

Buffering Against the Social and Emotional Challenges during COVID-19 Lockdown: A Guideline of Online Communication for Solo-dwellers

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Abstract: COVID-19 has severely damaged people's health worldwide, so governments adopted lockdown policies to control the spread of it. However, this policy threatens people's social and emotional well-being, especially among solo-dwellers. I found online communication a promising method to promote solo-dwellers' mental health, but it didn't always work well. Therefore, this research aims to identify reasons why online communication fails to improve people's mental health, and propose a guideline targeting these damaging factors. With this guideline, this research aims to help people survive the mental crisis during lockdown by digital communication. Given that online communication involves social interactions and regulating each other's emotions, I hypothesized that the problems and troubleshooting solutions might center around these two facets, so I read and analyzed previous literature on interpersonal social interaction and interpersonal emotion regulation. Through literature review, I found online communication has its drawbacks such as low adaptation to and preference for online activities and high risk of ruminating together and neglecting others' emotional needs. To overcome these drawbacks, I proposed a series of psychological procedures such as promoting shared reality and interpretation flexibility to improve social interactions and advocating co-reappraisal and responsiveness to improve the quality of emotional support. In conclusion, I proposed a guideline of online communication for solo-dwellers, targeting their skills of social interaction and emotion regulation, aiming to educate them on how to benefit from online activities. What is more, skills suggested in this guideline can help people whenever they go through a hard time.

Keywords: interpersonal social interaction, interpersonal emotion regulation, COVID-19, mental health, emotional well-being, social well-being, online communication

1. Introduction

Ever since the breakout of COVID-19, people worldwide have been suffering from this virus.

As of 18 September 2022, over 609 million confirmed cases and over 6.5 million deaths have been reported globally [1,2]. A person who catches the virus cannot realize his or her infection until they are required to take the nucleic acid test, which is the typical case showing COVID-19's ease of transmission and long incubation period. If such cases are not well controlled, an undetected carrier of COVID-19 can infect an extremely large number of people through his or her movements. Hence,

many governments had to adopt lockdown policies (e.g., stay-at-home orders, physical distancing interventions), as these interventions can separate people physically to slow down the spread of the virus [3,4].

However, the COVID-19 lockdown has the side effect, posing threats to peoples' mental health. On the one side, people during lockdown might be faced with low social well-being [5]. This is because lockdown stops people from engaging in social activities such as attending parties, dating and etc. In this condition, people cannot get touched with their friends, not to mention receive comforts and support from others, hence they tend to feel lonelier and less supportive than usual [5,6]. On the other side, the COVID-19 lockdown policy also impacts people's emotional well-being [6]. For example, lots of news about the severity of the virus and the decreased earnings due to the COVID-19 shutdown make people worry about their healthy and financial conditions. These worries lead them to experience more negative emotions, such as greater anxiety, depression, and stress [5, 7].

The mental health issues brought by the COVID-19 lockdown are even worse among solo-dwellers. The social isolation during COVID-19 lockdown is quite bad news for those people, as they live alone and do not have anyone to talk with, hence they experience far more loneliness in comparison with those who are forced to stay at home with family members [8]. For example, a study showed that the increase of loneliness is even larger among elders who live alone than those who live with families during the first six weeks of lockdown in the UK [9]. Apart from severe threats to social wellbeing, solo-dwellers also suffer from many emotional issues. For example, if solo-dwellers are told that one of their neighbors has caught the COVID-19 virus, they would definitely feel extremely worried about being infected, however, there is no one along their side to give them a hug and comfort their distress. The researcher found that people who live alone during the COVID-19 pandemic tend to experience less social contact and more negative emotions such as feelings of loss, grief, and loneliness [9-11]. Given above concerns, it is necessary for us to provide mental health care service that is specifically designed for solo-dwellers.

2. Online Communication: A Promising Utensil to Care for Solo-dwellers during Covid-19 Lockdown but with Limitations

To help solo-dweller survive the mental health crisis during the COVID-19 lockdown, one promising strategy is to utilize the internet communication technique [12]. This method creates opportunities for solo-dwellers to connect with others through online activities, such as having an online chat or a video call with others; sending emails, messages, and photos to share their life with others; organizing online group activities such as an online reading club, etc. [12]. Such online communication can serve as a part of solo dwellers' social life. What's more, when solo-dwellers share personal stories with their online friends, they can receive emotional support from others. For example, they can be soothed by others when they talk with their online friends about their concerns about boring life during the lockdown.

However, the existing literature suggests that online communication does not always guarantee the promotion of mental health during the lockdown period. Previous studies show that the interpersonal social interaction during online communication is not as well as that of face-to-face communication, and this limitation diminishes the effectiveness of online communication in increasing peoples' social well-being. On the one side, people are not familiar with the way to connect with others through the Internet. For example, online activities (e.g. phones calls, texting, videos) are less interesting than offline activities [13], as we only can send messages, make a call, or like others' posts but cannot enjoy playing tennis with friends as usual. Due to the limited types of online activities, we cannot fully enjoy the time spent with others [14]. For another example, online communication is not convenient because of poor networks, and interrupted video calls can upset communicators'

moods. Given such innate disadvantages of online communications, it is hard for people to adapt to online social activities, which can explain why the Internet cannot improve people's social life during COVID-lockdown. To ensure the benefits of online communication in improving solo-dwellers' social well-being, one possible solution is to organize interesting interpersonal activities on the Internet (for details, please refer to the following section).

On another side, it is hard for people to fully trust the relationships built online. A typical case is a misunderstanding caused by ambiguous information delivered through online communication [13]. To illustrate, we might feel disappointed about a person's statement posted on Twitter, for example, Mike posted "I do not like pets" online. A person with high level of neuroticism tended to interpret information with a negative bias [15], hence he or she might hold a bad impression of Mike, thinking that Mike might be a ruthless person. However, the fact is Mike is allergic to animal fur but he treats animals kindly. As we can see, the Internet could only show a small piece of one person, so we cannot fully know a person online. This limitation might lead to misinterpretation of others' behaviors online and prevent Internet users from building strong relationships with each other [17], hence the unstable effectiveness of online communication in improving people's social network during COVID-19 lockdown [18]. In sum, online communication helps people to connect with others through the interpersonal interacting process online. Good social experience requires common hobbies to share with others and social cognitive skills to understand others.

I also found that issues about interpersonal emotion regulation should be blamed for the dysfunction of online communication in enhancing people's moods during lockdown [19]. The internet offers people chances to ruminate together on the negative information about Covid-19. For an extreme case, Denial, a solo-dweller and also a YouTuber, opened a Livestream to complain about how bored he was during the lockdown. His complaints induced his fans to grumble about their excessive emotions together, which, undoubtedly, made their mood even worse [21]. As we can see, online communication can sometimes be a vicious cycle that involves all Internet users repeating their negative thoughts, especially when people are less skilled at emotion regulation. Such co-rumination was found to be associated with increased anxiety and depressive symptoms during the COVID-19 pandemic [22]. To help solo-dwellers successfully use online communication to enhance emotional well-being, we should focus on how to improve the process of emotion regulation during their online connections.

Another emotional issue happens when people fail to receive any needed responsiveness from their online friends [21]. Again, we take the above-mentioned Daniel as an example, during the COVID lockdown, he turned to his online friend, Caroline, for comfort when he cannot bear the loneliness. However, to his disappointment, Caroline's response to him was a little bit short and failed to make Daniel feel warm and accepted. Actually, Caroline did her best to offer support to Daniel although she was extremely busy at that time, the outcome was, Daniel probably felt that his friend did not value and care for him. As suggested in this case, during social interactions, it is not enough for the supporters to give a response to the receivers, equally important is to make sure the receivers can also perceive the responsiveness [23]. In another word, only when the responsiveness is exactly what the receivers need, can the emotional support be successfully delivered through online communication.

Taken above, a guideline for online communication is needed to help solo-dwellers effectively improve their social and emotional well-being during the lockdown. If solo-dwellers are skilled at social interaction and emotion regulation, it would be easier for them to enjoy social life by engaging in online interpersonal activities, as well as achieve good mood by receiving online friends' emotional support [19,20]. Drawing on previous findings, in this research we will propose a guideline that aims to improve the process of social interaction and emotion regulation during online communication, and in this way, we hope this guideline can help solo-dwellers survive the emotional and social crisis imposed by the lockdown.

3. Improving Social Wellbeing: Guideline of Interpersonal Social Interaction during Online Communication

To ensure that online communication can enhance solo-dwellers' social well-being, we have to help internet users adapt to the digital technique, improving the quality of their online social interaction. I want to enhance solo-dwellers' social-wellbeing through two key factors, one is the shared reality and another is the interpretation flexibility (see Figure 1).

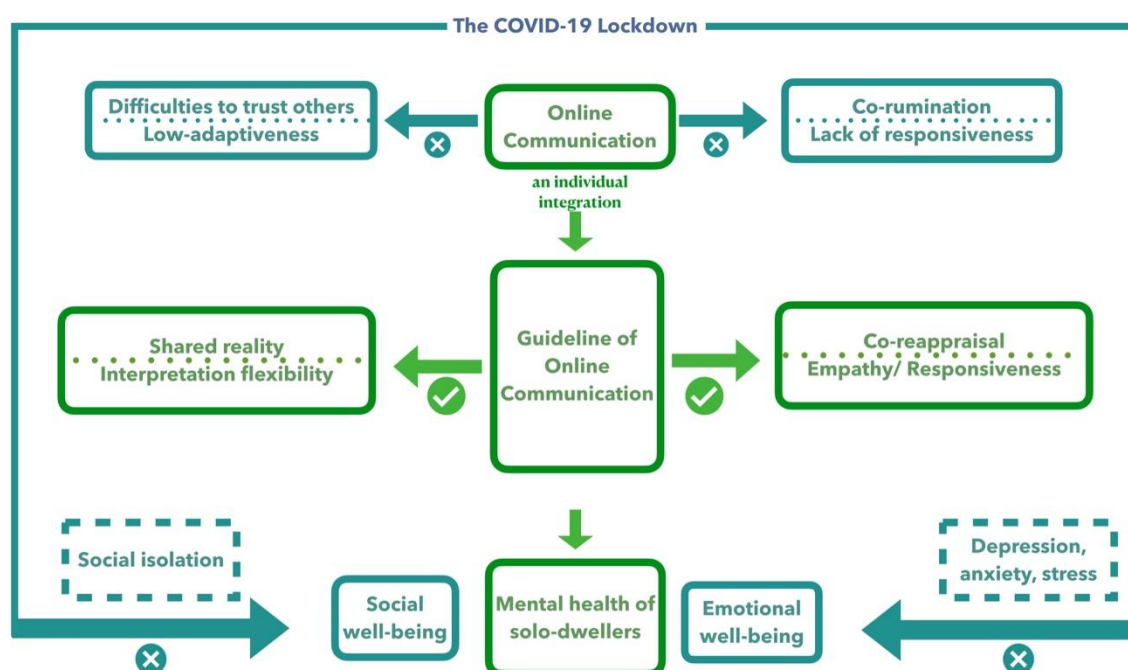


Figure 1 The limitations and guideline of Online Communication

In the previous section, we pointed out that people do not take digital communication as their first choice to socialize [24] because online activities are monotonous, and sometimes unstable internet signals interfere the communication. Through the guideline, we aim to help people achieve more interesting and engaging social experiences online and therefore feel connected with others. An enjoyable and successful social activity can make people feel closer to each other, and such closeness is often achieved by sharing each others' thoughts and feelings [25,26]. For example, during the COVID-19 lockdown, the solo-dweller, Daniel, can share his favorite album with his online friends who adore the same band. The same music interest can bring them together even if they are not meeting in person, making them feel not alone during lockdown [26]. It was found that doing the same activities online (e.g. listening to the same song, playing the same game, sharing a video with a friend, etc.) can increase the closeness and social cohesion among internet users [27]. When solo-dwellers are engaged in such shared online activities, they would feel supported by their online friends [28] and thus reduce the feeling of being socially isolated during the lockdown. To summarize, the shared reality leads people to connect with others' inner states successfully [25]. At that moment, they are on the same wavelength, so the closeness can improve their social well-being, even when they are 'locked' by the policies tragically without anyone to talk to.

It is easy for users to leave a bad impression on a person because of pieces of his or her opinion posted online, although he or she is indeed a nice person. Such misunderstanding should be blamed on the ambiguous information delivered through Internet [29], an innate limitation of digital communication that makes online relationships fragile. Why does this phenomenon happen in our

life? Actually, different people have different ways to understand the same information, just as the saying goes ‘there are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand people’s eyes’. Researchers also found that people with a higher level of depression and neuroticism made more negative interpretations of ambiguous information [29,30]. Admittedly, such negative interpretation bias has its evolutionary significance, as it can keep people alert to potential threats. However, this bias is a double-edged sword, it can sometimes induce misunderstanding and the suspicion could even damage our mental health [31].

In this research, I found two ways to achieve a comprehensive understanding of our online communicators. First, we can hold a relatively positive attitude towards the surrounding information, trying to flexibly explain a specific situation. For example, when people feel negative about their online new friends, mainly because they failed to receive an instant response from them, it is better to attribute the belated response to something uncontrollable (e.g. their friends might be busy doing housework) rather than something negative (e.g. their friends’ late reply is out of disrespect). A positive appraisal can improve solo dwellers’ satisfaction with online communication, reducing the negative influence of interpretation bias on social wellbeing [31]. Second, we can cultivate the habit to collect more information when faced with an ambiguous situation [32]. In the previous example, when Vicky sees Mike’s post about ‘I do not like pets.’ She might come up with a ruthless image of Mike, but she immediately realized that she should look at Mike’s other posts to give a comprehensive understanding of this person. Then, she found Mike is allergic to animals’ fur, so the brutal impression of Mike can be converted into a neutral image. In this case, Vicky did not think negatively about Mike, instead, she searched for more symmetric information about Mike, and thus establish a trustworthy online relationship. To summarize, those who use online communication to socially connect with others, they’d better increase their ability to learn about others in a more comprehensive manner, by holding a non-biased attitude and meanwhile referring to more information [33]. Given the limitation of the online technique, it is common to see a social crisis of misunderstanding induced by an ambiguous opinion posted online. With flexible interpretation, the relationship between online friends can survive such crisis, and hence the joyful social connections with each other.

4. Improving Emotional Wellbeing: Guideline of Interpersonal Emotion Regulation during Online Communication

According to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, humans have social needs, chasing after the feeling of belongingness [34]. During the lockdown period, solo-dwellers are lonely and depressed, so they need their peers’ psychological support more than ever. When using online communication to improve people’s emotional well-being during the lockdown, this communication can be deemed as a strategy to regulate our emotions. However, online communication can lead to uncontrolled transmission of negative news, arousing mass panic. Additionally, people might feel disappointed during communication when their partners did not respond as they expected. In some cases, online communication fails to help people feel better, probably because the communicators are not skilled at expressing and responding to one’s emotional needs. The previous literature suggested that the effectiveness of online communication depends on people’s ability to interpersonal emotion regulation [35]. In order to help solo-dwellers benefit from online communication, we come up with the idea of co-reappraisal and responsiveness to enhance their interpersonal emotion regulation and thus promote their emotional well-being.

First, the maladaptive emotion regulation strategy, rumination, should be blamed for the worse emotions following online communication. In the previous example of unsuccessful online communication, Daniel, the solo-dwellers continuously complained about the COVID-19 lockdown with his fans, actually, he and his fans were repeatedly thinking about how boring their life was. They were ruminating together during online communication, making them feel even more negative. In

this situation, they'd better stop rumination once they realized they are doing so. Instead, one suggested proposal is that they can turn co-rumination into co-reappraisal. Co-reappraisal means people together share their different opinions about an emotional issue, acquire a different perspective on this issue, and therefore alter the emotional meaning of this issue [36]. For example, when Daniel and his fans complained about the boring life under lockdown policies, if one of them turned to say that the boring life actually was relaxing and made people feel at ease, then it could be a good beginning for them to reappraise the life during the lockdown. To sum up, online media offers us a place to share and exchange our emotional concerns, by preventing the co-rumination and promoting the co-reappraisal, people can get together to identify the positive side of a negative event and thus enhance their emotional wellbeing.

Apart from utilizing co-reappraisal, another good strategy of interpersonal emotion regulation is responsiveness, which refers to responding to each other's needs and wishes during the interaction. Sometimes people cannot regulate their emotions themselves, hence they need to turn to others for support, however, they may feel even worse when others do not give an appropriate response. For instance, during the COVID-19 lockdown, Peter complained about how lonely he was to his online friends, but to his disappointment, his friend sent him a list of movies and told him to watch them when he feel lonely, making him feel even more lonely. Actually, Peter, as the help-seeker, needs a person who can understand his emotions and give him comfort. As for the helper, he or she needs to correctly identify Peter's needs, emotions, and thoughts, which require the involvement of empathy, an important social skill [37]. Mutual responsiveness during online communication requires not only empathy from the helper, but also clear expression from the help-seeker. If people do not clearly express their thoughts and feelings, it would be hard for their friends to offer the support they need [38]. Again in Peter's story, he might fail to clearly express his loneliness, simply telling his friends 'Life is so boring for a solo-dweller, I cannot bear it', making his friends think that he is merely feeling bored and therefore the inappropriate response of recommending films to him. It's better for Peter to tell his friend that 'I am lonely, is it convenient for you to make a phone call with me?'. Research showed that the latter expression would be more effective, helping people get the support they want [38]. To conclude, both the person asking for help and the person being asked for help should improve their emotion regulation skills in social contexts, one expressing their emotional needs more clearly and the other responding to emotional needs in a more sensitive manner [39].

5. Conclusions

Although lockdown is effective in controlling the spread of COVID-19, this policy can threaten people's social and emotional well-being, and such impact is even severer among solo-dwellers. This study suggested a guideline for solo-dwellers to buffer against the social and emotional challenges during the COVID-19 lockdown by using online communication. In this research, I searched for and analyzed papers about social interaction and interpersonal emotion regulation, aiming to clarify why online communication is sometimes invalid. I found there might be four factors that impede the progress of digital communication which are difficulties to trust others, low adaptiveness to communication via online mode, co-rumination, and lack of responsiveness. Then, I utilize relevant knowledge and figure out that people can overcome these impeding factors by improving their social and emotion-regulation skills, such as promoting shared reality, interpretation flexibility, co-reappraisal, and social cognition (empathy and responsiveness). To conclude, my research suggests two main mechanisms that support the function of online communication in improving people's social and emotional health, interpersonal social interaction and interpersonal emotion regulation. By proposing a guideline for online communication targeting these two mechanisms, my research offers a method for solo-dwellers to survive the social and emotional crises during the lockdown.

As to the limitations of this study, first, this study merely focused on the improvement of solo-dwellers' social and emotional well-being, but failed to care for their satisfaction with online work and study. For example, teenagers have to participate in online classes during the lockdown, and their learning performance will be influenced because students' willingness to learn was found to decline when they are out of campus [40]. In future studies, it deserved academic effort to investigate how to improve people's adaptation to online work and learning during the lockdown. Second, this study neglected another mechanism that impedes the effectiveness of online communication, the spreading of negative and fake news [16]. In future studies, it is important to clarify why and how negative information is delivered through online activities, and therefore prevent mass panic. Third, this study did not cover the age differences in the mental crisis imposed by lockdown. In most cases, solo-dwellers are either young adults or elder adults. They have different psychological crises which are worth to take separate research. For young solo-dwellers, lockdown makes them worry about their financial circumstances, and their mental care service should be much more pragmatic, helping them downregulate their financial worries [41]. Elderly people who live alone, care more about health conditions [42], so their mental care service should focus on downregulating their fear of death and aging. These are the three parts I want to involve in my study in the future.

Humans will face various crises over time, and the COVID-19 pandemic is just one of them. Human beings are different from other species as we can use the tool wisely. Nowadays, the Internet can be used by us to combat the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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