

# Global research shows that digital contact does not enhance wellbeing

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New research involving Nottingham Trent University (NTU) has found that during periods of limited face-to-face contact, such as that experienced by most people during COVID-19 lockdowns, digital

contact is particularly harmful for young people's wellbeing.

The research, led by the University of Kent, focused specifically on social isolation during the early stages of the pandemic, when restricted face-to-face interactions, widespread lockdowns and distancing measures were in place. Restrictions tested the capability of digital communication to foster [social contact](#) and wellbeing during this time.

The study, published by New Media and Society, suggests that video or text-based messaging apps in particular can have a negative effect on the mental wellbeing of young people over 16. For empathetic people, who readily recognize and align with others' emotions, wellbeing was worst when communicating via video chat.

Despite the legal and health implications, face-to-face contact was still positively associated with wellbeing compared to digital contact. However, perceived household vulnerability to COVID-19 reduced the positive effect of face-to-face communication on wellbeing, but surprisingly, people's own vulnerability did not. Findings show that people strived to remain socially connected while maintaining a physical distance, despite the tangible costs to their wellbeing.

The study is part of a larger international project, led by psychologist Dr. Bahar Tunçgenç from NTU's School of Social Sciences, which includes data from 110 countries.

Dr. Tunçgenç said: "We know that face-to-face contact has lots of benefits for social communication, interactions and wellbeing. But at a time when face-to-face contact potentially incurred threat to the health and safety of ourselves and others, would digital contact replace its benefits?"

"Our multi-national data show that only face-to-face contact was good

for wellbeing. With the potential for further [social isolation](#) over the Winter period, these results are critically important to guide individual choices and encourage policies to support people's physical and mental health."

The first author of the study, Dr. Martha Newson at Kent's School of Anthropology and Conservation, said: "As a highly social species, human beings are able to adapt much of their social interactions to online modes, yet our research shows that not all our social needs can be fully met online. We found that ultimately, digital contact does not promote wellbeing in the way that face-to-face does.

"Further to this, young people reported no more face-to-face contact in relation to their digital contact than older people. Therefore, previous attempts to blame young people's disregard for social distancing rules appears misplaced.

"Beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, we need more research to look into the impact that reduced physical interaction can have on young [people](#) and the implications of sustained, isolated digital contact."

The research paper titled "Digital contact does not promote [wellbeing](#), but face-to-face does: A cross-national survey during the COVID-19 pandemic" is published by *New Media and Society*.

**More information:** Martha Newson et al, Digital contact does not promote wellbeing, but face-to-face contact does: A cross-national survey during the COVID-19 pandemic, *New Media & Society* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/14614448211062164](https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211062164)

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