Cover letter:

This creator's statement is an attempt to put the ideas my TED talk discusses into a more relatable context. Prior to writing this, I had done a lot of thinking about how the concepts I had researched tie into the current situation with online learning. As a result, when I sat down to write this, most of what I wrote is about how online learning can be socially degrading. Even though this section seems somewhat exaggerated, I was happy with how I was able to articulate the ideas that I had.

Creator's Statement:

I began working on this project early in the school year. I decided to explore this topic because I have been interested in technology since I was a little kid. My interests have changed over the years, but the interest in technology has been with me for so long that at this point, it is practically a part of who I am. However the technology itself has changed over the years as well. It has quite subtly evolved from the versatile machines designed to perform specific functions into a social phenomenon that can take over people's lives and personalities. The goal for this project was to explore how that happened.

The short answer is that email, text messages, and social media took away uncertainties and made communication easy and convenient, but at the same time, made us worse in-person communicators. My ted talk goes into detail about what causes this, but the virtual presentation is not what was originally intended. I started researching this earlier in the year. The end goal for the project was to possibly create an interactive experience for an observer which would demonstrate the difference between online and in-person communication. I wanted to demonstrate this to show the audience that it is important to maintain their in-person social skills in an era where they can be eroded easily. I wanted to encourage people to talk to each other, and try to have real, meaningful conversations in person.

Then the entire world changed. March 13th was my last day at school (Friday the 13th- how appropriate). We live in a different world now. It’s a world of online classes and virtual social gatherings. We have never been so reliant on technology before. When I attempted to work on this project during remote school, I struggled to put thoughts together. All of the research I had done about the difference between online and in-person communication, was from the pre-quarantine era. That feels like a distant memory. It is impossible to prevent social skills from deteriorating when in-person communication has been almost completely eliminated.

Interestingly, this topic is more relevant now than ever. Since March 13th the entirety of my direct social communication has consisted solely of conversations over Zoom, Discord, and the occasional text message. Text messages are not active communications, Discord calls are voice only. Only Zoom puts us in a situation where we can even see each other’s faces. But even this is not a substitute for actually talking to someone in person. Yes, you can see their face and hear them talk. But the video feed is often low resolution, the audio quality can be inconsistent,
and I’m sure we’ve all had to deal with the “you internet connection is unstable” message at one time or another. And all of this, of course, is secondary to the fact that you are- you know- not in the same room. Real social interaction doesn’t work like a zoom meeting, and frankly, it is terrifying how quickly some people have forgotten this.

Let’s talk for a minute about online school. Going to school is more than just simply attending classes and studying material. It’s an overarching experience. One of the most important intangible things we learn at school is how to socialize. You don’t necessarily have to be the most outgoing or talkative person in the room (I certainly am not), but you learn how to create relationships, sometimes in large groups, sometimes in smaller circles. These social skills are important to have, and it is important that students are placed in an environment where they have to develop them because for some people, they do not come naturally. When you scroll through your preferred social-media platform, you will see droves of people enjoying themselves in quarantine, entertaining themselves through video calls in which they actively try to partake in meaningful conversations. These are not the people I’m worried about. Their social skills are fine. It’s the people you don’t see on social media that are really feeling the impact of this. They will never go out of their way to coordinate video calls or socially-distanced picnics with each other. The only way they socialized before was because they went to school for eight hours a day with many others just like them, and even though they probably won't admit it, they enjoyed this. I know this because I am one of these people. I’m not an overly social person, but I understand the implications of what is going on right now. I have just enough mental stability to have remained relatively even-keeled so far, but I’m genuinely concerned about what the future holds for the people who don’t. The source of almost all of their social interaction has been replaced with two to three video calls per day in which sixteen people are all asked bland, meaningless questions and respond with bland, meaningless answers. The teachers, administration, and parents have the audacity to keep calling it “school.”

The quarantine has forced me to experience some of what I’ve researched in its full effect. Sometimes, on the rare occasions that I talk to people from the outside world, it is as if I have no idea what to do. I hope that my TED talk presentation allows viewers to realize some of these things call attention to the detrimental impact that such limited social interaction can have. If the effects of technology on in-person communication were severe before, the research that I presented is more important than it has ever been.