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# Hanging Out Online: Social Life During the Pandemic

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**Abstract.** In March 2020, the government of India ordered a nationwide lockdown to prevent the spread of Covid-19. This led to the shutdown of educational institutes throughout the country, restricting all activities to online mediums. The shift has affected how students engage with each other, where rather than in-person interaction, they meet through a variety of online tools. In this paper, we discuss how the normal everyday routine of ‘hanging out’ with friends has been transformed during a prolonged lockdown of over ten months and counting. We investigate the opportunities and challenges students encounter when socializing online through various online modes including video calls, communal movie watching and social media. We discuss how social interaction; in particular, hanging out with friends has been transformed through these technologies and its implications for facilitating spontaneous interaction, negotiating intimacy, mutual understanding, and accessibility to different social groups. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of how these factors impact the transition from in-person to online modes of casual social interaction.

**Keywords:** Qualitative Fieldwork · Covid-19 · Negotiating Intimacy Online

## 1 Introduction

During the Covid-19 pandemic, countries imposed nationwide lockdowns as a preventive measure against the spread of the disease [1]. In India, the closing of educational institutes affected over 34 million university and college-going students [2]. In addition, 71% of youth located in metropolis cities were spending the lockdown with their families [3]. With all academic activities restricted to online mediums and restrictions on “hanging out” in physical settings, the social lives of university students have been significantly affected. Now, it is only possible to hang out with friends online.

In this study, we present preliminary findings on how students maintain their social connections, what we refer to as “hanging out”; specifically how they make use of various technologies to interact with friends online while adapting to the lockdown. Our aim is to understand which technologies facilitate communication amongst the students, with a focus on the role technologies play in mediating everyday social interaction [4]. In addition, we investigate the different ways in

which students use computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies to share their experiences with friends and how they manage those relationships.

We conduct a preliminary qualitative study to investigate the effects of the lockdown on the social life of university students; particularly the transformations brought about by CMC technologies and how they unfolded due to differences between in-person and computer-mediated interactions. We discuss these differences and their implications for opportunities for spontaneous social interaction. Next, we talk about the shifts in context and social accessibility of social interaction during the lockdown, followed by how students negotiate intimacy and configure their identity in CMC technologies. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of how students have adapted to the lockdown; discussing some challenges they encountered in the process.

## 2 Related Work

Our work builds upon three broad areas of computer-mediated communication, namely presence, presentation of self and common ground. Presence plays an important role in how students use different CMC technologies to socialize with their peers whereas self-presentation is key to how they construct their identity online. Lastly, we examine examples of how common ground is developed in the CMC technologies that students use and how these transform everyday social interactions.

### 2.1 Being Together Online

While presence is concerned with the sense of being transported to a space different from a physical environment, mediated presence refers to social interaction that takes place through the medium itself [5] and can be defined as the degree to which people overlook the mediated nature of an interaction [6]. For this paper, we discuss two aspects of mediated presence, namely co-presence and social presence. Co-presence refers to the sense of being together with other people [7] and is reflexive in nature [8]. Specifically, it relates to how people perceive others through the medium, as well as how they are perceived by others [8]. In computer-mediated interaction, the level of co-presence available plays an important role in determining the extent to which technologies provide people with a sense of being together. Social presence, on the other hand, is the moment-to-moment awareness of other people and participation with them [7]. Social presence influences the extent to which interpersonal relationships are facilitated by the medium [9]. Levels of social presence are said to increase when multiple modalities (such as audio and video), low latency (immediate feedback during an interaction), and personalisation are available [10]. In our research, we are interested to explore how support for social presence is used as a criteria when students select technologies for interacting with friends online.

### 2.2 Configuring Identity

Goffman's work on the presentation of self describes how people's roles differ depending upon the social context and the norms within it [11]. For example,

people may underplay or overplay aspects of themselves such as vulnerability or formality to ensure compatibility with the idealised version of themselves that they wish to display to others. Self-presentation becomes particularly relevant in the use of social media where people's profiles are visible to their different social circles including friends, acquaintances, co-workers and family members [12]. Each of these groups rarely mingle together in the real world [13]. Thus, when these diverse groups are flattened into a shared online space, it results in a phenomenon referred to as context collapse [12]. This situation results in a limiting effect on how people present themselves to others. Instead, people adopt a plethora of measures to navigate these tensions, such as using multiple accounts or creating alternate accounts under pseudonyms or nicknames [14]. Recently, people have started using private Instagram accounts (known as Finstas) to create intimate spaces that are only accessible to a trusted group of friends. This creates an opportunity for people to create safe spaces where they can share alternate identities with smaller groups [15]. Having control over one's presentation of self plays a crucial role in regulating one's identity, allowing more room for disclosure and affording more agency [16].

### 2.3 Shared Experiences

Common ground also plays an important role in the development of shared experiences. It refers to the shared knowledge, beliefs and suppositions shared in common between a group of people [17]. Here, we discuss two dimensions of common ground - namely cultural common ground and personal common ground paying particular attention to the different roles they play in sustaining social interaction online. When people have an affiliation to a community that shares the same history and practices, for instance, students who belong to the same educational institution; they share a cultural common ground because their joint (or shared) knowledge is a result of their affiliation to the same institution [17]. On the other hand, personal common ground is constituted by joint personal events or experiences, which can act as shared bases for holding conversations [17]. Friends can share a personal common ground because they share personal experiences in the past, such as attending the same class, travelling, or hanging out together. These often are a result of events and experiences that occur during a typical day. However, individuals can have varying levels of personal common ground with different groups of people; for instance, people share a more extensive common ground with partners through the sharing of more private information as compared to their friends [17]. Challenges to the development of personal common ground is highlighted during the Covid-19 pandemic due to the shift from in-person to online interactions and the differing affordances of both in supporting shared experiences. Cultural and personal common ground form important contexts in which everyday social interactions are situated and are important for developing a trove of shared experiences that foster interpersonal relationships [17]. In what follows, we discuss how its absence during the lockdown has brought challenges to students' casual social interactions online.

### 3 Methodology

To understand how hanging out with friends has transformed students’ casual social interactions during the lockdown, we conducted a preliminary qualitative study with five university students. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling [18] owing to the ease of accessibility during the lockdown period. Upon approval from our Institutional Review Board, we conducted semi-structured interviews for between 45 minutes to 1 hour with five participants (M=3, F=2) (Table 1.). The aim of the interviews was to understand different student perspectives on how they foster their social relationships online - specifically their normal routine of just hanging out with each other.

**Table 1.** Description of Participants.

Id	Age	Gender	Alias
P1	21	Female	Neetika
P2	21	Male	Ketan
P3	21	Male	Rahul
P4	20	Female	Preeti
P5	20	Male	Madhur

During the interviews we asked participants to describe how they would hang-out with their friends and acquaintances before the lockdown and how they hang out with them now, during the lockdown. We asked them to describe their use of different technologies - when they were used, who they were used with, and why they were used. Finally, we asked them to describe the challenges they encountered while socializing online and how they managed their relationships during the lockdown.

Interviews were conducted remotely and audio recorded using an online meeting tool. These were transcribed and anonymized with participant IDs. To analyze the data, we adopted an inductive coding approach to thematically code [19] the transcripts. In the first iteration, the first author identified high-level codes and for the second iteration, both authors performed line-by-line coding of the first round of high level categories. These refined codes were compared and discussed amongst the researchers to identify patterns and to reach consensus during remote data analysis sessions where the researchers discussed emerging themes, patterns and their significance to each other.

### 4 Findings

In this section, we present findings from the study in four subsections: First, we discuss how lack of **presence** has transformed spontaneous interaction over the lockdown period and how it affects the routine practice of hanging out with friends. Second, we examine contexts which give rise to social interaction and how technologies mediate them in a way that might compromise the continued

development of **common ground**. Third, we discuss how students negotiate intimacy and their **presentation of self** to engage in joint personal experiences and manage their social relationships online. Finally, we summarize students' challenges when transitioning to the lockdown, including how online social interaction helped them during the transition period in the face of various technical and personal challenges.

#### 4.1 Spontaneity of Social Interaction

In this section, we discuss how differences emerging from the affordances of in-person and mediated interactions affected online social interaction for students; particularly how the absence of a shared physical space has implications for spontaneity and situatedness of social interaction.

Participants associated their socializing experiences prior to the lockdown with "spontaneity" because they could simply "bump into each other" in shared physical settings. *"We were all living in a common space with similar schedules so there were naturally interactions between us while going to classes"* (Ketan). However, after the lockdown, the absence of shared physical spaces affected this spontaneity, making social interaction more planned. In this shift, co-presence is diminished; resulting in students no longer feeling that they're together with their friends. Rather, now they needed to make an effort to initiate conversations and chat with their friends. *"Now, you talk to people you explicitly want to talk to because that call button on your phone needs to be pressed. Spontaneity is good but it gets you in situations you don't want to be"* (Rahul). Here we see that the deliberate action required to communicate with others online has resulted in selective interactions with specific people, allowing for a greater sense of control in mediated settings as compared to in-person interactions.

All participants reported that their pre-lockdown socializing experiences were predominantly situated in their college surroundings. *"In college you would just sit and eat together and talk about nothing. Now that's very rare, right?"* (Neetika). During the lockdown, situatedness has shifted into virtual settings that mediate interaction between users. However, this shift has resulted in a decline in social interaction. *"My friend mentioned the same concern that there has been a sort of disconnect between us due to a reduction in communication during the lockdown"* (Ketan). The lack of shared physical space has reduced the frequency of casual everyday exchanges between people with the "disconnect" felt by most participants illustrating the inadequacies of computer-mediated communication when the goal of these interactions is aimed at fostering relationships rather than the less nuanced goal of exchanging information.

#### 4.2 Shifts in Context and Social Accessibility

Before the lockdown the context which acts as the basis for people to socially interact with each other emerged from personal experiences that occurred in everyday situations, many of which were shared with other students from college. *"So we used to talk about our workload, TV shows, plans or even gossip about*

*what's going around in college*" (Preeti). However, the dissolution of the ongoing establishment of in-person context and joint personal experiences has led to interactions which arise from a "requirement" to talk to college acquaintances to complete coursework online. "I don't really get time to interact with people I'm not close to, unless it's something particular like coursework" (Rahul). Interactions motivated by academic work from college indicate a shift in context and show how cultural common ground sustains some level of social interaction between people who were not close to each other. However, due to the lack of personal experiences together, there is less opportunity for spontaneous conversations to develop.

Another consequence of the shift to online mediums is seen in the different social groups people interact with both pre-lockdown and now. "I think, before the lockdown, I used to socialize with my school friends less. It's definitely a lot more now since you reach everyone that way [online]" (Neetika). Amidst the absence of in-person interaction access to people from different social groups (e.g. school and college friends) in the online mode has now flattened. Due to the affordances of computer-mediated communication technologies access across each of them is now the same whereas pre-lockdown these groups were associated with specific locations and circumstances. One result of this has been that students began reaching out to their old friends from school rather than trying to making new friends with college acquaintances online; something that would have developed more easily in-person.

### 4.3 Negotiating Intimacy

Technologies can facilitate interactions between people who share different types of personal common ground and students make decisions about which ones to use in order to negotiate different levels of intimacy with friends and partners. We examine instances of this negotiation across three different technologies, namely communal watching, video conferencing, and social media. Finally, we discuss how students overcome some of these tensions through how they configure and reveal their different online identities with different people.

**Communal Watching:** Students engaged in communal watching with their close friends and partners over popular technologies such as Netflix Party and streaming over Discord. While watching TV shows and movies together was framed as an intimate activity, the degree of intimacy is negotiated. "Yeah, I use it [Netflix Party] quite often with my really close friends who watch the same shows that I do and we like to talk over chat" (Neetika). "Sometimes me and my girlfriend video call while watching a movie but keeping each other on mute so we're there together but not actually speaking to each other" (Rahul). Neetika and her close friends use the chat feature on Netflix Party to engage in small talk throughout the film. Whereas Rahul and his girlfriend share a video call over Google Duo as the film plays only occasionally unmuting themselves to talk about the plot. These differences in the use of a communication side medium are intertwined with participants' mutually desired level of intimacy



and associated social presence (e.g. small talk between friends or silent presence between partners).

**Video Conferencing:** In addition to its use in communal TV and movie watching, video conferencing is also used by students to talk to their close friends and partners; both being groups with whom they share an extensive personal common ground. Video conferencing affords a high degree of social presence due to the richness of both video and audio modalities alongside their synchronous nature which affords immediate feedback. These applications were described as intimate mediums where they felt comfortable interacting with not more than “three to four” people or they interacted one-on-one with their partner. While birthdays are a common occasion where large groups of people participate in video calls, some students said that it is often awkward for them due to a large number of people on the call that they do not know - this limits their self-presentation in a medium which affords a high degree of social presence.

**Finstas:** Another instance of context collapse occurred on Instagram, where students attempted to circumvent it by creating private secondary accounts known as Finstas (Fake Instagram accounts) to share their daily experiences with close friends. Madhur described his motivations for creating a Finsta referring to his account as a “repository of memories” whereas Neetika said that she wanted to socialise with her close friends beyond just texting or sharing memes. Finstas helped students indulge in self-disclosure with people they shared a deep personal common ground with. *“Sharing experiences personally helps me process them as well as make my peace with them and I think it’s very wonderful that I am able to do so”* (Ketan). Being a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, Ketan used his Finsta as a rite of passage, creating artistic concepts using animation, visuals, and poetry to share his experiences with trusted friends who accept his identity in contrast to his family and the larger group of followers on his public Instagram account. Finstas make it possible to share personal experiences by giving students control over who has access to content so that they can express the most personal and intimate aspects of themselves.

#### 4.4 Adjusting to Lockdown

At the start of the lockdown, there was a period of uncertainty where it was unclear how soon the restrictions on in-person interaction would be lifted. Meeting online continued month-to-month and with it the realization that “social distancing” would be with us for the near future. As a result, students began to adapt to the “new normal”. *“So I got into the habit of calling people every two, three weeks and actively texting my close friends to keep in touch with them. So that’s definitely something that developed over time and became stable by June [2020]”* (Neetika). Students would engage in conversations with their friends more often for emotional support. A common routine involved “checking-up” regularly to ensure that friends were doing alright. They discussed a fear of growing apart and expressed a desire to preserve their relationships. *“I do wish to keep in touch*

*more frequently with my friends because our bonds are something that need to be kept alive despite the physical distances between us now” (Ketan). However, online social interaction was described as draining and difficult to sustain over long periods of time. It has also been challenging for friends to interact with each other due to varying schedules and different time zones. These challenges also included consequences for personal privacy when students spent all their time at home. “There is some noise in the background. People keep coming in and going out so it’s difficult to maintain my personal space” (Preeti). At home individual agency can be compromised, creating obstacles to freely interacting with friends which would otherwise be uninterrupted when meeting in-person. Further, students gender and sexual identity was threatened due to heteronormative beliefs held at home forcing them to conceal aspects of themselves to ensure their safety.*

## 5 Discussion

In this work we investigated how social interaction has been transformed during the Covid-19 lockdown for university students. We found that current technologies lack support for spontaneous interaction because they cannot simulate a sense of being together in the same way as a physical space. This absence of shared physical space makes it difficult to feel emotionally connected leading to a change in students’ interaction between their different social groups that are now equally accessible online. In fact, we found that students negotiate intimacy online by selecting which technologies to use with different people based upon their relationships with them (e.g. video, chat). These kinds of negotiations also allowed students to manage their personal identity when posting content on private Finsta accounts. Additionally, regular interactions between friends are used to check-in on each others’ well-being. However, students still face challenges exercising agency and managing personal space because they spend more time at home where they can be easily distracted and where the boundaries between personal, social, and academic spaces have become increasingly indistinguishable. Added to this, non-heterosexual students felt their identity was restricted when confined at home. Further, different schedules between geographically distributed friends made it difficult for them to meet. While the ongoing lockdown in India continues to transform how friends engage with each other our findings present opportunities to reconsider how technologies could be designed to accommodate ‘hanging out’. To this end, our future work will involve a series of co-design workshops with a larger group of students to sketch out ideas for how to better support spontaneity, intimacy, and shared experiences when hanging out with friends in casual social interactions online.

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