Academic Paper

Exploring Communication Practices in Life Coaching: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Communication and coaching are intertwined disciplines. However, their intersection still needs to be researched due to its relevance to theory and practice. Moreover, the rise of ICT has impacted coaching, from contracting to delivery. This qualitative study investigates the elements of interpersonal communication in online and offline life coaching, its advantages and disadvantages, demographic communication practices, and technology-led changes in coaching. The study uses an interpretative philosophy in a constructivist framework to answer these questions. The study presents preliminary results of a larger population of life coaches and aims to contribute to understanding the nuanced role of communication in coaching.

Introduction

Coaching, particularly online coaching, has soared with the development and transition of the end of a "pandemic century" that stressed the possibilities and concerns of interconnectedness (Honigsbaum, 2020, p. 439). The new digital environment became the "new normal" for many professions in the knowledge economy. Moreover, the ongoing technological development contributed to the steady migration of face-to-face coaching to online platforms, where "Zoom" became synonymous with the "opportunity to see or connect". Nonetheless, the new context further enhanced the development of the industry. Before this date, research in coaching from a communication perspective was rare, and the online component of coaching communication did not spark researchers' interest. From 2020 onwards, the scientific community mobilized, and communication research in online coaching (see Meyer, 2023) has diversified.

For this reason, the current paper explores how life coaches create relationships with their clients by analysing interpersonal communication elements and technology use. The timing of research is

suited not only for a post-pandemic moment but also for the long-lasting changes that have taken the new order of things.

The study proposes to answer the following research questions:

- **RQ1**: What elements of interpersonal communication are used in online coaching? But offline? How do they differ?
- **RQ2**: What types of coaching practices are preferred by clients from different socio-demographics? Women, men, youth, adults, and elderly; people from various professions.
- **RQ3**: How have coaching elements changed with the advancement of new communication and information technologies (ICT)? Is the use of new technologies a decisive factor in the coaching process? If so, for whom?
- **RQ4**: What are the advantages and disadvantages of online coaching communication? What coaching practices exist in online coaching? What coaching practices exist in face–to–face coaching? What elements of digitalization (applications, devices, etc.) contribute to the change in coaching practices?

The following section will present a succinct review of interpersonal communication and technological impact in coaching. The methodological approach and presentation of findings follow this. In the end, I discuss the findings, concluding on the relevance of the research and findings and suggesting further avenues of research in coaching from an interpersonal communication perspective.

Literature review

At its core, coaching is about the value *the other* creates in reaching one's potential. As such, the value of interpersonal communication in coaching represents the vehicle through which this "transference" and "activation of power" takes place.

Definitions of coaching can have a more directive or non-directive approach depending on whether they facilitate direct instruction compared to self-learning (Grant & Stober, 2006, p. 2). Focused on goal attainment or the *what* of coaching, "coaching is essentially about helping individuals regulate and direct their interpersonal and intra-personal resources to better attain their goals" (Grant, 2006, p. 153). However, when focusing on the process, on the *how,* "the coachee does acquire the facts, not from the coach but from within himself, stimulated by the coach" (Whitmore, 2009, p. 9). As a form of "dialogue oriented towards action", coaching is "an intervention" (Passmore, 2010, p. 2) concerned with "talking" but as much as with "doing" (Spence & Grant, 2007, p. 186).

Life coaching is a growing field. It usually involves lifestyle changes in health, smoking cessation, stress and diet management, relationships, careers, or work-life balance (Passmore, 2010, p. 2). In a broader sense, life coaching is a form of personal coaching in which coaches are "helping people to experience life the way they want to experience it" (Starr, 2003, p. 10).

Digital coaching

With the advance of modern digital technologies, coaching has become digitalised too. Ribbers and Waringa (2015) note the diversity in terminology (own emphasis in Italics):

E-coaching is also known as *online coaching*, *remote coaching*, *web coaching*, *cyber coaching*, *digital coaching*, *i-coaching*, *distance coaching* and *virtual coaching*. There are also other types in which specific software is used, such as *chat coaching* (via a chat program), *video coaching* (using a webcam), *SMS coaching* (via text messages) and *Skype coaching* (combination of Voice over Internet (VIOP) and webcam). (2015, p. 33).

Interpersonal communication in coaching

Described as "meso-phenomena", that is, the dynamics that take place between individuals rather than at the individual level (micro-phenomena) or societal level (macro-phenomena) (Barbour, 2017), interpersonal communication in the Digital Age focuses on aspects such as "interpersonal communication effectiveness, the commodification of human interactions and interpersonal conflicts" (Ivan, 2022, p. 887). Research shows that both the communication style of the coach and coachee play an essential role within the coaching relationship and, consequently, towards coaching effectiveness (O'Dell, 2011, p. 18).

The coaching relationship is an area of interest for coaching research (de Haan & Gannon, 2017; Terblanche & Heyns, 2020) and is fundamental in goal attainment (Henderson & Palmer, 2009). Research also indicates that "satisfaction with a coach–coachee relationship" is not enough to predict successful outcomes (De Haan et al., 2020; Grant, 2013). However, focusing on the elements that make the coaching relationship effective rather than on a coaching model is deemed essential to coaching success (Feldman & Lankau, 2005, p. 844). Accordingly, more research is necessary to establish the elements that are the basis of the coaching relationship (de Haan et al., 2020; Terblanche & Heyns, 2020).

Coaching, as a multidisciplinary field (Bachkirova, 2017; Bachkirova et al., 2010; Cox et al., 2014; Grant & Stober, 2006), cross-disciplinary (Grant & Cavanagh, 2004) or even transdisciplinary (Velencei, 2016), has been scrutinized by different research disciplines (Grant, 2001; Spence & Grant, 2005). Communication is a critical competency in coaching, part of the coaching relationship, as acknowledged primarily by the International Coaching Federation (ICF) who says it involves maintaining presence, communicating effectively, and listening actively")[1] and indirectly through building the relationship, acknowledged by the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC)[2]. Hence, the communication discipline owes its share of contribution as an underresearched area in coaching, as the need for theoretical contributions to the coaching field is an active area of research (Bachkirova, 2017; Bennett, 2006).

Coaching provides a place for reflection where client-coach communication can emerge (Scholl et al., 2022, p. 206). So far, research suggests that interpersonal communication can be a skill of higher value than content (Ertmer et al., 2003, p. 3), while other empirical research has highlighted the role of communication in recent times (Mayer, 2023). Interpersonal skills are decisive in the coach-coachee working alliance (Ianiro & Kauffeld, 2014, p. 231).

According to Hargie (2011), interpersonal communication is represented by 14 main skill areas: nonverbal communication, reinforcement, questioning, reflecting, listening, explaining, self-disclosure, set induction and closure, assertiveness, influencing, negotiating, and interacting in and leading group discussions (p. xiii). Coaching communication skills include questioning or asking questions, listening, rapport, attention to non-verbal communication, and relationship building. Listening is a process of understanding, compared to hearing, which involves detecting acoustic information (Porges, 2017). Listening competence requires specific skills, such as working with silence, quiet moments and empathy (Miller, 2018, p. xi). Empathy and presence in coaching (Henderson & Palmer, 2009, p. 185) can also be studied from a communication perspective. Empathy is "an ability to *perceive* and *communicate*[3], accurately and with sensitivity, the feelings of the patient [client] and the meaning of those feelings" (Truax & Carkhuff, 1967, p. 285).

Some studies suggest reading nonverbal behaviour is "significant and successful online" (Meyers, 2023, p. 86). Emphasising the "bodily action" and seeing the coaching relationship as not only "language" means exploring the strong relations between nonverbal and cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of coaching (Jackson, 2016, pp. 1, 300).

Technology use in coaching

Drawing on Heidegger's philosophical inquiries, his definition of technology as "both a means and a human activity" (Heidegger, 1977, p. 5), is congruent with his view of the union between the subject and object. This could provide a promising discussion in relation to 21st century ICT technologies and how they shape our lives. In Heidegger's view, "modern technology is revealing" in the sense that it opens up for "destruction or peaceful use" (Heidegger, 1977, pp. 14-15).

Reminiscing on nineteenth-century technology use in intellectual practices, Ihde (2016), in describing Husserl's writing-reading technologies, mentions *reading glasses*, using a *pen*, *paper*, *coloured pencils*, and switching from a *stand-up* and *sit-down desk* or *magnifying glass* (pp. 59, 62, 67), a time when the *typewriter* was just a recent invention. Ihde (2016) suggests that each of these technologies requires the use of "nuanced different bodily skills" (p. 65), coined as "embodiment relations", where the technology immerses in the life of the subject, becoming unnoticeable.

Kanatouri (2020) operationalises Ihde's technological relations to the coaching world, emphasizing how the more advanced technologies are, the more transparent and embodied in the life of the coach or client (p. 45). Likewise, Idhe's (2016) concept of "hermeneutic relations" can show how "journaling software" can aid further interpretation for the client or coach, highlighting the counterpower of written text as "disembodiment" (Kanatouri, 2020, p. 45), as contrasted or as an extension of face-to-face communication.

The 21st-century information and communication technologies (ICTs) or *technology-mediated communication*, with its digitalisation elements, such as the use of devices, web and smartphone applications, can be examined from the perspective of "medium as the message" (McLuhan, 1964), where the use of a particular medium carries more significance than the simple transfer of information. Contemporary technology-mediated communication has advanced to incorporate AI (Artificial Intelligence) features that offer new dimensions to their initial scope. ICTs or "the new communication technologies are shaping our interaction patterns and technology adoption will continue to grow in the future, creating gaps between people with different levels of expertise" (Ivan & Frunzaru, 2014, p. 3). This phenomenon does not deviate significantly for the coaching field, which has reached a high rate of digitalisation in the last years.

Communication perspectives suggest that media affect interpersonal communication based on their levels of social presence (Kanatouri, 2020, p. 41). Similarly, from an interpersonal neurobiology perspective, according to Porges (2017), the use of social networking sites can affect the qualities of social interaction, "stripping the essence of human interaction, direct face-to-face experiences from human interactions" (Porges, 2017, timestamp 3h56'), distinguishing between abilities to interact with *others* versus with *objects* and synchronous and asynchronous communication.

Digital coaching

Digital coaching means that at least one relevant digital component is involved in the coaching process, part of the "technology-based forms of coaching" (Kanatouri, 2020, p. 40). It can take many forms, from combinations of distance coaching with the aid of tech, blended, such as face-to-face coaching alternated with technology-assisted coaching sessions, presence coaching with tech aid, or entirely technological in the form of self-coaching (Kanatouri & Geißler, 2016, p. 714). Coaching can also be intermediated through dedicated coaching platforms, such as *Delenta*, which helps with client administration work or *BetterUp*, which can also match a coach with the client. Platforms with "perfect matching" algorithms have been criticised as "taking the soul out of coaching".

Relevant to this research is the data showing how coaches engage with their clients: "Almost one in four (24%) always engage on that basis [in person] while close to one in two (48%) do so frequently. The use of audio-video platforms doubled in the 2015 – 2019 period, 24 to 48% (ICF Global Coaching Study, 2020, p. 16).

AI impacts almost every aspect of our lives, including the professionalisation of coaching. As in many other industries. AI in coaching is here to stay, and authors argue that it will revolutionise the coaching industry (Passmore & Woodward, 2023, p. 58). However, it has been argued that AI–led coaching lacks *empathy* and *emotional intelligence* and cannot replace human coaching, mostly in more complex coaching models (Terblanche et al., 2022, p. 1).

In these diverse modalities, authors suggest that each media may affect the coaching experience differently (Kanatouri, 2020, p. 40). Research in online coaching suggests that "the establishment of online protocols should then lead to best practice in communication for coaching online: visually, aurally and holistically" (Meyer, 2023, p. 84).

Methodology

An interpretive philosophy guides the study's research approach and is "integral to qualitative research" (Snape & Spencer, 2003, p. 22). Interpretive research draws on the metaphysical underpinnings of Heidegger's philosophy and the importance of "personal responsibility, decision-making and choice" in understanding and interpreting the world (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016, p. 3). As a result, the *object* (the matter investigated) and *subject* (the participant) are both essential in qualitative research and should be studied together. Similarly, the communication theorist Karl-Otto Apel (1972) highlights the concept of "intersubjective communication" in understanding and explaining the world (p. 10). Apel's view critiques positivist sciences, proposing a complementary language of science that stresses the role of the other in knowledge creation (p. 10).

As such, the interpretative perspective "asks about human experience, social structure, and culture", valuing participants' subjective interpretations and "the meanings which people attach to phenomena (actions, decisions, beliefs, values etc.) within their social worlds" (Snape & Spencer, 2003, pp. 3, 7). In this endeavour, the researcher "makes sense of what has been learned" (Denzin, 2014, p. 569). With this in mind, the ontological stance of the current study follows *subtle idealism*'s perspective, a variant of *idealism* and *relativism*, where "reality is only knowable through the human mind and socially constructed meanings" (Snape & Spencer, 2003, p. 11), but which allows for collective shared meanings in interpreting the world (p. 16).

Epistemologically, the interpretive philosophy considers the researcher's existing knowledge, or "forestructure" (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016, p. 3). As a graduate communication student and aspiring coach with limited experience, my knowledge about the domain helps me understand the phenomenon researched. Even though I believe that "there is no such thing as a value-free inquiry" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 375), this did not impede data collection, analysis, and interpretation, as an attitude of "empathic neutrality" (Snape & Spencer, 2003, p. 13) was considered a prerequisite.

Consequently, a reflexive position has been adopted in relation to data collection and analysis since "social research is not separated from social life" and "self-awareness" is critical in this process (May & Perry, 2014, pp. 110-111). It is also important in understanding our own "drives and intentions" (Bachkirova et al., 2017, p. 39). I have also been aware of possible power imbalances in the research process under the vision of "interviewer as instrument" (Kvale, 2007). Reflexive and reflective practices have been discussed with experienced researchers, and these practices have been implemented.

However, the study explores interpersonal communication in coaching, not only the researcher's or the study's participants' experience (Creswell, 2007, p. 3). As such, from a logical reasoning perspective, the data analysis follows mainly an inductive or data-driven approach, even though scholars argue that all types of logical reasoning - *induction*, *deduction*, and *abduction* - take place in specific stages of all research (Reichertz, 2014; Snape & Spencer, 2003). In *qualitative induction*, certain qualitative features (*token*) of the investigated sample are combined in a way which resembles other known features or order (*type*) (Reichertz, 2014, pp. 128-129).

The study considers the constructivist paradigm in data interpretation. Here, emphasis is placed on "the studied phenomena rather than on the methods that studied it", incorporating a "reflexive view" of the modes of knowing (Charmaz, 2005, p. 509). Knowledge is "subjective" and "co-created" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 184) in a "socially situated event" [the interview; the researcher, and the researched] (Roulston, 2014, p. 298). Consequently, the researcher engages in a "performative" act when interpreting data (Denzin, 2014, p. 571), and the reader participates in constructing new meaning (Geertz, 1973, as cited in Denzin, 2014, p. 571). In the constructivist paradigm, "trustworthiness and authenticity" play a similar role to positivist validity arguments (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 184). More precisely, "trustworthiness" is formed of components such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Denzin, 2014, p. 576). Lastly, the study considers elements of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), especially constructivist grounded theory, in data collection and data analysis (Charmaz, 2005).

Research design and procedures

The study uses a qualitative approach and employs a monomethod to investigate the communication elements of life coaches, considering "multiple instances, as the process is displayed in a variety of different cases" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 378). As such, *semi-structured interviews (SSI)* and a corresponding *semi-structured interview guide* are employed. Due to their inherent guidance and flexibility, semi-structured interviews represent an appropriate inquiry technique to explore the communicative dimensions of the life coaching environment.

After the first two interviews, a few more questions emerged that touched upon the theme of relationship building, resulting in 15 questions covering three areas of research: *coaching approach*, *interpersonal communication in coaching* and *technology use in coaching*. This did not affect the duration of the interviews, as some answers were offered without prompting. An example question within the SSI was: "*It is said that the coach-coachee relationship is very important in coaching. What do you do to develop this relationship? What contributes to a working relationship? Can you tell me more about it?*"

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained after designing the study and drafting the interview guide and background questionnaire, which did not affect the initial design of the study.

Participants selection criteria

After purposively filtering the most relevant coaching practitioners with online and offline experience, coaches were recruited through a call to action posted on LinkedIn and shared via email and a Facebook group. Attending a coaching workshop in the United Kingdom also enlarged the pool of participants.

Since knowledge is contextual (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 381) and to better analyse interpersonal communication dynamics and simplify the coaching context, participants whose practice can be characterised mainly as "personal coaching" instead of "organisational coaching" were selected.

The main selection criteria were *age* (Bennett, 2006 p. 245) and *years of experience*, while *gender* was primarily considered to ensure diversity in responses. The background questionnaire includes non-binary responses and the option not to respond. The age groups are not evenly distributed; however, the goal was to include participants from distinct generations rather than achieving equal representation.

The years of experience in coaching were categorized into three levels: *beginner* (1 – 5 years), *medium* (6 – 11 years), and *advanced* (12+ years). In the second part of the series of interviews, the study will focus on filling the gaps in recruiting the participants according to the established selection criteria. Participants received a distinctive code (Coach 1, Coach 2, …, Coach 12) to ensure anonymity in the data analysis.

Table 1: Participants selection criteria

Age	Experience (years)	Sex (F)	Sex (M)	Participants
25 – 40 (6 participants)	**1 – 5**	Coach 1, 2, 11	Coach 5, 6	**5**
	6 – 11	0	0	0
	12+	Coach 8	0	1
41 – 55 (4 participants)	**1 – 5**	Coach 7	0	1
	6 – 11	Coach 3	0	1
	12+	Coach 4, 12	0	**2**
56 – 70+ (2 participants	**1 – 5**	Coach 9	0	1
	6 – 11	0	0	0
	12+	0	Coach 10	1
Total (partial results)				**12**

Data collection and analysis

Interview process

Discussions were all conducted in English, except one, which was conducted in Romanian. After obtaining the participants' written consent for audio-video recordings, they were reminded that the discussion would be recorded before the interview started. The discussions varied from 60 to 135 minutes, with an average length of 90 minutes.

Description of the study sample (partial)

The initial phase of the study included 12 interviews (N=12) with participants residing in the United Kingdom (5), Romania (2), Germany (1), Hungary (1), Italy (1), the United States (1), and the United Arab Emirates (1).

Background of the participants: *Life coaching* - 6 (Coach 1, Coach 2, Coach 3, Coach 7, Coach 9, Coach 11), *Career coaching* - 1 (Coach 4), *Life and sports coaching* - 1 (Coach 5), *Life and leadership coaching* - 2 (Coach 6 and Coach 10), *Sports and nutritional coaching* - 1 (Coach 8) and *Life, business, and sports coaching* - 1 (Coach 12).

The mean experience for the coaching participants was approximately 7.8 years, the average number of weekly practice hours was 6.5, and the number of clients was 5. At the same time, five participants were full-time coaches, and seven practised coaching part-time.

A reflective and reflexive practice

Before conducting the interviews, I discussed the proposal with experienced coaching researchers. Moreover, due to these meetings and other workshops on qualitative research in the Department of Humanities and Law at Bournemouth University, United Kingdom, I have developed the practice of writing in a *reflective journal* starting with my first interview (Figure 1). In solidifying my research

philosophy, I have also benefited from thoughtful advice from the Department of Ethics of Communication, Scientific Research, and Technological Innovation at Università degli Studi di Perugia, Italy.

Data analysis

The *thematic analysis* (Kvale, 2007; Nowell et al., 2017) method was used to analyse and interpret data, considering the guidelines of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2005), constantly comparing data. The interview texts were transcribed verbatim, analyzing both the content of the audio-video recordings and the corresponding transcripts. In addition to this, the data from the background questionnaire, the notes taken during and after the interview and notes from the reflective journal were considered. The data was manually coded for analysis and interpretation, emerging in the study's themes, and it took place in three stages - open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss, 1990). No AI (Artificial Intelligence) software or application was used to design, conduct, interpret, or write data about this study. The audio-video recordings were instrumental in the reflective practice after each interview.

Figure 1: Reflective Journal
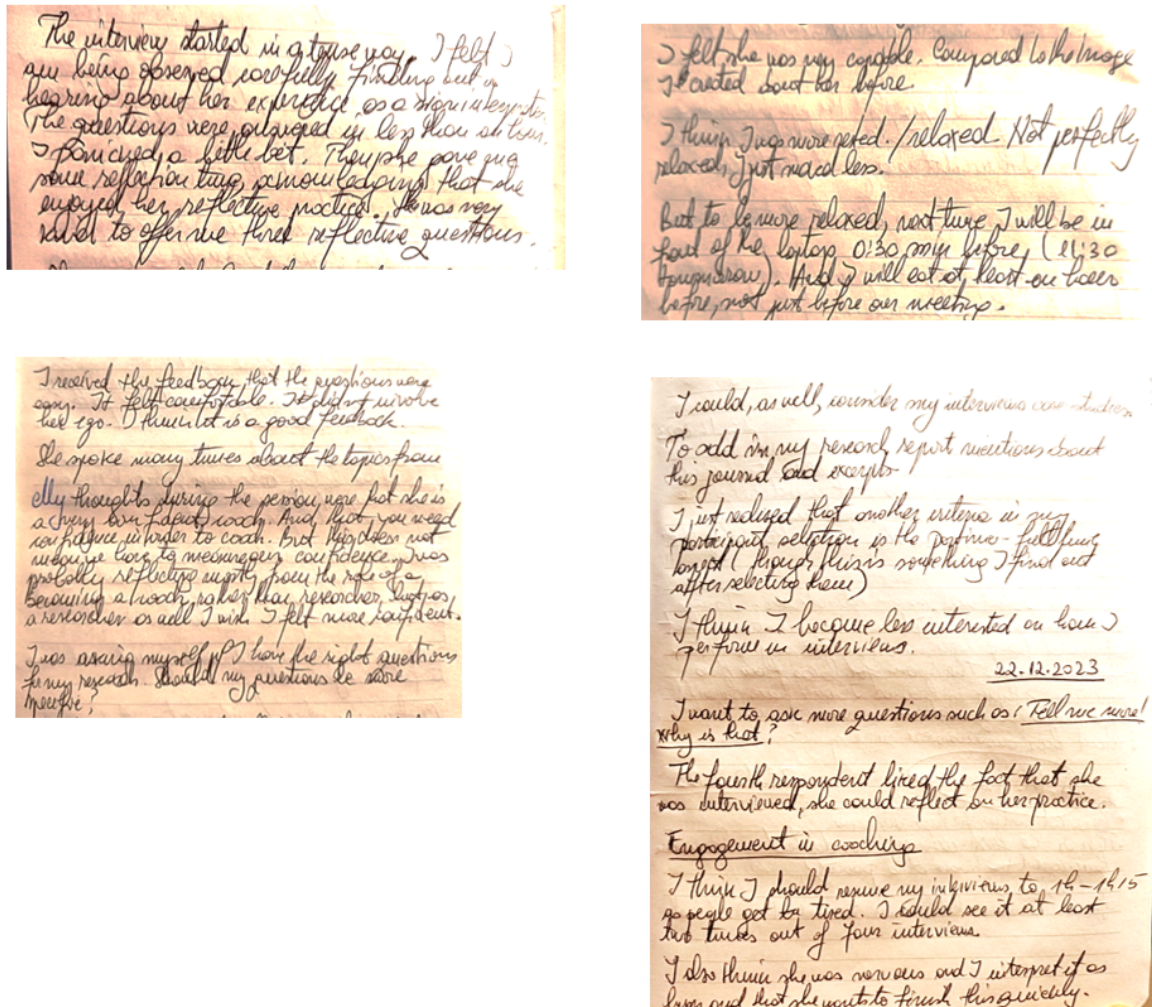
Findings (Preliminary)

The study's results were achieved by analysing primary data from 12 interviews out of 24 planned. Using the thematic analysis technique, the initial emerging themes from the first part of the study have been organised considering the three focus areas of the study: coaching approach, interpersonal communication in coaching, and technology use in coaching. As a preliminary study stage, the emerging themes may or may not be supported by further discussions, or new themes will emerge.

1. Coaching Approach

So far, the emerging themes are: the *identity of the coach*, and *outside coaching practices*, supported by the following subthemes:

Theme 1: Identity of the coach

Professional background. (*Subtheme*) The coach's communication style can be influenced by previous experience or formation. The study respondents come from the following professional backgrounds: communication (Coach 3, Coach 4, Coach 9), human resources (Coach 10, Coach 11), athletics, fitness, and nutrition (Coach 2, Coach 5, Coach 7, Coach 8), psychology (Coach 1 and Coach 9), and sales (Coach 6).

Role flexibility. The professional identity of the coach, and the previous and current roles, are sometimes intertwined in the coaching process. "Changing the hat" while informing the coachee, as reported by respondents whose practice includes leadership coaching and other practices such as training (Coach 6) or teaching coaching, mentoring in coaching, running workshops or facilitating leadership programmes (Coach 10). This aspect is relevant in that it concerns directive and non-directive instances in coaching. Career coaching, for example, sometimes requires moments when the coach is rather prescriptive (Coach 4).

Basic coaching and basic communication skills. All participants have taken specialized courses in coaching. In their approach, beginner coaches will use a less rich repertoire of tools. However, they will rely on applying basic coaching principles correctly:

> I don't think that I have a model (of coaching). It's different because what I was learning was "The Lazy Coach". This means that you don't do anything basically. You don't even make notes. But I like to make notes so that I can pass back what I actually heard. Lazy Coach is basically crossing your arms and ask(ing) questions. […] Lazy because the client is working, not me. (Coach 11)

The Lazy Coach description highlights the non-directive aspects of coaching.

On the other hand, more advanced coaches will characterise their approach as "eclectic", a coaching style influenced by multiple approaches. In contrast, beginners will describe "a model" that influences their practice.

Theme 2: Outside sessions practices

Building presence. Senior coaches do not have a routine before coaching: "I know that I differ. I have some colleagues who spend half an hour doing meditation" (*laughing*). (Coach 10, 20+ years' experience), whereas coaches with less experience (1 - 5 years) (Coach 6, Coach 3, Coach 9) leave time between sessions or have a routine (meditation or checking previous notes).

Communication habits. Communication between sessions is not standard. However, for coaches in the Middle East, communicating between sessions via online channels or applications might be

critical for coaching success (as testified by Coach 8).

2. Interpersonal communication in coaching

Similar to what the literature suggests, communication skills can be both a goal for the client and part of the solution (Scholl et al., 2022). The emerging themes in this section are *the prominence of nonverbal communication in coaching*, *the non-directiveness of coaching discourse*, *empathetic listening*, *face-to-face coaching as "the new different"*, and *building the coach-coachee relationship.*

Nonverbal communication

One of the insights reached is that communication aspects, such as the attention paid to nonverbal communication, presence, and face-to-face interaction, and excitement in the voice (mentioned by Coach 3, Coach 9, Coach 11), arise before being prompted with specific questions and are brought about throughout the discussion, even though less nonverbal elements are accessible to the coach in online, idealizing the face-to-face coaching (Coach 2, Coach 3).

The non-directiveness of coaching discourse

The coaches' discourse emphasises the non-directive elements. So far, situations where *advice-giving* was part of the coaching seemed to be in the more specific types of coaching, such as career coaching (Coach 4), SEN (special education needs) coaching and athletics coaching (Coach 5).

Asking questions. One of the most mentioned non-directive coaching techniques is asking open-ended questions. However, the way a question is phrased can suggest a certain degree of directiveness.

Present focus. Coaching sessions are focused on what is pressing at the moment, rather than forcefully referencing the goals from the contracting stage.

Empathetic listening

Empathy is a recurring theme in most of the discussions.

Face-to-face coaching is the new different

Offline sessions or walking coaching is the new unusual. They are a planned activity (Coach 3, Coach 10), an extra element, and a preference of the coachee (Coach 10).

Building the coach-coachee relationship

"[Human] Chemistry is built "Chimia se construiește" (original quote in Romanian);

Conflict resolution. Conflictual situations can be diverse and be a product of culture.

3. Technology in coaching

Eleven out of twelve respondents use a laptop as the main device for their coaching sessions, emphasising the role and value of the device in the coaching practice and relationship, and a shift in ICT use in coaching, as Coach 3 (46 years old, F, nine years coaching experience) highlights "I do not coach on the phone!".

COVID-19 as an inflection point for coaching

Online coaching is quite new in coaching. The COVID-19 pandemic provided a turning point for many professions and practices, including coaching. The pandemic was recognised as a facilitating moment when technology was embraced with no turning back. Moreover, the respondents highlighted the impact of the pandemic in a spontaneous and revelatory manner: "I was coaching before doing the coaching course, but I did not know I was doing coaching (see Coach 2) or "I do not remember when was last time I coached offline" (Coach 4).

Practical and unimagined advantages of online coaching. Communications technology connects coaches with clients anywhere in the world:

> Technology changed coaching for the better. It changed it massively. The coaching is fine but it means I no longer have the wear and tear I used to have when I was travelling so much. I now get out of bed and I can work from my study or my lounge. And it is easier! I am not driving, I am not catching the train, I am not walking across London. I am not going out in all weathers. So, it changes the coaching by reducing wear and tear for me. That's how it helps. And it means I can coach people anywhere in the world! (Coach 10, 20+ y.e.)

The silent partnership that technology provides. Another acknowledged benefit of online coaching is the option and the ease of recording the sessions, compared to practices dating years back when communications technology was more interfering:

> I was sat opposite people, around the table and I had to put a bloody dictaphone on the table and we were all aware that is being recorded because we could see it and it was bleeping and it was a red light there and it was inhibiting. Whereas now we are all used to online. Although I can see it says recording, I am not aware of it. It does not intrude. And also, what I will do is I will use an app called Otter that allows you to transcribe everything. (Coach 10, 20+ y.e.)

Similar to Heidegger's concept of immersive technology, digital communication in coaching can seem less intrusive than face-to-face communication with the aid of an electronic device, such as the classic recorder.

More senior coaches (46 – 70 years) expressed enthusiasm for online coaching. On the other hand, coaches from the first category (25 – 45 years), besides valuing practical aspects of online coaching, indicated how face-to-face or physical coaching is an ideal situation (Coach 1, Coach 2). The senior segment would see face-to-face coaching as an extra service they could negotiate or offer their clients.

The need to see and be seen

Technology breakdown insights or Research in action. During one interview with a senior, experienced coach (Coach 10), the internet connection determined to change the recording to audio-only. After a short while, the research participant expressed the need to resume the audio-video recording, underlining the importance of having a stable wifi connection:

> If you and I were now coaching, I would find this poor wifi signal disturbing to the rapport that we are able to build. And if we had to go off camera, that would disturb the rapport. So I subscribed to the highest, fastest wifi I can get to make sure it is fine. If the wifi does not work, it's deadly. (Coach 10, 20+ y.e.)

Online image is essential. Experienced coaches emphasize the importance of coachees desirably using the video communication platform "keeping the laptop's camera at eye-level" (Coach 10, 20+ y.e.), contrary to what people do by displaying the *contre-jour* effect or placing the camera underneath the eye level "People have to smarten up with technology" (Coach 10, 20+

y.e.). Shannon and Weaver's (1963) concept of "channel" and its attributed "noise" explains the issues with modern communication technology. Furthermore, the quote exemplifies the gaps in technology use (Ivan & Frunzaru, 2014), as reported by the coach about the coachees.

Similarly, the respondent explained what he sees in client's houses: "Sometimes people have a bed in the background. […] I have met people's children, and their cats and their dogs." (Coach 10, 20+ y.e.). This emphasises the coach's understanding of the balance between clients' real-life situations while keeping a neat image online. He proposes some solutions:

> When I am teaching at the University of X, I use this (virtual) background. It is ok, but I don't like it because you can tell it is a virtual background, but it is my actual bookcase, except it is in another room. So, I have taken a photograph of my bookcase and I can use it as a virtual background, even though in reality it's in the next room. That kind of is quite good. (Coach 10, 20+ y.e.)

This emphasises the need for authenticity, for a more "correct" image online, as if it were offline or face-to-face, while "humanizing" the virtual space to express one's identity.

Online communication in coaching

Online coaching seems to be "the new analogue" coaching as after the high adoption rate of platforms such as Zoom, the adoption trend seems to have not reached the full maturity to make the jump to more complex web interfaces or sets of services. Participants have not mentioned other forms of web communication, such as "3D graphical self-representation" (Kanatouri, 2020, p. 42), audio-video (synchronous) and text (asynchronous) representing the common communication practice.

Participants conduct coaching sessions via their *laptop* (11), *tablet PC* (4), and *smartphone* (2), while some use a combination of two or three devices. For tasks of an administrative nature, coaches use *WhatsApp*, but other admin-dedicated platforms, such as *Calendly* (1), *Aquivity* (1), or the *Gmail suite*. Administrative assistant (1) is an additional resource to the technology suite coaches used to handle details such as payments. Only one respondent used a *dedicated coaching platform*.

Respondents use the following audio-video communication platforms (or a combination) in their coaching practice: *Zoom* (6), *Microsoft Teams* (6), *Google Meet* (5), and *Skype* (1). *WhatsApp* (2) was also used, especially with coaches whose practice includes *sports / athletic coaching*. *WhatsApp* is used for impromptu messaging or check-ins.

Skype was replaced by platforms that individuals and organisations started using during the COVID-19 pandemic (as reported by Coach 12).

Note-taking is typical for all participants; most of them prefer to take notes on paper (9), using a paper and pen (6) or a journal (3), while some (also) keep their notes electronically (6) and use a document on the computer (3), an application (2) or cloud documents (1). Note-taking usually occurs during the session, while in some cases (Coach 6) after the session. Some share the notes taken during the session with their clients as a regular practice (Coach 1), while most keep them for their reference. Note-taking helps the coaches remember what is essential for the client (Coach 11). However, some are concerned this would be distracting for the client, which is why some prefer to do it after the session (Coach 6), and others do it "naturally" during the session, keeping the gaze active with the client (Coach 1).

AI is not (yet) a common theme in life coaching

Even though 2023 was the year when discussions around AI were the most ardent to date[4], coaches have not included AI in their practice or even experimented with AI.

Discussion and Conclusion

Despite the significant effort by coaching to try and find its "place in the sun" of evidence-based studies (Bachkirova, 2024), compared to organisational coaching, life coaching has been researched to a narrower extent (Terblanche, 2021, p. 12).

Coaches start to build rapport from the beginning of the coaching relationship (intake or contracting), and this is something that can be built. Incompatibility instances are rare, which is because before contracting, the client *knows* the coach through a communicated identity. Standard etiquette, such as "showing up on time" and "keeping boundaries in communication," was shown to contribute to a trusting coach-coachee relationship.

The context set by the COVID-19 pandemic, together with the technological advancement of the era, has created a new space for practitioners and users to practice. The online migration of services has contributed to a higher rate of development for the coaching practice. As such, technology enables coaching across borders and "it is here to stay". However, the adoption rates of modern technology, such as using specialised platforms or Artificial Intelligence in their practice, are not yet encouraged by study participants. Moreover, in online versus offline coaching, participants highlight the importance of the "human touch" in coaching as something valuable for clients and something that can not be replicated.

Conclusions

Exploratory in nature, the current research aims to inform further research on communication phenomena in coaching and identify areas for further investigation. As such, it tries to unravel themes, trends, and patterns specific to online communication in coaching compared to offline coaching. The findings can be translated into more specific research questions or study designs.

Nonverbal communication provides a fruitful area for further exploration in online coaching. The nearly complete embracing of online communication platforms, such as Zoom or Google Meet, calls coaches to pay equal attention to the more "humane" aspects that can still be transmitted through audio-video means. At the same time, further investigation into coachees' preferences in online coaching communication is necessary to understand the bigger picture of online coaching.

More research is needed on the impact online coaching has had on communication in coaching. The current study helps to fill this gap by exploring coaches' perceptions of how they use communication in coaching online compared to the physical presence medium. In the era of knowledge and information economy, where knowledge and information transfer and creation are mediated by technology, the current research findings can shed light on similar practices in the helping professions.

Limitations

As the study explores the reported nonverbal communication in a coaching situation, the scope of the analysis is not to go into depth in describing the actual kinetics, mimetics, and other aspects of nonverbal communication. The current research provides self-reported information about communication practices in coaching. Another way to analyse the differences in communication between online and offline coaching is to compare the two modes by direct observation of coaching in action and analysing recordings, which can also have limitations.

Further research

The study suggests the need for more reflection on how coaches communicate online and, further, to investigate the communication in a dyadic position of coach-coachee. As further research recommendations, exploring the coaching dyad through participant observation and clients/coachees' reflections can further explore interpersonal communication in coaching.

After several decades of advancing research in coaching from established fields, such as organisational theory and psychology, coaching evolved to be studied from the perspective of its complex framework, considering the entire disciplines that informed the emerging coaching discipline, including communication sciences and the less researched area of life coaching.

Endnotes

[1] ↵
International Coaching Federation - ICF, https://coachingfederation.org/credentials-and-standards/core-competencies, information retrived on 10.01.2024.

[2] ↵
The European Mentoring and Coaching Council - EMCC, https://www.emccglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/EMCC-competences-framework-v2-EN.pdf, information retrived on 10.01.2024.

[3] ↵
Italic emphasis in the original text.

[4] ↵
https://blog.research.google/2023/12/2023-year-of-groundbreaking-advances-in.html, accessed on 11.02.2024.

Acknowledgements

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