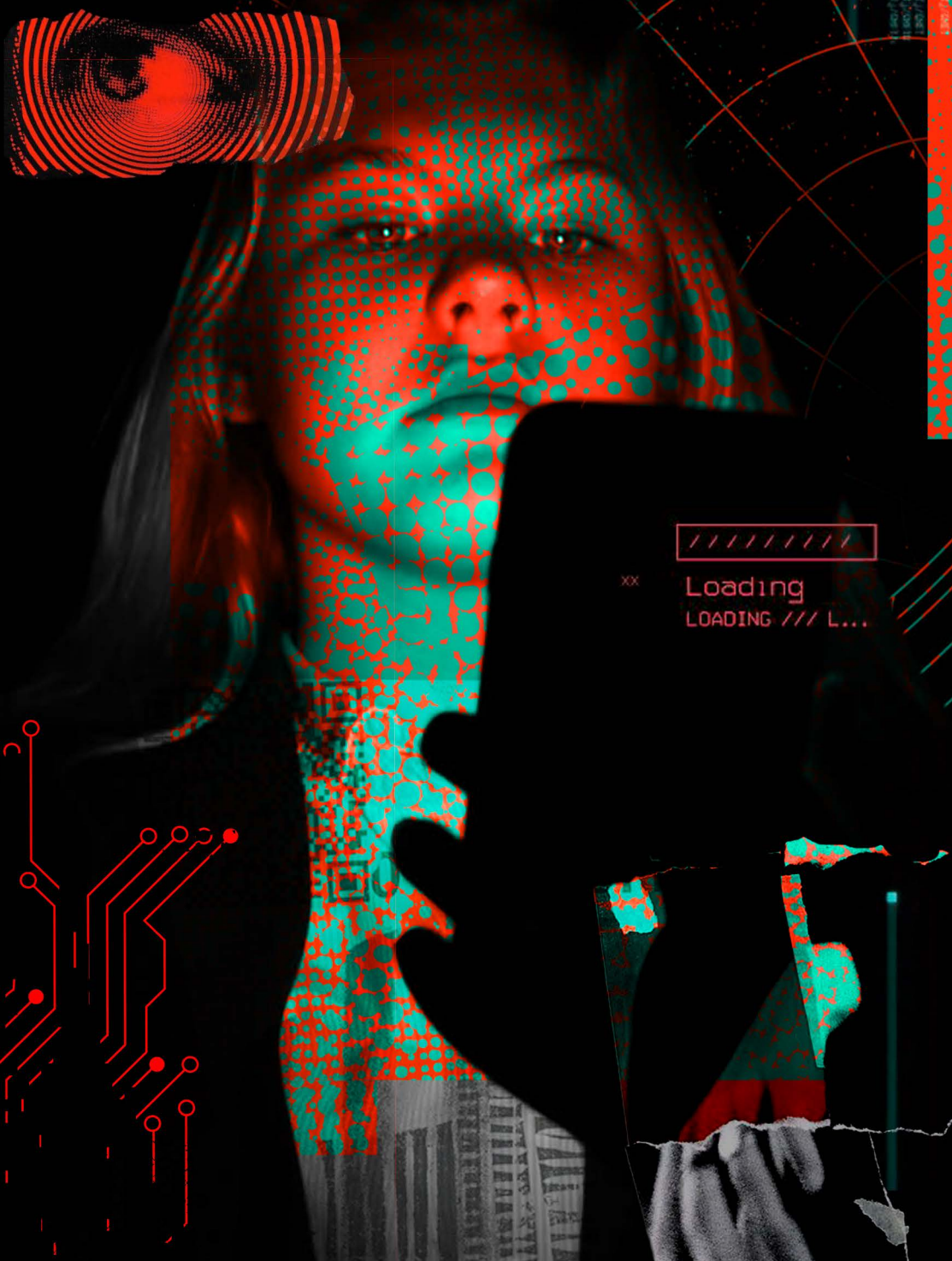
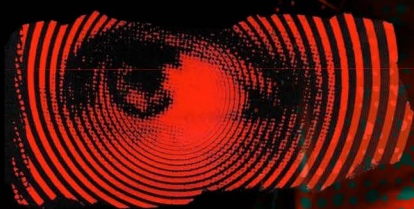


ONLINE BUT ALONE

The importance of physical experiences
in a digital world.



FUTURE,

WHERE ARE YOU NOW?

TODAY,

PAST,

PRESENT

Loading
LOADING /// L...

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INTRODUCTION

Technology has transformed how we connect, providing instant internet access and global communication that has enabled us to: share events worldwide, build remote relationships, and drive advancements in AI and digital experiences. The evolution of technology continues to shape our society, pushing the boundaries of a virtual reality and revolutionising the way we interact with the world around us. However, this convenience often masks a growing sense of isolation, pulling people away from social settings (Twenge, 2019). OFCOM (2022) states that Gen Z are the first generation to be raised consumed by technology 'With 91% of children owning a smartphone by age 11' (Para.11). This rapid rise in smartphone possession has increasingly replaced sensory rich experiences, vital for building meaningful social relationships, with shallow, screen based interactions and distant communication. This development has led to a growing trend amongst Gen Z to 'stay at home'(Rees, 2024, Para. 1), with studies identifying them as the 'loneliest generation, despite being hyperconnected through social media.'(Ho and Tan, 2024, Para.16).

Drawing references from social psychologists such as: Jonathan Haidt and Jean Twenge, this report delves into the inherent interplay between online engagement and loneliness, emphasising the heightened desire for in person social experiences and a true sense of belonging. Analysing studies on generational differences in the relationship between screen time and mental wellbeing offers valuable insights into the effects of our fundamental shift from a physical to a digital world. As humans, we require social experiences with physical embodiment for survival (Edmonds, 2019), questioning what is it about our evolution as a species that makes in person social connection essential, beyond what virtual interactions can provide? This report explores the social evolution of humans through theories such as Robin Dunbar's 'The Social Brain Hypothesis' highlighting why humans possess a deep rooted need for social interaction to foster growth and development. As well as investigating how the design of shared social experiences can encourage conversation and meaningful interactions through considered spatial layouts, multi sensory elements and materiality. Within these environments, moments are elevated, fostering a sense of shared identity, collective purpose, and the creation of lasting, shared memories which can deepen bonds (Pallasmaa, 2024). Drawing on this research, this study examines how a digital disconnect has amplified Gen Z's yearning for meaningful, in person connections and how shared social experiences remain crucial for social development within a modern society.



Figure 1: Gen Z Quotes (2025)

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

DIAGRAM

The research methodology employed for this report, consisted of a range of secondary sources, Such as: books, articles, trend analysis reports, websites and literature reviews. The literature was sourced using library sources, Google Scholar and Science Direct, focusing on search terms of: digital disconnect, social experiences, loneliness, collective identity and physical presence. With the protagonist of the study being Gen Z, the literature search was refined to include studies between 2004 - 2024, with the exception of readings on evolution to provide historical context.

Through the thematic analysis, four key themes were identified: Sensory Processes, Social Experiences, Digital Disconnect and Evolution. I discovered that many of the texts with Digital Disconnect as the main theme also contained themes of social experiences, displaying an inherent interplay between the two ideas. However, a significant gap was noted in resources which explored how multi sensory experiences can foster deeper social connections which this report addresses by triangulating data from both themes.

Key

Key Theme within Text

Link to secondary themes within text

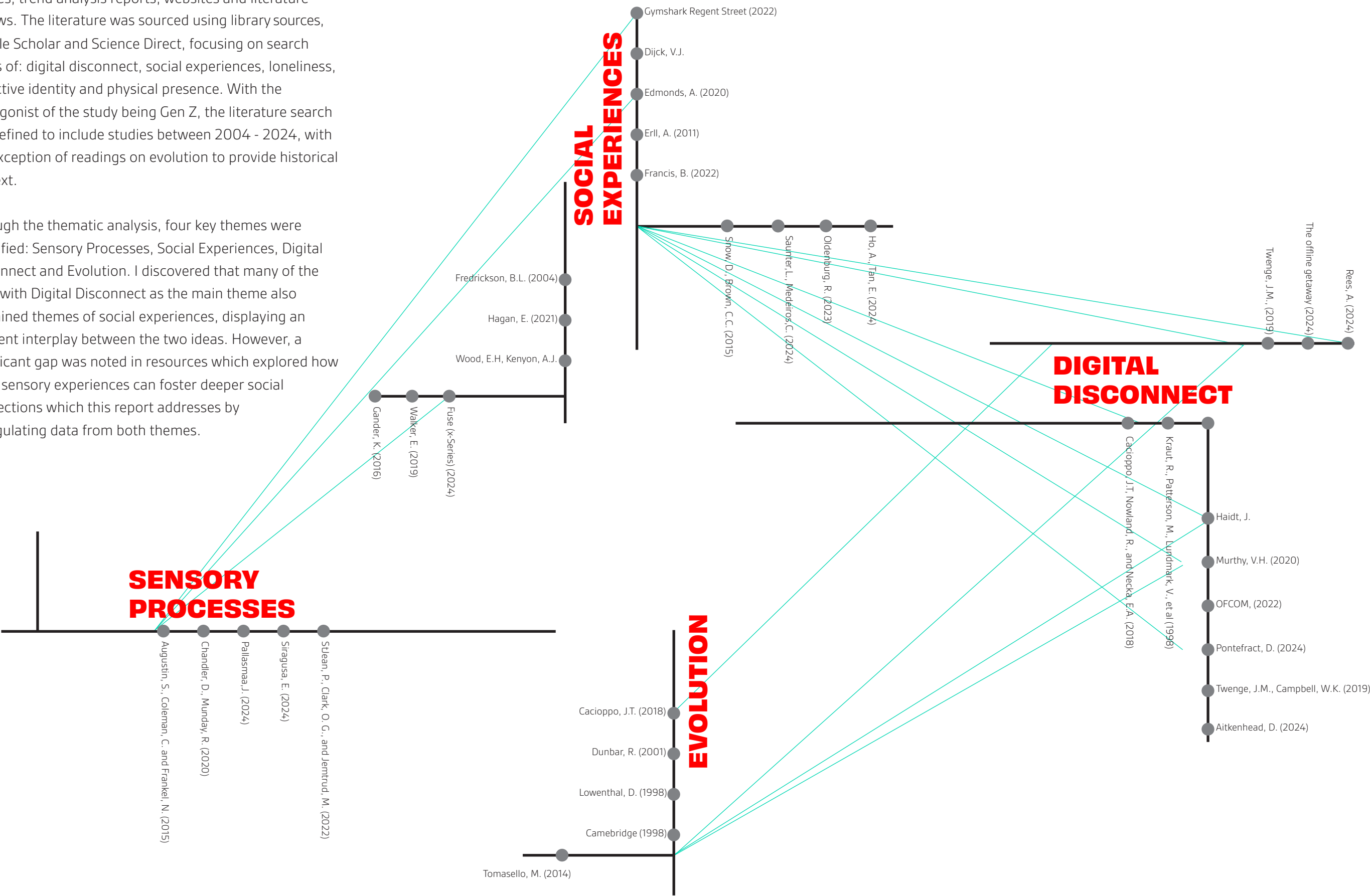


Figure 2: Thematic Analysis Diagram (2025)

DIGITAL DISCONNECT



Figure 3: Loneliness Photography (2015)



Figure 4: Loneliness Photography (2015)

Digital technology has radically redefined communication and social connectivity, yet for Gen Z , the first generation to grow up within a digital world, this unprecedented connectivity has brought a paradoxical rise in loneliness and isolation. Online platforms, oppose the face to face presence our brains have evolved to embrace, leading to a diminished sense of social connection and negatively affecting mental health (kruat et al., 1998). Increased time spent gaming, browsing and texting has consequently reduced human time within the real world, decreasing a sense of physical presence and interaction. Jonathan Haidt explores this within his book 'The Anxious Generation', investigating the relationship between online engagement and mental health amongst Gen Z, documenting the causes of such loneliness and proposing solutions to reverse this new life approach. It is apparent that technology has trapped many young people within a circular epidemic of poor mental wellbeing as social disconnection fuels heightened depression, adding to a lack of self esteem and the ability to seek out social connection (Haidt, 2024). This research encapsulates a sense of imprisonment; as technology continues to advance, many young people will find themselves trapped in a cycle of depression and loneliness with a diminished desire for social interaction.

This digital disconnect is documented in Figure 5, a line graph proving the positive correlation between hours a day spent on a digital screen and the percentage of low mental wellbeing amongst 15 year olds, recorded by Twenge and Campbell. This data clearly evidences that 'more than twice as many teens who spent 7+ hours a day on smartphones (vs. spending a half-hour a day) were in the lowest 15% of well-being...'(Twenge and Campbell, 2019, Para. 31), driving the rationale of why we need to reduce our online presence for our mental wellbeing to thrive.

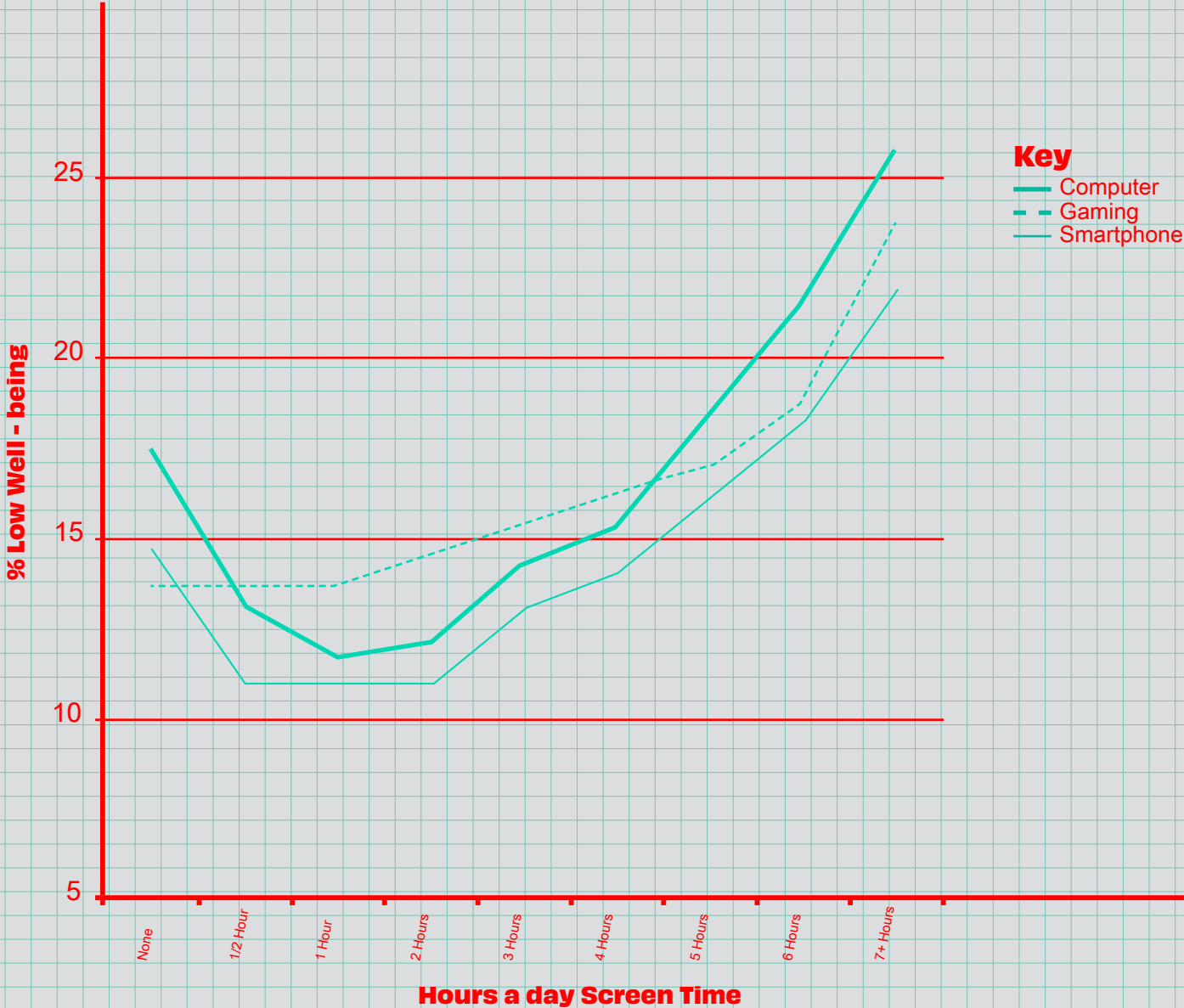


Figure 5: Percent of adolescents low in psychological well-being (2019)

Twenge concluded her research noting that it's not 'digital media itself which causes low mental wellbeing but the lack of more beneficial uses of time.' (Twenge, 2019, Para. 21), implying that frequent technology use replaces the time for engaging, social events. This lack of engagement in more enriching activities creates a void that digital media fails to fill, highlighting the need for a balanced lifestyle that appreciates digital advancements, yet notices the psychological need for shared physical activity. Gen Z find this balance hard to achieve as they are 'constantly online' with endless thoughts about events in the digital metaverse even when they are not active on their phone (Haidt, 2024, P.34). This conveys a clear shift in generational social patterns as the development of social media, allows for notifications and messages to disrupt the consciousness

of the receiver, disrupting their present moment awareness. This continuous splitting of one's focus, Haidt (2024) defines as 'attention fragmentation' which implies a constant switch between physical and digital worlds, resulting in a scattered focus and lack of emotional depth. Unlike previous generations, who had defined boundaries between personal and social spaces, technology has allowed for a 'never ending stream of interruptions' (Haidt, 2024, P.127) which leaves people trying to constantly keep up with social standards both online and in person. Alike, Haidt and Twenge's research highlight the correlation between advancements in digital media and trends of loneliness within a modern society, evidencing how smartphone use has remodelled social behaviour and contributed to the psychological damage of living within a digital life.

EVOLUTION

When exploring loneliness through the lens of history and evolution, Dr John Cacioppo emerged as a pioneer within this field, discovering that social relationships are not just beneficial but essential for human survival. When interviewed by Tim Adams, Cacioppo (2016) reported that 'Loneliness is like an iceberg,' with more to discover than what meets the surface but is so 'phylogenetically deep' that it requires recounting thousands of years of evolutionary development to understand. Identifying this significant gap in his scientific research, Dr Cacioppo, alongside Dr Bernston founded the field of 'social neuroscience', exploring the relationship between the brain's behaviour and social connection (Murthy, 2022). As a species that evolved as pack animals, Cacioppo (2018) discovered that 'The very survival of newborns depends on their attachment to and nurturance by others,' emphasising that since the very beginning of life, social bonds build the foundation for human survival. It is significant that Cacioppo deliberately chose to use the term 'others' rather than 'parent', which broadens the scope of social influence on newborns. This choice suggests that newborns are highly receptive to absorbing information from a wide range of individuals, highlighting the entire humanities dependence on one another for shared responsibilities of parenting and teaching.

Another theory which explores the evolution of the human species through social connection is Professor Robin Dunbar's 'The Social Brain Hypothesis'. This research aims to explain how the

extraordinary size and ability of the human brain is a result of knowledge and communication developed within large social networks (Dunbar, 1998). The hypothesis unpacks that human thinking and social evolution are intrinsically linked, emphasising the impact shared experiences has on the development of sophisticated forms of communication, emotions and language. Dunbar (1998) supports this by demonstrating that neocortex size, the 'part of the outer layer of the brain, usually connected with higher thinking and intelligence' (Cambridge Dictionary, 1995), directly correlates with the size of social groups, suggesting that the human brain evolved primarily to handle the complexities of maintaining large social networks. This is evident in Figure 6 which shows a direct relationship between a high social group size and neocortex volume, illustrating the need for communities within the unique social evolution of human beings.

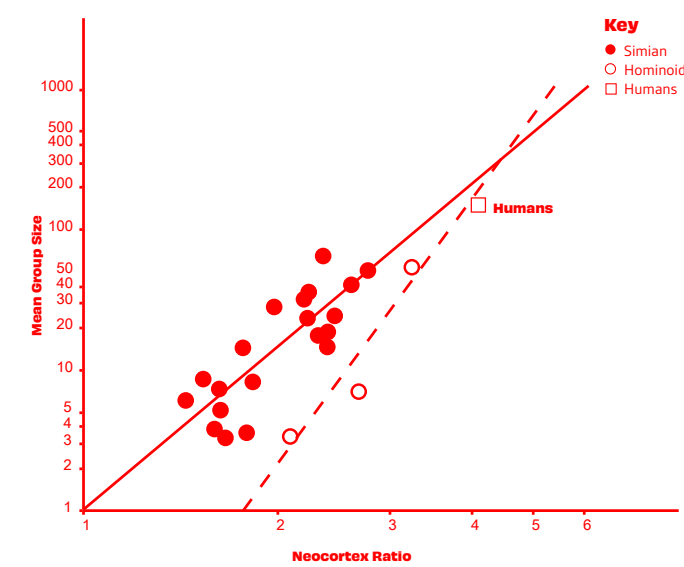


Figure 6: Size of Neocortex by social group size (2003)

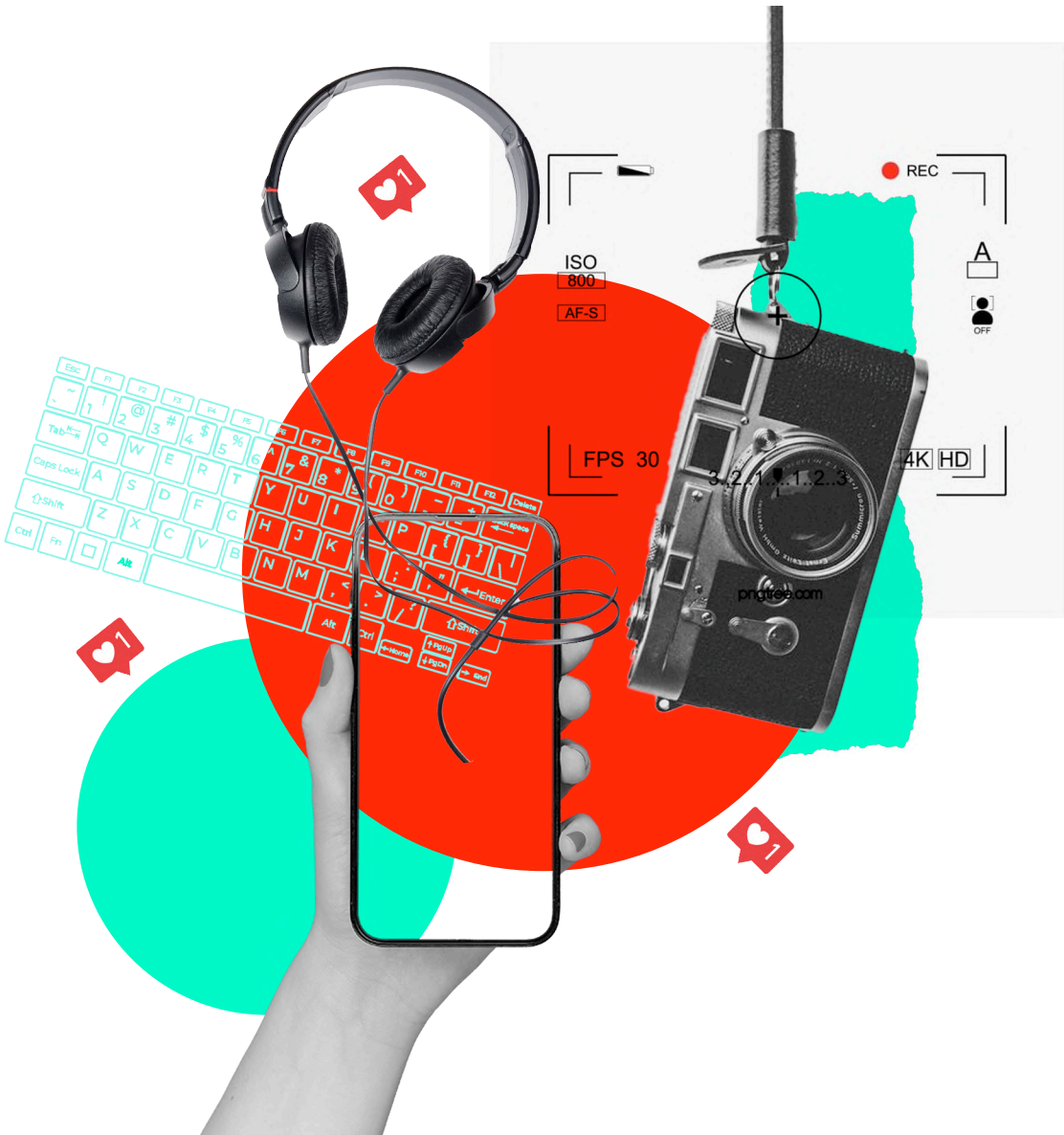


Figure 7: Technology Collage (2025)

Furthermore, this data aligns with Haidt's (2024) assertion that 'Our brains grew larger because the race for survival was no longer by the fastest or strongest but by those most adept at learning' (P.51). This inherent understanding of the value of collaboration and discovery sharing, underscores the evolutionary advantage of building a large social network. This dynamic exchange of knowledge effectively utilises shared information and skillsets, driving creativity and innovation amongst social groups. Michael Tomasello's research into human cognitive evolution also supports this as he argues that the development of the human species is reliant

on the expansion of cognitive and social capabilities (Tomasello, 2018). This perspective reinforces the significant role that shared communication and social connections played in the development of human society, enabling the species to adapt to the challenges of social living. Therefore, evolutionary science confirms that humans are inherently 'wired for direct contact with each other' (Murthy, 2020, P.xiii), as physical presence served as a critical foundation for survival throughout history. It is imperative that face to face interactions remain vital in today's society, fostering emotional connection and a sense of togetherness that digital media cannot replace.

SENSORY ACTIVATION

Fostering key relationships and friendships has become a critical priority for young people seeking to combat rising levels of loneliness (Ho and Tan, 2024). In an increasingly hyperconnected digital age, Gen Z's growing desire for in person social interactions highlights the profound role these deeper connections play in giving purpose and meaning to human life. Barbara Fredrickson's 'Broaden and Build Theory' explains how having a positive outlook on life and an approachable demeanour allows for the possibility of unexpected connections to occur in social settings. Fredrickson (2005) states that a 'Broadened behavioural repertoire' (P.1374) allows for the development of positive emotions such as 'joy' which 'sparks the urge to play' (Fredrickson, 2005, P.1367). This dynamic highlights how a hopeful emotional depth can establish a capacity for engagement and a layered interpersonal relationship, conveying the powerful role of physical presence to form true relationships.

Additionally, the concept of physical presence fostering deeper connections, could be argued as a result of the power of sensory activation within in-person gatherings. Environments in which we interact with others '... are measured equally by the eye, ear, nose, skin, tongue, skeleton and muscle.' (Pallasmaa, 2024, P. 34) illustrating the idea that our perception of a place is shaped by the integration of all senses.



Figure 8: Sensory Collage (2025)

This suggests that a true sense of belonging cannot be achieved on digital platforms which primarily relies on sight and sound where an 'equal' measurement of the space cannot be achieved. Pallasmaa introduces the notion of embodied perception within his book 'The Eyes of The Skin', challenging the dominance of vision within a modern society and a need to engage multiple senses to foster meaningful interactions. The term 'ocular centrism' describes the tendency to prioritise visual perception over the other senses (Chandler, Munday, 2020) when discovering the environment around us. Within a technological world, many individuals are experiencing a growing sense of alienation, detachment and solitude (Pallasmaa, 2024) due to an obsessive dominance of vision online and a suppression of the remaining senses. By highlighting this compulsive pull into isolation, Pallasmaa underscores the potential of multi sensory experiences to shape not only the physical world but the emotional and social dimensions of human life. The role of touch is central to Pallasmaa's argument as 'the significance of the tactile sense in human life has become increasingly evident' (Pallasmaa, 2024, P.4). This physical connection helps form social intimacy and compassion, highlighting the importance to not neglect the profound qualities of human touch in nurturing holistic human relationships.



Figure 9: Sonic Bloom (2021)

Furthermore, it is important to understand that every individual has a different dominant sense that shapes their perception and understanding of the world. Augustin (2009) discusses this as she uses 'place science principles' to examine how physical environments influence human behaviours. She unpacks the idea that humans uphold a 'sensory hierarchy' with a '...particular dominant sense that is the most immediate pathway to our emotional core.'(Augustin, et al , 2009, P.civ). This highlights how in person interactions naturally engage all of the senses, encouraging opportunities for more diverse and impactful connections in ways digital conversations cannot achieve. By catering to this diversity, designers can create spaces which enable all individuals to feel safe and accepted, fostering relationships and social experiences that are crucial to achieving a collective sense of purpose.

SOCIAL EXPERIENCES



Figure 10: Loubi's On The Beach Pop-Up Installation (2023)

WGSN trend analysts Tan and Ho (2024) highlight the growing importance of utilising retail and third spaces as 'meeting hubs' to foster physical connections, a trend driven by Gen Z's evolving demands. This demographic are increasingly shifting away from spending on physical goods, instead prioritising meaningful experiences (Saunter and Medeiros, 2024). This shift has fuelled the rise of experiential design, which not only enhances customer satisfaction but also strengthens brand loyalty and fosters a sense of community. The growing demand for in person interactions plays a crucial role in the transformation of third spaces into blended consumer hubs. This evolution creates opportunities for dynamic and playful designs which create memorable experiences that redefine the traditional concept of socialising. Saunter (2024) reports that Gen Z are increasingly seeking hybrid shopping experiences that integrate hobbies and activities, encouraging accidental connections with like minded individuals. This insight suggests a desire for a 'digital pause' among young people, reflecting their need for further spaces to build meaningful social connections through physical experiences.



Figure 11: Gymshark, Regent Street (2022)



Figure 12: Gymshark, Regent Street (2022)



Figure 13: Gymshark, Regent Street (2022)

Figure 3 depicts Gymshark's Flagship store on Regent Street, an example of an experiential fitness clothing shop, illustrating an innovative approach to retail design. Branded as a 'home for the fitness community' (Gymshark.com, 2022, Para. 1), the store prioritises experience over sales, a destination to encourage repeat custom and fully immerse themselves within the Gymshark brand (Francis, 2022, 3:17).

Beyond its primary function, Gymshark's Flagship store also includes a: try on and test area, a fully equipped gym, changing rooms, studio space, community hub and a juice bar (Francis, 2022). This multi functional approach, pushes the boundaries on what is considered retail by seamlessly blending fitness, lifestyle and social connection into the shopping experience. The design of the retail space promotes, flexibility, energy and community, with design details such as: gym mat rubber flooring, squat rack shelving systems and electric

lifting straps which can easily be transformed into a fully functional gym space once shop hours are over (as seen in figure 11). This project is a dynamic example of a 'third space', a concept developed by Oldenburg (1999) to describe environments separate from home and work which serve as 'people's own remedy for stress, loneliness, and alienation' (P.21). In response to this concept, the Gymshark store acts as an experience centre for the gym community, encouraging connection and collaboration through in store classes, the run club and athlete guest talks. Francis (2022) underscores this vision, by stating, 'we not only want you to see, feel and touch the Gymshark products but we want this to be a true community hub' (14:32), highlighting the brand's commitment to fostering meaningful connections with its audience. This innovative approach redefines third spaces as elevated hubs for shared experiences, that ignite genuine human connections and strengthen social bonds without the dominance of technology.

Another project which uses design details and materiality to encourage in person conversation is 'The Gin Tub', a bar encased in copper to stop people scrolling on their phone whilst at the bar. As described by Gander (2016), The gin bar in Brighton adopts a unique interior design approach that blocks all phone signals from within the space. The specification of silver foil walls and a copper wire ceiling allows its guests to engage with one another without the use of mobile phones. This intentional design choice directly influences human behaviour and proves that 'aesthetic qualities of architecture have an impact on human cognitive function and behaviour.' (StJean, 2022, para.7) By discouraging the use of mobile phones, The Gin Tub not only promotes the social benefit of physical connections but underscores that interior design can shape social dynamics and create impactful change to human wellbeing.

While the benefits of physical experiences to help strengthen social connections have been widely researched within this report, It is also important to consider the necessity of balancing social events with periods of rest and solo activities. Frequent networking can create a diminished sense of connection, increase stress levels and develop social fatigue (Hagan, 2021). These moments of pause allow us to disconnect from the hectic notion of modern life, recentre ourselves and create a moment of solitude. Murthy (2022) describes this reflective state as allowing us '...to tune in to ourselves, which simultaneously prepares us to tune in to others.' (P.206). This Highlights the intrinsic human need for relaxation and time alone, encouraging activities such as cycling and reading. This opportunity enables people to be further self aware of their own emotions and enhance their ability to show compassion for others. Ultimately, a moment of pause can be extremely beneficial to strengthen emotional knowledge and build collective empathy, which are necessary for discovering the complexities of human connections.

Building on the intrinsic human need for relaxation and moments away from technology, initiatives such as 'The Offline Club' demonstrates how 'a retreat from the digital world' (Pontefract, 2024, Para. 5) allows individuals to connect through face to face engagement and direct human contact. By prioritising the 'joys of in person communication and shared experiences' (Pontefract, 2024, Para. 11), 'The Offline Club', provides day events and weekend retreats to allow likeminded people to recharge, embrace freedom and connect away from the constant notifications of digital media (Theofflinegetaway,2024). This illustrates the vital role that such events play in addressing rising levels of loneliness and social fatigue by allowing people to feel self empowered and strengthen collective wellbeing. These spaces seek to develop the human need for personal contact in a digitally obsessed world, highlighting how these moments of reflection can deepen the understanding of oneself and assist their capacity to support and connect with others.

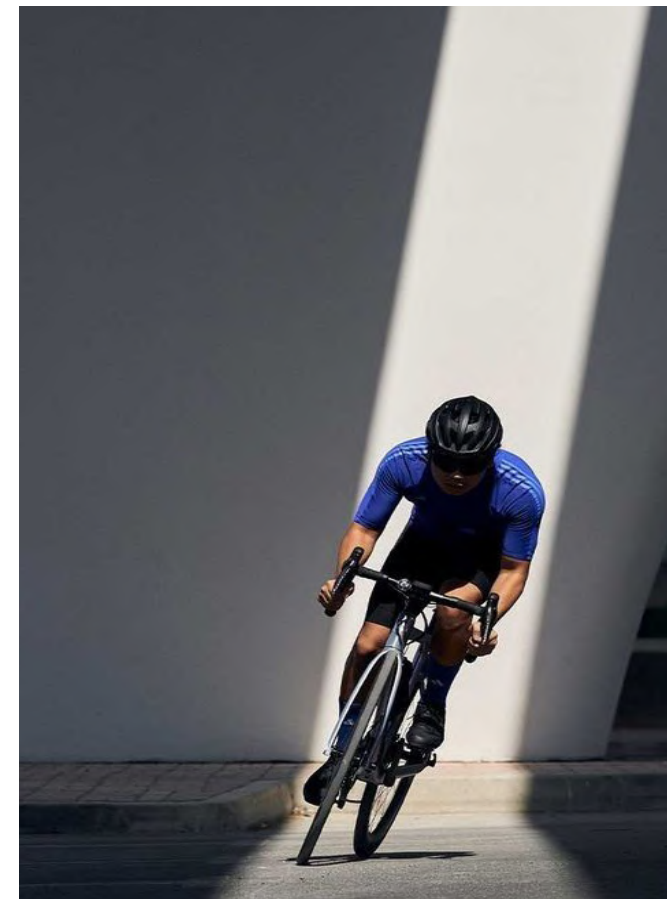


Figure 14: Cyclist (2023)

COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Collective identity defines the overlap of personal and social identities, rooted in shared experiences and common interests. It serves as a powerful social framework, shaping the appreciation of shared values and the emotional resonance of interpersonal actions (Snow And Brown, 2015). Collective identity emerges from the recognition of shared enjoyment within these moments, contributing towards stronger social bonds and the creation of special group memories. The importance of collective memory is reinforced by Erll (2011) who notes that 'Our perception is group-specific, our individual memories are socially formed, and both are unthinkable without the existence of a collective memory.' (P.16). This conveys the integral role that collective memory has in building social networks, shaping both individual perspectives and shared views which are inseparable from the larger cultural context.

The significance of collective identity is emphasised by Lowenthal (1998), who states that the remembrance of traditions and cultural heritage is empowered through contemporary collective memory. The act of participating within these shared rituals allows individuals to define themselves within a community, as Walker, (2019) emphasises that 'ritual celebrations affirm that we are not alone.'(Para.9). These annual traditions provide social groups with a shared purpose and a sense of togetherness, especially through the celebration of birthdays and religious events with family and friends. Such practices, strengthen cultural identity by creating lasting memories that when reflected upon in the future, transports individuals back to the moment, evoking emotions tied to the social experience. These celebrations not only reveal self identity amongst the social network but ensure that cultural values are developed across generations. Reflecting on these experiences, reminds people of their shared values and joys, strengthen their appreciation for one another and preserve narratives across time.

The emotional impact of experiencing live music with others who share the same interest goes beyond mere enjoyment, fostering a deep sense of human connection and enhancing collective identity. Dunbar (2001) believes that social activities, such as music events are central to creating social ties and building community culture. This unique social experience acts as a powerful tool which has 'the potential to shape attitudes and to be shaped by attitudes.' (Wood, et al , 2018P.164), noting an inherent interplay between response and action where shared engagement can alter individual influences. Developing this further, the social experience of music provides a space where people can generate their own preference and build towards the formation of a common social identity. The '...examination of the interrelation between personal and collective memories of popular music' (P.357) was conducted by Djick (2006) who founded that musical elements carry personal significance and emotional attachment which when listened to in a group setting generates a strong sense of togetherness and deep social connection. (P.357)

An example of a contemporary music event that fosters authentic, physical connections is Fuse X series which adopts a 'no phone no line up' concept, offering its audience '... the opportunity to fully immerse [themselves] in an authentic clubbing experience in this digital-fuelled age.' (93feet east, 2024, Para.2) This approach is designed to deliberately disconnect individuals from the busy notions of everyday life, avoid performative standards of posting online and experience the moment without external distractions. The creator of the event label, Siragusa (2024), describes Fuse X series as a platform which explores new dynamics, adopts a sense of togetherness and is a space to 'reinvigorate club culture.' (Para.1). This example highlights the importance of shared physical experiences in a digitally dominated world, demonstrating how music can connect people on the dance floor, strengthen collective identity and grow social bonds without the disruption of technology.



Figure 15: Fuse X Series Collage (2025)

CONCLUSION

Technology once strengthened bonds but now risks replacing authentic relationships with shallow online interactions and fears of social validation. This paradox has left many feeling more connected yet lonelier than ever before (Cacioppo, 2018), as technology replaces the intimacy of human connection. This report has explored the detrimental effects of Gen Z growing up immersed in the digital age, highlighting how this online glue reduces their time for real world play (Haidt, 2024). The result is an epidemic of loneliness and isolation during key social development stages, which has left many young people unable to uphold in person conversations, heightening a desire for social experiences. This human dependency on physical interaction is underscored by many theories presented in this research, such as : The Social Brain Hypothesis, Human evolution and Sensory Hierarchy which provide evidence of the importance of social networks for human development.

I advocate for the role of design in addressing such societal challenges like loneliness, and I'm eager to investigate further the future of experiential design and sensory activation within commercial spaces. By utilising digital tools to enhance rather than replace human interaction, I aim to explore the

fusion of physical and digital worlds to create a transformative experience which extends connections beyond the boundaries of physical space. Building on the analysis presented in this study, I am particularly interested in examining how individual personalities and sensory differences can shape human behaviour and engagement with space. As well as exploring how shared interests, like music, which I analysed an example in this report, can serve as a powerful force to strengthen collective identity.

To summarise, I believe, as a designer it is imperative to harness the power of multi sensory experiences as a critical tool in enhancing human connection and building a sense of togetherness. By placing sensory activation at the core of each development stage within the design process, it allows for the creation of an inclusive proposal that meets the diverse sensory needs of any individual. In a world increasingly dominated by technology, I believe that we still crave physical experiences to fulfil our human need for physical touch and shared presence. As a future designer, I am committed to create spaces that act as a catalyst to unite people, support the need for human connection and create everlasting memories, reminding us of the irreplaceable power of being together.

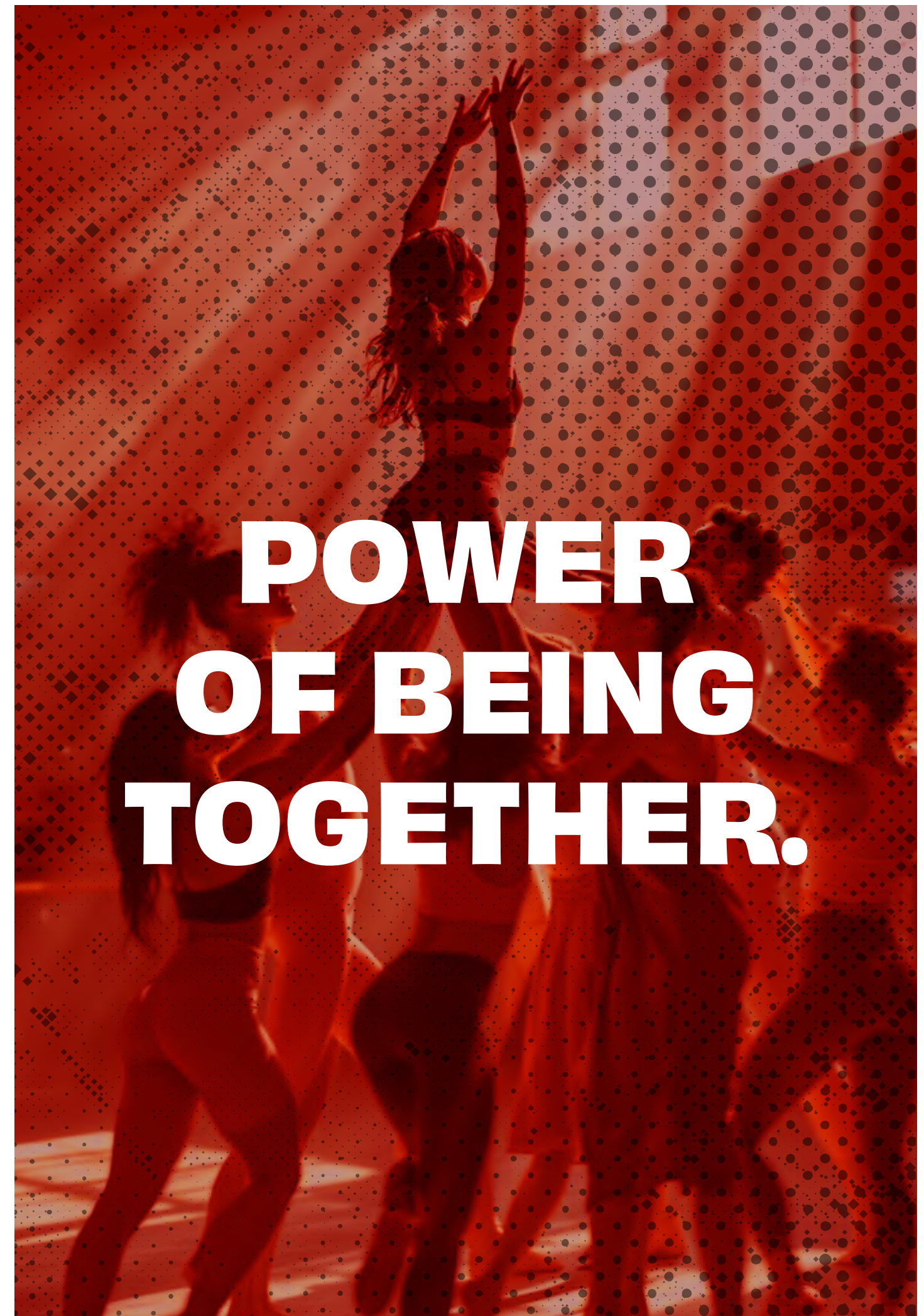


Figure 16: Dancers (2025)

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