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# SOCIAL REFRESH

Solo Culture,  
Social Pressure  
and the Future  
of Friendship



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# FOREWORD

White Claw® has long been the drink of choice for social instigators. The people who spark moments of connection — setting up group chats, throwing house parties, or telling their friends about the new bar that's just opened downtown.

They don't overthink it. Because they know good things happen when good people come together. But what happens when life gets in the way?

Hangouts have to be planned weeks or months in advance, calendars are full of other commitments, and even grabbing a quick coffee takes careful coordination.

For several years now, we've been witnessing a quiet introversion. A shift towards what we might call "**solo culture**" — a way of living that celebrates hyper-individualism and an extreme focus on personal autonomy and independence. We're often taught that doing difficult things alone is a sign of resilience. So, we've engineered a world that supports self-sufficiency and convenience.

None of this was a conscious choice. Loneliness is just the unexpected byproduct of a world that's changing faster than our brains can keep up with. In other words, we're creatures who evolved to be sociable, living in a habitat that makes connection harder.

With a dominant culture that prioritizes speed, productivity, and ease, we're encouraged to minimize moments of friction, but this comes at the cost of crucial social touchpoints. We can't run into a friend in the supermarket if we get our groceries delivered to our doorstep. We can't strike up conversation at the bar if we're spending our evenings on the couch ordering in.

Yet beneath this remains a simple, unwavering truth: We were never meant to do life alone. That's where White Claw strives to play an important role: as a catalyst for bringing people together in real life — whether that's with old friends or new ones yet to be met.

We're hardwired for connection. Being together doesn't just feel good, it actually makes us stronger — physically and mentally. Interdependence was never a weakness. It's always been our superpower.

That's exactly what White Claw is all about. We create more moments where people come together in real life to share what matters. When we say **Grab Life By The Claw™**, it's not just a mantra, it's our mission. A mindset that shapes the experiences we create and the ways we bring people together as a brand. And that same spirit comes through in our product. Our portfolio is built for every kind of moment — from core refreshment to higher ABV, cocktails, and non-alcoholic offerings.

We commissioned the **Social Refresh** report because people are more connected than ever but have never felt further apart — and we want to understand why.

The research shows us this isn't because we don't care. Despite the pressures of modern life, we still reach for each other. We still search for moments of belonging and for spaces where we can be our true selves, together.

It points to the possibility of reimagining what social connection looks like in today's world. Not going offline. Not setting ambition aside. Not just tearing up the rules but writing new ones.

**We believe it is time  
for a social refresh.  
Let's refill our lives with  
moments worth sharing.**

**Because when  
we come together,  
life is simply better.**



**SAM READER**  
Chief Marketing &  
Innovation Officer at  
Mark Anthony Brands

# INTRODUCTION

Friendship and social connection aren't just about popularity or follower counts — it's a fundamental human need. It's as important to our wellbeing as food, sleep, and movement. In fact, one landmark study found **having strong social relationships could even make us live longer** — increasing survival rates by as much as 50%<sup>1</sup>.

We seem to already know this intuitively. But the social behaviors we evolved over thousands of years, and the connections that ensured our survival as a species, are now being tested in new and unprecedented ways.

That's why White Claw commissioned the **Social Refresh** report to better understand the reality of our social ecosystems today, the barriers pushing us apart, and how we might start to navigate our way to a more connected future.

To do so, we heard from **6,600 people of legal drinking age (LDA)** from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom (turn to [page 16](#) to read more about our methodology).

We learned that despite living in the most connected era of human history, many of us are lonelier than ever.

“

From an evolutionary standpoint, social connection is a biological imperative. Humans survived not because we were the strongest species, but because we lived in communities. Our nervous systems literally evolved to regulate in the presence of others. That's how we survive and thrive.”

—KATHERINE TEMPLAR LEWIS  
Interdisciplinary Scientist



80% of people think strong social connections improve our quality of life.



<sup>1</sup> Holt-Lunstad J, Smith TB, Layton JB. Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review. *PLoS Medicine*. 2010; 7 (7): e1000316 DOI: 10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316

## DO NOT DISTURB: THE QUIET RISE OF “SOLO CULTURE”

**43% of people don't regularly spend quality time with their close friends and family.** When we do get together, that time doesn't feel as joyful or restorative as it should. In fact, it feels like work. **63% of Gen Zers say maintaining friendships feels like a second job.** Why do so many of us feel this way?

Even though the majority of us think socializing is as important to our health as physical fitness, it's a muscle we're often too busy — or too exhausted — to flex.

Culturally, we've long been conditioned to celebrate the daily grind. That could be building a career, managing busy schedules, or, for younger generations, navigating rising costs and the pressures of early adulthood. But this constant pursuit of “better” can be lonely. Never-ending to-do lists and relentless self-optimization saps our energy, making it difficult to find the bandwidth for community-building. And we're all so busy that when we do want to hang out with friends, we have to plan ahead around hectic schedules.

That's how, over time, **solo culture** quietly became the norm. Third places disappeared because we didn't need them anymore. Apps automated interactions that used to happen between people face-to-face. We became hyper-independent not through our own individual choices, but because social interaction wasn't naturally integrated into our everyday lives anymore.

## TOGETHER ONLINE, BUT PHYSICALLY ALONE

Because solo culture keeps us in our own lanes, when we do make the effort to show up socially it can make interactions feel high stakes. You've carved out time from your calendar, traveled across town, spent money to be there. It's no wonder 60% of Gen Zers say that socializing often leaves them feeling drained because of unspoken expectations. Just being there isn't enough. We want to bring our best, funniest, most charismatic selves.

That's likely why so many of us feel more comfortable behind a screen. **46% of Gen Zers say they feel more connected to their digital friends.** When we're not face-to-face, there's less pressure to get it right. We can respond at our own pace, take our time to compose a response and even edit, delete, or unsend messages if we change our minds.

Online interactions also benefit from being frictionless. Micro-moments of connection can be squeezed into our commute or between meetings. Watching a friend's Instagram story or sending a quick voice note can help us to feel connected in smaller, more manageable ways. But in digital spaces, even when we're “together,” we're often physically alone. And that matters.

Being together in person is more than conversation. It's all those tiny cues we don't consciously think about but make us feel seen and understood. In other words: **If digital helps us to find connection, being together in real life is what makes us feel connected.**

## IS IT TIME FOR A SOCIAL REFRESH?

Not a rejection of technology. Not a retreat from ambition. A gentle rebalancing.

Imagine a future where independence and interdependence coexist. Where friendship isn't something we squeeze in after everything else, but something we make space for every day. Not just more connection, **better** connection — deeper, more meaningful relationships, whether we're strengthening existing bonds or making new ones.

A future where friendship feels refreshing again.

“

Friendship used to be ambient — your community was on your doorstep. Now, connection is about logistics. It takes planning, scheduling, and often money. That makes it feel like effort in a way it wasn't for past generations.”

—KATHERINE TEMPLAR LEWIS



“

Since the dawn of time, we've survived as a species because we lived in communities. Our advantage was cooperation and knowledge-sharing. That's why our nervous systems evolved to regulate in the presence of other people.”

—KATHERINE TEMPLAR LEWIS



# CHAPTER 1

## Find your tribe: the biology of belonging

Perhaps you track your sleep, your stress levels, or your heart rate. You know it's important to eat well and exercise often to live a longer, healthier, happier life. But social connection shapes who we are and how we feel just as much as what we eat and how often we workout, though we don't always prioritize it in the same way.

### SURVIVAL OF THE FRIENDLIEST

Even if we're not familiar with the science, we seem to intuitively understand that being social is linked to better overall wellbeing. **80% of people told us they believe having social connections improves overall quality of life.**

It's a knowledge that has been encoded into our brains through thousands of years of evolution. **Katherine Templar Lewis, Interdisciplinary Scientist**, explains:

"From an evolutionary standpoint, social connection is a biological imperative. Being socially connected was a survival mechanism — we warned each other of danger and passed important knowledge down to new generations.

Today, when we feel connected, our stress systems settle...shaping our cardiovascular health, immune resilience and longevity. Being social literally shapes our quality of life."

It's easy to forget, in today's high-tech world, that social bonding is innately physical. It's a deeply instinctual behavior that's not unique

to humans, it's observed throughout the animal kingdom.

"Social rituals like handshakes are actually a very important part of human bonding. When we touch or share physical space with someone, our brains are constantly picking up signals — body language, movement, and even smell. Those cues help us decide whether someone feels safe and trustworthy. It's a very physical process that just can't be replicated in digital spaces," Katherine adds.

But it's not just physical. Our social world plays an interesting role in shaping who we are at an identity level. Sociologist Charles Horton Cooley called this "the looking-glass self," the idea that relationships are like mirrors, shaping how we view ourselves<sup>1</sup>.

"We know that identity is co-authored," Katherine says. "The parts of the brain involved in shaping our self-concept overlap with the areas that activate when we think about people close to us. In other words, our identity is tied to our closest relationships."

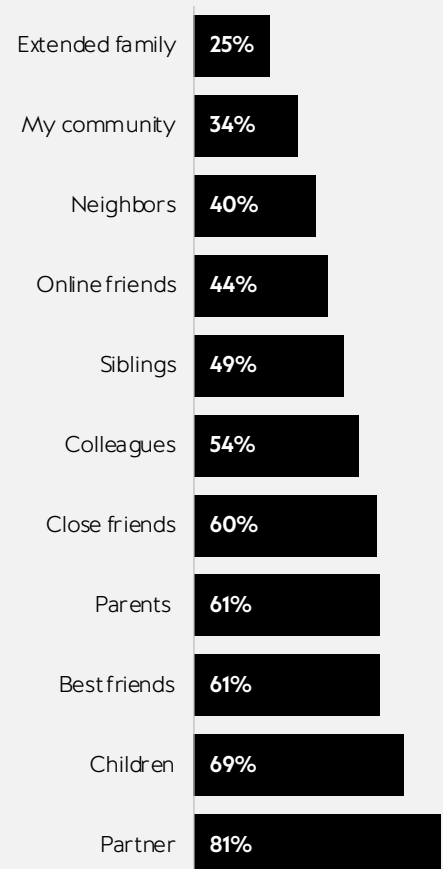
That's why people told us they often feel more themselves when they're around close friends. **3 in 4 people even told us their friendships give them a sense of purpose or meaning.**



**53% of people feel most like themselves when they're with close friends.**

#### WHO IS IN OUR CIRCLE

How often meaningful connection happens, at least weekly – by relationship type:



CONNECTION AND WELLBEING	LSC*	TOTAL	HSC*
How we link social connection to mental, emotional, and physical health			
Social connections play an important role in protecting against loneliness	73%	82%	90%
Having strong social connections improves the overall quality of my life	62%	80%	91%
Social connections are important for my mental health	64%	79%	89%
Social connections are just as important for health as exercise and diet	64%	78%	88%
Social connections help me cope with stress or difficult times	51%	72%	83%
Social connection is important for my physical wellbeing	47%	71%	84%

<sup>1</sup> Cooley, C. H. (1902). *Human Nature and the Social Order*.

\*Low-Socially-Connected (LSC) and Highly-Socially-Connected (HSC); turn to [page 16](#) to read more about our methodology

## KEEP YOUR FRIENDS CLOSE

But not all relationships are equal. We can't be best friends with everyone — but it is important that we have a handful of people we do feel close to. Anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar famously suggested there's a cognitive limit to the number of relationships we can meaningfully maintain — known as "**Dunbar's number.**" He theorized that while we can sustain around 150 social relationships at any one time, within that group is a smaller, more intimate layer — typically around 15 close friends<sup>1</sup>.

But as Katherine points out, it's less about volume and more about depth.

"In psychology, meaningful connection is built on emotional security and reciprocity — I show up for you, you show up for me," she explains. "That mutual exchange creates trust, and trust is what allows the nervous system to relax."

In our study, **44% of people defined "meaningful connection" as being able to trust and rely on each other.**

While we may not rely on our friends to alert us to approaching predators or defend the campfire at night as our ancestors once did, trust is still a signal of safety to the brain. It comes as no surprise that, in our data, it ranked as the most important element of meaningful connection.

## THE MISSING LINK

Most of us understand that social connection is important to our wellbeing in the same way that we know brushing our teeth twice a day is important to our dental

hygiene. But unlike that daily ritual, we're struggling to make connection a part of our everyday routines. Our research reveals **only 37% of people feel highly socially connected today.** And compared to a few years ago, we're spending less time together. In fact, **43% of people don't frequently spend quality time with close friends or family.**

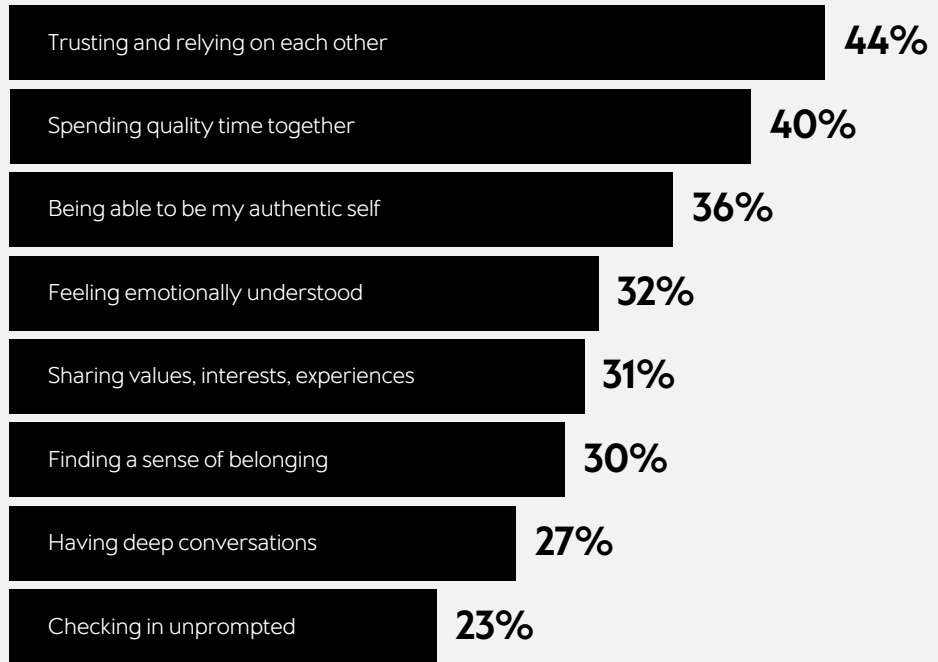
Clearly, there's a growing gap between what we value and what we experience. For many of us, meaningful connection feels harder to access than it should.

If our biology is wired for belonging, then why do we feel so disconnected?

We're not broken. But the social structures we relied on for thousands of years aren't working for us anymore.

### WHAT MAKES A CONNECTION MEANINGFUL?

% of people who define **meaningful connection** as:



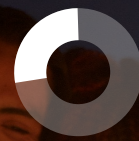
### SHRINKING SOCIAL ECOSYSTEMS

How our **social worlds have changed** over the last few years:



**Over 1 in 4**

say they attend fewer social gatherings or rituals than a few years ago



**Over 1 in 4**

say they make less connections than a few years ago



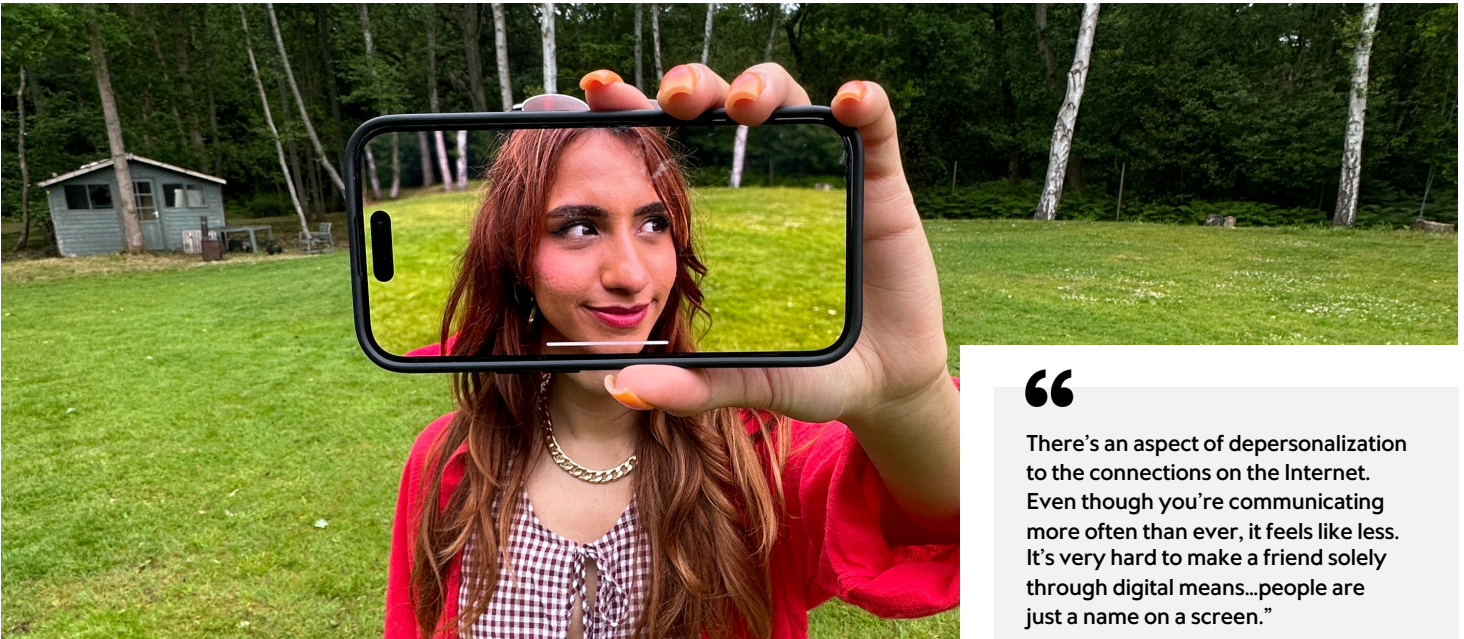
**Over 1 in 3**

say they spend time alone more than a few years ago

<sup>1</sup> Dunbar, R. I. M. (2010). How Many Friends Does One Person Need? Dunbar's Number and Other Evolutionary Quirks. Harvard University Press. <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/books/9780674057160>

# CHAPTER 2

## Solo culture, loneliness and the cost of convenience



**Imagine this:** you wake up and check your emails before getting out of bed. You spend the rest of the day taking calls, sending messages, liking friends' Instagram posts. When you get home, you're too tired to go grocery shopping so you get it delivered to your door.

You've had dozens of interactions through a screen, but none in real life.

If that feels relatable, it's because, for a large number of us, that's just the reality of today's world.

But beneath this sits a deeper shift. Independence has become the norm, with more of life managed alone — from work and wellbeing to the way we socialize. As society increasingly rewards convenience and self-reliance, this cultural shift is nudging us toward a form of 'toxic independence,' where doing more of life alone becomes the easiest option and friendship can start to feel like an extra step. The problem isn't a lack of desire for connection, but a changing environment that is creating new obstacles.

Technology has made our lives wonderfully frictionless, which reinforces this shift. We find ourselves spending more time socializing through screens. When everything can be done solo, connection starts to feel optional rather than essential. We're not bumping into a friend at the dog park or striking up a conversation with a stranger in the checkout line. Little by little, those unplanned moments disappear. Now, if we want to meet up with friends in person, we have to schedule it in, which adds to our mental load.

It's not really technology that keeps us apart — in many ways, it helps bring us together. But when we rely too much on online interactions, we lose something fundamental: those everyday, real-world moments that made socializing feel easy. And over time, without realizing it, our social world shrinks to the size of a screen.

“

There's an aspect of depersonalization to the connections on the Internet. Even though you're communicating more often than ever, it feels like less. It's very hard to make a friend solely through digital means...people are just a name on a screen.”

—ANONYMOUS GEN Z  
Male, UK



“

This is probably the most isolated people have ever been in modern Western society. Once upon a time, our whole village was our community. Now people don't even know their neighbors.”

—KATHERINE TEMPLAR LEWIS



“

I'm prioritizing more meaningful connections. I don't have time to spare or energy to spare on lower quality friendships.”

—ANONYMOUS MILLENNIAL  
Male, US



## CONVENIENCE VS. CONNECTION

It's not that we don't **want** to spend time together in person. But solo culture rewards speed, productivity, and independence. We reach for tools of convenience — apps for grocery shopping, banking, even dating — because we're too busy or too exhausted to step outside.

As Katherine explains, this can have a profound impact on our social relationships:

"So many of us think that a 'good day' is a productive one — back-to-back calls or working through our lunchbreak. But the brain needs recovery. Without it, you move into cognitive depletion, which can lead to reduced efficacy and depersonalization — a sense of feeling detached from yourself and the people around you."

This is reflected clearly in our data. **3 in 10 people report that burnout and exhaustion prevents them from maintaining meaningful connections.**

When we're running low on energy we have to make decisions — consciously or unconsciously — about how to prioritize our time. And most of us probably have less control over these choices than we'd like. We can't opt out of work, caring responsibilities, or the other demands that keep life moving. Friendship becomes harder to prioritize.

While some things, like buying groceries or ordering a taxi, may be more convenient because of apps, relying too much on digital interactions can make real-life friendship harder.

Friendship is like building a muscle, the more effort applied, the stronger it gets. Becoming friends doesn't just "happen" — it's something built through **repetition** and **proximity**.

Psychologist Jeffery Hall posited it can take roughly **50 hours of interaction to move from acquaintance to casual friend** and more than **200 hours to build a close friendship**<sup>1</sup>. In our research, **78% of people agree friendships require ongoing care** and **60% think it should be a priority every day**.

In early life, this formula for friendship — repetition and proximity — was built into the daily rhythm of our lives through school, sports teams, and clubs. But in adulthood, that social architecture falls away.

For past generations, the transition from early-life social structures into adulthood wasn't quite as jarring. That's because there were other spaces that could fill the gap.

"Communities used to be more intergenerational. People of different ages lived, worked and socialized together, which meant knowledge and support naturally flowed between generations. Now our social worlds are much more segmented and different generations increasingly move in their own tribes," Katherine notes.

So, if you feel like it's harder to make friends as an adult, you're not wrong. In a world where our basic needs can be met without leaving the house, moments of unplanned, spontaneous connection are becoming less frequent. In the past, it was easier to befriend people on our street, bump into friends at the supermarket, or strike up a conversation with your barista.

**Ray Oldenburg** first came up with the term "third places" to describe the spaces where social connection happens<sup>2</sup>. These are places outside of home or work where people can come together to connect, like parks or bars. In those spaces, proximity is able to do a lot of the heavy lifting — connection is something that just happens without trying.

In today's solo culture, friendship takes forethought. And when you're already overwhelmed, socializing can feel like just another chore. It's no wonder **63% of Gen Zers say maintaining friendships feels like a second job**.

“

As you get older, and if you have a family in particular, you just don't have that time that you used to. So you kind of have to be a bit more selective on the friendships you invest time in.”

—**ANONYMOUS GEN X**  
Male, UK



### LOST SOCIAL RITUALS

Percentage of **people who rarely engage** in these everyday social activities:



**62%**

Taking part in social routines (weekly dinner, coffee walks, etc.)



**54%**

Have meaningful one-on-one conversations



**43%**

Spend quality time with close friends or family



**41%**

Send / respond to check-in messages



**81% of people agree it's important to dedicate time and effort to nurture friendships.**

<sup>1</sup> Hall, J. A. (2018). How many hours does it take to make a friend? *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 36(4), 1278–1296 ([link](#))

<sup>2</sup> Oldenburg, R. (1989). *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.956147>



# CHAPTER 3

## When hanging out starts to feel like hard work

If social connection is as important to our wellbeing as our physical and mental health — why does socializing often feel draining? Why do some friendships drain us rather than replenish us?

We're all governed by a set of unspoken rules that teach us how to interact with others — social etiquette that varies across cultures and communities and that we usually learn from a very young age. Some of these rules can be helpful; they keep us safe or make sure we're being respectful to others, but they can also be limiting.

They dictate which emotions are acceptable to express and even who is allowed to express them. They can encourage us to disguise parts of ourselves to avoid embarrassment or awkwardness and prevent us from speaking up even when we're feeling uncomfortable.

Navigating this complex web of rules and expectations can be exhausting. They help make social interactions more predictable, but also more surface-level, stifling the kind of authenticity that makes connections feel meaningful.

“

There's a degree to which we always modulate our behavior across contexts – that's just being human. We go somewhere, we recognize the social norms, and we adjust accordingly. But if you're constantly suppressing parts of yourself and there's no psychological safety, that's absolutely draining.”

—KATHERINE TEMPLAR LEWIS



### THE PRESSURE TO FIT IN

When socializing — whether with close friends or total strangers — we often don't present our authentic self. Instead, we perform a part. We found **59% of people have different versions of themselves for different social settings.**

We're social shapeshifters: changing which mask we wear depending on who we're with. Sociologist Erving Goffman called this **"impression management."**<sup>1</sup> Think about how you'd behave on a first date versus with your colleagues at work. This usually isn't duplicitous, it's instinctual. But it can make social interactions harder.

**Over half (54%) of people feel like they need to stay positive in social settings,** even when that's not how they're really feeling. That's a heavy mask to wear.

Katherine explains:

“When your actions don't line up with your core values, your brain works harder. The prefrontal cortex is doing more work. There's more cognitive load. That's why inauthenticity feels exhausting.”

**Over half (52%) of people told us the pressure to perform socially gets in the way of real connection. 56% of Gen Zers go so far as to say some of their friendships don't feel genuine** and are more like a performance.

#### MANAGING OUR IDENTITIES

Percentage of people who **feel pressure to adjust how they present themselves** to fit in:

	TOTAL	LDA GEN Zers	HSC	LSC
I feel like I have different versions of myself for different settings	59%	68%	50%	69%
I feel pressure to stay positive in social settings, even when that's not how I'm really feeling	54%	61%	43%	74%
I censor parts of myself to fit in with different social groups	52%	62%	42%	65%

<sup>1</sup> Goffman, E. (1956). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*

This pressure to fit in isn't weakness. It's evolution. "The pressure to conform is very much linked to evolutionary survival pathways in our brains. When you're younger, especially, the pain of not fitting in is amplified. It feels big because, evolutionarily, belonging meant survival," Katherine says.

It's perhaps unsurprising then that we found Gen Zers struggle with authenticity, especially online. Their formative years unfolded at a time when socializing was mostly digital, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Friendships were made and maintained almost exclusively online, in spaces where it's normal — even expected — to curate the way you present yourself.

Now Gen Zers have a complex, sometimes contradictory, view of online friendship. While **1 in 5 say they feel most like their true selves in online communities or group chats, 64% believe social media only encourages surface-level connections**, rather than genuine ones.

"Online spaces can make it easier for people to explore parts of their identity," Katherine explains. "Because there's less immediate social pressure. But that also means it's easier to filter or hide parts of ourselves. In real life, we're much better at reading authenticity through body language and social cues."

Our digital footprint can also have an interesting effect on real-life dynamics. A joke taken out of context, an awkward social gaffe, an unflattering angle: there's always the risk that a vulnerable moment could be captured and shared online to a global audience. That can make IRL connections feel less safe.

But what does the science say about digital versus IRL relationships — how do they compare? Katherine explains that it isn't a question of either or. Both online and in-person connections are valuable in different ways:

"Digital platforms are amazing for identity exploration and self-expression. People can find their tribe online and connect with others who share their interests or experiences in a way that just wasn't possible before. But digital connection is still different from being with someone in real life. You have fewer social cues, less sensory input, and that means less of the biological bonding that happens when we're physically together."



## THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

This invites us to ask: What would happen if we could combine the freedom and exploration of digital spaces with the deeper feelings of belonging and trust that grow when we're together in real life? If we could create physical spaces where people feel the same sense of safety and belonging they find online — so they could feel confident showing up as their most authentic selves.

Perhaps maintaining friendships would feel less like hard work and instead become something that restores us. A reprieve from the hustle and bustle of modern life, rather than another chore on the list.

“

People don't come as they are online — they create personas and forget they're speaking to real humans.”

—ANONYMOUS GEN Z  
Female, Canada



“

Yeah, I think online connections have limits. There's nothing that compares to sitting around a bonfire. When someone tells a funny joke and everyone laughs.”

—ANONYMOUS GEN Z  
Male, US



# CHAPTER 4

## Social refresh: finding ways to refill your cup



Desire for connection hasn't disappeared. If anything, it's amplified. We're not withdrawing from our friendships because we care less, we're stepping back because modern life can make meaningful connection harder to find and sustain.

Solo culture tells us to celebrate independence and glorify busyness. When we do find room for social moments, they're carefully planned out, sapping the joy of spontaneity. Interactions often feel high stakes because we feel pressure to make each moment count. Suddenly, connection feels like a performance and becomes draining.

“  
I think we're at a cultural inflection point. Independence has been celebrated for a long time, but we're now starting to rediscover the value of interdependence. We're not meant to do life alone. Humans are co-regulating organisms – we're designed to be around other people.”  
—KATHERINE TEMPLAR LEWIS



But friendship is supposed to fill your cup.

There's no right or wrong way to spend time together. For some, it might look like lively group dinners or parties. For others, a quiet walk with a friend or just spending time together without needing to say much at all.

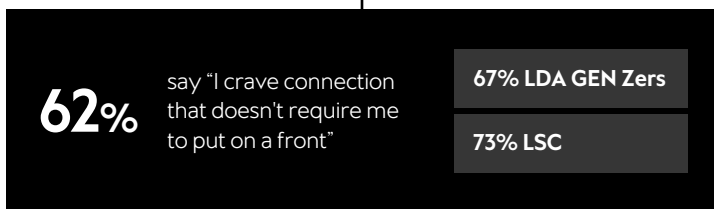
What's clear from our research is that people are increasingly choosing quality over quantity when it comes to friendship. **66% of people now choose to engage in fewer, more meaningful social interactions rather than frequent less meaningful ones.**

This is especially true for younger generations. **35% of Gen Zers told us they would be happy to let go of a few casual friendships in exchange for one very deep one.** Whether online or IRL, we crave connections that feel easy, honest and safe.

Throughout this report, we've seen that meaningful connection thrives through **proximity, repetition,** and — crucially — **authenticity.** But modern life rarely creates these conditions for us. So, we need to think about how we can create them for ourselves, in big and small ways.

### RETHINKING FRIENDSHIP

How meaningful connection should feel:



<sup>1</sup> Goffman, E. (1956). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*

## DIGITAL DISCOVERY AND IRL CONNECTION

Many of us wish connection was built into the rhythm of everyday life — through regular social rituals and smaller, low-cost ways of showing up for each other. In some ways, it's a nostalgic desire — a return to some of the social infrastructure enjoyed by previous generations.

"We've lost those low-effort moments where you're simply around other people — when connection would happen without needing to plan it weeks in advance," Katherine says. "Now you have to literally architect connection into your life."

But we don't want to turn back the clock to a pre-Internet world, either. Digital platforms have expanded access to connection. We now have more control than ever over how we find people with similar values and interests; we don't have to rely on chance encounters. That's incredibly powerful. But it can't fully replicate the benefits of being together IRL.

Finding people is only part of the equation. Building real connection still depends on shared environments, repeated interactions and low-pressure moments that happen when we're physically together.

The challenge lies in supplementing digital reach and convenience with meaningful but frictionless in-person connections.

Having grown up navigating a social world shaped by an increased online presence and shrinking third places — the cafes, parks and community spaces where connection used to happen naturally — as rising costs, digital habits and more home-centered lives quietly reduce the spaces we share.

Gen Zers have their own ideas about what a socially connected future could look like. And it's a vision that includes the best of both worlds.



### MAKING SPACE FOR CONNECTION

Top ways to make more meaningful connections:

	TOTAL	HSC	LSC
Social traditions that make time for friendships (e.g., monthly dinners, annual trips etc.)	39%	44%	31%
Easy, low-cost ways to show up for each other (e.g., care packages, small acts of kindness etc.)	36%	—	—
Time away from screens or tech-free gatherings to be more present and connected	35%	38%	29%
Better work-life balance to allow more time to build meaningful connections	34%	37%	22%
Reminders or nudges to check in with people I care about	30%	—	22%

### TOOLS FOR TOGETHERNESS

What Gen Zers say would help them build stronger relationships:

More opportunities to learn and practice relational skills	24%	31%
Spaces (online or in-person) that support meaningful connection	20%	27%
Collaborative planning tools to make organizing time together easier	19%	26%
Thoughtful products that help connection (friendship kits, shared journal etc.)	19%	26%
Digital platforms or apps designed for intentional social interaction	17%	25%
Tools or resources that guide deeper connection	15%	22%

□ ALL ■ GEN Z

Now in their early to mid-twenties, Gen Zers are in a life stage where their social relationships are in flux. Some will be entering the workforce for the first time, while others are just graduating and finding their feet in adulthood. We can feel this shift in our data. Younger LDA respondents were the most likely to want more structured support in building friendships.

For many Gen Zers, the challenge isn't just finding opportunities to connect, it's knowing how to navigate connection in the first place. **Nearly a third (32%) say they struggle with making new friends**, while others point to more nuanced barriers, from knowing how to reconnect after a period of silence (28%) to handling tension or disagreement (26%). Even the small moments can feel difficult. Around a quarter say they find it hard to reach out, initiate plans or express how they're really feeling.

These challenges reflect a generation that values connection deeply, but hasn't always been given the tools, spaces, or social norms to build it with confidence.

Katherine says:

**“Young people especially need somewhere they can just hang out. Creative spaces – whether that’s art, music, gaming, or shared hobbies – give people a reason to come together. They’re environments where friendships form naturally because people are doing things together. Digital platforms are brilliant for helping people to find their tribe. But once you’ve found those people you still need spaces where you can connect in real life.”**

If we want to reconnect and combat a solo culture that keeps us looking at screens rather than at each other, the answer isn't as simple as putting our phones away. It's being more intentional about how we use digital platforms, while making space in our lives for meaningful, in-person moments.

It's a shift that's already quietly in motion. We're rediscovering the joy of "analogue" with craft nights, board game cafes, and book clubs. We're creating hangout spaces where phones are put away and conversation isn't mandatory — where we can just be together, quietly. And more often than not, these communities begin online: in group chats,

forums, and on social media, before moving offline.

In short: Digital platforms help us to find our people. Shared spaces, rituals and everyday moments help those relationships to grow. And it's Gen Zers, the first truly digitally native generation, who are showing us what this balance could look like.

“

**I love just going on a walk and talking. There's no pressure to entertain, no need to dress up, no need to perform.”**

**—ANONYMOUS MILLENNIAL**  
Female, UK



# WHAT COMES NEXT

## Finding our way back to each other



When we're told that depending on others is a sign of weakness or that success is measured by our independence, choosing to prioritize friendship feels quietly radical.

But friendship has never been a luxury. It's not something to squeeze into the spaces between the moments that matter. It's what gives those moments meaning. Because life is meant to be shared.

At White Claw, we believe those moments are worth investing in. That's why back in 2024, we challenged people to **Grab Life By The Claw™**. It wasn't just a catchy slogan — it was a rally cry. An invitation to reconnect a disconnected world.

Now, we're refreshing that commitment, and this research is the first step. It's a pulse-check on modern friendship — by understanding where we are now and how we got here, we're in a better position to think about what comes next.

What's clear from the research is that there isn't one easy fix. While there's a lot that's beyond our control, there are ways we can claw back

some autonomy. It starts small — with just the simple decision to do things differently. Saying 'yes' when it's easier to say 'no.' Reaching out rather than opting out. Choosing to show up, even when it's inconvenient or imperfect.

Solo culture keeps us in our own bubble, which means we lose those moments of connection that happen without even trying. The joy of spotting a familiar face in a crowd. The smile shared with a stranger on the subway. The friendships that find you when you least expect it.

To Grab Life By The Claw™ means rejecting solo culture and embracing moments that are messy, energizing, and unexpected. It's rediscovering fun...together.

That doesn't mean turning back the clock, ditching our phones, or unplugging completely. It's just making space for moments of spontaneity — wherever they happen. And whether it's a backyard barbecue, beach party or music festival — with friends old or new — we'll keep finding new ways to bring friends together. Because that's the White Claw way.



# METHODOLOGY

This research combined desk research, social listening, qualitative research, expert interviews, and a large-scale online survey across the US, Canada, and the UK. Together, these methods were designed to build a robust picture of how people experience social connection today and the tensions shaping modern relationships.

## SOCIAL LISTENING

To understand how social connection is being discussed in public conversation, the research analyzed earned media and social discourse. This analysis was conducted across the US, Canada, and the UK from March 2024 through March 2025.

This analysis involved:

- Analyzing media coverage related to the core themes identified through thematic analysis,
- Reviewing social conversation across platforms including X, Reddit, and YouTube,
- Using social listening and media analytics tools to identify patterns in sentiment and key themes emerging across markets.

## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The qualitative research was conducted through web-assisted interviews in March and April 2025 across the US, Canada, and the UK. This phase was designed to explore how people experience social connection in their everyday lives and better understand the cultural tensions shaping connection today.

The research included multiple formats designed to capture both individual perspectives and real-life social dynamics:

- 12 online in-depth interviews with LDA Gen Z and Millennials
- 12 online friendship triads with LDA Gen Z and Millennials, with 3–4 existing friends participating together to reflect natural group dynamics and shared social experiences
- 9 online focus groups with LDA Gen Z, Millennials, and Gen X, with 5–6 participants in each group

Across all stages of the qualitative research, participants reflected a broad mix of backgrounds, experiences, and life stages. This included variation in gender identity, ethnicity, income, geography, living situation, and self-described personality type, including both introverts and extroverts. Participants were recruited from urban and rural communities across the US, Canada, and the UK. The majority of participants were alcohol drinkers, with a limited number of non-alcohol drinkers also included.

## EXPERT INTERVIEWS

To bring additional specialist perspective to the research, the study also included four expert interviews with thought leaders spanning public health, psychology, behavior change, and policy. Each expert contributed a distinct lens on the role of social connection in people's lives and the wider forces shaping connection today.

## SURVEY RESEARCH

The survey was fielded online between April 17 and May 6, 2025, in three markets: the US, Canada, and the UK. In total, the research surveyed n=6,624 LDA adults, including ~2,000 general population respondents and a ~200-person Gen Z boost in each market.

Throughout the report, analysis primarily focuses on total sample findings, while highlighting notable differences across key audience groups where relevant. These include:

- Gen Z (LDA-28)
- Millennials (29-44)
- Gen X (45-60)
- Boomers + Silent Generation (61+)

## SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS SCALE

To create a more nuanced understanding of social connection, the survey incorporated the 20-item Social Connectedness Scale (SCS), a validated academic framework developed by Lee and Robbins (1995).

Respondents rated 20 statements using a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The scale measures an individual's general sense of interpersonal closeness, belonging, and social connectedness. Based on their responses, participants received an overall social connectedness score and were grouped as Highly-Socially-Connected, Medium-Socially-Connected, or Low-Socially-Connected.

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Social Refresh was created in collaboration with Edelman Data & Intelligence (Dxi), a global research, analytics, and data consultancy dedicated to understanding the drivers behind behavior and culture. Dxi brings together a multidisciplinary team of research specialists, behavioral scientists, data engineers, and analytics experts working across markets worldwide.

The data in this report was collected and prepared by Veronica Lloyd, Account Director of Edelman Dxi EMEA, Human Intelligence.

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