I saw the symptoms first. It was the way music had become about hopelessness, drugs, sex, and disturbing emptiness. It was how platonic in-person conversation felt. It was in every addicted person around me. It was in the juul, and in Adderall and Xanax. It was in dab pens that offered an on-the-go high at a 90% THC concentrated wax. It was the girl on campus who always ate Cheetos before her meal at the dining hall, so that when she puked up her food later, she would know she got it all out the moment her vomit turned orange. It was in the unexplainable tears, and in the anorexic bodies around me. It was in the video game addictions and the porn addictions. It was in the mass shootings, the politicians lie, the opioid crisis, the hook-up culture, and on reality tv. It was the symptoms of a society lost, of an impulsive, sensitive, and egotistical culture - and a generation that's beginning to feel the impact of losing touch with the very things that make us human.

As I observed myself, my friends, and the culture we were living in, I saw the world changing around me. Born on the cusp of the digital revolution, I experienced a childhood without constant technology, and a pubescent adolescence learning how to navigate an iPhone and newly emerged social media. It took me a few years of desperately searching for an explanation, and months of research to understand the symptoms that I saw and that I personally felt from this digital world. I needed to know which commandments of the human experience we broke that are making us all so sad, so empty, and so anxious. Understanding and identifying the problem was the first step in curing them, and in this thesis, I want to relay the information that helped me heal to others – in hopes that facing the reality of our culture and its impact on the individual may help them heal as well. The symptoms I want to focus on specifically are the mental health crisis and the deterioration of human connection. These are only two symptoms

among many, but I've come to realize that these two are at the core of much of everything else we suffer from. Addiction rises at the hand of loneliness and depression. The Juul addictions, the eating disorders, the hookup culture, the Adderall and Xanax abuse, all of it seems to be coping habits derived from the two larger symptoms we endure.

The words anxiety and depression used to be scarce in people's vocabulary, if they even believed it to be a legitimate illness at all. Nowadays, it seems that anxiety and depression are brought up in conversation constantly. People speak about their anxiety on their Facebook walls and their depression in their tweets. Antidepressants and Xanax are being popped like tick tacks. Are we more depressed and anxious than we once were? Or are the words exploited in daily conversation in a dramatic show to stimulate sympathy and attention?

In her book *iGen* Jean Twenge conducts a generational study of the youngest generation, which she calls iGen (also referred to as Generation Z), or people born in 1995 or after. Jean Twenge allots an entire chapter of her book to exploring the mental health crisis she discovered this young generation was facing. It seems that we actually *are* more depressed than former generations. The stats tell the most compelling story of this sad and lonely generation. According to Twenge:

> Only 1% to 2% of Americans born before 1915 experienced a major depressive episode during their lifetimes, even though they lived through the great depression and two world wars. Today, the lifetime rate of major depression is ten times higher - between 15% and 20%... Although some of this trend might be due to more frequent reporting of mental illness, researchers have concluded that the change is too large and too consistent across studies to be explained solely by a reporting bias. (143)

Considering that the rate of depression was lower even during times of a world war and economic crisis than it is now clearly shows that America has a problem on its mind. This is "no small issue" Twenge states after identifying that "more than one in nine teens and one in eleven young adults" are suffering from major depression (108). In only five years between 2010-2015, the number of teens that experienced a major depressive episode rose by *fifty-six* percent.

Depression can be caused by many uncontrollable factors, like genetics and environment for example. But loneliness and anxiety are precursors to depression as well, and as expected both have risen amongst young adults. Studies show that loneliness amongst 8th-10th graders rose by 31% in just four years, from 2011 to 2015. In fact, "teens are now lonelier than at any time since the survey began in 1991" (97). So, it's not just that rates of loneliness are jumping ridiculously in short periods of time, the rates are also the highest they have been in twenty-eight years. America has never seen such a rise in loneliness in such a short amount of time.

The data that Twenge collected also revealed that girls are suffering at the hand of anxiety, depression, and loneliness at an alarmingly higher rate than boys. Boys and girls used to be equally as likely to have symptoms of depression, but between 2012 and 2015, girls' depression "increased by 50%" while "boys' depression increased by 21%" (102). That means that girls depression more than *doubled* boys in only three short years. Let that marinate. Twenge points out that when it comes to rates of loneliness, girls also suffer marginally higher than boys do. In fact, "Forty-eight percent more girls felt left out in 2015 than in 2010, compared to a 27% increase for boys" (99). After presenting the discrepancy in rates of depression and loneliness between girls and boys, Twenge uncoincidentally points out that girls are reported to spend much more time on social media than boys (because boys are spending that extra time playing video games…). The issue though, is that, "girls may also be uniquely vulnerable to the effects of

social media on mental health. The emphasis on perfect selfies has amplified body image issues for girls" and "double standards of sexuality are also very evident online. Girls often feel that they can't win - a sexy photo will get a lot of likes, but it also invites slut shaming. The usual girl drama of who said what to whom and who has a crush on whom is also heightened on social media, surrounding girls twenty-four hours a day with the back-and-forth of an often toxic interaction, all without the context of facial expressions and gestures" (106-107). The combination of more time on social media, and the messages of sexuality and body image that are relayed to young girls from the online world gives explanation to why their rates climbed so higher than boys. Boys certainly aren't exempt from this standard of sexuality, but it is more apparent for girls, as well as the fact that boys also spend much less time on social media and therefore are less likely to suffer from the negativite self-image it can encourage. However, boys replace their time online with playing video games, which isn't great either. These simulations often encourage aggressive, violent behavior and feeds this already existing tendency in boys who spend a lot of time playing.

So, how big of a role is technology really playing in these rates and how are these high rates a symptom of the digital age? Well, studies have shown that "teens who spend a lot of time with their friends in person are much less likely to be lonely (with their risk cut nearly in half), and those who visit social networking sites every day or nearly every day are 11% more likely to be lonely." (80). Apparently, it works in the other direction as well – time offline actually makes people happier. Twenge notes that data has shown that "there's not a single exception: all screen activities are linked to less happiness, and all nonscreen activities are linked to more happiness" (77-78). Getting offline doesn't just erase the pain, the more time teens spend outside of their screens, the *happier* they become. This makes sense if you think about what people are really

seeing while engaging with the online world. On social media, friends post their every move, so not only do young adults see that they were left out, its essentially shoved in their face with a large blinking sign. And if FOMO (fear of missing out) – the popular term that has been given to this exact sensation of aloneness - isn't plaguing kids, they're spending their time scrolling through people posting how awesome and exciting their lives are, while they sit on their dumpy couch in their dumpy clothes, alone. The online world of social media induces comparison of your own life and social status to that of hundreds of other people a day, all of whom are posting their best side and only their successes. Here, comparison truly is the thief of joy.

The decline in mental health is obvious, but can technology be entirely blamed? To answer this question, Twenge created a list of possible causes for the mental health crisis and puts them up to a two-part test in order to observe their correlation. Part one of the test states that the cause "must be correlated with mental health issues or unhappiness" and part two states that it must have "changed at the same time and in the correct direction" with regard to the trend in mental health (112). Once Twenge did this, she reports:

> Only three activities definitively pass both tests. First, new-media screen time (such as electronic devices and social media) is linked to mental health issues and/or unhappiness, and it rose at the same time. Second and third, in-person social interaction and print media are linked to less unhappiness and less depression, and both have declined at the same time as mental health has deteriorated. A plausible theory includes three possible causes: (1) more screen time has led directly to more unhappiness and depression, (2) more screen time has led to less in-person social interaction, which then led to unhappiness and depression, and (3) more screen time has led to less print media use, leading to

> unhappiness and depression. In the end, all of the mechanisms come back to new-media screen time in one way or another. By all accounts, it is the worm at the core of the apple. (112)

Twenge makes it abundantly clear here that the rise in mental health issues is directly correlated to increase use in media.

The overall message from these statistics though, is that this young generation is facing a colossal mental health crisis - they may look happy online, but something else is going on behind closed doors. People are depressed and anxious more than ever before because the digital world has disconnected them from *real* connection. Young adults and teens may be texting their friends all day long, but the deepest expression of emotion comes from reading each other's emojis instead of facial expressions. They may be watching their friends' stories and keeping up to date on what everyone is doing, but they're not truly connecting- they're mostly just in mere contact with each other. Living a life that lacks any real deep connection with the community around you? No wonder the rates of loneliness and depression are so high. Sherry Turkle, longtime advocate of digital technology, writes a compelling book about the state of conversation in the 21st century called "Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in A Digital Age." Turkle ruminates over the implications of a society that no longer holds the skills to converse in the same way they once did, as conversation is occurring more often in texts, phone calls, and emails. She states that this is problematic because the more time people spend texting, they lose "practice in face-to-face talk. That means lost practice in the empathic arts -- learning to make eye contact, to listen, and to attend to others. Conversation is on the path toward the experience of intimacy, community, and communion. Reclaiming conversation is a step toward reclaiming our most fundamental human values" (7). Notice that Turkle uses the word reclaiming here,

indicating that these skills are pretty much already lost. Conversation is responsible for creating the connections we are so desperately in need of, and conversation seems to be happening less and less. It's not just a theory, studies show that "in-person conversation led to the most emotional connection and online messaging led to the least" (23). Despite the fact that the students in this study "had tried to 'warm up' their digital messages by using emoticons, typing out the sounds of laughter ("Hahaha"), and using the forced urgency of TYPING IN ALL CAPS. But these techniques had not done the job. It is when we see each other's faces and hear each other's voices that we become most human to each other" (23). Human connection is a tale as old as time; even our hunter-gatherer ancestors saw the benefit of social gatherings as they moved around in packs for protection and reproduction. In this day and age, we've taken the importance of human connection for granted, and valued our connection with our self and our digital companion instead.

Superficial conversation, the kind induced by the online world, impedes on true connection, and a lack of true connections results in isolating loneliness and debilitating depression. But it's more than just the way we're replacing in-person conversation with digital ones, even our in-person conversation is different. Turkle shares alarming information about the way technology is ruining conversation *even* when we're not using it. She explains that:

> What phones do to in-person conversation *is* a problem. Studies show that the mere presence of a phone on the table (even a phone turned off) changes what people talk about. If we think we might be interrupted, we keep conversations light, on topics of little controversy or consequence. And conversations with phones on the landscape block empathic connection. If two people are speaking

> and there is a phone on a nearby desk, each feels less connected to the other than when there is no phone present. *Even a silent phone disconnects us.* (21)

This is startling data. For a generation that doesn't walk into a room without a piece of technology in it, wears their phone as a wrist watch, and walks around with at least one head phone in, what opportunity is there for real conversation and connection to ever occur? When is there ever a moment, nowadays, where we are without that distraction? It seems almost never. And it is obvious that we aren't truly connecting with one another - obvious through our loneliness, our high rates of depression and anxiety.

Disconnection, and its implicit loneliness, seems to be the MVP in the mental health crisis on our hands. Furthermore, however, it's not just a disconnect with one another we are experiencing - it seems that we are disconnected with our true selves as well. Solitude has long been an important part of human growth and development. It used to be a refreshing moment one had to oneself, to reflect and quiet the mind. However, young adults today seem to solitude in a negative light. If there is ever a moment for it, solitude is either considered 'boring' or 'scary.' Likely because it induces the exact kind self-reflection that the online world helps us avoid. And if it does occur? Most people turn on their music, place a reality TV show on in the background, or scroll through their timelines to avoid it. Turkle explains though that "developmental psychology has long made the case for the importance of solitude. And now so does neuroscience. It is only when we are alone with our thoughts -- not reacting to external stimuli -- that we engage that part of the brain's basic infrastructure devoted to building up a sense of our stable autobiographical past. This is the 'default mode network.' So, without solitude, we can't construct a stable sense of self. Yet children who grow up digital have always had something external to respond to. When they go online, their minds are not wandering but rather are

captured and divided" (61). Solitude is nearly impossible to come by; walk through a college campus and you'll find it difficult to find a student walking to class without headphones in. Even when we are alone, we choose the constant companionship of our personal digital tools. It distracts us from having to consider ourselves, our aloneness, and our disconnect - and it's an addicting distraction at that.

When I started diving into subtopics of the symptoms of the digital age, the hookup culture was one I couldn't stay away from. I know that this culture of sex is a symptom of our digital age. Just like so many young adults are, the hookup culture also lacks empathy, love, and human connection. I focus on hook-up culture because I truly believe that it is a manifestation of the deterioration in personal connection many have experienced. Understanding and observing it reveals our disconnect to one another and to ourselves, it shows our fear of vulnerability, and our lack of ability, or want, to deeply connect. It is a culture of sex that embodies the symptoms of our digital age.

In her book, "American Hookup: The New Culture Of Sex On Campus" Lisa Wade provides an informational guide to what 'hookup culture' really is on American college campuses. She begins by explaining it step by step.

Step 1) Pregaming, or students making sure that they show up to the party already drunk so as to avoid awkward sobriety and self-consciousness.

Step 2) Grind, which is the mating dance ritual where from the parameters of the wall boys' scope out beautiful girls shaking their hips to the left and to the right. They then proceed to choose one and approach her from behind to match his hips to her rhythm. This is when two people feel each other out, literally.

Step 3) Initiate a hookup – the moment where both parties decide that tonight they will be having some kind of sexual interactions after the party is over.

Step 4.) Do…Something - essentially, the sexual interaction mentioned above.

Step 5) Establish meaninglessness, or when both people explicitly make it obvious that the sexual interaction that will occur above has no meaning to them. This step ensures that both parties move on and don't find themselves in a romantic relationship. It may be the coldest step in the game.

Step 5a) Be plastered - because any hookup in the hookup culture must result from inebriation as sobriety may cause caring about that person.

Step 5b) Cap your hookups - similarly, in order to avoid caring, one must only meaninglessly hookup with the same person a few times or it may result in feelings.

Step 5c) Create emotional distance - yet another step that ensure NO FEELINGS WERE HARMED IN THE MAKING OF (NOT) LOVE.

This step by step explanation reveals the ways this young generation has pioneered change in our culture's relationship to sex. Notice anything about all these steps? They're all desperately involved in avoiding connection, feeling, and emotion. Yet ironically, all center around an intensely emotional act. Wade notes this in chapter six, "Careless and Carefree." She answers my quizzical fears about the relationship of sex and emotion: Can they be separated? Wade says, hookup culture "tells students that their frontal lobes are in charge, that they can be logical about sex and control their feelings if they choose to. Not just the pleasures and pangs of love, as the above example implies, but *all* the feelings that sex can spark: insecurity and fear; ambivalence, regret, and confusion: happiness, transcendence, sadness, and misery; loathing and awe. Hookup, they claim, can and should be emotionless" (134). So, the typical feelings

associated with sex must be avoided entirely, and if they are felt, must be pushed far down into the subconscious of the individual. Wade disputes the reality of this:

> Saying we can have sex without emotions is like saying we can have sex without bodies. There simply is no such emotion-free human state. We have emotions when we hear our morning alarm, have our first sip of coffee, sit in traffic, watch the clock tick toward quitting time, or think about exercising. Feelings are part of our basic biochemical operating system. We don't get to set them aside at will. (135)

So maybe it's not entirely sex *without* emotion, but hookup culture requires sex with *certain* emotions. Certain emotions are expected, certain emotions are expressed, and real, honest emotions are buried and silenced. Lust is an expected emotion and is expected to be expressed. But it's the only L word allowed in the game - like or love are a death sentence to hookup culture. Wade puts it well, "In this topsy-turvy world, you have sex with people you don't like and don't have sex with people you do" (137). Feelings, which can lead to relationships, should be avoided entirely.

Wade notes however, that, "the irony is that most college students actually want to be in a caring relationship. Of the students who filled out the Online College Social Life Survey, 71 percent of men and 67 percent of women said that they wished they had more opportunities to find a long-term partner" (145). Students are obviously missing the kind of deep connection that results from a monogamous relationship, yet they still continue to participate in this emotionless hookup culture. It's contradictive, and as Wade points out, the skills needed to navigate hookup culture "are in direct contradiction to the skills needed to propose, build, and sustain committed relationships. Perhaps most of all, students recognized that seeing "feelings as negative" could

make it hard to experience them as positive. “It’s just a relationship killer, I think,” said one of her male interviewees in his first year, noting that the women he knew seemed “numb”’ (152). Are students now incapable of practicing the vulnerability and emotion that comes with creating a long-term relationship? Are those skills lost in the digital age, or are they simply suppressed? Viewed as weak and therefore swept under the carpet? Though many in this generation report finding it more important to obtain happiness from themselves and themselves only, Jean Twenge comments that in reality, “we gain self-esteem from our relationships with others, not from focusing on ourselves… Study after study shows that people who have good relationships with friends and family are the happiest - these things consistently trump money or job satisfaction as predictors of happiness and life satisfaction. Even Abraham Maslow, the favorite psychologist of New Agers, says that belong and love needs must be met before esteem needs.” (131). One thing is clear, the longer that this culture continues, the more ‘numb’ these students will come to expressing emotion - a cornerstone of human development and quality of life.

To consider how the digital age is playing a role in this culture, it would be important to note the smartphone apps that cultivate it. Tinder is one of the more popular apps, but there are multitudes of platforms that offer an almost on-the-go hookup opportunity. On this app, one creates a profile stating a quick bio about themselves and providing a few different pictures. Pictures, of course, where the angles provide their sexual irresistibility. The app then uses location services to provide the user with hundreds of profiles of possible romantic partners. Anonymously, and in the span of milliseconds, a user views the picture on the profile and either swipes right or left. Swiping right means that you find that person attractive and it allows your profiles to open to one another to show your interests in matching. Swiping left is a reject, and this person’s profile is sent out of view and unable to connect with the anonymous user. So, for

example, if I swipe right on Adam and Adam swipes right on me, he now has the ability to message me, which he will, ask me to get drinks, which he will, and then proceed to engage in a 'hookup' if I accept. Tinder plays on the psychology of humans, forcing a decision on the attractivity of another person to be automatic for both parties before an opportunity for sex can arrive. These apps encourage this culture of no-strings attached, friends with benefits, and one-night stands and their use among young adults beyond college indicates that hookup culture is catching on everywhere.

But why this avoidance of relationships in the first place? Wade dives into the history in chapter 2. It exists for different reasons between men and women. For men, it is social status; for women, it's a fight against the patriarchy: and for both its the pursuit of freedom. Wade explains that from her interviews with students, she found the word fun to be a significant motivator in the hookup culture. Students recognized that coming to college meant fun, and freedom, and hookup culture is a way to express the kind of freedom that was suffocated from them before they arrived on campus. But how did students form the connection between fun and sexual freedom? To explain this, Wade provides some clarifying history.

Before the industrial revolution, families mostly lived together and worked on farms which required teamwork. But when people started migrating from the country to the cities, that familial relationship was swapped with competitive strangers trying to keep their low-wage job so they can continue to live in their small cramped housing. The home turned from a place of work to an escape from work. As Wade puts it:

> If work was about profit, home was about care. And if women did anything resembling work in the home -- if in their twelve-hour day they organized and completed errands, preserved and prepared food, made and mended clothes,

> cleaned and repaired the household, hosted and entertained company, and raised children to adulthood -- it was no longer work, it was a labor of love. Onto work and home were laid the now familiar gender stereo-types. Men were newly seen to be naturally suited to the workplace, whereas women, who had worked alongside men on farms for two hundred years at least, were thought to be too sentimental and physically frail for the harsh realities of capitalism. (57)

She goes on to explain how the emergence of these gender roles continued to grow during the industrial revolution. Whereas before in rural areas most women controlled the courtship process by inviting over young men and testing out their compatibility in the presence of a chaperone, in the cities, women made less money and to have any kind of fun or entertainment, they had to get it as a 'treat' from a man who was willing to pay. This aroused, the now very familiar pressure for women to be 'sexy' as a means to gain male attention.

As America rolled into the 60s the boomers came along and welcomed in individualism and social liberalism, so "more permissive attitudes toward sex were just part of the wider abandonment of conformity, obedience, hypocrisy, and the status quo." (62). During the feminist movement, women worked "to be able to give away sex for free instead of in exchange for men's resources. Economic independence was an essential part of this new contract, as was the decriminalization of contraception in 1965 (for married people) and 1972 (for single people) and the 1973 Supreme Court decisions that made certain restrictions on abortion unconstitutional." (63). And to sum things up, Wade explains that this movement was important to hookup culture today because, "Women came to embrace the same self-concept that men had once claimed for themselves because American society has continued to value the masculine over the feminine. It's why women flock to male-dominated occupations, break into male-identified sports, and

adopt masculine fashions, but men generally aren't doing the inverse. Because of this asymmetry, when women adopt masculine ways of life, they're doing more than just breaking out of their gender role; they're breaking into a better one. They're liberating themselves. Many women apply this logic to sex, too, adopting a stereotypically masculine approach that puts sex before love." (66-67). In short, hooking up for women is an act of defiance against the oppression of their sex. The less women care about sex, the more like men they become, and that's a win in the world of defeating stereotypes.

For men, though, Wade believes it's a different story. The hookup culture for men seems to be more of a social tool to up their standing amongst other men - hookups social competition. In fact, it's often not even about the woman, but about how having sex with her will elevate and inspire respect amongst his fellow men. It's tribal and primitive in nature, but it makes sense. If a guy hooks up with a very beautiful girl, he gets points, respect and, in the end, a higher social standing amongst his group. If a guy hooks up with a girl whose been collectively deemed as not-so-beautiful, he gets disrespected by his friends and could lose his status as a sexual conquistador. The personal narrative that Wade received in her interviews with men tells this story best:

> "I mean, why do you think it's called [scoring]?' asked a Dartmouth student rhetorically. 'It's like you're scoring with women, yeah, but you're like scoring *on* the other guys.' It's 'more about the social cachet it buys,' said a New York University alum about hooking up. 'It's a way to prove our masculinity.' Men are impressed when their buddies hook up, said a student at Stanford, because 'if a guy hooks up with a girl, he sort of broke down her wall of protection". (174-175)

In other words, he won. This is a very different idea than women hold when it comes to free sex, and this discrepancy in approach is both jarring and revealing. This culture about sex may be less about sex than it is about social power. Oscar Wilde's words appeared in my mind, "Everything in the world is about sex, except sex. Sex is about power."

Consider the pop song "Cool Girl" by artist Tove Lo. It was a hit that the radio stations refused to have mercy on, and the premise is a girl singing to a boy about how if she refuses to feel anything towards this boy, she'll be a cool girl. In the song, Tove Lo sings, "No, let's not put a label on it/ Let's keep it fun/ We don't put a label on it/ So we can run free, yeah/ I wanna be free like you." The lyrics tell the story of hookup culture from the perspective of a woman, and there's a reason it was so popular - it had a good beat, but the lyrics were *relatable.* The stanza includes both the words free, and fun, in regard to casual sex - the exact verbiage Wade finds coming from her students active in the hookup culture. If the two people involved don't label it, their interaction will remain fun and they can stay free - alluding that a label would suck out all the joy and suffocate their personal freedoms. The artist quite brilliantly created a song full of social commentary and sardonic messages about the standards which woman must uphold in order to be viewed as "cool" by men. Considering what Wade says about female casual sex being an act of defiance to oppression, the lyrics "I wanna be free like you" ring loud and clear. Tove Lo makes note of the freedom that men are privileged with in regard to their sexual desires, and at the same time nods at the desire that women have for that kind of freedom. She just wants to be free, like he is. What tells the story of a generation better than their popular culture?

Technology certainly plays a role in this culture with hook-up apps and media that cultivates sexuality of this manner, but I see it rooted even deeper in this culture than in its content. It is the kind of people that technology has made us that has truly spawned this sex

culture. As shown by Turkle, we are exceedingly suffering from an inability to connect to one another. Technology has instilled a deep fear of vulnerability because of its ability to make public our inner secrets, and its ability to make rejection easy. Turkle states that:

> technology brings on significant complications to the conversations of modern romance. We feel we have permission to simply drop out. It encourages us to feel that we have infinite choice in romantic partners, a prospect that turns out to be as stressful as it is helpful in finding a mate. It offers a dialogue that is often not a dialogue at all because it is not unusual for people to come to online conversations with a team of writers. You want a team because you feel you are working in an unforgiving medium. (180-181)

Gone are the days when you could celebrate your 21st birthday with your close friends, now it's a snapchat show on how drunk you were and how many times you fell. Gone are the days when what you said to someone was saved only in their memory, instead of on a screen-shotted text message that was sent around to a couple of different group messages. And certainly, gone are the days when if you wanted to reject someone, you had to do it nicely to their face. And in their place have been bred the days where whatever move you make may be documented to hundreds of others, and whatever you say to one person may be shown to your entire friend group, and if someone doesn't want to be with you anymore they simply ghost you.

This new, distant relationship to sex, an act of deep connection and expression of love, is telling of the deterioration of personal connection that this generation is experiencing. It isn't only friendships that are suffering, but romantic love itself has become a vulnerability that is feared instead of admired. With this inability to, and avoidance of, establishing real connection

individuals are left with the companionship of a screen and an aloneness that invokes anxiety, depression, and continued addiction to the only companion that is always there – our screens.

This mental health crisis and the deterioration of personal connection are insidious by-products of a digitalized society. As our country continued to adopt this new culture, I wondered where it all began. How did this change in the way we live happen so drastically, and without pause to consider its implications? How did we go from a society of community, of the 'greatest' generation, of patience and hard work, to a society that has almost essentially become the antithesis of that?

The promise of the 60's and all its postwar prosperity and glory seemed the most appropriate place to start. Fifteen years after the second world war had ended, stripped of foreign competition, the American economy was absolutely booming - and so was the population. The baby boomers had become young adults by 60's and they were pioneering a new American identity. The boomers broke down outdated traditional structures and challenged life as America once knew it. This was the decade of the civil rights movement, and protests against the war in Vietnam. Boomers were considering eastern doctrines on Buddhism, Taoism, and inner peace and radiation of love. They fought against feeding the ego and replaced it with feeding the self, the true self. As a theory, individualism, supports the moral worth and self-reliance of the individual - it emphasizes the inner purpose and freedom of thought. The boomers truly adopted individualism and used it as a tool to fight against the top-down, heavy handed, conservative ideologies of their forefathers. Where their parents had deep respect for social structures and did their best to blend in amongst the herd, boomers practiced individuality to break down any structure that told them who they had to be. Freedom of the self meant freedom of the *society*.

Individualism isn't a selfish or narcissistic ideology - it fights for the overall good of a society by starting with a wholesome relationship with the self.

In his book "The Impulse Society: America In the Age of Instant Gratification" Paul Roberts points to Ronald Inglehart to explain why it was the 60's and the boomers that welcomed in the age of social liberalism. Inglehart was a political scientist at the University of Michigan in the late 1960s who measured the connection between "affluence and a more socially engaged, democratic personality" (35). In his study of postwar political movements in Europe, Inglehart discovered that "people born before the Second World War, who had grown up insecure, gave priority to economic stability, political order, and other traditional 'materialist' values" (35). This differs from those born after the war as they were raised in a period of economic growth. So, "baby boomers had been relatively free to focus on less urgent objectives: entertainment and leisure, but also education, cultural enrichment, travel, political activism, and other more elevated pursuits. In short, boomers had been allowed to discover not simply what they needed, but what they *wanted*" (35-36). As the boomers continued this mission of individual purpose and exploration, "the more they sought to protect and *extend* that autonomy by supporting liberal social institutions, such as democracy, freedom of speech, gender equality, workers' rights, and environmental regulations" (36). In other words, as they found purpose and meaning in their own lives, they moved on to fight for the rest of the country to have the opportunity to find that same peace.

Where their parents faced the great depression and the second world war, the boomers grew up during America's age of economic prosperity and fiscal stability - they didn't face the same insecurities as their parents. The boomers were pioneers of individualism because, finally, a world existed where there was space and time to discover it. With the constant increase in

personal productivity tools, the boomers were allowed to spend time considering life beyond war, social constructs, and survival. They felt an individual power over their own lives. But during the 1970s-1980s this all changed.

Welcome in the credit card, and with it the transformation of individualism to egoism. In 1966 the BankAmeriCard was invented, and it became the first national, general-purpose credit card. By the 70s word had spread about this powerful new technology that allowed you to swipe a card to purchase a product you didn't quite have the physical money for yet, but that you certainly *intended* to have in the future. America's technological advancements led to a better understanding of consumerism and therefore the invention of the credit card. And even though the economy had a moment of crisis during the 70's, people "could continue the postwar project of self-improvement and self-discovery" that was initiated in the prosperity of the 60s, because despite fortunes derailed by economic conditions, technology "made it easier for us to finance the effort" (56). But therein lies the issue; to "finance" the effort to pursue a wholesome, individualistic concept of purpose in life is paradoxical. The whole idea behind the individualism of the boomers, was to find meaning within the self beyond material identities. Individualism fought against the propaganda of the suburban dream with a picket white fence, blue Mustang, and a colored television - this ideology encouraged the idea that happiness could be found within the inner peace and purpose of the self not within the confines of the status quo and the ego.

The credit card though, made it too easy to be a mass consumer. The feeling of self-gratification that was accompanied through that brand-new mustang one purchased on credit was mistaken with identity. I'll use John Doe to provide an antidote: John was a middle-class young adult who got by on paycheck to paycheck. His life was pretty uneventful and mediocre, and he still hadn't found love or family. John's boss made three times what he did, and he walked into

work every day in a dapper Armani suit. When John's brand-new credit card came in and he was able to purchase his own Armani suit, John felt like a new man. This suit became a very convenient way to find an identity beyond his own mediocre life. His outfit brought him purpose, status, and identity - he was no longer John, he was John with that beautiful Armani suit. It's easy to see why John confused the fleeting satisfaction of his purchase with a moment of intense self-value and discovery. The credit card made consumerism easy and convenient which transformed the ideology of individualism in the 60's into an a faux-individualism fed to the consumer by their constant material purchases. As Roberts puts it, "What had begun as crude quests for identity and self-actualization was now industrialized and professionalized into full-scale social agenda. We renovated our homes to match our emotional interiors. We pursued inner perfections through Scientology, Transcendental Meditation, and… 'productivity' tools … that let us attend to the project of the self with ever-greater efficiency" (56). Instead of real spirituality and purpose, technology and the credit card allowed for materialistic spirituality. In other words, the quick ability to *appear* to be individualistic, instead of actually being it.

As economist and businessmen realized, in order to keep selling, they had to keep producing better and faster products and sell them in the name of individual productivity. Here enters the scene the computer, and eventually, the laptop and the cell phone. Sure, these were products of technological advancement. But had our economy failed to understand the draw of personal power; would these devices ever had become common place? The computer turned to the laptop because we advanced the technology behind it, yes, but also because our economic model, motivated by copious amounts of income, supported the evolution of affordable tools that everyone could have access to, all the time. As Roberts puts it, "even after the faltering economy stopped generating so much real individual prosperity, the ongoing digital revolution ensured

that our campaign for personal liberation would become a permanent culture fixture, a lifestyle in its own right" (121).

Fast forward to today, the digital age has made materialistic convenience an even stronger force. Consider the one-click buy on Amazon, the apps that let us order a ride in minutes, or find someone to have sex with in close proximity. All of these conveniences are not only difficult to resist but give us a personal power that disguises itself as importance. Technology is now the tool that people use to find that same 'purpose' in their lives that the boomers set out to find sixty years ago. Roberts explains:

> Our capacity to self-gratify, meanwhile, was becoming so prodigious that we were running up all sorts of debts: financial, but also social, psychological, and even physical. We grew fat, despite our fitness obsession. We consumed oceans of tranquilizers and antidepressants. Our intensifying focus on self-improvement had grown so pervasive that many of us had little time or energy or thought for anything *not* related to the self. For many, critics, the once-promising drive toward self-actualization, social engagement, and the "democratic character" had now become another brand of self-help -- and justification for social withdrawal. Self-improvement, complained writer Peter Marin, had become the means for 'a retreat from the worlds of morality and history, and unembarrassed denial of human reciprocity and community. (58)

The credit card debt many find themselves in is responsible for much more 'debt' than just monetary. People are in debt of fulfillment, of personal connection, of happiness, content, and of true individualism. The purpose many people search for in the digital tools around them will only lead to a false, fleeting sense of self because of the inherent nature of the digital age itself.

Still, I wondered, what, as humans, made us so obsessed with personal autonomy, power, and productivity and why did we latch on specifically to these digital tools? Nicholas Carr provided the answer I was searching for in his book *The Shallows*. Carr paused to consider the implications of this new technology and in a prophetic style he shows the ways that the digital age is actually *changing* the way our minds work. In other words, it's not just a cultural transition we're experiencing - it's a transition of our physical minds. He begins by explaining, in laymen's terms, our neuroplasticity, or the capability of our brain to rewire its neurons in response to the environment it is in. It's how we evolve, grow, and change over time, and it turns out that those neurons rewire quickly and constantly. The problem with the digital environment is that it's rewiring our neurons due to its inherent nature. Carr explains:

> If, knowing what we know today about the brain's plasticity, you were to set out to invent a medium that would rewire our mental circuits as quickly and thoroughly as possible, you would probably end up designing something that looks and works a lot like the Internet. It's not just that we tend to use the Net regularly, even obsessively. It's that the Net delivers precisely the kind of sensory and cognitive stimuli -- repetitive, intensive, interactive, addictive -- that have been shown to result in strong and rapid alterations in brain circuits and functions. With the exception of alphabets and number systems, the Net may well be the single most powerful mind-altering technology that has ever come into general use. At the very least, it's the most powerful that has come along since the book. (116)

Social media, the internet, and quick-fix apps may be the tools we use to find an identity now, but humans once used another medium to accomplish this: books. Books are magical devices

that provide access into the brilliant minds of all those who have come before us. Books are teachers, mentors, and access points into wisdom collected over the span of humanity. We use them to discover truths about the human condition, to understand ourselves through our understanding of characters and conflicting points of view. We use them to teach ourselves empathy and patience. Books have long been a tool for self-actualization, but technology has essentially replaced the role of the book. The internet is filled with endless possibilities and new texts, pictures, or videos we have never seen, which is why we become obsessed and addicted to it. The more we click and scroll, the more we come across, and the more our brains feel that ping of reward as we discover more content. The more we use it, the more our brains practice the wiring it requires.

The kind of mode of attention the digital world requires is problematic, though. Consider the *Washington Post* profile that Jean Twenge provides in her book about a 13-year-old girl: "the story described what she did on her iPhone during the twelve-minute drive home from school: 'Her thumb [is] on Instagram. A Barbara Walters meme is on the screen. She scrolls, and another meme appears. Then another meme, and she closes the app. The opens BuzzFeed. There's a story about Florida Gov. Rick Scott, which she scrolls past to get to a story about Janet Jackson, then '28 Things You'll Understand If You're Both British and American.' She closes it. She opens Instagram. She opens the NBA app. She shuts the screen off. She turns it back on. She opens Spotify. Opens Fitbit. She has 7,427 steps. Opens Instagram again. Opens Snapchat. She watches a sparkly rainbow flow from her friend's mouth. She watches a YouTube star make pouty faces at the camera. She watches a tutorial on nail art. She feels the bump of the driveway and looks up. They're home'" (55-56). This is exhausting, constant and distracting entertainment.

Carr explains why this is an issue because, “studies have shown that when reading online, the need to evaluate links and make related navigational choices, while also processing a multiplicity of fleeting sensory stimuli, requires constant mental coordination and decision making, distracting the brain from the work of interpreting text or other information. Whenever we, as readers, come upon a link, we have to pause, for at least a split second, to allow our prefrontal cortex to evaluate whether or not we should click on it. The redirection of our mental resources, from reading words to making judgments, may be imperceptible to us -- our brains are quick -- but it’s been shown to impede comprehension and retention” (122). It’s not just that our brains are exhaustively distracted while online, it’s that being in that state of distraction actually hinders our ability to comprehend and remember content - it’s mindless distraction. As we spend more and more time online, often hours a day for young children, and less time with real books “the circuits that support those old intellectual functions and pursuits weaken and begin to break apart. The brain recycles the disused neurons and synapses for other, more pressing work. We gain new skills and perspectives but lose old ones” (120). As we continue to choose Netflix over a good book or send a text in the placement of an in-person conversation, our brain literally begins to rewire its neurons. The internet requires cognitive skills like hand-eye coordination, visual cue processing, pattern recognition and reflex response - it requires our ability to shift our attention quickly - and studies have shown that these skills have been strengthened in the human mind since the use of computers. These skills, however, involve primitive, lower-level mental functions, and they aren’t strengthening alongside our intelligent, prefrontal cortex. In fact, the more these primitive skills are used, our brain begins to rewire its pathways to strengthen them. It’s why we have trouble sitting down and reading a book from front to back.

Where the book rewired our ancient, primitive minds to think deeply, logically, and slowly, the digital world is rewiring, or so it seems un-wiring, our brains back to that primitive state before literacy taught our species how to slow down. Choosing to watch Netflix over reading *The Old Man and The Sea,* is detrimental. Carr even says, "What we're *not* doing when we're online also has neurological consequences. Just as neurons that fire together wire together, neurons that don't fire together don't wire together" (120). Reading requires a certain amount of depth, focus, comprehension, and an ability to follow a logical sequence. This change in thought, the way our neurons are rewiring to supplement all the distractions and sensory input from technology, doesn't just translate to difficulty reading books. These skills - deep, critical thinking, sustained concentration, empathy, the ability to make connection and discern a logical explanation from an emotional one - are absent in political debate, college classrooms, Facebook posts, and in interpersonal relationships. It's the reason the safe-space has become so popular. Emotions are a quick, primitive response to any part of our day, but it is in the power of our large, evolved prefrontal cortex to separate how we feel from what is right. This skill is deteriorating, and conversations/debates/arguments are more heavily based on emotion than logic. Ideas different than one's own have become offensive instead of thought-provoking as our ability to control our emotions lessens. Conversations with friends over dinner become scattered, like our thoughts, and our lack of empathy lessens our connections with each other.

The limbic system, or the instinctive, animalistic region of the brain is responsible for the quick instincts - flight or fight, sex, food, and survival. The limbic system is something humans have in common with even lizards, but our prefrontal cortex is what makes us intelligent beings. It is here where the mind considers abstract thought, complex issues, and weighs outcomes of the future. It is the prefrontal cortex that allowed humans to become literate, slow, methodical,

thinkers and readers. The limbic system is our reflexes and quick emotions; the prefrontal cortex is our logic and empathy. The problem with the digital age, and the personal tools we use within them, is that they feed and strengthen the wiring of our limbic system and those traits are manifesting themselves into our culture. As Carr notes, while online, "We revert to being 'mere decoders of information.' Our ability to make the rich mental connections that form when we read deeply and without distraction remains largely disengaged" (122). We may think we're becoming progressive and more intelligent, and in many ways maybe we are, but we're also reverting to a primitive mindset - more similar to the head-on-a-swivel that our Neanderthal ancestors required for survival.

The historical explanation is supplemented by a biological one. We are predisposed by our mere humanity to become addicted to these modes of technology - they feed the same neurotransmitters that drugs do - and we're only human after all. Combine our natural predisposition with technological advancement and a consumer economy geared towards feeding those instincts, the picture of how we got here becomes clearer.

So, now here we sit in 2019. Children and young adults are experiencing a deterioration of community and personal connection as those pillars of humanity are traded in for online interactions that provide the safe veil of a screen. The largest mental health crisis we've ever seen is upon us as loneliness continues to rise and hate is radiated from anonymous users into the hearts of feeble individuals. We've become impatient, aloof, inconsiderate, nearly illiterate, fast-paced, illogical, lost, empty, and mercilessly addicted the very medium that torments us. The opioid crisis occurred because of the ruthless sale of 'medicinal' drugs presented as an antidote to physical pain, only for the person in pain to become so addicted to the thing that was supposed to help them that it often kills them. The digital age crisis is similar - technology is sold as the

antidote to all our inconveniences but we've become so addicted to its instant satisfaction that we've failed to realize our excessive use is ironically making life much more inconvenient than it needs to be. If Americans are addicts, the drug is digital world.

In fairness, the digital world has not been all bad. We are also the generation that will break gender stereotypes and allow personal freedom that American's have never tasted before. We care about our environment and our universe (though, we probably won't take any *real* action to fix their issues… a tweet works, right?) We are the generation that is blind to race, gender, and sexual preference - we allow a real version of Free Love. With our use of technology, we've progressed in strengthening certain brain functions. As Nicholas Carr stated, "Web searching and browsing would also strengthen brain functions related to certain kinds of fast-paced problem solving, particularly those involving the recognition of patterns in a welter of data. Through the repetitive evaluation of links, headlines, text snippets, and images, we should become more adept at quickly distinguishing among competing informational cues, analyzing their salient characteristics, and judging whether they'll have practical benefit for whatever task we're engaged in or goal we're pursuing" (139). Meanwhile, "other studies suggest that kind of mental calisthenics we engage in online may lead to a small expansion in the capacity of our working memory" (139). This means research in STEM will soar with this generation. Our ability to quickly analyze and sort through information will progress, and with it our discoveries in science, technology, and math.

Though amongst this progress this generation is also losing much. As these skills advance, our brains lose emotional intelligence. The art of conversation becomes the art of the emoji. Long books with complex story lines and overarching truths about humanity becomes part of the past. Creativity, with it, begins to disappear. Twenge states, "Creative thinking scores

declined between 1966 and 2008, and especially since 1990. She concluded, “over the last 30 years, (1) people of all ages, kindergarteners through adults, have been steadily losing their ability to elaborate upon ideas and detailed and reflective thinking; (2) people are less motivated to be creative; and (3) creativity is less encouraged by home, school, and society overall.” How can this be when uniqueness is emphasized so much? Perhaps people want to be unique, but cannot translate that desire into actual creative thinking” (88). Many old, valuable skills are lost in the chaos of the transformation of a new culture. The once pure pursuit of individualism by the boomers in the 60s has been transformed into something more like egoism. Where individualism favors the moral worth of the self and self-actualization over conformity and authority, egoism is the idea that self, emphasized by feelings of self-importance, should be the primary concern of the individual. Individualism cultivated societal growth by way of individual purpose - it extended past the individual whereas egoism stops with the individual. The ego becomes the gluttonous focal point, and the concept of the true self diminishes behind a veil of materialistic representation.

The seeds of individualism planted by the patrons of the 60s are present in today’s young people. If you really pay attention, you can see it in their tattoos, beards, long and colored hair, and piercings. You can see it in their fight for a better work-life balance, and in their mixed families and their opinions on free love. These are modes of expression that break the chains of traditional social structures, and it started with the boomers. This pursuit of a unique identity though, has become an identity *itself*. The more ‘out-there’ you are, the more celebrated you become, the more likes you get on your photos and attention online. Being unique has become a way to conform instead of way to stand out. The digital age took the structure of individualism and stripped it of its pure intentions to use it as a faux presentation of self-expression. But if you

don't really know yourself, how can you express it? Finding your true inner self requires solitude, reflection, and facing your worse attributes; whereas finding your ego, the preferred method of gratification nowadays, requires your best selfie, a lot of followers, and emphasizing all the things you love about yourself. As we can see by the symptoms of this digital age, the former produces inner peace, and the latter produces debilitating depression.

My father once made a speech to a bunch of fresh faced, soon-to-be lieutenants at the columns on the quad of the University of Missouri. My dad is an alum, and as a Brigadier General who gave 36 years of his life to the Army, he was inducted into the Mizzou ROTC hall-of-fame. They asked him to give the graduation speech at the commencement of the new army officers. At the end of his speech, he asked the soldiers in front of him an interesting question. As my mother and I sat amongst the teary-eyed family members, my father asked their soldiers… what will be your great -ism? He then went on to explain - each generation fought an -ism, whether it was communism, fascism, socialism, terrorism and so on. What would they choose to fight? What would be their great -ism? And will we they respond to call of duty to fight against it?

Well, Dad, I'm no soldier, at least not in the official sense of the word, but I think soon I may have to become like one. Through understanding the symptoms of the digital age, I think I've come to understand what our -ism may be: egoism. Our technology has shifted focus so inward that we suffer from symptoms like depression and disconnection. It's becoming evident to me that the greatest war my generation fights is internal - it may be the loneliest war in the history of mankind. It's a war which impacts multiple generations, countries, economies, and cultures; yet it's fought entirely inside each individual, on their own, against themselves. There's no sense of community, no brotherhood of soldiers - only individuals deciding that they can't

live this way anymore. We'll wage war against an economy centered on feeding our worst impulses for their own profit, we'll fight against technology and media that distract us from the truth, we'll fight the symptoms of this digital age - depression, anxiety, obesity, anorexia, loneliness, disconnection - and it will be a tough fight. It's an invisible enemy and we will have to fight internally against our ism. The enemy will be difficult to spot, difficult to understand, and difficult to rise against. Like the isms before ours, I think our fight will require courage, comradery, self-awareness, and self-discipline. But the physical fatalities will come from suicides, accidental overdoses, and heart attacks - not from atomic bombs or automatic rifles. No, because the ism we're fighting will require a warfare that we've never seen before. It is a war we've never had to fight, and it will be far more significant in the hearts of the individual than in the band of brothers. But, I'm ready to fight, dad – and I think I'm far from alone in this battle.

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