

# When Worlds Collide: Sociality Between Physical and Cyberspace during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**ABSTRACT** Many studies have already demonstrated that ICT use does not necessarily lead to more loneliness and social isolation among people. Nevertheless, the assumption that ICT contributes to the feelings of loneliness and associated illnesses persists among some researchers and in everyday discourse. The paper explores the sociological understanding of sociality from the perspective of ICT use during the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovenia. The results of an online survey conducted in the autumn of 2020, with a random sample of 454 participants, indicated that despite the government-imposed restrictions on gatherings and physical interactions of individuals, social dynamics were maintained, albeit predominantly through ICT. Moreover, most respondents reported not experiencing greater loneliness during this period, probably owing to the preservation of their social contacts in cyberspace. It was also observed that the respondents engaged in different activities aimed at sustaining social interaction in cyberspace (i.e., telephone conversations, social media engagement, video calls), contributing to a reduced sense of isolation. The main objective of this paper is to reflect on contemporary social trends, positing that proximity in physical space is no longer a precondition for the emergence and maintenance of social dynamics between individuals.

*Key words:* ICT, sociality, loneliness, COVID-19 pandemic, physical space, cyberspace, spatial sociology, Slovenia.

*"New realities  
Singularities  
Breaking all illusions."*

*(Dream Theater, Breaking All Illusions, 2011)*

## 1. Introduction

In contrast to previous social forms, the distinctiveness of contemporary relationships and processes lies in their intertwining within both physical space and cyberspace. This blend is contributing to a societal shift from territorially-based to network-based model. This intertwining became particularly pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic when information and communication technologies (ICT)<sup>1</sup> played a pivotal role in fostering and maintaining social dynamics, effectively mitigating loneliness. Observations suggest that since the outbreak of COVID-19, loneliness has increased among both older and younger demographics (Dahlberg, 2021; Gallup, 2023), a phenomenon researchers have termed "lockdown loneliness" (Shah et al., 2020). Thus COVID-19 affected people's health both directly by infecting individuals with the virus, and indirectly, through the ramifications of non-pharmaceutical interventions designed to stop the spread of the virus, such as isolation, quarantine, and the enforcement of physical distancing. However, during this period, ICT emerged as a lifeline for those at risk of loneliness, facilitating avoidance of social isolation by enabling communication with the "outside world". This included access to the work sphere through flexible, remote work arrangements; consumer activities via online shopping; information on public affairs through mass media and social media; and leisure pursuits, such as watching movies, series, and gaming. In essence, one of the most significant outcomes of this period has been the migration of a vast array of daily activities from physical to cyberspace, profoundly altering daily life structure. While this trend had been evolving prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis accelerated the transition dramatically, leading to an almost complete shift of societal activities into cyberspace. Thus, the practice of "life on the screen" (Turkle, 1997) from the pre-pandemic period, when this was less desirable for individuals, has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic to "living on the screen out of necessity". We argue that the COVID-19 pandemic cast ICT in a new light, no longer perceived as the cause of the decline of social life but quite the opposite. These technologies have proven to be important for the establishing and maintaining of interpersonal contact. Therefore,

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<sup>1</sup> In our understanding, the fundamental element for a "digital space" is not merely "digital media" but, more accurately, ICT. While digital media encompasses content and technologies defined by their digital format, the scope of ICT is broader. It includes not only digital technologies, but also all data storage technologies and any form of communication, such as landline telephones. This broader definition emphasises the central role of ICT in the creation and functioning of digital spaces and underscores its importance beyond the confines of digital media.

this period offers an opportunity to rethink the nature of sociality in contemporary society, which now also unfolds in cyberspace.

Drawing on the social conditions outlined, and taking the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovenia as a case study, this paper examines how sociality is understood and experienced within the realm of cyberspace through the use of ICT. We begin by providing an overview of the COVID-19 pandemic situation in Slovenia. Following this, we introduce the theoretical framework underpinning our study. In the subsequent section, we present the results of our empirical research. Finally, we summarise these results and discuss their implications.

## **2. Brief history of COVID-19 Pandemic in Slovenia**

In Slovenia, the COVID-19 pandemic was officially declared on two occasions: first between 12<sup>th</sup> March and 14<sup>th</sup> May 2020, coinciding with the first (spring) wave, and subsequently on 18<sup>th</sup> October 2020, at the onset of the second (autumn) wave due to the high number of infected individuals. During the first wave, an average of 61 new infections were recorded daily. Fortunately, by the end of May 2020, the situation had stabilised, allowing life to gradually return to a semblance of normality, thanks in part to the adherence to a range of non-pharmaceutical measures. These included physical distancing, the mandatory wearing of masks, the imposition of curfews and lockdowns, enforcement of quarantine and isolation, restrictions on travel and public gatherings, the adoption of remote working and schooling practices, and the conducting of temperature checks. Owing to these efforts, the summer of 2020 witnessed a notable decline in the number of new cases. However, the situation deteriorated significantly in the autumn. By October 2020, the virus began to spread rapidly again, leading to an exponential increase in infections, and the declaration of the pandemic phase that lasted until June 2021. Strict measures were taken to prevent the spread of infection. In the autumn wave, the number of infected persons was much higher, up to 2,500 infections per day. In the second wave, Slovenia was one of the most severely affected countries. In December 2020, it recorded the highest COVID-19 per capita mortality rate globally (Rus Prelog et al., 2022:2).

Two days after declaring the COVID-19 pandemic in its autumn wave, Slovenia introduced a curfew, prohibiting outdoor activities between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m. Concurrently, all gatherings and events in physical space were prohibited. At the end of October 2020, the Slovenian government mandated a temporary closure, lasting one week, for educational institutions, student dormitories, shopping centres (with the exception for those selling groceries, pet food, and materials), hairdressers, and beauty salons. Furthermore, the government introduced a special act (PIS RS, 2020), which, barring certain exceptions, restricted movement to within individuals' municipality of residence. Throughout November 2020, social activities in physical spaces remained

largely prohibited, with the exception of those involving families and members of the same household. In December 2020, the government began to temporarily lift some of the measures aimed at preventing the spread of the COVID-19.

In March 2021, Slovenia witnessed resurgence in COVID-19 cases, partly attributed to the emergence of more infectious virus strains. The government and professionals began to talk about the third wave, and a complete lockdown of the country was ordered from 1<sup>st</sup> April to 11th April 2021. This was the last lockdown, as public life gradually resumed thereafter, taking into account individual protective measures (e.g., wearing masks in public places, restricting restaurant business, distance learning, etc.). On 15<sup>th</sup> September 2021, the RVT (recovered, vaccinated, tested) condition came into force, becoming mandatory for the majority of social activities, until it was fully lifted in mid-May 2022.

In Slovenia, as in most other countries of the world, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the usual practices and routines of people's daily lives (Ristić, Pajvančič-Cizelj and Čikić, 2020). One of the most notable changes during this period was the shift of numerous daily activities into cyberspace, as public life ground to a halt. This was largely due to restrictions on interpersonal contact and the enforcement of physical distancing measures.<sup>2</sup>

### **3. Sociality and Loneliness: Between Physical Space and Cyberspace**

Our exploration of the relationship between sociality, loneliness, and ICT starts with a discussion on the sociological definitions of sociality addressed by the sociological classics. According to Weber (1978), sociality is an interaction in which the actor's behaviour is meaningfully directed toward others. Simmel (1993) considers sociality to be an example of formal sociology, which in its pure form has no real goal, content, or outcome outside of the social moment as such since it is based entirely on the personalities of individuals. According to Simmel (*ibid.*), sociality is a relationship between actors without any addition, meaning that it is a pure form above any specific content.<sup>3</sup> We are aware that the definitions of sociality presented here are of an ideal type and, to a certain extent, ahistorical since they were created in different historical

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<sup>2</sup> We argue that the use of the term "social distance" in the context of an epidemic is incorrect because people engaged in social activities in cyberspace during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, we deliberately use the term "physical distance" to refer explicitly to the physical distance between people, but not also to distance in terms of social activities. For detailed explanation see Lenarčič and Smrdelj (2020: 130–134).

<sup>3</sup> Giddens' concept of pure relationship also recalls Simmel's definition of sociality, which "refers to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it" (Giddens, 1992:58).

and social contexts. Nevertheless, their common denominator is that they understand sociality as an interaction between at least two actors. This means that Weber (1978) and Simmel (1993) define sociality as a particular situation in which at least two people are present, talking, laughing, joking, or simply having fun interacting.

In discussing the notion of sociality, it is important to note that interactions between actors who are physically proximate to each other (i.e., interactions not mediated by any specific medium) are considered as a fundamental form of human communication and socialisation, both in classical sociological thought and in everyday life. Berger and Luckman (1991) explain this by saying that “the most important experience of the others takes place in the face-to-face situation, which is the prototypical case of social interaction. All other cases are derivatives of it” (1991:43). Their definition is based on the premise that unmediated communication is the most authentic and only true manifestation of the communication process, hierarchically highest, and that all other forms of communication (especially mediated) are subordinate to it. However, it is true that due to physical proximity, face to face communication among participants creates greater feeling of connectedness. As Nguyen et al. (2021) argue different digital communication methods display different relationships with social connectedness. According to their findings, “media that are high in social presence (e.g., synchronous and with more communicative cues) such as video and phone calls are likely better at facilitating social connectedness because they are closer to face-to-face communication compared to media that are lower in social presence (e.g., asynchronous and with fewer communicative cues) such as text messaging and email” (Nguyen et al. 2021:2047). At this point it is important to highlight that contemporary communication applications facilitated by ICT, such as Snapchat, Viber, and Facebook Messenger, integrate different modes of communication including video, voice, and text. As a result, the previously mentioned classifications of channels as being either high or low in social presence are now less distinct. In addition, contemporary users often select from multiple communication applications depending on their preferences, purposes, and circumstances, which means their perceptions of social presence and connectedness with others may vary. In this context, it is also pertinent to consider the assumptions of some early authors (Kraut et al., 1998; Nie and Erbring, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Nie, Hillygus and Erbring, 2002; Stepanikova, Nie and He, 2010; Turkle, 2012), who deem ICT to be a cause of antisocial behaviour of individuals.

Based on the assumption that the convergence of physical and social space is no longer essential for the emergence and maintenance of sociality in contemporary society, authors Zhao (2003; 2006) and Zhao and Elesh (2008) distinguish “co-location” and “co-presence”. To summarise, in co-location, the spatial relationship between actors is important, whereas in co-presence, the focus is on the social dynamics taking place among them. In accordance with the main thesis of our discussion, it should be emphasised that co-location is no longer a prerequisite for co-presence. This challenges the assumption that social relations require proximity in physical space.

In contemporary society, social dynamics are shaped not only by proximity in physical space but also by distant connections facilitated by ICT, leading to the emergence of cyberspace. The term “cyberspace” was first coined by William Gibson in his 1984 novel, *Neuromancer*, and has since been conceptualized and established by authors from different scientific fields including Benedikt (1991), Jordan (1999), Turkle (1999), and Bell (2002), among others. In contemporary sociological terms, cyberspace refers to the interconnected virtual environment created by ICT. It is a conceptual realm where individuals can interact, communicate, and engage in a myriad of activities via digital means, thus transcending traditional time and space boundaries. This evolution has changed the experience of interpersonal communication and with it, the way communicators experience other individuals in terms of their accessibility, their (simultaneous) presence, and the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships—all of which points to the construction of new kinds of sociality that we do not understand hierarchically as better or worse in relation to supposedly genuine and unmediated interpersonal communication, but merely as a new form of sociality that has no a priori negative effects (e.g., antisocial behaviour) stemming from the use of ICT in everyday life.

Even though sociality is one of the most important features of human existence, it must be taken into account that its forms change depending on the general social conditions. However, the understanding of these changes, while not entirely novel within the realm of sociology, remains somewhat elusive among researchers. Thus, in the late 1990s, one of the first articles was published that dealt with the impact of ICT on the social life of individuals. Based on empirical longitudinal research, Kraut and colleagues (1998) demonstrated that internet users experienced a decline in social life and an increase in loneliness and depression. This research was followed by other studies of empirical research on ICT users, including Nie and Erbring (2000), Putnam (2000), Nie, Hillygus and Erbring (2002), Stepanikova, Nie and He (2010), Turkle (2012), and Twenge (2017), among others, which claimed that ICT contributed significantly to the decline in contemporary social life. Compared to studies that conclude that ICT use has a positive impact on social dynamics (e.g., Nie, Hillygus and Erbring, 2002; Boase and Wellman, 2006; Mizuko et al., 2010; Rainie and Wellman, 2012; Ellison and boyd, 2013; boyd, 2014; Hampton and Wellman, 2018; 2020), studies that argue the opposite receive more media attention and, therefore, represent the source of a moral panic, not as a result of the actual situation but a result of the media’s treatment of the issue. One of the most notable examples of this type of media exposure is the *New York Times*, which published the research findings of Kraut and colleagues (1998) in the front-page article titled *Sad, Lonely World Discovered in Cyberspace* (Harmon, 1998), which could be held as the beginning of the moral panic that has not fully calmed down to this day.

The studies mentioned above, which adopt a negative attitude toward ICT from the outset, can also be contextualised within the context of general reservations and fears

usually present in most of the population when new media or communication technologies appear. For example, Plato regarded the written word as the enemy of human memory (Furedi, 2015), movies were once perceived as corruption to youth (Springhall, 1998; Biltereyst, 2005), the walkman was criticised for promoting anti-social behaviour (Hosokawa, 1984), and video games and rock music were accused of fostering bullying behaviour (Springhall, 1998). Similarly, the advent of ICT has been accompanied by fears that it might turn people into antisocial and lonely individuals.

However, empirical studies are increasingly finding that the causes of social isolation, loneliness, and depression are not primarily due to the use of ICT. Instead, they are attributed to the interconnectedness of broader social processes and phenomena of which these technologies are also part (boyd, 2008; 2014; Furedi, 2006; Glassner, 1999; Hampton and Wellman, 2018; 2020; Kusumota et al., 2022). With regard to the latter in particular, it must be stressed (again) that the integration of ICT into everyday life has transformed the forms of mutual communication and maintaining contacts that were valid until recently. For example, boyd's studies (2008; 2014) find that young people use ICT only because they do not have the opportunity to meet with friends and peers in public places in the physical space (e.g., the prohibition of being in certain public places and the combination of the process of suburbanisation and the decline of public transportation), their lives are very structured (the increasing number of school and extracurricular activities leads to the reduction of free time), and regulated by prohibitions due to a "culture of fear" (Glassner, 1999; Furedi, 2006), which is expressed in the opinion of parents that leaving home means danger. It can be concluded that cyberspace has become the equivalent of (public) physical places (e.g., streets, squares, parking lots, shopping malls, etc.) where not so long ago, most of the youth's social dynamics were taking place.

We conclude that the occurrence of loneliness and accompanying illnesses cannot solely be attributed to the use of ICT, but must be understood within the prevailing social framework that shapes contemporary lifestyles. The presence and use of ICT exclusively, therefore, do not inherently lead to a higher degree of loneliness and accompanying illnesses. On the contrary, the absence of ICT in modern social conditions could result in greater loneliness since without its existence or possibilities of use, interpersonal communication and connection would additionally be hindered or disabled. This was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the establishing and maintaining of interactions in physical space was practically impossible, and ICT played a central role in maintaining contact with the outside world. Several studies (e. g., DesChâtelets, 2023; Ammar et al., 2020; Shah et al., 2020) argue that ICT was critical in reducing and mitigating social, physical, and psychological risks during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, ICT not only facilitated improved social contact and reduced loneliness during the pandemic, but also enabled individuals at risk of loneliness to avoid social isolation.

In light of the pandemic, it is prudent to practice physical distance while simultaneously encouraging individuals to maintain connection through various (alternative) methods within their respective social networks. Failure to do so may result in social recession—a breakdown in social dynamics and contacts. This scenario disproportionately affects social groups most susceptible to isolation and loneliness, such as older adults and individuals with mobility impairments. Crisis situations underscore the necessity for interpersonal closeness. In addition, loneliness increases the risk of illness and even mortality. Social relationships are crucial for both physical (Holt-Lunstad and Smith, 2016; Holt-Lunstad, Robles and Sbarra, 2017) and mental health (DesChâtelets, 2023; Courtet et al., 2020). The limiting of social contact and social activities presents mortality risks comparable to those associated with smoking and obesity (Holt-Lunstad, Robles and Sbarra, 2017; Jeste, Lee and Cacioppo, 2020). These findings are also the reason why loneliness is increasingly recognised as an important public health problem (Gallup, 2023; Gerst-Emerson and Jayawardhana, 2015; Klinenberg, 2016), which intensified during the period when COVID-19-affected countries declared a pandemic and implemented various interventions, or non-pharmaceutical interventions, to curtail the spread of the virus, leading to a marked decrease in social activities in physical spaces.

#### **4. What We Studied and What We Found?**

Building on the theoretical foundation outlined above, this paper examines the role of ICT in shaping social interactions during the lockdown in everyday lives of Slovenia's residents. Our inquiry is driven by the transformative power of ICT during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in shifting social interactions from the physical domain to the expanses of cyberspace. Driven by this, our main interest is to research experience of social dynamics in the context of cyberspace by using ICT and consequently contribute towards the understanding of sociality in contemporary society. Our idea rests on the premise that, unlike previous social forms, the specificity of contemporary relations and processes lies in the intertwining and interdependence of physical space and cyberspace, with social dynamics being no exception.

To achieve this objective, we designed an online survey that was conducted during the peak of the second (autumn) wave, from 16<sup>th</sup> November to 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2020. The questionnaire link was disseminated through social networking sites and by email with a request for forwarding. The survey was completed by 454 individuals aged between 18 and 84 years, with the majority (34%) in the age group between 35 and 44. More than half of the respondents have a university degree (53%), the majority are employed (68%) and married or live together (72%). Among the respondents, there was a significantly higher proportion (62%) of women.

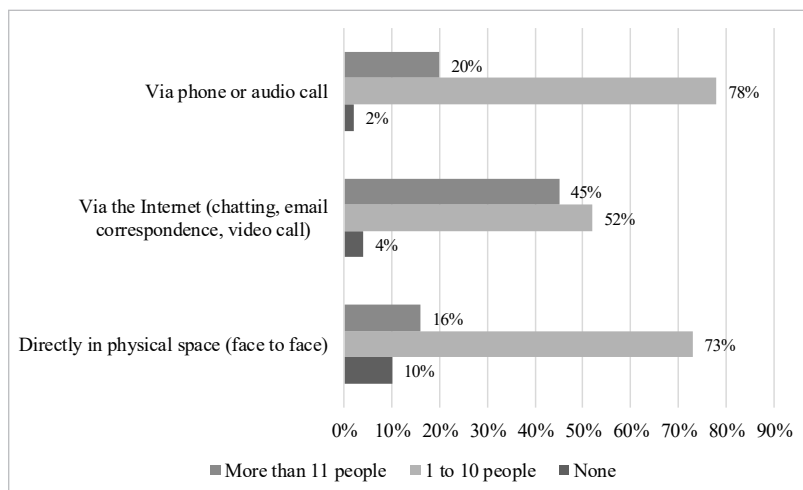


#### 4.1. The Existence of Social Dynamics in Cyberspace

The results of our online survey reveal that a substantial majority of the respondents (82%) adhered to the government's measures and recommendations to curb the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, social interaction was deemed important by over two-thirds (66%) of the respondents. Therefore, it is not surprising that when physical contact was limited, individuals sought alternative methods to maintain interactions within their social networks. As shown in Graph 1, the utilisation of ICT was notably prevalent among these alternatives. According to the data illustrated in Graph 1, 45% of the respondents communicated with an average of more than 11 people via the internet (using chat, email, and video calls) in the previous week, 20% maintained contact via telephone, while only 16% had direct, face-to-face interactions.

Graph 1.

How many people did you contact with in the last week and in what way?



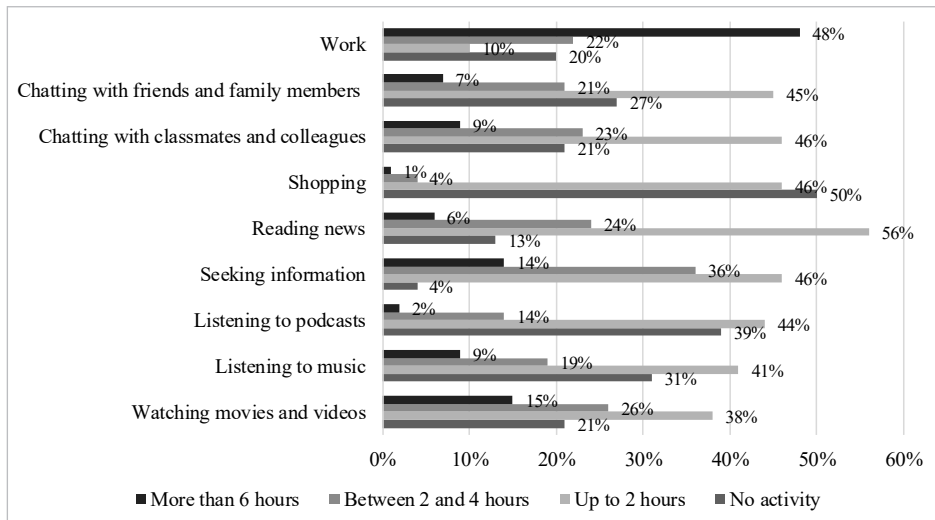
The data indicate that a large part of interpersonal communication took place in cyberspace, leading to a predominant use of online communication applications. Among these services, the majority of the respondents preferred Messenger (74%), followed by Viber (59%), ZOOM (58%), WhatsApp (42%), Skype (35%), and MS Teams (23%). Likewise, the respondents most frequently used an application intended for informal communication with friends and acquaintances (Messenger, Viber), while applications usually used for business and professional communication (ZOOM, MS Teams) were less frequently used. Moreover, the survey revealed that during this period, over half of the respondents (56%) were working from home.

To find out how important the activity of maintaining a social dynamic in comparison to other cyberspace activities (e.g., information seeking, work, leisure activities,

shopping), we interrogated the respondents on their previous-week daily ICT usage for different activities, such as communication, searching for information, work, etc. (Graph 2). The results revealed that 73% of all respondents used it to communicate with friends and family members. However, using ICT for social activities is among the most frequently performed activities in cyberspace. Information-related activities took precedence, with seeking information (96%) and reading news (87%) being the most common, followed by work-related activities (80%), chatting with classmates or colleagues and watching movies (79%), and then communication with friends and family (73%). Shopping was the least engaged activity, with only 50% of the respondents participating.

Graph 2.

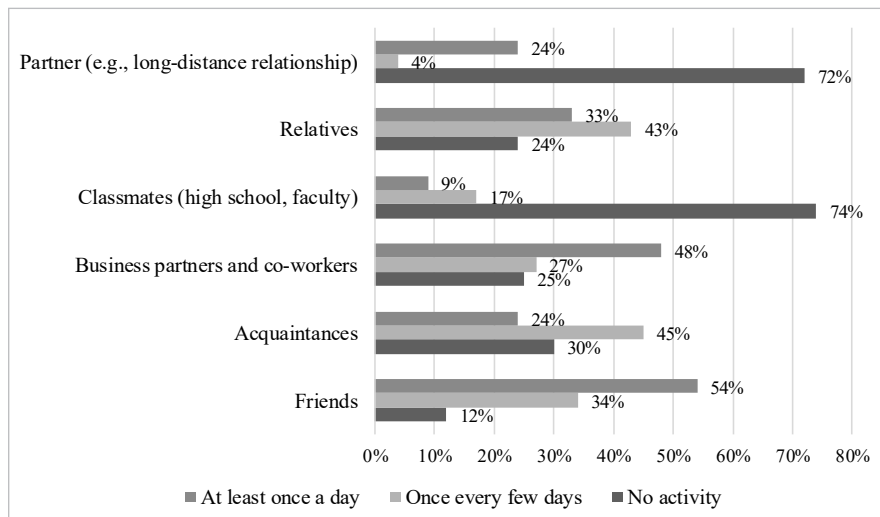
In the last week, how many hours per day did you use the internet for the activities listed above?



The frequency of social dynamics within cyberspace was also explored by asking the respondents about their most common communication partners over the past week (Graph 3). The results show that the majority of the respondents communicated with friends (88%), suggesting that most interpersonal communication over ICT falls within the sphere of social activities rather than work. Relatives were the second most common communication partners (76%), closely followed by business partners and colleagues (75%), and acquaintances (70%). Communication with partners, such as those in long-distance relationships, was reported by 28%, and classmates (from high school to university) by 26%. Additionally, the survey revealed that slightly more than half of all respondents (54%) communicated with their friends at least once a day over the past week. These results suggest that cyberspace could be an important arena for social interactions, occupying a significant portion of communication activities.

Graph 3.

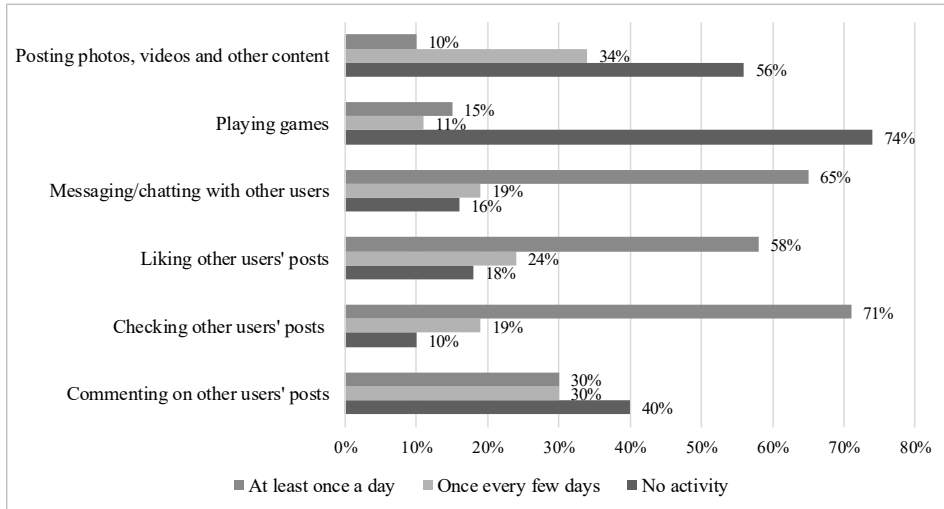
In the last week, how often did you communicate via the internet with the people mentioned above?



To gain insight into the predominant forms of communication activity in cyberspace, we examined the way in which the respondents interacted most frequently on social media platforms. We were particularly interested in the frequency of the respondents' engagement in active forms of communication in cyberspace (e.g., messaging/chatting with other users, commenting on other users' posts) compared to passive forms (e.g., viewing and liking other users' posts, posting photos, videos, and other content). The findings, illustrated in Graph 4, reveal that the most common form of interaction was viewing other users' posts, with 90% of the respondents engaging in this activity. Messaging/chatting with other users was the next most frequent form of communication (84%), followed by liking (82%) and commenting on other users' posts (60%). Sharing photos, videos, and other types of content was practiced by 44% of the respondents. The least popular activity among the respondents was playing games, at 26%.

Graph 4.

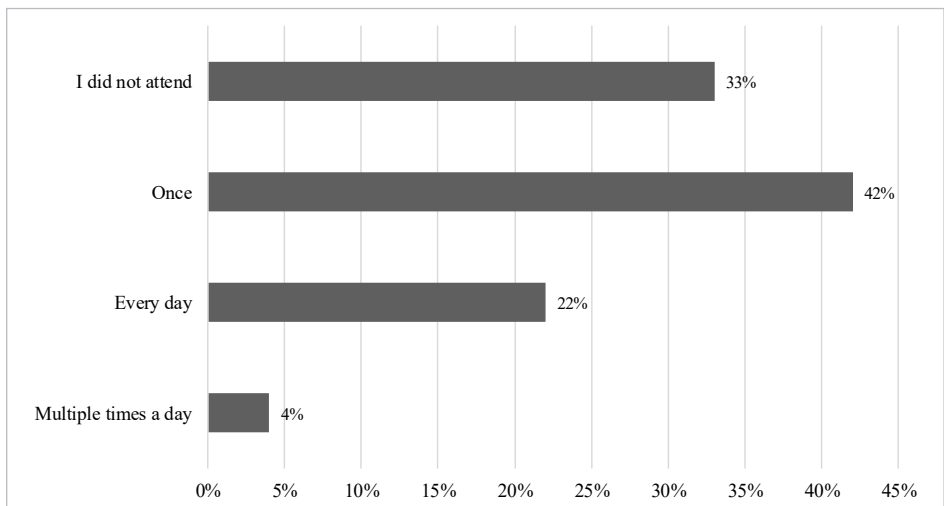
In the last week, how often did you use social media (Facebook, Twitter (now X), LinkedIn, Instagram, etc.) for the activities listed above?



In response to the prohibition of live, face-to-face events during the lockdown, live online events emerged as an alternative form of social interaction (Lenarčič and Smrdelj, 2020). To further understand these new social dynamics, we asked participants how often they attended such online events.

Graph 5.

In the past week, how often did you attend online events, such as music concerts, lectures, group video meetings, conversations with friends, etc.?



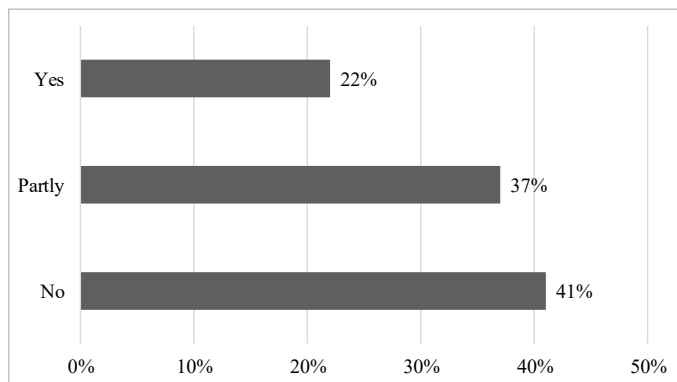
As shown in the data presented in Graph 5, two-thirds of the respondents participated in online social events at least once in the past week. These findings further demonstrate that social dynamics during the COVID-19 pandemic transitioned into cyberspace, where not only interpersonal communication took place, as we have shown above, but also social events in which the respondents participated.

Conversely, our research revealed that a vast majority of the respondents (95%) were not part of any specific online group established for socialising during the pandemic in Slovenia, such as Anticorona Schnaps Vaccination, Live Music from the Armchair, etc. We hypothesise that these groups were more relevant during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the situation was novel, unknown and held a certain intrigue. Likewise, there was more uncertainty about the progression of the COVID-19 pandemic, and therefore, such online gatherings probably played a more significant role.<sup>4</sup>

Graph 6 clearly shows that more than one-fifth of the respondents (22%) reported feeling lonelier than before the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, when asked to rate their prevailing mood over the last week, 3% of the participants identified loneliness as their dominant feeling, and 20% of reported feeling lonely at the moment of survey completion.

Graph 6.

Would you say for yourself that you feel lonelier during the COVID-19 pandemic than before it?



To delve deeper into the specific causes of the loneliness experienced by the respondents and identify what measures helped alleviate this feeling, a more complex and targeted survey should be designed. Nevertheless, based on the survey results obtained and the literature review conducted, it can be inferred that the contacts that the re-

<sup>4</sup> For more on the social dynamics during the first wave of the COVID-19 epidemic on Facebook, see Lenarčič and Smrdelj (2020).

spondents had with other people through ICT during this period somewhat contributed in reducing the feelings of loneliness. The respondents were also asked to rate on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 meaning does not impact at all, 5 meaning completely impact) to what extent various forms of communication with friends and family members contributed to making them feel less lonely.

Table 1.

The impact of certain activities on respondents that made them feel less lonely.

	1	2	3	4	5	Total	Avg.	SD
<b>Talking to friends/family members over the phone</b>	24	40	96	88	159	407	3.9	1.3
	5.9%	9.80%	23.60%	21.60%	39%	100%		
<b>Talking to friends/family members via video call</b>	48	41	87	52	102	330	3.9	1.7
	14.60%	12.40%	26.70%	15.70%	30.90%	100%		
<b>Keeping in touch with friends/family members via social networks</b>	34	64	98	75	110	381	3.7	1.4
	8.90%	16.80%	25.70%	19.70%	28.90%	100%		

Table 1 clearly demonstrates that for the majority of the respondents communicating with friends and family members over the phone helped them feel less lonely. This method was closely followed by communication via social network sites and video calls. Although telephone communication was considered the key tool for overcoming loneliness, ICT tools also played a significant role in this context, contributing a substantial share to the reducing of the feelings of isolation.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The study presented examines the sociological concept of sociality in relation to the utilisation of ICT. The results of an online survey revealed that despite the governmental measures restricting gatherings and physical interactions of individuals, social dynamics were still present, albeit predominantly through ICT. Namely, during the COVID-19 lockdown, 45% of the respondents reported communicating with more than 11 people through internet-based platforms, such as chat, email, and video calls, while 20% used telephones, and 16% engaged in face-to-face interactions. The most commonly used applications were for informal communication (e.g., Messenger and

Viber), with professional tools such as ZOOM and MS Teams being used less frequently. Moreover, the results revealed that 73% of the respondents used it to communicate with friends and family members. Friends were the primary contacts in online communications, with 88% of the respondents communicating with them, followed by relatives and colleagues. Social media usage was high, with 90% checking posts and 84% messaging others. Participation in online social events was noted by two-thirds of the respondents, but 95% did not join online groups aimed at socializing during the pandemic. Finally, only 22% felt lonelier during the pandemic, which can be explained by the fact that they maintained their social contacts through ICT. The study also found that several activities related to maintaining social interaction in cyberspace (i.e., telephone conversations, social media, video calls) made the respondents feel less lonely.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored how cyberspace, through ICT-mediated interactions, can transcend temporal and geographic barriers to foster social connections. Thus, in our case this period served as an opportunity to examine the “hybrid” nature of modern spaces, which integrate both physical and cyberspace, and entail interdependent and intertwined social interactions and relationships.

One of the concepts that can be used to describe this dynamic is the “refiguration of space” (Löw and Knoblauch, 2020). This concept helps us understand that contemporary “space”—on both material and conceptual levels—can no longer be envisioned as divided into physical space and cyberspace. Instead, it should be seen as an interplay between the two spheres, influencing the shaping of social dynamics and processes, which was already argued a while ago by different authors, such as Jones (1998) and Lenarčič (2010).

In everyday life, ICT-generated interactions have become a complement to local spatial structuring in physical space. Thus these interactions can no longer be viewed as a temporary social experiment, strictly separate from physical realms. Applying Roy’s (2020) explanatory apparatus, the COVID-19 pandemic forces a reimagination of the social, with the COVID-19 virus being a portal representing a transition between two worlds—the world as we knew it before March 2020 and the new world, in which the state of exception becomes the new normal—the Coronacene. However, when discussing the results from our research, it is pivotal to acknowledge that these findings should not be interpreted as definitive evidence or categorical affirmations substantiating our foundational assumption—that physical space is no longer a mandatory component for the unfolding of social dynamics. Instead, these outcomes should be viewed as insights pertinent to our constrained sample, serving as a groundwork for the reflecting on the nuances of sociability within contemporary society. Nevertheless, despite the significant methodological limitations of our study, including a non-representative sample and reliance on descriptive statistics, we maintain that our findings

highlight trends in the migration of social activities into cyberspace. These trends imply that physical proximity is no longer a prerequisite for the development and sustenance of social dynamics among individuals in contemporary society. Instead, as indicated in our study, these dynamics can also unfold within the realm of cyberspace.

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## **Kad se svjetovi sudare: Društenost između fizičkog i kibernetičkog prostora tijekom pandemije COVID-19**

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### **Sažetak**

Mnoge studije već su pokazale da korištenje informacijsko-komunikacijskih tehnologija (IKT) ne dovodi nužno do veće usamljenosti i socijalne izolacije među ljudima. Unatoč tome, pretpostavka da IKT doprinosi osjećajima usamljenosti i povezanim bolestima i dalje postoji među nekim istraživačima i u svakodnevnom životu. Ovaj rad raspravlja o sociološkom razumijevanju socijalnosti iz perspektive korištenja IKT-a za vrijeme pandemije COVID-19 u Sloveniji. Rezultati online ankete provedene na slučajnom uzorku (n=454) tijekom jeseni 2020. godine pokazali su da je unatoč vladinim mjerama, koje ograničavaju okupljanja i fizičke interakcije pojedinaca, socijalna dinamika i dalje bila prisutna, iako pretežno putem IKT-a. Štoviše, većina ispitanika nije iskusila veću usamljenost tijekom tog razdoblja, vjerojatno zato što su održavali svoje socijalne kontakte u kiberprostoru. Također, otkrili smo da su ispitanici bili uključeni u različite aktivnosti povezane s održavanjem socijalne interakcije u kiberprostoru (npr., telefonski razgovori, aktivnosti na društvenim mrežama, video-pozivi), što im je pomoglo osjećati se manje usamljeno. Glavni cilj rada je promišljanje o suvremenim socijalnim trendovima, sugerirajući da blizina u fizičkom prostoru više nije preduvjet za nastanak i održavanje socijalne dinamike među pojedincima.

*Ključne riječi:* IKT, društenost, usamljenost, COVID-19 epidemija, fizički prostor, kibernetički prostor, sociologija prostora, Slovenija.