

A lonelier world!

A time to cherish!

A while ago, my son's school asked us to fill out a questionnaire aimed at finding solutions to school traffic congestion. This survey was designed to identify the reasons why some parents prefer to drive their children to school rather than take the school bus. While filling out the form, I came across a question that struck me. It asked "Does picking up and dropping off your child allow you to spend quality time with your child?"

It left me wondering how the designer of the questionnaire came up with such a deep, personal, and delicate question. As it resonates with families like mine who have long struggled to spend quality time together, only to discover this hidden gem by accident during their school commutes.

It dawned on me that the family quality time problem is more pervasive than I initially presumed. Indeed, as an unintended consequence, my family's morning commute has become the most enjoyable time that we as a family have together each day. Every day, my husband and I take our two children to school together. Inside the car, nobody is looking at their devices, the windows are closed, and there is no background music. All we do is sit tight, hug each other and have small loving conversations on the way to school. Also, we take a few family pictures in random places such as the car, elevator, and parking lot. Once we get to school, we walk our children to their classes while holding hands and wishing them the best. Our morning commutes are the only times that we are all fully present.

Digital loneliness: a growing problem

Despite all the opportunities and conveniences that the rapid advancement of technology has brought about, unfortunately it has insidiously increased loneliness and unhappiness in the world. Absence of family quality time is only the tip of the iceberg of a much bigger problem that is loss of human connection.

I have always wanted to pass on the values of love, trust, and loyalty that I was raised with to my children. But, establishing simple family rituals that were once an integral part of my childhood seem like a never-ending battle against a much more powerful and charming opponent called the internet. Sadly family meals and cozy evenings that used to be inextricable elements of family life seem to become a thing of the past. So many

times, I have found my husband and two children sitting shoulder-to-shoulder on the sofa, each immersed in their own worlds of Minecraft and online news without saying a word to each other for a long time.

The thing that makes us truly happy

The omnipresence of smart devices in our daily lives has dramatically reduced the number of daily conversations people have. A simple observation of a cafe, restaurant or other public gatherings where used to be a hub for sharing ideas, laughing at jokes and telling stories reveal this very disorienting truth that more and more people prefer to interact with their mobiles rather than each other.

Numerous studies have shown that the sheer amount of time that we spend interacting with others determines how happy we are. In a famous study, positive psychologists [Ed Diener and Martin Seligman](#) examined people who scored in the highest percentile of happiness surveys to figure out why they were the happiest. The results showed that the happier people were not those who exercised more or were more religious, but, they were those who spent more time socializing and had stronger social and romantic relationships with other people.

Stay-at-home technologies are designed to make us lonely

The innovations in consumer technology of the past decade have consciously or unconsciously reduced or eliminated human interactions significantly. We can literally stay at home and still live an active and productive life. From the comfort of our homes, we can work remotely, learn any subject, tone our bodies, pay our bills, make investments, hold meetings, shop everything, do our banking, register a company, extend our visas, notarize our documents, meditate, find our future mate, and visit famous museums. It may be hard to believe, but now we can even go to nightclubs in Metaverse. The proliferation of options that minimize human connections is mind boggling. Starbucks' app allows customers to order through the app before they pick up their orders, so they don't have to wait in line.

Stay-at-home technologies have gained even more popularity due to advances in artificial intelligence and algorithmic recommendations. The personalized suggestions of algorithms have significantly enhanced user experiences by suggesting products that customers will enjoy but are unlikely to discover on their own. For instance Amazon's algorithm better knows what books we would enjoy reading than we can articulate.

All these efficiencies come at the cost of human connection and an increased sense of loneliness. According to [Nick Eppley](#), a behavioral science professor at Chicago's Booth school of business, talking to strangers makes people feel happier irrespective of their introvert or extrovert nature. According to him, staying happy is more about the frequency of happy events than their intensity. People must engage in daily conversations and small talks with one another, including strangers, to maintain a sense of happiness. The feel-good factor of socializing can help ease the burden of commutes and waiting in lines. That is why Eleanor, the wife of Wetzel, the inventor of the ATM machine, ironically never used one. She claimed that she preferred to interact with real people when banking. She said "ATMs do not smile back at you."

Avatar Friends

The emergence of social media has also aggravated the problem of loneliness and unhappiness in the world. Friends on Facebook or followers on Instagram can mislead us into thinking we have an active social life even though we don't have meaningful relationships with many of them. In fact it is dangerously easy to get addicted to the likes and emojis on social media.

The dawn of a new era

Whether we like it or not, the world has shifted to a new paradigm. A paradigm where altruism, collectivism and spiritualism are giving way to narcissism, individualism and materialism. Now, we do not eat our dinner under the stars, so we can gaze at them. Our children do not memorize ancient love poems at school. Film makers do not make movies about love and loyalty. Now we buy dresses for our avatars in the metaverse, so they look good in virtual meetings. Our children enjoy killing each other in video games rather than spending time with us and filmmakers portray scammers as heroes, so their movies sell better. Yes, it is going to be a very lonely world for homosapiens.