The reason Zoom calls drain your energy

By Manyu Jiang 22nd April 2020

Video chat is helping us stay employed and connected. But what makes it so tiring - and how can we reduce ‘Zoom fatigue’?

Your screen freezes. There’s a weird echo. A dozen heads stare at you. There are the work huddles, the one-on-one meetings and then, once you’re done for the day, the hangouts with friends and family.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic hit, we’re on video calls more than ever before – and many are finding it exhausting.

But what, exactly, is tiring us out? BBC Worklife spoke to Gianpiero Petriglieri, an associate professor at Insead, who explores sustainable learning and development in the workplace, and Marissa Shuffler, an associate professor at Clemson University, who studies workplace wellbeing and teamwork effectiveness, to hear their views.

Is video chat harder? What’s different compared to face-to-face communication?

Being on a video call requires more focus than a face-to-face chat, says Petriglieri. Video chats mean we need to work harder to process non-verbal cues like facial expressions, the tone and pitch of the voice, and body language; paying more attention to these consumes a lot of energy. “Our minds are together when our bodies feel we’re not. That dissonance, which causes people to have conflicting feelings, is exhausting. You cannot relax into the conversation naturally,” he says.

| Delays on phone or conferencing systems of 1.2 seconds made people perceive the responder as less friendly or focused |

Silence is another challenge, he adds. “Silence creates a natural rhythm in a real-life conversation. However, when it happens in a video call, you became anxious about the technology.” It also makes people uncomfortable. One 2014 study by German academics showed that delays on phone or conferencing systems shaped our views of people negatively: even delays of 1.2 seconds made people perceive the responder as less friendly or focused.

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An added factor, says Shuffler, is that if we are physically on camera, we are very aware of being watched. “When you're on a video conference, you know everybody’s looking at you; you are on stage, so there comes the social pressure and feeling like you need to perform. Being performative is nerve-wracking and more stressful.” It’s also very hard for people not to look at their own face if they can see it on screen, or not to be conscious of how they behave in front of the camera.

How are the current circumstances contributing?

Yet if video chats come with extra stressors, our Zoom fatigue can’t be attributed solely to that. Our current circumstances – whether lockdown, quarantine, working from home or otherwise – are also feeding in.

A 2014 study found that delays on phone or conferencing systems shaped our views of people negatively (Credit: Getty Images)

Petriglieri believes that fact we feel forced into these calls may be a contributory factor. “The video call is our reminder of the people we have lost temporarily. It is the distress that every time you see someone online, such as your colleagues, that reminds you we should really be in the workplace together,” he says. “What I’m finding is, we’re all exhausted; It doesn’t matter whether they are introverts or extroverts. We are experiencing the same disruption of the familiar context during the pandemic.”

Then there’s the fact that aspects of our lives that used to be separate – work, friends, family – are all now happening in the same space. The self-complexity theory posits that individuals have multiple aspects – context-dependent social roles, relationships, activities and goals – and we find the variety healthy, says Petriglieri. When these aspects are reduced, we become more vulnerable to negative feelings.

Imagine if you go to a bar, and in the same bar you talk with your professors, meet your parents or date someone, isn’t it weird? That’s what we’re doing now – Gianpiero Petriglieri

“Most of our social roles happen in different places, but now the context has collapsed,” says Petriglieri. “Imagine if you go to a bar, and in the same bar you talk with your professors, meet your parents or date someone, isn’t it weird? That's what we’re doing now... We are confined in our own space, in the context of a very anxiety-provoking crisis, and our only space for interaction is a computer window.”
Shuffler says a lack of downtime after we've fulfilled work and family commitments may be another factor in our tiredness, while some of us may be putting higher expectations on ourselves due to worries over the economy, furloughs and job losses. “There's also that heightened sense of ‘I need to be performing at my top level in a situation’... Some of us are kind of over-performing to secure our jobs.”

But when I’m Zooming my friends, for example, shouldn’t that relax me?

Lots of us are doing big group chats for the first time, whether it’s cooking and eating a virtual Easter dinner, attending a university catch-up or holding a birthday party for a friend. If the call is meant to be fun, why might it feel tiring?

Part of it, says Shuffler, is whether you’re joining in because you want to or because you feel you ought to – like a virtual happy hour with colleagues from work. If you see it as an obligation, that means more time that you’re ‘on’ as opposed to getting a break. A proper chat with friends will feel more social and there will be less ‘Zoom fatigue’ from conversations where you’ve had a chance to be yourself.

It doesn't matter whether you call it a virtual happy hour, it's a meeting, because mostly we are used to using these tools for work – Gianpiero Petriglieri

Big group calls can feel particularly performative, Petriglieri warns. People like watching television because you can allow your mind to wander – but a large video call “is like you're watching television and television is watching you”. Large group chats can also feel depersonalising, he adds, because your power as an individual is diminished. And despite the branding, it may not feel like leisure time. “It doesn't matter whether you call it a virtual happy hour, it's a meeting, because mostly we are used to using these tools for work.”

So how can we alleviate Zoom fatigue?

Both experts suggest limiting video calls to those that are necessary. Turning on the camera should be optional and in general there should be more understanding that cameras do not always have to be on throughout each meeting. Having your screen off to the side, instead of straight ahead, could also help your concentration, particularly in group meetings, says Petriglieri. It makes you feel like you’re in an adjoining room, so may be less tiring.

In some cases it’s worth considering if video chats are really the most efficient option. When it comes to work, Shuffler suggests shared files with clear notes can be a better option that avoids information overload. She also suggests taking time during meetings to
catch up before diving into business. “Spend some time to actually check into people's wellbeing,” she urges. “It’s a way to reconnect us with the world, and to maintain trust and reduce fatigue and concern.”

Building transition periods in between video meetings can also help refresh us – try stretching, having a drink or doing a bit of exercise, our experts say. Boundaries and transitions are important; we need to create buffers which allow us to put one identity aside and then go to another as we move between work and private personas.

And maybe, says Petriglieri, if you want to reach out, go old-school. “Write a letter to someone instead of meeting them on Zoom. Tell them you really care about them.”

By Maddy Savage 19th July 2020

Video dating surged during lockdowns, but how much will the trend stick around in the ‘new normal’?

As if dating weren’t tricky enough before Covid-19, the onset of the virus brought a whole new set of challenges for singletons. Bars and restaurants closed, authorities issued health warnings against getting intimate with strangers and some cities even introduced penalties for leaving home. Yet amid lockdowns, single people remained surprisingly open to finding new partners. Dating.com reported an 82% spike in online dating globally and, because face-to-face meetings weren’t possible, video calls quickly became the go-to alternative.

“She seemed very sweet, very thoughtful... I thought, ‘Why not?’,” says Stephanie Manns, a risk analyst and podcaster in New York City who began video dating a woman in her neighbourhood in April after they matched on OkCupid.

Keen to replicate the city’s famously inventive dating scene – “it’s New York, you can always do something interesting” – the 35-year-old arranged a cocktail night where they suggested recipes to one another, followed by a virtual tour of New Orleans. By their third digital meeting, Manns says she felt some chemistry developing. “She wanted us to each pick a book that was really influencing us or that we had read recently, so we picked a chapter and read something to each other... I’m into creative people so I liked that.”

Stephanie Manns was one of many to try out video dating during the long weeks of lockdown

The relationship ended after the pair went on a few dates in real life once the peak of the pandemic had passed in New York; Manns concluded that “lovely as she is, she’s not really what I’m looking for”. But their virtual experiences reflect a huge boom in singles trying out video dating for the first time.
A recent survey from Match showed that 69% of users in the US were open to video chatting with a potential partner, whereas just 6% had tried it before the pandemic. Bumble, the first major player to launch an in-app video tool last year, has seen a major increase in usage of its feature, which is marketed as a safer way to video chat compared to swapping phone numbers or social media details early in the dating process. Hinge added a ‘Date from Home’ video chat function in April in response to Covid-19, while start-ups also jumped on the trend, with one company, Quarantine Together, combining hand-washing alerts with a video matchmaking service.

| Before the pandemic there was a lot of scepticism about video dating – Dominic Whitlock |

There was also a surge in interest in livestreaming dating games, with The Meet Group, a US market leader in the sector, reporting a 95% surge in usage of its products since March. These include video speed-dating events and blind-dating games for users who want to focus on personality rather than looks. Some offline singles events pivoted to online spaces too, with companies such as The Inner Circle giving would-be daters the chance to video chat through activities like virtual pub quizzes.

Why singles warmed up to video

The obvious reason the video-dating trend took off alongside Covid-19, says Dominic Whitlock, editor of the Global Dating Insights website, is the fact that we quickly got used to using video in other areas of our lives.

“But before the pandemic there was a lot of scepticism about video dating and only a handful of apps were experimenting with the technology,” he explains. “The majority of dating apps are targeted at younger millennials and gen Z, two generations that, by their own admission, are inherently afraid of speaking to strangers on the phone or answering the door.” But once everyone was working from home, being forced to speak to their colleagues on Zoom or playing virtual games with friends, “this gave singles the initial confidence to try a virtual date and then realise it’s not as awkward as they first feared”.

Nyana Ficot had a good experience with video dating, even though it didn’t result in a serious relationship after lockdown

That was the case for Nyana Ficot, a 30-year-old financial advisor who describes herself as “normally quite shy” and went on her first video date after getting more comfortable using video tools during the lockdown in Luxembourg. “We talked for more than three hours, I had to charge my phone! It really felt like a good, proper date... the only thing missing was that you are far away and you can’t touch the person.” She was disappointed her match wasn’t ready for something serious once they finally met up, but still describes it as “a great experience, to see that I can get to know someone... online, talking through video calls”.

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Lockdowns also facilitated an uptick in video dating simply because they left many singles with time on their hands. In the absence of pre-Covid hobbies and travel, and with young people more likely to be furloughed or made unemployed by the crisis, Whitlock says some turned to apps simply “because they were bored”. Others found their stripped-back lives made them feel more lonely or aware of their relationship status. “They were thinking ‘I'm stuck at home, maybe it'll be better if there’s someone else here with me. So maybe it’s time to try and settle down’.”

Meanwhile, there was also a slow global realisation that social distancing was here to stay. “The public began to see that it was actually a very serious situation. Therefore, they needed to make a decision: take a complete break for an unknown period of time or embrace the new world of virtual dating. It appears as though the majority of daters chose the latter,” says Whitlock.

Dr Helen Fisher, who works as an advisor to Match Group, which owns dating platforms including Tinder and Plenty of Fish, says it’s also relevant that lockdows around the world followed a period in which many millennials were already experiencing swiping fatigue. Dating app growth slowed globally in 2019, and Fisher’s own research before the pandemic suggested a growing appetite for closer emotional connections developed over a longer period, instead of casual hook-ups.

“In ‘the old days’ prior to the pandemic, you met on the internet and then you went out on the first date and that first date was really very tense. ‘Should I kiss them? Do we hold hands? Do I invite them over to my apartment?’,” she says. Lockdowns, she believes, have helped to encourage dates to get to know one another better “before the kissing starts”, a trend she predicts will continue even as social-distancing restrictions ease.

**A chance to date across continents**

Jai Andrews, 28, a mentor and coach from London, and Karen Mendoza, 25, who lives in Texas, are one couple who experienced this kind of slow-dating experience during the pandemic. They started out as Facebook connections and began chatting on Messenger in January. But their relationship accelerated due to video calls during their respective lockdowns and they decided to formally become a couple in March, before ever meeting in real life.

“We got to know each other on a really deep sort of emotional level,” reflects Andrews, who says they discussed everything from politics to cereals during hours spent together online. “I look back on previous relationships and it's kind of the physical chemistry you have first and when you really take the time to get to know the person... sometimes you realise you
don’t actually have that much in common.” The couple recently spent several weeks together in the UK and say they’re planning to make things work long term, despite the distance.

Global Dating Insights editor Dominic Whitlock says they’re far from the only ones who have been using video technology to date across continents during the pandemic. Several dating apps, including Tinder, capitalised on the possibility of long-distance love by allowing users to match with users locked down in other locations without an additional subscription fee. This, says Whitlock, helped make the experience of online and video dating more exciting, by introducing people from different locations and cultures, while working as a clever marketing ploy to keep people active on dating platforms, because “after three months of swiping, you’re going to run out of people [locally]”.

British relationships writer and psychotherapist Lucy Beresford says she also observed an increasing willingness among her clients to video date outside their home cities or even countries during lockdowns. She believes the experience of remote working played a role in encouraging people to be more flexible about where they’d consider dating or living in future. “Whereas they might have said, ‘I live in London, I work in London, my future partner must also be in London’, there are a lot of people who are making different choices,” she explains.

**Dating in the ‘new normal’**

With countries now easing lockdowns, most dating experts think people will quickly return to developing romantic relationships offline, rather than focusing on video-based dating.

> It’s a lot easier to have a Zoom call with someone to work out that you really do fancy them than it is to go and waste two hours of your time in a bar - Charly Lester

“I think it will thin out simply because people want to get back to having normal human interaction, and that includes hugging people, having physical contacts, having penetrative sex – which you can't do with a video,” says Beresford. “That driver is going to outweigh some of the more intellectual concerns around it: ‘is it safe?’ and ‘what are medical issues that I have to grapple with?’.”

However, there is a consensus that the trend for video dating won’t disappear completely, with many suggesting that video calls in the ‘new normal’ will form part of a screening process before a first real-life date.

“People will be far more picky... because meeting up with someone, you're still putting yourself at risk,” says Charly Lester, a dating expert for The Inner Circle dating platform. “It's a lot easier to have a Zoom call with someone to work out that you really do fancy...
them than it is to go and waste two hours of your time in a bar.”

Post-lockdown video dating could serve as screening, a money-saving way to meet or a quick catch up for busy people, experts say

Lester believes that the financial impact of the pandemic will also encourage screen-based first dates. The average cost of a first date in a major global city was $85 in 2019, according to a recent study for Elite Singles, excluding any extra costs for new outfits or personal grooming. “Pre-Covid, it wasn’t a big deal to go on two or three dates for two or three different people... If you have lowered your income or you’ve been furloughed, well then it makes sense that you would do as many dates as possible in free and cheap ways.”

Tinder is betting on the trend, testing its long-awaited in-app video feature in four US states in July, as well as in 12 other countries. A survey for the company showed that 40% of generation Z users said they wanted to continue using video as a way to decide whether or not to meet in real life, even once their favourite dating spots opened up again. Last month, Bumble introduced a new feature to enable daters to signal whether they wanted a first date to be virtual, or socially distanced with or without a mask, a further signal that video dating is likely to remain part of the vetting process for many.

At Global Dating Insights, Dominic Whitlock believes the option to meet digitally will also become a handy tool for time-poor young professionals. “If you’re living and working in a big city, your life’s very busy with work and friends and all those other sorts of commitments, so maybe if you have just met someone once or twice, they’re not right at the top of your priorities,” he says. “[Video calling] will be a way for you to show ‘yes, I'm still interested, but I am just genuinely busy at the moment’... you can sort of mix it up a bit.”

But after months of spending so much time online during lockdown, some daters say the experience has actually put them off spending too much of their personal lives in the digital world.

“Doing a date over a video messaging app – I think I probably won’t do that again,” says David Fell, 43, a British business owner in Dubai who tried video dating at the peak of the pandemic there. “I’ve always enjoyed being around people and I already spend a lot of time on platforms like Zoom for business, because I work with people internationally.” With bars and restaurants now open again where he lives, he’s hoping to meet people the old fashion way “by walking up and talking to them”.

Back in New York, Stephanie Manns says she’s now taking a break from dating, after reflecting during lockdown that she wanted to focus on her work and hobbies for the time being. She says she wouldn’t rule out video dating again in future, especially due to the
current lack of physical events for the LGBTQ community. But she’d still prefer meeting any future partner for the first time in the flesh because “there’s no substitute for the chemistry you get with someone in real life”.