

Staying Connected: Life Online During the Covid-19 Pandemic

by

Dana M.S Kelly

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic brought about lockdowns and public health guidelines and left Canadians to grapple with the changes it inflicted on their daily lives. With the onset of the pandemic in March 2020 a great deal of Canadians lives switched to being online. This study seeks to understand the impact that working and learning virtually, as well as interacting with friends and family at a distance through screens, has had on people's daily life. It addresses the question: *How are people in Canada navigating and experiencing the switch to 'online living' during the Covid-19 pandemic?* Qualitative semi-structure interviews were conducted with participants living in Nova Scotia and Ontario and aimed to illuminate their experiences with online life resultant of the pandemic. This paper illustrates that, while the ways in which participants have been navigating theses changes in their lives, be it social, professional, or personal, varied greatly, one thing that is clear is that they are adapting. It will be shown that participants are finding new and creative ways to remain connected to family and friends, mapping out new boundaries in their public and private lives, and reconstructing how they manage impressions and perceptions of self on online platforms.

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Introduction

Around the globe, people have been grappling with the ramifications of the Covid-19 pandemic and the disruption it has caused on daily lives and routines. With the onset of the pandemic, and subsequent lockdowns in Canada beginning in March 2020, a great deal of our lives suddenly switched to being online. We began working from home, attending lectures online, and socializing through a screen outside of our immediate 'bubble'. While social media and online communication platforms have become a staple of the 21st century, the effects of the pandemic (e.g., public health guidelines and social distancing measures) have made these platforms preeminent in our day-to-day lives. The Covid-19 pandemic has fractured what constituted normalcy in our lives and has left Canadians struggling to adapt. Over a year into the pandemic, social distancing and lockdown measures are still in effect in most provinces and many people continue to work and study online. The switch to online life increasingly appears to be permanent. This fracture from what used to be normal and the pandemic that incited it will have lasting impacts on Canadian's daily lives and I therefore feel it is important to examine further.

This study seeks to understand the impact that working and learning virtually as well as interacting with friends and family through screens has had on people's day to day lives. To do so, I address the question: *How are people in Canada navigating and experiencing the switch to 'online living' during the Covid-19 pandemic?*

Research on social networking sites (SNS) and other online communication platforms prior to the pandemic raises three key themes: 1) social media and online

communication platforms as sources of connectivity and sociability, 2) social medias effect on blurring conceptions of public and private, and 3) their use in managing impressions and perceptions of self. These three key themes are utilized in my research to frame interview questions as well as to organize subsequent data analysis.

Literature Review – Life Online

Social media, or social networking sites (SNS), are “websites and applications that enable users to create and share content with networks (i.e., friends, followers, etc.) they construct for themselves” (Pittman and Reich, 2016, p155). To understand the shift in how people are using social media and online communication platforms (e.g., Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, etc.) during the Covid-19 pandemic, we must first understand how society used and engaged with these platforms prior to the onset of the pandemic.

Connectivity and Sociability

Social media and other online communication platforms play an increasingly important role in how we feel connected to others. For example, Jose Van Dijck’s (2010) article interrogates the role of SNS in this domain, exploring how the use of Flickr, a photo sharing website, fosters a “culture of connectivity” (p401) among users. The article defines the culture of connectivity as “a culture where perspectives, expressions, experiences and productions are increasingly mediated by social media sites” (Dijck, 2010, p402). Dijck (2010) looks at how our memories, experiences and perspectives are increasingly influenced by digital networks. They

found that this platform creates a communal space, on which users can connect over shared experiences and ideas through pictures. This article is useful in my research for analyzing which platforms are preferred for fostering certain forms of connectivity.

When examining social media and other online communication platforms and their relation to a sense of connectivity, current literature suggests that the nature or design of the platform plays a significant role in the level of connection that the user feels. Both Pittman and Reich (2016) and Sheldon and Bryant (2015) argue that photo sharing platforms, such as Instagram and Snapchat, foster more intimate connections among users than a more text-based platform like Twitter would.

Pittman and Reich (2016) explore how social media platforms are used to reduce loneliness and feel more connected to others. They examine how different social media platforms have differing effects on the loneliness of the user, and compare image-based platforms, such as Instagram and Snapchat, to text-based platforms, like Twitter, and to what they call “mixed platform[s]”, like Facebook (Pittman and Reich, 2016, p158). Overall, their findings suggest that people do use social media to make up for a lack of social interaction, but that each type of platform fulfills a specific need (Pittman and Reich, 2016, p156). For instance, Pittman and Reich (2016) argue that users find more intimacy on platforms such as Snapchat, where a user gets more casual face-to-face interactions through pictures or videos. They hypothesize that these interactions are more like in-person face-to-face interactions because they are not as curated, or artificial, as those from other

platforms. Pittman and Reich's (2016) analysis finds that loneliness is felt the most by people not using image based social media platforms and that likewise, happiness is felt the least among these people (p159). This study will be important to keep in mind in my own research when thinking about the attempts people have been making during Covid-19 to foster as close to a face-to-face interaction as they can, while not being able to see friends and family up close in person.

Like Pittman and Reich (2016), Sheldon and Bryant (2015) examine people's motives for using Instagram. Using "life position indicators" (Sheldon and Bryant, 2015, p89) such as social activity, life satisfaction, and the trait of narcissism, Sheldon and Bryant (2019) assess whether individual differences impact a person's motivation to use social media platforms. They find that the strongest motive for Instagram usage was to surveil others or acquire knowledge about them (Sheldon and Bryant, 2015, p93). This finding suggests that most people are using the platform to keep up with and stay connected to family, friends, and even strangers. Echoing Pittman and Reich's (2016) study, Sheldon and Bryant's (2019) findings illustrate how the design of a platform impacts a user's motives for using it as well as providing varying ways to connect to others; in the case of Instagram, the motive is to connect (and surveil) by sharing personal photos.

Pittman and Reich (2016) crucially acknowledge the potential harms and deficits that may come from frequent usage of image-based social media platforms. A potential harm that is particularly relevant in the context of my own research is the question "how much is too much time" (Pittman and Reich, 2016, p164) spent on social media platforms? This question is important to keep in mind when

thinking about how people are navigating the switch to online living and learning during Covid-19. Does too much time on our screens actually negatively impact our interactions and connections with other people?

Blurring Public and Private

A debate within social media and online communication literature is the delineation of public and private spheres within SNS. Here, Erving Goffman (1959) provides a starting place for the examination of this question. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical analysis, in which he relates social interactions to a theatre performance, makes the argument that when we interact with others, we are unconsciously performing a version of ourselves to our audience to "give them the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance to our own plan" (Goffman, 1959, p4). Two concepts that Goffman (1959) describes in his work, which are of particular relevance to my study, are the front stage and the backstage. The front stage refers to where the performance is taking place, often a public space where we interact with others. In the front stage there is pressure to "present an idealized version of the self according to a specific role" (Hogan, 2010, p378). The backstage, however, is where we have no need to put on a performance. It creates a more private space, an example of which is our homes or our bedrooms, where guests do not often enter, or our break rooms at work. These spaces are, according to Goffman (1959), particularly important because they are where we can do the behind the scenes work necessary to keep up with our front stage performances (Hogan, 2010, p378).

In the context of social media and online communication platforms, the lines that constitute a front stage or backstage performance become blurred, informing the debate between private and public spaces across these platforms. Goffman's (1959) framework for understanding social interactions is particularly important when looking at the shift to living online during the Covid-19 pandemic, in that with the use of platforms such as Zoom or Skype, we are bringing our typical front stage environments (e.g., our classroom, our office, our work space) into what would otherwise be our backstage environments (e.g. our private homes).

Prior studies suggest that social media platforms and social networking sites are not strictly public or private. Burkell et al. (2014) suggest that online social networks create a whole new social space of their own, which they refer to as a "networked public". Burkell et al. (2014) find that friends lists are an important aspect of privacy control on Facebook but are seldom used to their full effect. By friending someone on Facebook, a user is allowing that someone to see the pictures, status updates, and other pieces of private information on their profile. The authors find that many people are not very selective with whom they have friended on Facebook, and that their profiles often include friends of friends or people that they have only met once. Based on this finding, the authors infer that Facebook acts more as a public space than a private one, or at the very least, as an open and uncontrolled space that blurs the private with the public. As far as Skype is concerned, Burkell et al. (2014) find that the platform is used for more intimate or private interactions, but they also find that when communicating "deeply personal information, such as a significant illness" (p979), people still prefer a phone call or a face-to-face

conversation. Altogether, these findings bolster the significance of my research as many, if not all, people attempted to maintain and continue intimate relationships through their computer screens during the Covid-19 pandemic, having lost access to any physical alternatives.

West et al. (2009) also explore the public vs. private debate in the context of Facebook, but with a novel focus on young people's attitudes towards friending their parents on Facebook and how doing so impacts their conception of public and private on the platform. The authors argue that there is no strict "public/private dichotomy" (West et al., 2009, p16) on Facebook. Instead, they argue, we need to look at the varying ways people navigate this digital space. West et al. (2009) find that respondents want to share less with their family members and more with their actual friends. While respondents are fine with publicizing the social and personal aspects of their lives with their loosely controlled list of Facebook friends, they object to sharing this information with their parents (West et al., 2009, p621), which "suggests a notion of public that excludes the [immediate] family" (p621).

Social media and online communication technologies are often seen to occupy a separate sphere from non-digital forms of communication and socialization. The ethnographic study conducted by Miller et al., (2016) however, presents the idea that social media should actually be viewed in much the same way as the offline aspects of our lives; in other words, our online lives can rarely be fully "separated out from [our] offline li[ves]" (Miller et al., 2016, p100). In the context of my research, Miller et al.'s, (2016) study stresses the need to contemplate whether the online world is distinguishable from the offline world, or if they are simply one

and the same. Has the gap between them, if there ever was one, become smaller during Covid-19?

Impressions and Perceptions of Self

The last theme that I would like to touch on is the use of social media and other online communication platforms as a form of impression management. Self-presentation strategies are widely defined by social theorists as “behaviours and tactics designed to construct particular impressions or identities” (Cheng, et al., 2019, p2). While I have discussed Goffman mainly in terms of public and private, it is worth noting that his dramaturgical perspective – specifically, his theory that during social interactions we are unconsciously trying to ‘perform’ an idealized version of ourselves to our audience (Goffman, 1959, p35) – also applies to impression management.

Piazzes et al. (2019) use ‘selfies’ as a way of exploring how women engage in impression management. Using a Goffmanian approach, Piazzes et al. (2019) suggest that ‘selfies’ rarely offer authentic representations of ourselves; instead, we put a great deal of effort into curating these pictures for a specific audience. Through social media, we can portray curated versions of ourselves that allow us to show as much or as little of ourselves to the world as we would like – we can also portray different versions of ourselves depending on the platform. This form of artifice is also brought up by Rui and Stefanone (2013). In their article, they discuss the challenges in managing what they refer to as “conflicting social spheres” (p1292). The varying audiences we encounter on social media platforms make it difficult for

us to be able to create a specific image for each one. This desire to curate discrete identities is also echoed by Burkell et al.'s (2014) study, which argues that "the Facebook 'self' is not the real self[;] instead Facebook is used to present and even craft a persona" (p980).

How we manage impressions and present ourselves online has become increasingly important during Covid-19 because so many more of our interactions are taking place online.

Methods

I aimed to recruit participants of a variety of ages, genders, occupations and living circumstances (e.g., rural/urban, single dwellings/family dwellings) to get a well-rounded sample; largely as a result of my recruitment method, however, my participants did not represent as diverse a group as I had initially planned. I relied on snowball sampling techniques to recruit my participants. This technique required first approaching those whom I knew could be potential participants and then asking them to refer people like them (Wilkinson, et al., 2019, p160).

Unsurprisingly, I conducted this approach on my social media accounts, where I briefly described the research project in a series of posts and called on friends, family, and peers to pass along my contact information to anyone interested in participating.

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants, all of whom live in Canada. Because the study was carried out during the pandemic, five of the interviews were conducted via Zoom while three were

conducted in person under Nova Scotia's public health guidelines. Five of my participants were living in Nova Scotia throughout the pandemic while three were living in Ontario. The majority of participants identified as female (6:2) and the majority were in their early to mid-twenties.

Semi-structured interviews are defined as "a type of qualitative research design that consists of a semi-directed conversation between the interviewer and the participant" (Wilkinson, 2019, p312). As the interviewer, it was my job to make sure that all relevant topics were covered during the interviews; however, their semi-structured nature made it so that my participants had more opportunities to "tell their stories and to describe their perceptions and their feelings" (Wilkinson, 2019, p53), which yielded rich, analyzable data.

The interviews consisted of a series of questions that were designed to help me gain an understanding of the participant's engagement with online platforms prior to Covid-19, and more importantly, to understand how participants were engaging with those same, or sometimes new online platforms since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Interview questions drew on the three key themes that were identified in the literature review: social media and online communication platforms as sources of connectivity and sociability, social media's effect on blurring conceptions of the public and private, and social media's use in managing impressions and presentations of self.

The data analyzed comprised of the audio recordings taken during the interviews and their subsequent transcriptions. When analyzing the data, I compared participants' responses to gauge what common themes or concepts

emerged and whether there was any variation between the participants' online experiences during the pandemic. The themes that were identified in the literature review were used as a framework for my analysis, although attention was paid to new or expanding themes.

This study was of minimal risk to participants as the risk of discomfort or distress associated with the study was no greater than those incurred if discussed in everyday life. That said, my topic explicitly invoked the Covid-19 pandemic, the heightened emotions and anxieties of which were likely expressed during my interviews. Some of the questions posed were aimed at understanding how participants connected with others through online communication technology, which opened the window for more sensitive conversations about their personal relationships, especially those that took place during the pandemic. Keeping these revelations in mind, I tried to mitigate any discomfort that may have been felt by participants by informing and reminding them of their right to withdraw from the interview at any point, as well as their right to refrain from answering any questions that may have made them uncomfortable. Pseudonyms were used in this thesis to guarantee the participants' anonymity.

A written consent form was emailed to participants prior to setting up a Zoom or in-person interview to give them time to read over it and decide if they were willing to participate. The consent form addressed the potential risks discussed above and informed the participants of the aims of the study and what would be asked of them. Prior to commencing the interviews, I took a moment to go over the consent form again with every participant, to address any questions or

concerns that they had, and to gain additional oral consent to audio record their interviews.

Analysis

Finding Connection at a Distance

Social media and online communication platforms play an increasingly important role in how we connect and socialize in the 21st century. This study demonstrates that the Covid-19 pandemic has intensified the need to use social media and online communication platforms as sources of connectivity and sociability. While the time spent on these platforms has not changed for every participant, there is a general consensus among participants that they are using social media and other online communication platforms for increasingly targeted purposes, such as connecting with others in a time that has been exceedingly isolating.

To understand the shift in how participants were engaging with social media and online communication platforms as a way to foster a sense of connection and socialization, I explored how participants reported engaging with these platforms prior to Covid-19. Prior to the pandemic, several participants described their engagement with social media and other online communication platforms as a habit – the first thing they did when they woke up and the last thing they did before going to sleep – or as a time sink during moments of boredom. Most participants reported that, before the onset of the pandemic, they would spend a couple of hours per day on average engaging with social media and other online communication platforms.

Participants primarily engaged with these platforms as a way to “keep up with everyone” (Alex) and as a way to communicate with friends, family, and colleagues.

Covid-19 had varying effects on participants’ lives in terms of how much time was now being devoted to social media and online communication platform use. Some participants described only a slight increase in time spent online while others felt there was a significant increase. A commonality among participants, however, was that they were now engaging with social media and other online communication platforms in different and more targeted ways than they had been prior to the onset of the pandemic. While all participants described having used social media and other online communication platforms to communicate with friends and family prior to the pandemic, there was a sense that this function had since changed because of the pandemic. Participants were going out of their way to engage with social media platforms for the specific purpose of making or maintaining social connections. Multiple respondents stressed their increased use of video calls to communicate and stay connected to family and friends during the pandemic. While the option had always been there to use video chats, be it FaceTime, Skype, Zoom or a similar platform, many participants reported using them infrequently, and for limited purposes, prior to the pandemic. For instance, Megan discussed using Zoom to host virtual girls nights and drinks with friends. She acknowledged that while she could have engaged with these platforms for this purpose prior to the pandemic, “that was just not a thing before, we just didn’t do that”. Similarly, Jessica expressed that while, prior to the pandemic, she used online communication platforms to video chat with friends and family who lived far away,

she engaged with these platforms in a new way during the pandemic so that she could better socialize with others. As an example, she discussed using House Party, an extension of the app SnapChat, to video call with others and play games. Jessica commented, “we could always do this but the pandemic kind of made us decide to do it”. Both Megan and Jessica’s experiences illustrate the new and targeted ways participants have been engaging with social media and online communication platforms due to the lack of in-person interaction during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Twitch, a live streaming video service on which users can watch a whole host of live content such as musical performances and video game sessions, was also used by a couple of participants in a targeted manner to foster more meaningful connections with others. Both Bradyn and Emma reported using the platforms as a way to feel a sense of communal connection. Emma found that she engaged with Twitch more as a result of the pandemic because the real time content allowed her to feel connected to the streamers. She commented that “it definitely feels like you have someone there talking to you or like you’re with a friend or something, even if you are only just, say, in the chat” and that it allows you to get “that human interaction that we are kind of lacking right now”.

As a result of Covid-19, people in Canada and around the world have had to rely on social media and other online communication platforms to connect with friends, family, and co-workers in the absence of in-person, ‘real life’ interactions. I asked participants if they felt that they are able to foster the same sense of connection on an online platform as they would in real life. They were unanimous in their answer that, no, they did not feel as though the same level of connectivity

could be achieved on online platforms. In various ways, participants articulated that online interactions, through social media or other platforms, were “still lacking something that you get in a person-to-person interaction” (Elizabeth).

While participants reported not being able to foster the same sense of connection online, the type of platform they used determined the degree of connection they felt. Online communication platforms that allowed for a screen mediated, face-to-face interaction came close to fostering the same level of connection offered by in-person interactions. Jessica suggested that perhaps Zoom materialized more meaningful connections than other forms of social media and online communication platforms by saying “when we are in these Zoom meetings maybe you can [foster the same sense of connection] cause I can still see like your facial expressions”. This degree of similarity between screen-mediated online platforms and physical interactions is likely due in part to the presence of facial expressions, hand gestures, and other expressions of body language typically absent from text messages and social media posts

Zoom has unsurprisingly become central to how Canadians navigate and maintain social interactions with friends and family. While the option to use online communication platforms to video chat with family and friends has been available for many years now, the absence of in person interactions due to Covid-19 necessitated a switch in how people engaged with these platforms. Elizabeth discussed how Zoom has become an exceedingly important way that she can stay connected with friends. She feels the pandemic “has increased the want to do it

[Zoom/video chat] because I don't have as much contact, with, like live people as I did pre-pandemic".

Finding a Balance Between Public and Private

The concepts of public and private have been discussed at length and in many contexts within sociology. For my study, I was most interested in gauging what impact participants felt having to fulfill their professional and academic obligations online at home was having on their private lives. I then attempted to understand if that impact was due to the blurring of the private and the public domains, as a result of both occurring in the same intimate spaces.

Participants in my study reported having mixed feelings on whether working or studying virtually from home was having a negative impact on their private lives. A couple of participants stated that working or studying from home was putting a strain on their personal relationships. Bradyn articulated this personal intrusion by saying, "I think it really put my personal relationships to the test including the romantic relationship that I had at the time to the test". Covid-19, as he reflected, made it so there was no segregation between the various aspects of his life. As he aptly put it, "we are humans who like to compartmentalize, and categorize, and when things elide and collide, oouu, not good". Having to tackle his work, school, and personal obligations all in the same place generated a great amount of stress in Bradyn's personal life. One of the impacts that the blurring of public and private had on him was that his home was no longer a place of solace, serenity, and self-reflection.

With the onset of Covid-19, many people found themselves working remotely from home. Participants expressed that this trend often led them to devote more time to their work than before. Elizabeth spoke to this point by admitting that when working from home, she often found herself saying “well, I’ll just do this one more thing, or I’ll just look up this one more thing, or I’ll just add this to my notes on this one client”, only to work for far longer than she would have if she were in a traditional office setting. This point was similarly expressed by Jessica, who felt as though the stress-inducing demands of online schooling took away from the time she would otherwise spend with her partner and her dogs, which she felt negatively impacted her life.

Navigating public life and private life in the same space seemed to be the toughest challenge for the participants in my study. Many of them discussed the ways in which they had been attempting to create a separation between the two – their public and private lives – even if the physical space in which they occurred was the same. One of the ways that my participants attempted to create this separation was by having a designated workspace in their home. Having a designated workspace helped participants to compartmentalize their various obligations and enabled them to have a space for productivity and work, as well as a space that was for relaxation and personal time. Megan found that working and relaxing in the same space was “stressful, in that I was literally going to bed in the same room that I was just ‘leaving’ work” in. She went on to discuss how creating a workspace outside of her bedroom alleviated some of her stress and paved the way for a more concrete separation between her public, work life, and private, personal life.

One aspect of working and studying at home that seemed to intensify the intrusion into participants' personal and private lives was the prominence of Zoom meetings. Having to be involved in classes or meetings that required participants to have their cameras turned on exacerbated the sense of intrusion into their private lives. For instance, Emma discussed the impact of one of her university classes' requirements to have her camera turned on for the duration of the Zoom class:

It's kind of weird, it feels like Big Brother is always watching. Cause like in some of my classes we have TAs that just sit there to watch us throughout the lecture to make sure we keep our cameras on. So that's weird, that kind of feels intrusive.

In contrast to Emma, Sabrina did not find studying from home overly intrusive on her private life; however, Sabrina felt that this belief was likely due to the fact that her university classes allowed her to turn her camera off at her own discretion. Like Emma, Sabrina felt that she would find "it more obtrusive if our cameras always had to be on" because she would feel more self conscious about what was going on in the background or about what her peers would think about her private space.

The Online Self vs. The Real Life Self

Existing literature on the Internet and social media suggests that interactive online platforms, such as social media, allow users to curate an identity that only reveals as much or as little to their audience as they desire. To understand how people changed the way they managed their impressions online as a result of Covid-19, I asked my participants how they presented themselves online prior to the pandemic and afterwards.

There were mixed responses to this question. Only one of my participants outwardly expressed that they presented themselves differently online than in 'real life'. Bradyn discussed that how he presented himself online varied depending on the platform. The platforms where he felt that he was most actively 'presenting' a fabricated persona were Reddit and Discord. Here, he commented, he was not really himself: "I'm more my preferred sort of stylistic online self". As a result of not knowing the people he was talking to online in "real life", he felt he had the chance "to eke out or to create this new persona" that he "wanted to sort of exhibit".

While other participants did not outwardly express presenting a different persona online, it was evident to me that these participants were attempting to curate a specific image online and that they were well aware of their performance. For example, while she did not think that she presented herself any differently online, Jessica discussed how she actively thought about how her online interactions would be viewed by others. Similarly, Alex felt as though she did not actively try to curate her posts or present herself in any specific way, but commented that she did not frequently post in the winter months because no one would be interested in that kind of content – "I go to work and I come home so to me I'm like, hmm no one wants to hear that". This admission can be seen as a subconscious presentation of self online; the participant did not feel as though she was presenting herself any differently than she would in an in-person interaction, yet she clearly attempted to portray herself online according to the presumed preferences of others. Megan echoed this behaviour, admitting that on her Instagram account she posts "what I

think other people would want to see”, illustrating curating of the presentation of self.

Upon examining how participants’ presentations of self on online platforms changed due to the pandemic, one prominent theme emerged, which I will refer to here as increased monitoring. Participants stressed, in light of the pandemic, the necessity to exercise caution over how they presented themselves on social media and other online communication platforms. Some participants expressed noticing increased monitoring by their friends and family, prompting them to adopt more cautious posting behaviours for fear of how their posts could be perceived.

Sabrina felt more cautious about what she posted on social media during the pandemic after a Snapchat story she posted elicited negative responses from people in her social network. In the snapchat story, she appeared alongside the two friends she had chosen to share her ‘bubble’ with. Because it was not immediately clear to her wider network who these friends were, the story received negative comments as to how “irresponsible” the three of them were being. Sabrina was sure that she had been respecting the public health guidelines at the time, and felt that this unexpected backlash changed the way that she later interacted with social media. She said, “you know, we just become more hesitant to post for things that we were doing unless they were outside, or six feet away”. This situation serves as but one example of how online performances are being continuously adjusted, and how increased monitoring due to the pandemic has served as a prominent catalyst.

Alex provided yet another example of how increased monitoring changed her online posting behaviours. Again, the increased monitoring was in regards to public

health measures and safety. Alex said, "I feel like I am doing what's best for like my safety and the safety of people around me, but I find it doesn't matter what you post. Someone is always going to be like 'oh you shouldn't do that'". This increased monitoring was not something that Alex wanted to feel pressured by and as a result she adopted a reserved stance in the way that she engaged with online platforms.

An increased sense of monitoring was also felt on Zoom. The need to present an altered persona on Zoom was more crucial in calls that were academic or professional in nature. Both Alex and Elizabeth discussed using the platform for professional reasons during the pandemic, and expressed the need to be aware of how they were presenting themselves as a result. In contrast to Zoom calls with friends or family, during which Elizabeth enjoyed a more casual setup, sitting "on [her] chaise or [her] couch", professional Zoom calls with clients were always conducted at her desk to present herself in a professional manner. Alex expressed the same sentiment about a job orientation of hers. Since the Zoom call was for work and with people that she largely did not know, Alex was more aware of how she was presenting herself on the call. Alex said, "I was actually sitting at the table and the wine rack was behind us and I felt like 'oh I can't sit here, it's like nine in the morning, I can't sit here', like you can't see the wine at 9am". Alex expressed being self-conscious in front of a wine rack at nine in the morning on a business call because it might have given off the wrong impression to the others on the screen.

Cole, who used the platform primarily for family calls, did not express feeling overly monitored or self-conscious about how he was presenting himself. He said, "I might have moved a pizza box one time cause I think my mum might have

mentioned it” but overall, he did not feel the need to curate his persona. Cole attributed his indifference largely to the fact that it “was just family” on the other side of the screen and felt that if the call were a professional one, he would have made more attempts to “make sure there wasn’t the pizza boxes, the McDonald’s bag, the take out food or whatever” in the background.

Discussion

Due to public health guidelines and social distancing, Canadians have been forced to find new ways to remain connected through screens. The findings illustrated above suggest that the type of platform used played a key role in how my participants were able to foster as close to an in-person connection as possible. Platforms that allow for screen mediated, face-to-face interactions, such as Zoom, come closest to approximating this type of connection. This evidence reinforces what the study conducted by Pittman and Reich (2016) found. They argued that users would tap into greater intimacy on platforms such as Snapchat, where users have access to casual face-to-face interactions through pictures and videos (Pittman and Reich, 2016). Pittman and Reich’s (2016) hypothesis that these interactions would best mimic in-person interactions is supported by the findings of my study.

The study by Burkell et al., (2014) found that Skype was used primarily for intimate or private interactions. This finding is illustrative of my participants’ gravitation towards video calling platforms during the Covid-19 pandemic. While my study focused on Zoom instead of Skype, my study came to a similar conclusion. Participants vastly preferred video calling platforms like Zoom over text based

alternatives when trying to connect on a personal or intimate level with friends and family, given that the video calling offered visual interaction and communication, such as facial cues and other expressions of body language.

Navigating the fusion between public and private within the same space (e.g. the home or the bedroom) seemed to be the biggest challenge for the participants in my study. Participants responded to the blurring of public and private by attempting to create designated workspaces and leisure spaces within their homes. Erving Goffman's work can be invoked here to illustrate why participants felt a sense of intrusion and struggled to adjust. Goffman's (1959) concepts of front and back stage are especially pertinent. The front stage, which Goffman (1959) uses to refer to where the 'performance' is taking place, is a public space such as work or school. On the front stage, there is pressure to present "an idealized version of the self according to the specific role" (Hogan, 2010, p378), be that student or employee. In the backstage, a private space, we are able to let our guard down and regroup for future 'performances'. Covid-19, and the shift to working and studying from home, has effectively made it so there is no separation between the two stages. As discussed above, participants expressed feeling the need to perform for their work colleagues and classmates all day on Zoom calls, and felt they were working a great deal more than they otherwise would have in a typical work or classroom setting. Participants then struggled to try and relax and recover from the day, a key element to the separation between work life and home life. This inability to switch on and off effectively blurred the lines of the public and private spheres, resulting in an increased amount of stress in my participants' lives.

Goffman's (1959) work provides a useful framework for understanding how people have been managing their impressions and perceptions of self on online platforms throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Goffman (1959) theorizes that during social interactions, we are subconsciously performing an idealized version of ourselves. While most of my participants might not have expressed outwardly that they were presenting a different or idealized version of themselves on social media and other online communication platforms, they did appear to make subconscious attempts at curating the content they published on these platforms. Participants expressed feeling a greater impetus during the pandemic to indicate that they were following all public health guidelines to a tee and being mindful of the health and wellbeing of the people around them.

Prior studies have found that one of the strongest motivators for using social media platforms was "surveillance/knowledge about others" (Sheldon and Bryant, 2015, p93). Sheldon and Bryant's (2015) work found that the central motivation for using Instagram was to keep up with friends, family, and others. While this finding remained true in the present study, as participants expressed using online platforms to connect during a time of isolation, my research extends the idea of surveillance further. Covid-19 created a switch, in that rather than being motivated to use social media platforms for "surveillance/knowledge about others" (Sheldon and Bryant, 2015, p93), participants now felt as if they were the victims of surveillance and monitoring. Some participants expressed feeling an increased sense of monitoring and surveillance by others on these platforms, particularly about how they were responding to the pandemic and any relevant public health guidelines. Effectively,

Covid-19 has instigated an inversion in participants' engagement with online platforms, incentivizing a reserved and cautious approach to what they are posting and how they are presenting themselves online.

A heightened sense of monitoring brought on by the pandemic added to the existing need to manage impressions and perceptions of self on social media and other online communication platforms. This trend is contained by the participants' experiences with the online communication platform Zoom. It can be argued that the way one presents themselves on a Zoom call depends on the nature of the call. Calls that are professional in nature generate the impetus to, as Goffman (1959) would say, 'perform' for the audience.

The nature of the Zoom call played a role in the level of impression management that participants felt they needed to exercise. Calls with family allowed participants to let their guard down and refrain from performance. However, professional calls warranted the need for curated backgrounds and best behaviours. This finding illustrates an evolution to the findings of West et al., (2009) study. They argued that respondents were more open and willing to share with friends and acquaintances on Facebook than they were with family. My study illustrates a switch brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. It was illustrated that participants were now more willing to share things with family, particularly in regards to the background of Zoom where participants expressed feeling relaxed and not needing to 'perform' As has been illustrated in the analysis section of this paper, it can be argued that participants felt more open and less of a need to present or curate the

backgrounds of Zoom calls involving family than they did on business or school related Zoom calls.

The analysis bore witness to the blurring of the lines between public and private. Within the same physical space, people were forced to act in a professional manner when conducting a business Zoom call, but in a more personal or private manner when interacting with friends and family.

The blurring of the public and private spheres due to the Covid-19 pandemic adds credence to the ethnographic studies conducted by Miller et al. (2016). Miller et al., (2016) argued that our online lives can rarely be fully separated from our offline lives. Because the Covid-19 pandemic has forced the fusion of our private and public lives online, the result is in an even greater sense that the two spheres are inseparable.

Conclusions

To situate my findings in this project, I return to my research question: *How are people in Canada navigating and experiencing the switch to 'online living' during the Covid-19 pandemic?* The Covid-19 pandemic has had drastic impacts on Canadians' daily lives and routines. Canadians' social, professional, personal, and academic lives have been uprooted as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent public health guidelines and restrictions. As previous studies and literature suggest, social media and other online communication platforms play a large role in the lives of many. The Covid-19 pandemic, however, has made it so

these platforms, old and new, have taken on an increasingly prominent role in the daily lives and routines of Canadians.

This study depicts the tension that Canadians have been feeling in the wake of their switch to online life during the pandemic. Canadians have been forced to turn to social media and online platforms in new and targeted ways to find a sense of connection with colleagues, friends, and family in a time of imposed isolation. Through the exploration of our online lives in both public and private domains, we can see that vital social media usage comes at a cost. While, as mentioned above, social media and other online communication platforms have assumed an integral role in our pursuit of new connections, they have also breached into many of our private lives. Working and studying within same the four corners of our homes has blurred the lines between what constitutes the private and the public, with many struggling to find a balance between the two. Zoom calls have invited the public into the bedroom and intensified the sensation of being monitored by social media and other online communication platforms. To fit within the new surveillance paradigm online, we have doubled down on our efforts to manage our impressions and palliate our personas.

Due to the small sample size, narrow age range of participants, as well as narrow geographic reach of this study, the conclusions that can be drawn from it are limited in nature. However, I feel that this study illuminates challenges currently faced by all Canadians, meriting greater attention from the wider discipline of sociology. Further exploration into this topic could be done by taking on a larger sample population to better gauge Canadian's overall experience with the pandemic.

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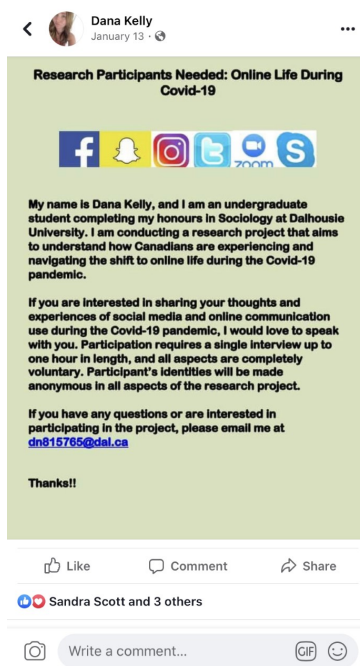
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Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Material

Posts were made to my personal Instagram story as well as my Facebook profile.



Appendix B: Research Instruments – Interview Guide

Research Question:

How are people living in Canada are navigating and experiencing the switch to 'online living' during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Keep in mind the themes from my literature review when conducting the interview.

Social media and online communication platforms as sources of connectivity and sociability

Social medias' effect on blurring conceptions of public and private

Their use in managing impressions and perceptions of self

Thank participant for coming and being part of study

*** Go over consent form and ask if the participant has any questions before beginning

*** For participants whom I have a prior relationship – make it clear to them that their participation in my study will in no way impact the prior relationship that they may have with me

To start off I am going to ask some questions about your use of social media and online communication platforms prior to the pandemic.

- 1) Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, how would you describe your activity on social media and other online communication platforms?
 - What types of platforms did you engage with most? For what purposes?
 - Instagram
 - Facebook
 - Twitter
 - Snapchat
- 2) Prior to Covid how much time would you say you spent on social media or other online communication platforms
- 3) How would you describe your relation to the people who you engage with on online platforms?
 - Are they primarily friends, family, co-workers, or acquaintances?
 - Are they primarily people that you met via an online platform or people that you met in an in-person interaction?

- Do you use different platforms depending on the nature of the relationship? (i.e., Is Facebook used for interacting with family? Is Snapchat used for close friends?)
- 4) Still thinking about pre-Covid-19 times, can you describe to me what motivated your use of these platforms?
- Go through the variety of platforms with the participant (to see if they have different motivations depending on the platform)
 - Do you find that certain platforms function better than others?
 - What do you like/dislike about each platform (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat)

Now moving into Pandemic Times

- 5) In March 2020 when the pandemic began really gaining momentum and we were largely confined to our immediate household, what aspects of your life switched to being online? Were you now working from home, doing school virtually, etc.?
- Can you describe how this impacted your life
 - Were you using different online platforms than you had previously? And if so what?
 - Take me through a typical weekday. What online platforms do you use as the day goes on?
- 6) How would you describe the way you present yourself on a social media or online communication platform?
- Do you feel that you present yourself differently online than you would in face-to-face interactions? Can you give me any examples of this?
- 7) Has this changed at all during the Covid-19 pandemic? Do you feel a greater need to present yourself in a certain way online as a result of more of our social interactions taking place on online platforms?
Are you more or less conscious of how you are presenting yourself online or in 'real life than prior to the pandemic'?
- 8) Do you feel that those that you are interacting with online are presenting themselves in a different way than how they would have in a normal face-to-face interaction with you prior to the pandemic?
- 9) Would you say that your motivations for using social media and other online communication platforms have changed since the onset of Covid-19? If so can you describe the switch in motivation?
- 10) Can you describe to me how you have been engaging with social media and online communication platforms as a way to socialize and remain connected during the Covid-19 pandemic?

- 11) Would you say this is a shift from how you might have engaged with these platforms prior to the pandemic?
- 12) Do you feel that you can foster the same sense of connection on an online platform as you can in real life? Can you explain to me why or why not?
- 13) Question for those working or doing school virtually in their homes.

How have you navigated having what is often considered our public life (e.g. Work or school) being conducted from our private homes?

Have you found it intrusive on your private life? Similarly do you feel as though you are being more intrusive on the people that you are interacting with? (for example if you are having a business call or meeting on Zoom, does it feel like you are intruding on the other persons privacy – you can see into their home perhaps see other people or pets in the background – this gives a much more intimate look into the private life of the person you are talking to than what we would generally get if we were doing meetings etc., in person in a public place)

Do you keep your camera turned on or off during Zoom/Skype calls? What impacts this decision?

Do you feel the need to curate what is in the background of your video calls?
- Do you feel self conscious about what can be seen in the background on video chat calls?

- 14) Do you find it hard to separate work and school from home life?
Have you been doing anything specific in order to keep a separation between home life and work life?
- Do you have strict work times and leisure times?
 - If you didn't have a home office prior to the pandemic have you set up a spot in your home that is specifically dedicated to work – do you think that this helps to separate public and private
- 15) Would you say that you are devoting a greater amount of time to social media and other online communication platforms? Can you describe the impact that this has had on your daily life?

Wrap Up:

Ask participants how they felt about the interview, if they have any final remarks about anything that was discussed.

I will be sure to note demographics of the participant e.g., age, gender, and preferred pronouns - to help with analysis of the data.

Appendix C: Demographics of Participants

Pseudonym	Age/Gender	Location
Brady	26, male	Nova Scotia
Jessica	29, female	Nova Scotia
Alex	23, female	Ontario
Elizabeth	65, female	Nova Scotia
Megan	25, female	Nova Scotia
Emma	22, female	Ontario
Sabrina	26, female	Nova Scotia
Cole	25, male	Ontario

Appendix D: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Staying Connected: Online Life During the Covid-19 Pandemic

You are invited to take part in research being conducted by me, Dana Kelly, an undergraduate student in Sociology, as part of my honours degree at Dalhousie University. The purpose of this research is to conduct interviews in order to understand how people living in Canada are experiencing and navigating the shift to online living, and more importantly socializing, during the Covid-19 pandemic. I will write up the results of this research in a paper for my class, called the honours thesis. In April 2021 the research will be presented to the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology at Dalhousie, and my thesis will be submitted to my supervisor, Dr. Radice, for evaluation.

As a participant in the research you will be asked to answer a number of interview questions about your experience and usage of social media and other online communication platforms prior to the pandemic, and questions regarding how you have been navigating the shift to online living and socialization during the Covid-19 pandemic. The interview should take about an hour and will be conducted in a quiet location of your choice (following proper Covid-19 social distancing protocols) or on a video chat platform such as Zoom or Skype. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded. If I quote any part of it in my honours thesis, I will use a pseudonym, not your real name, and I will remove any other details that could identify you from the quote.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You do not have to answer questions that you do not want to answer, and you are welcome to stop the interview at any time if you no longer want to participate. If you decide to stop participating after the interview is over, you can do so until March 1, 2021. I will not be able to remove the information you provided after that date because I will have completed my analysis, but the information will not be used in any other research.

The information that you provide to me will be kept private and will be anonymized, which means any identifying details such as your name will be removed from it. Only the honours class supervisor, Dr. Radice, and I will have access to the unprocessed information you offer. I will describe and share general findings in a presentation to the Sociology and Social Anthropology Department and in my honours thesis. Nothing that could identify you will be included in the presentation or the thesis. I will expunge all information after submitting and receiving a grade on my honours thesis.

The risks associated with this study are minimal, but could include potential discomfort, as I will be asking questions related to the Covid-19 pandemic, which I recognize, could be emotionally triggering for some people. You are welcome to withdraw from the

interview at any point and to refrain from answering any questions that you do not wish to answer.

There will be no direct benefit to you in participating in this research and you will not receive compensation. The research, however, will contribute to new knowledge on how people are experiencing the Covid-19 pandemic and to our understanding of how people are connecting and socializing on online platforms throughout Covid-19. If you would like to see how your information is being used, please feel free to contact me and I will send you a copy of my honours thesis after April 30.

If you have questions or concerns about the research please feel free to contact me or the honours class supervisor. My contact information is dn815765@dal.ca. You can contact the honours class supervisor, Dr Martha Radice, at the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Dalhousie University via email at martha.radice@dal.ca.

If you have any ethical concerns about your participation in this research, you may contact Catherine Connors, Director, Research Ethics, Dalhousie University at (902) 494-1462, or email ethics@dal.ca.

Participant's consent:

I have read the above information and I agree to participate in this study.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix E: Codes for Analysis

Codes were created within each interview transcript word document. I used different fonts and highlights to indicate themes, ideas and concepts that were reoccurring throughout the interview transcripts.

Connectivity -----

Public and Private -----

Managing Impressions -----

- *On Zoom calls*

Online/Offline Divide -----

Motivations (in general) (underlined text)

- To communicate with friends -----
- As a way to organize social activity -----
- Out of boredom **BOLD** (font underlined and bolded)

Engagement with Platforms – **BOLD** font

Nature of relationship -----

Facebook – Blue font

Instagram – Orange font

Snapchat – Yellow font

Zoom – Green font

Discord – *Grey font/italics*

Twitch – *italics*

Teams – Purple font

Time spent on social media -----

Skype – -----

TicTok – Pink font

Email/texting – *Red font*

Whatsapp – Yellow font

What shifted to being online

- Work ----
- School ----
- Socializing ----

Uncertainty and anxiety – red font

Pressures to be productive – brown font

Appendix F: REB Final Report



ANNUAL/FINAL REPORT

Annual report to the Research Ethics Board for the continuing ethical review of research involving humans / Final report to conclude REB oversight

A. ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

This report is (<i>select one</i>):				<input type="checkbox"/> An annual report	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> A final report
REB file number:					
Study title:	Staying Connected: Online Life During the Covid-19 Pandemic				
Lead researcher (named on REB submission)	Name	Dana Kelly			
	Email	dn815765@dal.ca	Phone	905 925 9098	
Current status of lead researcher (at Dalhousie University):					
<input type="checkbox"/> Employee/Academic Appointment					
<input type="checkbox"/> Former student					
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Current student					
<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please explain):					
Supervisor (if lead researcher is/was a student/resident/postdoc)	Name	Martha Radice			
	Email	Martha.radice@dal.ca			
Contact person for this report (if not lead researcher)	Name				
	Email		Phone		

B. RECRUITMENT & DATA COLLECTION STATUS

<p>Instructions: Complete ALL sections relevant to this study</p> <p>Study involves/involved recruiting participants: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No If yes, complete section B1.</p> <p>Study involves/involved secondary use of data: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No If yes, complete section B2.</p> <p>Study involves/involved use of human biological materials: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No If yes, complete section B2.</p>

B1. Recruitment of participants	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable
B1.1 How many participants did the researcher intend to recruit? <i>(provide number approved in the most recent REB application/amendment)</i>	8-10
B1.2 How many participants have been recruited? <i>(if applicable, identify by participant group/method e.g. interviews: 10, focus groups: 25)</i>	
a) In total, since the beginning of the study: 8 semi structured interviews were completed	
b) Since the last annual report:	
B1.3 Recruitment for this study is: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> complete; or <input type="checkbox"/> on-going	
B1.4 Data collection from participants for this study is: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> complete; or <input type="checkbox"/> on-going	

B2. Use of secondary data and/or biological materials	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable
B2.1 How many individual records/biological materials did the researcher intend to access? <i>(provide number approved in the most recent REB application/amendment)</i>	
B2.2 How many individual participant records/biological materials have been accessed?	
a) In total, since the beginning of the study:	
b) Since the last annual report:	

C. PROJECT HISTORY

<i>Since your last annual report (or since initial submission if this is your first annual report):</i>
C1. Have there been any variations to the original research project that have NOT been approved with an amendment request? This includes changes to the research methods, recruitment material, consent documents, study instruments or research team. <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
If yes, list the variation here: <i>(You will be notified if a formal amendment is required)</i>

C2. Have you experienced any challenges or delays recruiting or retaining participants or accessing records or biological materials?

Yes No

If yes, please explain:

C3. Have you experienced any problems in carrying out this project?

Yes No

If yes, please explain:

C4. Have any participants experienced any harm as a result of their participation in this study?

Yes No

If yes, please explain:

C5. Has any study participant expressed complaints, or experienced any difficulties in relation to their participation in the study?

Yes No

If yes, please explain:

C6. Since the original approval, have there been any new reports in the literature that would suggest a change in the nature or likelihood of risks or benefits resulting from participation in this study?

Yes No

If yes, please explain:

D. APPLYING FOR STUDY CLOSURE

Complete this section only if this is a FINAL report as indicated in section A

D1. For studies involving recruitment of participants, a closure may be submitted when:

all research-related interventions or interactions with participants have been completed

N/A (this study did not involve recruitment of participants)

D2. For studies involving secondary use of data and/or human biological materials, a closure may be submitted when:

all data acquisition is complete, there will be no further access to participant

records or collection of biological materials

N/A (this study did not involve secondary use of data and/or human biological materials)

D3. Closure Request

I am applying for study closure

E. ATTESTATION (both boxes *must* be checked for the report to be accepted by the REB)

I agree that the information provided in this report accurately portrays the status of this project and describes to the Research Ethics Board any new developments related to the study since initial approval or the latest report.

I attest this project was, or will continue to be, completed in accordance with the approved REB application (or most recent approved amendment) and in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2).

SUBMISSION INSTRUCTIONS

1. Submit this completed form to Research Ethics, Dalhousie University, by email at ethics@dal.ca at least 21 days prior to the expiry date of your current Research Ethics Board approval.

2. Enter subject line: REB# (8-digit number), last name, annual (or final) report.

3. Student researchers (including postdoctoral fellows and medical residents) must copy their supervisor(s) in the cc. line of the annual/final report email.

RESPONSE FROM THE REB

Your report will be reviewed, and any follow-up inquiries will be directed to you. You must respond to inquiries as part of the continuing review process.

Annual reports will be reviewed and may be approved for up to an additional 12 months; you will receive an annual renewal letter of approval from the Board that will include your new expiry date.

Final reports will be reviewed and study closure acknowledged in writing.

CONTACT RESEARCH ETHICS

- Phone: 902-494-3423
- Email: ethics@dal.ca
- In person: Henry Hicks Academic Administration Building, 6299 South Street, Suite 231
- By mail: PO Box 15000, Halifax, NS B3H 4R2