

Mapping Solitude: An Exploratory Study of the Concept of Solitude in a Hyper-connected Modern World

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Abstract

Social structures are built on a sense of connectedness among individuals. While interdependence among individuals maintains these structures, solitude acts as a means of disengagement from society. At the same time, solitude could also be a source of progress within societies, since it provides space and opportunity for self-regulation, peace, and contemplation at the level of the individual. In contemporary times, the advent of the internet and social media has led to a hyper-connected society, where individuals have the choice to, and to a certain extent, feel the need to be constantly connected with others. In this context, the space for solitude diminishes, but at the same time it becomes increasingly necessary to carve out time for oneself in a society constantly urging individuals to stay connected. It is important to understand how the concept of solitude has established itself in the age of technology, especially in the context of an individual's personal opinion, and how they view the relationship between solitude and social order. Towards this end, the researchers conducted ten qualitative, semi-structured interviews of students within the age of 20-25 years. Themes discussed include the conception and operationalisation of solitude, societal impact of solitude, and whether modern society provides a space for individuals to carve out time for solitude. Responses suggested that solitude in modern society is dependent on the willingness of the individual, and "time alone" is

associated with a disengagement from social, political, and technological factors overwhelming individual modern lives.

Keywords: solitude, technology, connectedness, society, social media

Introduction

The individuals inhabiting the space and their relationships make the fabric of a society, allowing discourse to happen, and society to function, adapt, and progress. In such a situation, solitude provides individuals the space to contemplate, pursue hobbies, and recharge their social energy (Bergmann & Hippler, 2017), and thus, is a fundamental aspect of life. Solitude is a pertinent topic of study in multiple disciplines including philosophy (McFlynn, 2015), psychology (Nguyen et al., 2017), and political science (Kulkarni, 2013). With the advent of technology and social media, and the world shaping into a huge digitally connected space overall, the social nature of humans is reinforced; the need and want to connect with others is higher than ever (Hippler, 2017). Solitude may be a potential tool for survival in such hyper-connected spaces.

Research and writing on solitude have emphasised its importance for self-regulation (Nyugen et al., 2019) and leadership (Deresiewicz, 2009), and as a way to escape the pressures of society (Coplan & Bowker, 2014). Empirical research also suggests that solitude is vital for democracy and freedom (Clark, n.d.) and helps an individual to think beyond the self and understand their community better (Mitcheson, 2015). However, with rapid changes in the means of interaction, perhaps the role of solitude is also changing. It becomes necessary to contextualize and understand what motivates individuals to seek solitude, and how solitude can be mapped in times when even the act of scrolling through social media feeds and looking at people's activities can be seen as communicating with the world (Nance & Mays, 2013). In order to understand and map solitude in modern lives, aspects like social media, politicisation of connected spaces in society, and impact on society of individuals seeking solitude, all become very important.

The aim of the paper is to explore the concept of solitude in modern lives with the help of qualitative interviews, and to map the existence of complete solitude, if any, in the present day. The study adds to existing knowledge about the interaction between solitude, society, and technology. For the purposes of this research paper, the term solitude will refer to a disconnection from other people in our minds and physical spaces. Technology encompasses any online medium that allows individuals to interact with others without being physically present (Nance & Mays, 2013). Lastly, society refers to the individuals and power structures present around and influencing the individual — both in online and physical spaces (Hillen & Walker, 2008).

The paper has been divided into three main sections. The first section reviews the existing literature on the topic of solitude, the second deals with the methodology used and the data collected, and the third contains the analysis of the qualitative data collected. The third section has been further divided into seven sub-sections, each dealing with a theme resulting from the analysis. The paper has been concluded by highlighting the key findings of this exploratory research.

Review of Literature

Solitude has been a long-discussed and debated concept that many scholars have attempted to define. According to Philip Koch (1994), solitude is an absence of other people from our minds even if they are physically present (as cited in Furui, 2016). Another more recent attempt defines solitude as “the act of being alone” (Nguyen et al., 2017, p. 1). However, various scholars have added their own qualifications. For example, according to Averill and Sundararajan (2014), solitude is usually interconnected with other psychological experiences that occur with the act of being alone, such as social rejection, social withdrawal, and loneliness. The idea of solitude began acquiring a positive connotation as an element of a fulfilled life only during the Romantic movement of the 19th century, when poets started including it in their writings, and linked it to finding truth beyond cultural and intellectual boundaries. There needs to be more clarity of what solitude is and, more importantly, whether it is beneficial or not.

In an experiment conducted by Nguyen, et al. (2017), 114 participants were randomly assigned to two experimental conditions – one in which they sat alone away from any electronic devices, and the other where they were asked to interact with a research assistant. After 15 minutes, the participants were asked to fill out an affect survey to gauge the influence of the activity on the participants’ emotional (positive and negative) affects. The study concluded that solitude plays an important role in effective self-regulation. The results of the experiment indicated that solitude decreases high arousal positive affect; at the same time, there is also a significant deactivation of both positive and negative high arousal affects, providing the person the opportunity for self-regulation. The study also supported the claim that autonomy plays an important role for positive affective experiences. People who chose solitude experienced positive effects while those who had solitude imposed upon them experienced negative effects. This important finding raises further questions regarding how and why one may choose solitude in the first place. Research conducted by Nance and Mays (2013) clearly demonstrates how autonomy influences the effects we experience through solitude and how we feel about it. The researchers suggest that solitude is necessary in our daily life. While the study highlighted several positive effects of solitude, it was also noticed that too much time alone leads to negative effects such as feeling lonely, sad, dejected, or not wanting to interact with others in the future as well. Another important factor influencing solitude are the social perceptions associated with it. People tend to

not seek solitude as it may be looked down upon, and the ones seeking solitude may be ostracized for doing so (Nance & Mays, 2013).

Several cultures have tried to understand the role of the group and the individual in society. Several may argue that wisdom, excellence, and happiness are derived from both — being a part of and being separate from the group. Thus, there is a significant need for time alone and away from the group. Montaigne (1965) emphasizes the need for solitude as a way to escape the pressures of dogma, conventions, vices, and powers of the group (as cited in Coplan & Bowker, 2014, pp. 5-6). However, he also claims that solitude, rather than being a purely physical state, is a natural personal experience that could be accomplished by being physically alone, as well as amongst other people. In recent times, technology and social media have had a significant impact on the concepts of solitude and connectedness. The internet and social media have provided a space to be physically alone, yet connected to others. With the increasing influence of the two in our everyday lives, there is also the increased pressure of being constantly present; being online at any given point has become a necessity (Hipler, 2017). With the development of technology, we seem to be constantly connected through technology. This has an impact on how much time we get to be alone. Technology and the advent of social media have brought the world closer and made it a tight-knit space. However, the increased opportunities to communicate with each other have also led to a generation of people not able to stay alone (Deresiewicz, 2009). Research in both natural and social sciences emphasize the importance of staying connected and together; it is an evolutionary, social, and developmental necessity (Deresiewicz, 2009). However, over the years, we have also seen philosophical and scientific commentary on the importance of disconnecting and taking time out for ourselves (Boivin, 2017; Hillen & Walker, 2008; Amichai-Hamburger & Schneider, 2014). Thus, in the age of constantly being connected to each other, there seems to be an apparent loss of time for oneself (Turkle, 2011; Deresiewicz, 2009). Coplan and Bowker (2014) remark on how it is extremely difficult to be truly alone since technology seems to connect us all the time. At the same time, the necessity of solitude has not decreased in recent times, and it is still extremely necessary for us to be alone. If we end up always being online and connected to others, we deny ourselves the solitude that we need (Turkle, 2011, as cited in Hippler, 2017).

There is now a fundamental change visible in what solitude means, and this is reflected in research on how modern interconnectedness affects solitude. There seems to be a shift in the definition of solitude (Amichai-Hamburger & Schneider, 2014). In research conducted by Nance and May (2013), several of the participants did not account for time away from technology as solitude. The time they spent on their phones, looking at social media or news pieces invariably tended to be about other people — yet this was included in the time they spent alone. Most people tend to consider their time online to be solitude in the case that they were not talking to somebody or texting somebody online (Nancy and May, 2013). Thus, it is necessary to

understand the impact of the digital world on solitude, and how being online and constantly in touch with people affects our own perception of solitude, and our need to seek solitude.

Modern times have engendered a regard for individualism and the concept of self above that of a collective (Hillen & Walker, 2008, p.1). This has consequently made people more aware of their self and its integration with their daily life. Clark (n.d.) investigates the root of the desire for private space in contemporary times. The author argues that solitude was foundational to the development of concepts like freedom, individualism, and democracy which are now considered ideals of western society. Solitude is carving out time for oneself away from society and its pressures, and being able to think in that space of mind. It also allows people to live deliberately and mindfully, removing all the clutter that social media and globalization can bring through constant availability and connectedness (Bergmann & Hippler, 2017). This has made solitude and time alone rare in contemporary societies due to the constant pressures of everyday responsibilities.

When alone, the personality demands space to stretch and elongate; this leads one to ask difficult questions, revisiting bad decisions and mistakes (Hoagland, 2014). Hence, even though Hoagland (2014) formulates a strong argument in favour of limited time spent in solitude, the argument underscores the reason for solitude, which is to grow, and not always in a comfortable and convenient direction. This discomfort leads one to ask difficult yet necessary questions about oneself and makes one more integrated with the self. People are also moving away from their fundamental thoughts and feelings, since they have no time to be alone. Modern life has left most people feeling unsatisfied, despite trying their best. Csorba (2018) suggests that introspection and resisting the urge to share, connect, and indulge in superficiality can help the modern youth live a deeper and grounded life. He highlights how the inability to seek solitude can lead to a culture of ruthlessness where constant competition and comparison fuel personal growth and development, painting rest and solitude as enemies of productivity. This paradox of an individualistic society discouraging solitude and self-reflection motivates our research study; the need for solitude arises because there is a constant societal force depriving us of it. Solitude allows members of a society to think beyond its realms, thereby threatening societal power structures and power holders; consequently, societies are deliberately made to suffer, along with the solitude of their members (Hillen & Walker, 2008).

The exercise of being alone, away from the distractions of the internet, mobile phones, newspapers, social media etc. is essential to lead without being influenced by “conventional wisdom” (Deresiewicz, 2010, p. 29). Hence, with workspaces and culture today depriving individuals of their time alone to reflect on morality and ethics, the importance of being alone with their thoughts is even more valuable; solitude gives people the opportunity to incorporate broader perspectives, flexibility, and creativity (Akrivou et al., 2011). The drive to always keep working, connecting, or being a part of the whole attests to the indispensability of Nietzsche’s

idea of solitude for healthy functioning of its members (Remhof, 2018). Ideas of the members of a society often become a mouthpiece of conventional wisdom trickling through social media and our immediate surroundings. People are denied the opportunity to challenge, question, or lead a group. This leads to conformity in models of leadership; where leaders are trained to maintain the routine rather than questioning or challenging it (Deresiewicz, 2010). Solitude also helps in ethical decision-making as it leads to an integration of inner thoughts and outer actions, thereby grounding morals in the real world (Akrivou et al., 2011).

Various philosophers have reflected on the impact of solitude on the functioning of a society. Roland Barthes (1977) argues that solitude provides individuals the avenue to think beyond the whole (as cited in Hillen & Walker, 2008). This becomes dangerous for societies that constrain individuals and dictate the economy of leisure, ideas of reward, punishment, productivity etc. (Hillen & Walker, 2008, p. 62). Other thinkers like Henry David Thoreau view solitude as not exclusive to the society one lives in. For Thoreau (1981), the dialectic of social connectivity and solitude served as a means to understand solitude for others, hence implying that “one sustains the other” (as cited in Furui, 2016, p. 330).

The literature helps the current study understand the indispensability of solitude in modern life as being both exclusive to the society one lives in as well as sustaining the society. Solitude is not only time alone, but also a conscious effort to detach oneself from the community or society and disengage the mind. Some who find peace in solitude desire to not be a part of the whole, disengaging from the constant occurrence of new events, influx of information, and invasion of various kinds. Solitude also offers disengagement from the society for an individual’s development, without allowing the common good to get in their way (Furui, 2016). Barthes suggests that margins provide an avenue for people to escape from time to time and live without being seen; the diffused power prevalent within the society can only be understood, analysed and critiqued when one disengages from societal structures (Hillen & Walker, 2008). Similarly, Nietzsche also refers to solitude as a collective version of individuals laughing at themselves and digressing from the routine path of society (Remhof, 2018). He presents solitude as an essential factor for self-transformation, leading people to distance themselves from their cultures and communities, and diagnose problems in their communities which cannot be seen without stepping away. Similarly, Ram Bapat, a political scientist, conceptualized the notion of solitude in line with its association to critiquing society (Bapat 2011, as cited in Kulkarni, 2013, p. 26). Kulkarni (2013) also refers to Bapat’s solitude which is rooted in the emancipatory discourse of modernity and ruptures of society. Even Thomas Merton, one of the best-known monks, defined solitude as a pathway providing both compassion and detachment to understand the problems of a modern society (McFlynn, 2015).

Withdrawal from a society, in real or virtual environments, also acts as political reclusion. Disengaging from such structures of society itself becomes a political statement of

non-participation by an individual (Bergmann & Hippler, 2017). However, there are two kinds of reclusion from society. Boivin (2017) discusses the role of a hermit as a healing influence in society. The notion of a hermit in American novels is associated with sensibility, nature, and wisdom. Boivin contrasts this idea with Thoreau's conception of solitude — the former is turning one's back on society whereas the latter refers to living a simpler life in nature. Seeking recluse from societies on being hurt and insulted by them is contrasted with Thoreau's notion of a celebration of life and being happy despite the failings of society. In a similar context, Nietzsche argued that the act of forgetting also carries a positive connotation because it is an active decision and the ability to suppress societal noise (Nietzsche, 1996, as cited in Mitcheson, 2015). The quiet of solitude and disengagement from existence allows for an honest self-investigation, which is pivotal to understanding the communities we collectively constitute (Mitcheson, 2015). By linking solitude with work cultures and ethical leadership models, the literature considered underscores the importance of solitude not only as a tool to understand oneself better but to also understand the society we live in.

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was adopted to explore the concept of solitude in modern times and its impact on society and individuals. Convenience sampling was used to identify individuals who could be interviewed regarding their perceptions of solitude. The sample consisted of ten students (4 men and 6 women) in the age group of 20-25 years studying different disciplines like economics, political science, psychology, anthropology, and engineering. A common, semi-structured questionnaire was used by the two researchers to conduct the ten interviews. The participants were presented with a small description of the study explaining its purpose before the interview and were also sent a written consent form to document their willingness to participate in the study. All interviews were conducted over Google Meet and each interview was about 15-20 minutes long.

The questions of the interview included those asking for their concept of solitude, the measures they take to seek solitude, the impact of solitude on individuals and society, and the impact of social media and a digital world on the nature of solitude. All interviews were later transcribed and coded by the researchers. Each researcher conducted five interviews, transcribed them and devised codes which were common in their five interviews, without discussing the codes with the other researcher. Post that, both researchers discussed their codes and produced seven common, overarching themes found across all interviews. The themes were conception of solitude, benefits of solitude, disadvantages of solitude, relation to society, space for solitude in modern society, relationship between disengagement and power, and solitude's relation to personal development. These covered all aspects of solitude discussed across the ten interviews, and therefore, became the final themes for the purpose of analysis.

Discussion and Analysis

Conceptualisation and Operationalisation

Across all participants, solitude was associated with the idea of a complete lack of contact — including, but not limited to physical, mental, and online spaces. For eight out of the ten participants, solitude was equivalent to a mental and physical disconnection from society and people. While the concepts of solitude and loneliness are quite often used synonymously (Nguyen et al., 2017), participants noted a difference — claiming that while they are considered synonymous, on a personal level, they consider them as separate concepts. Six participants categorised solitude as a space for self-contemplation, deliberation, peace, and calm. Two participants noted how some time away from connection helps them get in touch with themselves; for example, one participant emphasised how solitude acts as a force that helps them re-centre, refocus, and slow down especially when they tend to get carried away by the stimuli present around them. The individual conceptions of solitude conformed to established definitions — empirical definitions of solitude focus on a perception of being and feeling alone, and a space of freedom, recreation, and time alone to oneself (Long & Averill, 2003).

Solitude is usually sought in several ways. One participant emphasised that they complete their work and then seek solitude — so that they could be free of future worries and obligations. For them, the notion of solitude was also connected to a disengagement from real-world worries and commitments; thus, pending tasks often overpower the need to seek solitude. All the participants emphasised disconnecting from the internet and other ways of electronic communication — switching off the internet, notifications, deleting social media applications and avoiding text messages — as means of achieving solitude. The only exception was time spent watching television online; nine of the ten participants described the activity as a regular part of their time spent alone. The difficulties in attaining a state of solitude were also mentioned — personal and family schedules often come in the way. One of the participants commented on the same in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how although there was more isolation, it was forced, and there was limited choice and autonomy in seeking solitude in the first place. Another participant mentioned how the realisation of the need to seek solitude itself diminishes the ephemeral aspect of solitude. In contrast, only one participant mentioned that there is very little conscious effort required in attaining solitude — it comes naturally to them. In all responses, participants included technology and social media while explaining their ideas of solitude; however, no consensus could be inferred from the responses. Seven participants did not consider engagement with social media as solitude, because engaging with content online compels one to think about society and other people. Contradictorily, two participants included social media in their ‘alone-time,’ provided it was only restricted to scrolling through content and not engaging directly with others via the online platforms. However, limited literature (e.g., Nance & Mays, 2013) considers the presence of online social platforms while contextualising solitude. Inclusion

of the same in future conceptions of solitude would be beneficial to reach a holistic view of the concept.

Advantages of Solitude

Across interviews, opinion regarding solitude being good or bad was divided. All ten participants felt that it helped them deal with everything that surrounds them better, but two of them mentioned that a period of solitude also makes it tougher to return to society. In terms of the benefits of solitude, participants underscored its importance in improving mental health, reducing anxiety, and helping prevent a constant frenzy of comparison with other people. The disengagement from society, its usual norms, and central ideas helped in providing perspective and improving decision making skills. These views agree with Storr's (1988) idea of individuals getting a chance to go past their closest rigid identities by extracting themselves from their customary physical and social contexts when seeking solitude.

One of the participants mentioned that solitude helps in evaluating and being critical of the spaces they inhabit, supporting an association between solitude and authentic thinking (Treviño et al., 2003). The findings of the study also highlighted that in order to challenge existing structures, the question of ethics becomes extremely important which can be honed while seeking solitude. The participant also contextualized her argument in terms of time spent in one social space for a long time; it starts making one feel that being around people and staying connected to the outside world is how society should be ordered. Seeking solitude allows a degree of individuality in their lives which is in contrast to not seeking solitude and being a slave to time and external factors. One very interesting finding inferred from the responses of the participant was the effect of solitude on multidimensional thinking. Social media, regular social gatherings and other distractions often start feeding one's thinking, thereby hampering one's growth. The participant claims that they are not very social and feels that spending too much time with people or on social media "deadens one's capability" to look beyond issues that people are talking about at that point; time away from everything helps one take time to initiate learning about different issues, opens one's mind to different opinions, helping foster interest and curiosity.

Cost of solitude

Despite solitude forming an essential component of personal well-being for most participants, not every finding from the study was in favour of solitude. Across participants, there was a fear of missing out, not being updated with people's lives and a sense of guilt of missing something important when seeking solitude. One of the participants mentioned how it can lead to a state of solipsism where an individual can only describe themselves and not the processes that form society or society itself. Such solitude can also prevent social discourse, which helps an

individual contemplate and evaluate. Two of the participants mentioned that too much solitude can be bad – it leads to dark, complex thoughts and even mentally strong people are sometimes not equipped with the tools to indulge in such thinking; physical presence of another individual often helps in case of spiralling and offers a grip on reality. This finding corroborates with the thoughts of Hoagland (2014) when he mentions “but absent company is not medicinal” (p. 42). Another interesting finding from one of the interviews was the point of commercialisation of solitude and how it becomes a goal which humans start chasing. Additionally, two participants underscored the difficulty solitude poses in terms of getting back to society. One participant mentioned that if too many people sought solitude, it could lead to a breakdown of society.

Relation to Personal Development

One of the prominent findings among the benefits of solitude highlighted by the participants was its association to personal development. Five of the participants discussed the space that solitude provides for self-reflection and differentiating oneself from the society they live in; one out of these five participants discussed how solitude gives them space to understand the role they play in their own life, allowing them a third person perspective. These findings are supported by previous research on solitude which links personal growth, acceptance, and harmony by approaching the wholeness of self (Morgan, 1986). Disengaging from everything helps in building a more authentic version of oneself with no societal pressure, responsibilities, and expectations. One participant elaborated on solitude being a “by-product of their adult life”; in the midst of all external factors that influence adult life and the presence of diverse social groups, solitude reminds them that they need to be accountable only to themselves. The workspaces and culture of current times handicaps individuals to spend time alone and reflect on morality and ethics, underscoring the need for solitude even more (Akrivou et al., 2011). Two participants also mentioned its contribution in recharging oneself and giving oneself the space to step back from things that they do not find themselves compatible with.

Solitude in Relation to Society

Social relations, especially familial connections and peer relationships have a significant impact on an individual’s decisions and choices. Thus, it can be inferred that these social relationships have a significant impact on an individual’s choice and ability to seek (or not seek) solitude. However, taking into account interpersonal and contextual differences, each participant had a different experience of how their family influences their solitude. For example, one of the participants explained that their family encourages them to form social connections — that the parents are worried about their child being “too alone” or disconnected from the family, while another participant explained how their moments of disconnection from online platforms are usually motivated by their parents’ emphasis on taking time for oneself and away from constant connection. These findings are consistent with the findings of Csikszentmihalyi and Larson

(1984) that suggest that the motivation to seek solitude and the effect it has on adolescents is heavily influenced by their socioeconomic status, cultural resources, family experiences, and peer relationships (as cited in Lee, 2013). Contradictorily, peers did not influence participants' desire to seek solitude. While most participants claimed that there is, or has been at some point, a sense of guilt of missing out on something important, they also emphasised the shift in dynamic where there is now a mutual understanding about taking time out for oneself and not being connected constantly. Thus, it can be inferred that familial relationships tend to have a larger impact on an individual's choice to seek solitude than peer relations. However, this heavy influence of family and parents on solitude could be associated with the demographic and context in which the interviews were conducted – undergraduate students (age 20-25) were interviewed, and thus, especially considering the COVID-19 pandemic, most of them were either living with or in constant contact with their parents. Thus, had the context been different, it could be the case that family may not play such an important role in the participants seeking solitude.

Young adults spend almost seven hours daily using technological devices (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010 as cited in Twenge, 2013, p.11). Most of the professional and social engagements tend to take place over emails, instant messaging apps, and social media platforms. There is an unavoidable need to be connected to these devices — either for work or for recreation. Thus, the necessity of being online as a social and professional responsibility takes away the opportunity to seek solitude. A majority of the participants remarked that while they do not feel pressured to be connected through social media and other forms of communication, such connection is inevitable in today's scenario. One participant commented on how the way in which society and institutions are built make connections inevitable for survival; in this case, and specifically in context of the COVID-19 pandemic, because engagement is systematically encouraged, it is tougher to seek solitude. However, existence is almost contingent to connectedness. Another participant commented on how in times of physical disconnection, the spontaneity of conversation has diminished, and thus, there is a larger collective effort to stay connected.

However, the problem of replacing physical connections with virtual relationships had been persistent even before the onset of the pandemic (Twenge, 2013). An increase in virtual relationships poses a threat to the ability to relate to other people in person, yet, still increases the amount of time individuals spend engaging with others online (Rosen, 2012). Thus, online connections leave limited scope for solitude to be sought and found. One of the participants mentioned how the online space is used to compensate for the lack of a physical one, and how, while solitude ideally should come naturally, there is a lot of conscious effort required to attain it.

In relation to the emphasis on society for connection — four out of the ten participants commented that for a social system to sustain, there needs to be a certain sense of social cohesion and connectedness involved. One of the participants commented on how taking time out for oneself, in this case, would leave a feeling of being left behind while society moves forward.

Disconnection also brings about a fear of missing out because in a societal structure, we derive our self-concept in relation to the actions and behaviours of others, and how we engage with others. However, as suggested by Nietzsche, stepping away from the margins and movement of society helps critique and understand the issues that one cannot comprehend from inside the margins (as cited in Mitcheson, 2015). Nine out of ten participants commented on how both connectedness and solitude are necessary for understanding and critiquing the events in society – it is important to maintain a balance between both. Communication and engagement are key for us to understand how society works, and thus, complete disconnection will not aid in accurately understanding and critiquing contemporary issues. One of the participants mentioned how stepping away from the margins would ideally imply having an unbiased opinion of sorts — to be able to look at things objectively. However, objectivity is difficult to accomplish, especially when sooner or later, you have to step back inside the margins. A participant also spoke about how it becomes increasingly difficult to step back into the margins after a prolonged period of disconnection. Three participants emphasised the need for discourse for proper critique. Societies always thrive on uncritical submission, and thus, discourse enables the spread of knowledge and opinions. Knowledge is necessary for critique, and in the present day, knowledge itself is a privilege. Thus, discourse further helps in deliberation — especially amongst those who do not have the means to attain knowledge whilst in solitude. These findings are antithetical to the emphasis on solitude to critique and evaluate society (Mitcheson, 2015). However, these comments help contextualize the earlier findings to the modern world, and help understand the accessibility and plausibility of such solitude in times where there is a divide between the accessibility of information necessary to evaluate society itself.

Space for Solitude in a Digitally Connected World

Another important theme of the paper is the existence of space for solitude in times of the hyper-connectedness of a digital world. Social media forms a major part of modern communication and conversation; it constantly exposes people to what others are doing, updates about their life, achievements and lifestyles. These patterns of everyday life often create a very biased view of people's lives, creating high standards which individuals keep chasing, thereby constantly feeling the need to do more and do better. This finding is in agreement with Miller's (2016) findings which suggest that social media leads people to draw comparisons between their real lives and the showcased life of other people on their social media handles. Four of the participants mentioned how this not only takes a toll on their self-confidence and self-esteem but also invokes the urge to stay connected and glued to their screens. A balanced finding from the interviews was also the point of social media being a great tool if harnessed in moderation. Two participants mentioned that they discovered readings, as well as artists, musicians, and other interesting people on social media, whom they might not have been able to find otherwise. But at the same time, if social media is used as the only or major form of reality, it can often lead to the creation of echo chambers; even in terms of building friendships, one of the participants

mentioned that for them, the more a person *tries* to connect with them, the more superficial the connection seems. These findings seem to be consistent with existing research on social media that suggests it is a strong tool of public manipulation in a digital world (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). A participant discussed how people on social media tend to curate their reality – people have control on what they want to see and what they want to show others. Constantly being surrounded by people’s opinions and news on social media also “deadens one’s capability” to look beyond, as cited by one of the participants. Hence, disengaging from such platforms becomes essential to reason with reality and think more deeply.

Upon being asked whether there exists any space for solitude in the midst of such connectedness and communication, eight out of the ten participants’ responses can be linked to the idea of individual willingness. One of the participants mentioned that distractions in the form of radio, newspaper, television etc. have always existed to increase engagement among people and hamper solitude. It is probably more difficult for the present generation due to the distraction being readily accessible in their hands or their pockets. Hence, participants agreed that while there is space for solitude; carving out that time for oneself depended on the individual. One participant said it also depends on the individual’s understanding of the concept of solitude; if not talking to anyone counts as solitude, then just scrolling through social media can also be an avenue of spending time alone. Contrary to the rest of the findings, one participant believed that solitude is not possible in this technological age. Individual effort needs to be strong and persistent since social media feeds into one’s ability to stay connected. But, across all interviews, there was a consensus on solitude in modern lives being possible with willingness and effort.

Disengagement and Power

One of the participants mentioned that for a societal structure to work, there is, to a certain extent, a need for uncritical submission. However, this cannot be passive — engagement is connected to power, and power is present every time there is engagement. Two participants commented on how for power to be exerted, there is a necessity to make oneself known — without knowledge of presence, it is difficult to control others. A participant illustrated this through their personal experiences of student body elections — regardless of a space provided for actual campaigning, engagement and connection with others is a crucial aspect of letting others trust you with the power that one wants to seek. Four participants further commented on how the process of solitude itself – disengaging from the world around, is an act of power. When you take out the time for yourself, and take space without it relating to other individuals or larger power structures – you reclaim some of the power, and at the same time, refuse to let structural power influence you. This is in line with the argument put forward by Roland Barthes (1977), where he claimed that solitude itself is dangerous to the constructs of society – as it provides the space to think beyond the whole, and helps individuals move beyond the constraints that society

levies on them (as cited in Hillen & Walker, 2008). Therefore, in this sense, solitude itself becomes an act of rebellion.

However, contrary to this, half of the participants commented on how solitude is mainly for the individual, and not for the society. The motivation to seek solitude is an individual need and not to overthrow or deliberately disengage from power and society. Societies and interpersonal relationships always include power dynamics; thus, any social connection brings in the question of power. However, disengagement from that power will never be absolute – it will always circle back to re-entering the margins of the society; even if we pull ourselves out of the power structure, there will always be some form of connection that leads to an engagement with the power structures. Two participants also commented on how individual solitude may not affect the larger structures at play. Personal disengagement would barely affect the functioning of society if only a handful partake in the disconnection. Thus, while participants understood the necessity of pulling away from society itself as requiring power, opinion stands divided on what effect the act of pulling away has on society.

Conclusion

This exploratory study was undertaken to determine the role and position of solitude in today's society considering the increased connectedness through technology and social media. Previous research has examined and commented on the role of solitude and its necessity for an individual to critically analyse societal structures. Previous studies have indicated that seeking solitude is essential to self-regulation and leadership. The purpose of the current study was to understand the conceptions and opinions people tend to hold about solitude in contemporary times and what meaning solitude holds in this age of technology and hyper-connectedness.

Qualitative analysis of ten semi-structured interviews indicates that solitude, including time away from technology as well, is a way for individuals to recharge and refresh. Findings on solitude's role with relation to societal factors were divided; while some believed that it is necessary to step away from the margins to understand society better, others emphasised how it is nearly impossible to disengage fully. In findings pertaining to power and disengagement, parallels could be drawn between most responses emphasizing disengagement from the structure as an act of power, providing a space for the individual to look at society from outside the margins and its structure. The results from the study indicate that regardless of the shift in the ways and mediums through which people connect and the exponential rise in connectedness through technology, solitude still plays an important role in the day to day lives of individuals and, albeit with alterations and adaptations, has stayed relevant in the contemporary society.

The findings in the study are subject to limitations of a relatively small sample which is not representative of the general population. The sample is restricted to individuals of one

socioeconomic background and age group. Considering the amount of time, energy, and space required to attain solitude, these factors pose limitations to the generalisability of the study. The study can pave the way for further research to be undertaken in the domain of solitude. One of the areas that future research can investigate is how technology has affected different age groups in relation to the themes mentioned in the paper using larger samples. This would help in understanding the concept of solitude in greater detail.

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