

Connected in Isolation: How Zoom Enabled Ritual Communication for the Digitally Privileged During the Pandemic Lockdown

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In some ways it was hard to read Eszter Hargittai's (2022) book, *Connected in Isolation*. While pre-COVID seems like a lifetime ago, the fear and uncertainty that I and so many people felt in March 2020 suddenly resurfaced when reading the introduction to her book. But this is an outstanding empirical examination of the role of digital media in the early days of the pandemic. I appreciated many aspects of her book. First, the cross-national comparisons between the United States, Italy, and Switzerland were empirically fascinating, particularly the differences. For example, Hargittai found that different sociodemographic factors associated with different platforms in each country. This has important implications for how people connect differently on different platforms in different contexts.

I also appreciated the nuanced analysis regarding the relationship between the information access, misconceptions about the virus, and the behavioral outcomes of following recommended COVID-safe practices. This was for me one of the highlights of the book. Hargittai beautifully demonstrates that it was not lack of access to resources or information about the virus that led to incorrect knowledge about the virus. The sources of information mattered. Relying on Fox News, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube in the United States was linked to more misbeliefs about the virus. But sources mattered differently in Italy and Switzerland, so the potential negative impacts of social media for vital information are not universal, or deterministic.

Lastly, I deeply appreciated Hargittai's focus on inequality along dimensions of race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and physical and mental ability. She adeptly describes the historical contexts which give rise to racial and ethnic disparities, particularly in the United States, where there is significant distrust of medical and scientific institutions among Black and Brown communities. Moreover, her results regarding disabled people's significant social media use and their work to make digital platforms more accessible were particularly interesting:

In fighting to have options such as video for chatting and working remotely, disabled people likely paved the way for millions of those who were scrambling at the start of the pandemic to get their home situations fit for work. (Hargittai, 2022, p. 125)

We have a long way to go to better meet the needs of disabled people, but we should recognize and respect how the accommodations they fought for benefit us all.

Hargittai's (2022) goals to "document people's digital media experiences during the lockdown" (p. 1) and demonstrate how these vary by societal position and are connected to life outcomes were adeptly fulfilled in the book. However, one aspect of the digital experience during the pandemic was surprisingly not

mentioned explicitly in the book: Zoom, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Reddit, WhatsApp, and video calls were all discussed in the book. Zoom is not officially social media and likely fits under the category of video call, but frequency of video call use alone does not capture the importance of Zoom during the pandemic. I want to suggest that Zoom emerged as *the emblematic digital media platform* for connecting in isolation among digitally privileged Americans during the pandemic lockdown.

The Rise of Zoom

Zoom is a video conferencing company that sells its remote meeting software to businesses and offers a limited free-use version for the general public. Founded by Eric Yuan in 2011, Zoom had strong and steady growth, daily reaching 10 million meeting participants by the end of 2019 (Iqbal, 2023). However, once the lockdown hit, Zoom use soared (BBC, 2021; Iqbal, 2023). By the end of April 2020, daily meeting participants hit 200 million, and by the end of May, daily meeting participants reached 300 million per day (Iqbal, 2023). Zoom was the most downloaded mobile app of 2020 (Molla, 2020).

But also by the end of April 2020, people were publicly complaining about Zoom. On April 29, 2020, Kate Murphy (2020) wrote for the *New York Times*, "Why Zoom is Terrible" and how it can lead to anxiety and isolation. On the same date, Fosslien and West Duffy (2020) published a *Harvard Business Review* article describing how to avoid Zoom fatigue by taking breaks between Zoom meetings and not multitasking. Communication research has posited that indeed Zoom fatigue can be caused by nonverbal communication overload (Bailenson, 2020, 2021). Further concerns regarding Zoom emerged in the form of online harassment and trolling called Zoombombing, where uninvited users would take over a zoom session, often with racist and misogynist words and images (Ali, 2021; Elmer, Neville, Burton, & Ward-Kimola, 2021; Nakamura, Stiverson, & Lindsey, 2021). In short, Zoom as enterprise software was numbing and oppressive (Crano, 2021).

The Integration of Zoom

Zoom fatigue, glitches, and bombings belie our significant reliance and integration of Zoom into our early pandemic lives. Enterprise Zoom accounts became incorporated into personal use quickly during the pandemic, particularly for the economically and digitally privileged. My own family is among the most Internet connected households, with access via mobile, computer, tablet, smart TV, and a gaming device. According to Hargittai's scale, this put us into the top 19% of Americans with Internet access and classifies us as having some of the highest autonomy of Internet use. But we were not alone; 44% of Americans in Hargittai's data had a mobile, tablet, and computer. Zoom, which is accessible on computers, phones, and tablets, allowed for people to work remotely, but also importantly, to gather with families and friends.

As parents with elementary-school kids, my partner and I had particular challenges during the lockdown. Our kids were too young to text friends or be on social media or platforms like Discord, so we organized Zoom playdates for them. Zoom allowed the kids to see each other and talk while they played Among Us (2023). Zoom socializing was not just for the kids. For months, we would toast our glasses of wine and play Jackbox (2023) or Codenames (2023) with three other couples every Friday night on Zoom.

These playdates and game nights were something fun to anticipate. They were small but meaningful social gatherings that helped us to feel normal-ish, and Zoom made them possible.

I also organized Zoom birthday parties and Zoom holiday dinners (see Figure 1). Many family rituals, like weddings (Tang, 2020) and funerals (Birenbaum, 2021), transitioned to Zoom during the pandemic. Zoom allowed us to share these important events during the lockdown and helped us feel part of a bigger family and a bigger community.



Figure 1. Screenshot of my Facebook post on Thanksgiving 2020.

I think part of the reason we do not see Zoom mentioned in *Connected in Isolation* (Hargittai, 2022) is in part because Hargittai's approach to studying the digital media experiences during the pandemic is informed by the transmission model of communication (Carey, 1992), which understands the exchange of messages over distances as a means of control. This is exactly what we needed during the pandemic, to control people. By contrast, Carey (1992) argues, "a ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time" (p. 18). Zoom playdates and game nights, birthdays, and holidays are best understood through a ritual rather than transmission view of communication. They are not meant to disseminate information about the pandemic but to engage in fellowship, reinforce shared beliefs, and maintain social connection. If we were to approach the study of people's digital media experiences during early lockdown from a ritual view of communication, I think Zoom would have become part of the story.

Hargittai's research demonstrates that nationality and sociodemographic factors shape digital media use, so I want to be careful not to overgeneralize. There are likely a number of sociodemographic factors at play regarding Zoom use for ritual communication, including economic and digital privilege. Zoom can only become the means for social connection for those who have the resources for Internet-enabled devices with good broadband connection. Moreover, the integration of Zoom into ritual communication was likely easier for those already using Zoom for work. Despite Zoom's limitations and constraints, the mundane ways in which it became woven into the fabric of pandemic life and integrated into our lexicon of digital connection is a testament to the significance of Zoom's role during the pandemic.

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