

Real connections trump virtual gatherings: The magic of in-person events

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From virtual dance parties and raves to virtual happy hours and potlucks—online gatherings reached new heights during COVID-19, helping individuals stay connected during lockdowns.

While it's widely accepted that festivals and events bring people together to interact and socialize, less is known about the impact of virtual gatherings on people's social well-being.

Researchers at Flinders University and the University of South Australia examined whether attending an event virtually or in-person makes a difference to loneliness and social connectedness.

Their recent study [published](#) in *Event Management* revealed a significant link between attending face-to-face events and feeling socially connected. Results found that virtual events had no real impact on social connection or loneliness.

Lead author and Flinders University Tourism and Events Lecturer Dr. Eliza Kitchen says the findings are unsurprising given that face-to-face events allow for incidental social interactions as well as the sights, smells and sounds that only in-person experiences can offer.

"We know that in-person events such as festivals can bring about feelings of inclusion and create a sense of belonging and attachment to a place. It's much more difficult to create and maintain social connections in an online environment and the opportunity is limited for attendees to expand beyond their current social circle," she says.

In a survey of 351 people, more than 40% of them had attended between one and three virtual gatherings in 2021, with music events, private parties and online weddings the most popular, particularly among younger age groups.

More than half (66%) of participants had attended fewer events in 2021 than they had in 2019, clearly illustrating COVID-19's impact.

Researchers also considered the impact of age, living arrangements and

relationship status on loneliness and social connectedness. People aged over 60 felt the most socially connected and the least lonely, compared to participants in their 20s and people not in [romantic relationships](#) feeling the loneliest.

UniSA tourism and event management experts Dr. Sunny Son and Julia Jones agree that while it's well known that events bring people together and create opportunities to socialize with new people, there are still benefits to attending events in a [virtual space](#).

"Virtual events have wider reach and increased accessibility, and this is especially true for conferences, learning events and concerts," Dr. Son says.

"Virtual events also offer a perceived level of safety as people can choose how they interact with others and how they express themselves."

However, some experiences simply can't be replicated online.

"Think, for example, of the experience of going to a farmers' market or attending a sporting match. The things that engage our senses—the smell of freshly brewed coffee or the electric atmosphere of a football game—are hard to replicate online," Jones says.

"In-person events also break down people's daily routines and offer them a distraction and a chance to experience something different. Virtual events see a blurring of the line between a person's usual routine and the event. Virtual events are often attended from home, so the difference is reduced."

More information: Eliza Kitchen et al, Can Events Impact on Social Connectedness and Loneliness? An Analysis of Face-To-Face and Virtual Events Attended in South Australia, *Event Management* (2023).

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