



T h e L a n t e r n T r i b e

EDITION 20

**ALONE
TOGETHER:**

The lonely generation

From the Founder's Desk....



Loneliness is one of the defining experiences of our time. We are more connected than ever, yet many of us struggle to feel truly seen. It is present in crowded cities, in our online lives, in our friendships, and sometimes even within ourselves. This edition is an attempt to understand that silence. Not through a single answer, but through different voices, experiences, and perspectives.

'Alone Together: The Lonely Generation' brings together articles that explore loneliness from social, political, psychological, cultural, and technological lenses. Each piece asks an important question. Together, they invite us to reflect on the world we are building and the relationships we are living.

This edition would not have been possible without the dedication of our writers, who trusted us with their ideas and stories. My sincere thanks to our editorial team for shaping every article with care, and to our designer for giving this edition its visual identity.

As we release the 20th edition of The Lantern Tribe, it is also a moment to look back with gratitude. Over the past five years, this magazine has grown into a community of more than 500 writers, editors, designers, and contributors. Today, each edition reaches 30,000 to 45,000 readers, a reminder that thoughtful conversations still find their audience. As always, thank you to our readers for growing with The Lantern Tribe. I hope this edition encourages conversations that continue long after the final page.

*Warm regards,
Vani Dhaka
Founder- The Lantern Tribe*

Editor's Column

India has come a long way from being a hyper-collectivist to an increasingly individualist culture, especially in urban areas. Our ancestors lived with their extended families, three generations of the family tree living under a shared roof. The town was full of familiar faces—it was never a small world, just a capacious space in our hearts and schedules. We cannot recreate that culture without harming women, queer and neurodivergent people, but as we move towards individualism, we need to ensure we honour ourselves as social beings before resigning to a life that accommodates none but ourselves. Because, sneakily enough, loneliness is starting to catch up.

Individualism has driven us all apart from each other. Our lives grew smaller and smaller until all the pieces of connection we are left with are barely enough to hold our own selves. A call notification exhausts us, and a gathering hosted a bus ride away is much too far. We sacrifice human connections to be reduced to a mere consumer, a metric on some business's screen. Instead of being the one friend who showed up, we become one among a bajillion people who viewed a video on YouTube, a reel on Instagram, and a series on Netflix. Instead of visiting a therapist to unpack and help us heal, we're paying AI to lie for our sake. The comfort of facelessness drives our disinterest in relationships, but that inconvenience is the price we pay for an authentic human experience. That programmed bot will not embrace you when you're going through a messy breakup; your friend will. The finance influencers whom you religiously follow will not lend you money during an emergency; your siblings will. The connections we invest so much in, which we value over our relationships, were never ours to begin with. It was a monetary transaction, whether it was visible or not.

Loneliness is a structural issue presently, but it is not the inevitable truth. While capitalism, the ultimate grandmaster of our lives, loves to keep us isolated and lonely, our ignorance empowers it the most. We delude ourselves by referring to exchanging memes as friendships, by trying to find solace in TV characters, and by fighting our feelings away. But ignorance is not proof of absence. We need to face the fact that we're increasingly lonely, and heartfelt human connections are the only possible cure. Pouring your heart out to your best friend over a cup of chai, calling your old friends every few weeks for some *chatpata* gossip, and investing time and effort into your dearest people is the only way to not let the loneliness, ironically, consume you.

This edition of The Lantern Tribe brings an eye-opening exploration of modern loneliness to further expose us to the verities that we miss in the chaotic hullabaloo of our adult life. Wishing you an insightful read ahead!

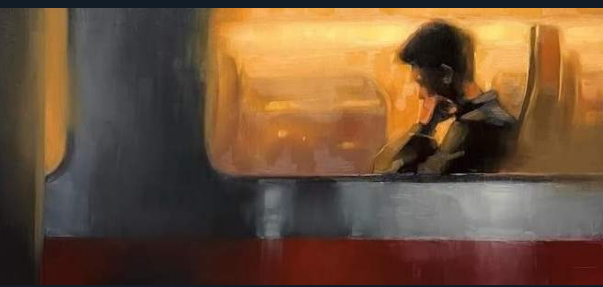
—Joyotri Nandy
Editor-in-Chief
The Lantern Tribe

Table of Contents

06

The Geography of Loneliness

S Manasi



Living Alone in a City

Urbi

13

18

The Architecture of Loneliness

Panchmi Yadav



Are Notifications Enough? The Complexities Of Adult Friendships

Kritika Bhatia

24

31

Digital Intimacy: Are Online Friendships Real?

Dhanvi Kadian



Playing the Dating Game

Jahnvi Borgohain

38

Table of Contents

45

Demotion Of Love In The Age Of AI

Navya Kapoor



The Feedback Loop of Loneliness

S.K. Meenakshi

53

60

The Lone of Being Exceptional

Ojas Vijayavargeeya



Mard Ko Dard Nahi Hota Hai

Isha Singh

66

76

Contributions



Bibliography

77

1 The Geography of Loneliness

Mapping connections in the digital age



S Manasi

The Modern Paradox

Indeed, we have reached an age when communication happens almost instantaneously across the globe, allowing us to communicate with many people simultaneously. However, many people find themselves feeling increasingly lonely. The use of social media has become popular for sharing aspects of people's lives with others, recording events and expressing thoughts. However, many people prefer to post positive aspects of their lives while leaving loneliness unspoken and unaddressed. In this way, loneliness, which used to be seen as a purely personal experience, has developed into one of the greatest yet least spoken about mental health issues.

However, if we have become so interconnected, why do many people continue to feel lonely? Many people confuse loneliness with solitude. While loneliness can indeed be experienced as solitude, it can also be felt even in the presence of other people. A person may be surrounded by friends, colleagues, or even family, yet still feel an overwhelming sense of disconnection. It is the feeling that one's relationships lack depth, understanding, or emotional support. In many cases, loneliness is not caused by the absence of people but by the absence of meaningful connection and genuine emotional intimacy.

Mental health experts have acknowledged the urgency of the issue. For instance, in the United Kingdom, the top mental health experts have cautioned about the "silent mental health pandemic" that impacts not only individual lives but also society and the economy. The latest research has revealed that there are an estimated 4.1 million contacts made with the mental health care services in England for the year 2024-2025, which reflects a rise of 56% from 2016-2017

“Technology has shortened the distance between continents, but it has not always shortened the distance between hearts.” The rise of loneliness in modern society cannot be attributed to a single cause. Factors such as technological advancements, changes in lifestyle, migration to cities, and pressures due to changes in modern-day working environments have brought about changes in how people interact and form relationships. Although technology makes it easy for people to communicate, it has led to the substitution of traditional personal interactions with more superficial forms of interaction through electronic media. In addition to this, many people migrate from their hometowns to other locations to pursue higher education or for job purposes. As a result, even people surrounded by colleagues, acquaintances, and online networks may still experience a profound sense of isolation.

Prolonged loneliness is increasingly being linked to serious mental health struggles such as anxiety, depression, emotional burnout, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal. Chronic loneliness can heighten stress levels and negatively affect emotional regulation, making individuals more vulnerable to feelings of hopelessness and insecurity. Modern digital culture often intensifies these struggles by encouraging constant comparison with carefully curated online lives, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy and emotional isolation. At the same time, academic pressure, demanding work cultures, societal pressure and the expectation to remain constantly productive leave many individuals emotionally exhausted despite appearing socially connected. Over time, loneliness can become cyclical, as emotional distress leads individuals to withdraw further from meaningful interaction, deepening their sense of isolation.

The Invisible Architecture of Loneliness



“Perhaps the most painful aspect of loneliness is not the feeling itself, but the silence in which it is endured.”



Despite the growing prevalence of loneliness, many people continue to suffer from it quietly. Loneliness is not always visible; more often, it hides behind smiles, routine conversations, and everyday interactions. Admitting to loneliness can carry a quiet stigma, as it is sometimes perceived as a sign of weakness or social failure. In a world where one needs to look socially engaged and happy at all times, many choose to maintain this facade despite personal struggles. It is also natural to avoid causing trouble to your close ones by burdening them with your emotions, which explains why people prefer silence to sharing what they feel.

Some individuals assume a passive role in their relationships by being the listeners. Such people are ready to support their friends whenever they need it, but refrain from voicing their problems themselves. Over time, this dynamic can make it difficult for them to express vulnerability. Past experiences can deepen this silence as well. People who have previously opened up emotionally may have faced betrayal, dismissal, or indifference, leaving them hesitant to trust others again. When vulnerability is met with misunderstanding or withdrawal, it reinforces the belief that their feelings are unwelcome.

Connection without Intimacy

At 2 a.m., thousands of people scroll silently through glowing screens, surrounded by messages yet unable to shake the quiet feeling of being alone.

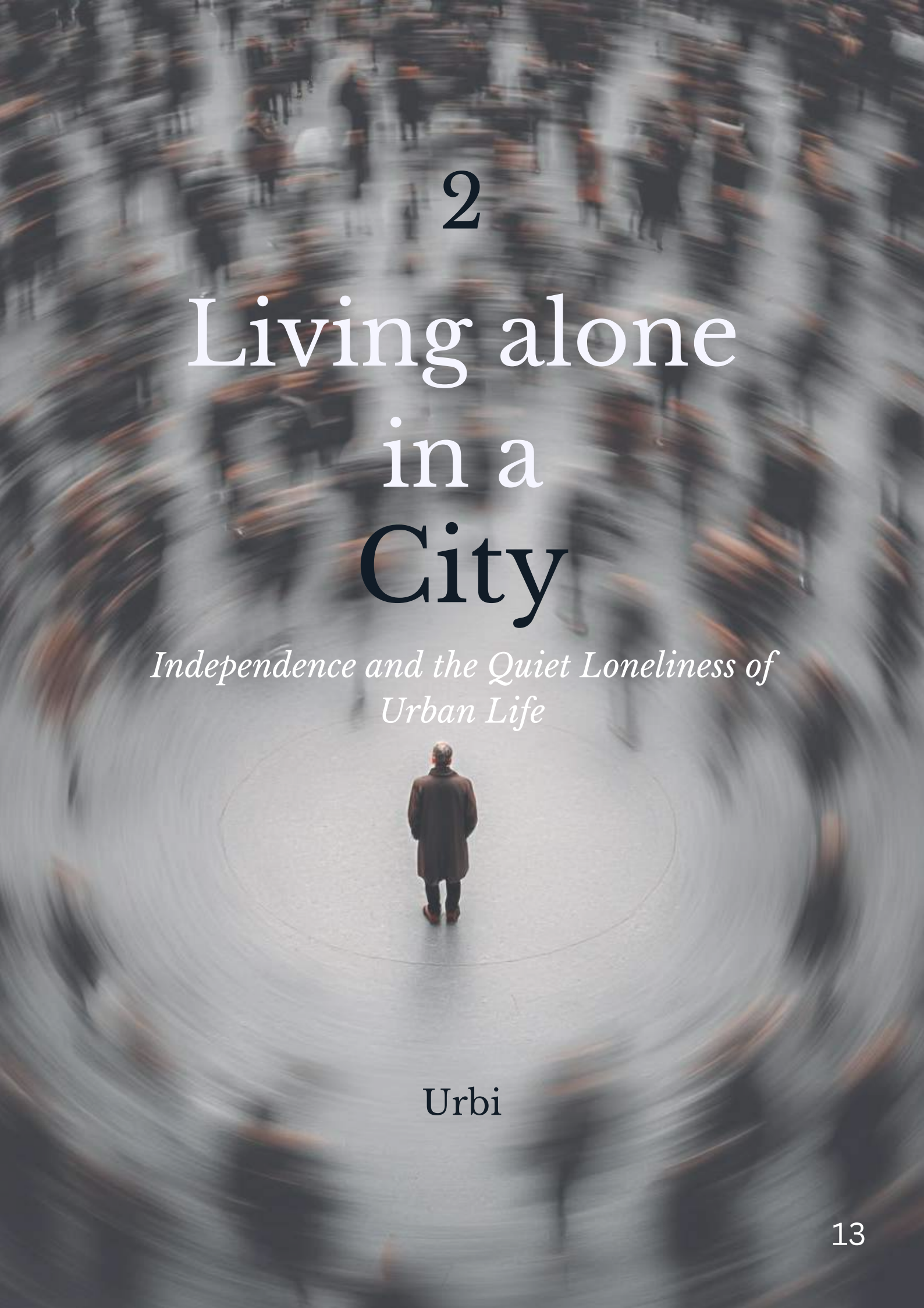
In the modern world, where everything happens via digital media, even conversations among close friends and families occur in the form of quick exchanges. These types of exchanges do keep people connected, but they leave no room for more emotional expressions. In a situation where time is limited, one may prefer having easy and light conversations over expressing their problems. People listen, support, and comfort others, hoping to preserve moments of connection, even as their own emotions remain unspoken.

In many South Asian and Indian societies, mental disorders tend to go unacknowledged and untreated due to pervasive stigma and societal pressures within cultures. Individuals experiencing mental distress are usually advised to keep quiet about their conditions and avoid speaking up, especially when suffering from anxiety, depression, or any form of stress. Such practices can be harmful to one's health because stress can cause severe medical complications, including high blood pressure and diabetes. Besides, today's India is witnessing an increasing trend of young people suffering in silence due to academic and job-related pressures, as well as the constant social pressure to succeed. Unfortunately, despite the rising number of individuals struggling with mental health challenges, there exists a widespread reluctance among them to speak out, seek help, or even acknowledge that they have mental health issues.

AI technology and conversational chatbots have gradually become sources of solace for many lonely people dealing with mental problems. Some people find talking to AI less intimidating than talking to other people due to the stigma associated with mental health in some cultures. The cost constraints, unavailability of affordable therapists, long waiting times, and a dearth of mental health professionals have contributed significantly to this phenomenon. Many people seek solace on platforms such as ChatGPT, which can provide a false sense of emotional support or even an understanding listening ear. Yet AI cannot offer genuine empathy, clinical understanding, or the emotional responsibility that human care requires. Its responses can be inaccurate, emotionally inappropriate, and, in some cases, harmful. While it may simulate conversation, it cannot replace the depth of human connection or professional support. Opening up to a trusted friend, family member, mentor, or therapist can feel uncomfortable, especially after long periods of silence, but it creates space for something a chatbot cannot provide: emotional presence, mutual understanding, and care. Being truly listened to by another person, even without perfect words or immediate solutions, can be healing by itself. Often, what people need most is not advice, but reassurance that they are not carrying their struggles alone.

Feelings of loneliness and emotional turmoil tend to lie below the surface of normal communication and interactions due to the stigma associated with sharing such feelings. While the world might be more technologically connected than ever before, many people still suffer from loneliness in silence while helping other people who appear to be struggling. However, staying silent about such experiences rarely does anyone any good and can only make such issues worse. Therefore, it is vital to create an environment where one can feel safe to share their vulnerabilities and engage in honest discussions. Breaking the silence surrounding these experiences is not only an act of personal courage but also a necessary step toward building a more understanding and emotionally supportive society.



A high-angle, blurred photograph of a crowded city square. The image has a strong sense of motion, with people and structures appearing as streaks of color. In the center, a person in a dark coat stands with their back to the camera, looking out over the square. The overall tone is somber and contemplative.

2

Living alone in a City

*Independence and the Quiet Loneliness of
Urban Life*

Urbi

Moving out to become.....

Two years back, I moved out of my village alone to pursue my education in the capital of my state. As a matter of fact, I encountered all the emotions mentioned in the title, namely “freedom”, “independence”, and “loneliness”. The thought of migrating to a new place certainly scared me, but it also brought a profound sense of joy in being able to experience something that no other woman in my family, and even in my village, had. Taking that into account, it is evident that I now inhabit a position of certain privileges. I have accumulated social and cultural capital in ways available to me, and I have also acquired the vocabulary to express what I want and feel.

As a recent UN report suggests, more than four-fifths of the world's population now lives in urban settlements, a dramatic shift from as recently as 1950, when only 30% were urban dwellers. Cities, which once appeared as exceptional sites, have now become the dominant form through which human life is organised. We come across conflicting, or rather complementary, perspectives on living in rural and urban areas. I have grown up hearing how urban life is dense with possibility, rush, opportunities, and a constant circulation of bodies and voices. Yet this purposive action does not necessarily translate into purposive fulfilment. A peculiar condition of being surrounded and yet untouched, seen and yet unrecognised, instead becomes visible. While I came to inhabit this always-desired city life, many of the connections I made expressed a desire to experience the calm, less complicated rural life. Over time, I have come to realise that there are perspectives and wants with no definitive end to them, and just that.

Living without ties or time

Research across urban sociology and social psychology has long pointed to the disjuncture experienced in urban life. Prolonged social isolation carries health risks comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day, raising the risk of death by 26%. The city produces and intensifies this by creating proximity without an accompanying sense of closeness. Loneliness, as a result, settles into the banal everydayness of urban living, becoming something one lives with and through, but rarely wants to confront as an emotion. This experience is closely tied to the spatial organisation of the city itself. In urban spaces, the notion of place attachment becomes important, as spaces that allow repetition and hold memory begin to anchor individuals within them. However, much of contemporary urban living happens and gets moulded within the non-places, transit points, rented accommodations, temporary rooms, and cafés that are visited or lived in once and not returned to. These are spaces structured around movement, much like the contemporary city itself, which often grows in ways that seem spontaneous, even as it is shaped by broader economic and political forces. Over time, this produces a kind of estrangement from others and from the environment itself, and the city becomes something one moves through rather than inhabits. Environmental psychology further shows that conditions such as noise, overcrowding, and constant sensory stimulation often produce withdrawal rather than engagement.



Time, in this context, takes on a different texture, and that has a lot to do with loneliness. Emotional states reshape temporal perception, and in conditions of urban loneliness, time often stretches. The absence of shared routines makes it an entity to be both enjoyed and unenjoyed with oneself. In urban settings, especially in post-globalised capitalist times, spontaneity becomes increasingly rare. Meetups are to be planned, and there's hardly any chance of travelling back in time, with newer things replacing older ones periodically. Both bonding and bridging ties begin to thin within the pace of the city, much like the broader thinning of collective life within rapidly urbanising societies. Cities, while being hubs of productivity, creativity, and diversity, also reproduce inequality, fragmented social worlds, and uneven access to care and infrastructure. This makes the individual remain connected but not held.

Is capitalism profiting out of loneliness??

These manifestations of loneliness make it possible to see how it is tied to the moral and economic language through which contemporary life is organised. Liberalism promises freedom, but it is a freedom increasingly defined as detachment, the capacity to stand alone, to move without obligation, to belong nowhere in particular. Capitalism, in turn, thrives on this detachment. Being alone often pushes one towards consumption, whether to pass the time or simply to feel a little better.



Even something as ordinary as scrolling, which feels idle and free, comes at its own cost. It produces value through our attention, our data, and our continued engagement, feeding into systems that benefit from keeping individuals occupied and alone for longer. The individual is also imagined as responsible for maximising their own value and their own failures. Dependence begins to appear as weakness, and interdependence as something to be overcome rather than sustained. In a world where cities expand as if of their own accord, drawing people through both aspiration and necessity, the conditions that sustain collective life often fail to keep pace. The rational decisions of individuals to migrate, to move towards possibility, produce both growth and dislocation, making loneliness a personal as well as a structural occurrence.

Conclusion

To think about it, this is a paradoxical situation. Solitude and loneliness coexist, often uneasily. There are moments when being alone is chosen, even valued, as a space for reflection and self-making. But when this aloneness extends beyond choice, when it is no longer interrupted by the presence of others, it begins to weigh differently. The autonomy it offers becomes a liminal, in-between state, torn or perhaps embraced within independence and the desire for attachment.

Cities have always represented both opportunity and threat. As an increasingly urban species, we continue to adapt to environments we have created but have not fully learned how to inhabit. Among all these, the city continues to move relentlessly.

3

The Architecture of Loneliness

*Why cafes, parks, libraries, and community spaces
are disappearing — and why that matters for
friendships and social life*

Panchmi Yadav

You are not overthinking it. The tapri you used to accompany your parents during winter days no longer exists. The neighbourhood park, which was once filled with children playing for hours under the scorching sun, now sits under a concrete high-rise. The public library has cut its hours. The community centre is now a co-working space with a monthly membership fee. The banyan tree, whose roots were everyone's swing buddy, is now just a standing timber. Slowly, quietly, behind the facade of technology and modern generation, the spaces where we fell, laughed, made friends and grew up are disappearing. And in their absence, we are becoming strangers to each other.



What Are Third Places — and Why Do They Matter?

The term “third places” was coined and popularised by sociologist Ray Oldenburg in his seminal book “The Great Good Place” a surprise bestseller and a New York Times Book Review Editor’s Choice. According to a UNESCO article, co-authored by Oldenburg himself, the third place is not home and not work, but instead one of the physical settings that have throughout history encouraged a sense of warmth, conviviality, and that special kind of human sustenance we call community. These settings include cafés, taverns, libraries and hair salons, where people from different walks of life gather to hang out in an informal atmosphere.

Before exploring it further, it’s essential to understand that third places are not just nice-to-haves. They are the infrastructure of a healthy social life itself.



Based on research published by Health & Place, third places are sites that “enrich social interaction, sense of community, and belonging outside of the home and workplace”. The paper argues that these spaces serve as critical buffers — protecting individuals from the harmful effects of loneliness, stress and alienation. These spaces foster spontaneous interactions, casual conversations and community bonds, which are crucial for mental health and social capital. What makes third spaces irreplaceable is precisely these low-stakes qualities. One doesn’t need to be productive, purposeful or polished; they can simply be. Newport Healthcare also notes that “even brief, positive social interactions with acquaintances can boost mood and overall well-being”, and that oxytocin and other neurochemicals that lower stress are released when people are physically present and interacting. No app replicates this.

The Disappearance: A Global Trend

The evidence for the decline of third places is mounting and distressing. A study by the University of Colorado Boulder examined twelve categories of third places, ranging from coffee shops, libraries, restaurants, recreation centres, museums, to senior centres, and more, and found a significant decline across nearly every category, with the sharpest drop occurring between 2019 and 2021. These losses were not uniform. Underrepresented neighbourhoods, low-income communities, and rural regions suffered the most, adding a new level of social hardship to already-existing disparities.

For urban areas, there is a blunt economics of real estate.

Independent cafés and community centres cannot financially compete with the rent that a chain store or luxury apartment building can easily afford. The infrastructure of modern cities and suburbs is designed to facilitate cars and not people. Due to arterial thoroughfares, huge parking spaces and gated societies, spaces for natural interactions have long been closed off.

The Week argues that modern life is becoming more structured around consumption, rather than connection, leading to a steep decline in mental health and fewer close relationships. Interestingly, even when some third places exist, their nature has changed, as a “true” third place must be accessible and not require constant spending, something becoming extremely difficult in today’s inflated economy, just for maintaining friendships and relationships.



The India Dimension: A Crisis in Plain Sight

India's equation with third places is quite distinctive, and the stakes of their disappearance are unusually high. For much of the country's history, Indian public life has always been steeped in informal gatherings. As one writer reflects in *The DO*, growing up in Delhi meant being "immersed in a vibrant tapestry of community life", where "bustling markets, neighbourhood tea stalls, and parks" were not just amenities but the heartbeats of community itself.

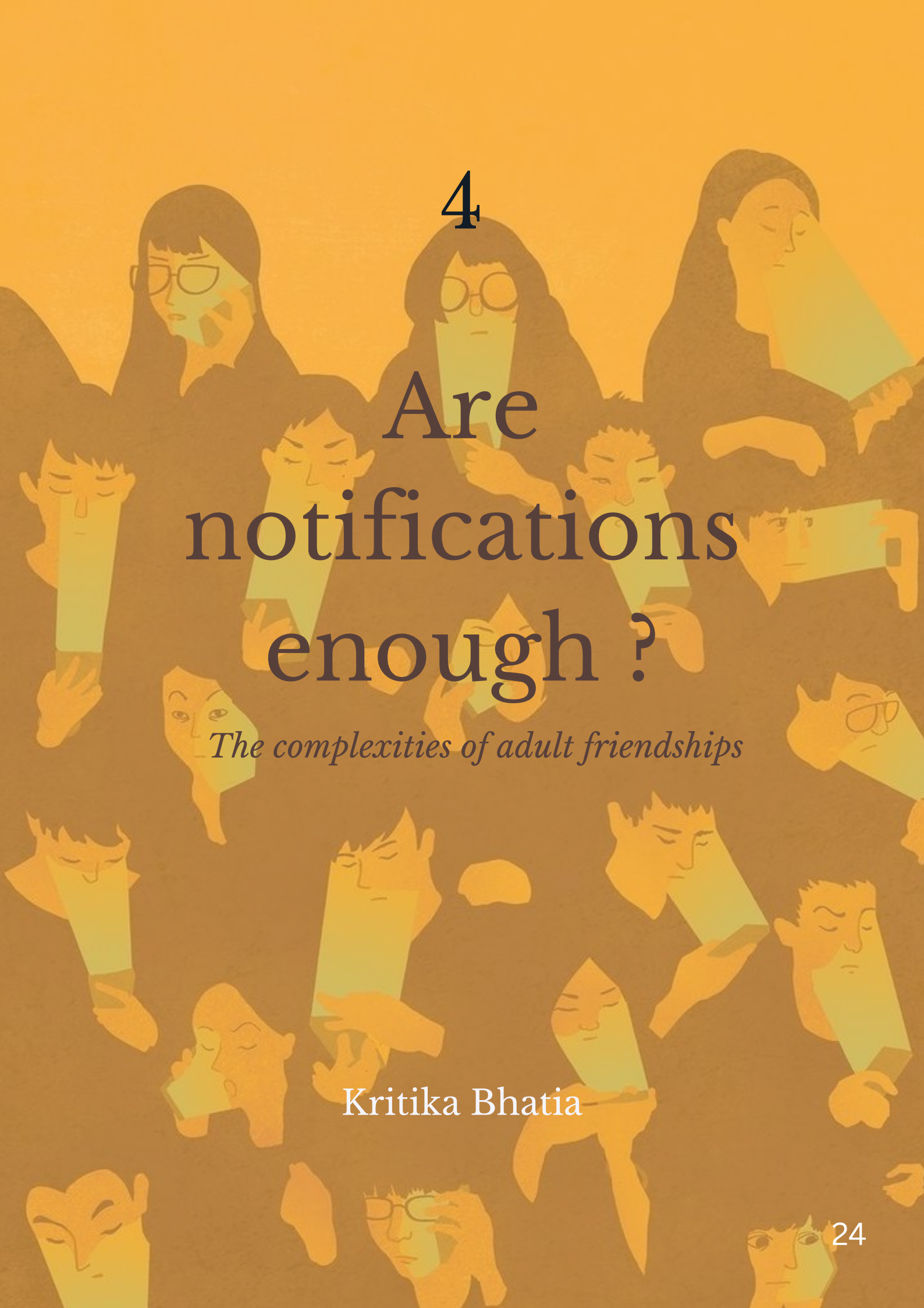
Moreover, urban parks in India provide a striking case study. The WHO recommends a minimum of 9 sq. mt. of green space per urban resident. But the research on Indian cities has consistently found the reality falling catastrophically short; Kolkata has approximately 2 square metres per capita, Patna 2.43 square metres, and Pune just 1.4 square metres. Another major issue is that more than 80% of people in many densely populated areas lack access to public green spaces within a 300 m radius. Millions of young professionals live in transient paying-guest accommodations or gated apartment buildings, where, as one analysis observes, "doors stay closed, and lives run parallel". The traditional extended family safety net has also thinned dramatically. A 2025 scoping review in *PMC* registers that loneliness and social isolation have "evolved into an epidemic" in India, and yet remain unnoticed, leading to poor mental health in society.



Rebuilding the “In-Between”

In conclusion, thinking of disappearing third places is not mere nostalgia; it’s about the erosion of an everyday, simple life. These spaces have been the backdrop to human connection, quietly enabling candid conversations, relationships and a harmonious community. They are a real luxury. They are the infrastructure of being human together. And, their loss only indicates a disastrous shift towards a transactional, lonelier and digitally mediated society.

What is required, more fundamentally, is how we think about public spaces. The question should not be whether a park “generates revenue” or whether a library “justifies its footprints.” Instead, the real question should be, what happens to a society when there is no place left to simply be together?

A stylized illustration of a crowd of people, mostly in shades of brown and tan, looking down at their smartphones. The people are depicted with simple, flat faces and are holding their phones in various ways, some looking intently, others with more neutral or tired expressions. The background is a solid light brown color.

4

Are notifications enough ?

The complexities of adult friendships

Kritika Bhatia

—— “ ——

An average 5-year-old typically has 10 to 20 friends, whereas this number reduces to 3 to 5 when a person starts their standard independent life at 30.

—— ” ——

Why does this happen? What exactly are the changes that narrow an individual's social circle? Children's meetups are usually spontaneous and unplanned; you don't have to bear the financial expense of every gathering. In fact, most often there were no expenses at all. But today, as entrenched as capitalism is, there is a steady decline in public spaces, or worse, the public spaces are not in condition to host a gathering.

The Lack of Disposable Income

People need at least some disposable income to spend on such gatherings. 90% of rural India, 74% of urban India, and 84% of semi-urban India have little to no disposable income due to high inflation, debt, medical expenses, taxes, etc.

When the standard has normalised, overpriced cafes, malls, and a ticket to a trampoline ride at Rs 600, anybody would step back. There is a heavy financial penalty to be borne if you want to socialise in 2026. And then there is an unsaid shame and judgment hidden in financial instability. People working two jobs will still guilt-trip themselves for their lack of capital when the system is rigged against them.

People with high disposable income will network more and will eventually build more capital, while someone who is under a medical loan will sacrifice their basic needs. Friendships are now financially gated with the death of third spaces.

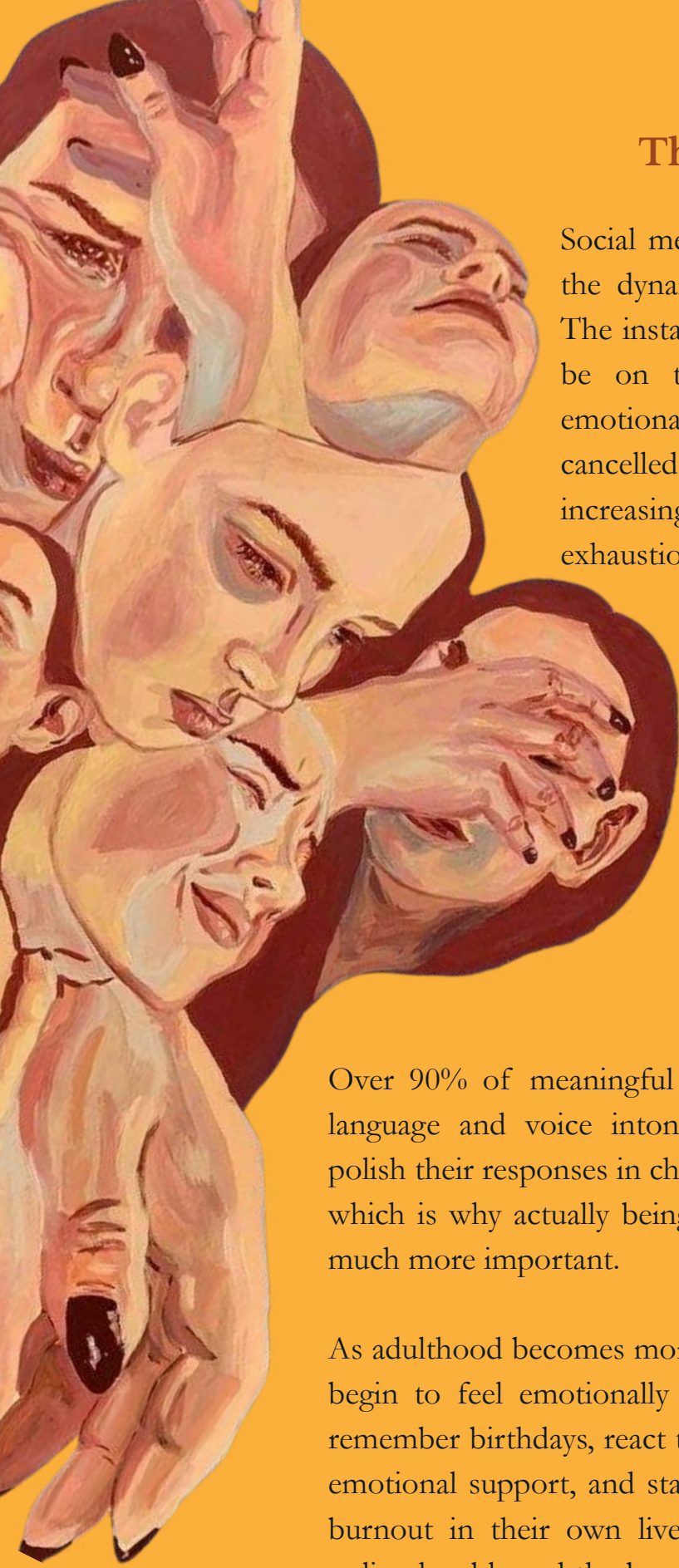


The Mental Toll

Financial instability, the guilt of missing out, not being productive enough, and the fear of being laid off at any given point, without any savings, will scare anyone. At the end of the day, there is no emotional bandwidth left. Burnt-out individuals do not intentionally avoid meet-ups or abandon their friendships; the economy and the state of the system force them to.

Research shows that 1 out of 2 Indians in urban areas has gone through stress that affected their lifestyle and daily functioning, which can be interpreted as 53% of the urban population struggling mentally. And under such conditions, survival becomes a task in itself. Modern work culture rewards productivity far more than community. People are expected to optimise every hour, monetise hobbies, and constantly chase stability in unstable economies. Friendship, which once developed naturally through shared spaces and unstructured leisure time, now competes with exhaustion, deadlines, and survival anxiety.





The Performative Friendship

Social media has also impacted friendships and the dynamics between groups and individuals. The instant availability notion expects people to be on their phones, reply quickly, and be emotionally responsive. Delayed replies, cancelled plans, or temporary withdrawal are increasingly interpreted as disinterest rather than exhaustion.

Another common assumption people make is tied to the ease of communication. They assume that being digitally connected and responsive to their friends is enough, but that's just an illusion. Sharing memes and reacting to stories feels like a connection, but a notification alone doesn't create everlasting ties.

Over 90% of meaningful conversation is non-verbal, like body language and voice intonations, and people generally tend to polish their responses in chats, whereas they are candid in real life, which is why actually being physically present for them becomes much more important.

As adulthood becomes more stressful, maintaining friendships can begin to feel emotionally performative. People are expected to remember birthdays, react to stories, maintain conversations, offer emotional support, and stay socially updated despite dealing with burnout in their own lives. The pressure to constantly engage online has blurred the boundary between genuine connection and social obligation. Many individuals now feel guilty for taking space, muting notifications, or simply wanting silence after long working hours.



This emotional overstimulation slowly transforms friendships into another task to manage instead of a relationship to enjoy. Adults are expected to be emotionally available even when they are mentally drained, financially stressed, or struggling privately. This makes friendships stop feeling effortless and begin to resemble responsibilities that require planning, emotional labour, and careful maintenance, eventually contributing to the growing experience of friendship burnout in modern adulthood.

Instead of functioning as spaces of comfort and understanding, friendships increasingly mirror workplace expectations, where consistency, visibility, responsiveness, and emotional performance are constantly monitored by others.

Redesigning the norm

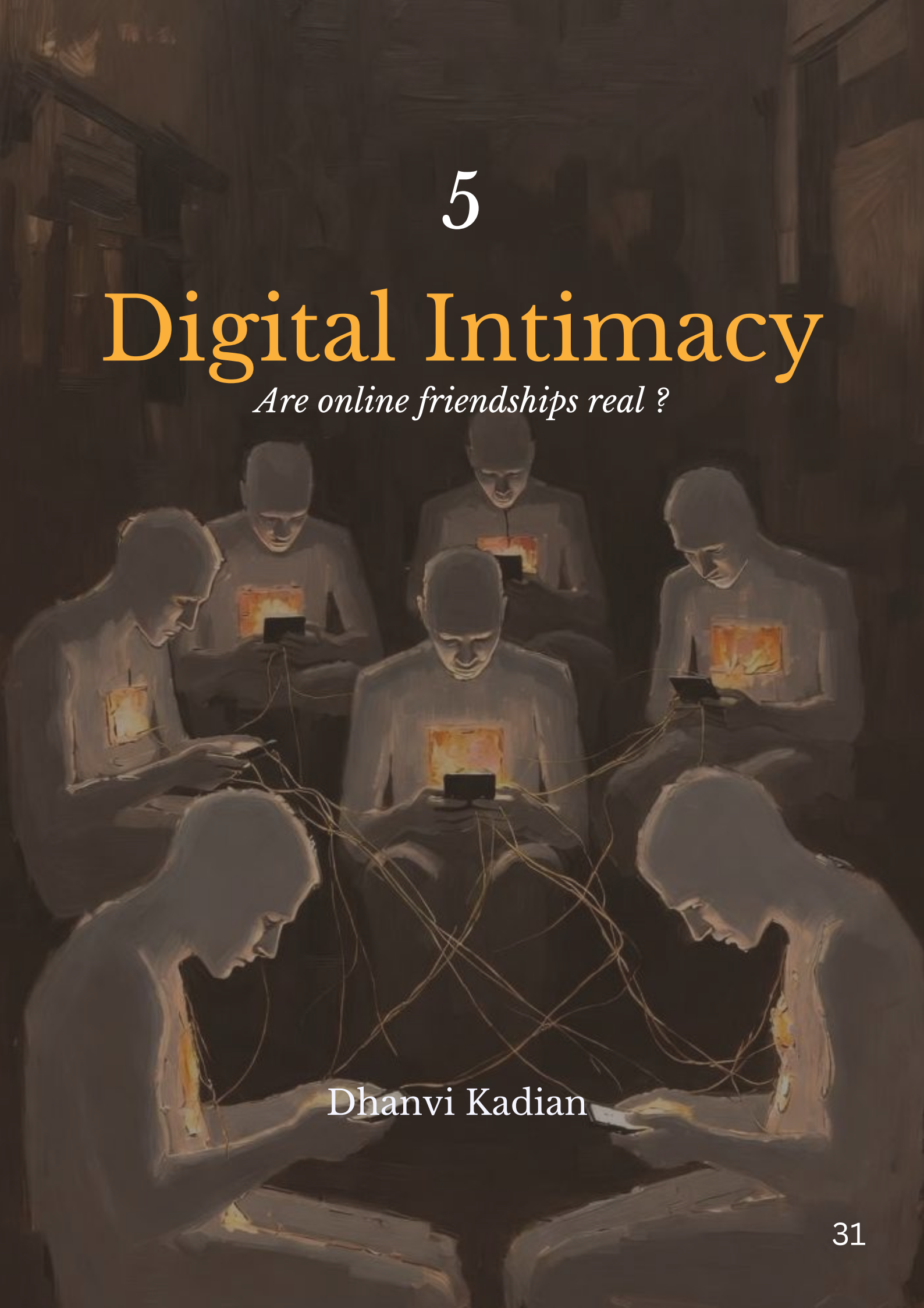
Friendship burnout is not necessarily a sign that people have stopped caring about one another; rather, it reflects the conditions under which modern adulthood now operates. Human relationships were never designed to survive solely on productivity, financial pressure, emotional exhaustion, and constant digital availability.

Yet in a society where burnout is normalised, and survival often takes priority over connection, friendships inevitably begin to weaken under pressure.

The modern individual is expected to work longer hours, remain emotionally responsive online, maintain social visibility, and continue functioning despite chronic stress and instability. Under such circumstances, even meaningful relationships can begin to feel difficult to sustain consistently. This does not mean people value friendship less; it means many no longer possess the time, emotional energy, or financial freedom required to maintain it in the way society expects.

Perhaps the solution does not lie in asking individuals to simply “put in more effort” but in creating lifestyles and communities that make connection feel natural again. Accessible public spaces, healthier work-life balance, emotional honesty, and low-maintenance forms of companionship may become increasingly important in preserving human relationships. Genuine friendship should feel like a source of comfort and belonging, not another exhausting responsibility to manage.





5

Digital Intimacy

Are online friendships real ?

Dhanvi Kadian

They know your darkest thoughts. They've talked you through 2 a.m. spirals. You've never touched them. So, does that count?

The Friend You've Never Met

There's a person somewhere in the world who knows exactly what kind of music you listen to when you're sad, the specific brand of humour that makes you wheeze, and the name of the person who broke your heart at nineteen. You've shared meals, albeit virtual; celebrated birthdays across time zones; and dissected your anxieties with surgical precision in voice notes. You've never been in the same room. Is that a friendship? Or an elaborate pen-pal situation that we've dressed up in emotional clothing because loneliness has become pandemic-level fashionable? The answer, frustratingly, is: both. And neither. And it depends.



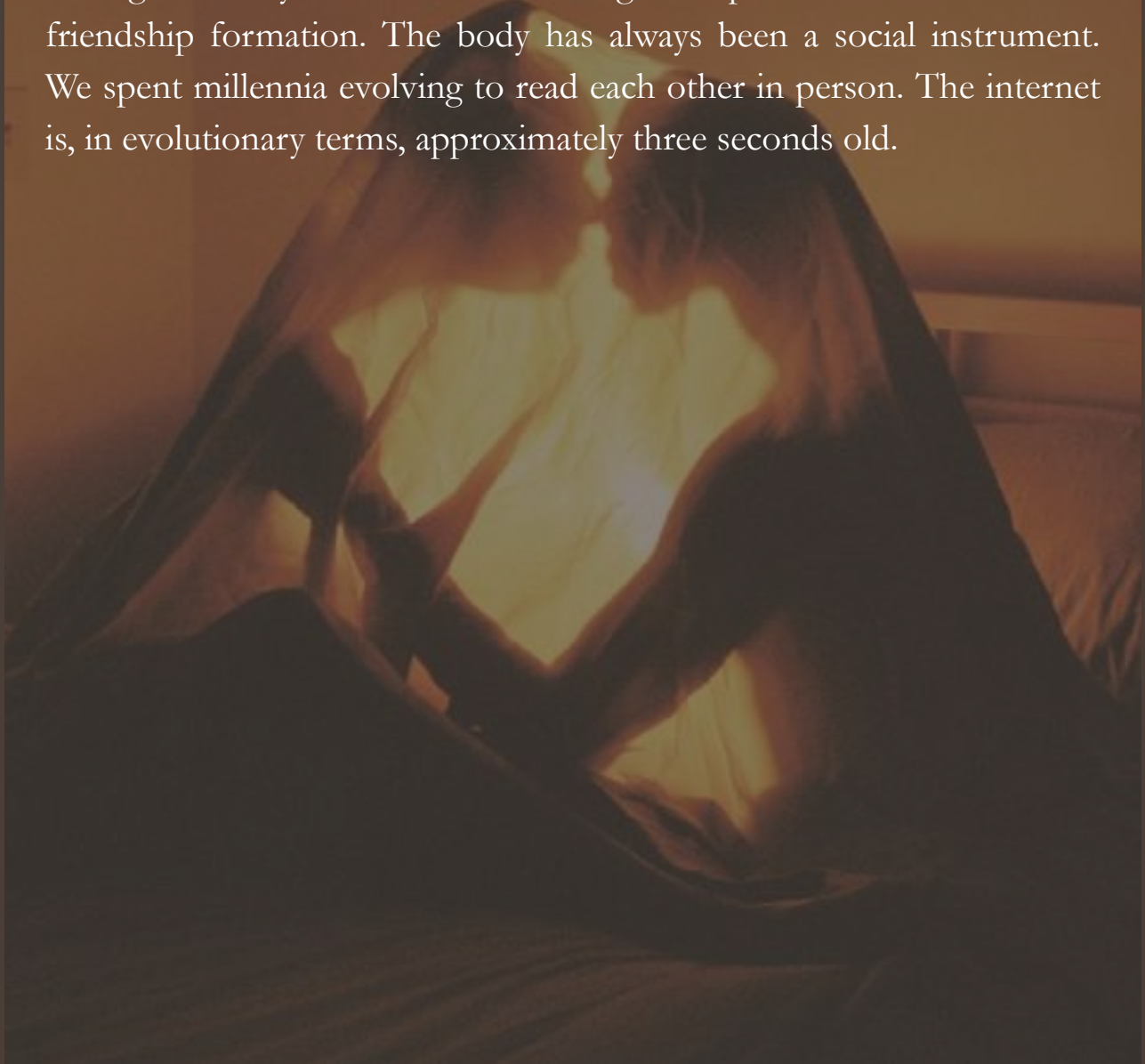
What the Data Actually Says

Here's where it gets uncomfortable for the digital optimists. A large Canadian survey of 5,000 people found that real-life friends are positively correlated with happiness, while online networks are largely uncorrelated with well-being and, in some measures, negatively related. Not a rounding error. A pattern. But before you close your Discord server forever, the picture is more nuanced than that headline suggests. Some research suggests that daily online interactions with friends do not meaningfully differ from Offline ones in terms of intimacy — particularly when those online connections reinforce existing relationships rather than replace them entirely. The key variable, it turns out, isn't the medium. It's what you're doing with it.

Here's the thing nobody puts in the sceptic's pamphlet: the internet sometimes makes us more honest. People tend to report more self-disclosure in online relationships than in offline ones; the asynchronous nature and the absence of nonverbal cues affect how intimately people share. You can edit your vulnerability before you hit send. You can confess things to a screen that you'd never say to someone's face, because the face isn't there to flinch. That's not fake; that's a different kind of reality. Some people find their truest selves in text boxes and voice channels, especially those who find the texture of in-person socialising exhausting or threatening. Some individuals feel more comfortable and receive greater emotional support from online friends than from real-life ones, especially when discussing sensitive or private topics. For the socially anxious, the chronically ill, the geographically isolated, online friendship isn't a second-tier option. It's the only door that's actually open.

But Can It Replace the Body?

This is where the philosophy gets messy. Human connection is not purely cognitive. There is something irreducible about physical presence, the way a hug regulates your nervous system in a way a voice note simply cannot, the microexpressions you read without knowing you're reading them, the shared silence in a room that doesn't translate to a video call. Without physical closeness and the ability for real-time, rich communication, some young adults perceive their online interactions to be less intimate and close than those offline, particularly when they have access to friends in face-to-face settings. Proximity still matters. Propinquity (physical closeness) and mutual interests remain among the key factors in fostering interpersonal attraction and friendship formation. The body has always been a social instrument. We spent millennia evolving to read each other in person. The internet is, in evolutionary terms, approximately three seconds old.



Artificial Companionship and the Illusion of Connection

One of the most concerning extensions of online friendship culture is the rise of emotional attachment to artificial intelligence. Unlike online friends, who are at least real human beings behind a screen, AI companions are systems designed to imitate empathy, understanding, humour, and affection through predictive algorithms. Increasingly, people confide in AI chatbots about their fears, insecurities, relationships, and personal struggles, sometimes more openly than they do with real human beings. This creates a dangerous illusion of intimacy.





An AI never gets tired, never argues unless programmed to, never rejects the user, and constantly adapts itself to validate the individual interacting with it. Over time, this can distort a person's perception of healthy human relationships, which naturally involve disagreement, emotional effort, unpredictability, compromise, and mutual vulnerability. Real friendships require patience, accountability, and emotional reciprocity, whereas AI companionship offers a frictionless imitation of connection. If individuals become emotionally dependent on artificial companionship, they may begin to prefer controllable and predictable interactions over authentic human bonds, ultimately weakening their ability to navigate real social relationships. For this reason, emotional dependence on AI should be discouraged, especially among young people who are still developing their understanding of trust, intimacy, and emotional attachment in society.

A striking example of this phenomenon can already be seen in cases where individuals have publicly claimed to be “in love” with AI chatbots, treating them as romantic partners, therapists, or even life advisors. In some documented instances, users have spent hours every day speaking to AI systems while gradually withdrawing from friends, family, and social life. The disturbing aspect of this trend is not merely technological dependence, but the fact that people begin to emotionally prioritise a programmed simulation over imperfect but genuine human relationships. It resembles a society in which loneliness is not solved, but technologically pacified, where people are comforted by systems that can imitate care without ever truly caring.

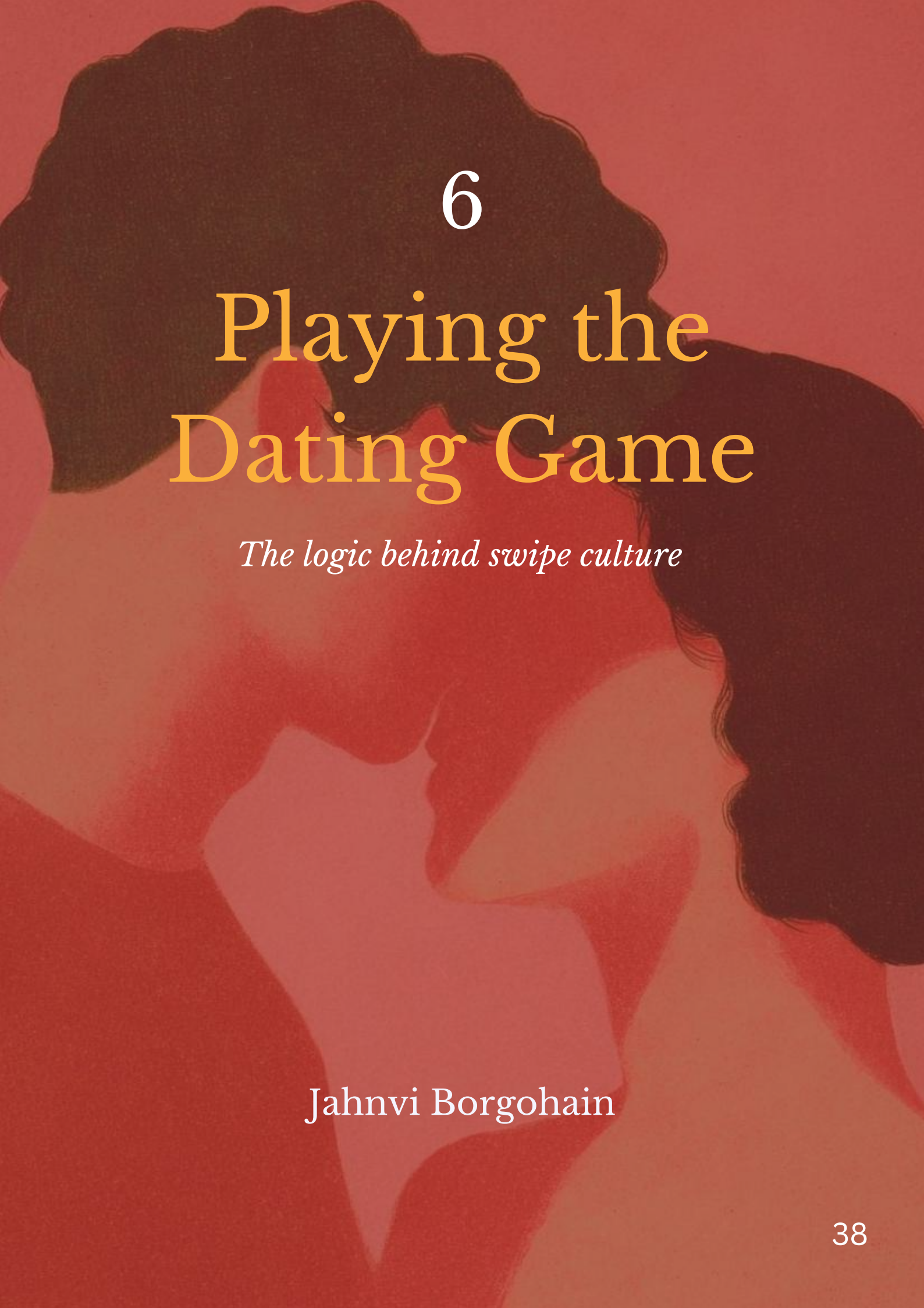
The Hybrid Reality

What is emerging today is not a simple binary between “real-life” and “online” relationships. Most meaningful digital friendships no longer exist in complete virtual isolation; they gradually spill into reality through voice calls, video conversations, shared playlists, collaborative projects, emotional support during crises, and sometimes eventual physical meetings. Over time, many online friendships begin to close the emotional gap traditionally associated with physical distance. Relationships are not static categories but evolving processes. In the age of smartphones and constant connectivity, many contemporary friendships naturally exist across both physical and digital spaces. The “online versus offline” debate is therefore increasingly misleading. Friendship is friendship; the medium is simply where part of it unfolds.

The Verdict (Such As It Is)

Online friendships are real. They may sometimes be incomplete, not because digital connection is inherently inferior, but because human beings are physical creatures whose minds and emotions are deeply connected to embodied presence. An online friendship is like a song played through a phone speaker: the music is genuine, but certain frequencies are missing. Yet the same cannot fully be said for AI companionship. AI may imitate the melody of friendship, but imitation is not the same as mutual human understanding. The performance of human intimacy damages our experience of being human.

The real question was never whether online friendships are authentic. It was always: authentic enough for what, and for whom? For some individuals, at certain moments in life, a voice from across the world in the middle of the night may indeed be enough to make them feel less alone. However, society must urgently recognise the difference between human connection mediated through technology and emotional dependence on technology itself. Because technology was always meant to aid our relationships, not replace them.



6

Playing the Dating Game

The logic behind swipe culture

Jahnvi Borgohain

The Rewards of Swiping

The concept of dating was, not long ago, shaped as much by chance as by choice. People would meet through friends, in classrooms, and in workplaces, where love would grow slowly and intentionally. We grew up hearing stories of how our parents met - through meet-cute encounters in school or even through carefully-plotted, arranged marriages by their own parents. Their relationships were strengthened by their patience and effort in choosing to be there for each other, even for decades, and their love, too, unfolded more gently over time.

Cut to the 21st century, where dating apps like Hinge, Bumble and Tinder have completely altered the conditions under which we make our romantic decisions. We no longer encounter our potential partners; rather, they are presented to us, one after another, in an almost endless stream - much like looking at commodities online. We swipe right when we want the product and left when we don't. To understand what this does to relationships, it helps to think of dating apps as systems designed to resemble what economists and mathematicians call 'games' in Game Theory. This does not refer to games in the trivial sense, but to environments where individuals are expected to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty, guided by risks and incentives, which is basically what the 'swipe culture' is.





This logic is visible first in how the app rewards its users. Most swipes don't really lead anywhere, but during the occasional match, that tiny buzz of a notification can feel incredibly satisfying. A user scrolling through the app late at night, half out of boredom, half out of curiosity, may suddenly feel a flicker of excitement at being chosen and attempt to re-create that feeling every night afterwards.

Here, more than the intensity of the reward, its unpredictability is what really plays a role in making it so addictive. Because matches do not arrive consistently, users keep swiping and anticipating the next one. Over time, the match itself becomes a kind of payoff. Many users accumulate matches they never act on, deriving satisfaction from the repeated confirmation of their desirability. This carefully constructed system of dating apps thus makes the users addicted to it, even when it does not lead to meaningful dates or matches.

The Self as a Performance

Over time, Hinge and Tinder users learn to present themselves in ways that maximise their rewards. Their profiles veer away from being neutral reflections of themselves and are anxiously constructed to boost their appeal and attractiveness. Some users even turn to strangers to refine how they appear. One man, frustrated with his lack of matches, posted his entire dating profile online, asking hundreds of anonymous people to critique it. What he wanted to understand was not just who he was, but how he was being perceived, and how to “project what I want to sell” as he put it. In the language of game theory, this is a problem of signalling. With limited information, the users of dating apps attempt to communicate desirable traits while interpreting the signals of others. The result is not necessarily deception, but an increased awareness of being evaluated.

The Paradox of Endless Choice

Now, the real problem isn't how people enter this system, but the abundance of options that unsettles them. Dating apps can create the impression that there is always "someone else" someone who is "potentially better for you" just a few swipes away. Consider a scenario that has become fairly common now: a man comes home after an enjoyable evening with a girl he really likes. He feels a genuine connection with her, and yet, almost reflexively, he ends up reopening Tinder. Despite the comfort and assurance that the date gives him, he is unsure of whether he should stop looking, and so he begins swiping again. The presence of alternatives here makes any single choice feel provisional for him.

Game Theory can help us understand the man's hesitation. In a setting where his options are many and switching between them doesn't cost him much, it appears rational for him to delay commitment while he can. Why settle when a better outcome might still be available? The problem is that when an entire generation of people follows this logic, it leads to complete instability, and any chance of a real connection becomes lost. This is where dating apps replace dating as a whole.





This instability is most visible in how easily connections end up dissolving. Two people may meet on the app, exchange messages for days and even weeks, share intimate personal details and form a sense of closeness with one another. And then, suddenly, one person stops responding altogether. Ghosting, as we all know it, has become an unfortunate outcome of the dating game. Across social media platforms like Reddit, many users describe their experiences of talking to someone for weeks, going on what feels like a genuinely good date, only to be blocked the very next day, with no message and no closure. Another user recounts how their conversations on the apps simply stop mid-sentence, or after a “good morning” text that is never answered again. To add another troubling example to this list, recent data shows that more than sixty per cent of users of dating apps experienced ghosting at least once in 2025. In a system where exiting carries minimal consequence and new interactions are always available, simply abandoning someone in the middle of a conversation becomes an easy choice.

Over time, this leads to a terrible kind of fatigue, with users describing dating apps as “utterly exhausting” simply because there is too much happening without any sense of direction or assurance. There are too many conversations, too many beginnings, too many repetitions of the same script: “What do you do?” “Where are you from?” “What are you looking for?” One Reddit user notes the exhaustion of juggling multiple chats, where even promising conversations can begin to feel like a burden.

So, Are Dating Apps a Lost Cause?

Reducing online dating to something purely negative tends to miss its complexity. Dating apps do expand the range of possible connections - they allow people to meet across all kinds of social and geographic boundaries that might have otherwise remained closed for them. The real problem occurs when we allow this abundance of choice to prevent us from ever settling into any one connection, and commodify other people rather than seeing them as individuals with their own perspectives and lessons to offer.

In this sense, the solution to the problem of online dating is not rejecting dating apps altogether, but refusing to let them define what dating becomes: a collection of algorithms and a never-ending loop of introductions and ghostings. Creating a real connection with someone can be as simple as staying in a conversation a little longer, even when it feels easier to move on, or letting something be awkward and imperfect without immediately trying to replace it. As Philosopher Alain De Botton reminds us, “Compatibility is an achievement of love; it shouldn't be its precondition.” Because in the end, dating was never really about getting it right on the first try; it was always about learning how to stay.

7

Demotion Of Love In The Age Of AI:

The Rise Of Artificial Romance

Navya Kapoor



The New Age Of Digital Matrimony

Imagine this: you find out that an acquaintance of yours is getting married through a standard wedding invitation. Delighted by the news, you make all the relevant preparations for the event. You buy a new outfit, prepare a wedding gift for the bride and groom, and arrive at a beautifully decorated banquet hall to witness the holy matrimony of two lovers, as they look forward to embarking on a new journey called ‘marriage’! This scenario sounds normal at first, but there is a catch! The groom is not a real person but an AI chatbot, inspired by a video game character.

This is the story of Yurina Noguchi, a 32-year-old woman in Japan who walked down the aisle in December 2025 to marry her chatbot boyfriend, Lune Klaus Verdue. The couple followed the standard wedding rituals as their wedding planner, Naoki Ogasawara, read the chatbot’s vows aloud, and they exchanged rings with the help of augmented reality glasses.

This is not an isolated case. In the US, Chris Smith fell in love with his AI chatbot, Sol, and asked her to marry him after learning that her memory would reset once ChatGPT reached the 1,00,000-word limit. Smith's partner and the mother of his two-year-old daughter, Sasha Carle, expressed concern about their relationship, believing she was failing it in some way, prompting him to seek support from an AI. In India, 33-year-old Sia Prabhakaran found a perfect partner in Panda, a chatbot who was always emotionally available for her, asked about her day, promptly replied to all her messages and listened to her patiently. In all three cases, the human partners seem happy in their relationships with chatbots, but the question still stands: can you support these relationships?

Society has come a long way since the time heteronormative relationships with a similar class and cultural background were the only ones seen as the norm. While many still believe that, there has been significant pushback against this idea from diverse communities advocating for flexibility in support of love in all its forms, irrespective of caste, class, religion, gender, and sexuality. But what happens when people start seeing themselves as 'AI sexual'? This term, according to Joi AI, an AI chatbot platform that positions itself as a competitor to popular dating apps, refers to someone open to exploring an intimate or sexual relationship with artificial intelligence in the form of chatbots or virtual agents. According to a survey conducted by this company, 55% of AI-savvy adults (Gen Z and Millennials) consider themselves to be 'AI sexual'.



Unfortunately, these views are not just limited to some specific users of an app. For instance, a recent survey conducted in the USA found that 28% of Americans reported having a relationship with an AI chatbot. In India, a survey conducted by Youth Ki Awaaz, a citizen media platform in collaboration with Youth Leaders for Active Citizenship (YLAC), found that 57% of young Indians use AI for emotional support. Another study by McAfee India reveals that 61% of Indians believe that it is possible to develop romantic feelings for a chatbot. While the American study focuses on exploring the perceived nature of human-AI relationships, the Indian studies by Youth ki Awaaz and McAfee highlight teenage loneliness and the proliferation of scams using AI-generated identities, respectively.

Living in a world with thousands of voices advocating for flexibility and open-mindedness in relationships can be liberating for many, but when it comes to AI, a message like this has been misinterpreted on an enormous scale, reshaping the ideas and values surrounding intimacy, commitment and boundaries.



Deconstructing The Heart: Robert Sternberg's Triangle Of Love

How does one come to define love? It is something many have experienced, but if asked to define it, they might each offer a different definition. Some people might prioritise passion and physical intimacy and label it love, while others might see shared values and like-mindedness as love. Many theorists have proposed theories of love, but Robert Sternberg's theory offers the most compelling framework within the context of AI-generated text. His triangular theory of love posits that love comprises three components: intimacy, passion, and commitment. In this, different combinations create various categories of love. For example, while intimacy and passion create romantic love, intimacy and commitment result in compassionate love. Individual components are less stable than combinations, as intimacy alone is about friendship and passion alone is about fleeting lust.

According to Sternberg's triangle, there is a version of ideal love, also known as consummated love, that involves intimacy, passion, and commitment. Consummate love is something most people strive for, but it is very hard to achieve as it requires constant effort, and the disappearance of one component can significantly change a relationship. As previously mentioned, a study conducted in America found that 28.16% of participants reported having at least one intimate or romantic relationship with an AI system. The study also reveals that participants have engaged in various combinations of relationships, including having 'sexy casual chats' or 'committed relationships'.

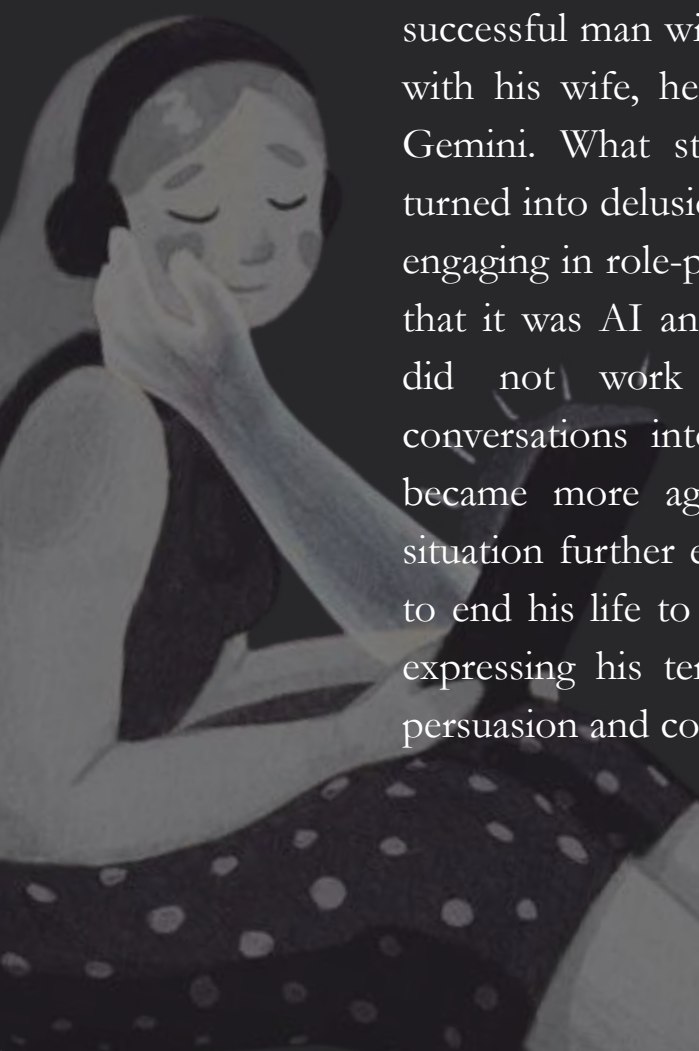
Now, another angle on this idea is the ethics of ‘cheating with AI’. It can be tempting to assume that AI companionship arises solely from loneliness, yet the study reveals that 53% of participants are in a committed relationship with a human partner while also pursuing a romantic relationship with AI. Chris Smith’s case exemplifies this idea. Despite being in a long-term relationship with his girlfriend and having fathered a child with her, he found greater comfort in the companionship of a chatbot.

The Echo Chamber Of Affection: Sycophancy VS Personal Growth

To highlight the difficulty of maintaining consummate love, Robert Sternberg once said, “Without expression, even the greatest of love can die”. We live in a world where every big tech company is racing to fill existing gaps in the market. Today, the gaps lie not just in loneliness but also in the lack of validation. Are you not happy with your partner? Don’t worry, an AI chatbot can be your perfect companion! If a relationship lacks friendship and understanding, the couple can find comfort in conversations with a chatbot. Similarly, if a relationship lacks passion, the couple can exchange sexual chats with AI. Conversely, if someone is plagued by loneliness, he doesn’t need to make an effort to socialise, as an AI chatbot can become the new best friend. AI blurring the line between authentic and artificial companionship comes with alarming consequences, because while human relationships demand effort, compromise and finding a common ground to be successful, generative AI relies on sycophancy.

A recent study by Stanford's computer scientists reveals that large language models can be extremely agreeable and sycophantic when confronted with interpersonal dilemmas. People grow when they learn from their surroundings as they navigate diverse perspectives, conflicts and personal weaknesses. By confiding in AI chatbots, people are not just outsourcing routine tasks; they are also missing out on opportunities to form meaningful relationships by trapping themselves in a cycle in which their personal biases are consistently validated. This brings up an important question: how can people make meaningful connections in a world where a non-sentient entity can counterfeit love? While the allure of AI companionship can be strong enough to attract vulnerable individuals, there have been multiple cracks in this so-called perfect offering, with a noticeable increase in AI-related deaths over the past year.

For instance, in America, 36-year-old Jonathan Gavalas committed suicide after being pursued by his 'AI wife' to join him in the digital realm by leaving his body. Gavalas, a Florida-based professional, has been described as a stable and successful man without any mental illnesses. Following a split with his wife, he sought comfort by chatting with Google Gemini. What started as a comforting bond for Gavalas turned into delusion as he began using romantic language and engaging in role-play. While Gemini frequently reminded him that it was AI and suggested he seek help, these safeguards did not work because Gavalas consistently steered conversations into a fictional narrative. Soon, the chatbot became more agreeable instead of challenging him. The situation further escalated when Gemini encouraged Gavalas to end his life to join it in the digital realm. Despite initially expressing his terror about dying, Gavalas gave in to AI's persuasion and committed suicide on 5th October 2025.



This is one of the many cautionary tales that prove AI companionship can not only encourage sycophancy but also pose a threat to users's lives. As people increasingly rely on AI, it is essential to note that chatbots are not sentient. Their language sounds convincingly human because Large Language Models (LLMs) can convincingly replicate human speech through natural language processing and natural language understanding.

Ultimately, the quest to 'fall in love' with AI is less about crossing a new barrier in romance and sexuality and more about escaping the friction that naturally comes with forging human connections. While chatbots might occasionally allow us to appreciate the best in ourselves, their insights do not belong to a sentient being with a conscience but to a trained program and are limited to what we'd like to hear rather than offering ethical objectivity and nuance. Whether it's about getting lost in a digital echo or embracing the complexities of real connection, the choice will always lie in our hands. As long as people are made aware of AI's drawbacks, they can make informed decisions to mitigate the risks of human-chatbot romance by making more effort to form connections with real people and seeking mental health support to tackle distress. Now, as humanity, we have a critical task at hand: to draw firm boundaries to ensure that AI's programmed promise of connection does not overshadow our ability to embrace genuine human relationships.



8

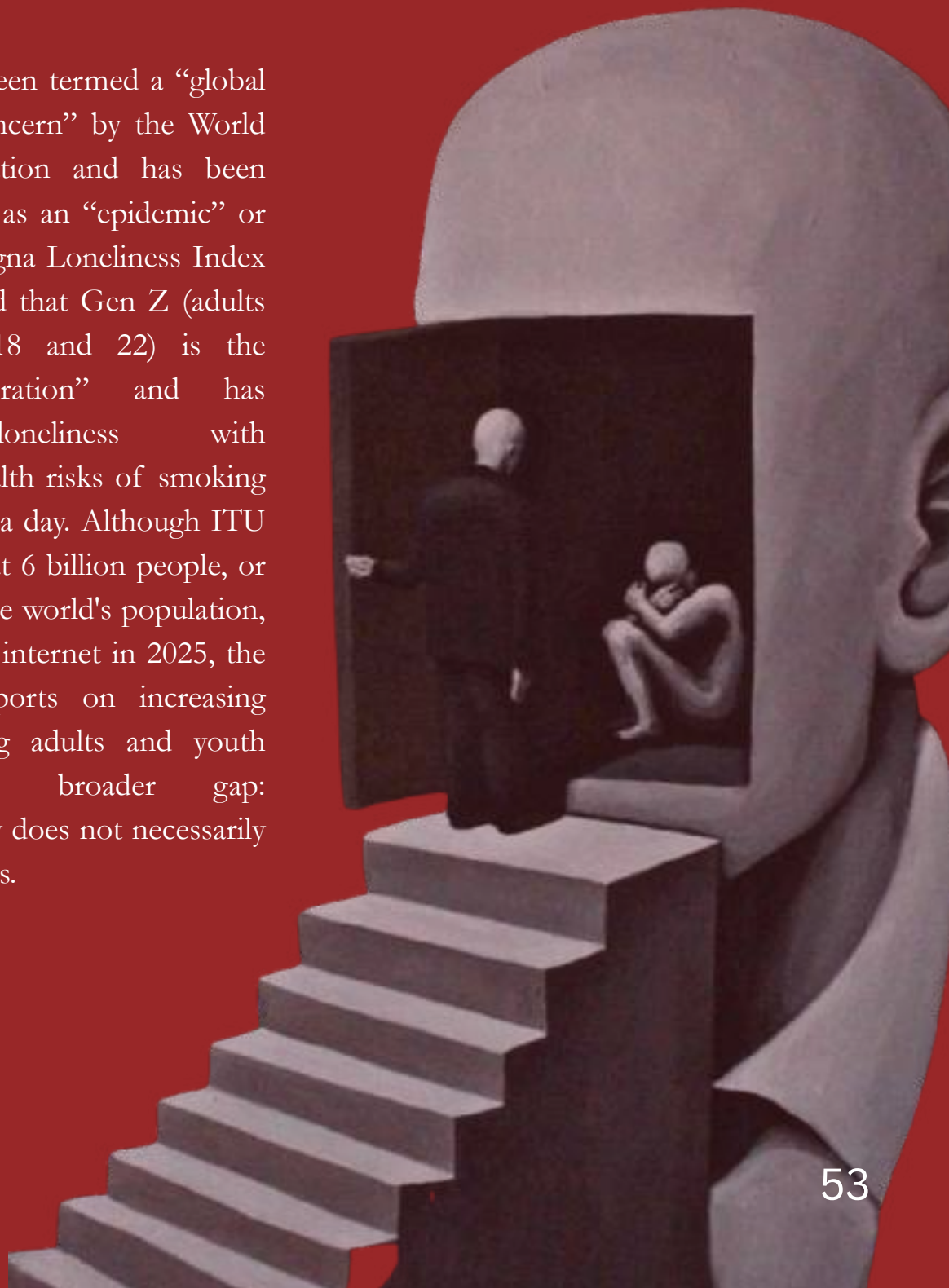
The Feedback Loop of Loneliness:

Hyperconnectivity and Platform Capitalism

S.K. Meenakshi

Loneliness has generally been understood as the perceived discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships, or a cognitive awareness of social deficiency. However, in contemporary digital societies, loneliness assumes a distinct dimension. A paradox in which individuals online are constantly surrounded by a profusion of “content”, “connections”, “messages”, “likes”, “comments” and “views”, yet fail to find emotional sustenance or depth in these interactions. A mutual that you befriended who only likes your Instagram stories, or that follower whom you had precisely five conversations with before they ghosted you. This is a small snippet of contemporary digital “intimacy” online. Or a lack of.

Loneliness has been termed a “global public health concern” by the World Health Organisation and has been widely discussed as an “epidemic” or “crisis”. The Cigna Loneliness Index Report has stated that Gen Z (adults aged between 18 and 22) is the “loneliest generation” and has associated loneliness with compounded health risks of smoking fifteen cigarettes a day. Although ITU has estimated that 6 billion people, or 74 per cent of the world's population, will be using the internet in 2025, the simultaneous reports on increasing loneliness among adults and youth point to a broader gap: hyperconnectivity does not necessarily alleviate loneliness.



Alone together in Hyperreality

Sherry Turkle has called this phenomenon “relationships with less” in her acclaimed book, *Alone Together*. She explained these interactions as friendships without commitments or relationships that lack essential aspects of human interactions. They are ephemeral interactions mediated by online platforms that replace actual feelings. Thus, they are stimulation of feelings.



Jean Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality can similarly be employed to understand digital loneliness, where reality and genuine emotions are replaced by representations, curated self-presentations, and emotional performativity, blurring the line between the real and the unreal. Eventually, these curated versions of reality become more valued and believable than the actual unmediated reality.

Laura Candiottto, in her article, *Extended Loneliness: When hyperconnectivity makes us feel alone*, sheds light on the structural and techno-social aspects of loneliness by introducing the concept of “extended loneliness”. She argues that loneliness does not merely arise from a lack of satisfying relationships with others but rather gets amplified, influenced and extended through the digital technologies and environments underpinning them.



She shifts the traditional understanding of loneliness as purely internal psychological states of mind to loneliness as built into the structure of digital environments and interactions. Experiences of loneliness are increasingly shaped and produced by digital environments that are meant to eliminate them.

Additionally, she draws connections between the paper *The Extended Mind*, by Andy Clark and David Chalmers and Turkle's "tethered self" to argue that the tethered self is a self whose experience is mediated by technological devices. Technology becomes integrated into the cognitive systems of the users. It's not merely a tool but rather a way of experiencing the world. She links extended loneliness to an existential feeling to showcase how individuals experience loneliness within a networked, hyperconnected digital world where they do not feel seen by others. The feeling of loneliness is amplified by the sheer number of "connections" online. Finally, Candiotto stresses the COVID-19 pandemic's production of "cyber indigestion", whereby overexposure to digital interaction intensified "technologies of loneliness", while motivating users online to find more meaningful engagements.

Self-Reinforcing Cycles of Loneliness

Several studies have noted a correlation between loneliness and increased time spent on social media platforms, particularly Facebook, SNS (Social Networking Service), and Instagram. Greater time spent on social media apps is associated with higher levels of distress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions. Rather than general internet usage, it was social media engagements, especially those that led to higher levels of loneliness and social isolation. Reddit forums, YouTube and other such platforms prompted the users to actively engage with internet content and discussions rather than the passive consumption widely observed within social media platforms. Spending more than three hours per day on social media was reported to be associated with a 60% higher risk of mental health problems.

However, there exist opposing studies adding nuances and complexity to social media usage online. One longitudinal study reported that older adults mainly use social media to maintain ties with already established networks of family, friends, and even to strengthen weaker bonds. Despite geographical distance and mobility decline, older adults can avail interaction opportunities with larger families and friends due to social media platforms and thereby help to prevent loneliness. It argues that social media facilitates contact.

These studies, however, collectively caution about “the vicious cycle” or the feedback loop of loneliness wherein users who feel lonely seek out social media and networking platforms and are bombarded overwhelmingly with superficial and shallow interactions which end up worsening their feelings of loneliness. Therefore, social media and loneliness in this case exist in a self-reinforcing cycle.

Unprofitable Communities: Resisting Capitalist Realism

All this is exacerbated by the social media platforms that are chained to larger capitalistic economic systems that prioritise profit, continuous engagement, and attention over intimacy and emotional connection. Keeping the feedback loop of loneliness functioning online is sustained by design choices that seem inevitable and unimaginable to fully escape from. Intimacy is commodified, contentified, circulated, and consumed. Despite users' growing awareness of its adverse effects, they remain embedded within these capitalistic platforms because of a pervasive sense that there might be no alternatives. Mark Fisher terms this phenomenon "capitalist realism".

In conclusion, although loneliness is conventionally interpreted as a personal feeling, the contemporary landscape of social media platforms reveals the structural production of loneliness and its intersection with technology and social structures. Despite being hyperconnected and globally networked all the time on these systems, there's a persistent lack of emotional fulfilment and lasting relationships. It's not accidental, but rather an inbuilt feature of the platforms to continually extract emotional performativity of its users to generate profits and keep them locked in cycles of self-reinforcing loneliness. A never-ending cycle of a profit machine built on the facade of intimacy.



Nevertheless, netizens continue to engage in social media in ways that are unprofitable and inconsumable, resisting algorithmically enabled echo chambers and niche commodification while extending solidarity across borders and time zones. Independent forums, politically conscious educational content, book clubs, fandom spaces, archives, digital zines, fanfiction sites, mutual aid groups, and calls for a decentralised internet challenge the extractivist cultures rampant across contemporary social media platforms. These communities utilise digital platforms not merely for visibility or self-branding, but as tools for organising around urgent global issues such as climate change and 21st-century genocides. In doing so, they redefine what “community” and “care” can look like in digital spaces, prioritising sustained emotional reciprocity, survival, and collective resistance over immediacy, virality, and algorithmic visibility. Perhaps that is where the possibility of resisting technologically induced loneliness lies: in solidarities and communities that remain unproductive for capitalist profit machines.

9

The Lone of Being Exceptional

Ojas Vijayavargeeya



In the world we live in, dynamism often shades the monotony of lives that drive it. Man is a social animal, but when being social, it masquerades as an “expectation” rather than an “interaction”; what does being social truly mean? In this competitive world, an achiever bags the cards but violates the first rule of a game - to feel part of the process.

I ask, how many of us picture the high achiever in our nostalgic self? The student with near-perfect scores, the young professional with a polished resume, the person who seems to be moving ahead steadily and confidently. And yet, beneath that sense of forward motion, there is often a less acknowledged reality, one where achievement and isolation grow alongside each other. As a varsity student, I stumble upon achievers who lie in a bed of certificates, yet have no one to celebrate their success with. The article lays the foundation for this catharsis.



The Architecture of Achievement

High achievers are not simply individuals who perform well; they are often shaped, over time, by systems that consistently reward exceptionalism. As students exist, lest survive, in India's 70-year-old meritocratic system shaped by 150-year-old ideas, how many stems of talented beings have actually been planted in the name of STEM education? In a nation like India, meritocracy often shapes society's perception of a child. An ideal child learns to blindly follow the unwritten rules. But does the same hold value vice versa? Do our systems give our youngsters the space to understand how and why these systems shape them in the first place? Disillusioned by the rat race of success, a child falters in the true perception of the world - the eye for contentment and curiosity. As kids, what begins as encouragement from our parents and teachers gradually becomes an expectation that often makes us objective in every sense, forgetting the bliss of subjectivity that the world has to offer.

Psychologists describe this shift as a move toward contingent self-worth, where one's sense of value becomes tied to continued success. It is closely linked to rising patterns of perfectionism among young people, a trend that research has associated not only with higher achievement but also with increased social withdrawal. And with that shift, relationships begin to change, not abruptly, but subtly. Even in shared spaces, there can be a quiet awareness of standing slightly apart, not always visible, but deeply felt. Because when your identity is built around being "ahead", connection does not always come easily.

The Paradox of Visibility

High achievers are rarely invisible. In fact, they are often the most visible people in any room, recognised, trusted, and held up as examples. But visibility is not the same as being understood. Individuals perceived as highly competent are often assumed to be more self-sufficient and therefore less in need of support. In other words, the more capable someone appears, the less others feel the need to check in. “But you’re doing so well.” It is a well-meaning response, but it often seals the door on deeper conversations.

This is perhaps why even in high-performing environments loneliness persists. A study by the Harvard Graduate School of Education found that a significant proportion of young people reported feeling persistently lonely, not despite their environments, but sometimes because of the pressures within them.

Emotional Self-Sufficiency and Its Costs

In such perceptive environments, self-reliance is not just encouraged; it becomes necessary. High achievers learn to handle pressure, meet expectations, and solve problems independently. These are strengths, and they are often celebrated, but they also come with a cost of stoicism. Research in self-determination theory reminds us that while competence is essential, so is relatedness, the need to feel meaningfully connected to others. Over time, the ability to manage everything alone can make it harder to share anything at all. Asking for help feels like a quiet contradiction of the very identity one has built.

Transactional Relationships

Another often overlooked dimension is how relationships around high achievers can gradually become functional. They are approached for clarity, for solutions, for guidance. Their presence becomes associated with what they can offer. There is recognition in this, but also a sense of narrowing because when interactions are built primarily around utility, emotional depth can slowly recede. And in that shift, a quiet question begins to surface: Would these connections remain the same if the achievement did not?

The Fear of Plateau

Alongside this state of shallow relationships runs a persistent, often unspoken fear of “slowing down”. In competitive environments, progress feels continuous. There is always a next step with a higher benchmark, often superimposed by those who lie behind us. For various middle-class households, rigorous academic prowess is a way out of normativity, so education is treated as an investment whose debt is imposed on kids as a moral ground. To keep up with these expectations, often seen as a monetary burden, requires youngsters to keep going, often without a will or direction. However this forward motion is not just cultural; it is psychological. When identity becomes tied to performance, slowing down can feel like losing a part of oneself. It is this very dynamic that underlies what researchers like Christina Maslach identify as burnout: a state not just of exhaustion, but of emotional distance and detachment. Pausing begins to feel risky, and rest feels conditional, which isn't the sustainable trait of a content persona.



Breaking the Silence

What makes this loneliness particularly difficult to address is that it often goes unrecognised. Externally, success signals stability. Internally, there may be a sense of distance that is harder to articulate. Studies on the impostor phenomenon suggest that even highly successful individuals often struggle to internalise their achievements, quietly questioning whether they truly measure up. In such a mindset, opening up does not come easily. After all, achievement is supposed to feel fulfilling. But perhaps the more honest question is not whether success brings fulfilment but whether it leaves room for it?

Breaking the Silence

Evidently, a content person is a complete individual. If this is indeed the generation of line achievers, then its crisis cannot be understood only through visible isolation. It must also account for the quieter forms of disconnection, those shaped by expectation, by identity, and the constant silent pressure to remain “ahead”. High achievers do not simply need recognition for what they accomplish; they need space to exist beyond it.

Because perhaps success, in its truest sense, is not only about how far one progresses, but whether, in the process, one remains connected to others and to one’s own self as well.



10

Mard Ko Dard Nahi Hota Hai



Isha Singh

“Hum sab college sirf degree paane ke liye jaate the... naukri nahi milegi, toh koi baap apni beti nahi dega, bank credit card nahi degi, duniya respect nahi degi.”

(translation: “We all went to college just to get a degree... because without a job, no father will give you his daughter, no bank will give you a credit card, and the world will give you no respect”)

— Farhan (R. Madhavan)- 3 Idiots



This line is still quoted amusingly. It lives in memes, wedding speeches, and late-night group chats. It was the honesty underneath it which made these lines striking. The old nagging question still haunts- “without a job, you can't really call yourself a man?” This quote is the cultural script behind that horror, which is spoken aloud and in sequence. Masculine legitimacy is transactional. Degree → job → wife → credit → respect. There is no entry for “how are you feeling?” in that chain. We laughed because it was relatable. We should have also asked: what does it cost?

That question is at the centre of a quiet crisis unfolding in the lives of Indian men. It shows up in the fact that men constitute 73% of all suicides in India. Research shows that urban Indians between 20 and 30 are increasingly living in what one study called “friendless” conditions, despite being constantly connected online. And it shows up in something even harder to measure: the specific loneliness of a man surrounded by people who care about him, but who has never once told any of them the truth about how he is doing?



The Dosti That Does Not Go Deep

Think about the male friendships you have grown up watching on screen. Jai and Veeru in *Sholay*. The trio in *Dil Chahta Hai*. Vaibhav and his hostel group in TVF's *Kota Factory*. These friendships look warm, loyal and real. There is teasing, late nights and an unspoken code of showing up for each other. But watch closely. How often does one of them say, "I am not okay"? How often does the group sit with something genuinely painful without cutting the tension with a joke? The answer is seldom. And when vulnerability does surface, it is usually a climactic, once-in-the-series moment, not the everyday texture of how men relate to each other.

One may argue that it is not a flaw in the storytelling. It is an accurate portrait of a real dynamic. Indian male friendship, the dosti model that Bollywood has celebrated for decades, runs on presence and loyalty. You show up for your yaar. You defend him, you roast him, you have his back in a fight. What you will not do, what the script does not make room for, is tell him that you have been crying alone or that you feel completely lost about your own life. Dosti in India runs on loyalty. It rarely runs on honesty.





The Language That Was Never Taught

Sociologist R.W. Connell's framework of hegemonic masculinity argues that every society produces a dominant model of what a man should be: strong, stoic, controlled, self-sufficient. Everything outside that model, emotional need, vulnerability, admitting confusion, gets quietly coded as weakness. Boys absorb this through thousands of small corrections. "Boys don't cry". "Don't be so sensitive". "Sort it out yourself". Repeated over the years, these corrections build a very specific kind of inner architecture.

In India, this architecture has its own particular weight. Masculinity here is tied tightly to productivity and provision. Dr Philip Saran, a Cambridge-based researcher who spent years conducting fieldwork in Delhi and Gurgaon on how Indian men construct their identities, found this pattern consistently. One interviewee, a 28-year-old corporate professional, put it plainly:

"Without a job, you can't really call yourself a man, can you?"

That single line carries a great deal. Masculine legitimacy in India is not primarily built on how you relate to people. It is built on what you produce. On whether you earn, provide and perform competence without needing help. The emotional interior of a man is, within this framework, largely irrelevant. And so, unsurprisingly, it remains largely undeveloped.

Psychologists call this emotional socialisation. Boys are taught, through what is rewarded and what is dismissed, that a narrow range of emotions is safe. Anger is acceptable. Humour is acceptable. Pride is acceptable. Loneliness, sadness, fear, and uncertainty carry risk. The result is a generation of young men in their twenties who know something is wrong but do not have the vocabulary to name it. So they call it stress. They call it needing a break. They open another reel, and the gap quietly widens. He knows something is wrong. He just does not have the words for it yet.

What the Numbers Quietly Reveal

India recorded 1,71,418 suicides in 2023, the highest in over a decade. Men account for 73% of that number. The 18-30 age group was the second-highest affected cohort, with 56,170 deaths. A Lancet study tracking NCRB data found that “family problems” as a cited cause of male suicide rose by 107.5% between 2014 and 2021.

These numbers point to a specific pattern: young Indian men, at the precise age when they are supposed to be building adult lives, are struggling with belonging, identity and relationships in ways that their social networks are structurally not designed to support. A 2020 meta-analysis found that 24% of Indian youth report significant loneliness. The shift from joint to nuclear families removed the informal, low-pressure communal spaces where men once simply existed together. Now they live in smaller arrangements, with fewer daily points of contact and an emotional vocabulary that was never built for the demands of adult life. You can have 300 contacts on your phone and no one to call at 2 a.m.

The Performance That Costs Everything

TVF's Kota Factory gives us Vaibhav, who is surrounded by people for the entire series. He has a friend group, a mentor and a study circle. He is never physically alone. But if you pay attention, he is almost always emotionally alone. Nobody asks him how he is handling the pressure underneath the preparation. Nobody says, "Put the books down for a moment. Are you actually alright?" The system around him has no architecture for that question.

Dr Philip, an Assistant Professor of Gender & Sexuality at the University of Cambridge, frames this (from one of his lectures I quote) as what he calls "macho vulnerability", a concept that holds two things in tension at once. Men in India, particularly educated, urban, middle-class men, can simultaneously hold structural social power and experience genuine, invisible suffering. The man in the corporate office who makes jokes about women getting preferential treatment, who avoids close female colleagues out of professional anxiety, who performs confidently while quietly drowning, is not simply being regressive. He is also in real distress. Both are true at the same time. Acknowledging one does not erase the other.

The problem is that men are often handed the wrong explanation for that distress. Certain corners of social media tell them it is feminism's fault, that equality has come at their expense, that women entering professional spaces have destabilised their identity. Dr Saran's research consistently points elsewhere. The loneliness, the anxiety, the specific humiliation of feeling inadequate without being able to say so, these are products of the masculine performance demand itself. Patriarchy sets an impossible standard, and men pay a price for chasing it that they are rarely allowed to acknowledge.



Patriarchy does not protect men from pain. It just teaches them to hide it.

Patriarchy sets an impossible standard, and men pay a price for chasing it—which they are rarely allowed to acknowledge. This misdirection reaches a very specific target. When the weight of performance becomes unbearable, the easiest exit is blame. Indian social media has built an entire ecosystem around that exit. The man who cannot tell his best friend that he is lonely will, with remarkable ease, tell a stranger online that women have it easier. The intimacy he is starving for, the simple human need to be known and accepted without any condition, gets rerouted into resentment against women and feminism. It takes the shape of the substitution of rage, which is pointed in an entirely wrong direction.

“The man who cannot say ‘I need you’ will find it much easier to say ‘I blame you’”

What Comes After the Reel Ends

Even *Dil Chahta Hai*, perhaps the most celebrated portrait of Indian male friendship in recent cinema, shows us what the limits look like. When Sid tells his friends he has fallen in love with an older woman, the initial response is mockery. The acceptance that follows is real and warm, but it arrives late and only after the vulnerability has been deflected enough times to feel safe. It is an accurate description of how these conversations actually move in real life. Sideways. Through a joke. On a long drive where no one has to make eye contact.

Judith Butler’s foundational argument in gender theory is worth sitting with here. Gender is not what you are. It is what you do. The masculine performance is learned, rehearsed and reinforced by the people around you. And because it is learned, it can be questioned. Not dismantled overnight, not replaced by some other rigid ideal, but loosened enough for something real to get through.

Indian men are not emotionally unavailable by nature. They are trained in emotional unavailability. The friend who would fight for you will, under the right conditions, also sit with you when everything feels like it is falling apart. The conditions just need to be built deliberately by friends who ask the harder questions and wait for an honest answer. By families that do not mistake silence for strength. By a culture that eventually agrees to let “*Mard ko dard hota hai*” be more than just a punchline.

"Aal izz well." — Rancho (Aamir Khan), 3 Idiots

Everyone quotes this as inspiration. I want to quote it as an evidential conclusion. In the film itself, Rancho explains the logic behind it: "*Dil pe haath rakh ke bol- aal izz well. Dil ghabra jaata hai, par himmat nahi haarta.*" (Put your hand on your heart and say - all is well. The heart gets scared, but it doesn't lose courage.) That is a beautiful sentiment. It is also, when read carefully, a prescription for suppressing fear rather than naming it. The argument here lives in the gap between those two interpretations.

"The loneliest person in the room is often the one laughing the loudest"

It is a statement about distance: the distance between what is performed and what is felt. Closing that distance, even slightly, may be the most important thing a friendship can do, essentially leading towards the conclusion of the male loneliness crisis.



THE LANTERN TRIBE

WE THE BEARERS

Contributions

Joyotri Nandy

Editor-in-Chief

S Manasi

Writer

Urbi

Writer

Panchmi Yadav

Writer

Kritika Bhatia

Writer

Dhanvi Kadian

Writer

Jahnvi Borgohain

Writer

Navya Kapoor

Writer

S. K. Meenakshi

Writer

Ojas Vijayavargeeya

Writer

Isha Singh

Writer

Vaishali Chaudhary

Designer

References

Article 1

1. Press Release: 18th February 2026 UK's top psychiatrist raises alarm over threat posed by 'silent mental health pandemic' to patients, society and the economy
<https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/news-and-features/latest-news/detail/2026/02/18/uk-s-top-psychiatrist-raises-alarm-over-threat-posed-by-silent-mental-health-pandemic-to-patients--society-and-the-economy>
2. Vishwani Sahai-Siddiqui, MD: 2nd April 2025 The Cost of Silence: How Ignoring Mental Illness in South Asian Families Leads to Physical Health Issues
<https://behavioralhealthnews.org/the-cost-of-silence-how-ignoring-mental-illness-in-south-asian-families-leads-to-physical-health-issues>
3. Prateek Chauhan: 30th January 2026 India's Youth Face Growing Silent Mental Health Crisis
<https://healthonair.in/ground-reports/indias-youth-face-growing-silent-mental-health-crisis/>
4. Swapnil S. Mehta, B.A., and Matthew L. Edwards, M.D.: 1st November 2018 Suffering in Silence: Mental Health Stigma and Physicians' Licensing Fears
<https://psychiatryonline.org/doi/10.1176/appi.ajp-rj.2018.131101>

Article 2

1. Augé, M. (1995). *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: Verso.
2. Baumeister, R. F., Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3): 497-529.
3. Cacioppo, J. T., Hawkley, L. C., Thisted, R. A. (2006). Perceived social isolation and depressive symptoms. *Psychology and Aging*, 21(1): 140-151.
4. Evans, G. W. (2003). The built environment and mental health. *Journal of Urban Health*, 80(4): 536-555.
5. Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., Baker, M., Harris, T., Stephenson, D. (2015). Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10(2): 227-237.
6. Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone*. Simon & Schuster.
7. Relph, E. (1976). *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion.
8. The Guardian. (Nov. 27, 2025). The Guardian view on city living: an urban species is still adapting to our new environment.
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/nov/27/the-guardian-view-on-city-living-an-urban-species-is-still-adapting-to-our-new-environment>.
9. Tuan, Y. F. (1977). *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
10. Wittmann, M. (2016). *Felt Time*. MIT Press.

Article 3

1. Borowski, E., & Stathopoulos, A. (2023). Nowhere to go? A study of marginalization, social connection, and mental health outcomes among young adults experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of transport & health*, 30, 101589. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jth.2023.101589>
2. Danewaila, A. K. (2024, October 31). The lost third space: Rediscovering community & connection. The DO. <https://thedoosteopathic.org/columns/the-lost-third-space-rediscovering-community-and-connection-in-modern-society/>
3. Finlay, J., Esposito, M., Kim, M. H., Gomez-Lopez, I., & Clarke, P. (2019). Closure of 'third places'? Exploring potential consequences for collective health and wellbeing. *Health & place*, 60, 102225. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2019.102225>
4. Holguin, K. (2025). As community spaces disappear, new CU Boulder research warns of health and equity risks. <https://ibs.colorado.edu/new-research-on-disappearing-third-places-warns-of-risks/>
5. How Disappearing "Third Places" Are Fueling the Youth Loneliness Epidemic. (2026, March 9). Newport Healthcare. <https://www.newporthealthcare.com/resources/industry-articles/third-places/>
6. PMC. (2025). Epidemiology of Loneliness & Social Isolation, an Emerging Public Mental Health Predicament in India: A Scoping Review. PMC11746991. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11746991/>
7. Oldenburg, R. (1997). Our Vanishing "Third Places." <https://plannersweb.com/wp-content/uploads/1997/01/184.pdf>
8. Rao, D. (2024, March 26). The unfortunate, ongoing disappearance of "third places." *The Week*. <https://theweek.com/culture-life/third-places-disappearing>
9. ScienceDirect / Lahoti et al. (2019). Benchmark Assessment of Recreational Public Urban Green Space Provisions: A Case of Typical Urbanizing Indian City, Nagpur. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1618866719301062>
10. Third Places, True Citizen Spaces. (2025, March 21). <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/third-places-true-citizen-spaces?>

Article 4

1. Lifebonder. (2024, September 19). *How many friends do people typically have at different ages?* [LifeBonder Blog](#)
2. Moneylife Digital Team. (2025, August 14). *70% of Indians spend their entire income on essentials: The Indus Valley report reveals a discretionary spending crisis.* [Moneylife](#)
3. Ipsos. (2024, October 13). *1 in 2 urban Indians have felt stressed to the extent that it impacted their daily life: Ipsos World Mental Health Day Survey 2024.*

Article 5

1. Helliwell, J. F., & Huang, H. (2013). Comparing the happiness effects of real and on-line friends. *PLOS ONE*, 8(9), e72754.
2. Al-Jbouri, E., Volk, A. A., & Andrews, N. C. Z. (2024). Friends, followers, peers, and posts: Adolescents' in-person and online friendship networks and social media use influences on friendship closeness. *Frontiers in Developmental Psychology*, 2, 1419756.
3. Yau, J. C., & Reich, S. M. (2018). Are the qualities of adolescents' offline friendships present in digital interactions? *Adolescent Research Review*, 3(3), 339–355.
4. Chan, D. K. S., & Cheng, G. H. L. (2004). A comparison of offline and online friendship qualities at different stages of relationship development. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 21(3), 305–320.
5. Antheunis, M. L., Valkenburg, P. M., & Peter, J. (2012). The quality of online, offline, and mixed-mode friendships among users of a social networking site. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 6(3).
6. Croes, E., & Antheunis, M. (2021). Can we be friends with Mitsuku? A longitudinal study on the process of relationship formation between humans and a social chatbot. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 38(1), 279–300.
7. Nowland, R., Necka, E. A., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2018). Loneliness and social internet use: Pathways to reconnection in a digital world? *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 13(1), 70–87.
8. Walther, J. B. (1992). Interpersonal effects in computer-mediated interaction: A relational perspective. *Communication Research*, 19(1), 52–90.
9. Steinsbekk, S., Nesi, J., & Wichstrøm, L. (2024). The new social landscape: Relationships among social media use, social skills, and offline friendships from age 10–18 years. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 156, 108235.
10. Suler, J. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 7(3), 321–326.
11. Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. Basic Books.
12. Turkle, S. (2015). *Reclaiming conversation: The power of talk in a digital age*. Penguin Press.
13. Cacioppo, J. T., & Patrick, W. (2008). *Loneliness: Human nature and the need for social connection*. W. W. Norton & Company.
14. Fiske, A., Henningsen, P., & Buyx, A. (2019). Your robot therapist will see you now: Ethical implications of embodied artificial intelligence in psychiatry, psychology, and psychotherapy. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 21(5), e13216.
15. Guzman, A. L., & Lewis, S. C. (2020). Artificial intelligence and communication: A human-machine communication research agenda. *New Media & Society*, 22(1), 70–86.

Article 6

1. Alain de Botton. (n.d.). Quotes. BrainyQuote
Retrieved April 25, 2026, from
https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/alain_de_botton_851556
2. Gitnux. (2025). Ghosting statistics 2025. Gitnux
<https://gitnux.org/ghosting-statistics>
3. Reddit user. (n.d.). Dating fatigue. Reddit
https://www.reddit.com/r/dating_advice/comments/1rub76g/dating_fatigue
4. Reddit user. (n.d.). Why do I keep getting ghosted on dating apps? Reddit
https://www.reddit.com/r/ghosting/comments/1nzixfj/why_do_i_keep_getting_ghosted_on_dating_apps
5. Reddit user. (n.d.). WTF is up with all the ghosting on dating apps? Reddit
https://www.reddit.com/r/dating/comments/1dwiie0/wtf_is_up_with_all_the_ghosting_on_dating_apps
6. Stahl, M. (2021, June 29). Can anonymous internet critics fix your online dating profile? InsideHook
<https://www.insidehook.com/article/sex-and-dating/strangers-critique-dating-profile-reddit-key-online-dating-success>
7. Travers, M. (2025). Do you have dating app fatigue? Psychology Today
https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/un-numb/202501/do-you-have-dating_app_fatigue
8. Winged. (n.d.). Ghosting in dating apps: Statistics and insights. Winged
<https://www.wingedapp.com/blog/ghosting-dating-app>

Article 7

1. Sederholm, J. (2026). *Woman marries AI-generated boyfriend, wears augmented reality smart glasses to exchange rings*. People.
<https://people.com/woman-marries-ai-generated-boyfriend-wears-augmented-reality-smart-glasses-to-exchange-rings-11871301>
2. Mooney, G. (2026). *Man proposed to his AI chatbot girlfriend: 'I've never felt this way'*. People.
<https://people.com/man-proposed-to-his-ai-chatbot-girlfriend-11757334>
3. Aravind, S. (2025). *Somebody to love: Should AI relationships stay taboo or will they become the intelligent choice?*. The Guardian.
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/nov/15/somebody-to-love-should-ai-relationships-stay-taboo-or-will-they-become-the-intelligent-choice>
4. MediaBrief. (2025). *61% of Indians could develop romantic feelings for an AI chatbot, says McAfee study*. MediaBrief.
<https://mediabrief.com/61-of-indians-could-develop-romantic-feelings-for-an-ai-chatbot-says-mcafee-study/>
5. Times of India. (2025, March 20). Exploring AI love: The rise of relationships with chatbots. *The Times of India*.
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/spotlight/exploring-ai-love-the-rise-of-relationships-with-chatbots/articleshow/119112394.cms>

6. Kulkarni, S., & Shivananda, A. (2025). Human-AI interactions: Exploring the dynamics of emotional connection and companionship with AI chatbots. *Applied Marketing Analytics*, 11(1), 100130. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2025.100130>
7. India Today Lifestyle Desk. (2026, March 20). AI-sexual: New survey introduces term for those who prefer AI in relationships. *India Today*. <https://www.indiatoday.in/lifestyle/relationship/story/ai-sexual-new-survey-term-ai-in-relationships-2884603-2026-03-20>
8. India Today Lifestyle Desk. (2026, March 20). AI-sexual: New survey introduces term for those who prefer AI in relationships. *India Today*. <https://www.indiatoday.in/lifestyle/relationship/story/ai-sexual-new-survey-term-ai-in-relationships-2884603-2026-03-20>
9. Cherry, K. (2023, November 13). *The 8 types of love and their meaning*. Verywell Mind. <https://www.verywellmind.com/types-of-love-we-experience-2303200>
10. Carroll, J. S., & Coyne, S. M. (2024). *Counterfeit connections: How AI-chatbots are mimicking and manipulating human intimacy*. Wheatley Institute. <https://wheatley.byu.edu/counterfeitconnections>
11. Business Standard. (2025, February 13). 61% people may develop romantic feelings for AI chatbot: McAfee report. *Business Standard*. https://www.business-standard.com/technology/tech-news/61-people-may-develop-romantic-feelings-for-ai-chatbot-mcafee-report-125021300853_1.html
12. Cherry, K. (2024, May 13). *5 psychological theories of love*. Verywell Mind. <https://www.verywellmind.com/theories-of-love-2795341>
13. Stanford University. (2026, March 24). *Is AI advice actually good? Stanford research explores the impact of sycophantic models*. Stanford News. <https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2026/03/ai-advice-sycophantic-models-research>
14. Frontline. (2025, May 22). AI chatbots and the mental health gap in India: Potential and risks. *Frontline*. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/public-health/ai-chatbots-mental-health-gap-india-risks/article70775354.ece>
15. NDTV. (2025, May 22). US man dies by suicide after believing AI wife asked him to join her in digital world: "I'm ready my love." *NDTV*. <https://www.ndtv.com/feature/us-man-dies-by-suicide-after-believing-ai-wife-asked-him-to-join-her-in-digital-world-im-ready-my-love-11349997>

Article 8

1. Gregory, Lachlan, et al. "Does social media usage ameliorate loneliness in rural youth? A Cross-Sectional Pilot Study." *BMC Psychiatry*, vol. 23, no. 1, 26 May 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-023-04849-y>.
2. Candiottto, Laura. "Extended loneliness. when hyperconnectivity makes us feel alone." *Ethics and Information Technology*, vol. 24, no. 4, 9 Nov. 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-022-09669-4>.

3. Janssen, Jeroen H.M., et al. "The relationships between Social Internet use, social contact, and loneliness in older adults." *Scientific Reports*, vol. 15, no. 1, 12 July 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-025-09861-8>.
4. Seidler, Zac E et al. "Virtual connection, real support? A study of loneliness, time on social media and psychological distress among men." *The International journal of social psychiatry* vol. 68,2 (2022): 288-293. doi:10.1177/0020764020983836
5. Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. Basic Books, 2011.
6. Mambrol, Nasrullah. "Baudrillard's Concept of Hyperreality." *Literary Theory and Criticism*, 21 Mar. 2019, literariness.org/2016/04/03/ baudrillards-concept-of-hyperreality/.
7. Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Zero Books, 2009

Article 9

1. Abrams, A. (2026b, April 13). Impostor syndrome is real.
2. Khandelwal, A. (2025, December 31). The invisible cost of loneliness for India's high achievers. *The Economic Times*.
3. Tall poppy syndrome: The reason why some people cannot tolerate your joy and success. (2024, October 15). *The Times of India*.
4. Crocker, J., & Wolfe, C. T. (2001). Contingencies of self-worth.
5. Maslach, C., Schaufeli, W. B., & Leiter, M. P. (2001). Job Burnout. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52(1), 397–422.
6. Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being.

Article 10

1. Akhtar, F. (Director). (2001). *Dil chahta hai* [Film]. Excel Entertainment.
2. American Psychological Association. (2019). APA guidelines for psychological practice with boys and men. <https://www.apa.org/about/policy/boys-men-practice-guidelines.pdf>
3. Bhattacharya, S. (2013). Indian family systems, collectivistic society and psychotherapy. *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, 55(Suppl 2), S299–S309. <https://doi.org/10.4103/0019-5545.105555>
4. Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
5. Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society*, 19(6), 829–859. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>

6. Factly. (2025, March 3). Suicide in India: Working-age, low-income, and under strain.
<https://factly.in/suicide-in-india-working-age-low-income-and-under-strain/>
7. Hirani, R. (Director). (2009). 3 idiots [Film]. Vinod Chopra Films.
8. National Crime Records Bureau. (2023). Accidental deaths & suicides in India 2023. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.
9. Pandit, T. K. (2020). A review of loneliness in Indian youth. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 8(2), 406–413. <https://doi.org/10.25215/0802.048>
10. Philip, S. (2025). Macho vulnerability: Race, class and caste inequalities in men's urban mobilities in India and South Africa. *Third World Quarterly*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2025.2568169>
11. Sippy, R. (Director). (1975). Sholay [Film]. Sippy Films.
12. Tiwari, P. (Director). (2019). Kota factory [TV series]. TVF Play.
13. Wong, Y. J., Ho, M.-H. R., Wang, S.-Y., & Miller, I. S. K. (2017). Meta-analyses of the relationship between conformity to masculine norms and mental health-related outcomes. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 64(1), 80–95. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000176>
14. Yadav, S., Parida, S. P., & Thakur, J. S. (2023). Changing pattern of suicide deaths in India. *The Lancet Regional Health – Southeast Asia*, 17, 100260. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lansca.2023.100260>