attribution of their own device and the Zoom application.

Technology affordance is defined as "the mutuality of actor intentions and technology capabilities that provide the potential for a particular action" (Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane & Azad, 2013, p. 2). Majchrzak et al. (2013) suggest that "(t)he affordance lens forces the researcher to consider the symbiotic relationship between the action to be taken in the context and the capability of the technology" (p. 2).

Grgecis, Holten, and Rosenkranz (2015) studied the student IT system (SIS) at one university and found that functional affordances, such as the possibility of exchanging opinions with other students, the bulletin board feature, or the information provided about seminars and lectures, directly impact perceived information quality in the case of the SIS. In their study, functional affordance is defined as "a feature-centric concept" that emphasizes the specific features of a technology and additionally takes the user's individual situation into account, "which perceived usefulness does not" (Grgecis et al, 2015, p. 584). Therefore, the functional affordance of Zoom should be analyzed in relation to the quality of online mediation because the usefulness of Zoom will be determined by the quality of the mediation.

Therefore, in this study, in order to elicit the features of online mediation, affordance lenses, such as functional affordance, technological affordance, and environment affordance have been used to capture the mutual dependency between Zoom (including a device) and the users. Second, the utilization of online mediation in Japanese higher education is discussed, based on these findings.

The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the features of online mediation compared with face-to-face mediation?
2. How can this be applied to higher education in Japan, based on the characteristics of online mediation?

Research Design and Methods

Zoom, a cloud-based video conferencing service, was used in this study for facilitating the mediation role-plays with two groups of three participants each, and for the two focus group discussions. The research methods are twofold. They are discussed below.

The Mediation Role-plays and Conversation Analysis

Two sets of mediation role-plays were conducted by six participants and recorded for analysis. Table 1 presents the descriptions of the six participants. All of them submitted the consent forms before participating this study. They are judicial scriveners, consultants, and communication studies professors who have already received more than 100 hours of training in mediation and have practiced it professionally. All of six participants submitted the consent forms before participating in this study.

To ensure the quality of the mediation, these six members were recruited. The role-play was conducted to gather data from six participants and not to present the mediation to any other persons. This scenario concerns the conflict between Mr. Tanaka and Ms. Yamada, members of an internal diversity promotion project. Mr. Tanaka emphasized the need for face-to-face meetings to discuss ideas, whereas Ms. Yamada preferred using Dropbox as much as possible, without holding frequent meetings.

Focus Group Interviews and Individual Interview

Immediately after the two role-plays, two focus group interviews with three participants were conducted by watching the recorded role-play. Six individual interviews were also conducted following the focus group interviews. Table 2 presents the schedule and length of time for each interview.

In the semi-structured interview, the participants were asked the following questions.

1) Please describe your device and room environment. In particular, the layout of each member on the zoom screen.
2) Please provide the reasons for any body movement and any significant opinions of members observed while watching the recordings.
3) What is your impression of online mediation regarding the mediation itself as well as the partners, facilitators, and use of Zoom with your device?

The data of the two focus group interviews and six individual interviews, as well as the two transcriptions of the role-play with participants' comments, were analyzed in terms of verbal and nonverbal communication.

Table 1
Description of the Participants

Name	Gender	Role	Career
Team 1			
MA	F	mediator	Consultant
Mr.B	M	Mr.Tanaka	Shiho-shoshi lawyer*
Ms.C	F	Ms.Yamada	Professor
Team 2			
MD	M	mediator	Shiho-shoshi lawyer
Mr.E	M	Mr.Tanaka	Shiho-shoshi lawyer
Ms.F	F	Ms.Yamada	Consultant

*Shiho-shoshi lawyer is the unique profession in Japan. It is not quite the same as a lawyer or a solicitor.

Table 2
Schedule of Data Collection

Schedule	Data collection	Time (minutes)
May 26th	mediation role play Team 1	55
	focus group discussion	60
June 7th	mediation role play Team 2	57
	focus group discussion	100
June 11th	individual interview MsC	120
June 15th	individual interview Mr.B	115
June 20th	individual interview Ms.F	125
June 22th	individual interview Mr.E	130
June 23rd	individual interview MD	140
June 25th	individual interview MA	140

Results and Discussion

Quality of the Online Mediation

Structure. The mediation role-plays took about 54 minutes for Team 1 (Table 3) and 59 minutes for Team 2 (Table 4). Since it was announced at the beginning that the role-plays should be finished in about 60 minutes, the flow of the mediation became similar, as shown in Tables 3 and 4.

To check the structure of the mediation, first, the number of turn constructional units and turns were counted. In the conversation, each person takes turns to speak to avoid overlapping with another person; thus, in this study, a turn was counted as the number of speakers who took a turn and started to talk. Similarly, a turn construction unit was also counted. A turn construction unit is the fundamental segment of speech in a conversation, such as a sentence, clause, phrase, or word, which is meaningful to the listener (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson 1974). The number of turn constructional units were MA: 218, Mr. B: 173, and Ms. C: 183 for Team 1 and MD: 173, Mr. E: 163, and Ms. F: 193 for Team 2. The number of turns were MA: 84, Mr. B: 44, and Ms. C: 96 for Team 1 and MD: 100, Mr. E: 124, and Ms. F: 103 for Team 2. Thus, it can be said that there were more interactions in Team 2; however, in each team, three participants talked almost evenly. The number of turns taken by Mr. B. is 44 and is the least in Team 1; however, the number of turn constructional units is 173; thus, he tends to talk longer than other participants.

The flow. The content of the mediation was analyzed. It has been summarized in Table 3 for Team 1 and Table 4 for Team 2. Based on conversation analysis (Sacks et al., 1974), the following features of online mediation were found.

Table 3
The flow of the mediation by team 1

May 26th

Time	**Steps**	**Main Speakers**	**Flow**	**Verbal/nonverbal cues**
0	Opening	MA	Greetings, explanation of the rules	
8:33	Explanation of the situation	MA→Mr.B, MA→Ms.C	Ask for explanations about the situation	3 overlapping
17:03	Collecting information	MA→Mr.B, MA→Ms.C	Explanation by Mr. B and Ms. C, question by Ms. C	1 overlapping
27:26	Commonalities and differences	MA	Summary of commonalities and differences by MA	
28:07	Correction, etc.	MA→Mr. B,	Confirmation/addition/correction by Mr. B and Ms. C	1 overlapping
36:20	Development of opinions	Mr. B ⇔Ms. C	Mr. B and Ms. C talk directly	Direct conversation between Mr. B and Ms. C
41:56	Commonalities and differences	MA	Clarification of commonalities and differences	
43:04	Constructive proposal		Ms. C agrees with Mr. E's proposal	**Smile on Mr. B's face because Ms. C agreed**
48:10				**1 overlapping, loud laugh among three members, good rhythm**
48:48	Ask for any concerns, closing remarks	MA→Mr.B, MA→Ms.C	MA asks if Mr. B and Ms. C any concerns. MA shows empathy.	1 overlapping
53:11		MA	**Summary by MA, create one sentence with three members**	1 overlapping
54:29	End		End	

Table 4
The flow of the mediation by team 2

June 7th

Time	**Steps**	**Main Speakers**	**Flow**	**Verbal/nonverbal cues**
0	Opening	MD	Greetings, explanation of the rules, confirmation of the purpose, checking of the surroundings.	
7:41	Explanation of the situation	MD→Mr. E, MD→Ms. F	Explanation by Mr. E and Ms. F, Dialogue to resolve the misunderstanding.	
20:16	Collecting information reconfiguring the problem	MD→Mr. E, MD→Ms. F	While MD is summarizing, Mr. E raises his hand. Mr. E wants to talk to clarify the misunderstanding.	Mr. E raised his hand to get his turn to talk.
21:42	Summary	MD⇔Mr.E, MD →Ms. C	Mr. E agrees strongly to what MD summarized by saying "So so so so." (No.192) (means empathy in Japanese)	1 overlapping, Ms. F coughed and drank coffee while listening.
35:48	Commonalities and differences	MD	MD summarizes the commonalities and differences	
37:11	Question by MD		MD asks a question (no.308).	
37:30	Dialogue to create a solution	Mr. F⇔ Mr. E	Ms. F gives positive feedback to Mr. E.	**1 overlapping, laughter, direct conversation**
37:58	Development of opinions	Ms. F→MD	Mr. F asks MD for permission to ask a question, and starts talking directly to Mr. E.	1 overlapping, Positive attitude
39:22		Mr. E ⇔ Mr. F		MD stepped back.
49:03	Ways of reaching a solution, agreement		Mr. E recognizes the good features of online mediation (no.406).	

54:34			**Make a sentence with Mr. F and Ms. C.**	MD moved forward, **good rhythm.**
56:00	Ask for any concerns, closing remarks	MD→Mr.E, MD→Ms. F	MD asks Mr. E and Ms. F if there are any concerns. MD summarizes the mediation.	
59:36	End		End	

Additional verbal messages by the mediator. The mediator in the online mediation tended to explain more verbally than in the face-to-face mediation. First, in the introduction, the mediators explained several confirmation conditions regarding online mediation, besides the usual statement of confidentiality and about turning off mobile phones during the sessions. The mediator asked whether there was anyone around the participants or in the same room. The participants were told not to interrupt while others were talking. These statements were specific to the online mediation.

Second, the introduction of mediation in this study took 8.33 (8 min 33 s) for Team 1 and 7.41 minutes for Team 2 (Table 3 and Table 4). In face-to-face court cases, the introduction of mediation lasts for about three to five minutes (Thompson, 2015). Therefore, the introduction of online mediation in this study was longer than anticipated, because the channels of nonverbal cues were limited. Mediator MD mentioned that it was difficult to affirm that the participants really understood what others said with nonverbal cues. Thus, he said that he intentionally summarized more frequently and more precisely as compared to face-to-face conversations.

Careful usage of nonverbal cues to create a rapport by the mediator. The mediators knew beforehand that they could not use direct eye contact, backchannels, and hand gestures for online mediation as much as they could for face-to-face sessions. Therefore, they had to use them in a smart way. When the meditator met the participants for the first time, he tried to show neutrality more than usual to avoid projecting any prejudiced or stereotypical views. To demonstrate his neutrality, the mediator nodded and spoke with a soft voice. As nodding was the only way to present their supportive attitude without overlapping words in online mediation, the mediators regulated their use of nodding intentionally and changed the voice volume of the backchannels.

In the interview, the participants mentioned that the mediator spoke slowly and her tempo matched the participants'. Thus, the tempo and tone of voice are important in creating rapport with a mediator in mediation.

In addition to these nonverbal cues, the mediators mentioned that it was difficult to observe breathing patterns, any changes in emotion, and the mood created by the participants' entire body during the Zoom sessions. On the other hand, mediators could concentrate on the content of the mediation. "Although I looked at the participants occasionally, I felt that I cannot get any feedback from them." "In the case of face-to-face sessions, I could get information from top to bottom, as well as information from breathing, however, I couldn't get such unintentional messages on Zoom." Thus, the mediator needed to attend more to verbal communication.

Avoidance of overlapping.–After the introduction, the explanation of the situation followed, and opinions developed at 36:20 minutes for Team 1 and at 37:30 minutes for Team 2. At 53:11 minutes for Team 1, one sentence was created by MA, Mr. B, and Ms. C. At 54:34 minutes for Team 2, one sentence was created by Mr. E and Ms. F. About ten minutes before the end of the role-plays, the content of the discussion converged, and a smile and simultaneous laughing occurred in both role-plays. Although the mediator and two participants were at a distance, they developed the same rhythm while talking and listening toward the end of the mediation. The interactions became smooth and rhythmic. There were several affirmative sentences and praises. This suggests that generative role-taking (Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane & Azad, 2013) occurs in online mediation. Without adequate listening, the overlapping will be prolonged. The data showed that overlapping occurred naturally, but

the instant timing of refraining from any voice was observed. In other words, the participants could create rhythmic talk to create generative role-taking because they listened carefully and were motivated to solve the problem, since the mediation was goal-oriented.

However, although the participants in the role-play were motivated to solve the problem in general, theoretically, the participants could choose whether to look at and listen to others carefully, depending on the conflict or their emotions. Mr. B said, 'I decided not to listen to her because she repeated the same things.' "When someone is searching for a position, then, it is fine that I don't need to listen carefully. However, online, I need to listen at least in order not to overlap with what they said." 'If the conflict is severe, then I will look at the mediator's face. Online, I can choose whether to look at the mediator's face." Therefore, the participants listened to others, at least to avoid overlapping in online mediation.

The Features of Zoom Functions from the Perspective of Functional Affordance

Virtual backgrounds. The mediators were particularly attentive to the use of virtual backgrounds. They kept it simple by sitting in front of a white wall (MD) or using a simple virtual background (MA) to avoid distractions. In particular, one of the mediators was accustomed to conducting online workshops, and was concerned about the importance of the virtual background.

The layout of each face on the screen. Second, the layout of each participant on the screen was important. Ms. C felt uneasy because of another party. Mr. B was located next to the mediator, MA, on her screen because she used a gallery view. Although the participants could choose between the gallery view or the speaker's view, they did not change the layout. As a result, some participants used a gallery view, while others used a speaker view, as shown in Figure 1. At the time of this study, the version of Zoom did not allow us to change the layout of the mediators and the two participants on the screen by themselves. In Japan, people are concerned about seating position since it usually reflects the power relations among participants, and there are special terms in the Japanese language, such as Kamiza (upper seat or seat of honor) and Shimoza (lower seat). Thus, the layout of each participant on the screen was very important, although the layout varied among the participants.

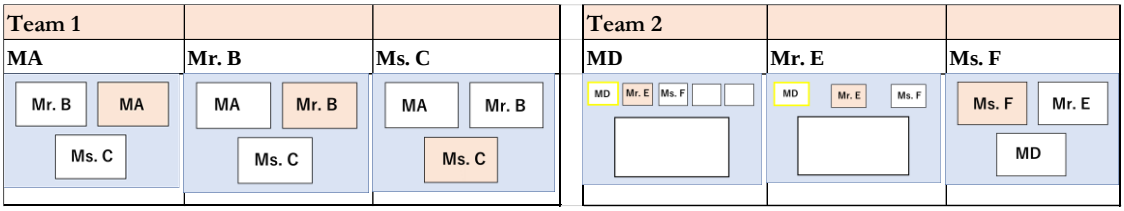

Figure 1. Layout of the mediator and two participants in each screen

Faces are shown on the screen. The faces of the mediator and the participants were shown on the same screen. This is not possible in face-to-face settings. The benefit of this function is the relief of not having to make direct eye contact with the person with whom one is in conflict. Although eye contact is important, most of the participants did not look at the camera, but looked at the face of the person to whom they were talking. Most of the time, they looked down at the papers in their hands, sometimes looked up to think, or occasionally looked at the face of the counter person when they emphasized words. To make direct eye contact, a person only needs to look at the camera without looking at the face of participant. This was not natural and did not occur frequently.

Refrain from rude attitude. While talking, participants could check their own facial expressions if they wanted; thus, one participant mentioned that he could not say anything rude. To that extent, participants concentrated more on the content of the discussion.

Device From the Perspective of Technological Affordance

Screen frame. Only participants' faces and shoulders were shown on the screen, and so the mediators could not see the whole body to check for nonverbal reactions. In addition, the mediator could not show their listening posture to the participants such as by intentionally showing them that they were taking notes. Thus, sometimes they had to verbalize more in online mediation compared to face-to-face sessions. In face-to-face sessions, the mediator (MD) needed to turn his body toward the others to listen, but with Zoom, he did not need to adjust his body. Thus, he described himself as a *jizo* (stone statue). Instead, the mediator could see the faces of both participants simultaneously on the screen. Since the mediator must pay attention to maintain an equal balance of power as well as control the emotions of the two participants, this feature was beneficial to the mediator.

Location of the camera and microphone. After watching the recording, Ms. C noticed that her voice had become muffled because she looked down while talking. In addition, the participants noticed that it was undesirable if their voices were unclear. They noticed that the volume of their voice differed depending on the camera and microphone settings of each device. Ms. C, who mainly talked to MA and showed the right side of her face to the camera, realized that she had created a weak impression of her to the counter-participant.

Familiarity with devices. A participant's ability to present a positive self-image was affected by their skill in using Zoom. Those accustomed to using Zoom could relax while speaking. However, one participant who was not accustomed to Zoom randomly moved her eyes to look at the camera or screen. This did not make a good impression on the others.

Environment Affordance

Changing the mood. In the case of face-to-face mediation, parties have to spend time travelling to the mediation site. Changing the location helps to change their minds from daily life to mediation, but online, there may be no such time. This affects the results of the online mediation in Zoom. For example, in the scenario of role-play mediation, Ms. C had to play the role of Ms. Yamada, who resides in Singapore. However, in the conversation, Ms. C said she is from "New Zealand" instead of "Singapore," because she had a conversation about New Zealand with her husband at her home just before starting the mediation role-play with Zoom. Thus, the physical environment affected her selection of what she needed to say during the conversation. In general, environmental affordance focuses on the landscape and human behaviors (Hadavi, Kaplan & Hunter, 2015), and any noise in the house is treated as disturbance for "enforced work from home' (Waizenegger, McKenna, Cai, & Bendz, 2020). However, it is better to consider immediate conversations with others as an environmental affordance, as found in this study.

Safe environment. In online mediation, the counter-participant did not exist in the same physical environment. One participant stated that one did not feel oppressed. He could not sense the other participant's breathing or determine the other person's emotional ups and downs, and felt safe. This is a benefit of online mediation.

RQ1 What Are the Features of Online Mediation Compared to a Face-to-Face Mediation?

Although the mediator could not grasp the moods of both participants, the participants felt that feeling safe and relaxed was a beneficial point of online mediation (environmental affordance). In addition, all participants sat in front of the camera with their upper bodies (mainly the face and shoulders) facing forward. Each moderator and participant joined the meditation session using their own devices. Thus, these devices afforded different eye movements, tones of voice, and facial impressions among the participants (technological affordance). Step A in Figure 2 shows the different affordances of individual devices.

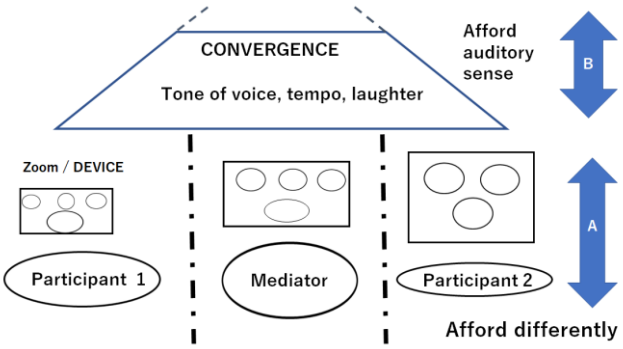

Figure 2. Affordance of Zoom and devices for the mediator and two participants

Step B in Figure 2 shows that the auditory sense of each participant is afforded based on step A. Analysis of the flow of mediation showed that the contents converged at the end of the mediation and created rapport and good rhythm. In other words, online mediation encouraged good behavior on behalf of the participants and they listened to others. One of the participants mentioned that Zoom makes the participants "ladies and gentlemen." In other words, mediation with Zoom emphasized the auditory rather than the visual sense of each participant in this study. This is a critical finding of this study.

RQ2: How Can We Apply This to Higher Education in Japan, Based on the Characteristics of Online Mediation?

First, the problem of different affordances due to the different devices of each participant could be solved if adequate instructions are provided before online mediation (Step A in Figure 2). A workshop on utilizing Zoom might be helpful for the participants who are not familiar with the application (Suzuki & Kubota, 2017). Since technology and the devices are is developing rapidly, a workshop responding to individual needs will be useful in Step A. At the same time, a mediator needs to know about Step A and ensure that each participant can attend online mediation with the same level of skills and knowledge about their own devices and Zoom. In other words, instructional knowledge is required for a mediator in online mediation.

Second, as described in Step B in Figure 2, we need to take advantage of online mediation with Zoom, which affords auditory rather than visual sensory skills. Through online mediation, university students can practice listening carefully to others to solve problems. The students in the conflict felt safe and secure because they were physically separated from each other and could concentrate during the mediation. For the mediator, it is necessary to receive training regarding additional opening statements. To explain the situation better, it will be good practice to determine the discussion points by listening to the different situations of the two participants. The recording function of Zoom can be used for educational purposes. Recording should be prohibited for real e-mediation; however, for educational purposes, it is convenient and useful. Students can record any mediation or mediation role-play and watch not only the flow of the mediation but also their own behaviors and facial expressions. Online mediation will be a good training tool for understanding the process of mediation as well as body and facial expressions. For example, micro gestures, such as avoiding overlapping of conversations, will be a good training for the predictability of the flow of the conversation. Gaver (1996) emphasized that affordances are primarily facts about action and interaction, not the perception of the objects and urged us to "consider predictability as an affordance because it stresses that even as mental an act as prediction depends fundamentally on the perceptible regularities of an environment, whether natural or artificial (p. 7)." Therefore, predictability is key when the affordance lens is applied to social interaction.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to elicit the features of online mediation through the affordance lens and discuss the utilization of online mediation for educational purposes. The features of online mediation were discussed from the perspective of the quality of mediation, functional affordance, technological affordance, and environmental affordance. In online mediation, participants can discuss in a safe environment; they do not need to feel any pressure from others, and need to verbalize precisely to make others understand. Therefore, online mediation is suitable for university students and adults, that is, Generation Z. They have already been trained to use Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic and are prepared to conduct online mediation. Based on the findings of this study, only a mediator can be instructed on how to facilitate online mediation. The application of online mediation for training will be studied in the future.

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