“You’re not being serious enough!”: Renegotiating Relationships during Lockdown

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ABSTRACT

The outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 led to a UK lockdown, where citizens were asked to stay at home for an undefined period. This forced people to make sudden decisions regarding where to live and who they would not see. Through 18 semi-structured interviews with individuals aged 27-72, this paper explores how people maintained friend-based, romantic, familial and professional relationships during lockdown in Spring 2020. The enforced separation following lockdown motivated people to reconsider how they conducted relationships in and outside the home. Within the household, people verbally and physically renegotiated boundaries to ensure relationship harmony. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) was utilised to maintain connections with estranged relationships, as people accessed new platforms to replicate familiar face-to-face (F2F) processes online. This article considers the disruption to relationships experienced during this time, providing an in-the-moment insight into the use of CMC in maintaining relationships during the first UK lockdown.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, UK lockdown, relationships, computer-mediated communication, face-to-face communication

Introduction

The rapid spread of COVID-19 in 2020 led to a pandemic, where people worldwide were required to alter their movements to avoid spreading the virus. The UK went into lockdown in March 2020, with citizens urged to stay at home (Ofcom 2020a; Fuchs 2020; CIPD 2021). This disrupted pre-established social practises: rather than being able to visit family homes, meet with friends, or see work colleagues at the office, people had to rely on computer-mediated communication (CMC) to perform social activities. Whether this was through phoning, instant messaging (IM), video-calling or social media (SM), there was a sudden, unprecedented dependence on mediated communication.

CMC was widely used in everyday life before 2020, already a normalised means of communication (Rainie & Wellman 2012; Chambers 2013, 2017; Miller 2016; Parks 2017). However, the abrupt lockdown meant people were not prepared to conduct the majority of their interactions from home (Fuchs 2020; Ofcom 2020a, 2020b). This motivated a sudden need to learn how to maintain numerous relationships in unfamiliar settings, both on and offline. Suddenly friendships, romantic relationships, professional bonds and familial dynamics were disrupted as individuals had to navigate novel relationship challenges during an already uncertain era. As academics have noted the importance of partaking in both strong and weak tie-relationships (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Chambers, 2013), this paper will consider how UK residents conducted an array of relationships during the lockdown period of Spring 2020. Through 18 qualitative interviews with UK residents, it examines how people negotiated both face-to-face (F2F) and mediated relationships during this time, the role CMC played in their everyday communications, and how this era altered relationship dynamics.

Research of this nature is important for understanding how people responded to relationship challenges in this time of uncertainty. By exploring experiences across both F2F and mediated relationships, this paper uncovers a dramatic shift in how people managed their everyday interactions, using CMC in new manners and renegotiating their pre-existing relationship norms. This shift in behaviour has long-lasting implications, both in terms of challenging existing academic debates regarding the role of CMC in everyday interactions, and altering how people navigate their relationships online and offline. As lockdowns continue into 2021 and the future remains uncertain, this paper captures experiences during the early days of COVID-19-related disruption and provides a foundation for future research on the impact of numerous lockdowns on relationship maintenance.

Computer-mediated communication and relationships

A leading narrative across academic literature within media studies presents online relationships as distinct from offline relationships (as noted by Parks 2017). For instance, Turkle (2011, 11) discusses “how we are changing as technology offers us substitutes for connecting with each other face-to-face”. The use of language such as “substitutes” (Turkle 2011, 11), “displaces” (Boellstorff 2008, 29) and “surrogate” (Rosen, 2007, 31) propels the narrative that one form of relationship replaces the other.

However, alternative research has indicated that many CMC users are utilising it to *maintain* existing ties, rather than to *replace* them (boyd 2007, 2014; Mendelson & Papacharissi 2010; Rainie & Wellman 2012; Miller 2016). These scholars contend that online and offline relationships do not exist entirely independently but are related and developed across both online and offline spheres, where “ICTs supplement – rather than replace – human contact” (Rainie & Wellman 2012, 144; see also Baym 2010). Parks (2017, 506) refers to these as “mixed media relationships”, defining them as “social relationships that parties conduct in whole or in part through the use of multiple media, including F2F”. In an increasingly mediatized society (Couldry 2012; Lundby 2014) – where media flows through everyday tasks and interactions – it is increasingly difficult (and inappropriate) to disentangle online and offline connections.

Disrupting the disrupter

Although computer-mediated communication has increasingly been used to maintain relationships over the last two decades, the lockdown period of 2020 drastically changed how users were expected to engage with this form of communication. The boundary between online and offline communication was suddenly more distinct than it had been in years, and the social norms, etiquette and motivations for use that people had been steadily developing over time between online and offline interactions (Gershon 2010; Miller 2016) were abruptly thrown into flux.

The connection between relationships and CMC use over time has been widely considered in the academic literature by scholars examining the extent to which the use of CMC has changed relationship norms and social etiquette, to changing network management, to explorations into how the affordances of developing platforms may shape everyday exchanges (see for example Rainie & Wellman 2012; Chambers 2013, 2017; Miller 2016; Parks 2017). The unparalleled disruption to relationships during the 2020 lockdowns means it is essential that this connection is re-examined now, as events continue to unfold, and people are repeatedly forced to reconsider how they navigate relationships with every governmental restriction change. To my knowledge, there has not been an empirical qualitative study that captures the experiences of UK residents physically distanced from others during Spring 2020 and the impact this era has had on their relationships and use of CMC. Thus, this article considers the research question: How did people maintain relationships both face-to-face and via computer-mediated communication during the first lockdown of Spring 2020?

Methodology

I conducted 18 qualitative interviews between 14th April and 23rd May 2020. At this time people in the UK were still in lockdown 1.0, asked to stay at home apart from when undertaking limited exercise or essential activities.

Interviews were conducted remotely using video-calling platforms *Zoom* and *Skype* (bar three interviews, conducted over the phone to overcome device/ internet restrictions). This allowed me to build rapport with participants, observe non-verbal cues, and gain an insight into their living circumstances, as I was "shown" their living space (for example, some pointed out to me where they were working, others showed me that they were conducting their interview from their bedroom, etc.). The interviews were semi-structured where, although there was always a focus on CMC use and relationships, discussion was flexible and altered from person to person. The shortest interview lasted 37.05 minutes; the longest was 51.35 minutes. I audio recorded each interview and securely stored recordings in a password-protected folder to which only I have access. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect participant privacy.

Sample

I utilised a snowball sampling methodology to recruit participants. Although there are limitations of this methodology (discussed below), snowball samples are deemed effective for recruiting hard to reach audiences in a cost-effective manner (Crouse & Lowe 2018). They depend on participants helping recruit further participants, making this sampling technique appropriate for the personal and potentially sensitive subject as participants were first approached by friends or family (Crouse & Lowe 2018). I initially only contacted people I personally knew with an overview of my proposed project, asking them to contact people they felt might be interested in learning more. They then provided me with the contact details of people who wanted to partake in the study. By asking friends and family to contact people on my behalf I minimised my personal role in the recruitment process and was able to reach numerous different social networks, widening the potential of reaching multiple groups.

I emailed 23 people overall, receiving responses from 18. Each interview was confirmed after participants replied with a signed consent form and a suggested interview time. Once I had completed the 18th interview, I decided to cease recruitment, as I felt this was a sufficient amount for the purposes of the study, having confidently reached thematic saturation.

Despite the benefits of the snowball sampling methodology, this approach meant that my sample was not demographically representative (Crouse & Lowe 2018). Six participants were male and 12 were female; only two participants were non-white; and I did not collect socio-economic status information. These sample limitations made it difficult to explore any connection between such variables and responses to lockdown, providing an opportunity for future research to explore any potential connections in more detail. Despite these limitations, the participants did come from a variety of backgrounds, professions and life stages. Their ages ranged from 27-72, they lived in rural and urban locations across England, and were part of a range of relationships. Five participants were born overseas, thus had relatives and friends from across the globe who they were in communication with. As such, I was able to consider a wide range of personal experiences during the first COVID-19 lockdown in England.

Analytical approach

I used the University of Nottingham's Automated Transcription Service to transcribe the audio recordings, saving time and costs. I reviewed the transcripts and uploaded them into analysis software platform NVivo11. The use of such software when managing qualitative datasets is encouraged by scholars, as it aids efficiency and organisation (Nowell et al. 2017). I used NVivo to collate my transcripts and conduct a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is considered by researchers to be a simple yet underrated form of qualitative analysis (Boyatzis 1998; Nowell et al. 2017). It is seen as especially beneficial when managing qualitative data from numerous interviews, as it allows for overarching themes and sub-themes to be identified and coded (Boyatzis 1998; Braun & Clarke 2006; Nowell et al. 2017). I systematically read through each transcript, coding themes as they emerged. I then examined all themes from the 18 interviews together, identifying key overarching themes and sub-themes. The themes found during the analysis inform the findings and insights discussed in this article, which are presented in the following sections.

Renegotiating F2F relationship dynamics: Changing households

Following the first announcement of an impending lockdown in March 2020, participants reported that they made rapid decisions on who to live with. The younger participants especially – who were already "in-between" households as they regularly shifted between rented accommodation, parents' and partners' homes – reported that the sudden UK lockdown forced them to reconsider where they lived. For example, Amelia – who previously split her time between her boyfriends' and parents' homes – decided to stay full time with her parents. Veronica, on the cusp of moving into shared accommodation, suspended her move to again stay with her parents. Conversely, Elizabeth decided to move into her boyfriend's house, away from her usual "home':

> I'm currently living with my boyfriend […] about 45 minutes from where my "home" is, where I was living with my parents […] I've kind of migrated up here 'cos I had a conversation with my parents […and we decided] that it would be better for me to actually move away from my family home.
>
> **Elizabeth, 27, Yorkshire**

Through discussion with her parents it was mutually decided that it would be safer for Elizabeth to live with her boyfriend, thus forsaking the ability to regularly see her parents. These rapid decisions often determined how individuals would live for the duration of lockdown, shaping their relationships both in and out of the home.

Negotiating household dynamics

During lockdown depth of time with fewer relationships replaced breadth of interaction with multiple people, disrupting pre-established dynamics and relationship norms and motivating a need to articulate new boundaries and norms within the home. Even those who remained within their typical households reported disruption to relationship dynamics. As participants' daily lives outside the home were restricted, their routines *within* the household also altered. 14 participants were either asked to work from home or were furloughed. Four participants also had children who were conducting schoolwork from the house. This led to nearly all participants physically changing the layout of their homes, creating designated workspaces and boundaries across time and space. For instance, Aaron and his wife had to adjust to working from home around their two teenage sons:

> I've got a work laptop which is set up in [my youngest son's] room. My wife's got a work laptop so she set up in the main master bedroom. We're lucky, you know, we've got enough space that everyone can go into.
>
> **Aaron, 45, Surrey**

Aaron acknowledged the advantage of having the physical space at home to manage these new demands, but still felt challenged by this upheaval as he and his family established new physical boundaries and divisions within the household.

This division of physical boundaries also motivated participants to articulate verbal agreements over personal space. Participants considered space to be vital for maintaining their sense of self whilst living in unfamiliar circumstances, even with those they were emotionally close to. The type of relationship shaped how these conversations took place, as exemplified by Elizabeth and her boyfriend versus Amelia and her parents:

> [My boyfriend and I] get along really great. I'm one of those people that I need my own space in order to feel like me […] So to navigate that with him we had some really kind of frank discussions about being able to create spaces for each other to have that alone time.
>
> **Elizabeth, 27, Yorkshire**

> I kind of commandeered this room as like *my* space for like studying, because also we need to kind of have our boundaries in the house […] Space is really important, just because we're in the house together, I need my alone time still.
>
> **Amelia, 29, Yorkshire**

While Elizabeth approached this topic through a sensitive negotiation with her boyfriend, Amelia was more explicit in defining her own physical space away from her parents. This implies that the sense of intimacy and emotional sensitivity associated with different relationships shaped how participants communicated their need for space.

Participants were aware that emotions were high during lockdown and reported taking steps to avoid conflict. This was again most evident in the parent-child connections within the sample, where both the parents who were living with their children (five participants) and the adult children living with their parents (two participants) discussed the need to act sensitively around each other:

> We've all compromised, and I think we've reached a decent respect for each other's needs of space, or cleanliness, tidiness. All those things that make for friction.
>
> **Samantha, 71, Yorkshire**

> I'm just trying to take as much time as possible away from [my parents]. If I can like sit in my room or go for a walk or a run. I think just take that time, take a breather.
>
> **Veronica, 30, Nottinghamshire**

From parent to teacher

The parents with school-aged children in the house also noted a disruption to their day-to-day routines that challenged their role as a parent. Lockdown led to parents extending their roles and undertaking new, unfamiliar tasks with their children. They noted a shift in their dynamic with their children as they switched between teacher and parent, rule-enforcer and care-giver throughout the day. This was exacerbated by the unfamiliar stresses surrounding lockdown, where it was difficult to gauge if they were managing the situation 'correctly' and successfully balancing their work and family lives.

Bea and her husband struggled to balance their workloads around caring for their two-year-old daughter, who was usually at day-care. Carol and her partner created a rigorous routine within their home to ensure that their children – aged 10 and 13 – were not missing out on their education. They assumed the role of teachers by creating and adhering to structured work schedules for their children:

> I'm working one morning, my husband is working the afternoon and then we switch the next day where he'll work in the morning and I work the afternoon. So one of us is always up in the 'school room' […] and I'm in one of our mezzanines which is our office. […] We're quite highly organised so for instance, we set up a massive timetable for everyone to work from.
>
> **Carol, 41, Buckinghamshire**

Carol and her husband ran their own business, providing flexibility in how they taught their children. This flexibility was not possible for all participants, as Aaron – working from home for a larger business – reported that his teenage sons (aged 13 and 16) found the adaptation from school to home-life challenging. He tried to ensure they were productive with their days, again balancing this around his own workload, however, unlike Carol, he could not ensure they were constantly intellectually stimulated:

> They're not that hard to look after, but you worry about them spending too much time in front of screens and stuff like that, because if you're working it's difficult to stimulate them in a proper way.
>
> **Aaron, 45, Surrey**

Aaron's concerns as a parent regarding screen time, potentially shaped by the prevalent narrative that too much screen time can be harmful to children (as critiqued by Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2016), conflicted with his role as a 'teacher', where he felt obligated to ensure that they completed their schoolwork.

Relationship surveillance and subterfuge

During the research period there were government rules in place regarding appropriate behaviour during the lockdown. These rules could cause relationship turmoil, especially when individuals within the same household held differing views on how the lockdown rules should be interpreted and followed. Participants' desire to ensure the safety of loved ones versus their want to continue F2F relationships with others outside their household could lead to disagreements over the 'right' course of action and elevated tensions as they tried to decipher and act on new social rules, both in and outside the household.

For instance, Aaron (45, Surrey) noted a disagreement he had with his wife following a visit to see friends, saying: "I walked around to my friend's house to talk to him across the street, but I was told off for doing that, so I haven't done it since". Aaron's wife's concern derived from her discomfort with potentially breaking the rules, a point that caused Aaron to reconsider this decision and shaped his future actions.

Furthermore, parents of adult children noted that the two generations responded differently to the new social rules. These parents reported feeling scrutinised by their children, who adopted authoritative roles. Kieran especially was bewildered by this new surveillance:

> The three children are quite anxious that we remain as locked down, as isolated, as home-bound as possible. […] I don't think without the worry and anxiety from the children [my wife and I] would be as disciplined as we are being at the moment. […] I mean they are also probing, you know: are we behaving ourselves? The phrase that struck in the beginning is […] "You're not being serious about this enough".
>
> **Kieran, 72, Yorkshire**

This reversal of who had authority in their relationship could lead to tension as parents felt frustrated by their children telling them what to do. The adult children in the sample also found the surveillance of their parents during this time stressful. Amelia, for instance, worried for her parents' safety and reported tension within her family due to differing views on how they should navigate lockdown:

> There's a big kind of weight on my shoulders. […] My brothers are very kind of controlling and very protective of my mum and dad and they come immediately down on me, kind of like "you've got to be really careful when you go out because you know if you catch anything, mum and dad are really high risk you'll be endangering them" and stuff like that.
>
> **Amelia, 29, Yorkshire**

The possibility of introducing a virus into the household exacerbated the stress brought on by lockdown and created further tension between parents and children, as children worried about the wellbeing of their older parents.

Despite the high stakes, some parents reported that this monitoring led to subterfuge, as they plotted to perform activities or see friends without their children knowing:

> People are beginning to rebel and I think maybe that's what's happened to me, that I'm thinking: "do I need to be quite so cautious? Do I need to stay behind closed doors?" I mean, I'm driving to my allotment [to see people].
>
> **Samantha, 71, Yorkshire**

> The kids maintain a degree of policing […]: sometimes it's got to the situation where [my wife] and I will say to each other, "don't tell the children [what we're doing today], they'll get upset about it".
>
> **Kieran, 72, Yorkshire**

Gordon also found it difficult to strictly adhere to the rules if it meant his elderly mother was on her own, stretching the rules to prevent her from feeling isolated:

> I've got my elderly mum. I know I shouldn't see her, but if *I* don't see her I don't know who else would. So I'm very careful. I do make sure my hands are really washed and she stays her distance. The real concern is just looking after your family, isn't it?
>
> **Gordon, 58, Devon**

Through cognitive dissonance Gordon reasoned that although he knew he should not be visiting anyone, his mother would be isolated without him, providing a reasonable justification to visit her.

Expanding networks

Despite the growing frictions in some households, numerous participants reported positive changes in their relationships during lockdown. Many felt closer to those they lived with as they gained a rare opportunity to spend time together, especially if, like Ken, they were furloughed from work:

> [My partner and I] can really take this time to relax and appreciate each other's company. In normal day-to-day life it would be that we've got work, we've got to do this, we've got to do that, you know. Whereas now we don't have any of that. […] We can actually just take time to have conversations together, bake together, we've been doing yoga […] it's just given us that time to really sit back and chill out.
>
> **Ken, 30, Lancashire**

This unexpected opportunity to have extended quality time with his partner gave Ken the opportunity to feel closer to him. Furthermore, four participants found themselves expanding their personal networks by developing new relationships with their neighbours:

> We've got quite friendly with our neighbours and I think had we not been locked down, that wouldn't have happened […] when the weather's been really good, we've been out there for like drinks or a barbecue.
>
> **Rebecca, 30, Plymouth**

The Clap for Carers social movement, where people across the UK applauded NHS workers every Thursday evening (Wood & Skeggs, 2020), helped shape these newfound relationships with neighbours, as participants saw people they did not normally encounter and developed a rapport. This became a social highpoint of the week for several participants, as they looked forward to engaging with this growing “sense of community” (Rebecca, 30, Plymouth).

> It was lovely. All these people, some of them I've never seen before. You know we're all out. It was really nice. Everyone stands in their front gardens or some people are in their windows.
>
> **Ruby, 62, Surrey**

Many attributed this new sense of closeness – with both existing and new relationships – to the enforced lockdown and hoped that it would continue once they returned to normality.

Despite this positive change, some participants still reported missing their estranged relationships, growing increasingly lonely. Even Dianne, who lived geographically very close to her parents, felt alienated due to the new rules enforcing separation from other households:

> I was quite positive, I was quite motivated […but] the last two weeks it's sort of gone more negative in like the motivation and I've had the stress and the anxiety. […] I think not seeing family members and stuff: they are like my support network, so I think that's what hit me.
>
> **Dianne, 32, Stockton-on-Tees**

Thus, this enforced separation was not an issue reserved for those who were geographically estranged from loved ones (such as those with family overseas) but felt across the sample by all of those who were no longer able to maintain their relationships in familiar ways, no matter how physically close they were.

Re-establishing the role of CMC

The physical estrangement experienced during this time led to all participants becoming increasingly dependent on computer-mediated communication, as it became an essential part of relationship maintenance. All participants reported using CMC to some extent prior to lockdown, but also noted that they adopted new platforms and forms of CMC during lockdown to engage with multiple networks:

> I feel like I'm chatting to my family more than I ever have […] we're doing it in different ways to what we normally would as well. […] I've been using *WhatsApp* video [with] my mum […] I've been using *Zoom*, I've got like a regular call with some of my friends that live all across the UK. […] And then I've been using *Facebook Messenger* with another group of friends.
>
> **Kim, 30, Nottinghamshire**

These participants either extended their use of pre-existing applications or adopted and learned how to use new services in efforts to match the intimacy of face-to-face communication. This was typically prompted by loved ones as they encouraged each other to find new ways to engage. As such, relationships motivated an increase in access to and adoption of different forms of CMC, promoting opportunities to build media literacy and widen media engagement.

All participants noted an increased use of instant messaging service *WhatsApp*. It was appreciated for its multimedia forms of communication, private and group conversations and user-friendly interface (also noted by Miller 2016; Chambers 2017). The group feature especially was considered a welcome novelty for those who wanted to connect with multiple family generations at once:

> I started setting daily challenges on [our family group chat]. I started each day saying: "name three favourite Disney films" and then the next day, "your three favourite comedies" and then "your three favourite songs from musicals". […] And the lovely thing about that is seeing everybody chip in with all their things.
>
> **Dana, 57, Devon**

Video-calling – especially via the platform *Zoom*, which was almost unanimously adopted across the sample because of lockdown – quickly became a key means for socialising. Again, the use of video calling generated a sense of community, especially for participants who regularly socialised via video:

> Oh it is lovely [speaking to my family on *Zoom*]. It's lovely, very nice. […] You're so used to seeing it on the telly now with all the different screens, it seems quite natural.
>
> **Dana, 57, Devon**

Dana's apparent familiarity with the "natural" video-call was motivated by her sons encouraging regular virtual 'meet-ups' with the family, meaning they quickly became part of her routine.

Replicating offline processes with online activities

While participants discussed missing *people*, it was evident that many also missed the *processes* that they associated with relationships. For instance, Paula missed the social opportunities that followed baby classes with her one-year-old son:

> Before I was like going to baby groups and meeting up with other mums, going for coffees and things. I haven't really got that social circle sort of thing anymore.
>
> **Paula, 31, Sussex**

Paula had only recently established this social group as a new mum, and was worried that through the loss of the activity she had also lost an entire friendship group. Thus, lockdown threatened new "weak tie" relationships, before they had the opportunity to develop into stronger ties that could endure such disruption (Chambers, 2013).

Ruby also missed the routines and rituals that came with socialising face to face, feeling nostalgic for the day out that accompanied visiting her 94-year-old dad:

> That's actually the thing I miss the most is going to see my dad, not even just seeing him, but the actual - I've been doing it for years: driving up the M25. I enjoy the day

> out to dinner and my little routine of taking him to Tesco.
>
> **Ruby, 62, Surrey**

While relationships were the anchor and reason for these processes, the wider activities associated with these meetings also added to the overall positive experiences, making participants nostalgic for the actions and places that led to such interactions. Consequently, participants identified the activities that typically shaped socialising in offline settings and attempted to replicate them in online spheres. For instance, Amelia and her boyfriend used *WhatsApp* calls to watch television “together". She noted that this derived from a desire for intimacy, not just for communication:

> Quite a lot of like meaningful interaction and relationship is also through not talking and just like being with each other, and I think because you can't do that, it's nice to be able to have a video chat but not be centred on kind of like continuously talking about things, especially when there's not that much to talk about in terms of being stuck in the house, and of course you don't want to talk about bad stuff.
>
> **Amelia, 29, Yorkshire**

For Amelia, the recreation of the act of watching TV with her boyfriend provided a sense of normality, especially as light-hearted conversation could be difficult during the anxious time of lockdown.

Others also tried to replicate social occasions online by instigating family quizzes, game nights or drinks with friends online. Paula (31, Sussex) discussed her and her sister setting up a game of *Pictionary* the first time they video-called their parents in lockdown, and Carol suggested reinstating ’girls nights’ with her friends:

> I kind of said “do you fancy a girls night, but virtually, via *WebEx*?” and it worked really nicely. […] We all had glasses of gin as we would have done if we were in person […] so we’re replicating a girls’ night.
>
> **Carol, 41, Buckinghamshire**

Finally, three participants attempted to reproduce activities often deemed an integral part of a normal weekly routine. For instance, Amelia used the social network *House Party* to conduct regular workouts:

> We created this morning workout in which all the morning people that attended 7am *CrossFit* workouts would still workout together, but we do it on *House Party*, some working out in their gardens, some in their living rooms.
>
> **Amelia, 29, Yorkshire**

Carol reported that some of her children's extracurricular classes were transferred online. Like Amelia, this created a sense of normality and provided a routine:

> There's a virtual swim squad, so every morning we're still up early to do swim specific yoga, believe or not, at 8 o'clock every morning. So, we do that all as a family […] then everybody gets changed, gets breakfast, scrabbles around to start at 9 where we can at least start the working day and the school day.
>
> **Carol, 41, Buckinghamshire**

Thus, the replication of familiar interactions became a prime coping mechanism for some participants, providing a degree of consistency and ritual in uncertain times.

Online social discomfort

While these attempts to replicate offline activities in online spaces were successful for some, other – noticeably all the male – participants discussed feeling uncomfortable with these efforts. Although they valued the opportunity to socialise, online communication was often considered too detached from familiar face-to-face contact. Aaron, for instance, rejected his workmates' attempts to set up a video-call meet-up:

> I didn't think it would be very good, a bit more awkward. […] The inherent thing about having a conversation with those four is the concept of being in a pub with a beer in your hand sort of thing. It's not the same. […] Just bit contrived, really.
>
> **Aaron, 45, Surrey**

His worry that the online activity would be awkward connected to his scepticism that they could not recreate pre-existing relationship rituals. Aaron associated his relationship with his workmates with visiting the local pub together and having a drink. Without these, he feared their interactions online would be forced, unnatural.

Some felt that the subtleties of F2F conversation – where one could read other people's moods, create a rapport, and confide in each other – were unattainable online. For instance, Kieran felt apprehensive about "meeting" his friends online as they – like Aaron – were more familiar with a pub setting:

> When it's a kind of banter and people interrupting as they do in the pub, and over-shouting each other and getting excited about arguments and stuff like that. […It's] very different interaction and it's a learned form of interaction […] I would imagine that if you compare interaction socially amongst that group of people in a pub as

> opposed to online, it will be very, very different.
>
> **Kieran, 72, Yorkshire**

A lack of clear social norms online made these unfamiliar interactions feel stressful, occasionally inhibiting participants as they struggled to participate in online group settings. In fact, many noted that video-calling especially could feel awkward, as the natural rhythm of conversation was disrupted by both infrastructural issues (such as poor internet quality) and social uncertainty (such as unclear etiquette):

> It's difficult sometimes to read people. If you're stood with someone then you can get a very clear read on if we're happy, if they're sad, listening to you, whether they agree with you, disagree. […but on video calls] you can't get the read on just normal social norms.
>
> **Jasper, 39, Nottinghamshire**

> I don't really like *House Party*. It depends on everyone's internet connections, and people talk over each other. […] So I normally just sit there and listen […] I'm trying to hear four people at the same time, it can be a bit tricky.
>
> **Dianne, 32, Stockton-on-Tees**

Finally, participants reported feeling increased social anxiety during this time. This was especially the case with those who were regularly engaging with social media platforms such as *Facebook* and *Instagram,* as they were able to observe their friends interacting with one another. This occasionally led to exclusion, where they discovered they were not invited to certain 'events' that their friends had created online:

> You can feel further isolated during social isolation: [we] sort of tentatively arranged to do something for my friend's birthday [over video-call]. Later that evening I saw on their social media posts and stories that they were going through with what the tentative plan was, but only with one set of their friends. […] So that made me quite upset and made me feel sort of alone and like, I've managed to be ditched over social media. […] At the time it made me feel very alone and very sad and frustrated.
>
> **Ken, 30, Lancashire**

Dianne (32, Stockton-on-Tees) also noted this sense of social exclusion, reporting that it was so upsetting sometimes that "it's like taking a toll, isn't it, on like mental health […] So I started to just like ignore that group message", removing herself from her group of friends on social media. Despite participants wanting to use computer-mediated communication to resolve their sense of loneliness during lockdown, some attempts to socialise actually exacerbated the problem, causing them to further distance themselves. Therefore, while CMC was a vital tool for socialising, its use could also be the cause of isolation for some.

Conclusion

The use of computer-mediated communication became an increasingly normalised part of everyday life long before 2020. This led to an academic rejection of the narrative that online communication was supplanting relationships, as CMC use became a crucial means for connecting online and offline communication (Baym 2010; Rainie & Wellman 2012; Miller 2016; Parks 2017). However, lockdown forced participants to use computer-mediated communication to replace face-to-face interaction in a new and unexpected manner. The research presented in this article captures a moment in time where some relationships *were* separated between online and offline in a clearer manner than they had been in decades. For once, F2F interactions were not always supported by CMC, and online interactions *were* supplanting offline.

This disruption impacted the study participants in varied ways: some embraced this new way of communicating, moving a number of previous interactions online and hoping that some of the new experiences carved during this time would continue after lockdown (such as regular communication with distant friends). They also found new opportunities to appreciate their time together within their household, renegotiating their dynamics and prioritising quality time together. Lockdown made participants re-evaluate the importance of their relationships, with Ruby (62, Surrey) noting “that’s the only thing that really matters: your relationships with other people and that they are alright”.

However, the majority of the participants struggled with this enforced separation. It was evident that ‘relationships’ were more than just communication between two people: they are the catalyst for comforting and routine interactions, and the absence of these familiar routines could make interaction feel forced, unnatural. Despite its crucial role, this unexpected dependence on new forms of CMC left many feeling disconcerted or isolated. All participants reported that while online communication was important, it was not enough to fully replicate their relationships, with Ollie (29, Nottingham) concluding: “I do still miss face-to-face, and that's never going to be replaceable anytime in our lifetime with technology”.

CMC was a lifeline for relationships during this time, facilitating relationship maintenance and even strengthening some bonds. However, it was not a sufficient replacement to face-to-face interaction. The enforced need to ‘supplant’ offline relationships with online communication only highlighted how unnatural this felt to participants. This research illustrates the extent to which people still value the intimacy that comes with F2F interactions. It also illustrates how tenuous and carefully managed our day-to-day relationships are, where people have unspoken rules and boundaries surrounding interaction with others. This flow between online and offline, computer-mediated and face-to-face interactions has become the normalised expectation for modern-day relationships, and lockdown only highlighted how essential it is to maintain this balance.

Future research

This research captures a moment in time, examining how people in the UK, specifically England, maintained relationships during lockdown in Spring 2020. The snowball recruitment methodology meant that I was not able to access or consider a demographically representative sample. Future research should examine the repercussions this era had for those from a range of backgrounds, including different socio-economic groups and ethnicities. This paper also notes the media literacy implications of people adopting new platforms and technology during lockdown to maintain estranged relationships. It would be beneficial to explore this topic in more detail with those who struggled to access the internet during this time, considering the difficulties they may have encountered and the impact this may have had on their relationships. Finally, there is a need for further research that examines the longer lasting impact this time period may have had on CMC use in relationship management, especially as lockdown continues in varying grades in the UK, and beyond.

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Biography

Dr Laurie Dempsey has a PhD from the University of Nottingham, where she partook in a Collaborative Doctoral Award with the UK communications regulator Ofcom. The project involved longitudinally researching the proliferation of Computer-mediated communication and how its use has shaped everyday life and relationships in the period 2005-2018. She is now working as a qualitative specialist, continuing to research the everyday use of digital media in both academic and commercial settings.

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