



Press Release – For Immediate Release

To: Assignment Editor/Editor of Education and Local News Sections

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Tech-savvy but camera-shy: HSUHK study reveals gap in digital oratory

Young adults' familiarity with smartphones and video platforms does not necessarily make them confident or effective speakers on camera, according to a new study led by Dr Michelle Huang, Assistant Professor in the Department of English at The Hang Seng University of Hong Kong (HSUHK). The findings reveal a mismatch between students' perceived ability and their observed performance, particularly in eye contact and gestures, and point to the growing importance of digital-oratory training for online presentations, video interviews and professional communication.

The study, "Digital oratory: a multi-data analysis of L2 speakers' public speaking anxiety and nonverbal speech performance in digital contexts", published in the international academic journal *ReCALL* (Volume 38, Issue 2), examines the distinct challenges second-language (L2) speakers face when presenting on digital platforms—particularly managing anxiety and using nonverbal cues effectively.

While young adults are generally comfortable with smartphones and video platforms, speaking persuasively to a camera and engaging an unseen audience require different skills from everyday technology use.

The research found cognitive anxiety to be the strongest concern among participants (mean score 3.54 on a 5-point scale), followed by physiological anxiety (3.35). Technical anxiety was considerably lower (2.02). Students were generally at ease with digital equipment, yet this did not necessarily translate into confidence when speaking to a camera.

Among the 20 interview participants, 85% identified eye contact as a challenge and 75% mentioned gestures. Eye contact scored lowest, while posture and gestures also required improvement.

Meanwhile, students generally found digital presentations less stressful than face-to-face speeches. Eighteen of the 20 participants said asynchronous presentations felt easier and valued the chance to rehearse, pause and restart recordings, control their environment and choose their best take.

Yet Dr Huang emphasised that lower stress does not mean digital presentations are anxiety-free. Cognitive and physiological factors proved more significant sources of anxiety than technical issues. Although a camera removes a live audience, speakers may still feel that they are being evaluated. They may worry about how viewers will judge their language, accent, confidence or competence, and the ability to replay a recording may lead them to focus on perceived flaws. These worries can trigger physical responses such as muscular tension, rapid heartbeat and faster breathing.



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By contrast, most participants already knew how to use smartphones, tablets and laptops, showing that digital-oratory anxiety is mainly linked to self-perception and evaluation rather than technology itself.

The findings point to digital oratory as a distinct and teachable communicative skill. Dr Huang recommends that educators give students chances to practise camera-specific eye contact and gestures, rather than simply transferring face-to-face expectations.

Students may experiment with directing their gaze naturally towards the screen or camera area and position the camera to capture the head and upper body so that purposeful gestures remain visible. Short recordings can also serve as learning tools, letting students to review their gaze, posture and movements to identify areas for improvement. This creates a “record-review-refine” cycle in which students can focus on improving different aspects of their delivery.

For L2 speakers especially, the study highlights that language proficiency alone is not enough for effective global digital communication. Verbal clarity, audience awareness, nonverbal delivery, intercultural sensitivity and basic technical control all contribute to successful communication.

“The goal should be intelligibility, credibility and meaningful audience connection—not imitation of a narrowly defined native-speaker model,” said Dr Huang.

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Photo:



Photo caption: A study conducted by HSUHK reveals that a mismatch between students’ perceived ability and their observed performance, particularly in eye contact and gestures.

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Aspiring to be a leading private university in the region, HSUHK prioritises stellar undergraduate education and research informed postgraduate education, supported by excellent student learning experience, impactful research and purposeful engagement. HSUHK places strategic importance on regional engagement and international partnership, which create a productive learning and research environment for students and scholars working creatively and innovatively with a strong interdisciplinary orientation.

HSUHK has earned various international recognitions. In the AppliedEdu’s ALL ASIA Private University Ranking 2026, it secured 7th place across Chinese Mainland, Hong Kong and Macau. HSUHK ranked 23rd in both Business and Management and Economics and Finance and 24th in Social Sciences and Humanities among this region’s top universities in the Research.com Top Universities and Top Scientists Rankings 2026. The MSc in Global Supply Chain Management programme achieved 84th place globally in the QS International Trade Rankings 2025. Additionally, HSUHK’s School of Business obtained AACSB International accreditation in 2023, a mark of excellence held by only 6% of the world’s leading business schools. HSUHK was also ranked among the top 200 worldwide on “Quality Education” and “Decent Work and Economic Growth” in the Times Higher Education University Impact Rankings 2021.