

# Experience of Aloneness in Information Society: Distinction Between Solitude and Loneliness Within Dichotomy Social/Individual

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The article discusses the concepts of solitude and loneliness, exploring their distinct roles in human experience within the context of the modern information society. It argues that while both involve a degree of separation from others, solitude is a voluntary, constructive state that supports self-reflection and inner growth, whereas loneliness is an involuntary, painful condition resulting from a lack of meaningful social connection. The study contends that digital technologies – despite offering constant connectivity – often exacerbate loneliness by fostering shallow interactions that fail to meet deeper relational needs, while simultaneously eroding opportunities for true solitude. The findings emphasise that solitude remains an essential, unchanging element of human nature, providing space for autonomy and inner dialogue, while loneliness has intensified in the digital era, reflecting both the breakdown of authentic communication and the illusion of connection. The article concludes that reclaiming the value of solitude and addressing the structural causes of loneliness are critical steps toward emotional well-being in today's hyperconnected world.

**Keywords:** solitude, loneliness, information society, Dasein, the Other, virtual communication

## INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2023, the WHO declared loneliness a global threat that causes more harm to a person than obesity or a sedentary lifestyle (Johnson 2023). To more vividly demonstrate the negative impact of loneliness, it was compared to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

This research explores the experience of aloneness through the lens of philosophical anthropology, along with existentialism, focusing on individual freedom and authenticity, and phenomenology, which studies how we experience the world. It aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the causes of loneliness and solitude, their interconnections, and exacerbation by modern technology, while also seeking to offer insights into how individuals and society can better address this growing global issue. Current research opens new opportunities for examining these phenomena through the concept of the creative society, which emphasises

human creativity as a central force in social and personal development. In this view, solitude is not merely understood as a symptom of social disconnection, but as a potentially generative space that fosters reflection, innovation and self-realisation (Kačerauskas 2015; 2023).

The paper seeks to address several key objectives:

- Analyse the growing prevalence of loneliness, particularly in the context of the global information society, where increased access to digital communication does not seem to alleviate but may rather exacerbate the feeling of isolation.
- Explore how human beings navigate the tension between social belonging and individual identity, and how this tension influences the experience of loneliness and solitude.
- Distinguish loneliness, a negative state resulting from a lack of social interaction and unmet relational needs, and solitude, a voluntary and often positive condition conducive to self-reflection, growth and peace.
- Examine how modern technologies both enable and hinder meaningful social interaction, noting that while they provide constant access to communication, they may also foster shallow connections that fail to meet deeper emotional and social needs of individuals.
- Suggest ways to mitigate the impact of loneliness, including the importance of fostering meaningful, high-quality interactions rather than simply increasing the quantity of social contacts.

The article employs a variety of methods to explore the concepts of loneliness and solitude. The comparative method contrasts these two phenomena by emphasising how loneliness is often viewed as a negative experience, while solitude is seen as a positive condition. These concepts are depicted within a historical context, drawing on examples of extreme isolation, to illustrate the psychological and emotional impact of being separated from society. These literary and symbolic examples help to ground abstract philosophical ideas in more tangible, relatable situations. The phenomenological approach, guided by Merleau-Ponty's work, enables the exploration of how physical and psychological separation from others shapes a person's lived experience. This method helps illustrate the internal struggle of balancing the desire for social connection with the need for personal space and autonomy. From a sociological perspective, the article examines how modern society, with its fast pace and digital tools, influences human relationships. It critiques how, despite the vast availability of online connections, a genuine, deep communication remains difficult to achieve. This sociological analysis is accompanied by a dialectical method, which explores opposing forces, such as the individual versus the collective, and examines how these tensions shape our experiences of solitude and loneliness.

## RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Despite an extensive scholarly attention to the concepts of solitude and loneliness, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding their analysis within the context of the information society. While these phenomena have been studied from psychological, philosophical and sociological perspectives, their role in the context of digital technologies and social media has received a limited exploration. The rise of the information society has transformed the ways in which individuals experience and express isolation. Authors such as Hipson et al. (2021) explore the language of solitude and loneliness on digital platforms, illustrating how social media shapes public discourse around these experiences. Similarly, Elmer et al. (2022) examine the concept of 'solitude inertia', emphasising how prolonged isolation, especially in the digital age, can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and mental health issues.

Loneliness and solitude are complex experiences that impact individuals in various ways, depending on their psychological state, personal motivations and social contexts. While these terms are often used interchangeably, contemporary research highlights their distinct nuances, revealing that solitude can be a source of self-discovery and growth, whereas loneliness is often a source of distress.

E. Wilkinson (2022) argues that loneliness should be recognised as a feminist issue due to its gendered nature, suggesting that women often experience loneliness differently because of societal expectations, gender roles, and the intersection of loneliness with various forms of social oppression. She challenges the dominant view of loneliness as a purely individual psychological dysfunction, emphasising instead the structural and relational dimensions of the experience. This feminist perspective aligns with other studies that stress the relational aspect of loneliness. For example, B. Nilsson, U. Lindström and D. Næden (2006) examine how prolonged social isolation can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and depression, illustrating that loneliness is often socially induced rather than purely psychological. This research on solitude inertia underscores the detrimental effects of involuntary isolation, suggesting that loneliness can manifest as a response to social and environmental factors.

In contrast, other studies highlight the positive aspects of solitude. For instance, a study by T. Nguyen, N. Weinstein and R. Ryan (2022) reveals that individuals with high levels of self-determined motivation, rather than introversion alone, are more likely to enjoy solitude. This finding underscores that solitude, when experienced as a choice, can be a source of personal growth. The study also shows that individuals motivated by autonomy are more likely to seek solitude for self-reflection and creativity. These views align with those expressed in A. Metcalfe's 'Solitude as a Community of Difference' (2013), which argues that solitude fosters a sense of community through embracing inner differences and allowing individuals to form authentic connections with themselves – thereby enriching relationships with others.

From a literary perspective, loneliness has long been depicted as both a psychological dysfunction and a source of profound existential reflection. The portrayal of loneliness in literature suggests that while it is often a painful emotional experience, it can also prompt a deep introspection and self-discovery. In fact, literature portrays loneliness as a condition that can lead to personal growth and transformation, allowing individuals to confront their emotions and engage with their inner selves in a meaningful way (Jackson 2016). Moreover, philosophical and spiritual perspectives on solitude emphasise its potential for personal development. 'The Value of Solitude' (Ungureanu 2022) argues that solitude, when chosen, offers opportunities for self-reflection, creativity, and emotional healing. The study suggests that solitude allows individuals to reconnect with their true selves, free from external distractions. Similarly, in the context of wilderness solo experiences, solitude in nature is seen as a transformative practice that promotes emotional well-being and self-awareness. These practices highlight the therapeutic benefits of solitude, suggesting that it can be a powerful tool for personal growth (Naor, Mayseless 2020). The spiritual dimensions of solitude are also emphasised in writings of early Christian monks, who present solitude not as a form of isolation but as an instrument for connecting with the divine. These writings propose that solitude can lead to deeper communal connections, demonstrating that it can be an enriching experience when approached with the right mindset (Siladi 2023).

Perspectives provided in these studies emphasise that both loneliness and solitude are shaped by individual motivations, social contexts and cultural norms. Future research should

continue to explore these dimensions, particularly how modern technological and social media platforms influence the ways individuals experience and express loneliness and solitude.

## ROOTS OF DISTINCTION BETWEEN LONELINESS AND SOLITUDE

It cannot be denied that man is a social being. Aristotle's (350/1943) definition remains relevant throughout the centuries. Moreover, Aristotle compares a person who is unable to live in society or does not need it, referring to their own self-sufficiency, either to an animal or to a deity (1253 a). On the other hand, each individual is (at the most primitive level) a physically separate functional unit. Merleau-Ponty (1945) claims that a person exists in the world primarily physically separated, that is, their independence from others is primarily given to them physically. Only later, thanks to the body as the initial point in the process of cognition, as a tool of perception, does one 'meet' the Other. Although we cannot find agreement in the philosophical tradition regarding the primacy of the social or the individual aspect in human nature, the obligatory presence of both within a person is undeniable.

Just as the existence of a person in society is determined by individual characteristics, so the 'private' life of each individual inevitably bears the imprint of those social structures to which he is in some way tangential, and it is possible even not to directly belong to a certain social group, but to be in its 'zone of influence', to constantly find signs of this group in one's own life space. According to M. Heidegger (1983), a person is constantly in coexistence (das Mitsein) with Others, that is why solitude is possible, because the desire for the Other can appear only when its presence is a given and for some reason it is absent.

Therefore, we must emphasise that a person must be considered both as a part of society and as an autonomous individual. In the context of the issue of loneliness, this approach allows us to identify both the cause and the ways to overcome this 'plague' of the global society of the 21st century. Along with loneliness, we always find the issue of solitude. Both phenomena imply a certain degree of separation from others, a certain concentration on oneself. To shed light on both phenomena, to establish the role that both play in a person's life, to find out what influence they have on a modern personality in the information society, let us first look at the central object (a person), and then at the background (society, others), on which it acts.

If we agree to accept as self-evident the fact that human nature has not undergone changes throughout its existence, then we must agree that a primitive man and a modern man have the same needs, mechanisms of activity, ways of overcoming conflict situations, ways of recognition among others, etc. Obviously, it cannot be denied that the instruments of human activity – as well as physical tools – have become more refined and 'detailed'. Therefore, in the further analysis of loneliness/solitude, we will take the statement about the immutability of human nature as a lemma.

Returning to the subject of our consideration, let us try to imagine the image of a person separated from the society. Lao Tzu riding a bull, discouraged in public service; Sailor Rutherford on the coast of New Zealand among the natives; Napoleon, who in exile dictates to Las Cases the memories of his stormy life on the island of St. Helena. What kind of condition unites them all in the described situations? – loneliness or solitude? These are all examples of extreme isolation from others, but they should not be given the same nature. It is not difficult to see that in some cases aloneness promotes personality development, leads to pacification and establishing harmony, while sometimes it is unbearable, causing not only psychological, but also physical damage. The fact is that these opposite poles are formed by essentially different phenomena: loneliness and solitude. And the root of their difference is hidden in

the duality of human nature, which, on the one hand, needs belonging to society or at least some Other for its own determination, and on the other hand, stands on the guard of its own identity, not allowing the collective to absorb it.

## STRUGGLE FOR EQUILIBRIUM

At first glance, modern society with its open possibilities offers a person both one and the other. Everyone can find a role model, an interest group, like-minded people, answers to troubling questions, ways to solve problems of various kinds, expert advice, a casual conversation, and a means of spending leisure time in the rapid flow of information. All this can serve as a tool for building one's own unique self, as well as joining a certain social formation. However, it is extremely difficult to achieve both goals at the same time, and even without losing the quality of the result. Human, by his nature, must always fight for the preservation of equilibrium, that fragile point of balance between the individual and the social. In addition, the need for one or the other may (and quite often) does not coincide with the current situation.

The question of the paradoxical nature of a single person existence in a metropolis can be easily answered by analysing the mechanism of this phenomenon. First, it is necessary to consider a person in the dichotomy social/individual; secondly, it should be established under what conditions it is possible to claim that a person is 'alone', devoid of any direct influences of the Other. The first condition is caused by the fact that both aspects of human life – private and collective – constantly intersect, condition each other, enable *Dasein*, an exclusively human way of being in the world. The second condition defends Occam's principle. It allows limiting the pool of phenomena that reflect a person's solitary stay, rejecting situations in which a person is not left alone, which misroutes the study of loneliness and solitude in a wrong way, such as multiplying the types of both phenomena unnecessarily. Most researchers distinguish positive and negative solitude, although this phenomenon by its nature cannot have a negative image, because in this case it is replaced by loneliness (solitude is a voluntary choice of a person, a catalyst for recovery in the broadest sense of the word, while loneliness has a purely harmful effect on a person, it is the result of a discrepancy between the desired and the actual).

If the first proposed condition does not cause doubts, then the second one must be approached with some clarification. First, the following question needs to be answered: when can you say that a person is alone? Consider four possible combinations of physical and psychological separation from others. Under the conditions when a person is both physically and psychologically involved with the Other, they are not alone. In the opposite situation – physical and psychological separation – a person is alone. Difficulties arise with the following two cases. If someone is surrounded by others, but psychologically separated from them, they are alone. On the other hand, it is impossible to be alone when psychologically you feel a connection with some Other, but physically it is absent. Moreover, physical presence does not play a decisive role in the possibility of seclusion. On the contrary, it is caused by psychological aloneness. Another important conclusion is that the Other is not necessarily another person. For any person, they themselves can become the Other. When we are deprived of the presence of others, we can still find an 'interlocutor'. It can be depicted as our inner voice in dialogue with ourselves. Thanks to it, it is possible to analyse a wide variety of situations, give evaluations, justify one's own choices, etc. Therefore, having become fascinated by an interesting book, our feeling of loneliness (if it was experienced in the preceding moment) gradually fades, recedes into the background, but again enters the field of actual attention after the last page of the book is turned and the reflection on what has been read is no longer so bright.

As we can see, solitude and loneliness are similar phenomena as their occurrence requires psychological separation from the Other, and physical seclusion is not a necessary condition for either solitude or loneliness. The essential and important figure in both cases is the subject of both phenomena. In the case of loneliness, even if a person finds an interlocutor in themselves, they feel an acute shortage of the Other; they lack social interaction while longing for it. If one is enough for oneself, this indicates the saturation of social and the need for the individual. Such a state does not contain even a shadow of coercion, because when any compulsion to seclusion (external or internal) appears, it inevitably turns into loneliness.

### FROM BOOKS TO SCREENS: EVOLUTION OF INTERACTION

Let us return to the physical presence of the Other and try to determine who the Other is for a person. The characteristic of the Other is determined by the ability to oppose oneself to some other Self and, at the same time, allow one to assert oneself in its own identity. This involves entering interaction (I-Other). Let us emphasise that the figure of the Other is not limited exclusively to some significant person who has a real existence, with whom there is a qualitative interaction. Characters from works of art, notable figures of different eras, images generated by one's own consciousness, etc. can act as the Other. It cannot be denied that being alone in the 'company' of a book, at the very moment of reading and thinking a person cannot be lonely, they are not bothered by the lack of interaction, they do not need (on the contrary, they want to get rid of) external stimuli.

Let us agree that in today's world, the time spent reading a book has changed to many hours of daily smartphone usage. Even at first glance, one can notice a significant difference in the nature of the interaction in both cases. In the first case, the events unfolding according to the plot, the characters with whom we identify or contrast ourselves remain 'mute' to the subject of their perception. A person can only interact with them in their imagination; the reader turns out to be an interlocutor, 'gives birth' to the Other, inspired by fascinating reading. On the other hand, when we are dealing with, for example, social networks, while viewing the content, we could receive feedback by leaving comments or indicate our attitude to the content by leaving appropriate reactions. Here we could mention Merleau-Ponty (1945: 177) with his example about the blind man and the cane. Just as a cane becomes body's extension for the blind, a tool for perceiving objects, so a smartphone becomes a similar tool for a modern person. If the cane serves as an extension of the body as a way of perception, is integrated into the body, then the smartphone, in addition to the specified function, is also designed to expand cognitive abilities, acting as a kind of extension of consciousness. It cannot be denied that the smartphone serves as an additional 'reservoir' that can be filled with a wide variety of information without spending one's own memory resources. On the one hand, the smartphone 'improves' our cognitive abilities, in the sense that you can always ask for specific information and get it. On the other hand, all these 'improvements' are present if we have access to a smartphone. Moreover, without it, acquired helplessness surfaces. And indeed, when this 'appendage' is lost, it is equivalent to the collapse of the system of habitual functioning.

Just as a blind person literally loses orientation in the world without a cane, so a modern person without a smartphone loses a significant part of their own 'functionality'. Let us simulate a situation when a person (it is necessary to emphasise the involuntary nature of this act) finds themselves alone in an unfamiliar place without the usual device. Undoubtedly, a person does not fall out of the situational group a part of which they are at a specific moment,

like people at a bus stop in the Place Saint-Germain (Sartre, 1976: 256). A person without a smartphone, which served as a tool for (primarily) keeping in touch with significant others, now feels isolated in the big city as acutely as possible. Everyone is concerned with their own interests. This collective of random individuals is not imbued with subject-subject relations: another person is always perceived as an object (as an obstacle on the way; as an object that distances me from the bus in the queue). This reality was relevant at the time of Sartre's writing and remains unchanged today. The only difference is that now we have 24/7 access to meaningful social interaction and any information, so our constant presence in the world of isolated individuals is not so obvious.

It was emphasised above that the feeling of confusion and loss of orientation, when we are deprived of a personal smartphone, inevitably appear when we find ourselves in such a situation against our will. This is closely related to the nature of loneliness because it only occurs when a person experiences a deficit of social interaction; when they need the Other but cannot satisfy that need. But it would be unfair to claim that having a gadget is a panacea for loneliness. It is appropriate to mention 'historical narrowness of communication' introduced by K. Jaspers (1956: 347). In fact, true communication with the Other cannot be recreated or simulated, because it is unique in every sense, and this is where its value lies. If we try to replace quality with quantity (increasing social contacts regardless of their expediency), we are unable to establish a deep communication with many a one, and here its 'historical narrowness' is most acutely revealed.

One more phenomenon which came to us thanks to the rapid rise of social networks is 'clip thinking'. It marks a fundamental change in thinking patterns when complex hierarchical logical structures change to bright, capacious, incomparable images. Such thinking in its structure fully corresponds to the rhizome model of J. Deleuze and F.-P. Guattari (1980). Indeed, a person 'wanders' between short videos, the origins of which are almost impossible to trace; without realising it, a person integrates into such a model of being in the social world, necessarily transferring it from the virtual world to the real one. As a result, superficiality of relations in the virtual world transfers to the real social interaction by inertia. Since loneliness inevitably appears due to the low quality of communication, the excessive usage of gadgets is often seen as its cause. It must be emphasised that a conscious individual, realising the risks of this situation, will try to abandon the pursuit of quantity and care about the quality of interaction, if not under all circumstances, then at least in the real world. Therefore, the criticism of the superficial nature of virtual interactions is not entirely fair. Their low quality is determined not by their essence, but by how a person uses the opportunities given to build social activity.

## **VIRTUAL SOCIALIZATION VS GENUINE CONNECTION?**

We often see an attempt to demonise modern gadgets, caused by the statement that interaction with them absorbs all time and replaces the real-world interaction. Regardless of the nature and form of subjects of social interaction in the virtual world, their function and role remain unchanged, identical to the functions and tasks of subjects in the real world.

Let us consider the peculiarities of the nature of virtual social interaction with the Other. The Other is physically absent on both sides (the tool that serves as a communication channel is physical). As it was mentioned above, the physical presence/absence of the Other has no fundamental influence on the emergence of the phenomena of solitude and loneliness. When a person enters communication by sending a message, the Other is actualised by potential possibility to receive a response. As time passes (waiting for feedback), the connection with

the Other loses its brightness, gradually leaves the field of actual attention. When the answer is received, the interaction with the Other is restored and again occupies a place in the field of attention.

Features of virtual communication has two important aspects, one of which enhances solitude and the other deepens loneliness. The first aspect is the constant potential possibility to 'access' the Other. We have satisfied our own need for solitude and now seek socialisation. We 'choose' the Other and try to establish communication with them. Thus, we move in social/individual cycles without the immediate need for the physical presence of the Other. The second aspect is related to loneliness and is often used to criticise virtual interaction. If the need for the Other emerges acutely and we do not satisfy it, this opens the way to loneliness. Having access to the 'desired' Other, a person faces the inconsistency; constantly having the Other potentially is not a guarantee to have it actually. Having a wide range of activities offered in the virtual world it may seem that the solution to loneliness (the unavailability of the Other) lies on the surface. You can either turn to the 'other Other' or switch your attention to viewing either entertaining or educational content. But it turns out that none of the options solves the problem of loneliness. Immersion into the world of content does not provide the kind of social interaction we wanted; 'other Other' will not replace the desired Other.

Let us again refer to Jaspers (1948). Full-value communication is possible only with a significant Other, more precisely, it is significance, i.e. being attuned to the Other as a subject that makes true communication possible. Only this kind of interaction is what we mean by high-quality social interaction, which, firstly, changes the inevitable cycles of solitude, and secondly, protects us from loneliness. That is why, during the era of short videos, the difference between true communication and insignificant social interaction can be so clearly traced. This type of activity undoubtedly affects the emotional state (sometimes recommendations within a few minutes offer us a wide range of emotions from excitement to horror, from anger to compassion), but does not offer quality social interaction.

In contrast to loneliness, solitude is inherent in human as his fundamental feature, as what distinguishes us from the creatures of the syncretic, merged into a single flow world. To quote E. Levinas (1987): 'Solitude lies in the very fact that there are existents' (p. 43). Firstly, our existence is never singular, in the sense that we are surrounded by and interact with other objects. Secondly, a person is not a part of something else, they always stand apart: physically, mentally and spiritually; all their acts come from themselves; their responsibilities are under their own jurisdiction. If the Other did not exist in the one's world, a person would not have the opportunity to form a concept of themselves, they would have no one to oppose themselves to. Here we can see the cognitive value of the dual human nature, which is made possible precisely by the lonely existence of human in the world. Returning to the beginning of our analysis, we recall the immutability of human nature. Therefore, since human is solitary by nature, the passage of time, radical changes in living conditions, the incredible world presented by the achievements of modern technology cannot change this.

## CONCLUSIONS

We can assert that the modern information society has profoundly influenced an individual action within society. This influence is evident not only in the causes and prevalence of loneliness but also in the strategies proposed to address it. Despite these societal and technological changes, the fundamental human need for solitude remains constant and unaltered. Solitude, understood as a voluntary and reflective state, is deeply rooted in human nature and serves as

a crucial element that distinguishes us from other entities. It fosters self-awareness, personal growth and mental clarity, underscoring what it truly means to be human.

In contrast, loneliness has been exacerbated by the superficiality often embedded in digital communication. The paradox of our times lies in the fact that while digital technologies offer unprecedented opportunities for connection, they frequently fall short in fulfilling the deeper emotional and relational needs of individuals. This gap highlights a critical challenge: how to harness the benefits of digital connectivity without allowing it to erode the quality and authenticity of human relationships.

By recognising and nurturing the essential role of solitude alongside genuine social engagement, we can better navigate the complexities of loneliness in the digital era, preserving both our individuality and our social bonds. This balance is key to fostering well-being and a richer, more fulfilling human experience in an increasingly digital world.

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## Vienatvės patirtis informacinėje visuomenėje: vienumo ir vienišumo skirtumas socialumo ir individualumo dichotomijoje

### *Santrauka*

Straipsnyje aptariamos vienumo (*solitude*) ir vienišumo (*loneliness*) sąvokos, tyrinėjant jų skirtingus vaidmenis žmogaus patirtyje šiuolaikinės informacinės visuomenės kontekste. Teigiamą, kad nors abi sąvokos apima tam tikrą atsiskyrimą nuo kitų, vienumas suprantamas kaip savanoriška ir konstruktyvų būsena, skatinanti savirefleksiją ir vidinį augimą, o vienišumas – kaip nevalinga ir skausminga būsena, atsirandanti dėl prasmingo socialinio ryšio stokos. Skaitmeninės technologijos, nors ir siūlo nuolatinį ryšį, dažnai paastrina vienišumą, skatindamos paviršutinišką sąveiką, kuri netenkina gilesnių santykijų poreikių, drauge naikindamos tikrojo vienumo galimybes. Pabrėžiama, kad vienumas išlieka esminiu ir nekintančiu žmogaus prigimties elementu, suteikiančiu erdvę autonomijai bei vidiniams dialogui, o skaitmeniniame amžiuje vienišumas yra sustiprėjęs ir atspindi tiek autentiško bendravimo žlugimą, tiek ryšio iliuziją. Vienatvės vertės susigrąžinimas ir struktūrių vienatvės priežasčių sprendimas yra esminiai žingsniai, siekiant emocinės gerovės šiandieniam susietame pasaulyje.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** vienumas, vienatvė, informacinė visuomenė, *Dasein*, Kitas, virtualus bendravimas