
Sustaining social capital online amidst social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic: web-based communities, their mitigating effects, and associated issues

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Abstract: COVID-19 prompted the enforcement of strict social distancing measures in most parts of the world. These measures have serious implications for how people interact, socialise, and collaborate with one another. As social distancing contradicts the social nature of human beings, social connections are still maintained even at a distance. Various forms of modern communication technologies (e.g., online social networking sites, video conferencing tools) allow people to sustain their social capital, even during a pandemic. Therefore, it is argued that web-based communities are instrumental in tackling the psychological costs of social distancing measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, people's increasing dependence on advanced communication technologies during uncertain times are associated with several issues. COVID-19 is highlighting digital inequality, which makes it unthinkable for people in some parts of the world to proceed with their normal activities online. Moreover, increased use of these technologies has implications for people's online privacy and mental well-being.

Keywords: COVID-19; social distancing; social capital; online social networking sites; video conferencing technologies; web-based communities.

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1 COVID-19 and its costs

The speed of COVID-19 transmission left almost all national governments with no other option but to strictly enforce regulations that reduced the movements of their citizens and to limit their proclivity for physical contacts. ‘Social distancing’ has become a catchphrase, as citizens are incessantly advised to maintain a 1.5- or 2-metre distance from other individuals when they are in public spaces. As medical experts believe that COVID-19 is rapidly spread through the movement of people who may or may not be aware that they are carrying the virus, social distancing is seen as an important measure to thwart virus transmission (Cohut, 2020), especially in the early phase of a pandemic (Kelso et al., 2009) and in the absence of effective pharmaceutical interventions (Lewnard and Lo, 2020). Additionally, social distancing measures are hoped to deter the pandemic from overwhelming a country’s healthcare system, especially when the number of infections within a population unabatedly increases (Sen-Crowe et al., in Press).

Closure of schools and universities, lessening of manpower within work settings, social and community interaction reduction, and increased home isolation are typical social distancing interventions that are specified in pandemic preparedness plans of most countries and prescribed by the World Health Organization (Kelso et al., 2009). Social distancing measures, Yan (2020) notes, are prompting shifts in human interactions from the physical setting to the online world. With the pressure to avoid crowds, people are navigating the online environment to pursue most of their activities - from shopping to learning, from meeting to being entertained, and, even, paying their last respects to family members who succumbed to the COVID-19 virus. Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic has immensely altered the ways people live.

Despite reports that social distancing measures, alongside quarantines and isolation of infected members of a population, have slowed the spread of COVID-19 infection in some countries such as Hong Kong (Scott, 2020a), the economic, social, and psychological costs of social distancing are frequently highlighted. From an economic standpoint, social distancing measures can result in income and job loss (Lewnard and Lo, 2020; Semuels, 2020). Staffing deficiencies and closure of national borders have disrupted operations within the manufacturing sector; while travel bans have prompted cancellations of flights and holiday bookings, subsequently posing serious difficulties for the hospitality, travel, and aviation sectors (Nicola et al., 2020). Efforts to contain COVID-19 through shutdowns have also reduced the output of the service sector (e.g., restaurants, theatres, hairdressers), as most establishments are forced to temporarily cease their operations, resulting in substantial decrease in output rates (OECD, 2020).

The subsequent loss of employment for a sizeable number of people, given the detrimental impact of social distancing measures for the business sector, is also surmised to inflate rates of suicide, substance abuse, and domestic violence (DeLuca et al., 2020). In fact, the role of unemployment in the increase of suicide rate among people younger than 65 years old has been documented in a study into the association between employment changes and mortality within 26 European Union countries from 1970 to 2007 (Stuckler et al., 2009).

Government advice for citizens to stay at home has also triggered an increase in the rates of ‘intimate terrorism’ or domestic violence, as calls to report domestic violence surged in countries (e.g., Spain, France) that instituted tight nationwide lockdowns (Taub, 2020). Women who are already in abusive relationships are unable to escape their

situations, as lockdowns prevented them from going to work or visiting their friends (Godin, 2020).

The experience of a lockdown is not the same for everyone. Children in economically disadvantaged households do not have access to learning and playing opportunities, may not receive support from schools, and do not have better access to the internet; and children deprived of these opportunities are vulnerable to problems related to their social development and mental and physical well-being (Ramchandani, 2020). As of 22 April 2020, school closures around the world have affected 90% of students, while digital inequality in developing countries is putting poor students at a disadvantaged compared to their wealthier counterparts (John et al., 2020). For children and adolescents with mental health problems, school closures mean a momentary cessation of their access to face-to-face peer support groups and counselling (Lee, 2020). Moreover, social distancing measures during the COVID-19 pandemic are exposing children to the risks of domestic violence and other forms of abuse, as evidenced by an increase in reports of child abuse in India and Singapore (Save the Children, 2020).

The psychological costs of social distancing for most people have also been noted. Reduced social interactions and increased loneliness due to social distancing measures are deemed detrimental to people's mental health (Fiorillo and Gorwood, 2020). Reviewing various empirical studies into the psychological effects of a quarantine, Brooks et al. (2020) underscore that isolating people during SARS and MERS outbreak has resulted in negative psychological outcomes (e.g., post-traumatic stress symptoms, confusion, anger), which are triggered by frustration, boredom, insufficient information, financial loss, and stigma. And with social distancing measures taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19, cases of anxiety, depression, and loneliness are expected to swell (Galea et al., 2020).

Abel and McQueen (2020) claim that in countries with strong collectivistic tendencies, social distancing could be a problematic concept, specifically from a social and cultural standpoint, especially when people from those countries are naturally inclined to seek social support in difficult times. Given human being's natural inclination to foster and maintain human connections (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), the notion of social distancing contradicts the human need for connection (Abel and McQueen, 2020; Van Bavel et al., 2020), as it signifies the suspension of physical interaction (Van Bavel et al., 2020). Hence, during a pandemic, 'spatial distancing' or 'physical distancing' are the most appropriate terms, as they emphasise the possibility for social connections despite physical separation among individuals and the need for social closeness during troubling times (Abel and McQueen, 2020; Van Bavel et al., 2020).

People's social networks enable them to build social capital (e.g., norms of reciprocity, trust) and to have access to necessary social support (Heaney and Israel, 2008). During a pandemic, social capital is reported to be associated with people's behavioural response (e.g., handwashing, receiving a vaccine, wearing masks) (Chuang et al., 2015). Additionally, social support is also recognised as pivotal for people's mental health during a pandemic (Mak et al., 2009), just as it is considered a natural remedy for people's feelings of isolation during a pandemic (Norcross and Phillips, 2020).

2 The value of social connections through web-based communities during a pandemic

Any pandemic is bound to fuel people's anxiety. Often, anxious feelings germinate as uncertainties burgeon during a pandemic. Being confronted with many 'unknowns' spurs people to feel powerless, subsequently triggering them to anticipate worst case-scenarios, which contributes to anxiety (Wiederhold, 2020b). Additionally, anxiety emanates from people's awareness of disruptions in their normal ways of life (Usher et al., 2020).

In a state of anxiety, people are normally predisposed to find ways to extinguish anxious emotions. The myriad of possible negative outcomes (e.g., job loss, mortality threats, loss of significant others) associated with a pandemic induces anxiety, which would influence not only people's intention to perform certain forms of protection behaviour (Bish and Michie, 2010; James et al., 2009; Liao et al., 2014) but also to search for information in an effort to reduce uncertainties (Kim and Niederdeppe, 2013). More importantly, anxiety can prompt people afflicted by it to pursue human connections through social support, given the role social support plays in making people feel accepted and validated during a pandemic (Pan et al., 2005).

With social distancing measures enforced in most parts of the world, web-based communities are indispensable. Nowadays, web-based communities can be easily created through various social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which, according to Freberg et al. (2013), allow users to interact with one another and to initiate conversations through user-generated contents (e.g., blogs, videos), just as those channels facilitate the creation of virtual communities where members can engage in information sharing and initiate dialogues with other members and with organisations.

While social media platforms played a minor role as sources of information for Canadians during the outbreak of H1N1 (Jardine et al., 2015); in China, citizens' discussion about and reactions to the H7N9 influenza and MERS-CoV outbreaks were done through a popular microblogging site (Fung et al., 2013). Analysing tweets from British users during the H1N1 pandemic, McNeill et al. (2016) found that Twitter was instrumental not only for spreading news from reliable media sources to raise awareness about the pandemic but also in influencing Twitter users' decisions pertaining to the use of vaccines and other antiviral medications.

One noteworthy benefit of social media during a pandemic, nonetheless, is their potential to reduce feelings of isolation and anxiety through sustained connections among people beyond the physical environment (Wiederhold, 2000a). Through social media, people are able to create web-based communities that do not only foster connections but also extend support and assistance to those in need, as in the case of web-based communities in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic (Cunningham, 2020).

3 Maintaining social capital despite social distancing through web-based communities

The literature on social capital is replete with claims regarding its benefits for individuals and communities. Social capital is as important as physical and human capital given its productive nature, specifically as it enables a person to realise his goals, which would have been impossible without social capital (Coleman, 1988). Lin (2000) conceptualises

social capital as having two dimensions – firstly, the resources inherent in an individual’s social relations, and, secondly, the location of that individual within his social network. The author further claims that social capital provides an individual with both instrumental benefits (e.g., increased job opportunities, better earnings, earlier promotions) and expressive benefits (e.g., positive health).

Woolcock (1998, p.155) views social capital as “a broad term encompassing the norms and networks facilitating collective action for mutual benefit.” According to Portes (1998), for an individual to possess social capital, he must be related to others who can potentially provide him with whatever form of advantage. The author adds that social capital performs three important functions as:

- a a source of social control (e.g., enforcement of norms)
- b a source of family support
- c a source of benefits that can be derived from a person’s social networks.

In his book, *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (2000) differentiates social capital into two, namely, bridging social capital and bonding social capital. On the one hand, bridging social capital, Putnam states, is characterised by its inclusivity and its outward-looking focus, especially that networks based on bridging tend to include people from various social categories. He describes members of a bridging network to have ‘weak ties’, which, according to Granovetter (1983, p.201), are shared by individuals who are “less likely to be socially involved with one another.” Examples of bridging social capital include social movements and religious organisations. Putnam (2000, p.22) argues that bridging networks are “better for linkage to external assets and for information diffusion”.

On the other hand, bonding social capital, Putnam claims, is characterised by its exclusivity and by its inward-looking focus, as networks based on bonding developed out of choice and/or necessity and have the tendency to amplify exclusive group identities and emphasise group homogeneity. Additionally, members of a bonding network, Putnam asserts, share strong ties, which, according to Granovetter (1983), are shared by individuals who are socially involved with one another. Examples of bonding social capital include professional associations and local community groups. According to Putnam (2000, p.22), bonding networks are “good for undergirding specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity”.

It has been emphasised that stronger social capital effects are generated from face-to-face communications through the experience of interacting parties, the reciprocity that potentially emerged during interactions, and the frequency of interactions (Kittilson and Dalton, 2011). For people who have the necessary resources (e.g., technology, know-how), online social networks enable them to develop and sustain bridging and bonding social capital (Choi et al., 2011).

However, with the widespread implementation of social distancing measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face interactions among individuals not belonging to the same household are substantially reduced. One can rightfully argue, then, that social capital, alongside individual freedom, is often compromised with the enforcement of social distancing measures during a pandemic (Reluga, 2010).

Still, social capital does not necessarily have to falter in times of social distancing, given the potential of the internet and other forms of advanced communication technologies to sustain Putnam’s bridging and bonding social capital. Norris (2002),

citing results of a Pew survey, states that among people who are active online, their participation in online communities enables them to broaden their experience of a community by connecting to individuals who are different from themselves and to enhance their experience of a community by strengthening their existing social connections. This survey, Norris argues, signifies that online communities can amplify both bridging and bonding social capital.

Several researchers have reported how users of various online social networking (OSN) sites maintain their bridging and bonding social capitals according to their activities in those sites. Among Twitter users, for example, bridging social capital is cultivated through the number of people they follow on the site, while bonding social capital is attained through the number of followers those users have (Hofer and Aubert, 2013). In the case of Facebook, the use of a large number of site features and the frequent use of *likes* and *comments* are associated with bonding social capital, while the frequent use of *wall* and the preference for *status* and *groups* are associated with bridging social capital (Lee et al., 2014).

4 Sustaining bridging social capital and bonding social capital through OSN sites during the COVID-19 pandemic

In societies with high levels of internet access, the use of various OSN sites is already more popular than using traditional media channels. These sites have become so embedded in the lives of their users that experts describe such widespread site usage as a ritualised act (Debatin et al., 2009; Hoffman, 2012).

The potentials of OSN sites to boost users' bridging and bonding social capital depends on the primary motivations for using them. For instance, Facebook is deemed pivotal for cultivating bridging social capital when used to develop and maintain weak ties with a large number of distant social connections and acquaintances, given its functionality of allowing users to freely and quickly relay messages to a wider group of recipients (Hoffman, 2012). Nonetheless, maintaining bonding social capital using Facebook is also possible with the use of its instant messaging feature.

In 2017, Phua, Jin, and Kim conducted a study into the levels of bridging and bonding social capital people obtain from using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. The researchers found that bridging social capital is higher in Twitter than in the three other OSN sites, as the site enables users to follow other individuals with whom they do not share personal relationships (e.g., celebrities, politicians, organisations), thereby allowing users to maintain their weak ties. Bridging social capital is also higher in Instagram though comparatively lower than that of Twitter. Both Facebook and Snapchat, primarily used to connect with individuals with whom users have close and private relationships, have less opportunities for creating bridging social capital. However, as that same study shows, the use of Facebook and Snapchat for close relationships means that the highest level of bonding social capital can be obtained, when compared to using Twitter and Snapchat.

As previously mentioned, during the H1N1 pandemic, people capitalised on Twitter to broadcast their views on the crisis and to post information from reliable sources. The use of OSN sites for information sharing during a pandemic, however, has its dark side,

as they have been instrumental in the dissemination of false news and erroneous information (e.g., conspiracy theories concerning the origins of COVID-19), especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Limaye et al., 2020; Pazzanesse, 2020; Scott, 2020b).

Still, uncertainties resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have prompted an increase in the number of people using OSN sites such as Facebook to connect with family members and friends during a lockdown (Ghaffary, 2020; Koeze and Popper, 2020; Wong, 2020) and to share information to their network members (Ghaffary, 2020). These are typical examples of how bridging and bonding social capital are sustained through social media.

5 Sustaining bonding social capital through instant messaging applications and video conferencing tools during the COVID-19 pandemic

Maintaining online communication with strong ties, or sustaining bonding social capital, has been reported to improve people's well-being (Ishii, 2017). This is especially true during a pandemic when physical contacts are substantially reduced by social distancing measures. When aging parents who are at risk to the virus could not receive visits from their children and grandchildren, when colleagues could not temporarily collaborate and socialise with one another in a physical setting, and when students and teachers could not continue with their learning interactions in a physical classroom, a sense of normalcy in the 'new normal' of interacting from a distance ought to be maintained.

The psychological effects (e.g., loneliness, anxiety) of social distancing measures must be mitigated through constant communication with family members, friends, and peers. This is when instant messaging tools (e.g., WhatsApp) and video chat applications (e.g., Skype) become indispensable. Voice chats and group calls have been deemed instrumental in combating loneliness resulting from social distancing measures (Fiorillo and Gorwood, 2020).

Indeed, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, people are increasingly using tools that allow them to replicate their physical interactions with others in an online setting. However, text and instant messaging might be deemed insufficient, as people are increasingly clamouring to see their interaction partners. As Koeze and Popper (2020) reported, apps that did not manage to attract widespread usage prior to the pandemic (e.g., Google's chatting applications, Duo, and Houseparty) have witnessed a surge in the number of their users, given those apps' features of enabling groups of friends to participate in a single video chat or allowing users to play games with one another.

Additionally, with the closure of schools and universities and the widespread implementation of work-at-home regulations, people are forced to attend lectures or continue their professional activities at the comfort of their homes. Lectures, discussions, consultations, and meetings are happening on Zoom, Google Hangouts, and Microsoft Teams (Koeze and Popper, 2020). This overreliance on technologies to pursue a 'normal' work and social life in uncertain times, however, has serious implications for online privacy, an issue that will be discussed in the next section.

6 Issues with sustaining social capital through web-based communities during the COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19 has altered how people do things and live their lives, while current forms of communication technology have managed to smoothen disruptions in people's interactions and connections resulting from measures taken to reduce the unwanted consequences of the pandemic. While the benefits of various communication technologies for the maintenance of people's social capital and for their mental well-being could not be downplayed, the 'new normal' of pursuing the usual daily activities and tasks online comes with certain costs. The issues associated with the transition from physical interaction to online communication are of structural and socio-psychological nature.

6.1 *Digital inequality: a structural issue with sustaining social capital online during the COVID-19 pandemic*

People's experiences with social distancing measures (e.g., lockdowns, school closures, community quarantines) considerably differ. The COVID-19 pandemic is highlighting certain forms of inequalities for all affected citizens (e.g., differential access to work, income, financial safety nets, and healthcare). However, in relation to the maintenance of social capital online, differential access to the internet is a serious form of inequality. Whereas billions of people are going online to stay connected during the COVID-19 pandemic, for almost half of the world's population without internet connection, the move to the digital environment for communication, information, and other forms of exchanges is unimaginable (Broom, 2020). This digital inequality has severe implications for educational equality and for maintaining social connections in desperate times.

It has been reported that among students from poor communities, their lack of access to the internet makes it impossible for them to follow online classes and lectures at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (Jalli, 2020; John et al., 2020). Without an internet connection, it also becomes unthinkable for people not only to proceed with their educational activities but also to continue working at home and to be socially connected. And alongside the absence of internet access is the poor quality of broadband speed, which could have an impact not only on work-related video conferences but also on the quality of healthcare delivered online (Holpuch, 2020).

Nonetheless, digital inequality, also referred to as digital divide, is characterised not only by differential access to the technology (e.g., having a computer, having a reliable and stable internet connection) but also by variations in levels of experience with, skills in, and opportunities for using the internet (Van Dijk and Hacker, 2003). The point related to variations in experience and skills is crucial, especially when considering the experience of people who are older than 70.

It has been reported that senior citizens belonging to the age cluster previously mentioned are seriously at risk from COVID-19, and, hence, have a strong incentive to physically isolate themselves from family members and friends. A study with Swiss internet users found that while the digital divide is narrowing for younger users, the gap for those over 70 years old is an issue (Friemel, 2016). Underscoring that the 'elderly' could not be regarded as a homogenous group, Niehaves and Platfautt (2014), in their survey with German internet users, revealed that older seniors were less likely to adopt the internet than younger seniors.

Citing a study by the Pew Research Center in 2016, Anderson and Perrin (2017) reported that a third of American adults aged 65 years and older indicated to have never used the internet, while approximately half reported not having home broadband services. Setting aside the figures from an American context, if the number of elderly people with limited resources to establish and sustain online connections with family and friends is quite high, specifically in less developed and developing countries, the difficulty for the elderly to maintain their social capital during the COVID-19 pandemic would be an unsettling issue.

While a segment of the elderly population, especially in developed countries, might be spared from the risks of depression, loneliness, and social isolation by video chatting with family members through Skype and Zoom (Atabakhsh and Todd, 2020; Zamir et al., 2018), majority of senior citizens in countries with low or limited access to the internet would most likely be deprived of the amenities offered by modern modes of communication, especially during a pandemic.

6.2 Socio-psychological issues with maintaining social capital online during the COVID-19 pandemic

Managing one's social capital online can be asynchronous (e.g., posting messages on Facebook, sharing information via Twitter, commenting on discussion forums) or synchronous (e.g., video chatting through Skype, text chats). Both communication modalities have their share of advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, asynchronous communication enables a person to carefully think about his message, although it is constrained by the absence of immediate feedback from the message recipient (Chan, 2011). On the other hand, synchronous communication is characterised by high involvement between interacting parties, common ground, and synchronised interaction (Burgoon et al., 2010). The requirement for interacting parties to be available at an appointed time, however, is a downside for synchronous communication. Whether a person opts for asynchronous communication or synchronous communication to maintain connections online during the COVID-19 pandemic, issues of social or psychological character can be expected.

6.2.1 Privacy concerns

The first issue is that the use of OSN sites, video chatting apps, and instant messaging tools is susceptible to privacy violations. Sharing various types of information on an OSN site might have its benefits, but this act of sharing also compromises a person's online privacy (Beldad, 2015; Houghton and Joinson, 2010). Privacy violations in an OSN context could be attributed to the actions of the sites themselves (e.g., commercialising users' information), to the actions of unauthorised third parties (e.g., illegally accessing users' information for purposes unknown to them and which could potentially harm them), and to the actions of individuals within the users' social network (e.g., misusing users' information with the aim of tarnishing their reputation) (Beldad, 2015).

The need for social connection in uncertain times prompted a substantial increase in the rate of social media and instant messaging app use. Recent data show that text message and voice application WhatsApp has experienced a surge in usage from 27% during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic to 41% during the middle phase (in Spain, WhatsApp usage rate rose to 76%), while Facebook and Instagram (alongside

WhatsApp) witnessed an increase of 40% in usage among individuals within the age cluster 18 to 34 years (Perez, 2020). Usage rate increase means more data and information are voluntarily and involuntarily shared online, which subsequently means that the probability for users' online privacy to be compromised is high.

The trend of working at home also spurred dependence on video chatting tools such as Zoom, Google Hangouts, and Microsoft Teams, which brings privacy issues to the fore. For instance, Zoom, which has been adopted by schools and universities to provide online education, has been swamped with questions from parents and privacy experts concerning the use of children's data, as a software inside the app has been found to be sending users' data to Facebook (Hakim and Singer, 2020). Furthermore, instances of intrusion have also plagued usage of Zoom, as hackers were able to join supposedly private video conferences and post lewd, offensive, and hateful contents (Brooks, 2020; Tyko, 2020). These clear-cut cases of security failures are exposing the vulnerability of internet users' online privacy at a time when dependence on the internet during a pandemic is high.

6.2.2 Fatigue and exhaustion

The second issue associated with the use of video chatting tools is online meeting fatigue and exhaustion. For people thrust to carry on with their daily activities online, the experience of being mentally drained and physically depleted after a call has been a common complain (Miller, 2020; Spicer, 2020), prompting the notion of 'Zoom fatigue' (Sklar, 2020). One explanation for this is that during a face-to-face conversation, people are able to divide their focus on the words being spoken and on the non-verbal cues (e.g., facial expressions, hand movements) emitted by interacting parties, whereas during an online video call users are forced to attend to words for most of the time (Sklar, 2020). The author furthers that even if interacting individuals can see each other on screen, poor video quality and technical glitches can dampen efforts to derive meanings from minute facial expressions.

In the absence of other non-verbal cues during a video call, users can only rely on eye contact (Sklar, 2020). Maintenance of eye contact is important for regulating social interactions (Hietanen et al., 2008) and for determining the focus of an interaction partner's direction of attention (Emery, 2000). At the same time, eye contact helps interacting parties in perceiving certain emotions expressed by their faces (Bohannon et al., 2013). However, during a video call, eye contact can be threatening and uncomfortable when maintained for a long period of time (Moyer, 2016).

Momentary silence and delayed response may not severely distort interaction quality in an offline setting, but their inevitability in video calls can generate anxiety about the technology (Sander and Bauman, 2020). Delays in responding are inherent in video conferences, and they could impact interaction quality. Response delays of 1,200 milliseconds can already trigger a person to perceive his interaction partners as less attentive, when compared to response delays of 0 to 400 milliseconds (Schoenberg et al., 2014).

Fatigue could also be attributed to technical glitches during the video call: network delays causing out-of-sync conversations and low-quality audio signals impacting speech clarity and distorting utterances (Hines and Sun, 2020). Missing elements in utterances impose cognitive demands on the message recipient, as gaps must be filled to make sense of what was said (Hines and Sun, 2020; Spicer, 2020). Unsynchronised conversations

(e.g., interacting parties talking over each other), muffled speeches, and unclear and incomplete utterances can trigger non-understanding, misunderstanding, and misinterpretation. Understanding difficulties due to poor audio quality during an online meeting can be vexing if the discussion concerns highly pertinent subject matters.

6.2.3 *Absence of cues vs. awareness of one's objective self*

Users' personality can influence their preference for certain channels when maintaining their social capital online and how they use those channels. Regarding channel preference, it is known that people high in extraversion and low in neuroticism tend to prefer richer channels for their communication (e.g., face-to-face) than leaner channels such as e-mails (Hertel et al., 2008). Additionally, people with high levels of shyness are reported to increasingly use OSN sites and to be more satisfied with and closer to their friends in those sites when compared to those with low levels of shyness (Baker and Oswald, 2010).

Regarding the ways people use communication technology, individuals high in extraversion tend to use an OSN site for communication with others; while high levels of neuroticism, agreeableness, and extraversion are positively related to users' propensity to express their actual selves online (Seidman, 2013). That same study found that people high in conscientiousness are careful in how they present themselves.

When maintaining social capital online, hence, some people might prefer to engage in synchronous communication in which social presence is high and almost all non-verbal cues can be conveyed, while others might opt for synchronous communication using tools that allow them to withhold facial cues and bodily movements. Others still will just be contented engaging in asynchronous communication in which real-time presence and all forms of nonverbal cues (e.g., expressions, gestures) are missing. It is worth noting, however, that the use of emoticons to compensate for the absence of non-verbal cues in most asynchronous communication and in some instances of synchronous interaction (e.g., text chat) has already gained traction (Derks et al., 2007).

What is apparent in the ways people conduct their activities and maintain their social connections online is that access to a range of non-verbal cues inherent in a face-to-face communication is virtually limited or artificially compensated. While video call technologies such as Skype, for example, can potentially match the level of authenticity characterising face-to-face interactions (Janghorban et al., 2014), video calls are not as rich as face-to-face meetings (Bohannon et al., 2013). Video calls require interacting parties to process whatever nonverbal cues have been transmitted, and this can already be mentally taxing (Sander and Bauman, 2020).

Then, there is the other problem – seeing one's face on screen. To replicate face-to-face interactions, people are compelled to switch their cameras on. In most cases, they do not only see their interaction partners but also themselves. For some individuals, constantly seeing themselves on screen can be uncomfortable and unpleasant. In fact, the Theory of Objective Self-Awareness stipulates that “focusing attention on the self brought about objective self-awareness, which initiated an automatic comparison of the self against standards” [Silvia and Duval, (2001), p.213]. And the individual perception that one's self does not meet certain standards might cause frustration.

Wegge (2006) states that people who saw an image of themselves during a video call are predisposed to feel negative emotions such as dislike and shame, as this confrontation with one's image on screen amplifies self-awareness, eventually triggering

self-regulation. In one experiment, Miller et al. (2017) found that video call participants who saw themselves on screen experienced increased self-awareness, which eventually impacted how they performed during the call (e.g., use of socially focused words, reduced use of words expressing certainty).

Insights from the ‘new normal’ of shifting most interactions online

The ‘new normal’ people frequently talked about nowadays – from keeping a safe distance from others when in public places to shifting most activities to the virtual space – can certainly alter the ways people look at the things they normally do prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. If there is one valuable take-away from this ‘new normal’, it is the realisation that people can carry on with their businesses and affairs with their access to new modes of communication.

Even before the pandemic, social media, instant messaging channels, and video conferencing tools have already altered the ways people connect and communicate. Their role in sustaining connections is even more important at this time when everybody is strongly advised to refrain from physical contacts.

That platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Skype, and Microsoft Teams are enabling people to easily connect with one another unconstrained by time and space is an indisputable fact. Through those channels, maintaining bridging and bonding social capital has become possible. However, there is a limit to people’s dependence on social media and other modern communication applications to cultivate bonding social capital. Face-to-face interactions, according to Townsend et al. (2016), remain a pivotal ingredient for maintaining bonding social capital and for cultivating relationships built on trust.

The clamour to return to normal face-to-face interactions is expectedly intensifying after months of social distancing measures. But until an effective vaccine for COVID-19 is developed, people are left with no other choice but to maintain their connections and interactions online. As previously mentioned, the current forms of communication technologies are allowing people to proceed with their professional tasks and social activities at a distance, although the issues associated with the increased use of these technologies should not be undermined.

It is highly likely that after this COVID-19 pandemic, more people will be increasingly open to a hybrid form of interaction, socialisation, and collaboration. However, the benefits offered by modern communication technologies must be experienced not just by some, but by a large number of the global population.

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