# Unprofessional Communication in the Workplace

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Degree

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## Dedication

To my parents

**Acknowledgments**

I would first and foremost like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Emily Paskewitz, for pushing me to be the best student, writer, and scholar I can be. I could not have completed this tremendous effort without her continued support throughout the process. Thanks, Dr. P.

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## Abstract

This study creates a measurable definition of unprofessional communication in the workplace. First, literature is explored, looking at the existing information (or lack thereof) about professional and unprofessional communication in the workplace, along with additional information about politeness norms. A brief definition of unprofessional communication is offered. Next, a method for the study is offered, using both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine perceptions of unprofessional communication in the workplace. Results are then given, showing communicative behaviors that are viewed as both professional and unprofessional in the workplace. Behaviors such as being appropriate or being polite were seen as professional, whereas being untimely or inappropriate are considered to be unprofessional in the workplace. Implications of the findings are then explored, showing that professional and unprofessional communication as terms are opposites and the initial definition is edited to align with the study results. Lastly, limitations and future research is discussed.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

Through verbal instruction or mere observation, young children are taught to be still, quiet, and polite from a very young age. As adults, this evolved into the notion that showing lots of emotion is disruptive and problematic, especially in the workplace (Kramer & Hess, 2002). Additionally, in school and similar social situations, we are taught that only certain ways of communicating may be acceptable, such as refraining from swearing (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008), making sarcastic comments (Taylor, 2015), or showing negative nonverbal behaviors (Trees & Manusov, 1998), and instead consistently portraying a polite demeanor. Through this social learning process, we have all developed somewhat similar expectations as to how one should communicate or behave within the workplace, which tends to be what people refer to as being "professional".

Across contexts, professionalism usually means to mask negative emotions or behaviors (Kramer & Hess, 2002). We give this vague and ambiguous term, professionalism, as a reason to constantly hide our emotions and true thoughts or reactions because we have been taught that this is what will lead us to be successful (Staw et al., 1994). In reality, research shows that using typically "unprofessional" communicative behaviors in the workplace can be beneficial. Sandberg (2013) claims that recognizing the role of emotions in the workplace and being able to honestly communicate them makes us better co-workers and leaders in the workplace. She continues to explain that if we act like a "fake, all business professional," it can be profoundly negative for the organization because our professional decisions are driven by our true emotions and values (p. 89). Scarduzio and Redden (2015) found that using typically negatively perceived

behaviors like sarcasm and intimidation can bring about outcomes like camaraderie and collaboration among workgroups.

In terms of the workplace, looking past mere leader subordinate communication and further analyzing co-worker relations is important because co-worker relationships are a huge factor in employee motivation and their intentions to stay loyal to a company (Basford & Offermann, 2012). Basford and Offermann (2012) found that co-worker relations often mean more to individuals than their relationship with their superiors. Additionally, since people work with co-workers more consistently than with leadership, it seems more likely for unprofessional communication to occur when people are equals. Thus, looking into the relationship between unprofessional communication in the workplace among co-workers is needed and could lend some fascinating results.

This research is necessary because as we head into a more modern and casual workplace, unprofessional communication is bound to become all the more common (Morgan, 2020). Research shows a variety of variables that one may simply consider to be "unprofessional" like swearing, sarcasm, dark jokes, etc., but no study has ever come to a clear definition of what it means to communicate unprofessionally in the workplace (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Trees & Manusov, 1998; Taylor 2015). If communication studies scholars are to conduct research about this more and more common communication behavior, we need to have a better understanding of what the average person perceives unprofessional communication to be and more importantly, have measurable characteristics so that future research can have something valid to measure.

To further understand and analyze the argument made, chapter two will cover the surrounding literature on professional and unprofessional communication, as well as the literature on politeness norms. Chapter three will then go into the method of how this study is to

be conducted and the outcomes that are being considered. Lastly, chapter three will present this study's hypotheses and research questions being explored.

# CHAPTER TWO

# LITERATURE REVIEW

Professionalism can have many different definitions depending on the context one is in. However, most people agree that there are certain "backstage behaviors" which should not be used in the workplace (Goffman, 1959) because they are perceived as unprofessional. The following sections will cover the definition of unprofessional and professional communication followed by a discussion of politeness norms.

## Defining Unprofessional Communication

### *Unprofessional Communication*

There are a myriad of ideas out there on what it means to be unprofessional. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, unprofessionalism is "not exhibiting business-like behavior"; but naturally "business-like behavior" is also a subjective term that changes based on context ("unprofessionalism," n.d.). Characteristics such as being untimely, overly negative, and a know-it-all, as well as swearing and talking about personal business on the job, can be seen as unprofessional (Gillet, 2017). Additionally, Career Advice Experts from Glassdoor, one of the country's largest job recruiters, claim that behaviors such as being late, dominating a discussion, being aggressive, being sexually inappropriate, and sharing personal opinions are characteristics of unprofessionalism (Glassdoor Career Experts, n.d.).

Although literature can be found surrounding professionalism (and thus unprofessionalism), the literature is lacking when it comes to specific unprofessional communicative acts or behaviors that are performed in the workplace. Academic articles merely point out that to remain professional one must always mask their negative emotions and control their positive emotions to be appropriate and meet expectations (Kramer & Hess, 2002). A term

called emotional labor, which focuses on emotions (or lack thereof) shown in the workplace was coined by Hochschild (1983), further promoting the idea that all emotions should be disregarded in workplace relations. Although this is one aspect of what society perceives professionalism to be, this hints that more research needs to be done on professionalism so that we can have a better understanding of what specifically it means to be professional or unprofessional. Although this topic is commonly talked about both in the popular press and the workplace itself, it is so vague that more research must be conducted to understand the implications of unprofessional communication and expectancy violation in the workplace.

### *Professional Communication*

According to the American Association of Professional Coders, characteristics of professionalism in the workplace include a neat appearance (up to society's standards of what professionals are supposed to look like), a proper demeanor (being "polite and well-spoken 100% of the time"), remaining competent (which to them means "show confidence, not attitude"), and being an effective communicator (e.g."keeping your tone polite" at all times as well as avoiding slang; Picirilli, 2018). Additionally, reputable organizations such as LinkedIn and the National Business Aviation Association emphasize the importance of being "real" and forthright in one's communication to be a professional (which isn't always polite and proper; NBAA 2021; Mason, 2016). Therefore, it is clear that there are many different definitions, some of which are contradictory, of what it means to be a professional in different workplace settings.

In academia, there is one major "professionalism scale" by Hall (1967) which touches on the inner beliefs of the professional and not their outward behaviors or communication style. There are some articles regarding professionalism based in the field of sociology (e.g., Abbott, 1988; Macdonald, 1995) and communication scholars have looked to expand the literature of

professionalism in our field. Cheney and Ashcraft (2007) talk about how professionalism has the ability to "demonstrate the power of ambiguity for reflecting, shaping, and indexing particular kinds of social relations and expectations for them" (p. 146). Since professionalism is such a commonly used, "self-evident descriptor" that lay individuals do not normally question, Cheney and Ashcraft (2007) go on to explain that communication scholars have not done enough to examine the underlying implications of the ambiguous term. They continue to make the point that since communication studies became a legitimate area of study that our scholars have always focused on the abstract aspects of communication and never the concrete. Because of this, the term professionalism has become too abstract and contextual to examine in research until now. Lastly, Cheney and Ashcraft (2007) push for more concrete communication research so that "'mere' labels, metaphors, and narratives (such as the concept of professionalism) evolve and function persuasively and consequentially in everyday practice and scholarship" (p. 168). Due to the lack of solid, repeatable evidence surrounding professionalism in the context of communication studies, further research into communicative politeness norms within the workplace was considered since multiple non-academic sources mentioned politeness as a characteristic of professionalism.

***Politeness Norms in the Workplace***

Schurr et al. (2008) discuss politeness norms in the workplace. They emphasize that politeness is more about the intention of the sender than the message itself. In other words, if the sender intends to be impolite, that is completely different than if someone says something that is perceived to be impolite. Culpeper (1996) coined a type of impoliteness in the workplace, which they term "mock impoliteness". This type of impolite communicative behavior is not truly impolite but reflects the values and shared knowledge of the group. The intention behind mock

impoliteness is to reinforce solidarity among group members and promote further cohesion. This is another example of how negative or perceived unprofessional behaviors/emotions can be used for positive outcomes in the workplace.

Additionally, Locher (2004) notes that impolite communication cannot be studied without looking at the context of the situation, as that influences what makes something polite or impolite. Schurr et al. (2008) discuss how within the workplace, workers create unspoken rules or norms about how to express politeness or impoliteness. For example, norms can be things like refraining from expressing true emotions to appear polite and using things like sarcasm or negative nonverbals to appear impolite. Once these norms are set in place, adherence to these norms continues to reinforce them but also accept existing power relations. There are a multitude of ways in which communicating impolitely can serve to increase the sender's power in a relationship (Beebe et al., 1995). Speaking impolitely leads to the sender appearing superior to others by using communicative tactics such as sarcasm, interruptions, and floor management. This hints at the idea that people in power, such as management, can get away with performing more impolite or unprofessional communicative behaviors without receiving punishment and alternatively, gain power from their impolite behaviors. In order to explore scenarios such as this, further research is necessary to validate that politeness is a part of unprofessional communication.

**Proposed Study**

With all this literature in mind regarding professionalism, unprofessionalism, and politeness, all aforementioned information is taken into account to formulate a measurable, communication-based definition of unprofessional communication:

> ***Unprofessional communication*** can be defined as any communicative behavior that goes against what industrial society would typically deem polite and is thus unprofessional (i.e., swearing, sarcasm, inappropriate nonverbals, inappropriate humor).

Within this definition, there are a few important concepts. A communicative behavior includes verbal and nonverbal communication between two or more people. “Industrial society” refers to the classical management perspective, in which organizational philosophers like Taylor, Fayol, and Weber had the understanding that human beings are inherently lazy (McGregor, 1957), and thus the most effective way to run an organization was by way of high power distance between leadership and subordinates and highly structured days (Taylor & Person, 1947). Early philosophers like Taylor and Person (1947) even created concepts such as the machine metaphor to best describe how organizations should run. Although in more modern times these harsh ideas of the workplace have diminished, these concepts are rooted in capitalist culture (Marx et al., 1973) and thus live on in organizational society today. These original ideas of organizational communication and culture have had a strong influence on how society views professionalism that carries through to modern-day (Parker & Lewis, 1995). Lastly, ‘polite’ refers to politeness theory and the concepts within it that were previously mentioned (Culpeper, 1996; Locher, 2004; Schurr et al., 2008). More specifically, politeness is formed by social norms within the workplace. Norms for how one should communicate within the workplace have been developed with influences from classical management theory (Parker & Lewis, 1995). Thus, politeness in this definition is related to norms that have been formed around organizational culture that have workers refrain from showing negative emotions and instead portray a phony attitude that is calm and collected (Kramer & Hess, 2002).

Though it has been deemed important from a societal norm standpoint that it is necessary to maintain professionalism in the workplace, people still use unprofessional communication, and increasingly so by younger generations (Morgan, 2020). Although unprofessional communication is discussed in the communication literature, there is little research testing definitions to identify other key components of unprofessionalism. There is some research on violating traditional workplace expectations by swearing in the workplace (Baruch et al., 2017; Johnson, 2012) as well as the use of sarcasm in the workplace (Anderson, 2015; Huang et al., 2015; Shrawankar & Chandankhede, 2019). These studies have a mixture of results, revealing both positive and negative perceptions of these unprofessional communicative behaviors in the workplace. However, there have been no studies found in the literature that combine different unprofessional communicative behaviors together as one definitional variable (e.g., swearing, sarcasm, inappropriate nonverbals, etc.). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore employee perceptions of professional and unprofessional communication in the workplace, with the goal of beginning to define unprofessional communication:

RQ: What is unprofessional communication?

# CHAPTER THREE

# METHODS

## Participants

The population for this study were any U.S. resident who was over the age of 20 that worked at least 30 hours per week in an office setting. The population was set to anyone over 20 years of age so that participants would have adequate time in an office setting in order to answer survey questions to the best of their ability. In order to keep responses in a corporate setting, it was also required that participants work in an office setting. Participants were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk samples include only individuals who opt into MTurk and complete a given survey, leading to samples that researchers worry are unrepresentative of the U.S. population (Levay et al., 2016). Even still, literature focusing on the generalizability of experimental research using MTurk data finds that with few exceptions, researchers can make credible, generalizable experimental inferences with some confidence (e.g., Berinsky et al., 2012; Krupnikov & Levine, 2014; Mullinix et al., 2015).

All participants participated in the study voluntarily, with a total of $N = 190$. On average, participants worked around 41 hours per week ($M = 41.32$, $SD = 8.85$) and were around 35 years of age ($M = 37.25$, $SD = 11.67$). Participants worked in an office setting ranging from 6 months to 40 years ($M = 10.16$ years, $SD = 8.75$ years). The majority of respondents were male ($n = 87$ 60%; $n = 58$, 40% female). Additionally, the majority of respondents were Caucasian ($n = 127$, 86%), but African American ($n = 12$, 8%), Asian ($n = 5$, 3%), Native American ($n = 2$, 1%) and Latino ($n = 1$, .68%) ethnicities were also represented in the sample (see Table 1). The majority of respondents have a four-year degree ($n = 97$, 68%; see Table 2). The most common industries

**Table 1**

*Ethnicity of Study Participants*

| Ethnicity | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| White | 127 | 86.39% |
| African American | 12 | 8.16% |
| Asian | 5 | 3.40% |
| Pacific Islander | 0 | 0.0% |
| Native American | 2 | 1.36% |
| Latinx | 1 | .68% |

**Table 2**

*Education Level of Study Participants*

| Level of Education | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Four-Year Degree | 97 | 67.83% |
| Masters or Doctoral Degree | 27 | 18.88% |
| Some Collee | 8 | 5.59% |
| Two-year degree | 8 | 5.59% |
| Some High School | 2 | 1.40% |
| GED or HS Graduate | 1 | .70% |

respondents worked in were business (*n* = 20, 13%), finance (*n* = 22, 15%), and IT (*n* = 32, 22%; see Table 3). The majority of respondents also held managerial roles (*n*=64, 44%; see Table 4).

**Procedure**

Based on scale creation research (Thompson & Mazer, 2012; Meyers & Weber 2004), the researcher wanted to identify key behaviors that employees defined as unprofessional and why they perceived said behaviors to be unprofessional. A similar approach to Myers and Weber (2004) was taken. In the first part of the Myers and Weber (2004) study, they focused on developing a measure of sibling relational maintenance behaviors by simply identifying the behaviors siblings do. With that information, in the second part of their study, they were able to validate the variables they found. This study is focusing on the initial findings so that future research may be able to have measurable characteristics of what it means to be unprofessional in the workplace that they can then validate and create a professionalism scale.

Before the collection of data began, a pilot test of the survey was given to ensure the survey questions were valid. Pilot test questions were created and refined through discussions with committee members. Two individuals from different backgrounds, ages, genders, and workplace experiences then took the pilot survey and then were interviewed about how they answered the questions given to them. Final survey questions were refined and perfected after these interviews. More specifically, the word “behaviors” became included instead of “communication” in the survey to make it more clear that responses needed to be specific behaviors. Additionally, a question for rationale, asking why respondents viewed something as professional/unprofessional was re-worded so that it sounded less similar to previous questions, avoiding redundant answers.

**Table 3**

*Industries of Study Participants*

| Industry | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Computing or IT | 32 | 22.07% |
| Accountancy/Banking/Finance | 22 | 15.17% |
| Business/Consultancy/Management | 20 | 13.79% |
| Healthcare | 14 | 9.66% |
| Engineering/Manufacturing | 12 | 8.28% |
| Marketing/Advertising/PR | 8 | 5.52% |
| Retail | 6 | 4.14% |
| Teacher Training or Education | 5 | 3.45% |
| Creative Arts/Design | 3 | 2.07% |
| Energy and Utilities | 3 | 2.07% |
| Public Services or Administration | 3 | 2.07% |
| Sales | 3 | 2.07% |
| Charity/Volunteer Work | 2 | 1.38% |
| Environment/Agriculture | 2 | 1.38% |
| Hospitality or Events | 2 | 1.38% |
| Media or Digital | 2 | 1.38% |
| Property or Construction | 2 | 1.38% |
| Transport or Logistics | 2 | 1.38% |
| Recruitment | 1 | 0.69% |
| Law | 1 | 0.69% |

**Table 4**

*Job Title of Study Participants*

| Job Title | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Manager | 64 | 44.44% |
| Analyst/Associate | 39 | 27.08% |
| Senior Manager | 17 | 11.81% |
| Entry Level | 12 | 8.33% |
| Director | 5 | 4.37% |
| Other | 4 | 2.78% |
| Vice President | 3 | 2.08% |

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When collection began, each participant was instructed to click a link in MTurk which lead them to a Qualtrics survey. In the first part of the survey, they were asked eligibility questions, including questions about age, residency, hours worked per week, and work setting. Once participants gained eligibility, they continued through the survey to answer questions about perceptions of professional and unprofessional communication in the workplace. This short survey took approximately 30 minutes for participants to complete. The survey asked participants open-ended questions about their opinions and experiences with professional and unprofessional communication in the workplace. An example survey question looked like "Please tell us in your own words what unprofessional communication looks like to you" (see Appendix A). Upon completion of the survey, participants were paid fifty cents for their participation within five days of completing the survey.

**Analysis**

Once data was collected, all responses were separated into different Excel sheets (every question had its own Excel sheet) and any names or identifiers were removed from the responses. Questions that were left blank or received invalid responses were also removed from the data set. To give an example of what is meant by an invalid response, one participant copied and pasted a chapter of a textbook on screenwriting into the response box asking about how they perceived professional communication.

Once the data was cleaned, the researcher conducted thematic analysis in accordance with Guest et al. (2012), where she first read through the data multiple times and became familiar with the data. She then coded the data based on common phrasings, words, and ideas. Initial coding was done by putting keywords next to each corresponding response in the excel sheet. To provide an example of this process, a piece of data in the unprofessional section stated: “Saying inappropriate things at the office or about those in the office”. From that response, the keywords “gossip” and “inappropriate topics” were coded next to the response.

Once keywords were found, initial themes were developed on the basis of the frequency of keyword codes. Frequency was found by adding up the number of times a keyword was found in the data. Themes were then refined and subthemes were formed through communication with the thesis advisor and further re-reading of the data. Themes were then defined and examples of each theme were pulled from the data. Lastly, definitions were refined, additional examples were pulled from the data, and subtheme groups were re-grouped in some areas. For example, gossip was initially a subtheme of unclear communication, but upon reflection and communication with the thesis advisor, the subtheme of gossip was transferred to the impolite theme. These final steps of thematic analyses were a result of returning to data to ensure representation of all data,

as well as coherence and clarity in the way themes and subthemes, were grouped together. The frequency of themes was then examined quantitatively.

This method of analyzing data was the best option for this study because there is not a formal term for unprofessional communication and thus, having open-ended questions and being able to receive responses and group them together into themes may help in creating measurable characteristics for future research. With thematic analysis, researchers can take a broad range of data from qualitative findings and then find nuances within that to come to a much more specific and narrow understanding of what something is. When there are small amounts of literature on a subject and researchers want initial findings, thematic analysis is the best option (Guest et al., 2012).

# CHAPTER FOUR

# RESULTS

In order to get a better idea of what it really means to be unprofessional and thus answer the research question, data was collected and thematic analyses was conducted. The focus of this data was seeing what specific behaviors respondents associated with being unprofessional. Additionally, professional behaviors were considered in order to understand participants' perceptions of the opposite of unprofessional in order to see if there is a direct link between professional and unprofessional behaviors. It turns out that professional behaviors are in fact the exact opposite of unprofessional behaviors for the most part. Themes emerged showing specific attributes and communicative behaviors of individuals who are perceived as professional and unprofessional in the workplace. Themes surrounding both professional and unprofessional communication are defined and described with additional context below.

## Themes Surrounding Professional Communication

Professional communication behaviors are included in the results because respondents had more consistent ideas about what it means to be professional, whereas unprofessional behaviors described were less consistent across the board. Additionally, if unprofessional communication is to be defined, it is important to also note what unprofessional communication is not. Exploring themes of professional communication will help to distinguish that. Themes are included in Table 5, with common words or phrases from the responses in Table 6.

### *Being Appropriate*

For the purposes of this study, "being appropriate" can be defined as following the unspoken rules of what behaviors participants identified as suitable for the workplace setting.

**Table 5**

*Themes of Professional Communication (out of 112 responses)*

| Theme | Count | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| **Being Appropriate** | 40 | 35.7% |
| • Appropriate Topic | 15 | 13.4% |
| • Appropriate Audience Analyses | 11 | 9.8% |
| • Appropriate CMC | 10 | 8.9% |
| • Appropriate Language | 4 | 3.5% |
| **Being Polite** | 36 | 32.1% |
| • Respect | 14 | 12.5% |
| • Politeness | 12 | 10.7% |
| • Listening | 6 | 5.3% |
| • Manners | 4 | 3.5% |
| **Being Timely** | 18 | 16.1% |
| **Giving and Receiving Feedback** | 13 | 11.6% |
| • Coworker Feedback | 8 | 7.1% |
| • Supervisor Feedback | 5 | 4.4% |
| **Being A Clear Communicator** | 12 | 10.7% |

**Table 6**

*Professional Communication Descriptors*

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Good speaking | Responsible | Communicate effectively | Friendly | Open-mindedness |
| Empathetic | Confident | Respectful | Communicate efficiently | Honesty |
| Articulate | Strict | Punctual | Seek feedback | Respectful |
| No assumptions | Channel conscious | Listening | Precise | Relevant to work |
| Transparency | Prompt and timely | Direct communication | Good attitude | Kind in criticism |

Within this theme, there are categories spanning from talking about appropriate topics to using appropriate language. Since being appropriate was the most frequently mentioned theme, appropriate behavior seems to be very influential in how professional one may appear.

The first and most frequently mentioned category in being appropriate was talking about the appropriate topic. 15 (13.4%) of respondents mentioned that talking about work-related topics as an indicator of professionalism. It would make sense that not mentioning taboo topics like politics, personal issues, or inappropriate topics would help one to be seen as more professional. For example, one individual talked about their work meeting when asked to recall a time that professional communication was used in the workplace. “We usually connect via zoom meet and talk and discuss our daily and weekly targets and difficulties on anything work related”. This person saw that having a meeting to only talk about work-related topics was professional. Additionally, another individual talked about how “Work conversation is one that needs to be about the situation at hand. You don’t need to talk about things that belong out of work. When you get personal you can get in trouble by what you say or what someone hears you say”. This person emphasized that staying on topic about work-related topics is important in the workplace because one could be perceived as unprofessional if they get off-topic.

The next category mentioned in the data was appropriate audience analyses. People who are more professional tend to be able to adapt their communication to the correct context and audience. 11 (9.8%) responses mention correctly analyzing audience as an indicator of professionalism. For example, when asked what professionalism meant to them, one individual stated that “There are four main types of workplace communication: verbal, body, phone, and written. During any point in the workday, you are always faced with at least one. Understanding how to communicate within these fields can be one of the most delicate skills an employee can

learn". They emphasized that knowing how to accommodate one's communication to their audience is one of the most important skills that a professional can have. Additionally, someone else stated, "Know where to communicate—and about what. ... Build your collaboration skills. ... Talk face-to-face when you can. ... Watch your body language and tone of voice. ... Prioritize two-way communication. ... Stick to facts, not stories. ... Make sure you're speaking to the right person". Similar to the first example, this person talks about the importance of knowing how to accommodate your nonverbals and tone to who one speaks with and additionally, focus on who really needs to receive the message.

The category following audience analyses is appropriate computer-mediated communication (CMC). Participants felt that being able to choose the appropriate wording in emails and instant messaging were important to maintaining a professional demeanor in the workplace, along with having the sense to know when information needed to be shared in person instead of through CMC. 10 (8.9%) of responses mentioned appropriate CMC as an indicator of professionalism. For example, an individual stated that "professionally written emails and prompt response to emails" were factors in appearing professional. Other responses merely listed things like "emails" or "phone calls" being held in an appropriate manner were traits of professionalism.

The final category mentioned in appropriateness was using appropriate language. This can mean maintaining formal language, accommodating language to avoid confusion (even if that means everyone "speaking English", or avoiding using "slang" or "curse" words). 4 (3.5%) of responses mentioned using appropriate language as being an indicator of professionalism. One person stated in their response that "In my workplace, the communication will be formal as well as informal language. But the formal is the best way to communicate with our colleagues inside

the working place". Another person emphasized that their group meeting was professional due to the fact that "no one yelled or used any curse words and were polite about all issues brought up". This shows that appropriate language is important for people to upkeep a professional demeanor.

***Being Polite***

For the purposes of this study "being polite" means performing behaviors that save face and promote fulfilling coworker relationships. Being polite was shown through a variety of behaviors in the responses, from being respectful to using manners. Across the board, it seemed very important to respondents that politeness be maintained in order to be perceived as professional in the workplace.

The most frequent category of politeness that was talked about was being respectful. Of 112 responses, 14 (12.5%) instances of respect were mentioned in the data. One individual stated that for them, "the main principles of professional work behavior include: Treating your managers, colleagues and clients with respect". Respecting others is a main aspect of professionalism for this individual. Similarly, another individual mentions that "acting like a professional means working and behaving in such a way that others think of them as competent, reliable and respectful. Professionals are a credit not only to themselves but also to others". It seems clear that being respectful is how this person thinks they maintain a professional demeanor to others in their workplace.

The second most popular category mentioned was politeness. 12 (10.7%) of respondents talked about how being polite was an important indicator of professionalism to them in the workplace. To give an example of this, one individual stated "It was our weekly group meeting that we have every Monday, everyone was very polite about any issues brought up and spoke in professional manners. Everyone listened to everyone's side and politely provided praise or issues

with things brought up". This person felt that it was professional that everyone maintained a polite demeanor and used manners in their work meeting. Another individual mentioned that when something bad did happen in their workplace, "They were very kind about it and made sure they weren't yelling or anything". It is this person's perception that a professional must keep a polite demeanor at all times, even when bad things happen.

The third most popular category in this section was being a good listener. Workers associate having good listening skills as a way to be polite, which in turn helps workers appear to be more professional. 6 (5.3%) of responses mention listening as a professional behavior. One respondent mentioned being "an empathic listener" as a trait of being professional. Another stated that "being a good listener is one of the best ways to be a good communicator," when asked how they perceived professional communication.

The last category of polite behavior that was mentioned was using manners. 4 (3.5%) responses mentioned that manners were important to maintaining professionalism in the workplace. Manners are a good indicator of professionalism because manners differ across contexts just as professionalism does. For example, one participant stated that "professional behavior in the workplace is a combination of attitude, appearance, and manners. It includes the way you speak, look, act and make decisions". This person puts manners alongside other politeness techniques to appear professional to their co-workers. Other participants listed "manners" when asked to list traits of professional communication.

***Being Timely***

For this study, being timely can be defined as performing behaviors that make the most of the time given in the workday. This can mean things like getting tasks done early, replying to emails promptly, or simply not carrying out a meeting or conversation longer than it needs to be.

18 (16.1%) responses mentioned timeliness as an indicator of being professional. For example, one respondent stated that “good communication means saying just enough”. This is hitting at the point that in order to be professional one does not drag out a conversation. They keep their communication succinct and to the point. Additionally, many respondents talked about how they thought it was professional when as a group, “we talk about when to complete projects on time” and when meetings are scheduled ahead of time.

***Giving and Receiving Feedback***

For this study, giving and receiving feedback is defined as giving or receiving advice and constructive feedback from other coworkers or supervisors to improve relationships or work performance. 13 (11.6%) responses indicated that giving and receiving feedback was a strong measure of professionalism. Two categories within giving feedback emerged from the data: coworker feedback and supervisor feedback.

The most frequently mentioned category was coworker feedback. Individuals that asked their co-workers to give their thoughts and feelings about work-related tasks were seen as a team player and thus more professional. 8 (7.1%) responses mentioned giving or receiving feedback from coworkers as an indicator of professionalism. For example, one participant stated that “group meeting is the best option when you conduct in the company. The group meeting will bring out the suggestions of each and every person in the group meeting”. This participant seems to believe that when coworkers are in an environment where feedback can be shared more easily, they are in a more professional space. In another example, an individual talked about how in group settings, their coworkers would “Ensure that the team is aligned. Strengthen relationships and team cohesion. Share information and encourage discussion. Exchange feedback about projects and ideas. Showcase leadership and motivate”. This respondent thought all these

techniques were professional and used them in a group setting to promote healthy workplace relationships and task productivity.

The second most mentioned category was supervisor feedback. Respondents felt that supervisors that shared their knowledge and gave guidance to others through constructive feedback were viewed as being professional. 5 (4.4%) responses mentioned giving and receiving feedback from a supervisor as an indicator of professionalism. One individual said it was professional when their "supervisor asked about their perceptions". When supervisors or bosses ask for feedback from employees, employees find them to be more professional because they can effectively understand not only their own ideas but the ideas of their employees, which then can be reflected in their work. Another participant talked about their experience with a supervisor. They stated that "They didn't think that I was getting enough work done in the time I was at the office and they mentioned that to me and gave me different ideas on how I could be more productive". This was professional in that their supervisor did not punish them but offered constructive guidance on how to improve their work performance.

***Being A Clear Communicator***

The last theme surrounding professionalism, being a clear communicator, can be defined as communicating as clearly and honestly as possible, giving all necessary details to co-workers so everyone can do their jobs effectively. 12 (10.7%) responses mentioned being a clear communicator as an indicator of professionalism. To give an example, one respondent stated that "The group meeting is so that announcement reached by all staffs at the same time". This individual thought it was professional when their superiors are clear in their communication by having everyone hear the same message at the same time from the same channel. Additionally, another person mentioned that "Professional communication is clear and easy to understand".

This person emphasizes that having a clear message in the workplace is professional. Lastly, an individual states that "when I communicate with my workers and my communication is clear and effective, I strengthen trust and improve my connections". Being a clear communicator is thus shown to be professional and a way to improve workplace relationships.

## Themes Surrounding Unprofessional Communication

Unprofessional communication seems to be a mixture of behaviors that overall end up hindering the workplace. The research question for this study focused on finding out what unprofessional communication is. The focus was more on defining unprofessional communication than professional communication because unprofessional communication is assumed to bring more negative implications with it to the workplace that could be harmful to workers' reputation or promotion goals. Out of the total number of survey respondents, 86 participants chose to answer survey questions about unprofessional communication. Wasting time and impoliteness appeared to be the most commonly mentioned themes. All of the themes that arose from the data are discussed below (see Table 7) as well as common words, phrases, and ideas from the responses (Table 8).

### *Wasting Time*

For the purposes of this study, wasting time can be defined as any behavior that hinders tasks from being finished in a timely manner. This theme includes categories such as having off-topic conversation, being unorganized, and being untimely. 30 (34.8%) of responses indicated wasting time was a factor of unprofessional behavior in the workplace. The most frequent category mentioned within this theme was off-topic conversation. 16 out of 86 responses (18.6%) mentioned how off-topic conversation indicated unprofessionalism in the

**Table 7**

*Themes of Unprofessional Communication (out of 86 responses)*

| Theme | Count | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| **Wasting Time** | 30 | 34.8% |
| • Non-work related conversation | 16 | 18.6% |
| • Being untimely | 8 | 9.3% |
| • Being unorganized | 6 | 6.9% |
| **Being Impolite** | 35 | 40.6% |
| • Gossiping | 9 | 10.5% |
| • Disrespectful | 8 | 9.3% |
| • Rudeness | 6 | 6.9% |
| • Showing anger/yelling | 5 | 5.8% |
| • Sarcasm | 4 | 4.6% |
| **Not Communicating Clearly** | 13 | 25.6% |
| • Unclear Communication | 10 | 11.6% |
| • Lying | 3 | 3.5% |
| **Inappropriate Language** | 13 | 15.1% |
| • Cursing | 10 | 11.6% |
| • Inappropriate joking | 3 | 3.5% |

**Table 8**

*Unprofessional Communication Descriptors*

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Not caring | Misrepresenting information | Sarcasm | Absenteeism | Informal language |
| Passive-aggressive | Foul words | Small talk | Rude or insulting | Unclear |
| Accusatory language | No active listening | Lengthy | Sharing personal opinions | Harsh |
| Lateness | Biased | Demanding | Obtuse language | Bullying |
| Waste of time | About family | Dirty politics | Disregard for culture | Unrelated topics |

workplace. These responses included talking about politics, family, and personal topics. More than one person stated that “talking about family looks unprofessional”. Another participant talked about how they “received an invite to a party on company email. I felt that it was not the best thing to do and using company email for this type of thing could get a person in trouble”. This person felt uncomfortable because this person was using a workplace channel of communication for non-work related tasks. Lastly, one individual mentioned, “I remember about a 45-minute call with about 10 people a few weeks back and 3 or 4 of the people wasted probably half of it talking about their upcoming vacations”. This individual seems frustrated that time was wasted talking about personal topics, and thus the meeting was perceived to be unprofessional.

The next most frequent category was being untimely. This can mean not meeting deadlines or not communicating in a timely fashion. 8 (9.3%) responses mentioned that not being timely was a factor in them perceiving a co-worker as unprofessional. One person talked about an instance where “The meeting was last-minute, leading me to have to reschedule patients at the last minute. It was information that could have been conveyed in an e-mail, rather than disrupting staff's schedule with minimal notice”. This person was frustrated because plans were not communicated in a timely fashion which then in turn made them look unprofessional because they had to reschedule things last minute. Another participant commented that “unprofessional behavior is related to an employee not giving a timely and appropriate response to a manager, subordinate, colleague or the customer”. This participant placed high value on replying to fellow employees in a timely manner.

The last category of wasting time was being unorganized. Being unorganized can be things like not showing up to meetings on time, not scheduling events correctly, or relaying the

wrong information due to disorganization. 6 (6.9%) responses indicated that being unorganized was an unprofessional behavior. One individual mentioned how the disorganization of her company led to a miscommunication where she missed an event she needed to attend. She stated that “not being told about an event that I needed to attend was disrespectful”. Disorganization of events and scheduled meetings and having “no advanced notice” of upcoming events were seen as unprofessional to a few participants.

***Being Impolite***

For the purposes of this study, being impolite can be defined as any behavior that harms face and/or leads to deterioration of workplace relationships. 26 (30.2%) of responses mentioned being impolite as a characteristic of someone who is unprofessional in the workplace. Being impolite encompasses being disrespectful, rude, angry, or sarcastic.

The first category mentioned was gossiping. This includes co-workers spreading information (true or false) about another employee in the workplace. 9 (10.5%) instances of gossip causing a hindrance to the workplace occurred. One participant talked about an instance where “they talked about an issue that we had behind my back and then brought it up when we were all in a group setting. They made me feel uncomfortable and already had people on their side when they mentioned it in the meeting”. This participant thought it was unprofessional to communicate about an issue indirectly instead of approaching them directly. Another participant gave an example: “I have a coworker who trash talks people at work. It's not only unprofessional, it is really off-putting. He says things about people behind their back and about their appearances and whatnot”. Another participant stated that unprofessional communication “looks like when people are talking about you instead of reaching out to you”. It seems that workers find it to be unprofessional when gossip occurs in the office.

The second most common category mentioned was disrespectful communication. 8 (9.3%) of responses mentioned that when a co-worker talked to them in a disrespectful manner, they were perceived as unprofessional. One participant gave an example of another co-worker: “this person was working a long time in our office. And so he wouldn’t give any kind of respect to anyone. One day, he scolded a fellow worker, so the company fired him”. This person’s unprofessional behavior and disrespectful demeanor ended up leading to them losing their job. Alternatively, one participant claimed that sometimes he wanted to “use some kind of disrespectful words to my subordinates in extreme situations” but refrains because it would be unprofessional of them to do so. Lastly, respondents mentioned that acting in an unprofessional manner was a way of showing that workers have “a lack of respect for themselves and others”.

The next category was rudeness. 6 (6.9%) of responses mentioned that co-workers who spoke to them or behaved in a rude manner were seen as unprofessional. One example a participant gave was a time that a coworker told him his haircut looked like “his barber’s eyes were closed when he cut his hair”. This offended the participant and he thought this rude comment was unprofessional. A different participant shared that they felt their co-workers “asked details in a rude way,” which they perceived to be unprofessional. Another participant claimed that to them, “unprofessional communication is rude and/or insulting”. Additionally, one of the best pieces of data received mentioned a coworker that cut their toenails in a work meeting and left the nails on the floor. This participant marveled at their coworker’s rude behavior, claiming that their coworker was “someone with no sense of decorum, definitely. And, of course, someone who doesn't know how to behave in a professional setting”. The other participants that mentioned rudeness listed it as a trait that they associated with unprofessional communication.

The fourth category was showing one's anger or yelling. 5 (5.8%) cases were given of individuals experiencing a co-worker show anger and/or yell. One participant stated that in regards to yelling, "speaking too loudly can make listeners uncomfortable and signifies stress, anger, and frustration, even if that's not what you mean to convey". They felt that yelling was an indicator of unprofessional behavior. Several other people indicated that showing anger and/or yelling as a trait of unprofessional communication when asked to describe what unprofessional communication means to them.

The fifth category mentioned in impoliteness was using sarcasm. It was found that individuals that use sarcasm appear impolite. 4 (4.6%) of responses reported that sarcasm was a sign of unprofessionalism in the workplace. Similarly to anger, a few participants listed using sarcasm as a trait that they associated with unprofessional communication in the workplace when they were asked to describe unprofessional communication in their own words. In one response, the participant claimed that "unprofessional techniques using tone include conveying sarcasm or boredom".

***Not Communicating Clearly***

For this study, not communicating clearly can be defined as communicating in an unclear or suppressed manner in the workplace. 22 (25.6%) responses indicated that not communicating clearly in the workplace was unprofessional. Within this theme, two categories emerged: unclear communication and lying.

The most common category in the data was unclear communication. 10 (11.6%) responses stated that unclear communication was a sign of unprofessional behavior in the workplace. One person mentioned that "I was told by someone else about an event that would be happening and didn't hear about it from my supervisor so I didn't have a clue what this person

was talking about". Because information was not relayed correctly to the right people, this person was perceived as unprofessional because she did not know what they were talking about. Other participants listed examples like "when communication is unclear" or "hard to understand" as a trait of unprofessional communication.

The last category mentioned was lying. 3 (3.5%) responses mentioned that lying indicated unprofessional communication in the workplace. Although no anecdotal examples were given, participants did list "lying" as a trait of unprofessional communication when they were asked to describe unprofessional communication in their own words.

***Using Inappropriate Language***

The last unprofessional theme, inappropriate language, can be defined as using curse words or making inappropriate jokes in the workplace. 13 (15.1%) responses indicated that inappropriate language was a sign of unprofessionalism in the workplace. Cursing and inappropriate jokes are shown in more detail below.

The most commonly occurring category was cursing. 10 (11.6%) responses explained that cursing in the workplace was seen as unprofessional. One participant shared their opinion of swearing in the workplace, claiming that "using foul words are completely unacceptable among the working environment". Another participant claimed that their boss gave a presentation and used curse words to "appeal to younger people," but because the boss used vulgar language, "many people thought the presentation was cringey and it really didn't seem appropriate in a professional setting". Thus, it seems that using curse words in the language is seen as unprofessional.

The last category was inappropriate joking. This can be any kind of humor that is seen as unfit for the workplace, whether it is dark humor, explicit humor, or humor about a co-worker. 3

(3.5%) responses indicated that inappropriate jokes were unprofessional in the workplace. For example, one respondent talked about how “a former coworker would often joke about inappropriate things at work and try to engage me in those conversations, particularly about sex or unwanted comments about my body”. These jokes made this individual feel uncomfortable and thus she perceived this coworker to be unprofessional. Other participants claimed that their perceived inside jokes were irrelevant to work-related content and were thus perceived as unprofessional.

# CHAPTER 5

# DISCUSSION

This research study focused on defining a vague and ambiguous term in academic literature: unprofessional communication (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007; Locher, 2004). Though popular press discusses professional and unprofessional workplace behaviors regularly (Mason, 2016; NBAA 2021; Picirilli, 2018), academic literature lacks an understanding of professional and unprofessional communication. By creating an academic definition of unprofessional communication, this project contributes to the field of organizational communication by helping organizational communication researchers align with contemporary issues in today's organizations. Furthermore, with measurable characteristics of professional and unprofessional communication, there are limitless opportunities for this topic that could help inform organizational decision making.

The results showed that unprofessional communication and professional communication have similar, yet opposing, characteristics. This study showed that professionalism is associated with polite behaviors and unprofessionalism is associated with impolite behaviors. Based on prior research, it makes sense that unprofessional and professional communication are opposites given professionalism is highly associated with politeness and emotional control (Picirilli, 2018; Kramer & Hess, 2002). Since it appears people associate politeness and appropriate emotional control with professionalism, people may use their expectations of what is or is not appropriate or polite in a workplace context to formulate what is professional and/or unprofessional in the same situation. They may also appear as opposites because people have a set idea of what they think professional communication to be. When questioned about what acts make someone unprofessional, people may simply choose traits and behaviors opposite of their perception of

professionalism. This aligns with Cheney and Ashcraft (2007), as professionalism is highly ambiguous and symbolic. Thus, in accordance with symbolic interaction theory, it's reasonable to think that people draw assumptions about behavior based on prior societal norms or "re-combinations" they have witnessed about similar symbolic terms (Carter & Fuller, 2015; Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007).

Another reason that professional and unprofessional may have reaped similar, yet opposing results is because the terms may be on a semantic differential spectrum. Cheney and Ashcraft (2007) mention that professionalism is multidimensional and that people use professionalism as a means to suppress others by stating one is not professional enough (pp. 158). Being "professional enough" would hint that one can be more professional or unprofessional based on communicative behaviors or one's appearance. More research is necessary. Cheney and Ashcraft (2007) also claim that people can be more or less professional in certain workplace contexts. Because of this, the spectrum could be based on the specific workplace context and how society views an individual, but the behaviors being measured would remain the same. For example, an employee in an office setting may be viewed as more professional than an employee working on a construction site, even if they perform the same behaviors. A man and a woman could work in the same setting and perform the same behaviors, but how each employee is viewed professionally may be different based on how society perceives women versus men in that particular workplace context. Professionalism is vague because it is so contextual (van Mook et al., 2009; Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007), but a semantic differential scale that takes workplace context into account can still provide consistent measurable characteristics. Workplace context is important to examine further in future research,

as this study only covered what professional and unprofessional communication looks like in an office setting.

A number of interesting characteristics were found when asking participants how they would define unprofessional communication. Certain characteristics, such as using manners and being polite, were expected as seen in the review of politeness theory (Schurr et al., 2008; Locher, 2004; Culpeper, 1996). Additionally, characteristics that mention showing emotion as being unprofessional were expected from previous research (Kramer & Hess, 2002). Other characteristics like gossiping and unclear communication were common in the data, yet somewhat unexpected due to prior literature on these characteristics. Prior researchers assumed gossip in the workplace was unprofessional based on "common knowledge", with no sources to back this claim up (Akangbe et al., 2011; Waddington, 2016; Labianca, 2010). Their results then showed gossip as professional and a valuable tool for the workplace (Akangbe et al., 2011; Waddington, 2016). The present study found the opposite; Individuals do find gossip in the workplace to be unprofessional. This discrepancy makes it clear that it is not enough to assume that something is or is not professional based on what they perceive to be "common knowledge". This error furthers the argument that Cheney and Ashcraft (2007) made claiming that the term "professionalism" is seen as a "deceptively straightforward term" (pp. 147). It also emphasizes why valid definitions of these terms are needed. The present study is a very necessary stepping stone of research that others have skipped over.

Furthermore, while some characteristics like sarcasm and swearing in the workplace were mentioned, they were less commonly mentioned than anticipated considering their prevalence in prior literature (Baruch et al., 2017; Johnson, 2012; Anderson, 2015; Huang et al., 2015; Shrawankar & Chandankhede, 2019). This is puzzling, as the aforementioned studies are current,

meaning that time could not be a factor in their diminished frequency in this study's data. Even still, looking back at Baruch et al. (2017), behaviors like swearing can lead to positive outcomes in the workplace like stress relief, communication enrichment, and socialization enhancement. Perhaps behaviors like swearing have become normalized in the workplace through these outcomes and workers look past sarcasm and swearing, not categorizing them as professional or unprofessional.

**Theoretical Implications**

There are some theoretical implications of this study for the field of organizational communication. Primarily, one of the main articles that influenced this study, Cheney and Ashcraft (2007), mentions that professionalism has been too vague and ambiguous in the past, leading to why this topic may be neglected by communication scholars. This study has made an initial effort in making the terms professional or unprofessional clearer and less abstract. With this, scholars can now begin testing these concepts. Researchers should focus future research on these terms because there are many questions pertaining to professionalism and unprofessionalism that have yet to be explored. For example, prior literature shows that professionalism is a term used by either leadership or one's peers in the workplace to exert power over another (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007). Since this study has given clearer understanding of professionalism and unprofessionalism, taking the next step and empirically examining professionalism's relationship to power in the workplace could be extremely beneficial for practical use. This could also provide an understanding of where the term professionalism really derives from (was the term created as a means to show status or power?). Furthermore, previous researchers claim that people act professionally to support the status quo (Schmidt, 2000). Scholars have the ability to find out why people act professionally, and why people think their

behaviors are professional. This study has provided specific characteristics office employees perceive as professional and unprofessional, providing scholars the opportunity to move beyond theorizing and begin testing these characteristics.

The results found in this study can be used to create a more concrete definition of unprofessional communication. The original definition based on literature about professional and unprofessional communication was:

> "Any communicative behavior that goes against what industrial society would typically deem polite and is thus unprofessional (i.e., swearing, sarcasm, inappropriate nonverbals, inappropriate humor)".

Based on this study's results, parts of the definition are supported. First, politeness did play a huge role in participants' perceptions of both unprofessional and professional communication. Many subcategories of themes were related to politeness (e.g., respect/disrespect, rudeness, not listening, sarcasm, showing anger or yelling). This is not surprising because prior literature notes that politeness was a factor in how professional an individual is perceived (Picirilli, 2018; Schurr et al., 2008). Second, the focus on industrial society will remain critical to any definition since "the connection between professionalism and the division of labor in modern [industrial] society is to be of primary importance in understanding what it means to be marked 'professional'" (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007, pp. 149). Industrial society prevails across workplaces, and so it must remain a constant in the definition of unprofessional communication.

However, the definition needs revisions. One major revision to this definition are the examples at the end of the definition. Although swearing, sarcasm, and inappropriate jokes were all mentioned in participant responses, they were not mentioned often. As previously stated, behaviors such as swearing or sarcasm may now be somewhat neutral in the workplace due to

the positive impacts they can make (Baruch et al., 2017; Johnson, 2012; Anderson, 2015; Huang et al., 2015; Shrawankar & Chandankhede, 2019). With that stated, it is important to include terms that actually come to the forefront of participants' minds when they think of unprofessionalism and not merely include characteristics that have been mentioned in the literature. The new characteristics listed are not hypothetically mentioned in an article, they are the products of data collected from people with lived experience in what it means to be professional or unprofessional.

Furthermore, the concept of appropriateness arose more often than politeness in the data, demonstrating the importance of this concept in the definition. According to past research, appropriateness has a direct link with the extent to which one follows social norms (Westmyer et al., 1998). Most people are taught social norms for what is appropriate in any given situation. A behavioral norm for the workplace is to be professional. If this norm is violated, then coworkers' expectations may be violated. According to expectancy violation theory (Burgoon, 1993), this violation leads to a positive or negative relational valence, which alters one's perception of the expectation violator. In this context, valence seems to be associated with how professional one's behavior is and how it aligns with the norms of the workplace. When expectations are violated, it usually stays in the forefront of the brain because the violation was an unexpected experience. Thus, it would make sense that when asked to recall an unprofessional experience, people would recall an instance in which inappropriate behavior occurred and their expectations were violated.

With all this stated, the updated definition of unprofessional communication in the workplace is as follows:

> "Any communicative behavior that goes against what industrial society would typically deem polite or appropriate and is thus unprofessional (i.e., communication that is off-topic, untimely, unclear, or harmful to fellow employees)".

This updated definition brings to the forefront the most prominent aspects of unprofessional communication mentioned in the data. The examples given are themes that were common across the data (e.g., harmful to fellow employees referring to gossip, lying, being rude or disrespectful), which helps researchers begin measuring and exploring actual unprofessional communication in the workplace.

Since the characteristics from the first definition (sarcasm, swearing, inappropriate nonverbals, inappropriate humor) were based on prior research, this new definition hints at the fact that scholars are focusing on the wrong characteristics in the workplace. There have been several studies on how swearing and sarcasm impact the workplace (Johnson, 2012; Baruch et al., 2017; Huang et al., 2015; Shrawankar & Chandankhede, 2019; Anderson, 2015). Yet, we see from this study that these characteristics are not as prominent in the minds of employees. If researchers place emphasis on characteristics that do not actually impact perceptions of what is or is not professional, then organizational communication scholars are not able to help improve organizations. What makes organizational communication different from many other disciplines is that our research can be used to benefit organizations across disciplines and industries. It is important to study what is going on "in the real world" outside academia. Scholars can use their expertise and theoretical knowledge to address contemporary organizational communication problems. For example, learning about perceptions of specific communication behaviors can help scholars partner with organizations to improve communication and performance. To provide

practical assistance to organizations, we have to be aware of the reality of organizations instead of just thinking about phenomena theoretically.

**Practical Implications**

This study has practical implications for communication consultants, corporate trainers, and human resources representatives in understanding how certain behaviors are perceived in the workplace. Employees and supervisors who are aware of unprofessional behaviors can help guide communication to create the appropriate workplace climate they desire. For example, this study has shown that gossiping is a major factor in being unprofessional in the workplace. With this specific behavior and others that were found in this study, human resources representatives or corporate training employees can provide beneficial information on why these behaviors are not appropriate for the workplace; they should also explain why workers may want to avoid that behavior to avoid the perception of being unprofessional.

From an interpersonal perspective, this study could help to form training explaining how unprofessional matters can influence relationships in the workplace. It is clear from this study that unprofessional communication can leave lasting impressions on coworkers that lead to instances such as being fired from a job or coworkers going behind their back. Training surrounding unprofessional communication could help organizations clearly establish their norms surrounding what they perceive to be appropriate. When people have norms clearly defined for them, there is no ambiguity surrounding what is or what is not professional. With expectations clearly stated, there are fewer opportunities for expectancy violations and face threats to occur. While corporate training currently focuses on the impact of technology, globalization, and diversity in the workplace (Meyer & Marsick, 2003), it would also be beneficial to train employees on what it means to be professional so they are not left to their own

assumptions about what that means. With this, employees can portray themselves in a way that will lead organizations to harbor the most interpersonal and task-oriented success.

In contrast, human resources professionals and corporate trainers may take these findings as a sign that workplace norms are changing and evolving. As shown in the data, behaviors like swearing or sarcasm are not as commonly identified as unprofessional, whereas being untimely and being off-topic are. This could because we are evolving into an extremely time-oriented, fast-paced workplace that values getting things done as quickly as possible. Ideas on what professionalism or unprofessionalism looks like now versus what it looked like 20 years ago even might be very different because of the upcoming generations (Kapoor et al., 2011), technology (Schess, 2013), and feminism (Howell et al., 2002), so it is important that HR workers keep cultural expectations clear. Employees could also use data from this study to compare to their own organizational culture to see what behaviors their employees view as unprofessional or professional. Since every workplace is different, it would be interesting to see how much the data from this study aligns with a variety of organizations and industries.

Overall, this study encourages employees to look at their own behaviors or the behaviors of those around them and think about what they are doing on a daily basis. Workers may not be fully aware that some of the behaviors they perform are perceived unprofessional by their coworkers. Additionally, introspection as a result of this study could lead to further understanding of relationships with others in the workplace, as well as a fuller understanding of why favorable outcomes for their goals are not achieved (e.g., perhaps not getting promoted when they felt like they earned it).

**Future Research**

This study was conducted to lay a foundation for future research defining and exploring unprofessional communication. With that being said, the next steps for research would be to validate these characteristics and create a scale using the characteristics provided from this study. After that, researchers could use that scale to explore relationships with other workplace variables, including workgroup cohesion or task productivity. Once that scale is created and validated, the possibilities for unprofessional communication in the workplace are limitless.

An important first step would be to test the predictive validity of unprofessional communication in the workplace. By combining observation and self-report, researchers could do a field study where they observe the behaviors that occur in the workplace, using the definition created in this study as a guideline for what behaviors are considered unprofessional. After the initial observation is complete, researchers could conduct interviews or provide surveys to the employees about what behaviors they think are professional and unprofessional. Researchers could compare their observations and the reports the employees gave to see if there is any discrepancy in their true behaviors versus their self-responses. It would be interesting if a participant claimed that a behavior is unprofessional but then also performed that behavior in the workplace on a daily basis. It is important for researchers to measure predictive validity because if our data does explain or predict behavior, there may be some other confounding variable not taken into account in this study.

Additionally, it would be beneficial to further examine the relationship between professional and unprofessional communication. As previously stated, the findings in this study show that professional and unprofessional appear to have very similar, opposing characteristics. With that, it is necessary to figure out whether these terms are in fact opposites and if there is

some kind of semantic differential spectrum that spans from professional to unprofessional. One could conduct a basic study where they rank the identified characteristics on a range to measure if certain behaviors are more or less professional than others. Findings on this will lead to a better understanding of data for analyses, as well as the possibility of developing a semantic differential scale for professionalism to use in future research endeavors.

Lastly, researchers need to examine the impact unprofessional communication has in the workplace. For example, it would be fascinating to examine if certain people (women/minorities) get punished more for using unprofessional communication than others. This would be interesting to research further since past researchers found that men are able to perform more deviant, unprofessional communicative behaviors without expectations being violated (Colston & Lee, 2004). Additionally, prior research has shown that women in places of higher power in the workplace use humor such as repressive jokes to make themselves appear on the same level as their subordinates and gain compliance, whereas men do not use this same humor tactic (Mullany, 2006). Clearly, there is a difference in how men and women are perceived, as well as the behaviors they perform in the workplace. It would be fascinating to see what the implications of that are when it comes to unprofessional communicative behaviors.

More specifically, it could be proposed that when it comes to unprofessional communication in the workplace, men are held to a different standard than women. If expectations for men and women are different (Blasko et al., 2016), a violation of those expectations could lead to decreased levels of liking, respect, relatability, competence, trust, and promotability for women than men. Negative relational valences may lead to decreased opportunity for promotion or leadership roles. One could use the characteristics found in this study as a base point for measuring unprofessional behaviors, by way of either field observation

or experimental design. Then, researchers could add additional survey questions, such as items from the workplace trust survey (Ferres, 2003) or Thacker and Wayne's (1995) promotability items in order to measure the impact these particular behaviors have on participants' perceptions of people using unprofessional behaviors. Then one could compare the effect across genders to see if there is a discrepancy in perceptions of professionalism and gender. This study makes this possible because before this study was conducted, the researcher would have to make assumptions about what characteristics or behaviors measure as unprofessional; That is not a credible way of conducting research. Now, this study has shown exactly what needs to be measured and there is no guessing or assumptions about what unprofessional behavior is.

**Limitations**

The main limitation of this study was that many of the responses were slightly vague. The purpose of this study was to create a solid, measurable definition of the vagueness and ambiguity of the words "professionalism" and "unprofessionalism" carried over into the results of this study. To give an example, a few participants claimed that "formal language" or "using manners" was seen as professional communication but did not further explain what that meant. Thus, in order for these characteristics to be fully validated for scale purposes, another study would need to be conducted where participants gave definitions or examples of these vaguer communicative behaviors so they could actually be clear, measurable characteristics. The second limitation of this study is that while characteristics were found and defined within this study, these characteristics have yet to be validated or replicated. With that, a follow-up study that validates these characteristics must be conducted before a scale can be created.

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# APPENDIX

## APPENDIX A

## SURVEY

Unprofessional Workplace Communication Survey

Standard Qualtrics Recaptcha

This initial part of the survey will ask questions regarding your demographic information.

**Demographic Questions**

1. **Are you living in the US?** Required- Must be living in the US.

   Yes No

2. **Do you work in an office setting?** Required question- must work in an office setting.

   Yes No

3. **Approximately how many hours a week do you spend in a work setting?** Required question- must work at least 30 hours a week.

   Answer_____

4. **What is your age?** Required Question (must be 20 or older)

   Answer _____

5. **How long have you worked in an office setting?**

   Answer_____

6. **What is your sex?**

   **Male**

   **Female**

   **Prefer not to respond**

   **Other (please specify)**

7. **What race/ethnicity do you identify with? (Multiple Response Answer)**

   White/Caucasian

   African American

   Pacific Islander

   Asian

   Native American

   Latino/Latina

   Other___

8. **What is your highest level of education?**

   Some high school

   GED or High School Graduate

   Some college

   Two-year degree

   Four-year degree

   Masters or Doctoral Degree

9. **Which of the following most closely matches your job title?**

   Intern

   Entry Level

   Analyst / Associate

   Manager

   Senior Manager

   Director

   Vice President

Senior Vice President

President or CEO

Owner

Other _____

**10. Which of the following categories best describes the industry you primarily work in (regardless of your actual position)?**

Business, consultancy or management

Accountancy, banking or finance

Charity and voluntary work

Creative arts or design

Energy and utilities

Engineering or manufacturing

Environment or agriculture

Healthcare

Hospitality or events

Computing or IT

Law

Law enforcement and security

Leisure, sport or tourism

Marketing, advertising or PR

Media or digital

Property or construction

Public services or administration

Recruitment or HR

Retail

Sales

Science or pharmaceuticals

Social care

Teacher training or education

Transport or logistics

Student

Unemployed

Other _____

**Unprofessional Communication Questionnaire**

Workplace communication is the exchange of information between two or more people or groups within an organization. This can include talking with coworkers or supervisors about projects, schedules, meetings, and more. With that stated, please answer the following questions about your perceptions of professional and unprofessional communication in the workplace.

1. In the box below, please tell us in your own words what professional communication in the workplace looks like to you. You can just list traits or examples.

   (OPEN RESPONSE BOX HERE)
2. Think of an interaction you had in the workplace when someone communicated in what you perceived to be a professional manner.
    a. What type of interaction was it?

i. One on one conversation

ii. Group/Meeting Setting

b. Please describe the interaction in as much detail as possible. You may write this in a script format or based on your perspective only.

(OPEN RESPONSE BOX HERE)

c. What specific behavior in this interaction was professional?

(OPEN RESPONSE BOX HERE)

d. Why did you feel that behavior was professional?

(OPEN RESPONSE BOX HERE)

3. In the box below, please tell us in your own words what unprofessional communication in the workplace looks like to you. You can just list traits or examples.

(OPEN RESPONSE BOX HERE)

4. Think of an interaction you had in the workplace when someone communicated in what you perceived to be an unprofessional manner.

a. What type of interaction was it?

i. One on one conversation

ii. Group/meeting setting

b. Please describe the interaction that occurred. You may write this in a script format or based on your perspective only.

(OPEN RESPONSE BOX HERE)

c. What specific behavior in this interaction was unprofessional?

(OPEN RESPONSE BOX HERE)

d. Why did you feel that behavior was unprofessional?

# VITA

Originally from Tennessee, Lilli Tillman grew up in Scituate, Massachusetts. After high school, she attended the University Tennessee, Knoxville and received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Communication. Before graduating with her undergraduate degree, she knew she wanted to attend graduate school. She chose to attend the University of Tennessee, Knoxville to pursue a Master's of Science Degree in Communication with a concentration in organizational communication. Her research interest includes studying professional and unprofessional communication in the workplace. After graduation, she will move to Florida and enter the corporate workforce. She is incredibly grateful for all the support from her fiancé, friends, mentors, and family as she begins this new chapter of her life.