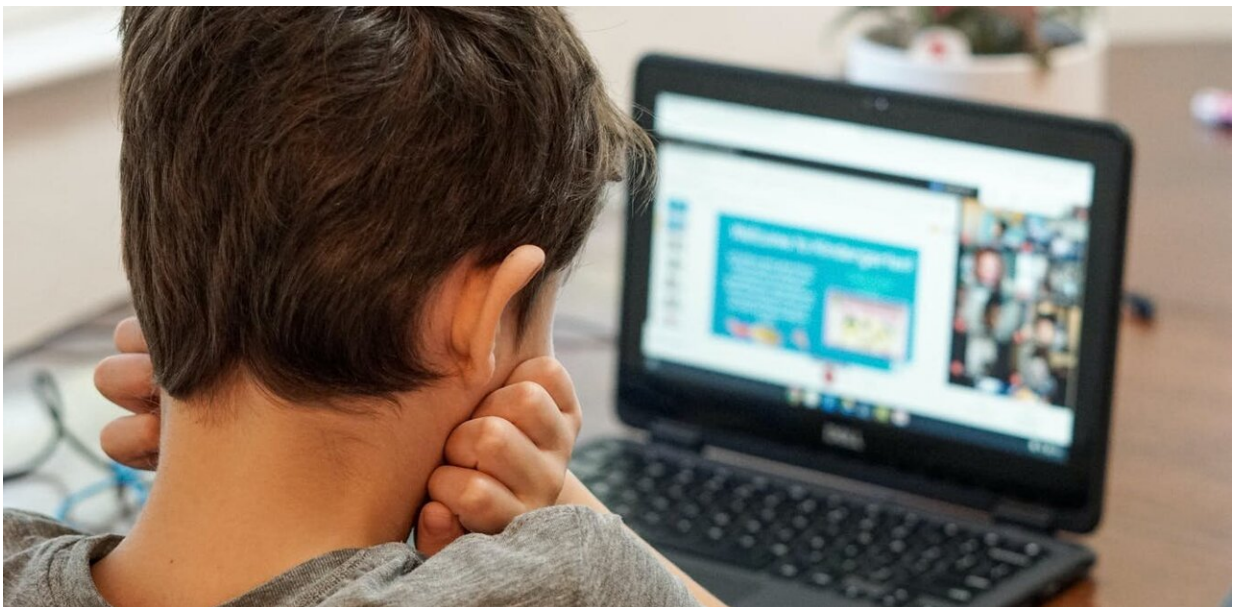


For teenagers, the internet helps during lockdowns but it's no substitute for the outside world

May 19 2021, by Valerie Michaelson, Robert Porter and Valerie Steeves



The internet has helped teenagers continue learning and connect with others.
Credit: Aziz Achkari/Unsplash

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the creation—and evolution—of a new socio-technical environment around the world. Lockdowns across Canada spurred an unprecedented surge in online communication as people moved school, work and social lives online.

In the midst of the first lockdowns in Canada in 2020, a group of teens in Kingston, Ont., explored and analyzed their own experiences of connection during this unparalleled time of social isolation. With the sudden shift to virtual learning and restrictions on in-person gatherings, they wanted to explore how their reliance on technology and networked devices for communication and socialization effected their sense of connection to themselves and others.

These teens had previously collaborated in 2017 on a [research project focused on how social media use shapes our sense of connectedness](#).

As vaccinations roll out across Canada, thoughts are cautiously turning to getting back to normal and what that will look like. As [decision-makers](#) begin to shape the world moving forward, it's a good time to share the [Youth Participatory Action Research](#) project that we, and this same dynamic team of teenaged co-researchers, conducted during the spring of 2020.

Maintaining links

The teens had originally come together in 2019 to learn more about their relationship with technology by disconnecting from their devices for a week and tracking the impact this had on them. When pandemic-related stay-at-home and physical distancing orders forced them to disconnect from everything but technology, it was a perfect opportunity to reconvene and relaunch our experiment, and think through the ways that technology can and can't connect us when we're physically isolated.

People often [assume that teens have an uncomplicated relationship with technology](#). Yet, this is not always the case, especially for young people who are marginalized. Certainly, the youth members of our research team were the first to admit that they had it easy during the first lockdown: safe houses to live in, families for company and support, and,

sufficient internet access for school, work and socializing—things which many others in their communities and around the world don't have.

At the same time, after examining their own experiences of using networked technologies during the first lockdown, our teen researchers concluded that connecting over computers can only connect you so much. Although they continued to chat online with their closest friends, the link between them and their wider community of peers was much more difficult to maintain virtually. Reflecting on this loss, one research team member said:

"Normally I would consider myself to be friends with people that I would see and talk with at school, or at extracurriculars. Now, I only have frequent contact with very few people that I am close with, and I am missing out on talking to these other people. I do not know them well enough to Facetime them one-on-one, or to have a lengthy conversation online."

Beyond their connections with their peers, the youth also reflected on their connections to their broader community:

"My sense of community is changed during isolation. I would normally feel like a part of a community through experiences of walking outside in the neighborhood and seeing other people walking or being out in the garden. I didn't have to actually speak with them, but I would see people around me and feel connected. This experience made me realize that feeling like a part of a community really affects how connected you feel to others, and can't be replaced by some online communication."

Real world connection

Even though these teens had access to a lot of technology—and by extension, the ability to communicate online with others—being so

physically disconnected felt incredibly lonely.

The limits of online interaction highlights how important physical co-presence is to a sense of belonging. One of the youth shared their experiences during lockdown:

"I think for me loneliness isn't just talking to someone. I feel like I need to be in a group or just be able to see and be physically close with someone who I am talking to. Because even if I am in a group and I am not speaking to people around me, I can actually see that I am a part of something bigger. And not in a philosophical way, but as part of a community, whatever the community it.

So that is what stops the loneliness. I don't think it's talking to someone, it's just being around people. And I think that has to be something that is physically present and that the virtual world doesn't carry across. Because in spite of all the technology in the world, I still notice that I am alone in my room."

Our teen researchers' results certainly challenge the common misunderstanding that [young people are digital natives who were born into the digital environment with the will and ability to navigate it with relative ease](#). While they continue to manage, every member of our teen research team says that they would take the offline world over the online world any day.

Face-to-face community

Our teen researchers want decision-makers to know that relying on networked communications is not working. As one put it:

"It is strange. I feel like as humans we interact better on a face to face basis. So now that I have been talking to my friends more online, I want

to see them in person now and have those face to face conversations because I feel like they are more valuable and they are better."

It's important for adult decision-makers to learn from [young people's](#) experiences of the pandemic isolation and to take their perspectives and needs seriously. This team of teen researchers reminds us that: "The world of technology is huge but the world of our actual world is way bigger. And we all feel like that is so much more valuable."

As we readjust to life as the pandemic moves towards some kind of resolution, let's ensure we protect that real world.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: For teenagers, the internet helps during lockdowns but it's no substitute for the outside world (2021, May 19) retrieved 8 September 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-05-teenagers-internet-lockdowns-substitute-world.html>

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