

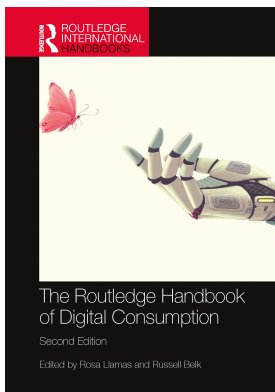
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### You'll Never Walk Alone

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# YOU'LL NEVER WALK ALONE

## Socializing and Finding Your Tribe in a Digital Age

*Bernard Cova and Laurence Dessart*

### Introduction

#### *You'll Never Walk Alone – A Metaphor of Our Times?*

March 20th 2020. Radio stations across Europe unite at 7.45 am GMT to simultaneously play Gerry and the Pacemakers' 1963 hit *You'll Never Walk Alone* (YNWA) in a bid to boost listener mood as millions are forced to forgo their usual routines and social lives to abide by social distancing rules. YNWA has become a recognized anthem deployed and appreciated by football fans the world over, especially Liverpool fans, expressing camaraderie and unity. Singing it is therefore a show of unity: "We want everyone to know that whatever they're going through, they're not alone" declared the creator of this event. YNWA topped the coronavirus "lockdown chart" on March 27th 2020, a chart of classic songs enjoying renewed popularity in the coronavirus pandemic.

Indeed, not being alone appears to be a key driver of human participation in digital platforms, especially in times of crisis. People chat, comment, and discuss with other people they have never met face-to-face in a bid to feel they are not alone. The word "alone" is the *fil rouge* in this chapter to understand a specific aspect of socializing in the digital age. First, we analyze the rise of individualism at the end of last millennium, and the reverse trend of tribalism brought about by the postmodern condition. Second, we document how digitalization has boosted tribalism by enabling individuals to belong to several online communities. Third, we highlight the subsequent reduction in feeling loneliness and how people can live together alone. Through an auto-ethnographic account, we detail the life of the anonymous and digitally gregarious, building on this to envision the future of digital socialization.

#### **Bowling Alone in the Time of Tribes?**

Robert Putnam's (2000) book *Bowling Alone* documents the decline in civic engagement, social connectedness, social capital, and sense of community among Americans. In this book based on vast data, Putnam shows how Americans have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and our democratic structures. Putnam argues that the stock of social capital of the average American – the very fabric of their connections with each

other – has plummeted, impoverishing their lives and communities. In fact, in the two last decades of last millennium, Americans signed fewer petitions, belonged to fewer organizations that actually met, knew their neighbors less, met with friends less frequently, and even socialized less often with their families. They even bowled alone. More Americans than ever before were bowling, but they were not bowling in leagues.

According to Putnam (2000), the end of the last millennium was characterized by individualism, the logical conclusion of the modern quest for liberation from social bonds. The right to liberty affected all aspects of daily life. Gaining ground was the idea of a social condition in which individuals, freed from the constraints of collective ideals in matters of education, family, and sex, operated a process of personalization as a way to manage behavior. It has been said that this was the era of the ordinary individual, that is to say, an age in which any individual can – and must – take personal action so as to create and show their own existence, their own difference (Elliott, 1997).

The end of last millennium can therefore be seen as a period of severe social dissolution and extreme individualism. Yet, attempts at social recomposition were also visible: people who had finally managed to free themselves from social constraints embarked on a reverse movement to recompose their social universe. This resulted in an active quest for alternative social arrangements and new communities (Cova, 1997). People increasingly gathered in multiple and ephemeral groups, and these social, proximate groupings had more influence on their behaviors than either modern institutions or other formal cultural authorities. Thus, the end of millennium did not crown the triumph of individualism but might have heralded the beginning of its end.

We can therefore speak of the emergence of a reverse movement: the search for maintaining or (re)creating social links differently, based on new norms. In fact, it is sometimes claimed that the social dynamics that characterized the end of the last millennium consisted of a multitude of experiences, representations, and emotions that very often were not properly understood. Although such dynamics were mostly explained by individualism, some readily observed the emergence of “tribalism”. The near universal currency of this anthropological vocab – and the ancestral lore that underpins it – was largely due to the influence of *The Time of the Tribes* written by the French sociologist Michel Maffesoli in 1996. In this book, Maffesoli set out his theory of micro-communal formations – nomadic, dispersed, open-ended, apolitical, unofficial, aesthetically organized, and empathetically intertwined – all antithetical to the centralized, hierarchical social totalities feeding and prospering on religious and political dogmas, which in the end divide more than unite.

Today, tribes are not tribes in the traditional anthropological sense, such as those populating the Amazon, the ancestral home of 1 million Indians divided into some 400 groupings, each with their own language, culture, and territory. Nor are they distinct social units, such as our families, political parties, or professional associations, which have some clear membership criteria, purpose, rules of conduct, and continuity. Tribes also differ from communities in a number of important ways (Goulding, Shankar & Canniford, 2013). First, tribes are multiple. Unlike communities, tribes rarely dominate consumers’ lives. Rather, they represent temporary escapes. Second, tribes are playful. Tied to fluidity of identity, tribal belonging is often devoid of long-term moral responsibility. Third, tribes are transient. Connected to these features of multiple identity and play, tribes emerge and disappear as affinity groups of an ephemeral, tenuous nature. Tribes, like communities, can exist online and offline. When online, they are bound by the affordances of digital technology (Morgan-Thomas, Dessart, & Veloutsou, 2020) and can connect users beyond geographic boundaries.

Today, we ambulate between these groups, participating not to reach some abstract goal but role-playing according to our fancies, for the sake of individual freedom itself. For instance, a neo-tribe takes shape when signing up for an interactive theme camp at Burning Man (Kozinets, 2002), an obstacle race such as Tough Mudder (Scott, Cayla, & Cova, 2017), or following an online group of interest on social media (Dessart & Duclou, 2019), wherein everyone is at once author, actor, and spectator. One consequence of the coexistence of the rise of individualism and the reverse trend of tribalism is the development of a kind of schizophrenic tendency toward individualization while showcasing ourselves as hypersocial, popular, and connected.

### **Net-Surfers Don't Ride Alone, Thus No One Really Bowls Alone**

With the dawn of digitalization, society has seen a seismic shift in the rules of human engagement. While social groups have become fragmented in the real world, online platforms allow people to make connections and find a sense of belonging in the digital world (Rheingold, 1993; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Individuals and groups can use social media to connect with digital, more geographically dispersed tribes than those found in local, physical establishments, such as the Liverpool stadium or Starbucks. Using social media, people can also choose to narrow conversations by topic, connecting with others who have similar passions regardless of physical proximity. Connecting with others with similar interests is one of the primary drivers of people engaging in online communities. Digital tribes are, thus, daily constructed and deconstructed online, built by individuals all around the world. They function as digital third places (McArthur & White, 2016). Feeling isolated? Find your community online! The internet is full of people sharing the things they enjoy with like-minded nerds, bookworms, metalheads, knitting enthusiasts – you name it! Even, negative experiences can be put forward and shared on internet as healing rituals (Sik, 2021). For instance, depression blogs offer people a rare opportunity to publicly share very intimate depression narratives and form communal bonds with their readers (Kotliar, 2016).

An online community can be defined as an organic aggregate meeting place not necessarily focused around an activity or brand, but around loosely connected consumption interests and lifestyles under which various discourses are negotiated (Weijo, Hietanen, & Mattila, 2014). Take the case of Audition Online, a free-to-play multiplayer online game originally released in South Korea in 2004 and today counting more than 300 million users worldwide. This music and dancing game allows players to compete against, and cooperate with, players from all over the world. Audition Online is a prominent example of promoting exclusive one-to-one interpersonal relationships through an online community: a monogamous, heteronormative virtual marriage system at the core of gameplay and tied directly to gaming progress or achievements. The game features matching cards to search for potential “dance partners”, a date planner to schedule and accomplish missions with partners each day, and a wedding party to officially become a couple with a love license and ring. A digital ethnography of this online community (Nhu, 2016) shows that engaging in the game – and its accessories – has three purposes for the isolated individual: a (costly) ticket to get into the community, an effective way of establishing and maintaining relationships, creating solidarity and sense of belonging within a subgroup. In other words, the individual's sense of belonging is reinforced through engaging with the digital community and its practices.

Despite the caution that the digital world is distancing us from each other, making us lonelier (Song et al., 2014), research suggests that our tech habits stem from a healthy human need to socialize, rooted in evolutionary science. We have an innate tribal need as humans

to rub shoulders, interact, play, and collaborate with each other (Cova, Kozinets, & Shankar, 2007). Digital tribes help us feel united in an accelerating world of fractured media, competing interests, and dynamic change. Where social groups have become fragmented in the real world, online communities allow making connections and finding a sense belonging in the digital world. As social dynamics have changed for offline institutions and social media, online communities have emerged to connect people with like-minded interests and experiences.

Indeed, a decade after Putnam, Klinenberg (2013) tempered the *Bowling Alone* analysis by emphasizing that *No One Really Bowls Alone*. More people live alone now than at any other time in history. In prosperous American cities – Atlanta, Denver, Seattle, San Francisco, and Minneapolis – 40% or more of all households contain a single occupant. Any discussion of families in the United States cannot exclude all those choosing to live alone. Thanks to new technologies – smartphones, internet, social media, etc. – people who live alone are not isolated in ways they might have been 20 years ago. A counterintuitive result is that people who live alone are actually more social than those with families. Those living alone lead more active social lives and create more connections with people outside their home, beyond digital connections. A distinction has to be made between being physically alone and being socially lonely. While the two may be correlated, living alone does not necessarily cause loneliness: “For most adults the reverse is true. In many cases, those who live alone are socially overextended, and hyperactive use of digital media keeps them even busier” (Klinenberg, 2013, p. 64).

### **Alone Together**

However, more and more voices argue that these digital connections produce fake socializing. Indeed, Turkle (2011, p. 121) posits that digital relationships “make us feel connected although we are alone”. Feeling connected yet isolated is further exemplified by how we have embraced smartphones. With these pocket computers, we are tethered at all times to the internet and virtual world of social media. Our apps bring us food, directions, capture moments, entertainment, and instant solutions literally at the touch of a fingertip. Turkle (2011, p. 1) identifies a particular relational vulnerability of human beings in the 21st century: “We are lonely but fearful of intimacy. Digital connections and sociable robots may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. Our networked life allows us to hide from each other. . .we’d rather text than talk”.

We are witnessing the growth of paradoxical behaviors that lead individuals to seek connection with others, but not necessarily interactions, and even less so disclosing their identity. These persons enjoy being alone yet can find a sense of belonging on a particular servicescape (McCamley & Morland, 2021). They aim to alleviate their isolation without bearing its price: interactivity. They agree to rub shoulders and feel passionate about the same things, but without any social or digital obligations. They prefer being satellites than core members. One, thus, wonders if within these online platforms and communities sharing is indeed the right denomination for their practices. Often, individuals do not really communicate or know each other. They emit signals (such as “likes” or “shares”) or short text or visual messages (a couple of words, an emoji, often not expecting a response), avoiding entering a system of relationships or reciprocity.

We next discuss the nature of the “gregarious anonymous”, a loner in the crowd, a person who does not seek out or may even actively avoid interactions with other people but stays with others on digital platforms. To address the as yet undiscussed nature of socialization

in a digital age, we focus on the case of new mothers. Currently, the focus in community research is on hegemonic masculinity, while a more gendered focus seems warranted. Harley-Davidson owners, Tough Mudder participants, sky divers and so forth are all very masculine and performance-oriented activities. Female-led and dominated tribes are said to be more support-oriented, more based on empowerment, celebration, and guidance (O'Sullivan & Richardson, 2020). According to Bruckner (2011), being happy is now perceived as a duty, and what is a more salient representation of the quintessence of happiness than becoming a mother and welcoming life? When becoming a mother, the pressure to put on a happy face is sharply contrasted by the abysmal loneliness and helplessness experienced.

The next section presents an account of the different kinds of emotions a new mum experienced during pregnancy and early motherhood, and the way she navigates between loneliness and belonging to an online tribe. Auto-ethnography, a qualitative method that provides rich insights into a phenomenon by exploring an individual's experience in depth, is particularly suited (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), as it allows for extraordinary and real-life aspects of personal experiences to be expressed. As a reflexive methodology, it offers a means of critically exploring the social forces that shape the researcher's own involvement in consumption practices. Rather than excluding personal insights and information, auto-ethnography embraces the researcher's subjective experience, putting him/her back into the research. Based on the personal introspection of a particular experience, but with an academic background, the researcher zooms in on his/her own perceptions and back out, critically reading the social situation. Auto-ethnography enables addressing experiences that often remain undiscussed (Brennan & Letherby, 2017), acknowledging and accommodating subjectivity and emotionality in the account of experiences, instead of hiding from them or pretending they do not exist. As the nexus of an online tribe of "new moms", auto-ethnography is positioned as a form of netnography (Villegas, 2018), using the self as a starting point, and evolving in a digital, social context.

### **Together, We Dance Alone. The Auto-Netnography of a New Mom**

The impetus to join the "new mom" online tribe is rooted in the unique and extreme loneliness felt by women in this period of their lives. We seek solace in the presence of others, in knowing that we are not alone in these difficult times, and that it is actually sometimes more difficult for others than it is for us. We look for support to understand the bewildering process of creating, welcoming, and growing life, and all its many stages, discoveries, and intricacies. More than just a lonely time, becoming a mother is an experience where many say that they feel dispossessed of their self. Having a new inhabitant in your body, bringing him to life, and then being totally at the disposal of this little being leave many feeling very lonely. More than feeling alone and on our own, we feel alone in the presence of a new woman we do not know: a changed woman who we do not recognize and need to adjust to. Often unable to resort to our own strengths and knowledge, we look for a tribe to join and feel part of.

Becoming a mom has been a challenging experience for me, and just speaking to friends and family did not seem enough for me to comprehend and adjust to the immensity of new experiences I faced continuously, from pregnancy to post-partum, and beyond. Being a rational decision-maker, I needed more information, more sources of knowledge, and also more comforting and varied discourses, to make up my mind and rationalize, or sometimes de-dramatize my own journey.

Being a very down-to-heart person, I like facts and figures. But when I became pregnant the first time, I quickly realized that I needed to be more in tune with my emotions and body and find ways to understand what was going on. Being highly aware of digital technologies and with my phone as an extension of my hand, a natural reaction was to turn to social media to find groups of people experiencing the same thing. The process was of course simplified by those little things that follow us everywhere: cookies and data. As soon as you start Googling baby-related things or purchase a cot on Amazon, you can be sure that you will be served content related to motherhood and pregnancy on all social and advertising platforms.

I follow several accounts of new moms, mainly on Instagram. Most of the mothers I started following a few years ago now have toddlers, like me, but they keep talking about kids and their journeys as mums. Others are just pregnant or brand-new mothers. They show the good and the bad things, with more or less authenticity. I also look for baby-related content through the search functions, and less often, via hashtags. The amount of accounts and content related to the topic is bewildering. In the process, I discover new profiles of young moms (to be) and sometimes follow them if they bring a different approach or vision that seems in tune with mine or have particularly visually pleasing profiles. I also follow several accounts of mother-related products or services. Celebrities who have babies are also a fun or glamorous addition to the mix.

Another reason for being part of the tribe of new moms, which is quite strange to admit to, but I am sure many feel the same way, is because of all the “graphic” contents. There is a form of normalization of baby-related content online, which can very often be totally adorable and beautiful but also sometime disturbing, embarrassing, or even plain disgusting. I must admit to being attracted by this type of content, like you would by a car accident on the road. What I am talking about here is birth pictures, bodies, and even the odd handicap or sicknesses. I am not actively looking for this type of content, but it sits there, sometimes published by women I follow, or sometimes pushed on my feed by clever algorithms.

For instance, it is no surprise that women’s bodies change a lot during and after pregnancy. I was prepared for the idea, but it is a whole other story when it is your own body that gains weight, marks, or floppiness. Watching pregnant and post-partum bodies of varied, and sometimes very extreme types, is a comfort. Seeing that some women have huge stretch marks or linea nigra is a comfort and makes you feel better, and understood. Seeing painfully beautiful babies dressed up to the nines is a pleasure, but seeing premature little ones struggling, kids with diseases or other terrible issues (where, honestly, you’re lucky they cannot give consent to you posting their lives like that!) is also important. These stories remind you that these things can happen and you need to cherish life, no matter how hard it is to be a new mom, and that in your own little bubble with your perfectly healthy kids, you have it pretty good. Whilst sometimes shocked and disturbed, you also feel reassured.

One lady that I started following, after one of her pregnant videos made a buzz, is a good example of the attractiveness of graphic pregnancies. When pregnant with her second child, she had one of the most massively huge bellies I have seen. She was not carrying multiples, just one average-sized little boy, but her belly was tremendously big, on a rather petite body. I never understood how she could carry it around, and even, in that one video, dance around blissfully in her pajamas, a few hours before giving birth. I still follow this woman, mother of two, who is a stay-at-home-mom (like many mom influencers!), now thinner than she ever was, exercising like mad, and with a house that is clean at all times.

There is this other woman that I follow and regularly want to unfollow. She has a massive follower base, three beautiful kids (two of them born in the same year!), a loving and slightly overwhelmed husband, heavy post-partum depression, and what seems to be a generally



hyperactive nature. As a result, she alternates between moments of total breakdowns and pure joyful hysteria. I just want to tell her to CALM DOWN. I don't know why I keep following her, but I do. Very often, I want to comment something nasty on her posts, but I would never do that. While every other post or story that she produces annoys me, I think I will not unfollow her either. I think I probably stick to her profile because it reminds me on the one hand that things are worse for others, and despite all the apparent beauty of their lives and houses, they are struggling too. It also reminds me that when I feel a little hysterical and out of control myself, it is OK. I have the right to feel this way, as many others do: I feel validated, which is a very strong need when you are doubting yourself.

One interesting thing about seeing the lives of other mothers unfold is the amount of support they get from their followers, women like me. Of course, when they have hundreds of thousands of followers, having 50 comments on a post is not spectacular, but still. Seeing all the supportive comments that these ladies get, seeing that among the followers, many others empathize and feel the same, is an extra relief and reason to tag along. All the likes, all the comments, all the love shared on these platforms is heartwarming and encouraging. It is almost as if it was meant for me, because their struggles are mine and their joys too. I suppose one of the reasons to keep following all these accounts is partly due to all that well-meaning support. Moreover, even if each woman has her personal style, which may be close or very far from mine, the point is not that we are the same in every single way, but we are very closely bound by the fact that we are, separately, all experiencing the same thing.

Despite all this support and positivity, I almost never take part in these discussions; I just want to read them. I want to see what others say, feel, and experience. I want to agree or disagree with them, but in my head, not in my feed. One thing I do is “like” content that resonates with me, and when it really hits the spot, I will also every now and then share it with a little comment. In any case, I do not contribute very actively to the discussion by actively sharing things. I will share every now and then something about being a mother, or my son, but I am much more self-conscious than many women I follow. For instance, I have not made it public on these platforms that I am expecting again. I quite often start a post to end up deleting it.

One lady that I absolutely love following is a French “body positive” influencer, whom I have been following for years because of her “no filter” attitude about everything. Over the years, she has evolved quite a bit and recently became a mother. She very recently wrote a post that perfectly exemplifies what we are there for: to feel less alone. She explains that when reading the comments of her followers, she understood that becoming a mother is extremely lonely, for everyone. It is not just physical loneliness, but rather a feeling of being alone in our own choices and decisions; of being criticized and misunderstood, judged. As a result, she posted stories of a whole day spent with her newborn and started a movement: many of her followers have started posting stories of their day with their babies in an attempt to show and normalize the reality of being a lonely mom, at home, confined with a baby.

This lady really echoes what I feel and what I think many others feel: the endless solitude of being a mother. Of wondering if what we do is right, if we are a good mother. The pressure of it. And there she is, posting her new-mother life without any filters, the tiredness, helplessness, her struggles but also her partner's. The drooping boobs and the messy house. I really like her for that and like her posts very often. I agree with her very much, feel touched by her rawness and own truth. Yet, I hardly ever comment on her content and do not feel the need to.

Of course, beyond all the influencers out there, the new mom tribe on Instagram is also composed of regular people, like me, who just share the joys of life with little ones with their



personal and small network. The content they share is usually more in tune with my direct reality, more genuine, and also less “over-the-top” in either good or bad ways. With these women, who are sometimes close friends or acquaintances, I interact a bit more, often saying things like “mine is doing this too”, or “hang in there”, or taking or giving small pieces of advice on what to buy or what to do in a given situation. It is very opportunistic though, I never actively or publicly turn to them to ask things, but I certainly interact privately with them more frequently. A few days back, an acquaintance posted a picture of her girl who is just a tiny bit older than my son playing with a board game that seemed very interesting. I asked her what it was and she replied with her opinion about it and an extra recommendation of things to buy. I would probably have this kind of interaction with this person about twice a year.

### **Interpassive Together**

The above auto-netnographic account reveals a particular practice of socializing and finding a tribe in the digital age of those we call the “gregarious anonymous”. A first striking element is that technology allows seamlessly taking or tapping into: digital tribes function as an information “open bar” where the gregarious anonymous feel comfortable helping themselves, without necessarily giving anything back. There is a lack of reciprocity they feel comfortable with, departing from the usual functioning of consumer tribes based on mutual support (Cova et al., 2007). This reciprocity disequilibrium is supported by technology that enables people to stay anonymous, to remain a drop in an ocean of followers. The act of being gregarious anonymous is, thus, afforded and sanctioned by the platform’s functionalities. The functional configuration of social media (here, Instagram) provides a salient role to technological affordances (Morgan-Thomas et al., 2020) in sustaining gregarious anonymous behaviors. For instance, platforms allow using an avatar or a pseudonym, and what they do can also remain largely unnoticed, not because it is untracked but anonymized and aggregated, often due to data protection enforcement. As a result, they can, for instance, follow or unfollow others, and hardly anyone will notice. Being anonymous and not “showing up” is necessary for this fluidity to remain possible, and for behaviors, or lack thereof, to remain unnoticed.

Seeing the experiences of others unfold, the gregarious anonymous can make sense of their own life: to be reassured or validated in their choices. They can compare and contrast their experiences with others, demystify behaviors, learn things, and normalize behaviors. More importantly, they can pick and choose what they want to believe and use in their own identity creation and obtain exactly the support or validation they need. Thanks to the various features of technology, the gregarious anonymous manage to obtain benefits that do not reside in interactions, but in the usefulness of the content and in a feeling of identification and a shared experience with others. The gregarious anonymous avoid intimacy and give very little, but their techno-social configuration certainly brings many benefits. In this respect, we can draw on Zizek’s (2004) thinking on interactivity, the dominant concept in both our real and digital world. Zizek opposed the concept of interpassivity with interactivity, defining the former as a state of passivity achieved through other people. However, interactivity and interpassivity cannot be dissociated. This is the ontological axiom of Lacanian subjectivity: the more active I am, the more I must be passive elsewhere. Furthering this idea, and in accordance with Zizek (2004), we envisage interpassivity as a major trait of the digital age and a building block of the contiguous experiences of the gregarious anonymous.

Instances of the gregarious anonymous giving something back are rare, but unlike the pure “lurker”, they are not inexistent. While the gregarious anonymous do not want to interact too much, express opinions, or engage in a debate, this anonymous position can also lead to breaches in some cases. Unlike the pure lurker (Preece, Nonnecke, & Andrews, 2004), the gregarious anonymous will every now and then share or interact. This is usually limited to rare and weak signals but might occur when content “hits the spot”. In contrast to the lurker who explicitly avoids all forms of interactions, the gregarious anonymous are not bound by such limitations. They do not seek by all means to remain unnoticed and will speak up if they feel like it and get some value from it. There is thus a form of kinship but also contrasting lurkers.

Another important feature of digital technologies is allowing and sustaining a certain bulimia of content consumption, which cannot realistically be matched by equal content creation or participation. Many social media platforms, like Instagram, are visual media based on highly aesthetic and attractive visual content. The attractiveness or attractive repulsiveness of content (Dessart & Cova, 2021) often present in motherhood experiences plays a big role in sustaining the gregarious anonymous’ need to keep tagging along. How well or badly content visually comes across is key to the formation of the community and its membership, albeit very fluid.

Finally, the digital behavior of the gregarious anonymous can be considered a threat to the development of digital capitalism based on digital labor (Fumagalli et al., 2018). Platform-based business models rely on a new composition of capital able to capture personal information and transforming it into data. The engagement of people is, thus, of primary importance, enabled by the production of content. However, the gregarious anonymous seldom engage in the creation of content and other activities, such as creating value for the platform.

## Conclusion

This chapter brings under a new light the reality of the gregarious anonymous and unpacks its specificities and nuances, using an auto-ethnographic account. Yet, it is important to point out that the nature of the study itself is subject to several methodological shortcomings, due to the subject under study, nature of the data, and its context. Auto-ethnographic data lends itself to a very rich and deep understanding of the reality of a subject but can hardly be systematically generalized. Further, the context is very specific to a certain gender, type of persons and technology used. Investigating similar situations for other tribes and on other platforms would bring more insight on the matter.

The digital age is often presented as a time when socializing and finding a tribe is easier than ever. However, social media and technology can also increase the practice of living and being alone. This is exemplified by the gregarious anonymous who live contiguous experiences online: they are simultaneously together and alone. This kind of behavior is already promoted in certain cultures, such as Korea (Han, 2020), and pushed worldwide with people’s forced Covid-19 isolation. In any case, it might be an error to limit these observations to only the digital world. The gregarious anonymous develop the same paradoxical practices offline. Being gregarious anonymous would seem to be triggered by, or linked to, a form of loneliness in one’s life, whether psychological or physical. One may actually live alone or be isolated from the rest of the world or our peers and have few real-life interactions. In conclusion, future research might observe the overall life of the gregarious anonymous – a rather difficult type of participant observation – to verify whether living alone in a digital age means being gregarious or hyperactive on digital media.

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