Find your tribe

Staying connected to combat loneliness

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Introduction

'Loneliness' is a loaded term, but few words better encapsulate what many people are going through amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Now, more than ever, people are having to explore new ways to 'find their tribe'.

The forced removal from normal social situations has direct correlations with this feeling of loneliness as we all adapt to new ways of connecting with friends, family and colleagues.

At the heart of this transition, and perhaps a saving grace for many, has been the role of technology.

In work settings, notions of data sharing, Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and digital conference rooms have been thrown to the fore; while in a social context people have relied on Zoom, e-commerce or online gaming to help combat the solitude.

However, through research conducted across 12 European nations, we have also found that four in 10 people who say they have felt lonely during the pandemic, also felt the same way prior to the outbreak and lockdown.

For many, this period is simply an exaggerated norm when it comes to social isolation or feelings of loneliness. And as technology's role as a mitigation tactic or solution becomes all the more significant, cybersecurity and safe use of said technologies must also become a priority.

If we're moving into a new world – either temporarily or longer-term – then we must make sure it's a safe world.

In essence, Kaspersky is urging you to '**Find your tribe**', but in a secure way.

Methodology

The Kaspersky Find Your Tribe Campaign was initiated to fully understand the stresses and strains different population demographics are going through during the COVID-19 pandemic. We also wanted to find out what methods and technologies people are employing to mitigate the challenges of lockdown so far.

The focus accounted for consumers in 12 countries: the UK (2,000 respondents), Germany (1,000 respondents), France (1,000 respondents), Italy (1,000 respondents), Spain (1,000 respondents), Netherlands (1,000 respondents), Austria (500 respondents), Hungary (500 respondents), Belgium (500 respondents), Portugal (500 respondents), Romania (500 respondents) and the Czech Republic (500 respondents).

Find your tribe. Staying connected to combat loneliness

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Kathleen Saxton
Psychotherapist
Founder of Psyched

Key Findings

- **Loneliness isn't just for lockdown** – despite the study being earmarked for trends during the outbreak period, 41% of Europeans also admitted to having felt lonely before social distancing regulations were put in place

- **Generation Z is the loneliest age group in Europe** – almost seven in 10 respondents from this age category felt 'lonely at least some of the time'; compared to just 37% at the other end of the age spectrum

- **A sign of things to come** – More than four in 10 Europeans have used new types of video call technology during COVID-19; 36% now feel more comfortable with technology than they did before; and 40% say they will use more technology post-COVID-19

- **Italy is the loneliest country** in Europe with as many as 59% admitting they feel lonely at least some of the time

- **Technology** has made 89% of those who feel lonely some of the time, feel less so

- **Digital aids** have also breached the older generations, with 64% of the Baby Boomer and Silent Generation demographics feeling that tech has helped to combat their loneliness

Loneliness goes beyond lockdown

Homing in on perhaps the most significant research finding, it seems as though – while COVID-19 has certainly exacerbated it for many – 'loneliness' isn't just a fleeting feeling reserved for pandemics.

More than half felt lonelier on a given week during the pandemic than they felt back in February, but the fact that as many as 41% also admitted to feeling lonely without social distancing regulations, opens up a whole avenue of additional issues to address.

"What I notice as a psychotherapist is the evidence of just how many people were already feeling lonely before the pandemic, which would indicate to me that these feelings may now be peaking but they in fact will continue even once the lockdown has ended," says Kathleen Saxton, Psychotherapist for the Find Your Tribe Campaign.

From a social perspective, this statistic begs the question as to what is causing this loneliness? How would they mitigate the feeling in 'usual' times? And to what extent COVID has simply been an extension of the norm for some?

And from a tech point of view, if almost half of Europeans have already been relying on digital tools to offset such feelings in normal times, then have they been doing so in a safe and secure way?

The answer to the latter question seems especially prevalent, with 60% of those who felt less lonely during COVID-19 accrediting tech such as phones, video calls, messaging or even Alexa as reasons why.

Digital application usage is rising during COVID-19, for sure. However, if utilised in a secure way, then they represent significant solutions for people at all times.

"We are fortunate that we can stay connected online during this period and we are likely to see this rise in technology adoption continue, even after any remaining social distancing measures are lifted. When used safely, the online and digital tools we have at our disposal can offer a great remedy for loneliness."

David Emm
Principal Security Researcher, Kaspersky

Generation Z struggle with the transition

At first glance, seeing that Generation Z (those born between 1994 and 2001) are struggling more with lockdown than Baby Boomers or The Silent Generation seems surprising. Perhaps though, as is also the case with Italy's high levels of loneliness, it highlights how the gulf in difference between 'now' and 'the norm' is what causes that feeling of loneliness.

Younger generations would often be those who meet socially, work among others daily, or participate in physical activity regularly. In fact, almost 70% of Generation Z respondents feel lonely some of the time. The contrast between this age group and older generations is even starker considering they're expected to be more proficient in using technologies that may help alleviate these feelings.

Our hope is that, as these youngsters turn to tech out of frustration, boredom or loneliness, that they still treat new digital reliance with respect and caution where required.

Shaping the future

The status quo has undoubtedly changed. Those who were once fearful, over-cautious, disinterested or just unexposed to digital tools, are now savvier than ever.

More than a third of respondents feel more comfortable using tech than they did before COVID-19 and as many as half of the 'very lonely' respondents admit to spending more than five hours a day online.

It seems that the reliance on and usage of many digital tools is more than a short-term obsession and will be embedded into longer-term behaviours. And if this is the case, then the point must be made that 'savviness' doesn't directly equal 'safety'.


"Just because I can make the technology do what I want doesn't mean I'm clued-up about the potential dangers associated with using group meeting apps, shopping, banking, etc. online," says David Emm, Principal Security Researcher at Kaspersky.

Looking to life and tech usage trends beyond the outbreak, Emm adds: "We need to ensure that people are staying connected safely because, when used safely, the online and digital tools we have at our disposal can offer a great remedy for loneliness."

In lighter news...

To safeguard against potential threats, we will of course offer some guidance for those who are making that transition to new digital realms. But it's also important to focus on the positive. Or the uplifting. Or even just the quirky in such unprecedented times.

- Our research found that more than a quarter of respondents are combating loneliness by helping others or being part of community initiatives. This rises as high as 35% in Portugal

- While it's still a minority, 31% agreed that they actually find it easier to make and build friendships online

- 30% also find it easier to portray themselves as they would like through online means

- And variety across mitigation strategies is also a positive take-home message. While 82% earmarked tech usage as a reason why they felt less lonely on a given week, other factors also included exercise and hobbies (23.7%), or even talking to pets (24%) or plants (4.9%)
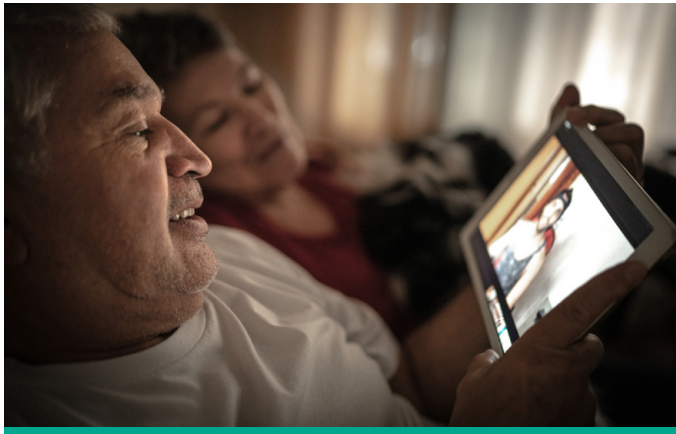
Keeping each other safe

The new technologies we're relying on to get through this 'new norm' aren't unprecedented. They have been developing for some time. However, they come with risks that we should all be aware of if we're going to start embedding them into our lives both now and beyond COVID-19.

The key thing is to develop a security culture, so that whatever you're doing online, you get into the habit of asking yourself if it's digitally safe.

Before installing any app, ask yourself how it makes money. If it's free, is your private data the price you're required to pay for using it? Remind yourself that you don't have to be a large enterprise to be a target. On the other hand, if you work for a company, you could be targeted by cybercriminals as a way into the company if you overlook security.

Here are our top 10 tips for navigating a world that you may not be used to, but that may represent a new norm beyond the coronavirus:

1 **Protect all your devices** with a reputable Internet security product

2 **Apply updates** to your operating system and all applications as soon as they become available

3 **Backup your data** regularly, and don't keep your backup disk connected to your computer other than to backup your files

4 **Use unique, complex passwords** for all your online accounts, and consider using a password manager to make this job easier

5 **Don't respond to unsolicited messages** by clicking on links or attachments – it's always better to go directly to a web site by typing in the URL yourself

6 **Review the privacy and security settings** of any online service you use, to limit the data you share with others

7 When using group meeting apps, **keep invitations, meeting IDs, etc. private** and make use of any features that can safeguard your privacy

8 **Disable features** you're not using, e.g. microphone, camera or audio

9 If you're using a device for work, **only use apps that have been provided by the company**

10 **Report abuse** to the provider of the online service

These small steps will help to vastly improve your safety levels in a world that is relying on digital applications more than ever before. It's highly likely, as we've found through this study, that this reliance will continue beyond COVID-19 to an extent that we weren't seeing before the outbreak.

It's a trend that could have hugely beneficial ramifications on both an industry and social level, in combating or enriching some of the findings exposed in this survey.

Just like loneliness, technology is relevant beyond pandemic life. And to merge the two safely and responsibly creates the potential to keep ourselves and others even safer than before the outbreak.

For those struggling the most, both now and after COVID-19, technology can be one of the most effective ways to allay loneliness and to find your tribe.

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