

# Lonely? These odd rituals can help, study finds

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Credit: [Emily Rudolph](#) on [Unsplash](#)

If you dunk a tea bag repeatedly into your mug or open a cream-filled cookie to lick the filling, you might find coping with pandemic isolation a bit easier than others.

A UC Riverside-led study has found people who adopt unique rituals to make everyday tasks more meaningful might feel less lonely.

"We found that something as simple as preparing tea in a certain way, as long as it's interpreted as a ritual, can make the experience more meaningful," said Thomas Kramer, a professor of marketing at UC

Riverside's School of Business. "This makes people feel less lonely."

The paper, published in the *Journal of Marketing Research*, addressed the fact that people who experience chronic loneliness often feel their lives lack meaning. Rituals create meaning. Most rituals occur in celebratory, social, or religious group settings and draw upon and reinforce shared cultural values. But rituals are also an important part of consumer culture. These rituals do not draw from shared [cultural values](#) and might be created by marketers or individual consumers. Marketers have long known that rituals facilitate relationships with consumers and brands and between consumers themselves.

Kramer and co-authors Xuehua Wang, an associate professor of marketing at East China Normal University; and Yixia Sun, an assistant professor of marketing at Zhejiang University; sought to find out if rituals around everyday consumer products could also help people feel less lonely by imbuing use of the products with meaning.

"Nobody in marketing has ever looked at rituals with private meaning," Kramer said. "A lot has been done on what they do, for example, promoting self-control. But no one has looked at whether or not idiosyncratic, private rituals provide meaning in the context of consumer products."

After asking participants questions designed to assess their degree of chronic loneliness, the researchers told participants that consumers often adopt rituals around the consumption of everyday products. They asked about rituals the participants practice and asked them either to imagine or actually use the product in either the ritualistic way, such as the familiar "twist-lick-dunk" technique for eating cream-filled cookies, or engaging with the product the way they usually did.

They found that the participants who experienced the most chronic

loneliness also habitually engaged in the most rituals around consumer products. Moreover, participants who completed activities the researchers designed to induce loneliness felt less lonely after completing a real or imagined act of ritualized consumption. They also indicated that they felt their life had more meaning after the action.

The findings show that [consumers](#) might engage more strongly with brands that create rituals around purchasing or using products because they find meaning and a sense of community. The authors also suggest that governments can do more to reduce widespread [loneliness](#) by promoting rituals that do not include particular product options and add meaning to lives devoid of meaning.

"Many people are trying to find structure right now because everything is so chaotic," Kramer said. "The implications of our study are that if you feel lonely, find a [ritual](#). It doesn't have to be elaborate. It can help you feel less lonely by providing a sense of [meaning](#) and purpose."

The authors note that though participants felt less lonely immediately after using the product, they did not follow up to determine how long this feeling lasted. They also note idiosyncratic consumption rituals might not be advisable for individuals with obsessive-compulsive disorders.

The paper is titled "Ritualistic Consumption Decreases Loneliness by Increasing Meaning."

**More information:** Xuehua Wang et al. Ritualistic Consumption Decreases Loneliness by Increasing Meaning, *Journal of Marketing Research* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/0022243721993426](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022243721993426)

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