

NEWS ANALYSIS

Why Zoom Is Terrible

There's a reason video apps make you feel awkward and unfulfilled.

By **Kate Murphy**

Ms. Murphy is the author of "You're Not Listening: What You're Missing and Why It Matters."

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Last month, global downloads of the apps Zoom, Houseparty and Skype increased more than 100 percent as video conferencing and chats replaced the face-to-face encounters we are all so sorely missing. Their faces arranged in a grid reminiscent of the game show "Hollywood Squares," people are attending virtual happy hours and birthday parties, holding virtual business meetings, learning in virtual classrooms and having virtual psychotherapy.

But there are reasons to be wary of the technology, beyond the widely reported security and privacy concerns. Psychologists, computer scientists and neuroscientists say the distortions and delays inherent in video communication can end up making you feel isolated, anxious and disconnected (or more than you were already). You might be better off just talking on the phone.

The problem is that the way the video images are digitally encoded and decoded, altered and adjusted, patched and synthesized introduces all kinds of artifacts: blocking, freezing, blurring, jerkiness and out-of-sync audio. These disruptions, some below our conscious awareness, confound perception and scramble subtle social cues. Our brains strain to fill in the gaps and make sense of the disorder, which makes us feel vaguely disturbed, uneasy and tired without quite knowing why.

Jeffrey Golde, an adjunct professor at Columbia Business School, has been teaching his previously in-person leadership class via Zoom for about a month now and he has found it strangely wearing. "I've noticed, not only in my students, but also in myself, a tendency to flag," he said. "It gets hard to concentrate on the grid, and it's hard to think in a robust way."

This is consistent with research on interpreters at the United Nations and at European Union institutions, who reported similar feelings of burnout, fogginess and alienation when translating proceedings via video feed. Studies on video psychotherapy indicate that both therapists and their patients also often feel fatigued, disaffected and uncomfortable.

Sheryl Brahmam, a professor in the department of information technology and cybersecurity at Missouri State University in Springfield, explains the phenomenon by comparing video conferencing to highly processed foods. “In-person communication resembles video conferencing about as much as a real blueberry muffin resembles a packaged blueberry muffin that contains not a single blueberry but artificial flavors, textures and preservatives,” she said. “You eat too many, and you’re not going to feel very good.”

To be sure, video calls are great for letting toddlers blow kisses to their grandparents, showing people what you’re cooking for dinner or maybe demonstrating how to make a face mask out of boxer briefs. But if you want to really communicate with someone in a meaningful way, video can be vexing.

This is foremost because human beings are exquisitely sensitive to one another’s facial expressions. Authentic expressions of emotion are an intricate array of minute muscle contractions, particularly around the eyes and mouth, often subconsciously perceived, and essential to our understanding of one another. But those telling twitches all but disappear on pixelated video or, worse, are frozen, smoothed over or delayed to preserve bandwidth.

Not only does this mess with our perception, but it also plays havoc with our ability to mirror. Without realizing it, all of us engage in facial mimicry whenever we encounter another person. It’s a constant, almost synchronous, interplay. To recognize emotion, we have to actually embody it, which makes mirroring essential to empathy and connection. When we can’t do it seamlessly, as happens during a video chat, we feel unsettled because it’s hard to read people’s reactions and, thus, predict what they will do.

“Our brains are prediction generators, and when there are delays or the facial expressions are frozen or out of sync, as happens on Zoom and Skype, we perceive it as a prediction error that needs to be fixed,” said Paula Niedenthal, a professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who specializes in affective response. “Whether subconscious or conscious, we’re having to do more work because aspects of our predictions are not being confirmed, and that can get exhausting.”

Video chats have also been shown to inhibit trust because we can’t look one another in the eye. Depending on the camera angle, people may appear to be looking up or down or to the side. Viewers may then perceive them as uninterested, shifty, haughty, servile or guilty. For this reason, law scholars and criminal justice activists have questioned the fairness of remote depositions, hearings and trials.

But as anyone who has been on a video call knows, people tend to look more at themselves than at the camera or even at others on the call. “I would be lying if I said I wasn’t super aware of my appearance on video chats,” said Dave Nitkiewicz, a recently furloughed employee of Experience Grand Rapids, the convention and visitors’ bureau in Grand Rapids, Mich. “I have the skin of Casper the Ghost right now — it’s, like, fluorescent — so I’m always concerned with framing and lighting.”

Craving company while confined at home, Mr. Nitkiewicz frequently arranges Zoom meet-ups with family and friends and he even went on a Zoom date. And yet he doesn’t find these interactions terribly satisfying.

“On video chat there’s literally a glowing box around your face when you’re talking, so you feel like every eyeball is on you, like a very intimidating job interview,” Mr. Nitkiewicz said. “The conversation kind of defaults to trivial drivel because people don’t want to take a risk.” And the delay in people’s feedback makes him feel that it wouldn’t be rewarding to share a good story anyway.

He doesn’t feel the same reserve when he talks on the phone, which he does for two or three hours every other Sunday with his cousin in Los Angeles. “We have for years, and it’s never occurred to us to video chat,” said Mr. Nitkiewicz. “Our comfort place is still on the phone.”

This makes sense given that experts say no facial cues are better than faulty ones. The absence of visual input might even heighten people’s sensitivity to what’s being said. It could be why Verizon and AT&T have reported average daily increases of as much as 78 percent in voice-only calls since the start of the pandemic, as well as an increase in the length of these calls.

“You can have a sense of hyper-presence on the telephone because of that coiled relationship where it feels like my mouth is right next to your ear, and vice versa,” said Dr. Brahnam during a telephone interview. Provided you have a good connection, she said, you end up hearing more: slight tonal shifts, brief hesitations and the rhythm of someone’s breathing. When it comes to developing intimacy remotely, sometimes it’s better to be heard and not seen.

Are You Vexed by Video Chats?

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