



THE AGE OF SOLOCULTURE

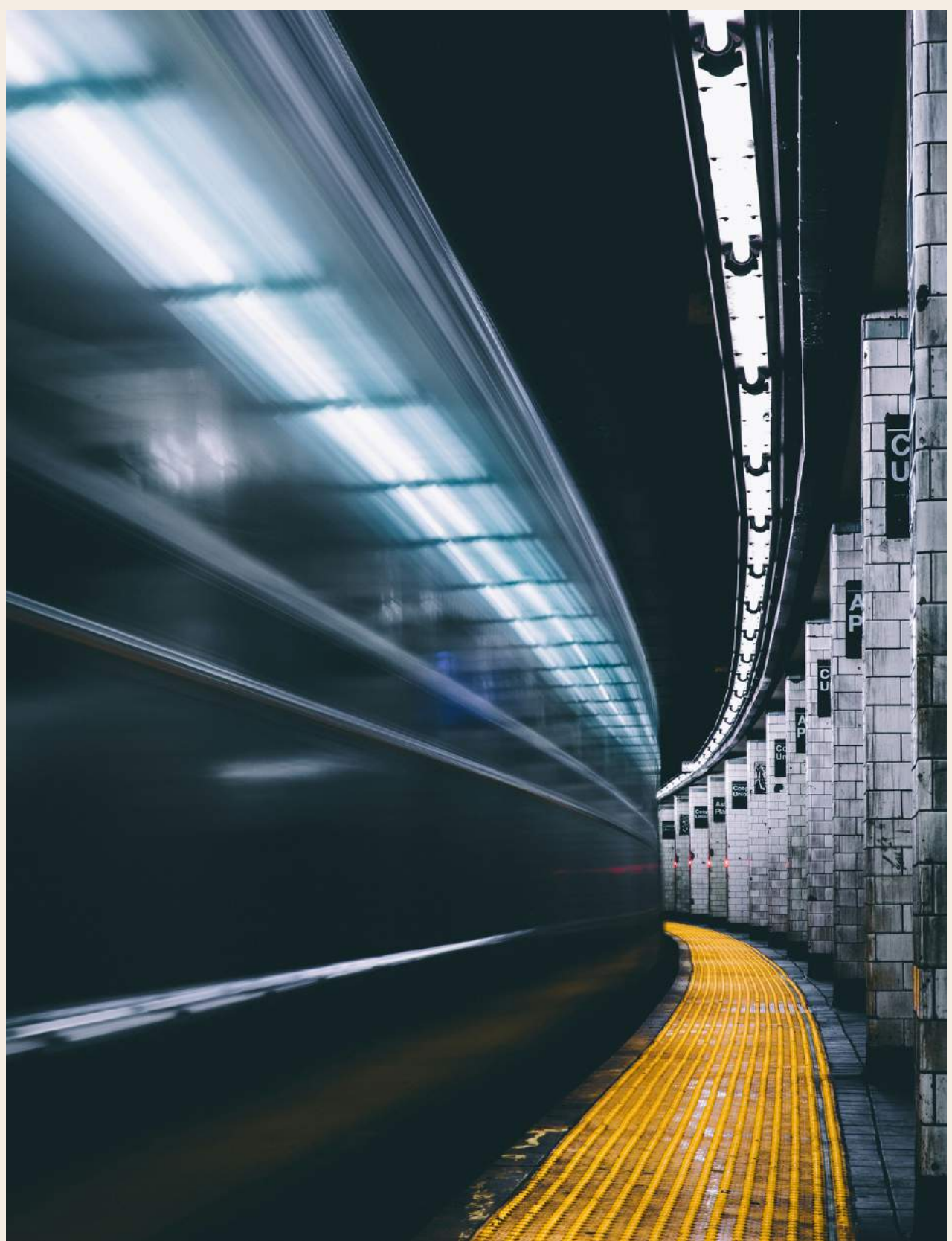
We're living in our own curated realities. What does that mean for how we view cultural change?

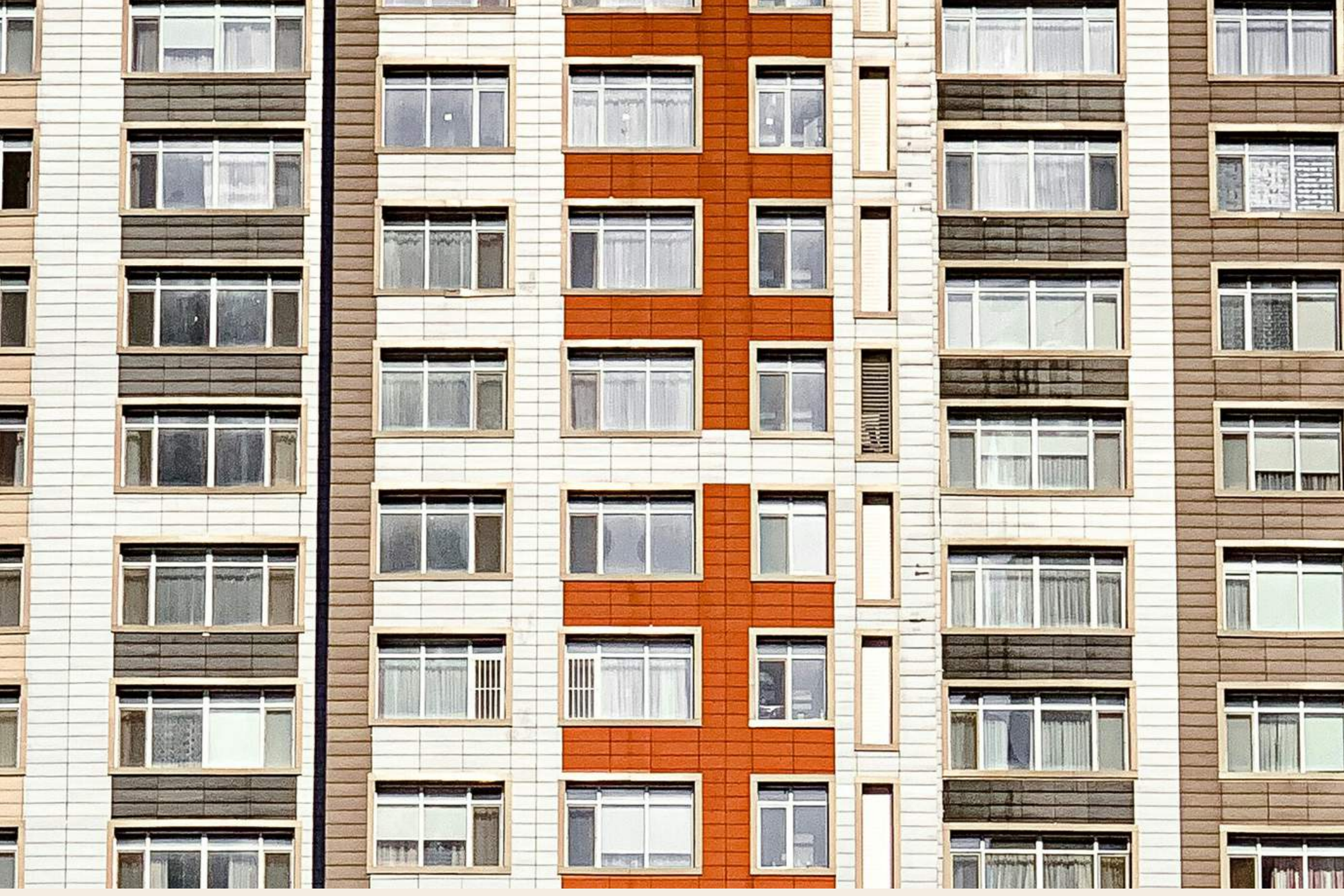
A Study Guide examination by **Quick Study**

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Prt 1

Welcome to Your Soloculture





Let's start here:

In agriculture, monoculture refers to “the growing of a single crop over and over on the same piece of land.” It's a practice designed for efficiency - the consistent, mass-production of one crop lowers harvesting challenges and increases the profitability of a farm. But over time, the monoculture farming method also creates a lack of biodiversity and degrades the soil. Eventually, if not subsidized with expensive fertilizer and/or other tactics to replicate biodiversity, monoculture farming lowers crop yield & quality and economically damages the farmer.

In US culture, monoculture mostly refers to "a Pleasantville image of a lost togetherness that was maybe just an illusion in the first place, or a byproduct of socioeconomic hegemony." But despite this illusion, the persistence of “monoculture” in the narrative of how we interact as a society remains. A simplistic timeline of monoculture closely follows that of media: access to information dissemination formats (radio, for example) starts out limited but grows and spreads as the costs to produce and surface such content go down; then a new media format emerges (TV, for example) that once again starts limited but shows the potential for greater impact and we begin again.

The constant in this cycle has been the increase in total output. There were once three TV channels, just a few movie studios, and a handful of magazines to read. Now, there's <holds up iPhone> all of this and what it entails: hundreds of daily notifications, immediate access to billions of hours of content, and algorithms so addictive that they even try to nudge us to stop when we're in too deep. We've figured out how to efficiently mass-produce something that might be called a monoculture, but it's really just the tools that have become ubiquitous. The ideas found from using those tools are usually anything but mass.

These three videos, originally served to users who have been on TikTok for about an hour straight, have been seen over 3.5 billion times. Last year, the platform also added additional videos in collaboration with Headspace that encouraged mindfulness, and a series of videos focused on encouraging people to go to sleep.



In fact, if you dig deep enough into the rise and fall of the different formats for the transmission of culture, you'll likely find that a subculture (or "microculture" or "counterculture") pushed the transmission forward first. By definition, subcultures, microcultures, and/or countercultures have existed ever since there was culture, sometimes in the shadows and other times openly challenging the narrative that the monoculture puts forth. Many people regard a symbiotic relationship between monoculture and subculture as one sign of a healthy society that promotes certain freedoms and expressions, creating a "fresh air" that pushes up against monoculture's homogeneous nature. The challenge historically has been that these subcultures couldn't compete with the reach of monoculture. That is, until the internet.

The discoverability of subcultures, primarily thanks to mass adoption of the world wide web, has changed us individually forever. Easy access to an encyclopedic database (or "menu") of subcultures allows individuals to reinterpret and remix their identities in hyper-specific ways. Not only have we thrown aside the traditional pillars of monoculture (with one major exception to come later), but we have reached a point where we are no longer even bound by the same realities and truths.

Research conducted by Quick Study in January 2024 found:¹

46% of Americans today feel like they are living in their own bubble more than in years past.

Only 13% feel they are less in a bubble than they have been previously.

Women of all ages, people living in rural areas, and those 45-64 years old stand out for being some of the most likely groups to say they are “much more” in their own bubble than they have been in the past. From gender to geography to age to level of education obtained, there is no demographic that conclusively feels less in a bubble than before.²

It's clear based on these results that the push & pull of mono and subcultures are no longer a specific enough way to describe what is happening to our sense of self. We have reached a new level of depth in our understanding of how we connect to the world around us, and we need to introduce a third level of the cultural spectrum to reflect that. At Quick Study, we're calling it Soloculture.



SOLOCULTURE

(ˈsō,lō ˈkəlCHər)

noun: The unique worldview a person holds based on how they consume, manipulate, and contribute to the transmission of information.

Put simply, we're all in our own Truman Show, and the way we interact with our individual “show” impacts how we see society. Our Solocultures are the result of a cross-section of choices: the ones we make for ourselves and the ones algorithms, AI, and others make for us. These choices create a fingerprint for how someone understands the world.

Because our Solocultures are distinct, we've become obsessed with transmitting our version of reality (or Soloculture) to others in order to find small pieces of the connective tissue. In fact, our research found that 68% of Americans introduce friends or family to something new at least a few times a month and 70% are introduced to something new by friends or family at least a few times a month. We also found that one-third of Americans are introduced to something new or introduce something new to someone else at least once a week, and almost 15% say it happens three times a week or more. The transmissions we heard about ranged from the simple to the complex, including “an interesting Youtube video about home improvement”, lentil chips, news stories, and a track by boygenius. They are all examples of how much sharing a piece of our Soloculture has become a cornerstone of interaction in society today.



Here are further examples of the types of conversations we are having more than ever because of our Solocultural existence:

A newfound openness toward discussing mental health

A 2023 study found that one in four people have self-diagnosed themselves based on information they found on social media, we freely use terms like “delulu” to relate to idealistic goals and manifestation, trauma researchers are getting profiles in NY Mag, and a reassessment of how we treat those with mental illness that build their own realities is underway.

Our unending search for authenticity

Webster’s 2023 word of the year saw “a substantial increase” of lookups last year “driven by stories and conversations about AI, celebrity culture, identity, and social media.”

The daily examples of “Who’s That?” Syndrome

According to Glimpse, searches for Jo Koy’s name were up 2,686% compared to the week before the 2024 Golden Globes despite him selling out arenas nationwide and sitting at the top of the charts when he releases comedy albums. We’ve also seen “Who’s That?” Syndrome with the initial announcement that Nate Bargatze would be hosting SNL in the fall of 2023, or just ask a random sampling of people who Mr. Beast is and you’ll find some confused looks despite him being one of the biggest creators in the world.

The blending of subcultures into personal “Cores” and “Roman Empires”

Our obsession with using common language to express distinct differences in our personalities is showcased best through TikToks and Reels. Cottage Core begets Coquette Core, and a trend asking men how often they think about the Roman Empire becomes shorthand language referring to the very specific things people think about deeply that they believe no one else does.

As you can see, our Solocultures feed off subcultures and the monoculture for initial inputs, but then remix them personally before sending our Solocultural transmission back into the world. It's a symbiotic relationship that gives us connection while also remaining individuals.³ Even if we do find subcultures to belong to, no one person is forming the same exact connections or doing so at the same time or with the same background. Think of Solocultures like a snowflake; when our snowflakes combine they become something bigger, maybe a light dusting of snow, but the monoculture is the blizzard that brings more snowflakes together than anything else. (In fact, the present state of monoculture is just like snow in New York City: we're seeing less blizzards than ever before.)



From our disparate Solocultures, to the connective tissue of subcultures, to the conversation dominating monoculture. Each informs and is fed by the others.



No one person is forming the same exact connections or doing so at the same time or with the same background.

You've likely noticed we haven't taken a position on whether or not Solocultures are a net positive or negative for culture at large. There are obvious issues with a society that cannot collectively agree on the basic facts of their reality, and as 2024 rolls on we will undoubtedly see the impact our Solocultures have on shaping major decisions like elections. We are also living through a loneliness epidemic, one fueled by disconnection and the negative perceptions we tend to form in our own bubbles. Not everyone has adapted to the need to transmit our Soloculture to others or accept that need as a prerequisite for connecting to greater society today. A Solocultural society can and does leave people behind if we don't build the right safeguards (which we haven't).

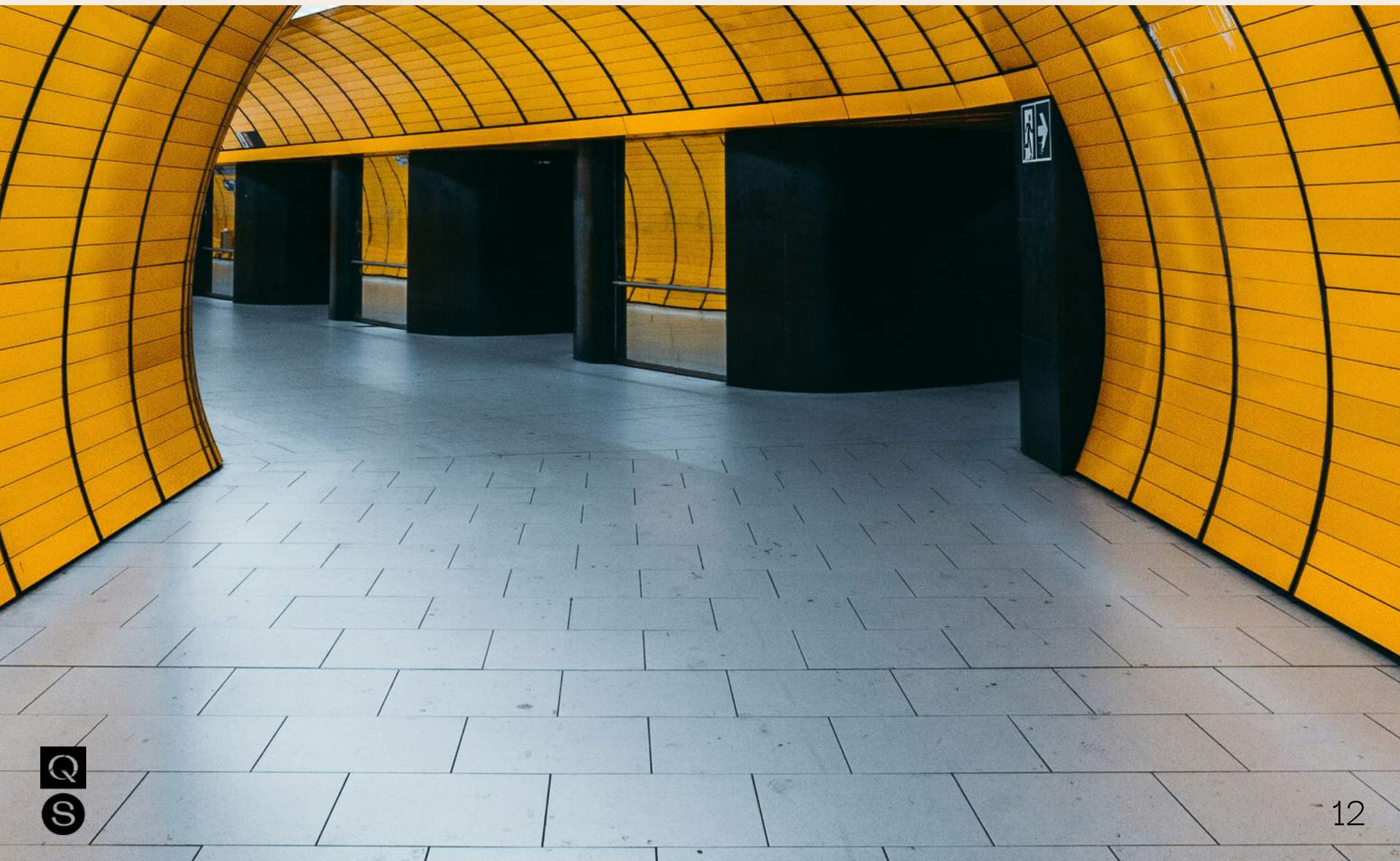


Ultimately, as we learned with agriculture, a monoculture that goes without variety for too long becomes stale and a net negative for its owner (i.e. humanity). We need the unique connective tissue that comes from connecting our Solocultures to help push subcultures and the monoculture forward. It's our hope that recognizing the existence of our own individual realities will help start a conversation about how brands can positively influence the bubbles we all form, not just for profit but for progress. That may sound naive to some, but we're just speaking from our specific Solocultures. Your own reality is up to you.



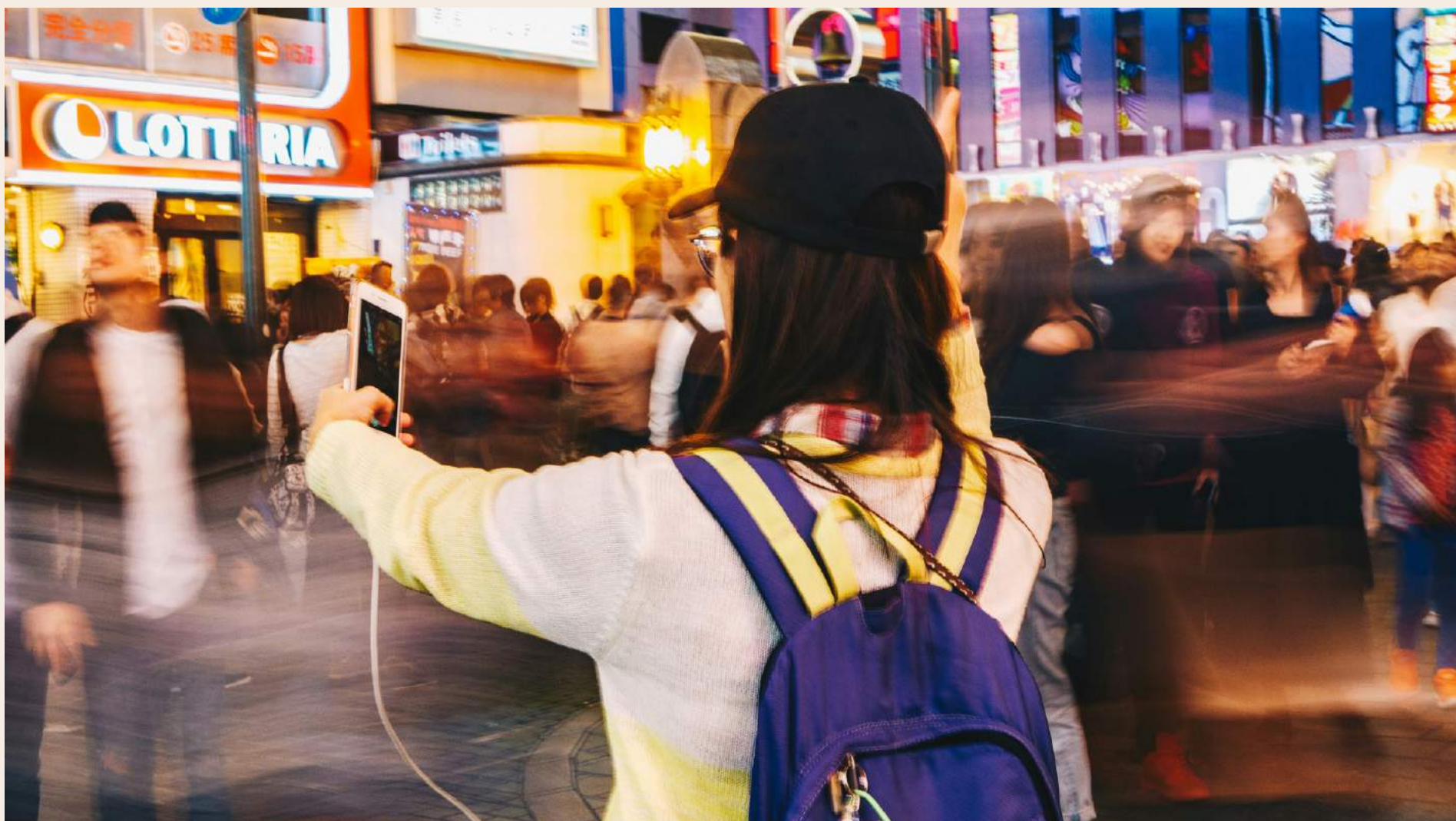
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Time Is Of My Essence



For a moment around the year 2000, one sound dominated the living rooms of “cool” families in the United States. The quick but distinct buh-bup! of the TiVo remote was a status symbol of the technologically advanced, ushering people out of the dark ages of recording their shows to VHS tapes and into a brand new world of DVR. People had been manipulating time to benefit their consumption for decades - from mixtapes on cassette to those oft-overwritten VHS tapes sitting in the media cabinet below the TV. But those old methods required preparation. TiVo was right there, pausing the ostensibly live action at the press of a button. Its tagline? You run the show. And while it did feel like you were running the show through well-timed buh-bups, there was one aspect of TiVo that acted as the canary in a coal mine of a future run by someone else: each box featured an algorithm that could recommend shows for you based on what you were watching & saving.

Our relationship with time today is a lot different than it was when TiVo debuted at CES in 1999. Back then, tools for manipulating time were emerging but we still controlled them and determined how they affected our lives. Today, the way time is altered by others plays a major part in how we see the world. In part 1, we discussed how our Solocultures are representative of what we choose to consume as well as what algorithms, AI, and others choose to share with us. Now, let’s talk about how the time we consume things changes our Solocultures as well. Time, for better or worse, has gone from indisputable fact to foggy outline. And it’s in that fogginess that we lose connection.



Defining time's role in the loss of connection can be abstract, so in an attempt to quantify the foggy feeling we asked 500 Americans aged 16-64 to help us better understand their current relationship with time. The results mirror our research around personal bubbles from part 1, proving that time is an important factor when it comes to how people relate to the world around them:

The vast majority of Americans feel a disconnect with time on a semi-frequent basis, a feeling that has increased over time.

Nearly 8 in 10 people say they feel disconnected from time at least sometimes, and 18% say they always feel disconnected from time. 44% say they feel more disconnected from time than they used to, and only 10% feel less disconnected. Single and self-employed people are more likely to feel disconnected from time more frequently than others, while women of all ages and people living in rural areas are more likely to feel much more disconnected than they have previously. These results mirror the learnings that found these groups feel more in a bubble than others.

The majority of Americans feel like the world around them has sped up.

59% say the world is faster than ever before, compared to only 4% who feel time is moving slower. The age group most likely to say time is moving faster is people aged 45-64, the same age group who were most likely to say they feel like they are living in their own bubble more than ever before.

Technology is unsurprisingly the top reason people are struggling with time, but it also helps some stay connected as well.

“Technology has made things go much faster and sometimes it's overwhelming,” one person told us. Another said that “There's simply so much more information and data available that makes [the world] seem faster.” Some people admitted that without their phones they wouldn't easily know the day of the week or the date, and others said that they have trouble remembering when certain conversations occurred at home or at work without their device. This co-dependence is something we'll dig into.

I often forget tasks when I get in front of a screen.

Just yesterday I was playing a phone game for hours and didn't even realize it.

I find myself doom scrolling and losing track of time.

I feel like the time has stayed the same but our perception has changed.

I feel like I barely know what day it is lately.

Sometimes I have to think twice about what day it is.

It's a daily thing, I have to look on my phone to know what the date and day of the week is.

The world is a 24 hour operation these days.

I think we are more distracted more than ever.

I've felt like I've been living in a time warp since Covid.

There's simply so much more information and data available that makes time seem faster.

Technology has made things go much faster and sometimes it's overwhelming.

Sometimes at work I can't recall if a previous conversation was the day or more before.



What Happened to our Sense of Time?

Quick Study

77%

of people 16-64 years old feel disconnected from time sometimes, often or always

44%

feel more disconnected from time than they used to

59%

feel the world is moving faster than ever

There are some arguments that time is standing still culturally, or that we are stuck in the now because of fears for the future and an inability to collectively acknowledge the past.⁴ Based on this study and additional research, we believe that instead of standing still, time has become malleable at the individual level, like a TiVo for how we interact with the world.

Time has never been less concrete, and there are countless ways this impacts our Solocultures. Let's focus on two:

1.

Recency bias is polluting our ability to create lasting cultural connections

2.

No one is consuming cultural transmissions at the same time as anyone else.



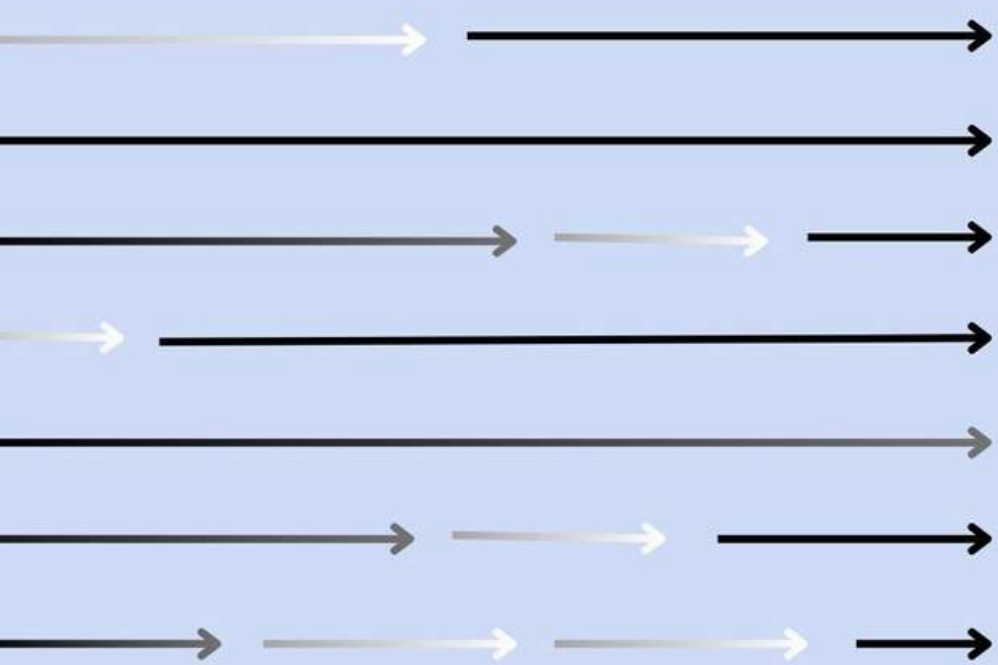
Recency bias is polluting our ability to create lasting cultural connections

Our race to recap things as soon as they happen for the sake of content is impressive. If, as one survey respondent put it, “The world is a 24 hour operation these days,” then nowstalgia occupies hours 25-48. How often do you open Hulu and see that 20/20 has a new “Special Report” about a thing that happened about three days ago? Did you see Dumb Money, the movie from 2023 recapping the Gamestop short squeeze of 2021 based on a book written & published that same year? Did you watch the Emmys this year (unlikely) or did you watch the near-instantaneous recaps and highlights that someone compiled and posted across social media (much more likely)? What about your Spotify Wrapped and its myriad copycats that remind you of what just happened and solidify it in custom infographics for you to share? No wonder 6 in 10 Americans feel like time is moving faster - the world around them is being recapped at warp speed.

This type of recency bias when it comes to the stories we choose to remember endangers culture in the long term. For one, Nowstalgia content puts a too-cute bow on a short period of time, solidifying the final results by closing the loop without accounting for the still-shifting sands below. What might a Dumb Money movie look like in 20 years when we know the long-tail impact the retail investing craze had on the market and the legacy of all the players in the story? Alternatively, think of the TV shows that memory-holed COVID as quickly as possible in their storylines and how that helped minimize the realities of the ongoing pandemic for viewers.⁵ The time we choose to tell stories in culture can sometimes matter just as much as the content within them.⁶

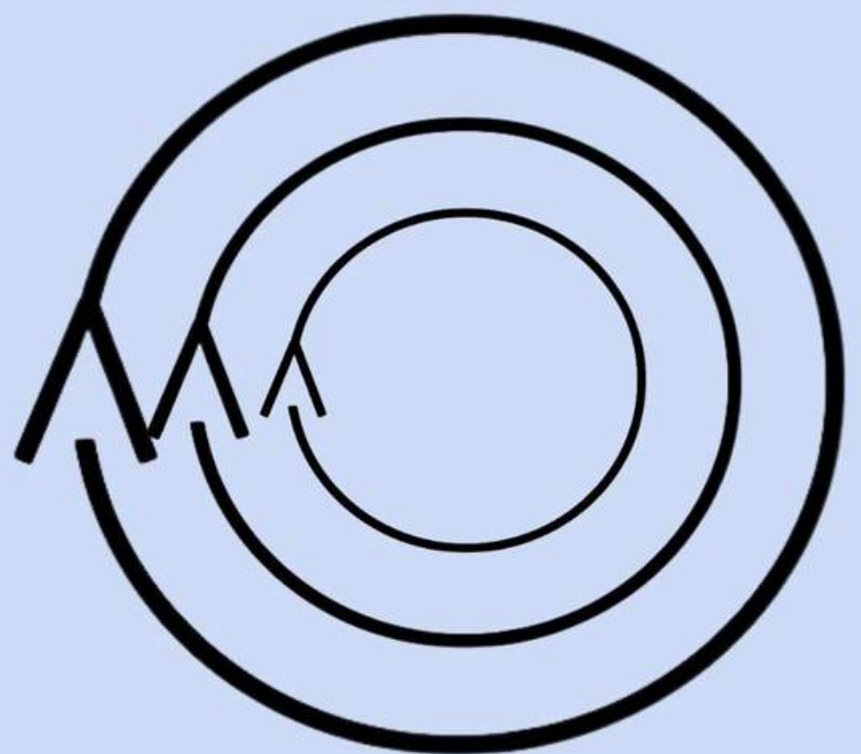
Nowstalgia and recency bias also make culture more shallow. In the 2017 book *The Acceleration of Cultural Change*, authors R. Alexander Bentley and Michael J. O'Brien discuss the two shapes of cultural transmission and what they leave behind, what archaeologists call tradition and horizon. Historically, "traditions reach back in a deep and narrow fashion, through many generations of related people, usually residing over relatively small areas. Horizons are shallow and broad and can cover magnitudes more people over a much larger region." The internet, according to the authors, put everything on a horizontal plane, testing our ability to cut out junk and keep the deep & narrow. "A viral video gets copied identically millions of times without being streamlined by the transmission process, and actually accumulates more junk in the form of comments and metadata," they wrote. "Without the kind of vetting that has long typified cultural transmission, culture is bound to accumulate a lot of junk."

Traditions & Horizons



Continuous introduction and then decaying of ideas makes way for new ideas & creativity. The best ideas are honed and stay part of culture for the long term.

Nowstalgia



Evergreen recycling of similar concepts limits new ideas & creativity. The cycle takes horizons and shortens them even more.

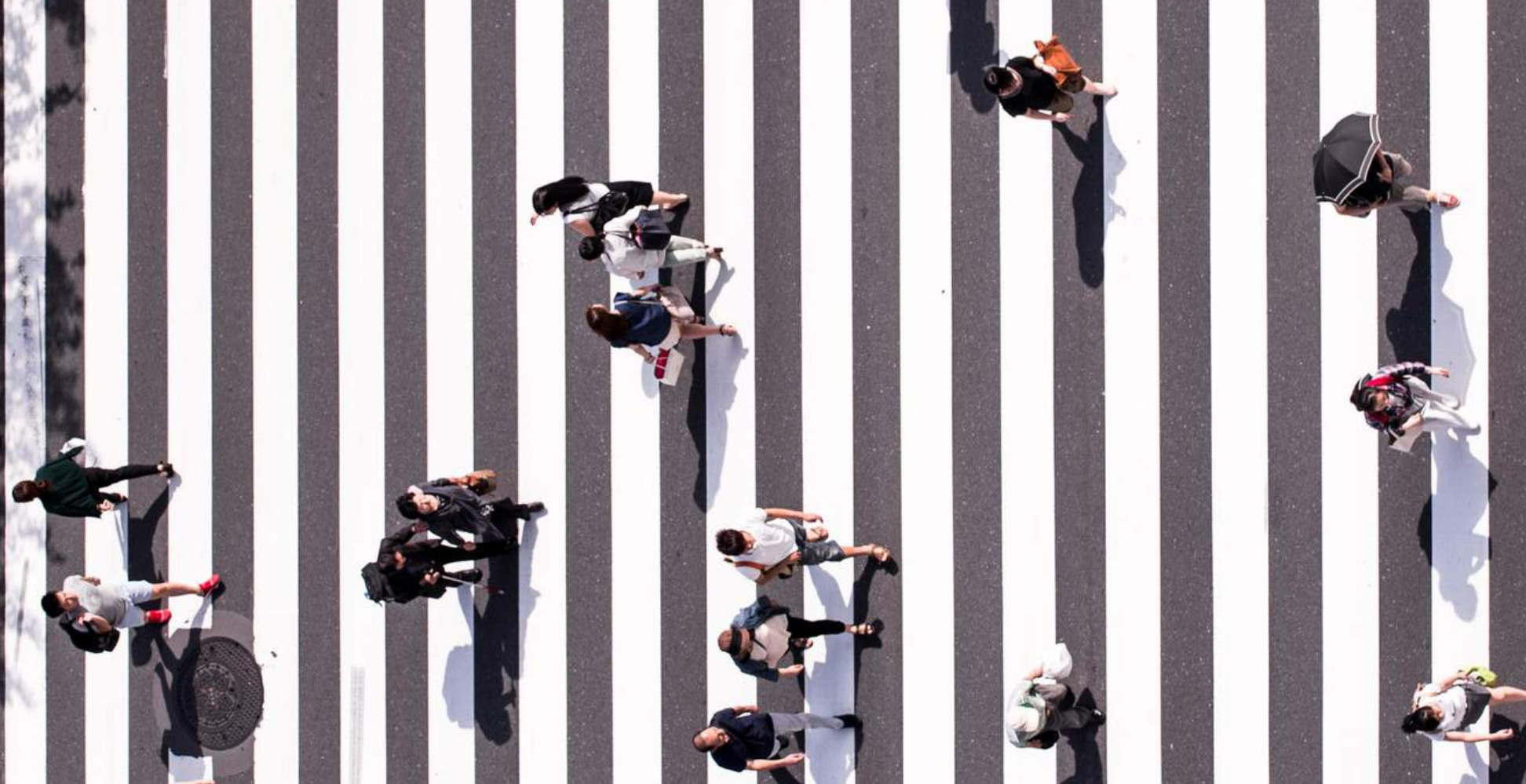
Quick Study

A mix of horizons and traditions signals a functioning system of cultural transmission. Nowstalgia threatens that function by shortening horizons and repeating them instead of letting them die off.

It should come as no surprise that junk does not subculture or monoculture make, and that our increased content outputs over time threaten to keep us stuck in the horizon. As cited by Bentley and O'Brien, "historian Abby Smith Rumsey argued that vast amounts of digital information hinder our collective capacity for forgetting, which is an important behavioral trait that clears away informational clutter, making room for creative thought." Without better methods of vetting what we consume, we lose the chance to create the connective tissue necessary to build broad societal stories and norms, allowing the tail of our immediate copycatting to eat itself, and creativity to die. You might feel this sensation when you see the 200th version of a dance on your FYP, or the same screenshotted meme from years ago; it might be that we're developing new forms of information transmission, but it also might be that we're running out of truly new creative thought.

"I think we are distracted more than ever," one survey respondent told us. "I often forget tasks when I get in front of a screen," said another. "My teenage kids just sit on their phones even at the dinner table even when I say it's a rule to not be on them," one mom said. It's clear that the immediacy of the junk is winning.





No one is consuming cultural transmissions at the same time as anyone else.

The context collapse that comes from how we experience the immediacy of this junk as individuals on our own timeline makes it even more complicated to find connective tissue. Thanks to the way we each discover through our own habits and algorithms, no one person consumes cultural transmissions at the same moments, which means our understanding of reality has a totally different timeline than everyone else's. A quick scroll of my TikTok FYP serves me videos that range from hours old to some posted last November. Even worse, my Explore page on Instagram sometimes recommends posts that are literally years old. Given the randomness of when we consume, context is infrequent, if there is any at all. Our study found that people without built-in networks feel this collapse the most: almost 50% of single people and those who are self-employed say they feel more disconnected than ever.

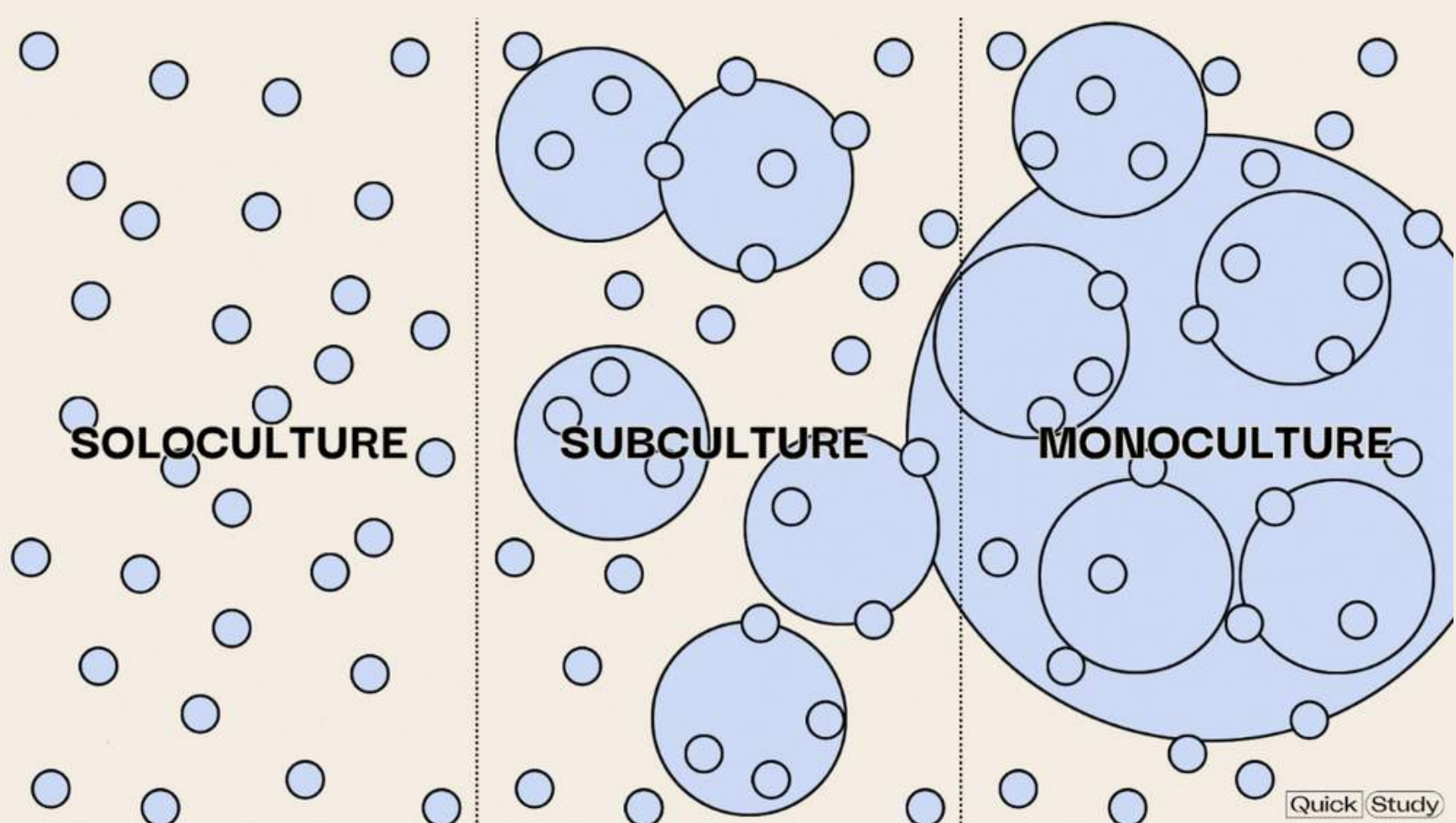
That's a core component of Soloculture: in some ways, we control our timeline, but in most cases, it's influenced or controlled by machines whose mission is to keep us engaged, not connected or informed. We often lose track of time in our rabbit holes and become experts on topics that only exist to ourselves⁷. The depth of our individual connections can actually make us more disconnected because that depth was not achieved via the same exact timeline as others. This is why spoiler alerts exist: to address the problems that arise when people consume content at different times.



In some ways, we control our timeline, but in most cases it's influenced or controlled by machines whose mission is to keep us engaged, not connected or informed.

For example, the way watching *The West Wing* impacted my worldview and Soloculture when it initially aired is vastly different than someone viewing it today based on the added weight of time they bring to the experience and the surrounding world in which they are choosing to watch the show. Back then, it felt like the show painted an optimistic picture of what American politics could be; today, someone watching for the first time likely recoils at instances of the show's naivete related to where the country has headed since it first aired. These are the opinions of people who have consumed the same content, but the way it interacts with the world today is different, and therefore the show impacts their Soloculture differently than it has mine.

To put it in the terms of Bentley and O'Brien, traditions can't emerge if there's no common time or place to reach back to. We attempt to re-anchor ourselves to time and place in various ways, like rewatching podcasts of popular shows and online forums that provide contextual notes that have otherwise been lost over time. But the additional consumption required ("now I have to watch a show AND listen to a podcast about the show AND read a Subreddit about the show?") creates a barrier to context that can feel insurmountable. At the end of the day, sometimes your consumption patterns mean your Soloculture won't attach to others, and other times your consumption hits just right and you find common subcultures to attach to. It's a lottery of chance that adds a significant layer of randomness to how connected we feel to the world around us at any given time.

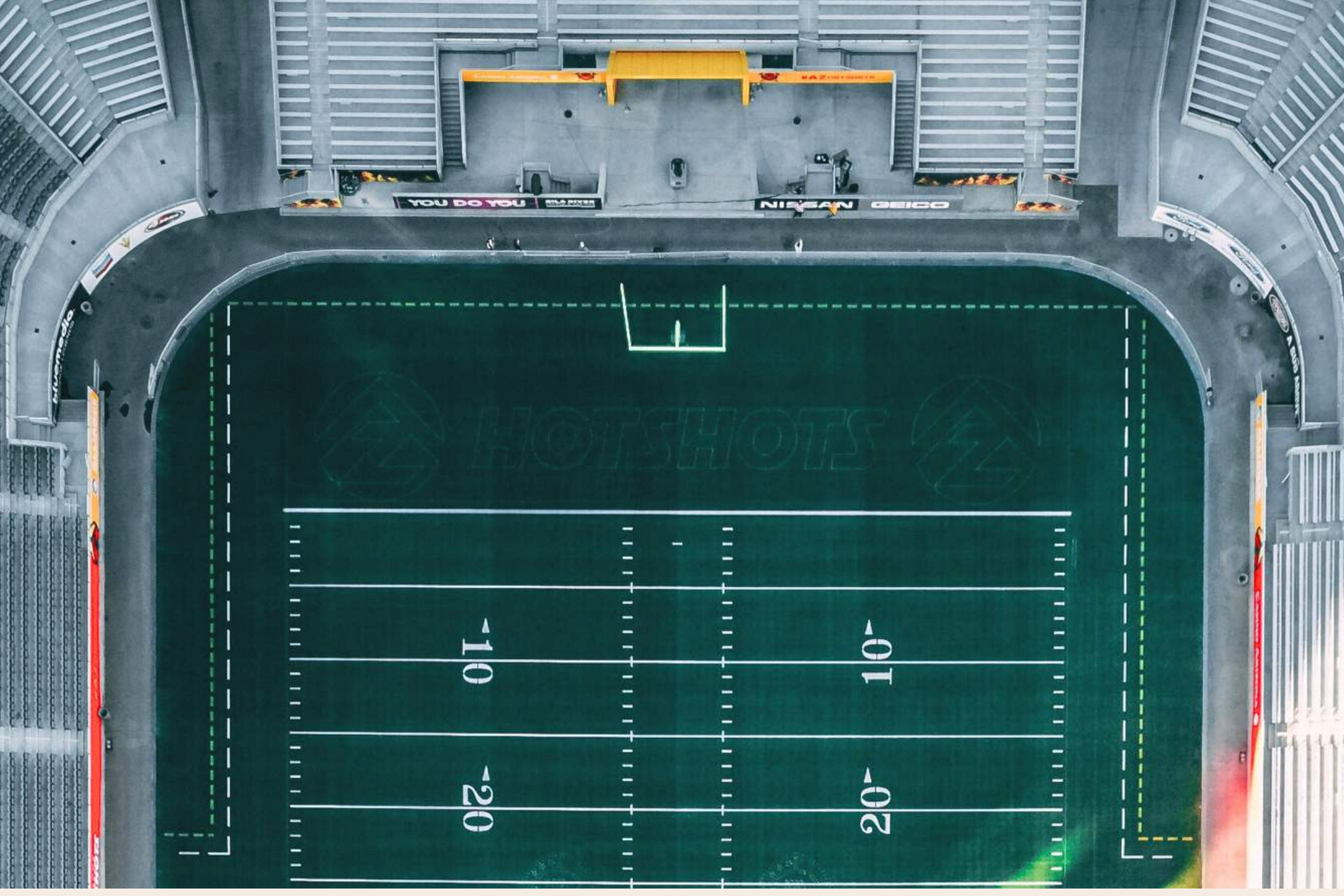


Over time, our Solocultures may come in contact with others at different depths or speeds, building on existing subcultures or creating new ones that may eventually contribute to the monoculture. At the same time, subcultures fall out of favor and end up only being recognized by individuals.

Context or no context, the result of this timelessness is that we get to individually manage our own rate of cultural change by choosing to make as much time as we want for things that matter to us. We are free to dial up and down how long something exists in our world by retraining the algorithm with a few swipes or by liberally blocking & muting that which doesn't interest us. We get to determine how much we care about the recent past or when our headspace is "right" to consume something in our queue. "We can snark about being addicted to our phones or worry about inflated screen-time numbers or the way we pull out our cameras to document moments we should instead be present for," wrote Charlie Warzel recently, "but acknowledging the positives is equally disorienting—to do so suggests a certain unknowability about a technology we live with every day. What are our phones doing to us? A lot, it seems. Perhaps more than we realize."⁸



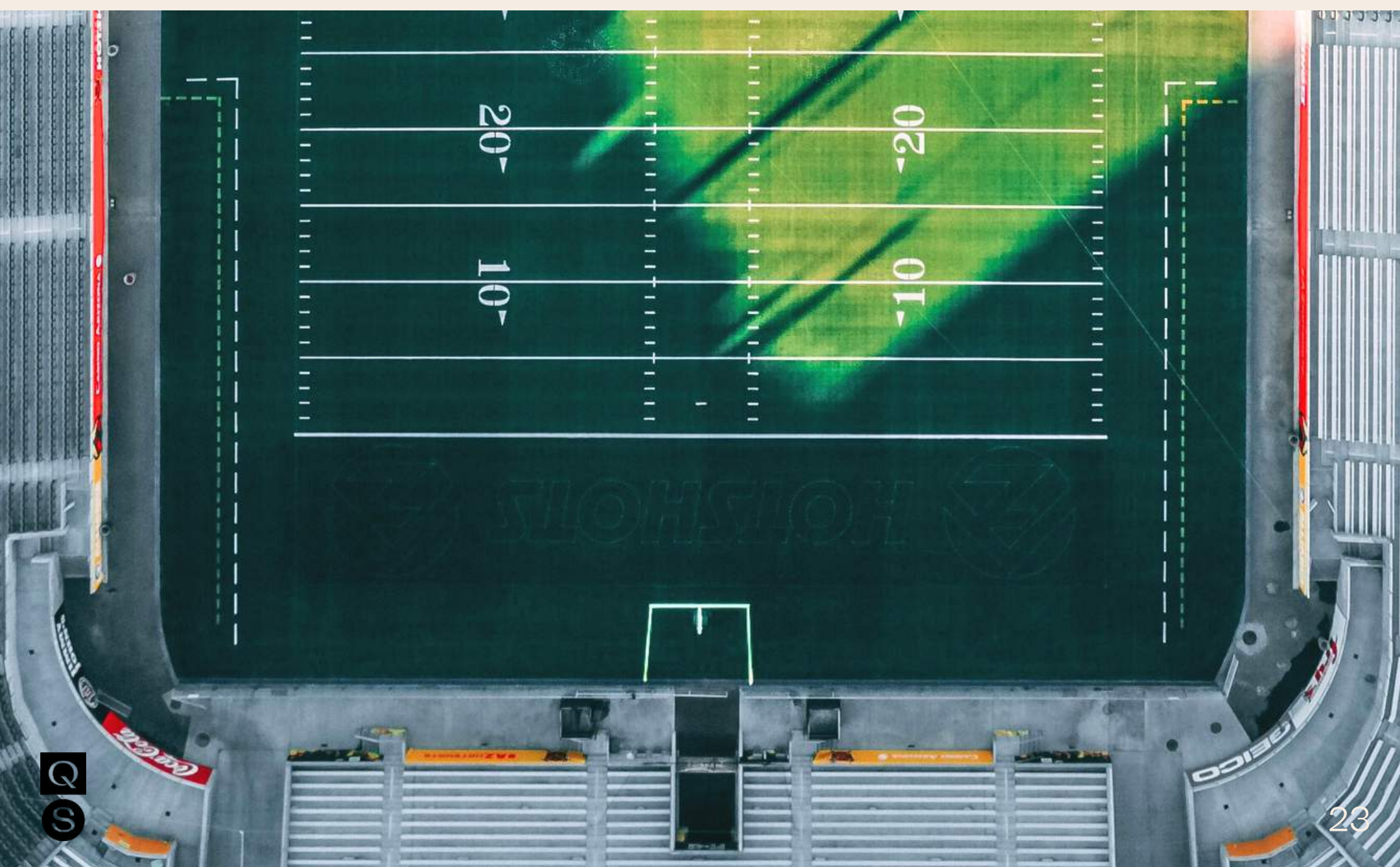
Solocultures don't exist solely because of our phones, but they are certainly co-conspirators in our unmooring from time. We've all seen the viral photos of a sold-out concert lit by the phones of thousands recording the moment. Regardless of their recording quality, each person is doing so in the hopes that one day they can revisit that specific time. They don't know when they'll watch the clip again, but the time they choose will carry a personal meaning that no one else can truly connect to. A shared mono or subcultural experience, made Solo by the recollection. Will we find a way to make the good uses of our malleable chronologies outweigh the disconnects their existence creates? Only time will tell.



Prt 3

Zero

Blitz





It's now clear that we've created a siloed world for ourselves based on our consumption habits and time-shifting behaviors. The concept of Soloculture is the result of our personal preferences becoming married to algorithmic decision-making, a partnership that has changed the way we live, in sickness and in health. We've noted the symbiotic nature of Soloculture, subcultures, and monoculture and how they continually feed off each other, the traditions and horizons pulsing in and out of favor at increasing speeds that have people feeling more disconnected from each other and time than ever before.

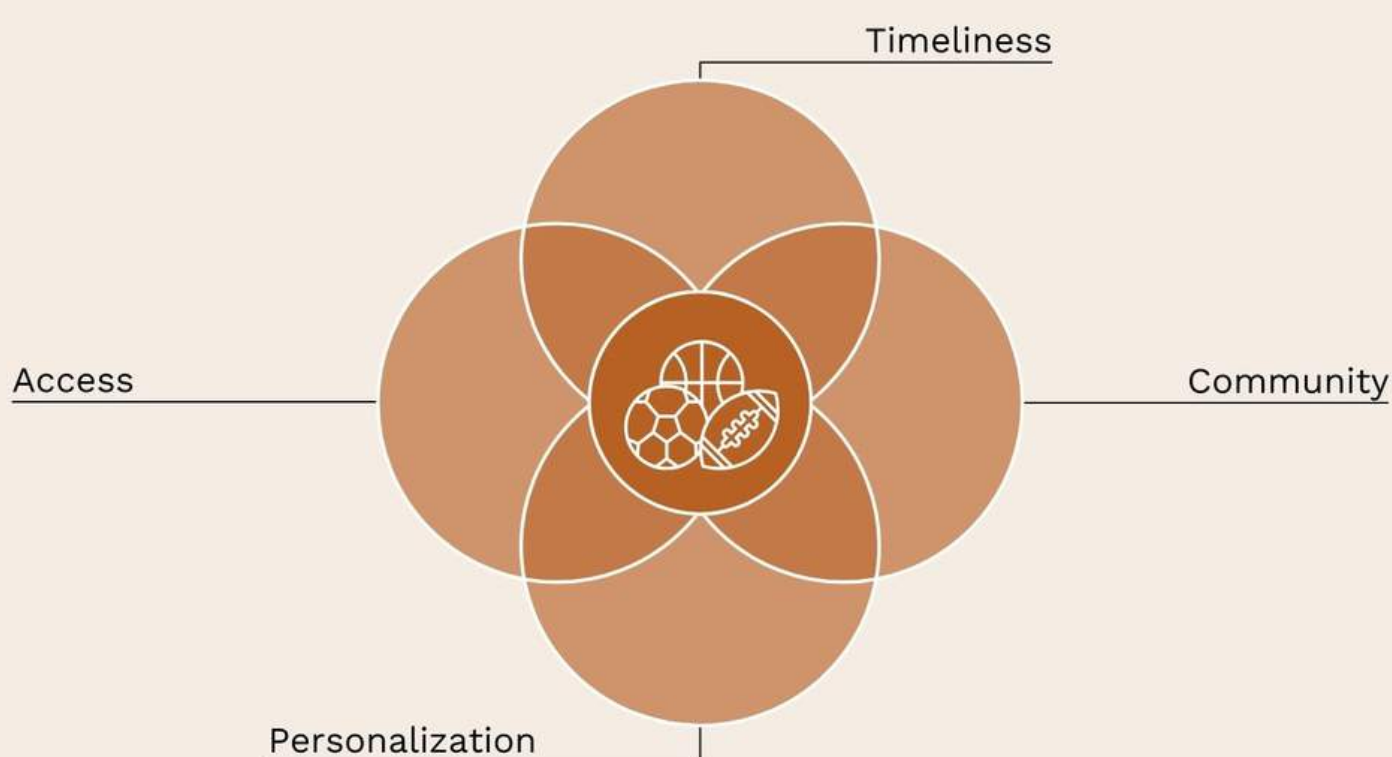
Sometimes, however, the stars align, and a piece of culture finds a way to feel relevant at all three depths: mono, sub, and solo. This is the holy grail for anyone looking to reap the benefits of a cultural transmission, whether it be a political party, a brand, or a movie studio. In this part, we'll take a few minutes to examine something that brings people out of their Solocultures and builds the connective tissue people are missing.

If there's one area that can still claim the sort of impact we're talking about, it's sports. As you no doubt already know, the Super Bowl is the most-watched event in America. The 2024 edition of the game carried alongside it a perfect cultural storm: Taylor Swift, the upcoming election, continued uneasiness in advertising, the hollowing out of traditional media, just to name a few. The game was not just the culmination of the football season, it was the coronation of a sport that has to many become an all-consuming cultural behemoth. 92 of the top 100 broadcasts in 2023 were NFL games (and 4 of the other 8 were football-related), but the power goes beyond that. As Politico wrote in 2022, despite its myriad controversies (or maybe even a little because of them), "Pro football is the only thing that's still big enough to make us feel small."

How big does something have to be to be a monoculture?

It's a question I've been asking myself a lot lately. Is it actually quantifiable, or do you just know? The Super Bowl as an event certainly feels monocultural - in 2023, it was viewed by an estimated 115 million people. But is the NFL as a whole truly the behemoth it seems, or are we confirming the bias of our own Solocultural experiences? According to GlobalWebIndex (GWI), in Q4 of 2023, 46.7% of Americans said they watch the NFL. That's up 5% from Q4 of 2021, an impressive leap in 24 months, but it's still less than half of Americans. To put it in perspective, 46.7% is roughly the same amount of Americans who say they are interested in travel (48.1%) or that they fear gun violence (46.8%). If you look generationally, the monocultural status of football becomes even harder to find. 33.4% of Gen Z say they watch the NFL, but a study by Polygon recently found that 42% of Gen Z watch anime weekly. Does that mean anime is a monoculture of Gen Z more than football is? Can it even be called monoculture if it only applies to one generation? Is monoculture actually more of a vibes-based sensation? And if so, whose vibes are we basing it on? Once you start digging, the questions write themselves, and our Solocultures seep in.

We're going to avoid that runaway train of thought for now because regardless of how we define what monoculture is today, it's hard to argue against the fact that the NFL's place in culture is outsized compared to most, if not all, cultural transmissions. To better understand how football - and sports at large - are seemingly the only thing connecting more than dividing in America right now, Quick Study spoke to professionals in various parts of the sports world. Based on our research and conversations, we found four key components that make sports stand out:



These traits work together like a strong defense to attack culture from all angles at a scale and consistency that isn't seen anywhere else. To extend the metaphor, they are the cultural Legion of Boom. Let's head to the telestrator:



1. Timeliness

As we noted in part 2, the concept of a spoiler alert exists because of our ability to consume culture at our own time and pace. Combined with the power of algorithms, it's impossible for one person to consume the same content at the same time in the same order as another. But sports break that system. "There's really nothing else that has that ability to bring every single person in the world together at the same time, except maybe breaking news," said Kayla Knapp, Director of Marketing at COLLiDE Agency and formerly an employee of the Portland Thorns & Timbers, as well as Fox Sports. "I turn into a psychopath during the World Cup. If it's not in my time zone, I don't sleep. I'm up at 2 AM tweeting. I'm going to the bar at midnight. There's nothing else in the world that does that."

Paul Webber, Senior Director of Global Brand Marketing for adidas Basketball, agrees. "The beauty of sports is that they're completely unpredictable and you don't really know what's going to happen. And so much of it is still rooted in the live experience." Other events like awards shows or heavily covered red carpets bring a timely component to their cultural impact, but not nearly as often as sports. Plus, we watch sports generally with the knowledge and connection that we could be in those seats, but securing a seat at a fancy gala or award ceremony feels less attainable. It's a classic "those folks in the stands look like me and therefore I feel more connected to it" feeling. The connection we lack in those moments is not one of timeliness, but one of access.

2. Access

There are a few ways to view access when thinking about sports: the ability to be that person in the seats having the live experience, the amount of access we have to athletes today, and the sheer volume of content that exists related to sports in general.

“There are elements in our world and our culture that are so iconic that I don't care how technology evolves; you still cannot replace that feeling [of being there],” Jon Cohen told me. Jon is Co-Founder & CEO of music publication The Fader, as well as Owner and co-CEO of Cornerstone, a creative agency that works with brands like Coca-Cola and sports leagues like MLS. “It's the live aspect that gives you that passion and love, and it's that live aspect that you take home with you that makes you feel so fanatical to still participate on your phone.”

Then, at home, access becomes about how much we can consume on our devices and what kind of things we are consuming. Kayla noted that a major shift in the content dynamic from teams and leagues to players came during the pandemic when games weren't happening, but something needed to be posted. “I think the pandemic really forced people to completely change how they create content because I think we were in a direction of telling the players' stories. But I think for a long time, since there weren't games, there wasn't actual sport activity to cover.”



Our access to players, which feels commonplace today, hasn't existed for that long in the grand scheme of American sports. According to Jon, "there is something really amazing about this time where we can get closer."

"Back in the day, call it the 80s, early 90s, there weren't as many avenues into the athlete," said Paul. "So, the athletes relied on brands like adidas or Nike to help establish their positioning and market them. If you think about MJ, you remember the Nike x Jordan affiliation and you remember Gatorade. His brand was really kind of communicated through those things outside of the greatness on court. They didn't have Twitter, they didn't have Instagram, they didn't have YouTube. But I think now it's interesting because the athlete has more power."

"The whole industry, whether it be teams, leagues, or marketing agencies, has thrived on being able to be in front of you everywhere you are," said Nate Loucks, VP & General Manager of Boardroom, a media company cofounded by Kevin Durant. Being everywhere starts with TV and streaming, from literal networks run by the NBA, NHL, MLB, and NFL to always-on content hubs like MLS Season Pass on Apple TV or the new NWSL+.

When Nate worked for the WWE, he was surprised to discover that for some people, their reality shows weren't an extension of the brand but instead a way in. "I didn't believe it at first, but the amount of folks that I spoke with while I worked at WWE who had become a WWE fan from watching Total Divas" was huge, he said.

Similar sensations drove Formula 1's rise thanks to Drive to Survive or made Wrexham the biggest team in Wales thanks to Welcome to Wrexham. In these scenarios, the long-form content was so well executed that it almost overshadows the games themselves. I've seen posts from folks who love Welcome to Wrexham not wanting the real-time results of matches to be spoiled so they can watch the recap of the match on the show in 8 or 9 months time.

Broadcasting games or other long-form content isn't the only point of access; in fact, for some leagues, clips may be even more important. "We know that at least within basketball, less and less kids are watching full games, and more of it's consumed via social and clips," said Paul.



Almost 1/4 of Americans say they watch sports highlights on TV or online at least weekly, including 44% of self-described sports fans (GWI). Many of those clips are viewed on social media, where sports people and teams are the fifth most favorite social accounts Americans like to follow. 11% of people go so far as to say that watching/following sports is one of the top 3 reasons they use social media at all. Accessing the sport, teams, players, and leagues from all these angles "satiates" the hardcore fans (to use Nate's words) and also provides plenty of points of entry for casuals.

3. Personalization

Having so much access makes it easier for us as individuals to find the parts of the storyline we like, which is where personalization comes in. We choose how deep to go and where we are consuming, and then the algorithm takes us into a bubble filled with a story that goes for as long as we want it to. To illustrate the point, Nate referred to America's current favorite couple: "Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce, their story does not end. It goes from his podcast to the pregame show, to the tunnel fits, to Taylor in the stands... And the same goes for even the fans of other teams or players, they now have a myriad of podcasts or player-specific shows that they can just continue to consume."

The personalized nature of what we consume is even driving product conversations. "We were just talking about this the other day: we have five signature shoes. Is that too much?," asked Paul. "Are we lacking focus? But then we started talking about how the algorithm, if I'm an Anthony Edwards fan, it's just serving me in a way that I may not even see the Donovan Mitchell content to the same degree. And so I do think that there's still a level of Soloculture within sports based on the team you follow, the sport you follow, the athlete you follow."

Sports betting has also increased our personal interest in ways that may not have existed in the past. "Gambling is completely changing the sports equation," said Jon. "If we had this conversation five or ten years ago, gambling in sports was so taboo. Now it's completely changed a lot of the mentality around sports and it's made it gamified and fun."

"You can curate your entire football Sunday based on the decisions you've made that have nothing to do with how the game is being presented to you," said Nate. "I'm going to get the NFL Sunday Ticket or Red Zone or whatever so I can watch my fantasy team, or I'm going to put a ten player parlay in Fanduel and hope for the best because they've marketed it to me that it's a fun experience, that it's just got a little piece of skin in the game to make it more appetizing."





**There's still a level of
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sport you follow, the
athlete you follow.**

-- Paul Webber

Senior Director of Global Brand Marketing, adidas Basketball



4. Community

Sports create the space for connections that most brands can only dream of. Their communities are vibrant and passionate, unlike many of the brand-led communities we see today. In fact, according to GWI, sports fans are more likely to say social media helps them feel more connected to people than the average American.

“I noticed this a lot in Portland with the Timbers and the Thorns - a lot of those fans that are die-hard community members and supporters of the teams didn't start out as soccer fans,” said Kayla. “They're people that were looking for community, and this is something they built a community around.”

Nate highlighted how the emotional fulfillment of sports communities can carry far past the pitch: “The aspect of community, of how can I find someone like-minded or someone who shares my emotional connection to a certain thing? To me, that always either comes back to sports or perhaps music, but more so sports. It's one of those last things that you can experience together physically and also all the way down to social platforms in your own web of the internet, on TikTok or Twitch or Roblox.”

Paul relayed a story of how successful these communities can be when done right. “I was speaking with the head of marketing for an MLS team, who told me their supporters group has a WhatsApp group. If the team is about to announce a trade, they text that group first and say, “Hey, FYI, this is about to happen” so they don't catch it from the news first. What they've found is that [the info] never leaked from that group. And in fact, once it's announced, because they were told first, even if folks disagreed with it, they would defend the point of view because they heard it from the executive team first.”

That type of community can't be faked or bought, it needs to feel real. As more brands recognize the power of sports in culture, the danger becomes over-extending their connection to the sport itself.

“Everyone wants to borrow the influence from sports, and so every brand is trying to play in that space,” said Paul. “But I think there's a lot of brands that play in sports without necessarily having a true understanding and authentic understanding of who these athletes are and what they care about and what's authentic within the sport itself.”

The danger of inauthenticity can also apply to the way athletes tell their stories as well, where focusing too much on building up community around superstars could be seen as shortsighted: “I think the curse is sometimes [superstars] get so big they overshadow the team and they overshadow the league,” said Jon. “I think there has to be a careful balance of the way leagues are portrayed and marketed versus pushing the superstar perspective. The narrative is great, but the problem is eventually those icons retire and they move on and if you build too much around one individual, versus building around the game, it's really tricky to regain that audience.”

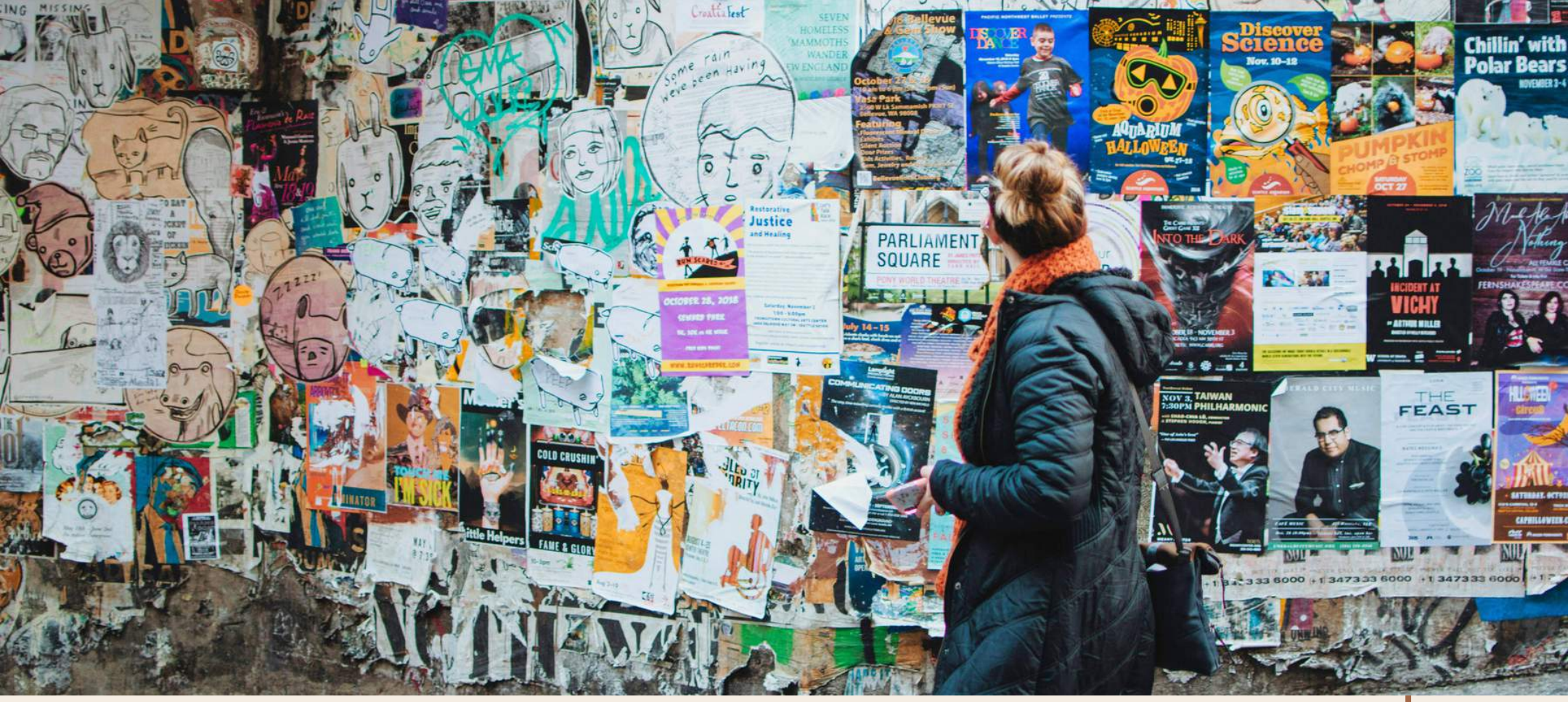


It's easy to see, through these conversations, how our Solocultural interests can become symbiotic with sports. Maybe we like the fashion sense of a particular WNBA player, or fell into a love of the Premier League because we have a habit of waking up early on the weekends. Sports are wide and deep enough to satiate our particular attachments while simultaneously making us feel part of something more. We trust its consistency to be there so that we can tune it in or out as needed. As the rest of culture flattens or even repeats itself over and over again, sports carry the weight of tradition with the foresight to evolve.

In this context, the biggest danger to the dominance of sports in culture is if it start to feel too much like everything else we consume. "If the wrong people are making culture decisions at any league, it could feel a little bit too try-hard and cringe and turn people off," said Kayla. To her point, the big bucket of entertainment can draw people in, but it can also minimize the sport aspect of the story. What happens when clicks become more important than on-field performance? "Do the results matter to the casual fan? Not likely, no. They're having a fun time whether they're there physically or watching at home," said Nate. "I don't know if [results are] as critical or important as they once were," Paul said. "There's other ways to build influence and audiences now. But I think we still, as a culture, have an obsession for champions and MVPs."



We see a new champion crowned at every championship, and an MVP of the big games as well. But perhaps the biggest winner will continue to be any sport that can use its advantageous narratives to connect with us at any cultural depth. Soloculture hasn't hollowed out sport or fragmented it; instead, it's deepened its power and broadened its appeal. There's no wonder brands are lining up to get a cut of the last monoculture in America.



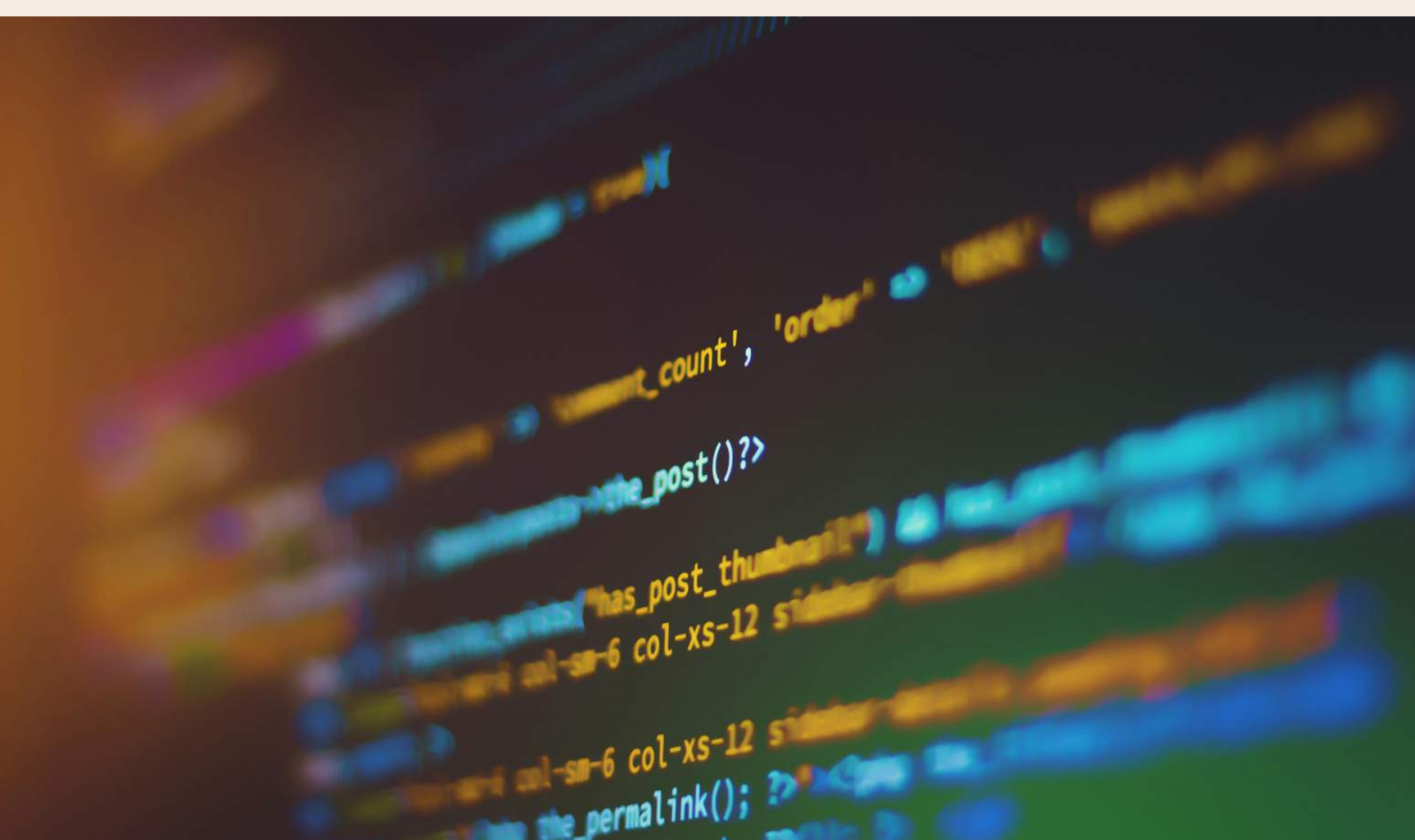
In the fall of 2023, AdWeek and Frontify conducted a study of 200 “creative marketing leaders at brands and agencies.” 58% of the respondents said that brands are struggling to understand the needs of their customers, 72% said brands are struggling to respond to cultural changes, and 73% said brands are struggling to respond to changing user behaviors. We’re aware that we aren’t doing a good enough job at connecting with people on their terms.

And guess what? Consumers agree that the marketing isn’t working. Our research at Quick Study found that 30% of Americans struggle to name a brand that is relevant in their life today. Over at GWI, they found that only 10.5% of Americans felt represented in the advertising they saw in 2023. So we have marketers saying they aren't doing a good job understanding and reacting to consumers and their needs, and a country of marketed-tos that don't feel like they're being reached in a useful way, if they're being spoken to at all. At least we can all agree on something in this country: the way advertising works right now is broken.

There are myriad reasons why so much of the hundreds of billions of dollars spent on advertising in the US is DOA, but the biggest sin of all is the misunderstanding of the world people inhabit today. Or as we've established throughout this Study Guide, worlds. Solocultures are not a passing fad or a TikTok trend; every person has a more unique worldview today than ever before thanks to how they consume, manipulate, and contribute to the further transmission of information. No one human experience is the same, so why should all our advertising be?

The path of least resistance for marketers would be to look at an increasingly fragmented & divided country and choose the most generic & broad route possible in order to appease and not offend. But the results of such efforts over recent years have only served to homogenize culture, lulling us into a sleep of boredom.

“Homogenization is beginning to alienate consumers rather than entertain them,” says Kyle Chayka in his new book *Filterworld*. “In recent years, an underlying sense has emerged that algorithmic culture is shallow, cheap, and degraded in the washed-out manner of a photocopy copied many times over.” Ads made for everyone cut through clutter like a dull knife through concrete: they don’t.



Society also cannot abide going too far in the other direction and risk the loss of authenticity. Hyper-personalization of ads, particularly online, reached such levels of invasiveness that governments actually decided to legislate the internet for once. Filling up on cookies and delivering contextual ad placements can be clever in certain scenarios, but it’s not realistic to expect this kind of marketing to prevail as people become more fragmented across platforms and formats, stretching the bounds of responsive tools that make ads feel custom. This is where the limitations of AI are truly tested: sure, it creates scale, but it’s hard to believe humans will be as motivated to act by relatively soulless content from the uncanny valley than they would be from work created with care by other humans (keyword “care”). As Chayka goes on to say in his book, “This, too, is a form of algorithmic anxiety: the feeling that, when such a human endeavor as making culture is so automated, authenticity becomes impossible.”

So how do we address Soloculture in a balanced fashion? What's a practical way to showcase a brand and create value for each consumer without losing authenticity or inducing boredom? There is no one answer, but over the course of this Study Guide we've been silently laying the blueprint for a more thoughtful and effective approach to creating relevance and results in the age of Soloculture:

Recognize Your Own Soloculture

Our research earlier found that 46% of Americans today feel like they are living in their own bubble more than in years past. This includes the people who make ads! We hear often about marketers needing to check their biases at the door, which is true, but this is deeper than that. Strategists and marketers need to understand that those biases have been formed by their own Solocultures and play a role in every single decision they make on behalf of brands. This doesn't need to be a bad thing; the individuality of Solocultures can make the work more fun as long as there is diversity amongst key decision makers. Thankfully, more marketers are being honest about their knowledge limitations as we saw in the AdWeek study. This self-awareness is key to getting out of the way and letting trusted research & data fuel the work.

Swim At Two Depths

Our research into sports in part 3 revealed how Solocultures allow people to become deeply engrossed in their very specific consumption pattern. Increased access means some fans spend 24/7 engrossed in their favorite teams and athletes, while the ability to personalize the experience lets casual fans consume the fringe aspects of sports culture like betting or the occasional podcast.

This selective depth has widened the gap between a casual brand fan and the hardcore brand fanatic beyond sports as well. Much like lost fringe friends, people these days are either all the way in on your brand story or pretty much tuned out and choosing a brand in your category for ease & convenience only. There is still some movement between these two types of fans, but that movement is much rarer than it used to be. If growth is the ultimate goal for a brand, the question "do I want new people to love my brand or existing fans to love it more?" should be part of every brief, because the resulting work should look very, very different.



Self-awareness is key
to getting out of the
way and letting
trusted research &
data fuel the work.

Say Yes More

We learned in part 1 that sharing newness with each other is the new foundation for connection in America. 70% are introduced to something new by friends or family at least a few times a month, and one-third of Americans say that it's happening a few times a week or more. "Have you seen this?" is the currency of the realm, and the beauty of a world full of Solocultures is that the money will never run out. Brands can thrive in this environment by loosening the definitions of who or what they would traditionally connect their brand with, and identifying new partnerships, influencers, and collaborations that make their customers feel seen in ways that literally no other brand could. Scaling such an opportunity is challenging, but taking a lot of swings at connecting the dots for your consumer has never been more important. Remember, you will tire of the swings you are taking before your audience does, especially because in our Solocultural world the majority of your fans will not be seeing every swing you're taking (in fact, if you're doing it right, they'll only see the ones that feel right to them).

Think In Moments, Not Days

Perhaps the most important thing marketers can recognize is that time is no longer linear. We found that 77% of people feel disconnected from time at least sometimes in their lives, and that 59% feel the world is moving faster than ever before. None of our consumption timelines are the same order or pace, but that doesn't mean marketers should ignore the whens & wheres of storytelling. Choosing appropriate moments to speak to your audience is more important than before because the time you show up carries value that is based on the consumer's Soloculture, not yours. How do you ensure that your message still carries value the day it's posted, but also three weeks later when the algorithm is still serving it to people? And if you can't guarantee that value, how do you change the way you treat the platforms you use to reach people? These questions should create opportunities for more creativity, not less.

Marketing in the Age of Soloculture

Recognize your Soloculture

Check your own Soloculture for biases and misconceptions before making decisions about storytelling.

Swim at two depths

Balance efforts between your dedicated brand fans and the casual, a gap that has widened as loyalty has declined.

Say yes more

Seek out unexpected connection points with partnerships, influencers, and collaborations that make consumers feel seen.

Think in moments, not days

Broaden storytelling timelines knowing that no one's consumption happens at the same speed or in the same order.

Quick Study

All Things Considered™, advertising's crisis of relevance is unsurprising. The magic bullets of advertising's recent past (top tier influencers, Super Bowl ads, huge spends, etc.) are no match for the situation we are facing. A consistent drumbeat of layoffs has created major gaps in historical knowledge, causing brands to repeat old missteps and agencies to be too afraid to push the envelope. There are 6 PR people per journalist today, creating tension in how narratives are shaped and gatekept. People are retreating from the noise of feed-driven platforms to spaces that are more difficult for marketers to reach. Ads and audiences often feel like two passing ships in the dark: The result isn't a crash, it's that they'll never know the other was there. For advertisers, that's the worst fate possible; another expensive campaign worked on by dozens, seen by millions, but ultimately heard by no one.

Success in this environment will be hard-won, but it is possible. Marketers must be willing to adopt new ways of working that prioritize what we know: people feel increasingly disconnected from time & each other, and they crave sharing the new things they love in order to create connective tissue and build culture. Brands that create value in this environment will thrive, and the slowest to adapt will not. In a sea of Solocultures, be a spotlight; connect Solocultures through a clear, consistent, and authentic message. Make your relevance individual and undeniable. Honoring the existence, and contents, of our Solocultures is the best chance there is at making an impact, advertising or otherwise. If the way culture is fed doesn't adapt to how it's consumed, our silos will only get deeper, more disparate, and more difficult to connect. The clock is ticking (non-linearly, of course).

**From speaking
engagements &
project needs
to comments &
critiques, we'd
love to hear
from you.**

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Footnotes

1. OnePulse; January 11, 2024; n=501
2. Some hypotheses for why we are more in our own bubbles as noted by respondents: more working from home and a loss of social spaces due to COVID, the "very isolating" political climate, fatigue from trying to keep up with everything happening in the world, and the recognition that "most people don't like what I like."
3. Expressing our Solocultures is not only beneficial to us, but also to scientists' understanding of the world at large. Without the interaction between us and others, we would never know some of the things we are learning about each other today. Remember the white/gold or blue/black dress in 2015? The virality of that content actually showed scientists information that they didn't previously have related to how we literally see the world. And that's one of several instances where people being more open about how they process the world around them has taught us new things about the brain. In a piece about these discoveries for [Aeon in December](#), professor Gary Lupyan wrote, "The idea that the same image can look different to different people is alarming because it threatens our conviction that the world is as we ourselves experience it. When an aphantasic [someone who doesn't have visual imagery] learns that other people can form mental images, they are learning that something they did not know was even a possibility is, in fact, many people's everyday reality. This is understandably destabilising."
4. The [WELL's 2024 State of the World](#) included this quote that summarizes the link between our speed of culture and future's uncertainty: "I cannot shake the sense that we are rapidly outrunning our headlights, into unknown futures that will emerge outside of the cone of probability we thought bounded our world as deep change drivers upend comfortable assumptions of our earlier epoch."
5. The levels of seriousness with which people treated and continue to treat COVID are a perfect example of building our own realities and how time impacts them. There are massive differences between how people suffering from pre-existing conditions or long COVID make time for the pandemic as part of their cultural landscape versus people who ignored initial guidelines or disregard its long-term impact. 2020 was a massive monocultural moment that became subculturally managed and ultimately Soloculturally determined.

Footnotes

6. David Grann's 2023 bestseller *The Wager* makes this distinction in its 5th and final act, following different factions of castaways from the book's namesake ship as they race to publish their own versions of history first. Despite it happening in the early 1740s, the recognition that each sailor needed to tell their narrative as soon as possible, in some cases to directly contradict the stories of others in order to further sow confusion in the narrative, was prescient.
7. Like the Roman Empires we discussed in the previous part, being parodied in [this TikTok](#) for their specificity in the search for connection.
8. Warzel's comments come in a piece describing how the Photo Shuffle feature of his iPhone helped him come to terms with the loss of his dog last summer. "Grief is not linear, and neither is Photo Shuffle," he wrote. It's no small thing that a feature on his phone allowed him to find his own timeline for grieving.