



The Citizen Connections Report **2023**



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Conversation has always been a two-way street. A transaction that requires, at a minimum, two parties to willingly engage in the exchange of ideas and information. Connecting to others in this way is a fundamental human need. It is also the basis of good marketing; our industry pours billions into knowing who we're talking to—in connecting—after all.

So how can we as an industry ignore what Dr. Vivek Murthy, the current U.S. Surgeon General, called in 2023 “profound threats to our health and well-being”? How can we not pay extra attention to the fact that the consumers we need to know so well are lonelier and less connected than ever? Dr. Murthy’s message is clear:

“Each of us can start now, in our own lives, by strengthening our connections and relationships.”

As an agency that aims to make every conversation count, we see dialogue as a catalyst for connection. The crisis, understandably, made us curious. We wanted to know what's driving it and how we can help.

The Citizen Connection Report 2023 is our attempt to do just that. It is the first of what will be an annual review, in which we unpack the current state of social connection across North America and the UK.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nick Cowling'.

Nick Cowling
Global CEO, Citizen Relations



I

The Crisis of Connection



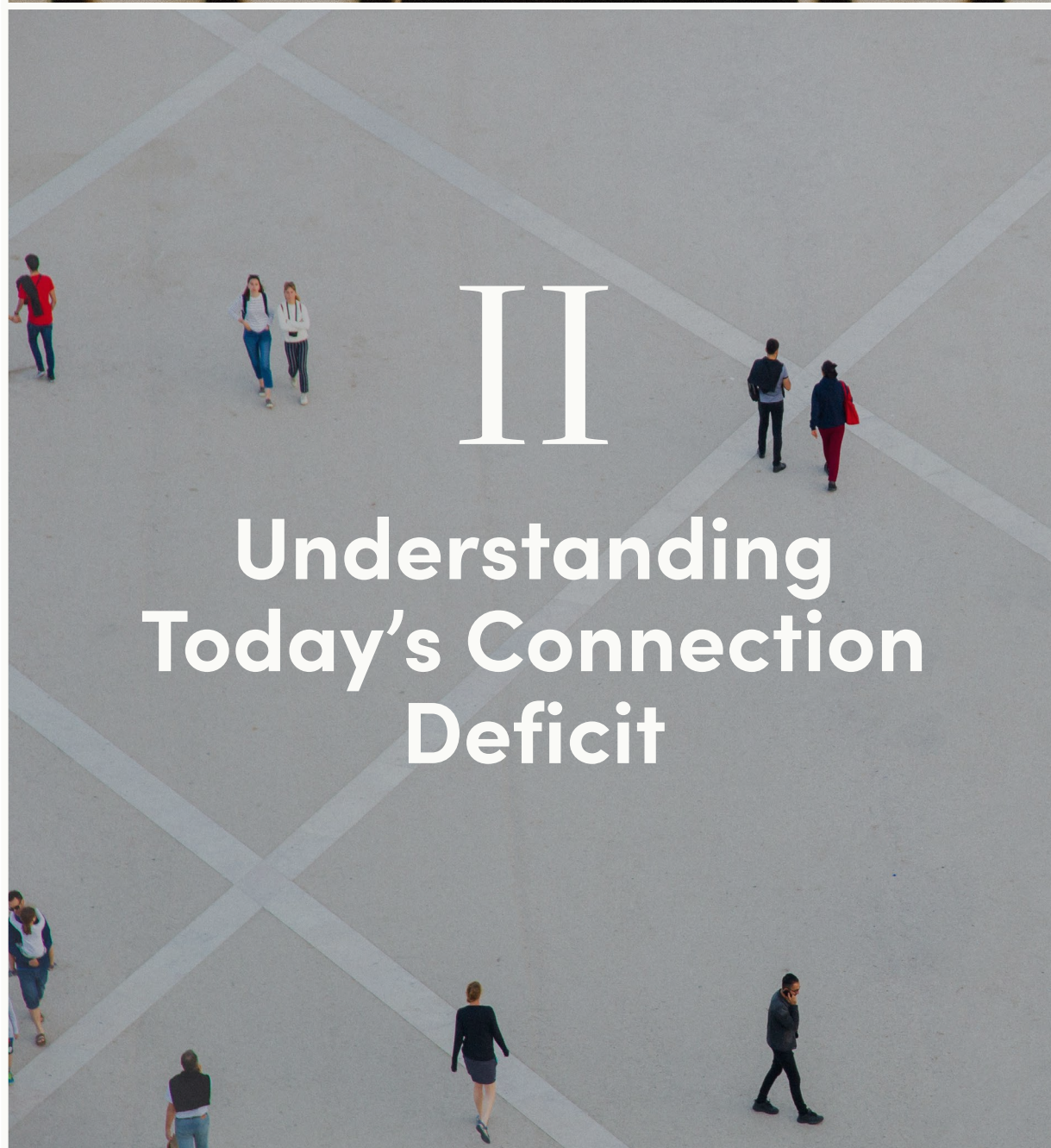
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The Crisis of Connection

What do we mean when we talk about connection? As our agency began diving deeper into this issue we used the definition put forward by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

“When you feel like you belong and have the support and care you need, as well as the number, quality, and diversity of relationships that you want.”



Why Connectedness Matters

High-quality relationships can help people live longer, healthier lives.

Supportive and inclusive relationships can protect against the harmful health effects of loneliness and social isolation.



While the pandemic certainly amplified the crisis of connection, the reality is that loneliness and isolation had already begun increasing before 2020. Ongoing [clinical trials](#) by Mount Sinai Hospital in Canada attribute 45,000 deaths a year to loneliness. The UK government even appointed a [Minister of Loneliness](#) in 2018, calling the issue “one of the greatest public health challenges of our time”.

But what’s at stake?

Simply put, it comes down to survival. Humans need deep connection in order to survive and a state of disconnection changes our functioning:

how we think, plan, organize and engage with other people. Our mental and physical health both hinge on how well we connect with those around us. And in order to survive, we need to take this matter into our own hands.

While public policy and health officials have begun the work to tackle this crisis, the onus isn’t just on them. We know the impact our industry can have on society; on creating social change and bringing people together. Brands play a crucial role in how they engage with consumers and what they can do to foster stronger connection.

Key takeaways from [Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation](#), the 2023 U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community

Humans are wired for social connection, but we've become more isolated over time

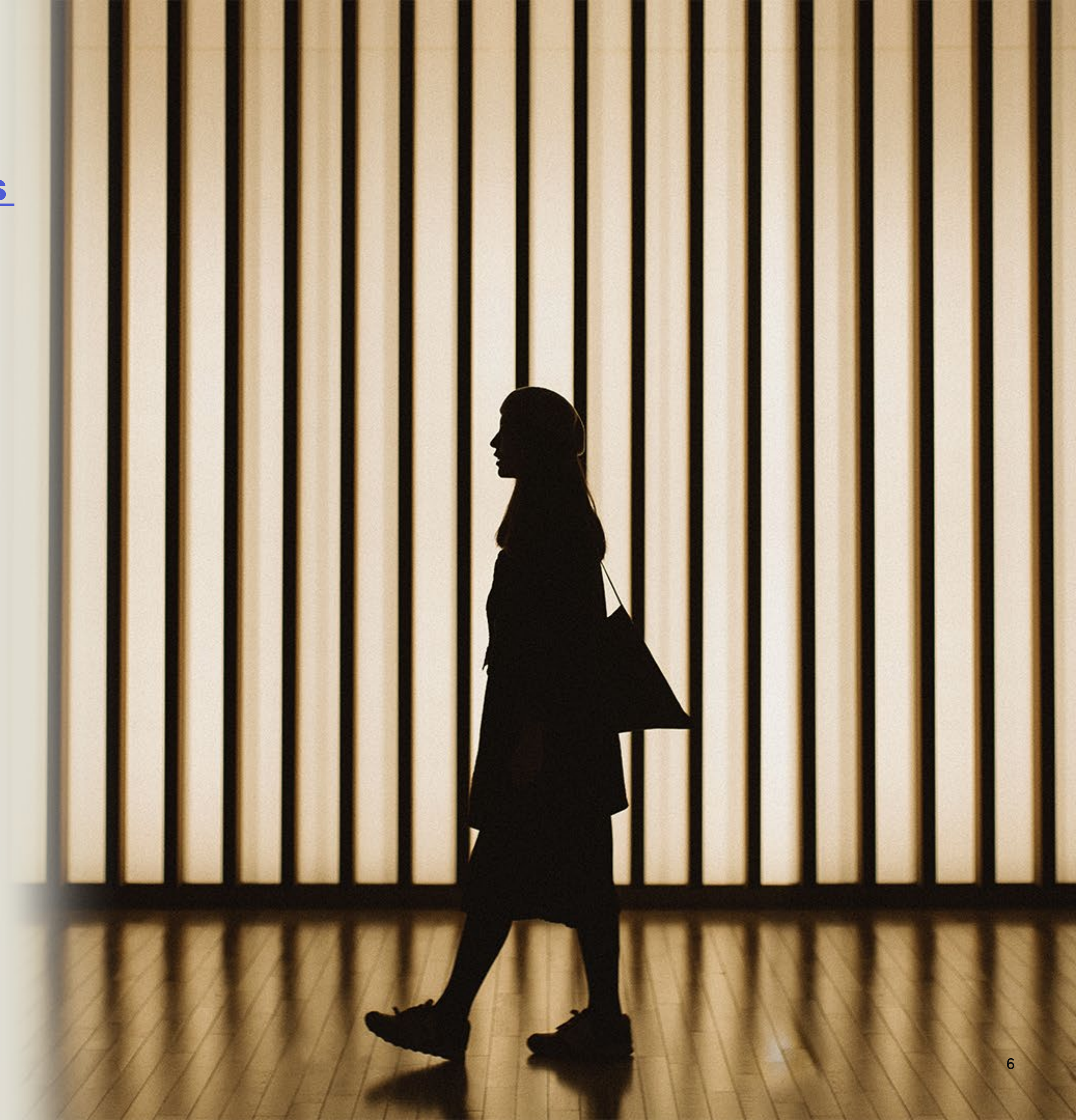
Social connection is as essential to our long-term survival as food and water. But today, loneliness is more widespread than other major health issues. Our epidemic of loneliness and isolation is a major public health concern.

Social connection significantly improves the health and well-being of all individuals

Social connection reduces the risk of premature mortality. It can predict better physical and mental health outcomes and ease stress. Higher levels of connection can influence health-related behaviors. Connection can even impact educational and economic achievement.

Social connection is vital to community health and success

Socially connected communities enjoy better population-level health. They are more prepared for—and resilient in the face—of disaster situations. They also experience greater economic prosperity and reduced levels of crime and violence.





Understanding Today's Connection Deficit

The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory treats loneliness as a matter of public policy, which it undoubtedly is. We, however, as counselors to global brands with the influence to bring people closer together, wanted to gain a more nuanced understanding of how people connect and what helps or hinders in building stronger connections. So we asked them.

A Startling Counterpoint

Almost universally, people desire more connection—but they're held back.

Our survey of over 3,000 respondents from Canada, the US, and the UK exposes a dichotomy: the majority of people crave more social connection but practice restraint. We call this gap “The Connection Deficit”.

The Connection Deficit is a complex issue with several contributing factors. Three key themes emerged:

01

We've deliberately shrunk our social circles.

We have become more empowered and intentional about who we choose to connect with, opting for smaller social circles that tend to drive us further apart.

02

It's not about online vs. Offline—we need both.

With distinct perceived benefits between online and offline connection, each serves completely different needs and have to be thoughtfully balanced.

03

Mental health is the biggest barrier.

How we perceive ourselves and our mental health is directly linked to our ability to create new connections.

In this context, brands and organizations have a critical role to play, whether it's using their platforms to drive meaningful discussions with customers or creating a workplace that enables social connection to thrive. Brands and organizations have the power, platform, and responsibility to bring people together and help close The Connection Deficit.

Which Type Are You?

Based on our research, we've identified five broad groups that everyone's connection style falls into.



The Enthusiast

I go out of my way to connect with people. I am at my best surrounded by people, and I seek out opportunities to be around others.

The Charmer

I make friends easily and like to spend my time with others and in groups.

The Affable

I enjoy the time I spend with people, but I prefer to be alone when I can.

The Bashful

I get uncomfortable and feel out of sorts when having to spend time around others.

The Island

I prefer to be alone and have structured my life to be mostly just me and or my family members only.

The Enthusiast

The Enthusiats are younger, wealthier and confident. Their friendships reflect their beliefs, and they desire social interaction. Notably, they clock the most screen time.

Screen time

10 hrs/day

Desire MORE Connection

77%

The Charmer

The Charmers are wealthier and less-focused. They value social connection & view friends and family as a source of information.

Screen time

6+ hrs/day

Desire MORE Connection

56%

The Affable

The Affables are older and likely to be women. They are happy with their level of social interaction and heavier users of Facebook. They value brand involvement in issues.

Screen time

4 hrs/day

Desire MORE Connection

44%

The Bashful

The Bashful are more likely to be Gen X and women. They are more likely to experience social anxiety in a polarized society, but still value brand involvement in important issues.

Screen time

9 hrs/day

Desire MORE Connection

49%

The Island

The Islands are least likely to be working. They're more self-reliant and least likely to desire more social interaction. They're also least likely to be affected by the polarization of society.

Screen time

2 hrs/day

Desire MORE Connection

31%

Three Key Drivers of The Connection Deficit



We've deliberately shrunk our social circles.

“There was once a time when strangers talked to one another, sometimes eagerly.” begins a New Yorker [article](#) titled What Conversation Can Do for Us. In it, the writer Hon Hsu argues that today “No spaces seem safe for the frictions or disagreements that make conversation go”. The reasons are numerous. Political polarization, disinformation, and a maniacal drive to have the last word—online and offline—have made us all a little cagey in our interactions.

Our survey shows

30%

are less likely to talk about anything controversial

15%

have lost friends due to polarization, while 16% have found new friends that share their beliefs

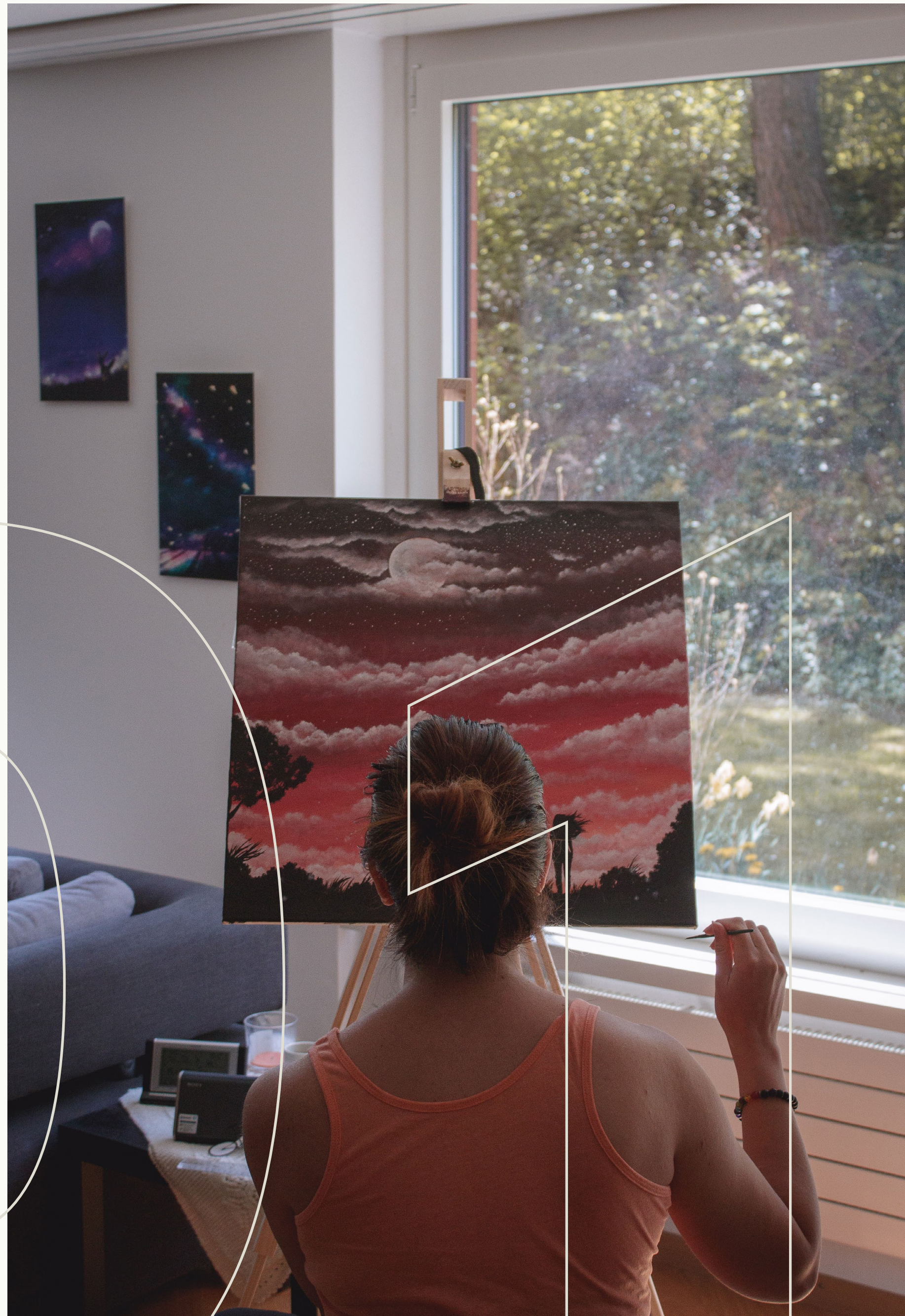
“I feel less connected today to extended family and friends”

48%

“The Bashful” Connectors

38%

“The Affable” Connectors



The rise of polarization, never more evident than in 2023, has also shifted the trust in external influences, our survey reveals. Notably, nearly a quarter of respondents have lost faith in at least one media organization while over 20% feel less connected to political leaders today. So, where can people turn to for connection in this ever divided world? Turns out, themselves and those closest to them.

Surprisingly, a full third of total respondents globally reported feeling more connected “to myself” after having lived through the pandemic, the number one response over spouse/partner and children, particularly amongst the younger generation.

One-third feel most connected with themselves



Just a small distance outside of ourselves are those closest to us, our “inner circle”. With greater hesitation to engage in conversations in fear of friction or as a byproduct of ‘bubbling together’ with a small group during the pandemic, there is an unspoken burrowing into smaller comfortable corners. Boundaries are firmer as we become more deliberate when it comes to who gets our energy and time. There was agreement across all types of connectors to the question “I think more about where I go and who I spend my time with since the pandemic”. We found the highest value relationships (e.g immediate family) are now intensified while lower value relationships (e.g. co-workers) have been cast aside.

And we can see the tightening of our core social circles all around. Things like the trending content on the ‘joy of missing out’ (i.e. “JOMO”), or memes abound on the secret relief of social plans getting canceled, or resistance to “return to office” mandates. There is now even the option to control the amount of conversation with an Uber driver – all collectively serve to make our “weak ties” even weaker.



74%

thought more about where they go and who they spend time with since the pandemic

21%

interact less with their friends

But these weak ties and opportunities to interact with those outside our inner circles are exactly what help foster a sense of community, combat loneliness, even gain employment—a fact we’ve known for 50 years, as first introduced by Mark Granovetter in his seminal paper [“The Strength of Weak Ties.”](#) “Your weak ties connect you to networks that are outside of your own circle,” explained Granovetter in 2022. “They give you information and ideas that you otherwise would not have gotten.”

And this is where organizations and brands can play a role to offer these opportunities, as we’ve recently seen in Holland at Jumbo grocery store, who today offers a Klets-kassa, or “chat

checkout,” for those non-rushed customers who want to converse with the cashier. These “slow lanes” - in addition to a “chat corner” where customers can meet for coffee and a conversation - were first introduced by Jumbo in 2019 as a part of the Dutch government’s [“One Against Loneliness”](#) campaign.

What could your brand’s “Slow Lane” offering be to give the social connection your consumers desire and aren’t getting?

It's not about online versus offline—we need both.

In recent years, the debate has intensified around online vs. offline connections, and which is superior? Since the pandemic, the epicenter of this discussion has often revolved around the workplace. As organizations planted flags in either camp in recent months—from once again demanding traditional 5-day office attendance to adopting fully remote teams—the need for clear insights grew.

Our research provides a data-backed perspective and shows we need an approach that balances both:

Offline Connections

78% prefer spending time with others in real life (IRL), citing improved communication and camaraderie as primary benefits. It underscores the human need for tangible interactions and spontaneous, face-to-face moments that can't be replicated digitally.

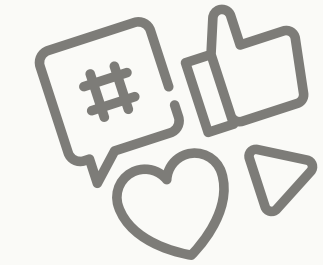
Online Connections

While only 24% of respondents were likely to form new friends or acquaintances online, a third found value in meeting others with shared or niche interests. A quarter found resonance in discovering like-minded individuals, and others appreciated the convenience and specificity that online platforms offer.



There are also some important generational differences when it comes to online vs. offline relationships. Gen-Z and Millennials are nearly three times more likely to say that they prefer to spend time interacting with people online vs. boomers. The decision isn't about choosing one over the other but recognizing the distinct advantages each brings. Integrating the strengths of both online and offline interactions, supported by data, is the path forward for organizations and individuals alike.

The preference between online vs. offline is higher amongst "The Enthusiasts" (64%) and "The Bashful" (55%) but for opposing reasons - while "Enthusiasts" seek out more opportunities to connect online and offline, "Bashful" find being online more convenient and want to avoid connecting with people offline, especially when they have differing opinions.



When it comes to connecting online - what tools are people finding most helpful?

81%

of respondents say that at least one online social platform has a positive impact on their life

This is concentrated among Gen-Z and Millennials (91-92% vs Boomers 63%)



The top cited social platform most having a positive impact are:



Especially non-Boomers and Canada and US



#1 in the US, GenX and Boomers



#1 in the UK



#2 for GenZ who are the heaviest users of the platform

Question Asked:

Which of the following social media and or digital platforms that you use, do you find makes the most positive impact on your life or is most helpful to your life?

CAN	UK	USA	GenZ	Mill	GenX	Boomer

Most Cited Answers

Mental health is the biggest barrier.

We've long known that mental health, social connection and self-esteem are all interconnected. But more and more, our cultural fascination with self-care and individualism has impacted the quality of connection and sense of community we have. The Canadian Mental Health Association says that social connection can lower anxiety and depression, help us regulate our emotions, lead to higher self-esteem and empathy, and actually improve our immune systems.

Since 68% agree that they think about their mental health more so now since the pandemic, is seeking out more connection the missing piece to the mental health conversation? 65% of those dealing with mental stress want more social connection versus 59% of those with no mental stress feeling they have the right amount.

Our data shows that 36% of those identifying as “The Bashful” Connector cite their mental health as a barrier to connection, with nearly half saying they want more connection.

Further, how we view ourselves impacts how open we are to more connection. Gen-Z and millennials report mental health and appearance as factors that pose barriers to social connection, and hobbies and interest in pop-culture as catalysts. The younger the respondent the more mental health resonates as a social and personal issue.



57%

of our respondents agree with the statement
“I feel lonely sometimes even when I am
surrounded by people”

20%

say they are more anxious in social settings

Our data shows nearly 50% of all respondents want brands to play a role in bringing societal change to mental health—the number one topic selected across markets. Whether it’s Kids Help Phone or [Norwich City FC](#), brands can step in and help tell stories, bring texture to our understanding, and help change the prevailing media narrative.



Our data shows that



GenZ and Millenials are twice as likely to say they feel lonely sometimes even around people than Boomers



GenZ and Millenials are significantly more likely to say they consider their mental health more since the pandemic



GenZ and Millenials are nearly three times more likely to say that they prefer to spend time interacting with people online vs Boomers

Question Asked:

Please rate the following statements

Agree Summary	Total	CAN	UK	USA	GenZ	Mill	GenX	Boomer
	2967	1021	980	966	511	855	777	824
I feel lonely sometimes even when I am with people	57%	58%	62%	52%	72%	68%	59%	35%
I think about my mental health more so now since the pandemic	68%	70%	71%	63%	77%	80%	71%	48%
I think more about where I go and who I spend my time with since the pandemic	74%	76%	73%	72%	77%	81%	72%	67%
It is important to spend time with people and be connected socially	88%	91%	88%	86%	87%	88%	87%	91%
I prefer to spend time interacting with people online	44%	40%	48%	43%	57%	58%	44%	20%
I prefer to spend time interacting with people offline	78%	78%	77%	78%	77%	80%	75%	79%

The New Mandate For Brands

We now know what's at stake—that we're grasping for social connection, and that its absence is more detrimental to health than air pollution or obesity. In an era when more people feel connected to themselves than others, how can our industry shape where we go from here? Create space for building social cohesion? How can we design better experiences that foster community, lead with stories, and put data to good use? We believe brands can tackle social connection in ways we haven't yet seen, and that's worth fighting for.

To get started, consider:

Letting purpose drive the change

Communications exists to push the status quo and nurture public opinion. Brands have the power to lead with intention to drive change. And consumers want this too—nearly 90% of survey respondents said there was at least one societal issue that brands have a role in addressing. On the list of social issues, they care the most about mental health, climate change and unhoused communities. Interestingly, income inequality and unhoused communities are the two topics respondents want to see brands address but aren't seeing as much activity for versus other issues.

Most critically, our survey shows that mental health is the number one issue consumers across the globe want to see brands increase their advocacy for. And loneliness and the connection deficit has emerged as a critical component of this.

We're calling on brands to tackle the crisis of connection and loneliness like they would other purpose-led initiatives through:

- Investing in campaigns that tackle the issue head-on
- Considering how events and activations they are planning can contribute to building stronger connections and
- Putting the issue at the forefront of their internal communications and initiatives

After all, when purpose leads, bottom lines follow.

To get started, consider:

Changing the online vs. offline conversation.

It's time to take offline and online connection out of opposite corners. Brands should add nuance to the conversation—going from one that is influenced by opinions and outdated expectations to one that is evidence-based and puts forth a new vision. Online communities can and do support niche interests, bring audiences to creators and community to people with disabilities, and help us feel less alone.

Functionally, however, we must tackle the fact that only 12% of us meet someone they trust online. Polarization and the spread of misinformation are threats to real online connection. Whether it's standing up for local news outlets, helping design less addictive online experiences, or facilitating constructive debate, brands have an opportunity to step in and shape the next era of online connection.

To get started, consider: Helping people disagree.

Too often, our cultural conversations are about scoring points and winning arguments. As philosopher Michael Oakeshott [observed](#), what matters is the “flow of speculation.” Our data shows polarization is alive and well – 80% of our respondents have been affected by polarization – fueled by the choices people make when choosing who to connect with and how. We’ve seen an increase in self-censoring,

diminishing faith in media organizations and breaking ties with people. How can brands support public debate? Brands can help foster the free flow of conversation, where we truly listen to each other, where ideas are exchanged and minds are open.

To get started, consider:

Finding the weak ties.

The park bench conversation, the bus driver chat, the barista small talk. Our research shows that these conversations should never be taken lightly – in fact, they have a major impact on our wellbeing. Instead of protecting consumers from unexpected chatter, brands should be encouraging these “weak ties” as ways to bolster social connection and find purpose in our community. Our research shows Gen-Z and millennials are more likely to feel

less connected to people outside their core circle, in comparison to boomers. As proven when brands put forth things like slow grocery lane checkouts, a little interaction goes a long way.

We’re putting out a clear call to action for brands: to create, seek out, and nurture weak ties. The small talk at the subway stop? We take those moments very seriously, and look for more.

Let's Reconnect - Together

The research shared in this report is only a slice of the data we've uncovered. Social connection is a complex issue, after all, and it requires all segments of society to come together to address it.

As an agency guided by a simple mantra—to make every conversation count—Citizen can guide and support organizations in finding their part in the solution. Together, let's close The Connection Deficit among consumers across the globe.

Reach out to us at www.citizenrelations.com



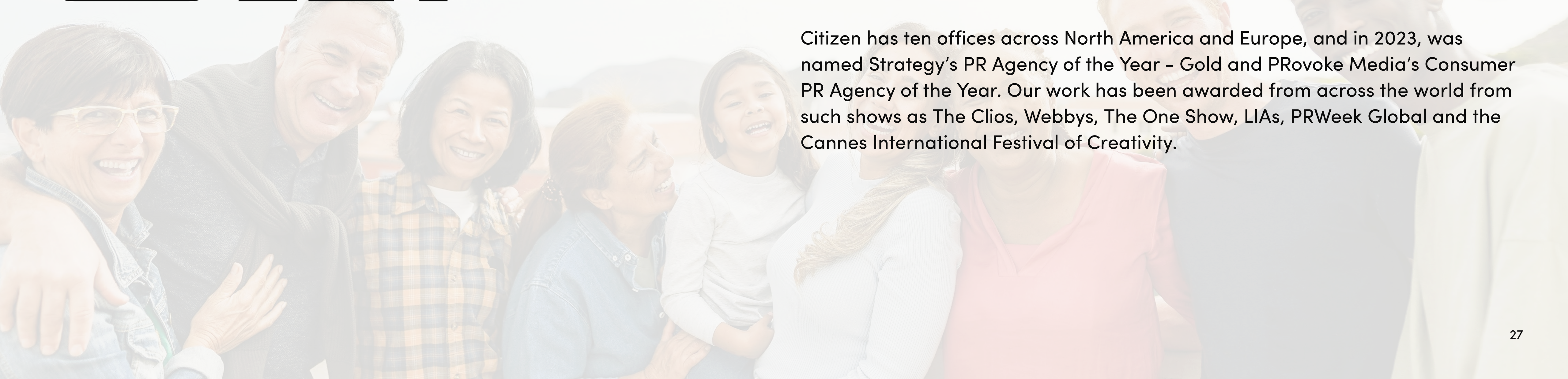
About

CITIZEN

Citizen Relations is a global communications agency built by and for the modern citizen. Our mission is to make every conversation count; we believe that conversations lead to action and action leads to meaningful impact. We know our name comes with a responsibility, anchored by our values to champion equity, set the standard and do what's right.

Citizen integrates digital, creative & strategy, insights & intelligence and experiential into the way we build, execute and measure our earned-first programs. It's our business to understand how and why people connect - to society, to brands and to each other - and that understanding is reflected in our work across such sectors as consumer packaged goods, food & beverage, automotive, gaming, tech and travel.

Citizen has ten offices across North America and Europe, and in 2023, was named Strategy's PR Agency of the Year - Gold and PProvoke Media's Consumer PR Agency of the Year. Our work has been awarded from across the world from such shows as The Clios, Webbys, The One Show, LIAs, PRWeek Global and the Cannes International Festival of Creativity.



Methodology

The Citizen Connections Report 2023 is our first annual study on the state of social connection in today’s world. The survey was carried out by Citizen Relations & RKI in June 2023, sampling 3,000+ respondents online, over the age of 18, across North America and the UK - with a +/-2% on data. The survey gathered insights on how respondents perceive social connection, how they connect with each other, with society and with themselves, along with understanding what social connection they’re looking for.

Our research categorized respondents based on how they connect (“Connector Types”), asking them to self-identify with one of the following statements:

The Enthusiast (16% respondents)

I go out of my way to connect with people. I am at my best surrounded by people, and I seek out opportunities to be around others.

The Bashful (5% respondents)

I get uncomfortable and feel out of sorts when having to spend time around others.

The Charmer (29% respondents)

I make friends easily and like to spend my time with others and in groups.

The Island (9% respondents)

I prefer to be alone and have structured my life to be mostly just me and or my family members only.

The Affable (41% respondents)

I enjoy the time I spend with people, but I prefer to be alone when I can.

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