

YEARNING TO BELONG, THE MOST HUMAN FEELING OF THEM ALL

By Catherine Del Monte

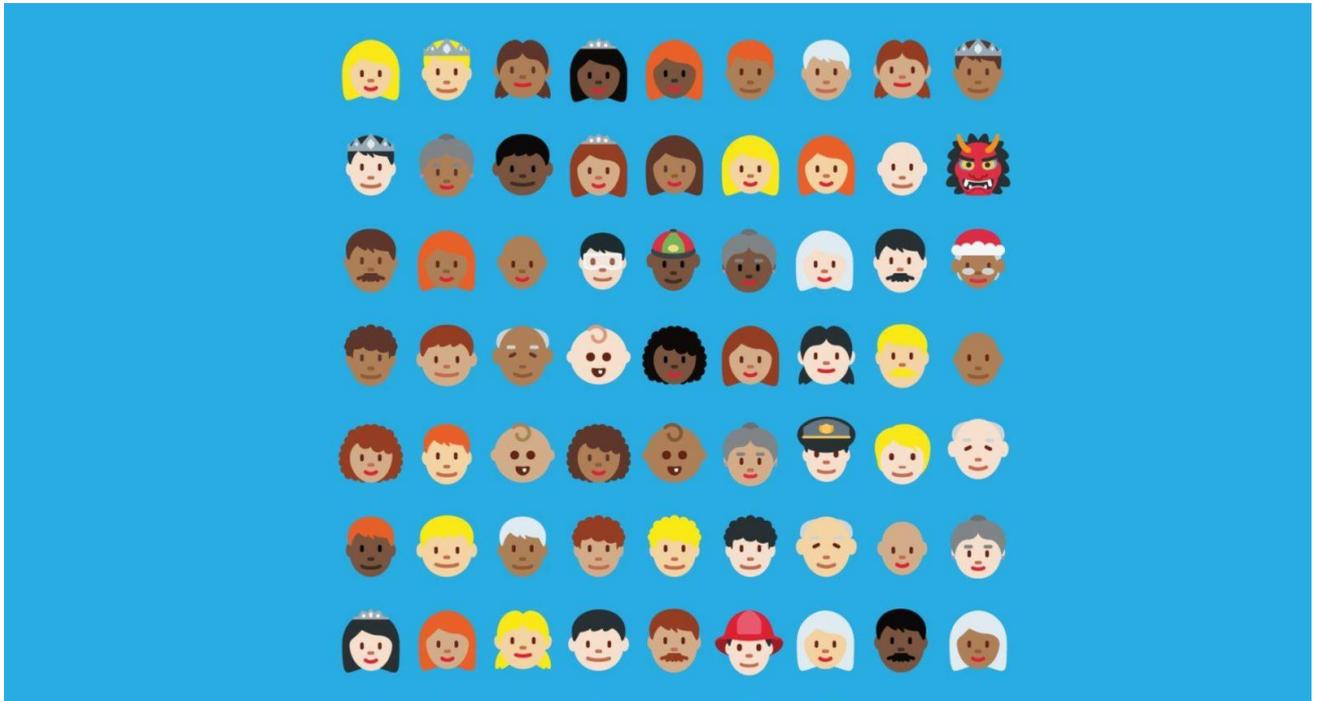


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In the first part of our series, we explore the complex phenomenon of belonging, its evolution through time and what it means to be a part of the world today.

“Be sure that when your parents were younger and when my parents were younger, they also worried about who liked, and did not like them. That is a *big* part of what it means to belong to a social group. We worry about this constantly as individuals. Human beings are fraught with this sense,” says political psychologist Prof Rajen Govender of the Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance, UCT.

Today, technology has, in many ways, given us an instrument to enhance our sense of belonging: that one instrument can have simplified the way we connect with each other is astounding, and from “befriending” to fitting into one group, satisfying one of our [most basic human needs](#), is now as easy as the click of a button.

But just how did we get from satisfying our need to affiliate and belong as a means to stay alive and survive, to belonging for the sake of a series of impalpable likes, hearts and follows?

The concept of belonging has been [studied for decades](#) in the behavioural sciences. American psychologist Abraham Harold Maslow famously proposed a hierarchical approach to human motivation — the Maslow Pyramid of Human Needs, 48 years ago.

According to an article titled [The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation](#), first published in the *Psychological Bulletin* in 1995, sandwiched between physiological needs and safety needs (making up the foundation of the pyramid), and esteem and self-actualisation (forming the tip of the pyramid) is the need for love (affection and belongingness).

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In 2013, an article published in the American Journal of Psychology and titled [Maslow and the Motivation Hierarchy: Measuring Satisfaction of the Needs](#), authors Robert J Taormina and Jennifer H Gao remind us of Maslow's description of belongingness as, "People hunger for affectionate relations with people in general." The term "hunger" isn't trivial; it places the need to belong at the crux of our very existence. Building upon this a few decades later in an extensive review of the concept, psychologists [Baumeister and Leary](#) purported that, "the need of human beings to have interpersonal attachments and to feel a sense of belonging with other people is considered fundamental to the species" and that "belongingness needs are innate, (that they are universal because they are found in every human society) and that the deprivation of satisfying these needs can have negative consequences for the individual".

In the same article, authors Taormina and Gao attain a technical definition from Maslow, and Baumeister and Leary's theorisation of the concept of belonging as being, "close, lasting, emotionally pleasant interactions with other people, in groups as well as in intimate dyads, that yield personal relationships characterised by mutual active concern" in the forms of "family, as well as same-sex and heterosexual friendships, romances, marriage, work and work groups".

According to the [Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History](#), about 1.8 million years ago during the Stone Age, our first true hunter-gatherer ancestor, *Homo erectus*, existed. This was a time characterised by the first [stone-tool technology](#) which is said to have [aided in hunting](#) for meat,

protection from predators and ultimately, to survive during changing climates. During this archaeological time period, [evidence of campfires](#) meant our earliest human ancestors were cooking and sharing food with their group or community within which they moved and so began the phenomenon of social interaction and the very beginning stages of what it meant to belong.

“Going back in the history of evolution in the early days of *Homo habilis* and *Homo erectus*, there were considerable threats that were experienced from predators, to the elements, to finding food... so there was a very fundamental, physical reason for our need to belong to a group essentially driven by a survival instinct and protection of the group,” says Professor Govender.

“Tens of thousands of years of evolution have hardwired us into social beings with a need to belong. We are born into a social context, we are born into a unit, and this is first nature for us because we cannot conceptualise being born outside of a social unit. So from that perspective, belonging has a very strong foundation and thread in terms of how human beings actually evolved,” he says.

But up until [12,000 years ago](#), the need to be part of a group or collective to survive slowly began to shift. The development of civilisations, agriculture, industry and technology within societies through the ages brought about capitalisation on convenience; things like supermarkets, restaurants, hospitals, medicine, security systems emerged. This meant society relied less and less on the group to satisfy basic physiological and safety-security needs and shifting behavioural focus from the group to the individual.

“Over time, as human society evolved and as we moved through the agrarian phase and we started to build culture — language and art — that notion of needing to survive expanded into those concepts as well and it became a question of, we don’t just need a community to survive physically but need the community to survive intellectually, psychologically.

“Increasingly, as society became more complex, that basic instinct itself evolved so that it is not just a question of today, I need this community in order to survive, but I actually need the community because I want to grow, I have set goals for myself, it is important for my social development,” says Govender.

“If you go back a few hundred years and certainly a few thousand or even tens of thousands of years, the idea of “me” within the collective was a lot less pronounced. It was more about ‘what is best for the group’. Today, the question is a lot more about ‘what is in it for me’ as opposed to ‘what is in it for the group’ and that is a reflection of what I call the ‘massification’ of our society which has caused fragmentation of the collective.

“We evolved to care about whether other people in our tribe think well of us or not because it matters. But were we evolved to be aware of what 10,000 people think of us? We were not evolved to have social approval being dosed to us every five minutes,” says Harris.

“We used to talk about the basic building block of society being the immediate family, extended families, communities — they are all extensions of the same concept which is a sense of a group, a group to which you belong, a group from which you derive identity, a group from which you derive esteem, a group that you feel protected by... the extended family, then local communities, then larger communities and societies. Today we talk about the individual first and then we talk about families,” he explains.

A glaring example of what Dr Govender is describing when he says our behavioural focus has shifted from the collective to the individual can be seen in parts of the US where minors have been able to successfully launch challenges to “divorce” or [“emancipate” themselves](#) from their families and essentially remove themselves from their basic social unit.

“What I like to call the ‘massification of society’ happened. The need to build communities became less because there are so many groups you can fit into, or choose anyway. This is really important when we get to the conversation about social media — the issue of exercising personal choice or discretion in terms of who I want to associate with and which group I actually want to belong to,” says Govender.

However, hundreds of thousands of years of evolution are difficult to erase or ignore. While today we may not need our friends from a solely biological perspective, Govender says that the need to fulfil a sense of belonging remains the same, but the way we belong and the spaces within which we seek belonging are changing and we are seeking belonging less and less in our immediate physical environment, and instead, looking for it within the virtual space.

Today, the individual still recognises the importance of being in “a group” because otherwise, “What do you have? What are you left with?” says Govender.

Cue social media: In 2020 [3.6 billion people](#) worldwide were spending, on average, two hours and 20 minutes of their time on social media per day.

When interviewed in the Netflix documentary [The Social Dilemma](#), American computer scientist Tristan Harris expresses his scepticism at society’s ability to cope mentally and emotionally within the vast, heavily manipulated community that *is* social media.

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“Social media has shown quite clearly that we have technologies that far supersede not only our intellectual abilities, but more importantly our emotional quotient... in terms of social media and the hazards of that, I think the EQ is far more important than the IQ,” says Govender.

“We may understand how to use our tablets and how to navigate social media like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, but we are seriously underprepared to deal with the emotional and psychological consequences of what happens when we are on social media,” he adds. **DM/ ML**

“A sense of belonging” is a series peering into the psychology behind belonging and how what was once considered a coveted behavioural need has evolved and morphed into a superficial concept with the advent of technology and social media.