Advancing Positive Solitude and Social Connection
TCR 2027 Track One
Track Chair: Mark J. Kay

1. **Short Track Description**

While loneliness is framed as a pervasive epidemic, this view provides little understanding of the interior perspectives and social skills needed to improve mental functioning that "connects with others." Nuanced views are needed to advance social, work, and relational connections. As AI threatens to disrupt employment, person-centric connections of work to consumption and well-being deserve renewed attention. This session examines paths to develop human potential, examining concepts of agency as a capacity-building process. Values of artistry and creative craft, enabled by focused disciplinary human engagement, provide experiential means to counter social isolation.

2. **Extended Track Description:** A revised track description with mention of your track's goals and connection to consumers

The goal of this track is to examine research and extend knowledge regarding what is framed as the loneliness epidemic. The session explores adjacent areas important to solo consumption, including challenges related to work meaning, human agency, social disconnection, and depression. This track is open to relevant external stakeholders, including community organizations, service practitioners, creatives, and includes early-stage scholars.

Loneliness is an individual, subjective, and emotionally challenging experience, one that has been specifically defined in relation to perceived social disconnection –the difference between actual and desired social relationships (Peplau & Perlman 1982). Research on specific types of loneliness (situational, developmental, cultural) suggest distress is experienced among people of all ages (Hawkley et al. 2022). The interior and subjective focus of definitions of solo experience should not constrict appraisals of their value. Alternatively interpreted and valuably cultivated as solitary pursuits, lone experiences can activate motivations to restore decisiveness and agency that expands self-definition. Positive solitary pursuits foster physical and mental gains through regular disciplinary practices, leading to the development of skills, knowledge, and creative pursuits (Kay et al. 2023). As reflective practices associated with mindfulness, these increase self-awareness to ground mental health and stability.

The favorable paths of development, defined and measured as positive solitude (Palgi et al. 2021), is one that contrasts with past discussions of social disconnection initiated by Putnam (2000). This seminal book carefully documents in the widespread social collapse of participation in civic and community organizations (such as the PTA, social clubs, bowling leagues, and many others). Today, further and more serious disconnections are expected as the adoption of AI agents potentially unsettle careers, destroy job security, and restructures education. This uncertainty already impairs social connections related to employment –work being a profoundly social, physical, and psychological necessity.

Despite the pervasiveness of reports that consumers regularly suffer from loneliness, many solo consumer experiences are determined by a sense of individual agency that is conditioned by repetitive choices. These result in developmental paths that can certainly have negative

consequences. Daily social media "connections" often fuel habitual and mindless passivity or lead to merely reactive scrolling and trolling.

Repetitive daily tasks affect perceptions. The positive contributions of "work and working" to human experience are seen in the advances of person-centric psychology (Weiss et al. 2026). The meaning of work, the sociability of employment and its workspaces, and the human associations that products and services offer –these are highly important to consumer psychology. Moreover, new concerns are being recognized in the need to safeguard conversational artificial intelligence, given the alarming findings of mental health harms (Moore et al. 2026). The contribution and repetitive choices of relational social connection is an important concern deeply related to mental health (Holt-Lunstad 2024). These are distinctively shaped in the myriad contexts of consumer experience.

Recent studies (van Prooijen et al. 2022) reinforce the idea that social groups regulate relationships and provide models for group norms that provide a sense of affiliation and safety. As suspicion and misinformation increasingly undermine social affiliative appeals, a range of negative outcomes result. When affiliation or membership is devalued or stigmatized, the positive psychological values of belonging and social identification become a curse, potentially harming health and well-being (Jetten et al. 2017).

This session seeks to formulate views of new potentials related to the concept of agency. The effort involves reviewing concepts of human agency and affect. While the interior sense of agency as self-regulation may be limited, this is subject to development as a capacity-building process requiring connection and compassion. Human skills and development include *involuntary* neurological changes and uniquely *voluntary* human abilities to transform physically, cognitively, emotionally, and relationally.

In contrast, the concept of automated "machine agency" now dominates discussions of AI as a construct that can escape programmatic control. Yet the encounter of automated machine agency by consumers often disturbs, confuses, degrades, and frustrates.

Finally, the focus on the artistry and creativity spawned by highly focused human engagement provides experiential means to counter social isolation. The evidence for this idea has been demonstrated in studies of aesthetic chills, noted to be involuntary sensory experiences fostered by music and art. These experiences are shown to provide significant psychological insight that enhances emotional awareness (Schoeller et al. 2025). The significance and reality of cognitive processes behind such epiphanies and "aha" moments draw new research attention. Human development acutely relates to connecting the involuntary and voluntary processes that challenge and foster cognitive and emotional well-being.

References

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3. **Track chairs and short bios.** (pictures are below)

Mark J. Kay, Ph.D., is a professor at Montclair State University. Publication areas include case studies, articles in branding, sustainability, retailing, supply chains, and healthcare. His recent concerns include neurodiverse consumers and inclusive approaches to design and marketing. The author of *Better Marketing*, past employment includes work in marketing research, film production, arts, various nonprofits, international pedagogical program development, and the "unlikely" work of advising and consulting. He is committed to bring wide ranging perspectives to advancing transformative consumer research.

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