

Alone Together in the Digital Age

Fourteen-year-old Kim Sung-jin has what many might consider the ideal job. He eats. A lot. His “mukbangs,” or eating live streams, gain hundreds of thousands of views as South Koreans tune in on their laptops to watch Sung-jin devour his delicious dinners, often as they eat their own dinners right alongside him.

In recent years, this phenomenon has spread to the United States. Famous YouTube stars like Erik the Electric and Trisha Paytas have adopted these mukbangs, often filming and live streaming themselves eating everything from donuts to tacos to pizza—always in enormous portions. Their videos have gained millions of views, and these “mukbangers” now make a living from posting their eating videos. From the outside, the job of a mukbanger may appear a bit peculiar, if not downright disturbing. But no one seems to focus on *why* these people are able to gain fans from their eating live streams. Interestingly enough, the popularity of these live streams seems to reveal a lot about America’s loneliness epidemic and our persistent desire for human interaction, even if it’s through a laptop screen.

As I delved into the world of mukbangs, I stumbled upon a whole community of individuals who regularly watch these videos and bond with fellow fans in the online comment sections. Eating has always been a social experience in the United States, but for the many people who don’t have anyone to share a meal with, these live streams offer a comforting

antidote to their loneliness. Mukbanger Trisha Paytas posted a video titled “Lonely + sad eating show | Have dinner with me,” and in the description box she wrote, “love u all so much. hopefully u won't have to eat alone now :).” In this video, Paytas eats take-out Chinese food and laments her love life for 25 minutes. Judging from the comment section, many of Paytas’ fans seem to relate to her struggles, although some comments read more like cries for help. One fan named Ivy writes, “This is your first eating show where I shed tears, Trisha... I am lonely as well... I ordered my dinner tonight and I saw your video and ate virtually with you. Thank you for being here for me through my loneliness.” For Trisha Paytas’ 3.5 million subscribers, her videos give them an opportunity to eat dinner with a (virtual) friend and cope with their feelings. Mukbanger Erik the Electric agrees, noting of his viewers, “I think people watch because they are alone and want to eat with somebody else through the computer.” In this sense, technology—and live streams in particular—allows lonely Americans to find comfort and companionship online.

But what about the long-standing claim that technology is a powerful driver of our isolation? After all, American society has grown increasingly lonely, according to the 2004 General Social Survey. Since 1985, the number of Americans who report having no close friends has tripled. Almost one quarter of the subjects reported having “zero” close confidants. A large body of research and surveys reveals just how lonely most of us feel, and how our loneliness has increased in the Digital Age. It would be easy to assume that technology is causing this loneliness. In fact, many pundits are increasingly making this assertion. However, the answer is more complex than many of them suggest.

We're living in a strange world right now. We're more connected than we've ever been before, but in some ways, also more isolated than ever. In the introduction of her book "Alone Together," psychologist Sherry Turkle writes, "We are lonely but fearful of intimacy. Digital connections [...] may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other." In many ways, "mukbangs" are an example of how technology allows us to take the easy route in terms of friendship. Why would you bother putting yourself out there and trying to make friends when you can simply sit at your laptop and have the same feelings of companionship?

The platform Livestream was first launched in 2007, but the popularity of these live personal broadcasting channels has skyrocketed in the last few years, after Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter each launched its own streaming service. Now, we can watch people from anywhere in the world record and share their lives. But these live streams can easily be misused as a form of escapism, while giving viewers the illusion of friendship and connections.

In the Digital Age, when we feel more connected than ever, we are really more isolated, and technology certainly allows us to further this isolation. Watching a live stream may make you feel less lonely, but this digital interaction is not the same as a face-to-face interaction. In fact, live streams are almost entirely one-sided. When watching a live stream, one person essentially takes a break from his or her own life to watch someone else live theirs.

One of the more revealing examples of this is singer Katy Perry's 96 hour live stream, which she used as a way to promote her new album. She recorded and live-streamed on YouTube every moment of her life for four days straight, and fans actually watched her do things like sleep, eat, brush her teeth, go to therapy, and explore Buddhism. Throughout the live stream, the

comment section bustled with activity from viewers worldwide. On the last day of her promotional experiment, a commenter named Rishu commented, “Idk [I don’t know] what I’m gonna do without this live stream my life is so boring lol. Don’t gooo I’ll miss you!” Perry responded, “Aw, I’m gonna miss you too, Rishu.” That may be a winning line for a pop star to deliver to make her fans feel as though she genuinely cares about them, but the friendship between Rishu and Perry is completely false. It’s a safe bet that Perry did not think of Rishu for one second after her live stream ended. But Rishu certainly continues to think of Perry, and he was not the only viewer who had become so absorbed in Perry’s life that he wasn’t sure how he could go back to living his own. After all, Perry’s life is pretty fabulous, and with technology, it’s so easy for many fans to watch her live her life in order to escape the tedium of their own.

Another popular live streamer is 14-year-old *Stranger Things* star Millie Bobby Brown, who often live streams to her 15.6 million Instagram followers. At any given moment, she has thousands and thousands of people watching her all over the world as she gives fans a glimpse into her daily life. In one of her most popular live streams, Brown and her boyfriend, Jacob Sartorius (who boasts 9.2 million Instagram followers himself) confirmed their relationship status to tens of thousands of viewers. From the chatter and excitement in the comments, it became clear that Brown’s young fans love to watch her life. But even as Brown notes, “It’s a bit creepy you know, 55,000 people watching my life. Like wow, that’s a lot of people.” Still, she continues to live-stream, and her young fans continue to tune in to experience a thrilling life—full of red carpets, makeup artists, and famous boyfriends.

When I pictured thousands of teenagers sitting in their bedrooms and watching Brown and Perry live-stream all aspects of their lives, I certainly got the impression that technology is to

blame for our increased feelings of loneliness and isolation. Still, it is important to note that technology did not create loneliness. The feeling of loneliness is a human condition that has existed throughout history and will continue to exist simply because we are social beings. Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's believed in epistemic loneliness—the idea that loneliness occurs when we try to reconcile our desires for a meaningful life with the emptiness and nothingness of the universe. But no matter how you define loneliness, technology certainly does amplify it by providing us with an easy escape from the demands and unpredictability of in-person interactions. For example, watching Katy Perry live stream her life for 96 consecutive hours probably led to a substantial amount of isolation for Rishu.

Yet it would be too simple to write off technology as the cause of our loneliness without looking at its positive impacts. In many cases, technology—and specifically live streams—allows us to feel more connected than ever before.

Surprisingly, one of the biggest beneficiaries of live streams are long-haul truckers. Loneliness is an occupational hazard for this group. Buck Black, a therapist who counsels truckers via his website truckertherapy.com says, “At least 80 percent of my trucker clients have problems with loneliness because many are away from home for weeks at a time.” These long, isolating drives often lead to depression in truckers, according to Buck. But when Facebook introduced the Facebook Live function, many truckers quickly used it to find a sense of community and a source of companionship while on the road. Many truckers now live-stream themselves singing, talking, ranting and joking during their tedious drives. And family members, fellow truckers, and ex-truckers from all around the world join in and comment on these live

streams. This form of technology actually offers an innovative cure for truckers' loneliness by helping them build a community.

Technology gives us the ability to create proxy communities. In the case of the truckers, technology isn't displacing authentic friendships. Rather, it is filling a void where face-to-face companionship isn't possible. In these types of situations, technology is great because it reduces feelings of detachment and isolation. But in situations where people use technology as a shield against the outside world, that reduces their willingness to take chances and put themselves out there. After all, real relationships require time and effort, while watching our favorite celebrity's live stream asks so little of us.

Technology is a scary thing because no one really knows what it is doing to us, or how we should best use it. We can easily become consumed by technology, sitting in our bedrooms all day and watching live streams rather than going outside and trying to make friends. But technology also has some overlooked benefits. In most of the articles I've read on loneliness, the author cites technology as the primary cause of our increased loneliness. In some ways, this may be true. But it also seems as though we are looking to blame our loneliness on anything except ourselves. In reality, technology offers communities and companionship, albeit through a laptop screen, to many people who would not otherwise have access to these essential connections.

Whether we love or hate technology, it's here, and it doesn't seem to be going anywhere. In the best interest of our society, we should learn how to use technology to our benefit, but also have the strength and discipline to avoid letting it become a detriment to authentic social interactions. Some live streams allow people to connect and reduce their feelings of loneliness. But no one should watch Katy Perry live stream for four days straight. Because we

don't want to end up like Rishu, so absorbed in Katy Perry's life that we eventually forget to live our own.

Works Cited

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