

Q&A: Zooming for the socially anxious

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Have you ever squirmed with self-consciousness during a Zoom meeting? Then this might be a relief: Social anxiety doesn't seem to hinder your ability to know how others see you on Zoom as much as it does during in-person meetings.

That's a takeaway from research detailed in "'Zooming' in on positive

and accurate metaperceptions in first impressions: Examining the links with social anxiety and liking in online video interactions," co-authored by Marie-Catherine Mignault.

She is a post-doctoral researcher and Future of Work fellow at the Cornell University ILR School's Experimental Psychology and Organizations Lab.

The *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* published the work online earlier this year and will include the research in a fall print issue. Hasagani Tissera of McGill University and Lauren J. Human of the University of British Columbia Okanagan are co-authors.

In a recent interview, Mignault discussed why the findings shared in the paper are so significant for the future of work.

Can you start with context about why knowing how others judge us matters?

If you've ever been a nervous applicant focused on landing your dream job, then you know you leave a job interview thinking something like this: Okay, how did the boss see me? Did I come across as competent and kind? Did I seem overly energetic?

In person, we're quite good at knowing how others judge us, even in brief first impressions. And this information is very useful: By knowing how others view us, we can likely adjust our behavior to make the interaction smoother.

In fact, when we know how others view us, it leads them to like us more. Then, imagine how valuable this knowledge might be in high-stakes first impressions, like job interviews.

But with the recent shift to remote work, we wondered: How good are we at telling how others judge us ... on Zoom? It turns out that we can tell how others judge our personality on Zoom just as well as in person. What's more, socially anxious people, who have difficulty detecting how others judge them in person, do not have this same difficulty on Zoom.

How did you arrive at these findings?

As much as we can, we prioritize taking an approach to social perceptions that reflects real-life social interactions. Because we are interested in first impressions here, we organized events that resemble "speed networking" by inviting about seven or eight people into the lab at any given time who previously didn't know each other, and we got them to interact in pairs to get acquainted for a few minutes.

Then, they rated each other's personalities and how they thought the other person saw their personality. Afterward, they switched to meeting with someone else, until everybody had met and rated everybody. We held these events in person before the pandemic and switched to videoconferencing events during the pandemic, with people meeting in pairs via Zoom break-out rooms.

What guidance do your findings hold for socially anxious people?

The most optimistic takeaway from our research is that there are instances when socially anxious people are not at a disadvantage in social interactions: On Zoom, they are just as accurate as non-anxious people at detecting how others view them.

Although we don't exactly know why yet, we think it could be because they have feedback from the self-view feature, which could help them

understand how they're coming across. So having that instantaneous feedback about their expressions and the cues they give off could help them navigate those social interactions.

That said, it doesn't help them navigate social interactions to the point of being liked as much as non-anxious people during that first impression. So, it might take time to put that feedback and knowledge into practice in a way that actually improves the quality of social interaction.

Further, regardless of how accurate you are at detecting others' unique view of you, if you're socially anxious, you'll still expect to be judged negatively—whether on Zoom or in person.

The problem is that by assuming that others view you negatively, you end up disliking them. This can be an isolating experience and fuel your social anxiety even more.

If you're the socially anxious type, remember this: Go into an interaction with more positive expectations about how you'll be judged. You might find yourself liking new people, which could be just the spark it takes to form lasting friendships and build your social confidence.

Does this research show that working from home improves some people's mental health?

While our research doesn't specifically target the mental health benefits of remote work, we find that Zoom might level the playing field for socially anxious people.

As mentioned above, on Zoom, socially anxious people, despite their negative expectations, gauge how they are perceived by others just as accurately as their non-socially anxious counterparts. We think it could

be the self-view feature that allows you to view yourself from a different perspective. But, it could also be the comfort of being in front of a computer instead of being face-to-face, which decreases your anxiety and could free up some space in your mind to accurately detect how you're coming across.

In the workplace, it's often useful to know how you're coming across. For example, if you're on a team project, it's useful to accurately gauge the extent to which your colleagues see how hard you're working. If you realize that your colleagues think you're working harder than everyone else on the team, then you might allow yourself to relax, and perhaps even delegate some tasks.

In turn, you might feel more satisfied with your job, and who knows, perhaps even be more pleasant with your colleagues. Given that such accurate perceptions seem to come more easily via videoconferencing for socially anxious people, holding some team meetings on Zoom might help them navigate those [interactions](#) more skillfully.

Now remember, it doesn't seem to have an immediate impact on being liked: Despite being equally accurate, socially anxious people are still less liked than non-anxious people on Zoom. But, the benefits of this enhanced accuracy on Zoom might emerge for them over time. That said, from a clinical perspective, we know that you don't want to completely avoid what is making you anxious. So, some form of hybrid work context, part in-person, part remote, might be the solution.

More information: Hasagani Tissera et al, "Zooming" in on positive and accurate metaperceptions in first impressions: Examining the links with social anxiety and liking in online video interactions., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/pspp0000457](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000457)

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